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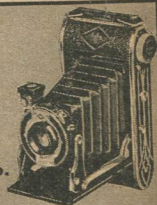
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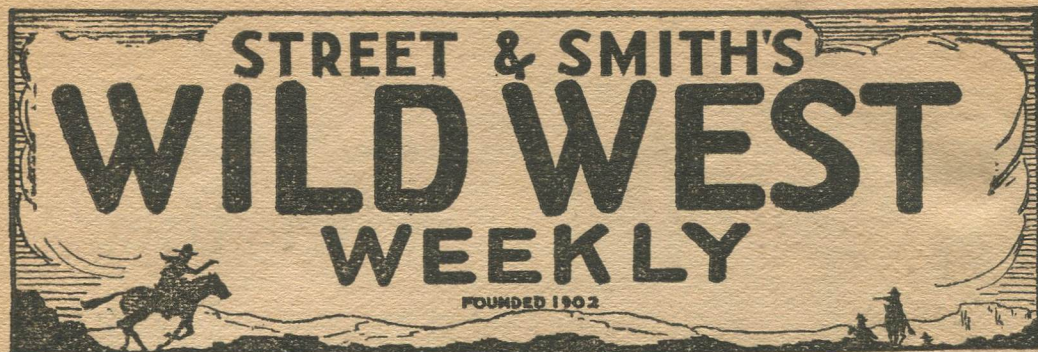
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Vol. 124, No. 2 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 26, 1938 Whole No. 1884

Cover Picture from

"The Silver Kid's Death Card" . Painted by H. W. Scott

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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He finds that dealin' it to a mighty clever bandit is risky business.

War Trail for the Devil's Deputy C. William Harrison 61
It's a crimson-smear'd trail that leads to sartain death.

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An' when the gang fixes 'im fer slaughter, it looks like boothill fer keeps.

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Hungry an' Rusty know the only way to fight 'em is with their own breed.

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It kin shore git a runt of a cowpoke into a mighty tight spot.

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THIS MAGAZINE CONTAINS NEW STORIES ONLY. NO REPRINTS ARE USED.

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A Chat with the Range Boss

THANKSGIVIN' time again! The ol' pot-bellied stove is red-hot, so visitors to the Range Boss' hangout will be comfortable while he's chattin' with them. Thar's sure a nip in the air these days out o' doors. Mebbe that's why it ain't so hard to corral some o' these author mavericks an' git 'em to tell a few words about themselves. They're plumb glad to git indoors out o' the cold.

C. William Harrison, who wrote, "War Trail For The Devil's Deputy," in this issue, is a gent who don't talk about himself—much. But he obliged with these few words, by way of introducin' himself to the gals an' gents who read 3W and are interested in its writin' hombres.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: My background for doing Western fiction was built up through doing considerable traveling in the West. I have been in all but two of the Western States and I worked for several months in the Sutter's Creek region of California, and also in Wyoming.

What I missed in actual experience in the West, I got through contacts I made here and there. I still correspond frequently with these friends, and they have given me much valuable help.

My only experience on the back of a brone ended with me lodged very embarrassingly on the limb of a pine tree.

This Chuck Martin gent, who writes the yarns about Rawhide Runyan, has a neat little story in "Dead Hombre's Dinero" in this number.

Chuck is like most o' the cow-punchin' breed; he's kind o' shy about meetin' up with gals an' women. So we was plumb amused—in fact, we just roared out loud—at gittin' this bit of news in a recent letter from our bashful pard Chuck.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am inclosin' a brand-new Rawhide Runyan yarn, and I'm inclosing a stamped envelope in case it doesn't tally prime beef.

Of all things! The Writers Guild in San Diego read that first Rawhide Runyan novelette, and they are mostly women. No-how, here I am booked to wind-jam for an hour this noon to those femmes about characterization and drama! If I crib a few paragraphs from yore recent letters, you will know why your ears are burning. Like always,

CHUCK.

Sometimes these author hombres write under difficulties, even when they're living in the East, far away from the wind-swept prairies, Montana blizzards, Texas northers, and Kansas cyclones. This tale of a writer who worked under difficulties during the hurricane which swept the East this fall came from T. W. Ford, about the time he was writing the Silver Kid novelette which appears in this issue:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: The wind has come, and we are still here and breathing. In these parts, that's considered lucky. I won't bore you with the details, but it's the first time I ever saw window panes belly inward.

The place here where I live got off com-

paratively easy, some windows being smashed in, and an unused wing being flattened by the fall of a giant apple tree. But to come out alive, much less uninjured, is a good break under the circumstances.

When the doors of my private entrance were broken in, the gale snapping an iron bolt lock in the job, all my copy was ruined or carried off with the exception of the novelette which I had just completed and was about to mail.

I saved all of it except about the last third. I finished the rewriting of that part last night by candlelight. No electric power; so no lights, no phone, and no running water.

Included among the other copy was the last Silver Kid novelette. I found a piece of that the next day plastered against an abandoned car several hundred yards down the road.

T. W. Ford.

A reader has a few remarks to make about the Pete Rice stories. He's a Pete Rice fan from 'way back—when Pete an' his depities had a magazine all to theirselves.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Something is lacking of the old-time interest in the stories about Sheriff Pete Rice which you are publishing in 3W. I believe that "something" is this:

The stories are by far too short. In *Pete Rice Magazine* of 1936, they were eighty-page complete book-length novels, as compared with the twenty-six-page novelettes in *Wild West Weekly*.

The plot and mystery were more baffling in *Pete Rice Magazine*, which is only natural, due to the length of the stories as being printed now.

Now you read ten pages out of twenty-six, and you have your mystery solved, and you lose interest in the balance of the tale.

I appreciate the fact that Sonny Tabor, Whistlin' Kid, Hungry and Rusty, and the others are all fine and dandy, but they don't compare to my favorite Pete Rice. How about it?

HERMAN F. DREWS.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Wonder how many other readin' hombres favor the idea of having book-length novels about Pete Rice, as well as about other characters. Let's hear yore views, gents an' gals!

THE RANGE BOSS.

Has Mickey Rooney a steady girl?

Honestly, does he have a valet?

Is he really as tough as he acts?

That pug-nosed, freckled-faced, 17-year-old hard guy, whose rise to the Top Spot is one of the highlights of this year's movie history has a lot of questions to answer to his multitude of fans.

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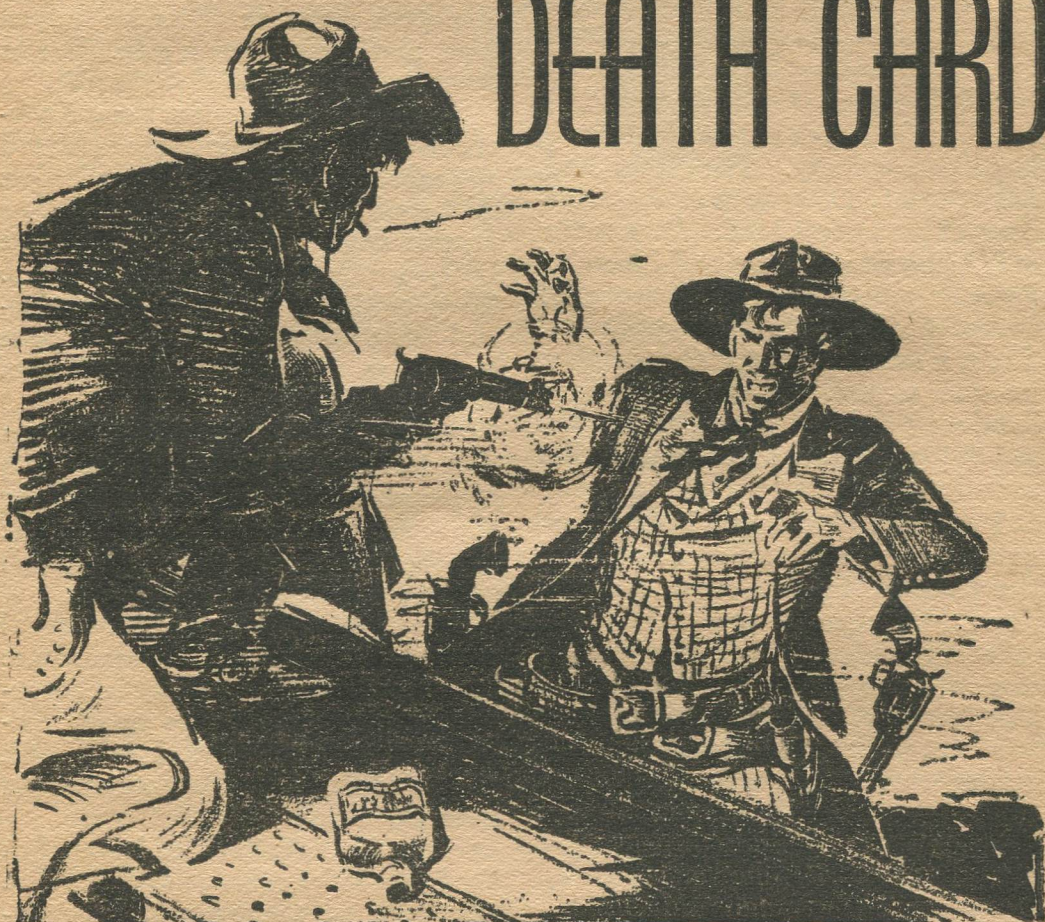
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THE SILVER KID'S DEATH CARD



By T. W. FORD

Author of "Solo Herds The Gallows Spread," etc.

The Kid's tryin' to beat a gambler at his
own game, an' the penalty fer losin' is death.

The Silver Kid's Death Card

CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH OF A FIGHTER.

THE Silver Kid was forking along the narrow path that cut out of the foothills, down to the white ribbon of the stage road to Windfall. The sun, like a satanic eye, glared on the scrub-growth country through which he rode.

Off to the north a dust cloud hung low like a canopy. The Silver Kid, Solo Strant, knew it was the trail-drag of a moving herd. It was the only thing around him and his paint horse that betokened the presence of human life beneath the coppery sky. Then, a moment later, Solo saw that he was wrong. Even as his lean hands crossed and dived to his silver-butted Colts, he looked upon life and death!

The trail had emerged from a mesquite thicket and turned sharply as the precipice lip of a narrow chasm showed through the grass. Sunlight reflected blindingly from the reddish stone of the opposite wall of the gash. But despite it, Solo Strant saw those two struggling men through a gap in the trees on the other side.

There were no gunshots to warn that it was to the death. At that distance no sound even carried to the Silver Kid. One of his deadly guns was already snaked free of holster leather. The next instant, he had rolled from the saddle to drop spread-legged on the ground, blinking against the glare. But he couldn't shoot yet. For the bigger hombre had his hands wrapped on the throat of the slim gent, had jerked him around so that his back was to the unseen Kid.

Red from the blow of a gun barrel stained the strangling man's hair.

And Solo could see his ivory-handled gun still in its holster. The poor devil never had had a chance to draw. Straining at the bit, the Kid watched with sleepy-seeming eyes.

The next moment it was done, the burly gent letting the other collapse in the grass. Solo couldn't see the former's face under its down-bent sombrero brim as the man leaped back and hooked out a gun. It was going to be cold-blooded murder.

Then the Kid was in action. Puckering his brows against the reflected sunlight, he sent one cocked Colt into slashing action. A branch was lopped from the scrub oak at the burly man's elbow across the gap. Then, with the report of Solo's second shot reverberating, the man leaped as if stung. His weapon fell from his hand.

It looked like the usual story when Solo Strant fired, as if the Kid's slug had creased his gun hand, disarming the burly one. He cursed on the hot air, then dived into the grass. High overhead, a buzzard soared.

Solo dropped to his knees behind a rough boulder. But no lead came his way. Seconds crept by as everything grew as still as the grave. Solo's eyes gauged the width and depth of the chasm that separated him from the other.

Then the impatient Kid saw that the burly killer wasn't finished. The slim form of the unconscious hombre began to roll involuntarily toward the lip of the cliff over there. The Kid saw that he was being propelled by a pole in the form of a dead tree limb. The man was doomed to die unless Solo could do something pronto.

But with the killer crouched flat, Solo couldn't fire without risk of drilling the unconscious man. Desperate, the Kid raked the chasm rim with his eyes. Over to the right, a

narrow ledge dipped downward along the cliff wall. Opposite it, on the other side, nature had carved a notch. It was a thin chance, but the Kid took it. Doubled over, he left the shield of the rock, slid through the brush, and worked down that narrow, shale-strewn ledge.

The fallen gent was being moved nearer the edge of the precipice. And, through that notch, Solo could see the hummock of ground behind which the other man lay. The big killer was prodding away with the limb over the top of it, completely hidden and protected. The doomed man was within a few feet of the edge of the chasm.

The Kid dropped to his knees and spent one precious moment thumbing shells from his double, crisscrossing gun belts, dropping them onto the shale beside him. Then his right gun bucked into snapping, lead-slammng action. Its slugs gashed and knifed and hewed at the crest of that hummock across the way. The Kid's face was a grim mask behind the wreathing powder smoke. He knew he would be a perfect target if the gent over there once got up enough nerve to shoot it out.

But his savage lead barrage made the would-be murderer eat crow for the moment. He stopped his prodding with the pole. Then Solo's gun clicked hollowly on an empty shell. The killer's head popped up as he started to level a gun barrel.

Solo laced the ground of the hummock with two cartridges from the gun in his left hand. The man ducked down. The Kid began to thumb shells into his empty gun. He got in three, then four.

The next moment the gent who'd been choked called the turn. Gasping for air, pawing feebly at his neck, he floundered up onto his knees, facing Solo with sightless eyes. He was

unaware of the chasm that yawned just in front of him. He started to rise, instinctively probing for the gun at his hip. Solo yelled to him in vain.

The would-be killer saw his chance. He flung the pole through the air like an arrow at his half-conscious victim. It speared the latter plumb between the shoulder blades and sent him forward to the brink of the tiny canyon. Swaying, the poor devil hesitated a moment there.

There was nothing the watching Solo could do. Then the man, who was still half insensible from his choking, took a slow stride forward in an attempt to steady himself. That stride was out over thin air, off the lip of the chasm side, into nothingness. A faint cry was torn from his lips as he plunged to his death.

The Kid didn't want to look at that broken form down on the boulders far below. But he couldn't forget that last-second glimpse he'd caught of the doomed man's face, of the livid white scar that furrowed his lean jaw as if he'd once seared himself with a branding iron.

An instant later the killer seized the break to rear up and fling lead at the Kid on the open ledge, shooting with his left hand. The Kid was forced to leap sidewise and drop prone to keep from being hit. The other, his job done, whipped around and ran into the brush where he'd left his cayuse.

Solo had a split-second glimpse of him through a gap in the foliage as he forked away. He sent a snap shot. The slug smashed off a rock and caromed wildly. The flattened lead pellet knifed through the cinch strap of the killer's pony.

As the saddle slid crazily to one side under him, the gent hurled him-

self from the animal into the high grass. His hoarse oaths carried to Solo. Then he snagged his horse deeper in the brush, got rid of the damaged saddle, and rode off bareback, out of sight.

Sleeving his sweating face, Solo thumbed fresh shells into his hot weapons. Gazing down a moment at the dead figure in the gap, the Kid tipped his sombrero.

"Hope you find good bedding ground at the last roundup, stranger," he said.

Then he grimaced savagely, remembering how the killer bore the raw, red welt of his gun sign, a brand that condemned a man to boothill sooner or later.

"I'm sittin' in on this game until I hang the deadwood on that two-bit pack rat!" he added.

Then he mounted, fingering the silver skull at his throat.

CHAPTER II.

A TELLER OF DEATH.

THE Kid had already noted the wispy film of alkali powder rising from the trail of the fleeing rider. The plume of dust had already turned down toward the stage road to Windfall. The Kid forked hard along his side of the chasm for the white ribbon of the track he could see below in the distance.

The Kid knew that the man below was beyond all help, that if he double-burdened his horse, Sorghum, to take in his body, he'd lose all chance of tracking down the killer. And that last itch gripped him.

This was a cold-blooded murder if he'd ever seen one. It was plain that the victim, his hogleg still in its holster, had suspected nothing.

Once more Solo Strant played a hunch. The killer was heading for Windfall. And with that gun-hand

scar he bore, Solo knew he could be traced there.

There was no chance to bridge the chasm until he reached the stage track. But he remembered that the killer, although on the Windfall side of the gash, was riding bareback.

The impatient Kid urged his wiry paint on across the broken, thickly treed country. Once he reined up at a spring. With quick, nervously deft fingers, he formed himself a smoke. But he forgot to light it as once again he spotted thin flags of alkali drifting up.

Pressing on under the hot afternoon sun, the Kid came onto a vast mesa, picked out the huge butte across it. The killer, heading for town, where his sign would ordinarily be lost, had put the butte between himself and his pursuer.

Picking up fresh horse sign repeatedly, Solo kept on the trail and rounded the butte a couple of hours later, to look down upon the prosperous town of Windfall. And he was confident that with that gun sign the man bore he could find him any place.

Windfall had been well named, sitting in a great cup formed by interlocking hills on three sides. On the west, the huge butte crouched like a scowling sentry to ward off winter storms and yet permit access to the range country on both the north and south. With those steep, dark slopes shoring up, it almost looked as if Nature herself had laid a trap for the killer.

But there didn't seem to be any fresh hoofprints on the little causeway that angled over the morass that further guarded the town. The Kid was some surprised as he reined in a moment. Absently he stared at where smoke issued in heavy, broken puffs from a place on the brow of one of the hills.

Figuring he'd better report what he'd seen to the local lawman, Solo forked into town, passing the bank with two guards lolling under its wooden awning. There was the usual blacksmith's shop, a Chinese restaurant, a barroom, then a big place bearing the sign: "All Aces Gambling Hall."

As Solo curved his horse, Sorghum, toward the gambling hall to learn where the town marshal might be, a saddle tramp burst from the doors. He bellowed to folks in general along the sun-scorched street.

"Peaceful Lume's done it ag'in, gents! Peaceful's done it. He jist read the cards. An' he says the cards tell as how Scarjaw Crake ain't ever goin' to git home to the rancho alive! Seems like Peaceful can see him plumb daid already!"

Solo had a hunch once again. As men came running up, he recalled that livid scar he'd seen along the jaw of the now dead man when he took the step out into space over the chasm. Dropping from the saddle, Solo hurried stiffly to the edge of the crowd that had already clustered thick, as gents hustled from their stores.

"Where's this Crake's rancho lay?" the Kid asked one.

The man pointed back in the direction from which Solo had come. "Over there a space. Old Crake was comin' back from shippin' some stuff. He was totin' quite a load o' dinero, I figure. This Peaceful gent is as smart as—"

The first man who'd come from the gambling hall was going on. "Peaceful was a-standin' here just starin' off. Suddenlike, he went back in an' began to work them pasteboards. Then he says as how Scarjaw Crake ain't a-goin' to live. Why, you'd figger he could see that ol'

white scar 'long Crake's jaw right plumb smack in them cards."

Solo was certain beyond all doubt. The man he'd seen die was Scarjaw Crake. And this so-called card reader, Peaceful Lume, had just predicted his death. The Kid shoved forward.

"I'd like to meet up with this Peaceful . . . uh . . . gent!" he said.

A figure had appeared in the doorway of the All Aces place. Gray hair, long and sleek, framed his sad face. His eyes peered mildly out from bulbous brows. His lank body was clothed in worn gray. But when he sighted the Kid advancing, his hands galvanized, then hooked down an inch or two, the typical gesture of the hardened gunman spotting a foe.

And Solo Strant was an unforgettable picture to any gent who'd ever met him or had cause to fear him. At casual glance, he was just a trail-worn waddy, half-pint sized, with run-down boots and rusty black clothes.

But there was one thing that marked him. Those patched boots boasted spurs with rowels fashioned from Mex silver dollars. Silver conchas decorated his batwing chaps. The twin Colts that sat in his gun belts at his wasplike waist were silver-stocked. The front of his black shirt sported a double row of buttons of silver.

Above his pointed, sleepy-eyed face, his warped, black sombrero had a silver-spangled band. And, beneath his lean chin hung the final identifying sign, the tiny silver skull, grisly and humanlike, that joined his sombrero strings.

The man in the doorway spread himself, and his hands hooked a mite lower. Solo saw him, had a hand brushing just an inch above one of

his guns across his body in the start of the deadly cross-arm draw.

Solo was ready for any trouble. But the man he wanted it with was that Peaceful Lume, the card reader. There must be the killer of the chasm, the man who *knew* that Scarjaw was already dead. How he knew was what the Kid meant to find out.

"Peaceful Lume! Where's he?" Solo purred in that soft voice that still had the steel of command in it.

The man in the doorway stared, then let his hands drop loosely, as if he had nothing more to fear. And the saddle-bum who'd brought the news spun around and pointed at him.

"Thet there's Peaceful!" he cackled.

Men stepped back instinctively. And Solo's eyes, which had become more sleepy-seeming than ever, flickered wide for a brief instant. For not only did Peaceful Lume *not* bear that bullet-creased gun brand on his hand, but he had a crutch to supplant a leg missing from just below the knee.

Solo knew he couldn't be the killer now. Yet he'd foretold the death. For a moment the Silver Kid felt a strange fear.

CHAPTER III.

A GUN BRAND FOR THE KID.

A BANDY-LEGGED individual with a round, rosy face shoved through authoritatively; there was a lawman's star on his calfskin vest. The flicker of his eyes, as cold-gray as a striking blizzard in the night, belied the soft, chubby look about him. He ranged before Peaceful Lume.

"See here, Lume! What's this newest windy of yores about Scarjaw?" he rasped bluntly.

The long, gray-clad Peaceful bent sad eyes upon him. "I only tell what the cards says, Mr. Lawman. When I told about what I seen in them other times . . . was the cards a-lying?"

Solo saw the face of the lawman—whom he'd already sized up for a hard-headed, hard-bitten citizen—jerk quickly as if stumped by the query. But he repeated his question about Scarjaw Crake.

And Peaceful solemnly repeated the facts which the saddle-bum had yelled about. "The cards tell me that Mr. Crake'll never reach his ranch alive. Mebbe this time the cards have lied. I hope so." With gentle movements he turned and re-entered the gambling den.

Everybody started to gabble away. Solo put a match to his quirly and shrugged off that strange fear he'd felt a moment ago when he'd seen that the crippled Peaceful Lume couldn't be the killer. But that didn't mean he wasn't hooked up with the latter. Maybe the slayer had slipped into town by a back trail down one of those bluffs.

The red-cheeked marshal was checking off facts on stubby fingers. Scarjaw had told him that he aimed to come in and deposit his money that day.

"But I been on the porch o' my house at the foot of the slope there since noon," he went on. "Couldn't no gent come in from any side without my seein' him. I just left the porch a few minutes back. An' nobody rid in here this afternoon—not Scarjaw nor nobody!"

The Kid tautened. It made this Peaceful's claim that he could read cards seem true!

A man spat tobacco juice and swore. "Hang it, Marshal Baker, yuh know Scarjaw'd be comin' in by

the Little Gap Trail along the chasm. Yuh might be able to save him yet!"

The astounded Solo saw the marshal order his two deputies to get horses saddled, saw that the townsmen were taking this card reader's prediction with deadly solemnity.

The Kid made a hair-trigger decision. It was not to tell yet what he'd seen. That half-hypnotized crowd might believe that *he'd* done it. And he'd have a better chance of cornering the killer if he kept silent.

More people came eddying down the street, men elbowing to get into the gambling place to hear Peaceful. The set-up suited the Kid. Folks were too busy to notice a stranger.

He led his pony off. In the reflection of a window he saw that his face was smudged with red clay from the fall on the ledge of the chasm. It made him almost unrecognizable even to himself. Fate had helped there.

Down at the crossroads he saw a little alley that angled off down behind the main line. Solo turned into it and came to a shallow, dried-up creek bed that meandered toward one of the slopes.

Fairly well hidden from sight, the Kid followed it and shortly came to a heap of rubble that marked a long-deserted attempt at mining. A lean-to shack sagged in the shadow of the heap.

Inside he quickly shifted his black shirt for a checkered one in his saddle roll, shed his chaps with the silver conchas, and pulled off his silver-roweled spurs.

Reluctantly he unstrung the silver skull from the chin strings of his hat and pocketed it. Rolling his stuff in a bed tarp, he hid it in the corner, then washed his face in the water of a pothole outside. Then he was ready.

Traipsing back up the alley, he went over to the feed lot and told the fat proprietor to grain his horse, then rub it down.

"Got to sashay down an' see what's the excitement," he said.

"Just forked in, huh?" The proprietor took it for granted. Then a stealthy glitter of fear crossed his eyes, the fear of an hombre who doesn't know what will strike next. He spoke huskily. "Thar's a fella here named Peaceful Lume what reads cards. He just said a gent would die!"

Solo snorted derisively. The livery man sucked on his stogy, then told the story, anxious to unburden himself to somebody.

This Peaceful Lume had drifted in and begun to deal a few hands at the All Aces place, not seeming to care much whether he won or lost. One day he'd mentioned that he could read folks' fortunes in the cards. Then he had warned Flash Lasco, the gambling-hall owner, to be careful when he closed up nights. Three nights later a sniper's slug had barely missed Lasco as he was locking the doors.

"Might've been just some sore cowhand," Solo suggested.

The liveryman shook his head. There was the case of the white-hatted stranger who'd sloped in. Late that evening this Peaceful had read his cards and warned him not to hit the trail again that night. The man had laughed at him.

"Just afore dawn his screams brought us down to the bog beside the trail," the liveryman ended. "Too late to git him out. All we saved was his fancy white hat. An' now Peaceful says Scarjaw Crake'll die!"

Solo was no superstitious fool. He had always smiled at those tales of ghosts and such that men spun

around bed-wagon fires. But he saw one thing. This mild cardman, Peaceful Lume, whether he meant to or not, sure held the town in a thrall of fear. And there was no getting away from the fact that he had foretold Scarjaw Crake's death—though Solo alone knew it.

The Kid straightened. "Seems like this card reader is mighty close to a lot of death fer a gent named 'Peaceful,'" he opined. "Think I'll take a pasear down and give him a look-see."

His hand slid into the pocket where he now toted the silver skull, and rubbed it slowly—which was always a sure-fire omen that the blood sign was due pronto. And the tip-off on it came almost immediately.

There was a bellow of fury from down the road in the direction of the gambling hall. Solo went over a saddle rack at a dead run and got in front just in time to see a hulk of a man beat a little gent from the saddle with a blow of his mighty arm.

The big man was cursing away wrathfully. He jumped down himself, dragged out a Colt, gripped it by the barrel, then dealt the other gent's cayuse a heavy blow in the head. The animal whinnied shrilly in pain as it settled to the knees of its forelegs.

Sickened by the picture of a man who'd attack a horse, the Silver Kid was already running down the uneven sidewalk planks. It was happening smack in front of the broad doorway of the All Aces.

The big gent was a shambling hulk, short-legged and broad-bodied. Clad in baggy clothes, his face was half hidden by a beard stubble. He turned on the little hombre, roaring away.

"So yuh will bust yore broomtail onto me when I'm fixin' to move out o' the hitch rail! Know who I am,

yuh two-bit cull? Brimstone John, a hell-splitting wolf when I'm prodded!" He tacked on some oaths that somehow had a familiar ring to Solo.

The Kid eyed the man, noting his huge, hairy paws that looked as if they could snap a Colt barrel itself in two. There were no marks, much less a fresh wound on those hands.

The little gent, a pin-headed waddy of middle age, picked himself up, then began to dodge backward through the doorway of the All Aces. Brimstone followed. And Solo Strant eased in and along the wall. It began to look like a case of a wind-bellied cuss with a killer streak riding a helpless, scared gent ragged just to show off.

Then it abruptly became more serious. The little gent had backed down into the ell where the green-topped card tables were.

Brimstone John snarled: "Stop an' fill yore hand, yuh lily-livered dog!"

Solo knew he was drawing chips then. Blindingly fast, his hands hooked past each other over his body in the deadly cross-arm draw. He had just touched his silver gun butts.

Then the card-reading gambler, Peaceful Lume, appeared at the foot of those stairs in back. His crutch hit the floor with a crack as he jumped down the last few steps to the bottom. He planted that crutch forward, his long right hand sweeping the tail of his gray coat back to get at the Colt slung on his hip.

"Call him, Brimstone John, and I'm filling *my* hand!"

It seemed loco, this gambler with his gray hair and the crutch trying to make the shambling gent with the beard-thicketed face eat crow.

Brimstone bit off his cursing and backed a little toward the bar as he pivoted to face Peaceful Lume.

The Kid could see Peaceful better now because Brimstone had been be-

tween them. As Brimstone's broad shoulders turned ponderously toward Solo, Peaceful looked like such a pitiful figure.

Brimstone's left arm pistoned down toward the holster with its tip laced to his thigh. It was very still. Then, at the last moment, Peaceful's deep-sunk eyes seemed to light on Solo Strant.

"Wait!" the Kid purred his soft-voiced command. He was about to add that he had the gent covered from behind.

But his words were lost in a jarring rattle of laughter from Brimstone John as the latter's gun arm dropped slack and empty.

"Me, I was only jokin'," Brimstone began. "Ha-ha!"

The All Aces rattled with the crash of a fast-spitting weapon. It was Peaceful's.

Brimstone cried garbled words of surprise as the first slug splintered the floor near his muddy boots. The roar of the gun swallowed the words of the man, who'd showed himself a fourflushing tinhorn.

Solo had his twin weapons half drawn, undecided what to do for once. The place was in an uproar.

Flash Lasco, the proprietor, and his two housemen, who'd been visiting down the way at the back door of the general store with the girl who worked there, came hustling in the rear.

The gambling-hall boss was a gaudily dressed, dapper little gent with the dark, smiling face and liquid eyes that bespoke some Spanish blood. The smile was gone like a fleeting shadow, and his hand was already slicking a .32 from a shoulder hide-out when he saw Peaceful standing there with smoking gun.

"If anybody is shooting at my friend, Peaceful—" Lasco cried hissing.

But the crash of Peaceful Lume's hogleg was again thundering under the low ceiling, following his shot. Whipped half around, Solo lurched against the table as if his right leg had been torn from under him, as if he needed the crutch instead of Peaceful. For the latter's slug had struck the Kid in the thigh.

It all happened in a matter of seconds. The Kid took the table crashing down with him as he fell on hands and knees. Pain raked up his side like a jagged spur. Nausea half blinded him. But even as he'd gone down, the deep-dyed instinct of the veteran gun fighter had made him whip out one of his matched guns. He found the table top rolling between him and the length of the room, cutting off his view.

Lume's gun spoke again and a chunk of wood was notched from the edge of the table top. The Kid started to peep around the rim, his gun-bearing hand moving along the floor in front of him.

It was the first thing to appear in view, the only part of him for a target. Then his hand was emptied of the gun, numbed, gashed, as Lume's Colt exploded a fourth time. The bullet had hit the Kid in the hand.

Solo was vaguely aware of a voice of command barking from the front door. Lume's gun blasted for the final time, sending a wild shot that sprayed plaster from the ceiling above where the wounded Solo lay, as Baker, the town marshal, rushed in.

It was Baker's rasping voice that had called from the doorway. He and his deputies had been at the edge of the town, bringing back Scarjaw Crake's body, when the gun ruckus had begun.

Baker at once took command, covering the place with his own long-

barreled weapon as the crippled Solo tried to rise.

But it was Peaceful Lume who, with remarkable agility on his crutch, was the first beside the Silver Kid and tried to help him up. The gambler babbled away, berating himself for being all kinds of a fool.

"I thought it was a trick and that Brimstone was going to draw anyway. Then I shot and it didn't seem like I could stop that dratted smoke pole! That gun just ran plumb haywire and hog-wild!"

Solo scarcely heard his words of regret. The Kid was staring at his own wounded right hand. Peaceful's apparently wild bullet had left a red streak across the back of it. Solo bore his own fatal gun brand!

CHAPTER IV.

SICKROOM GUN FIGHT.

USING an old door as a stretcher, they took Solo Strant up the road to the marshal's house. Peaceful Lume was walking by his side and vowing to kill himself if Solo was crippled.

But the crowd was more excited over the news that Scarjaw Crake had been found dead, as Peaceful Lume had predicted. It was the third time the gambler had forecast doom from the cards. He held the town in the palm of his hand by his strange power.

Up at the marshal's, the doc was summoned. The Kid still had enough control of his senses to make certain that his prized guns were on the chair beside his bed. But he went through an agony of torment verging on unconsciousness before the doc got that slug out of his leg.

His senses swam and faded into a swirl of delirium, though he kept his teeth clinched against crying out. He seemed to be in that gun battle

with the Red Draver bunch up at Caslow again, trying to pluck fresh cartridges from his gun belt as the other weapon bucked in his hot hand.

Then the picture faded like fogging smoke, and he was back in the room of the marshal's home. The doc was strapping up his thigh with torn cloth and saying that the bullet had just missed the bone. Solo felt his creased hand being bandaged after that.

Somebody forced hot coffee between his lips. The marshal let himself down into a creaking chair to watch him. And the Kid lay there with heavy-lidded eyes closed, trying to figure out things. The problem of the killer of Scarjaw Crake still hadn't been answered.

He forced his lips to form words to the sitting lawman. "Yuh . . . yuh found that . . . that murdered hombre?" he asked.

Baker's rosy, round face betrayed nothing. "Found Scarjaw. But who said he'd been murdered, mister?"

The Kid was so surprised and weakened he said no more. He was still sure that the killer was some place near. The bullet brand on the hand would tell him. And he was equally certain that he was unknown to the killer. Facing the glaring sun, as the latter had been across that gap, he couldn't have gotten a good look at Solo's face.

The changing of his rig since he'd forked in made it impossible for the killer to identify him by his silver trappings. Solo couldn't see any reason why anybody would want to gun him, therefore. He thought some more of Peaceful Lume's wild shooting and dozed off.

When he woke it was broad daylight, with the room sweltering under the fierce play of the sun on the tin roof. From the front room came the

solemn voice of Peaceful Lume. Then the Kid heard the raspy tones of Baker, the marshal.

"Well, I'll go down to the jail an' let Brimstone John loose. Reckon he should've learned his lesson now fer threatenin' little Hinnerman." His boot heels rattled on the front steps.

When Solo's eyelids raised heavily again, he realized that Lume was in the room. Then he saw that the card man was toying with one of his silver-stocked guns, his head half turned as he listened. The Kid went steel-stiff under the thin blanket.

The next moment the kitchen door opened from the back yard. Baker, the marshal, stuck in his head and said that he'd turned back because he saw the doc coming up.

Peaceful Lume nodded calmly. "Right pretty pair of weapons this ranny's got, eh?" he said.

The doc changed the bandage on the Kid's leg. Afterward they all left, and the Kid got himself propped up in the bed, then worked that chair with his guns closer. It was only some sixth sense warning him. But he didn't intend to be asleep the next time the gentle-speaking gambler called.

Solo studied that bullet brand—always his own way of marking a man—that Peaceful had put on his hand. And he decided to tell Baker what he'd seen across that chasm.

But it was not to be that way. One of the deputies brought him his dinner along about dusk and lighted a lamp in the room. The marshal had gone out to North Fork to see about some rustled cow stuff.

The deputy said he'd drop back later, that he had to keep an eye on things in the town, what with that Brimstone John setting up free red-eye to celebrate his release from jail.

Solo did some more waiting. It
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was a game he hated to play. As night settled, the uproar from the town increased, welling out of the pocket in the hills. Then, as his eyelids drooped heavily, the Kid sensed a tapping noise in the next room, above the regular chirp of a cricket.

It came again, and Solo shook off his drowsiness. He noticed a recurring sliver of light from the town through the closed shutters of the window. It came to him that somebody was trying to force these shutters to get in.

Grimly the Silver Kid edged his legs over to the floor. Using the chair and dragging it along like a crutch with one hand, his cocked gun in the other, he inched his way to the window. The scraping sound from without continued.

Carefully the Kid unbolted one of the shutters, then snapped it outward with his gunsight and rammed the muzzle almost into the nose of the shadowy figure outside. It was the little, pin-headed gent whom Brimstone had called down in the All Aces, the man whom the marshal had called Hinnerman.

Hinnerman lowered the gun barrel he'd used as a pry and spoke in a husky whisper. "Strant, yuh gotta git out o' here! Some gents are comin' to see you! They ain't friends!"

The Kid's eyes, catlike at night, raked the darkness. "Mebbe Peaceful Lume, eh, amigo?" He supposed that the man was there to pay off the debt for Solo's stepping in against Brimstone John.

Hinnerman's little eyes grew as blank as stone, and his teeth met with a determined click. He was scared, worried. Yet there was something about him far different from the terror-gutted little creature whom Brimstone John had backed to the wall at the gambling hall. Even though he was afraid of some-

thing, there was a dangerous hardness about him now.

"Ain't saying," he snapped. When the Kid started to ask him how he knew, Hinnerman's eyes jerked away. "Just drift out o' here less'n you want 'em to stake you a six-foot range on boothill!" His final words were almost drowned in the uproar of celebrating from the town.

Solo lifted his cocked gun. He wasn't the kind that took a powder from anybody or anything. "Mebbe I might stop more lead myself, but I'd take a couple of 'em with me!"

Hinnerman's small head kept jerking around to survey the darkness. "Not a chance. Ain't been rain around here fer weeks. This shack'd go up like tinder. They'd burn you down like a crippled coyote when yuh tried to git out—an' afore anybody'd git here from the—"

He broke off, straining his ears as he thrust his head toward the darkness at one side. But the Kid saw the sense of what he said. And he saw, too, that Hinnerman knew a heap more than he was saying. Solo nodded and started to back away, but almost foundered on his bad leg.

Little Hinnerman snaked over the window sill and gave the Kid a hand in getting into his clothes. He brought a piece of firewood in from the kitchen for Solo to use as a cane.

"Now, if I had a horse," the Kid began.

But Hinnerman was suddenly aware that the lamp had been on and the shutters open all the time. He cursed and was at the window in a single skulking motion. Solo tried to thank him.

"Drift," the other whispered from the ground, and was gone.

Solo headed for the rear door. And a dry twig outside snapped crisply. In the kitchen, with one Colt ready, Solo reached for the door handle.

But the portal began to swing toward him slowly. Backing in a short arc, the Kid moved with the door until he was against a cabinet standing there, hidden.

The door stopped just beyond his gun muzzle. The darker blot of a figure advanced into the place. A low whistle came from out in front of the marshal's place.

Solo heard the figure standing a foot from him draw in his breath to answer it, made out his tensed hand holding a Colt in the wan beam of moonlight from without. Then the Kid struck, slashing down with his own gun at that other weapon. He didn't aim at the man's hand because he didn't want him to cry out.

There was a quick ring of metal on metal, the thud of the gun as it dropped onto a chair. The man whirled. But before he could cry out, the swift-moving Kid had rammed his gun muzzle into the man's shirt.

"Grab yoreself a chunk o' sky, amigo!" the Kid ordered.

The man's knuckles banged the rafters of the low-roofed kitchen in the blackness. Solo began to back him into the bedroom he'd left.

"You Strant?" the man asked hoarsely.

"Shut down!" Solo warned him, lest he tip off the other.

They moved into the room that Solo had just left. The Kid ordered the man to turn around, then put the gun in his back. His tall body blocked out the low light of the lamp with its smudged chimney.

"Now crawl into that bed an' pull the blanket high over yuh!" Solo purred in that velvety voice that signified danger. He backed his command with the cold click of the cocking of his gun hammer.

Sullenly the hombre shucked his sombrero and obeyed. Before he

climbed under the blanket he tried to get a look at his captor, and revealed that one of his eyes had a cast in it. But Solo had faded back into the darkness of the doorway.

In the front of the house a board creaked. A shadowy form appeared in the doorway at the front end of the bedroom. Studying the prone figure in the bed that he took for Solo Strant, he sucked in his breath audibly. He leaped across the room with a tremendous spring, clubbing up a gun barrel.

Solo saw that it was the beard-stubbed Brimstone, and was stunned for a moment. It seemed impossible that this gent, who'd showed himself a fourflusher once, packed the nerve to come for him.

Then Brimstone was on the figure in the bed, clubbing down with his weapon before his own partner could cry out. Brimstone batted him unconscious, then stepped back, puffing, to shove his gun mouth against the now quiet, blanketed figure. Solo swung into the room; he couldn't let even a lobo murder a friend in cold blood.

"Hoist 'em, yuh two-bit coyote!" the Kid commanded.

Brimstone whirled and stared as if seeing a ghost. He tore back the blanket and saw what he'd done. Then he sneered at the Kid without hoisting his paws. He seemed suddenly loco as he lumbered unhurriedly straight at him.

Solo hesitated but a moment longer. He hated to kill any man. "Stop or I'll drill you, Brimstone!"

He yanked the trigger. And nothing happened as he caught a flat, hollow sound when the firing pin struck empty shells. His guns were worthless, bulletless.

Brimstone's gun roared twice. One slug ripped the door inches from Solo. The second knifed through

the sleeve of the checkered shirt the Kid was now wearing.

It looked as though Solo was cornered. But the ever-cool Kid had been in tight places before. Lashing out with the stick he had for a cane, he shattered the chimney of the lamp on the table, extinguishing it. In the darkness, despite his injured leg, he managed to turn and scuttle back into the kitchen.

Brimstone lunged after him, guffawing. Solo realized that the other knew his guns would be empty. Seizing a chair, he sent it spinning behind him into Brimstone's path. There was a snorted oath as the latter tripped. The Kid tried to make it through that door.

But from the corner of his eye he saw Brimstone reared on his knees and knew it would be suicide to step into the patch of moonlight that filtered in.

Then, in that moonlight, the Kid saw the gun he'd beaten from the hand of the tall hombre when the man first came in. Solo flung himself to the floor on his good knee, clutching for the hogleg as he put the table between himself and Brimstone John. The latter straightened.

He leaped in to fire. Clawing for that gun, the Kid fired, too. His powder flash seemed to become enchaind with that from Brimstone's gun in midair. A slug horneted past Solo's ear. Then he saw Brimstone sprawl, a red gash on his head in the moonlight as Solo's bullet cut his scalp.

The Kid retreated out into the night, listened a moment to the uproar from the town's street. His own senses were reeling, but he steadied himself. Inside, Brimstone was rising slowly, and his partner, the tall one, was calling out from the other room.

Solo thumbd shells from his car-

tridge belt into one of his silver-stocked guns. The weapon's mate lay in there, dropped when he grabbed up the gun from the floor. He inspected this new gun. It was an odd smoke pole, a high-powered .32-20 mounted on a regulation .45-caliber frame.

Solo saw a dim form flit by the opened door. He pumped four shots through the door with that weapon, just to discourage pursuit for a while. The weapon clicked empty, and the Kid realized that it would be no more use to him, since his shells wouldn't fit it. Still, he jammed it into his waistband.

Then he moved off across the shaly slope. These coyotes were small fry who could be handled later. For the Kid knew the only man who'd had the opportunity to empty his guns, remembered seeing him holding one of them. That was Peaceful Lume.

CHAPTER V.

WITCHCRAFT OVER WINDFALL.

THE Kid moved in a semicircle, cursing himself because it took him so long to cover a little ground. But he had to get to his pony. Behind, the marshal's house lay as still as death as those two killers tried to figure out where he was.

Working down the slope, the Kid got around to the feed lot and found a sign on the barn that the boss was at the All Aces. That suited the Kid's plans. After he'd gotten his saddle off the rack, a low whistle brought the rested paint horse obediently trotting over. Saddling, Solo dragged himself by force of his arms into the saddle.

When he peered around the corner of the barn it was just in time to see a man move out of the moonlight down at the bridge at the other end of the road. The Kid smiled grimly.

The hunt was on already! They were setting the trap to nab a crippled cowboy if he tried to get away. And it would mean certain trouble to try to scale those hills, now dyed with moonlight.

But Solo wasn't pulling stakes. He meant to sit in on this Peaceful's game. He rode behind the corral. On the side street, a giant eucalyptus shaded a section from the light of the moon. He made his crossing there unobserved and was soon down back of the sprawling All Aces.

From atop his horse he could look into the upper half of the windows, could see the throng of men seething around the bar. The crowd parted an instant, and the Kid had a glimpse of the benign gray head of Peaceful himself as he dealt a game of draw.

The Kid worked his horse closer, moving him over to a clump of ponies at an extra hitch rail that handled the overflow from the front road. He was trying to figure some way to make that card-reading gambler show his hand.

Boots rattled tin cans in the back yard of the place next door. Men were coming. Brimstone John's thick voice carried to Solo. And when he twisted the other way in the saddle he saw a couple of men as they passed through the glow behind a barroom over there. Brimstone called out to them.

"Ain't seen hide ner hair o' him," one of them answered.

Flash Lasco appeared at the back door. Brimstone went up to him, a bit of bandage showing beneath his slouch hat in the yellow light.

"Just like I said," Brimstone said. "I got to feelin' it was my fault this Strant fella got shot up, an' went up to make peace with him. But he took a shot at me an' lit out, sayin' he was goin' to git Peaceful!" That

was his version of the ruckus at the marshal's house. "An' crippled like he is, he must be some place in town!"

"No one will kill Peaceful," Lasco said curtly. He said he'd keep one man with him as a guard, and warned Brimstone to look around carefully.

The Kid still hated the idea of fogging it as he saw the men spread out. With cool daring he reached up to a low branch of the tree and drew himself up into the mask of the foliage. He was trapped like a rat if one of them found him.

But they failed to see him as they prowled about, even down to the horse shed. Brimstone led them out front to scour the town again. Still, the Kid couldn't descend. For the houseman who was staying behind with Lasco was stationed just outside the back door, smoking steadily, one hand ever on his holster.

The hours crept for the Kid in his cramped perch in the tree. But finally the crowd thinned more and more inside. Shutters began to be closed. All but one light went out on the first floor of the gambling hall. Then Lasco came out back, spoke, and the houseman on guard reentered with him.

His limbs numb with stiffness, the Kid began to lower himself. Then he forgot all about leaving the tree. For a lamp had glowed into life in a rear room on the second floor. And Peaceful Lume was in that room, swinging over on his crutch to open the window.

Back at the table again, he began to toy with a deck of cards. Solo not only commanded a perfect view of the room, but could even hear the flutter of the pasteboards in the stillness that had settled.

There was a knock on the door and a stubby man, nervously twid-

dling the gold nugget on his watch fob, came in. Peaceful began speaking.

"Tonger, when I ran off yore cards before, I said I didn't see nothin' in 'em. Well, I lied. I couldn't believe what I saw. I'm going to read them again, mister."

Awed, as if partaking in some solemn rite, Tonger sat, shuffled once, then drew three as directed. The gambler went through more shuffling and dealing in separate stacks, then spread them out. As he began to speak in an unreal voice, it was plain to the spying Solo what a grip he had on the faith of these town-folks.

"There it is again, Tonger. The same card. I see a man breaking into your place by a window. I see him moving toward your cash till. I see—"

Tonger leaped up, his eyes bulging. "That means I'm going to be robbed? My money taken?" he squeaked.

Peaceful nodded gravely. "It seems, in the cards, as if it is almost dawn, perhaps. Tonight, or maybe tomorrow night. One cannot tell *everything* from the cards."

Tonger paced the floor. He acted as if an unescapable curse had been put on him. He mumbled something once about how Peaceful had said that Scarjaw Crake would die and how he had.

"What am I goin' to do?" he moaned.

It was the question for which Peaceful had been waiting. "Why not lay for him? You, your brother, and your father. Leave the shutters unbarred. Then, when he walks in, blast down on him. I'm almost sure it will be soon . . . even tonight. You'll have him dead to rights!"

Outside, Solo heard everything. And he knew then that this Peaceful

Lume was a fraud, that he was no more reading those pasteboards than he was flying. Yet by foretelling death, he had worked a magic of witchcraft over Windfall.

Tonger's head bobbed. "All right. All right. I'll do that. O' course, the cards . . . they might be wrong," he added.

Peaceful paid no attention. He acted as certain as if he was going to send the robber there himself. "For your own protection," he ordered, "say nothing about it to anyone until I tell you to!"

Tonger nodded as he left. "Only you an' me know about it, Peaceful! I won't breathe a word till you say so."

But he was wrong. Out in that tree, Solo Strant knew. And this time he meant to be sitting in on the game when Peaceful's prediction came off.

CHAPTER VI.

A RESCUE.

TONGER came downstairs and out the rear door, walking almost directly under Solo to his barroom, which was a few doors down. A light went on in its back room. The Kid marked the place. And when, a few minutes later, a couple of wild-eyed waddies started a brawl in front of the All Aces, the Kid slid stiffly from the tree and into the saddle of his paint.

Cautiously the Silver Kid guided his horse away from the place, toward the base of the hill frowning down on that side. The moon had already waned, and scudding clouds dimmed its face. In a hollow, Solo ground-anchored his pony behind a huge old stump. He had a view of the All Aces where Peaceful was, and of the back of the Tonger place. Then he settled down to wait.

The night was more than half gone. Solo didn't have to wait long before the darkness thinned to a grayish light and a yellow glow spread from the eastern hills. Shortly he caught the faint clink of bridle chains. He thought he saw a horse shift behind a rise. A moment after, he glimpsed a hunched figure gliding to a clump of brush, afoot now. The man vanished. But the tall grass ahead swayed as the man advanced toward Tonger's place.

In the half light, Solo moved, paralleling the other's course, though he could no longer see him. He was almost dead certain that the gent had been sent by Peaceful. The scrape of a spur on stone came to him.

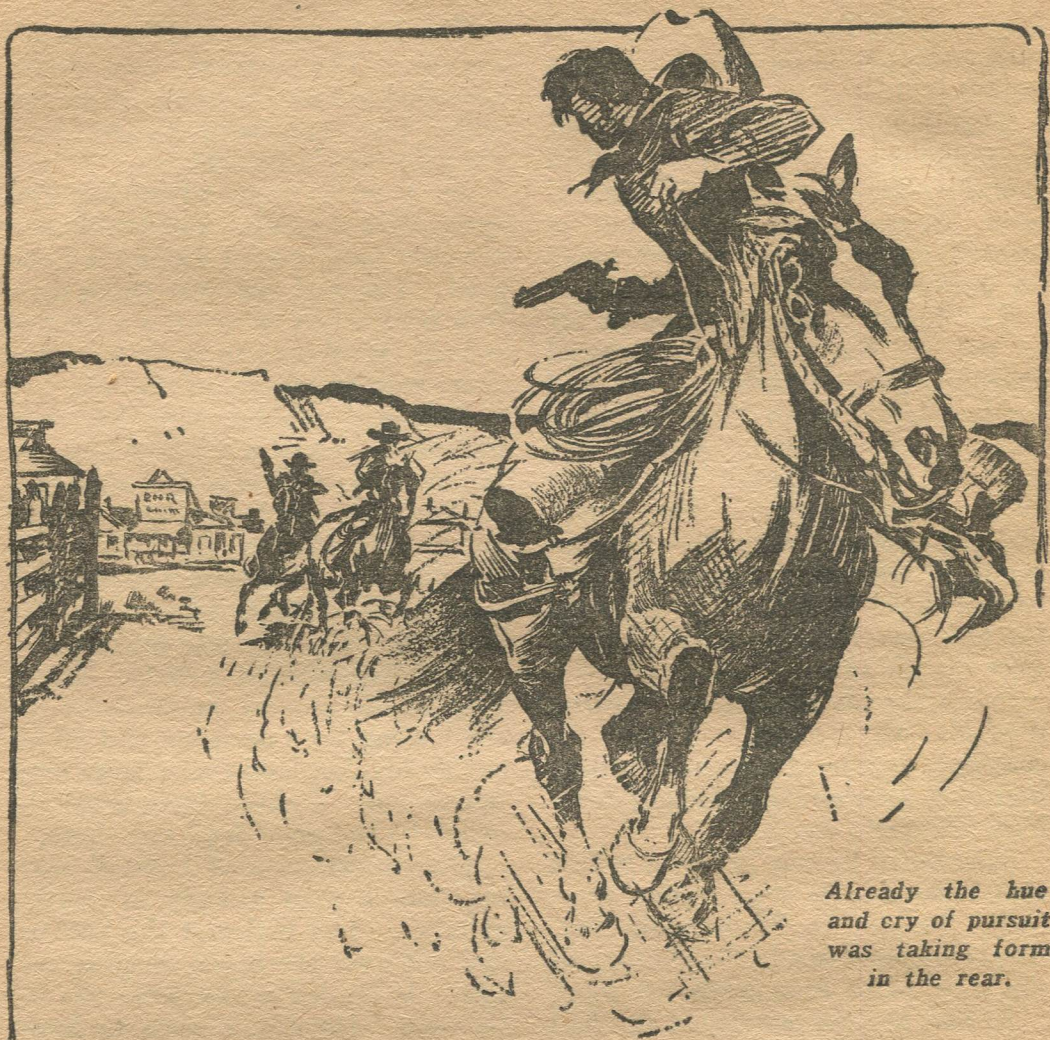
The Kid strained his eyes through the patches of ground mist that was being whisked about by the chill breeze. And the figure appeared, racing through that mist, almost at one of those sets of shutters in the back wall of the barroom.

Solo didn't want him blasted to bits by those he knew were likely waiting. Candidates for boothill can't answer questions. And the Kid had a heap of questions to ask. Stiffly he advanced with cocked gun.

The other was prying at the shutters. Then the earth opened up and seemed to erupt gunfire, even as Solo was about to cry out to the man that he was covered.

The man jerked back as if he'd stuck his face into hell's own oven. From inside the shutters, yellow-red slashes of gunfire showed. The man turned, pawing at a red-running cheek. And Solo saw that it was little Hinnerman. He was plainly astonished at walking into a trap.

Hinnerman began to return the fire as he backed away. The door opened and stubby Tonger appeared



*Already the hue
and cry of pursuit
was taking form
in the rear.*

in it, working a big Colt hard. Deadly calm, Solo tried to bawl through the roar of lead. Then he triggered and sent a shell buzzing close to Tonger to drive him back inside.

But another weapon joined the battle, barking from a shed in the rear. Struck, Hinnerman doubled over and reeled as he ran. Another blast came from the shed. Dropping to a knee, Solo sent two shells drilling high into the shed. He didn't want to hit anybody. But he didn't want this Hinnerman silenced forever, either.

"It's that Strant fella!" yelled

Tonger as he recognized the Kid through a rift in the ground mist.

Solo spun to signal to him to stop shooting. For answer, he got a slug through the warped brim of his hat. Then he saw that Hinnerman had gone. Jerking around, the Kid was in time to see him plunge into the tall grass, heading back for his pony. Solo took after him, two slugs biting around his heels.

But he was handicapped by his leg. Realizing that he wouldn't overtake the other, the Kid veered toward his own cayuse. He made it, swung into the saddle, and saw Hinnerman fork out from behind the rise

over near the foot of the slope. Solo drummed his heels on the paint's flanks.

That gun from the shed spoke just as Hinnerman bolted away. And it was a rifle. Hinnerman's horse almost went down, letting out a screech of pain. Then the man drove on, Solo tearing after him.

The fugitive wasn't going to try to get up the slope. He veered sharply after a hundred yards and headed for the backs of the buildings along the main road. Already the hue and cry of pursuit was taking form in the rear. Hinnerman plunged down an alley between two frame shacks, hit the road, and turned down it to the bridge over the morass. He rode as if the devil were on his tail.

Solo's cayuse slipped while going through the alley. When he emerged, a pair of horsemen riding bareback were already flinging down from Tonger's place.

Solo knew he would be in a bad spot himself if he were caught now, unless he got to Hinnerman first. The Kid called low to Sorghum, and the wiry paint tore down the road.

A scud of mist enveloped the Kid a moment. When he came out of it he was near the bridge, and saw Hinnerman, across it, suddenly swing his cayuse into the bog.

When he got down there, with the mist drifting across the road thicker than ever, the Kid did the same thing. Little clumps and hummocks of solid ground formed a faint, treacherous path into the fastnesses of the swamp. Soon he was among trees, half of them dead, standing like weary skeletons. Behind he heard the hastily assembled pursuit go pounding past and out toward the mesa, never believing for an instant that any man would risk the swamp.

The Kid came upon Hinnerman's cayuse. The animal was down, sprawled across the roots of an up-ended tree, breathing its last from the rifle slug in its side.

At a walk now, advancing gingerly, Solo went on. The barely discernible path angled around a dank pool. The Kid was just going up a tiny peak when he heard a strangled sound. It seemed to come from the sheer wall of foliage on the left.

The Kid probed with his arm, parted the heavy, wet leaves and saw Hinnerman. The man had stumbled off the path and landed in a spot of quicksand. He was only visible from the waist up, the pressure of the stuff having forced most of the wind from his body. His face was greenish.

The Kid worked swiftly. Dropping to the ground, he loosened the cinch strap for a moment, slid off his saddle blanket, and tied a large knot in one end. Kicking down brush, he called to the poor devil out there.

Hinnerman seemed beyond hearing, like a man already in death's clutches. The Kid cast the knotted end out over the black, seeping surface. It landed a foot from the little man. He didn't seem to know it was there.

Again Solo threw. The knot struck Hinnerman's little head. It roused him for a moment. His glassy eyes stirred. Then instinct made him wrap his arms around the blanket knot. Stepping back, Solo took a dally around the saddle horn with the other end, then spoke to the well-trained paint.

Digging its hoofs deep, yet moving but by inches as the strain tautened, the horse advanced. For a long moment it seemed as if the blanket would rip. Then there was a sucking sound, and Hinnerman's body rose a little from the swamp. It was a long job. Twice Hinnerman lost

his grip. But finally he was out, gasping, prone on the ground beside the Kid.

Solo saw that the man had been wounded in the side, just below the left lung. The slug hadn't emerged. As Solo examined it, Hinnerman's eyes opened and, after a moment, he recognized the Kid.

Solo bent close and spoke very distinctly. "Peaceful Lume told Tonger his place was a-goin' to be robbed, amigo."

Hinnerman's mouth jerked, and his sun-bleached eyebrows climbed. He shook his head feebly in disbelief.

"I heard him," Solo said. "Why do yuh suppose the Tongers were ready waitin' fer you? How do yuh figure I happened to be there, if that ain't the truth?"

Hinnerman coughed hollowly and lay thinking. Then he began to nod. "I . . . I sabe. I sabe. Peaceful sent me there . . . an' it was a double cross, huh? Reckon he learned I warned yuh that time. Mebbe I kin deal him the same kind o' cards." His voice drifted off and he sagged back.

Then the Kid knew that Hinnerman was one of Peaceful Lume's band. Yet he bore no bullet brand on either hand. It could not have been he who had killed Scarjaw Crake back there in the chasm.

CHAPTER VII.

SOLO MEETS THE MURDERER.

SOLO saw that he'd have to get the little gun slinger some place pronto. He managed to hoist him into the saddle. Then, limping alongside, he let Sorghum have its head, knowing that an animal can pick solid ground.

It was mid-morning when they came out of the swamp, followed a tiny creek, and finally stumbled over

a line rider's camp. Getting Hinnerman onto the bunk, Solo heated water and dressed the wound as well as he could. He found a flask of redeye in the man's pocket and worked some through his lips. Hinnerman's eyes opened and he reached for the bottle and took a deep swallow.

"Now I'm payin' back Peaceful Lume!" He jabbed a weak finger at Solo. "Peaceful knew who yuh were all the time. The minute he heared a gent with silver trappin's had seen the killin' at the chasm, he said it was the Silver Kid. Seems he was with the Red Draver bunch you run out o' Caslow one time."

Solo remembered that. And he understood now how Peaceful had figuratively had the drop on him all the time, and why he wanted him out of the picture. Hinnerman was talking on, telling how Peaceful's game was all a fake.

"We've worked it afore in other towns. Once folks believes he kin read them cards, he's got 'em in the palm of his hand."

It had been one of Peaceful's partners who had taken the sniping shot at Lasco to make that first prediction come true. That white-hatted rider who had drifted into town had been recognized as a wanted man by Peaceful. It had been simple to tell him that the marshal knew this and was going to grab him, then to lead him off into the swamp under pretense of helping him escape. There they had dropped him into the morass with a gun blow over the head after Peaceful had predicted that it would be fatal for him to ride. Then had come Scarjaw Crake.

"Who finished him?" Solo put in. Hinnerman's mouth shut hard. "That gent ain't sold me down the line that I know of. I ain't a rat. I—" He fell back from weakness.

Solo nursed strength back into him with more of the redeye. Hinnerman roused himself and talked some more, though his voice was weaker.

The ruckus between him and Brimstone and Peaceful in the All Aces had been a frame-up. After Peaceful learned that the killing at the chasm had been witnessed, he had staged the fight to make it seem as if Brimstone was no friend of either his or Hinnerman.

When Solo heard that, he thought he knew the killer—Brimstone. Then he remembered that the man's hands bore no bullet brand.

"Then Peaceful recognized yuh," the little man said, "an' tried to git yuh, makin' it look like it was an accident!"

When they had plotted to burn down Solo as he lay in bed wounded, it had been too much for Hinnerman. After all, the Kid had stepped in to protect him in that gun ruckus, believing it to have been real.

"One of 'em must 'a' seen me slip-pin' away"—Hinnerman's voice was getting huskier and fainter—"an' figured . . . I'd warned yuh. Then Peaceful cold-decked me so the Tongers'd burn me down."

Hinnerman's head rolled slackly on the cot. Solo gave him the last few drops of the redeye.

The Kid savvied a heap of things now. Peaceful's game was to intimidate the town by his seeming card magic. It was easy to predict things when you yourself arranged to have them done. The cardman had Windfall under his spell.

Just to think of how he'd arranged to avenge himself on Hinnerman made Solo's blood run cold. It was going to be hard to get the goods on this Peaceful. Solo had a hunch he wouldn't have his man trapped with

proof until he learned who was the slayer of Scarjaw Crake.

Hinnerman's mouth bubbled and he got out a thin curse. "I'm goin' . . . cashin' my chips, fella. An' now I won't git revenged on Peaceful."

Solo gripped his arm. "I'll take care o' that Peaceful."

The Kid knew that Hinnerman was an outlaw. But the Kid hated double-crossings like this. And Hinnerman had done his best to save him from a dry-gulching once.

But Hinnerman wobbled his head negatively, his face already gray. His eyes lighted with an idea, and he asked for paper and pencil.

The Kid found a blank sheet of paper in an old tally book on the shelf, a pencil stub as well. He propped up the mortally wounded man with his arm while the latter printed out a few words.

Hinnerman told Solo to read it. The note said:

Peaceful double-crossed me. He sent me to rob Tonger after tellin him I was comin. The gent with this tried to save my hide.

HINNY.

"That last part," Hinnerman croaked faintly, "that'll take care o' yuh. He won't hurt yuh when he knows that." He only shook his head when Solo wanted to know who "he" was.

Then he told the Kid where to take it, describing a place on the hill behind Windfall. Solo recognized it as the cabin he'd noticed the day he'd entered the town.

"Just yell out that I sent yuh when yuh see the gent there," Hinnerman finished. "Then . . . then there won't be no shootin'. I saved this gent from a hangin' once. He'll take care o' Peaceful fer me. Now . . . ride off now . . . while I kin

still see yuh . . . so I'll know it'll be done!"

Hinnerman's face was aglow with the fanatic desire for vengeance. Wrapping him in his blanket and leaving some water beside him, the Kid went out and forked for Windfall, the note tucked in the sweatband of his sombrero. Though it might be risky, he intended to deliver that message, because he saw that it would show him another member of Peaceful's bunch.

Up the creek he swung onto a trail that curved toward the town. Later, at a sod buster's shack, he bought some stale Dutch-oven bread and a chunk of jerked beef to munch on.

The Kid realized that if he were seen near the town, they might try to grab him for the attempt on Tonger's place. But luck was with him in the form of a fine, yet thick drizzle, like a dense mist draining from the heavens, even as he sighted the big butte outside Windfall.

The Kid found a path that mounted gradually up a spur of one of those hills that almost hemmed in the town. When he got higher he could see down through the misty rain. There was a small crowd before the town bank, and something seemed to be wrong.

Higher, he rounded a bend by a clump of trees and saw the weather-beaten little place which Hinnerman had described. Behind it was a corral containing a dozen or so horses. As he reined up, Solo called out a couple of times, but there was no answer.

Leaving his paint in the trees, the Kid walked slowly toward the cabin, one gun bared. There were no signs of life, no smoke issuing from the chimney now. He mounted the broken-down steps awkwardly with his injured leg held stiff, then shoved

open the door. There were only a few pieces of rough furniture inside, a table with some greasy dishes, a spade bit, and a bucket of water.

On tiptoe he crossed to the cubbyhole in the rear, saw there was nothing much there but a couple of Teton pole bunks. For some reason his fingers went to that spot at his throat where his silver skull usually hung, a sure-fire sign of trouble ahead. Then he saw why he had the premonition of danger. Over on the window sill lay a Colt with a silver butt, the gun Solo had lost in the fight with Brimstone and his partner at the marshal's house.

It hit the Kid like a swat between the eyes. He was in Brimstone's place. Little Hinnerman, his brain befogged by approaching death, half-crazed by his hunger for vengeance, had sent him to one of his mates in the lobo bunch.

Even as the Kid turned, horses swung into the yard. A glance showed him that it was Brimstone and the tall man with the cast in one eye. Praying that his paint over in the woods wouldn't nicker, he just had time to shove the door of the back room shut before they entered. He commanded a view through a crack between the planks.

Brimstone swaggered in, his face smeared with dirt from a fall he'd taken from his cayuse. Saying that he was mighty glad the rain was breaking, he proceeded to strip off his coat, roll up his sleeves, and splash water from the bucket on his face.

The spying Silver Kid was startled. For Brimstone's bared arms revealed the raw furrow of a bullet crease just above the wrist of his shooting hand. It was a spot usually covered by his shirt sleeves. Solo knew it was his own bullet brand. He realized then that that

day at the chasm the glare of the sun had thrown off his deadly aim just enough so that he had failed to lead-mark his man where he usually did, across the back of the gun hand.

Brimstone John was the man who'd choked Scarjaw Crake to his death! Solo went cold with fury!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KID TAKES A HAND.

WIPING water from his beard stubble, Brimstone brought down a bottle of redeye from a shelf, chortling as though he were already celebrating some victory. Behind the door, his eager thumb trembling over a gun hammer, the Kid decided to wait and listen.

"Things are all set. I better give Peaceful the signal," he said. Moving to the fireplace, he booted aside old ashes and began to build a fire.

The tall hombre, sprawled at the table, gulped down a drink. "I don't like the look o' things," he spat.

Brimstone sneered as Solo saw him reach for some freshly cut green wood as he got the blaze started.

"What's the matter? That Strant fella got run out o' town last night, though I cain't figger that. Baker, the marshal, got that fake message we sent that thar was a killin' out at the JP spread, an' he rode right off. Now all I gotta do is give Peaceful the signal—three long puffs of smoke—to tell him the rest of the boys is slopin' in. Then we go ahead with the plans tonight like we figured. Easy!"

He reached for an old blanket as the green wood sizzled and smoldered, pouring off heavy, thick smoke with little, low flame. He shoved the blanket in to block the opening of the small chimney a moment. Smoke clouded the room. He pulled out the blanket to let a long

puff eddy up the chimney, counting as he did so.

"Two puffs." He slapped the blanket into the chimney again. "There goes three. Just like I did it to tip off Peaceful that I'd finished that Scarjaw." He sloshed water on the fire to put it out.

Behind the door, the Kid had just guessed how he'd been fooled when he was back-trailing Scarjaw's killer. Brimstone hadn't gone into the town at all, but had cut off the trail to come to his place on the hill and give Peaceful the smoke signal. It had been a crafty trick.

Solo was thinking fast, knowing that at last the tables had been turned. The Kid craved action. But he wanted to know what the plans for that night were.

The tall gent on the other side of the door unwittingly aided him. "Wish I knew what'd happened to Hinnerman."

Brimstone shrugged, saying that maybe Henny had got cold feet. He went on to explain things as if dealing with a child.

"Look—it's easy. We cain't miss. Peaceful's got folks eatin' plumb out o' his hand after his predictions always come true. This mornin' he tells a few folks that the cards says the bank is goin' bust, an' they'd better take out their dinero."

Solo remembered the throng he'd seen milling before the bank, guessed they'd been drawing their money.

"Now, I rode out to the coulee camp this mornin' an' told the boys to come in," Brimstone went on. "They git here round dark. All we have to do is slip in an' take that dinero certain folks has in their homes 'stead of in the bank."

He chortled some more and explained how much easier it was than holding up a bank itself. Peaceful was going to handle the getting of

that Flash Lasco's money himself. He meant to get that and move out before they struck anywhere else.

The Kid knew all he needed to know then. Stepping back, he took that second gun of his off the window ledge and slipped fresh shells into it.

"Mebbe we won't have to do no gunnin', huh?" said the tall, worried man on the other side of the door.

The Kid ripped the door open and slid stiffly through it in one motion. His cocked guns swiveled a little to cover them both.

"No, amigos, I got one strong feelin' you two won't have to do no gunnin'!" He mimicked their last words.

Brimstone was seated so that his burly back was to the Kid. And Brimstone just froze, caught as he was in the way he liked to get other men, from behind. The tall man started to rise, hesitated halfway up. Then he made a desperate dive for a shoulder holster.

Solo's left gun licked out a tongue of savage flame and the bullet horneted scarcely an inch from the man's ear. He pushed his trembling arms high and backed, shaking his head in a mute, frantic plea not to shoot again. But Brimstone played for a break as the gun roared in the little cabin. Without rising, he flung himself and his chair backward against the Kid.

The Kid was smashed back against the wall hard. A dishpan that had been hanging from a nail slid off and crashed off the side of his head. Brimstone spun, going for a holster. But the Kid knew that the coyote would make the play with his left dewclaw because of the flesh wound which he, Solo, had put on his right. And Solo slashed with one of his gun barrels, crushing that left hand down past the gun it was going for.

Solo's eyes seemed sleepier-looking than ever as he stepped clear and covered them. He made them face the wall, then quickly stripped them both of their weapons. After that he made the tall gent tie up Brimstone with some pigging strings in the cabin. Next he bound the former himself.

He herded them into the back room, taking no pains to be particularly gentle when he flopped them over on the bunks. After that it was only the work of a few moments to secure their feet, then gag them with their own neckerchiefs.

CHAPTER IX.

SHOW-DOWN.

THEN the Silver Kid stepped out and closed the door as Brimstone tried to get out more words. Calmly the Kid seated himself at the table, built a quirkly and waited. It was going to be one of the longest-shot gambles the steel-nerved half pint of a ranny had ever taken.

He didn't have long to wait. The sun was already pushing into the horizon, and the first shadows of dusk were creeping across the town below. Four riders turned off the trail, reined in as they took a furtive look-see around, then forked up to the steps. And the Kid sauntered onto the porch to talk to them.

"Where in blazes have you saddle-bums been?" he flung at them. "We got a job to do! Peaceful's overdue to play his last card fer a long time! An' Brimstone's sore as the devil!" All of which was quite true.

The fat man in front had clapped a hand to his holster and gone rigid in the saddle of his dun horse. Another gent had a gun half out of his holster. The four of them were of the cold-eyed breed, with the stamp

of "gun fighter" plain on them. The fat one finally spoke.

"Who are you, mister?"

Solo shrugged. "Name might be Jones . . . er Smith . . . er mebbe even Brown. Fella finds it convenient to change his handle sometimes. Trail pardners call me Solo."

"Did Peaceful bring yuh in on this deal?"

Solo played his bluff to the hilt. "After Hinnerman vanished, I reckon Peaceful felt he needed another hand."

They nodded, half convinced that his story was straight because he knew about Hinnerman. They'd heard from Brimstone. Solo flipped away his quirky stub. As he did so, the fat one noted the scar of the bullet crease that Peaceful had put on the Kid's hand.

"Brimstone got the same kind of a mark on his wrist," he said. "Mebbe yuh ran into the same gun fighter. Fella called Strant."

Solo nodded. "I've met up with the waddy." It was a break he hadn't looked for. That bullet brand on him clinched it.

When they asked for Brimstone, Solo said he'd been all-fired impatient to get down to the town.

"I'm leadin' you gents down, then drifting in alone to get orders from Peaceful—an' mebbe give a few," he added to himself.

"I hear the pickin's will be fat," the leader said. They were ready to go.

Solo ambled around to the rear, where he'd put the horses belonging to Brimstone and the tall man in a shed, mounted the latter's, and rejoined them.

In the dimness of dusk they threaded down the faint trail of the cliff that Solo had ascended just a few hours before. He led the way off toward the shack in which he'd

changed his garb when he first hit Windfall.

"You gents lay low here while I mosey in," he told the four outlaws. "Don't pay no heed to any shoot-in'. It might be one of us just tryin' to draw folks somewhere else. Now, I'll see what Peaceful has to say." His hand tautened around that bulletless .32-20 stuck in his waistband.

He moved off up the alley, fairly well disguised in that slicker he'd donned when it was raining. He was tapping his second silver-butted Colt, which he had recovered at Brimstone's place.

The road was practically deserted, it being the town's supper hour. Down in front of the All Aces, a yellow lantern was already flickering.

As he watched outside the door, the only three men at the bar came out and went down the road. Solo spotted one of Lasco's housemen idly flipping a silver dollar, then saw Peaceful himself idly shuffling a deck of cards at a table in the ell. A mechanical piano jangled away.

Having made final plans, knowing that he had first to unmask the fraud of the gambler's alleged card reading, the Kid eased in under cover of the music. The barkeep gave him a casual glance. The gambler himself barely looked up to call for a drink.

Solo edged along the wall, then swung and catfooted it swiftly toward the gambler. "Mebbe you'll need that drink more later, Lume, if you're able to use yore throat then!" he purred.

Peaceful slid up from the chair, whisking his crutch under his armpit, his other hand flicking back under his gray frock coat to his hip. He yelled to the houseman.

But Solo's own gun had leaped miraculously into his hand. He sidled around until he was between

the side wall and the cardman, then motioned him to sit down across the table. Lasco, with another of his house guards at his side, appeared on the stairs and went rigid when he saw the Kid.

"Gents, I'm a soft-hearted ranny that hates bloodshed, an' you'd all hate to see Peaceful here plugged." His fingers started toward where he usually wore his silver skull.

"Wait, now—" Lasco began.

"So don't try to draw cards in this little game Peaceful here an' me is due to play, sabe?"

He slid that empty .32-20 onto the table, then sheathed his own Colt, although he kept his hand flung across his body and over the smoke pole. If one of those housemen tried to make a play, Solo could easily get the gambler first.

Peaceful's face could barely restrain a smile as he saw the Kid's gun go away. The gambler figured that Brimstone would be arriving any moment with those other hands.

"You say we are to play a game?" he asked. "You realize that if you try to kill me you'll never leave this place alive?"

Solo's hands itched to turn hot, spitting guns on the sweet-talking coyote. But he held himself in for the moment. He nodded.

"We're going to cut for this gun, Peaceful," Solo went on, pointing to the .32-20 on the table. "High card gets the gun. An' the loser gets ten seconds to pull stakes. It's yore one chance to live, polecat!"

Peaceful sneered. He knew what he could do with the cards. "It's a deal, mister!"

The Kid held up his free hand. "One minute. Fust, fella, I'm going to give you a chance to read the cards once more." He tapped his gun butt significantly as the gambler

gaped. "Read yore *own* fate in the cards, Peaceful, an' see if yo're goin' to live!"

Peaceful had to stiffen against a smile. It was a perfect set-up for him. Knowing that he was going to see that he cut the high card, thus winning the gun, he could afford to predict in safety again. His eyes flicked to that bullet brand he'd put on Solo's hand, a lead sign that had always spelled death in the past.

Then Lume began to read his own fortune, going through the complicated rigmarole of drawing three and reshuffling and arranging them in stacks, then eliminating some and working the rest again. He laid them out at last, face up, and pretended to be engrossed in studying them. He tapped a jack.

"This card says I'll be stayin' here alive after we make the cut," he intoned gravely. "You?" He shrugged. "The death card is here, but it isn't *mine*, my friend!"

It was Solo's turn to smile thinly. He eyed Lasco and his men, knowing how Peaceful had just proved he couldn't read cards. "We cut!"

Peaceful nodded, motioned the barman to bring a new deck, and handed them to the Kid in the tense stillness. A dog barked down the road.

Solo shuffled, then handed them to the gambler, one hand still on a holster top. Peaceful worked them offhandedly, then put them on the table.

"You will have ten seconds to leave, mister," he said. "Cut."

As if it were for two-bits, Solo reached out, smiled, then turned up the diamond queen. Lasco gasped. A queen was hard to whip. But Lume only grinned, shot out his hand, flicked up the spade ace. He clamped on the gun.

"Ten seconds, Strant!"

With his hands half hoisted, Solo had already started backing for the door. He knew now he'd won his gamble against the cardman who'd cold-decked him.

"... three . . . four—" Peaceful tolled off the count. Then: "Look out, he's goin' to draw!"

It was a bald lie. Peaceful simply wanted an excuse to burn down the Kid, the only witness to the killing of Scarjaw. The gambler jerked the .32-20 forward, tongued his lip, then triggered. There was only the click of the empty shell. And Solo, his hands streaking faster than the eye could follow, cleared the gun steel from his holsters.

"If yuh can read cards," the Kid purred, "why didn't them cards tell yuh the gun was empty? Because yo're an all-fired liar, Peaceful! Yuh can't read 'em. If yuh could, they'd have told you that yo're goin' to hang!"

"Hang?" The gambler husked the word like an echo, sweat streaming from under his gray locks. "Fer . . . fer what?"

"For plannin' and bossin' the job of killing Scarjaw . . . even if yuh didn't actually do it yoreself," Solo said more softly than ever. "I snaked Hinnerman out o' town." He didn't say the gent was dead. "I got Brimstone a prisoner. By the time they finish talkin' to save their own hides, you'll stretch rope."

"He's lyin'!" snapped Peaceful. "Remember, he's the gent Tonger recognized tryin' to break into his place early this mornin'!"

The Kid thought he'd held the whip hand. But that charge of Peaceful's clicked. Solo saw Lasco's brown hand edging toward a shoulder holster. But it was the stupid-looking barman who dived behind his counter and came up clutching a Frontier-model Colt.

"One shot," Solo warned, "an' Peaceful draws a slug plumb 'tween the eyes!"

Then the Kid remembered how Brimstone had said that Peaceful had planned to handle the robbing of Flash Lasco himself. Solo played his last card.

"Flash Lasco," he said, "this snake told yuh to draw yore dinero out o' the bank. Still got it?"

"Sure," Lasco said. "Up in my little safe. But, no. You, Peaceful, you tell me it will be safer under my bed mattress an'—" As his gaze shifted to Peaceful, that empty .32-20 fell from the gambler's suddenly limp hand. It reminded Lasco of Peaceful's failure to read the cards that last time. "So-o."

Whirling, the gambling-hall proprietor ran up the stairs to his room. When he came out again on the balcony he was ashen. He pointed down at Peaceful, then yelled:

"And you told me to have a saddled horse ready—that you might have to ride to see a friend. See if my dinero's in his saddlebags!"

Both housemen hustled out. Seconds ticked off as the lives of two men, Solo and Peaceful, hung in the balance. Then the gambler's nerve failed as he practically admitted that the money was out there.

"If that dinero's there," Peaceful shouted, "it was this sidewinder that put it there." He was pointing at Solo.

From the back there was a dull thud as if a man's skull was struck. There came a faint, strangled cry. Lasco half turned on the stairs. Two figures swooped in in the darkness of the rear of the place that hadn't been lighted up yet.

"Peaceful! Peaceful!" called one as he sighted the gambler's gray back. "That Strant gent came back!"

He knows everything—even how we killed Searjaw. Yuh got the dinero in yore saddlebags! We gotta fog it!” And a wild-eyed Brimstone John, gone almost haywire, ran forward into the light, followed by the tall gent with the cast in his eye.

They had managed to get untied at the place, and had hustled down. They’d taken care of those two house hands they’d come upon out back. Then Brimstone sighted the half-pint Solo up the bar beyond Peaceful Lume.

Solo started to thrust his legs wider as he triggered. But his boot heel struck a rent in the spur-scraped floor and he lurched sidewise so that his first slug went wild. He had never seen a man tear a shooting iron up and into action as suddenly as did Peaceful Lume, who preferred to plot men’s deaths.

Lead fanned past Solo’s left cheek. All three of them were raking the place, Peaceful and Brimstone and the tall hombre.

Lasco came staggering down the stairs, a slug already in his shoulder. The bartender had dived behind his counter, out of it. Lead plucked at the bandage beneath the sleeve of the Kid’s wounded arm. Then the Kid had his deadly hoglegs storming into action, wreathed in hot smoke as they bucked in his hands.

Brimstone roared a curse as his right arm was lead-seared, but he was shooting with his left, anyway. He was spun around by the impact, though in time to see his tall partner dive floorward with one of Solo’s slugs in his head.

Then the Kid lunged sidewise and leaped into the cover of the end of the bar. It was just as a third houseman of Lasco’s ran in the front door in time to catch one of Peaceful’s bullets full in the chest.

“Get that low-down dog!” cried Peaceful.

Crouched back of the bar refilling a gun, Solo heard one of them shifting over to nail him from the other open end. He knew if he tried to bolt out on the front side, he’d be mowed down pronto. It was himself against the two.

Then the Kid took his biggest gamble. He grabbed the end of the bar, braced himself on his good leg, and vaulted clear up on top of it.

It was totally unexpected. And in a flash, the Kid was running along its surface, closing in on them before they could elevate their gun noses and draw bead on him. Brimstone’s next slug splintered the bar mirror, and its crash was echoed by the blast of the Kid’s right gun. Its slug drilled Brimstone through the body and sent him crashing backward, then down to a sitting position, fatally hit.

Solo flung himself to hands and knees, then went flat on the shiny bar top as Peaceful ripped a second weapon from under his shirt and fanned it. The Kid was just in time. From his prone position, he triggered with lead whistling over him, sent the gambler’s crutch crashing with his first shot, put a hole through the hopping Peaceful’s Stetson with his second, then knifed the man’s shoulder flesh with his third.

Peaceful was no gambler without a stacked deck. He threw down his second gun and shoved up his hand as he balanced on his one leg. Solo dropped down from the bar as the wounded Lasco came over to thank him.

With an incredible one-legged hop, Peaceful was behind Lasco and shuffling a derringer from his left sleeve. The only bit of target Solo had, as he triggered once more, was that left hand with the tiny gun. But he sent

one of his slugs slicing across the back of it to put his bullet brand on Peaceful and drive the derringer from his hand.

Peaceful shot a split second before he was hit. Solo looked down at his own hand. And he saw that the tiny derringer slug had flattened off his gun barrel to tear skin from the back of his right dewclaw and remove that shallow bullet sign that Peaceful had burned on it.

It was over. Peaceful was over gripping the post of the star railing, whining that they couldn't hang him because he hadn't actually slain anybody himself.

Solo was wishing he could gun down an unarmed man as he pushed his hat off his hot head. The black Stetson hit the floor, then rolled toward where the dying Brimstone was sitting with glazing eyes. A slip of paper fell from the hat, unfolding, and Solo recalled Hinnerman's note.

Brimstone stared at the paper. Then his arm flung out to his gun beside him.

"You killed little Hinny, huh, Peaceful?" He coughed. And he shot Peaceful Lume dead through the mouth before he fell back himself. Solo Strant's bullet sign had had its payoff mighty pronto that time.

Townpeople flocked in. Solo, with Lasco's backing, gave them the truth about the dead card reader.

After a while, Marshal Baker rode down the road. He hadn't found any shooting out at the JP. But with him was the JP boss and a cowboy on a spring wagon bearing Hinnerman's body.

The cowboy had come across Hinnerman in the line cabin. The latter, still alive and afraid that he wouldn't get his vengeance, had told all he knew of Peaceful for the cowboy to write down, and had scrawled his sign on it before dying. It backed up what Solo had claimed.

The Kid told the lawman about those four gun slicks still cooling their boot heels down in the shack, then ambled out into the cool night. He looked up at the hills.

"Looked fer awhile like I wouldn't git back to yuh, pardner," he said softly. "I'm coming." He was talking to his Sorghum horse up there.

One thing shore—when Solo gets ready to cash in his chips, he shore won't be able to say that he hasn't had an active life. But we're not expectin' 'im to cross the divide fer some time yet—not with his shootin' ability. An' we're goin' to have 'im back with us plumb pronto, in a mighty excitin' story. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

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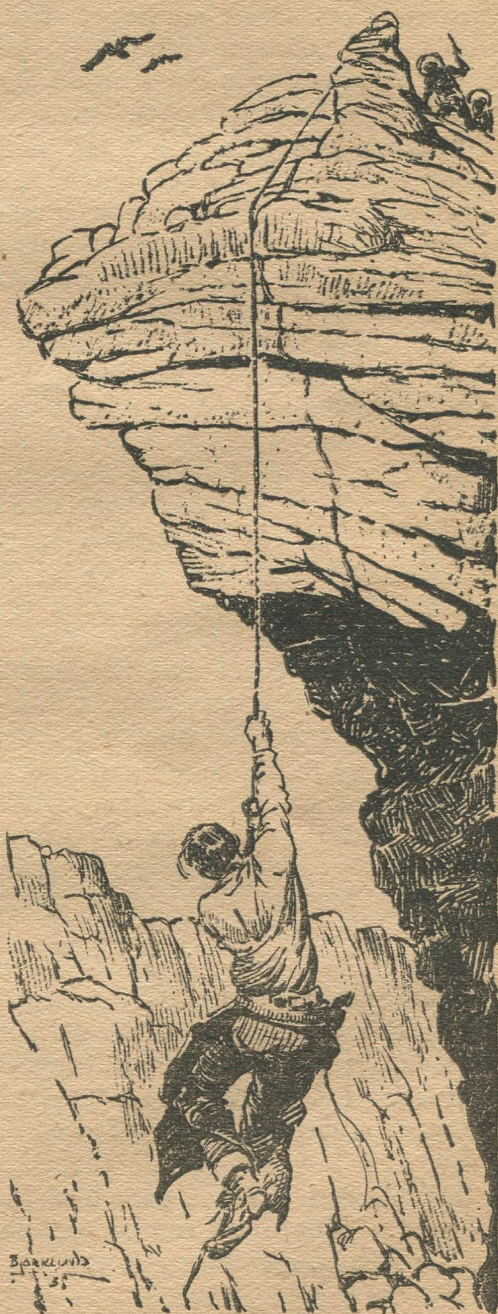
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GUN-SMOKE ACES

By DEAN OWEN

*Author of
"Gun-smoke Tornado," etc.*

The waddy's got one
chance in a hundred,
trapped an' with eight
or ten killers slingin'
hot lead at 'im.



Gun-smoke Aces

THE dead man lay piled by the bulge of rocks, his pale features twisted as if in protest at the buzzards arcing in the boiling sky. He had been dead an hour. But Gil Thorpe talked to him coldly, deliberately, his words like stabs of icy wind in the bullet-churned air.

"Ladroe got yuh, Jim," Gil said through tight lips as he plugged his last three shells into his smoking six-gun. "These slugs has Ladroe's brand cut on their nose. I'll git him for yuh, Jim."

Gil Thorpe's voice lacked conviction. He had one chance in a hundred, trapped as he was with eight or ten killers slinging hot lead at him. By the position of the sun, Gil knew it was a good hour until dark. He couldn't last that long.

The sultry wind carried the harsh voices of Ladroe and his men up the sloping hill to Gil's ears. A rifle cracked down there and the bullet chopped through mesquite, throwing splinters in the cowboy's face.

Dropping to his hands and knees, Gil crawled around two slain saddle horses and edged up to a boulder clump. Death was waiting for him. His eyes burned as frigid as flame behind blue ice.

Slowly he raised his head above a flat-topped rock, partially screened by mesquite. Down there at the base of the hill, concealed in tangled brush and boulders, was "Poker" Ladroe and his gang of border killers.

Gil slanted the hot barrel of his six-gun. Knots of muscle ridged either side of his craggy jaw.

"Show yoreself, Ladroe!" he challenged, his voice ripping through the hot air. "You an' yore killin'

hounds, put yoreselves in the sunlight!"

Gil heard the boom of a Colt, felt his sun-warped Stetson jerk on his head as a bullet punched through the crown. His eyes narrowed against the sting of sweat and powder smoke, Gil saw a bearded face behind the muzzle of a long gun down there in the brush. His caloused right thumb dropped the hammer of his six-gun.

The killer's beard was suddenly dotted with crimson. He didn't scream above the roar of the gun. He just slumped like a dropped stone.

"One more, Jim," Gil growled at the dead man as he ducked low.

Gunfire like driving leaden sleet raked upward. Gil could hear Ladroe swearing.

"I'll git yuh, Gil Thorpe!" Ladroe was yelling. "I got an old score to settle! Yuh cain't hold out much longer!"

Gil knew that as soon as his two remaining shells were used he was helpless. Ladroe would lay low until dark, having no way of knowing how the cowboy's ammunition supply was holding out.

In order to reach the nest of boulders behind which Gil crouched, Ladroe's gang had to cross a twenty-five-foot clear space. They had lost three men under Gil's deadly fire and they didn't want to run the risk of feeling the bite of his lead again.

Three hours before, Ladroe and his crew had jumped Gil and his old pard, Jim Sloan, as they were driving a bunch of thoroughbred horses to Colonel Sam Hartley's Spiked Wheel spread. The first blast of gunfire had caught the pards by surprise, killing their saddle horses. A little while later, Jim Sloan had taken a .30-30 slug in his heart and died with his boots on.

Gil backed away from the boulders, careful to keep low. An occasional bullet screamed against the rocks and smashed through the heavy brush. Ladroe was taking it easy, waiting for darkness.

Wiping his tanned forehead with the sleeve of his old cotton shirt, Gil clutched the hot gun and stepped to the edge of a sheer cliff. A hundred feet below he could see the floor of a rocky canyon. He and his pard had been trapped here. Faced by almost certain death either way he turned, Gil shrugged blocky shoulders and grinned coldly.

With hot lead in front and a steep cliff in back, there seemed no way out. Yet there was a chance, a slim chance. Gil's blue eyes puckered at the corners as he surveyed the two slain saddle horses.

Deliberately Gil took Jim's lariat then his own from the saddles. With quick twists of his strong fingers he tied the two ropes together, tested the knot.

He had to work fast. The voices of the outlaws came to him again.

"Let's rush him!" yelled one killer. "The old coot's dead. I seen Ladroe pot him myself. Come on! Thorpe's left alone!"

"Hold off," Ladroe snapped with a curse. "I'm givin' orders here! Mebbe he went down under thet last bunch o' lead we slung! We'll wait a minute. If there ain't no sign of him, we'll take a look-see. I'm cuttin' his heart out personal an' feedin' it to the buzzards! Hear that, Thorpe! I'm wipin' the slate clean!"

Gil heard it all right and he worked calmly there in the burning heat on the edge of the precipice tying one end of the long rope to a rock spire.

Off to the left Gil could see his bunch of thoroughbred horses grazing on a mesa, half a mile away.

Ladroe hadn't dry-gulched him for the horses. He wanted to settle an old matter which had stung him like a wound that wouldn't heal.

Before he died, Gil's dad had been sheriff of San Leonardo County. Poker Ladroe's brother had been charged with murder. The elder Thorpe was the one instrumental in getting him hanged. Poker Ladroe had vowed he would avenge the score. Gil's father had died soon after, and Ladroe had taken Gil's trail.

"An' pore ol' Jim Sloan had to walk right into a slug," growled Gil Thorpe. "Me an' him was pards for five years. I'm nailin' Ladroe's hide to the fence if I live!"

Brush crackled down below there at the base of the sloping hill. The cowboy's boots kicked up spirals of dust as he moved to the boulder clump and peered through the screen of brush. His heartbeat quickened. His right hand was sweaty where his fingers clutched the hot gun butt.

Through slitted eyes, Gil could see four of the outlaws moving up the slope. Ladroe was staying under cover. The four were nearly to the clearing. They were hard-faced jaspers, killers. Gil had seen their pictures on reward dodgers in his father's office.

The tall, skinny one with the red mustache was "Pinky" Dane. The short, squat jasper with half his jaw shot away was Pete Shank. Gil couldn't remember the names of the other two.

The waddy swore softly when he thought of the boxes of shells he had left behind at his little 2X horse spread over in San Leonardo Valley. When he and old Jim Sloan had started out with the bunch of thoroughbred broncs for Colonel Hartley's Spiked Wheel spread, they had

enough ammunition for ordinary purposes.

After Ladroe had ambushed them, the shells had been rapidly used up, staving off his charges.

"Well, here goes my last two," Gil said under his breath.

He poked the six-gun muzzle through the brush. Pinky Dane was firing now, the bullet clattering off rocks and screaming away in the hot air.

Gil hammered a quick shot but Pinky side-stepped just then. One shot gone. Gil's next bullet whacked into the shoulder of Pete Shank. The gunman screamed and sat down hard. Crimson seeped through the fingers that clutched his bullet-punched shoulder.

Ladroe started to yell. "Back under cover! Wait till dark! Thorpe'll be buzzard bait then!"

Through narrowed blue eyes, Gil watched Pinky drag the wounded Shank back into the brush. Shank was swearing at the top of his voice. The other two killers followed their pards.

Gil knew he had to work fast. He had neither time nor tools to dig a grave for his old pard. Hastily he piled brush over the body and weighted it down with heavy stones.

"That'll keep the coyotes an' buzzards offn him," Gil said with a lump in his throat. "If I git out o' this spot, Jim, I'll be back." He tossed his empty six-gun aside.

Walking to the edge of the cliff, he took the lariat in his hands and tested it. The knot held fast to the rock spire. He looked down. The cliff sloped inward. There was no way of telling whether he could reach a ledge or not. With his trained eye Gil could see that the end of the dangling rope would not reach the canyon bottom. He rubbed dirt on his hands.

"It's better than waitin' here an' lettin' Ladroe blow me apart," he said through gritted teeth.

With those words, Gil Thorpe wrapped strong fingers around the lariat and swung out over the cliff edge. Down he went, the hemp burning his hands. A jagged rock speared his knees, ripping his faded Levis. His body slammed against the rough granite wall.

From ten feet below the precipice edge, Gil heard the shouts of Ladroe and his killers as they charged up the slope. Evidently Ladroe had been unable to hold his men longer. In seconds they would find he was gone, would see the tied lariat. One sweep of a keen knife blade and Gil Thorpe would plunge to the canyon floor.

II.

Grimly, desperately, Gil Thorpe inched down the swaying rope. From above he could hear Ladroe's strident voice bellowing in disappointment that his quarry had escaped. Sweat plastered Gil's old shirt to his muscled back. Sweat dripped from beneath the brim of his floppy-brimmed hat.

Arms aching, nerves pulled tight as new-strung fence wire, Gil slipped down the rope. He glanced down. Sharp-pointed rocks littered the canyon floor. He could see a dry creek bed. The end of the trailing lariat was a good thirty feet above the canyon bed.

The harsh voice of Pinky Dane came to Gil's ears.

"Over here, Ladroe!" Pinky was yelling. "Thorpe's done tied a rope here." There was a pause. "I see the mangy skunk. He's over the side here. I'm shootin' him!"

Icy shocks raced up Gil's spine as the realization that death was very near smote him like a blast of wintry

air. He looked up. Pinky Shank was leaning over the cliff edge, a grin on his red-mustached features. The last rays of the dying sun reflected on the naked muzzle of Pinky's gun. He couldn't miss at that distance.

Then Pinky was suddenly yanked backward and Poker Ladroe took his place. Gil showed his teeth in a defiant grin. If he had to die, he'd go out like Jim Sloan had, with a smile on his lips.

All this time Gil was moving down the swinging rope. He saw Poker Ladroe's eyes, like two splotches of dirty wagon grease, lighted in triumph. There was a frigid smile on the killer's gashlike mouth. A two-days' growth of black whiskers were spotted here and there on his hollow cheeks.

"I ain't goin' to let my boys put a slug in yore hide," Ladroe chuckled. "Thet's too easy fer the son of Hank Thorpe, who hanged my brother. Much too easy. I'm havin' yuh pulled back up here. I know some Injun tricks that'll make you good entertainment for my boys. Got to keep 'em happy."

Gil's arms felt like two leaden weights. The palms of his hands were raw from the sharp rope. But he didn't lose the grin on his lips.

"Pull away, Ladroe," he challenged. "I ain't scairt of yore threats! They call yuh Poker Ladroe, 'cause yo're a fiend fer draw poker. Waal, yuh pulled a bad hand out o' the deck this time."

Swaying there in mid-air above the rocky floor of the canyon, Gil's words sounded like the last defiant shout of a man about to be hanged. He had no fear of Ladroe. He only wished he could live long enough to avenge the death of old Jim Sloan.

He knew there was a posse out here in the hills hunting for Ladroe and his gang. That morning, as they

passed through Buxton, he had heard that Ladroe's crew had held up the bank the day before and vanished with six thousand dollars.

Pinky Dane stepped to Ladroe's side. He tugged at his red mustache.

"Cut the rope, Ladroe," he growled. "Let Thorpe fall. We got to duck. Thet posse may be around here. We played with this skunk too long. Cut the rope an' let's line out fer the hide-out at Salt Canyon!"

Gil looked down again. In his slow descent he came even with a scrubby pine growing out of the side of the cliff. Right below was a small ledge, not more than a foot wide. If he could make that he might be able to turn the tables on Ladroe.

Releasing one hand, Gil tried to reach the pine trunk. He was inches short. Glancing up he saw a long-bladed knife in Ladroe's skinny hand. The blade was biting into the rope as the gang boss sawed back and forth. Sweat streamed down Gil's face.

He had to work fast. Gil started swinging his body, throwing his weight first to one side then the other. Again he tried to grab the tree. His fingers brushed the bark. He wasn't close enough.

In seconds he would plunge to his death. Looking up, he saw the fiendish grin on Ladroe's thin face, saw his black eyes glowing in anticipation of the sight of seeing Gil's body smashed on the rocks below.

Gil swung farther this time. One hand wrapped around the skinny tree. He got his right arm hooked between the pine trunk and the cliff. Just then the rope slacked and came shooting down on top of him.

He hung there, dangling in mid-air, his boot toes digging into the cliff wall. Gil made the foot-wide

ledge. Clinging perilously to the tree trunk, his feet planted firmly on the narrow shelf, the waddy got his breath. The coils of the lariat were still around his shoulders.

He looked up. From this point he couldn't see Ladroe or his men. A bulge in the cliff wall prevented that. He could hear Ladroe swearing.

A gun crashed up there. Gil heard the screech of the slug as it ricocheted off a rock ten feet below him.

Then suddenly Ladroe burst out laughing. "He's stuck on a ledge down there, boys, or hangin' to a rock. We'll cross the canyon an' pot him with long guns from the other side. Come on."

Gil Thorpe's bronzed forehead was pinched in deep lines. He knew that Ladroe would never give up until he was dead. Gil released one hand from the pine trunk and disentangled the rope from his body. Above, Gil could hear Ladroe and his men riding away.

One thought was uppermost in Gil's brain. He had to get out of this spot and avenge the death of old Jim Sloan. Gil realized that the instant Ladroe and his crew reached the other side of the canyon they would cut him to ribbons with rifle fire. He was unprotected here from the blasts of the raiders' guns.

Feverishly he worked, tying one end of the lariat to the pine trunk. He tested it for strength. His knees felt raw and sore where the jagged rock had sliced into them. His Levis were torn.

Long shadows of twilight were knifing across the ravine. Gil glanced up across the canyon. The sun was dipping rapidly below the craggy ridges. There was no sign of Ladroe yet. The waddy realized that Ladroe had no way of knowing whether he got the rope or whether

the tied lariats became entangled in the rocks.

Just as Gil was ready to begin his descent again, he saw the long line of Ladroe's horsemen cutting the trail across the canyon. Gil stood there on the narrow shelf of rock, balancing himself by holding onto the pine trunk. He realized he could never hope to slide down the rope and make the canyon floor now before Ladroe and his men would cut him down.

If he could hold off here until dark. He remembered Pinky's statement about the hide-out in Salt Canyon. The killers would head for that spot when they finished with him.

Through narrowed eyes the cowboy scanned the cliffs, hoping for a sign of the posse that was hunting Ladroe. But he saw no one. Only the six horsemen were across the gorge.

The sun was completely gone now, only a faint light streaking the tops of the ridges. Quickly he pulled up the rope. If Ladroe didn't see the lariat and figured he had no way of escape, there might be a chance to beat the killer yet.

Gil saw Ladroe twist in the saddle. He could see his white Stetson and imagined the satanic light in his black eyes. He would try to make short work of Gil Thorpe, ride to Salt Canyon, and begin his nightly game of draw poker. Gil stood tensed, waiting.

A rifle bullet slammed into the rock wall by his side, chipping dirt into his face. The report of the gun came seconds later across the chasm. Ladroe lowered his .30-30.

The stinging rock dust caused Gil to jerk aside, nearly losing his footing on the narrow shelf. The sudden lurch of his body loosened the pine

trunk. Little trickles of shale cascaded down the cliff side.

Again Ladroe pumped a shot. Gil saw the flash of the gun, and ducked low as the slug chunked into the trunk of the scrubby pine. Darkness was setting in rapidly. The figures of the outlaws were blurs in the foggy light.

Gil knew that in a few seconds, life would be blasted from his body. Ladroe's bullets were coming closer. The light was bad for accurate shooting, but sooner or later one of those slugs would rip into his hide.

He steeled himself against the expected impact of hot lead. Ladroe was doing all the firing, evidently wanting to kill the cowboy himself.

The waddy saw the bloom of flame across the gorge and felt the slice of a hot bullet against his ribs. He was slammed back against the cold cliff wall, swayed dizzily over the rocky ledge. His head whirled crazily. Something warm and sticky was running down his side.

This looked like the end, but Gil clenched his teeth until his jaw muscles ridged like cords. He thought of old Jim Sloan lying up above, dead. Thought of Ladroe's leering eyes. He had to live; he couldn't die now.

Ladroe was yelling across the canyon, his booming voice echoing against the sheer walls.

"Yuh'll be dead afore mornin', Thorpe!" he sang out. "Yuh cain't hang there all night! We'll be back at sunup to see buzzards pickin' the meat offn yore bones!"

III.

Gil Thorpe clung there on the foot-wide ledge of rock, his hands wrapped around the skinny trunk of the scrub pine. Crimson seeped through the side of his shirt. Al-

though he knew the wound in his side was not serious, still it pained.

The sharp crack of shod hoofs on rocks came to Gil's ears as Ladroe and his men rode off in the direction of Salt Canyon. It was so dark now that he could barely see the floor of the canyon. He realized that Ladroe couldn't see the rope in the gloom.

Gathering the coils of the lariat, Gil dropped it down. He watched the long rope snake out, then pull taut from where it was tied to the tree trunk.

"This pine ain't goin' to stand much weight," he muttered to himself. "But I got to chance it. Poker Ladroe will be over at Salt Canyon playin' his favorite game. I'm aimin' to bust in on him if I live thet long."

Once again Gil Thorpe swung out into space. His whole left side felt as if it was on fire. His shirt clung to the open wound, making every movement stiff and awkward. The palms of his hands were raw from the bite of the rope.

Down, down he went. Once he slipped and the coarse hemp bit into his flesh. Perspiration streaked his forehead. He could feel the pine tree tremble under the weight. How much longer would it hold?

Gil glanced down. He could barely see the white rocks below. Again he started the descent. What if Ladroe hadn't gone to Salt Canyon? What if he was down below waiting to blast him?

Shaking his head, Gil knocked the crazy thoughts from his brain. He had heard the outlaws' horses move away in the darkness. Ladroe wasn't around here, he assured himself.

Suddenly Gil came to the end of the lariat. He jerked on the rope to get a better hold. Dirt and shale

tumbled down on him. He felt the rope sway. Then he was falling through space, with the crack of the snapping pine trunk in his ears.

Wind rushed up around him. Gil tensed his body. Abruptly his boot heels smacked the sand of the dry-creek bed. Pain shot up his legs. Then he was tumbling head over heels. His body cracked into a rotted log.

Gil sat up, shaking dirt from his hair. His battered Stetson lay a few feet away. Jamming his old hat on his head, he got to his feet. The scrub pine lay half-covered by a pile of shale and stones.

"Lucky one of them rocks didn't bash in my brains," Gil muttered to himself.

He glanced up at the canopy of stars overhead. Salt Canyon lay about five miles to the west. He remembered having gone through there once when hunting deer.

Slowly Gill crossed the canyon floor. His left side still pained him. His high-heeled boots pinched his feet as he walked, but he kept doggedly on. Reaching the other side, he glanced toward the ridge where he had left the body of old Jim Sloan.

"I'll be back, Jim," he promised. "An' when I do, you'll have the best tombstone I kin buy. Poker Ladroe is makin' part payment on it."

Then he turned and plunged on through the night, one thought uppermost in his mind. He had to kill Poker Ladroe. Gil's big mouth pinched at the corners. That was a large order. Here he was without horse or gun, figuring on tangling with six desperate killers.

A cougar sent its spine-chilling wail through the night. A cool breeze rustled across the tops of the mesquite as Gil kept his face turned toward Salt Canyon. He wondered

if he might run into the posse that was searching for Ladroe, but he considered it unlikely.

An hour and a half rolled by. Gil topped a rise and looked down a brushy slope to a cabin set in a clearing. He saw the yellow squares of light at the dirty windows. The moon was out now, flooding the canyon.

Off to the left of the cabin, Gil could see the black shapes of saddle horses. An occasional coarse laugh came from the cabin. A man's shadow crossed the window, then vanished.

"I'll bet a crowbait against a Morgan hoss, Ladroe has got his crew playin' poker," Gil said softly.

A cigarette glowed down there at the corner of the house. By straining his eyes, Gil could see a dark form hunched there. One man on guard outside. Gil moved slowly down the slope, avoiding dry twigs with his boots.

The voices from the interior of the cabin came louder. Gil could tell by their talk that they were half drunk. With his heart hammering in his ears, the waddy reached a corner of the cabin. His hands pressed against the logs, still warm from the heat of the day.

Cautiously he moved around the back of the shack. His boot toe clicked against a rock. He stiffened, hands balled into hard fists. But nobody in the cabin had heard him. The guard was in front.

Foot by foot, Gil slipped around the far corner of the shack. He could see the guard seated on the ground with a rifle across his knees.

In the yellow moonlight the waddy noted the bright-colored serape draped over the hombre's shoulders, saw the glowing tip of a cigarette. Pinky Dane was talking in his high, singsong voice from in-

side the cabin. Gil glued his eye to a crack in the chinking and watched Pinky.

"I still think yuh shouldn't have dry-gulched Thorpe an' the old jasper," he snapped. "Thet posse might have heard the shootin'."

"Shut up!" Ladroe roared drunkenly. "I been layin' fer Gil Thorpe for years. I seen a chance to git rid o' him an' I took it. We'll go back in the mornin' an' take a look at him. He couldn't have got down offn thet ledge. Besides I think I winged him. Come on, play poker."

Gil saw the interior of the cabin. Five men sat around a rough pine table. A gallon jug of moonshine was on the board top. The old lamp sputtered, throwing wavering light on the pine walls.

Ladroe sat hunched there fingering a poker hand. His little black eyes were red from too much whisky. Pinky Dane chewed on a match and toyed with poker chips. Pete Shank, one arm in a sling, scowled darkly at the cards he held.

Up at the corner of the cabin, the guard changed his position, getting to his feet and stretching. Gil flattened against the log wall, his teeth clenched, his eyes narrowed. The guard laid the rifle against a rock and rolled another cigarette.

Without a gun, Gil knew he was helpless. He was just about to leap on the unsuspecting guard when one of the horses whinnied.

"What's thet?" bellowed Ladroe from the cabin. "What's up, Sanchez?"

Chairs scraped the board floor as men sprang to their feet. The guard picked up his rifle, peered into the darkness for a moment, then laid it down again.

"Eet ees notheeng, señor," he replied after a minute.

Ladroe was apparently satisfied.

Gil heard them resume their seats at the table, and in a few seconds their voices became a babble as they continued their game.

An owl hooted from a near-by tree as Gil moved slowly forward. Every nerve tense, his blue eyes narrowed, the cowboy edged toward the guard. It was one chance in a hundred that he could lay the man out before the alarm was given.

He was ten feet away. Now five. Gil's foot cracked on a dry twig. Sanchez, the guard, whirled, his lighted cigarette dangling from his lips. Gil had a glimpse of deadly black eyes, white teeth bared in a snarl. The breed's right hand was digging for his holstered gun.

Like the smash of a sledge hammer, the waddy's right fist lanced upward. Pain ripped along his arm as bare knuckles cracked against the Mex's jaw. The guard grunted, then slumped on his face in the dirt.

Quickly Gil pulled out the breed's six-gun, twirled the cylinder, and stepped toward the cabin window. He crouched there in the gloom, one eye fastened to the lower corner of the lighted square. He saw the five men sitting just as they had before. Ladroe was dealing now. There was a flush on his whiskery cheeks. His thin mouth was slanted in a leering grin.

"If I keep on winnin', you hombres won't have a dime share in the Buxton bank job," he chuckled. "No wonder they call me Poker Ladroe. I'm the best danged card man in these parts."

Pinky Dane was scowling darkly and tugging at his red mustache. His pale eyes narrowed at sight of the small stack of chips in front of him.

"Fer a gent thet don't keep extra aces stuck up his sleeve, yo're uncommonly lucky, Ladroe," Pinky

Ladroe paused with the deck of cards in his right hand. His black-whiskered chin jutted out. Danger lights glowed in his red-rimmed eyes.

"Yuh better watch yore talk, Pinky," the big man snapped. "If I thought yuh was insinuat'ing I'm cheatin', I'd plant a bullet in yore throat."

Pinky held up his hand in protest. "I never meant nothin'. Yo're jist lucky. We'll let it ride at that."

Rubbing his bullet-smashed jaw, Pete Shank set the whiskey jug on the table. Ladroe turned suddenly to deal, hit the jug with his arm, and spilled the fiery liquid over the deck of cards.

"Why don't yuh watch what yo're doin'!" he yelled at Shank. "Fer a lead dollar I'd fan yore head with a six-gun butt! Look at them cards." He held the dripping pasteboards in his hand. "Jist when I was gittin' lucky."

Pinky grinned. "A new deck means new luck fer me."

Ladroe squinted one black eye shut. He scowled, then slapped the table with his heavy hand.

"Sanchez!" he bellowed. "Git off yore easy seat an' fetch a fresh deck from my saddlebags! *Andale!*"

Outside, Gil Thorpe stiffened. He glanced at the fallen Sanchez. If he didn't answer, the whole crew would come piling out the door to see what was wrong. Remembering how Sanchez had talked, the waddy gripped the big six-gun in his hand and stepped toward the open door.

"Si, señor," he answered in a heavy accent. "I weel get them."

A wild plan was popping into Gil's brain. Swiftly he moved toward the saddled horses. He picked out Ladroe's big gray, fumbled in the saddlebags. He found four decks of cards in their cases, the seals still unbroken.

"Unless I'm mistaken, them jaspers is goin' to be plenty sore at each other," he chuckled.

IV.

Snorting and side-stepping, the horses fidgeted there in the clearing while Gil Thorpe hunkered down in the yellow moonlight. He laid the six-gun on the ground, keeping one eye on the lighted door of the cabin as he worked.

Quickly he broke the seals on two decks. His deft fingers worked swiftly. He noted with satisfaction that the backs of the cards were identical in both decks. In a few minutes he finished his job, straightened and walked toward the cabin.

He made no effort to disguise his footsteps now. The hardest part of the trick faced him. He halted alongside the door.

Gil remembered about where the table was standing inside the cabin. He hooked his hand around a corner of the door and tossed the deck of cards into the room. He heard them strike wood.

"What the blazes," growled Ladroe. "Yuh lazy Mex, why didn't yuh bring 'em in?"

"Leave him be," snorted Pinky. "Let's git on with the game. I got to git even."

Gil stepped to the window again and watched the five men inside. It would be plain suicide to try and corner them now. Pinky and the other two men faced the door. Pete Shank and Ladroe sat with their backs to the opening. Gil knew he might account for one or two, but sooner or later hot lead would burn him down.

If his trick only worked.

Ladroe kept hitting the jug. Pinky dealt this time. With quickened breath, Gil watched them pick up

the cards, saw them ante. After drawing, Pete Shank won the pot.

It was five minutes later when Ladroe suddenly pushed his whole pile of chips into the center of the table. There was gloating triumph burning in his black eyes.

"Let's see you jaspers match that," he chuckled. "Show the color of yore money."

Pete Shank scowled at the pile of chips in the center, then shrugged his shoulders. With his one good hand he fished in his pocket and pulled out a wad of greenbacks. With a resounding thump he plunked them down in the center of the table.

"I'll match yore play," he said nervously. He rubbed his hand over his bullet-torn jaw, glanced at his cards again and smiled.

The two hard-eyed jaspers on either side of Pinky threw down their hands. Pinky Dane fingered his red mustache, let his pale eyes flick from Ladroe to Shank. Then he pushed all his chips into the pot.

"I'm callin' yuh," he said confidently.

Ladroe took a nip from the jug. He relished this play and wanted to savor his triumph. Slowly, deliberately, he laid down his cards. Four aces stared face up from the rough table top.

Gil Thorpe, watching through the corner of the window, saw Pete Shank and Pinky Dane stiffen. Pinky snarled, flipped his cards face up. His red mustache bristled.

"Yuh wear yore sleeves too long, Ladroe!" he yelled. "They cover up too many cards!" He had three aces showing.

Poker Ladroe kicked his chair crashing against the log wall. He stood there straddle-legged, right hand near his gun, a red flush crawling over his black-whiskered cheeks.

"Yuh dug them aces out o' yore boot top, Pinky," he bellowed.

"Hold yore wind, you two," Pete Shank ripped out. He flung his own cards on the table. He had a full house, aces high. "I been wonderin' how come either Ladroe or Pinky been winnin' all the time. Yuh been playin' me an' the boys fer suckers. Somethin' went wrong with yore signals to-night."

Pete Shank dug for his gun. He ducked low as Pinky flipped his own Colt from leather and flung a quick, blasting shot. The bullet punched the back window into a jangled mess of glass.

The slug from Shank's gun cut down the man next to Pinky. He sprawled face-down, crimson welling from a wound just above the high pocket of his vest.

With a wild yell, Gil Thorpe charged through the door. His big Colt was gripped in his right hand. The jasper on Pinky's left opened fire. Gil's quick shot caught him over the left eye. He went back on his heels, the bullet from his gun screaming out the open doorway.

Pinky Dane, his red mustache twitching in the breeze as he moved, was throwing down on Shank. Shank's shattered jaw threw a grotesque shadow on the wall. His eyes opened in fright.

"Thorpe's in the door!" he yelled.

But Pinky's thumb dropped. His weapon roared and Pete Shank bent in two as though he was hinged. He thumped the board floor, kicked once or twice, and lay still.

Ladroe had his back to Gil, pulling his own gun and lining the muzzle on Pinky's back. At Shank's shouted warning, Ladroe had whirled. Surprise, then anger flooded his eyes.

"Thorpe!" he growled. "How yuh got offn thet ledge I'll never know,

But it didn't do yuh no good. Yo're good as six feet under right now."

Pinky was jumping aside, trying to bring his own hot gun into the fray. Gil dropped to one knee, thumbing two quick shots at the hulking Ladroe. The outlaw chief staggered back as if hit by a battering ram, but he didn't go down.

Gil tried to roll aside as Pinky's gun opened up. One bullet ripped through his left leg. As he struck the floor on his side, he flung one desperate shot at that red-mustached man. Pinky came on like a charging steer, but he was staggering blindly. His body struck the table and he fell to the floor, his heart sliced by Gil's hot bullet.

Like a man whose legs have suddenly become as limp as a stake rope, Poker Ladroe bounced around, trying to bring his smoking gun waist-high. Crimson was splotching his shirt front. He tried to claw through the fog of powder smoke which wreathed the air.

Gil was crawling across the floor, the pain from his wounded leg sending white lights shooting through his brain. He saw Ladroe bring his gun up with both hands. Then Gil triggered his last bullet.

Ladroe grinned sickly. He sat down abruptly in the one remaining chair, leaned back and crashed to the floor.

The pound of horses' hoofs smashed on the ground outside. And through the open doorway Gil could see a man with a star leading a posse.

"Reckon the posse heard the shootin'," he said feebly. Gil surveyed the sprawled figures on the cabin floor. "I reckon that's part payment for Jim Sloan's life. I'll be roundin' up my hosses an' drivin' 'em to Colonel Hartley's spread. Sanchez outside may live to hang. Them five jaspers in here is out o' commission. First time I ever heard of a few aces slipped into a deck beatin' five of a kind."

LONE INHABITANT OF FRIO TOWN

A BOOM town of Texas that once had a population of thirteen hundred can now boast of only one inhabitant. This is Mrs. W. A. Roberts, whose husband was a rancher. The place was known in the old days as Frio City, and was the first county seat of Frio County. Today all that is left of its past glory is the old courthouse, the jail, abandoned houses, and the cemetery.

The cemetery is on a nearby hill, and is so overgrown that the graves are hidden. One part of it contains the remains of those who were killed by Indians. About one mile from town is the Presidio Crossing, where Santa Ana encamped on his way to San Antonio to wipe out the brave defenders of the Alamo.

Cannon balls, swords, pistols, and scraps of metal have been found at this spot during a long period, and are still guarded as souvenirs by those whose ancestors fought and died fighting for the freedom of their country, and did not give up against the superior numbers of the enemy until their object was attained.

Mrs. Roberts, who was postmistress in Frio Town for some years, is convinced that oil will gush here some day, and nothing will shake her faith. Tests have been made at various times, and so far all have failed, but the lone inhabitant is so certain that oil is there that she will not leave the place. She hopes to be on the spot when the oil begins to spout.

THEM ORNERY POLECATS



BY SAMUEL H. NICKELS

Author of "Billy the Kid Ropes Geronimo," etc.

Hungry 'an' Rusty know that the only way to handle
skunks is to fight 'em with their own breed.

Them Ornery Polecats

WITH his ungloved right hand resting lightly on one of the black-butted six-guns which sagged his crisscrossed cartridge belts, Rusty Bolivar pulled his horse to a quick halt in the darkness behind a tumble-down shed. The little bow-legged Texas Ranger darted a quick look behind him, then swung from his saddle and dropped his bridle reins.

The whine of a fiddle and the tinny whang of a guitar cut through the whoops of carousing hombres in the old saloon across the street, and the hideous bray of a burro from a nearby corral added to the uproar. Rusty scowled and looked warily around the corner of the shed.

"I wonder if Hungry is over there," Rusty muttered, keeping his hand on his gun. "He said he was comin' here to arrest a horse thief, an' he's been gone a week. If thet long-legged pelican has showed his Ranger badge around this dump, he's more'n likely in trouble up to his neck. Doggone him, he—"

Bang! Bang-bang-bang! The sudden vicious bark of swiftly fired guns sent Rusty leaping backward, and he heard the spiteful whine of a stray bullet that split the air above his head.

The lights in the old saloon winked out. Excited yells and the sound of desperate fighting reached Rusty. Doors slammed and there came a splintering crash of shattered glass. A sawed-off shotgun bellowed twice, and a few shadowy forms came diving into the street.

"What the—" Rusty snarled, gripping his guns. "Thet shindig has ended in a free-fer-all rookus! I wonder is thet long-legged pard of mine mixed up in it."

Wild yells and oaths still sounded from inside the saloon. A gun roared twice, and there came another crash of shattered glass. A light flared up, and Rusty heard a chorus of savage whoops.

"Now what?" he snarled, glaring. "Thet sounds like somebody's just been handed the short end of thet set-to. I reckon I'd better have me a look over there."

Rusty hastily jerked off his Ranger badge and hid it in his pocket. He knew that he was in one of the toughest outlaw towns along the entire Texas border. To be seen with that badge on him would be almost certain to mean his instant death.

Leaving his well-trained horse ground-hitched, Rusty pulled his hat brim lower on his forehead and stepped from behind the shed. With his squinted eyes on the front of the saloon, he hurried across the street, both his hands close to his holstered guns.

Rusty quickly reached the shelter of an adobe wall. He crouched there in the thick darkness and darted a hasty look along the little town's single crooked street. He then slipped both guns from his holsters and crept swiftly on.

The little Ranger had just reached the side of the old saloon when he heard a shouted oath and a roar of angry voices. Gripping his guns and watching closely in every direction, he jumped to the nearest window and crouched to listen.

"I tell yuh plain shootin' is too good fer the likes of him!" came a savage bellow. "He figgered to come hyar an' arrest a feller right under our noses, did he? Let's hang him!"

Rusty stiffened. As a chorus of whoops and murderous oaths sounded from inside, he bounded

erect and peeped cautiously around the side of the window.

There at the end of the long bar, he saw Hungry Hawkins. One side of Hungry's homely, lantern-jawed face was a smear of crimson from a jagged gash in the edge of his hair, and his wrists were lashed together behind him. His flannel shirt was almost ripped from his lanky body, but he stood with his long legs planted wide apart and grimly faced the angry crowd of heavily armed ruffians.

Little Rusty's first thought was to leap through the window with his guns blazing and stake everything on a desperate effort to reach his lanky partner before the angry outlaws downed him. But he realized that he could never hope to save Hungry single-handed.

"What'll it be, men?" a thick-shouldered, bull-necked hombre shouted, his beefy face red with rage. "Will it be shootin' or hangin'? All in favor of the rope, say so!"

Rusty had jerked up his long-barreled .45s to plant his first bullet between the bull-necked ruffian's eyes. But as the crowd roared savagely for the rope, he suddenly lowered both weapons and stepped back.

"Figgerin' to hang him, are they?" Rusty snarled, a fighting scowl twisting his freckled face. "Well, I've busted up more'n one hangin' since me an' Hungry has been ridin' the law trail. Them polecats ain't goin' to hang no pard of mine while I'm able to fan a Colt!"

At that instant the yelling crowd closed in around Hungry and hustled him toward the door. As the puffy-faced bartender threw his dirty apron on the bar and followed close behind them, Rusty whirled and ran to the corner of the building.

When the crowd passed him with

Hungry in their midst, the little bow-legged Ranger rushed into the empty saloon and darted behind the bar. He snatched up a pair of loaded .45s and shoved them inside his belt, then ran to the big brass lamp which swung from the ceiling in the middle of the room.

"Hang somebody, will they?" Rusty gritted as he jumped on a chair and grabbed the lamp. "Like blazes, they will! I'll give them ornery polecats somethin' else to think about!"

As Rusty dumped the oil from the huge lamp on the sawdust-covered floor and snatched a match from his shirt pocket, he could hear wild whoops from the direction of a big cottonwood tree a short distance down the street. With an angry snarl, he touched a lighted match to the oil-soaked sawdust and ran from the saloon.

Without a pause, the little Ranger sped to the long hitch rack and swiftly untied the nearest horse. Flames were licking to the ceiling inside the buildings, and smoke was pouring from every window as he leaped into the saddle and spurred down the street.

II.

The outlaws had already stopped beneath the wide-limbed cottonwood. Hungry had been lifted upon a horse, and one of the crowd was reaching to put a rope about his neck. As soon as the rope was tied, the hombres would lead the horse from beneath him and leave Hungry hanging to the tree.

With his slitted eyes on his lanky partner, Rusty rode straight toward the crowd. "Look out, men!" he yelled. "To blazes with hangin' thet hombre now! The saloon's on fire! Git back there an' put it out while

there's time! This hangin'll keep till later! Run!"

Wild yells and oaths burst from the startled outlaws as they whirled and saw flames leaping from the saloon windows. Rusty was among them before they could see who he was. His plunging cow horse knocked an hombre sprawling as he slapped Hungry's mount across the rump with his hat and sent it leaping forward. He and Hungry were spurring madly away before the rufians saw what he was doing.

A sudden murderous bellow came from behind them.

"Cut 'em down, men! We've been tricked! Shoot 'em both 'fore they git away on us!"

"Down!" Rusty yelled to Hungry. "Down on yore horse's neck! They're goin' to shoot! I'll—"

Bang-bang-bang! Br-a-ng! The sudden thudding roar of hastily fired guns drowned the sound of Rusty's voice, and a hail of badly aimed bullets split the air all around the fleeing Rangers.

Hunched low over their horses' necks, Hungry and Rusty spurred to a still greater burst of speed. Rusty had clawed a knife from his chaps pocket and was trying desperately to open the blade with his teeth.

A bullet slapped through the top of Rusty's hat. Another cut his shirt across the shoulder, and a third burned a stinging groove along Hungry's left side near his hip.

Just then Rusty got his knife open. In spite of the bullets that were whizzing all around them, he leaned over and managed to cut the cords from his lanky partner's wrists. Shoving his extra pair of guns into Hungry's hands, they reined hurriedly away from the street.

"Now," Rusty snarled, darting a

quick look behind them, "doggone 'em, we're all set to take the whole nest of polecats on. Fer two pins I'd be fer goin' back an' shootin' it out with 'em."

"Keep goin'!" Hungry barked harshly. "We'll come back when we've shook that gang offn our heels."

At that instant a bullet struck Rusty's horse and sent it to its knees. Rusty had barely time to jerk his feet from the stirrups and leap clear as the stricken animal plunged headlong among the tumbleweeds.

Like a flash, Hungry reined his own mount over beside him. With more bullets kicking up the dirt around them, Rusty sprang up behind his lanky partner and they sped on.

"Head fer that old shed over there," Rusty barked. "That's where I left my horse. We can't git nowhere ridin' double. Hurry, 'fore them polecats cut us off!"

Hungry instantly reined his mount to the left and raked it with his spurs. Several of the outlaws were already running to get in front of them, and a couple of guns were flaming from the darkness in a vacant lot a short distance to one side.

A bullet grazed Hungry's saddlehorn and hummed spitefully off into the darkness. Another tugged at Rusty's shirt collar, and several more made the sand and dust boil from the ground beyond their straining horse.

The two Rangers were almost to the old shed when a sawed-off shotgun suddenly bellowed from straight in front of them. With an almost human scream of agony and terror, their mount staggered and nearly went down. As the dying animal fought gamely to stay on its feet, Hungry and Rusty leaped from its

back and dived behind the corner of a low fence.

"Look out!" Hungry barked, grabbing his guns. "Start shootin'! We've got to hold them hombres offn us if we kin. Hyar they come! Let 'em have it!"

As shadowy forms leaped into view in the darkness, both Rangers began shooting as fast as they could thumb their Colt hammers. Yells, oaths and a swift bellow of gunfire instantly sounded from in front of them, and a hail of bullets tore splinters from the fence.

"Surround 'em, mien!" came a hoarse shout. "Watch thet they don't git away. Keep 'em huggin' thet fence till yuh kin git on both sides of 'em!"

"Yeah!" Rusty snarled to his lanky partner. "Like blazes they will!"

Hungry jerked around and snapped two quick shots at a pair of dim forms that were creeping toward a small patch of chamisa a short distance away. He fired again, then leaned closer to Rusty.

Flames suddenly burst through the flimsy roof of the old saloon, and burning shingles flew high into the air. The fire cast a red glare on the ground around the cornered Rangers, and bullets from the infuriated outlaws began cutting closer and closer.

"We've got to move from hyar," Hungry drawled grimly. "This fence ain't stoppin' no bullets, an' it's gittin' light enough fer them hombres to see to plug us. Let's try to reach thet old shack over thar."

Hungry pointed with his left-hand gun toward a small building a short distance away. As Rusty peered over the fence, a bullet slapped wickedly through his hat and almost lifted it from his red head.

"Blast thet polecat!" Rusty gritted. "I just paid twenty-four dollars fer this John B., an' now look at it. I'll shoot the pants offn the hombre thet done thet! Lead on to thet house. We kin maybe hold 'em off from there."

Both Rangers instantly began crawling away along the old fence. Searching bullets followed them and stung their faces with dirt and flying splinters as the outlaws fired shot after shot through the warped boards above them.

Hungry and Rusty quickly reached the end of the fence. They darted a measuring look at a small house a short distance away and pulled their feet under them.

"All right!" Hungry barked softly. "We may make it an' we may not. We'll be in plain sight of them hombres all the way to thet shack, an' both of us may stop bullets 'fore we git thar. Yuh ready? Hold on!"

Three crouched hombres suddenly darted around the corner of the old house and scurried toward a stack of lumber near the fence. The lanky Ranger twisted hastily around and jerked up his guns. He fired two quick shots and sent one of the ruffians sprawling to the ground. A hurried shot from Rusty got another of the hombres, and the third one dived behind a boulder before either Ranger could reach him.

Like a flash, Hungry bounded erect. "Let's go!" he barked. "Head fer thet nearest door, an' don't stop to shoot nor nothin' else! Thar'll be plenty of time fer shootin' when we git thar, if we make it."

Both Rangers darted hastily from the shelter of the fence and went racing toward the old house. The outlaws spotted them instantly, and a hail of bullets split the air all around their flying forms.

"Thar they aire, men!" came a wild whoop. "Blast 'em down! Let 'em have it!"

A big bullet smashed against a rock near Rusty and stung his side with slivers of flying lead. Another ball slapped through the flange of his chaps, and a third twisted the shank of one of Hungry's spurs.

"Hurry!" Hungry barked sharply. "Don't slow down!"

"What!" Rusty cried, panting. "What do yuh think I'm doin'? Playin' tiddlywinks? Git out of my way or I'll run right through yuh!"

At that instant Hungry dived headlong through the partly open door of the old house. Little Rusty plunged in behind him and landed on hands and knees as a hail of bullets hit the flimsy walls on both sides of him.

Hungry had barely time to slam the door and shove a heavy oak bar into place when savage oaths and a thud of feet sounded from outside. He and Rusty sprang to the nearest window just as several hombres came running toward the house.

Bang-bang-bang! The roar of Ranger and outlaw guns jarred the building, and whizzing bullets smashed wickedly through the walls all around the window.

Glass from a shattered sash showered down on Rusty, and a big bullet sliced through his hat brim from edge to edge until it flapped down over his left ear. Hungry felt the sting of a bullet that cut his shirt across the shoulder.

"Now look at my hat, will yuh?" Rusty yelped. "Doggone it, every time we git mixed up in a gun rookus, I git a good hat ruint. Fer two pins I'd quit this blasted Rang-erin' an' go back to punchin' cows."

"Git down!" Hungry cut in harshly. "Git yore head down from

thet winder 'fore yuh git worse than a bullet in yore hat!"

The thundering double whang of a big sawed-off shotgun roared from the lumber pile, and a hurricane of buckshot and slugs filled the room with flying glass from the sash above their heads as both Rangers ducked hastily to the floor.

But Hungry and Rusty had stopped the outlaws' rush. The ruf-fians had taken shelter behind everything that would hide them, and they were now riddling the walls of the old house with a hail of bullets.

"Surround the shack, men!" came a bull voice. "We've got 'em whar we want 'em this time! Thet little runt set our saloon afire fer us, did he? We'll give him a taste of his own medicine 'fore he's many minutes older. If we can't git 'em out to hang 'em, we'll fry 'em both!"

With a fighting scowl twisting his freckled face, Rusty jerked around. "Did yuh hear thet?" he snarled, glaring. "Them skunks is figgerin' to burn us out."

"I heerd it," Hungry drawled grimly. "Thet hombre thet was talkin' is the hoss thief I come hyar to arrest. He ain't only a hoss thief, but he's a killer of the orneriest kind, an' he's the straw boss of the big gang of toughs thet's makin' this old minin' camp their hangout. His name's Pete Cleghorn, an' he's a bad one. Look out!"

Another rush of feet sounded from outside, and the two Rangers again leaped to the window. For nearly a minute snarling guns crashed viciously from every direction. But aided by the red glare of the burning saloon, Hungry and Rusty managed to drop two of the outlaws and once more drove the rest to cover.

Suddenly the ripping crack of a big rifle sounded from the other side

of the building, and a heavy bullet tore a shower of splinters from the floor behind Rusty. Hungry instantly went running across the room to the other window.

"You stay thar!" he called back to Rusty. "Keep yore eyes peeled! They're jumpin' us from both sides! We've got to—"

The blasting roar of a sawed-off shotgun drowned the sound of Hungry's voice as a hail of buckshot from another direction shattered the window at the back of the room. Flying glass tinkled to the floor all around the lanky Ranger as he dropped hastily to one knee and began shooting.

The thudding crack of guns now sounded from every side. Hungry and Rusty fired carefully at the flashes of the outlaws' weapons, but the wily ruffians were keeping well down to avoid being hit.

Suddenly the shooting stopped, and there came a growl of voices from the back of the house. As the two Rangers rapidly crammed fresh cartridges into their hot guns, they tried to see what the outlaws were doing.

"Watch close!" Hungry called sharply. "Them hombres is up to somethin'. Yeah! Look at thet!"

Before the lanky Ranger had finished speaking, a match flared up behind a pile of rock a short distance away. Almost instantly a blazing torch of oil-soaked rags came hurtling toward the house. Another torch followed, and a third came sailing from behind a pile of boards to one side. One rolled clear under the edge of the house, and smoke came drifting up through cracks in the old floor.

"Thet's the ticket, men!" came a savage whoop. "I reckon thet'll fix 'em! Watch close an' see thet they

don't duck out of thar an' try to git away!"

As a chorus of wild yells burst from the circle of outlaws, Hungry tried desperately to rip a board from the floor. Rusty fired two quick shots in the direction of the lumber stack and sprang to help his lanky partner.

III.

Together they wrenched and tugged to tear up one of the rough planks and reach the torch that was blazing beneath them. But they could already hear the crackle of flames as tongues of fire from the ball of oil-soaked rags bit swiftly into the dried timbers and rubbish. One of the torches had struck in a pile of tumbleweeds near the corner of the house, and fire from that side was leaping to the edge of the roof.

"Waal, it won' be long now," Hungry said grimly. "Git back to thet winder, an' we'll pick off as many of them hombres as we kin. When the fire chases us out, we'll go out shootin'."

Little Rusty was halfway to the window before his lanky partner finished speaking, and a hasty shot from his left-hand gun brought a yell of pain and a torrent of oaths from the direction of the lumber stack. Hungry's guns blasted an echo from across the room, and a hail of outlaw bullets splintered through the walls all around him.

For a few minutes, the battle raged with renewed fury. Long tongues of flame were beginning to leap through cracks in the floor, and the two trapped Rangers had to crouch lower at the windows to keep the outlaws from seeing them too plainly.

One side of the tinderlike roof was now ablaze, and sparks showered down through the flimsy ceil-

ing. The room was filled with boiling clouds of smoke, and some of the boards on the rear wall were rapidly buckling under the terrific heat.

Sweat was trickling down Hungry's homely, lantern-jawed face as he coughed the smoke out of his lungs and spat a huge stream of tobacco juice to one side. He coughed again and began hastily reloading his guns.

Rusty muttered a remark and slapped hastily at a spark that had burned through his shirt. As he did so, a bullet almost parted his hair and he fired a hurried shot at a head that showed for a split second above a pile of rocks.

Just then, part of the flimsy ceiling sagged crazily and crashed to the floor. A section of the roof followed it, and both Rangers had to jump aside to keep from being caught beneath the blazing timbers.

The heat was terrific, and Rusty crouched back against the wall as the side of his shirt began smoking. Hungry held one arm up to shield his face and stumbled hastily toward him.

"Git ready!" Hungry said hoarsely. "We're goin' out of hyar, an' we're goin' out shootin'! They may git us, but we'll down as many of them hombres as we kin 'fore they drop us. Git yore guns loaded!"

"My guns is already loaded," Rusty answered, "an' the first guy thet sticks his blasted head up in front of me is goin' to find it out. Let's go!"

The two cowboy Rangers stumbled hastily to the door, and Hungry jerked it open. Wild yells and a thudding crash of gunfire instantly sounded from the front of the flaming building.

"Thar they aire, men!" came a triumphant whoop. "I knowed thet

fire would chase 'em out. Git ready! Hyar they come!"

Rusty started to leap through the doorway, but Hungry suddenly gripped his arm. As he did so, outlaws came running from the back of the house, their guns gripped ready.

"Hold on!" Hungry barked grimly, and he pulled his scrappy little partner over beside the door. "Wait until them hombres all gits out in front, then we'll fool 'em. We'll duck right around the corner of the house an' make fer one of them other shacks 'fore they kin head us off, savvy?"

At that instant another section of the blazing roof fell with a crackling roar. As the rear wall toppled and began to sag inward, Hungry jerked up his guns and nodded.

"Yuh ready?" he snapped harshly. "Fire a couple of shots an' act like we was comin' straight ahead, then duck to the left around the corner of the house."

As the two Rangers leaped into the open, a bellow of gunfire ringed them with a hail of whining bullets. With their own guns flaming at every jump, Hungry and Rusty suddenly swerved aside and sped toward the corner of the house.

"Look out, men!" came the bull voice of Pete Cleghorn. "Cut 'em down!"

A bullet grazed Hungry's shoulder. Another almost severed Rusty's cartridge belt, and a third kicked up a spurt of dust between his flying feet as he and his lanky partner turned the corner.

"Keep goin'!" Hungry barked as Rusty turned partly around for a cross-arm shot at a ruffian who had jumped from behind a stunted tree. "Don't stop until we—"

Before Hungry could finish what he meant to say, a glancing bullet

struck the side of his head, and he went rolling on the ground. With an angry yelp, Rusty bounded over beside him and turned with both guns blazing as fast as his trigger fingers could trip the weapons' hammers.

But before the game little Ranger had fired more than a few shots, his guns clicked on empty cylinders. As he began trying hurriedly to reload, a creeping hombre leaped on his back from behind. Before he could tear free, more outlaws jumped on him, and he was hurled to the ground.

Heaving and twisting, fighting with the fury of a trapped bobcat, Rusty tried to snatch a gun from an outlaw's hand. But before he could get a grip on the weapon, a Colt barrel smashed down across his head from behind, and he went limp. Dazed and helpless, but not entirely unconscious, he felt the ruffians tie his hands together behind him.

"Waal," came a snarl of brutal satisfaction, "we got thish whar we want him. See if thet long-legged one is dead yit. If he ain't, we'll tie him, too. When they wake up, we'll finish thet hangin' we started when this little bow-legged runt butted in. Neck-stretchin' beats shootin'."

One of the hombres kicked Rusty viciously and rolled him over on his side. The little Ranger's head was rapidly clearing, but he kept his eyes closed and made no move.

"Yeah," came a growling voice, "this other one is still alive. Thet bullet must've just creased him. He'll be comin' out of it soon."

"Tie him up," Cleghorn said harshly. "Then drag 'em both over to thet old powder house an' lock 'em in till they wake up. We'll fix 'em plenty fer burnin' our saloon."

Hungry and Rusty were dragged over to a thick-walled building near the street and tossed inside. Some of the hombres were starting to turn away when Cleghorn suddenly growled an oath.

"Git a bucket of cold water an' sluice it on 'em," he ordered. "Maybe thet'll wake 'em up. If it will, it'll save time an' we kin git this hangin' over with."

A couple of the ruffians instantly rushed away toward the street. They were soon back with a big bucket of cold water, and as part of it was sloshed over Rusty's face and chest, he had to almost clench his teeth to keep from shivering. They threw some more over the little Ranger, then turned and emptied the rest of the bucket over Hungry.

Cleghorn grunted impatiently when neither Ranger moved. "Waal, come on, men!" he snarled. "We'll come back after a while. Maybe they'll be woke up then. Bar thet door good so they can't git out on us."

Rusty lay motionless as the hombres clumped outside and slammed the heavy door behind them. He waited until he heard them fasten it and go away, then he heaved himself up on one elbow.

"Blast them slimy polecats!" he snarled softly. "Nobody kin fling a bucket of water in my face an' git away with it. I'll—"

"Shhh!" came a warning hiss from behind him. "Not so loud. If somebody is planted out thar to keep tab on us, they'll hyar yuh."

"Hungry!" Rusty ejaculated. "Doggone it, I thought you was still addled."

Hungry grunted. "Nope," he whispered, "I was only knocked out fer a couple of minutes. Now let's git busy an' bust loose 'fore Cleg-

horn an' his amigos gits back. We'll have to hurry."

Rusty was already tugging and wrenching in an effort to break the cords that held him. Suddenly he rolled over and began feeling carefully along the floor around him.

In scarcely a moment the little Ranger's groping fingers touched a puddle of water beside him. With a grunt of satisfaction, he began wetting the cords on his slender wrists. He could hear his lanky partner heaving and twisting in the darkness behind him.

Soon Rusty felt the tightly drawn cords begin to stretch. By placing the palms of his hands together and pressing outward with his wrists, he quickly freed himself and sprang to his feet.

"All right," he snapped as he stooped beside Hungry. "Let me at yore wrists fer a couple of seconds. Them polecats played right into our hands when they throwed thet water on us. They tied us with buckskin, an' water was the very thing to make it stretch so's I could git loose."

Rusty quickly freed his lanky partner and helped him to his feet. Without a pause, they began searching about them.

IV.

They found that the place had once been used as a storehouse for tools and blasting powder by the men who had run the mine and built the little town. Old powder cans, empty boxes, barrels, and discarded tools lay scattered all about the dusty floor. There were no windows to the place.

Hungry and Rusty tried to open the heavy door, but found it impossible to even shake it. Rusty jerked a small match box from his pocket

and was starting to rake a match on his heel when he suddenly stopped and began sniffing suspiciously.

"I smell a skunk," he snarled softly. "There may be a den of 'em under the floor. Thet door was open when we was drug in here, an' one might've got inside. Wait! We don't want to git one of them things stirred up. I'd rather face a gun than a skunk on the prod."

Watching closely, Rusty raked the match on his heel and stepped back. As the light flared up, he heard a slight scratching sound almost beside him, and he jerked hastily around. As he did so, he caught the gleam of beady eyes from the inside of an overturned box scarcely a step away.

He gasped, glaring. "Don't move! There ain't just *one* skunk in thet box. There's two or three of 'em. Fer the love of Pete don't git 'em excited or we're goners. If they start sprayin' thet musk at us, we won't be able to git our breath fer the smell. Wait! Maybe I kin tip thet box over 'em. It's our onliest chance."

Rusty handed Hungry the match and tiptoed hastily around behind the big box. Working cautiously, he took hold of it and slowly turned it down over the top of the skunks.

"Doggone!" he snapped. "Feller, we was lucky. If one of us had made a single quick move around them things, they'd 've fixed us proper. There must be a den of 'em in thet box. I'd hate to git 'em stirred up."

Hungry started to toss the match aside when he suddenly noticed a big trapdoor in the floor beneath his feet. He stooped quickly and began tugging to lift it.

As it came slowly up, Rusty

sprang toward him and raked a second match on the leg of his chaps. There beneath them, they saw a flimsy ladder that led down into a small cellar. The musty odor of rats and decayed rubbish made them almost hold their breath as they leaned over the opening.

"There ain't no way out of there," Rusty said, holding his match lower and peering all about the cellar. "This is the only openin' to it. Maybe we could—"

At a sudden rumble of voices from somewhere outside, Rusty bit off what he meant to say and sprang to his feet. Hungry instantly gripped his arm and pointed to a pile of old mining tools.

"Grab us a couple of them pick handles to fight with," Hungry barked. "We'll leave this trapdoor open so's some of 'em'll fall in it as they step inside."

As Rusty leaped toward the pile of tools, Hungry hurriedly lifted the light ladder from the hole and laid it out of the way. Then with their pick handles gripped ready, the two Rangers flattened themselves against the wall beside the door.

Instantly a crunch of feet sounded from outside. "All right, men," came a wicked snarl, "open up. If them Rangers ain't come to yit, we'll throw another bucket of water on 'em."

The heavy door creaked open, and Hungry and Rusty braced themselves. And as the outlaws came crowding inside, they began smashing right and left with their pick handles at every head within reach.

Startled yells and oaths instantly burst from the bunch of outlaws, and some of them went plunging headlong into the cellar. The thudding bellow of a gun added to the uproar as the two fighting Rangers

knocked three more of the ruffians through the open trapdoor.

"Look out, men!" came a bawl from Cleghorn. "Them Rangers is loose! Shoot 'em!"

Before the bull-necked outlaw leader could finish what he meant to say, a smashing blow of little Rusty's pick handle spun him against the wall, and Hungry shoved him into the cellar. Two more hombres leaped inside and fell headlong through the trapdoor before they could fire a shot.

The fight was over in less than a minute. One ruffian lay sprawled upon the floor beside Rusty, but the little bow-legged Ranger hastily rolled him through the hole and slammed the trapdoor shut.

"Waal," Hungry drawled, mopping the sweat from his homely face, "I reckon thet's thet. We've been lucky. It's a good thing thet cellar openin' was right in front of this door so's them jaspers would fall in it. Some of 'em would've downed us."

Before Rusty could reply, a volley of shots roared from beneath them, and a hail of bullets smashed through the old floor all around his and Hungry's feet. With more bullets hurling dust and splinters into the air, they leaped back against the wall.

"Huh!" Hungry grunted. "We've got 'em, but how aire we ever goin' to git them guns away from 'em an' git 'em out of thet cellar? Them ornery skunks ain't aimin' to surrender unless we find a way to make 'em."

Rusty scowled. Suddenly a waspish grin twisted his freckled face, and he gave a cackling laugh.

"Did I hear yuh say somethin' about skunks?" he demanded. "Tie a piece of wire to the ring in thet trapdoor so's yuh kin jerk it up with-

out gittin' shot. If them jaspers don't start beggin' to surrender when I git done with 'em, it'll be because there's somethin' wrong with their smellers."

Hungry grabbed up a length of heavy wire and hooked it in the iron ring on the trapdoor, while Rusty jumped to the box that held the imprisoned skunks. Working cautiously, the little Ranger shoved the box slowly across the floor until it was close beside the opening in the floor. Hungry had to grin when he saw what his little partner meant to do.

"All right," Rusty snapped. "Git back where yuh won't stop a bullet, then hoist that door fer about a couple of seconds. Yuh ready? Let 'er go!"

As Hungry stepped back out of the way and jerked up the door, a bellow of angry oaths and a blast of gunfire sounded from below. In spite of the hail of bullets that came whizzing up through the hole, little Rusty shoved the skunks, box and all, into the cellar.

Hungry slammed the door, and a chorus of muffled yells and a mad scramble sounded from below. The shooting stopped instantly, and the overpowering smell of musk from the nest of skunks came drifting up through cracks in the old floor.

"Help!" came a frantic bawl. "Let us out of hyar! We can't git our breath fer this stink. It's blamed nigh puttin' our eyes out! Help!"

Rusty grinned. "Are yuh surrenderin'?" he yelled.

"Yeah!" came a chorus of choking howls. "Fer criminy sakes open

that door an' give us air. These polecats is still sprayin' us!"

"Then throw yore guns out when we open this trap," Hungry called. "Be shore yuh throw 'em all up, then I'll shove the ladder down an' yuh kin come up one at a time. Na tricks, or we'll leave yuh down there."

As Hungry opened the trapdoor, guns came flying up through the hole. He and Rusty each grabbed a pair of the weapons and made certain they were loaded before shoving the ladder into the cellar.

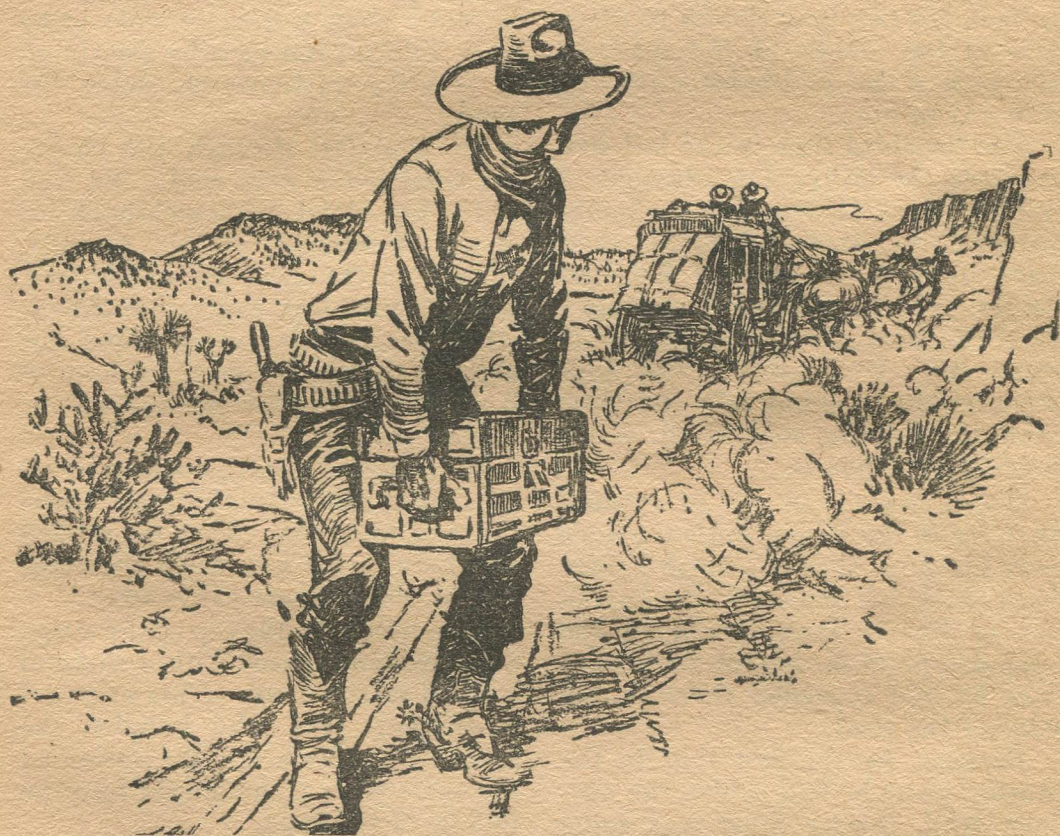
Using pieces of rope and old wire from the floor, Hungry and Rusty tied the hombres' hands behind them as fast as they came up the ladder. One side of Pete Cleghorn's beefy face was a smear of crimson, and he was barely able to climb from the hole. He was mouthing oaths in a savage whine.

"Waal," Hungry drawled as he finally stepped back to look at their battered prisoners, "we finally got 'em all, but they smell so ornery I'll bet thar ain't a sheriff in Texas thet'll let us put 'em in his jail."

"Yeah!" Rusty snarled, glaring at Cleghorn. "You ain't said half of it. They smell so doggoned loud, I'm goin' to have to find me a clothes pin to pin over my nose before I kin help drive 'em to any jail! They is the most rancidest smellin' bunch of polecats I ever smelt."

Dealin' with a bunch o' skunks is Hungry an' Rusty's meat. An' they're goin' to have a chance to do it ag'in right soon. Watch fer the next story about the two Rangers in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

WAR TRAIL FOR THE DEVIL'S DEPUTY



By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Author of "Peaceful Perkins—From Purgatory," etc.

Pinnin' Blacky Starr's badge to his heart
with a bullet is the outlaw's way of fixin' 'im.

War Trail for the Devil's Deputy

CHAPTER I.

STICK-UP.

IT wasn't far from where Blacky Starr, the Devil's Deputy, squatted behind a clump of spike-leaved cholla to where the road to Lodestone began its twisting, snaky climb up the rock-tortured slope of the ridge. It was only far enough, in fact, for two long strides to place him in the middle of the road, in the path of the gold-laden stage due now any minute.

For the third time in the last five minutes, the lathy, slope-shouldered outlaw checked his guns. Long-barreled, battered old Colts, they were, laced down low on his lean thighs. He knew those guns didn't need checking; they were well-oiled, clean, and rested lightly in their holsters, ready to jump into the clear with the flashing movement of his long-fingered hands.

No, it wasn't an act of caution that made the young outlaw glance over his guns, then slip them lightly back into their pouches. It was an act of taut nerves, drawn to the snapping point during the tense minutes he had crouched there at the edge of the road.

Because, for the first time in the stormy years he had ridden the owl-hoot trail, Blacky Starr was going to break the law openly. He was going to rob the Lodestone stage.

A faint rattle of wheels brought a hard glint to his smoke-blue eyes. Bunched muscles rode the lean line of his jaw, pushing spots of gray through skin that had been bronzed by desert sun and wind.

He didn't look like an owl-hooter who was wanted the length and

breadth of two States by the law. He was tall and rangy, with a certain catlike alertness in his crouching body. His clothes were a somber black from hand-stitched boots to the crown of his broad-brimmed range hat. And pinned to his shirt, a black enameled star glinted dully under the rays of the coppery desert sun—the badge of the Devil's Deputy.

Muscles rippled into hardness, as he listened to the increasing sound of the approaching stage. It couldn't be more than a quarter mile away now, hidden from view by the clump of scrubby cottonwoods down the road.

He squinted through the cholla, his smoke-blue eyes cold. No hint of the hot blood surging through his veins, drumming at his temples, showed in the grim set of his face. Nor did his bleak expression change when he saw the stage round the bend in the road, then slow down as it started up the low rise toward the foot of the ridge.

He leaned forward, coming to his toes, both hands brushing the cedar butts of his guns. Then he pushed suddenly to his feet when the stage was hardly a dozen yards away.

Two men rode the top of the stage, a square-built guard with a shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm and a dried-up gent who handled the reins. They both saw the outlaw at the same time, as he leaped into the middle of the road.

"Pull up, gents!" Starr's voice was like the crack of a whip. "An' sky them gun hooks. You, square-face, drop that scattergun, or—"

The outlaw's hands blurred at his hip. In that split second as he had leaped to the middle of the road, he had seen the driver hunker down in his seat, sawing wildly on the reins. But the guard was a salty hombre.

If he heard the outlaw's command, it made no difference to him. Yelling a hoarse curse, he swung his shotgun in a savage arc.

Sun flashed on blue as the outlaw's twin Colts leaped level, jumped with a roar of smoke and flame. The guard screamed. The shotgun slid from his fingers, and he clutched at a bullet-burned arm. The driver made a quick grab for his side gun, then halted the movement as the outlaw's gun roared again.

Blacky Starr paced forward, his eyes cold and narrowed. "I said this is a stick-up, gents," he rapped out. "Make another break, an' I'll have tuh throw lead where it hurts more. Most fast now, an' kick that strong box down here."

A flicker of fear came to the driver's leathery face. His handlebar mustache quivered, and his bugged-out eyes seemed about to pop out of his head.

"Strong box?" he said whiningly. "Heck, we ain't carryin' no gold. Mister, yo're just proddin' yoreself into the jail house for nothin'."

A faint smile came to the lips of the Devil's Deputy. It was just a stall, and he knew it. That grim-faced old-timer wasn't scared; he had sand and plenty of it.

Starr scowled savagely, jabbing his gun forward. "Don't lie," he rasped. "You got a strong box filled with ten thousand in gold. An' if yuh want tuh keep yore hide sound— Quick, man, I mean business."

The guard groaned a curse, glaring at the outlaw. "Blast you," he grated. "Yuh'll never get away with this. They'll round yuh up afore yuh see what that gold looks like."

He pulled a robe from a something on the floor boards, then kicked angrily with his foot. The strong box slid off the stage, thud-

ded heavily to the ground. Flashing a glance at it, the outlaw saw a small, square box banded with iron straps and sealed with a heavy lock. His eyes jerked back to the two men.

"One of you gents has the key tuh that lock," he bit out coldly. "If it takes that jasper more'n three seconds tuh climb down an' unlock it, he'll wake up in Hades yellin' for ice water."

A rush of blood darkened the driver's leathery face. "Like blazes!" he roared. "I've lost three shipments already this month. This time, I'm killin' me a skunk."

His gnarled, bony hand clawed savagely for his gun. But before he could draw, the guard caught his hand and jerked it away from the weapon.

"Cut it, Jake," he rasped. "He'd kill yuh, shore. Don't yuh see that black badge he's wearin'? He's that blasted owl-hooter, the Devil's Deputy!"

Jake stiffened, his cheeks going gray. "The Devil's Deputy!" he gasped. He laughed harshly. "First it's the Phantom Legion that cleans us out, then it's the Devil's Deputy. Yeah, he's the gunny folks say never hurt nobody that didn't have it comin' tuh him."

He fumbled in the pocket of his vest, then climbed stiffly to the ground and bent over the strong box.

The outlaw stepped back, his eyes narrowed, alert. He flashed a quick glance back over his shoulder toward the crest of the ridge. Chill lights flared in his smoky eyes. There were riders up there, fully half a dozen of them, mounted and staring down the rocky slope. His eyes darted back to the stage.

The driver had flipped open the lid of the strong box and was starting to climb back to his seat.

Starr lashed out brittly. "Yore

job ain't done yet. Them bags of gold, throw 'em onto the floor of the stage an' cover 'em with that robe."

The stage driver whirled around his jaw sagging in amazement.

"Throw 'em back?" he gasped. "Of all the loco, fog-brained—"

The outlaw flashed another glance back over his shoulder, saw the riders on the top of the ridge spurring their mounts recklessly down the rocky slope. They were no more than three quarters of a mile away, but he knew it would take minutes for them to get to the foot of that boulder-studded, treacherous slope.

He spun back around, to see the driver and guard still staring at him in blank amazement. His eyes clouded with a flare of anger.

"Well, don't stand there gawkin'," he snapped. "If them riders get low enough tuh see you throw that gold back in the stage, neither of yuh'll get off so easy. Move, dang it!"

There was still a look of dumb wonder on the leathery face of the driver. He didn't understand the game this cool-eyed, grim-faced outlaw was playing, but he did understand the sudden threat of that brace of leveled Colts.

He bent swiftly and began throwing the bags of gold onto the floor board of the stage. The guard waited until the last bag had been tossed up from the box, then kicked the robe over the floor board.

Cautiously, Blacky Starr drifted back from the stage. His guns were back in their holsters again, but he didn't think that either of the two men would try to match his flashing draw.

His lips twisted into a thin, mocking grin. "Rattle yore hocks, gents," he clipped. "Them riders comin' are part of the Phantom Legion. Let them think I didn't take the gold,

an' they'll clean yuh out shore. Now, get rollin'."

The driver didn't need a second invitation. More than once he had heard of this gun-swift outlaw who called himself the Devil's Deputy. Always before, the outlaw's guns had fought on the side of the law, but here was the bleak-faced, black-garbed youth sticking up the stage. Not for gold, but for an empty strong box.

It didn't make sense, but the grizzled old stage driver didn't intend to stick around and try to figure it out. There was warning in the smoky blue eyes of the Devil's Deputy, and a warning even more deadly in that group of silent, hooded riders spurring their mounts down the slope of the ridge.

Blacky Starr stooped, as the stage jerked into movement and rattled off down the road, picked up the strong box and lock, then broke into a run toward a draw that gouged its way into the flats at the side of the road. He slid down the slope of the draw and ran to Big Red, his sorrel bronc, ground-reined a few yards away.

Swiftly, he flipped open the saddlebags and pulled out several small, heavy cloth bags, which he dumped into the empty strong box. A moment later he slammed the lid of the box shut and clicked the lock into place.

Distantly, he heard the throaty yell of the Phantom Legion, as they halted the stage. They couldn't be more than a quarter mile away, still on the slope of the ridge, and when they learned that a lone outlaw had already robbed the stage they had been about to ambush—

Starr grinned thinly as he quickly knotted the rope binding the strong box behind his saddle. He knew what that gun pack would do when

they found out that the Devil's Deputy had beat them to the stage they had been planning to hold up. They would come down the ridge like a black cloud, guns high, their cold eyes searching for sign of the lone outlaw.

And they would cut his sign, for the trail the Devil's Deputy would leave was going to be bold and plain.

Blacky leaped into the saddle and spurred the bronc down the draw. Fifty yards away, the draw deepened into a steep-walled gulch. For a half mile he held his horse into the gulch, then the walls gradually sloped away, and he turned Big Red across open range toward the Pinaleno Mountains looming five miles away.

Cold, steady lights clouded his smoke-blue eyes, as he leaned forward to the gait of his horse. He pulled in slightly on the reins, slowing Big Red into an easy, mile-eating pace. There was no need of tiring the long-legged bronc uselessly. Sooner or later that band of killers—the Phantom Legion—would cut his sign.

A sudden burst of gunfire sent him twisting around in the saddle. His lips thinned over clenched teeth and curled into a grim, mocking smile, as he saw the hooded riders streaming out of the mouth of the gulch scarcely a half mile behind him. With their guns blasting, they strung out across the sage-dotted flats.

The Phantom Legion was riding to the kill!

CHAPTER II.

RECRUIT FOR THE LEGION.

BIG RED was winded and straining when Blacky Starr rode into the shadows of the Pinalenos. He swung his bronc parallel to the range, crashing through scrubby

mesquite, swerving around clumps of cholla, as he cut across the gulches and draws that gouged into the side of the mountain.

Up ahead, he saw the yawning black gash of a canyon knifing into the range. He pointed his horse toward it, heading across the badlands at an angle.

Behind him the killer gang clung doggedly to his trail. They had stopped shooting after that first burst, but their guns were still held ready. A yell floated to Blacky's ears over the drum of hoofs, as they saw him ride into the rock-choked mouth of the canyon.

The waddy grinned bleakly, his eyes narrowed and cold. The canyon floor was clogged with loose rock that had tumbled down from the age-rotted cliffs towering above. Darkness was beginning to purple the desert sky, and the dying light of day slanted into the gloom of the canyon.

He was forced to slow his mount as the boulders became thicker with the narrowing of the canyon walls. Half a mile farther on, the gorge twisted sharply to the north. He swung in close to the wall, threading his bronc through the jumbled mass of rock.

Then he knew why that exultant yell had lifted from the throats of the gun crew behind him. Ahead, the frowning gray walls of the canyon narrowed abruptly until they joined. There was no escape from that gorge. It was a box canyon!

He pulled Big Red to a halt, his eyes darting frantically through the tangled mass of rust-colored rock.

"We're trapped, hoss," he muttered grimly. "That gang knew they had us when we turned in here. Shore, we planned tuh be caught, but this here setup—"

An idea flashed over his brain.

He slid quickly from the saddle and slapped the rump of his horse. The animal trotted a dozen or so paces through the rocks, then came to a puzzled halt near the wall of the cliff.

The mounting rumble of hoofs drummed on the outlaw's ears. He turned and ran toward a maze of boulders near the bend in the canyon. He crouched behind one of the rocks, both his guns palmed, alert.

The outlaw pack slowed their horses to a walk, then to a halt, as they neared the bend in the canyon. Cautiously, Blacky Starr peered around the side of the boulder. The Phantom Legion were dim shadows huddled a few yards away. He smiled thinly, as a hoarse voice that was muffled by a long black hood rasped out:

"The canyon ends up ahead. We got the skunk bottled up."

"Probably holed up in the rocks around here," another voice cut in. "Blast it, fer no light. If that jasper is the Devil's Deputy like the stage driver said—"

They came forward slowly on foot, guns high, their eyes stabbing into the shadows through slits in their hoods. A dozen paces they crept forward, then one of them jerked to a halt, clipped out in a low, harsh voice:

"There's his hoss! He won't be far. By jaspers, when I see that skunk— He killed a pard of mine, an' I'm settlin' that score pronto."

Blacky marked that gent coldly; a short, square-bodied hombre, with feet that toed in as he walked.

Tensely, he waited, while the gang edged cautiously forward. A vein in his temple pulsed and throbbed. His hands felt warm and moist in their grip on the butts of his guns. He faded slowly around the boulder as the gang came abreast of him.

Then he was on the opposite side of the rock, behind them.

He waited a brief instant, then stepped silently out from behind the boulder. The gang hadn't heard him; they had come to a stiff halt, staring greedily at the strong box lashed behind Starr's saddle.

"He left the gold!" a man burst out hotly. "Shore, that dirty—"

"Freeze, gents!"

The gang was rigid in their tracks a fleeting instant, then they spun around as if suddenly stung. Hard eyes flared with savage lights through the slits in their hoods. Guns swung in deadly arcs, poised, alert, held by the threat of the lone waddy's leveled Colts.

For a single breathless instant, they were rooted in their tracks. Then a tall, gangling man leaned forward, his eyes screwed down on the black badge gleaming dully on Starr's shirt front. He swayed back, cursing softly.

"He is the Devil's Deputy!"

"—killed my pard!" The words came with a hoarse oath, as the square-built hombre suddenly hopped forward, his gun blaring.

Starr felt hot lead snick through his shirt, burn across his ribs. Only the quick sway of his body to one side had saved his life. Then his own gun kicked.

The chunky man stumbled in his tracks, a scream bubbling in his throat. He swayed, clutched for the man next to him, missed, then slumped limply to the ground.

Hands whitened on gun butts, bodies went taut, lips flattened, as men prepared to turn loose a barrage of leaden death. And only the soft drawl from the cold-faced youth held their triggers.

"Take it easy, gents. Ain't no sense in smokin' each other up for what gold I got offn that stage.

Shore, there's enough of yuh tuh down me, but I'd take plenty company with me."

The tall, gangling man stepped out in mincing strides.

"Yuh ain't got a chance, kid," he droned.

Blacky Starr nodded slowly. "Maybe," he said tonelessly, "but I'm set tuh play my cards out the way they fall."

The tall man hesitated, then said softly, "An' if yuh had a chance tuh draw a new hand?"

A faint, hard smile came to the lips of the Devil's Deputy. "I'd say let's split the gold even," he said slowly. "That, or let me join up with yuh. I've made an opening in yore gang, an' I can shore fill it better'n that other gent."

A man cut in harshly, as the tall hombre mulled over Starr's words.

"Boss, he ain't our kind. He's the Devil's Deputy, an' he—"

"I *was* the Devil's Deputy," Starr spoke up softly. "Right now I'm plumb fed up on bein' outlawed for nothin'. Do yuh think I held up that stage for fun?"

But that gang of gun hawks didn't know why Blacky Starr had faked that stage holdup. They didn't know of the letter sewed into the lining of his saddle skirt. That letter was from United States Marshal Bland Whitmore, offering to clear the name of the Devil's Deputy if he would help break up that gang of killers, the Phantom Legion, whose murders and robberies had haunted three counties.

Blacky watched narrowly as the tall hombre made up his mind. He felt a hot, savage tingle surge through him as the man's head dropped in a single curt nod.

"Yuh'll get yore chance," the man said flatly. "The big boss will have tuh O. K. yuh afore yuh get yore

hood. An' if he don't, it's yore hard luck. Yuh'll never get out of our hide-out alive."

CHAPTER III.

LAIR OF THE LOBO PACK.

THE afterglow of evening had deepened into darkness when the riders swung out of the canyon. Stars were bright nail heads in the purple velvet of the night sky, and a half moon painted mesquite and sage with ghostly light.

Blacky's eyes shifted alertly around him as he followed the lead of the tall hombre. Mentally, he marked a coulee cutting into the flat lands from a spur in the mountain-side; shadowy Joshua trees and chico brush growing near outcropping rock a few yards away.

The gang seemed to be heading out over open range, and this fact puzzled the black-garbed outlaw. From the information he had picked up here and there, he had gathered that the Phantom Legion made its headquarters somewhere high in the rocky fastness of the Pinalenos, yet here they were making for a hide-out on rolling, open range.

He frowned slightly, letting his eyes shift to the men who rode in a silent half-circle around him. After that burst of hot words in the canyon, none of them had uttered a word.

Two of them rode on either side of him, their hands firm on holstered guns; the rest rode behind him, and he could feel their cold eyes fastened on his back.

They were giving him a chance to join their gang, but they were taking no chance of a double cross. The slightest crooked move on his part would bare their Colts, shatter the silence of the night with roaring gun thunder.

They still wore their masks, long hoods of cloth he now recognized as burlap. And they wore gloves with fingers and thumbs cut out, but hiding any scar that might identify them as members of the killer gang. The body of the gunman whom Starr had been forced to kill hung face downward, tied behind the empty saddle of his horse.

Gradually, the range became rougher, and Starr sensed that they were nearing the hide-out. They passed through a clump of cholla, and the tall waddy heard the sleepy chirp of cactus wrens. Spike-leaved yucca in full flower clawed at his boots, pierced his jeans, and scratched chapless legs.

Then they were threading their horses through chaparral. Starr's eyes were narrow, probing the thicket for some sign of the hide-out. Suddenly the chaparral thinned out, and he found his horse halted on the lip of a steep slope. Dimly through the darkness, he could see the ground pitching downward into a pocket a couple of hundred yards in area.

He smiled thinly, cold lights flickering in his eyes. The hide-out! Down in that yawning black pit, a campfire waved tendrils of yellow light into the darkness. He felt a warm surge of blood quicken through his veins. It was a perfect hide-out for the Phantom Legion.

He knew now why no law posse had ever found that hidden camp. The gang had struck swiftly, robbing stages, swooping down on banks in nearby towns, then headed directly for the Pinalenos, leaving a plain trail behind them.

Once in the mountains, they had hidden their trail on hard, trackless ground, then crossed the range and dropped down to their hide-out on open range. No one had thought of looking for them on open range, nor

had they thought of looking for such a pocket surrounded by chaparral and cactus.

Yet, in spite of that savage anger that came with the finding of the gang's hide-out, a doubt clouded the mind of the Devil's Deputy.

Only yesterday the Phantom Legion had robbed the bank at Rawhide, fifty miles to the south. And the day before they had struck in Concho City, nearly ninety miles north, only to swoop down a few hours later on a stage sixty miles to the west, leaving behind a murdered guard and a driver who had barely lived to tell his story to a passing cowboy.

It wasn't possible for a gang mounted on even the fastest horses to cover that area in such a short time. Still the Phantom Legion had made those lightning, deadly thrusts a dozen times during the last three months, striking fear to ranchmen and bankers, leaving law posses worn and baffled in their search for the gang's hide-out.

A low whistle from the tall hombre in the lead cut through the darkness. Blacky tensed in the saddle as he heard the answering whistle that came from somewhere below. Then the tall gent's voice sounded hollowly.

"We'll go down now. Jake, you an' Pete stick close tuh the new jasper jest in case he wants tuh change his mind. An' leave yore masks on. We don't want him tuh see too much till the boss says it's O. K."

They pushed their horses over the lip of the slope. Blacky rode slowly, keeping close to the tall gent in the lead. His guns were still in their holsters, but he made no move to place his hands near their jutting black butts.

Gradually the slope tapered off until they were on level ground

again. They turned their mounts toward the campfire, and pulled up a moment later just outside the wav-
ing yellow light.

Blacky slid loosely to the ground. He knew that, now that he was here, he had to play out his cards the way they fell. His tall, lean frame was lax, yet with the easy, alert caution of a huge cat. If it came to a show-down, he would have to make his fight here; there would be no escape up the steep slope of the pocket with killer lead horneting around him.

His smoke-blue eyes were hard as he stalked calmly up to the campfire. The thick-shouldered hombre whom the tall gent had called Jake waddled after him on slant-heeled boots. Pete, a man with bandy legs and small, red-rimmed eyes peering through the slits of his mask, came up behind Jake.

Blacky glanced coolly at a wizened skeleton of a man hunkered down beside the campfire. So far the man had said nothing, only stared impersonally from one to another of the masked outlaws as they strode up.

His eyes rested for a moment at the limp body the tall gent had untied and let slide to the ground. Then his pale eyes fastened on the stranger, traveled slowly from worn boots to black jeans and shirt, hesitated on the black badge, then continued upward to Starr's bleak young face.

Blacky stiffened under that cold, probing stare. Some inner caution born and nourished by powder smoke and sudden death jangled across his brain.

This skinny gent, with a thin, wedgy face and sunken cheeks, was a killer! It was mirrored in the sudden flare of cold lights in his pale, colorless eyes; in the thinning of bloodless lips pulling back from yel-

low, clenched teeth. It showed in the swift snap of whipcord muscles propelling him to his feet. The man whirled to the tall gent.

"Tom, yuh loco?" he lashed out hotly. "This jasper, he—"

Tom cut in tonelessly: "Yeah, we know, Shad. He's that gun slick, the Devil's Deputy. We brought him here 'cause he asked for a chance tuh join up."

Shad's lips twisted into a snarl. "Yo're crazy as a coot, Tom," he rasped. "That was just a trick of his tuh find our hide-out. The boss'll raise blazes when he hears of this."

"He'd have raised more blazes if two or three more of us got shot tryin' tuh smoke this gent out. This jasper beat us tuh the stage and got the gold while we was waitin' up on the ridge. An' after facin' that salty driver an' guard, he didn't hanker on turnin' loose that gold easylike."

The skinny man's pale eyes bored into those of the Devil's Deputy. A shallow, mocking smile came to his lips as he glanced briefly at the dully gleaming black badge. Then he chuckled gratingly.

"Sq the Devil's Deputy has really turned bad, huh? I reckon I better rustle tuh town an' tell the boss. He'll be plumb anxious tuh let yuh in the gang—or plant yuh if he thinks the same as I do."

Shad turned coldly away from the campfire, went to a horse which stood a few feet away, mounted and rode grimly off into the darkness. Not until the muffled *clop-clop* of the hoofbeats faded out of hearing up the slope did Blacky Starr relax his lazy alertness.

He glanced from one to another of the masked outlaws, grinning coolly.

"Plenty proddy, that jasper," he drawled. "Yuh'd think he was the

right-hand man tuh yore boss, the way he clumb yore frame."

The tall gent chuckled bleakly behind his hood.

"That's just what he is," he said tonelessly. "Which puts one of yore feet in the grave already, Shad thinkin' like he does about yuh."

And Blacky Starr, his hunch satisfied by that thinly veiled warning, untied his bedroll and prepared to go to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

BUZZARD BAIT.

THE outlaw boss was in camp when Blacky Starr wakened the next morning. The dawn sun was streaking the sky with light, driving shadows out of the pocket that was already beginning to gather heat.

He was instantly aware that the rest of the gang was up, throwing saddles on horses, checking their guns. They made little sound, yet he felt a stir of anger surge through him that he had slept so soundly during the movement of the outlaws.

He sat up quickly, and the action set trip hammers pounding at his temples. A chill of apprehension raced down his spine. He knew now why he had slept so soundly. He knew with the dull throb of pain in his head, the sudden remembrance of the hot coffee Tom, the tall hombre, had given him just before he had turned in. That coffee had been doped!

His hands drifted down to his sides, brushed the comforting black butts of his guns, which were still in their holsters. Whatever the reason for doping his coffee, it hadn't been to disarm him. He still had his guns, but something in the hard stares of the hooded outlaws as they

turned to face him brought the warning of danger.

He stood up slowly, no hint of his racing thoughts reaching his bleak face. His smoke-blue eyes were mild as his glance flicked from one to another of the outlaws.

Then his eyes halted on a rangy, lean-bodied hombre standing at one side. The man was hooded like the rest, but his lathy body was covered by a black robe that fell almost to his bowed-out knees. A brace of laced-down Colts girded his flat middle, belted over the robe. Starr knew instantly that he was staring at the leader of the Phantom Legion.

A cool smile brushed the lips of the Devil's Deputy. "I reckon yo're the boss of this outfit," he drawled calmly. "The boys must have told yuh I was honin' tuh join up."

The man's head dropped in a curt nod. "They told me." His voice was a muffled rasp behind the hood. "Are yuh ready tuh pass my test?"

Blacky Starr stiffened. There was something deadly in that hooded gent's tone, in the tight crouch he was falling into, in the gloved hands hovering clawlike near his guns. Blacky glanced swiftly around, looking for the skinny hombre who had ridden to town to bring the gang chief to the hide-out. Shad was nowhere in sight.

"I reckon I'm ready for yore test," he spoke levelly.

A tense silence fell smotheringly over the pocket. Men drifted back, breathing audibly. Blacky's eyes narrowed, puzzled, yet alert.

"Then draw!" The outlaw chief's voice came in a toneless snarl.

Blacky's eyes flared. What was this? A trap? He shot a swift glance up toward the rim of the pocket. But if Shad was there squinting down the sights of a rifle,

he was hidden well back in the chaparral. Was this just a test of his nerve?

"Draw!" the killer's voice lashed out.

Blacky's body went taut. He felt the slow tightening of his lips, the bunching of jaw muscles.

"Are yuh loco?" he said tensely. "I came here tuh join yore gang, not tuh shoot it out with yuh."

The man laughed harshly, gratingly. Then, for the first time, Blacky Starr saw the open strong box a few feet away, the fake gold bags slit open, spilling chips of lead and gravel. He leaned forward on his toes, forcing a look of surprise into his face, as he stared into the open box.

"The dirty lobos!" he gritted harshly. "So that's all that was in that box. They crossed me. They faked that strong box, an' had the gold hid somewhere else."

His hot stare jerked up to the outlaw leader. "So that's why yo're so proddy," he bit out. "Yuh opened that box, an' figured I was tryin' tuh cut a rusty. Blast it, man—"

"I know right well yuh crossed us." There was an ugly ring to the man's voice—a grim, harsh note. "All yuh took from that stage was an empty box. Yuh threwed the gold back tuh the driver. It's all over Lodestone how yuh pulled that trick. Yuh stinkin', spyin' skunk! An' yuh thought yuh'd work yore way into the Phantom Legion!"

A tingling glow of savage heat enveloped Blacky. His nerves keened; his eyes brightened into smoky chips of ice. His long-fingered hands hooked out just over his guns, poised and ready.

He knew he didn't have a chance against this killer gang. They could cut him down through sheer force

of numbers. But still that nameless warning jangled across his brain.

Something was wrong. Even though they had him outnumbered, he knew that killer pack wouldn't give him an even break. And yet he knew his Colts were loaded; he had felt the brass cases when his hands had brushed the guns a moment before.

"So that's the way it is," he whispered tensely. "It's a cold deck, an' yo're holdin' high cards. Make yore play, killer man."

The outlaw chief cursed softly. "That blamed black badge is right over yore heart. I'm gonna pin it there permanent."

Then the killer's hands twitched, swooped downward.

The Devil's Deputy leaned forward, his hands slashing toward laced-down holsters, blurring upward filled with heavy Colts. Hammer dogs rocked back under his thumbs, fell as his guns jerked level. But only the pop of shell caps met his ears; not the blasting roar of flame and smoke that should have shattered the silence.

Horried, he heard the fiendish cackle that came from the killer.

"Pulled yore fangs, depity. Took the lead out of yore shells, an' the powder."

Blacky twisted frantically to one side, as the killer's gun blared. He saw flame spear toward him, felt the shock of lead into his chest, the dig of hot pain jabbing into his flesh.

He knew dimly that his guns were still clicking on empty shells, that he was swaying drunkenly on his feet, weak, light-headed, sick from sudden agony.

His head lolled forward. He saw his badge, as he toppled forward to the ground. It was battered, twisted, torn by the heavy slug that had plowed through it. And something

warm was creeping down his chest, matting his shirt.

Then the ground shocked into him. It drove the pain from his body, left him strangely numb and cold. Dimly, he knew that a hard boot had kicked him roughly over to his back. Hooded faces peered down at him through swirling red fog; savage, red-rimmed eyes mocking him.

"Got that badge dead center," a voice cackled from the distance.

"Buzzard bait—" another chipped in.

Then the dead tones of the outlaw leader's voice cut in. "Throw him on his hoss, an' drive it out on the range. We don't want no one followin' the buzzards down here. We'll raid thet town now, an' get the gold this skunk tricked us out of. That Devil's Deputy wasn't such a heller"—the man laughed harshly—"when he was shootin' blanks!"

CHAPTER V.

JAILED.

WHEN Blacky Starr's eyes fluttered open again he had no idea how long he had been unconscious. It must have been hours, for the brassy ball of the desert sun was beginning to tip over into the western sky.

He sat up weakly, struggling with fogged wits. His left arm felt numb where it had been pinned under him, but he knew dimly that his arm, curled as it had been under his chest, must have stopped the flow of blood. His whole body seemed alive with throbbing, pulsating pain. He fumbled his black shirt open, saw the ragged wound the slug had raked across his ribs. That black badge he wore had been battered into a shapeless scrap of metal by the shock of the heavy slug.

A faint, mirthless smile came to his lips as he remembered that frantic twisting of his body at the split second the killer had fired. He knew that movement had saved his life, causing the slug to strike the badge at an angle, deflecting the lead, so that it only raked the ugly gash across his ribs instead of driving deeper into his body. He wadded a bandanna over the wound and shoved weakly to his feet.

Big Red, browsing a short distance away, looked up and nickered when the tall waddy whistled softly. The bronc trotted up, and Blacky climbed painfully into the saddle.

Cactus and sage spun crazily before his eyes, as he touched the animal with his spurs. That jogging trot seemed to tear his chest apart, fill his muscles with white-hot fires.

Dusk had begun to gather when he finally reached Lodestone. The pain in his chest had eased off, but he was still weak and tired.

He slid from the saddle in front of the livery, snapped a terse question to the stableboy dozing at the side of the building.

"Anything happen here this afternoon?"

The boy's head shook lazily. "Naw," he said sleepily. "Hi Fesler's team got spooky, but the ol' coot got 'em afore they smashed up his buckboard."

"I mean, was there a holdup?" Blacky's voice was sharp, impatient.

The kid raised drowsy eyes to the lathy, black-garbed youth. "Naw," he began. "Yest'day the Phantom Legion tried— Heck, mister, yo're shot!"

Blacky Starr turned quickly away. He realized that only minutes would pass now before the whole town knew that a wounded stranger had ridden in asking about a holdup.

Across the street he spotted a nar-

row, weather-beaten slab of wood bearing the dim words:

T. L. Corey, M. D.

He angled across the street in long strides, his narrowed eyes shifting alertly down the double line of unpainted buildings. Somewhere in this town that still slumbered after the heat of the afternoon was the Phantom Legion, mingling with cowboys who had ridden in from neighboring ranches. Killers, that gang, waiting their chance to pull on those burlap hoods and swoop down on the town's bank.

And the Devil's Deputy knew what would happen if one of that gang saw him. They would come after him, fired with murder lust, their guns flaming. And he couldn't fight back. Unmasked, he couldn't tell the killers of the Phantom Legion from honest townsmen, and the guns of the Devil's Deputy were notched only for those outside the law.

He smiled grimly, as he unpinned the shapeless black badge, and dropped it into his shirt pocket. Down the street, he heard the stableboy's excited voice yelling for the sheriff. Bleak of face, he shoved into the doctor's office. A small man with round shoulders and thick-lensed spectacles perched on the end of his nose turned as he quickly closed the door.

"Got a job for yuh, doc," Blacky drawled. "A little nick that ought tuh be patched before I run dry."

He pulled his shirt open, and the doctor leaned forward, peering at the wound. His keen blue eyes stabbed into the puncher's bland face, then he turned and rummaged in a table drawer for bandages.

"Looks like a bullet wound to me," he snapped caustically. "An

inch to one side, an' you'd have been tradin' your guns for a harp."

Blacky chuckled softly. He pushed back his black felt hat, baring a thatch of yellow hair.

"Or a pitchfork," he drawled. "Make it pronto, doc. I got some mighty important business tuh attend to."

The little doctor came around fast. One hand held bandages, but the other was filled with a heavy-bore derringer. His eyes were bright behind the thick glasses.

"Your business will wait," he snapped. "I'm bandagin' you, but this gun will make another hole if your feet get itchy. When I'm through we'll take a pasear down to see the sheriff. Me, I may be a saw-bones, but that don't make me cater to polecats like the Phantom Legion, an' yuh may be one."

Blacky's eyes narrowed, chilled. "Yuh better put up that popgun, doc. Them things can get a gent in a heap of trouble."

The doctor growled in his throat and went quickly to work. Minutes crawled by while the bandage was wrapped over the wound. Blacky's nerves grew taut, thin-edged. Any instant now that stableboy might come up with the sheriff.

Then the doctor stepped back and waved for him to put on his shirt. As he pulled the shirt over his shoulders, something black and metallic fell to the floor. He stooped quickly, reaching for the battered black badge. Half bent, he stiffened, the gruff tones of a man's voice jarring against his ears.

"Yuh say he headed this way, but-ton? Shore, he must be in the doc's office."

Blacky's eyes flared. Under his bent-over body, he saw the doctor press close. Lean muscles snapped into hardness. The stubby muzzle

of the derringer was leveled near his back, but he had to chance that deadly little gun. He couldn't be caught now. That heavy voice could have been only a lawman's.

He said in quick, low tones: "Doc, it fell right behind yuh."

The doctor started to turn, but he jerked to a quick halt as the tall waddy moved. Blacky leaned back. His elbow lifted swiftly, butted into the doctor's arm, then snapped straight. The man rocked backward off balance. The derringer roared. Blacky felt lead rip through his shirt, then heard the crash of a man's body against the door. He ducked low, diving toward a hallway leading toward the rear of the building.

Halfway down the hall, he heard the doctor's high-pitched yelp. "Sheriff, he's in here!"

Light flooded into the gloom of the hall as the front door banged open. Blacky flashed a quick glance over his shoulder, saw a thickset man framed in the doorway, gun in his hand, his jaw rock-hard. Then he was out of the hall and into a small room that smelled of smoke and grease.

Behind him a gun blared. Lead fanned past him, hammered into a pan hanging on the wall, as he dived to the back door. He jerked the door open, leaped out, and slammed it after him.

His wild glance darted around him, took in the corrals sprawled out a hundred yards away, the faint outline of an adobe hut just beyond, the dark lane angling back toward the street between the doctor's house and another building.

He started toward the lane, then jerked to a halt. He couldn't go that way. Already he could hear the pound of boots as men crowded up to the front of the house.

He changed his direction toward

a clump of sage and tumbleweed half a dozen yards away. Diving behind them, he stretched his lean body flat, as cursing, yelling men clogged the doorway he had just come through.

He waited tensely, his breath baited. He knew he would have no chance if they saw him. Those dodgers in the sheriff's office posted a reward for him dead or alive, and more than that, any of the townsmen might be killers of the Phantom Legion, eager to shoot if they discovered he was still alive.

A low, hot voice beat on his ears. "Sheriff, he shore moved fast. Ain't in sight, an' this is all plumb open."

A thin-edged voice lashed out. "Bentley, them weeds over there—"

"Yo're loco!" It was the sheriff's voice, gruff, booming. "He doubled on us. Thet gent was headin' for the high lonesome. Spread out, an' work back toward the street. His hoss is out front, an' he'll shore need it."

Tensely, the Devil's Deputy waited, while men pressed cautiously between the buildings to join those who milled along the street. Then he pushed quickly to his feet. Through the gloomy maw of the lane, he could see the dim outline of men halted at the front of the buildings, undecided, puzzled. They would come back; one gent had suspected that patch of tumbleweed and sage.

Blacky broke into a run down the rutty alley that sloped down the line of buildings. Lights in stores and houses were beginning to wink on, and he dodged the yellow shafts slanting into the gloom.

Near the corral, he pulled to a tense halt. There were horses inside, half-wild animals recently driven down from the mountains to be broken. A thin grin split his lips

as an idea struck him. The law posse would expect him to head here for a horse, since he hadn't tried to reach his own mount. And if they thought he took a horse from the corral to get away—

He leaped to the corral gate, pulled the wires loose, swung it open. Heaving, pitching horseflesh shocked into the gate as it swung back. He let half a dozen of the range-wild animals plunge through, then slowly forced the gate shut. Behind him, he heard a roar lift from the posse as they heard hoofbeats thunder out across the black-mantled range.

He turned quickly and worked around the rails toward the corral sheds. He was just starting into one when a door burst open in the adobe shack twenty yards beyond.

He pressed back into the shadows of the shed, eyes flaring, hands dropping to the butts of his twin Colts. Warm blood surged through his veins as he stared at the man standing in the doorway of the shack. There was something familiar in that skinny, wedge-faced gent framed against the sheet of yellow light, gun in hand, his body taut. He heard the man's toneless, droning words.

"Quién es?"

The skinny man left the doorway, pacing cautiously forward. Blacky drifted back along the side of the shed, rounded the corner, and crawled between the corral rails. He halted there, hugging the shadows. His guns were out now, his thumbs tense on the hammer dogs.

There was no mistaking that bony figure stalking tensely forward. He was the gent who had been waiting for the killer pack to return to their pocket hide-out; the right-hand man to the boss of the Phantom Legion. He was the hombre they had called "Shad."

Blacky could hear the man's low,

heavy breathing, as he reached the side of the shed, halted there peering into the darkness. Then Shad's toneless voice sounded.

"Blast it, I could have sworn someone was here! Must be nerves. But them shots—"

Blacky peered around the corner of the shed to see Shad turn away and stalk off toward the town's main street, clogged now by men running for their horses. He waited until Shad had disappeared into the darkness, then broke into a crouching run for the adobe shack. He dived through the open doorway, kicked the door shut, at the same time fading to one side, his guns snapping up.

For a full minute he stood there, tall, lean, somber in black jeans and shirt. The yellow mop of his hair tumbled down from under the brim of his black felt hat. His smoke-blue eyes were hard, taking in every detail of the empty room, the battered table and chairs, the low cot covered with dirty, rumpled blankets, the empty whiskey bottle that had been kicked into one corner.

A puzzled light flickered in his smoky eyes. A dozen questions popped into his mind, lurked there while he groped for the answers. This was Shad's cabin, and yet where were the rest of the killer gang? Why hadn't they already swooped down on the bank as they had planned? Or were they waiting for some signal from their boss?

A ladder built into the far wall caught the tall waddy's alert eyes. It led upward to a trapdoor in the ceiling. Were those killers crouching up there, waiting for Shad to bring orders from their boss? But he doubted that. They had probably ridden into town without their hoods, mingled with the cowboys who drifted up and down the street and clogged the smoke-filled saloons.

Cautiously, he climbed up the rungs of the ladder and poked his head through the trapdoor. For an instant, he only stared into the murky gloom, eyes glued on half a dozen separate heaps of cloth piled there.

A slow grin split his lips. These heaps of cloth were the burlap hoods and black gloves the killers wore. Shad would call the gun pack to his cabin, toss down their hoods, then the gang would circle town, swoop down from the opposite direction with blasting guns and flaming lead.

A strange, chilly gleam came to Blacky's eyes. Without their hoods and gloves, he couldn't tell the killers from honest townsmen, but if he could mark those gun hawks—

Minutes later, Blacky Starr slid out the door of the adobe hut into the night. Somewhere in the town a piano jangled through a range tune. A horse whickered in the corral; far out on the moon-blanchèd range a coyote wailed.

He moved cautiously out toward the corral. He would hide in one of the sheds, and when the Phantom Legion came to the adobe hut for their hoods—

A black shadow suddenly moved out from the gloom of the corral shed. The figure slid close behind him before he saw it, jabbed something hard and cold into his back.

"Reach, owl-hooter," a gruff voice clipped.

Blacky stiffened, his eyes flicking over his shoulder toward that stocky figure, body going taut, as muscles went hard.

"Reckoned yuh'd hid around here," the sheriff grunted harshly. "Figured yuh wasn't on one of them horses yuh turned out of the corral. If yuh had been, yuh shore wouldn't have taken time tuh close the gate. I got that black badge yuh dropped,

Mr. Devil's Deputy, an' we got a jail here."

Blacky twisted frantically around, fading swiftly to one side of that gun as he moved. His hand slashed down for the lawman's Colt, then he realized abruptly that the sheriff had moved to one side with him when his hand missed the leveled gun. He got a glimpse of blue steel shunting off splinters of moonlight as the Colt bored into his flat middle.

"Try that trick again, an' I'll bust yore head," Sheriff Bentley growled darkly. "I said we got a jail for owl-hooters like yuh. An' we got a boothill for jaspers that don't like our jail."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LEGION STRIKES.

BY the moon which was hanging high in the night sky, Blacky Starr judged the time to be somewhere near midnight. Across the street the Wild Cat Saloon was going full blast. A tin-pan piano banged; punchers stamped heavy boots, or raised whiskey-hoarse voices to the range tune.

Grim apprehension crawled over the tall waddy's strained nerves. With that wild clamor coming from the saloon, the Phantom Legion could make their raid and be off before the town came to its senses.

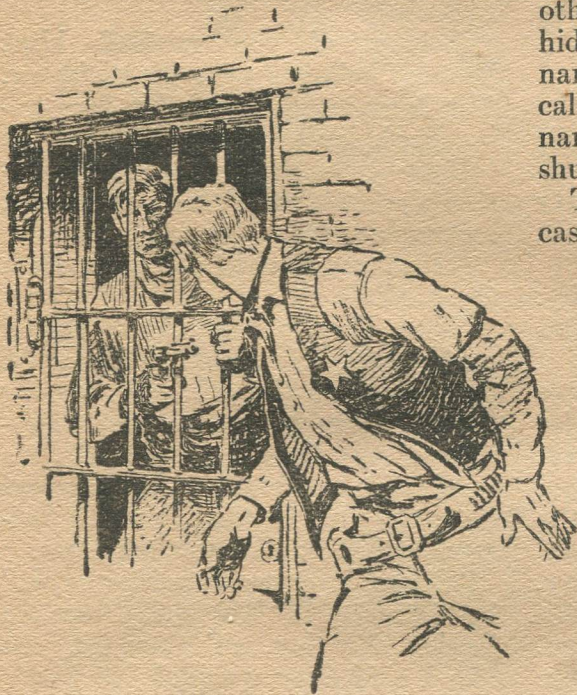
He turned away from the window and stalked across the cell floor to the barred door. He shook the bars roughly. Inside the jail office, the sheriff cursed sleepily. Heavy boots thudded on the floor, and a moment later the lawman came into view.

He glared at the tall waddy behind the bars. "Well, what do yuh want now?" he growled. "Do I have tuh bust yore head tuh get some sleep?"

Blacky smiled thinly. "I wish yuh'd try that, sheriff," he said softly.

Bentley scowled and started to turn away. Blacky spoke up quickly.

"Wait a minute. That posse yore deputy took out lookin' for me ain't got back yet. With the few men left in town either asleep or drunk, the Phantom Legion couldn't ask for a better time tuh rob yore bank."



Bentley laughed sourly. "Shut up an' go tuh sleep," he grunted. "Yuh tried tuh tell me that afore. It's just a trick tuh get me away from here so's yuh can bust out. But it don't work, Starr. I don't know why yuh pulled that trick tuh save the stage gold the other day, but I know there's a price on yore head, an' I'm collectin'."

Blacky's lips flattened in a tight line. "Yuh thick-headed donkey," he snapped. "I stuck up that stage tuh get the empty strong box. I filled it with fake gold bags, then

let the Phantom Legion catch me. I planned tuh get in with that pack of skunks, only that skinny gent, Shad, came tuh town an' found they'd been crossed."

"Shad?" Bentley's jaw pulled into a blunt, hard line. "Yuh tellin' me Shad Morley is mixed in with the Phantom Legion?"

Blacky nodded, his eyes bleak. "I reckon he's the right-hand man tuh the big boss. An' I heard three other names while I was in their hide-out. There was a tall gent named Tom, a thickset jasper they called Jake, an' a dried-up runt named Pete. If yuh'd kept yore trap shut, I'd have told yuh before."

The lawman flushed, snorted sarcastically. His lips pulled up in a

"Wait a minute, sheriff," he clipped flatly. "I never plugged a lawman yet, an' I'd shore hate tuh start now."

sneer. "An' I allus heard yuh was an honest outlaw," he bit out harshly. "Yeah, yo're honest. Yuh get in a ruckus, then try tuh lie honest men into trouble."

Bunched muscles rode the lean line of Blacky's jaw. His face grayed, became taut, grim. His smoke-blue eyes were fogged with cold lights.

"Sheriff, if yuh don't believe me now—"

Bentley's face darkened with a rush of anger. "I might have believed yuh till yuh started mentionin' names," he rasped. "Only

yuh picked the wrong men tuh frame. Shad Morley happens tuh be a lunger that came here six-eight months ago tuh run the telegraph station. I reckon he couldn't top a hoss if he wanted to."

"I wouldn't be too shore o' that," Blacky put in hastily.

"Pete Ashley is a harmless old coot that cleans out the saloon an' general store," the sheriff continued. "Tom Fenton runs a small spread a dozen miles north of here. He's as honest as the day is long, an' so is Jake Sneed, his ramrod."

Blacky's eyes hooded, veiling the chilly sparks that came to their smoky depths. "An' maybe yuh seen them gents here in town the day the Legion stuck up the stage, huh, Bentley?" he pressed softly.

The sheriff's lips flattened angrily. His blunt-fingered hands knotted into fists.

"I've taken about enough of yore lip, fella," he growled. "I ain't sayin' I saw Shad an' Tom an' the rest here that day, but I know danged well they was in town when the Phantom Legion raided Rawhide an' Concho City yesterday an' tuhday. They split up on them jobs, an' both halves rode into a sheriff's trap. They was wiped out, Starr. In other words, they ain't no Phantom Legion no more!"

The Phantom Legion wiped out! The sheriff's words echoed hollowly over Blacky's mind. Had he been wrong about that gang coming here to town after shooting him? Had they split to raid those two towns, or was there something to that other thought that flared through his brain, sent hot blood rushing through his veins?

He looked up to see the sheriff staring at him with keen, probing eyes, and a cool, mocking grin came to his lips.

"Sheriff," he drawled softly, "I was outlawed a long time ago for killin' some gents that was long overdue a gunnin'. Since then I've been chased by you star-men just 'cause I made my own law in bustin' up gangs yore posses couldn't catch. Part of the Phantom Legion may have been wiped out. But I've a hunch the outlaw boss is right here in town plannin' tuh rob yore bank, an' after that, he'll—"

Boom!

Echoes of the muffled blast boomed hollowly over the night air. The lawman stiffened, his face going hard, his eyes darting from the tall waddy to the barred window inside the little cell. He cursed in a soft monotone.

"That sounded like it came from the bank!"

The Devil's Deputy grinned mirthlessly. He watched the sheriff press close to the cell door, staring through the window in the direction of the bank. Cautiously, his hand slid between the bars, closed over the gun in the lawman's holster, and lifted the weapon clear.

"Shore, it came from the bank," he drawled. "It's the Phantom Legion, Bentley, an' they hit just like I said they would."

The sheriff whirled away from the cell, diving toward the front door. Blacky lifted the gun in his hand, his face cold and bleak.

"Wait a minute, sheriff," he clipped flatly. "I never plugged a lawman yet, an' I'd shore hate tuh start now."

Bentley jerked to a halt, spun in his tracks, his blunt fingers flashing down to his empty holster. His square face grayed as he saw his gun clamped in the tall waddy's hand. A curse rumbled in his chest, died behind tight lips. His jaw was rock-hard.

"No man ever busted out of my jail yet," he said brokenly. "Yuh can shoot an' be danged, fella."

Blacky's knuckles whitened in their grip on the gun. He flashed a glance over his shoulder, saw hooded men piling out of the bank fifty yards down the street, running toward their horses. His eyes snapped back to the lawman.

"I'm not bustin' out, Bentley." His voice was hard-edged, pressing. "If yuh won't turn me loose, I reckon I won't play my bluff an' try tuh shoot my way out. But I'm askin' yuh to unlock this door. I promise I won't try tuh get away till after this gang is busted up."

His fingers opened, and the gun slid free, dropped to the floor. Bentley stared from the fallen gun to the bleak-faced waddy. Then he lurched forward, fitted a key into the lock, and jerked the door open.

"Reckon I'm gettin' loco in my old age," he growled. "Here's yore chance, kid."

Blacky leaped out, dived into the jail office with the puzzled lawman close behind. A single flashing glance showed his twin Colts on the sheriff's desk. He snatched them up, leaped out the front door even as hoofbeats thundered up the street.

He halted just outside the jail door, his sombre, black-garbed figure outlined in the yellow light streaming through the doorway. Coldly, he watched the hooded riders pound down the street from the bank, waited until they were a scant dozen yards from him, then yelled harshly:

"Sheriff! Get yore men together. I know where them skunks hole up!"

Hooded heads swiveled at the sound of his voice. A man squalled over the roll of horses' hoofs.

"It's the Devil's Deputy—alive!"

A gun blared, jabbing an orange finger through the darkness. Then

the night was torn by the blatant, full-throated roar of guns.

Blacky leaped out of the patch of light, his guns hammering and pitching in his hands. The hollow boom of a scattergun blasted from the jail's doorway where the sheriff crouched. Blacky saw a man rock in the saddle, then clutch wildly for the horn. Another screamed and swayed forward to the neck of his horse, as the hooded riders thundered out of town.

Bentley's sonorous voice rolled out, calling to startled men peering from saloon doors and house windows.

"Get yore hosses, men. That was the Phantom Legion! We're ridin'!"

Coolly, Blacky Starr flipped spent shells from his guns, refilled the chambers, and dropped the Colts into their pouches. He grinned up at the lawman, his smoky eyes fogged with cold lights.

"Ain't no use losin' a night's sleep chasin' them skunks, sheriff," he drawled calmly. "They'll be back by mornin'."

The lawman's eyes widened, then puckered into slits. Blacky chuckled softly.

"They won't head for their hide-out when they think I'll be takin' a posse there, will they?" he asked soberly. "Way I figure it, there was three separate gangs workin' so's it would look like one. Two of those gangs are wiped out. This is the last gang; their boss is here, an' they'll count on him protectin' them."

Bentley exploded angrily. "Kid, yo're crazy! If what yuh say is true about the three gangs, then this outfit will leave the country like it had the plague."

Blacky grinned. "Yuh said I was loco when I said they'd clean out the bank, too, didn't yuh?"

Bentley flushed and stepped aside as the Devil's Deputy pressed into the jail. Blacky paused at the cell door, grinned through the bars at the puzzled lawman.

"Blamed if I ever thought I'd bed down in a jail without a gun in my back," he chuckled. "See yuh in the mornin', sheriff."

CHAPTER VII.

LEAD SHOWDOWN.

THE low, persistent rumble of heavy voices wakened Blacky Starr the next morning. He lay quietly a moment, listening to the excited babble that came from the front of the jail. One voice, sharper, higher-pitched than the rest, came clearly to his ears.

"Sheriff, that owl-hooter may have been throwin' lead at that gang, but I'm bettin' my chips with Jed Burris. He wasn't shootin' tuh hit."

Another chimed in shrilly. "Burris is right. That Devil's Deputy jasper was just givin' the gang their chance tuh get away, that's what. An' yuh let him talk yuh into waitin' for them tuh come back. By blazes, if we had a sheriff with hoss sense—"

The tall waddy shoved to his feet, his face grim. Carefully, he checked the long-barreled, cedar-butted guns still belted around his lean middle, then let them slip lightly back into their pouches. He turned calmly and stalked out of the little cell.

A dozen or so grim-faced men clogged the boardwalk in front of the jail. The sheriff was there, his blocky body framed in the doorway facing the mob. One of the men saw the slender, black-garbed outlaw striding up, and he yipped.

"Here he comes! Walkin' around like he owns the jail. Shore, it's like I said. The sheriff is in with the dirty lobo!"

Blacky pressed into the doorway beside the sheriff, his face bleak, expressionless. He saw grim-eyed men drift nervously back under the chill of his smoky eyes. One man, a short, barrel-bodied hombre dressed in dark store clothes, held his ground stubbornly. Blacky glanced over the man coldly, then let his eyes travel back to the sheriff.

"Seen any sign of 'em yet?" he asked softly.

The lawman's jaw tightened. "If yuh mean the Phantom Legion, no," he growled. "Hang it, I took yore word on this, younker. If yo're crossin' me the way I'm beginnin' tuh think—"

"I mean Tom Fenton, Shad Morley, an' the rest I named," Blacky cut in softly.

Bentley's face darkened with mounting rage. "I ain't seem 'em, an' I ain't been lookin' for 'em," he snapped. "I got enough troubles, let alone botherin' honest men."

The short man in the store clothes spoke up in a scratchy voice. "What's Fenton an' Morley got tuh do with this, mister?"

Blacky eyed the man coldly. "Yo're Jed Burris, I take it," he drawled coolly. "The gent that's been fillin' these men with ideas about me."

A faint, deadly glint came to the man's eyes. "I'm Burris," he clipped.

Sheriff Bentley spoke up grumpily. "He's the law shark around here. Shad Morley is a friend of his."

Blacky's eyes narrowed, hiding a sudden brightness that crept into their smoky depths. Then a man's voice broke out sharply.

"Here comes Tom Fenton now!"

Blacky's eyes slanted up the wide, rutty street. He saw four or five riders moving slowly down the street. The limp bodies of two dead men

sagged behind the saddles of the tall, lathy gent in the lead, and the thickest hombre who rode just behind. They turned in at the jail and drew up at the tie rack.

His stare fastened coldly on the lathy gent. Tom Fenton's face looked like leather stretched tightly over his high, bony cheeks and jutting jaw. His eyes were a washed-out blue, flitting impersonally over the tall waddy standing near the sheriff. He wore a single, walnut-handled Colt.

Behind Fenton was the thick-shouldered gent Blacky knew would be Jake Sneed. Sneed's moonface was impassive, but his small black eyes held smoldering hatred.

The tall outlaw's stare slanted down to Sneed's hair-matted hands. The back of his hands, the cuff of his faded blue shirt showed the same dark smudge that he had seen on Tom Fenton, and the other hard-faced riders reined in close behind. He watched them as they slid to the ground and untied the bodies.

Sheriff Bentley lurched forward, his face grim.

"That's Shad Morley," he rasped, as Fenton lowered one of the bodies to the ground.

Fenton looked up bleakly. "Shore," he grunted. His voice was a dry, toneless drone. "An' the other is Pete Ashley. We found 'em on the trail as we rode here this mornin'."

An ominous rumble lifted from the lips of the men who had crowded in front of the little jail. Jed Burris flashed the Devil's Deputy a significant look, then shouldered through the crowd to Shad Morley's body.

"Who done it?" he burst out harshly. "By blazes, I'll get that skunk if it's the last thing I do."

Jake Sneed laughed darkly. "It'll

take more'n the talk we been gettin' from Bentley," he said sneeringly. "The Phantom Legion done this killin'. Morley an' Pete Ashley was headed for our ranch for a little poker when they met up with the Legion. They didn't have a chance. Pete lived long enough tuh tell who done it."

Tom Fenton's pale, expressionless eyes fastened on the tall waddy in the jail door. His stare traveled up and down the waddy's lean frame, then froze on the battered badge which Blacky had taken from the sheriff's desk. Fenton's hand dropped swiftly to the handle of his gun.

"Bentley, that jasper is the Devil's Deputy," he rasped. "How come he's runnin' loose?"

The lawman scowled, his lips puckering into a grim line. "He claimed he knew a lot about the Phantom Legion," he growled. "Said they'd be back here in the mornin'. Told me that last night."

A strange pallor crept along the line of Tom Fenton's jaw. He hunched forward, his eyes like chips of ice.

"*Said they'd be back!*" His words pulsed with savage, throbbing heat. Behind him, Jake Sneed cursed chokingly.

"An' they *did* come back," Blacky dawdled softly. "They brought back two of the gang that we killed during the fight last night, sheriff. Fenton, you an' Sneed an' them two skunks behind yuh are what's left of the Phantom Legion, except for yore boss, an' none of yuh know who he is now that Shad is dead."

A pallor spread over Tom Fenton's narrow face. Sneed laughed brokenly, as smoldering hatred in his eyes fanned into flame.

"Boss, yuh ain't gonna take—"

Fenton's toneless voice took on an

ugly rasp. "Sheriff, if yuh don't lock up that lyin' skunk, by blazes, I'll make him eat them words."

Blacky smiled mockingly. He knew by the slow tightening of lips that the men near Fenton were straining to hold taut nerves. One word, one movement, and the red of the early-morning sky would drip into this wide, dusty street. And he spoke that word.

"Sheriff, last night when yuh rounded me up, I had just come from Shad Morley's hut back there at the edge of town. While I was snoopin' around in there, I found the hoods an' gloves the Phantom Legion wears, hidden in the attic."

The men started noticeably, their faces suddenly pale, as Blacky continued his story in the same calm, even tone.

"I knew I couldn't recognize any of the skunks while they didn't wear their masks, but I knew I could if I marked 'em. I took soot from the stove an' sprinkled it in their gloves. That stuff is about like lampblack tuh get rid of; these skunks still have it on the back of their hands an' shirt sleeves— *Don't try it, Fenton!*"

But Tom Fenton's gun was already clearing leather. The hands of the Devil's Deputy flashed. The dawn sun sent slivers of light shunting from the barrels of his twin Colts as they blurred upward. Hammer dogs rocked; smoke and flame gushed from leveled muzzles.

Tom Fenton folded up as if struck by a battering-ram. At his side, Jake Sneed was dancing drunkenly on his toes, both guns hammering into the ground under the convulsive jerking of his fingers. His eyes were staring in horror at the stream of red seeping through his shirt front.

One of the townsmen was running down the street, yelling at the top of

his voice. Others crouched there over their guns, trading lead for lead with the killer pack.

One of the outlaws began stumbling around in a dazed circle, his hands clamped over his eyes. Then the other reared to his toes under the impact of lead, swayed there, and slowly fell forward into the dust of the street.

The Devil's Deputy drifted slowly back to the corner of the jail. His narrowed eyes were as smoky as the blue wisps that curled upward from his guns. The faint smile on his lips was cynical, mocking, as he turned quickly and ran toward the rear of the jail. He found his sorrel bronc, Big Red, in the stable behind the jail, led the animal out, and swiftly saddled it.

At the mouth of the alley, he paused, with both hands on holstered Colts. Sheriff Bentley came forward, his square face grim and powder-stained. His gun jutted up toward the lanky outlaw.

"Yuh ain't leavin' here, Starr," he growled harshly. "Yuh was right about Fenton an' the rest, but Jed Burris has an idee maybe yo're the real leader of that gang. Says yuh crossed 'em tuh get all the dinero they stole, for yourself."

Blacky's eyes fogged with deadly lights. From the corner of his eye, he saw Burris pacing forward, a pair of derringer in his white hands.

"So he says that, huh?" Blacky drawled. "Yuh just tell him I was thinkin' the same about him, an' stopped here tuh let yuh know. An' maybe yuh'd like tuh know, Bentley, that I ain't an outlaw no more. I was workin' with United States Marshal Bland Whitmore on this job. He promised tuh clear my name if this Legion gang was busted up. I got Whitmore's letter here if yuh want proof."

The sheriff's eyes widened with surprise and respect. The guns in his hands nosed down.

"Why didn't yuh say so afore?" he snapped gruffly. "Only maybe yuh didn't know that Whitmore was—"

Jed Burris' scratchy voice lashed out. "When did yuh get that letter from Whitmore, fella? I don't think he'd throw in with an owl-hooter like you."

Blacky's eyes narrowed slightly, and a warmth crept into his veins. "I got it about a week ago," he said softly. "An' when a gent calls me a liar—"

Burris' hot words rang out. "I'm callin' yuh one. Take him, sheriff! He's the leader of the Phantom Legion. That letter is just a trick tuh make his getaway. He didn't know that Whitmore was killed nearly a month ago."

The sheriff hesitated, puzzled. "That's right, younker. Whitmore was killed on his way here. Burris himself found his body where the Legion had murdered him out on the trail."

A cold wind seemed to fan Blacky's back. He grinned at Burris crookedly, bitterly. So that letter sewed into his saddle skirt was a fake! His long-fingered hands tensed near his gun handles.

"So that's the way it rides, huh, Burris?" he drawled softly. "Yuh let Shad Morley do the frontin' for yuh with yore gang, while you played safe. Yuh knew the Legion couldn't operate much longer, so yuh tipped off Rawhide an' Concho City so's they'd be set tuh wipe out the gangs when they hit."

Jed Burris started to cry out a protest, but Blacky's droning voice only drowned his words. The man listened as though spellbound as the waddy continued.

"Yuh swiped some paper from Marshal Whitmore's body, an' faked the letter bringin' me up here tuh bust up this gang, then yuh'd get all the loot for yoreself. Yuh even tried tuh say I was the leader of the Legion when yuh got scared maybe I knew too much about yuh an' would be back. But it won't work, mister. Not with me."

Blacky's hands blurred at twin holsters. He rocked back in the saddle, as Burris' derringers roared. Leaden death whispered at his ears, and was lost instantly in the blare of his Colts. He didn't pause to check his shots. He knew where those two slugs had gone.

Behind him, as he whirled his bronc and thundered down the alley, he heard a man's ringing yell:

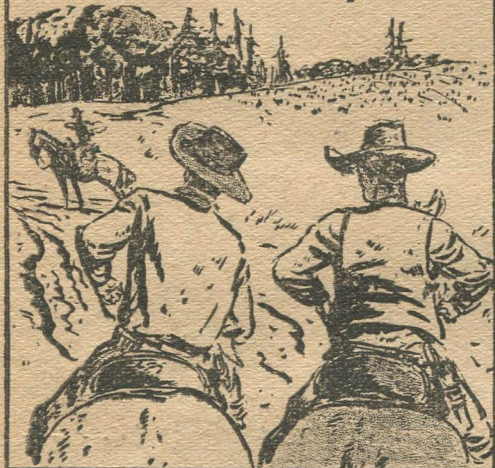
"Burris is dead! Get movin', sheriff!"

Six hours later the Devil's Deputy swung Big Red down the far slope of the Pinalenos and headed the long-limbed bronc toward the hide-out which the Legion had used, far out on the open range. It would be a good place for him to hole up for a while, he figured, a good place to forget the plans he had made when he received that faked letter. And after that?

The bitterness left his lean young face, and was replaced with a cynical, mocking smile. After that there was only the owl-hoot trail to follow, and it was shadowed with gun smoke and studded with flaming lead.

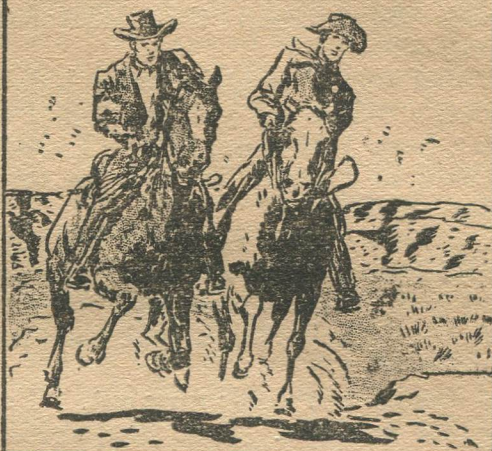
Shore is kind of unjust when an owl-hooter has an idee of gittin' on the right side of the law an' then gits disappointed. But mebbe the Devil's Deputy'll git a pardon yet. Whatever happens, we'll be hearin' about it, 'cause he's comin' back with us right soon in another ace adventure. Watch fer 'im in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

Dusty



1. Riding on the trail of some mail robbers, Dusty Radburn and Blaze Chilton sighted a lone horseman. When they rode faster to question him, he raised a rifle and fired it over their heads. Then he turned and hightailed it toward the hills.

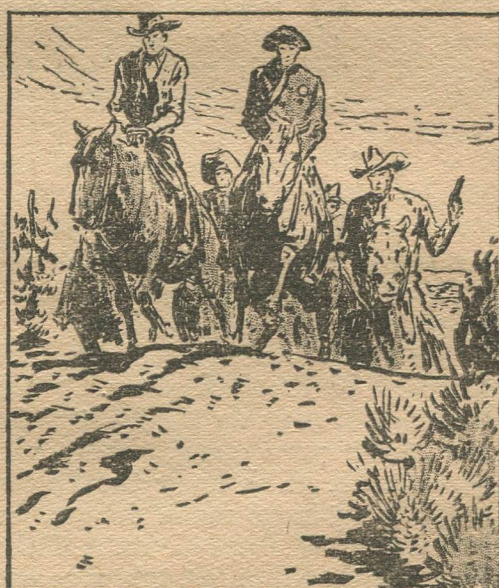
Radburn



2. "After him!" yelled Blaze, and he and Dusty rode hard to overhail the caballero. But fast though the Rangers' cayuses were, the lone rider kept ahead of them. "Thet's a fine hoss he's on," growled Blaze. "We ain't goin' tuh quit, though!"

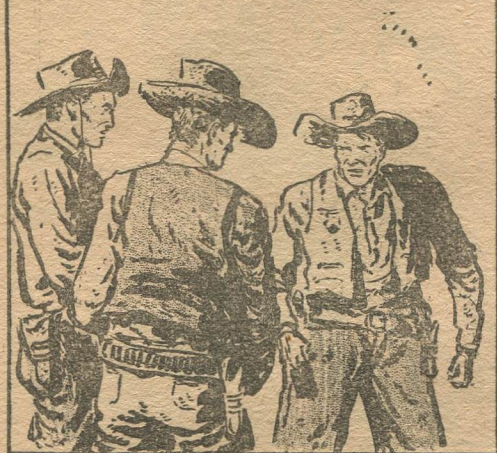


3. The trail led Dusty and Blaze into woodland. Suddenly, from behind the trees stepped men who surrounded them, pointing six-guns at them. "Don't make no keerless moves, Rangers," one of them warned. Dusty and Blaze surrendered. The lone rider had lured them into a trap.



4. Bound hand and foot aboard their brones, the Ranger pards rode into the foothills. Behind them rode the outlaws, sneering and guffawing over the easy capture of their prisoners. "I don't blame 'em fer laffin'," Blaze grated. "'Twas my fault, pardner. I should 'a' scented a skunk trap."

Saves The



5. On a high point of land, they were brought before Butch Kingman, the most notorious bandit chief in Arizona. Advancing, he rasped: "Rangers, I'm goin' tuh set yuh on yore hosses an' send yuh back tuh Cap Hollins, only yuh won't go alive!"

Mail



6. On one side, the high point ended abruptly at the edge of a tall cliff. Dusty was closer to it than Blaze. Facing death and disgrace, he dashed to the edge of the cliff and leaped off! Far below, he had glimpsed a stream. He might hit the water.



7. Through the air Dusty dropped like an eagle shot in flight. The stream was only a thread of silver, then widened rapidly as he plunged toward it. *Splash!* He hit the water feet-first in a deep pool that emptied into the white water of swift rapids breaking over the rocky stream bed.



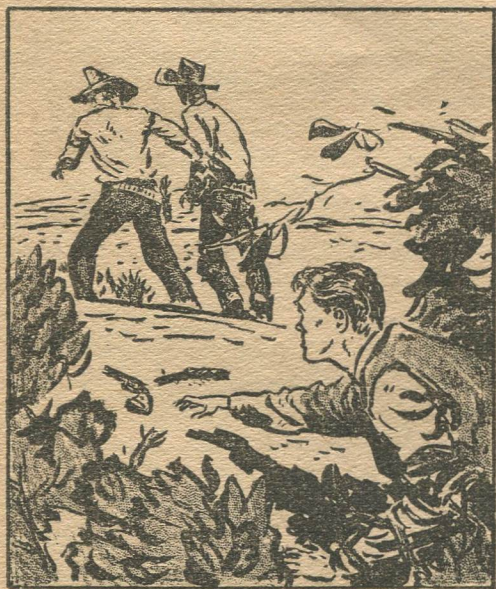
8. Dusty was a strong swimmer, but had never swum before with his wrists bound. Kicking, dog-paddling, he struggled to reach shore. "If I git intuh them rapids," he thought, "I'll git drowned shore!" But his struggles only carried him into the rapids. He was swept downstream!



9. Through the seething, hissing white water he shot, no longer struggling against its power. He had given up, resigning himself to death. Then he was suddenly sitting on a sand bar. He struggled to free his wrists. The wet, limp rawhide slipped off!



10. Wading through the river shallows, he reached the base of the cliff. It was almost straight up and down. But he got a grip with his fingers. Digging into the soft shale, kicking toe holds with his boots, he labored toward his jumping-off place.



11. At last, he reached the top. Crawling through bushes, he stole to the bandits' temporary camp. There he saw his six-gun and Blaze's gun lying on the ground with other duffel. Reaching out his hand, he picked them up. An outlaw held Blaze and told him: "Now Butch'll kill yuh!"



12. Bursting from the bushes, Dusty rasped at Blaze's guard: "Let him go!" But the guard slanted his six-gun at Dusty. Dusty's gun blazed. The guard reeled, a slug smashing his chest. With a heave, Blaze burst the rawhide from his wrists. Dusty slipped him the extra Colt.



13. After shooting the guard, Dusty swapped lead with Butch Kingman in the general battle that followed. Dusty chased the outlaw chief closer and closer to the rim of the cliff. A bullet crashed into Butch. Reeling, he stepped over the edge!



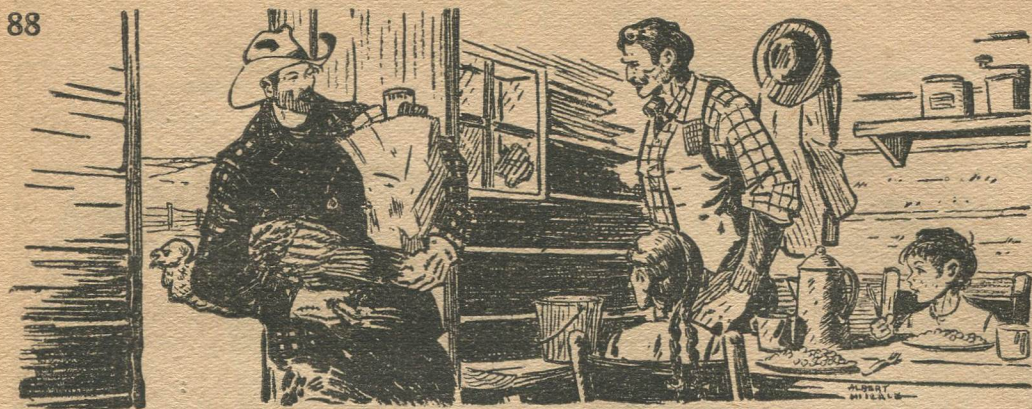
14. All the bandits had been killed. Dusty and Blaze brought back the recovered mail. Cap Hollins called Dusty into his office, and showed him a reward notice from Kansas that read: "WANTED FOR MURDER—ALBERT RADBURN."



15. Then Cap handed Dusty an opened letter. "I wired Kansas," he said. "Told the attorney general I got a man answerin' Albert Radburn's description. Here's what he wrote back." Dusty wilted. "I'm the man they want in Kansas," he confessed. "It's true. I kilt my stepfather thar."



16. Dusty read the letter. He whooped with delight. It read: "The witnesses to the killing have admitted that they lied in their testimony. The murder charge against Albert Radburn has been dropped. It was clearly self-defense. (signed) Lemuel Palmer, State attorney general."



BEANS FER THANKSGIVIN'

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Thanksgivin' morn, on the cattle track,

Stub Nye meets young Riata Jack,
As a boy an' a gal comes up the trail,

A-luggin' a full-up water pail.

Says Riata: "Them's a nester's brats.

He's staked on the range of Ol' Man Katz.

I heered their mother is two months dead.

They kinder look like they ain't been fed."

Stub asks the gal, who's taller an' thinner:

"Are yuh gittin' ready Thanksgivin' dinner?"

The two kids smile. She answers: "Yes.

It won't be nuthin' but beans, I guess.

We used ter have turkey every year.

We got none now, 'cause mom ain't here."

The two kids foller a path on the right,

An' the punchers watch, till they're out o' sight.

Says Riata: "Beans! They ain't much help,

But good enough for a nester's whelp."

"I reckon yo're right," says Stub, with a frown.

"We better git goin', an' ride to town."

'Long 'bout noon, in the nester's shack,

As the kids an' their pap is takin' a snack,

Stub Nye blows in, a-scrapin' his feet,

An' totin' a turkey an' things to eat.

An' then, as the kids stare goggle-eyed,

Once more the door swings open wide,

An' Riata Jack comes stampin' through,

He's packin' grub an' a turkey, too.

Says Stub to Riata: "I left yuh in Cal's."

An' Riata grins: "Yuh was meetin' some gals."

"Waal, let's git busy, an' cook," says Stub.

Then the skinny boy, who is pawin' in' the grub,

Sings out: "Don't eat them beans from the tin.

Here's turkey, an' puddin' an' everythin'."

Them kids git a dinner without no flaw,

An' eat, an' eat, till they jest can't chaw.

Then Stub tells the nester, when they're through,

They'll git him a few odd jobs to do,

Then Riata allows, as they ride away:

"We shore had a fine Thanksgivin' Day."



THUNDERBOLT BUCKS A SYNDICATE

BY WALKER TOMPKINS

Author of "Mortgage Money For Thunderbolt," etc.



The waddy's bent on cleanin' up the cow town, but he's shore got a mighty
big job on his hands.

LARRY JACKLUND

Thunderbolt Bucks A Syndicate

CHAPTER I.

SYNDICATE BOSS.

THE three men who squatted in the aspen thicket atop Cougar Claw butte stiffened with excitement as they caught sight of a lone rider emerging from the willows which fringed the river bottom, far below them.

In the piercing rays of the New Mexican sun, the waddy's saddle, martingale and bridle trappings glinted blindingly. A few moments later the cowboy was heading his sorrel bronc through hock-deep water, intending to cross the Rio Madras to reach the regular trail leading to the cow town of Coffinville, some two miles farther downstream.

"That's the jigger they calls the Arizona Thunderbolt, all right!" cried Mitch Cardell, a beefy-shouldered killer from down along the border. "I'm plumb positive that's the owner o' the Arrowhead, boss!"

At Cardell's elbow, a scrawny-necked Apache named Red Eagle gripped the stock of a .30-30. Both killers had twisted to gaze at the black-sombreroed man behind them.

"This Thunderbolt hombre's new tuh the country," Skyhigh Poole reminded him. "We can't afford tuh take any chances on ambushin' the wrong buckaroo. Too much depends on it."

Cougar Claw bluff towered more than two thousand feet above the Rio Madras, so that the fording figure of the cowboy was little more than a bug crossing the sluggish yellow ripples of the river.

Stepping back into the aspen growth where their horses were

cached, Poole unhooked a pair of cased binoculars from his saddlehorn. Squirming back into the open, he focused the powerful glasses on the rider, who by now was in mid-river.

The powerful magnified vision afforded by the glasses gave the outlaw boss a clear view of the rider. The most startling thing about the hombre whom Mitch Cardell and the Indian had claimed to be the waddy known as Thunderbolt Burke, was his astonishing height.

Burke's six feet four inches became nearer seven, in his high-heeled boots and cone-peaked blue beaver Stetson. He was clad in a brilliant red shirt, with green neckerchief and brass-studded leathern cuffs.

His batwing chaps, now well up on the swelling fork of the saddle to avoid wetting his boots in the river, bore the Diamond Bar brand of southern Arizona in brilliant studs across the bullhide wings.

White ivory gun stocks gleamed in the sunlight. So close did the glasses make the image appear that Skyhigh Poole could see the cowboy stroking his sorrel's glossy neck, see his lips move as he urged the horse across the tugging water.

"It's Burke, all right," panted the outlaw, a pulse cording his forehead as he lowered the glasses and shoved back his black Stetson. "Git down thar quick, boys, an' don't miss, savvy? The future o' the Bittergrass Cattle & Land Syndicate depends on how well you boys notch yore sights on that buckaroo this mornin'."

Grinning with excitement, Cardell and the Apache pushed their way out of the chaparral and began sliding down the steep face of the butte.

In a very few minutes the two had tobogganed a thousand feet down

the rocky slope, to bring themselves to a halt on a ledgelike bench overlooking the river. Their slide had not been witnessed by the ambush victim, for Burke had gained the near side of the river and had vanished into the salt cedars on his way to the trail.

Skyhigh Poole whipped off his sombrero and waved it. A second or two later, through his field glasses, Poole caught an answering wink of light on a similar bluff across the river—sun rays glittering on the barrel of a moving rifle.

"That means Beardog le Proo is ready, in case anything goes wrong," chuckled Poole. "But with Cardell an' the redskin bein' the best shots in Coffinville, I don't reckon as how young Burke will git very far along that trail."

Poole settled himself on the rimrock to witness the forthcoming ambushade. It was like having a ring-side seat at a murder, with no possible risk to himself, even should a running exchange of bullets ensue. And Poole's faith in his hired killers was such that he was positive that the Arizona Thunderbolt would drop from his saddle at the first shot.

Far below him, Cardell and the Indian were working their way along the open rimrock, rifles in hand, waiting tensely for the cowboy to emerge from the thick undergrowth which hemmed the Rio Madras.

Across the river, Beardog le Proo, Poole's right-hand man, was planted on the bluff crest with a .30-30, just in case the impossible happened and the two dry-gulchers failed in their first attempt, thereby forcing Burke to retreat to the opposite side of the river.

It was a trap that Poole was positive no man could emerge from alive. But it would be worth the money it would cost to pay off the three

gunmen, for Skyhigh Poole's dream of controlling the cattle range of Bittergrass County hinged on his getting title to the one-man cow spread, the Arrowhead, which Thunderbolt owned.

"The Arrowhead's a half-pint outfit," Poole recounted to himself, "but it controls the water rights o' the Madras. Everywhar else the banks is too steep tuh water stock, or even ford the river with a beef herd—except in front o' Burke's ranch. An' the blamed cowprod's so set on developin' the place he wouldn't think o' leasin' his water rights tuh the Syndicate."

The Cattle & Land Syndicate was little more than a band of rustlers, operating behind a false front of legality as represented by its president and manager, Skyhigh Poole. The latter owned the Red Star saloon and gambling hall in Coffinville.

"Once Burke's out o' the way, I'll be able tuh buy the Arrowhead at next spring's tax sales," chuckled the outlaw, as he caught sight of the cowboy emerge from the undergrowth and rein his sorrel out on the open trail to town. "Nobody'd dare compete agin' the Syndicate at the auction—an' if I have my way, thar won't be no independent ranchers left tuh do any biddin' anyhow."

Poole leaned forward tensely, his hawklike face rigid as he saw Cardell and Red Eagle throw themselves on their stomachs on the ledge rim, their rifles trained at the cowboy who was spurring his bronc into a long lope below them.

Smoke puffed from fast-triggered rifles. Seconds later, the sound of rifle shots met the ears of the Syndicate boss.

A harsh cry rasped through the outlaw's mouth as he saw Thunder-

bolt Burke's horse stop abruptly on the trail. Through his field glasses Poole saw Burke's face contort with surprise or pain, saw the cowboy's hands go up a split second before he toppled sidewise from the saddle to land in the brush alongside the trail.

The two ambushers leaped to their feet, peering down the slope of Cougar Claw butte at the sprawled figure of the cowboy. Then they turned, yelling soundlessly and waving their arms in triumph to their hidden chief at the crown of the butte.

Thus it was that Mitch Cardell and his Indian henchman did not see the amazing thing transpiring behind their backs, as did Skyhigh Poole through his field glasses.

Leaping to his feet, the supposed corpse of the Arizona Thunderbolt sprang across the trail to jerk a booted Winchester from under his saddle skirts. Even as his would-be ambushers' joyous shouts reached Poole's ears, Thunderbolt Burke's rifle spat smoke and flame.

A slug whined between the two outlaws, causing them to whirl about in horror as the bullet smashed into the rubble of the bluff side. And then they jerked the levers of their guns as the Arizona Thunderbolt yelled harshly for them to drop their weapons.

Brang! Brrrang! Just twice did Burke fire, as he saw the two outlaws whip rifles to cheeks.

Shooting almost straight up, the towering cowboy sent the two outlaws staggering with bullets neatly centered in their heads. Killed instantly before they had time to trigger slugs at the waddy, Cardell and Red Eagle dropped from the waddy's sight behind the rimrock above him, as neatly as he might have knocked

tin cans off a fence rail in target practice.

Poole's face froze with horror as he swung his glasses across the river to where Le Proo, the renegade rifleman planted there to prevent Burke's escape, braced himself behind a boulder, rifle in hands.

But the cowboy did not choose to retreat across the river, thereby putting himself within Le Proo's range. As if satisfied that he had successfully fought off his bushwhackers, Thunderbolt Burke slid his smoking .30-30 into its scabbard, picked up reins, and mounted.

While Skyhigh Poole watched in dumfounded rage from the top of Cougar Claw, the boss of the Arrowhead outfit spurred his sorrel into a comfortable lope and disappeared in the direction of Coffinville, his lanky frame completely unscathed by outlaw lead.

CHAPTER II.

SALOON BRAWL.

IN front of the Coffinville sheriff's office, Thunderbolt Burke dismounted and moved his towering frame up the steps into the jailhouse.

He removed his sweat-grimy Stetson and flopped into a spur-scuffed chair across the desk from where his friend, Sheriff Joe Mason, was busy going through a large pile of papers.

"How's the ranch owner comin' tuhday?" greeted the sheriff, a raw-boned, white-haired oldster who had cut his teeth on a lawman's badge and who was the only sheriff ever able to survive more than a month in the wild town of Coffinville.

"Runnin' a ranch, even a one-man outfit, takes dinero, I'm findin' out," chuckled the waddy as he rolled a wheat-straw quiry. "T'm

in town tuhday tuh see see if I can't rake up a couple thousand bucks so's I kin git some blooded Herefords ontuh my grass an' start buildin' up a quality herd. With all the water an' range I got at my command, thar's no sense in foolin' with longhorns."

Sheriff Mason chuckled, his friendly eyes regarding Thunderbolt as the waddy licked his quirly and tapered it deftly. The two had become fast friends during the brief three months in which Burke had lived in the Bittergrass country.

"What's that hole 'doin' in yore Stet, son?" asked Mason, eying the waddy's hat on Burke's knee. "Looks like a fresh bullet hole tuh me. You ain't the type who'd saw a ventilator in a forty-dollar John B."

Burke scratched a match on his inlaid boots and touched it to his brownie. He let twin jets of smoke fork from his nostrils before replying.

"That is a bullet hole, an' the slug took a few hairs with it, not an hour back, Joe," he said casually. "That's why I dropped in hyar first thing. Yuh don't think I'd try tuh borrow two thousand bucks from a pauper like a cow-country sheriff, do yuh?"

Mason's pipe dropped from his teeth as his jaw gaped in astonishment. Then he kicked back his chair and stood up, hitching his cartridge belts.

"You have a shoot-out with somebody?" he asked anxiously. "Yuh ain't comin' in tuh give yoreself up, are yuh?"

Burke chuckled boyishly.

"Not any, sheriff. Nope—couple road agents cracked down on me with long guns when I forded the Rio at Cougar Claw bluff. I flopped out o' the saddle, an' heard 'em yellin' tuh a third busky farther up

the bluff. That give me time tuh unshuck my saddle gun."

The sheriff's nostrils twitched.

"I see," he grunted. "An' you left three corpses on Cougar Claw, huh? A heck-raisin' ranny like you wouldn't do no less."

To Mason's surprise and concern, Burke shook his head.

"I dropped the two bushwhackers closest to me," he admitted, "but I never even seen the third feller. I didn't run fer the brush—figgered I'd give him a chance tuh open up on me, knowin' he must be clear to the top o' Cougar Claw in the brush, an' tharfore out o' range."

"But the third gent didn't show up?"

"Nope. Figgered it would be too risky tuh skyline hisself."

Mason tugged at a sandy mustache.

"Who was these dry-gulchers, Thunderbolt?"

Burke shook his head. "Bein' a stranger in these parts, I wouldn't know. One of 'em was a 'Pache; tother was a gringo with no distinguishin' features I could name. I couldn't climb the cliff tuh git at them carcasses without exposin' myself tuh the third hombre, so I come on tuh town."

Sheriff Mason went to a wall peg and got his Stetson. He took a rifle from an elk-antler rack over his desk and levered a shell into the breech block.

"I'll saddle up an' take a *pasear* over tuh Cougar Claw," he said. "Somebody's out tuh nail yuh, son, an' if I kin identify them bushwhackers mebbe I kin tell yuh who the third gent was."

Burke followed the lawman outside.

"Any idea who in town would take a mortgage on the Arrowhead fer

the money I want tuh borrow?" he asked his friend.

Mason scratched his jaw and stared a moment at the Cattleman's National Bank across the street. Then passing that source up as unwise, he focused his gaze on the biggest saloon in town—the Red Star.

"Yuh might go in an' talk tuh Skyhigh Poole," suggested the sheriff. "He's president o' the Syndicate, an' I've heard that outfit's anxious tuh water their stock at Elbow Bend, which same stretch o' river flanks yore ranch. Mebbe you an' him could figger up a deal wharby yuh'd git yore money in exchange fer water."

Thunderbolt frowned. He had heard many rumors about the Bittergrass Cattle & Land Syndicate, had heard that the Syndicate was trying to crowd out one-man ranches such as his.

"Thanks, Joe," said the waddy. "I'll try the other business men in town, an' if I don't have no luck I'll tackle Poole. But I ain't exactly honin' tuh dicker with that hombre."

Four hours later, following the sheriff's departure for the dry-gulch scene upriver, Thunderbolt Burke trailed his spurs into the barroom of the Red Star.

He hadn't been able to raise a nickel for his ranch improvements anywhere in town. The feed-store proprietor shook his head and spoke sadly of the drought killing his cash business. Two general merchandise storekeepers informed him their books were already swamped with credit and that they had no actual capital available. Similar stories came from the livery-barn owners and the several professional gamblers whom Burke had accosted with his proposition.

"Reckon it's Skyhigh Poole, or no money," grunted the waddy, shouldering his way through the slatted doors of the Red Star.

Making his way to the bar, Burke eyed the surly-faced, French-Canadian barkeep, named Beardog le Proo. Burke was surprised to see a look of fear in the renegade's eyes as he slid a bottle and glass in front of the cowboy.

"I didn't come hyar tuh drink, Le Proo," gruffed the waddy. "Is yore boss in?"

Le Proo gulped hard and shot a furtive gaze at the door of Poole's private office, facing the gambling room on the left.

"Reckon so. He's asleep."

Burke hooked a spurred heel on the brass rail.

"Wake him up. Tell Poole I want tuh talk business with him. Cattle business."

Le Proo gulped again, set bottle and glass on the back bar, and shuffled off to enter Poole's office. He found the outlaw seated at his desk, drumming the mahogany nervously with his fingernails.

"He's out there, boss. Says he wants tuh see yuh."

Poole's yellow-skinned face was twitching with nervous fear. He adjusted his six-gun holsters at his hips.

"Loaded fer bear? Yuh think he suspects we was behind that dry-gulch attempt this mornin'?"

Le Proo shrugged. "Couldn't say, boss. Seemed friendly enough, but yuh cain't tell. Said somethin' about wantin' tuh discuss cattle business with yuh. But mebbe that's jest a stall tuh git yuh out whar he kin drill yuh."

Skyhigh Poole got to his feet. He was the only man in Coffinville who could match Thunderbolt Burke for height. He wore the flowing black

coat, corduroy trousers, and neatly polished boots of a professional gambler and saloonman.

"I'll see him. You have yore scatergun handy behind the bar, Le Proo, in case he gits boogery."

A few moments later, Poole was offering to buy the cowboy a drink. Instead, he received a courteous word of refusal, and then heard a crisp, businesslike offer to swap the use of his watering ground for two thousand dollars in cash.

"Reckon yore proposition sounds interestin', son," muttered Skyhigh Poole, thoughts churning in his brain. "Come out tuh my private office an' we'll discuss it."

Ushering the cowboy into the rear room, Poole paused long enough to hiss brief instructions to his bartender, Beardog le Proo.

"*Trés bien*, boss," replied the renegade, untying his apron. "Don't worry. The Arizona Thunderbolt won't get out of that office alive. This time we won't miss."

CHAPTER III.

FRAMED FOR MURDER.

BURKE sensed peril, even as he eased himself into a chair before Poole's desk and watched the ornately garbed saloonman seat himself, then swivel about to spin the knob of a wall safe.

Somehow, it seemed to Burke that Poole had given in to his proposition too easily. Poole had a reputation for being a driver of hard bargains, an unscrupulous man in business deals. Yet even now he was swinging open his safe door and drawing out a steel cash box.

"Two thousand, eh?" said Poole, pausing to light a cheroot and tossing the match with a flourish into a burnished spittoon. "What yuh goin' tuh do, build yoreself some

barns an' corrals or somethin', Burke?"

The Arizona Thunderbolt's hands tightened on the arms of his chair. He was remembering the hunted look of fear, unveiled in the bartender's eyes when he had first entered the saloon and asked for Skyhigh Poole.

Under Poole's desk he could see the gambler's polished boots, and there was dried mud ankle deep on them—dust too deep to have been gained in crossing the hard-rutted main street. The nearest mud Poole could have stepped in would be the Rio Madras.

Then, too, there had been something furtive, hostile, in the brief whispers which the bartender and Poole had exchanged just after Burke had been ushered into the gambler's private office.

"I'm figgerin' on buyin' some blooded beef stuff tuh establish a herd on, Mr. Poole," said the cowpuncher, his eyes glued to the gambler's evil face. "I didn't figger on you givin' in so easy. Ain't yuh even goin' tuh ask me my terms?"

Poole, his face wreathed in fragrant cigar smoke, chuckled as he counted off bills from a thick roll and tossed them in front of the cowpuncher.

"Yore repitation fer square dealin' is young in this hyar county, but it's O. K. with me, Burke," smirked the gambler. "Count out them frogskins, son, an' give me a receipt. I don't reckon yuh'll ever regret dealin' with the Bittergrass Cattle & Land Syndicate."

In order to count the bills, it would mean that both of the cowboy's lean hands would be above the level of the table.

Even as he moved his chair forward he felt a faint draft on his neck nape. Burke's slitted eyes,

darting to a mirror behind Poole's desk, caught sight of a double-barreled shotgun eased through a crack in a closet door behind him—a closet that could be entered through the back bar of the saloon outside, as well as from Poole's office room.

Burke suppressed a shiver as his eye lifted to see the mirrored reflection of Beardog le Proo's foul countenance above the shotgun snout that was trained on his back.

"Count that dinero, son," repeated Skyhigh Poole, getting up from his chair. "I'll go git a receipt blank."

Thunderbolt Burke's jaws gritted as he saw through the guile behind Poole's seemingly innocent words.

Without doubt Poole had a receipt book in his desk. But he was moving out of range of the charge of buckshot that he would soon signal his closeted henchman to trigger into Burke's unprotected back.

Already Poole was moving out of range, his hooded eyes flicking toward the closet door.

Half rising from his chair as if to pull it forward to the desk and reach out to count the greenbacks laid thereon, the Arizona Thunderbolt's right hand slid to his ivory-stocked Colt.

With magic speed the .45 came up in a wide arc that came to the level of the waddy's shoulder. Cocking the knurled hammer as the barrel came to a level on his shoulder and pointing straight backward, Thunderbolt lifted his thumb to let the hammer fall on firing pin.

Brrrang! There was a deafening explosion as the six-gun roared alongside his right ear.

His eyes on the mirror, Thunderbolt Burke saw the leveled shotgun sag, then go clattering to the threshold.

Skyhigh Poole gagged on his cigar

as he saw the closet door swing open before the thudding impact of a weight falling against it. And then both Poole and the mirror-watching cowboy saw the bullet-tunneled corpse of Beardog le Proo topple forward out of the closet, to smash hard against the linoleum-covered floor of the private office.

The gun with which Burke had triggered a shot backward over his shoulder came down to bore on Skyhigh Poole, a wisp of smoke drifting from its barrel.

"Yore ambushers ain't playin' in luck today, Poole!" whispered Burke in a voice like ice. "Hoist 'em before you git a dose o' lead p'izen, too!"

Choking for breath, Skyhigh Poole lifted his arms. His eyes shuttled between the black bore of Burke's gun and the motionless corpse of his bartender, sprawled dead on the floor a split instant before Le Proo could jerk triggers and send Burke to his doom.

Bam! The barroom door slammed open, to reveal a dozen faces outside, attracted to Poole's private office by the roar of the six-gun.

All eyes swung down to the corpse of the French-Canadian renegade, where a ghastly crimson pool was spreading across the linoleum. The unfired scattergun was under Le Proo's prostrate bulk.

And then, across the threshold, strode the hard-eyed sheriff of Bittergrass County, trail dust still thick on his shirt and chaps.

Joe Mason's slitted eyes took in the tense picture before him: Le Proo's hulk by the open closet door, Skyhigh Poole standing with his shoulders against the wall, arms uplifted before the menace of the six-gun in the giant cowboy's hand, and the open safe door and the

greenbacks which covered Poole's desk.

"What's goin' on hyar, anyhow?" gritted the sheriff, his eyes seeking Burke's.

The cowboy's compressed lips moved.

"I'm turnin' Poole over tuh you tuh arrest fer attempted murder, sheriff. He planted his bartender in the closet with a buckshot gun tuh kill me."

The horror had left Skyhigh Poole's face as he saw a number of his own paid gun-toters in the crowd that jammed behind the sheriff.

A gambler and bad man all his forty-odd years, Skyhigh Poole was used to thinking fast in emergencies. And now his fertile brain saw a chance to turn the tables against Thunderbolt Burke, even in the eyes of his old enemy, the sheriff.

"Burke's lyin', sheriff!" screamed the saloonman, his hands climbing even higher. "He came in here an' demanded two thousand bucks in cash. I refused him, so he draws a gun on me an' forces me tuh open my safe an' shell out my dinero. Yuh kin see it thar on the desk, jest as he was goin' tuh grab it!"

Burke smiled grimly, knowing that the sheriff was fresh back from his trip to Cougar Claw bluff and that Mason had no doubt found the two dead dry-gulchers and had identified them as employees of Skyhigh Poole's.

That was probably the very reason why the sheriff had been coming inside Poole's saloon in time to hear the shot which had killed Le Proo.

"How d'yuh account fer Le Proo bein' in the closet with a sawed-off shotgun, Poole?" demanded the sheriff, drawing his own Colt .45.

Poole thought fast, but a confident grin on his face belied his in-

ward uneasiness. He licked his lips nervously.

"I . . . well . . . I admits Le Proo was figgerin' on coverin' Burke from behind with his scatter-gun, sheriff," panted the boss of the Syndicate. "Le Proo told me that Burke was honin' fer trouble when he let Burke in. So it was plumb natural Le Proo would git his scatter-gun an' come in the closet tuh pectect me. He was jest comin' out tuh cover Burke when Burke shot him. If you hadn't come in when yuh did, sheriff, Burke would have shot me an' vamosed with all o' that dinero."

The office was rapidly filling with people, all of whom heard Skyhigh Poole's high-pitched accusations against the grim-faced cowboy who still kept him covered with an unwavering Peacemaker.

Many of the spectators were bar flies who hung around the Red Star, gun-hung killers friendly to Poole and the Syndicate. But even the neutral onlookers and strangers had but to glance at the setup to see that Poole's account of the affair could be true.

"O. K., Burke!" said the sheriff finally. "Lay yore gun on the desk."

Puzzled by Mason's tone, the cowboy placed his six-gun on Poole's desk alongside the pile of scattered currency. He supposed that the sheriff was taking Poole into custody with his own weapon.

Instead he was startled to see Mason's .45 swing to cover him, and the lawman stepped forward with a pair of handcuffs which he had fished from a chaps pocket.

"What in blazes!" gasped the Arizonan, as he felt his wrists suddenly fettered with cold steel. "You goin' tuh let Poole git away with this, Mason?"

Skyhigh Poole's eyes flashed over

to his grinning pards in the crowd, his face beaming with triumph as he saw the sheriff unbuckle the cowpoke's shell belts and loop them over an elbow.

"I'm jailin' you, Burke, on suspicion o' murder an' robbery," said Joe Mason levelly. "The way things look, Poole's story is plumb correct. If my investigations prove yo're right, then yuh'll git out o' the calaboose. But not a minute before!"

CHAPTER IV.

WAR ON THE SYNDICATE.

A GOODLY crowd of sombreroed and Colt-toting men followed Sheriff Mason out of the Red Star Saloon and watched from the porch while the Coffinville sheriff conducted his tall, lanky-jointed prisoner across the street and inside the Bittergrass County jail.

Once inside the cell block, Sheriff Mason unlocked the waddy's handcuffs.

"You loco coot!" stormed the boss of the Arrowhead Ranch. "Fallin' fer a trumped-up yarn like Skyhigh peddled yuh! Why, that dinero on the desk was jest a bait. They got me in that office tuh ambush me, an' then claim I got killed tryin' tuh pull a robbery."

Mason waited patiently until Burke's tirade was finished. Then, after calmly locking a cell door on the cowboy, the old sheriff grinned.

"I know—I know," he said. "What in blazes did yuh think I was Johnny-on-the-spot in the saloon for, if I hadn't come tuh arrest Poole fer tryin' tuh have you ambushed this mornin' on the river?"

The cowboy relaxed, as understanding of the sheriff's actions penetrated his brain.

"Then . . . then yuh arrested me jist tuh keep that saloon mob from

shootin' us both down if yuh'd tried tuh grab Poole?"

Mason nodded.

"No use in us committin' suicide right inside the lion's den. I'm jest sorry I didn't open the door in time tuh forestall Le Proo's death—not that I had any love fer that renegade owl-hooter, but we could 'a' squeezed a confession out o' him quicker'n we'll be able tuh make Skyhigh Poole admit he tried tuh bushwhack you at Cougar Claw this mornin'."

Thunderbolt clutched the jail bars with both hands and regarded his lawman friend closely.

"Yuh found them two bodies on the rimrock overlookin' the river-bank trail, like I said?" he asked curiously.

Mason shook his head.

"Nope. Not a sign of a body on that ledge, son."

Thunderbolt's heart sank like a rock. With the bodies gone, he had no way of proving his ambush story. And Burke realized that since he was a virtual stranger in Coffinville, even the friendly sheriff had to regard him as an unknown quantity.

Things looked plenty black, in view of the fact that the sheriff knew that Burke's purpose in being in town was to borrow money. Would Mason think that Burke, failing to find a lender, had decided to use his guns to get money from the head of the Cattle Syndicate?

"Quit worryin', son," were the sheriff's reassuring words. "I didn't find no corpses whar you said you'd dropped 'em, but I found whar leaves had been scraped over pools o' blood, an' I found plenty o' tracks—the tracks o' four men, tuh be exact."

The cowboy's eyes slitted.

"Four men, huh? Then two other

hombres must 'a' taken away the dead men, bein' afraid if you found 'em you'd identify 'em as members o' the Syndicate."

The sheriff glanced back to make sure that no one was in the jail eavesdropping, and then said to the prisoner inside the cell:

"I found yore victims, Thunderbolt—down in the river. Two hombres had carried 'em down the bluff on hossback, filled their shirts with rocks, an' heaved 'em in the Madras. I dived an' brung them bodies up."

"Was they Syndicate men?"

"Nothin' else. One o' 'em was Red Eagle, an Injun pãrd o' Sky-high Poole's. The other was a gun-slammer name of Mitch Cardell, one o' the Syndicate straw bosses. The Syndicate's back o' these attempts tuh dry-gulch you, Burke, an' you went straight tuh the man who wanted yuh killed, when yuh tried tuh borrow money from Poole. Me bein' the one who told yuh tuh go there, it's up tuh me tuh git yuh out o' this mess."

The Arizona Thunderbolt, remembering the dried mud he had seen on Poole's boots, deduced that Poole had been one of the ambushers who had disposed of the two corpses. He told the sheriff as much.

"Oh, we got the deadwood on Poole," agreed the sheriff. "It won't be easy provin' anything, but my evidence will make the local judge let you out o' this jug on bail, anyhow."

The sheriff already had a deputy on the way out to Cougar Claw bluff to bring back the water-logged corpses of the Indian and Cardell. This evidence, plus the mud caked on Poole's boots, which would undoubtedly match that of the river where the corpses had been dumped, would count heavily in a court trial against Poole.

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"Jest you set down an' take things easy fer a half-hour, amigo," assured Sheriff Joe Mason, "while I go fix up yore bail bond an' spring yuh out o' hyar. Then me an' you will go to work on that Cattle Syndicate an' bust it wide open!"

A fighting grin appeared on Burke's lips as the youthful cowman saw the sheriff bowleg his way out into the main street.

Busting the Syndicate wide open would mean a long and difficult fight, both inside and outside of a courtroom. But having been dealt cards in the game, Thunderbolt Burke was ready to back his hand to the limit, even if the payoff came with thundering guns instead of jurymen's votes.

CHAPTER V.

"I'M A CURLY WOLF!"

BEHIND the grimy windows of the Red Star barroom, Skyhigh Poole watched as Sheriff Joe Mason strode out of the jail building and headed for the Bittergrass County courthouse, a block away.

"That means but one thing, boys!" rasped the Syndicate boss, turning to a group of rock-faced Syndicate riders who had gathered at their saloon headquarters. "Mason's wise, an' he's headin' fer Judge Peggler's tuh git a bond so's he kin turn Thunderbolt loose legal."

One of the group, a rat-faced cattleman named Latigo Richards, rubbed a stubbly jowl and volunteered a suggestion.

"Mebbe not, boss. The sheriff seemed tuh swallow yore version o' things inside the office after Burke had shot Le Proo. Mason didn't act no way suspicious then."

Poole sucked at an expensive cigar and watched Mason until the

old sheriff had disappeared inside the courthouse.

"That's jest why I'm uneasy," said the gambler. "The sheriff's been buckin' the Syndicate fer years. He believed my yarn too blamed easy. He jest wanted tuh make shore he got Burke out o' the Red Star alive. Whar we made our mistake was by not cuttin' 'em both down while we had 'em."

Latigo Richards shrugged and fingered his gun stocks.

"If yuh'd given us the wink, we'd 'a' smoked 'em down with pleasure, boss," he reminded Poole.

Poole strode across the sawdust-littered floor and went into his office. Most of the Syndicate men returned to their poker games or drinking. But Richards and one or two others followed their chief into the office.

A Mexican *mozo* was busy scrubbing up the crimson stains which marked the spot where Beardog le Proo had toppled from his closet hide-out, a dead man with a shotgun in his hands.

The bartender's corpse had already been removed to the coroner's office, pending the sheriff's official investigation.

Poole shuddered as he visualized once more the magical way in which the Arizona Thunderbolt had whisked a .45 from leather and fired over his right shoulder to kill his ambusher, a split second before the waddy himself would have been mowed down with a double charge of No. 4 shot.

"Everything's gone loco," cried the Syndicate chief, sinking into his chair and gathering up the loose bills from his cash box. If Le Proo had killed the Thunderbolt, everything would have been O. K.—because the sheriff couldn't have

proved my story of the robbery was phony."

Latigo Richards rolled himself a quirly and grunted skeptically.

"Mason cain't prove yuh lied, as it stands, boss," he said confidentially. "After all, it's yore word agin' a stranger's."

Poole propped elbows on his mahogany desk and ruffled his hair with long, clawlike fingers.

"Jest the same, I don't like it a bit," declared Poole. "Thunderbolt Burke's buckin' our Syndicate, boys, an' he's as dangerous as his name. Yuh'd feel the way I do if yuh'd seen him drop Mitch an' the Injun this mornin' an' ride out of a man trap as cool as a cucumber. An' the way he shot Le Proo—"

Poole's face pimpled with sweat at the grisly recollection.

After a period of thought, the Syndicate boss straightened. He eyed his henchman critically.

"I happen tuh know that Judge Peggler's out o' town an' won't be back until the stagecoach from Gallup pulls in about ten o'clock to-night," he said, the old-time confidence once more evident in his voice. "An' I doubt if the sheriff will release Thunderbolt Burke without the judge's bail, jest tuh make his side o' things look right."

The Syndicate killers grouped about the desk, waiting for their boss to go on. From past experience, they knew by the saloonkeeper's tone and expression that he had figured out some plot which they would help engineer.

"That means Burke will be in jail until after dark," went on Skyhigh Poole, eying each of his men in turn. "If we're goin' tuh smash Burke, we got tuh move quick. Once he gits on the loose, with them lightnin' guns in his holsters ag'in, things'll be too hot around Coffinville."

Poole leaned forward and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Listen close, amigos," he purred. "I've had my plans go kibosh twice tuhday, an' the ownership o' Burke's ranch is jest as far from the Syndicate's hands as ever. But this scheme won't fail, an' it'll put Burke out o' the picture fer keeps. Listen."

Five minutes later, Latigo Richards reeled out of the Red Star Saloon. Liquor was on his breath; to all appearances, the rancher was reeling drunk, despite the fact that five minutes before, in the secret conference in Poole's office, he had been cold sober.

Whipping six-guns from leather, Latigo Richards proceeded to take wabbly aim at the windows of an abandoned livery barn across the street.

Brrram! Bang-bang-bang!

Glass jangled an echo to the thunder of shots, as bullet holes appeared in the stable windows.

Men who had been lounging on the sidewalks and saloon porches hastily scrambled for the protection of alleys and doorways. A drunk with a shooting complex was as dangerous as a mad dog. More than one innocent man or woman had been slain on the streets of Coffinville by some bullet-slinging drunk.

"*Yeee-ow!*" whooped Richards, staggering out into the middle of the street, his guns fuming. "I'm a curly wolf, an' this is my day tuh howl. Anybody want tuh sh-sh-shoot it out with me?"

Richards' offer had no takers. Grinning men peered at the drunk from around corners.

Sheriff Joe Mason appeared in his office door, his face stern, his hands on gun butts. The grizzled old tin-star knew better than to walk out after the drunk while Richards still had any loads left in his Colts.

Wabbly though he was, there was a chance that Richards could make a killing shot.

"*Yeeee-peeel!*" bellowed Latigo Richards, turning around three times and then flopping to a sitting position in the dusty street. "*Yip!* Run fer cover, ever'body! I'm a curly wolf, an' I'm honin' fer excitement!"

Richards had dropped one of his guns. He now took the other, aimed it unsteadily at the adobe side of a dance hall down the street and commenced taking pot shots at a circus poster plastered over the wall. Most of the bullets went wild.

When his firing pin clicked on fired shells, Latigo Richards clumsily jacked open the .45 and began ejecting cartridge cases. Immediately, Sheriff Joe Mason headed for him.

Under cover of his sombrero brim, Richards shot an exultant glance at the window of the Red Star, behind which Skyhigh Poole watched with approving eye.

"I'm a curly wolf!" babbled Richards, fumbling at his shell belt for ammunition. "I'm a—"

The heavy hand of the law jerked the empty gun out of his hand. Mason hauled Richards to his feet by the scruff of the neck, recoiling from the foul stench of whiskey on the rancher's mouth.

"Handsh off, sheriff!" hiccupped Richards, as Mason started him toward the jail. "Whatsh idea?"

The sheriff propelled his charge toward the jail with well-directed kicks with his right knee.

"Yo're sleepin' off yore drunk inside o' the *juzgado*, Latigo," snarled the sheriff in a voice which carried to the ears of the relieved populace who were beginning to emerge from hiding up and down the street. "Nobody's goin' tuh knock out window lights while I'm ramroddin' this town."

"I'm a curly wolf, sheriff, an'—"

"An' yo're goin' in the cell we reserves fer coyotes!" clipped Mason as he hustled Richards into the jail and kicked the door shut behind him. "Keep yore trap close-hobbed!"

Over in the Red Star Saloon, Sky-high Poole turned to his partners and chuckled.

"Richards got in jail O. K.," he whispered. "He'll take care o' his end o' the scheme, come nightfall. Now, you boys hustle around tuh the various saloons an' git busy, savvy? We'll have Coffinville so drunk it'll be glad tuh lynch Thunderbolt Burke, whether they're Syndicate hombres or not!"

Poole returned to his office, a burden of worry removed from his mind. He was positive that free liquor and expert goading would muster up a lynch mob which would see to it that Thunderbolt Burke would not be in shape to be released from jail on bail when the night stage arrived from Gallup with Judge Pegpler.

CHAPTER VI.

LYNCH TALK.

COFFINVILLE had long since been nicknamed "Lynchtown" by residents of New Mexico who knew the frequency with which the cow town strung up erring citizens.

There had been a marked drop-off in hangings outside the law since Sheriff Joe Mason had been sworn into office. But despite the grizzled old law dog's best efforts, nearly a dozen men had been ushered into eternity at rope's end.

As sunset began painting the false-fronted buildings along the main street with an ominous crimson glare, lynch talk began to take spark in half a dozen different saloons and gambling halls.

Cowboys, their pockets supplied with dinero from the coffers of the Cattle & Land Syndicate, began setting up the house.

In every case, when a sizable crowd of half-drunk cowmen were jamming the bar, the cowboy who was buying the drinks would hammer on the counter for attention and begin a carefully coached harangue in accordance with Skyhigh Poole's orders.

"How about it, amigos?" thundered a crow-voiced horse wrangler inside Poole's own establishment, the Red Star. "Are we citizens o' Coffinville goin' tuh stand fer a jasper comin' intuh town bent on borrowin' money—an' then, jest because nobody's got any tuh spare, let this jasper try tuh git it at the p'int of a gun?"

Merchants in the crowd, who had been approached by Thunderbolt Burke during the afternoon, felt shudders go down their spines as they realized they had coolly turned down the tall young stranger who had offered them a mortgage on his ranch.

"Any one o' you men who refused tuh lend Burke money might 'a' been shot in his tracks tuhday!" roared on the agitator. "I'm tellin' yuh, Burke ain't safe tuh have in town. I says, string that skunk up!"

Whiskey-inflamed men shouted agreement. In cooler moments they would have seen through the faulty arguments of the lynch agitator, but now their senses were dulled by alcohol and the bar was flowing freely with liquor and more liquor.

"The sheriff's friendly tuh this Burke hombre," spoke up another waddy in the crowd. "The sheriff hates Skyhigh Poole jest because he hates the Syndicate. So he'll prob'ly see to it that Burke goes scot-free

after he kilt our pardner Beardog le Proo in cold blood!"

The circumstances of Le Proo's death were not clear in the minds of many of Coffinville's citizenry. Skyhigh Poole had taken care to spread the belief that Le Proo had been shot in the back by the Arizona Thunderbolt, without a chance for his life.

"I'm sayin', lynch the Thunderbolt afore he does any more killin's!" yelled the agitator, hammering the bar counter with a whiskey bottle. "Are you hombres with me?"

A roar of approval went up. The lynching fever had seized the mob of drinkers, many of whom were too far gone with liquor even to be sure who the intended victim was.

A sudden chill descended over the Red Star's barroom as the batwing doors of the place swung open to reveal the rawboned person of Sheriff Joe Mason.

The lawman's guns were in their holsters still, but Mason's calloused hands were hooked in his belts, and his steely eyes were raking the crowd of riffraff, making them cower before the stern presence of the law.

"Thar's lynch talk goin' on in half the saloons in town tuhnight," snarled Mason ominously. "In every case the agitator who's doin' the bellerin' an' buyin' the drinks happens tuh be hitched up with Poole's rotten Syndicate."

Standing in the door of his private office, Skyhigh Poole flushed angrily. He was in hopes that some drunken sot in the crowd would open fire on the sheriff.

"I resent that, Mason!" clipped the saloon owner. "You're inferring I want that prisoner lynched. You're insinuating my Cattle & Land Syndicate is back of all o' the lynch talk that's goin' on around town."

The sheriff snorted.

"Insinuat'in', blazes!" he yelled. "I know blamed well yo're after Thunderbolt's hide. That's why I'm tellin' you now, Poole, in front o' all yore toadies, that me an' my depities will protect our prisoner in case yuh storm the jail. An' that if I lose a single man, Poole, I'll rip off my badge an' come after you as man tuh man. An' you better have yore guns a-foggin' when yuh see me comin', because I'll be on the prod!"

So enraged was Skyhigh Poole by the sheriff's impassioned outburst that he could not think up a retort as the sheriff turned on his heel and departed through the slatted doors into the night.

Poole turned to a crony at his elbow and whispered through the corner of his mouth:

"Spread the word, Soapy. Tell the crowds in the other saloons that we're marchin' on the jail, pronto, an' that we're goin' tuh drag out the Arizona Thunderbolt in spite o' the sheriff, heck, or high water!"

Soapy scuttled out a back door to do the Syndicate boss's bidding.

In the meantime, Sheriff Joe Mason crossed the street and entered his jail. Two solemn-faced deputies were inside the darkened office, shot-guns in hand.

"Things don't look so good," admitted the tin-star. "Reckon half the owl-hooters in town will storm the jail inside of a few minutes. An' I'll hate tuh mow 'em down with buckshot, because they're loco with whiskey an' don't know what Poole's egg'in' 'em on tuh do."

Going back into the cell block, the sheriff went to Thunderbolt Burke's cell. Even as he paused there, the two men heard the first ominous rumble of voices as a score or more of drunken, gun-toting hom-

bres emerged from the Red Star Saloon, chanting a death call.

"Listen, sheriff," whispered Burke, clutching the sheriff's arm through the bars. "All o' this loud talk about stormin' the jail an' haulin' me out o' hyar by the tail is a blind. I think Poole's got another scheme up his sleeve tuh git me out whar I kin be stretched tuh a lass'-rope."

The sheriff ground his teeth.

"We'll keep 'em from bashin' down the jail if we're besieged fer a month, Thunderbolt!" swore the lawman. "Don't worry about that!"

Burke peered across the dark cell block to where he could see the drunken "curly wolf," Latigo Richards, standing at the barred window of his cell.

"Richards is one o' Poole's men, yuh told me," whispered the cowboy. "Well, I been watchin' him since yuh jailed him, sheriff, an' he don't act like no drunk that's soberin' up. I think it's a trick."

Sheriff Mason scowled across the jail room at his other prisoner. Outside, the yelling of the lynch mob had redoubled in volume, for men were streaming out of saloons all along the main street, to swell the crowd forming in front of the jail.

"What yuh drivin' at, Thunderbolt?"

Burke drew the sheriff closer to his cell bars.

"Poole wants one o' his men on the *inside* o' the jail, savvy?" whispered the Arizona cowpuncher. "I've seen Richards stickin' his face through the cell window, so's Poole an' his *compadres* will know what cell Richards occupies."

The sheriff scratched his head in bewilderment.

"I don't get—"

Brrrang! Bang-bang-bang! A rain of bullets clattered on the roof of the jail, and up and down the

main street of Coffinville went a rolling thunder of guns.

Out of the sheriff's office bobbed a white-faced deputy, shotgun in hand.

"Thar's near a hundred of 'em outside, an' mebbe they're gittin' ready tuh bash down the door, sheriff!" cried the deputy. "When yuh goin' tuh give us orders tuh fire through knotholes an' scatter 'em?"

The sheriff turned to go, but found Burke's hand gripping his sleeve.

"Afore yuh go, sheriff, do me a favor, will yuh? Put me in the same cell with Latigo Richards."

Brrrang! A second volley of shots deafened them, and bullets hammered the walls of the jail. Ear-shattering yells went up after each round of firing, as the mob incensed itself to fever pitch outside.

"O. K. But if the worst comes tuh worst, I'll let yuh have yore guns an' come out front tuh fight, Burke!" muttered the sheriff, unlocking Burke's door. "After all, I ain't really got yuh under arrest, nohow."

A moment later the sheriff was unlocking the door of Latigo Richards' cell. The drunk who had claimed himself to be a curly wolf looking for trouble out on the main street was now whining miserably.

"They're goin' tuh bust down this jail, sheriff!" babbled Richards. "Why don't yuh let 'em have Burke, afore they set fire tuh the place or somethin'."

Without answering, Sheriff Joe Mason shoved the Arizona Thunderbolt into the cell with Poole's henchman, and locked it. Then he hurried to the front office to begin the defense of the jail.

"What's the idea, Burke?" demanded Latigo Richards, when he realized what the sheriff had done.

There wasn't a trace of drunkenness in Richards' voice now.

Burke's face was amused, yet hostile in the reflected glare of saloon windows outside the jail.

"You figgered yuh was purty smart, gittin' yoreself put in jail with me tuhnight, Latigo," challenged Thunderbolt Burke. "So I just thought I'd move in with yuh."

Richards gulped hard and sat down on the cot. He was suddenly trembling before the menace of the grinning cowboy.

And then a shadow fell across the barred window above them as a sombreroed man climbed upon a box outside the jail to peer into the dark jail.

"Latigo!" came the steely whisper of Skyhigh Poole, boss of Coffinville's Syndicate. "Yuh there?"

CHAPTER VII.

POOLE'S SCHEME.

LATIGO RICHARDS opened his mouth to answer his boss outside, but no sound of warning ever came. The crunch of Thunderbolt Burke's fist hammering against the Syndicate rider's jaw was muffled from Poole's hearing by the roar of the lynch mob out on the street.

Unseen by the outlaw outside the jail window, Burke's terrific right jab smashed Latigo Richards back against the cot, knocked out.

"Latigo! Latigo! We ain't got any time tuh waste!"

Thunderbolt Burke removed his own blue Stetson and picked up Richards' battered gray sombrero. Jamming it on his head so that the flopping brim put his face in shadow, Burke went to the window.

Because of his towering height, his face was on a level with Poole's, giving the impression that Richards was standing on the cot.

"O. K., boss," answered Burke in a husky whisper. "What's the lay?"

Across the thick stone sill of the jail window Burke could see Skyhigh Poole clinging to the bars, his breath foul with liquor.

"I'm passin' yuh a pair o' hoglegs, same as we planned over in my office this evenin'," whispered Poole. "You fire a shot an' that'll bring the sheriff scamperin' back, figgerin' that the lynchers is shootin' at Burke from the windows."

"O. K., boss."

"When the sheriff comes in, cover him. Make him unlock yore cell. Then you kin cover them depities from behind, an' unlock the front door. We'll come in an' drag Burke out o' his cell an' down tuh the plaza."

A pulse hammered in the cowboy's throat as he realized at last the true purpose of Latigo Richards' fake drunk, which had forced the sheriff to jail him. Joe Mason would not be expecting an enemy inside his own jail, to aid the lynchers outside. Poole had thought his scheme out well.

A moment later a pair of six-guns were thrust across the granite sill of the window.

Burke seized them eagerly, his intention being to reach out and seize Poole by the neck and cover him with one of his own .45s.

But the cowardly Syndicate boss, after thrusting the guns to his supposed confederate inside the jail, lost no time in getting away from the window.

As Burke palmed the six-gun stocks he heard the clatter of running boots as Skyhigh Poole headed for the street. Leveling one of the .45s at a sand-filled box which served as a cuspidor, Burke triggered a bullet at the floor.

Almost immediately, the office



*"I'm passin'
yuh a pair o'
hoglegs, same as
we planned."*

door slammed open and Joe Mason rushed inside, guns in hand.

"Burke!" Mason yelled, rushing for the cell. "I better git you up front, if they're startin' tuh shoot through the windows."

The sheriff stared in amazement as he saw the guns in the waddy's hands.

"Poole jest passed these in the window, thinkin' that Latigo Richards was receivin' 'em," chuckled the Thunderbolt, jerking his head at the stirring figure of the Syndicate spy

lying on the cot. "So yuh see, my suspicions o' Richards not bein' really drunk was plumb correct."

Briefly, Burke outlined to the dumfounded sheriff what Poole's scheme had been to turn over the Arizona Thunderbolt to the lynch mob outside.

"By gosh, we'll jest let their plan go through!" snarled the sheriff angrily. "When they git tuh the Plaza they'll understand their mistake an' turn Richards loose. An' by that time the crowd'll be cooled off."

Keys clicked in the lock, and a moment later Burke was stepping outside. He and the sheriff then carried Latigo Richards across the cell block and deposited him in the cell formerly occupied by the Arizona Thunderbolt.

Outside the jail, gunshots rocked the night. Rocks slammed against the roof and walls. Windows had already been shuttered with thick planks by Mason and his deputies. The granite-block walls would defy the efforts of the mob.

"O. K., boys!" clipped the sheriff, as he and his erstwhile prisoner stepped into the room. "Fer the first time in the history o' my lawin' career, I'm openin' my jail an' lettin' a lynch mob inside!"

The deputies stared at Mason as if they thought he had gone crazy. And then the grizzled old tin-star drew them together and briefly outlined the plan by which Skyhigh Poole had figured to get Thunderbolt Burke out of the jail before the arrival of the judge on the Gallup stagecoach.

Back in the cell block, Thunderbolt performed one more operation to heighten the effect of their ruse. He crammed his blue Stetson on Latigo Richards' head, and then proceeded to exchange his bright-red shirt for Richards' blue hickory one.

By the time the switch was made the saloon mob outside was crowding about the front door, bellowing frantically for the sheriff to turn his prisoner over to them.

Going into his rôle of a Syndicate traitor, the Arizona Thunderbolt strapped on his own gun belts, and then covered the sheriff and deputies.

Sure that the lawmen were crowded over out of possible bullet range, Burke went to the door and unbolted it, shoving it wide open.

Outside, the faces of the mob were

dimly outlined in the glare of saloon windows farther down the street. There was a moment of shocked silence as the leaders of the lynching crowd leaped up on the steps, having been instructed what to do by Poole earlier in the evening.

"Everything worked O. K., eh?" whispered one burly, black-whiskered crook as he leaped inside to see the dim form of an hombre he supposed to be Latigo Richards, standing in the shadow with his guns covering the sheriff and his deputies.

"Git 'im out quick, boys!" whispered Burke, as the Syndicate straw bosses shoved their way through the office into the cell block. "I had tuh conk him, but he'll come around."

Into the open cell formerly occupied by the Arizona Thunderbolt went the Syndicate lynchers. A figure was sitting up on the bed, rubbing his sore head. By the dim light which washed in through grated windows, the lynchers recognized Burke's towering blue hat and red shirt.

A moment later, Latigo Richards was being carried by the arms and legs out through the sheriff's office. A frenzied shout went up as the drunken mob outside caught sight of their leaders descending the steps of the sheriff's office, carrying the limp form between them.

"It's Thunderbolt Burke! The skunk's goin' tuh stretch rope!"

"Lynch the polecat! Make him sorry he ever murdered Le Proo!"

The real Thunderbolt, appearing in the doorway of the sheriff's office, saw Richards vanish in the surging mob as they headed down the street toward the plaza and its grim, rope-scarred hangman's tree.

Burke turned to the waiting sheriff with a grin. Before he could speak, boots clattered on the steps behind him and he whirled to find

himself facing Skyhigh Poole's messenger, a filthy bar rag known as Soapy, who made a living swamping out the Red Star.

Burke, his face hidden from Soapy's by the dark shadows, stooped to listen to the bar fly's message.

"Poole wants you tuh j'ine him an' the other boys over in his office, *may pronto!*" whispered Soapy. "Says fer you tuh lock the sheriff an' his depities up in the southwest cell, so's they kin see the hangin'. Later Poole an' you boys will let the sheriff out o' jail, so's Mason won't think Poole had anything tuh do with the hangin'. But by that time it'll be too late fer Burke!"

Giggling foolishly, Soapy scuffled off down the street on the heels of the lynching mob. Already the mob was streaming into the plaza. Lanterns were beginning to bob here and there. A few oil-soaked torches began to shed their scarlet light over the scene under the hangman's tree.

"Here's hopin' they recognize Richards afore they stretch his neck," chuckled Burke as the lawmen lowered their arms, their part of the act over. "Meanwhile, I'm goin' over tuh the Red Star an' join Poole an' his Syndicate lieutenants."

Sheriff Joe Mason called out sharply in protest.

"You ain't goin' over thar with them outlaws, Thunderbolt. They'd spot yore disguise in a minute, you bein' a head taller'n Richards. What yuh fixin' tuh do, commit suicide?"

The Arizona Thunderbolt turned to regard the lawmen from the porch steps.

"Fergit about the lynch mob in the plaza, the ringleaders are meetin' in Poole's saloon," ordered the cowboy. "You fellers glue yore ears tuh the outside wall o' Poole's private office. Yuh may hear some inter-

estin' things. An' don't worry about me."

Before the sheriff could cry out, Burke had gone. He was heading across the street toward the Red Star. A moment later he had disappeared inside the front door of Poole's barroom.

CHAPTER VIII.

SYNDICATE TRIUMPH.

SKYHIGH POOLE rubbed his hands together in fiendish glee inside his private office. One by one, the ringleaders of the rustlers' Syndicate, who had gone among the Coffinville saloons that night rousing the lynch mob to action, had obeyed Poole's orders and had assembled at their leader's office.

"Tuhnight's our lucky night, boys!" chuckled Poole, reaching in a bucket of ice and drawing forth several wine bottles. "By way o' celebration, I'm openin' some of my private stock o' champagne. By the time it's rollin' down our necks, I reckon the Arizona Thunderbolt's neck'll be stretched."

Dimly, their ears could pick up the shouts of the drunken mob over in the plaza. The last time that Poole had looked through his front windows, a rope had already been slung over the hang tree's lower limb.

Champagne gurgled into glasses as the Syndicate boss poured drinks of the sparkling, expensive wine for his chief henchmen.

"A toast tuh the Syndicate, boys!" preposed Skyhigh Poole, going behind his desk and raising his glass of bubbling champagne. "I reckon it's the first champagne you cow-prods have ever let roll down yore tongues, but I figgered the occasion justified somethin' more'n rotgut."

They drank greedily, exchanging

exultant grins. The hairy-faced and gun-toting killers on Poole's murder pay roll knew what Thunderbolt Burke's death would mean to their boss and to their Syndicate.

"The hangin' o' Thunderbolt Burke won't be laid at our doors, because in a minute we're goin' tuh pose like indignant citizens an' run over an' rescue the sheriff an' his depities," chuckled Poole. "By the time they kin git tuh the Plaza though, Burke will be croaked."

Poole kept his eye on the door, as if expecting someone.

"Wish Latigo Richards would hurry up an' git here," grunted Poole. "I told Soapy tuh tell him tuh join us, quick as he locked up the sheriff in one of his own cells."

A black-whiskered hombre at one corner of the room guffawed loudly and came up for another glass of champagne.

"That was a right neat trick yuh had o' gittin' Richards in jail, passin' him smoke poles, an' him turnin' the jail wrongside out fer the mob!" chuckled the black-whiskered ruffian. "Now we'll be able tuh buy the Arrowhead Ranch an' have our water rights an' the Syndicate'll ramrod the cattle business in Bittergrass."

The door slammed open, but instead of Latigo Richards, the wild-eyed person of the swamper, Soapy, appeared in the office.

"Boss! Boss!" cried the swamper desperately, going over to Poole's table. "Somethin' terrible's happened tuh our scheme! You hombres better high-tail it!"

The faces of the Syndicate killers drained to a pasty white hue as they all stared at the jibbering swamper.

"What yuh gittin' at, Soapy?" growled Poole, seizing the swamper's shoulder in a viselike grip. "The

mob didn't turn yaller an' refuse tuh hang Thunderbolt Burke, did they?"

Soapy shook his head wildly.

"That wasn't Thunderbolt Burke we dragged tuh the hang tree!"

There was a moment's stunned silence, broken only by Soapy's heaving lungs.

"What?" The word came like the boom of a cannon from Poole's lips, as his nerveless hand dropped his champagne glass with a crash.

"That wasn't Thunderbolt we was about tuh hang," repeated Soapy, gasping for breath. "When we got lanterns an' went tuh put the hang knot around Thunderbolt's neck, we found out that jigger we hauled out o' jail was our own pard, Latigo Richards!"

For the space of fifteen seconds, the Syndicate killers let Soapy's amazing revelation penetrate their stunned brains.

It was Skyhigh Poole who first got an inkling of what had happened inside the jail.

"Then . . . then that means that Thunderbolt's still on the loose!" gasped Poole, jerking a six-gun from leather. "Men, we're in a tight spot. Mebbe even now, Burke an' the sheriff are huntin' fer us. We got tuh beat 'em to it!"

And then Poole froze in his tracks as he saw the door of his closet which connected to the back bar of his saloon, slowly open to reveal a towering figure clad in Latigo Richards' familiar gray sombrero and blue hickory shirt.

Twin six-guns protruded from the hombre's hips. And the face under Richards' flopping hat brim was that of the Arizona Thunderbolt!

"Hoist 'em, gents!" snarled the owner of the Arrowhead outfit. "I been hidin' in the same closet that Le Proo was goin' tuh use tuh kill me, an' I got the deadwood on the

whole outfit of yuh. Git yore hands up pronto, afore these hoglegs start smokin'!"

One by one the stupefied Syndicate men raised their arms. The .45 Colt dropped from Poole's fist to fall into the pool of champagne at his feet.

And then, as Thunderbolt Burke stepped out of the closet to go about the job of disarming his prisoners, a panting figure leaped out of the closet behind him, six-gun in hand.

"No yuh don't, Burke! Drop them guns!"

It was the real Latigo Richards, disheveled and bruised from the battering he had received at the hands of the lynch mob before they had discovered that he was not their intended victim.

The cowboy turned, sick at heart as he found himself under the drop of Latigo Richards. And then, before he could drop his own Colts, he heard Skyhigh Poole's shriek:

"Yank triggers, Latigo! Kill the skunk!"

Richards' finger tightened on the trigger. But before a bullet could zip from the bore of his Colt, there sounded a crash of breaking window glass across the room, and another .45 thundered deafeningly.

With his skull drilled by a bullet, Latigo Richards toppled backward to disappear into the open closet. And behind the gun which was spouting smoke through the broken window came Sheriff Joe Mason's brittle voice:

"Me an' my depities got yuh all covered, Syndicators! The first hombre tuh reach fer his shootin' iron dies!"

A glad cry escaped Thunderbolt's lips as he saw the faces of his sheriff friend and deputies outside the Red Star Saloon.

With a choked gasp, Skyhigh

Poole turned on his heel and leaped for the rear door, out of line of the lawmen's fire. As he reached for the knob, his other hand shot to holster and came up with a Colt six-gun that was spitting lead.

Brrrang! Bang-bang-bang! Thunderbolt Burke dropped his lanky frame to a quick squat as bullets raked through the space that his chest had occupied a moment before.

Then, as he saw the Syndicate boss lower his gun for a fatal shot, Burke let his gun hammers fall together.

Brrroom! His chest tunneled by converging slugs, Skyhigh Poole seemed to break in the middle. He collapsed against the door he had tried to open, and crimson gushed from his lips.

Vainly he struggled for strength to lift his gun for a last shot at the squatting cowboy across the room. Then death glazed the Syndicate boss's narrow-set eyes, his head dropped on his chest, and then his corpse seemed to shudder as it slid sidewise to the floor.

Sheriff Mason and his deputies were crawling through the broken window, their guns covering the Syndicate lieutenants. They had heard enough to put hang ropes about the necks of every outlaw present.

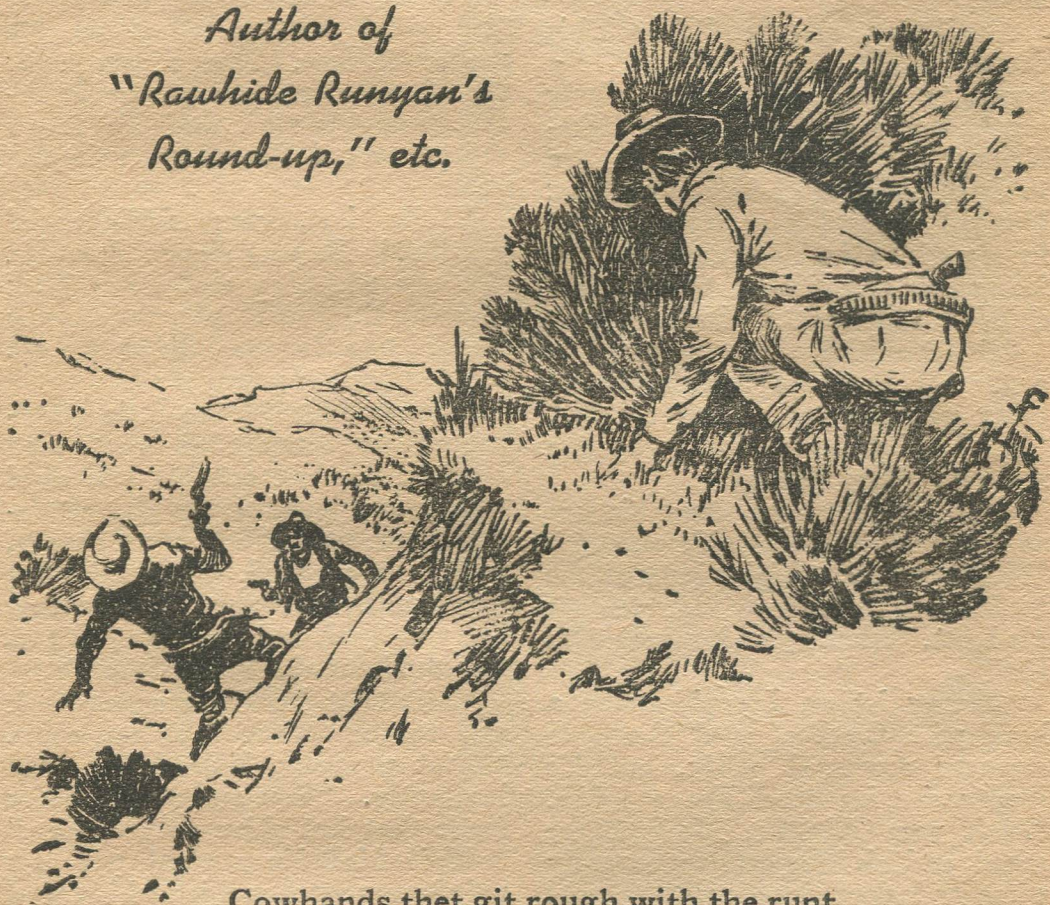
"I reckon the backbone o' this Cattle & Land Syndicate is smashed tuhnight!" cried Sheriff Joe Mason. "An' I reckon we kin lay the credit at yore feet, Thunderbolt Burke!"

It takes bullets an' brains to match a clever outlaw like the Syndicate boss, but the Arizona Thunderbolt's got plenty o' both. What's more, he's goin' to have a rip-roarin' chance to use 'em right soon, 'cause he's about due to corral real trouble. Don't miss the next excitin' story about the young rancher in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly next week.

DEAD HOMBRE'S DINERO

BY CHUCK MARTIN

*Author of
"Rawhide Runyan's
Round-up," etc.*



Cowhands thet git rough with the runt
would do better to fight a bunch o'
wild cats.

Dead Hombre's Dinero

HE wasn't more than button size when he came rocketing up to the Sevens fire on a man's sized horse. Old Chris Morley slapped for his holster when he stretched to his feet, and his old .45 centered down on the runty stranger, with the hammer at full cock under a calloused thumb.

"Sit saddle while you read yore brands and ear-markings," the old cattleman growled hoarsely. "Bust-in' in here thisaway, and it near midnight!"

The little stranger cuffed back his droopy Stetson and dropped his hands to the saddle horn. Curly brown hair waved down over light-blue eyes that darted around the fire to read the faces of lounging riders. His rigging and gear were scarred from work in the high brush, but the face under the black hat was finely chiseled, and smooth with youth.

"Call me Bisley," he answered in a deep bass voice that narrowed every pair of eyes around the fire. "I'm looking for a waddy by the name of Jimmy Morley."

Old Chris Morley lowered his gun and leaned forward with surprise. "Now you talk straight, button!" he barked. "Jimmy is my son, the only kin I got. What's yore business with him?"

"Jimmy let on I could make a hand with the beef cut," the little stranger answered softly, but his deep voice hummed like a fiddle. "Ain't you Old Man Morley?" he asked, and his blue eyes were steady when he locked glances with the old cattleman.

A tall, lean man rose from his bed roll at the far end of the fire and walked slowly toward the chunky sorrel. "Where did you see Jimmy Morley last?" he asked softly, but

his right hand was hooked in his belt just above his six-gun.

The little stranger turned his head slowly and looked the big cowboy up and down. His lips curled slightly at the corners when he shrugged his slender shoulders and turned back to Morley. His voice was a drawling whisper when he spoke to the old cattleman.

"I met Jimmy in Longhorn two days ago," he said slowly. "He told me he was delivering a little herd of feeder stock to some feller up on the Rio Hondo."

Old Chris Morley stepped up to the sorrel with a scowl on his weathered face. Then a gun in his right hand dug savagely into the little stranger's ribs, and his rough voice boomed like thunder in the hills.

"Talk fast, you fiddle-footin' yearlin'!" He was almost shouting. "Jimmy was shot and killed back there by the Rio Hondo, and he was packin' two thousand dollars he got for that herd of young stuff!"

"Jimmy killed?" the little stranger whispered under his breath, and then he reached out his left hand slowly and pushed the old cattleman's gun away. "Give me a chance, boss," he pleaded. "I'll take his place until after you finish cutting out yore beef, and mebbeso you and me could cut sign on his killers!"

Old Chris Morley stepped back and turned to the tall, lean rider. "What you say, Wolf?" he asked hesitantly. "You and Roper Tully made that last drive with Jimmy."

Wolf McBride sneered with his ugly loose mouth and jerked his head at a sharp-faced hombre standing just behind him. "Do you remember seeing this jigger before, Roper?" he asked quietly.

Roper Tully nodded his head and flipped his right hand. A rawhide

rope hissed across the firelight toward the little stranger, and then it happened, before the hondo could reach its mark.

The runty cowboy flicked his left hand down and up with gunfire blasting from his slender fingers. The severed riata dropped into the mesquite fire like a beheaded snake, and a deep voice spoke warningly.

"I don't stand for hazin', hombre. I asked for a job, and I'll do a man's work with any of you jaspers!" He turned to old Chris Morley when his hand waved to make the smoking gun disappear. "Do I get a job?" he asked in his humming whisper.

The old cattleman sucked in a deep breath and nodded vigorously. "Yo're hod-danged tootin'," he answered heartily. "You don't run much to size, but any gent that can win a augerment with Wolf McBride and Roper Tully is big enough. Throw yore cuttin' hoss in with the cavy and bed down by the fire!"

"Thanks, boss," and the little stranger turned his sorrel and headed for the rope corral where the night hawk was holding the riding stock.

II.

Wolf McBride was sitting on his heels when Bisley walked back to the fire with a single blanket over his right arm. The little stranger was not more than five-feet-four in his cowboy boots, but his saddle-toughened body was covered with smoothly working muscles from the ankles up. He did not look to be more than twenty, and McBride sneered when he raised up to tower a full foot above the new hand.

"Me and Roper saw you back there at the Rio Hondo," the big man began harshly. "Jimmy Morley was a pard of mine, and I've taken up for him!"

The little cowboy stopped abruptly and rocked back on his rounded heels. "Meaning what?" he asked in his deep voice.

"Meaning that Roper has you under his sights, you runty gun-slick," McBride answered promptly. "And he didn't take kindly to what you done a while back. Now you shuck that hardware and drop it down behind yore boots!"

The little stranger jerked his head around and set his lips when he saw the gun in Roper Tully's hand. Then he swiveled his eyes to study the face of Chris Morley, but the old cattleman was staring into the fire and refused to meet his glance.

"The name is Fargo," the stranger announced suddenly. "Bisley Fargo!"

He saw old Chris straighten suddenly and then relax again. Wolf McBride shrugged a shoulder and palmed his heavy six-gun.

"I don't care if yore name is Bat Masterson," he sneered. "Now you shed that little old .41 Colt like I said. Roper wants to talk some to you!"

Bisley Fargo glanced at the other three cowboys around the fire. They avoided his probing eyes, and the little stranger clicked his teeth and slowly lowered his hands. They were slender, long-fingered hands that were too small to fit a .45, and even the .41 had been thinned down in the grip.

Wolf McBride grinned when the shell-studded belt thudded to the ground behind the scuffed pewee boots of his victim. Roper Tully laid his six-gun on his blanket and came to his feet stretching like a cat. He was not a big man, but he towered above Bisley Fargo when he stepped forward to face the little stranger.

"You asked for it," he sneered,

and his right hand flicked out like the lash end of a bull whip.

Bisley Fargo turned his head to let the blow whistle by. Then he was on top of his taller foe, and his fists blurred in the firelight when he rattled a vicious tattoo on the thin, sneering face. It all happened while a man could take a deep breath, and Roper Tully's face was cut to ribbons when Bisley Fargo stepped back and measured him for the kill.

A left jab to the middle brought Roper Tully's head down just as the runty cowboy stepped in behind a straight driving right with a hundred and forty pounds of muscle behind the blow. The Sevens cowboy shuddered like a wind-blown pine, and then he dropped forward just as a gun blasted off to the side.

Bisley Fargo was jerked halfway around before he fell into the fire. A big hand caught him by a boot and dragged him clear, and he shook himself like a dog coming out of water when a bellowing voice boomed through his foggy senses.

"Drop that cutter, Wolf! Or I'll blow a hole through yore carcass big enough to throw a dog sidewise!"

Bisley Fargo sat up weaving from side to side. Old Morley had the drop on big Wolf McBride with the hammer slipping under his sweating thumb. McBride lowered his smoking gun with a muttered curse when a Sevens cowboy stepped up behind him to back up his boss.

"Hold him so, Tommy," old Morley growled. "He pulled a sneak on that runty yearlin', and by rights we ought to drag him on the end of a rope!"

Bisley Fargo pressed a hand to his right side when he felt something wet and sticky trickle down his skin. McBride's bullet had scored a deep gash across his ribs, and he levered unsteadily to his feet and stripped

off his wool shirt. Then he shrugged and turned to face the killer.

"You want it now?" he asked softly, but his deep voice rang like a bell.

"I'll take some," Wolf McBride grunted harshly, and took a step forward.

Bisley Fargo stepped back and went down sidewise. His fingers closed over his gun belt, but a snarling command ripped across the fire before he could shed leather from his gun.

"Claw sky, or I'm drillin' the old man!"

Bisley Fargo slowly turned his head. He caught his breath sharply when he saw Roper Tully on his feet, with a raised six-gun in his right hand. Old Chris Morley was covering Wolf McBride, and the rest of the crew were caught flat-footed.

"Take a chance, son," the old cattleman whispered hoarsely. "I've done lived mine!"

Bisley Fargo drew his gun and slowly shook his head. "She's a draw," he said quietly. "I could get both them killers, but they'd get you between my shots!"

"Me and Wolf are riding," Roper Tully grunted. "We got our brones geared to stand night watch, and we'll either fight or drift. Speak up, old man!"

"Hit leather and light a shuck," old Chris answered quietly, but his voice was hoarse with anger. "If I ever cut yore sign again, I'm coming out smokin'!"

Wolf McBride turned his back squarely and walked over to the wagon where two saddled horses were tied to the rear wheels. He pulled the hair ropes and mounted a line-back dun with one smooth movement. Then he waited until Roper Tully backed away from the fire, still holding the drop on old Morley.

Bisley Fargo cuddled the whittled grip of his Colt .45 and bit down hard on his lower lip. His fingers ached to feel the buck of smooth wood, but he knew that Roper Tully could not miss at twenty feet. He knew that he could tag both of the killers, but the price would be the life of old Chris Morley.

"You ain't lived yores out yet, old Chris," he heard himself mutter fiercely. "High-tail, you two, before I come apart!"

Roper Tully caught the stirrup with his left boot and threw his right leg behind the cantle without losing the drop on the old cattleman. Then he backed his horse away from the fire, and the Sevens cowboys threw themselves away from the light when the two horses leaped into a lope going away.

Old Chris Morley sat motionless with the gun lowered in his hand. He turned when a hand touched his shoulder, and Bisley Fargo holstered his light six-gun and jerked his head toward the shadows of the chuck wagon.

"Mebbe we better talk some," the little cowboy suggested, and walked away to hunker down near the end-gate table.

III.

Old Chris Morley straightened slowly and directed riders to relieve the night-herders. Bisley Fargo was rolling a brownie when the Sevens owner came to the wagon and reached for the makings. When the cigarettes were going, he cocked his grizzled head to one side and spoke softly.

"Talk straight, cowboy," he began. "I sold four hundred head of weaner calves to old Bill Fargo, yore dad. My boy Jim was rodding that drive, and you said you knew Jimmy!"

WW—8B

"Yeah," Bisley answered gruffly. "I still know him!"

The old cattleman leaned forward and gripped the little cowboy by the shoulder. "Is Jimmy alive?" he whispered, with a sobbing catch in his voice.

"Now you catch a grip on yore-self, old-timer," the cowboy answered slowly. "I found Jimmy bad hurt, but I plugged the wounds and packed him to the Circle Dot. He wants to see you and I geared my tops and came a-foggin'!"

The old cattleman came unhinged and lunged for a horse tethered at the back wheel of the wagon. "All this palaver about a job," he growled huskily. "Gear that knot-head of yores and let's make tracks!"

"I didn't strip my saddle," the cowboy answered as softly as his deep voice would register. "I was going to get yore ear, but them two jumped me and made me shuck my gun belt."

He ran to the rope corral and rode back on his chunky cutting horse while Morley was giving orders to the crew. The old cattleman wheeled his horse to rub stirrups until they were well away from the fire. His voice was pleading when he eased down to a slow dog-trot and turned to his companion.

"Will Jimmy make it?" he whispered.

"You know blamed well you can't kill a cowhand," Bisley barked at him. "Jimmy stopped two .45 slugs high in the chest, but he was more worried about the money belt he lost than about them dinky little old wounds!"

The old cattleman breathed a sigh of relief and then leaned forward again. "But Jimmy didn't have a money belt," he contradicted. "I gave him a canvas sack to pack the gold!"

"I gave him the belt," the little cowboy answered gruffly. "All I had was foldin' money old Bill left me when he died last month!"

"Old Bill Fargo dead?" Morley whispered. "Naw, son; he couldn't be. Why, he writ me to cut him out them four hundred head of weaners not more than a month ago!"

Bisley Fargo growled low in his throat like a hound following a hot scent. "He was killed down near Longhorn," he explained finally. "We sold our beef, and the old man went in to bank the gold. I found the sign of two men, but they got better than five thousand from the old man!"

Old Chris Morley reached out a gnarled hand and gripped the little cowboy hard. "You was just a little button when I saw you last, but I knew old Bill most of my life," he muttered softly. "How much farther to the Circle Dot?"

"We ought to get there by day-break," Bisley answered. "I only got one hand now, and he's stove up with the rheumatiz. Misery Watkins is looking after Jimmy."

Gray dawn was just breaking over the Brimstone Mountains when the two riders roared into the Circle Dot yard and anchored their horses with trailing reins in front of the sod-and-log cabin. Old Chris Morley jumped the steps and started across the porch, when a bent old cowhand came out of the cabin and pulled the door shut behind him.

"Jimmy cashed an hour ago," he said to Bisley Fargo. "But he roused around enough to talk before he rattled his hocks down the one-way trail!"

Bisley Fargo swallowed hard and jumped to the old cattleman's side. "Bear up, old feller," he whispered huskily. "I know how it feels to lose

yore only kin, but you got to keep yore head up!"

Old Chris knuckled a hot tear from his faded eyes and squared his drooping shoulders. He walked up to Misery Watkins, stared at the old cowhand, and nodded his head.

"What'd Jimmy say?" he murmured.

"He mentioned something about a Lobo," old Misery answered slowly. "Sounded like this Lobo was a top-hand roper."

Bisley Fargo crossed the porch with one flying leap. "I get it now!" he almost shouted. "Lobo means wolf, and the other killer must have been Roper Tully. They were on that drive with Jimmy when he delivered that herd of young stuff!"

"Tall jigger with slopin' shoulders and green eyes?" old Misery Watkins asked sharply. "Sounds like Lobo McBride to me, and the hombre that did for old Bill Fargo wore a wolf's head studded in the heel of his right boot!"

Bisley Fargo was staring at the old cowhand with lips parted and tears in his blue eyes. His left hand was rubbing the grip of his light gun, and his voice was a deep, husky whisper when he accused Misery of carelessness.

"You never told me about finding that sign, Misery. What do you know about this Lobo McBride?"

"He's wanted for murder, Bisley," the old puncher answered slowly. "On top of that, he's the fastest gun-swift in Texas. I figgered to take after him myself when I got the kinks worked out of my joints!"

"I'll ride gun sign on that killin' sidewinder!" old Chris Morley growled savagely. "Old Bill was a pard of mine, and Jimmy was my only chip!"

Bisley Fargo whirled to face the old cattleman. "He's mine," he

growled deep in his chest, and his left hand whipped down to his cut-away holster. "Now you get in there with Jimmy and let a man get about his work!"

Old Chris stared at the smooth face that had turned as hard as lava rocks in the gray light of early dawn. He hesitated until old Misery sidled up to him and spoke softly.

"He's right, Bisley is. I clouded the sign when old Bill was killed to keep Bisley from getting bush-whacked. He's more than double fast with that Bisley .41, and you and me has work to do!"

The old cattleman drooped his shoulders under the weight of his loss. He nodded wearily at Bisley and walked toward the door.

The little cowboy swallowed noisily, and when the two old-timers had closed the door, he drew his six-gun and checked the loads.


"I mind the time dad bought this Bisley and shaped her down to fit my hand," he muttered to himself. "I wasn't big enough to grip a man's-sized Colt, and old Bill taught me how to thumb hammer when the barrel cleared leather!"

He whirled on his heel when a muffled sob came from within the front room. Old Chris Morley was talking softly to Jimmy, and Bisley raced to the barn and stripped his riding gear.

He made a quick change to a leggy racer in a box stall. The sun was just peeping over the Brimstones when he roared out of the Circle Dot yard at a dead run.

IV.

Bisley Fargo could not have explained why he rode straight for the little brushy draw where he had found young Jimmy Morley. His blue eyes narrowed when he remembered that he had found old Bill Fargo in almost the same spot, with



THRILL-PACKED FUN Ahead!

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The Enthusiast MAGAZINE

a bullet between his shoulders, and the canvas sack of gold missing.

The little cowboy remembered the first weeks of grief when he could barely see out of his swollen eyes. His father had understood him, had never made fun of his size. Jimmy Morley had been the same way, and now they were both gone. And then Bisley remembered what old Misery Watkins had kept from him.

One of the men who had killed old Bill Fargo had worn the head of a wolf studded in his right boot. Bisley had found the same marks trampled deep in the dirt where young Jimmy Morley had been bush-whacked. Now he knew why Wolf McBride had picked a fight with him at the Sevens chuck wagon, and he set his jaw and swung down from his saddle.

A brown splotch marked the spot where Jimmy Morley had fallen in the trampled short grass. The little cowboy leaned over and studied the ground carefully. His breath hissed between his parted lips when he found what he wanted. The print of a big heel, with the head of a wolf studded deep.

"Lobo!" he whispered hoarsely. "Killer wolf!"

His left hand went to his holster and eased the long-barreled six-gun while his eyes searched the tops of the brush over to the west where Chris Morley had made his 777 round-up. The Sevens, they called Morley's spread, and Jimmy had helped cut out the weaners that were to give the Circle Dot a new start.

Bisley jerked erect when he saw a movement far up on the ridge. He had spent his entire life on the range, and he knew that riders were forcing a way through the brush. They might just be cowboys riding to Longhorn to spend round-up wages.

Then the ears of a horse pricked up above the swaying buckthorn.

Bisley Fargo felt the blood rush to his temples when he recognized the dun-colored ears. Lobo McBride was riding a dun, and his pard was straddling a hip-shot bay.

Size didn't make any difference if a man was big enough to pack a six-gun, and the little cowboy led his racer back in the brush and waited to make sure.

His eyes widened when he saw the reddish brown ears of the second horse. Anger slows up a man's muscles, and Bisley Fargo forced himself to breathe deeply while he waited for the riders to come out of the brush. And while he waited, Bisley thought of young Jimmy and old Chris Morley back on the Circle Dot.

"We might as well stop down there in the draw and split the dinero," a whining voice suggested.

The little cowboy felt another surge of anger flood through his veins when Roper Tully rode out of the brush and into the little draw. Lobo McBride was crowding his pard close, and the two checked their horses and swung down as one man.

Roper Tully flipped his reins to make a ground-hitch, and then he high-heeled to a flat rock and turned it over. He leaned over and lifted something heavy, and the watching cowboy stepped back into the brush when Tully tossed a heavy canvas sack to the ground.

"Five thousand in gold there," the killer gloated. "Along with that two thousand we got from Jimmy Morley, that gives us thirty-five hundred apiece. Enough to get to the Argentine with, and have a stake!"

"A gent could live twice as long if he had all that dinero," McBride answered dryly. "I've always been

a lone wolf until I met you a couple months ago, Roper!"

Roper Tully whirled swiftly to face his tall pard. "I get it, Lobo," he whispered hoarsely. "Yo're asking for a shoot-out!"

His hand streaked down for the gun on his right leg, but Lobo McBride already had the jump on him.

Flame blasted from the tall killer's hand before Tully had cleared leather. Two more shots roared out when Roper Tully staggered, and then Lobo McBride was crouching over his smoking weapon, sneering down at the twitching figure on the ground.

He jacked the spent shells from his gun and plucked fresh cartridges from the loops of his belt. He was nodding slowly while he worked the loading gate, and then he holstered his gun and leaned over to heft the sack of gold. A deep bass voice jerked him erect just as his hand touched the canvas bag.

"Hands high, killer!"

Lobo McBride raised his hands swiftly before he turned. He knew that deep voice, and his green eyes were slits of hatred when he saw Bisley Fargo facing him up the draw. He grunted softly when he saw that the cowboy had both hands hooked in his belt, and a crafty look changed the expression on his lean face.

Lobo McBride slowly lowered his hands and hooked his thumbs in his shell-studded belt. Bisley Fargo was watching every move, but he made no sound after that first command.

It was the outlaw who finally broke the silence.

"You saw what happened to Roper?" he asked.

"I saw," the little cowboy answered quietly. "You killed him in the same spot where you killed young Jimmy and old Bill!"

The outlaw nodded slowly. "If

that spot was good enough for them, it ought to suit you," he sneered. "What we waiting for?"

"I just wanted to be sure," Bisley answered softly. "A gent lives longer if you shoot him in the middle, but it might spoil that folding money. You got it on you?"

Lobo McBride jerked his left hand and felt above his belt. "Got it strapped on," he boasted.

"That paper money is all in fifties," Bisley answered clearly. "And every one of them bills is branded in green ink with the Circle Dot. Start reachin', brother!"

Lobo McBride was already halfway to his gun before the barking words had left the lips of Bisley Fargo. The little cowboy flipped his left hand down and to the side, like the whipping stroke of the deadly whip scorpion of the wastelands.

The long-barreled Bisley .41 cleared leather with orange flame tipping the muzzle, and Lobo McBride was a man with three eyes before he could thumb the hammer back on the end of his draw.

The outlaw coughed and swayed forward, and a thin trickle of crimson made a streak between his eyes before he crashed face-down without moving his rusty boots.

Bisley Fargo stared for a moment before he holstered his light six-gun. He felt suddenly older than his twenty years when the stillness beat down upon him in the brush-bordered draw where four men had died. Then he stiffened when a husky voice boomed behind him.

"Nice shootin', Bisley."

The little cowboy turned with widened eyes when six men stepped out from the brush with Winchesters in their grimy hands. He recognized Sheriff Sam Baker as the speaker, and the old officer stepped up and gravely offered his hand.

"I got a Boot Hill posse here with me, Bisley," the sheriff explained softly. "Our orders were to shoot to kill, and we had that ringy Lobo under our sights. You got him square between the eyes!"

Bisley nodded and turned away. "He's packin' a belt on him, sheriff," he murmured as softly as his deep voice would whisper. "It's foldin' money, and it belongs to old Chris Morley of the Sevens outfit!"

A pair of big arms wrapped around him from behind, and the little cowboy lowered his head when old Chris Morley drew him back in the brush, gripping him tight. He knew what the old cattleman was feeling. They had both lost their only kin.

"I'm asking it special, Bisley son," old Chris pleaded brokenly. "I'll try to take old Bill's place, if you will take Jimmy's. We both need a

pard, and we'll throw the two spreads together!"

Bisley Fargo swallowed hard and leaned back against the old man. "I'll pard you like you said, Chris. I reckon we need each other!"

The old cattleman turned when the sheriff handed him a leather money belt. He took the belt and turned a flap; and the sheriff walked back to his posse. Old Chris Morley drew out a bill and pointed to a little dot in a circle.

"Branded Circle Dot," he muttered huskily. "It was Jimmy's and he would want you to have it. I don't know why he wanted it in paper."

Bisley Fargo took the belt and strapped it around his lean waist. "Me and Jimmy was both that-away," he murmured. "We both liked foldin' money!"

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

THE OKLAHOMA KID ROBS A GRAVE

Novelette

By LEE BOND

Deputy Ed Sparks would expect the Kid to do most anythin', but the little owl-hooter ain't likely to stoop to grave robbin' without a mighty good reason.

TAMIN' THUNDER BEND

Novelette

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

Flash Moran ain't wanted in the outlaw town, but his six-guns stand an even chance o' keepin' 'im thar.

THE BADGE OF THUNDERBOLT

Novelette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

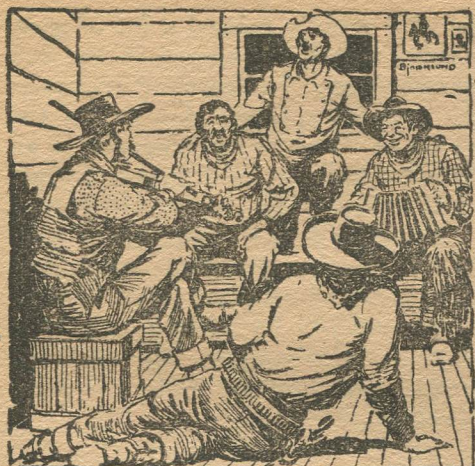
The sheriff has bucked the cow town's owl-hoot crowd too long an' he gits salivated fer his efforts, but that ain't stoppin' Thunderbolt from takin' over.

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Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, I hope yo're givin' thanks for this hyar Corral among other things this month. It's a right handy place to git together an' hear America sing. I'm plumb thankful fer it, fer many reasons.

Sometimes it's good to stop an' take stock of all the things we got to be thankful fer. Thet's the way the Pilgrim Fathers figgered it long afore the West was even heered of. An' thet's why folks in this great country of ours, from East to West, have set aside this one day a year jest fer such stock takin'.

Now hyar's how I look at it:
If it hadn't been fer this hyar Cor-



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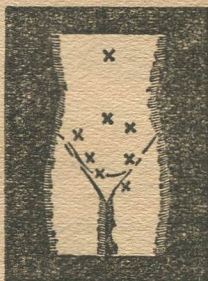
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ral, I'd prob'ly missed a lot of good things thet I've enjoyed in the last seven years. In searchin' fer songs fer you folks, songs thet tell of the great ol' West, I've come across all kinds o' ballads, an' it means a great deal to know 'em, let me tell you!

Durin' all the times we've corralled together I reckon we've had a number of songs entitled "Soliloquy," written by different authors. Well, hyar's another. This one's by one of yore favorite writers: Curley Fletcher.

THE COWBOY'S SOLILOQUY*

I've ridden afar on the trails of life;
And whether I've been right er wrong
In saddlin' the pleasure, ropin' the strife—
I've follered the trail right along.

If I ain't got very much knowledge
Of literchure, figgers, an' such,
It's because I growed up at cow college
Where book l'arnin' don't count for much.

My youth now is some dim an' distant,
As I'm jest sorta on the downgrade,
An' old Father Time gets insistent
Yet—I don't 'pear to feel much afraid.

Why, if I had my life to live over,
An' was put here to ride this same range—
'Course I can't say it's allus been clover—
They ain't very much I would change.

I've played out my hand as I found it;
Busted flushes, an' straights. All the same,
I ain't goin' to lay down an' hound it,
Jest 'cause Time had a seat in the game.

When Gabriel blows his horn for me,
An' I'm tallied along with the dead,
I don't want no cryin' done o'er me
Ner no branded rock put by my head.

Jes' dig me a hole in the hillside,
An' throw in some gravel an' stones;
Cause it might be best on the last ride
If the varmints ain't gnawin' my bones.

I've collected what I had comin',
In the years I've been here on earth.
If I don't get to hear a harp strummin'
I guess I've got all I was worth.

I've paid fer my drinks as I got 'em,
An' I've toted my end of the load,
Ner I never dealt off of the bottom,
As I scattered my chips 'long the road.

* Taken by kind permission of the author, Curley Fletcher, from his book entitled "Songs of the Sage," published by the Frontier Publishing Company, Los Angeles.

I've never been much of a hedger,
 So I'll jes' play the board as it lays;
 An' I'll take my chance on Their ledger,
 When They round me up with the strays.

An' if the devil has got me branded,
 When I ride fer the Golden Stair,
 An' old St. Pete leaves me stranded;
 They'll be wrong, fer I've allus been square.

A cowboy had to face all kinds of life, an' thar was one more thing he had to do: He had tuh l'arn tuh face death. His ideal was to "pay fer his drinks" as he got 'em, an' face whatever came right square.

Hyar's S. Omar Barker's way of puttin' it:

THE LAST BRONC*

Buckskin, black, mohina, gray,
 R'arin' roan or buckin' bay—
 Ever' bronc cut to yore string,
 Mount him, cowboy, with a swing!
 Some you'll straddle wide and high,
 Some will buck you to the sky.
 Snortin' outlaws, brones or just
 Unbroke colts to tame and bust,
 In your string by luck or fate,
 Ride 'em, boy, don't hesitate!
 Life's a ridin' contest, boy,
 Some draws grief and some draws joy.
 One old bronc we all must straddle,
 Great big black without no saddle.
 He's the contest's final draw,
 Shadow-eyed and dark with awe.
 Big Jedge watchin'—swing up, son!
 Show Him you ain't scared of none!
 White horse, sorrel, pinto, too—
 Ride 'em all, and when you're through,
 Throw yore leg across the back
 Of old Universal Black.

Ride him like you've always rode—
 Never fear, you won't git throwed!

Set him clean and scratch him fast:
 Bronco Death, the contest's last!

By the great horn spoon, we're gettin' kind o' gloomy hyar! An' thet's no way to be on a holiday like this. Let's have a rollickin' song, like:

WHOOPEE TI-YI-YO, GIT ALONG, LITTLE DOGIES*

As I walked out one morning for pleasure,
 I spied a cowpuncher a-riding alone;
 His hat was throwed back and his spurs
 was a-jingling,
 As he approached me a-singin' this song:

Whoopee ti-yi-yo, git along little dogies,
 It's your misfortune and none of my own,

Whoopee ti-yi-yo, git along little dogies,
 For you know Wyoming will be your new home.

Early in the spring we round up the dogies,
 Mark and brand and bob off their tails;
 Round up our horses, load up the chuck wagon,

Then throw the dogies upon the trail.

It's whooping and yelling and driving the dogies;

Oh, how I wish you would go on;

It's whooping and punching, and go on little dogies,

For you know Wyoming will be your new home.

Some boys go up the trail for pleasure,
 But that's where you get it most awfully wrong;

For you haven't any idea the trouble they give us

While we go driving them all along.

When the night comes on and we hold them on the bed ground,

Those little dogies that roll on so slow;

Roll up the herd and cut out the strays,
 And roll the little dogies that never rolled before.

Your mother she was raised way down in Texas,

Where the jimson weed and sand burs grow;

Now we'll fill you upon prickly pear and cholla,

Till you are ready for the trail to Idaho.

Oh, you'll be soup for Uncle Sam's Injuns;
 "It's beef, heap beef," I hear them cry.
 Git along, git along, git along, little dogies,
 You're going to be beef steers by and by.

So long, folks, an' good luck! An' all best wishes fer a right happy Thanksgivin'.

* Taken by kind permission of the author, S. Omar Barker, from his book of poems entitled "Buckaroo Ballads," published by the Santa Fe New Mexican Publishing Corporation.

* Reprinted by courteous permission of Mr. John Lomax from his book entitled "Cowboy Songs."



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Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WE shore faces a hefty problem this week! Thar's a big turkey an' all the fixin's steamin' up the cook-shack winders. An' at the same time thar's a stack o' mail from the amachooors waitin' fer us ter pass judgment on. So we asks:

"What'll we do fust, waddies—tackle the turkey or the business o' the evenin'?"

"What yuh mean, business o' the evenin'?" asks Rusty Bolivar. "Ain't the turkey the main business everywhere at Thanksgivin' time?"

"Yeah," the Silver Kid sides him. "The amachooahs sho'ly nevah'd

hold it agin' us fer eatin' fust an' jedgin' latah."

"Mebbe they wouldn't," speaks up the Devil's Deputy, "but did yuh ever try tuh think when yore stummick's loaded?"

"Overloaded, yuh mean," Dusty Radburn busts in. "With thet turkey, cranb'ry sass an' mince pie linin' our gizzards, we'll be prime fer holin' up like b'ars fer the winter."

"Thet's jest it," Hungry Hawkins chimes in. "I been lickin' my chops till they're chapped, but I shore reckons we owes it ter our amigos,

the amachooors, ter keep our wolves hobbled a spell longer."

"Yo're right, Hungry," says the Devil's Deputy. "The letters we-all gits from the amachooors proves thet they're our amigos shore-nough. Let's send 'em a few checks tuh give thanks fer. Then we'll tear intuh the turkey."

"Thet's a plumb fair way ter settle it, waddies," we tells 'em. "Now listen ter this story. It's the fust un we ropes out o' the mail bags."

OUTLAW'S LAST WARNING

By Ted Hamilton—Age 21
Jonesboro, Tennessee

The little cow town of Sunset was as silent as one of the many ghost towns that dotted the border. Not a sign of life stirred in the dusty street that zigzagged through the center of town. Why? Because Sheriff Sandy Hook had received another warning from the "Phantom."

Many people had heard the weird tales that drifted down the cattle trails telling of the daring episodes pulled off by the lone rider. It seemed like the Phantom rider would swoop down from the skies and steal and murder to his black heart's content, then ride off without a person seeing him.

The outlaw had visited every cow town on the border and robbed and killed without apprehension and now he was on his way to Sunset. This little town was the last one on U. S. soil—the last one to be visited by the Phantom.

To-day the entire population was staying indoors because Sheriff Hook had posted the warning, which read:

SHERIFF SANDY HOOK:

I'M COMIN' AFTER YOU AND ALL THE CASH THAT'S IN SUNSET. IF YOU'RE IN TOWN WHEN I GET THERE YOU BETTER COME AT ME SLINGIN' LEAD.

THE PHANTOM.

The old sheriff had only chewed harder on his wad of tobacco when he posted that notice on the door of his office. He was not a man to scare at a jack rabbit, but to-day he was making preparations to receive his guest. The sheriff was busy oiling his Colt .45s when a rattle of hoofs drew up before his office building. Old Sandy was just slipping a cylinder into one of his guns when the door burst open and a hooded man entered with drawn .45s.

"Well, I reckon you can't savvy plain English, sheriff," drawled a soft voice beneath the flowing white robe.

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"Shore, I savvy the lingo, Phantom. But I—"

"Well, whyr't you pull yore freight out o' town like I told you in that note?"

"Well, I figured you was only foolin'," returned Sandy, wishing he had not taken time to oil his guns. How was he to get this vicious killer with both guns torn down? As the Phantom moved nearer his desk an idea was forming in the sheriff's mind.

In the desk drawer was an old .38 Special, but the sheriff wasn't sure that it was loaded. Now the Phantom was speaking.

"I shore hate to send Arapahoe County's sheriff to boothill, but he didn't take my warnin' and I reckon I has to," snarled the outlaw.

"Since you hate to shoot me, whyr't you wait?" queried Sandy, as he slipped his right hand into the drawer. Before the Phantom could answer Hook's last question, the old sheriff had the .38 out and was pulling back the trigger.

"Oh, no, you don't!" cried the outlaw, sweeping down to the big guns at his hips.

Crash! Bramm-mm! The Phantom's guns roared, driving a slug into the old sheriff's shoulder.

Click—clickety-click! Sheriff Hook's hammer fell on empty chambers!

Was this Phantom going to succeed in cleaning out another border town? Twice more his big Colts roared, making splinters fly from the officer's desk.

Sheriff Sandy flopped behind his desk and once more triggered the .38.

Boo-mmm! The gun fired!

All at once, the room became silent. Raising above his desk, the old Arizonan lawman saw sprawled before him the ghostly form of the Phantom! The old .38 Special had had one shell in it and it had downed one of the most famous outlaws since the time of Pancho Selos!

Sunset's sheriff staggered over to the robed outlaw and pulled back the hood. Underneath it was the most vicious face ever seen on a criminal.

"Well, I reckon this is that outlaw's last warning," sighed Sandy.

"Sandy was right," agrees the Silver Kid. "Thet shore was an outlaw's last warnin'."

"An' we're warnin' ternight's amachooors thet their stories better be as good as this un, 'cause we're in thet calm an' peaceful mood whar sayin' 'yes,'" murmurs Hungry Hawkins. We sees him wink at Dusty Radburn.

"Thar's no keepin' thet story out though," puts in the Devil's Deputy. "How 'bout it?"

We all vote thet Señor Hamilton's story gits the 3W brand. With it safe in the corral, we reads:

SHADOW OF THE NOOSE

By Steadman Hughes—Age 17

Hampton, South Carolina

A chill, steady downpour of rain was beating down. Rod Steele shivered as he glanced up at a leaden sky and urged his horse onward. The piercing gray eyes of the cowboy were constantly scanning the surrounding country in search of shelter. He was chilled to the bone and he and his horse needed food.

Suddenly, he jerked erect in his saddle, as the unmistakable sound of exploding guns reached his ears. The short hairs on the back of his neck bristled and his hands hovered near holstered six-guns. Rod Steele had reason to become alarmed. He was a "wanted" man, and the sound of guns always denoted the presence of someone who might be eager to turn him in for a reward.

As he rounded a clump of greasewood, he came in sight of a cabin—but at that moment a lariat shot out and settled over his shoulders, jerked him from his saddle. Dimly, as a gun butt knocked him into unconsciousness, he saw the squat form of a man bent over him.

Consciousness came back swiftly, and Rod felt himself being tied in a corner of the cabin. Through slitted eyes he recognized his captor as the man who had lassoed him from his horse. He pretended lifelessness but, expanding his body, he took up all the slack he could. Presently the man left the room and, opening his eyes, Rod saw that he was not alone in the cabin. Trussed up directly across from him was Ben Larkin, sheriff of Palomas County!

Rod Steele relaxed and felt the ropes give slack. Minutes later, sweat beading his forehead, he was free. Bending over Larkin, he freed him, and saw that he was coming to.

But at that moment Rod had a serious setback. Their captor was entering the room!

Seeing that his prisoners were free, the man let out a cry of anger. He clawed for his gun. Rod launched his one-hundred-and-eighty-pound body straight for the crook. The crook thumbed his gun and Rod felt a bullet sear his right cheek. His moving body had made a difficult target. Now he and the crook had tangled and, hitting the floor, fought for the possession of the gun.

Rod's head still ached dizzily, and the sudden shock of the bullet searing across his cheek had left him momentarily weak. He felt the hand gripping his enemy's wrist being pushed and saw the gun in the crook's hand come in line with his heart. With a superhuman effort, born of desperation, he diverted the gun, which exploded in the outlaw's body.

Rod turned to face Sheriff Ben Larkin. A tired smile lit up his face. "I guess you're goin' to arrest me, sheriff?"

"What for, Rod Steele?"

"For the robbery of the Elkhorn bank last fall. But I swear I didn't do it."

"I know you didn't," said the sheriff. "That dead man on the floor, Bert Crawford, did. Later I discovered that he had dressed in clothes and rode a horse similar to yours and robbed the bank. The people of Elkhorn owe you an apology. You're a free man, Rod Steele—a free man!"

"Hooray fer Red Steele!" whoops Rusty Bolivar.

"An' hooray fer the sheriff!" yells the Silver Kid.

"An' hooray fer Señor Hughes!" busts out Dusty Radburn. "I calls thet a plumb good story. What yuh think 'bout it, Hungry?"

"I ain't in no jedgin' mood," Hungry Hawkins tells him. "All I kin keep my mind on is thet turkey, all brown an' sizzlin', an'—"

"Shut up, yuh crazy pelican!" hollers Rusty Bolivar. "I knowed hambres what has been hung fer less. Hurry up an' vote, yuh rannies! I'm gittin' an empty feelin' in my stummick myself."

We herds the story inter the corral pronto, an' don't lose no time startin' ter read:

BAD MAN'S BLUFF

By John Hughes—Age 24

Daytona Beach, Florida

Every man in the Half Dollar Saloon turned to face the stranger standing in the doorway. A couple of hands edged downward, then stopped, for few dared match draws with the Tarantula Kid. And tonight, he wore a red sombrero—the sign that he was on the trail of a killer!

The Kid, rawboned and angular, stood with his back to the batwings, his hands placed listlessly above two cut-off holsters that hung low on his hips. His blue eyes smiled as he watched the monte players lay their cards face down and slide to the wall. Even Pete, the bartender, edged to a more healthful position.

"I reckon yuh knowed some skunk shot Jeb Beacon," the Kid drawled easily. "Shot him in the back!"

Slowly he met the glance of every pair of eyes in the room, but his face concealed the disappointment he felt. He had figured that announcement would make the killer betray his hand. But not an eye flickered, or a cowardly hand sneaked to get the drop. Yet the Kid was certain the killer was in this room!

"Who deed it, amigo?"

The Kid turned toward the speaker, a tall swarthy-skinned half-breed, he knew to be Enrique Mendez, a killer so slick that no lawman had ever been able to pin anything on him.

When the Kid didn't answer, Mendez's thin lips curled into a jeering smile. "No sabe, Señor Keed?"

The Kid's eyes narrowed. Mendez had guessed he didn't know the killer, had called his bluff. For a second his face clouded; then a horse neighed, and his face brightened.

"I knowed his horse lost a left hind shoe," he growled. "So I'm agoin' to wait in the road, and the jasper mountin' thet horse, better mount it slingin' lead."

Standing in the dusty street, the Kid sent a quick glance at the horses tethered along the hitching rail. There were nine. One was the killer's!

The batwings swung. The monte dealer slid out, his hands raised above his head. He slipped the reins of a dun and rode away. One by one the others came, mounted and galloped off, until only a big sorrel, a pinto and a roan remained.

"You no find heem yet, Keed?" Mendez sneered, stepping out on the porch. "Maybe heem gone. Too bad." Confidently he strutted to the hitch rail and slipped the reins of the big sorrel.

"Draw yore poles, yuh dirty skunk!" the Kid roared.

Mendez whirled. His hand streaked down and up.

Wham!

The Kid slipped the smoking gun back and smiled as he watched Pete dash through the batwings and examine the horses' hoofs.

"Look!" Pete gasped, the color draining from his face. "All these horses got four shoes. You've shot the wrong man!"

"Yeah!" the Tarantula Kid laughed. He walked over to where Mendez lay face down in the dust, and placed the red sombrero on Mendez's head.

"Then why'd he take thet sorrel?"

The Kid grinned. "Thet's my horse!"

"Waal, now," says the Devil's Deputy, "thet Tarantula Kid hombre shore done some fast thinkin', seems like."

"Thet's more'n I kin do tuh-night," opines Dusty Radburn. "Seems like I had a coyote trapped in my stummick an' he was gnawin' his way out."

"I see thet story was wrote by anothah hombre named Hughes," says the Silver Kid. "They lives a good ways apaht, though. Wondah if—"

"Vote!" howls Rusty Bolivar. "I can't stand it much longer. I let out so many notches in my belt, it's only my sharp hips thet's keepin' my pants up."

We prods the story inter the corral pronto, slams the gate an' reads:

GLORY GUNS

By Frank Hickman—Age 20

Mulga, Alabama

Marshal Jack Fenton looked at the two men bitterly. "So you want me to resign, hand in my badge?" he queried.

Big, flabby-looking Mayor Parker declared a bit pompously, "Well, yes. The citizens of Red Gulch feel that you are ruining the name of our town."

"It's evident that you are entirely too ready to use your guns," lanky Horace Burton, the banker, said waspishly. "You're a glory-seeker, Fenton, and it's hurting all of us!"

"You're a liar!" the young marshal spat wrathfully. "I've done nothin' but 'tend to my duty, and it's blasted funny that none of you saw anything wrong about me usin' guns to clean up the mess of killers and outlaws that swarmed here when I took the job! This is the thanks I get for makin' it a decent place. All right, take this and get out!"

With steady fingers, Jack removed his badge and tossed it into the white hands of the astounded mayor. That worthy hombre opened his mouth to say something, but he gulped hastily instead and rose nervously. Without a word the two departed.

Jack shook his head wearily. "The pore fools!" he whispered. "So they want a peaceful marshal. Wait'll some of the riff-raff in this neck of the country hear about it. They'll take the place apart!"

The prophecy was entirely true, and from his little cabin at the edge of town, Jack watched developments. Each day saw more gunmen and range scum drift into the little town, and the new marshal was utterly unable to cope with the situation. Killings and robberies were regular occurrences, and the law-abiding citizens were almost afraid to venture out.

Then one morning Mayor Parker and Horace Burton ran panting into Jack's cabin. Humbly and meekly they spoke to him.

"Fenton," Mayor Parker husked. "I am begging you to take back this badge and save our town."

Jack laughed bitterly. "Had a change of heart, ain't you?"

The mayor nodded his head dumbly. "We—we are ruined if you refuse," he faltered. "Flash Templar and his gang have just shot Sheriff Beavers and killed his deputy, when he tried to make an arrest. We sent for the sheriff hoping that he could aid us."

Wordlessly, Jack took the proffered badge and pinned it on his vest. Then he said, "I'd be committin' suicide if I tried to clean up that bunch by myself. The best men of the town will have to help."

Some of the men were hesitant about offering resistance to the outlaws, but Jack managed to gather several punchers and townsmen. He stationed them strategically

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in front of the Silver Eagle saloon, without rousing suspicion.

Boldly, he entered the saloon where the gunmen were carousing. Like a whip-lash his voice roared above the noise. "Listen, you coyotes! I'm marshal here now, and you skunks can leave or take lead!"

Before the befuddled hombres could move, Jack had leaped back out the bat-wing doors. Then there was a roar of anger inside. The gunmen spewed out to vent their rage on the hardy marshal.

Jack stood in the center of the street, poised. The first man out he recognized as Flash Templer, and a bullet zipped angrily by Jack's head as the gunman fired. Jack laughed as he pressed trigger and saw the killer flop forward in the dusty street. Then there was a booming volley from the waiting defenders. Curses and screams rent the air as the outlaws broke ranks and fled, thoroughly beaten.

Jack smiled as he fondled his guns. Glory guns.

By this time we're all tightenin' our belts an' payin' plumb little mind ter the jedgment o' stories. So mebbe we sort o' hurries Señor Hickman's story inter the corral. Then ag'in, mebbe we didn't, 'cause it shore looked like a fat prime ter us. Waal, reckon we'll have ter let yuh folks settle thet p'int.

As fer us, all we kin see right then is a big brown drumstick, an' we ain't got the heart ter hold up the dinner no longer.

"Come an' git it!" we hollers, an' hits up a high lope at the head o' the stampede. Hungry Hawkins an' the Devil's Deputy is neck an' neck in a foot race, an' Rusty Bolivar an' the Silver Kid is burnin' shoe leather an' takin' the rough spots high, wide, an' han'some!

We makes this promise ter ourself right then an' thar. Next Thanks-givin', we keeps our date with the amachooors on a full stummick.

But right now we're gittin' outside of a turkey with all the fixin's an' it's roundin' out to be a mighty fine Thanksgivin'. Hyar's hopin' yores is the same.

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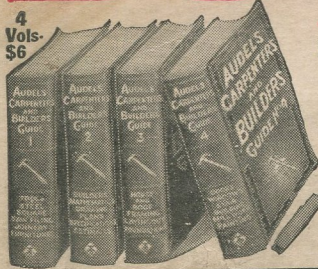
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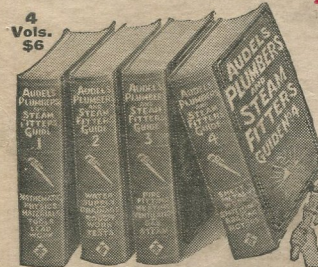
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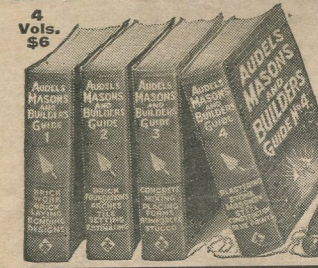
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