

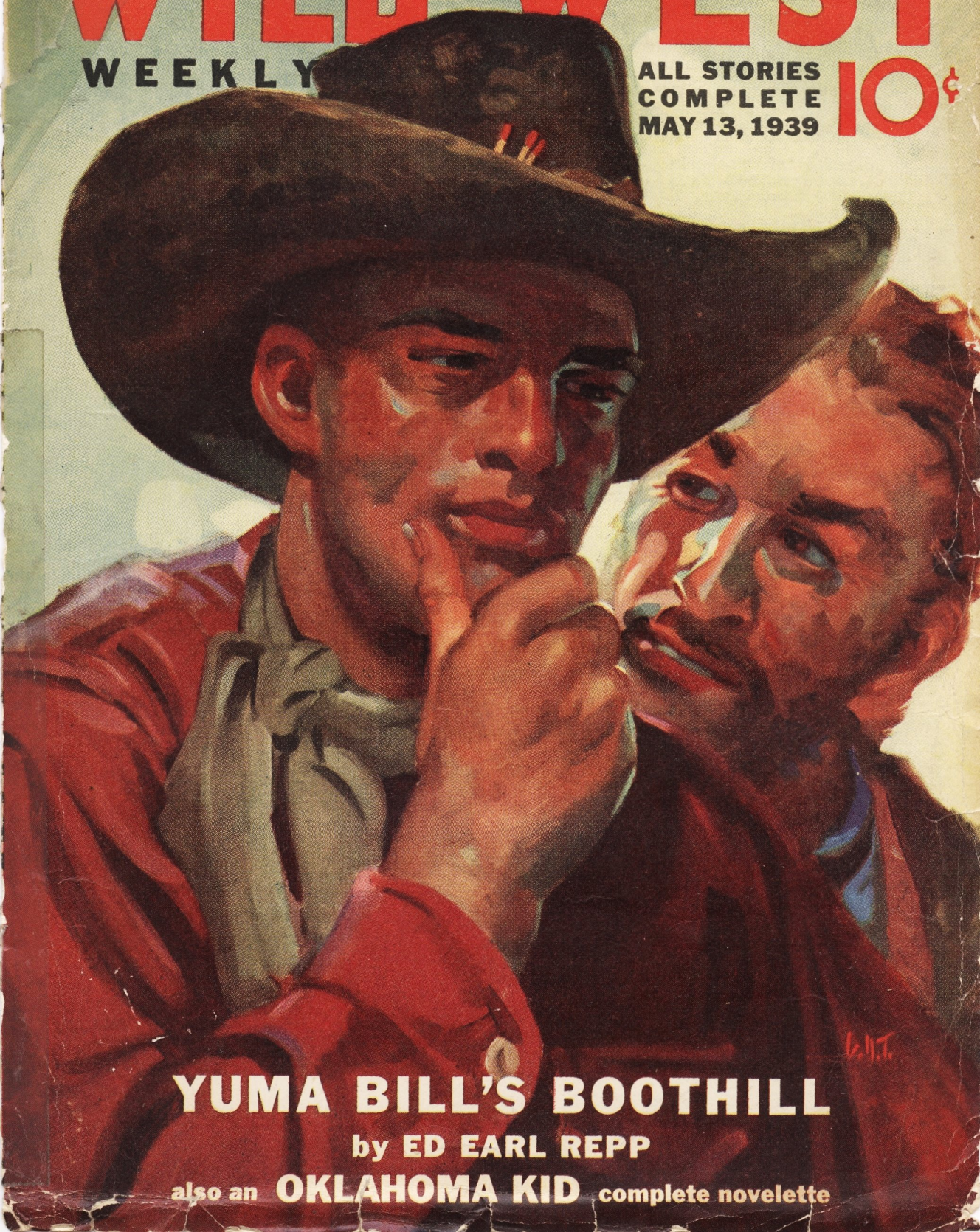
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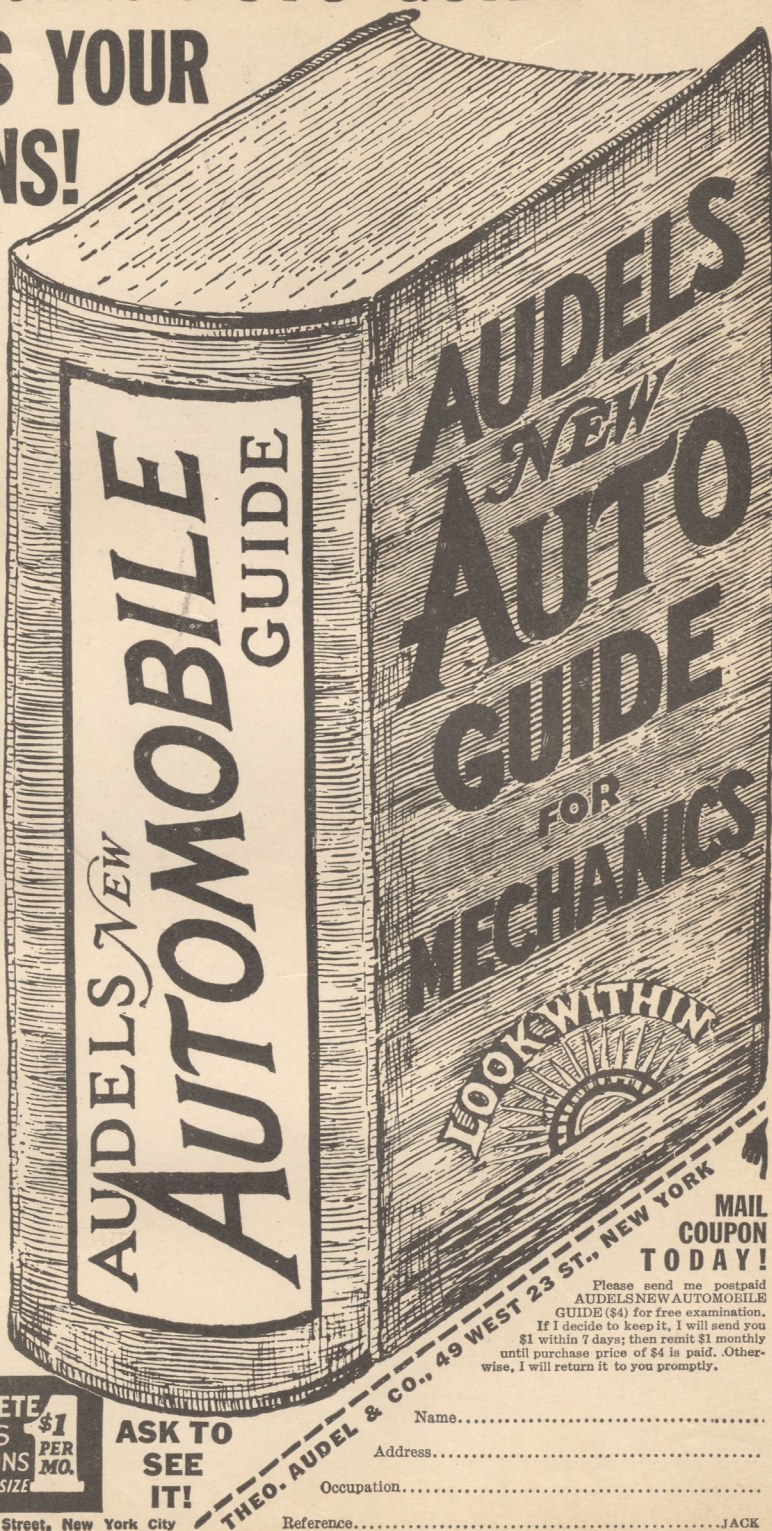
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FOUNDED 1902

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Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Treasurer. Copyright, 1939, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1939, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Canada, Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$5.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year.

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A Chat with the Range Boss

EVEN if Ed Earl Repp hadn't told us that he had a real buckaroo in mind when he's writin' about Yuma Bill Storms—like he does once ag'in in "Yuma Bill's Boothill" in this week's issue—I reckon everybody'd know it. Thet chunky little hunk o' gun-swift wildfire shore comes to life whenever Ed Earl gits to writin' about 'im.

Tother day I had a letter from Ed Earl. Seems like it's aimed right at you readin' hombres. So it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Among my prized collection of Western relics are three old brandin' irons which the jigger I'm fiction-izin' as Yuma Bill Storms left in our barn on the Sunset Ranch out here in California when he was gunned by a jittery lawman several years ago. The hombre had rode fer the spreads that run these irons, but never told us where they were located.

They are the RU, the LD, and the A Over A. I'm wonderin' if any of the boys down in Arizona and New Mexico can identify 'em. I'd shore be grateful to any readers from that section who could tell me somethin' of the history of these three old irons.

Yours,
ED EARL REPP.

Waal, here's hopin' thet some o' you readin' hombres *kin* help out Señor Repp. If you kin, send yore letters to yores truly, the Range Boss, an' I'll see thet Ed gits 'em. Likewise, I'll probably print 'em here in our Chat department.

Our ol' pard, Sam Nickels, is back on the spread ag'in this week, too.

Another yarn about them two cowboy Texas Rangers, Hungry Hawkins an' Rusty Bolivar. I figger everybody'll think "Pie Fer Rusty" is a plumb thrillin'—an' rib-ticklin'—yarn.

Sam Nickels, yuh know, is a real Westerner who knows his guns, brones, cows, ropes, an' hombres. Couple days ago, a letter blew in from him—a letter thet adds some more to the gun argument thet W. S. Davis started with Chuck Martin about Bisley Model Colts. I'd figgered thet argument was plumb settled, but Sam's words o' wisdom are too interestin' to keep to myself, so I'm passin' 'em along to you-all, herewith:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I was amused at the letter of W. S. Davis in the March 11th number of W. W. W., in which he gets after Chuck Martin for changing the caliber of his gun from .41 to .45. I am sure that Chuck knows his guns from sight to butt plate and that his slip was only a typographical error.

Davis is pretty well posted on the gun question himself, but I don't like his choice of a Bisley. A Bisley is a fine weapon, so don't mistake me there. It is the grip only that I don't like. For that reason, I wouldn't carry one on a bet. Very, very few experienced cowboys will have one. Those grips are so underslung they remind me of plow handles.

A man can shoot the Frontier Model Colt in the dark. The grip fits the hand, and the gun can be pointed instinctively as one points a finger. I'd be afraid to shoot at a skunk or a coyote at night with a Bisley. I'd be afraid of shooting myself in the foot.

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Davis also says that a .270 Winchester will make a .30-30 take a back seat any time. Of course, it will. But the little old .30-30 makes a better saddle gun. You can't cut the barrel length of a .270 to twenty inches without having the muzzle blast of a Minnenwerfer. But you can carry a lever-action .30-30 with a twenty-inch barrel in a saddle scabbard under your leg all day without being bothered.

A .30-30 is big enough to put a bear or a mountain lion down for the count, any time, if a man places his shots where they belong. Of course, if a fellow gets excited and just closes both eyes when he shoots, he'd better get a machine gun and wear a suit of boiler plate. Better still, he'd better stay at home.

Yours,
SAM NICKELS.

Waal, now there don't seem to be nothin' left to be said on the Bisley question. An' Sam's remarks about the .30-30 seem plumb logical.

To finish off with, here's a letter from a readin' hombre about another argument thet's been ragin' in 3W fer quite a spell.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: 'Bout this here feud goin' on amongst the readers o' the ol' 3W. If it keeps gittin' any hotter, first thing yuh know thar's gonna be bullets flyin' high, wide an' handsome. Me, I reckon I'll be right thar shootin' my ownself at them high-falutin' folks with sech fancy notions.

Me, Boss, I says defend the flyin' colors o' the ol' 3W brand. Folks got a swell change in the mag when you started puttin' in all them purty full-page illustrations. Just what-all do some folks expect?

If folks want to see more of their favorite waddies, git the author hombres to write about 'em more frequent. Thar ain't no reason to ruin a plumb good magazine by publishin' book-length novels. Most people like short stories better, anyhow.

Adios, Boss, fer the time bein', an' thanks fer this opportunity o' givin' folks my own opinion about this situation.

Sincerely yours,
CARL POLLARD.

Birmingham, Alabama.

An' thank you, too, Señor Pollard. Drop us another line sometime. Reckon thet's all fer this week.
THE RANGE BOSS.

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YUMA BILL'S BOOTHILL



By ED. EARL REPP

Author of "Local Voter In Cochise County," etc.

It was a corpse corral when Yuma Bill sat in on that bullet showdown—
and the rained who bossed the proceedings was old man Death.

Yuma Bill's Boothill

CHAPTER I.

CUT-BANK KILLER.

H EAT waves danced over the Arizona badlands like liquid glass. In a cloudless, cobalt sky the sun was a ball of molten bronze. Boulders and cat's-claw reflected its stinging heat into the brown face of Yuma Bill Storms and seemed to shrivel his skin as he roweled his claybank, Concho, up the narrow gulch.

Ruefully Yuma scrubbed the beads of perspiration from his truculent chin on the sleeve of his faded shirt and silently swore at the necessity of being a-saddle on a scorching day like this. Even Concho seemed to resent it. He looked back at the chunky waddy through reproachful eyes as if to say: "You got a hell of a crust bringing me away from a nice cool dobe barn for a fool ride like this, boss. There ain't nothin' happened to that long, stringbean pard o' yores, unless he's got his head stuck in a jug o' Forty Rod."

Yuma's wide, straight mouth lifted in a lop-sided grin at the fanciful words he had put in Concho's muzzle. He wanted to believe those words, but couldn't.

The intuitive hunches he always followed religiously had lifted him out of more than one tight spot, and when his old pard, Bean-pole Badger, had failed to return from Charleston on time, the scent of trouble had claimed him once more. Now he was riding alone to the little mining town some nine miles from Tombstone.

Gifted, or cursed, with a vivid imagination, he pictured all sorts of dire things befalling old Bean-pole in a renegade hang-out like Charles-

ton. Both he and the oldster had many enemies in this section of Hell's Corners. Grimly he condemned himself for not accompanying Bean-pole, as something up the slope ahead of him caused a small slide of gravel and shale to clatter down the hill.

He curbed his claybank instantly. The slide might have been caused by some animal, but Yuma Bill Storms had learned that to see things at their worst was the safest.

What he saw up there gave him a tight feeling at the base of his muscular neck. A glint of sunlight caromed off the blued barrel of a carbine as some hombre behind a small boulder laid it over the rock. Instinctively Yuma's steel-thewed fingers closed about the bone-handled Peacemaker at his blocky thigh. But he let the six-shooter drop back half drawn. The man hadn't seen him yet, he was sure. Or perhaps the stranger was in ambush for someone else.

But who? Yuma's mouth tightened. Through slitted eyes he studied the set-up. The rifle was nosed straight into the gulch, but of the man himself he saw nothing. He was well hidden. The intended victim of this cut-bank killer must be someone important, he decided, to cause a man to stake out in the boiling sun like that.

Yuma debated a moment on what steps to take. He could turn and ease out of the gulch. But the idea was met with keen disfavor. He had never ducked a fight, and range-bred hatred for all bushwhackers held him. Besides, he had to get through the gulch to reach Bean-pole, whom he was sure was in trouble. And the oldster came first in his scheme of things. He realized that to circle the cut-bank gunny would take time, perhaps hours of

hard stalking. And to attack from the front was suicidal. But he couldn't sit here passively and allow the man to salivate some helpless jasper who might ride along any minute.

Somehow he had to call the play. One plan was uppermost in his mind, the riskiest of all. He followed it recklessly, realizing that sometimes the riskiest chances by law of averages favor the taker. He pretended ignorance of the man's presence and roweled up the gulch, slumped casually in his kak. Out of the sides of his pale eyes he watched the boulder, counting on his reflexes to aid his taut muscles at the first sign of gunplay.

In a matter of seconds his square-built shoulders would be lined under the sights of that hide-out gun. If the jasper up there on the rim had an itchy finger, this might be his last ride, Yuma Bill realized grimly. And it was almost certain to be if the hide-out gent recognized him. For every bad man from the Mogollon Plateau to the Whetstones honed to hang the stocky waddy's scalp at his belt. He and Beanpole Badger had proved themselves a big menace to outlaw rule of Cochise County, since the stocky waddy had been released from Yuma Prison. He had tacked the Yuma to Bill Storms on leaving the penitentiary so he would never forget the experience or the pay he would sometime exact for it. Yuma had been sent up for horse stealing. Perfectly innocent of the charge, he had done nothing worse than pay hard-earned cash for a horse that hadn't belonged to the gent who had sold it to him. He had come back to Cochise County to pick up the trail of that hombre, but one bunch of trouble after another had interfered with his search.

Oddly enough, as he rode along with seeming casualness, those thoughts of the past came back to him. And he grimly freshened his vow to make that horse thief pay if chance crossed their paths again.

Then thought was driven from his mind as he heard the strike of a shod hoof against stone. Somebody was coming up the winding canyon trail!

Yuma's impulse was to dig spurs into the claybank's flanks, but that wasn't going to help much either. For, the moment the jasper on the rim got the idea that he had been spotted, he was going to start blasting, and the lead was going to be aimed right at Yuma's back!

It was one of the queerest predicaments that Yuma had ever been in. His hard grin slanted across his face. It was the first time in his life that he had ever deliberately put himself in front of a bushwhacker's gun, with the balance hanging mighty fine as to the outcome. If that unknown gent coming up the trail got around the curve some thirty feet ahead before he made it himself, Yuma saw that he was going to have to do some fast moving or eat lead.

The bushwhacker couldn't afford to let him escape. Word of the killing in Charleston would send posses out to comb the hills.

"An' if that cuss up there behind me ain't a half-wit," Yuma muttered, "he'll figger things out the same as me!"

The path under Concho's hoofs was dusty right up to the crooked turn of the gully. The thirty feet separating him from that turn and safety looked a thousand miles away to the waddy. He would be bowled out of the saddle inside of ten feet if he tried to make a run for it.

Again Yuma heard the click of

steel on stone. It turned him cold inside. That fellow coming up the canyon was closer to the curve than he was, judging by the sound. He'd be around the bend first, and then hell was going to pop. For Yuma had a hunch that the fellow coming was the one wanted by the bushwhacker! That hunch made him toss caution aside.

His dull-roweled spurs dug into the flanks of the long-legged clay-bank. The outraged Concho, who wasn't used to this kind of treatment from his warm-hearted boss, crow-hopped.

Yuma's stocky, wiry body swayed in the saddle. The sudden leap of his mount had almost unseated him. But he managed to cling to leather as his hand forked back in a lightning-fast draw.

He moved so quickly that his Colt and the bushwhacker's Winchester blared almost together. Lead snarled into the bank just behind the waddy. Yuma knew that only the fast jump of his Concho horse had saved him. And he might not be so lucky a second time, unless he could keep that hombre from drawing another bead. He triggered at the boulder sheltering the cut-bank killer and nodded as he saw a geyser of grit lift from the red sandstone. But before he could trigger a second time that rider who had been coming up the narrow gorge plunged into view.

"Get back, yuh danged fool!" the hard-pressed waddy yelled hoarsely. "That gent's aimin' to salivate you —" But the rest of the words froze in his throat.

Muzzle flame lanced through the murk of dust kicked up by Concho's hoofs. Yuma felt the sting of a slug as it knifed through the sleeve of his plaid shirt. The hombre he

had been trying to save was throwing lead at him!

Yet, despite that, Yuma couldn't turn his own weapon on this fellow. It was all one big mistake, he figured.

"Hey, watch where yuh're pointin' that thing!" Yuma yelled. "I'm tryin' to help yuh—not kill yuh!"

Fogging dust clung to his narrow eyelids, half blinding him as he flung one more wild shot toward that boulder on the rim. The unknown gent who was in this mix-up with Yuma Bill had a horse that went hog-wild at the sound of a gun fired from his back. The black animal arrowed out of the murk. The rider tried to jerk him back, but he wasn't quick enough. The black horse hit Concho in the withers. The impact sent both horses back on their haunches.

That gun from the rim was still blasting away, and lead was coming uncomfortably close to the stocky waddy as Concho heaved back to even footing again. Yuma's temper, always on a hair trigger, snapped completely. He jerked around to get another shot at that hombre on the rim. It began to look as if he'd have to silence the jasper himself if it was going to be done at all. The rider of the black was having his hands full to keep his mount from plunging on up the trail straight into the sights of the bushwhacker's rifle.

But the killer was evidently afraid that his quarry was going to get away. Through the clogging dust Yuma saw the cut-bank gent rear up suddenly from behind his boulder, Winchester cradled to his cheek for a better shot at the pair in the gulch. And he'd get it, too, unless lead took the starch out of him, Yuma saw in the flash of a second. The crooked grin, with

which he had faced death before, plastered itself across Yuma's face.

"Here goes nothin', Concho," he muttered and spurred the big clay-bank from the dust cloud. He saw the cut-bank killer's gun tip down on him. Yuma's long-barreled Peacemaker jarred back against his palm a split second before lead left the killer's rifle. He saw the gent's long weapon come spinning down the side of the gulch. His own quick shot had smashed against the magazine of the Winchester and knocked it from the killer's hand. But the hombre wasn't quitting. His fingers clawed out a Colt. Lead whipped and snarled around the waddy in the gulch. Aiming a six-gun from the hurricane deck of a running mount was mostly guesswork, as Yuma knew. But he returned that fire savagely. And he was lucky.

The cut-bank killer was slapped back against the boulder by the force of one slug. Yuma saw the man claw at the stone with fingers that had lost their strength. Slowly then the hombre keeled forward. He took a blind step and his hands pawed nothing but air. He had walked straight off the rim! Like a tumbleweed the gent rolled down to bring up with a sudden thud in the bottom of the gulch.

CHAPTER II.

THE DYING COMMAND.

YUMA spurred toward him. Sweat was seeping through his sandy eyebrows to sting his Stetson-gray eyes, but he didn't take his gaze from the crumpled bushwhacker. Scotched snakes, as Yuma had good reason to know, were sometimes more dangerous than healthy ones. This gent seemed to be completely done in, but Yuma was taking no

chances. He swung Concho so that he could get down facing the crumpled figure, and, gun in hand, stepped up to him.

His caution was well merited. With a motion incredibly fast for one so near death, the bushwhacker whipped an arm from beneath his body. Sunlight slid along the length of the big .45 in his hand. The gun snarled at the stocky waddy. Only Yuma's catlike leap sidewise saved him, but, even so, he felt the slug gash the plaid poplin shirt where it was taut against his lean ribs.

Then his bone-handled Peacemaker, which had subdued more than one Cochise outlaw, thundered. Yuma didn't shoot to kill. He wanted this hombre alive. The lead from his smoke pole once again smashed a gun from the hands of the cut-bank jitter.

As though it had taken his last bit of strength to make that final play, the gent slumped back into the mess of gravel and mesquite twigs his roll down the slope had started. Venomous-eyed, he stared up at Yuma Bill, who was thoughtfully blowing smoke from the barrel of his Colt.

Yuma eyed the jasper around the barrel of his gun. The fellow was much his own size, broad through the shoulders, with a tapering waist and stocky legs. Red was staining the matted hair on the jasper's chest from a wound just above the heart. Yuma could see that the gent didn't have long to live.

The man looked to be part Mex. He had a swarthy skin, stubbled with beard. His slit of a mouth curled back in a snarling grin. Deliberately he spat at the stocky waddy's Blucher boots, as Yuma, his gun refilled, came alongside.

"Fella," Yuma Bill said in tones

as persuasive as he might have used to a child, "why were you so danged anxious to salivate me—an' that other gent?"

Then it came to him suddenly that the fellow on the black horse hadn't showed up yet. The stranger had had plenty of time to quiet the animal by now. Yuma twisted to glance back down the gully. Mesquite brush, chilla and tawny sand scarred by Concho's hoofs was all he saw. The gent on the black horse had pulled out!

"Without so much as a thank yuh!" Yuma muttered bitterly. He twisted back around to face the bushwhacker, then swiftly hunkered down at the man's side. He could see that the breed was going fast. A film seemed to be spreading across the jasper's black eyes. Red froth stained his lips, but he still had the strength to snarl:

"You get no answers from me, señor. I am only sorree that you keep me from keeling that other *cabron*. So now, I geeve you a dying man's command. *You mus' keel him for me!*"

"But who is he?" Yuma rasped. A prickly chill chased down his spine. This was the weirdest thing that had ever happened to him. Taking orders from a gent who had done his dangedest to salivate him was sure a new experience.

"What's the hombre's name?" he rasped again.

The breed on the ground smiled. Wicked joy curled his lips. "You weel learn, señor—eef you go to Charleston. Adios now. Send that *cabron* to hell, to the care of Pedro Loco!"

The breed's jaw dropped slackly. His black eyes closed, and a long sigh seemed to run from his throat. Yuma knew without closer inspec-

tion that the cut-bank killer was dead.

The hot sun of mid-afternoon beat down on his shoulder blades. It was hot as blazes here in this barren, mesquite-sided gulch, but not as hot as the place to which Pedro Loco had ordered him to send a man's soul. A gent whom he didn't even know!

Already a speck was looming in the brazen bowl of the coppery sky overhead. A buzzard had spotted the carrion in the gulch. Others would be drawn to a grisly feast unless he buried the dead breed. And he had no tools. However, there were plenty of boulders.

Slowly Yuma got to his feet. He sweated for a half hour carrying boulders to cover the body so that neither the hovering buzzards nor the coyotes could get at it. His calloused hands were scraped and red by the time he finished the job.

Concho stamped impatiently at one side, switching at flies with his silky tail.

"We'll be done here in jest a second, partner," Yuma panted. His chilly eyes, which were the same color as his smoky-gray Stetson, surveyed the grim cairn of boulders he had placed about the body.

"To the care of Pedro Loco!" Yuma Bill Storms murmured with something almost like awe in his hard-bitten drawl. He removed his gray hat to show a tousled head of carrot-colored hair, about the same tint as his saddle-hued face. And that pugnacious, snub-nosed visage was somber for once as Yuma turned and mounted his claybank. He wiped sweat from his face with his blue neckerchief and put his high-crowned hat back on at its usual rakish slant over one ear.

Yuma Bill was both puzzled and worried as he giggered around the

bend in the gulch, and lined out again down its twisting length toward the San Pedro and Charleston, some six miles away.

Just what devil's jackpot he might run into there he had no way of knowing. "But if this is a sample, hoss," he confided to Concho with a wry grin, "it's shore goin' to be right exciting!"

Yuma scrubbed a grimy fist along the slant of his jaw as he jogged along. He was in a hurry to get to town, but hurry sometimes made for waste. Carefully his flinty eyes probed every brush clump and boulder as he passed. He wasn't going to spring any more gun traps if he could help it.

Thought of that hombre whom he had saved from almost certain death made his blood rise to boiling temperature. There were a lot of things Yuma didn't have much use for, and one of them was lack of appreciation. And that fellow certainly had shown plenty of lack. Fact was, Yuma saw now, the gent had seemed bent on helping the cut-bank killer make him eat lead. The first shot from the mysterious gent's smoke pole had almost nailed him. And Concho being run down by the gent's black mightn't have been accident either.

"Mebbe," Yuma muttered acidly to himself, "yuh gunned the wrong man!"

To make matters even worse, he didn't know whether he would recognize the gent again if he saw him. But he took some cheer in the knowledge that there weren't over two hundred people living in Charleston. Probably he could cut that number by half or more, for most of the citizens of the river town were miners employed in the quartz mill owned by the Bronchow Mill

and Mining Co., and it wouldn't be one of them.

Old Pat Stakes, the owner of the company, had gone into the business of milling other men's ore when his own Bronchow Mine a couple of miles up the river toward Tombstone had petered out. The old mine, Yuma had heard, was being used as a smuggler's hide-out now. It was an ideal place, too, he reflected grimly. The old tunnels and steps were like a puzzle. A gent could dodge the law for a long time underground in the Bronchow Mine.

But, as far as that went, the waddy knew that border smugglers and long-loopers were pretty safe right in Charleston, unless United States Marshal Wyatt Earp or Sheriff Behan showed up from Tombstone.

The local law was negligible. An old marshal, more interested in feathering his own nest with collected fines than in enforcing justice, was the sole representative. Knowing that, confidence men and gamblers plied their trade with impunity. Outlaws from Soldiers Hole Ranch made it their hang-out. And from that slimy share of the citizenry, Yuma Bill felt certain came the ungrateful jitter who had tried to make him eat bushwhack lead intended for himself.

"Only this time boothill back-fired, an' I'm thinkin' I'll jest accept that chore Pedro Loco give me!" he growled to himself as he came out of the hills and into the wide river valley of the San Pedro.

The sun was sinking westward beyond the high Mogollon Plateau. Blue and purple shadows were creeping across the cholla and prickly-pear spangled floor of the valley. Yuma could see the little town of Charleston spread on either

side of a single dusty street only a mile away now.

And, because he was a gent who hated mystery in any of its forms, Yuma Bill tickled Concho with his dull-roweled spurs. The claybank unkinked into a fleet run along the trail to town.

His first job when he got there, Yuma decided, was to look up his lanky partner, Bean-pole Badger. There was something mighty queer about that, too. Bean-pole had left their mine in the Chiricahuas to find out why receipts had been falling off. The ore they were taking out looked just as good as ever, but the returns they got said it wasn't. So Bean-pole had ridden to Charleston to interview their old friend, Pat Stakes. The mill owner had been refining their ore since they had opened their quartz claim. And, until recently, the returns had been good, but now they had fallen to a point where they didn't meet expenses.

That well-developed sixth sense possessed by Yuma Bill had warned him that Bean-pole was in trouble. It was why he had left the mine. Now that same hunch told him that his encounter in the gully was going to fit right into the mystery surrounding Bean-pole's absence!

CHAPTER III.

STINGAREE SHOWDOWN.

WATCHFUL as a lobo trailed by hunters, Yuma Bill loped into the river town. His flinty eyes peered narrowly out from beneath the brim of the sombrero he had tugged a little lower across his bronzed forehead. He had lifted the silk neckerchief, too, and let his shoulders hunch up as he rode in. Yuma had no way of knowing what he might be up against, but he did

know that if the owl-hoot fraternity was in from Soldiers Hole Ranch, he might expect trouble if he were recognized. He and his partner had smashed three outlaw bands from Silverado to Galeyville, and the word had come to him that the owl-hooters had put a price on his head.

The mill whistle blared throatily from across the San Pedro. That meant that the shifts were changing. Soon the town would be filling up with a roaring bunch of thirsty mill hands. It would be more difficult to locate Bean-pole after that raucous crowd hit town.

Yuma gighed his mount to a little faster pace down the street. He surveyed the adobe buildings with square false fronts of wood that made them look more impressive. A few scrawny elm trees grew along the street curb. Water barrels for public use and in case fire broke out were banded to some of the trees with strap iron. Horses, still sleepy from the day's heat, stood on three legs at the scarred hitch racks, idly switching at flies.

Yuma looked the broncs over swiftly as he moved along, but he saw no sign of the black horse that the mysterious gent had been riding. Then as he came abreast of the Stingaree Saloon, Yuma Bill stiffened in his kak. His eyes flew open and his head jerked back with surprise.

Amongst the half dozen sorry-looking nags hitched to the rack, one animal stood out like a sore thumb. It was the sorriest-looking of the bunch, a jug-headed calico mule a good six hands higher than any of the other broncs. Its ribs would have served for a washboard. Its drooping head and pendulous ears were the picture of dejection.

The mule was Bean-pole's Ol' Jughead, and the proud old prospec-

tor had raced it against most of the stake horses in Cochise County and won hands down. The sight of that mule brought Yuma's hard, reckless grin slanting across his lips. With a twitch of the reins he guided Concho in alongside the crow-bait mule and dismounted. He dropped his right hand and loosened the long-barreled Peacemaker against his hip. If Bean-pole was in the Stingaree, that gun might have to do some talking before long, Yuma knew. For the dingy, warp-boarded false-front was the hang-out for the Soldiers Hole outlaws, not to mention the Bronchow Mine smugglers.

"The danged old coot!" Yuma muttered as he strode across the boardwalk. "He couldn't 'a' picked a wuss place to likker up in!"

And that, too, made the waddy wonder, for, after one celebration that had nearly cost them their mine to an outlaw bunch of bullwhackers, Bean-pole had sworn off redevye—except for an occasional nip. A little sick at heart at the way his old pard had gone back on his word, Yuma jingled up the steps and across the porch.

He pushed through the bat-wing doors with a roll of shoulders that were broad enough to suit a six-footer, though he only tipped five feet six in his high-heeled Bluchers.

His flinty eyes turned hard as he took in the room with a single glance. Bean-pole was here all right. He was seated at a table near the back wall. There were a couple of gents in tuck-crowned Stetsons and cowpoke clothes seated at the table with him. A bottle of whiskey, glasses, and a greasy deck of cards lay on top of the plain board table.

Behind the bar another attendant had just come from the back room. He was tying on a fresh apron, get-

ting ready to help the regular bartender during the rush hour before supper time. A stubble-faced old swamper was shuffling around lighting the nickel-plated lamps in their wall brackets.

Outside of those three, and the trio at the back of the room, the Stingaree seemed empty. Yuma thanked his lucky stars for that. He might be able to get his drunken partner out before the mob from the mill showed up.

Purposefully he strode down the room. Then all at once the tigerish smoothness of his gait, which usually signaled trouble for someone, went out of Yuma's step. He kept on walking toward the table, but more casually now. For Bean-pole's droopy eyelids had shot back to send his young side-kick a single warning glance. Those eyes were black and bright, not filmed with drunkenness. Bean-pole Badger was running a sandy on those two gents sitting with him! But why, Yuma wondered.

Casually he moved closer to the table, watching his old partner out of sleepy-looking eyes. He couldn't figure Bean-pole's game yet, but, out of a past spent in the company of the old prospector, he knew his pard wasn't doing this without good reason.

Bean-pole's lined, leathery face suddenly mirrored surprise as he looked up from the drink he had just poured himself, and appeared to see the stocky waddy for the first time.

He emitted a pleased whoop that sounded like a rusty file scratching a nail. With a drunken weave he lurched back in his chair and unsteadily made his feet. He towered six feet three. Thin as a lath, his long arms dangled from sleeves that were too short for him. His gnarled

old hands were permanently crooked from having spent so many years grubbing with pick and shovel at worthless prospect holes.

"Waal dang me fer a horned toad," Bean-pole yipped, "if it ain't my young pard, Jigger Jones! Jigger, meet up with Slant Grady an' Bud Barnes."

For a moment the pseudonym his partner had tacked on him dumfounded the stocky waddy. But it reinforced his hunch that there was more going on here than met the eye. One glance at Bean-pole's steady hand had told him that his side-kick was just pretending to be drunk.

Yuma strolled to the table and took the hand of the gent Bean-pole had called Slant Grady. He looked down into the man's face and a shock of warning ran along his nerves. The narrow-faced gent was a killer! It showed in the milky opaqueness of his expressionless eyes, in the thin, traplike spread of his mouth. Yuma could see a pair of black-handled Colts in thonged-down holsters at the gent's thighs. The man's grip was quick. His palm barely touched the waddy's before it was drawn swiftly away.

Bean-pole kicked out a chair and waved airily at it, as Yuma reached across the table to grasp the hand of the other fellow. This one was worse than the first gent. For Bud Barnes looked like a kid, a cold-eyed, wedge-faced kid, until Yuma noticed the network of fine wrinkles that had kept old skin taut, giving the face an appearance of youthfulness. It was a death's-head face, with a killer's cold grin shutting across tight lips as he measured the stocky waddy.

"Glad to meet any friend of Mesquite Joe's," Barnes drawled in

colorless tones. "Set, Jones, and have a drink. It's on us!"

So Bean-pole was going under the name of Mesquite Joe! Why? The thought caromed through Yuma's brain. He took the proffered seat with prickles of warning chasing along his spine. Then he grinned wryly to himself. Bean-pole had sure picked a couple of tough gents to run a sandy on. But he was willing to draw blind cards and play them till the shuffle. Alert in every sense, Yuma poured himself a drink. But he wasn't swallowing any of the rotgut. Whiskey and a quick gun hand didn't mix.

Bean-pole leaned across the table to slap Yuma on the shoulder. "Jigger," he chuckled in whiskey-husked tones, "yuh got hyar jest in time. These here kind gents was beginnin' to git kinda boogery jest sittin' around waitin' fer you to show up. But I tole 'em if they'd jest take it easy fer a while you'd be along. I explained thet I couldn't lay no cash out without yore agreein'."

None of this talk made sense to Yuma, but he rose quickly to the lead.

"Shore," he agreed, glancing from one of the cold-eyed killers to the other, "Mesquite's got that right."

"I was tellin' 'em"—Bean-pole lowered his voice confidentially—"that we got five thousand cash dinero atween us—from thet pocket strike we made up in the Whetstones, a month or so ago. I tole 'em, Jigger, thet I'd come to Charleston to see if mebbe I could invest it in some good mine."

Yuma Bill forced an eager smile to his thin straight mouth as he leaned forward. "Yeah, an' did yuh find anything thet might pay us dividends?"

"I shore did," the leathery-faced old rapsallion chuckled. "Jigger,

keep this under yore J. B., but these here gents tell me the Bronchow Mine is fer sale, cheap!"

The Bronchow Mine? Quick thoughts rioted through Yuma's brain. That was the hang-out of the border riffraff that made fat profits out of smuggling aliens and contraband across the border. What was Bean-pole's game, anyway?

"The Bronchow!" Yuma exclaimed. "Holy smokes!" The awe he put into his voice was real. "Yuh mean yuh kin buy it?"

"Fer a song," Badger nodded. "We was jest takin' on a few reinforcements afore we headed fer there to look it over. Now yuh can come along. If we like the looks of things, we'll make a deal, pronto. Eh, Jigger?"

"Shore thing," Yuma nodded seriously. "But it's got to be good," he added with feigned caution.

"Oh, it's good, all right," spoke up Slant Grady heartily. "Come on, gents, down the hatch, an' let's git movin'. If we ride fast, we'll make it in time fer supper. We—"

A voice sheered out from the direction of the bar. "Storms! Boys, there's that half-pint snake, an' his side-kick. Thar's money for the gent who downs 'em!"

CHAPTER IV.

SALTED.

THEN a number of things seemed to happen all at once. The old swamper who had been slowly lighting the wall lamps, galvanized into action. He snuffed one lamp by knocking the chimney from it, and scuttled toward the next.

A gun blared from the direction of the bar, and the slug dug a trench across the greasy top of the table in front of Yuma Bill. He saw the

faces of Slant Grady and Bud Barnes contort with sudden rage.

"Tryin' to run a sandy on us, eh, with those phony names!" Barnes snarled. "Well, it'll shore be yore last one!"

The man's hands snaked below table level. Grady, too, was going into action, and he was a split second faster at getting his hogleg clear of leather because he hadn't wasted any time on words. But, fast as he moved, the stocky waddy was quicker. Yuma knew that he could never unlimber his big Colt before the other's cleared leather. But his mind, trained in the gun-smoke school, reacted with lightning speed to the emergency.

He kicked up from the floor. His booted toe smashed solidly against the bottom of the table, the force of his kick lifting it to smash full against the jutting chins of the pair of killers across the board from him. Their heads snapped back to the force of the steel-th-wed blow that had lifted the table. The guns in their hands blared toward the ceiling as they toppled backward.

Yuma Bill rolled sideways out of his chair, dragging it with him. He lit on his hands and knees, agile as a cat, one blocky hand slapping down to drag the bone-handled Peacemaker Colt from his hip. The knurled hammer prong curled back under his thumb, then dropped as the barrel leveled toward those snaky flashes of gun flame spearing out at him from the direction of the bar.

At the blare of his weapon one of the shadowy figures crouched against the bar, screamed and flopped sideways into one of his mates. They both went down in a tangle of flying arms and legs.

Yuma counted four more of the jaspers slinging lead at them from

the bar, and figured them for a bunch of outlaws from Soldiers' Hole Ranch. He had heard some gents ramble into the saloon a few moments before, but hadn't paid any attention, figuring them to be mill hands.

Now the only thing that was aiding them was the blur of shadows filling the room. The old swamper had helped them plenty when he had doused the lights. Otherwise, Yuma realized, they wouldn't have a chance, and, as it was, the outlook was none too good. The odds were still six to two, big in any man's language. Almost beside him he heard the scrape of another chair, and then the roar of an old Frontier Model Colt that half-deafened him.

"Tally one, by gum!" Yuma heard his old pard chuckle.

Yuma grinned. "Yuh're slippin'," he growled coolly. "I got me two with one shot! Try thet on yore smoke wagon."

A slug slashed wickedly from one side, and only the chair that acted as a partial shield kept Yuma from eating lead. The bullet had caromed off the chair seat. Like a cornered catamount, Yuma twisted to thumb a shot under the table. He could tell by the angle that the bullet which had nearly nailed him had been fired by either Grady or Barnes.

Acrid smoke fumes floated like gray ghosts through the room. It was hard to see, but, sooner or later, the waddy knew that he and Bean-pole would eat lead.

"We gotta git outta here," Yuma rasped tensely to Badger.

As though to reinforce his words, a slug from the bar scored a direct hit on the chair bottom behind which he was hiding, and came on through it. The force of the slug was spent, but it still had enough

power to gash a red furrow across the waddy's chest.

"It's gittin' hot all right," Bean-pole agreed in a hoarse whisper. "But yuh cain't make a run fer no winder they'd cut yuh down afore yuh could lift the sash!"

Yuma had emptied his gun, and while he was hastily stuffing fresh shells into it, his eyes were busy. In a little alcove at the extreme back of the room saw a closed door.

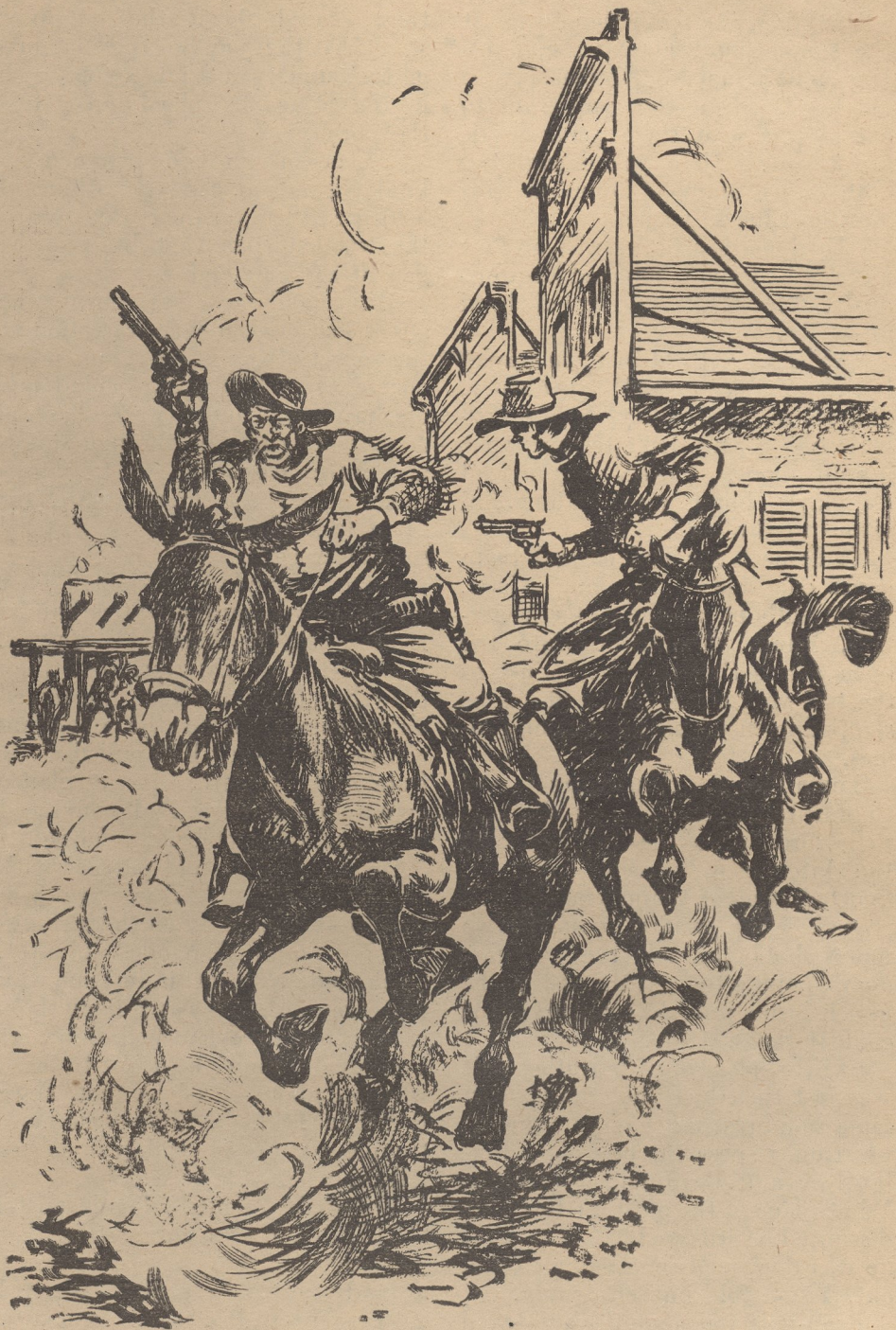
"They's a door behind us," he rasped out. "Ain't no way of knowin' where it'll lead, but it cain't be no wuss than this. Come on, pard, pronto!"

Yuma straightened as he finished speaking, and gave a helping hand to his old partner. He slapped Bean-pole between the shoulders, started him toward the door. A gun blared from one side. The slug nicked the lobe of the stocky waddy's ear as he whirled toward the shadowy shape of Slant Grady, who had also lurched to his feet. Their guns blazed almost as a single sound, the snaky muzzle flashes seeming to blend together. Then he heard a hoarse cry choke from Grady's traplike mouth and saw the killer clap a hand to a drilled shoulder.

Yuma backed to the door that Bean-pole had opened in the alcove. He emptied his Colt toward the bar just to discourage any attempt of the bunch up there to follow them.

Bean-pole's gnarled hand reached out to pull him into a narrow hall. It was as dark as the inside of a hat, but, at the opposite end of the passage, Yuma saw the lighter shine of sky. He followed Bean-pole's gangling shape outside. Once there, the oldster grabbed Yuma's arm.

"Stay hyar," he advised hoarsely, "an' I'll go git the cayuses. No reason fer us both to go—"



Lancets of gun flame bloomed behind Bean-pole and Yuma Bill, and the ugly whine of lead sped them on their way.

Yuma's white teeth shone against the smoke-smudged expanse of his face as he grinned. "No reason, yuh old fossil, except thet yuh want to eat all the lead them gents inside kin throw. They got enough fer both of us, amigo! Come on, this ain't no time to argue!"

"Then neither of us will git out alive!" Bean-pole moaned lugubriously. "Here I had things all fixed up—"

"An' if we get out of town wholehide," Yuma rasped truculently, "I'll carve yore ornery carcass into little bits if yuh don't tell me what it's all about. I been dodgin' lead an' playin' blind hands so long. I'm gittin' tired of it!"

Their fleet run had carried them down one side of the long saloon. Now, without an instant's hesitation, Yuma plunged out into the open across the boardwalk, just as the bat-wing doors of the Stingaree slapped open to emit a pair of gunnies.

Yuma saw them first and thumbed a pair of quick shots in their direction as he ducked under the hitch rail, jerking loose the knotted reins of the claybank as he passed. The waddy poured two more shots through the swinging doors, hoping to hold the rest of the bunch inside until he and Bean-pole could fork away.

Swiftly he swung to leather. It was just their luck that the Soldiers Hole hombres had had to come to town on a spree the one night that both he and Bean-pole were there. What plans of the oldster's they had disrupted he still couldn't figure, but he was doggoned soon going to find out, Yuma told himself grimly.

Bean-pole was aboard his ugly old mule now, and at a terse nod from him Yuma struck spurs into the flanks of his claybank. Side by side

they roared down the elm-lined street. At the sound of their mounts getting underway that coyote pack in the Stingaree spilled out across the porch.

Lancets of gun flame bloomed behind them, and the ugly whine of lead sped them on their way toward the wooden span that bridged the gap of the San Pedro.

Mill hands coming down the street scattered in every direction at the sound of the firing. Yuma saw one of them hunkering behind one of those iron-banded water barrels. A stray slug pierced through staves and water cascaded out to mushroom across the miner. A howl lifted from the man as he scuttled for better cover.

Yuma grinned at the sight. "Thet feller's more afeard of water than he is of bullets," he chuckled to Badger.

Then the waddy sobered as they drew beyond gun range. He reined down Concho from the pounding run in which they had pulled away from the Stingaree, for a glance across his shoulder had convinced him they were not being followed.

He centered his old partner with a bleak stare. "Why were you tryin' to run a sandy on them smugglers?" Yuma demanded bluntly. "You come to town to find out why our high-grade ore was bringin' low-grade returns. When yuh didn't git back this mornin', I set out to learn why, an' about all I been doin' since is dodgin' lead. So afore some more trouble gits on our tail, yuh better tell me what yuh been doin'."

Bean-pole sighed lugubriously. "Well, Bill, it's on account of thet danged ore thet I was hangin' around those two gents. When I got here me 'n' Pat Stakes went over his mill books and learnt thet a lot of our ore has been disappearin' from the mill, afore goin' through

the stamps. But we couldn't ketch the hombres who've been takin' it, an' we couldn't find airy trail of where it's gone. Now yuh know as well as me that unmilled ore ain't cash by a danged sight. That give me 'n' Pat the idee that whoever was stealin' it was salting a mine to hook some pilgrim, who *has* got cash!"

"Yuh're talkin' the most sense I've heerd outta you in many a day," Yuma drawled. "So that's why you was playin' up to Grady an' the Barnes jigger. Yuh figger our ore has gone to salt the abandoned Bronchow!"

"Yup," his old partner said, and grinned wolfishly, "but knowin' it an' provin' it is a hoss of another color. Howsomever, I'm sartin thet's where it's been goin', the way them smugglers fell for the line I give them. I had 'em convinced I wuz jest the pilgrim they was lookin' for when them Soldiers Hole rannies upset our applecart."

Yuma nodded. "What's Pat Stakes been doin' while you wuz tryin' to run a sandy on them two smugglers?"

"A-settin' like a cat at a rat hole," Badger returned promptly. "He's hid out in a clump of cholla up the hill behind the mill, waitin' to nab them gents thet's been bleedin' us, if they sneak out with any more of our ore. We better git up there pronto an' have a war council. Dang those Soldiers Hole varmints, they shore threw a monkey wrench into our plan."

CHAPTER V.

LONG TRAIL'S END.

THE brassy rim of an Arizona moon was poking above the jagged crests of the Huachucas when they thundered across the bridge over the San Pedro. The gaunt

stack of the Bronchow Mill and Mining Co. was etched against the star-studded sky. The mill itself squatted against the hillside below the stack. Lights shining out from the windows were like red-rimmed eyes looking at them.

They gave Yuma an eerie feeling, and he wasn't the kind who spooked easily. But that queer command he had got from the dying breed, Pedro Loco, had got under his skin, and Yuma was willing to admit it. It came to him suddenly that he sure hadn't done much to carry out the dying bushwhacker's macabre order.

It was right on the tip of his tongue to tell his pard about that strange experience when the puffy breeze whipping down from the hills behind the river seemed to blow a rangy black horse out of the mouth of the dark canyon a couple of hundred yards in front of them.

The sight was so unexpected, coming right on the tail of his thoughts, that for the moment the stocky waddy thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. The rider on the big black, who apparently had not seen him, lined out across the mesquite-dotted slope toward the mill.

Yuma felt certain that there was the horse, and probably the hombre, who had tried to make him eat bushwhack lead. And this time the gent wasn't going to get away so easy. Yuma had already twitched Concho to the new trail. The claybank was stretched out in a belly-flat run after the black when Yuma heard the thump of hoofs drawing alongside.

He looked across his shoulder to see his gangling pard reining close. Bean-pole's bright black eyes were sparkling. "What in blazes is the idee?" he yowled.

Impatiently Yuma reined in, keeping sight of the course the other hombre was taking.

"I got me a little score to settle with that feller on the black," he muttered as they drew in their blowing mounts.

Bean-pole Badger's black eyes clouded with surprise, then anger set them to glittering. "What in tarnation yuh talkin' about?" he rasped. "Do you know who that gent is?"

"No, but I'd shore like to!" Yuma answered grimly. "Come on, we can talk as we ride. I ain't lettin' him git away from me ag'in."

Bean-pole let out an incredulous snort and stared pityingly at his young side-kick. "Plumb daft," he marveled. "Why Bill, that gent yuh're so all-fired anxious to see is the superintendent of Pat's mill here. His handle is Ronald Sykes, a minin' engineer from Phoenix."

"Then they shore didn't teach him much gun-smoke etiquette in the school he went to," Yuma growled.

"I dunno what yuh're drivin' at, Bill," Bean-pole grumbled as they followed that other rider up the slope toward the mill, "but if yo're tryin' to pin some deadwood on Sykes, yuh're barkin' up the wrong tree. Thet feller's straight as a string, and he feels as bad as me 'n' Pat about our ore disappearin'. He even headed out fer Tombstone this afternoon to lay the whole case afore United States Marshal Wyatt Earp—an' danged near got hisself salivated doin' it. A pair of ornery sidewinders dry-gulched him five or six mile from here, an' only quick thinkin' saved him."

Yuma's stocky body rose in the saddle as though he'd sat on a hat-pin. "Why that dirty, lyin' polecat!" he gasped. Badger's story re-

moved the last doubt that might have lingered in his mind concerning the identity of the man riding the big black horse.

Angry words spilled from Yuma's suddenly white lips. "It jest happens thet I was one of them ornery dry-gulchers, Bean-pole. An' I was doin' my dangedest to keep the gent from eatin' dry-gulch lead that was ticketed fer him. An' what'd he do? Pard, thet polecat rammed his horse into mine, and took a pot shot at me. Then, when I kept right on swappin' shots with the dry-gulcher, this brave gent hightailed it. Danged if I don't think I got me the wrong hombre!"

Bug-eyed with surprise, Bean-pole couldn't speak for a moment. His voice was little better than a hoarse croak when he managed to bring out the words. "Yuh shore Sykes was the gent?"

"The stories tally!" Yuma Bill snapped.

"Who was the dry-gulcher yuh shot?"

"A breed about my size. Called hisself Pedro Loco, an' he give me the chore of riddin' Cochise of the ornery gent that I kept him from gettin'. And danged if I don't feel like doin' it!" Yuma growled indignantly.

Bean-pole shook his head wonderingly. "What yuh suppose that breed wanted to dry-gulch Sykes fer?"

"If I knew thet, I might know more about what's been happenin' to our gold ore," Yuma retorted. "I figger that bushwhackin' an' our ore disappearin' tie up!"

Bean-pole shook his head gloomily. "Danged if I see how, but I suppose it ain't goin' to do no harm to have a talk with Sykes. I'd like the gent to meet you, an' git this misunderstanding cleared up. Then

I'll ride up on the hill an' bring Pat down. We got to hold a council an' plan our next move."

They had been steadily climbing the hill while their talk ran on. Now, as they drew nearer to the superintendent's office in an isolated wing of the big mill building, Yuma had a chance to study Sykes' black horse tethered to a rail out front. He looked the animal over as they drew up and dismounted. The horse's slick hide was stained with sweat. Air still whistled into its flaring nostrils.

"This nag's been rid some," Yuma Bill said grimly. "Me, I never did have no use for a gent who abused hossflesh without good reason. I got a hunch it's goin' to take more'n yo're persuasive tongue to make me like this Sykes jigger."

His lank old partner had nothing but a grunt to answer that remark as he gangled up the path that led to the lighted office. Yuma was a little behind him as Bean-pole mounted the steps to the closed door. He saw his side-kick rap on the panel and call in his unforgettable dry voice:

"It's me, Sykes. I'm comin' in."

Then Badger pushed the door open, and Yuma, still on the ground behind him, saw a man at a table littered with blueprints spring to his feet and grab a Colt from the table-top. That warning sixth sense of his moved Yuma faster than thought. His left arm snaked out to jerk hard at one of his pard's ankles. Bean-pole tripped and sprawled forward into the room just as flame and smoke spewed from the muzzle of the Colt in Sykes' fist.

Lead whistled across the stocky waddy's shoulder. Had Badger remained standing, Yuma knew he would have taken it just above the belt line. An ugly place to shoot a

man. The thought chilled him with its intensity. His hand snapped down and up, but, cool in any emergency, he saw that now was not the time to send the gent to Hades—to the care of Pedro Loco.

Sykes had seen the shadowy shape of Yuma crouched outside, and he sent a slug at him. But Yuma made a tricky target hunched low against the steps. Before the hombre inside could trigger a third time, Yuma's Peacemaker snarled just once. He had aimed for Sykes' gun, and scored a direct hit. The fellow's Colt tore from his fingers as though a giant had slapped it.

As he saw the effect of his shot, Yuma leaped up the steps. He side-stepped his partner's stringbean length and dropped into a deadly crouch across the littered drafting table from the mill superintendent.

Bean-pole Badger, who had clambered to his feet by now, saw a queer expression wash across the bulldog visage of his young pard. He had never seen anything quite like it on Yuma Bill's expressive face before. The waddy looked like a gent who'd just met a long-lost friend—or enemy. Utter dismay had turned Yuma Bill Storms' face slack for a moment. His flinty eyes bugged, his straight mouth dropped open. Then, almost as swiftly as it had come, the expression passed. Yuma was once more his hard-eyed, pugnacious self.

The gun in his rocky fist hadn't wavered from its line centering Sykes' chest. He looked the superintendent over, and a narrow, ironic smile spread across his wide, thin lips.

Sykes was just standing there, staring stupidly at him. He had the fingers of his right hand clutched in the left, as though that might ease some of the numbness caused

by having his gun torn from his dewclaw. He was a big gent, a good six inches taller than Yuma. Dark hair made a pointed V on his bulging forehead. His nose was long and crooked, with small eyes set too close to it. A full mouth and a narrow chin made up the picture of his face. His thick neck dropped into a pair of powerfully sloping shoulders and a thick torso. Garbed in natty whipcord and laced boots he looked every inch a mining engineer.

It was that prosperous well-fed look which had brought the ironic grin to Yuma Bill's lips. The last time he had seen this hombre he had looked and acted like a wandering cowpoke down on his luck. And that had been the gent's story. All he'd had was a good-looking bronc, for which he wanted a fair price. And that had fooled the waddy. A crook as a rule was willing to sell hot goods cheap. But this gent had been too smart for that kind of move. Yuma Bill had listened to the wandering cowpoke's hard-luck yarn and, being pretty soft-hearted under his hard exterior, had fallen and bought the gent's bronc.

That was the story Yuma Bill had told Silverado's sheriff. It was the story the law hadn't believed. And plain Bill Storms had gone to Yuma prison for horse stealing. Now he was at the end of a long trail, face to face with the horse thief who'd sold him that wet mount!

CHAPTER VI.

HELP FOR A BROKEN WADDY.

ALL of that passed through the waddy's mind as he held the big gent under the muzzle of his steady Colt. There was an almost uncontrollable urge in him to cut the hombre down. His nerves were jump-

ing. Like an aroused lobo, Yuma Bill stood there, lips drawing back tighter and tighter from strain.

The pseudo superintendent had been watching the pull of conflicting emotions sweep the waddy's face, fear contorting his own visage.

"Hold it, hold it," Sykes began to yammer. "I . . . I made a bad mistake. Thought that you fellas were stick-up men comin' to rob the safe. Lord, Badger"—his little eyes swept pleadingly to the lank old prospector—"call this jigger off." His hands started to shake. He leaned across the littered table, crumpling a blueprint under his hand. "Honest to gosh, I didn't aim to gun you down, amigos. I'd shore feel mighty sick if I had."

"Yuh're danged right you would," Yuma Bill said icily. "You'd be exchanging a hogleg for a pitchfork right now!"

Still narrowly watching the mill superintendent, Yuma decided that recognition hadn't been mutual. Palming off a stolen bronc on a cowhand hadn't meant enough to make him remember Yuma. He'd probably done it plenty times before, Yuma figured. He curbed his impulse to give the superintendent back his gun and force him to draw. It would be a lot smarter to wait a bit and learn this hombre's game. It didn't fool the waddy for a moment to hear Sykes say he had thought them road agents. Nobody could mistake Badger's lank length, or his dry, rusty voice. Sykes had been all set to salivate them, and the waddy wanted to find out why.

He gave his old pard a warning look as Bean-pole limped forward, nursing a skinned shin.

Badger was quick to catch the hint, and his lined, leathery face, which had been contorted with righteous indignation, turned bland.

"Shore, shore," he grunted. "Hell, Sykes, a gent's apt to make a mistake like that anytime. I allus say what ends well is hunky-dory with me. We'll fergit it. I'd like for yuh to meet up with my pard, Bill Storms. He's a mite quick on the trigger, as I guess yuh found out."

The sickly pallor that had been on the superintendent's face faded a little. He managed to laugh shakily and stretch his hand across the table.

"Shore glad to meet up with Badger's side-kick," he said with an effort at heartiness. "I guess mebbe I'm kinda lucky myself that yore bullet didn't go where it was intended."

Yuma pouched his weapon. That thin ironic grin spread across his mouth as he stepped up to the table. The gent didn't know it, but that slug had gone exactly where he had aimed it.

The waddy's scuffed old boot went under the edge of the table, and then swiftly he leaped backward, for his toe had hit something soft and yielding, and an unmistakably scared voice yowled: "Don't shoot. Don't shoot—"

Wide-eyed, Yuma Bill peered under the table, and then the grim lines of his blocky visage broke into hearty laughter.

For, crawling out from under that table, was a little gent smaller than himself. The man's face was pale as paper, and he was shaking visibly, his wide eyes darting first to one pard and then the other. He wore buttoned patent-leather shoes, a dark business suit and a stand-up collar. He had on a brave red tie that had twisted up under one ear. Plainly the little gent was an Easterner, and plainly he was scared half to death.

What he was doing here in the

Bronchow Mill office Yuma for the moment couldn't figure. Then it came to him in a flash. Here was a pilgrim who might have cash. If the fake superintendent was mixed up in the mine-salting deal, this Easterner might be a prospective buyer.

The little fellow looked so scared that the waddy took pity on him. "Shore now," he drawled, "we ain't goin' to salivate you. Why me 'n' Bean-pole is gentle as a coupla lambs."

"Till we're riled," Bean-pole added, his long horse face completely sober. "An' you don't look like the kind who'd rile us. However, we're shore honin' to know why you were hidin' under that table!"

Before the Easterner could speak, Sykes broke in. "Meet John Blessing," he said hastily. "He's come to Arizona for his health. Some friends of mine in Tombstone asked me to show him around Charleston."

Yuma grinned genially at the little hombre. "Yore health musta took an awful setback jest now!"

Some color had returned to the Easterner's thin face. He smiled feebly at the bronzed waddy and drew a long breath. "This has certainly been quite an experience," he admitted timidly. "I wouldn't like to have another like it!"

"Yuh're sartin to," Bean-pole Badger prophesied darkly, "if yuh hang around us jaspers. Trouble seems to stick to us like burs to a hound dog." He switched his gaze to the mill superintendent. "The scheme me 'n' Pat cooked up turned sour on us," he told Sykes. "I'm goin' up the hill to git him now. When we git back we'll hold a war council to figger out what to do next."

Sykes nodded. He seemed to

have regained his confidence. Casually he had stooped and picked up his fallen gun. He holstered it and shrugged. "I haven't learned a thing here," he confessed, "and I've been watching the hands pretty carefully."

"We'll work out somethin'," Beanpole grunted pessimistically, and turned toward the door.

Yuma wanted a private word with him, so he followed his pard out to the steps. "Fella," he whispered hurriedly, "thet Sykes hombre is at the bottom of this bizness, or I'm a hoptoad. Blamed if he ain't the cuss who sold me the wet mount that sent me to Yuma."

The shock of that information swayed Badger back on his heels. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" he said. His crooked fingers reached out to close on Yuma's steely biceps. "Stay here an' keep an eye on him. I'll git Pat. When we come back we'll make that jigger talk turkey!"

"*Buenol!*" Yuma agreed. He watched his partner down to his Ol' Jughead, then turned back through the open door. And that was almost the last that Yuma remembered for a long time. He caught just a glimpse of Sykes to one side of the door, his face twisted into a demoniacal sneer, uplifted Colt gripped by the barrel.

Frantically, Yuma tried to sidestep the descending weapon, but he knew even as he moved that it was too late. He saw the flashing blur of the bludgeoning gunstock, and heard the sodden thud of it as it crushed in the crown of his sombrero. Then he felt the dull impact against his skull.

Jagged daggers of pain filled his head. A red mist formed before his eyes and he felt himself falling. Through the mist he saw the Easterner's thin, horrified face staring at him.

Sykes mocked him as he hit the floor. "Thought yuh had me fooled, eh, Storms? Hell, I knew yuh right off as the gent I sent to the pen. Well, yuh ain't goin' to the pen this time, amigo. Yuh're goin' to Hades!"

Those words seemed to come from a great distance to the waddy. He was lying on his gun arm, but he hardly noticed it. His whole body felt strangely numb, except for that fiendish pain in his head.

Helplessly he watched Sykes efficiently muffle his big gun with his own warped Stetson. The man's little eyes were venomous as he hunkered down to place the gun muzzle against Yuma's temple. Yuma felt the hard nozzle of the Colt through his hat.

Then another figure knelt beside his fallen form. Yuma made out the diminutive Easterner, Blessing. And now, strangely enough, the little man didn't look afraid. There was a sort of foxy desperateness mirrored in his narrow face.

Almost gently Blessing placed his hand on Sykes' wrist. "You know, Mr. Sykes," Yuma heard him say through the deadening fog that plugged his ears, "you're making a bad mistake. I think you've already killed this man. In the East I was a doctor, and I know a dead man when I see one. You're just making things harder for yourself if you pull that trigger. This young man's partner is not so far away but what the sound of the gunshot will carry to him. And from my observation of that lanky individual he'll come right back to investigate. And I should certainly hate to be in your shoes if he does!"

Yuma, lying there unable to move, saw a look of indecision sweep the heavy, florid features of the mill superintendent. The muzzle of the gun against his forehead was

lifted. Through narrowed eyelids Yuma watched Sykes sit back on his heels.

"Mebbe yore right," Yuma heard him say, "mebbe—" Then Sykes' words filtered into nothingness. Try as he would, Yuma could keep his eyes open no longer. He felt himself drifting off to the heavy beat of that pain in his head. One odd thought clung in his mind. He had to send Sykes to Hades—to the care of Pedro Loco!

When Yuma Bill's eyes squeezed open again he couldn't for the moment remember what had happened to him. Then he saw his battered old hat lying on the floor and everything came back. That hat, he realized, had probably helped to save his life. The heavy felt had taken some of the force out of Sykes' first treacherous blow.

Yuma struggled to a sitting position, and the office spun around and around him, like a pin-wheeling bronc. The arm that had been under him felt dead. The rest of his body was queerly lifeless, except for his head, and that still throbbed like an Indian devil drum. It was hard to think, but Yuma realized dazedly that unless something had happened to Bean-pole and Pat Stakes, they should have returned to the office and found him long since.

The moon had risen until he could see it through the dusty pane of glass beside the door. That meant he had been unconscious for at least two hours. And plenty could go wrong in that time!

The thought spurred Yuma to reach out a blocky hand for his hat. He eased it over the ragged tear in his scalp. It would tend to act as a bandage, to stop the flow of blood. His grim fighting grin curled about

his lips as he made certain that Sykes had not removed his old gun.

Yuma got weakly to his feet. His stomach felt hollow and the floor lifted and swam before his eyes as he took a couple of steps and grabbed for the wall. Supporting himself on sagging knees, he panted like a spent animal.

It took him a long time to do it, but at last he got the door open. Climbing down the steps he fell. Concho, at the hitch rail, snorted, and jerked hard on the loosely tied reins. They came free and as Yuma lurched again to his feet the big claybank walked toward him. Yuma caught at the horn, hung on for a moment gathering strength, and then managed to pull himself into the saddle.

He dug blunt spur rowels into his bronc's flanks, and Concho broke into a trot down the hill, away from the mill. The movement sent dizzying waves of pain through Yuma's brain, but after a minute or two he could think more clearly.

Then, despite the added pain it brought, he forced his mount into a gallop. He headed along the slope toward the mouth of the canyon from which the black horse had come earlier that evening.

In the mouth of the canyon the moon shed light enough for the waddy to see a number of sets of tracks. Still weaving a little in the saddle, Yuma studied them. One set of prints stood out. The prong of the shoe was set at an angle that he recognized as belonging to his pard's lathy old mule. The mark was deeper than the rest. He knew that meant Ol' Jughead had been carrying a double burden.

The thought turned his face bleak and hard as flint. Those tracks told Yuma all he needed to know. Bean-

pole and Pat hadn't returned to the mill office because they had been surprised up on the hill by some of the smuggler crew which Sykes evidently bossed.

The waddy tried to count the sets of tracks going up the long canyon, but tipping his head down made him dizzy. He grabbed at the pommel of his kak to steady himself, then he tickled the claybank with dull rowels.

"Git movin' hoss," he muttered. "They's a boothill party makin' up at the Bronchow—an' I'd shore hate to miss it!"

CHAPTER VII.

BOOTHILL PAY-OFF.

YUMA rode slowly up the black canyon cursing himself because he knew that if he gigged Concho to a faster pace he'd probably fall out of the saddle. But the very slowness of his pace helped clear his head and bring the spring back to his steely muscles. By the time he had ridden for a couple of miles up the twisting gulch he could think in a straight line again.

Grimly flexing his gun hand he found it to be all right. And he was going to have use for it from the look of the signs. Those coyotes at the Bronchow Mine had made only one mistake. They had left an injured cowpoke behind on the word of a little gent who, if Yuma's guess was correct, was no more of a doctor than himself. He had just been using the only means in his possession to stop cold murder. And he had succeeded, but there was no telling what penalty he would have to pay if anything went wrong now!

Yuma had a warm spot in his heart for that little pilgrim. Oddly

enough he found himself wishing that he had another little hombre to side him—Pedro Loco. But maybe that breed was watching from beyond the "dark veil."

Working almost to the head of the canyon, Yuma found a side trail that cut up through the mesquite and cholla to the jagged ridge line a couple of hundred feet above him. Across the ridge and halfway down the other side on a narrow shelf above the river lay the old Bronchow Mine. Yuma turned into the trail, gun in hand, flinty eyes narrowly searching each brush clump. Then he relaxed. Sykes was so certain of himself that he hadn't bothered to leave a guard.

At the top of the ridge, Yuma drew up in the cover of a towering barrel cactus. He couldn't afford to make any mistake now. He was just one against at least a half dozen killers. There were more in the smuggling bunch that had been using the abandoned mine for a headquarters, but the waddy had a hunch that Sykes had probably sent most of them packing across the border until he finished his salting and selling of the abandoned mine. Until he succeeded in doing that Sykes probably was planning to hold Beanpole, Stakes, and Blessing prisoner. He might even kill them. White ridged Yuma Bill's jaw at the thought. There were plenty of drifts where bodies could be laid away, a stick of dynamite exploded to bring down the roof, and nobody would ever see them again.

The moon was slowly dipping to westward, leaving the slope facing the river in almost complete darkness. But there was still enough light for Yuma to make out the gaunt skeleton of the old snaff house, and the tumble-down adobe

huts where the muckers and powder men had once lived.

Yuma couldn't make out a sign of life down there. For a moment fear hit him. Had all of them been making a mistake? Had Sykes been planting the stolen ore in some other forsaken glory hole in these barren hills?

Yuma considered the idea for a time, then with the bulldog tenacity that was part of his character he touched the bronc under him with his spurs. There was one way to find out, and that was to have a look. He knew that riding down the trail openly was a dangerous thing to do, but his legs were still too rubbery for him to try walking it.

As silently as possible Yuma rode up to the shaft house. Everything was as still as a graveyard. There was no sound in the night but the mournful quaver of a coyote with an empty belly. Slowly, conserving as much of his strength as possible, Yuma dismounted.

He could tell by the scarred feel of the ground underfoot that horses had been here, but there was no sign of them now. Then he turned toward the brushy hill just back of the narrow shelf where the shaft house stood.

Thin bars of light were seemingly springing from the dark face of the hill. Yuma Bill tensed with sudden surprise, then stole swiftly toward those bars of light, cursing himself for ever having been fooled. He should have remembered the original workings which had been tunneled directly into the hill.

A heavy plank door had sealed them off for a long time, but Sykes had evidently opened them again. If his three friends were here they were behind that closed door, Yuma reasoned.

Then he stiffened in his tracks. His foot had landed smack on a dead mesquite stick, and it had cracked beneath his weight with a noise like a firecracker exploding.

At the sound a caped figure materialized suddenly from the thick shadows beside the closed tunnel door. Yuma saw the hombre's cone-peaked sombrero and serape-wrapped shape in the light seeping through the cracks in the old warped door. He saw instantly that the guard had been asleep. It had taken that cracking stick to awaken him. If the Mexie's brain was still fogged with slumber a quick move might turn the trick.

"Who's there?" Yuma hissed sibilantly in Spanish. "Caramba, amigo! Don't you know that if the *jefe* catches you sleepin' on the job he'll slit yore gullet for you?"

As he talked, Yuma strode forward swiftly. It looked as if his daring offensive move were going to work. The befuddled Mexie at the mention of slit throat started to whine. It was not until Yuma was right up alongside him that the Mexie saw that he had been tricked.

The man's black eyes dilated with astonishment, then he swung the Winchester cradled in one arm upward to center the waddy. But his move was woefully slow.

Yuma Bill surged forward. His rocky right fist lashed out with every ounce of his weight behind the blow. His knuckles cracked solidly on the Mexican's chin. The hombre's head snapped back and his hat fell off. He weaved for a moment, then his knees caved under him. Yuma caught the man as he went down, easing him into the shadow of a mesquite clump.

Eyes bright with excitement he went swiftly to work on the hombre.

For the Mexie's hat had given him an idea. He jerked the serape from the man's still shape. Donning it and the heavily braided Mexican sombrero took but moments.

Grasping his gun beneath the serape, Yuma banged on the door with his left fist.

Almost instantly the portal gaped in front of him to send a flood of light shining outward. The gent who had opened the door was the milk-eyed gunman Yuma had met in the Stingaree, Slant Grady.

Yuma recognized him as he stepped inside. "*Gracias*," he muttered. He had passed the first hurdle safely. The killer's face had shown no sign of recognition.

Head tipped down Yuma moved along the old tunnel. He heard the door slam behind him. This was the pay-off, he realized grimly. He'd go out that door on a shutter unless he cleaned up the snakes' nest that was probably around the bend in the tunnel he was approaching.

He drew a deep breath and moved around the corner. His face beneath the masking brim of the cone-peaked sombrero wore its grim, fighting smile.

The tunnel widened in front of him. Beams dark with age crossed the ceiling. Ancient shoring supported them. In the center of the wide room that had been hollowed out of the hill blazed a small fire to drive back the chill of this underground retreat. Shadows lurched like dancing demons on the walls. Hunkered close about the blaze for warmth were three figures. One was the nattily garbed fake mining engineer, Sykes, another the parchment-skinned killer, Bud Barnes. The other was a dark-faced Mex breed.

At sight of the latter, Yuma started involuntarily. The breed looked enough like Pedro Loco to be

a twin, except that he was younger, with the wicked fires of wild youth leaping in him. And something told Yuma as he paused there for just a moment that this was the reason Pedro Loco had been waiting to bushwhack Ronald Sykes. The smuggler chieftain had inveigled Pedro's younger brother into joining his band. And Pedro Loco was going to take the only revenge he knew!

Back in the shadows against one wall a figure stirred and grumbled querulously. Bean-pole Badger's lanky shape reared up against the wall.

"I've slept on some mighty hard beds in my time," he moaned lugubriously, "but danged if this ain't the hardest!"

"Shut up!" Sykes snarled from his place by the fire. "You danged old coot, yuh oughta be glad yuh ain't dead like thet half-pint pard of yores."

Bean-pole's black old eyes sparkled with rage. "Yuh better kill me now while yuh got the chanct," he said in deadly quiet tones. "'Cause if I ever git shet of these chain cuffs yuh got around my wrists I'm gonna get yuh if its the last thing I ever do!"

An evil sneer spread across Sykes' full lips. His hand speared back to the heavy Colt holstered at his hip. "You're askin' for it, mister—"

Then the smuggler chief noticed Yuma quietly watching the byplay from just inside the stone chamber. "What the hell yuh standin' there for, *mozo*? Why ain't yuh outside where yuh belong?"

Yuma took a catlike step sidewise to put his back to the jagged rocks of the wall. "I been waitin' for yuh to draw that smoke pole yuh dirty hoss thief. I got a pair of slugs initialed for you. One from a waddy

yuh sent to Yuma. Another signed by a gent named Pedro Loco. He ate lead that should 'a' gone in yore carcass," Yuma droned on. "Now I'm payin' off—for us!"

"Bill!" Bean-pole's amazed shout of joy echoed to the joists overhead.

But his cry was drowned by a weirder one. Like a spitting cat, the breed who resembled Pedro Loco whirled to face the smuggler boss. A knife glittered suddenly from the sash at his waist and swung straight toward Ronald Sykes' throat.

"*Caramba!*" the breed hissed. "You keel my brothair. I keel you like—"

Yuma saw the gunny, Bud Barnes, going for his weapon. And, in the same instant, Yuma flung off his disguising serape.

Three guns blared almost as one. Barnes' lead took the breed boy in the chest and knocked him backward, a dying scream on his lips, just after his knife had found its mark. Yuma triggered once at Barnes and his lead caught the killer in the ugly slit of his mouth, driving him backward, dead before he struck the floor.

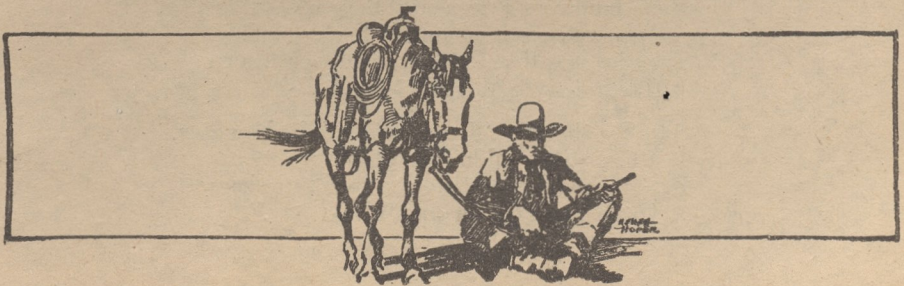
Lead fanned past Yuma's cheek, and he whirled like a bayed lobo to face this new menace. For at the first shot Slant Grady had come running back from his post inside the door. Now his black guns were lacing lead at the stocky waddy. Yuma felt a slug burn across his

arm as he turned. Another scored his ribs. Then he triggered coolly in the face of the killer's screaming lead. His gun clicked on an empty, but there was no need to reload. A dazed expression on his face, Slant Grady buckled at the knees and pitched forward to lie still.

It was finished. A little sick at so much slaughter, Yuma turned slowly toward the fire. He didn't want to look at what remained of Ronald Sykes, horse thief, mining engineer, and smuggler chief. But his fascinated gaze slid across the man. He was crumpled forward by the fire, his large head almost severed from his body, his shirt front dyed red. Yuma decided somberly that the knife death meted out to the smuggler boss might satisfy Pedro Loco as much as a bullet death.

His somber thoughts were interrupted by a yell from the wall. "Hey, you pizen pup," came Bean-pole Badger's call, "will yuh hurry up an' git these chains off us fellas. I've been sittin' here so long I've done wore out my breeches—an' my patience!"

The hoss thief an' killer who had Yuma Bill sent to prison is daid. Thet score is settled. Sykes won't cause no trouble any more. But Yuma an' Bean-pole Badger have a knack of gittin' into tight places and hot-lead mix-ups. Thar'll be another ace adventure about 'em soon ag'in in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



UNWILLIN' TO FIGHT

By Arthur L. Rafter

Dude Donovan an' his pet cayuse
Drift into Silvertown,
After Piute Pete has robbed the bank,
An' shot four hombres down.

When the posse is formin', Dude's axed to go,
But he answers: "Not today.
I wouldn't spoil my bran'-new duds,
For twicet a deputy's pay."

Then Dude starts out for Cedar Gap,
An' he's roundin' a bend, on a lope,
When a rope, that's stretchin' across the trail,
Knocks Dude to the rocky slope.

He lays there still, on the stony ground,
All numb, from the sudden shock,
An' he's scairt to move, as Piute Pete
Comes out from behind a rock.

Pete searches Dude, an' takes his gun,
As Dude's purtendin' he's dead.
Then he grabs the bridle of Dude's pet hoss,
That waits by its master's head.

But the faithful hoss don't want to leave,
An' balks at bein' led.
Then Piute, usin' the butt of the gun,
Bangs the pony over the head.

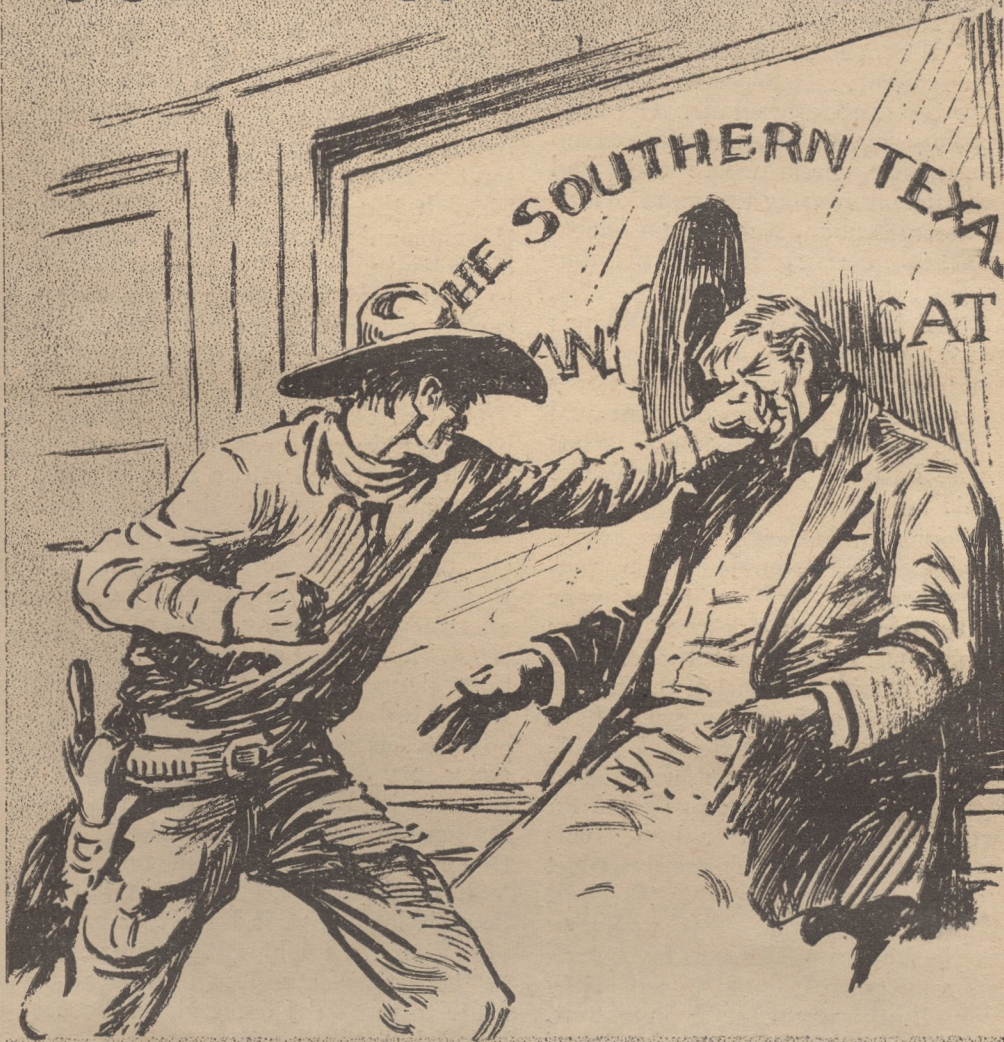
Waal, Dude furgits he's a lifeless corpse,
When he sees that gun butt land,
He's up like a flash, an' dives for Pete,
With nuthin' in either hand.

Pete shoots an' misses the rushin' Dude,
Who gits a-holt of his wrist,
An' makes him drop that shootin' tool,
With one almighty twist.

Dude hammers Pete again' the rock,
An' stretches him out on the ground.
Then he sees that the sheriff an' seven men
Has quietly gathered round.

Says the sheriff: "I reckoned yuh had no guts,
When yuh wouldn't jine today;
But yuh risked yore life for yore little hoss,
That's braver than fightin' for pay."

GUN HAWKS' DINERO



By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

The eyes of those gun hawks were red with murder lust
—but the flame of Tom Greer's shootin' iron was redder.

Gun Hawks' Dinero

FROM one end of Sycamore's rutty, dust-blanketed street to the other, the echoes of the waddy's hot, bitter words shuddered over the heat-festered air. Grizzled, leathery-faced old-timers looked up from their chairs where they had been dozing sleepily through the lazy Texas afternoon, stared from one to another in rising excitement, and wagged their heads grimly.

"It'd hate to be in Sam Gillum's pants," one of them grunted. "Fust time I ever seen young Tom Greer get steamed up, but his old man used to be a stompin' fire-eater. What made him get his neck bowed like that?"

Young Tom Greer's stormy, anger-strained words sounded again, rolling down the street as if in answer to the old-timer's question. Greer was standing stiffly at the edge of the plank walk in front of the Southern Texas Cattle Syndicate's office, his big, work-hardened hands knotted at his side. A tremble reached down his lanky frame, as if his own words stung him like a lash, goading his temper to a dangerous edge.

"It's all been yore play this far, Gillum," he flared. "It was yore cattle that brought Texas fever here, an' mine got it from yore herds. Now you think you'll cash in on it. Yuh've been wantin' my land, an' yore boss would pin a big red feather in yore hat if yuh could get it. But yuh won't, dang yuh! Not even if yore syndicate land has got me locked in, an' yuh won't let me drive my cattle to market across yore range."

Sam Gillum, tall, hulking, his thick shoulders weaving slightly under the sting of the lanky waddy's words, stepped grimly down from the low

porch of the syndicate office. A faint, mocking grin curled his puffy lips, and his deep-toned words lashed out tauntingly.

"No one'll keep yuh from movin' yore cattle to market, if yuh'll obey the law," he boomed. "But I'm not goin' to have my herds catch the tick fever from yore critters. We've built our vats an' run our cattle through the creosote dip. You do the same an' yuh won't have no trouble gettin' yore herd to market. Try to bust yore way through an' the county commissioners will have the law down on yore neck."

Bunched muscles leaped out along Tom Greer's lean jaw, tingling his bronzed skin with a shadow of gray. His lips flattened into a thin, bitter sneer, and a chilly, deadly light kindled in his smoke-blue eyes.

"Some more of yore skunky work, throwin' pressure on the county commissioners to have my cattle quarantined," he ground out harshly. "Yuh knew danged well I didn't have the money to build a dipping vat or buy creosote, as cheap as it is. Yuh've got plenty of money in yore safe in there to lend me: I offered to sign my herd at twenty percent less than the market price an' yuh refused. Yuh're robbin' me, Gillum. Yuh're doin' it legal, but if I start clawin' yore frame I might not be so particular. One skunk smells like another to me, an' I don't give a hoot how I kill it."

A dark tide of color mounted in Sam Gillum's heavy-jowled face, and his right hand rose imperceptibly toward the open front of his coat. He sneered crookedly, an ugly light flaring in his small muddy eyes.

"Yuh ought to do a good job of bustin' the law, Greer," he jeered loudly. "Yuh an' yore ex-outlaw pard—"

White-hot fury suddenly burned

its bonds in the lanky waddy. He slid forward in smooth, catlike movement, left fist whipping out like a piston.

His balled knuckles crashed full into big Gillum's sneering mouth, smashing lips into raw, bloody pulp. Gillum stumbled backward into the side of the building, his big frame jarring the huge, plate-glass window until it threatened to fall from its frame. He tried to catch himself, missed with a groping hand, and slumped heavily to the ground, crimson drooling from his battered lips.

For a long, taunting moment, Tom Greer stood there waiting for the big man to get to his feet. But Gillum didn't move. He sat there, hunkered down on the boardwalk, his broad face contorted with hatred for the lanky youth standing over him.

Then Tom Greer laughed harshly, spun on his heels, and stalked woodenly down the street. Red flecks of murder lust flamed in Sam Gillum's muddy eyes, as he followed the tall waddy's broad back down the plank walk. A curse snarled from his bloody lips, and his hand snaked back to the Colt belted under his coat. The gun flicked clear, swung up with murderous speed, thumb rocking back the hammer.

But he didn't shoot. Another man leaped into view around the side of the building, a short, bandy-legged jasper with quick, limping strides. A long-barreled gun was gripped in the man's gnarled fist, and there was death in his pale eyes.

"Don't try it, Gillum," came Jake Engle's scratchy words. "I ain't askin' more'n half an excuse to see if yore blood runs red or yella. I been wonderin' that ever since I came here an' hired out with young Greer. Now put up that hogleg, polecat, or start usin' it on me."

Sam Gillum's heavy face turned a sickly gray under the oldster's frosty stare. Fear flooded into his muddy eyes, brought a quiver to his puffy lips. He glanced up and down the street nervously, then nosed his gun down quickly, and slipped it back into its holster under his coat.

Jake Engle backed slowly away to young Tom Greer, who had halted and turned a few feet away at the sound of the oldster's harsh words. They both stared at Gillum long and silently, then spun on their heels, and stalked on down the street.

"Yuh ought to have knowed better'n to turn yore back on that side-winder so soon," came old Jake's scratchy words. "Looks to me like yuh're goin' to need me to dry-nurse yuh when yuh let yore hair down an' get sore. Snakes like Gillum are filled with pizen, an' none of them rattle afore they strike."

II.

The hot fever of rage still boiled through Tom Greer's veins, as he rode back to his little ranch in Willow Canyon. On either side of the narrow, rutty road his horse plodded along—even in the road itself—lay syndicate land, rolling, billowing range that stretched out on all sides of the canyon that gouged into the looming Diablo Mountains. Rancher after rancher had sold out, permitting his spread to be swallowed up by the powerful syndicate until young Greer's little Rocking G was an island in the middle of the giant Triple S range, with Greer stubbornly fighting off Sam Gillum's under-priced offers to buy him out.

The brassy ball of the afternoon sun was swinging low over the Diablos when the tall waddy turned into the canyon, and pulled up in front

of his little ranchhouse. He stared bitterly at the weathered outbuildings, at the paintless, sun-cracked sides of his house. A shed door had been hanging open since a rusty hinge had broken a month ago. The roof of his house was patched with pine slabs, and a portion of it sagged when he had been forced to put in a green log rafter to replace the old rafter that had rotted away.

His lips quirked up in a crooked, lopsided smile. Little by little during the last two years Sam Gillum had been forcing him to go broke. He couldn't afford to make the repairs his ranch buildings needed. He had to buy water that Gillum had fenced off and was selling at a cut-throat price. And Gillum's underselling the cattle market had cost him money the last two seasons.

"Shore, he'll get my land," Greer muttered bitterly. "He'll get it one way or another 'cause his boss, Jinglebob Hart, wants this canyon for winter range. But it'll take guns to move me out of here, not tick fever or Sam Gillum's crooked laws."

He unsaddled his bronc, watered it, and turned it into the corral. Then he went inside, fired the stove, and set out a supper of beans and bacon. He paced back to the front door, stared out toward the mouth of the canyon. Dusk was thickening between the looming gray walls, and up above a sprinkling of early stars were dotting the darkening sky. He frowned worriedly. Old Jake Engle should have been in long ago. The grizzled old puncher had said he was only going to make a few purchases, and then he would follow him to the ranch.

A tremor of doubt gnawed at the tall waddy, as he ate his supper. He found himself listening intently, but no drumming of hoofbeats came to his ears. He finished eating, put the

food back on the stove to keep it warm, and paced back to the door. Darkness lay thick in the canyon now, broken only by the pale light the rising moon slanted over the walls.

An hour dragged by, and the feeling of doubt became a deep-set conviction.

"Shore, he walked out on me," young Greer muttered bitterly. "I told him when he hired on I wouldn't be able to pay him for a while, maybe not at all. Reckon he figured my ruckus with Gillum was too much to take for nothin', an' jest skipped out."

Then another thought struck him, brought a tight set to his thin lips. Maybe old Jake *was* the ex-outlaw Sam Gillum had called him. Jake had told nothing about himself, and Tom had figured that Gillum's ex-outlaw talk had been merely gossip such as might have been started about any stranger as tight-lipped as old Engle. Maybe Jake had gone back to shoot up Sam Gillum. Maybe—

The tall waddy stiffened suddenly, his smoke-blue eyes narrowing, trying to stab through the thick darkness. The throbbing beat of a horse's hoofs rolled across the night air to his ears. He tensed, hands slipping down to the brace of Colts laced low on his legs. He listened tensely, then tried to shake the feeling of uneasiness from him. There was only one horse, he told himself. It would be Jake. But the feeling persisted, became an ice-cold hand tracing down his spine as the horse thundered up and slid to a bunch-footed halt.

Jake Engle dropped from the saddle, stumbled, then came toward the ranchhouse at a weaving run.

Tom stepped back, as the old puncher lurched into the room and kicked the door shut behind him.

Drops of red wormed down Jake's gnarled old hand, fell to stain the rough board floor. Jake swayed across the room, leaned heavily on the table. Tom leaped forward, his face bleak and hard.

"Jake, yuh're shot!" The words lashed out from young Greer's taut lips.

The old puncher looked around, his leathery face drawn, frosty gray eyes grim and expressionless. His left arm hung limply at his side, and blood matted his shirt sleeve below a bullet hole high up near his shoulder.

"Shore, I'm shot," he bit out harshly. "I allus go out an' let some dirty son plug me on Friday. Didn't I tell yuh when I hired on? This is Friday, ain't it?"

Tom stiffened under the oldster's biting sarcasm. Lean, range-toughened muscles snapped hard over his lanky frame. His blood chilled to ice water, hammering through his veins. He ran his hands through his hair in quick, jerky motions, as he stared at the wad of greenbacks the old puncher pulled from under his shirt and dumped on the table. His eyes seemed riveted to the money. With an effort he tore his eyes away, fastened them on Jake's gaunt, leathery face. As if from a distance, he heard Engle's words through the chaotic humming in his ears.

"There it is, boss! It ought to be enough to build a dipping vat an' buy creosote for yore sick cows, an' leave yuh enough over to buy winter feed an' a few breeders. Two thousand bucks, sonny, an' Sam Gillum will yell loud an' long when he—"

The door was suddenly kicked open behind them, spilling hard-faced men into the room. Tom whirled, froze in a low, tense crouch, eyes crawling into cold, deadly slits

as he recognized the four sneering gunmen.

Tack O'Day, Stub Prather, Joe Price, Hop Winger—all Sam Gillum's syndicate waddies—crouched there by the door, guns bared, eyes red with murder lust.

Tack O'Day, a slatty, wedge-faced jasper, came forward in slow, mining strides.

"If Sam Gilum does any yellin' you two won't hear him," he snarled harshly. "We don't like crooks around here. We're goin' to have a little party, jest the six of us. We'll furnish the ropes an' you two furnish the necks. Now move, blast yuh, an' don't try no tricks!"

III.

An icy wind seemed to fan up Tom Greer's spine. He stared from one to another of the sneering gunmen, then fastened his eyes bitterly on Jake Engle's gaunt old face. It was plain what had happened—the wad of greenbacks on the table, the bullet hole in Jake's shoulder, Jake's sweat-lathered horse still saddled outside, left there in the oldster's haste to get inside. Jake had held up Sam Gillum, or had waited until after dark and robbed Gillum's safe. It couldn't be anything else. Jake had been almost broke when he had come to the Rocking G.

Tom tried to speak, but his vocal cords seemed numb, constricted by a galling hard lump that had knotted in his throat. He swallowed audibly, burst out hoarsely.

"Jake—that ain't true, is it? Dang it, man—"

Tack O'Day cut in, laughing raucously. "Listen to him bleat! He's tryin' to crawl out of it now, frame it on his pard. He'll squeal plenty when we start building that hang noose for him!"

"Yella!" Stub Prather sneered. "Jest a four-flushin', yella—"

White-hot fires of rage flared through Tom Greer's veins. He swayed backward a short step, bringing him near the table.

His upraised hands jerked into movement, right hand swooping down toward his gun, left swinging around in a flashing arc that swept the oil lamp from the table, sent it sailing wildly toward the four gunmen.

Chunky Stub Prather squalled a curse, triggered a wild shot that burned past the tall waddy's ears. Tack O'Day's Colt slammed out two quick shots, but he was frantically ducking the flying lamp when his finger jerked the trigger, and the slugs smashed into the floor.

Joe Price and Hop Winger lurched to one side. The lamp crashed into the wall behind them, exploded into flaring flame and showering splinters of glass.

Tom got a fleeting glimpse of Stub Prather hunkered down on the floor, gun tilted up, thumb already rocking back the hammer dog. He lurched to one side, his own gun clearing leather in a blur of speed.

The walls of the little ranchhouse seemed to shudder under the double blast of the guns. Lead ripped through the tall waddy's clothes, burned across his ribs like a hot iron. Prather screamed shrilly, snapped to his feet, spinning like a shadow against the flame eating across the oil-splattered floor.

Then the air seemed filled with roaring lead and jabbing fingers of gunfire. Tom crouched there, fading back from the waving lights, gun hammer eared back, finger tense on the trigger.

Tack O'Day's cursing voice roared from the shadows on the far side of the room.

"Get them dirty sons! Price, you an' Winger close in on that other wall. I'll watch the door. They won't be leavin' without the money that was on the table, an' I got it. They robbed the boss shore as the devil!"

Bitterly, Tom's shifting eyes took in the flames eating across the floor, climbing hungrily up the walls on either side of the door. The next instant he was lurching wildly for the fire-bordered doorway, shoved forward by the hard palm of a hand at his back. He got a glimpse of old Jake Engle pounding close behind him, as he struck the open door.

A gun blared from the rear wall of the room, ringing in Tom's ears. He felt the hot breath of the flames, as he passed through the fire-bordered doorway, followed instantly by the cool touch of the night air, as he leaped into the open.

Old Jake was at his side, goading him on with hard-edged, panting words.

"Don't head for the hosses. We'd run smack-dab into Sheriff Moffett's posse coming from town. Them polecats back there are jest part of Gillum's frame to throw you in jail."

Spike-leaved cholla and barbed cactus clawed at Tom's legs as he plunged through the thicket toward the mouth of the canyon. For fifty yards he held his breakneck pace, then he pulled to a halt near a jumble of rocks that cropped out a few feet from the trail leading out of the canyon.

Tight-lipped, he turned to face old Jake Engle. Jake's leathery face was gaunt and drawn with grim lines, but his keen gray eyes still held their frosty lack of expression. Tom's words cracked out strained and harsh with bitterness.

"Jake, them gun sharks back there'll be on our trail any minute

now. We're settlin' this thing right now. Yuh was almost broke when yuh came here. That dinero yuh brought in tonight—where'd yuh get it so sudden? An' that bullet hole—"

"One of yore sheriff's slugs made that hole," Jake's scratchy voice cut in. "Shore, go on an' get yore neck bowed an' let yore temper fly off. Bust me one—I wouldn't blame yuh much. Sam Gillum's safe was robbed about an hour ago. Gillum swears you an' me done it!"

Hard muscles knotted and rode the lean line of Tom Greer's jaw, and his smoke-blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Then Gillum's a liar," he ground out. "He's been lookin' for a chance to get me over a barrel. Blast it, Jake, if yuh're workin' with that polecat—"

"Gillum claims he saw me comin' out of his office an hour after he closed it," the old puncher growled.

Tom fastened cold, bleak eyes on the oldster, and his knuckles whitened around the butt of the Colt he still gripped.

"Did he?"

Jake's grizzled head dropped in a single, curt nod. "He shore did," he grunted tonelessly. "But I didn't rob that safe. There was only a lot of papers in it when I got the safe open. Shore, I know it sounds like a danged lie, but it ain't. Gillum was linin' you up for the calaboose, kid. He raised a yell when he saw me comin' out of his office. Sheriff Moffett turned loose a gunful of slugs, an' nicked me once when I cut loose every hoss along the street an' stampeded 'em out of town. That's why Moffett an' Gillum ain't got here afore now."

A strained, brooding silence fell over the two punchers. Somewhere in the darkness a cactus wren fussed sleepily. Underbrush crackled some

distance away and low voices sounded cautiously, as the syndicate gunnies worked toward them. Ugly, suspicious thoughts tumbled down over the tall waddy's brain. He searched the oldster's leathery face, and saw nothing. Vaguely, over Jake's words, he heard the faint drumming of hoofs that floated in from the mouth of the canyon. The sheriff coming, and Sam Gillum!

"None of them skunks that busted into the house a while ago was in town when I left," came Jake's tense words. "That ought to prove somethin'. They was here all the time, kid. *They knowed Sam Gillum's safe was going to be robbed!*"

A thought kindled in the tall waddy's mind, raced down his spine like fire. The slow *clop-clop* of hoofs sounded nearby, just beyond the screening pile of boulders where the trail snaked through the cactus.

"Dang it, kid, yuh gotta believe me," the oldster pressed hotly. "I never lied to yuh about who I am. My last name ain't Engle. I can prove that by a telegram folded up in that wad of bills them skunks got. Folks call me—"

Shadowy figures merged from the darkness beyond the rocks. Tom got a glimpse of Sheriff Brad Moffett's stocky frame, of giant Sam Gillum hunched forward in the saddle, peering toward them, moonlight gleaming dully from the barrel of the gun snouting toward the old puncher. Tom's jaw snapped tight with sudden decision. His thinned lips curled and the gun in his hand whipped around in a wicked clubbing arc.

"Blast yuh!" he lashed out. "Try to ring me in on yore dirty work, will yuh?"

Then his gun barrel cracked against Jake's chin, and the oldster slumped limply to the ground.

IV.

Tom spun as sheriff Brad Moffett and Sam Gillum crashed through the underbrush toward him. The lawman's blunt jaw was rock hard, and a Colt jutted from his fist, as he slid his horse to a halt and dropped to the ground beside the unconscious Jake Engle. He bent quickly, pulled the gun from Jake's holster, and clicked handcuffs around the oldest's wrists.

"That'll hold that danged crook," he growled grimly. He straightened, fastened cold blue eyes on the lanky waddy. "I heard what yuh said about that old codger tryin' to ring you in on his crooked deal. It saved yuh a heap of jail trouble, Tom. After yore threat this afternoon against Gillum here, I jest about figured yuh'd turned lobo for shore."

Sam Gillum slid heavily to the ground, big face red and beaded with sweat. His puffy lips curled into a sneer, and an ugly gleam kindled in the muddy depths of his small eyes.

"Moffett, yuh ain't believin' that younker, are yuh?" he rasped. "He seen us comin' an' made that crack just to clear himself. The dirty son is tryin' to lay that job onto his pard."

Tom Greer turned chilly bleak eyes toward the big rancher. His lips twisted upward in a thin, mirthless smile.

"Yuh're right about me sayin' that to throw the sheriff off," he drawled softly. "If I hadn't said something quick, yuh'd have killed Jake. He didn't rob yore safe an' yuh know it. An' yuh didn't plan on either of us livin' long enough to buck yore word."

A dark tide of blood mounted in Sam Gillum's face. His lips went white around their edges, and rage hammering through his veins showed

in the tremor that shook the gun in his big fist. His small, muddy eyes stabbed meaningly to the sheriff.

"Moffett, I ain't takin' that younker's lip," he grated. "He'll lie a blue streak to get out of this mess. Sheriff, there's only one way to handle crooks like these. You ride back to town, an' I'll round up some of my boys, an'—"

Tom Greer's lips tightened. A look of doubt had crept into the sheriff's eyes. The tall waddy backed away cautiously, nerves keened to the snapping point.

"Yuh wouldn't have to round yore gun hawks up, Gillum," he drawled icily. "They was here waitin' till the time when they was supposed to string us up for a robbery they wasn't even in town to know about."

Sam Gillum's broad face went white. The gun in his hand nosed up with savage speed. His voice cracked out hoarse and choked with hatred.

"Blast you, Greer! I'll—"

Tack O'Day, Joe Price, and Hop Winger broke through the underbrush into the open. They skidded to a halt, hard-bitten faces taut, lips curled back baring set teeth.

O'Day's flashing glance darted from the tall waddy to the sheriff and then to Sam Gillum. He hesitated, then slid quickly to the side of his boss.

"Sam, this jasper killed Stub Prather. Didn't give Stub a chance, jest cut loose when we barged in on him an' his pard countin' the money they got from yore safe. But we got the dinero, an' these two skunks will swing sky high for killin' Stub."

"Yuh got what!"

The hoarse words burst from Sam Gillum's drawn lips. Surprise flicked over O'Day's narrow countenance, then his face went blank again. He

held out the wad of greenbacks clamped in his left hand. Gillum stared at the money, the muscles of his face jerking and twitching nervously. He looked up to see Tom Greer eying him coldly, mockingly.

"Yuh act surprised at seein' that dinero, Gillum," the tall waddy drawled softly. "It's yours, ain't it?"

Gillum's eyelids crawled down, veiling the murder lust that flamed in his eyes.

"Shore, it's mine," he choked. "That's jest the way I had it tied up. I'd recognize it anywhere with that black string tied around it."

Hot blood churned upward through Tom Greer's veins, pulsing in his throat, throbbing at his temples. His thinned lips curled into a crooked, deadly grin.

"Hear that, sheriff?" he cracked out harshly. "Gillum says that wad of money is the same that was taken from his safe. There's a telegram folded up inside that dinero. Old Jake was tellin' me about it just before I knocked him out. It'll prove Sam Gillum is a danged liar. It'll prove Gillum robbed his own safe plannin' to frame me an' Jake for the job. That's why he had O'Day an' his skunky pards here, an'—"

Sam Gillum's deep voice boomed out hoarsely.

"O'Day, Price, Winger! Get that dirty son!"

Gillum's quick shot burned past Tom Greer's ears, whacked into the boulder behind him, and screamed off into space. O'Day's gun spouted flame and roaring lead. The guns in the hands of Price burst into yammering gun thunder. Lead ripped through Tom's clothes, smashed into the rock, showering him with tiny particles of stone and splattered lead. A slug snatched the hat from his head, and a lock of tawny hair tum-

bled down in his eyes. He shook it back grimly, squeezed on the trigger, and felt the gun bounce in his hand.

Giant Sam Gillum shivered under the impact of the heavy slug. He rocked back on his heels, caught himself, leaned forward, shaking his big head like a wounded grizzly. His gun emptied in one wild burst of death-blinded shots, then he toppled heavily to the ground.

Tom swiveled his gun, grimly methodical. He had counted his shots—three in the ranchhouse, one that had dropped Sam Gillum, two left unfired in his gun.

A numbing blow suddenly shocked high into his left shoulder, followed instantly by blazing, white-hot pain. He set his teeth against the weakness that flooded over him, felt the gun jerk in his hand again.

Dimly, through the pall of powder smoke, he saw Tack O'Day spin around crazily as lead hammered into his body.

Then Brad Moffett's gun opened up from one side. Tom felt himself slip weakly to his knees, then rise stubbornly back to his feet, and fight to lift his gun level again.

But it was all over now. Gradually his vision cleared as that first wave of weakness left him. He saw Hop Winger huddled in an inert heap a few feet away, heard Joe Price sobbing curses where he stood at one side, clutching at a shattered arm.

"I tell yuh I'm dyin', Moffett," Joe Price whimpered. "Everything Greer said was the truth. Gillum was supposed to rob his own safe, an' split with us after we lynched Engle an' young Greer an' planted some of the dinero on them to frame 'em. But we figured there was a slip-up when we saw the money Engle brought in. Get me to a doctor, sheriff. Do something, man."

Old Jake Engle shoved to a sitting position, looked around him dazedly, growling under his breath. Sheriff Brad Moffett unlocked the handcuffs from the oldster's wrists, and clamped them on Joe Price.

"Yuh'll live," Moffett grunted sourly. "Yuh'll live to sweat out a few years in the calaboose for gettin' mixed up in this skunky deal."

Moffett turned to Tack O'Day, pulled the wad of greenbacks from the killer's dead hand, riffled through it until he found the folded telegram. He glanced over the printed words, then looked toward old Jake Engle climbing stiffly to his feet.

"I'll be danged!" the sheriff burst out. "An' I was thinkin' yuh was an outlaw. Yuh're Jack Englehart."

"Jinglebob Hart," the oldster growled peevishly. "I don't like that other name. I came here to snoop around and find out if young Greer was keepin' his spread goin' on rustled Triple S cattle like Sam Gillum claimed. Found proof that

Gillum was the crook when I opened his safe tonight. Got shot for that, an' danged near hanged. Went over to Mesa City to wire for money to help this proddy younker out, then got my jaw busted for my trouble. Reckon it serves me right fer bein' so nosy."

He broke off, fastened frosty gray eyes on the lanky waddy. He rubbed his bruised chin reflectively, then chuckled.

"I figured I wanted yore land, Greer, but I reckon there ain't no sense tryin' to talk a hard-headed younker like you out of it. I can do the next best thing, though. I can hire yuh to boss my ranch, an' rent yore land from yuh."

Tom Greer grinned, stuck out his hand. "Yuh've hired yoreself a new hand, Jinglebob," he drawled. "Seein' as how yore other range boss sorta got used up in the fight, I reckon I couldn't refuse. Hate like the blazes to work for a snoop, though—even though he is a plumb tough hombre."

GOVERNMENT BEAVERS BUILD DAMS

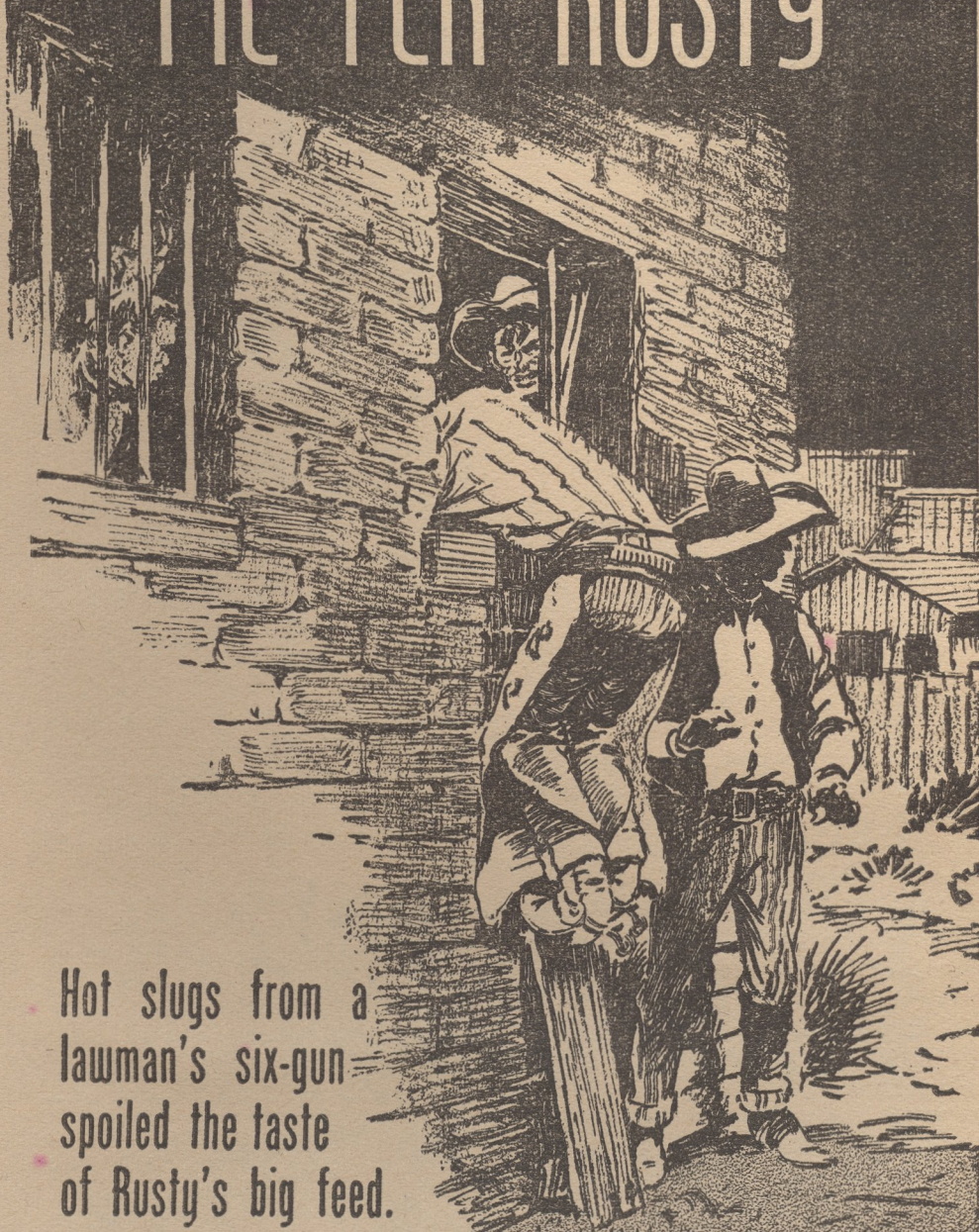
PRESS gangs in time of war or emergency used to be a common sight as they patrolled the streets to gather up young men who were expected to do their duty, but were slow at enlisting. Lately a new kind of press gang has appeared right here in America. Something like a thousand husky young beavers have been press-ganged to work for the American government. And they are performing their tasks like good patriots.

First of all, they had to be pampered a bit, and put in good condition for the hard labor they were expected to tackle. So, after they were trapped, they were given a good holiday in special camps, where they were supplied with government ra-

tions of corn cobs, apples, bread and carrots.

These industrious little animals were first employed to build dams for the prevention of soil erosion, after dust storms had carried away much of the soil that was needed for crops. Their use has spread to many States. Engineers begin the work on dams just where they are wanted, to give the beavers a start. The little builders then set to work with untiring energy, and will complete a dam in about ten days. These small dams are now appearing in many of the dry areas, and cost very little. It is estimated that one beaver will do something like three hundred dollars' worth of useful work in a year.

PIE FER RUSTY



Hot slugs from a
lawman's six-gun
spoiled the taste
of Rusty's big feed.

By SAM H. NICKELS

Pie Fer Rusty

WITH their badges pinned out of sight beneath their shirts and their hat brims pulled low on their foreheads, Hungry Hawkins and Rusty Bolivar slipped their holstered guns to a more convenient position and rode warily on along the dusty street.

It was rapidly getting dark and they could see lamps burning in some of the buildings as they turned their horses toward a big feed corral a short distance away.

The two young Texas Rangers exchanged glances and swung from their saddles at the corral gate. As they started to lead their tired mounts inside, a tall Colt-armed hombre called harshly from the front of the saloon across the street and came striding importantly toward them.

Hungry and Rusty instantly turned. Rusty's small freckled face hardened in a fighting scowl as he got a better look at the man. He started to snap an angry remark, but his lanky, lantern-jawed partner grunted a low warning and nudged him with his elbow.

"Waal," the hombre demanded insultingly as he planted himself in front of them and stood glaring. "What do you two tramp cowhands think yuh're doin' hyar in Ancho? Who aire yuh, an' whar did yuh blow from?"

Rusty let out an angry yelp and dropped his bridle reins. But before the scrappy little Ranger could reply or swing a freckled fist at the tall man's jaw, Hungry pushed him aside and stepped past him.

"Steady, mister," he drawled quietly, a deadly greenish glint smoldering in his usually mild eyes. "Don't go makin' no gun plays. Yuh

may be plenty fast, but the best yuh got won't be fast enough fer either one of us. Just keep yore shirt on."

"Yeah!" Rusty cut in harshly. "Keep yore shirt on, or yuh'll git yore pants shot off! Feller, I don't like yore face, an' it won't take me more'n about one half of a split second to change it fer yuh, if my pard'll just git out of my way!"

Rusty had plenty more to say, and he would have said it, but Hungry shook his head and motioned him aside. As he did so, the stranger gritted an oath and threw himself into a fighting crouch with both hands almost touching his gun butts.

"Hold it, hombre," Hungry advised in a lazy Texas drawl. "I've done warned yuh oncet, an' I ain't goin' to bother to do it again. If yuh try draggin' them guns, somethin' is goin' to happen, an' it'll all happen to you."

The man's tobacco-stained lips curled into a wicked leer, and he hunched his wide shoulders. His pale, close-set eyes swiveled toward Rusty in a murderous glare, then came back to Hungry's homely face and he braced himself on outspread legs.

"Uh-huh!" he grunted savagely. "You two fresh cowhands is plumb spoilin' fer trouble, aire yuh? Waal now—"

Like a flash, the man's hands stabbed down in a flashing draw and he started to throw himself aside. But, before he could clear leather with a weapon, Hungry's bony fist cracked against his jaw in a pile-driver smash that spun him half around. As he sagged dazedly against the side of the corral, the lanky Ranger hit him again with a roundhouse swing that put him down so hard he almost bounced.

"Doggone!" Rusty grinned. "Yuh long-legged pelican, when you hit a

hombre, he stays hit. I could see the tacks in thet guy's boot soles 'fore his shoulders hit the ground. He—"

At that instant, Rusty suddenly caught a glint of metal on the front of the unconscious hombre's shirt. When he saw what it was, his mouth flew open and he grabbed Hungry's arm.

"Yuh've fixed it now!" he cried, glaring. "Durn it, thet's the town marshal yuh've hit! His badge must've been hid in a fold of his blasted shirt where we couldn't see it."

Hungry gave a startled gasp and almost swallowed his chew of tobacco. He coughed it up with a strangled snort and leaned hastily over his battered victim.

"Yuh're right," he said worriedly. "Why couldn't he have pinned thet badge whar we could see it? Take his guns ofn him an' let's pack him in thar to thet hoss trough whar we kin pour some cold water on his face an' bring him to. Hurry 'fore somebody sees what we've done."

Rusty hastily grabbed the marshal's guns and shoved them inside his belt. He and his lanky partner then picked the man up and lugged him through the gate to the big watering trough on the other side of the corral.

"Now," Hungry muttered as they laid him down, "maybe I kin find a cup or a bucket to dip water with. No, wait. I've got us a better idea. We'll just hold him over an' dip his face in the water. Hold thet other arm an' leg. Yuh ready?"

The two worried Rangers rolled the marshal over. When Rusty got a grip on an arm and a leg, he nodded grouchily and they picked him up.

"All right," Hungry grunted as they held him over the water. "Now

be awful keerful yuh don't drop him. Just dip his face in easylike. Thet's the—"

But before Hungry could finish, Rusty's foot slipped and the marshal's heavy body fell into the trough with a splash that sent water flying in every direction. As Rusty staggered back and tripped over a wagon tongue, Hungry made a hasty grab and dragged the dripping marshal out upon the damp ground.

"Now yuh've shore fixed it," Hungry accused mournfully. "This feller was plenty hosstile before I busted him. He'll be mad enough after this duckin' to have a spell of hyderphoby. What did yuh drop him fer?"

"Wha-a-t!" Rusty flared hotly. "How could I help it? Yuh seen my foot slip, didn't yuh? Did yuh want me to hang on an' fall in on top of him? Doggone yuh, I— Hey, he's wakin' up! I think I seen his legs move. What'll we do?"

Hungry looked hastily around. The marshal had just caught his breath in a shivering gasp and was trying to cough the water out of his lungs. As he raised his head and wheezed a gurgling oath, Hungry gulped nervously and jerked a thumb toward the gate.

"I reckon thar ain't but one thing we kin do now," he said hastily. "If we stick around hyar any longer, one of us'll have to shoot him. Fork yore hoss an' let's run. We kin come back when he gits over his mad."

At that instant, the marshal rolled over on one elbow. Hungry and Rusty were legging it earnestly toward the gate when he sat up with a sudden yell and clawed savagely at a hide-out gun beneath his dripping shirt.

As Rusty scrambled hastily into his saddle, a bullet from the hombre's stubby-barreled weapon split the air

beside his face and broke a window across the street. With more bullets whizzing around them, he and Hungry raked their mounts with their spurs and sped away across vacant lots at a dead run.

It was entirely dark when the two Rangers pulled to a halt in a little grove of cottonwoods just beyond the edge of town. They turned and looked carefully behind them, then swung from their saddles.

"Waal," Hungry drawled, "hyar we aire. If yore hand-holt hadn't slipped, we'd have got to sleep in a bed tonight."

"Yeah!" Rusty replied hotly. "Thet dippin' him like a scabby sheep was yore crazy idea. My stummick was all set fer a mess of real restaurant grub, too, an' now it's either eat another bait of sow bosom an' flapjacks or go back an' shoot thet doggoned marshal. What wouldn't I give fer a big hunk of custard pie with a lot of nice gooey on top of it. I'm so empty I could eat a whole one an' have room left fer a plate of ham an' eggs."

Hungry sighed and reached in his hip pocket for his battered plug of Bullwhackers' Delight. He sat down upon the end of a cottonwood log and thoughtfully gnawed off a huge chew. He was starting to shove the tobacco back into his pocket, when he suddenly sprang to his feet and looked across at Rusty.

"Uh-huh!" he grunted sharply. "We never once thought of what brung us hyar. Thet proddy marshal made me plumb fergit it. Wait!"

Hungry jerked off his sombrero and fumbled hastily beneath the leather sweatband. As he pulled out a bit of paper and carefully unfolded it, Rusty snapped a match on his thumbnail and shielded its flame with both hands. Crouching beside

the log, they read a badly scrawled message:

cap Roberts of the texitis Raingers.

yu had better send some of yore best men to Ancho plumb immejit. Some ornery theeves has been robbin stoars an makin off with cattle an hosses hear fer several months an this hear lunk headed marshal we got aint abel to ketch em. He is plenty long on shootin if he kin git somethin to shoot at but he is powerful short on branes. I heerd that our bank is due to be robbed any night so yu had better send someboddie quick to keep watch fer them theeves. This marshal cant ketch nothin but hes alreddy shot him a chineyman an an eyetalian feller an foar mexikins on suspishum so yu better git hear quick.

Yoars truley Gotch-ear Botts
Mayor of Ancho.

Hungry nodded grimly and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt beside him. "Waal," he drawled, "thet means we've got to go back. If thet marshal jumps us again, we'll hogtie him an' lock him in his own jail. Fork yore hoss, an' git ready fer some of thet custard pie yuh was cravin'."

Rusty was halfway to his horse before his lanky partner finished speaking. In another moment, both Rangers were in their saddles and galloping back toward town.

By riding cautiously behind the noisy saloons, pool rooms and false-fronted stores, they managed to reach the feed corral without being seen. When Hungry made certain that the marshal was no longer there, they led their horses inside.

"Waal," Hungry drawled as they turned toward the gate, "I reckon we'll take on a mess of vittles first thing. I hope we don't run afoul of thet plaguey marshal till we've et."

Rusty scowled and muttered a remark. "Aw rats!" he said grouchyly. "Why don't yuh just tell thet guy we're Rangers? Maybe thet'll quiet him down."

Hungry shook his head. "Nope," he grumbled thoughtfully, "I ain't ready to tell him yit. I read in a book onct whar it said thet if yuh was wantin' to find out somethin', not to let nobody know nothin'. We've got to let thet marshal keep right on thinkin' we're just a pair of stray cowhands. Thet way, we'll maybe stand a better chance to locate them thieves the mayor of this place was writin' about."

The two cowboy Rangers stopped just outside the gate and looked carefully in every direction. With their hands held close to their guns, they started warily up the street.

Keeping close to the ramshackle buildings and taking care not to show themselves in front of any brightly lighted windows, they kept going until Rusty spotted a small restaurant. They paused to make sure there were no customers in the place, then went inside and seated themselves at the oilcloth-covered counter where a Chinaman was busy slicing a loaf of bread.

"What kind of pie yuh got, feller?" Rusty demanded. "Talk fast. I'm so empty my innards is squeakin', an' I'm goin' to start by eatin' a whole one."

The Chinaman dropped his bread knife and looked up. "You likee pie?" he cackled. "Me gottee apple plie, aplice plie, lemon plie, goosebelly plie, custald plie, an'—"

"Thet'll do," Rusty cut in impatiently. "Just set us each a whole custard pie down here, then yuh kin put all the skillet yuh got on the stove an' start cookin' ham an' eggs. Hurry, feller!"

The grinning Chinaman hastily lifted a couple of big pies from the shelf behind him and shoved them across the counter. As he went flap-flap away to the kitchen, Rusty

sighed happily and pulled one of them toward him.

"Hot dog!" he chuckled as he tenderly picked up his pie and balanced it in both hands. "This is what I call eatin' what is eatin'! Fer two pins I'd quit this blasted gallivantin' around the country an' git me a job in a restaurant where I could do this all the time."

As Rusty talked, he and his lanky partner failed to hear a stealthy step at the door. The little Ranger was leaning over to take a careful bite out of the edge of the pie, when a sudden bellowed oath and the sharp click of Colt hammers sounded from behind them.

"So thar yuh aire, aire yuh?" came a wicked snarl. "Hands in the air, both of yuh! Reach!"

Hungry gave a startled grunt and jerked around on his stool. Rusty jumped and almost dropped his pie. With custard sticking to his freckled nose, he turned to find the marshal glaring murderously over a pair of cocked .45s.

"I said to git them hands up!" the infuriated marshal roared again. "Ducked me in thet hoss trough, did yuh? If I didn't have this badge on, I'd go ahead an' kill yuh. Make one phony move an' I'll do it anyhow. Hoist them dewclaws or I'll—"

Before he could finish, Rusty suddenly ducked and hurled his pie straight at the marshal's face. The thundering blast of the lawman's hastily fired guns made dishes bounce on the counter as the pie landed with a soggy plop that filled his hair and eyes with flying custard.

Another hasty shot hurled a stack of plates from the end of the counter as Rusty dived headlong at the marshal's legs and brought him down with a crash that shook the restaurant.

"Whoeee!" Rusty screeched. "Doggone it, thet's bustin' him! Grab his guns, Hungry! Grab 'em while I—"

Two more bellowing shots roared from the pie-blinded marshal's smoking guns, and there came a screech and a clatter of tinware from the direction of the kitchen as a stray bullet ripped through the thin partition and tore down the Chinaman's stove-pipe.

"Run!" Hungry yelled, grabbing Rusty's arm. "Yuh can't reason with a guy like thet! Git out of hyar 'fore he has the whole town swarmin' down on us!"

A wild shot grazed Hungry's shoulder and lifted a sugar bowl from the counter. Another shot ripped through the big coffee urn and sent a stream of hot coffee spurting out on the floor, as Hungry and Rusty leaped toward the door.

But, before they could reach it, a stocky, bald-headed hornet of a man sprang into the smoke-filled restaurant with a huge sawed-off shotgun gripped ready in both gnarled hands. With eyes snapping, he swung his shotgun muzzle to cover both Rangers.

"Elevate yore flippers, dang yuh!" he yelled, panting. "Dadburn yuh, if thet lunk-headed marshal ain't able to stop yuh, Gotch-ear Botts kin! It's lucky I heerd this rookus. Git them hands up 'fore I scatter yore blasted carcasses all over the place with this sawed-off!"

Hungry wrinkled his forehead and looked mournfully at his scrappy little partner. Rusty was bracing himself for a desperate try to dive in under the menacing gun, but Hungry sighed and motioned him back.

"Thet's better," the old hombre said as they slowly lifted their hands. "All right, marshal. Hyar's yere prisoners. Snap the handcuffs on

'em an' get 'em to the hoosegow where they belong."

Mouthing oaths, the marshal lurched heavily to his feet and wiped the custard from his eyes. "I ought to go ahead an' kill 'em!" he raged. "Keep 'em covered till I git so's I kin see."

He paused to shake a gob of custard from above his ear. He mopped his eyes again, then blew his nose and glared murderously. The next instant he gripped his guns as if he meant to shoot, but a sharp grunt from the mayor stopped him.

"All right," he said grudgingly. "Neck stretchin' will beat shootin' 'em. Stick yore hands out fer the bracelets. Yuh're both charged with resistin' an' officer, assault an' battery, assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder an' bein' members of thet robber gang thet's been doin' all thet stealin' round hyar. The judge ought to hang yuh twice fer all thet."

Grumbling and muttering threats, the marshal handcuffed Hungry and Rusty together and took their guns. He and the mayor then drove them through the door and marched them down the street to the jail where they were shoved into a stuffy little cell.

"Now, blast yuh!" the marshal gritted as he locked the steel-barred door behind them. "Yuh kin stay hyar till yuh quiet down. If the judge fails to hang yuh fer yore orneriness, I'm goin' to shoot yuh. Savvy?"

Rusty glared until the two men had clumped away through the passage. When the office door had slammed behind them, he whirled toward his lanky partner.

"Now yuh *have* fixed it!" he accused angrily. "Why didn't yuh just go ahead an' tell 'em we was Rangers instid of keepin' up this

crazy foolishness? Thet was the mayor thet wrote the letter we got. Yuh could have told *him*."

Hungry shook his head and smiled grimly. "Not yit," he drawled. "If it was to git out around hyar thet we're Rangers, we might never find them thieves we've come to hunt. I'm goin' to try handlin' this case like thet book said."

"Yeah!" Rusty yelled. "You an' thet blasted book gives me a pain in the neck. Fer two pins, I'd bust yuh in the eye!"

Still grumbling and glaring at his lanky partner, Rusty flounced down on the side of their bunk and jerked tobacco and papers from his pocket. Hungry yawned carelessly and began examining the barred window at the back of the cell.

Rusty had just rolled a cigarette and was reaching for a match when a sudden uproar sounded from outside. In a moment, the jail door crashed open and the marshal came in, driving five drunken ruffians along the passage. The hombres were soon herded into a cell near the two Rangers, then the marshal stamped noisily away.

Rusty scowled disgustedly and started to rake his match along the side of the bunk. But as he did so, Hungry hissed a low warning and shook his head.

Just then there came a sarcastic laugh from the other cell. It was quickly followed by a low hum of voices, which made Hungry frown thoughtfully and lean closer to Rusty.

"Don't make no noise," he whispered. "I got me a hunch thet them hombres ain't as drunk as they're lettin' on. They're maybe up to somethin' ornery. Listen close to what they're sayin'."

As Hungry turned and crept

noiselessly across the cell, Rusty slid from the bunk and followed him. They had just crouched against the bars when another laugh sounded from the darkness beyond.

"No," came a chuckling voice. "Thet fool marshal ain't got sense enough to come in out of the wet. So long as we keep makin' him lock us up before each job, he'll never git next to nothin'. If he ever does wake up, we'll fill his hide full of hot lead 'fore he knows what's happenin' to him."

As a rumble of guarded laughter sounded from the other cell, Rusty gripped his lanky partner's arm. "Did yuh git thet?" he whispered. "Fer once, I'm bettin' yore hunch was correct. Listen!"

Just then, there came a scrape of feet and a muttered oath. The two listening Rangers heard several sharp clicks which were followed by a harsh creaking sound.

"Waal," came another whisper in a strange voice, "he ain't never found them loose bars in this winder yit. We'll just leave 'em out till we git back. Yuh all ready? Let's go. This'll be our big job, an' thet fool marshal will swear thet he had us locked up in jail hyar. Nobody has ever suspicioned us yit."

Rusty dug his fingers into Hungry's arm. "Yuh hear thet?" he whispered tensely. "Yuh savvy what thet means? It means thet we've blundered right onto the very hombres thet we come here to hunt. Call thet fool marshal! Them polecats is gittin' out!"

Rusty started to let out a wild yell, but Hungry hissed a quick warning and gripped his shoulder. "Not yit!" he said softly. "Wait! Let me handle this."

At that moment, there came a loud grunt and another muttered oath. It was followed almost in-

stantly by a thud of feet outside. Both Rangers rushed to the barred window at the end of their bunk.

They were just in time to see the last of the five prisoners climb from the window of the other cell and drop to the ground. Without a pause, the hombres crept swiftly away in the pale starlight and disappeared around a corner of the jail.

"Now they're gone!" Rusty flared angrily. "Yuh crazy, bat-eared pelican, I should have gone ahead an' called thet marshal."

Hungry shook his head and his lips tightened grimly. "Yuh'd never git nowhar doin' thet," he drawled. "I'm bettin' them is the thieves we're after, but it'll take evidence instid of suspicion to convict 'em. Come on an' let's try to bust out of hyar. We're goin' to hunt us thet evidence now."

The lanky Ranger instantly turned, threw back the hay-filled mattress on the bunk and began wrenching at the cheap coil springs beneath it. Working swiftly, he twisted off a piece of the stiff wire and hurried to the door. While Rusty tugged at the barred window, Hungry hurriedly bent a small hook on the end of the wire and began gouging in the heavy, old-fashioned lock.

Moving the tough wire from side to side and sliding it back and forth, Hungry worked carefully. Rusty was just starting to wrench a leg from the bunk when the lock slid open with a rasping click.

"All right," Hungry called softly. "Never mind tryin' to open thet winder. We ain't got a minute to lose. Let's go!"

Hungry pulled the door open and stepped out into the narrow passage. With Rusty close beside him, they hurried warily to the marshal's stuffy little office and crept inside.

By the light of a match which

Rusty held cupped in both hands, they found their own guns hanging upon nails in the corner. With the familiar weapons again in their holsters, they climbed through the window and dropped to the ground in the darkness beside the jail.

The two Rangers darted a hasty look in every direction, then turned and ran to the rear of the building. They had just reached the shelter of an old adobe wall a short distance away when they heard a muffled yell and a bellowed oath from inside the jail and recognized the bull voice of the angry marshal.

"They're gone!" came a savage howl. "I told yuh I seen a light over hyar. The whole kit an' bilin' of 'em has broke out on us! I don't mind losin' them skunks I had, but them two pie-singin' outlaws had a hangin' waitin' fer 'em. Outside an' let's find 'em, Gotch-ear! This time I'm shootin' 'em on sight!"

Rusty grinned and nudged his lanky partner. "Did yuh git thet?" he whispered. "Keep goin'. If thet doggoned hombre locates us an' tries to start another rookus, I'm goin' to see kin I knock a horn offn 'im."

Hungry made no reply. With his eyes fixed upon the dimly lighted street which was now almost deserted, he slowly munched his big chew of tobacco and stared thoughtfully.

"Hey!" Rusty flared impatiently. "I said, let's go. We ain't goin' to find them five hombres standin' here. Come on 'fore we tangle with thet fool marshal again!"

Hungry acted as if he had not heard. Rusty was starting to grab his arm when he suddenly spat a stream of tobacco juice to one side and nodded grimly.

"I got it," he drawled softly. "I been figgerin' whar them five hombres went. Yuh remember what one

of 'em said about this bein' their big job? Waal, thet can't mean but one thing—the bank. Let's go!"

At that moment, the marshal and the mayor came rushing around the corner of the jail. Hungry and Rusty crouched motionless against the adobe wall until both hombres had hurried back toward the street, then they rose and crept warily away.

Keeping a close watch in every direction, they circled around behind a row of old sheds and corrals until they were nearly to the other side of town. There, they turned aside and made their way carefully toward the two-storied adobe bank building which they had noticed earlier in the evening.

They had just crouched behind some old boxes and barrels to watch, when the marshal and the mayor passed along the plank sidewalk in front of them.

The mayor was again clutching his sawed-off shotgun, and he and the marshal were glaring at the doorways on both sides of the street.

When the two hombres were a safe distance away, Hungry and Rusty sat up and looked carefully at the bank. They stared for a moment, then Hungry bit off a fresh chew of tobacco and they settled themselves to watch.

A tiny piano was banging discordantly in a dance hall a short distance away. After a while it stopped, and a few cowboys straggled past on their way from town. Soon lights began to go out along the dusty street.

Rusty was beginning to fidget impatiently. He muttered a remark and looked toward the little restaurant where he and Hungry had meant to eat. He was just starting to pull tobacco and papers from his pocket when Hungry suddenly

hissed a warning and touched his arm.

"Look over thar!" Hungry said sharply. "Over by them sheds. I think I seen somethin' move. Yeah, thar it is again. Watch close!"

With both hands sliding to his holstered guns, Rusty stared in the direction his lanky partner was pointing. Almost instantly a crouched figure slipped stealthily from the darkness beneath the nearest shed and darted across the narrow patch of starlight toward the back of the bank. Another dim form followed close behind him, then another and another. When the watching Rangers had counted five of the hombres, Hungry nodded grimly.

"Waal," he drawled softly, "my figgerin' was correct. Thar they aire. Gotch-ear Botts was right in the letter he wrote. The bank is due to be robbed."

Rusty started to lunge to his feet, but Hungry grunted a quick warning and pulled him back. Hungry smiled quietly and motioned for him to sit down.

"Take it easy," Hungry said. "Give 'em time to break in an' git to work on thet safe. We ain't got no evidence yit. I want plenty to convict 'em 'fore we close in."

Rusty glared. "You an' yore blasted evidence!" he said disgustedly. "Yuh crazy pelican, if evidence was dynamite, yuh've got enough to blow 'em to the moon. Ain't break-in' in a bank enough? Thet's what they're doin' now."

Hungry nodded and calmly spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt beside him. He examined his guns and carefully tested their hammers, then shoved both long-barreled weapons loosely into his holsters.

Just then there came a faint tinkle of glass which was quickly followed

by a slight creaking sound. Soon a dull glimmer of light appeared inside the bank. It glowed for a moment, then winked out.

"All right," Hungry said softly, and he again slipped his guns from his holsters. "Keep yore eyes everlastin'ly peeled an' be ready to shoot. Some of them hombres is goin' to be watchin'."

The two cowboy Rangers crept from their hiding place and circled hurriedly around the back of the nearest building. They paused at the edge of the plank sidewalk for a hasty look around them, then raced across the narrow street and darted behind the nearest shed. Without a pause, they turned toward the bank.

Moving with extreme caution now and keeping their guns poised for lightning use, they crept slowly along behind the old sheds. Suddenly Hungry hissed a soft warning and they crouched down in the shelter of a broken wagon.

There, just in front of them, they could see the back of the bank. One of the shuttered windows had been forced open, and they could see a faint glimmer of light inside.

"I reckon none of 'em has seen us yit," Hungry whispered. "If they had, thet light would've been put out. All right. Now we'll—"

A muffled boom drowned the sound of the lanky Ranger's voice, and a vivid flash lighted the windows of the bank with a split-second glare. Gripping their guns, Hungry and Rusty lunged forward.

"The safe!" Hungry said quickly. "Them hombres has blowed open the safe in thar. Come on!"

Both Rangers rushed around the old wagon and headed at a run for the back of the bank. They were nearly to the open window when a

sudden treacherous shot roared from inside and Rusty felt the wind of a bullet that cracked past his face.

"Look out!" Hungry yelled as his and Rusty's ready guns blasted a split-second echo. "Keep 'em from duckin' out thet winder till I bust thet door. Hold 'em back!"

With more bullets cutting the air around him, Hungry sped on toward the door. As he threw his shoulder against it in an effort to burst it open, little Rusty dropped to one knee behind an overturned barrel and fanned his .45s at the flashes of gun flame inside the window.

A bullet plowed across the top of the barrel and stung Rusty's face with flying splinters. Another kicked up a spurt of dust beside him, and a third hit the top of his hat as Hungry again threw himself against the door.

Yells and oaths sounded from inside, and bullets smashed through the flimsy door panels as some of the cornered hombres tried savagely to down Hungry with a chance shot.

"Git to the front, men!" came a muffled bawl. "It's our only chance! If we're caught, our game's up! Run 'fore the place is surrounded!"

Another hasty shot tore splinters from Rusty's barrel, then came a rush of feet toward the front door. As Rusty bounded erect and raced toward the window, the sudden thundering double report of a sawed-off shotgun and a crash of shattered glass sounded from the direction of the street.

"Hyar they aire!" came a loud whoop, and both Rangers instantly recognized the angry voice of Gotchear Botts. "Come out of thar with yore hands up, yuh consarned pinheads of misery, or I'll blow yore gizzards out! Dadburn yore ornery hides, I'll—"

The bellowing crash of fanned guns drowned the sound of the mayor's voice, then came another blasting roar of the sawed-off shotgun and a chorus of murderous yells.

At that moment, Hungry jumped back and hurled himself at the door in a last desperate effort to burst it from its hinges. As it crashed open and pieces of the broken lock flew in every direction, Rusty threw a leg over the window sill and climbed into the room with guns blazing.

A bullet broke the sash above his bobbing head as he ducked aside and threw himself into a fighting crouch against the adobe wall. Another ball splintered through the sagging door and grazed Hungry's arm as he staggered inside.

"Look out, men!" came an excited shout. "They've got us cut off from both directions. Upstairs, all of yuh! We kin hold 'em back from thar! It's our only chance!"

A rush of feet instantly sounded toward the rickety stairway which was partly hidden by a low partition. The two Rangers fired at a dim form which loomed in the fog of powder smoke, then rushed forward in an effort to head the hombres off.

"Keep goin'!" Hungry called to Rusty. "We'll corner 'em yit! Keep right behind 'em!"

Broken glass crunched underfoot as they raced toward the stairway, and a splintering crash sounded from the front of the building as they sped upward after the fleeing hombres. With bullets and buckshot whizzing around them, they reached the second floor and dived behind a stack of old boxes and discarded furniture.

"Doggone!" Rusty yelped as a bullet parted his hair and slapped into

the adobe wall behind him. "Keep yore eyes on thet stairway. If thet meddlesome marshal an' the mayor gits up here, we'll have the whole mess to fight. Watch out fer 'em!"

Bullets were now slashing through the boxes and rubbish all around the crouched Rangers. A double charge of buckshot and slugs from the foot of the stairway hit the low ceiling and showered them with plaster.

Just then Hungry caught a glimpse of one of the robbers and broke his shoulder with a lightning shot. As the fellow staggered and went down, there came an angry whoop and a clatter on the stairway.

"Look out!" Hungry called. "It's the mayor an' thet marshal. They're comin' up hyar to horn in."

Rusty jerked hastily around, and an angry snarl twisted his freckled face. He darted one quick look at the dim forms on the stairway, and snatched up an overturned flour barrel which lay on the floor beside him. With more bullets whizzing around him, he rose on one knee.

As the marshal's dirt-streaked face appeared above the level of the floor, Rusty suddenly jammed the old barrel down over his head and gave him a shove. With a muffled cry, the lawman toppled backward on top of the puffing mayor, and both went bumping and rolling to the floor below.

"Thet's fixin' 'em!" Rusty yelped. "Maybe thet'll teach 'em to keep their meddlin' noses out of this!"

Rusty ducked back beside his lanky partner and began swiftly cramming fresh cartridges into the empty chambers of his guns. But he had scarcely started, when a thrown chair grazed the top of his red head and the four remaining bank bandits charged from the smoke-filled darkness in a desperate effort

to down them and again reach the stairway.

Instantly locked in a death struggle, Rangers and outlaws battled savagely back and forth with their clubbed guns. Neither now dared to risk a shot for fear of hitting each other.

A Colt barrel grazed Rusty's left ear and thudded against his shoulder. A knife slash split Hungry's shirt sleeve and cut a small gash along his arm, but the lanky Ranger staggered the knifer with a back-handed blow and hurled him headlong over the stair railing.

As the man landed with a thud, there came a wild shout and a mad scramble from below. The mayor's sawed-off shotgun sprayed the ceiling with buckshot and slugs.

"All right, you fellers down thar!" Hungry yelled as he hurled a second man over the stair railing. "Stay whar yuh aire an' handcuff these jaspers as we fling 'em down to yuh. These is them robbers yuh was huntin'!"

The marshal bellowed a startled oath. The mayor was trying again to climb the stairway when Rusty cracked a third bandit above the ear and dropped him on top of Botts.

The fourth outlaw hastily threw down his guns and surrendered. Rusty was starting to tie the man's hands when there came a grunt of pain and an angry oath from below.

"Hey, you up thar!" shouted the mayor. "Stop flingin' them jaspers down hyar on top of us, dadburn yuh! Who in heck aire yuh?"

Hungry had just carried his wounded victim over to the top of the stairway. He spat a brown stream into the pile of rubbish and looked down.

"Us?" he drawled lazily. "Oh, we happen to be a couple of Rangers thet

Cap'n Roberts sent to nab them robbers yuh wrote about. I might've told yuh sooner if yore marshal hadn't got so plaguey hosstile. Git out of the way. We're comin' down with two more prisoners."

A match instantly flared up from below. Driving one prisoner in front of them and lugging the other, Hungry and Rusty started down the rickety steps. When the marshal got a good look at Rusty, he let out a hoarse yell.

"You!" he howled, glaring. "It's them two fresh cowhands we had locked up! An' thet little bow-legged runt is the one thet hit me in the face with a pie! Dang him, I'll—"

"Aw, shet up yore blasted yap-pin'!" the mayor cut in grouchily. "Light thet lamp over thar an' let's see thet these rapscaillions is tied so's they can't bust loose no more."

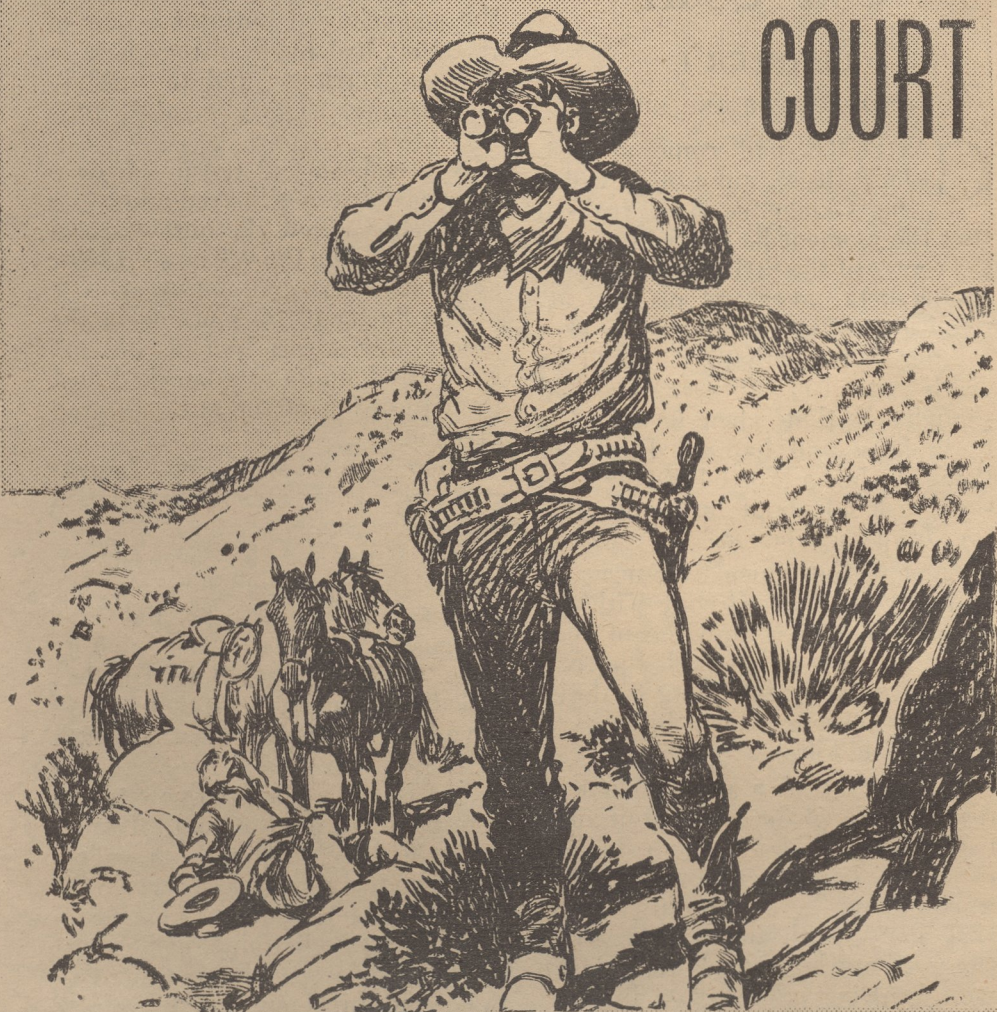
When the light cast a yellow gleam about the littered bank and the mayor got a better look at the wrecked safe, his eyes widened and he growled an oath.

"Look at thet, will yuh?" he raged. "An' thet was supposed to be a burglar-proof safe, too!"

Rusty nudged Hungry and winked. "Yeah!" he said, grinning. "Well, ain't it? Feller, what more proof of burglars would yuh want than that? Come on, Hungry, an' let's git back to thet restaurant again. This time I'm startin' with two pies, an' I'll cripple thet marshal if he shows up while I'm eatin' 'em. Let's go."

Hungry an' Rusty lived up to the Ranger code thet time all right! Rangers allus have to git their man—an' gittin' evidence is part of the job of catchin' a criminal. Yuh'll meet up with Hungry an' Rusty soon ag'in in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

THE OKLAHOMA KID'S COLT COURT



By LEE BOND

Author of "Hoss Thieves Strike The Lazy K," etc.

A six-gun was the prosecutin' attorney—an' the blood verdict went to the hombre who had the fastest draw.

The Oklahoma Kid's Colt Court

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE FOR THE KID.

CAPTURE had come at last. Jack Reese, more often called the Oklahoma Kid, realized that the moment he walked out into the center of the little clearing where his blankets and camp tools lay scattered about the day-old ashes of a campfire. Or perhaps it would be death instead of capture! The Kid thought of that when he saw the tense faces and hate-filled eyes of the men who had come bursting from the brush all about him, guns jutting from their hands.

A lot of those men were nervous, and nervous fingers toying with the triggers of cocked guns meant that some hombre might kill the Kid without actually intending to do it. Or perhaps some of those bitter-eyed gents would kill deliberately.

Outlawed, with a small fortune in rewards offered for his dead-or-alive capture, the Kid was fair game for the sort of hombres who would shoot a man simply for the reward money that man's death might bring. And these men who ringed the Kid in with bristling guns looked like the bounty-hunting type. Despite their numbers, they were afraid of him. He could see it in their eyes, in the way they trembled and exchanged glances.

The Kid stood tense and silent, afraid even to speak lest the sound of his voice throw some hombre into trigger-jerking nervousness. Chills played along the wiry little outlaw's spine, and some of the color drained from his cheeks. His beady black eyes thinned, and a white splash

showed at each outside corner of his narrow, fiercely down-curved lips. His supple hands hung poised above the age-yellowed butts of a pair of .45s that had made history here in Arizona Territory, and the nostrils of his long, slightly crooked nose flared.

A breeze sucked down the deep canyon, fluttering the red-and-white neckerchief about the outlaw's lean throat, molding the yellow shirt close about his chest and sinewy arms.

The flutter of his clothing in the breeze almost cost him his life. A gun blared, and a slug knocked dust from the brim of the outlaw's gray Stetson.

"Here, no more o' that, Lannagan!" a stocky man with grizzled mustaches roared.

Jack Reese saw the tension lessen among the men about him, and felt breath whistling past his lips in a hot gust. It had been close, awfully close. If that stocky oldster hadn't yelled just when he had, there would have been other guns blasting death at the outlaw.

The Kid's eyes shifted now to the man who had fired at him. Lannagan, the hombre had been called. And suddenly anger darkened the Kid's hard-bitten face. The slab-sided man who had fired at him was showing yellow teeth in a snarl of rage, and his bony forefinger still toyed with the trigger of the gun he had cocked again.

The Oklahoma Kid knew Tip Lannagan by reputation, and had seen him from a distance a good many times of late. This wild section of mountains and mesas and canyons was part of Lannagan's vast 3 Bar 3 range. The Kid had drifted in here a week ago, in his eternal search for a place where he could find at least some small measure of safety from the guns of bounty hunters and from

Ed Sparks, a deputy sheriff from Two Forks, who hated the Oklahoma Kid.

But yesterday Ed Sparks and a big posse had swooped suddenly into this canyon, and the Kid had been lucky to escape with his life when the deputy and the men with him opened fire. The Kid had ridden that gantlet of blazing guns, and had finally lost his pursuers in a rocky country miles to the north. He had been forced to quit his camp without grub and bedding, however, and hunger had driven him back to the camp this morning.

"Yuh gents ease off on gun triggers," he said, speaking for the first time. "I've got better sense than to buck as many guns as I'm facin' now."

A mutter of relief ran around the semicircle of tense men.

"Yaller!" Tip Lannagan spat harshly. "Yuh're as yaller at heart as that shirt yuh're wearin'."

"I never tried to shoot a man down cold like yuh just tried to shoot me, Lannagan," the Kid replied stiffly. "What's the idea, fella? I ever do anything to yuh?"

"Don't give me none o' yore lip, blast yuh!" Lannagan snarled. "Fer two cents I'd smash yuh betwixt the eyes with a bullet."

"Cut out the war talk, Tip," snapped the dumpy oldster with the drooping mustache. "Ed Sparks left me in charge o' things, so I'm orderin' yuh to cool down. The Oklahoma Kid ain't offerin' no fight. Until he does there'll be no more shootin'. That plain?"

Lannagan's wedge-shaped face turned almost purple, and from beneath ragged lumps of thick brows his pale-blue eyes glittered hotly.

"Me takin' orders from a blasted nester!" he howled. "Or maybe I ain't takin' yore orders, Dalt. The

way to handle a sidewinder like we've ketched is to kill the thing before it fangs some of us. Why waste taxpayers' money tryin' this ugly cuss?"

"It's up to the law to convict an' hang the Oklahoma Kid," Dalt snapped. "An' after we found them split mail sacks buried here at his camp, there shore ain't no doubt about him gettin' hung. There was a dozen people killed when that train went off into the arroyo where the bridge had been dynamited, so—"

"What in thunder are yuh talkin' about, old-timer?" the Kid cut in sharply.

"Innercent, ain't yuh?" Tip Lannagan sneered.

"Frank, yuh an' Tony get the Kid's guns," Dalt ordered quietly. "We can palaver all we want after that killer is disarmed."

A couple of hombres edged forward, plainly uneasy at approaching the Kid. But the ugly little outlaw barely noticed them as they stepped up close and lifted his big six-guns from soft holsters. The Kid's brain was racing, trying to make sense out of what he had heard.

"Look here, Dalt," the outlaw snapped, "yuh might at least tell me what yuh meant by sayin' somethin' about buried mail sacks found here at my camp, an' a train bein' wrecked."

Tip Lannagan lurched forward, his six-gun lifted as if he meant to slam the Kid across the head with the heavy weapon.

"Quit tryin' to play innercent," the rancher snarled. "Blast yore ugly hide, I'll knock—"

The six-gun started down, and into Lannagan's eyes came a look of gloating. But the 3 Bar 3 owner's voice suddenly ended in a wheezing gasp.

The Oklahoma Kid had weaved nimbly aside, letting the whistling gun barrel slide past his head. The Kid's left fist smashed Lannagan's flat belly a blow that drove the breath from the man, ending his threatening speech. Lannagan doubled over, bringing his head down sharply. And the Oklahoma Kid grinned a twisted, unnerving grin as he saw the tall man double up.

The outlaw pivoted, ignoring the yells of men who rushed toward him. His right fist smashed out in a blow that had his weight behind it. The knuckles popped against the point of Tip Lannagan's jaw, and the lanky rancher crashed over backward, tripping three of the other men who were leaping at the Kid. Tip Lannagan's eyes were rolled back until they showed only white. He was out cold.

The Oklahoma Kid blew on his knuckles, and glared at the hombres who were leveling guns at him from short range. "Keep yore heads!" he snapped at the crowd. "I had to wallop Lannagan, or get my skull cracked. I don't know what he's got against me, an' don't care. All I'm interested in right now, Dalt, is hearin' yuh explain about them mail sacks and the train yuh claim was wrecked. I've got gumption enough to see that the mail sacks likely mean that the wrecked train was robbed. But what about it? When did it happen? An' where did it happen?"

"Yuh're a cool one, young feller," Dalt said after a long pause. "Blamed if yuh don't act like yuh didn't know a thing about that low-down trick of wreckin' an' robbin' the train."

"Don't let him fool yuh, Harry," a gangly man snorted. "Depity Ed Sparks swears that the Oklahoma Kid, there, is the jigger who dyna-

मित that bridge an' wrecked the train so's he could rob it."

"Talk sense, will yuh?" the Kid growled. "Where an' when did this happen?"

"Three days ago," Harry Dalt said. "A bridge out on the flats twenty or thirty miles east o' these mountains was dynamited. The crack Western Rocket plunged into a deep wash when the bridge give way under it. There was a dozen people killed, three times that many hurt. Likely some of the injured have died by this time. The baggage car was robbed of mail sacks an' sixty thousand dollars in cash."

The Kid groaned. "An' yuh . . . yuh say there was some of the slit mail sacks from that train found buried around my camp here?"

"Eight of 'em," Dalt snorted in his jerky manner. "Locks still on the sacks. Registered mail, likely. Which means it was valuable. No tellin' how much them mail sacks held in cash money. No check-up on that yet. But it's the death o' them people that has got the country wild. Kid, yuh'll swing as shore as there's a trial."

"I'm no blasted murderer," the Kid rasped. "That bug-eyed Ed Sparks accuses me of every crime that's committed in this country. The flitter-witted fool has told yuh hombres a lot of crazy stuff, I can see that. But we'll not argue that point now. Show me where the mail sacks were found around my camp."

The Kid was shown. A flat rock which lay only a few feet from the dead ashes of his campfire was lifted by one of the men. The Kid's beady eyes bulged, and a groan of dismay squeezed past his lips.

Someone had dug a deep hole beneath that rock. And from the hole came eight tightly rolled mail sacks. They were spread out by the man

who took them from the cavity, and the Kid saw that each stout sack had been slit open.

"Yuh was pretty slick, Kid," a man pointed out. "Yuh carried away the dirt yuh dug out from beneath this rock. My hunch is that yuh threw the dirt in the crick down yonder, where it would be washed plumb away."

"Who found these cached sacks?"

Something in the Kid's voice made the men about him grow tense. They gripped their guns a little tighter at sight of his set face and slitted eyes.

"Tip Lannagan found these cached sacks, didn't he?" the Kid blazed at the silent captors.

"Yuh better smooth yore hackles, young feller," old Harry Dalt warned. "Do yuh no good to start a ruckus. Yeah, Tip Lannagan found them hidden mail pouches. Seen a few clods'o' fresh dirt beside that rock, an' lifted it up. There was the sacks."

"I thought so!" the Kid rasped.

For the first time the ugly little outlaw really studied the men about him. And as he read most of the brands his thin lips curled back from big, crooked white teeth in a grimace of disgust.

With the exception of old Harry Dalt and three others, the hombres about the Kid were a bleary-eyed bunch of loafers such as might be found around Two Forks or any other other good-sized cow town. Ed Sparks had evidently routed those ornery looking jaspers from saloons, pool halls and other such hangouts when he started gathering a posse. The Kid noticed that Harry Dalt and the three men who were obviously cowpunchers, stuck close together, and eyed the slovenly gang of town bums darkly.

"So Ed Sparks left yuh hombres here, figurin' I'd come back for my

camp stuff, did he?" the outlaw asked Dalt.

The old man nodded jerkily, tugging at his drooping mustache with gnarled fingers. "Yup," he answered. "After we lost yore trail in that rock country late yesterday, we all went back to the 3 Bar 3. Sparks got the notion that yuh might come back to the canyon for yore stuff. He sent my three punchers, here, an' me back with these other hombres to lay hid in the brush."

"Lannagan is beginnin' to bat his eyes," one of the punchers beside Dalt grunted. "We better get this Oklahoma Kid headed back to the 3 Bar 3, boss. Lannagan will be sweatin' to put a slug into the Kid after what happened."

"I can't savvy Tip's hate for the Kid," Dalt muttered.

"There's maybe some things about that jigger's hate for me that I don't understand, either," the wiry little outlaw grunted. "But I'm beginnin' to get a few ideas, at least. An' what them ideas spell out is liable to make a headache for Lannagan, if he don't watch his step. Between yuh an' me an' the gatepost, Dalt, I've got a hunch Lannagan knew them split-open mail sacks was under that flat rock before he ever showed yuh gents they was there."

CHAPTER II.

UNEXPECTED AID.

IT was noon when the Oklahoma Kid's captors herded him into the 3 Bar 3 ranchhouse yard. What the Kid had said out there in the canyon about Lannagan perhaps knowing that those mail pouches were under the flat rock before he pretended to discover the fresh dirt near the stone had taken root in the minds of these men who guarded him.

Harry Dalt's face wore an uneasy scowl now, and the outlaw could tell by the oldster's actions that he was plenty on edge.

The Kid had learned that Dalt owned the Slashed Z outfit, which lay to the south of the much larger 3 Bar 3. He had also learned that Harry Dalt trusted Tip Lannagan just about as much as a man would trust a blind rattler. Dalt had said nothing to convey this feeling, but the way he and his three cowboys stuck close together, kept their hands on their gun butts and their eyes on Lannagan and the town bums, told the Kid that Dalt and his punchers were more than half expecting trouble.

The outlaw had fed the feeling of uneasiness by heckling Tip Lannagan. The 3 Bar 3 owner was white-lipped with fury now as he stepped down off his sweaty horse and stood facing the others.

"Not a one o' yuh are to come inside my house," he growled at them. "Dalt, yuh're stuck up because Ed Sparks give yuh authority to boss this pack o' tramps. All right, boss 'em. But keep 'em outside my house. That goes for yuh an' yore would-be cowboys, too. Wait here for Sparks, like he ordered, if yuh want. But I'll shoot the first man that starts up on my porch. That plain, yuh razor-backed nester?"

Lannagan's eyes were bloodshot slits, and his thin lips trembled with the rage that burned through him. Tip Lannagan was killing mad, and the Oklahoma Kid saw his lean right hand paw the empty holster at his thigh. There was a lump on Lannagan's jaw where the Kid's fist had landed, and the outlaw grinned faintly as he saw the 3 Bar 3 owner feel tenderly of the bruise.

"Cool off, Tip," old Harry Dalt grunted. "No sense in raisin' yore

bristles like this. An' quit callin' me a nester. I was runnin' cattle in these hills before yuh ever seen this country. I got along with Lon Drake, who built up the 3 Bar 3 while I built up my Slashed Z. Good neighbors, Lon an' his wife. Then Lon died, an' in six or eight years Buck Lannagan, yore daddy, come along an' married widder Drake."

The old fellow bit a hunk from a plug of tobacco, tongued the quid into his cheek, and spat thoughtfully.

"I tried to get along with Buck Lannagan, same as I'd always got along with Lon Drake. But Buck had the orneriest disposition ever I seen a man have. The button he brought in here with him was sorta seedy an' underfed. Yeah—yuh was a mighty sorry-lookin' specimen when yore booze-fightin', loud-mouthed daddy fetched yuh into the country, married widder Drake, an' settled down to raisin' yuh. Yuh growed up fast enough, though. An' with yuh growed a disposition that yuh got from yore daddy. Better watch that temper, Tip. It'll get yuh into a peck o' trouble, some day."

"If yuh was ten years younger, I'd pull yuh off that hoss an' tromp yuh flatter than a boot sole," Lannagan snarled. "So I've got a bad temper, have I? Well, yuh ol' goat, if yuh had as much to worry yuh as I have—"

Lannagan broke off, cursing under his breath. A door had creaked, and out onto the broad porch stepped a slender, well-dressed young fellow who eyed the mounted men quietly.

"Quite a gathering we have here," the stranger smiled. "And isn't the . . . ah . . . pleasant-looking fellow there on the chunky bay horse our much-sought-after friend, the Oklahoma Kid?"

The Kid's beady eyes clashed with the cool brown eyes of the well-dressed hombre who stood leaning lazily against one of the solid porch posts. The outlaw saw impudence in the man's smile, and there was something mocking in the stranger's unflinching brown eyes.

Tip Lannagan whirled on him. "None of yore high-toned stuff around here right now," he yelled. "Get to blazes back in the house an' poke yore nose into one o' them po'try books yuh're so fond of. This ain't no party for a pink tea pet like yuh to horn into."

"My charming brother is his usual self, only more emphatically so," came the cool retort. "Tip, you amuse me. Since when did you get the notion that you could order me about as if I were one of the . . . the cow servants about the silly place?"

Tip Lannagan looked as if he might explode. The Oklahoma Kid grinned coolly, and his beady eyes studied the lounging young man with a keener interest. Then the Kid's glance dropped to Tip Lannagan, who stood purple-faced and glowering.

"Who's the stuffed shirt who thinks a cowboy is a cow's servant, Lannagan?" the Kid asked mildly. "Or don't yuh want to admit that yuh know him?"

"Yuh dry up!" Lannagan snarled. "One more yap outa yuh, Reese, an' I'll pull yuh off that horse an' lam the smartness out o' yuh."

"An' get a mate to that lump on yore jaw, maybe," Harry Dalt cut in sourly. "Kid, turn yore bronc an' ride off to them trees around the pond, yonder. Lannagan says we can't come in an' rest in the house, which is his business if he feels that way. Head for them trees, Kid."

There was something too urgent

in the old man's voice for the Kid to miss the fact that he was being taken away from there for some reason other than shade hunting. But, at the moment, Jack Reese was too busy studying the pinkish face of the young man on the porch to wonder about Dalt's words.

The curly brown head had snapped erect. The sneering half smile had faded from the man's lips. Into those brown eyes leaped angry lights, and the Kid saw the dudish gent's soft right hand make a single, nervous gesture toward a coat tail. Then the young man smiled again, as his hand dropped to his side. But blistering hate remained in those brown eyes, and the Kid frowned in puzzlement as he turned Shorty, his chunky bay, and rode out to where a grove of cottonwoods circled a horse pond.

"Yuh about started somethin' back there, young feller," old Harry Dalt growled as they dismounted. "I'll be glad when Sparks gets here an' takes charge o' yuh."

"What did I about start?" Reese demanded.

"A killin'," Dalt snapped. "Another dig or two like yuh handed him would have sent Tip Lannagan into the house after another gun. I took his gun away before he woke up, out there in the canyon, to keep yuh from gettin' killed. An' yuh blamed near brought it on after all my pains."

"How come?" the Kid asked, yawning. "I only asked Lannagan who the stuffed shirt was."

"That was the danger," Dalt snorted. "If Lannagan had said that the fancy-dressin', sneering young hellion on the porch was Bob Drake, his stepbrother, yuh'd likely have ribbed him about it. An' just one dig like that would set that crazy temper o' Lannagan's off like a ton

o' dynamite. He hates Bob Drake, an' if I don't miss my guess, Bob is due to get a bait o' hot lead pumped into his hide one o' these days. Widder Drake kept her son, Bob, in fancy schools, wouldn't let him soil his purty hands doin' a man's work, an' made a fool out o' him."

"So that's it," the Kid said. "This widder Drake had a son when she married Buck Lannagan. Buck had a son, too, an' the boys never hit it off."

"An' the funny part of it is, it ain't Tip's fault," Harry Dalt scowled. "When Buck Lannagan an' his wife both died of pneumonia a couple o' years back after they got throwed out o' a buggy while they was crossin' the crick between here an' Two Forks, Bob Drake come home from some furren country acrost the sea where he'd been studyin' somethin' or other. Tip, givin' the devil his due, done his best to be friends with Bob. But no luck. The young whelp sneers at Tip an' the cowboys, makes all manner o' fun o' 'em, an' shore thinks he's some punkins."

"Tip Lannagan don't look like the sort who'd take that kind o' monkey business," the Kid observed. "Maybe if he knocked the daylights out o' that swell-headed Bob feller they'd get along better."

"That's the big rub," Dalt muttered. "After he seen it was no use to try gettin' along with his step-brother, Tip set out to give Bob a fist whippin'. It happened in town, after Bob had took on a few snorts of forty rod. An' that young jack-ass is a past master at sneerin' after he's had a few drinks."

"Well, how about the scrap?" the Kid prompted.

"Wasn't much scrap," Dalt shrugged. "With blamed near the whole town lookin' an' listenin', Bob

Drake whipped Tip Lannagan worse than any man I ever seen whipped. An' all the time Drake was sneerin' an' belittlin' Tip."

"That pink-cheeked dude whipped a tough hand like Lannagan?" the Kid demanded sharply.

"He liked to beat Tip to death," Dalt growled. "But it was the sneerin' an' name callin' that hurt Tip worst. I can understand Tip goin' bad after that humiliation. He ain't set foot in Two Forks since."

"So Lannagan has gone bad, eh?" the Kid asked.

Harry Dalt started nervously, shot a keen glance at the Kid, then at his three Slashed Z cowhands, who were squatting on their heels close by. He got red in the face, cussing under his breath as he tugged at his mustache.

"Did I say that?" He looked down at the ground as he talked. "Well, forget it if I did, Reese. I ain't peddlin' gossip. An' only gossip has anything to say about Tip Lannagan maybe bein' behind the rustlin' that's goin' on in this section. Yuh've got trouble enough o' yore own, feller, without worryin' about what's said against Lannagan. If Tip had kicked over the traces an' started doin' a little rustlin' an' maybeso a bushwhackin' or two, nobody can prove it."

Before the Kid could pump the scowling old rancher any further, one of the shifty-eyed town bums came sauntering up. The bums had drawn off to themselves, and the Kid had noticed that they were whispering and looking uneasily toward the 3 Bar 3 ranchhouse.

"Me an' these other fellers is hon-gry, Dalt," the ratty-faced fellow who had just left the other bums whined. "We been talkin' it over, an' figger yuh an' yore punchers can handle this here prisoner we took.

With Lannagan refusin' us rest an' grub, the others an' me figgered we'd go back to town."

"Suits me," Dalt told the fellow shortly. "Yeah, hit a lope to Two Forks, if yuh like. My boys an' me can handle Reese. Sparks an' the 3 Bar 3 cowhands ought to be back before much longer anyhow."

The Oklahoma Kid fished a roll of bills from his trousers pocket, peeled off a twenty, and tendered it to the rat-faced bum. A clawlike hand snatched the bill, and the bum's eye fairly popped out as he saw its denomination.

"That'll buy drinks for the bunch o' yuh when yuh hit Two Forks," the outlaw told the slovenly crowd.

The rest of the gang almost mobbed the man who held the money. They squealed and clawed and fought over the bill like half-starved coyotes battling over a fresh kill, and Harry Dalt had to stop the thing before it turned into a brawl.

"Take that money an' clear out o' here," he ordered.

The bum flung into saddles and hammered away down the trail, the whole pack of them still swarming around the man who had hung onto the twenty-dollar bill.

"What was the idea in handin' out money like that to them whelps?" Dalt said, scowling at the Kid.

The outlaw's eyes were veiled by drooping lids as he lit a slim cigarette he had just rolled. "Yuh don't look like a man to begrudge that bunch a few drinks, Dalt," he parried.

"An' yuh wouldn't hand out twenty cart wheels without some blamed good reason for it," the rancher came back.

The Kid grinned through a fog of blue smoke, and his right hand slid lazily down his leg as he seated himself, back to the bole of a cotton-

wood tree. The Kid's fingers dipped inside his boot top, touching the butt of a small, four-barreled Remington pistol which rode in a specially constructed holster.

He'd had good reason for handing out that twenty, all right. He knew that the money would take those bums toward the nearest bar as fast as horses could carry them. Which left four men to guard the Kid instead of a whole gang.

The Kid's fingers tested the little gun in its holster, and loosened it, so that the clumsy appearing but deadly weapon would slid free at a hurried tug. Harry Dalt and the three Slashed Z cowhands were watching him narrowly at the moment, still wondering why he had parted with twenty dollars so readily. But they would, the Kid told himself silently, calm down after a minute or two, and maybe one or two of them would doze.

The outlaw's nerves grew tense. Something bitter welled up within him and ran like fire through his veins. He had no quarrel with these men, and didn't want to hurt them if he could help it. But there was a hang noose waiting to crack his neck if he let himself be taken to jail. These men had helped capture him, and would turn him over to the law for hanging in the belief that they were doing the right and proper thing. They were signing his death warrant if not actually executing him. And the Kid knew he would shoot some of them if he had to before he'd sit there like a knot on a log and let them hold him until Ed Sparks arrived.

He meant to make his bid for freedom the moment the four relaxed their present vigilance over him. He'd bluff it through, if he could, by getting the drop with that hide-out gun. But if Harry Dalt and the

other three crowded him, tried to shoot him down—

"Reach, yuh four gents. Steady, or these guns start talkin'. Kid, straddle yore hoss an' ride over this way. Move, feller, while the movin' is good. An' collect hardware to fill yore holsters."

The voice came from a clump of willows across the little horse pond. It was a brittle voice, authoritative and cold; a voice the Oklahoma Kid could not remember ever having heard before.

Harry Dalt and his three cow-punchers stiffened, hands slapping pistol butts as they gaped foolishly toward the willows.

"I ain't kiddin' yuh sports!" that gruff voice snarled. "Jerk a gun, an' yuh'll die before the thing leaves leather. Hustle, Kid."

The Kid hustled. He jerked the guns from the holsters of Dalt and the others, threw the shooting irons out into the horse pond, and grinned at the cursing, red-faced men who stood helplessly glaring at him. Then the Kid took his own guns from the pockets behind Dalt's saddle, dropped them into the holsters at his thighs, and swung aboard his chunky, bald-faced bay.

CHAPTER III.

BUSHWHACKER.

TWO hours after the Oklahoma Kid rode away from the horse pond there at the 3 Bar 3 Ranch, he and the man who had given him a hand, stopped on top of a big ridge. They swung out of their saddles, letting their sweating horses blow.

Behind them lay ragged country, broken by ridges and canyons. They had come up through that expanse of rock and brush and shale at a hard pace, for behind them some-

where Harry Dalt and his three cow-punchers came doggedly.

The Kid and this man who had given him help when he sorely needed it had sighted the four men who trailed them a time or two. But they had gained on their pursuers, and had ridden over ground that would tax the ability of the most expert sign readers. But as he stood there atop the ridge the Oklahoma Kid was not thinking of those who followed him. He was studying the man who stood beside him, and the outlaw's nerves were tense and strained.

His rescuer was short and thick and round—a powerfully muscled man who had the solid appearance of a granite boulder. The Kid knew he was an officer of some sort. He had known it from the first minute he looked into the brittle eyes and square-jawed face. Lonesome Smith the stranger had called himself. But the Kid knew that the name was assumed just as he had known that the man was an officer.

"Well, I reckon we gave that bunch the slip, Kid," the man who called himself Lonesome Smith grunted. "They'll potter around tryin' to read our sign until dark, then give it up. I reckon we ain't got much to worry about now."

"Not from Dalt an' his boys, no," the Kid drawled. "But Ed Sparks an' the 3 Bar 3 punchers are up this way some place, Smith. We'll have to keep close watch. Badge-toters have a habit o' showin' up at the most unusual times. An' some badge men are slick with their tricks, too."

The chill blue eyes of the man beside the Kid slitted and burned into the outlaw's own level glance.

"The way yuh said that sounds like yuh don't cotton to badge-toters much, feller," Smith suggested. "I can understand yore hate for the

breed. Me, I'd as soon kill off a badge man as not—if he got in my way. I—”

“How come yuh bought chips in the game down there?” the Kid cut in. “How come yuh, a plumb stranger, give me a hand?”

Smith's hard face turned a little pink. But he twisted his lips into a grin, and did a fair-to-middlin' job of looking like a salty hombre who was ready to spit into the devil's eye.

“I seen yuh was in a bad spot,” he said, shrugging thick shoulders. “I sloped down to the ranch, aimin' to trade hosses—while nobody was lookin'. There's a Nevada sheriff on my back trail, an' I want to hit the border soon as possible. But I'm never in too big a rush to lend a feller owl-hooter a hand. So when I seen what yuh was up against, I figgered maybe I'd ought to give yuh a lift. Yuh needed it, from what I seen an' heard.”

“Uh-huh, maybe I needed help,” the Kid said quietly. “So yuh're on the dodge, too, are yuh?”

“Me?” Lonesome Smith smirked. “Say, I've been on the dodge since I was big enough to straddle a hoss, almost. But yuh know what? I'm sick of the lone-handed game I've always played. I know yuh're a lone wolf, too. Yuh never run with anybody, so when yuh pull off a big job like this train thing there's nobody but yuh to say who done it. An' that train job was a slick one! Dynamitin' the pilin' loose under that bridge, then lettin' the train stack up, shore saved yuh a lot of worry. That way, one man could swing the deal fine. So—”

“So for a gent who just got down here from Nevada ahead o' a sheriff, yuh seem to know a lot,” the Kid butted in coldly.

Smith swallowed hard, and his face turned brick-red.

“I . . . I've been down in this country a week or so,” he said lamely. “I run into a gent over at a ranch west of here who told me about the country bein' up in arms because the Oklahoma Kid had wrecked an' robbed a train. It sounds sorta crazy, maybe. But the minute I heard about a feller bein' slick enough to turn such a deal, I says to myself, ‘There's the first huckleberry I've heard of that has got what it takes to make a real pard.’ Yes, Kid, I figured it that way right off the bat.”

“Yeah?” The Kid's voice was a humming sound.

“An' yuh're the first gent I ever offered to team up with, too,” Smith blurted. “Workin' together, we could clean up big. I ain't got nothin' in the way of cash on me now. Things got tough up Nevada way, an' that sheriff put me on the run. But I'll side yuh in anything yuh name, feller, from here on out. I ain't tryin' to cut in on this haul yuh've just made. That's yores. But I'd like to see that dinero yuh took off the train. It's been a long time since I seen that much money in one lump.”

The Kid shrugged wearily, a mingled feeling of anger and hopelessness sweeping over him. This man, who called himself Smith, was disappointing and amateurish at this business of trying to win the confidence of the outlaw he had helped. He was so crude in his attempt to win the Kid's confidence that anyone could have seen through his scheme. He was too eager to declare a friendship, and his talk of teaming up with the Kid was such an old trick of officers who figured to keep their real identity hidden that the outlaw wanted to tell the

man flatly that he was wise to him, and that his schemes were not apt to work. But the Kid kept silent, pretending not to be aware that Smith was studying him out of coldly calculating eyes. That blocky, hard-jawed fellow would be bad medicine in a scrap, and the Kid wanted no trouble if he could avoid it.

"Yuh've got quite a rep down in this end of the desert country, Reese," Smith broke a long silence. "The few fellers I've talked to tell it scary about yuh an' them guns yuh pack. How long yuh been on the owl-hoot trail?"

"Too long," the Kid answered bitterly. "An' don't go believin' all yuh hear, Smith. Deputy Ed Sparks from Two Forks sees to it that I get blamed for every rotten crime that is committed in this country."

"This country is gettin' too hot for yuh," Smith decided instantly. "I'm some older than yuh, an' maybe know the ropes better. So why not listen to me?"

"I'm listenin'," the outlaw drawled.

Smith's eyes gleamed, and he licked nervously at his lips.

"Why not get that dinero yuh took off the train an' come down into Mexico with me?" Smith lowered his voice impressively. "After this train job, the country here will be hotter for yuh than ever. Why not hit acrost the line with me an' hole up until this deal blows over? Yuh'd have sense enough to bury that loot some place instead o' carryin' it around with yuh. Why don't we go dig it up, then slope into Mexico?"

The Kid found himself suddenly fighting back a grin. He had been racking his brain for a way of getting rid of this man who called himself Lonesome Smith without exciting the stranger's suspicions.

To have denied that he had had

anything to do with the wrecking and robbing of the train a few nights ago would simply have made Smith more suspicious than he already was. And for the Kid to have told this masquerading officer that he was not a cold-blooded murderer, would have brought only a sneer from Smith. But the Kid thought he saw the way to get rid of Smith for a while.

The outlaw had the feeling that Tip Lannagan was either the man who had wrecked and robbed that train, or that Lannagan knew who had done the horrible thing. And the Kid wanted to get back to the 3 Bar 3 as soon as possible.

He squinted up at the westering sun, then brought his glance back to Lonesome Smith, who was watching him sharply.

"Yuh know, Smith, this country is getting mighty hot for me," the Kid said, scowling. "Maybe it *would* be a good idea if I drifted to another climate for a spell."

"Now yuh're talkin' sense," Smith approved much too heartily. "We'll dig up this loot yuh got off the train before we leave, eh?"

"I'll get at that loot if I can," the Kid nodded. "But I'm goin' alone to see about it. Maybe the time ain't right. Or maybe I can't get to it for a day or two. But I'll take a pasear by myself soon as the sun goes down, an' see what can be done."

If the Kid had had even a faint notion that this stolid fellow beside him was not an officer of some sort that notion would have been dispelled now. The outlaw had worded his speech in such a way that it sounded as if he were actually admitting that he had the loot hidden some place, and meant to go after it. And as he spoke the Kid was watch-

ing Lonesome Smith without appearing to do so.

Smith's face turned almost white, and hate blaze from those hard eyes. The Kid saw the hombre's hands tremble against gun butts, and knew that this man who called himself Lonesome Smith wanted to jerk those weapons and start using them.

"What's the idea?" Smith growled finally. "Don't yuh trust me, Kid, after I went an' got yuh loose from them men down at the 3 Bar 3 Ranch?"

"I never laid eyes on yuh until today." The Oklahoma Kid almost snarled the words. "Yuh helped me out of a tight spot, an' I'm thankful for that. But when I go tryin' to get my hands on that train loot, feller, I ride alone. Do yuh think I'm a plumb greenhorn?"

"Meanin' just what?" Smith rasped, and his hands tightened over gun butts.

"Meanin'," the Kid told him coldly, "that I'd have to know yuh better before I'd take yuh along on the kind of a trip I'm makin' to-night. If yuh're the salty owl-hooter yuh claim to be, yuh can see my point. If yuh can't see my point, then we'll part company here an' now. An' I wouldn't go liftin' them guns any higher out of leather, Smith."

The Kid's hands had seemed only to twitch, yet those hands held cocked .45s now, and the six-shooters were trained unwaveringly on Lonesome Smith's solid body.

Smith's jaw sagged, and for an instant fear sprang into his eyes. Then he grinned sheepishly, let his guns fall back into holsters, and spread his hands slowly.

"I never seen guns come out of leather as fast as yuh just shucked them cutters," he grunted. "An' it's

my fault. I see yore point about goin' after yore cache alone. But—yuh'll meet me later?"

"I'll meet yuh later," the Kid replied. "If I don't, Smith, it'll be because I stopped a chunk o' lead."

"What are yuh drivin' at?" Smith demanded brusquely. "How come it's dangerous for yuh to go after that cache of yores?"

"If I could get my hands on the loot, wouldn't I be a fool to split with any other man who maybe figured he had a claim to part of it?" the Kid countered.

Smith looked startled, then suspicious.

"Looky here, Reese," he growled. "Yuh can't stuff anything like that down me. The fireman and the mail clerk on that train both seen the lone bandit who hopped into the baggage coach an' looted it. So did a couple o' dozen passengers see that bandit as he crawled out of the wrecked coach, loaded down with stuff he had stole. Yuh can't tell me there was more than one man pulled that job."

"An' yuh can't tell me that yuh're a newcomer in this country," the Kid snapped. "Yuh know too much for a man who just dusted in here ahead of a law pack."

"I . . . I heard things, that's all," Smith stammered uneasily. "A feller on the dodge has to keep his ear to the ground. Yuh ought to know that."

"I do," Reese admitted grimly. "We'll let it pass, Smith. Right now we'd better make tracks over to a mesa I know about. We'll hole up until dark, then I'll go see if I can collect that loot without gettin' shot to doll rags."

"So yuh didn't pull the train job all by yore lonesome, after all," Smith muttered. "Had a man or two help-

in' yuh, eh? An' now yuh aim to double-cross whoever helped yuh swing that job."

The Kid grinned bitterly, but offered no reply. He turned to his horse, tightened the cinches, and mounted.

Smith mounted, too, and they rode for almost a half hour in complete silence, working their way up a boulder-strewn, brush-grown ramp toward a ragged line of towering bluffs which stood bleak and foreboding against the sharp blue of the sky.

"Yuh're a close-mouthed cuss, Reese," Smith offered finally. "I see yuh don't aim to say anything about the men who helped yuh pull that train job. But if yuh aim to try double-crossin' them gents, yuh're liable to need help. Better take me along."

The Kid wanted to laugh. This masquerading badge-toter who called himself Lonesome Smith, was getting plenty uneasy. It showed in his nervous movements, in his squinted, probing eyes. He was beginning to realize just what a tough spot he had got himself into. He had pulled that fake rescue, down at the 3 Bar 3, and was, in the eyes of the law he represented, guilty of aiding a notorious outlaw to escape. And Smith was beginning to see now that the Kid might intend simply to ride on his way when darkness came.

To insist upon accompanying the outlaw too strongly would arouse the Kid's suspicion, to Smith's way of thinking. Yet if he let the Kid get away from him there would be the devil to pay when he faced his superior, United States Marshal Joe Drain, down at Phoenix, and explained what had happened.

The man who called himself Smith fingered the deputy U. S.

marshal's badge which was pinned inside his trousers pocket, and seriously wished that he had not tried this trick of winning the Oklahoma Kid's confidence by rescuing the Kid as he had done.

As the badge-toter sat hunched there in the saddle, trying to think of a way out of this dilemma, the Oklahoma Kid was watching him, guessing just about what went on in the fellow's mind. And as the Kid saw something akin to desperation creep into the officer's face, he knew that he was in for trouble unless he watched his step.

"I've said enough to make this badge-toter think I'm guilty of wreckin' an' robbin' that train," the Kid reasoned. "Now he's got it into his head that maybe I'll take the loot an' skip the country, which would leave him in a bad fix. Unless I keep an eye on that jigger, he'll get the drop on me, slap handcuffs on me, an' take me to jail rather than take the risk o' havin' me skip the country an' leave him holdin' the sack."

As if to strengthen those thoughts which were running through the wily Kid's brain, the officer beside him suddenly reined in, his right hand dropping to gun butt while his left flung up and back hauling hard on bridle reins. But, instead of riding on a pace or two before fully understanding what was happening as Smith had, no doubt, figured he would, the Oklahoma Kid's own left hand flung up and back, bringing his chunky bay bronc sharply up. And the Kid's right hand sprang down and up, to level a cocked .45 at Smith before that amazed hombre could get his own Colt free of leather.

The eyes of the two men met—Smith's wide and startled, the Kid's slitted and coolly mocking. But be-

fore either of them could speak a bullet hissed past their bodies, struck a boulder just beyond, and screamed away into space, the echo of its wailing drowned by the rifle that had hurled it.

The Oklahoma Kid reacted with a speed that proved his acquaintance with such salutations. He flung backward over the rump of his bay, and both his hands were gun-filled as he lit crouched on wide-planted feet.

"Hit the dirt, Smith!" the Kid barked. "With both yuh an' that sniper to watch, looks like I've got my hands full. Hit the ground before a slug hits you. Don't sit there like— Blazes!"

The rifle spoke again, and suddenly Smith swayed to the right. His pawing hands seemed useless, for they skidded from the saddlehorn he tried to clutch, and the masquerading officer who had given himself the name of Lonesome Smith, crashed into a patch of brush.

The Oklahoma Kid ducked quickly when he felt the flaming carress of a bullet that brushed his cheek.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KID'S DISCOVERY.

LONESOME SMITH was badly wounded. The slug had struck him high in the shoulder, smashed the collar bone, and torn the thick muscle at the back of that left shoulder. Only the man's name was not Smith. The Oklahoma Kid found the badge in the hombre's pocket, and found papers in a worn wallet which told him that this wounded man's name was Jerald Ernest McRune, deputy U. S. marshal.

The Kid whistled at sight of the name. Jerry McRune, famous man hunter. Then the Kid's surprise changed to blazing anger, and he left

the wounded McRune lying still and unconscious in the shade of the boulders to which he had dragged him.

"That jigger who done the shoot-in' was on the opposite slope over yonder," the outlaw growled. "Good shot, that skunk. He hit McRune, an' blamed near tallied me."

There was a welt across the Kid's right cheek where the rifle slug had brushed him lightly. He ran slim fingertips along the welt, and his eyes studied the slope across the little canyon which lay brush-choked and crooked below him.

The Kid had bandaged that ugly wound in McRune's shoulder, which had taken him almost half an hour. The deputy marshal had been conscious at first, but had fainted dead away when the Kid did the best he could toward setting that shattered collar bone. McRune seemed to be sleeping now, for his breathing was deep and regular, and his skin had lost that dead pallor the pain had brought to it.

The Kid had figured, when those rifle slugs first began blistering the air about him, that Deputy Ed Sparks had sighted him, and was trying to tag him at long range. Sparks was a rattle-headed sort, apt to pull dumb stunts instead of planning his actions coolly. But Sparks had not done that sniping. The lanky cuss was neither a bushwhacker nor a coward.

Sparks, the Kid knew, would have been across the canyon and steaming up this slope long ago, bellowing his lungs out for the Kid to surrender. Sparks had more nerve than brains. Whoever had done that snipping had more brains than nerve.

That the bushwhacker would be gone now the Kid doubted not at all. He showed himself plainly,



The Kid slid out along the wall, moving swiftly yet silently, for to his ears came a mutter of voices.

stepped to his horse, Shorty, and took a pair of powerful glasses from a bulged saddle pocket. His beady eyes searched the ragged slope across the canyon through those powerful lenses for a long time. He had seen the rifle's smoke puffs, and now the lenses brought the spot from which those puffs had come amazingly close for the outlaw's inspection. The rifleman had been in a water-gouged pocket near the rim of the ridge as he did his shooting, where a tangle

of brush almost hid house-high boulders.

"There's a spring in that pocket," the outlaw muttered. "That sniper was in there, where him an' his hoss would be hid by the brush an' boulders. But who in blazes was he, an' why would he open up on me an' the deputy marshal like he did?"

The Kid pouched his binoculars, swung up into the saddle, and cut across the canyon. He found two bits of evidence which both excited

and amazed him. The first thing he discovered was that the hidden rifleman had worn flat-heeled footgear of some sort.

The rifleman had stood in the very edge of a seep spring, where a number of his footprints showed plainly. The heel prints were too broad, and the sole marks not curved enough to have been made by the shoes of some gambler or other man who spent most of his time in towns. Yet those prints were too long and narrow and gently rounded at the toes to have been put there by the coarse brogans of a farmer or shepherd or the rock-defying boots of a miner or prospector.

Deeply puzzled over this strange type of footgear he could not readily visualize, the Kid stood up, instinctively tracing the line of vision the unknown gunman had used in shooting at him. But in lifting, his eyes stopped suddenly on a little clearing at the base of the slope below the seep spring.

The Kid stared for a moment, then whirled with a muttered exclamation, bounded into Shorty's saddle, and rode down the slope to that little clearing. There was a shovel sticking up in a freshly turned mound of earth, and the Kid saw as he reined quickly to a halt that a small, almost square hole had been dug in a strip of sandy soil.

He sprang down from the saddle, keen eyes searching. He saw footprints in the fresh earth, and recognized them instantly as the prints of ordinary cow-country boots. The high heels had bitten down into the soil, and the soles of the boots had left clearly defined prints.

"One big feller, an' one little jigger," the Kid muttered tensely. "At least one of the hombres who done this diggin' had big feet, an' the

other one had medium-sized boots on. I wonder—good gosh!"

The Kid's voice ended with a yip. He had turned away from the pit, eyes instinctively following the double line of boot prints toward a mesquite clump beyond the little clearing. And now the Kid was bounding toward that brush, his eyes riveted on a cloth sack.

"Another one of them slit-open mail sacks," he panted as he stooped and snatched the bag up eagerly.

But the bag was not slit open. Bulky objects rattled dully inside the stout fabric as the outlaw lifted it. The lock was still intact at the mouth of the sack, and the Kid knew suddenly that it had been dropped accidentally.

"By gosh, McRune an' me blunder smack onto them train bandits!" the Kid decided excitedly. "They had the loot, and the mail sacks that they hadn't opened and planted at my camp was buried yonder where they dug the hole. The bandits were here, diggin' up their booty when McRune an' me blundered along. Two men were down here. A third was hid up at that seep spring, where he could see all over the country. The gent at the spring was a lookout. When he started shootin' up McRune an' me, the two gents down here got in a hurry an' dropped this sack."

The Kid mounted and rode back to where he had left the wounded officer as fast as the brush and boulders and steep slopes would permit. He found McRune conscious, but a very sick man. Yet McRune's hard eyes kindled at sight of the mail sack, and his pallid lips stretched into a grim line as the Kid dismounted and tossed the mail pouch down upon the stony earth.

"The loot, eh?" McRune's voice

was a husky whisper. "Yuh kept yore word—after all. So that's the loot yuh murdered innocent people to get yore hands on. Reese, yuh're lower—"

The man caught himself, cursing through twitching lips as he realized that pain caused him momentarily to forget his rôle of Lonesome Smith, owl-hooter.

Reese squatted beside the wounded man and met those flinty eyes in an unwavering stare. "I had no more to do with that train wreck-in' than yuh did," he said flatly. "Ever since I had to slam lead into a high-handed cuss down in Oklahoma a few years back an' take to the tall uncut to keep that devil's friends from doin' me in, I've been hounded an' hated an' hunted like some rabid animal."

The Kid broke off, touching match flame to a slim cigarette that his supple fingers had fashioned.

"I've done a few things that maybe a right pious an' law-abidin' citizen wouldn't do," he went on grimly. "But I've never stolen anything from an honest man. Nor have I ever turned my guns on a man who wasn't tryin' his best to do me in. I'm not a murderer."

The eyes of McRune were squinted from pain and the uncertainty that was in his mind as he watched the lean, brown face of the outlaw.

"Tryin' to whitewash yoreself, Kid?" he asked slowly.

The Kid lifted one shoulder in a cool shrug. "Nope," he answered. "Just wanted yuh to know where I stand in the deal now that I've got the upper hand, McRune."

The officer jerked violently at the sound of his name, but the movement brought blinding pain to his torn shoulder, and he lay back,

breathing hard, while sweat beaded his paling brow.

"So yuh went through my pockets," he husked finally. "A snoop like yuh would do that!"

"The only new information the papers gave me was yore name," the outlaw snorted. "I knew yuh for a badge-toter the minute I laid eyes on yuh. It's written all over yuh, McRune."

The officer cursed through set teeth, and his good right hand pawed feebly at the empty holster against that thigh.

"Yuh're lyin'," he said finally. "Yuh didn't spot me for a badge man. Yuh was bringin' me here, aimin' to dig up this loot, like yuh'd promised. I got the notion that yuh aimed to give me the dodge, come dark, an' made a mess of my own plans by tryin' to catch yuh nappin' an' get the drop on yuh."

The Kid began talking quietly, explaining what he had found on his trip to the opposite side of the brushy canyon.

"The loot was buried out there," he finished. "Yuh an' me stumbled up just when the gang was diggin' the stuff up. The lookout opened up on us. Yuh're hit pretty bad, but not fatal, if yore luck holds good. I got this bullet burn across my cheek."

McRune's eyes went a little wide as he saw, obviously for the first time, the swollen ridge across the Kid's cheek.

"Bullet mark," he gasped. "By thunder, they *did* try to get yuh, too. Kid, I . . . I can't figure this all out."

"There's plenty about it that I don't understand," the Kid admitted. "But one shore thing is, McRune, I've got to get yuh to a ranch, where a doctor can be called to look

after yuh. Yuh've got a bullet-shattered collar bone, an' the flesh is badly torn."

"Kid, if yuh're not behind this train job, then who in blazes is?" the deputy marshal burst out. "Hanged if I'm not beginnin' to think I misjudged yuh. Yuh save my life, by tyin' up my wound. Now yuh talk of riskin' yore neck by ridin' to some ranch with me, so that I can have further help. It sounds crazy, considerin' how convinced I was that yuh pulled that train robbery. Still, I can't believe yuh'd help me as yuh have if yuh were as cold-blooded as the man who wrecked that train. But if yuh didn't do it, who did?"

"Tip Lannagan is my guess," the Kid said calmly.

McRune's jaw sagged, and his pain-sickened eyes bulged slowly.

"Lannagan!" he choked finally. "Reese, are yuh crazy?"

"Maybe," the Kid admitted, "an' again, maybe not."

He told how Lannagan had tried to kill him, without any apparent cause.

"All I can figure is that Lannagan planted those mail sacks at my camp, an' aimed to drill me before I could dig up an alibi," the outlaw finished. "But that's only guessin', I'll admit. Still, it's the only sensible reason I can think of for Lannagan wantin' to blast me down in cold blood."

"A man who'd wreck a train load of people for the loot he could maybe get wouldn't hesitate to shoot a man down," McRune admitted. "But yore case against Lannagan is mighty thin. It wouldn't hold water in any court, so—"

"The only kind of court it'll likely be tested in is Colt court," the Kid cut in coldly. "An' the way to get

at the testin' is to get to the 3 Bar 3. That's the closest ranch anyhow, so I'll take yuh there."

"Yuh're crazy to go nosin' around that spread," McRune scowled. "Yuh'll be shot by that salty outfit, Reese."

"Which is a chance I've got to take," the Kid answered. "I'll get yore bronc over here, an' get yuh into the saddle. I've got a small bottle of Bourbon that'll maybe help yuh stand the pain. It hurts like blazes to ride when yore flesh is ripped by bullets. I know."

CHAPTER V.

THE KID HOLDS COURT.

IT was past midnight when the Oklahoma Kid drifted on noiseless feet toward the big 3 Bar 3 ranchhouse. Because of McRune's condition, it had taken a long time to come down out of those hills. The wounded officer was lying in a thicket a quarter mile behind the corrals now, all but unconscious. Yet McRune had stood the trip without a whimper, despite the fact that he had passed out cold a couple of times.

The Kid wanted to get that very sick man here where he could be put to bed as soon as possible. But he wanted a chance to get at Tip Lannagan for at least a few minutes before he let anyone know about McRune.

As he rode down through the hills, the Kid had decided to simply single Lannagan out, get the drop on the man, and march him away from the place at gun point if such a thing could possibly be done. But the Kid had reckoned without realizing how much time it would take him to reach the place.

The ranch was as silent and dark

as the hills about it now, which certainly threw a kick into the outlaw's plans. Had he arrived while people were still up and stirring about, he would have had at least some chance of locating Tip Lannagan, and getting the drop on him without arousing the whole 3 Bar 3 crowd. But as things stood now, the Kid admitted that he was licked.

"Lannagan an' that swelled-up stepbrother of his will be sleepin' somewhere in the house, that's a cinch," the Kid reasoned. "But if I got inside, an' went blunderin' around in the dark, I'd likely collect a hunk of gun lead before—"

The outlaw's train of thought ended in a quick intake of breath. He had approached close to the north wall of the sprawling ranch-house, and would have continued his prowling little past that point if he hadn't caught the aroma of burning tobacco. Instantly alert, the Kid moved swiftly to a corner of the big house, pulled the Stetson from his head, and peered cautiously around.

Down a long length of gritty adobe wall from him he saw the shadowy end of the great porch which spanned the front of the house. The Kid saw, too, the glow of a small coal as some hombre dragged on a cigarette. Then the coal curved up and out, landing with a shower of tiny sparks in the yard. The Kid heard a deep yawn, and saw the shadowy figure of a man who got up from the end of the porch. Then another sound came to the Kid's ears, and he saw the shadowy hombre on the porch end vanish quickly back into the blackness of the shadows.

The Kid slid out along the wall, moving swiftly yet silently, for to his ears came a mutter of low voices.

"But I still don't like it, Dick,"

a coarse voice rumbled plainly as the Kid reached the porch, crouching almost flat against the sandy earth.

"Neither do I like it, yuh big ox," a thinner voice snapped. "But we're in too deep to back out now. Sparks ketched us with that loot we dug up. We've got to settle his hash. As fer that other jigger, I don't mind so much. He hates us, an' yuh know it."

"If anything goes wrong, we'll get our necks stretched," the heavy voice of the first speaker complained. "If we had the brains of two sun-addled gophers, we'd have lit a shuck out of here after the boss double-crossed us on that train job."

"Double-crossed us?" Dick's thin voice demanded. "Yuh must be loco, Nate. The boss is splittin' that loot even Stephen with yuh an' me, ain't he?"

"I didn't mean that." There was uneasiness in Nate's tones. "What I meant, Dick, was that the cuss made yuh an' me stay hid out in the brush with the hosses, claimin' he wanted to rob that train single-handed. If I'd knowed he had sneaked out there three or four hours early an' fixed that bridge so's the train would pile up like it did—"

"Shet up, an' come on here," Dick cut in peevishly. "No use bellerin' over split milk. The boss says it's safe now fer us to take them two nosy sons out an' shut their mouths fer keeps. Hyar, quit that stumblin' around. I'll light a match so's we can see to—"

The voice was receding. The Oklahoma Kid sprang up to the porch, eyes focused on the red flaring of a match. The feeble light showed him an open front door, and the backs of the two men who were moving away from him and on into the ranchhouse.

The Kid stooped, stripped the boots from his slender feet, and tucked them under his left arm, leaving his right hand and arm free to swing up a gun in case things went wrong. His pulse was hammering, and a rage burned like fire through his veins as he stepped into the house.

Nate and Dick were turning into a hallway from the big living room, and the Kid shuffled across the floor in his socks while he still remembered the lay of the furniture he had faintly seen. Then he was in the hallway, watching the two shadowy men move on ahead of him.

Another match sputtered, and the hombres down the hall waited until it was burning steadily before moving on. They turned a sharp corner, and the Kid almost trotted after them. When he turned that corner he was just in time to see the pair halt before a doorway at the hall's dead end.

The big fellow grasped the door-knob, and was twisting it when his much smaller companion blew out the match. But the door was opening now. Feeble yellow light painted the two men as they moved through the doorway and started sharply downward. The Kid heard their boots thumping wooden steps, but the door had been closed, and he had no chance to see much of what was going on.

He moved on to the door, drew his boots on carefully, and stood listening intently. The footsteps faded to a sulky whisper, then pinched off altogether.

The Kid tried the door, found that it opened noiselessly and easily. Then he went down those steps which slanted sharply, soundless as a mouse-hunting cat.

Halfway down the steps the Kid

stopped short and his beady eyes widened slowly. Out in a large basement room a lamp was burning brightly on an upended box. And sprawled within the lamp's mellow glow were two men, bound hand and foot, gagged by thick wads of white cloth. One of those hombres was Deputy Ed Sparks, the Two Forks officer who hated the Kid so violently.

Sparks was a gangly, rawboned fellow, with bulging brown eyes and a ragged brown mustache. He was squirming now, muttering through the gag in his ample jaws as he glared up at the two men who had just arrived. But the Kid, for once, gave Ed Sparks mighty little attention.

Instead, he stood there upon the steps, his eyes growing rounder with each second, while it seemed that the breath was slowly squeezed from his lungs. The other bound man was Tip Lannagan!

After hearing what he had, the Kid would have bet his own hide that the "boss" those two cutthroats he had followed had mentioned was Tip Lannagan. But that was obviously not the case, for Lannagan lay sprawled and helpless upon the cellar's dirt floor, glaring almost wildly at a spot off to one side.

The Kid's eyes shifted, and suddenly he felt the breath pump back into his lungs, and felt the needle-pricks of his nerves tightening to the straining pitch.

Seated upon the corner of a bin of some sort was Bob Drake, smiling calmly down upon the two helpless men. And as he sat there, silently taunting the two prisoners, Drake swung one foot sharply two and fro. The Kid's eyes dropped to the glittering of that boot, and he

felt a new, hotter burst of feeling pour through him.

The mystery of those strange tracks out at the seep spring was solved now. Bob Drake wore beautifully made English type riding boots, and the Kid needed but a single glance at their slim feet and low, broad heels to know who had tried to murder him and the deputy U. S. marshal that afternoon.

"It was quite unfortunate for you, Mr. Sparks, that your mount went lame today, causing you to turn back toward the ranch and leave your posse." Drake's voice was purring and cool. "You blundered upon my two friends and me at a very inopportune moment. I realize it was the sound of my rifle which drew you. A little score I'll have to settle with that infernal Reese. But you and my stepbrother come first. Tomorrow you two will be found out on the range, shot. Only my two trusted companions, here, and myself will know the answer to the puzzling mystery. So if you and my brother have finished resting we shall—"

"Why rush matters, Drake? No, leave the fancy cannon in its holster. Dick, yuh or Nate move a muscle, an' I'll blast yuh!"

The Oklahoma Kid's voice was brittle and cool, yet not hurried. He came on down the steps and into the room, a gun in each slim hand, his gray Stetson rocked far back on thick black hair. The Kid's lips held a twisted, bitter grin, and his beady eyes were the slitted, watchful eyes of a man who would look through powder smoke without a moment's hesitation.

Dick and Nate froze, eyes bulging as they stared nervously toward the waspy little outlaw. Bob Drake's face drained of color, and something

wild and desperate crept into his twitching eyes.

"You!" he croaked. "Reese, you fool, put those guns up. I can make it worth your while to keep your mouth shut about this. All you have to do is—"

With the agility of a gopher dodging a hawk, Bob Drake flung himself backward over into the bin. And, as Drake moved, a scream of rage shrilled from his throat, almost shattering the nerves of Nate and Dick.

The pair had shot their way out of tight spots before. The Kid knew that when he saw them fling apart, and saw their practiced hands slam down to gun butts. The Kid's guns blazed, and the chunky Dick, who was trying with a lashing foot to overturn the box which held the lamp, fell sprawling, a cry of terror on his lips as he felt a bullet-broken shin bone give way beneath his weight. Then the Kid weaved and dodged like a trained fighter, for lead was hammering at him from two angles.

The Kid missed big Nate with a brace of slugs when a bullet ripped the flesh along his own right flank. But he nailed Nate center with his next shots, and whirled even as the big jasper wilted, smoke-spewing guns chopping down toward the bin, over the top of which Bob Drake rested a fancy .45 and took careful aim.

As the Kid turned, a bullet slapped his left thigh, twisted him over sideways. He swiveled his guns sharply as he dropped to his knees, shooting from the floor's level.

The outlaw could see Ed Sparks and Tip Lannagan writhing madly, yet he had no time to see whether they were slipping out of bonds or not. A bullet ripped the hat from

the Kid's head, and he lurched to his feet, turning slowly because of the numb and throbbing feeling in his left thigh.

Then his bleak eyes shone with a merciless glare, and his trained hands brought those ivory-buttled six-guns into leaping, thunderous action.

A neat row of black dots appeared in the soft pine board at the top of the bin, and suddenly Bob Drake came up like a jack-in-the-box, clawing wildly at his chest, face contorted in a spasm of pain and rage. The next instant the shuddering knees which held Bob Drake went slack. He spilled out of the bin, rooted the dirt floor, and rolled half over, to lie twitching for an instant and then sag lifeless.

The Oklahoma Kid punched spent shells from his hot guns, reloaded the powder-heated cylinders, and limped to where Ed Sparks and Tip Lannagan lay wild-eyed and panting hoarsely through and around the gags they chewed. The Kid holstered his guns, leaned over, and yanked the gag from Lannagan's mouth.

"I reckon I owe yuh an apology—as well as maybe a kick in the ribs, Lannagan," the outlaw gritted. "After yuh tried to murder me to-day, I figgered yuh were the hombre who wrecked an' robbed that train, an' that yuh had planted them mail sacks out there, then tried to kill me so's the blame would always rest on me for the train job."

"Reese, I'm sorry about the thing I tried to do to yuh," Lannagan croaked. "But until I seen yuh an' Bob come face to face here at the ranchhouse, I figured *you* was the brains of that train job. I knowed he was mixed up in the deal, for he was gone all night the night of that

wreck. But I never give him credit for havin' the brains an' sand to do the thing his ownself. I didn't have any proof agin' Bob. But I knowed in my heart he was mixed into the deal, just as I've knowed, without bein' able to prove, that he's been mixed in the rustlin' that's been goin' on around here."

"I've got to get out o' here," the Kid growled. "I hear yore punchers yellin'. If they find me here they would—"

"Hold on!" Lannagan cut in sharply. "Kid, them riders o' mine are a salty lot, I'll admit. But outside o' Dick Harwell an' Nate Brant, the two yuh just blasted down, my other riders are square. They'll give yuh no trouble when they learn the facts."

Ed Sparks was about to explode, judging from his purple face, staring eyes, and heaving body. The Kid grinned faintly despite the burn of wounds as he stared down at his old enemy.

"Ed, I've wanted to see yuh roped and muzzled like this for a long time," he drawled. "Since Lannagan seems friendly, I'll stay a minute or two, an' enjoy watchin' yuh. Yuh rattlehead, do yuh still think I rattled an' robbed that train?"

"Bob an' them other two told Sparks an' me the whole thing, figurin' we'd never be able to repeat it," Lannagan growled. "Get me out o' these ropes, Kid, an' I'll bind up them wounds o' yores. Then we'll dig up that loot where it's buried over yonder in a corner of this basement. We'll be so busy we'll not have time to untie Ed for quite a spell."

Lannagan winked broadly as he finished.

"If yuh'll make them punchers o' yores behave, I'll get these ropes off

yuh, Lannagan," the Kid answered. "But there's a gent out back o' yore corrals who needs attention worse than I do. He's Jerald McRune, deputy U. S. marshal. We'll get McRune in here, then I'll drift yonderly before Ed Sparks manages to get that gag out o' his jaw and snap me. The way he looks right now,

I'd die o' rabies if the cuss even bit me."

The Oklahoma Kid is allus driftin'. On account of his owl-hoot past it ain't safe fer him to stay in one place very long. An' when he drifts he mostly drifts into some big gun-smoke adventure. Yuh'll be hearin' about him soon ag'in in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

TRAPPER'S TROUBLES

Two trappers, who had worked together in northern Canada for sometime, had arranged to meet in the northwest territories for the winter season. One of them, Carl Arhus, set out alone. He had arranged with his partner, Ole Loe, that he should come to their trapping grounds some time later, and bring along the camping equipment, winter clothing, and supplies of food. Ole misunderstood the agreement, and thought that his partner had said he would return after setting the traps and doing some caribou hunting, and then the two would go back to their camp together.

Arhus arrived at the camp, which was near Mackay Lake, in September. In one month he killed thirty-five caribou. Then he ran out of shells. Finding that Ole didn't show up, he had been very sparing with his provisions, but finally, the last bit was eaten. Still Ole didn't come. So Carl became anxious, fearing that some disaster had befallen his partner. He had never failed him before. But there was nothing to do but make the best of things. He was completely cut off from the world.

So the lone trapped began to feed on caribou, but he had no salt. He roasted the meat, and said afterward that it would have been fine if he had had some salt, and also a bit of bread. Likewise, a change of diet

would have been welcome.

As the weeks went by and Carl did not return, his partner and other friends became anxious, and asked for assistance to make a search for the missing man. Stanley Mac-Millan, of the Mackenzie Air Service flew out to the wilderness from Yellowknife and brought the veteran trapper back. He had killed thirty-five caribou before his ammunition ran out. At night, hungry wolves surrounded his tent and howled until daylight. All he could do to scare them off was to rattle his tin plates.

But another trapper was not so fortunate. One night in February last, he staggered into the cabin of W. Linklater in the Overflow River district in Manitoba, while a blizzard was raging. He was badly frozen, delirious, and unable to speak. Linklater gave him all the first aid he knew. The storm abated during the night, and he harnessed his dogs at daybreak and took the stranger to Mafeking. He arrived there at midnight, and wired to the R. C. M. P. to send a doctor. He was told that no trains were running, that the one plane they had was absent on an urgent call, and that the roads were impassable for horses and dogs.

Two days later, the plane came from Swan River, and took the sick man to a hospital at that place. He never recovered consciousness, and died after one day in the hospital.

SEÑOR LAW BITES A SIDEWINDER



By LIONEL E. I. DAY

In the death-dealin' bullets of that bloody feud, Drew Hardigan met the hardest gun test of his whole badge-totin' career.

Senor Law Bites A Sidewinder

THE face of young Marshal Drew Hardigan was somber with worry as he studied Yucca's dust-white main street, and cursed the sweat that bathed his bronzed, clean-cut features.

Ordinarily he would have been dozing in his office, away from the fierce heat, dreaming of the little cattle spread he planned to buy for himself some day—if he lived long enough! Only Sheriff Rawhide Singer's message to "come a-lopin' before hell busts loose" could have brought him from the county seat, back to Yucca, the town he hated with a bitterness entirely foreign to his nature. The old feud had burst into flame again. For some unknown reason, the Kingsleys were swearing to rid the earth of the Hardigans!

Drew Hardigan had seen his father and three brothers kick their lives away, one after the other, on the dusty streets of Yucca. From childhood he had been schooled by the Hardigan patriarchs to one great, gallingly bitter creed—anything that walked, crawled or flew bearing the Kingsley brand must be destroyed!

That was why U. S. Marshal Drew Hardigan hated Yucca. The town was the traditional battlefield of the feuding factions. Once every decade the latest crop of Kingsleys had met those Hardigans old enough to lift a six-gun, and killed or were killed in Yucca.

Drew and the younger Hardigans had no sympathy for a feud that had begun years back out of memory, but family pride kept them

from backing down before a Kingsley challenge.

The star, pinned to Drew's spotted calfskin vest, glittered in the late afternoon sun as he leaned on the hitching rail in front of the Cattleman's Bank and watched a drunken cowpoke weaving down the street. The waddy was hatless, happy, and shouting a range song replete with picturesque barroom words. At the other end of the row of rustic store fronts, an expensively outfitted rider was advancing slowly toward the Rio Drink Emporium, opposite the bank. Drew recognized Lon Hardigan, his first cousin.

"Trouble," he muttered, "is on its way!"

Drunken cowpokes were no unusual cause for apprehension, but when a Kingsley met a Hardigan, and one of them was drunk—there was promise of warfare and sudden death, especially with both the Kingsley and Hardigan clans in town, full force, and ready to throw lead at the drop of a hat.

Drew's eyes shuttled from the drunken Kingsley to Lon Hardigan. Sitting his saddle tensely, hand close to gun butt, the rider pulled rein twenty feet from Kingsley and waited for him to pass. But Kingsley, feeling his load of liquor, unsheathed his gun and loosed a thundering volley at the heels of Lon's mount. Drew cursed under his breath, straightened, and flipped his own hardware free. Lon triggered one shot from the back of his rearing, frightened mount. His slug kicked up dust far wide of its mark, and Drew darted a quick, astonished look across the street at Kingsley sprawled face downward and lay without stirring.

Drew advanced to the fallen cowpoke and rolled him over with his foot. There was a small, black-

rimmed hole over his right eye! Bobo Kingsley would never sing again. Drew wheeled and covered Lon with both cutters.

"Climb down, Lon. I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Bobo Kingsley!"

Lon stared in disbelief at the dead man, then flushed and moved for his gun. Drew's voice stopped him—few men were willing to match six-gun lore with the young marshal.

"Don't do nothin' foolish, Lon. Just climb down an' shag along with me to the calaboose."

Sullenly Lon Hardigan slid off his hull and stood while Drew disarmed him. They moved down the street toward the jail, and thiny dust devils danced along behind their heels.

"You know danged well it wasn't my slug that cut Bobo down!" Lon gritted after a moment. "Why are you takin' me in?"

"Because as soon as the word spreads, every Kingsley in town'll be huntin' your scalp. Whoever bushwhacked Bobo figgered I wouldn't arrest you on account of us both bein' Hardigans—an' that nothin' I could do would stop the hell fire then."

"It was one o' them Kingsleys!"

"Don't be a fool! What Kingsley'd gun down another? They'll be thinkin' a Hardigan did the killin' an' before this hot sun sets, I'll be lucky if I don't have to freight the corpses off the streets."

"If you think you can clap me in the jug for a murder I didn't do, you're loco!" said Lon fiercely. "I'm your blood cousin, an' every Hardigan higher'n your knee will come callin' on you inside an hour. You better—"

"That's the trouble with both the hotheaded clans!" Drew cut in bitterly. "Always too danged anxious to take the law into their own hands.

Somebody wants powerful bad to start trouble, an' till I find out who an' why, you're goin' to jail an' the clans can go jump! Marshalin' this foresaken spread is like doin' a jig in a nest o' sidewinders!"

Old Sheriff Rawhide Singer met them at the door of his office, eyes bulging with consternation.

"Lock him up, Rawhide, an' keep him here till I tell you to let him out."

"But Jehoshaphat, Drew, are you aimin' to commit suicide?" Rawhide gasped, running a hand through his sparse white hair. "Now you'll have both the Kingsleys an' Hardigans gunnin' for you!"

"Maybe, but lock him up anyhow. I'm goin' lookin' for a gent who wants trouble so powerful bad he's willin' to see this town wiped plumb off the map."

"Which gent?" Rawhide asked nervously.

"I dunno, but I'm sure findin' out!"

Drew strode out into the street and squinted his eyes against the sharp glare of the sunlight. He saw that Doc Kane was examining the dead man, and he walked toward him, his eyes searching the row of second-story windows that faced the street. They were shuttered. Around him, shopkeepers were nailing boards over their windows. Everywhere he read the trouble sign. Yucca was like a hound dog, trembling and skulking when the smell of death is in the air.

He drew abreast of Doc Kane and shot a question at him.

"What kinda gun you reckon throwed that slug into Bobo?"

"Rifle," the Doc announced shortly, cocking a shrewd eye up at him. "It had plumb too much kick to have been fired from a Peacemaker. Busted right through his

haid, an' kept on goin'. Reckon you'd find the slug close by if you was to look for it."

"More'n that, maybe," Drew said, nodding, "I'll likely find some dog-gone fancy gun-slingin' if I look far enough!"

He noted the position of Bobo's body, and worked backward along the line the bullet must have taken. His reckoning led him to a watering trough in front of the bank. He dug a chunk of lead from the rotted planks with the point of his knife and squinted across the street. The shot had been fired from one of the shuttered top-story windows of the Rio Drink Emporium.

"Kinda what I figgered," he grunted, "that half-breed, P  p   Rio, is back o' this, but what in blue blazes is he up to? He's too slick a hombre to play such a dangerous game unless the stakes are high—higher'n a man would imagine!"

He moved toward the bat wings of Rio's big saloon, but Doc Kane stopped him.

"I'm havin' the body took to the undertakin' parlor, an', son—don't bite off a hunk that'll choke you. Bobo wasn't worth losin' a marshal like you on account of. Looks to me like Rio is out to even his old score with you. That slick greaser ain't forgettin' it was you who salivated his ornery brother for holdin' up the stage."

Drew shrugged, but a smile of appreciation touched his lips. "If I'm gonna bite, doc, it's gotta be a big hunk—an' I'm sure gonna bite! I ain't never backed away from marshalin' as I seen fit, an' I ain't gonna make this the first time."

"Good luck, son!" said the doc, slapping him on the back. "We're all rootin' for you."

Drew nodded and mounted the steps of the Rio Drink Emporium.

He eased the set of his guns in their molded holsters then kicked the bat wings open before him.

The air was heavy with smoke, and the babble of coarse voices dwindled sharply as he strode into the room. He spotted half a dozen Kingsleys huddled around a table in the far corner of the crowded saloon. They looked up sullenly as he wended his way past toward Rio's back-room office. Drew knew they were cooking up trouble—there was plenty of sign in their smoldering glances. He found himself wondering if he was big enough to stop the feud from tearing the town apart. Bloody wars between the two families had flared up over much less than a killing!

P  p   Rio looked up from his desk when Drew stepped into the office. His eyes narrowed fearfully, then, as if he had donned a mask, he smiled pleasantly and nodded. His double chins quivered, and Drew fought down his old loathing. P  p   looked exactly like his dead brother, Jos  .

"There ees something you weesh, Se  or Law?" he asked.

"You can tell me who shot Bobo Kingsley from your upstairs window!" Drew snapped.

The half-breed's face paled. He seemed strangely agitated. "Why . . . why you theenk eet was from my weendow? Eet could have been someone else's, yes?"

"Maybe, but it's funny you admittin' it wasn't Lon who killed Bobo. You got a Winchester around?"

Rio nodded and pointed to a corner. A short-barreled Winchester carbine leaned against the wall. Drew strode to it and picked it up, sniffing the muzzle suspiciously. He jerked open the breech and examined it closely, then tossed the gun back into the corner.

"Just cleaned, eh?" he growled. "Maybe you didn't want me to know it had just been fired!"

"Eet hasn't." Rio insisted promptly, "I clean heem often."

Drew seized him by the shirt front and dragged him to his feet.

"Bobo was bushwhacked from one o' your windows, an' I'm gonna know why before this sun sets! Meanwhile don't you or any o' your bunch leave this town if you want to stay healthy!"

He shoved Rio back into his chair and saw dangerous hate flashing in the Mexican's beady eyes.

"Sometime," Rio hissed, "you gonna be too damn smart, Señor Law! Some day you gonna grab *culebra de cascabel* by her tail!"

"Any time I grab a rattler by the tail—it'll be a dead one!"

"We weel see—soon, maybe. I have not forget who keel my brother, José!"

Drew stalked out and banged the door after him, ignoring Rio's threat. Old Puma Kingsley rose to meet him as he stepped into the saloon. Drew watched him narrowly, and hoped he wouldn't force a showdown—yet. He halted ten feet from the old patriarch, and stood quietly, giving him first say, but his hands dangled comfortably near the worn walnut of his gun butts. Puma, his grizzled beard working with emotion, planted himself in front of Drew.

"You ain't pullin' the wool over our eyes, Hardigan!" he growled. "Us Kingsleys know danged well you locked Lon up to keep us from gittin' at him, but one Hardigan's as good as another for killin', we say—so draw, marshal!"

The old man tensed and his fingers became lean claws, waiting to clutch the guns that sagged from his crossed belts. Drew darted a quick look toward the other Kingsleys.

They were edging close, circling him, ready to make him pay in blood for Bobo's death. He cursed heartily under his breath.

"Puma, this crazy feudin' has got to stop!" he snapped. "Bobo wasn't killed by a Hardigan, an' if you had any sense you'd see it. Somebody wants to badger us into fightin'—"

"Draw, you lyin', belly-crawlin' Hardigan!"

Drew opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap. If he went for his guns, they'd get him sure, and the feud would break out with such fury there wouldn't be either a Hardigan or Kingsley left breathing inside twenty-four hours.

Slowly, but resolutely, he walked toward Puma, and the Kingsleys inched along behind him. Puma's beard began to bob more furiously than ever.

"Stand and draw—or I'll drop you cold!" he bellowed.

Drew didn't falter. The ten feet between them dwindled to eight, five, three—then Puma's hands slapped down. At the same instant, Drew's bony left fist darted out and connected solidly. Puma's head snapped back, but he was a tough old waddy, and Drew ducked his answering blow. A wild yell of rage issued from the Kingsleys behind him. A bottle thudded numbingly on his shoulder, missing his head by a bare fraction of an inch.

Instantly the saloon became a mêlée of stumbling, cursing forms. The Kingsleys rushed Drew in a body, and he found himself fighting madly to keep his feet. His shirt was in ribbons, and blood streamed from a gash over his eye. Suddenly he saw an opening and dived for it. Before the press of bodies could untangle itself, he was behind Puma, pinioning his arms. He flipped a

gun free and jammed it into the old man's back.

"Now you hell cats, make one wrong move and I'll let Puma have it!" he grated, "I'm tossin' him in the calaboose alongside Lon to cool off. The rest o' you, light outta town, or I'll jug you all an' throw the key away!"

They drew back, thwarted hate blazing from their bristle-studded faces. Drew knew that he had the upper hand now—but there would be another deal with death sitting in if he didn't find Bobo's murderer in a hurry! He moved cautiously toward the door, keeping the fuming Puma between him and the Kingsley guns.

"You better round up the rest o' your coyote clan," shouted one of them, "because you'll sure need 'em to back you! You'll be hearin' from us in hot lead before another day dawns!"

He ducked out the door, prodding Puma along with his gun muzzle. They moved down the street toward the jail, and Drew darted keen glances around him. All windows facing the street were tightly shuttered. He felt an eerie threat in the heat-heavy air. Something was amiss! He sensed it and it made the short hair on his neck prickle warningly.

When they swung into the jail house, Drew blinked the sun glare out of his eyes, then cursed savagely, for Sheriff Rawhide Singer was lying on the floor with a knife protruding from his back! Drew dropped to one knee and felt for the old man's pulse. He was dead.

"Satan himself must be roddin' this town today!" Drew snarled, rising. "Rawhide was my best friend, an' I'll get the skunk who did this if it takes me till my dying day!"

"That won't give you much time!"

sneered Puma. "Why don't you take a look-see for your murderin' cousin? I'll bet my eye teeth he ain't in this jug, or any other."

Drew shot him a look, and hurried into the cell block. Puma's hunch was right! The cell that had held Lon Hardigan was empty, and the lock had been opened with a key. He faced Puma squarely and his eyes became two lumps of green ice.

"Whoever knifed Rawhide, took his key an' let Lon out," he said slowly. "It's a saddle cinch Lon didn't do this killin', either, an' he's probably gone to round up the whole danged Hardigan clan. That means bloodshed an' more killin'."

Puma shrugged coldly. "You Hardigans should 'a' thought o' that before you blasted poor Bobo down. I'm an old man, an' I'd certain like to see the end o' this gun grudge, but you can bet your J. B. we Kingsleys ain't gonna leave Bobo's score unsettled!"

"Let's gamble, then," Drew said, sucking in a deep breath. "If I don't produce your son Bobo's murderer by sundown, I'll turn in my marshal's star an' give you first draw. Meantime, you give me your word you won't start nothin' till sundown."

Puma's old eyes drilled into his suspiciously, then, satisfied that Drew was up to no trickery, he nodded contemptuously.

"It's a fair gamble, Hardigan. Either you're plumb wrong, or you're a bare-faced liar! We knows plumb well Lon killed Bobo, but we'll give you a fair chance till sundown to prove contrariwise, or come a-shoot-in!"

He wheeled and strode out of the office, and Drew made no move to stop him. He knew that old Puma Kingsley's word was sacred to him.

Moving back into the office, Drew

examined Rawhide's body carefully. The murder knife was an ordinary bowie. It might have belonged to any one of Yucca's inhabitants. With a grunt of disappointment, he straightened and looked around the disorderly office. Something lying on Rawhide's battered old desk caught his eye. It was a note, scrawled in pencil on the back of an envelope. He frowned darkly as he read it.

Marshal—if you want hombre who kill
yor fren com to shepherds dobe down by
arroyo. A fren.

For a long moment Drew stood undecided, his brow furrowed in thought. The hombre who had written the note, far from being a friend, was probably Rawhide's murderer. It was a trap, and a crude one, he guessed, but he wasn't getting anywhere waiting for things to happen. If he went to the shepherd's shack mentioned in the note, he was certain to contact with some part of the devilish scheme, even if the part was his own death—though whoever had shot Bobo, could just as easily have shot him! Drew experienced a sudden, chilly hunch that he was being saved for something worse than death!

He got his big cavalry bay from the *mozo* at the livery stable, and was riding toward the arroyo before another fifteen minutes had elapsed. The arroyo lay eight miles south of the town, and Drew cast an anxious eyes at the sun. It was a scant hour away from the horizon. He clamped his lips grimly and touched spurs to his mount's flanks. His career as a marshal was ended the instant feud guns started burning in the streets of Yucca, and they would begin sounding a flaming, death-ridden tattoo at sunset—unless he could produce Bobo's killer.

Rounding a clump of silver-barked aspen, he sighted the shepherd's adobe hut half an hour later, and reined up to take stock.

The ground sloped down to a cottonwood-bordered stream that ran through the bottom of the arroyo, and the bay's hoofs sank deep in the soggy turf. Drew's restlessly searching eyes noted several deep impressions of Mex boots, and hoofprints of two horses, but the sign was so mixed that Drew failed to read any sense into it. One thing he knew—the tracks were fresh. Along the banks of the stream, seepage had not filled the deeper impressions.

Satisfied that the hut wasn't surrounded by ambush guns, he reined close and dismounted, ground-hitching his bay at a handy distance. He jogged his guns loose in their holsters and cat-footed toward the hut.

He paused by a low, glassless window and peered in. At first glance the hunt appeared to be empty, but, as he was turning away, a slight movement caught his eye. He squinted sharply through the gloom, and discovered a trussed figure lying against the far wall!

Unsheathing his guns, he moved catuiously to the doorway, then paused to listen to moment. He heard nothing to arouse his suspicions, and stepped boldly into the hut. A second later he was cursing himself for an incautious fool. Three heavy forms descended upon him from a loft over the door! He spun like a bayed catamount, trying to shake his attackers loose, but they bore him to the floor by sheer weight. A sharp blow on the head ended his resistance.

When the sense-numbing blackness at last dissolved, he found himself hogtied and propped helplessly in a corner. His aching eyes lighted

on the smooth, smiling face of P  p   Rio!

"If I ever lay my hands on you, Rio—" he choked, jerking viciously at his bonds.

"I tol' you some day you gonna be too damn smart!" Rio gloated, baring yellowed teeth, "you have catch *culebra de cascabel* by her tail, an' Se  or Law—she ees not a dead one! She weel bite you like she have bite Bobo, an' Rawhide!"

Drew's eyes darted restlessly around the hut, searching for a way out. He started with surprise as he recognized the other bound-and-gagged prisoner. It was Lon Hardigan!

"I'm not disputin' that you're a rattler," he growled. "I sure know that, but I don't savvy what you're up to. What good did it do you to murder Bobo an' Rawhide, an' what the devil do you want with Lon, here?"

All the innate craft and cunning of an ocelot appeared suddenly on Rio's swarthy face, and he swelled with pride. Icy waves sped along Drew's spine as he read the mark of a born murderer in the half-breed's black, boarlike eyes.

"Becos you are so clever, but not as much as me, I weel explain my leetle *conspiraci  n*," Rio said softly. "Then I keel you, too, for which I am so sorry, but not till I have feenish weeth you."

Like a fat weasel, Rio darted to Drew's side, and lifted the star from his vest, pocketing it with a flourish.

"Thees leethe star, she will be foun' een the bank when we have feenish taking the dinero. Also weel be foun' the gun of your cousin, here. People weel say, when you do not return to Yucca, that both of you are *muuy* naughty for to have rob the bank. That is clever—no?"

"You'll never get away with it!"

snapped Drew, trembling with rage. "If you try to hold the bank up in broad daylight, you'll be cut down before you get ten feet away!"

Rio laughed derisively. "Ah, no, Se  or Law. I theenk of that, too. A week ago my caballeros spread the gun talk among your two Americano clans. Soon the loco Hardigans weel be trying to rid the earth of the also loco Kingsleys, an' when they are so busy shooting each other—P  p  's men weel rob the bank! Ah, se  or, eet ees a shame, but I have mees my calling. I should have been the great general!"

"Yeah! You should have—anything but what you are! Go ahead an' plug the both of us. The sooner we quit lookin' at your ugly pan, the better we'll like it!"

"You are a very brave hombre, Se  or Law, but I do not weesh to keel you so quick. That would not be worthy of P  p   Rio, such a foolish leetle plan, an' the death of my brother ees not so easily avenged. The bank, she weel offer the reward of one thousan' dollar each for the robbers—dead or alive. Then P  p   Rio heemself weel keel these two bad hombres. People weel then say—'Thees Rio, he ees one ver' good man weeth the gun. He weel make the good sheriff for Yucca now that Rawhide ees no more.' After I am sheriff, I weel run Yucca to suit P  p   Rio!"

The insanely perfect details of Rio's devilish scheme for revenge left Drew stunned. He felt suddenly like a mouse between the paws of a cat, and hope dribbled away from him as he failed to find a single loophole in Rio's plan. The last rays of the setting sun were filtering through the window. He was beaten!

"Looks like your play from now on," he said slowly. "An' I sure got

to hand it to you. You're Satan himself or his ramrod imp!"

Rio laughed proudly, and began speaking rapid Mexican to the two peons who sided him. Drew failed to follow the rapid-fire syllables, and he waited with morbid interest for Rio's next move. When the fat Mexican turned to him, finally, his face was wreathed in a sad smile.

"Now I must leave you, Señor Law. Josepho weel take care of you, but he has the bad temper, an' he shoot to queeck, so be careful! The pleasure of keelin' you, I weesh for myself alone. My brother, José, would want eet so."

Rio waddled out the door, followed by one of his peons. The other cradled an old .45 carbine in his arms and squatted in the doorway, watching his two charges with mild, disinterested eyes. Drew guessed that Josepho was a dull fellow or he would have been riding with his chief, but the mark of cruelty was stamped deeply on his features, and though dull, he was also dangerous. There could be no mistaking that!

"Hey," Drew said suddenly. "Take the gag outta my friend's mouth. I want to talk with him."

Josepho shook his head and smiled absently. "*No habla Americano, señor.*"

It was Drew's turn to grin. If the Mex wasn't lying, there was a slim chance they could work out a plan of their own.

"You're settin' on a scorpion!" Drew snapped without warning. The Mex shook his head mournfully.

"*No sabe, señor.*"

"Good!" Drew chuckled, "Lon, if you can hear me an' understand what I'm sayin', bump your head against the wall."

Lon bumped vigorously, and the

Mexican's face remained uncomprehending.

"I'm gonna try to get Josepho over here, an' if he comes within range, boot him with all you got! If we can get him outta the way, I think maybe we can wiggle outta this spot. Follow my drift?"

Lon bumped in assent, and Drew turned to the Mexican.

"*Yo . . . yo muy want cigaretto,*" he stammered. "*Donar?*"

Josepho shrugged, dug out the makings, and began rolling a cigarette. When it was finished, he propped his gun against the door, and bent over Drew, shoving the quirley between his lips. Drew edged closer to the wall endeavoring to lure him within reach of Lon's ready boots. Lon lashed out with terrific force, and the Mexican thudded headfirst into the wall. He slumped down and lay motionless.

"Knocked him cold!" exulted Drew, crawling toward Lon. "Now bend your bean so I can reach your gag with my teeth."

For the next fifteen minutes Drew chewed on the tightly-knotted rawhide, until Lon at last staggered to his feet, free, and began to work on Drew's bonds.

"It'll be a danged long time before I ever set tooth to any part of a cow, cook or raw!" Drew said, spitting disgustedly. "Work fast, pard—the Mex shows signs of comin' to."

"First time ever I heard of a lawman chewin' his way outta a tight squeeze, but you done doggone well at it," Lon said, grinning, and ripping off the last length of rawhide.

With great satisfaction, they trussed Josepho's hands behind his back, and as they stepped from the hut, Drew lifted his guns from where they were piled outside the door.

"You take the carbine," he ordered, "an' start shaggin' our peon

friend back across the border. When he comes to, sign him that if he ever sets foot across the Rio again, we'll cut him in little pieces an' feed him to the buzzards. I'm foggin' pronto to see if I can pry the Kingsleys loose from the Hardigans long enough to leave me catch a couple o' coyote bank robbers."

"Lemme go along an' side you, Drew," Lon objected. "You'll sure be needin' help."

Drew shook his head emphatically and made for his mount which was grazing contentedly nearby.

"Not on your life! Once the Kingsleys clap eyes on your, nothin' this side o' Tophet could stop 'em from lynchin' you on the spot."

Drew swung into the saddle and checked the cylinders of both guns before he shoved them into their holsters. Where he was going, he'd need them—there was no doubting that! Blood-red streamers signaled prophetically on the western horizon, for the sun had set! By now, Puma Kingsley had given the word for a finish fight and feud guns were blazing bloody history!

He hit the trail and leveled out for town, forcing a pace that would have finished an ordinary horse, but his big trooper bay thundered ahead gamely. Long before he reached the outskirts of the town he heard, with sinking heart, the crash of volleying six-guns. Judging by the frequency and intensity of firing, the feud was raging full blast.

When he reached Yucca, he rounded the first line of ramshackle buildings and spurred recklessly into the main street—then hauled rein in consternation.

Smoke, flame, and howling lead seemed to be pouring from every nook and corner big enough to hide a gunman! He wheeled his bay in an effort to seek cover. Puma Kings-

ley's voice raised in a raucous bellow clove the twilight.

"Git that star-totin' Hardigan!"

Slugs ripped the air around him, and suddenly he was slammed from his hull with stunning force. Blackness surged around him for an instant. He cursed feebly, spat the dust out of his mouth, and groped for his guns. The movement brought three more slugs exploding the dust around his head, and with a frantic heave, he rolled to safety behind a watering trough.

He lay gasping for breath and gritting his teeth against the searing pain in his side where Puma's slug had lodged. Reason returned to him slowly, and with grim determination, he holstered his guns. As long as he wore a marshal's star, he was no party to the feud, much as he ached to blast away at the inch of Puma's head he could see protruding around the corner of a building.

Drew's eyes swerved anxiously to the bank, across the street. There was no external evidence that a holdup was in progress, but he was not fooled by that. Even as he watched, Rio was probably toting the bank's cash out the back entrance. Feud and bullets notwithstanding, he had to get across the street and match gunplay with Rio's gang!

Steeling himself against the pain, he crouched, ready to size the first opportunity for a dash across the death-ridden street.

"Hold your fire!" he yelled. "The bank is bein' robbed!"

A slug splintered into the horse trough an inch from his head, and Puma laughed uproarously.

"We ain't fallin' for none o' your smart tricks, Hardigan! This is a showdown! From now on either us

Kingsleys or you Hardigans leaves this range for keeps, an' we got a hot heap o' lead that argues for your hightailin' it."

"That suits us right down!" Drew heard one of his kinsmen shout. "Shoot the ears off that old buzzard bait!"

"Buzzard bait, am I! Why, you —" bellowed Puma, loosing a hail of bullets at the speaker.

Like a spooked antelope, Drew vaulted the trough and sprinted for the bank. Lead crashed around him and tore at the steps as he mounted them. One slug burst through the glass of the door and showered him with fine, sparkling dust. He flipped both guns free, crouched, and ran through the doorway.

Flame burst almost in his face! Through the reeling powder smoke he glimpsed the contorted face of Pépé Rio. Behind him, one of his serape-clad henchmen added to the chorus of gun thunder with a Winchester.

Drew dropped to one knee and carefully thumbed his hammers. Fire and lead belched from his twin guns and Rio screamed in hysterical agony, dropping his smoking weapons. Out of the corner of his eye, Drew glimpsed a white-faced teller going into action with a sawed-off Peacemaker. Rio's henchman fell, kicking, and a bulging sack of currency thudded from his hand, strewing the floor with greenbacks.

Drew rose wearily to his feet. Gingerly he fingered the gash left by Puma's slug and a grim smile played across his lips. He holstered his guns and stepped out into the deepening twilight. His gaze swung to a lone figure walking slowly down the middle of the street, and the hammering guns were suddenly stilled. It was Doc Kane! There

wasn't a waddy in Texas willing to risk the life of a man like Doc Kane.

Drew walked to meet him, and as he did so, old Puma Kingsley stepped from cover, his beard fluttering majestically.

"You wasn't lyin' about the bank bein' robbed," he said slowly, as Drew came abreast of him. "An' you risked your neck to duck my lead an' shoot it out with the owlhooters."

Drew nodded, and in quick, clipped syllables, explained the extent of Rio's treachery in fanning the feud to life again. Puma studied the dusty toe of his boot as he listened, and when Drew had finished, he looked up.

"Drew Hardigan, I've been an old fool!" he said, his voice grown suddenly husky with emotion. "You're a heap sight more of a man than any Kingsley that ever breathed! Will you take my hand?"

Silently, Drew clasped the old man's rope-calloused palm, and gulped down the lump that rose in his throat. In the space of a few minutes, the hate nurtured by fifty years of deadly feud had been wiped out forever!

"Any man who can put hate behind him an' shake hands with his old enemy, is a better man than me, an' a credit to the Kingsley name," he growled.

Doc Kane took Drew gently by the arm and pulled him toward the door that bore his shingle.

"C'mon, Drew. You're needin' a mite of patchin' up, an' I reckon the Hardigans is willin' to drink with the Kingsleys for the first time in memory—if Puma'll set 'em up."

"You bet your last peso I will!" Puma bellowed, electrified with sudden energy. "Come on you fire-eatin' Hardigans! The drinks is on the Kingsleys!"

PECOS WILSON



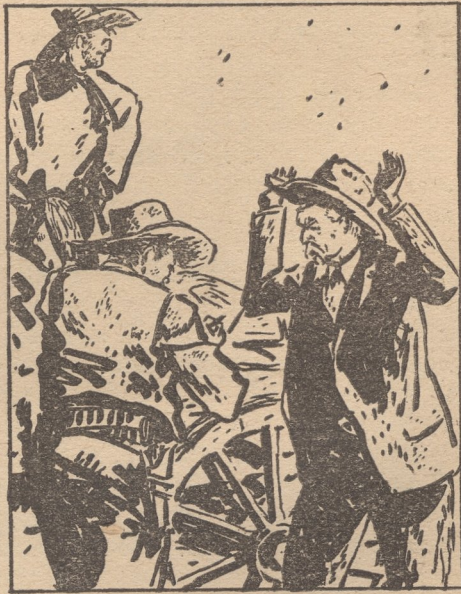
1. The Lazy W trail herd was gathered and ready to start north. Old Man Wilson made his last trip to the cow town to buy supplies. As he rolled away in the buckboard, he waved farewell to old friends. He never expected to be back.



2. When he was still less than halfway to the home ranch, three riders came toward him down the road. At first, he thought they were bandits, but then he recognized the leader—Ab Lester, a neighbor and owner of the big Rafter L spread.



3. Thinking that Lester merely wanted to say good-by, the Old Man halted his team. He had never liked Lester, but had nothing definite against him. But suddenly he went rigid with surprise as Lester and his men got the drop on him.



4. They forced him to climb down from the wagon. While the other riders kept him covered, Lester produced a scrap of paper and began scribbling on it. He wanted the Lazy W trail herd and had cooked up a scheme to get it.

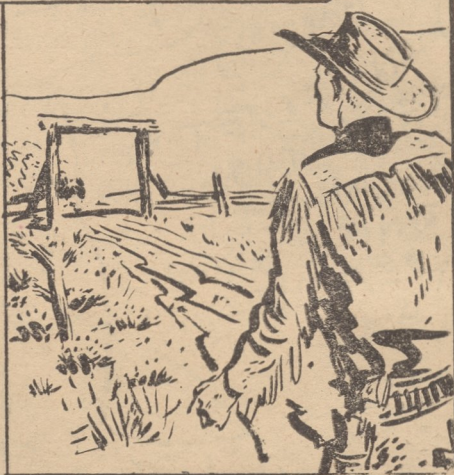
RUNS A BLUFF



5. Tacking the note to the wagon seat, Lester then ordered the Old Man to climb aboard his bronc. Ab swung up behind him. He laughed cruelly. "Reckon thet salty kid o' yores will be plenty scared when he reads that," he said.



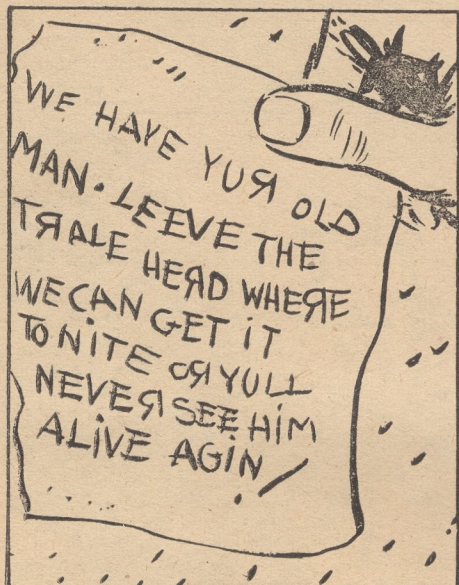
7. As soon as the wagon drew near enough for him to see that there was no one on the driver's seat, Pecos ran out to meet it. Cold dread gripped his heart. What could have happened to his dad? Had bushwhackers killed him?



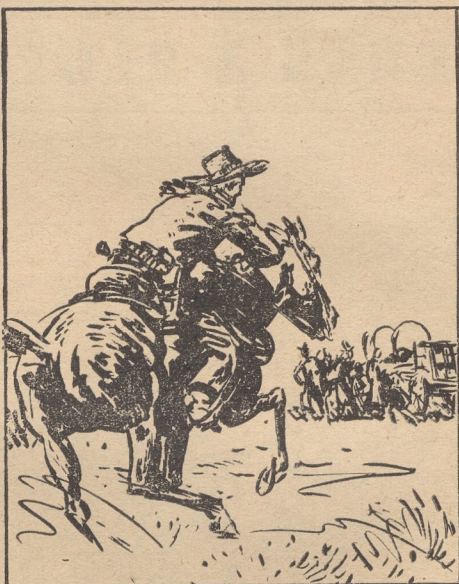
6. Pecos Wilson was alone at Lazy W headquarters, waiting for his father's return from town. The rest of the outfit were out with the herd, ready to start the long drive north. At last, Pecos saw the dust of the approaching wagon.



8. Stopping the team, Pecos' eyes at once found the note which Ab Lester had tacked to the seat. With hands that trembled slightly, he tore it loose and read it hurriedly. His feelings of dread gave way to seething anger.



9. There was no way to identify the writer of the ransom note. And there was no mistaking the sincerity of its grim message. Pecos swore softly as he pocketed the note and ran to get a bronc. He'd have to tell the rest of the outfit.



10. Hastily throwing a hula on his fastest bronc, Pecos swung aboard and rolled his spurs. As the speedy cayuse galloped across the level range, Pecos thought up scheme after scheme for foiling the kidnapers, but gave up all of them.



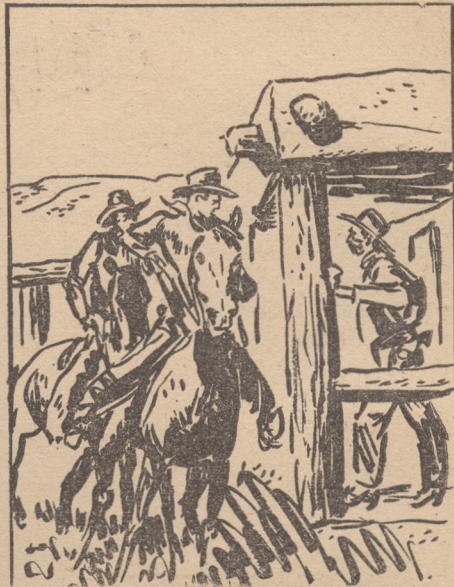
11. At the Lazy W camp, Pecos found his mother and the rest of the hands. He gathered them together and read them the ransom note. Mrs. Wilson took it like the pioneer she was. But she told Pecos that they would have to obey the note's orders.



12. Sadly the Lazy W crew hitched up the wagons and saddled their broncs. They rode slowly away from the big herd, leaving it unguarded, an easy grab for the rustling kidnapers. Pecos seethed with rage, but realized there was nothing he could do.



13. Pecos and Cheyenne left the outfit and rode toward a spot from which they could watch the herd. Possibly they could follow the rustlers. As they passed the Rafter L Ranch wire, Pecos noted the sign which Lester had placed there.



14. Something clicked in the young waddy's mind as he stared at the sign. Without telling Cheyenne about his hunch, he headed straight for Rafter L headquarters. Ab Lester met him on the ranchhouse porch. He grunted in greeting.



15. "Lester," Pecos snapped, "I come here fer my father. What've yuh done with him, yuh rustlin'—" With an oath of surprise and fury, Lester dug fast for his six-gun. But he was too slow. Pecos' bullet drilled his evil heart.



**NEXT WEEK:
Pecos Wilson
Cuts The Wire**

16. A search of the ranchhouse revealed Old Man Wilson. In a few minutes, the three were riding away. As they passed the sign, Pecos explained. "Them backward 'Rs' gave me a hunch," he said. "The rest was plain bluff."

ROY BEAN'S SHEEP

THE most eccentric justice of the peace in the Wild West was Judge Roy Bean, "The Law West of the Pecos." This was a sub title that he had adopted himself, and no one ever disputed his right to it. Judge Bean was always as ready to help the underdog as he was to get even with any one who tried to put something over on him. But he had a sense of justice, and would never cheat a man who dealt honestly with him. He was a peculiar mixture of good and not-so-good. But he had a kind, sympathetic heart, and never refused to help any one who was in need. While he would refuse to give change to customers at his bar, he would always hand out a good meal to a hungry man.

He was quite an observer of human nature, too. He had noticed that, when a man saw there was no sign of fire in the stove, he would shiver and talk about the cold. But if there was a gleam of fire, no one complained.

One night, a game of poker was being played in his Jersey Lily Saloon, and the weather was unusually cold. But no one said anything. At last W. H. Dodd, feeling chilly, decided to have a look at the fire. He could see there was some fire, but it gave no heat. When he opened the stove, he found that a lighted candle had been placed inside, and that was all. Dodd said nothing at the moment, but when the others had left, he joked the judge about his mode of heating. Bean laughed and said, "Why, dang it, Dodd! Don't you know that when folks see

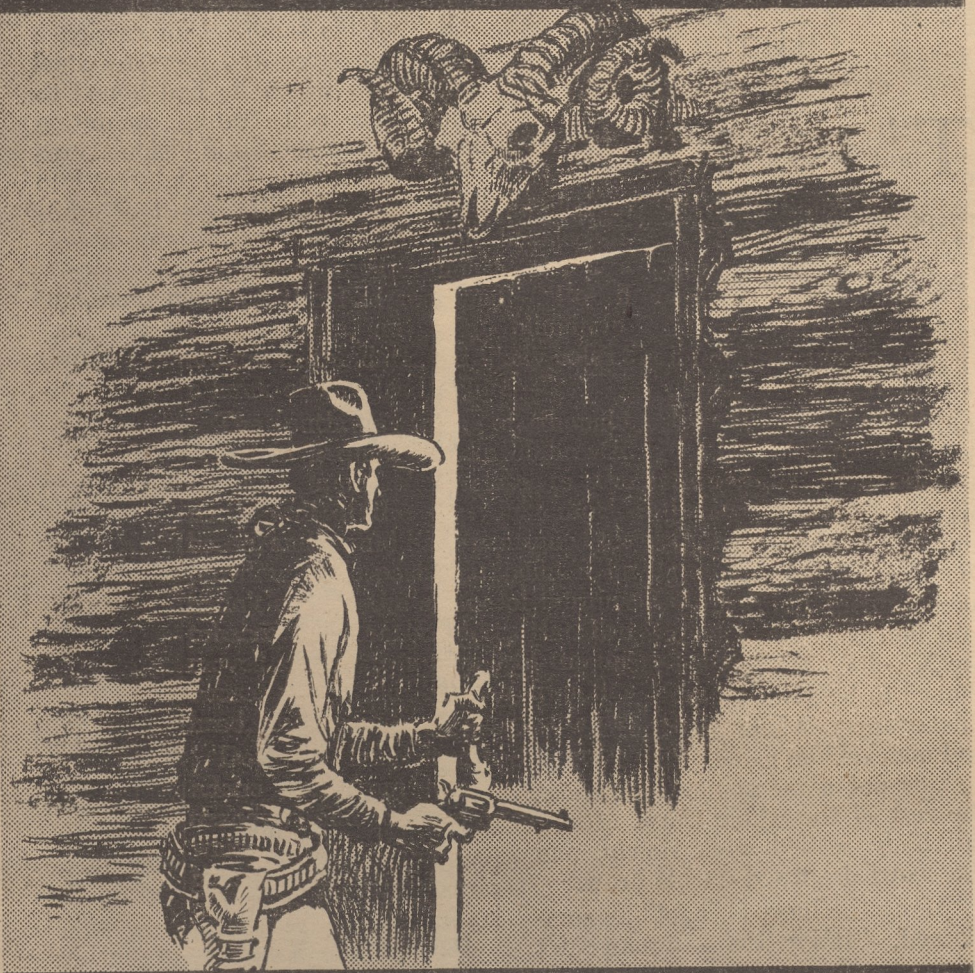
a spark of light, they think it's a fire, and imagine they are warm?"

The way that Judge Roy Bean and W. H. Dodd first met, had formed a tie between the two that lasted as long as Bean lived. The judge had agreed to sell a small herd of sheep to an old buyer from St. Louis. Dodd and several others were perched on the fence watching the cutting of the sheep from one pen to another. This was always a pastime with boys and men, and any one who happened to be near while such activities were on, would naturally stop to look.

Dodd, as much from force of habit as anything else, counted the sheep during the cutting. When the tally was called, he found that the buyer had counted ten under the actual number, and was preparing to send them right off to the shipping pens. Dodd called Roy Bean's attention to the mistake. Bean, not knowing the young fellow, asked him if he was quite sure that he was right. Dodd assured him that he was.

The judge yelled to the buyer to stop and count the sheep over again. The man, who was unaware that he had miscounted, was quite willing, and it was found that the young stranger was correct. Bean walked up to him, asked him his name, and complimented him on being such an expert counter. They shook hands, and from that moment the two became firm friends. When Bean resigned from the office of justice of the peace some years later, he backed Dodd for the post. He won, and served for over seventeen years.

DEATH RIDES THE CANYONS



By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

Author of "Sheep For The Flying X," etc.

A murder-mad human enemy blazed a death sign on Cliff Merchant's trail, while Cliff stalked a four-footed killer.

Death Rides The Canyons

CHAPTER I.

CLIFF MAKES A CALL.

THE prospect of several pleasant as well as profitable days spent here in the windswept peaks turned sour for Cliff Merchant when his sharp eyes found the wisp of smoke lifting out of a deep canyon. He pulled his tall brown horse, Gringo, to a stop at sight of the smoke, and sat studying it, sandy brows drawn into a lump by the vexation which came to him.

He was on the northern fringe of his father's vast Flying X Ranch, and had meant to stay here among the cloud-draped peaks and silent forests until he ran down the mountain lion that had been killing Flying X colts. He had welcomed this chance to be alone in the solitude of this country where storms brewed and men seldom came. To find that he was not alone spoiled, somehow, the zest of the whole thing. Cliff's tall body settled back slowly, and the scowl deepened on his brow.

"Hang the luck, Gringo!" he complained. "It's gettin' so a man can't ride more than a few miles without runnin' into some other hombre."

Gringo champed at the bit as if agreeing with his tall master that the country was indeed getting much too crowded for comfort.

Cliff would have liked nothing better than to have ignored the fact that other humans were here in the high country, and gone on beyond this canyon from which the smoke came. But the straight column of smoke meant that it came from a flue of some sort rather than an open

fire. A flue or chimney meant a human habitation, and people living this far back in the Arizona forest would probably have dogs.

Behind his saddle, Cliff carried a half dozen large and powerful steel traps, with which he had hoped to catch the colt-stealing mountain lion. But to set those vicious traps where some man's dog might get into them would be little short of criminal, to Cliff Merchant's way of considering things.

"We'll have to go down there, an' see who owns that place, Gringo," he grumbled. "They'll keep their dogs up if I warn 'em that I'm puttin' out lion traps."

The brown horse moved on along the ridge under the gentle touch of dull rowels, and after a short ride Cliff saw a place where the rimrock broke away as if hacked by a giant ax. Gringo stepped through the break and started down a pine-clad slope that was easy going despite its pitch.

A few minutes later Cliff Merchant was approaching a new log house, which stood close to the base of tall reddish bluffs. Cliff's eyes were keen with interest as he approached, and he felt excitement race through him as he sized up the layout.

Beyond the house, in a natural cove, or pocket, in the tall bluffs, a strong corral of peeled poles gleamed white against the green of trees and the bluff's somber brown hues. And it was the unusual height as well as the strength of the corral which told Cliff what brought newcomers to this region.

"Wild hoss hunters!" he exclaimed. "That corral yonder was built to hold the wild fellows, all right. An' whoever built it knows his business."

A long, silvery toned baying reached out to greet Cliff, and he

watched a pair of black-and-tan hounds lope out to meet him. Their voices lifted in a clamorous song that Cliff loved, and their tails wagged happily as he spoke to them.

"Too broad-chested an' heavy-bodied for straight black-an'-tan hounds," he thought. "They're crossed with bloodhounds, I'd say. An' I'd bet my bottom peso that you two noisy scamps would tree that colt-killin' lion for me if I could borrow you."

The hounds galloped along, one on either side of Cliff's mount, their sad faces turned up to him as they continued their baying. But the baying stopped now, for a man had come out onto the split-log steps before the house and was yelling angrily. He had a rifle cradled across his arm, and Cliff felt a quick stab of displeasure when he saw the two friendly hounds crouch at sound of the man's voice. They rolled their eyes up at him as if pleading, then scurried hastily for a thicket of young pines when the man came down the trail.

"Drum! Judy!" the stranger roared. "Yuh flop-eared fools want me to take a club to yuh?"

Cliff Merchant's gray eyes narrowed, and the friendliness left his face.

The rifle-toting hombre who threatened the hounds with a clubbing was planted on wide spread legs now, his very attitude commanding the tall rider to halt.

Cliff reined in, eyes taking in the man's burly figure and coarse features. Black whiskers stubbled the fellow's broad jaws and chin. His lips were twisted as if he meant to snarl, and his black eyes held no friendliness as he looked the caller over.

"Howdy," the cowboy offered. "Seen smoke from the rims, an' rode

down. I come up this way to set some lion traps, an' thought I'd better tell you before I done it. Wouldn't want to catch one of them fine hounds."

"Fine hounds!" the man in the trail sneered. "Them pot-lickers ain't fit fer nothin' that I kin think of. Set all the traps yuh want, younker. An' I hope yuh catch them flop-eared dogs the fust thing."

"Say, what's got into you?" Cliff demanded. "I wouldn't put out a trap where a dog might get into it. Besides, them hounds you hate are lion dogs, ain't they?"

"Shore, they're lion dogs," the big fellow guffawed. "They 'lie-on' their stummicks all day lookin' fer a chanet to grab somethin' to eat. But their eatin' days are over. I heard the boss say this mornin' that he aimed to shoot them two critters when they showed up fer their supper tonight."

"Shoot hounds like them?" Cliff blazed. "This boss o' yores—"

A man's voice interrupted what he was about to say.

"Whit, who's that yuh're jawin' with down there?" some hombre called, and Cliff glanced up, then bounced as if prodded.

Out of the cabin's door a gaunt man was stepping. The hombre was dressed in buckskin trousers and jacket, and a tangled mat of brown hair brushed the tops of his round-tipped shoulders as he moved. Twin six-guns were belted about his waist, and he moved with a sort of slinking stride, as if he were eternally vigilant. Instead of boots or shoes he wore buckskin moccasins.

"Rimrock Dixon!" The name seemed to explode in Cliff's brain as he sat there, watching the wild-looking man in greasy buckskins. Rimrock Dixon was hated and cussed by badge-toters from Canada

to Mexico, and it was no secret that the shaggy-haired rascal had broken about every law a man could break. But Rimrock Dixon had proven too sharp for the authorities so far.

The sight of Dixon brought a burning pang of unpleasant memory to Cliff Merchant. Stolen from his parents when he was only six months old, Cliff had been raised along the outlaw trails by the notorious Flip Breel gang. And Rimrock Dixon had known him then—known him as Cliff Breel, son of the murderous Flip Breel.

Cliff felt cold all over, and his head seemed to spin dizzily. Flip Breel and the three cutthroats he had always run with had shot each other to death a few months ago, fighting over loot they had taken from a stagecoach. Cliff had come into this country then, bearing a letter which told him the amazing news that he was not Cliff Breel as he had always supposed, but Cliff Merchant, son of old Seth Merchant, who owned the great Flying X.

Those thoughts seared through the young ranny's brain now. He felt like whirling Gringo and racing away before he was recognized. Because he had thrown more than one kink into the snaky schemes of Grant Sawtell, owner of the Ladder P outfit, Cliff was pretty soundly disliked by Sheriff Gus Leadford.

"Nothin' would please that numskulled Gus more than to be able to prove that I'm the last survivin' member of the Breel gang," Cliff thought glumly. "An' Rimrock Dixon would turn me in, if he could make a few dollars by doin' it. But maybe the ornery cuss won't recognize me."

Cliff's hopes of not being recognized were dashed almost as soon as they were born in his brain. Rimrock Dixon had walked a few paces

down the trail, green eyes sharply probing.

"Well, fry me in skunk grease!" he whooped suddenly. "Cliff Breel, shore as the world! Light down, button, an' make yoreself to home."

The cowboy's nerves tightened, and something within him revolted at the thought of being friendly with this unwashed cutthroat. Then Cliff noticed how Rimrock Dixon's mouth was twisted, and caught a gleam of hate deep in the shaggy man's eyes. Rimrock Dixon's words had been friendly enough, but that glitter of hate in his eyes gave the lie to his words. Puzzled, Cliff swung a long leg over saddle pommel and bounced to the dirt, facing Dixon and the other burly hombre.

"You've shore come up in the world since I knowed yuh, button," Dixon purred coldly. "But come on up to the house where we can set as we talk."

CHAPTER II.

TRICKY HOMBRES.

IT was an hour before Cliff could get away from Rimrock Dixon and the three hard-bitten jaspers Dixon called his pards.

Cliff was told that Dixon and his three men, Whit Casey, Lew Hazen and Ben Reedy, were up here to trap wild horses. According to Dixon they meant to break the horses they caught, then sell them to the Mormons over in Utah. The scheme was sound enough, Cliff had to admit. But somehow he couldn't imagine men like Rimrock Dixon and these other three jaspers doing such honest work as catching and breaking wild horses.

Whit Casey was the burly man who had halted Cliff near the cabin.

"If Whit Casey ain't a professional gun fighter, then I'll eat this

log house," Cliff thought sourly as he walked out the door.

Lew Hazen, a slender man with thin features and nervous dark eyes, had all the earmarks of a tinhorn gambler as well as a gunman. Ben Reedy, the fourth member of the unlovely crew, could have been anything from shepherd to an ace train robber. He was a slovenly clad hombre, whose sulky expression and pale eyes masked whatever went on in his mind.

"Wild hoss hunters!" Cliff thought bitterly. "These four are here for somethin' a blamed sight bigger than that."

He had to admit, however, that there was at least some truth in the wild horse hunting-story of these four. They took him out to the stout corral he had noted on his arrival, and his eyes shone with excitement as he watched a half dozen sleek young stallions thunder around the inclosure, whistling angrily at the approach of men.

"Say, them are fine ones, Dixon," Cliff exclaimed as he watched the wild horses.

"We keep only the cream of the catch each time," Dixon explained. "We've got a half dozen traps in the mountains, an' it's hard work, snaggin' the wild critters. But them six will bring a good price, oncet they're handled right."

"An' it's a benefit to all the ranchers in these parts, too, havin' the wild stallions caught," Whit Casey pointed out. "Them six in the corral, thar, fer instance, would steal a lot o' mares from ranches."

Cliff had to agree with that. It was valuable help to have the wild stallions caught and taken out of the country, for the rascals would lure away mares. But for the life of him he could not believe that these men

were here for the purpose of making honest money.

He found himself wanting to get away, where he'd have a chance to think things out. And the way Rimrock Dixon kept watching him made Cliff feel as if the shaggy-haired jasper was laughing up his sleeve about something.

"Rimrock was tellin' us about you a while back, Cliff," Lew Hazen said, grinning thinly. "He claims you're plenty fast with them double guns you pack. Jist how fast do you think you are?"

Cliff bristled at the bald taunt in the wiry gunman's voice.

"No man ever gets so fast on the shoot but what he runs into somebody just a little faster, if he goes testin' his speed too much," the Flying X ranny drawled.

Hazen flushed, and his mouth curled in an ugly sneer.

"From what we hear, younker, yuh've been sorta testin' yore gun speed since yuh come to this country," Ben Reedy answered. "Had quite a few run-ins with them Pool Rangers of Grant Sawtell's, ain't yuh?"

Cliff was instantly alert at hearing the name of Sawtell spoken by the sour-faced gunman.

Cliff had been forced to fight with some of the murderous gang Grant Sawtell had hired to ride his Ladder P range. Sawtell called those pet gunmen of his "Pool Rangers," because he was the head of what he called the "Cattleman's Protective Pool." Actually, the pool offered no one protection except Sawtell himself, for he had simply bullied and bluffed a bunch of small owners into joining the pool in order to give himself that much more power in the country.

Sawtell's aim was to gather strength enough to buck old Seth

Merchant's Flying X. The Ladder P owner had the crazy notion that he could break Seth Merchant and run him out of the Territory. With kindly old Seth Merchant out of the way, a man like Grant Sawtell could reap a rich harvest by looting this country.

"Sawtell has given the Flyin' X some trouble, at that," Cliff admitted as he met Ben Reedy's pale glance. "An' I've sorta bucked Sawtell's rotten game when I could. That mean anything to you, fella?"

"Me?" Reedy asked. "Nary a thing, kid. Only I jist heard some of them Sawtell fellers a-cussin' yuh, that's all."

"We run into Sawtell an' his bunch in Red Butte town the other night," Rimrock Dixon explained. "The Ladder P crowd was mouthin' about yuh havin' sorta throwed a hitch in some plans o' theirs. But my boys an' me are on yore side, understand. We didn't cotton to that Sawtell bunch a-tall."

Cliff felt his pulse skip a beat, then race so that his ears were filled with a dull roar. He was certain that Rimrock Dixon had just lied when he said he and his men did not cotton to Sawtell's gang. And if the man lied about a thing like that, it meant that he was trying to cover up something.

"Sawtell has hired these four," Cliff's thoughts raced. "Rimrock Dixon an' these other three are here for somethin' besides wild hoss huntin', after all. An' whatever that somethin' is, it won't do the Flyin' X any good!"

Dixon's green eyes had betrayed him when he claimed to dislike Sawtell and the Ladder P crowd. And Cliff Merchant was on his guard now.

Rimrock Dixon swung the conversation to horses again, and Cliff

found himself breathing easier, but not relaxing his watchfulness. When he walked away from the horse corral he made it a point to see that none of the four hombres got behind him. That they sensed his watchfulness Cliff knew, for he saw them exchange glances.

"Hold it, everybody!" Rimrock Dixon hissed suddenly.

Cliff sprang lithely back, hands dropping to gun butts. His move had put him behind the others, and he saw dark anger stain their faces as they glared back at him.

"Yuh're jumpier than a frog with sore feet," Dixon growled. "If these boys an' me wanted to drill yuh, Cliff, yuh'd git drilled."

"That so?" the ranny asked coldly.

"Say, don't give us none o' yore lip," Whit Casey rumbled. "We treat yuh decent, an' yuh go actin' like—"

"Shet up, Whit!" Rimrock cut in hotly. "What I said hold it fer was to git a shot at them droop-eared hounds yander. Watch me start 'em runnin', then bowl the grub-guzzlin' devils over afore they git to the bresh. I'll shoot under their feet to start—"

"Lay off that," Cliff bit out sharply. "Dixon, what's the use in killin' good hounds like them two yonder?"

Cliff saw the two big hounds now, standing out in a little clearing. But the dogs were half crouched, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger.

"I don't want them cussed things around here, that's all," Dixon scowled at Cliff. "Lew won 'em off a hunter one night a couple months back. The feller stopped over at the house, hyar, to spend the night. We all hit the jug a few times, an' the hunter wanted to play cards."

"I cleaned that fool right down

to the hide," Lew Hazen chuckled. "Even won his dogs, which he bragged about so much. But I was a fool to keep them flop-ears."

"Their bellerin' around up in the rocks keeps the wild hosses on the run too much," Ben Reedy complained. "Go ahead, Rimrock, an' start the show. I'll bet them pups howl plenty when lead whacks their hides."

"So the dogs are yours, eh, Hazen?" Cliff was white to the lips, and his voice shook as he spoke.

The thought of these callous jaspers killing those two big, friendly hounds was making him see red.

"Shore, the dogs are mine," Hazen sneered. "An' if the boss wants to have a little fun shootin' at the critters that's up to him. You got any argument to offer, Merchant?"

Tension gripped all four of the mustangers as Cliff locked eyes with Hazen.

The Flying X ranny's left hand delved slowly into a trousers pocket, to come out a moment later with a shiny gold coin. It was a double eagle, worth twenty dollars. Cliff shoved the coin angrily toward Lew Hazen.

"There's twenty dollars," he snapped. "I'll give you that for them hounds."

"Sold!" Lew Hazen cried, and grabbed the coin as if fearing Cliff might change his mind.

"Well, that beats me," Ben Reedy grunted. "Rimrock, I thought yuh said this youngster was a sharp one? Anybody that'd pay twenty dollars for a pair o' rabbit-runnin' hounds ain't very bright."

"Keep them big-eared things away from this place if yuh don't want 'em shot, Merchant," Whit Casey snorted. "They'd steal anything they're able to chaw an' swaller."

"If you'd had the decency to feed them dogs they likely wouldn't steal," Cliff retorted.

Whit Casey would have come back with a quick reply if Rimrock Dixon hadn't motioned him to silence.

"Might be a good idea if you hombres waited here, Dixon, while I catch the dogs," Cliff decided. "I'll get 'em to follow me if I can. If they won't, I'll cut my lariat rope in two an' lead the hounds away."

"I warn you, Merchant, if them things git loose from yuh an' come back here, they'll be shot," Whit Casey growled.

"Better keep the dogs tied up awhile," Dixon advised. "That'll be kinda hard to do, since yuh say yuh're aimin' to camp out up hyar an' trap lions fer a few days. But if them hounds do get loose, I'll not be responsible for what my men do to 'em."

"They'll be responsible," Cliff drawled coldly. "But I reckon you've got no cause to fret about the dogs. I'll take 'em home until I'm better acquainted with 'em."

Cliff stalked away, ignoring the looks the four men gave him. He approached the two big hounds, talking to them in low, gentle tones as they tucked their tails and started away. The dogs hesitated, sniffing at Cliff, wanting desperately to be friendly. And under his gentle coaxing they came slowly to him, eager for the friendliness they sensed in this stranger.

Cliff was much too busy winning the friendship of the dogs he had just bought to see the grins that stretched the faces of Rimrock Dixon and the others. The four bunched together, nudging each other.

"It worked, Rimrock," Whit



He saw the dogs then, leaping and barking, their muzzles lifted toward the tall boulder. And atop that boulder crouched the biggest, maddest tom cougar Cliff had ever seen.

Casey whispered tensely. "Man, yuh've shore got a head on yuh. How'd yuh know that fool kid would fall fer our story of aimin' to kill them pot-polishers?"

"I knowed Cliff when he was with the Flip Breel gang, I tell yuh," Dixon hissed. "I've been in the Breel camp a lot o' times. If a man abused a hoss, or shot a deer along the trail jist fer target practice, Cliff always raised his hackles. So when we overheard them Flyin' X punchers in town last night sayin' the younker was comin' up hyar to trap lions, I started figgerin' how we could send him home without raisin' his suspicions. I told you he would get sore if we made him think we aimed to kill off them two mangy hounds."

"Yeah, we had to get him back home if Sawtell got a chance to work that scheme of his," Lew Hazen snickered. "Merchant fell for your dog scheme plumb slick, Rimrock. An' I'm twenty cartwheels to the good!"

"That kid ain't a fool," Ben Reedy mused. "If he gets wise that we made all that fuss about wantin' to kill them dogs just to get him to head back home with the critters, we're liable to have trouble with that feller. An' somethin' tells me he's maybe better with guns than Sawtell has let on. I wouldn't trust Sawtell too far."

"Cliff Merchant will land in jail tomorrow," Rimrock Dixon grunted.

"If that younker shows up hyar again, we'd better put a bullet where his suspenders would cross if he wore the things," Whit Casey advised coldly.

"Don't forget that we've got to shadder that kid until we carry out our end o' the bargain we made with Sawtell," Lew Hazen reminded.

CHAPTER III.

NIGHT BRINGS TROUBLE.

WITHIN half an hour after he left Rimrock Dixon's place, a frown had begun creasing Cliff Merchant's brow. Another half hour saw that frown changed to a worried scowl.

Cliff failed to enjoy the antics of Drum and Judy as the hounds cavorted ahead of Gringo, seeming actually to clown for their new master's benefit. Two things were pressing down upon Cliff's mind, and the pressure was increasing with each minute. In the first place, it had occurred to him as very strange that Rimrock Dixon and his three tough companions should keep Drum and Judy some little time without having killed them.

"I wonder if that bunch just whizzed me into buyin' a couple o' hounds?" he grumbled. "If they was so set on shootin' the dogs, why hadn't they done it before?"

That Dixon and the others had been abusive to the dogs was plain enough from the way the hounds had acted around the men. Cliff was not in the least sorry that he had bought the dogs. Nor did he worry over the fact that Rimrock and the others had said something about the hounds being only a couple of rabbit chasers. Cliff felt that he could easily break them from running rabbits, and teach them the much more exciting sport of following the scent of mountain lions. And a couple of good lion dogs would save any ranchman money by helping him run down colt-killing cougars. It was not the fact that he found himself the possessor of two reputedly worthless dogs that worried Cliff Merchant.

"I'd buy the dogs rather than see them shot even if I knowed they'd

never amount to shucks," he muttered. "But what I can't see is why Rimrock Dixon would decide to kill the hounds the day I happened to locate his place. Somehow, it don't ring true."

Cliff was dipping into the head of a valley as he muttered his thoughts aloud. He had chosen the valley head purposely, for it was walled by tall bluffs, beneath which were innumerable caves.

Cliff had been past the place on other occasions, and figured that perhaps this cave-pitted series of bluffs was where the bothersome lions hid out. But he was not hunting lions now. He meant to cache the blankets, traps and foodstuff he had brought along with him, since he would return to this country sooner or later and take up his cat hunting in earnest.

It was while he rode along the base of one bluff hunting a suitable cave in which to cache his stuff that he found out for certain that Rimrock Dixon and those other hombres had lied about the habits of Drum and Judy. The big hounds were just ahead of Cliff, inquisitive noses searching stone and moist earth as if they expected to find some animal's scent. The dogs were trotting past a fallen pine when a rabbit bounded out and darted away along a deer trail ahead of them. The hounds merely watched the rabbit scurry off, tails wagging slightly, as if they found amusement in Mr. Rabbit's frantic rush.

"Rabbit dogs, eh?" Cliff gritted. "Dixon lied on that score, no mistake about it. Them hounds are rabbit proof."

He found a cave which suited his needs a few yards farther along, and cached the bulky roll he'd carried behind his saddle. Then another

worry came to Cliff, and his face darkened.

For some reason he could not have explained he had the feeling that human eyes were watching his every move. He looked over his shoulder often, and a creepy feeling along his spine added to his uneasiness. He could see no one, nor did stopping Gringo, and listening intently bring to his ears any sounds that were not natural to the forest. But the feeling that he was being followed and watched persisted, and Cliff knew that a hundred men could be strung along ridges and among the pines about him without showing themselves at all.

He took to a high ridge, making no effort to mask his movement.

"If there is anybody followin' me it'd be Dixon or some of his bunch," he reasoned. "An' if they aim to sling lead at my back, they'll do it regardless o' where I ride. But why would anybody follow me? Or am I just jumpy after findin' that thievin' Rimrock holed up this close to Flyin' X cattle an' hosses?"

Coupled with the feeling that he had been bluffed into buying the hounds, this notion that he was being followed made Cliff unusually keyed up. When a big buck deer plunged out of a pine thicket just ahead of him, the ranny had both six-guns halfway out of holsters before he realized what had made the racket.

Grinning sheepishly, he slid the weapons back into soft leather, and watched the buck bound nimbly away. Drum and Judy quivered eagerly, and Judy loosed a long cry of yearning to be off after that fat buck. But someone had trained those hounds to let deer alone, for neither of them offered to give chase.

"They don't run rabbits, an' they don't run deer," Cliff thought. "In

other words, them hounds are trained. Rimrock either didn't know a blamed thing about the dogs, or else he lied deliberate."

Cliff's saddle pockets bulged with meat sandwiches his mother and Him Fu, the Chinese cook at the Flying X, had fixed before he left the ranch that morning. He stopped an hour before sundown where a mountain stream raced through a slot of canyon, and ate a cold meal. He fed Drum and Judy part of the sandwiches, then stretched out on a grassy bank to smoke while Gringo grazed along the stream.

But he could not rest as he had hoped to do. He fidgeted nervously, eyes forever darting quick glances at the rimrocks high above his head. He was glad when the shadows of dusk came stealing into the canyon. He caught and saddled Gringo once more, swung aboard, and whistled to the hounds.

"It'll be midnight before we get home now, pups," he told them as they ranged alongside. "But you'll have plenty o' feed an' a good hay barn to sleep in when we do get there."

Cliff relaxed somewhat when dusk changed to darkness, for he felt that those staring eyes would be powerless now to watch him. Then he again wondered if there really had been anyone watching him, and wished that he could have known for certain.

He pressed on into the Flying X Range, guided by the familiar shapes of peaks he recognized limned against the stars. As the night wore on he grew weary from the long hours he had spent in the saddle. He thought sleepily that if he had been trailed all this time the party or parties doing the trailing must have had plenty of chances to shoot him before darkness came.

Cliff was not really asleep, yet he



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was dozing enough to be startled into pawing at holstered guns and almost falling out of the saddle when the night was suddenly torn apart by a din such as he had seldom heard. But even as he clutched at guns, he recognized the sound as the voices of Drum and Judy.

The hounds were in a deep canyon to his right, and an hombre who was not familiar with their breed would have sworn that someone was lambasting the daylights out of the dogs. But Cliff knew instantly that the hounds had come upon the scent of some animal they wanted to chase, and were giving tongue in sheer joy at the prospects of a run. Judy's clear tones shrilled above Drum's deeper voice, and those big hounds were putting country behind them in a hurry.

"They've jumped a fox or coyote," Cliff decided. "An' are they burnin' the heels off the critter."

Cliff was fully awake now, thrilling to the voices of the dogs. He swung Gringo, riding back along the rim of the canyon, wishing that he could get hold of the dogs.

"I'd ought to get on home soon as possible, an' warn dad that we've got Rimrock Dixon for a neighbor," the ranny mused. "But, gosh, that's music, the way them hounds are singin' to that varmint. Some hombre has maybe trained 'em to run calf-killin' mountain coyotes."

Cliff made for the head of the canyon, and was able to gain considerable distance, since he remembered this country well enough to take a short cut. But he was very little ahead of the dogs at that, for their ringing voices came rolling up from almost under Gringo's feet when Cliff halted the horse.

The puncher sprang down from the saddle, thinking to stop the hounds as they came up out of the

rocks below. They came up, but roared past within a dozen yards of him.

"Thunderation!" he groaned when they streaked on into the night, not heeding him.

He could not help enjoying the thrill of the chase as he stood listening.

"Well, looks like I'll have to let 'em have their fun," he chuckled. "Now if that's a fox, he'll likely circle pretty quick."

Curious to know just what sort of animal his dogs were so keen to chase, Cliff got into the very head of the canyon, where a seep spring made the earth soggy, and began striking matches. He had heard Drum and Judy slash through the mud and water, and he saw the prints of their feet. Then he saw the tracks of another animal there in the mud, and his eyes popped wide as he stared. He was looking at the biggest mountain lion tracks he remembered ever having seen, and suddenly it dawned upon him that here was the cat guilty of killing Flying X colts.

"Wahoo!" the ranny whooped shrilly. "Burn the wind after him, pups. We'll learn that cuss to kill colts. Rabbit hounds, are you?"

Cliff dropped the match in the mud as he yelled, and began scrambling back toward his horse. He was deeply excited now, and his worry over the Flying X spread's new neighbors was forgotten. But as he bounced into the saddle he was quickly reminded of the troubles which were brewing.

Drum and Judy were swinging sharply to the south again, following the ridge just opposite this canyon up which they had come. And above the bugling sound of their voices came the angry shouting of men.

"Head 'em off, yuh fools!" Cliff heard the words plainly. "Stop them bellerin' devils if yuh have to shoot 'em. That kid will stay up hyar as long as—"

The voice ended, as a gun's bellow filled the night. The baying of one hound changed to a yowl of pain, and Cliff hit his bronc's ribs with spur rowels.

"Rimrock Dixon done that talk-in'," he snarled as Gringo bolted. "I'll learn that cuss to shoot my dogs!"

CHAPTER IV.

KILLER'S FRAME-UP.

THROUGH eyes that were sullen from straining nerves and the loss of sleep, Cliff Merchant watched a dirty gray smudge against the eastern sky change to the first faint glow of daylight. He was gaunt of cheek and so weary he felt as if he would fall asleep in spite of himself.

Throughout a night that had seemed endless he had circled and listened to the unending voices of Drum and Judy. He could hear the hounds now, racing in a canyon to his right, apparently as eager as they had been when they jumped the lion the night before. But the keen zest of the chase had been taken from Cliff by the knowledge that Rimrock Dixon and those other three wolf-eyed jaspers were shadowing him, following the sound of the hounds as he himself followed it.

A dozen times during the night they had come close enough for Cliff to hear their horses traveling. But they were a wary bunch, and despite several attempts to come upon them, he had failed.

For a while after the shooting, when Dixon had ordered his followers to head off the hounds, only

one of the dogs had kept on after the lion. Cliff had feared that one hound had been killed, for he had heard the animal's yell of pain when some of the Dixon bunch fired. But after an hour or so both hounds were bawling after the lion, and Cliff knew now that whichever dog had yelped could not have been badly hurt. But, with the coming of daylight, his worries increased, for Rimrock Dixon and those others could see to shoot much straighter.

"I've got to crowd up closer to the hounds," the weary puncher growled. "If that Dixon jasper—"

He broke off, slack body lifting to attention. It had come at last! The hounds had ceased their bugling cry of the chase. Their voices were deeper now, breaking off in short barks.

"Treed!" the puncher cried. "They've put that cat up!"

He sent Gringo scooting down a slope and into the canyon, thrilling to the sound of the hounds telling him that they had brought the quarry to a stop. Cliff drew a Winchester from the saddle scabbard beneath his right knee, and levered a shell into the firing chamber. He slowed Gringo to a walk, tensely alert as he came around a bend in the canyon.

He saw the dogs then, leaping and barking, their muzzles lifted toward the tall boulder that was shaped like a huge bullet. And atop that boulder crouched the biggest, maddest tom cougar Cliff had ever seen.

"Gosh, but that colt-killin' cuss is a whopper!" the puncher gasped, and brought his horse to a stop.

He slid out of the saddle, swung the Winchester up to his shoulder, and brought the silver bead to bear on the cat's ugly head. Judy was doing her best to scramble up the steep side of the boulder, and the

lion was poised, one great forepaw ready to slash out the moment Judy's sleek head got within range. And in that moment, while the snarling cat's yellow eyes were fixed on the too-nervy hound, Cliff's lean forefinger pressed the Winchester's trigger.

The rifle's sharp sound echoed among the crags, and the cougar leaped high into the air, screaming in one last burst of savage life. Then the great cat fell threshing among the lesser rocks upon the earth, while Drum and Judy danced warily this way and that, baying their mightiest.

Cliff came up to them, and only then could he see the gauntness of their bodies that told of a weariness their excitement had not yet let them feel. And suddenly Cliff growled deep in his throat, for along Drum's left ribs gaped a long wound that only a bullet could have made. He noticed that Drum staggered, and realized how weak the plucky hound must be.

Cliff talked to them, patted their big heads, and told them that he thought they were a pretty swell pair of lion dogs. Gradually the hounds quieted, their broad tongues lolling as fatigue took its toll.

Cliff dragged the lion to the deep shade of a bluff, thinking what a nice rug the big killer's tan pelt would make for Tinkie, his kid sister. But there was no time for skinning now, and Cliff's eyes kept searching the rims above the canyon as he got the cat into a cool recess beneath the bluff where it would not spoil too soon.

He swung up into the saddle, whistled to the weary hounds, and rode down the canyon at a trot. The dogs followed him, but they looked as if they were ready to drop in their tracks.

"Good thing that cat worked south most o' the night," the puncher grumbled. "Drum wouldn't be able to travel very long today."

It was only a couple of hours' ride to the Flying X headquarters, and Cliff took the shortest possible course. And he rode with Winchester across his lap, bloodshot eyes scanning the ridges constantly.

He saw nothing of the Dixon crowd, however, and was beginning to relax as he got within a couple of miles of the Flying X headquarters. In fact his lids had drooped and he was dozing without realizing it when Gringo snorted sharply.

Cliff snapped erect, blinking as his hands clutched the rifle tighter. He saw the rider coming toward him up out of a canyon then, and a smothered yell passed his lips when he recognized the rider as his sister. The girl was riding up the slope at a reckless speed, and the paint pony under her staggered and skidded dangerously in its clawing run up the hill.

Cliff swung Gringo and sent the brown over the brow of the ridge and down to a little bench. Before he saw Tinkie's white face and staring eyes he knew that something was wrong, from the way the youngster had been riding up the slope.

"Cliff!" she choked. "Cliff, I'm so glad you're here instead of away up north in the pinnacle country. It's the awfulest thing—"

"Hold on, sis!" Cliff interrupted. "Now calm down, an' tell me what has scared you so."

"Th-there's a man swinging by the neck down this canyon about a mile," Tinkie cried. "The man is Sam Jordan, one of the small owners. Cliff, his face—"

Tinkie was weeping, hysterical from the horror of having come upon a dead man. And Cliff's lips

pinched into a dry line as the significance of a small rancher being hanged on Flying X range struck him forcefully.

"Sawtell!" he croaked. "Grant Sawtell is behind a neighbor of ours gettin' hung on this range. But steady now, youngster. It was tough on you, ridin' up on a hanged man. But buck up, little fella. I want you to meet a couple of new pals of ours."

Tinkie was fifteen, pretty as a picture, and the pet of the whole Flying X crew. She could ride like an Indian, handle a lariat rope with amazing skill for a girl of her age, and was a crack shot with the .32-20 Winchester she carried in a scabbard on her saddle. Cliff knew that the youngster would snap out of it if he could get her mind off the hanged man for a minute or two, and started telling her about the two big hounds as they trotted wearily down to him.

"That one—the biggest one—is hurt, Cliff!" Tinkie cried, and sprang down from the saddle.

The hounds shied at first, but came to her and wagged drooping tails after a little coaxing.

Cliff wanted to plunge on down the canyon and see what there was to be seen about the hanged man Tinkie had found. But he waited long enough to tell her of the long night chase, of the mountain lion's pelt that would make a rug for her to step on when her bedroom floor was cold of mornings. He told her briefly of Rimrock Dixon, and how Dixon or some of his bunch had shot the big hound the night before.

Tinkie's face was regaining color, and her mind was busy as she stroked Drum's long ears and sympathized with him.

"The wounded one you're pettin' is Drum, Tinkie," Cliff told her.

"The other is Judy. An' will we have fun runnin' cougars with them."

"You'll take me, Cliff?" Tinkie was breathless with the prospect of such a thrilling trip.

"On Friday or Saturday nights, when you don't have to go to school next day," he promised. "But right now, I've got to go down the canyon an' see about that man. Here, take my rope an' put it around Drum's neck. Put your rope around Judy's neck, an' take the hounds on home. Feed 'em good, an' get dad or some of the men to help you doctor that bullet cut on Drum's side. We don't want anything to happen to him."

Tinkie took the rope Cliff held out, but her face was pale again, and her lips trembled as she looked up at him. "Be careful, Cliff," she choked. "That man being hanged down there means more trouble for us, doesn't it?"

"I hope not, sis," Cliff answered gravely. "But you hike on home with the dogs now. Send dad an' any of the men who are around the place on out. I'll wait for 'em at the tree where Jordan is hung." He was gone then, bitterness added to his fatigue.

He found the hanged man without trouble, for Jordan had been swung from the limb of a big juniper which grew in an open spot near the base of one slope of the canyon.

Cliff dismounted, studying the maze of hoof marks beneath the tree. And in the back of his tired brain ran the disturbing memory of Rimrock Dixon having trailed him, and of the trouble the Flying X had had with Grant Sawtell. After a brief look, Cliff kept his eyes off the stubby old man who had been hanged, abandoning his first impulse to cut the man down.

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"Sawtell's work, no question of it," he muttered fiercely. "An' the dirty coyote will see that the Flyin' X gets blamed for the hangin'. The only way to ever stop Grant Sawtell is to kill him, looks like."

Cliff reached for tobacco and papers, but his hands stopped and his head rocked sidewise. Riders were coming up the canyon from the south, and the tall puncher started toward his own horse. He went up into the saddle, wondering grimly if he wasn't a little foolish to stay here with the hanged man. Those riders from the south were close, though, and to be seen fleeing would certainly look bad. Cliff crossed his hands on the saddlehorn, and sat watching a half dozen men round a turn in the canyon.

"Jordan's neighbors, an' they're readin' sign," Cliff muttered.

One of the six looked up, yelled something. The other five heads snapped erect, sun glinted on gun metal, and one man fired. Cliff heard the bullet whistle over his head, but did not move a hand as the six men spurred toward him, the one who had done the shooting cursing because a friend had snatched the gun from his hand.

"Lift them hands, Cliff Merchant," a stout man bellowed.

"Look! On the tree there." Another of the group shrieked. "It's Sam, boys. An' he's been hung."

The faces of Sam Jordan's friends whitened, the guns in their hands became steadier. They fanned out, circled Cliff, their eyes bitter as they reined in about him.

"Look at this gun-slingin' kid's face," a skinny little fellow shrieked. "He's dead tired, an' his eyes show he ain't had a wink o' sleep. He's guilty as sin, fellers. We ort to trigger a ton o' lead into him."

"Why?" Cliff's voice was dry and hard. "What have I done to you

hombres? Do you think I hung Sam Jordan?"

"Think it, nothin'! We know you did!" the big hombre who had first ordered Cliff to lift his hands snarled.

Cliff met the man's blazing eyes levelly. "You've known my dad a good many years, Todd Granville," the young ranny snapped. "Can you think of any reason why Seth Merchant, or his son, either, would want to hang a friendly neighbor like old Sam Jordan was?"

"Stalls an' smooth lies!" the shriveled little man yelled again. "Give me back my gun, Gyp Glynn, an' I'll finish this cub of Seth Merchant's right now."

"Shut up, Dabney," Tod Granville ordered without taking his eyes from Cliff.

Granville was raising his free hand, dipping strong fingers into a jacket pocket. He pulled out a square of white paper, and shoved the paper accusingly at Cliff.

"Lower yore left hand real careful an' take this note," the big man ordered. "Then see if yuh've got the brass to deny that yuh know anything about what happened to Sam."

Cliff took the paper, choking on a muttered word as he read: "Back-track this hoss an you will see what happens to them that trespass on the Flyin' X." And at the bottom of the note was Cliff's own name.

"Now what do yuh say, blast yore eyes?" Polk Dabney shrilled.

"Sawtell," Cliff snarled. "Grant Sawtell has pulled this murder, just as he's pulled other rotten tricks in the hope that you hombres would turn against the Flyin' X an' help him fight dad. Granville, can't you see that—"

Cliff's voice broke off. Around the bend in the canyon another rider had come from the south. And at

sight of this new arrival Cliff would have slashed his hands down to gun butts but for the snarled warnings of the men who had him hemmed in.

The rider who came up now was Grant Sawtell, owner of the Ladder P, and boss of the Pool he had bullied men into joining.

Sawtell was a tall fellow, thin and sinewy of body, with a narrow face from which two jetty eyes stared coldly. Sawtell's thin mouth twisted into a mocking grin as he met Cliff's blazing glance, and the Ladder P men reined in a little apart from the others, a thing Cliff was to remember later.

"Well, well, men, what goes on here?" Sawtell hummed. "Don't tell me—say, ain't that a man hung to the tree there?"

"You ought to know, you oily buzzard," Cliff flared. "You or some of that crew of yours hung Jordan last night. Didn't figure on makin' the one little mistake that would tip your hand, did you?"

Alarm paled Sawtell's face, and Cliff was searching frantically for some further bluff that might cause the man to betray himself when guns opened up with the suddenness of a thunderbolt.

A man directly in front of Cliff fell headlong from the saddle. Another on his right wilted, toppled when the horse under him lunged. The other four ranchers who had been holding the drop on Cliff whirled when Grant Sawtell let out a shrill yell.

"Hightail it, men!" the Ladder P owner howled. "Bull Zane an' the Flyin' X punchers will kill us all!"

Sawtell spurred away, the other four ranchmen following him swiftly. And Cliff whirled toward the mouth

of the side canyon from which those murder guns had snarled.

He spurred Gringo, sent the brown leaping toward the canyon. But a swarm of bullets singed the air around him, and he plunged out of the saddle, realizing that he could advance on foot much more safely. His guns were out. Their double thunder smashed into the echoes of the rifles at the side canyon as he lit running.

The rifles grew silent, and when he reached the mouth of the draw he heard the swift throb of hoofs from somewhere beyond a grove of tall pines which choked the little canyon. Then Cliff's eyes fell to the sand spit behind the shoulder of granite that had protected the ambushers.

He had known from the first deadly blast of gunfire that no Flying X men would do such a cowardly bit of bushwhacking. And as he looked down at the sand now Cliff knew who had done the shooting. There before his eyes were three sets of boot tracks, and one set of moccasin tracks. Someone had brushed hastily at the sand, trying to wipe out the sign. But Cliff's unexpected rush, and the threat of his six-gun slugs had put the four killers to rout.

"Rimrock Dixon an' his three pards," the puncher choked. "An' Grant Sawtell knowed them four was planted here, for he hollered that it was Bull Zane an' the other Flyin' X punchers doin' the shootin'."

CHAPTER V.

HOT-LEAD RECEPTION.

THE two hombres who had been shot from their horses by the Dixon gang were not dead. But they were mighty sick men, so

nearly unconscious they could only moan as Cliff Merchant hastily dressed their wounds.

One of them had been shot through the shoulder, and the bone was broken. The other had a couple of bullet-broken ribs and a bad cut along his side. But Cliff dressed their wounds, carried them to the shade of a tree, and made them as comfortable as possible.

"Kid, I think the others an' me made a mistake," the fellow with the broken shoulder panted weakly. "I seen yuh shoot at them bushwhackers, which means they wasn't Flyin' X men. Yuh wouldn't shoot at yore own daddy's crew."

"Them four bushwhackers was hired by Grant Sawtell," Cliff croaked. "But I've got no time to argue matters now, Chilton. You an' Hogarth just lay quiet. Dad an' the Flyin' X men will be here before much longer an' they'll see that you are taken care of. In the meantime, I'm borrowin' that buckskin o' yours."

Cliff sprinted to the chunky buckskin, sprang up into the saddle, and galloped away before the man he had called Chilton could offer an argument. Gringo was too fagged out for a long run, and Cliff had left the horse behind. But this buckskin was fresh, and the Flying X ranny shoved spurs against the brone's ribs as he thundered into the mouth of the canyon from which Dixon and those other killers had fired.

Cliff knew that Rimrock and those other three were on tired broncs, for they had followed him all night. He had thought of that as he dressed the wounds of the two ranchers who had been shot down. Mounted now on a fresh horse, he figured that his chances of running Rimrock Dixon and those other three down were

very good. But the sign he followed north up the canyon swung east and south within two miles, and Cliff groaned through locked teeth when he realized what that meant. Rimrock and his pards were scooting straight for the Ladder P, where the murderous gang Sawtell called cowboys and Pool Rangers would help protect them.

The Flying X waddy followed their sign until he could see the Ladder P buildings off in a valley, then reined in, to sit white-faced and trembling with anger. But, as his anger cooled, his weary brain hit upon an idea which brought a sparkle of new hope to his eyes.

"Rimrock an' his bunch will get fresh mounts, then circle back to their mountain hang-out," he muttered in grim excitement. "Come on, buckskin hoss. We'll be at Rimrock's place to sorta welcome him an' them other three when they get home."

But Rimrock Dixon and his gang did not return home that day. Cliff hid the buckskin in a grassy pocket where the horse could graze, and lay down upon the cool earth to get some much-needed sleep. He was within a few yards of the trail Dixon and his men would ride, hidden by thick bushes while he slept. Regardless of his fatigue, he would have been wide awake at the first mutter of hoofs along the trail. But Cliff slept soundly until the chill of night awakened him.

He sat up, startled to find that it was dark. His first thought was that he had slept too soundly, and had let the four cutthroats pass him. But the log house was dark when he approached it. And when he went inside he found the cook stove cold, which meant that no one had used it in a good many hours.

Cliff was ravenous, and uneasy be-
WW—8B

cause Rimrock Dixon and the others had failed to appear. He dared not light a lamp, for the killers who lived here might come riding up the canyon at any time. But he struck matches, keeping them cupped in his palms as he searched the grocery cabinet.

He found a can of hominy, got it open, and made a meal on the swollen grains. He had stepped out the back door to open the can and do his eating, and had just finished the hominy when his keen ears caught the throb of hoofs racing up out of the night.

Cliff hurled the can from him, darted to the front of the log house, and stood crouched and listening, his pulse lifting to a swift beat as the horses charged toward him. Then he crouched down close to the earth, and could see three riders outlined against the stars.

"Only three o' the coyotes," he growled. "But that's all the better. I'll have one less lobo to watch when I try to get the drop."

The riders were swinging into the front yard now, and Cliff remained where he was, pressed close to the earth. He had drawn both guns, yet he had no intention of trying to get the drop on those three yet. Out here in the canyon's blackness, it would be too much of a risk. He wanted them inside, hemmed in by four walls and under the rays of a lamp when he made his play.

He heard the three hombres talking as they dismounted, and Rimrock Dixon's voice lifted angrily above the others.

"Ain't no use to argue," Rimrock said harshly. "The hull deal is off, far as I'm concerned."

"Cool down, Dixon, an' talk sense," another voice advised.

At the sound of that voice Cliff

Merchant came dangerously close to yelping in surprise. He strangled the cry barely in time, a hot wave of tenseness burning through his quivering body. For the voice that had advised Rimrock to cool down was the voice of Grant Sawtell!

"Cool down, hey?" Dixon stormed. "I lost two mighty good men tonight, Sawtell. Whit Casey an' Ben Reedy got blasted out o' saddles when we tried to grab that measly shirt-tail full o' cattle them small owners had bunched fer shipment."

"An' them tough hands you call Pool Rangers shore turned their tails an' run instead of givin' us fellers a hand," Lew Hazen's voice declared. "If your men had stuck, Sawtell, Whit an' Ben would be alive right now. They wasn't more than six or eight o' them shoestring ranchers shootin' at us."

"Yuh claimed that herd wouldn't be guarded by more than a couple o' men, Sawtell," Rimrock snarled. "Them ranchers was set fer trouble, which makes it look like they'd been tipped off, or else yuh didn't know what yuh was talkin' about in the first place."

"I lost a man or two myself, didn't I?" the Ladder P owner rapped. "Dixon, cut out the bellyachin' an' act sensible. How was I to know that the herd them penny-ante coyotes had bunched together fer shippin' would be guarded as heavy as it was?"

"Yuh claimed to know about the guards," Rimrock fumed. "On top o' that, yuh told us that Cliff Merchant wouldn't do no fightin' to speak of. But that youngster jumped me an' my three men today when we done that bushwhackin' job fer yuh."

"An' yuh botched that job," Saw-

tell snarled. "Instead of downin' them two-bit ranchers fer keeps, yuh only crippled 'em up. But to blazes with this fussin'. What I want is to—"

Sawtell's voice trailed into a meaningless mutter as the men stamped angrily into the log house.

Cliff Merchant stood up, breathing hard as excitement tingled in his veins.

"So that gang hubbed some trouble when they jumped a herd, did they?" he mused softly.

Cliff trod softly to the front door, which had been closed. But there was a crack beneath the panel, and now yellow lamplight crept out that crack in a thin glow.

"All right, yuh hothead, now listen to me," Sawtell's voice came angrily. "I'll pay yuh an' Hazen, here, the same amount I promised the four of yuh fellers at the outset. Sure, things have gone agin' us so far. But Cliff Merchant is to blame fer all my miseries. Git that slick-eared kid out o' my way!"

"Me an' my men could have drilled him this mornin' when he blundered down to where yuh an' yore bunch had hung that Sam Jordan feller durin' the night, Sawtell," Rimrock flared. "But yuh had ordered us to jist foller the youngster, so's we'd be shore to know right where he was when that thick-headed sheriff wanted him on a murder charge."

"Hang the luck! I figgered Bull Zane, the Flyin' X foreman, or some other Flyin' X man would find Jordan's carcass," the Ladder P owner fumed.

"Well, if you got a surprise out of Cliff Merchant bein' the one to show up there, try to figger out how Rimrock an' the rest of us felt," Lew Hazen grated. "We follered the kid

until after daylight, an' he was shore headin' fer home with them sore-footed hounds. Then we rode over to that canyon, bushed up like you had told us, an' the fust thing we knowed there was that yonker we'd follered until we was plumb wore out."

Cliff holstered his left-hand Colt, grasped the door's latch and felt the catch slide free.

"If yuh'd downed Cliff Merchant there this mornin', it would have ruint my chances o' makin' them shoestring ranchers think the Flyin' X was behind that bushwhackin'," Sawtell was saying. "As it is, I've still got a chanet to—"

"To elevate them Colt hooks, or get drilled. That goes for the three o' you!"

Rimrock Dixon and his two companions almost jumped out of their shirts. They whirled toward the door, and the oaths they loosed were like whispers of despair.

Cliff Merchant stood in the open doorway, framed against the blackness of the night beyond. He was crouched slightly, and from the level of each hip a big six-gun jutted.

"It's him!" Sawtell screeched. "It's that . . . that blasted kid, fellers."

"Well, it ain't Santy Claus," Cliff rasped. "Sawtell, reach for your ears if you want to stay healthy. It looks like—"

Cliff saw Lew Hazen move. Twin guns belched flame-tipped thunder at him from down the room, and a bullet burned his left cheek. Cliff triggered at the two jetting flames, and caught the sodden sound of lead striking flesh a split second before the room became a shuddering inferno of whanging guns and the high-pitched cursing of nervous men.

A bullet slapped Cliff's left shoulder. He felt his arm go dead and knew that the gun spilled from his fingers. But the gun in his right hand coughed redly through the

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swirling powder fumes, and he saw Rimrock Dixon lean forward, long hair fanning out wildly as he pitched lifelessly down to the floor.

Then the world seemed to explode in Cliff's face. He blinked at lights shimmering before his eyes, and tried to shut his ears against the clanging of what sounded like a huge gong. He thumped the floor before he realized that he was even falling. But the shock of the fall steadied his reeling senses for a moment, and he brought his gun-filled right hand up as his dazed eyes saw Grant Sawtell crouched beside the table which held the lamp.

Cliff fired, but his hand was wobbling so that his slug smashed the lamp instead of thudding into Sawtell's snarling face. The wick of the exploding lamp fell into a pool of oil on the table and blue-red flames sprang up, driving back the shadows that tried to close in.

Cliff felt sicker than he had ever been in his life, and there was warm crimson pouring down the side of his head and face. Splinters stung his cheeks when two slugs tore the flooring almost under his nose, and the threat of death pumped a thin flow of energy into his shaking muscles. He propped himself on one elbow, eyes dazedly searching the fogged room for Grant Sawtell.

He saw the Ladder P owner just as Sawtell screamed an alarmed oath and came lunging out from a corner behind the blazing table. Flame was licking along one side of Sawtell's coat, where oil had sprayed over the cloth when the lamp shattered under the impact of Cliff's bullet.

Sawtell's face was a mask of mingled rage and terror, and his wild eyes saw Cliff's feeble movements as the ranny came up to a sitting position. Cliff tried to yell a warning at Sawtell, but realized that his voice was only a weak croak. Then the Ladder P owner's guns whipped down

to aim as he charged, and Cliff felt more awe than anger as he centered his own wabbling gun as best he could on the flaming human projectile that was hurtling at him.

Cliff's gun bucked. He saw the Ladder P owner stiffen, rear, and keep on going back until he was stretched face up on the floor. Cliff holstered his gun, found the one he had dropped earlier, and got it into leather. He was sick, and the smoke that came from the burning table and floor choked him. But he crawled to Sawtell's side, saw the man's face as a crimson washed mask. Cliff beat out the fire that was eating into Sawtell's coat, and started dragging the limp weight of the Ladder P man toward the open door.

"Got to get him out o' here, even if he is dead," the ranny panted.

But the pain of his wounds was too much, and he pitched over sideways. He fought desperately against the blackness of unconsciousness, some small spark of reason deep within his brain telling him to get to the door and breathe fresh air before it was too late. He did not know that he crawled feebly over the flooring, leaving a bright red smear of crimson behind him.

The next thing he knew he was half strangling on a tangy liquid that burned his tongue and throat. But the liquid stung new life into him, and he opened his eyes to blink into what he at first mistook for sunlight.

He saw within a few moments, however, that the light was too red and flickering for sunlight, and he recognized it as the glow from a giant fire. The thought of fire stabbed his memory alive. He would have sat up but for strong hands which held him. Cliff saw his big, grizzled father leaning over him

then. And beside his father was squat Bull Zane, the Flying X foreman.

"Easy, son," old Seth Merchant soothed. "Yuh've got a ugly wound in yore shoulder, an' a slug has opened yore scalp a good four inches."

Cliff stared at the grave faces of men who were bunched behind his father and Bull Zane. Some of them were Flying X riders, others were from the smaller ranches, and still others were men Cliff recognized as merchants from Red Butte. And among them stood Sheriff Gus Leadford, a huge figure of a man who rolled uneasy eyes this way and that. For once the bullheaded sheriff was quiet, which was very strange indeed.

"Sawtell?" Cliff asked in a croaking voice.

"Don't worry about that skunk any more, Cliff," Bull Zane rumbled. "Sawtell set his Pool Rangers an' some other toughs to steal a herd of cattle just at dusk tonight. But the herd was guarded by the men who owned it, an' Sawtell's gang got shot up."

"He's done in this country at last, son," Seth Merchant told Cliff. "Two of Sawtell's men got captured durin' a runnin' fight after they tried that raid. An', in order to make things easier on theirselves, they talked plenty, although Sawtell had already been recognized as the leader of them raiders. What we're interested in knowin' is who yuh tangled with an' how come that house yonder is on fire."

Cliff sat up now despite restraining hands, and his face went gray when he looked at what had once been Rimrock Dixon's house. The roof had fallen in, the walls were beginning to sway, and a column of smoke

and sparks reached high into the night above the crackling logs.

"Sawtell is in there," Cliff said grimly, nodding toward the blazing log ruins of the house.

When the howls of excitement died down he told his listeners what had happened.

"So I guess that ends it," he finished hoarsely. "Last I remember, I was tryin' to drag Sawtell's body outside. But things went blackish, an' I remember thinkin' that a lungful o' fresh air might clear my head."

"Thinkin' about that fresh air is all that saved yuh," old Seth choked. "We found yuh layin' out in the yard when we spotted this fire an' rode up. The roof caved in just as we drug yuh out o' the heat."

"We knowed Sawtell an' two others rode up this way, an' we was follerin' in the hope we'd run onto the snakes," a man gritted. "But this boy o' Seth's saved us the trouble of ever huntin' Sawtell again. This country owes that younker plenty, if you ask me."

"The peace this range will know now that Sawtell is out o' the picture is payment enough for me," Cliff said, smiling gravely, as willing hands helped him to his feet.

But the peace that Cliff Merchant hopes for an' deserves ain't comin' yet. There's trouble ahead fer him—big trouble that he don't expect. Look out fer another fast-action adventure about him in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly next week.

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Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

By the great horn spoon, it's already time fer us to celebrate another anniversary. Can yuh beat how time flies? This is the eighth month o' May thet I've been a-findin' ol' Western songs fer readers of the W. W. W. Corral!

Purty soon I'll git to be like ol' maids thet's afraid to say how ol' they are: I'll have to say the Corral's so many years ol' an' thet's thet, no matter how many Mays roll around while we keep on a-gatherin' these ol' songs together.

Waal, now, let's see what we'll have fer this occasion? "When it rains, it pours," they say, about



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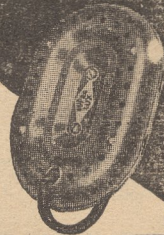
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blessin's an' disasters alike—an' some kinds o' salt. Waal, I reckon yuh'll agree with me thet the songs thet Mr. Gerald McIntosh has been a-pourin' in on the Corral is in the nature of a blessin'!

Hyar's one of the songs he sent in recently:

IN THE FRONTIER GRAVEYARD

Here lie the dead 'neath headboards stained by time,

In rough graves uncared for; rudest heaps of earth;

Rough men whose lives on earth were black with crime,

Devoid of every mark of honest worth,

In ways unnatural they met up with death,

In bloodstained garments they were laid from sight,

A curse clung to each victim's dying breath And hatred lit their eyes till dimmed of light.

With boots yet on their sinful feet they'll lie

Till Gabriel's trumpet echoes from on high.

Here lies old Texas Joe who met his death From hand of one who was of quicker fire,

And Tuscorora Sam, whose fund of breath Slipped from him when he called Black

Bill a liar,

And here is Poker Frank, who tried to steal The frayed affection of Sport Daly's

dame,

And this rude board stands over Brack Teale,

Whom drink had made unsteady in his aim

When with their shooters he and Grizzly Pete

Went out to hunt each other on the street.

Here lies the shot-up frame of Smoky Tim, Whose stolen horse lacked necessary

speed,

And close beside him sleeps old Greaser Jim,

Who was by vigilantes roped and treed.

Just over there lies Sacramento Joe,

Who died with boots too full of wriggling snakes,

And just beyond they planted Tommy Lowe,

Who made a fatal play to grab the stakes From off the table in a game of draw—

"Bit off," the boys said, "more than he could chew."

Here's Bob, the Methodist, and Sleepy Ike, And Doughface Henderson, and Whiskey

Mack,

And poor Joe Bowers (not the man from Pike)

And Faro Dick and old Three-fingered
Jack,
And others, names unknown, lie in this
spot;

And standin' in this border burial ground,
Rude and uncared for, comes the passing
thought

That when the dead awake at the trum-
pet sound
Old Gabriel will be filled with mute surprise
To see this gang of thoroughbreds arise!

Waal, judgin' by the sound of 'em,
I reckon whatever town it was thet
had this pertickler frontier grave-
yard did right well to keep its bad
men in graves thet were set apart
from its good men.

By the way, yuh remember thet
ol' Civil War song thet was turned
into a favorite cowboy song called
Joe Bowers, about the Joe thet
comes from Pike? The verse above
put me in mind of it. Let's have it
ag'in!

JOE BOWERS

My name it is Joe Bowers;
I've got a brother Ike;
I come from old Missouri,
Yes, all the way from Pike.

I'll tell you why I left thar,
And how I came to roam,
And leave my old mammy,
So far away from home.

I used to love a gal;
Oh, they called her Sally Black.
I asked her to marry me;
She said it was a whack.
But says she to me: "Joe Bowers,
Before you hitch for life,
You had better get a little house
To put your little wife."

Says I: "My dearest Sally,
Oh, for your sake,
I'll go into the army
And try to raise a stake."
Says she to me: "Joe Bowers,
Oh, you're the chap to win;
Give me a buss—'tis a bargain—
And throw a dozen in."

I'll ne'er forget my feelings
When I bid adieu to all.
Sally coted me round the neck
And I began to bawl.

When I got in they all commenced;
You never did hear the like,
How they all took on and cried so hard
The day I left old Pike.

When I landed in Galveston,
I hadn't *nary red*;
I had such wolfish feelings,
I wished myself most dead.
But the thoughts of my dear Sally
Soon made those feelings get,
And whispered hope to Bowers—
I wish I had 'em yet!

At length I went in the army,
Put in my biggest licks,
And come down upon the breastworks
Just like a thousand bricks.

I worked both late and early,
In rain and sun and snow;
But I was working for my Sally,
So it was all the same to Joe.

One day I got a letter
From my dear brother Ike;
It came from old Missouri,
And all the way from Pike.
It brought me the doggonedest news
That ever I did hear—
My heart is almost breaking,
So please excuse this tear!

It said my Sally was fickle,
Her love for me was fled!
That she had gone and married
A butcher whose hair was red!

It's too bad, folks, thet Joe
Bowers had sech a tough time with
thet gal of his. But we got one
thing to thank Sally for anyway—
the story of her an' Joe makes a
darn good song. An' maybe if she'd
waited around an' hadn't run off
with thet red-headed butcher, Joe
would never have writ thet fine
pome. It's an ill wind, as they say,
thet don't blow somebody some
good. So let's give a couple of
cheers fer Sally an' Joe.

An' now we gotta wind up this
song rodeo an' close the Corral fer
this week. I sure hope each an'
every one of yuh will be celebratin'
next May with me. So long an'
good luck!



The Wranglers Corner

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from beginners and amateur writers and artists.

The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

Drawings should be in India ink on plain white paper. No pencil or crayon drawings can be used. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned, but an effort will be made to return drawings, provided it is especially requested, and a stamped, addressed envelope is inclosed for that purpose.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, waddies, hyar 'tis Juniors' Night ag'in! Mebbe some o' yuh fergot it, but the Oklahoma Kid don't when we gits together fer this week's meetin'.

"Bring on them stories by the youngers!" says he. "I don't reckon we'll stay long jedgin' 'em. They're prob'ly plumb pore nohow."

"Better not let yore hand drift too fur from a gun butt, Kid," advised Yuma Bill. "You're in fer a big surprise. Yeah, you're headin' straight into an ambush!"

"The youngers shore give me a su'prise the last Juniors' Night I took in," speaks up Hungry Hawkins. "Durned if I could see no

diff'rence twixt their stories an' them o' the older amachooers."

"Yeah," agrees Pecos Wilson, "the youngers has did theirselves proud so fur. But fer 'em to keep it up mebbe's expectin' too much. Yuh got to remember thet dogies can't keep up with full-growed steers when they're herded over a long trail."

"Huh!" snorts Rusty Bolivar. "These yere amachoor dogies done it, didn't they? Yuh admits yoreself thet they ain't got winded on the trail any Juniors' Night yit."

"Course," opines Hungry Hawkins, "we prob'ly ain't so stern with the youngers as we is with the older uns."

"Yuh crazy pelican!" barks Rusty Bolivar. "Yuh know thet ain't so! Yuh knows durned well we—"

"Waal," we horns in, "if we don't git started pronto, the younkens'll be all growed up 'fore they gits their checks. Listen to this un, an' don't be too chicken-hearted when yuh pass judgment."

RENEGADE'S PAYDAY

By Edward Belasco—Age 15

San Antonio, Texas

When his stern, gray eyes focused upon the small cabin erected in the center of a fertile valley which lay ahead of him, Skeeter McGee cursed. His ugly, scar-covered face grew dark and his huge hands jerked viciously at the reins. The roan under his half-slumped body thrust its head upward, then began the descent of the slope.

Skeeter McGee knew he had no time to lose. He must act quickly; otherwise, the only thing he had lived for would never be accomplished. Twelve years prior, he had known this day was coming. And for twelve years he kept a vigilant eye on Lou Cotter, owner and dweller of the cabin which he was approaching.

As he drew closer, his stark hate of Cotter became almost intolerable. He recalled when in years past he had settled in that valley hopeful of becoming one of the biggest ranchers in the Southwest and live to see the day when he, too, would be sending herds up the Texas Trail. His son would then come West to carry on the work. This was a picture Skeeter McGee had always visualized and one that Lou Cotter had done everything to obliterate.

But now, his unsteady and crippled body entered the cabin. He found Cotter, a sharp knife in his hand, near the center of the room. The husky, oily-faced man was stooped over the frame of a curly, hobbled-yellow dog.

"Only snakes of yore breed would ear-brand a dog," McGee's voice was distinctively clear.

"Durn yuh, Scatter-shot," the other belated, "start back-trailin' to Stacy's before I sear yuh up some more!"

Saying this, Cotter reached for his gun. But even then he became aware of the .45 Colt in Skeeter McGee's hand.

"We've got a score to settle first," came the grim retort. "I ain't Scatter-shot, the swamper yuh've been seain' at Stacy's Saloon all this time. I'm yore ole boss, Skeeter McGee!"

It gave him satisfaction to see the ghastly

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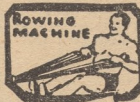


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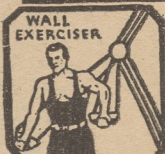


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pallor that took possession of Cotter. Somehow, it reminded him of all the misery and suffering he had endured waiting for this moment.

"I'm the hombre yuh left down in the shaft to be blown to hell," he continued. "I got crushed by them rocks, got all scarred up like I'm now, but I didn't check in. My boy got into town this mornin'. I seen him come in an' I'm here to take over the spread thet's his an' mine!"

But Skeeter McGee had drawn close—too close—and in a flash Cotter lunged at him unexpectedly. The .45 jarred free of McGee's grasp. They tumbled to the floor. They smashed, gripped and tore at each other like frenzied beasts. And it was only through superhuman efforts that McGee's broken body could withstand such savage onslaught.

Suddenly, he felt cold steel scrape painfully against the side of his neck. He heard wood splinter beneath the blow's force. A powerful jerk at his adversary's wrist and he knew that he was disposed of the weapon.

Then he grew aware of a new danger. Cotter was digging down to the holster for his gun! He had to stop him!

Their ebony arms tangled after the Colt was out of the holster. Dull sounds emitted from the clashing of those hard-muscled limbs. As Skeeter McGee battled desperately for life, he saw the hobbled dog trying vainly to avoid being crushed by those furious humans. He saw the dog leap awkwardly, his hindquarters striking the unsteady, strength-spent arms. Next, there was a resounding boom and Lou Cotter slowly became limp.

Skeeter McGee drew himself to a sitting position. He labored at the buckskin tongs about the yellow dog's paws. The startled, quivering animal looked at him gratefully.

"The score's settled now," the oldster spoke completely exhausted. "We'll both have a better home when my son takes us in."

"Look at me, an' yuh'll see a gent thet's plumb flabbergasted!" hollers Yuma Bill. "Yuh mean to tell me thet a fifteen-year-old younker writ thet story, Boss?"

"What's su'prisin' 'bout thet?" speaks up Pecos Wilson.

"They never l'arned me to write no sech stories back in the leetle red schoolhouse," says the Oklahoma Kid. "I rates her a plumb good un."

We sides the Kid on thet. After

seen' the story herded into the brandin' pen, we reads:

DAVE TRAVIS WINS OUT

By Juanita Evans—Age 13

Kirkwood, Illinois

Dave Travis was riding home. He had just traded his horse and fifty dollars for Ben McGilly's roan. They had made the bargain and shook hands on it in front of McGilly's foreman, Butch Nolan.

The next day as Dave was eating his dinner, he heard someone ride into the ranchhouse yard.

"Who is it?" whispered Molly, his wife, for she sensed that something was wrong.

"I don't know," Dave whispered back. Aloud he said, "What do you want?" It was the sheriff, Ben McGilly, and McGilly's foreman.

"Ben here says that you stole his roan," replied the sheriff. "He says that Butch saw you riding the horse out o' town."

"Why yuh low-down thiev'n' polecat!" exclaimed Dave. "I paid yuh fifty dollars besides my own nag for yore horse."

"Yuh didn't, either!" yelled McGilly. "Butch saw yuh go out and untie my hoss from the hitch rail, and ride out o' town on it. Yuh didn't pay me for it, either."

"That hoss of yores is out in the corral now, also Ben's horse. The evidence is all against yuh, boy," said the sheriff. "Better come along plumb peacefullike. We'll see that yuh get a fair trial."

Dave turned to Molly. "Bye honey. You and the boys'll have tuh do the best yuh can. Jim Baker'll know what tuh do."

Dave turned to go with the sheriff.

"I'll get one of the boys tuh bring me down to see yuh in a couple of days," cried Molly cheerfully.

Two days later Molly and Jim Baker, the foreman of Dave's ranch, came to see Dave.

After Dave had talked to Molly, he called Jim and told him that he thought McGilly had framed him, but that he couldn't prove it.

Two weeks later at the trial, Butch Nolan testified that he saw Dave ride out of town on McGilly's horse.

Then Jim Baker got up and shouted, "Ben McGilly, yuh sneakin', lyin' snake. You took Dave's horse and his money for that horse of yours. Then yuh put the horse he traded yuh in his corral. But yuh tore a piece out of yore pants leg when yuh got out of the saddle. I found the piece on the saddle next day."

McGilly jumped up and ran for the door, but Jim Baker caught him and under threat of torture he signed a written confession.

Classified Advertising

Detectives—Instructions

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Bow-Legs Straightened

WITHOUT INTERRUPTING daily routine. Inexpensive. Write, New York Surgical Appliance, 132 Lexington Ave., New York.

As Dave and Jim were riding home, Jim told Dave that the night after he had been to see Dave, he had climbed in McGilly's bedroom window, and tore a piece out of McGilly's pants leg, to make him confess at the trial.

"That," said Dave, "was pretty slick work. Yore pay is raised."

"Thet shore was a good trick o' Jim's," chuckles Pecos Wilson. "Fur as thet goes, I calls the hull story good."

"Yeah," agrees Yuma Bill, "an' I notices 'twas wrote by a gal."

"Then thet means Rusty won't vote fer it," says Hungry Hawkins, an' he winks at the Oklahoma Kid. "He ain't had no use fer women sinct a gang o' bandits ketched him an' dressed him up in gal's clothes."

"Yuh crazy pelican, guess ag'in!," yelps Rusty. "It'll take more'n be-in' dressed up in gal's clothes to keep me from votin' fer thet story!"

FLASH!



King of them all—for camp—hikes—night signaling—to find things in the dark. This powerful flashlight is the best.

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This offer is good in the United States and Canada until September 1, 1939.

So she's corralled pronto, an' we reads:

BILL OF SALE

By Allen Bonner—Age 15
Norwalk, California

Down the hill and up the dusty main street of Buckshot rode the clean-cut, range-hardened, sunburned young waddy. Dismounting, he stalked into the Last Drop Saloon and up to the bar.

"Make mine root beer." The bartender gave a slight jerk at the sound of the order and was primed to say something when the look in the eyes of the stranger convinced him that the waddy knew what he wanted.

In one corner of the smoke-and-whiskey-smelling saloon, a card game was in progress. A tall, black-clothed gambler seemed to be leading. Holding his cards close to his face, the gambler spoke. "In front of me is my total for the pot, this saloon, the Last Stop Hotel, ten thousand dollars and the bill of sale to the H Bar K Ranch. Put up, gentlemen, or quit the game."

At the mention of the words H Bar K Ranch, the newcomer sauntered over to the table and addressed the tinhorn. "Did I hear you mention the H Bar K Ranch bill of sale?"

"You heard right, cow waddy, and what business is it of yours, may I ask?"

Reaching to the table top and picking up the paper marked "Bill of Sale," he turned to the place that the signatures were signed. "Is this supposed to be the signature of Old Man Johnson?" he queried.

"Whose does it look like?" was the curt reply.

"I'm taking cards in this game and if you gotta call me something, just call me Long Vincent Johnson."

At the mention of the name, the gambler gave a slight jerk of the shoulders as he went for his guns.

Long Vincent Johnson's guns cleared the tops of his holsters and spat their leaden messengers of death. Like a lightning-struck cottonwood, the card dealer wavered, bent at the middle and fell to the sawdust-covered floor.

Sliding his guns back to their resting places the waddy turned to the awe-stricken crowd and in a harsh whisper he announced: "As the son or sole heir of Old Man Johnson, I wish to tell you bar rags that I used to sign all the bills and papers for my father. Old Man Johnson never knew how to put his name on paper."

Sauntering out of the saloon, he piled on his paint and headed west, toward the H Bar K.

We votes that un in, too, an' ends up with a pome.

COWBOY MEMORIES

By Hazel McDonald—Age 19
Vernonia, Oregon

I want to go back to the prairie
I used to claim as mine.

Where the lingering sagebrush odor
Is more fragrant than the pine.

I want to wake up in the morning
And hear my old pinto neigh.
A breakfast of flapjacks and coffee,
Mount my horse and ride away.

Out over the wide-open prairie,
The cool breeze fanning my face,
With my heart and old Pinto's hoofbeats
Keeping time at breakneck pace.

I still long to head for the roundup
Though it's many miles away.
For we never did fail to be there
To take part in the fun and fray.

I yearn for that life on the prairie.
Who but this cowboy can know
The joy of riding old Pinto
As I did in days long ago.

"Durn it, Boss," says the Oklahoma Kid when we kicks the empty mailbags into a corner, "seems like this night has went all too fast. I knows it's late, too. Right hyar, I takes back what I said 'bout them younkurs writin' pore stories."

"Yuh'd ought to knowed better," says Hungry Hawkins.

"Waal, they knows it now, all right," says Yuma Bill. "What yuh aimin' to do next week, Boss?"

"Jest hold the reg'lar session fer amachooors of all ages, Yuma," we tells him. "'Lessn I miss my guess, the older uns'll be out loaded fer b'ar."

But we knows that younkurs an' older uns among the amachooors is plumb good sports, takin' it as a game, all in fun, with checks goin' to the lucky uns.

Come ahead an' git into it any time, amigos!

THE RANGE BOSS.

and the composition and balance of the
illy. vid.

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This Advertisement About "ATHLETE'S FOOT" IS THE MOST STARTLING, AMAZING OFFER EVER MADE!

Here Is What We Will Do . . .

To any victim of Athlete's Foot, anywhere in the U. S., we will send the complete Sporex Treatment simply upon request. You send us no money. You do not pay the postman a penny—not even postage. There are no strings, no catches to this offer whatsoever. Hundreds of people have used Sporex with almost unbelievable success. Just 6 treatments is usually enough. Now we want not hundreds, but hundreds of thousands of victims to know what Sporex will do for them.

WE LEAVE IT UP TO YOUR HONOR

We believe that any victim of Athlete's Foot who ends the misery, annoyance and suffering of his affliction will be grateful. We believe that anyone able to pay for deliverance from the scourge will want to do so. We be-

lieve that anyone able to pay \$3.00, we leave it to your conscience and honor to do so. But maybe you cannot afford that much. Don't let that fact prevent you from sending for Sporex! **YOU SET YOUR OWN PRICE!** If you can afford \$2.00, pay that. If \$1.50 is your financial limit, pay that. If you can only afford a dollar, pay \$1.00. If you actually cannot afford more than 25c, send that.

HERE'S WHAT WE ASK THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD THE REGULAR \$3.00 PRICE TO DO

We firmly believe any victim of Athlete's Foot who finds that Sporex ends the affliction, will be only too willing to pay the regular price, if he can afford it. We ask such people to do so. That will help us to extend our present unprecedented offer to more people who can only pay a little because of actual, pressing financial stringencies. **But we bar no one from our offer!** Act at once. This offer is for a limited time only.

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Sporex is a scientific formula, discovered in a scientific manner through long, arduous laboratory experimentation. It is a liquid—to be applied with an atomizer, that comes to you with the Sporex liquid (as shown in the illustration). Sporex is definitely for Athlete's Foot (and ringworm)—was created for these afflictions alone—and is not something just adapted. It is a clean treatment—nothing messy. The liquid is sprayed on. It penetrates and kills the Tinea Parasites that cause Athlete's Foot (Epidermophytosis). In almost all cases only 6 treatments are required. Used according to directions, Sporex prevents re-infection. This last is very important. The treatment is entirely safe.

AGAIN WE SAY, THIS IS A GENUINE OFFER WITHOUT STRINGS OR CATCH OF ANY KIND

We repeat that our offer is exactly as stated in this advertisement. We realize that some readers will be skeptical. They will perhaps feel that no one could make an offer like this—the treatment sent without obligation, no money to send, nothing to pay the postman, not even postage—and the option of paying what you can afford after you are satisfied. But if you do not take advantage of this offer, it is your own loss.

JUST MAIL THE COUPON—THAT'S ALL

Read the coupon and you'll see that it protects you fully from any obligation.

SPOREX LABORATORIES, Inc.
307 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. Dept. 2775

Gentlemen: Send me a complete Sporex Treatment as illustrated. I understand it will be delivered to me absolutely without cost, not even postage. I understand that I am free to use the Treatment, that I do not have to return it under any circumstances, that payment for the treatment is left to my honor if I am satisfied with it. I understand that the regular price is \$3.00, but that if I cannot afford three dollars, I will send what I can voluntarily . . . and that I am not compelled to pay at all.

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Complete Sporex Treatment for Athlete's Foot, Ringworm

lieve that the public is honest—and we are backing this belief in this unheard of way. If anyone thinks we are crazy to advertise in this way—well that's all right with us. We'll take the chance.

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Get the complete Sporex Treatment (for ringworm as well as Athlete's Foot) and use it. Directions for use come with the treatment. If—and only if—you are completely satisfied we request you to pay us for the treatment. But we cannot make you do so. We admit that—and even emphasize the fact!

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SPOREX LABORATORIES, Inc.
307 N. MICHIGAN AVE. Dept. 2775 CHICAGO, ILL.

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THOUSANDS GAIN
10 TO 25 POUNDS
THIS QUICK EASY WAY**



**Read how thin, tired-out, nervous,
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ARE you ashamed to be seen in a bathing suit, because you're too skinny and scrawny-looking? Are you often tired, nervous—unable to eat and sleep properly?

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Scientists have discovered that countless people are thin and rundown—tired, cranky, washed-out—only because they don't get enough Vitamin B and iron from their daily food. Without enough of these vital substances you may lack appetite and not get the most body-building good out of what you eat.

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Irvin Echard, Barberton, O.



R. Loeffler

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