

WILD WEST WEEKLY

CONTENTS NOVEMBER 11, 1939 VOL. 132, NO. 4 Whole No. 1934

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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.

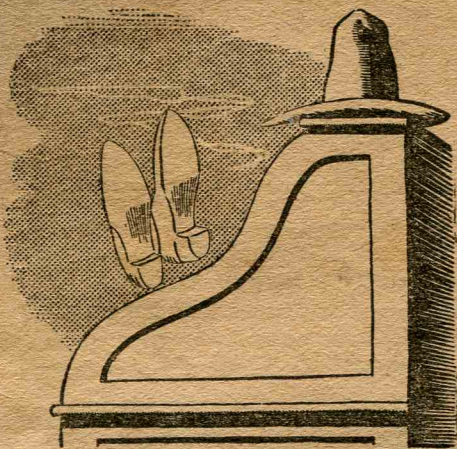


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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.



A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

THERE's a heap of variety in this issue, both in the story plots and the writing styles. That's what we aim for up here on the 3W range, as we figure variety is not only the spice of life but likewise the spice of a magazine. Of course, you may like one writer's style better than another's—but that's only natural. One reader thinks Mr. X is the best word wrangler there is, while another customer will rate Mr. Z the top hand with Mr. X way down in the list.

Years ago I knew an editor who got an enthusiastic letter from a reader. This letter praised *everything* in one particular issue. So the editor went plumb on a rampage, roarin' through the office and tearing his shaggy mane. "What in hell's wrong with me!" he bawled, "*I must be slippin'!*" That reader galoot likes *the whole magazine!*"

Don't reckon I'd take it quite so hard. But like him, I feel better

when you complain about somethin' once in a while. It's human nature to bellyache about things—and usually we'd rather raise objection than pay a compliment. Here's a note from a mysterious hombre who's mighty vehement both ways:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: You wanted to know if Bud Jones and Kiowa Kenyon were still popular with Wild West Weekly readers. Well, here's my opinion.

The stories with Bud Jones in them alone were excellent, but now with the addition of old Kiowa Kenyon they just can't be beat. J. Allan Dunn's stories about these characters are always fresh and give you a lot of clean enjoyment. Here's a suggestion: how about getting Dunn to write a novel featuring Bud and Kiowa?

About Sonny Tabor—as an outlaw he was swell reading matter, but now as a Ranger he's better than ever. Give Ward M. Stevens a hand. He deserves it.

Here's a few things about Wild West Weekly that sorta go against my grain. You said you could take brickbats, Range Boss, so here goes:

I consider Chuck Martin's character, Rawhide Runyan, just an ornery low-down, bounty-huntin' killer, not fit to ride with the rest of the clean-fighting Wild West Weekly outfit. Although Chuck Martin's other stories are all right, I think they're written too much the same.

In regard to the Pole Pickett stories—they're written only fairly well and have little or no plot to speak of. To put it bluntly, you sure must have a misplaced sense of humor to see anything funny in them. I sure can't.

Hasta La Vista,

THE GALLOPING GHOST.

Chicago, Ill.

That's the kind of reader spirit I like to see, Ghost. You speak your mind in a right frank manner. Like I said earlier, it's likely—fact, it's *certain*—that some of the other customers disagree. But I'd be pleased to hear from a flock of 'em regarding a novel-length yarn about Bud and Kiowa. Unlimber your pens, you

readin' rannihans and scrawl out your opinions.

As in the case of most all our writers, Ray Nafziger is a genuine Westerner. Since he writes the complete novel in this issue, seems proper for him to talk some about his career:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been knocking around the wide open spaces practically all my life—living on farms and ranches, in small towns and big, listening to old-timers and having a few adventures on my own. As a kid I lived on a Nebraska stock farm four miles from Rock Creek Station on the old Oregon Trail where Wild Bill Hickok got his reputation as a fighter and, until research showed otherwise, the credit for killing anywhere from five to ten men single-handed. Had the true story of that episode under my nose, but at the time I was too busy loping around the country on a cow pony to trouble about such things.

Spent some years East and West chasing an education that I never quite caught up with, and came back to the Southwest to break in as a U. S. Forest Ranger in back mountain country at a time when horse thieves were operating full blast in there—and when a drought and winter were so severe that ranchers had to steal government grass in a vain effort to save their cattle.

Most of my stories go back to yarns told me by men, some of them the kind who were in a lot of trouble in their earlier lives—shooting scrapes, mutual stealing of their neighbors' cattle, picking up and taking away ropes that happened to have someone else's horse on the other end, stopping stagecoaches at unscheduled places and—in the case of one fine old-timer—being accused of holding up an army paymaster.

Since quitting the rangers and tying onto a typewriter, I've taken a pack trip now and then, had a try at dude ranching and managed a frequent visit with cowboys who are riding the roughest mountain range in Arizona—Whoa! (At this point in Mr. Nafziger's letter there's an uneven quaver.—Editor.)

Wow! Believe it or not, but just then—11:44 p. m. on my watch—one of those things these Californians call earth tremors gave the house a hefty kick on the rear

porch and nearly shook my teeth loose! Maybe I'd better sign off for now and see if any molars are missin'!

Sincerely—and shaken!

RAY NAFZIGER.

Santa Monica, Cal.

Used to live in California myself—and it's as fine a country as a man'll find anywhere. Those tremors which occur once in a while in certain small parts of it aren't serious. They only make it more interesting. Santa Monica's as clean and purty a city as anybody could ask. Glad to have the information, Señor Nafziger. I reckon you'll be giving us more stories of the same caliber as "Guns Across the Border." Don't make us wait too long!

Billy West and Buck Foster are back this week in "Sheep War for Circle J." Buck is pretty much to the front in this yarn, as he causes a pile of trouble for himself and plenty of others. The old mossy-horn and straight-up Billy West have been favorites here for a long spell.

Part III of Ed Earl Repp's continued novel keeps up the pace of this week's spread and it reminds me to print a note Ed sent me the other day:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I want to take time off from braggin' about what caused me to write "Canyon of the Forgotten," to introduce an old friend o' mine to the 3W bunk-house crew—Colonel E. D. Nix, one of the last links in the chain of pioneers connectin' the present with the wild and woolly West.

Colonel Ed is about seventy-seven years old now, stands six feet one and is still as hale and hearty as he was the day he carried law into the Injun Territory of Oklahoma as its first United States marshal and fired the shot that sent thousands of land-mad homesteaders on the Cherokee Strip Stampede.

I've known Colonel Ed these many years now and despite his havin' right too many honorable notches on his gun, which notches he never whittled, I've never heard

him utter a single cussword, never saw him drink or smoke. Here's a gent that handled the toughest outlaws Oklahoma ever produced, in the days when law was on a man's hip. He's had many close calls, but has lived to a ripe old age because he was faster and straighter on the draw than those who wanted to plant him in boothill. He was boss o' such lead-splayin' gents as Billy Tilghman, Steve Burke, Chris Madsen, Bud Ledbetter and Charlie Colcord—and tamed such raw cow towns as Oklahoma City, Guthrie, and Tulsa. When he retired, the citizens gave him a gold-plated six-gun in appreciation of all he's done for Oklahoma and posterity—and you couldn't buy that gun for love nor money!

I reckon Colonel Ed's only fault is modesty. He never had a press agent to exploit him and his deeds as a lawman par excellence. A gent to ride the river with—that's what they say up in Okla. I agree that he is, which is sayin' in range-land lingo that there isn't a better man in all the country than Colonel Ed. And at seventy-seven he still goes home twice a year to visit his aged mother! Which goes to prove that a man, no matter how old he is, is still a baby to his ma.

So, let's rise and give a lusty yip-yip for a real gent—the man who put finis to such outlaws as Bill Doolin, his gang, Little Dick, Bill Powers and a flock of other bad uns, and made Oklahoma a law-abidin' State out of a raw, red Indian Territory.

Yores,

ED EARL REPP.

Yes, Colonel Nix is the kind of man to which the West will always

be heavily indebted. That kind of man *built* the West, changed it into the fine, flourishing country it is today—a place where men breathe free and feel honest red blood pounding in their veins.

Guess I'd better say something about next week's line-up. C. William Harrison writes the complete novel, "Curse of the Tumbling T." Kept me readin' right through noontime, it was so interestin'. Hope it does the same for you, without wanting you to get to ganted up from hunger the way I did. "Death Rides Black Gorge Pass" is a plumb unusual novelette by a new hand named George Michener. Your old favorites, the Bar U Twins, are back again in an exciting adventure. Jeff and Bugeye find "A Cure for Stutterin'" in a mighty comical fashion—and to top off all this there are a couple more short stories and a generous installment of Ed Earl Repp's suspenseful continued novel. I rate it the biggest dime's worth a reader can find.

About time I closed the gates to this word pen. See you next week, with spurs jinglin'. Adios.

THE RANGE BOSS.



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READ
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MAGAZINE

★ In its December number, Athlete presents a star-studded issue, including:

WHAT ALL-AMERICA?—H. O. (Fritz) Crisler, University of Michigan's head coach, speaks out on the benefits and evils in the present system of picking All-Americans.

HOLD 'EM, PITTSBURGH—The inside story of the Pitt Panther football situation by a famous sports writer who lived through it.

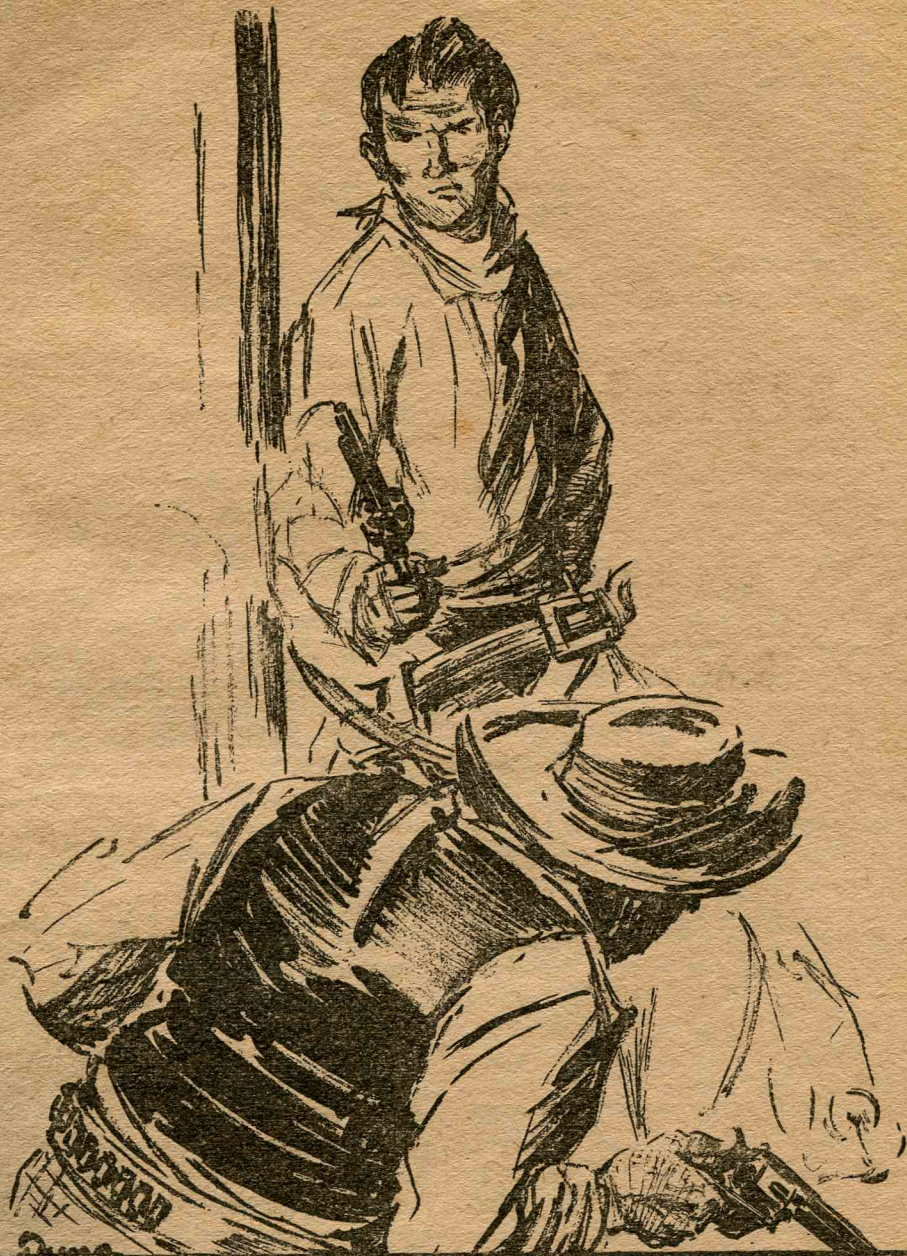
MAKER OF CHAMPIONS—Coach Wm. Foley gives the formula he has used in turning out grid, court and diamond champions in profusion at Bloomfield High School, N. J.

Also articles by **Kingsley Moses** who finds two million forgotten athletes; **Fred Keeling** who discusses the only real amateurs left in America and top-notch stories by **Jack Kofoed**, **Richard McCann** and others.



Athlete

ON SALE NOVEMBER 11th



GUNS ACROSS THE BORDER

by RAY NAFZIGER

Author of "Hoss Thieves in the Tyrones," etc.

GUNS ACROSS THE BORDER

By Ray Nafziger

A powerful greed for gold gnawed at those Mexican bandidos, and they built a gunflame hell between Tass Majors and his father!

CHAPTER I.

VISITORS TO THE SACABOTA.

As young Tass Majors hazed in the bunch of horses he had just gathered off the Sacabota range, he looked hopefully at the house which loomed through the alamos and drooped pepper trees of the ranch headquarters. But there was no smoke rising from the chimney.

That meant that his father had not returned. It had been over a month now since Dan Majors had ridden away, heading south for Mexico on mining business, and no word had come back to his son. Which, with most of Mañana-land aflame in one of its periodic revolutions, had Tass worried. Anything could happen across the Border—even to Dan Majors, who had spent the years of his early life in Mexico.

A three-year-old sorrel filly in the bunch of horses streaked off through the mesquite. The blood-bay gelding under Tass leveled off in a run and the rider's yell split the air. It was a race, hoofbeat matching hoofbeat, until the longer stride of the three-quarter thoroughbred under Tass shot him ahead. The filly spun on a dime and again it was a race, but the pole wing stretching out from the corral turned the colt back to the open gate. Tail high, the filly flashed into the pen, and Tass Majors, his gray eyes gleaming in the dusty tan of his lean face,

grinned as he leaned from the saddle to swing the gate shut. Plenty of speed in the filly that the twenty-year-old mare, Carmen, had lately brought back to the Sacabota ranch.

With a revolution down in Mexico, that old Carmen mare had been smart in returning from the land where she had been foaled long before. Likely too many shots flying down there for her; too many *soldados* wanting spirited colts to ride into battle. At the advanced age of twenty, old Carmen hadn't raised her colt to be a soldier's mount.

Tass wiped sweat from his face with his neckerchief, of white silk with green spears of sotol embroidered on it. Then his keen eyes went to the steel water tank where there were two sets of tracks that had been made since he had ridden out that morning. A shod horse and a shod mule had watered at the reservoir not long before. The water they had dribbled on the ground was not yet dry. He noticed something else, too—near the horse tracks a dark patch on the adobe earth, not much larger than a dollar, and alongside it a few little spots. A darker liquid than water had fallen there.

"Blood, most likely," muttered Tass to himself. From the position of the spots he knew they had come from the rider of the horse. Maybe, Tass thought, that rider had been

his father. He opened his mouth to raise a whoop and then shut it, instead sliding out the worn carbine from its scabbard under his stirrup leather. The years had ground caution into him; half of the travelers through this Border country were fleeing American and Mexican renegades, horse thieves and murderers.

Dismounting, he headed through the pepper trees, carrying his carbine, still hoping that the rider might be his father, back from that bloody land of killers and bandit rebels to the south.

Slipping through a hedge of feathery-leaved tamarisk, he came into sight of the brown-walled adobe house, lying at the foot of a cliff of black rock. Standing in front of the kitchen door was a claybank horse and a dun mule. The mule bore a pack, two rawhide boxes with a small tarp tied loosely over their tops. On the horse sat a man in a gaudy Mexican saddle, a slender gray-bearded Mexican, bent far over the drooped neck of his weary mount.

The rider's right boot had been slashed open; exposed was a bare calf, badly swollen, covered in part with a dusty bandage from which blood dripped slowly. Another bandage made from a torn shirt had been tied turban-fashion about the man's head.

Tass walked alongside, but the oldish man did not seem to hear him. A filled cartridge belt sagged about his waist but the holster was empty. A canteen with its stopper gone hung from the flat dinner-plate saddlehorn.

Tass spoke to him in Spanish, and the man lifted his head, opening eyes dull with exhaustion. Then the old fellow made a desperate effort and lifted himself erect. He was no peon, that was plain.

"This is the *casa* of Don Dan Majors?" he asked weakly.

"Yes," said Tass.

"Then you are perhaps the son of Dan Majors?" went on the man.

Tass said "Yes" again. "You have word of my father?"

Either the visitor did not hear Tass' question or he ignored it. "Maybe you have heard your father speak of me—Marcial Robles?"

Tass' eyes widened. "Sure," he said. "Plenty. Don Marcial Robles, the mining man that stepped in years ago when a gang of rebels had dad before a firing squad and told the buzzards they'd have to shoot him 'fore they shot dad. You're the Robles that saved dad's life."

"It was *nada*—nothing," the Mexican said depreciatingly. "But if you are Dan Majors' son, I am compelled to ask a favor of my old friend's son. A place to hide, a chance to rest. There are those that follow me."

"I'll see that they don't find you," said Tass. "But my father, where is he, Don Marcial?"

The bloodless lips of Don Marcial Robles opened as the man slowly began to slip down. "Your father," he said, "he is—" He gestured feebly toward the south. "Hide me, my son. Not only for my sake—for your father's, too. Later I—"

The man's faint voice trailed off; his eyes closed again. A long gusty sigh came from him, and abruptly he slid from the saddle like a sack of meal.

Tass caught the slight body in his arms and eased the man to the little stretch of grass beside the kitchen door. It looked as if the wealthy Mexican mining man, Don Marcial Robles, had run into a peck of trouble down there below the Border. Which was nothing surprising: there had been plenty hell down in

that corner of Mañana-land. For weeks Mexican ranchers and their families had been fleeing across the line from raiding rebel-bandit bands, led mostly by a bandit, Coronel Colorow Borrunda, whose buzzard legions were terrorizing hundreds of square miles of northern Mexico.

But why old Don Marcial had fled made no difference to Tass. The don at risk of his own life, had saved Dan Majors from the bullets of an adobe-wall firing squad. The Mexican had appealed to Tass to hide him, and when it came to a hiding place, the Sacabota ranch had one that couldn't be beaten.

He carried the man into the spring house under the black cliff rising behind the ranch headquarters. The adobe shed had been built directly against the cliff wall where a running stream of pure cold water gushed out and ran through troughs to the water tank at the corrals.

Behind this shed was a low-ceiled cave blasted out in Apache days by the first owner of the ranch. Entrance to it was by a boulder that could be pivoted about to make a small opening. The boulder door could not be detected in the darkness of the room, even by the sharpest-sighted. Dan Majors and his son used the cave room as a burglar-proof store place for miscellaneous articles; a few cases of canned food, stock salt, sacks of flour and sugar. A duct hidden in the ceiling carried in a supply of fresh air.

Depositing Don Marcial on the floor of the spring house, Tass pivoted the boulder and slipping through the narrow opening into the cave, lit a candle stuck in an iron spike in the wall. Then he dragged Don Marcial in through the narrow opening and stripped off the man's

clothes. The blood-clotted bandage on the head covered a raw furrow made by a bullet that had scraped the don's scalp. The leg, badly swollen, was still bleeding a little. The wounds were serious enough in themselves, and with the long ride in crossing the malpais desert they had brought on a high fever. Tass bathed the man in cold water, washing off the blood and applying fresh bandages.

Then he returned to dispose of the horse and mule. Surely no one would dare follow Robles this far into the United States, but as he scanned the country to the south, Tass saw miles distant, a faint dust cloud which could be raised either by loose horses or a band of mounted men.

The pack load and the saddles he decided to take into the cave room, after which he would dispose of the horse and mule.

Taking off the tarp covering the pack, he lifted one of the rawhide-covered boxes from the forks of the pack saddle. The box, as he heaved up on the rope handles, was astonishingly heavy, a solid sort of weight, too, as if it were metal. He placed it on the doorstep and went around the mule to lift the other box from the mule's back.

"Whew! The don must be packin' iron," Tass muttered to himself as he plunked the second box on the stone doorstep. Strips of canvas covered the contents. Tass did not investigate; what the boxes held was none of his business. But as he turned to loosen the cinches on the mule's saddle, the animal flung his big-eared head around. As he dodged, Tass tripped over one of the boxes which he had left sitting at an angle. The box tipped over, spilling out a buckskin sack. The sack had been poorly tied and as it

fell, a few round gleaming yellow disks of metal rolled from it.

He blinked his eyes in amazement and picked up two of the disks. American double eagles. There were five other similar sacks in the box, and when he lifted the canvas strip covering the other box, he saw half a dozen sacks in the bottom. Hefting each sack, they were of a weight equal to the opened one.

Gold in both rawhide boxes, twelve sacks of twenty-dollar gold-pieces, worth forty or fifty thousand dollars, maybe more. Why Don Marcial Robles was carrying all that money was none of Tass' business, but whoever had been chasing Don Marcial and shooting him up, would still be following that gold. Was following him, Tass decided. That dust cloud to the south was not made by a band of loose horses, but by horsemen.

Thoughtfully he carried the heavy rawhide-covered boxes into the hidden room behind the spring house and placing them in a corner not far from Don Marcial, returned to the horse and mule.

He'd have to use his head to fool the pursuers. The cinches of the pack saddle were old, almost worn in two. They gave him an idea. Without unsaddling either animal, he mounted the horse and led the mule back into a side canyon of the hills, climbing the ridge and turning the tired pair of animals into a maze of ravines and barrancas. Before turning them loose, carefully stepping on rocks to hide his tracks, he turned the pack saddle so that it would appear that the treasure boxes had fallen off. The pair of hungry animals would head into a brushy wilderness, hunting grass. It was the best he could do in the limited time before the riders would appear.

Turning then, he hurried back down the malpais ridge, careful to leave no telltale bootprints.

Arriving at the ranch again, he stepped into the saddle of his blood-bay and turned out the bunch of horses he had just brought in, hazing them into the yard about the house, driving them in a circle until he had erased the signs of the mule and the horse tracks from the steel tank to the house. The scattered tracks would look as if he had trouble in corraling the horses.

After that he cleaned the blood marks from the ground and washed the rock slab before the kitchen door where blood had dripped. Next he cleared away all traces of the visitor from the spring house.

The dust cloud from the south was getting nearer fast. Don Marcial was asleep, breathing raspingly. He'd make some broth for the man from a quarter of beef kept in a well under the spring house. What the don needed now mostly was rest.

Meanwhile, Tass prepared a meal for himself, making coffee and frying a steak. He was eating when there came a sudden beat of hoofs into the yard. Not from the south, but from the west, where a trail led from the American cowtown of Glade.

Tass heaved a sigh of relief. Those riders would be Americans. he could count on them for help if necessary, against that band of riders pouring up out of Mexico.

His six-shooter in his holster, he went to the door. Half a dozen men were loping into the yard on sweated-up mounts, one a little sly-faced Mexican, the other five Americans. He identified only one man by name, Ike Clasben, who had once been deputy sheriff in the county and now owned a saloon and gambling place. The other men he had seen about Glade, hanging about the

barrooms, tinhorns who lured cowboys and ranchers into crooked poker games. They weren't the kind to trust with what Tass knew about Don Marcial and his gold.

Clasben, a lantern-jawed beanpole, five inches or more over six feet in height, was plainly the leader of the group.

"Lo, Tass," said Clasben while his almost colorless eyes dwelled on the boy. "Any strangers ride into here today?"

Tass figured that Don Marcial was no stranger to him and that he wouldn't be lying to say, "No." He shook his head. "Been gone most of the day," he stated. "Just got in with a bunch of horses. Had the devil of a time corralin' 'em. But I saw the tracks of a horse and mule that watered at the tank while I was gone. They headed over the ridge."

Clasben and two of the men immediately raced off to the tank. The tracks testified to the truth of Tass' statement.

"You must of had to chase them hosses all over the yard," remarked Clasben as he returned. "Thought you assayed better hoss wrangler than that."

"They were pretty wild," said Tass easily. "One of 'em, a colt out of that old sorrel mare, Carmen. Thought I'd never get her penned and—"

"We're hunting a Mex," interrupted Clasben impatiently. "Got word to be on the lookout for a old fella that killed a gringo down in Mexico. The gringo was travelin' north outta Mexico with a couple pack boxes of gold. I don't want to scare yuh without cause, Tass, but from the description we got of the American that old ladrone killed, it might of been your father."

Tass' jaw dropped and he stared thunderstruck at Clasben. For a

moment he distrusted the old Mexican he had hidden. There was no proof that the old fellow was really Don Marcial Robles. And the bird had dodged telling him about his father. But no; there could be no doubt. The man to whom he had given shelter was Don Marcial and no killer. Clasben was mistaken or lying. But the mention of the possibility of the death of his father was enough to sober Tass. For a month he had had no word of Dan Majors.

"Dad's still alive," he protested, as if to silence his own fears.

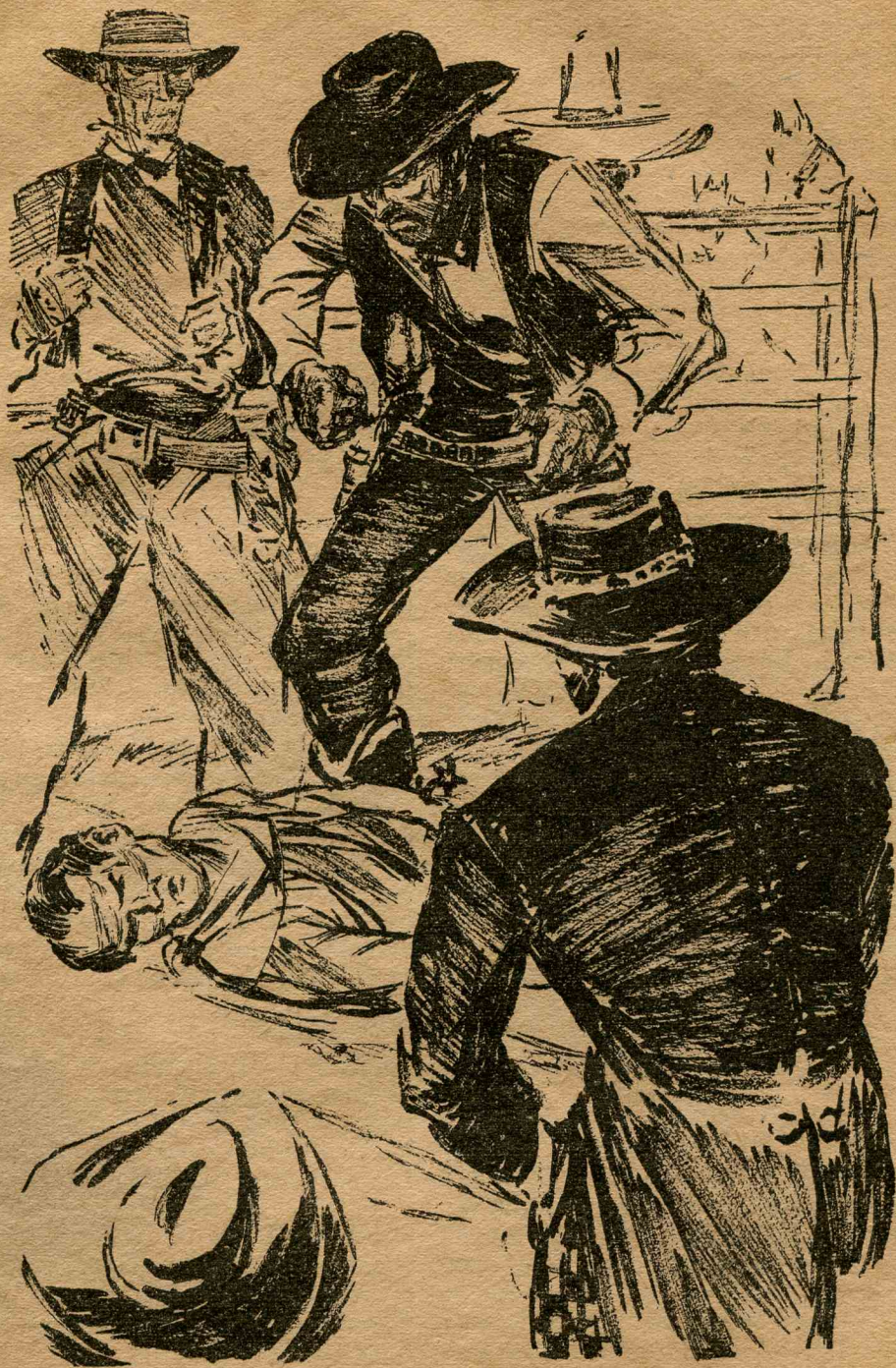
Clasben frowned darkly at the malpais desert lying between the Majors ranch and the Border. "Ain't had word from him since he left for Mexico, have you?"

"No," admitted Tass. "I been worried about him plenty, but I can't believe he run into anything serious down there. He knows Mexico and how to get along with Mexicans. But I wisht I'd 'a' been here when that old Mexican showed up, if he was the man you're lookin' for. Those tracks'll be hard to follow on that malpais rock ridge."

"We'll follow 'em," Clasben said resolutely. "Throw a saddle on a hoss and come with us. You know every foot of this country, and we don't."

"All right," agreed Tass. "Soon's I grab me another cup of Java. You men all better come in and have some." Anything to delay the time when this bunch found the horse and mule with their empty saddles and began to wonder if Tass maybe hadn't put something over on them.

"Not a bad idea," said Clasben and swung down. His colorless eyes were restless, glancing about. Clasben had been considered a bloodhound; as deputy sheriff he had



A hard-knuckled fist blasted him to the ground.

caught many outlaws by sheer tracking skill.

Ike Clasben, however, was no longer a peace officer. Gold had brought Clasben here with this party of men on fagged-out horses, not an attempt to catch a murderer. He had got word somehow, of that pack load of gold.

Clasben jingled spurs toward the doorstep and then halting abruptly, stared down sharply at the ground. One of his boots had struck a little object, kicking it out from under a covering of dust.

With a curse, Clasben reached down and picked up the object. Tass saw it, too, and he became rigid. One of the double eagles that had rolled, unseen by Tass, under the hoofs of the horse or mule and, covered with dust, had by chance been kicked out by Clasben's boot toe.

Clasben swung suddenly on Tass, his .45 out and pointing at the boy's middle. Death lay in his eyes.

"That Mex has been here," he snarled. "Where is he?"

They had part of his secret, but they still didn't know where Don Marcial was hidden. None of these men knew of the cavern behind the rock wall of the spring house, and they'd never find out about it from Tass Majors.

CHAPTER II.

APACHE TRICK.

LOOK, TASS," said Clasben in his loud voice, "you're young. Hardly more'n a kid, with all o' life ahead of yuh—if yuh tell us where Don Marcial Robles is. He ain't where the tracks of his hoss and mule lead—we know that. Yuh a'most put it over on us with rubbin' out his trail with that bunch of hosses yuh run around the yard, but yuh didn't.

The jig's up an' don't try to protect that bird. After all, he's on'y a greaser. Come on, speak up; if yuh don't, we're goin' to kill yuh."

The other men, dismounting, crowded in close around Tass. There was no hope to be put in mercy from any of them; they were all Ike Clasben's sort, the kind who would kill Tass in a second, to get Don Marcial's treasure. Looking at them, he could see over their shoulders the cloud of dust to the south, coming nearer and nearer. If Ike Clasben and the others had noticed the dust, they had thought it was just a bunch of loose horses. Tass knew better; he had seen too often the dust raised by horses coming into water.

One of the men, a tall gambler dressed in black garb, stepped close and took a knife from a scabbard. "If he don't tell us where that Mex is, we'll cut off his ears," he threatened. "And won't he look plumb funny without those lop ears o' his?"

They were trying to break his nerve, but Tass Majors, raised in the Sacabota country, fighting horse thieves, breaking tough horses, had gone through too hard a school to be scared easily. He knew men, bad and good, and had seen too many of the bad kind to be made to talk by threats.

"Come on," growled Clasben, as he waved the six-gun menacingly. "Unhobble yore tongue. Where'd yuh put that Mex? We know he's hurt and that he wasn't able to get far. Where'd yuh hide him?"

Tass was weighing his possible chances. Those riders approaching the ranch might be friends of Don Marcial, but probably were not. The don had said men were pursuing him. He had only one hope of getting out of this mess—to make his escape. If he slipped into the thorny brush of the mountainside,

he could hide out until this bunch left and then come back to look after Don Marcial.

The men in their eagerness, had formed a circle about him, leaving their horses outside the ring. Unexpectedly, Tass knocked Clasben's six-shooter aside, and shouldered in between two riders to leap toward a sorrel horse among the mounts.

His attempt caught the men by surprise. They hadn't expected flight or resistance. Clasben let out a bellow and raised his gun, but the horses were in a wild confusion, plunging about frightened as Tass dashed in among them. There was also another reason why Clasben did not shoot. Tass, dead, would be of no use to him.

"Get him!" he bawled. "Run him down."

The sorrel gelding Tass had chosen was a half-crazy animal, and scared by the noise, started to run before Tass could get into the saddle. Tass had barely time to snatch up the reins and catch hold of the horn with both hands. Running alongside the horse as the sorrel crashed through the tamarisk hedge, he swung up, using the old pony-express mount, without touching foot to a stirrup.

"Don't kill him!" bawled Ike Clasben as guns burst out in a ragged chorus. "We want him to talk. Ketch him and I'll skin him alive. Shoot that hoss out from under him."

Tass raced the sorrel toward the brush of the cliff while Clasben and the rest, throwing themselves into saddles, spurred frantically to head him. Swinging back from the mountain as a swarm of bullets hailed about his mount, Tass turned toward the desert. He might have made it had not one rider been farsighted enough to guess that the

fugitive would be forced in that direction. A bullet stung the sorrel's rump, caused him to start bucking. Before Tass could spur him out of it, the riders were all about him.

They were no longer trying to shoot his horse; they didn't need to. Their lariats would do the job. The first two loops he dodged, but a third cast fell over him like a hoop over a barrel and tightened. He was yanked from the saddle and sailed through the air, striking his head against the bole of a scrubby cottonwood so hard that he went completely out.

When he came to, they had taken him to the steel stock tank at the corrals and were splashing buckets of water over him. His hands were tied behind his back and a rope was looped about his ankles. As he opened his eyes, a boot thudded into his ribs, hard. The owner of the boot was Ike Clasben.

"Now, damn you," snarled Clasben, "talk, and talk mighty quick. Where's that Mexican?" The boot thudded into his ribs again and shot agonizing pain over his whole side. Still half stunned, Tass tried to move away, but the little Mexican planted his foot on Tass' chest, anchoring him so that there was no chance of dodging the torment Clasben was giving him.

The thudding boot forced a groan through Tass' lips; then he set his teeth in a vise.

"I'll make him talk," growled Clasben. "Yank off one of his boots."

The man dressed in gambler garb knelt to shuck leather from Tass' right foot. Deliberately, then Clasben broke off a stout pitchy splinter from a board, sharpened its point and slowly stuck it through the sock into the sole of Tass' foot. It was

like a dull knife being forced through his flesh.

"Next we'll set this splinter afire," Clasben remarked in his cold voice, "and let it burn clear into yore foot. The same trick the Apaches used to pull. It'll lame yuh for life."

Tass struggled violently, trying to roll away, and two of the men flung themselves on him and sat on him as they would hold a refractory colt. He kicked violently with his left foot and the boot smashed into Clasben's shin, bringing a yell of pain from the ex-deputy.

The splinter even without being set afire, was bringing unbearable agony. Tass' teeth came unclenched, but it was not to spill the hiding place of Don Marcial Robles; it was to curse Clasben in all the salty phrases, English and Spanish, that Tass had heard along the Border.

He heard the sound of a match head being drawn over a boot sole. The threat of setting the splinter afire was no bluff. And then someone spoke in a bellowing voice, drowning Tass' swearing, and through a mist of pain, Tass saw a rider on a huge red roan horse a few yards distant. The rider, a stranger, was big like his horse, huge-framed, rawboned and craggy-faced, with sandy bristles which on one side of his face were matted with dried blood.

The newcomer had come up so suddenly and silently, that Clasben and the rest had not noticed him, and they were caught flat-footed when a huge paw swept a long-barreled Frontier-model six-shooter from its holster.

"You cussed Apaches!" the newcomer bawled. "Yank out that splinter or I'll shoot a lead one into your brisket."

The men growled menacingly but

Clasben withdrew the thorn from Tass' foot. Pain lanced his foot afresh, and he could feel blood soaking his sock.

The big, raw-boned, sandy-bristled giant grinned bleakly. "What goes on here?" he demanded.

Clasben stared at him. "I've seen yuh somewhere," he stated. "But whoever you are, fella, yuh're hornin' in on something that don't concern yuh. Put down that gun an' get the hell outta here."

The rider made no reply to this; dust-covered, he continued to look down on the group from a pair of frosty blue eyes. Bulking big on his tall horse, he seemed one moment invincible, full of fire and strength; the next moment he was wavering in the saddle, and the six-shooter in his hand lowering. He jerked himself erect again, but it was too late. Clasben had sprung tigerishly at him, to pull him from the saddle to the ground where the whole group swarmed over him.

Recovering from his momentary stupor, the big fellow fought powerfully, tossing off men as if they were boys. They were too many for him, however. A gun, used in batting him over the head, went off sending a bullet into the ground. Kicked, beaten, the stranger was left lying senseless, with blood oozing from his temple to join the dried blood of his previous injury.

Cursing, Clasben's outfit tied him as the boy was already tied. Tass, at the defeat of the stranger, felt black despair. For what Clasben intended here—the robbery, and no doubt murder of Dan Marcial—was something that he would want hushed up. Tass and this big raw-boned man with the foghorn bellow, were doomed alike to death.

"Who's that big hippo and where

did he come from?" demanded Clasben.

The little Mexican in the party spoke rapid Spanish, explaining swiftly. Tass listened. The newcomer's name was Jeff Storm from the mining town of Cobre Durango, below the Border. He was a partner of Don Marcial's in the big Cobre Durango silver mine.

Jeff Storm. Several times Tass had heard his father mention Jeff Storm's name. Whoever he was, Tass felt sorry for Jeff Storm. Storm hadn't long to live, and all because he had befriended a helpless youngster.

Tass raised a little and looked to the south. Maybe that party of riders belonged to Jeff Storm. But the dust had disappeared from the sky. The band must have turned off before reaching the Majors ranch. No hope from that direction.

The disturbance caused by Jeff Storm's arrival ended, Clasben turned back to Tass. "Talk!" he belowered. "Where's that Mex? What did you do with him?"

Again the boot thudded into Tass' ribs, and he gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. He had no choice but to keep still; once they located Don Marcial Robles and the treasure, they would kill Jeff Storm, Tass, and Robles. Maybe they would put the bodies in the house and burn the structure to cover their crime. And when Dan Majors returned he would find only the ashes of his ranchhouse and a few human bones. He would probably figure that some of Colonel Colorow Borrunda's rebel army had raided across the line hoping to steal horses.

Clasben, his face contorted with rage, knelt to put his six-gun against Tass' temple. The hammer clicked

back and the end of the barrel dug hard into the boy's flesh.

"This is your last chance," snarled Clasben. "And I ain't bluffing. I've wasted all the time I'm going to with you. We don't need yuh to locate that greaser. He ain't far and we'll hunt him down. I'm givin' yuh just ten seconds to spill it."

Tass' lips remained tightly sealed. They could kill him but they couldn't make him betray his father's friend. Somewhere in the distance it seemed to him he heard a hoof click. Those horsemen might have dismounted in the mesquite to come up quietly to the ranch. That would account for the disappearance of the dust. The horsemen were the only hope that he had for rescue now. Maybe if he stalled for time he could delay this long enough for them to arrive—if they were coming.

"What's there in it for me if I tell you?" he asked. "What's to keep you from puttin' a bullet in my head afterward?"

Clasben's eyes became crafty. "That shows good sense, Tass, to ask that. Yuh know you can trust me. Same as anybody that helps me can trust me. We'll turn yuh loose and give yuh a share of the money the old coot brung up from Mexico."

To Tass with senses made alert by pain and anxiety, he was sure now that he could hear a stealthy movement of boots behind the tamarisk hedges, an occasional jingle of spurs. Clasben's men didn't hear it, evidently; they were too intent on hearing what he had to tell them.

Hope flamed in Tass and a sudden belief that the horsemen had left their horses in the mesquite and had stolen quietly into the ranch clearing.

The little Mexican in Clasben's

group also sniffed something and glanced uneasily back of him. Then an exclamation came from the Mexican, and the whole group of men glanced behind them.

"Hell!" exclaimed Clasben. "That tamarisk hedge is full of guns."

The Mexican gave a shrill yell of terror and got his legs into action, racing toward the nearest brushy clump. Half a dozen guns must have been fired at once. The Mexican gave a yell and leaped high into the air to come down a lifeless huddle of legs and arms.

Clasben, still crouched by Tass' side, had swung his six-shooter and began emptying his gun at the tamarisk hedge. The others flung themselves behind their horses, to shoot over their saddles.

But there was no cover from the guns that suddenly hailed lead at them from the hedge, the sheds and a little hillock back of the corrals. Another one of the six men tried flight and mounting a horse, spurred off to break through the death cordon. Horse and rider got only thirty feet before guns reached them, sending them down in a tangled heap.

Clasben and the other three were putting up a desperate battle, after two of their horses went down, crouching behind the barricade of the dead animals. The numbers against them were too overwhelming, however, the fight lasted only seconds. The man in gambler garb gave a yell of pain and raised up above the dead horses. A shot hit him in the face, tore half of a cheek away; another smashed into his chest, dropped him.

Clasben had called out asking that they quit, but no attention was paid to his appeal. Clasben, hit in the leg, loaded his gun again, keeping up a muttered undertone of swearing.

"I bet it's Colonel Colorow," Tass

heard Clasben snarl. "That damned redhead Mexican rebel of a Bor-runda. We fooled away too much time here. If that kid had told us when we first rode in, where he'd hid Don Marcial, we'd 'a' had the gold and been miles away by now."

Cursing hoarsely as another bullet struck him, Clasben turned his gun on Tass, still lying bound, with flying bullets passing over him.

Plain for Tass to see what Clasben intended: to kill him before he himself died. But before Clasben could pull trigger, two shots knocked the man over sideways, sent him to the dust where his legs threshed back and forth until the man stiffened, a thin dribble of blood coming from his mouth. Another hail of shots and the other two men fell. That left alive only the two bound prisoners.

The firing stopped and Tass could see the Mexican ambushers advance toward the tank, thirty or forty men. All were heavily armed with rifles and six-shooters; bandoleers of cartridges hung from their shoulders. Reaching the group of dead men and the horses, they stared in sudden astonishment at the two bound prisoners.

Tass eyed them in return. If this were part of Colonel Colorow Bor-runda's army, it wasn't much of an army. The men were of all ages, from boys to grizzled oldsters and in all manner of garb, some with sandallike *guaraches* on bare horny-soled feet, some with expensive boots, a few in blue uniforms with red sashes, most in dirty cotton shirts and pants. They had one similarity: all wore huge, gaudy sombreros of straw or cheap felt. A boy who was no more than twelve years old came close to Tass, flourishing a machete, shouting taunts at the gringo.

"I will cut off his ears and send them as a present to my *muchacha*," he boasted and moved forward as if to do that very thing.

Tass lashed out with both feet and rolled the boy in the dirt. He sprang up, shouting man-sized curses, but older men shoved him away.

Then a man shoved and the others gave way respectfully. He was thick-set, lighter than the others in complexion, with heavy red bristles, long red hair. Tass guessed this was the notorious Colonel Colorow Borrunda. He wore a blue uniform with a lot of braid and a huge dove-colored sombrero with a band of woven gold wire.

He stared down at the unconscious Storm and kicked the man. Then seeing that Tass was eying him, he squatted over the boy. "W'at the hell is this?" he demanded. "W'at for they tie you up?"

He seemed proud of his English and Tass diplomatically explained in that language. "I was here at the ranch when those fellas rode in wanting to know about an old Mexican that had a bunch of gold."

"They did, hey?" said the man. Tass took to be Colorow Borrunda. "And w'at you tell them, hey?"

"I told them I'd seen a mule and a horse track by the tank. And when I didn't produce that Mexican for them, they tied me up and started to work on me. Then this big American rode in and they jumped him and tied him up. I don't know who he is."

"No, but I do," snarled the Mexican with a show of teeth. "I know him very well. Jeff Storm. And so your fellow gringos hurt you, eh?" said Colorow, looking at the bloody sock on Tass' punctured foot. "That ees nothing to w'at I do. Some of my men they are Yaquis, *sabe*?

They skin the hide off the soles of your feet and then mak' you walk on sharp rocks. How you like that, eh?" he asked with a ferocious grin. "You did not lie about not seeing the old Mexican?"

"Why should I lie?" Tass returned. "The tracks are there, if you aren't too blind to see them."

"I know the tracks are here," said Colorow. "We follow them from Mexico. All right. You maybe don't mak' lie. We find out. We hunt a old man with one pack mule. You not see him ride in here, no?"

"No," said Tass truthfully. "I didn't see him ride in. But the tracks go up the ridge."

Colonel Colorow Borrunda was as vain as a peacock, with the grand manner which many Mexicans can put on when they have positions of authority. He strode up and down for a few moments with his hands behind his back, frowning deeply. Tass had heard considerable about Borrunda, whose nickname "Colorado," shortened to Colorow, came from his red hair. In his youth he had been a sheepherder in the United States, but he had gone home to become the leader of a force of bandits, which bandits, since the revolution had begun, he had turned into a rebel army. Modestly, instead of calling himself a general, he clung to *Coronel*—Colonel in English.

Stopping his pacing, he began barking out orders. All the men were to mount to ride out for the hunt. Two men were to stay to shoe horses; one was to cook supper. A yearling that had come up to water was to be butchered for the meal.

Men sprang to do his bidding while Colonel Colorow, looking at the scattered dead bodies, hissed in sudden anger. "There are too many people that know about Don Mar-

cial," he stated. "I do not like it. No telling when American troops may ride in here. Pick up the tracks of that horse and mule. I'll follow."

As men mounted, having drunk from the stock tank, Colonel Colorow walked over to Jeff Storm and kicked him in the ribs half a dozen times. Then bending he slapped the man's face repeatedly, harder and harder, until the blows fairly cracked. But Jeff Storm was plainly out. With blood, fresh and old, on him, he looked all but dead. And Colorow could not waken him.

"We'll keep him," said Colonel Colorow. "He'll be worth ransom, that Jeff Storm. Put these two in there." He jerked his thick thumb toward a grain room in a nearby adobe shed. "Pablo, you keep guard on them."

Tass and Jeff Storm were picked up and dumped unceremoniously, still bound, in the shed, with the door left open and the guard outside. Colorow and the rest rode away.

Jeff Storm lay like dead in the light that came in through the door, his face bloody and ugly. Tass wondered if the man were really dead. Then to Tass' astonishment, Jeff Storm's eyes opened. Then one closed in an expressive wink.

CHAPTER III.

GUNS FOR MEXICO.

THEIR guard left the doorway to move a few feet away, hunkering down to lean back against the wall of the building. He was a sociable sort and from this new position, he could see and talk to his two companions who were shoeing horses in the corral.

Jeff Storm spoke in a whisper that could not carry to the guard. "Roll close to me, bud, back to back.

Maybe one of us can work his fingers enough to git us outta this mess."

Tass worked himself about until his back was close to Jeff Storm's broad one. His hands, bound hard and fast at the wrists, touched the man's big paws, their wrists having been crossed in binding so that their palms lay outward.

The tying had been done expertly, but their fingers were free. The big strong ones of Jeff Storm's right hand began working on the knot of Tass' bonds. Those fingers were swift, efficient. It took no more than two minutes for Storm to undo the first knot; the others were easy. The light rope fell from Tass' wrists and he hastily loosed Jeff Storm's wrists. After that they both untied their ankles, but, afraid that the guard might take a notion to peer in the door, neither man sat up. The guard was still shouting talk back and forth with the men at the corral.

They were free, but they had no weapons. And Colonel Colorow, with all his men on the search, wouldn't take long to find the mule and horse and return to torture information out of Tass. Whatever was done, would have to be done in a hurry, but Tass waited for Jeff Storm to take the lead. He had a lot of respect for that craggy-faced, booming-voiced giant. Jeff seemed in no hurry; he was waiting perhaps for Colorow's bunch to get far enough away so they could not hear shots.

"If you don't know, that's Colonel Colorow Borrunda, the damn Mex rebel leader," he whispered. "You better fog it out of here, bud; sneak out to the mountain and hide until they leave."

"This is my dad's ranch," said Tass stubbornly. "And I ain't let-

tin' nobody make me hide here. And, anyway, dad didn't teach me to run from a bunch of Mexicans."

"He'd 'a' taught you to run plenty from this gang. That's what I'm going to do as soon as I get the chance. What happened to Don Marcial? Did he cash in?"

"Nope, and he's not going to. Got him in a cave behind the well house, an old hide-out rigged out in Apache days. They'll never find him there. But what's all this about? Do you know anything about my dad—Dan Majors?"

"Dan Majors!" exclaimed Storm in his husky whisper. "I should 'a' guessed it. If your dad's Dan Majors, reckon I know plenty. He's down there in the mine town of Cobre Durango right now, fighting off Colorow's little bandit army. For three weeks the town's been under siege. Don Marcial asked your dad to take command. There were a dozen of us American mining men in there; we been fighting day and night, trying to keep that butcher out. The Mex government hasn't been able to send any troops to help us and we need ammunition down there—mighty bad. That's why Don Marcial brought up that gold—he's made arrangements to buy a pack train load of rifles and cartridges from a gun-runner named Deever Drew. Drew's camped in a deserted little mine town above the Border called Little Chihuahua. I and half a dozen Mexicans went along with the don. This bunch of Colorow's jumped us, but the rest of us held him off long enough to let Don Marcial get away. I tracked the don up here. He's way off the trail; he's due to meet Drew in Little Chihuahua to take delivery of those cartridges and rifles."

"So that's it," said Tass, stunned. His father alive but fighting in

Mexico. And Don Marcial Robles had brought up that gold to buy ammunition. Little Chihuahua, the abandoned mine settlement, he knew very well.

"The gold's here all right," said Tass. "That bunch of Americans was trying to make me tell where it was when you rode in. They must have smelled out that gold some way."

"They didn't smell it out. The little Mex with 'em was in our bunch. The skunk turned traitor to ride and tip off Clasben. Bud, that gold has got to be delivered to Deever Drew and those cartridges rushed down to your father. Cartridges for our modern guns is 'bout gone and they're usin' powder and meltin' bullets for all the old-style rifles in town. It's up to me to deliver 'em. It's comin' dark and I can dodge Colorow's gang tonight. You can tell me how to find Little Chihuahua?"

"Yeah. Camped there half a dozen times."

"Bueno. I better be movin' out. No time to lose. If that town falls to Colorow, he'll butcher every American and all the Mex miners. And so you're the son of Dan Majors? A fighter, that hombre. Knew him years ago in Mexico. He rode out once and licked a bandit outfit that the rurales were afraid to tackle. And once he went into the Madres to bring out a bunch of Apache renegades that the whole Mex army didn't dare chase."

"Dad never told me anything about that—or anything else that happened to him in Mexico."

Storm grinned. "Lots of what he could tell would sound like bragging, but wouldn't be. Here's where we start the snake-killin'. We got four men to git rid of—the guard, the cook, those two men shoeing horses.

We'll start with the guard. Call to him that you think I've kicked off for a brighter, greener land."

Promptly Tass summoned the guard, calling excitedly that the big gringo had died. The guard shambled in finally, carrying his rifle, and saw the two lying on the floor, their hands behind their backs, the tie ropes still apparently about their ankles. Jeff Storm had shoved farther back in the shed, away from the door.

The guard laughed. "Dead, is he?" he said in Spanish. "I'll make sure of that."

Passing Tass, he raised a boot to kick the supposed corpse. When his foot was in the air, Tass raised and caught his other leg, jerking back hard. As the guard fell, Jeff Storm rolled on him, putting his big paws about the man's neck, squeezing so hard that the fellow got out only a strangled squawk. Unluckily, the guard's old rifle as it hit the ground, exploded. Next instant Tass hit the guard over the head with the six-gun he had snatched out of the man's holster.

The shot had been enough to alarm the cook and the two men shoeing horses. Their voices rose inquiringly. Jeff Storm had snatched up the rifle; Tass had the six-shooter.

"Le's go," said Jeff Storm, who believed in action. Getting to his feet, he promptly galloped out into the yard.

The two men who had been shoeing horses had dropped their work to jump for the rifles they had leaned against a tree. Swinging about with these in their hands, they opened fire, but the sight of the charging pair hurried their shots.

Tass and Jeff Storm fired simultaneously. Both weapons were old, uncertain, and the shots missed.

The two Mexicans, however, dropped their carbines and turned to race toward the corner of the building.

"*Alto!*" bawled Jeff Storm at their heels, and the men halted, their hands raised.

Tass following Jeff Storm, turned about to see the cook standing with a long-barreled rifle before the kitchen door, aiming at either him or Storm. Tass snapped a hurried shot and Storm added another from his rifle. The cook stiffened suddenly and crumpled, going down still holding his rifle to his shoulder. He never even kicked, and when Storm went over for a look the big man grinned.

"Both of us were better shots than we thought," he said. "Two holes right over his heart."

It took them but half a minute to haze the pair of horseshoers into the adobe shed with the guard and to tie all three men. Then they hurried into the spring house where Tass pivoted the boulder and led the way into the cavelike little room behind it. Don Marcial stirred awake as the candle flamed to life. His head seemed to have cleared during his short rest.

"Jeff Storm!" he exclaimed hoarsely, identifying the big fellow. "You here?"

"Yes. And so is Colorow with about forty men. Or at least, they ain't far off and they'll be back before long. You can't travel, Don Marcial, but you'll be safe hidden here. I'll go down and buy those cartridges from Deever and deliver 'em."

Don Marcial tried to get up, but he could not even raise on an elbow. He nodded approval. "Yes, go," he said. "Lose no time. And God go with you."

Jeff picked up one of the rawhide-

covered boxes. "If you'll help me git started," he told Tass, "I'll shore appreciate it."

"Me," said Tass firmly, "I'm going with you. You forget dad is down there waitin' for those cartridges. I got a stake in seeing they get to him."

"Your dad," said Jeff, frowning, "wouldn't want you mixing in this. You got a long time to live. There's one chance in a thousand of dodging that polecat outfit."

"You're pretty well done for," Tass stated. "Only a little bit better off than the don. You'll need help."

Jeff nodded. "All right," he agreed. "Mexico it is. And they better make a lot of room for a pair of gringos."

They hurried out to bring up the horses. Colorow's men had taken Tass' mount and Jeff's, but had left the saddles. Tass cinched his on an iron-gray cowhorse and Jeff forked a big hammer-head bay, both of which had come up for water. A stout little mule would serve as pack animal.

Jeff Storm had found a bottle of tequila belonging to the cook and drank half of what the man had left. The liquor seemed to give him strength. They loaded the pack boxes and then mounted. It was high time they were leaving. They could hear the distant hoofbeats of horses racing toward the house through the dusk. Some of Colorow's outfit maybe had heard the shots and had given the alarm.

As further precaution, to muffle the sound of their horses from the sharp ears of the men that would follow, Tass tied sacking about their hoofs. They headed out, taking with them the two best rifles of the Mexican arms, and draping bandoleers of cartridges over their

shoulders, climbing the ridge by a steep brush-hidden trail that Tass occasionally used.

They traveled on in the gathering darkness with the swooping of nighthawks overhead and the muffled padding of their horses the only sounds to break the silence. Full darkness saw them traveling across the barren lands that stretched to Little Chihuahua.

"Colorow when he gets our trail will follow us, guessing that we'll be heading for Drew's camp," stated Jeff Storm. "But trailing us will be slow in the dark."

Tass nodded. They had the advantage of darkness and fresh horses. The mounts ridden by Colonel Colorow's party had been exhausted by hard riding, but the Mexicans would not spare those horses, riding them in the chase until they dropped dead. And when the moon arose, Colorow's keen trackers would be able to follow the trail fast.

As he rode, Jeff Storm talked about the little mining town and its besieged people—Americans and Mexicans fighting, all but starved, reduced to burro meat, desperately holding the town against the forces of the red-haired wolf, Colorow Borrunda.

"If Colorow is beaten there, he'll be done for—just a bandit running from the law," said Jeff. "But if he wins, he'll have one of the richest silver mines in Mexico to buy him unlimited arms so he can recruit a lot more hell-raising soldiers."

The moon rose and under it they pushed on fast, through thorny clumps of cat's claw, mesquite and prickly pear. Twenty miles from the Majors ranch, Tass guided them to a spring where they watered their mounts and pack mule and fed the

animals oats they carried on their saddles. Jeff stripped and bathed, put a fresh bandage about his head that had been damaged by a ricocheting bullet, and once more they went on, at a horse-killing pace.

Some time past midnight as they threaded a way through lava ridges, they heard a clatter of hoofs behind them. Hastily tying their horses in brush, they crouched behind a ready-made barricade of rock and waited. The riders were only three in number, an advance guard of Colorow's men that had lighted on the trail of the two. The trio came loping along, spurring their jaded animals.

As the three came abreast, Jeff yelled for them to throw up their hands. When the trio went for their guns instead, he and Tass opened fire.

The battle was short. The man in the lead pitched from his horse at the first exchange of shots; the other two dropped from their saddles to use their horses for barricade. Shots slapped into the rocks about Tass and Storm. One man went down under his horse; the other voted for flight and leaping to the back of his horse, spurred off. Jeff ruthlessly dumped him from the saddle to prevent him from taking word to the main body of Colorow's men.

They pushed on again toward the shadow of the Tres Palomas in which lay Little Chihuahua. As the hours went by, Jeff Storm could keep himself in the saddle only by helping himself to more tequila. From him as he rode came a tuneless repetition of an old song on the Border:

"No tengo tobacco,
No tengo papel;
No tengo dinero,
Dodgast it to hell."

Dropping down through the stunted pines of a steep slope, they rode into a narrow canyon bottom twisting through a wilderness of thorn and brush. The old adobe mining camp of Little Chihuahua lay in the moonlight ahead, but there was no sign of Deever Drew when Jeff let out a yell. Hastily they searched through the few remaining buildings. There were fresh signs of occupancy by men and mules and a campfire.

"Gone," said Jeff in deep disappointment. "Deever Drew must of got scared and pulled out. That cooks us."

But Tass was on the ground examining tracks in the dust. "They headed down canyon only two or three hours ago. Twenty or more pack mules."

"Drew had his orders to stay here until Don Marcial came," growled Jeff. "He'd never 'a' started south of his own accord; told us he was too afraid of Colorow. Looks to me as if Drew's double-crossin' us. I got a hunch he's headin' to deliver those guns and cartridges to Colorow!"

CHAPTER IV.

DOUBLE-CROSS DREW.

THERE was nothing to do but to ride in pursuit, at a still faster pace, while Jeff Storm rumbled out a stream of curses at Deever Drew. Since Drew had refused to venture below the Border because of the danger of running into Colonel Colorow, the fact that he was going now proved to Storm's satisfaction that he must have some understanding with the Mexican.

The trail of the pack mules was plain in the moonlight and when the moon disappeared behind clouds, they were traveling down a canyon with walls too steep for pack ani-

imals to climb. Deever Drew had to be somewhere up ahead.

Rounding a bend they suddenly saw a campfire glimmering a half mile or so away. Since there had been no other tracks in the canyon, it was most likely Drew's outfit. Jeff grunted and pulled up beside an oblong boulder as big as a house. "No use giving this money to that snake," he growled, and dismounted to begin scooping out a little hole in the ground. "We'll cache it until we know what we're running into."

Tass unloaded the buckskin sacks and Jeff Storm emptied the double eagles into the hole, reserving only one sack, to be used, he said, in an emergency. Sand was scooped over the cache and a rock rolled on top. In the place of gold, gravel was substituted to fill the rawhide sacks. After which Tass put them and the one sack of gold coins back into the pack boxes.

"Deever is up to some trick, that's plain," stated Storm. "He's as crooked as a drunken sidewinder's trail. And we got to play our cards right or the buzzards will be having white meat for breakfast today. This is the way we'll do it: I'll ride into camp to do the palavering with Deever while you sneak up on the camp, keepin' out of sight. If it comes to guns and you got a chance to help, back my play. But don't bust in if you see the deck is stacked against me."

"I'll back any play you make," said Tass firmly. "No matter if the deck is stacked or not."

"All right," said Jeff. "The smartest thing I could do is to put a bullet through the big tub of lard as soon as I ride in."

Tass tied his horse and advanced on foot, while Storm, after giving Tass time to get placed, rode boldly down canyon singing at the top of

his voice, stopping as he got near the fire to yell Deever Drew's name.

Tass meanwhile, had worked his way close in to the fire, a temporary camp made to rest and graze the mules. Some twenty animals had been unloaded of their packs, evidently boxes of rifles and ammunition. Half a dozen armed Mexicans, Deever Drew's guard Tass guessed, squatted about the fire.

He had heard of Deever Drew who dealt in rifles and ammunition on the Border. He saw him now, a big moon-faced man, so fat his eyes were almost hidden by loose pouches of flesh. By his side sat a swart Mexican in the same sort of blue, heavily-braided uniform that Colorow Borrunda had worn. If the man were one of Colorow's men, the situation looked bad.

"Hello, Jeffy," Drew greeted Jeff Storm as the big fellow rode up to the fire. Drew's piggish eyes went thoughtfully to the rawhide boxes on the pack mule.

Jeff draped one leg carelessly over his saddlehorn and surveyed Drew, the guards, the packs and the man who might be an officer of Colorow.

"Where you think you're goin, Deever?" he demanded. "You were told to wait at Little Chihuahua until Don Marcial got in touch with you."

Drew shifted position; cleared his throat. "I thought I'd move the stuff down 'cross the line for the don," he said.

"You unformed hunk of tallow, expect me to believe that?" asked Jeff harshly. "You'd be afraid to take it down to Mexico unless you was takin' it to Colorow. That's one of Colorow's horse thieves sittin' alongside you now. You're double-crossin' us, you blasted old

cactus-eating, marijuana-smoking goat."

"Them's hard words, Jeffy," protested Drew in a hurt tone. "I promised this stuff to Don Marcial. You know you can trust me. I gave Don Marcial my word, didn't I?"

"Don't make me laugh," retorted Jeff Storm. "Your word has the same weight as the pin feather on a baby gosling."

Deever Drew, despite the fact that his party outnumbered Jeff eight to one, was plainly disturbed.

"What could I do, Jeffy?" he pleaded. "This man here is Colorow's all right, and he rode in sayin' that Colorow grabbed off both Don Marcial and the gold he was bringing to pay me. He said Colorow would pay me the same amount as Don Marcial—usin' Don Marcial's gold. And whatever they say against Colorow, he's a man that keeps his word."

"The man was lyin', Deever!" rasped out Storm. "He just happened to run across yuh and handed yuh a cock-and-bull yarn. Maybe it'll surprise yuh to hear that a bunch of United States cavalry has got Colorow trapped above the Border and is shootin' the daylights outta him."

"That is not possible," put in Colorow's man. "I did not lie. Colorow has caught Don Marcial and he has the money Don Marcial was bringing north to buy guns and ammunition."

Jeff for reply leaned over to take from a pack box the one buckskin sack he had not emptied. Contemptuously he flung it at Deever Drew's feet. The strings broke, letting the gold pieces spill out on the ground.

"Got eleven more sacks just like that," said Storm. "Does that look

like Colorow got Don Marcial and his money?" he inquired.

Deever's little eyes glittered. "I should say not," he agreed. "And so Colorow failed to get Don Marcial. You know me, Jeffy," he went on whiningly. "I wouldn't go back on my word. It's just that I believed this here lieutenant when he told me Colorow had caught Don Marcial and the money that was to go to me. Me, I'm in a dangerous business, sellin' guns across the Border, and I figured if I couldn't sell to one man, I'd sell to another." He bent his body gruntingly to pick up the gold pieces in his thick fingers. "Yes sir, Jaffy, you know Deever Drew can be trusted."

"Wait," sputtered the dark-faced lieutenant, "you promised these arms to Colorow, Drew. If you go back on your word, Colorow will cut your heart out. Here is the money, and besides that I promise you a share in the Cobre Durango mine."

"So that was it!" growled Jeff Storm. "You were going to sell to Colorow, Drew, takin' stolen gold and part of a stolen mine. A lot your word is worth."

"Yes, but I changed my mind, Jeffy," said Deever. "Colorow ain't got the mine yet, and he ain't got the money. A bird in the hand is worth two in a cholla cactus. Your boss, Colorow, is out of luck," he told the Mexican.

"But it is not Don Marcial that has the gold. It is Colorow," said the lieutenant, and his pearl-handled six-shooter suddenly flashed from his holster. "I take this gold in the name of Coronel Colorow Borunda. I kill this Jeff Storm; I take the money; then I pay it to you, Señor Drew."

"I guess he's got you at that, Jeffy," chuckled Deever Drew.

"He's raised your offer. Looks like you're playing a deuce against a full hand. Business is business; cash talks with me. And he's got the drop on you and you're so done for you can't hardly sit your saddle. 'Pears your bet is coppered and the buzzards will be pickin' your bones tomorrow."

Deever Drew had spoken the truth: Jeff Storm was a sick man, wavering in his saddle. But he grinned bleakly. "You're wrong," he stated. "Think I'd come here alone? I got men hidden near your camp, coverin' you with their guns."

Colorow's officer laughed disbelieving and Deever Drew chuckled until his fat belly shook.

"You can't expect this hombre to fall for a old bluff like that, Jeffy," he said.

"I'm warnin' you," said Jeff Storm hoarsely. "Lieutenant, throw down that gun."

"No, Señor Storm," said the officer. "Instead of throwing down this gun, I press the trigger gently."

Tass had been covering the officer even before the man had produced the six-shooter. Aiming carefully now he fired at the officer, shooting high at the man's right shoulder.

The shot sounded like a thunder-clap from a clear sky. The officer dropped his gun and sprang to his feet, staring out into the darkness. His gun had exploded, the bullet barely missing Jeff Storm who, seeing that the Mexican was out of the fight, hastily shoved his pistol into Drew's stomach. The fat man flinched away.

"Tell your men to put down their guns, Drew!" ordered Storm as he saw the half-dozen Mexicans going for their rifles. "And do it quick if you want to save your worthless carcass."

Drew barked out an order to the

muleteers, who had no stake in this matter except for the few pesos Drew was to pay them.

"I'm your friend, Jeffy," whined Drew hastily. "No need to pull a gun on me. This officer of Colorow's forced my hand. He told me that Colorow would grab everything I had and that I'd better sell it to Colorow while I had a chance. I'm a friend of Don Marcial's and of you. You know that, Jeffy. Deever Drew, he wouldn't double-cross a friend, nosiree."

"Not more'n ten times in the same hour at least," growled Jeff. "Shut your blabber mouth; just hearing you talk about friendship makes me sick. Here you were going to unload on a friend a lot of old second-hand arms at ten times what they was worth, but even that didn't satisfy you; you figured to get even more."

"You wrong me, Jeffy," protested Drew almost tearfully. "Friendship means more to me than money. I would even give these arms to my good friend, Don Marcial, if he did not have the money to pay me."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Storm. "You're going to have your chance to prove how good a friend you are of Don Marcial's. Because that one sack is all the money in those pack boxes. I got a lot of sacks in there but all they hold is just gravel."

"What!" bawled Drew. "You mean you—" He stared with eyes popping while Jeff flung out sack after sack of the gravel, and for once Deever Drew was speechless.

A gray-bearded old Mexican who had a high-pitched, squeaky voice and was evidently an old acquaintance of Jeff's appeared from among the muleteers. Jeff took the man to help make a hasty inspection of the packs, picking out ammunition, test-

ing some of the boxes of cartridges to make sure that they were good. Tass came into camp to stand guard, ordering Deever Drew to tie up the wounded shoulder of the lieutenant.

Storm had gone through all the mule loads when Tass stiffened and listened intently. The canyon was narrow, with precipitous walls. Far up it he could hear the faint beat of hoofs.

"Colorow or some of his bunch on our tail," he muttered.

Jeff nodded. "All right. The horses he's ridin' are about dead under 'em and we'll give him a race, for we're movin' on light. I'm takin' only half this stuff—cartridges and about fifty rifles. With them we can stand Colorow off for another month. But, meanwhile, we don't want Colorow to get the rest of these arms. Pasqual!" he called to the old Mexican and gestured at the pack loads and then at the fire.

Pasquel grinned and promptly started dumping boxes of rifles into the flames.

Drew gave a yowl of protest. "That's my property," he bawled. "You got no right to burn 'em up."

"It's for the sake of your good friend, Don Marcial," stated Jeff. "Jump into it, you hombres," he shouted at the men and bawling orders, hustled them into action, rearranging packs, loading the cartridges he had selected. They loaded eight mules with ammunition and the rifles he had picked out as most serviceable. The other mules were to be driven along, to be used as relays on the trip. The wounded officer was tied on his horse to be taken along as prisoner.

"Most of these rifles are no good, anyway," said Jeff. "Couldn't hit a flock of barns with 'em. Stuff Deever picks up from some garbage pile and sells to Mexicans. We'll

throw the cartridges in before we leave—as a sort of salute for Colonel Colorow."

While another howl of anguish came from Drew, Storm took the sack of gold pieces from the gun-runner and tossed each of the escort a gold piece, more than they could earn below the Border in three months. Another double eagle he promised them should be theirs when they reached Cobre Durango.

The hoofs were coming nearer. Judging from the racket, it was not all of Colorow's band, but too many to engage in a fight.

"I got a better idea than using those cartridges as a salute," said Tass. "Why not send those birds back up the canyon faster than they're comin' down it?"

"How?" asked Jeff.

"By throwing a scare into 'em," said Tass, nodding at the boxes of cartridges and then at the fire.

Jeff grinned. "All right; you and me will stay to give 'em a little reception. We'll haze this bunch around the bend and leave Pasqual to watch 'em. *Andale!*"

With the cavalcade out of sight, Jeff watched Tass suspend a pack load of the cartridges on a stout rope, running the rope up to a bench on the cliff. A second lariat held another mule load.

"Ain't you the little engineer?" said Jeff admiringly, as he followed Tass to the bench. The oncoming group, horses and riders looming as dim shapes in the darkness of the canyon bottom, galloped confidently toward the fire. As they appeared a hundred yards away, Tass raised a yell and emptied his rifle. Certain that there were at most two men to oppose them, the riders yelled in return and spurred on.

Tass released the first bundle of cartridges into the fire and he and

Jeff Storm ducked down out of range. As the hot flames began exploding the cartridges, the canyon shook to the rattling explosions. Then the staccato stutter of individual cartridges changed into a deafening roar. The cavalcade pulled up while Tass and Jeff, wary of flying shots, raised to empty their rifles in the direction of the men. But the sound of the detonating cartridges was enough. More than enough. Apparently an army was firing at them.

Before Tass had released the second sack of cartridges into the fire, the riders were already in full flight. Then just to make it good, Jeff dropped half a dozen sticks of dynamite into the fire. They exploded with a bellow that rocked the canyon. Faintly there floated back panicky yells from the mounted men who continued fleeing up canyon as if the devil were after them.

Jeff Storm slapped his knee. "They won't stop stampedin' for ten miles," he predicted, and together the two rode down to set the pack train into motion.

CHAPTER V.

A JOKE ON COLOROW.

AFTER the line of riders and mules got into motion, Jeff Storm, who seemed to have only enough strength to serve him in emergencies, fell into a semiconscious stupor, riding along loosely in his saddle, his eyes closed.

"Keep foggin' 'em along, Tass," he muttered. "I've told Pasqual where we're heading and we can trust him to guide us there."

His voice trailed off drowsily, and Tass was left with the responsibility for the journey to Cobre Durango. A tough job, Tass realized. What it amounted to was running a race

with Colonel Colorow Borrunda, in the hope of reaching the town before Colorow started a fresh attack. The defenders would be needing cartridges in the worst way. Every minute counted; a man-killing, mule-killing pace would have to be set and maintained.

Excepting only Drew and the wounded Mexican officer, the men seemed willing enough to obey orders. The muleteers, with a twenty-dollar gold piece in their pockets and a second promised them, had no reason to rebel, but Tass kept a sharp eye on them, as he rode up and down the line with a carbine held over his saddlehorn, keeping the cavalcade moving at a steady jog.

Dust billowed out from under the hoofs of their animals, saddle leather creaked, the boxes of cartridges in the packs jounced rhythmically. The squeaky-voiced Pasqual, riding as guide, never hesitated as he threaded a tortuous course along the bases of high mesas, crossing riverless valleys, or climbing ridges with sharp rock spines like the horny backs of armored desert animals.

What worried Tass most was their problem when they reached their destination. How could Jeff Storm hope to slip a pack train through a town ringed in by a rebel army?

Dawn found them in the midst of a desert, broken by tall steeplelike pinnacles of conglomerate. Waterholes were few and when they reached one of them before noon, Tass gave orders to unpack. While the mules rolled and grazed on the sparse vegetation and the men prepared a hasty meal, Tass watched from a little hill for signs of pursuit. He saw none; Colorow was undoubtedly hightailing it back to Cobre Durango to start an attack

and to make doubly sure that the munitions did not reach the beleaguered forces.

An hour, and they pushed on again, Tass hazing them along fast, with the heavy packs now on the mules which had been driven along in a loose bunch. The fat Deever Drew, suffering from heat and dust, as he jounced along in his saddle kept up a mumbled cursing, calling down maledictions on the heads of Storm and Tass Majors. Colorow's lieutenant stoically bore the pain the moving of the horse was dealing his punctured shoulder.

The heat bore down harder on them as they crossed a wide sink of wasteland heading for the mountain range in which lay Cobre Durango. Deever Drew was trying cunningly to delay the party, getting in the road of pack mules, slowing the pace. Tass yelled at the men to gig on the lagging mules and rode up behind Deever Drew to whack the big man between the shoulder blades. After that the cavalcade raised dust faster.

Toward evening they came into a maze of ridges and narrow, deep canyons shoved together like the surface of a gigantic washboard. In the canyons they began to see old mines, dozens of prospect holes, the remains of ancient *orastres* and crude smelters, with the ruins of long-deserted mining settlements. As they passed one town which showed signs of recent occupancy, Pasqual chuckled.

"Colorow hanged all the men in this place," he told Tass in Spanish. "When he takes a town, Colorow hangs all the men in the plaza, and then marches the children down to see their papas hanging like apples from the branches of the trees."

Tass, thinking of his father fighting a desperate battle in Cobre Durango, could not laugh with Pasqual.

He shivered instead, and then yelled at the leader of the string of pack animals, and began hurling pebbles at lazy mules from a bag he carried at his saddlehorn. Wearily, riders and mules pressed on.

Jeff Storm who had apparently been sleeping away the hours while he balanced automatically in his saddle, cowboy-fashion, now came to life. The big mining man was still in bad shape, gaunt with weariness, the lines of his face deep with the suffering from his bullet wound.

"It ain't long now," said Storm, and raised his cracked voice in the monotonous verse of what must have been the only song that he knew:

"No tengo tobacco,
No tengo papel—"

"With Colorow surrounding the place, how you figure on slippin' those cartridges through?" Tass interrupted. "Aim to shoot 'em in, maybe?"

"It'll be easy," declared the mining man. "A smart kiyote always has more than one hole to his den. In the canyon back of the one Cobre Durango lays in, is the old Pedragon mine, which was operated by a English company for forty years. Their main tunnel bores half a mile into the ridge to connect with the workings of the old Bonanza Espanola. And the Espanola tunnels hook up with our Cobre Durango mine. We drop into the Pedragon and pop up on the other side of the ridge right in Cobre Durango pueblo."

"And we take these mules through those mines?" asked Tass.

Jeff Storm laughed. "Not much. These mules got more sense than to risk their life in those tunnels. We'll pack in what cartridges we can and



He lashed his horse viciously with the quirt.

cache the rest. There's enough men in our party to lug in ammunition to hold Colorow off for a week, and we can come back for more when we need it. But what a joke on Colorow—crawlin' under a ridge while that Mex and his buzzard bunch keeps their eyes peeled for a string of mules dodging through the mountains."

And Storm began singing again in his cracked voice the song about the gent with no tobacco and no cigarette papers and no money to buy either.

Tass shook his head doubtfully at the idea of stealing through the subterranean passages of abandoned mines. He didn't like it. He had never been down in a mine, and he thought regretfully that only the day before he had been peacefully hazing horses toward the corral of his father's ranch, with Mexico only a dim mysterious haze in the distance.

They switched packs again from the backs of the tired mules and hustled along on the final stage of the long journey. Darkness fell

swiftly on the knife-edge ridge along which they moved, and then abruptly they pitched down a steep wall into a canyon. Before them lay the immense dump and deserted shedlike buildings of a huge mine—an iron-roofed boiler house, offices, a structure containing a battery of crushing-stamps, a roofless shaft house.

Here they unpacked, caching most of the mule loads and making shoulder packs of what the men could carry.

"Me, I don't go in there!" bawled fat Deever Drew as he saw the gaping black hole of the mine entrance. "Those old tunnels ain't safe. This mine ain't been worked for twenty years."

"You'll go," growled Jeff Storm. "And you'll lug your share of cartridges, all same as a jassack. Shoulder that pack!"

He jabbed Drew with a six-shooter barrel and Drew hastily took up his pack. Fifty feet of tunnel and they had to descend a forty-foot well. At the bottom, with a few lanterns lighting the way, the string of men moved into a huge tunnel, with the rusted tracks along which ore cars had once moved. The rails disappeared in a shallow pool of water through which the men splashed for a hundred yards.

Drew had reason to be scared, Tass thought, as he looked at the rotting roof beams and props. This old mine looked more dangerous than trying to ride an African elephant. Several times they got down on their knees and crawled to pass under caved-in sections.

Three hundred yards and they descended a deep shaft by way of a rickety ladder. Once more they filed through a tunnel that slanted down steeply toward the innermost bowels of the earth, reaching finally,

a huge chamber out of which Jeff Storm declared half a million dollars in silver had been taken.

"The ore was so rich they just sawed off the silver in chunks, all same as you'd saw stove wood off a log," he claimed.

Tass grinned. "Even if that wasn't blarney," he returned, "that silver would still be here if I had to come in and saw it off."

They rested and moved on again, with Deever Drew puffing like a broken-winded horse, the sweat running off his big body in streams. The air was dead in the lower tunnels and often reeked with gas that emanated from crevices in the rock walls. Tass' head began to ache and his body to tremble from weariness. He had gone forty hours without sleep, and the strain was beginning to tell. The whole party slowed down, but Jeff Storm cursed them into moving faster.

Out of the chamber, they began toiling up a long series of ladders, with half the rungs broken or ready to break. Men groaned under the heavy loads that burdened them, but Jeff Storm harshly drove them on. They were now in the old Bonanza Espanola workings. Up these shafts, said Jeff Storm, a century before, Indians driven by the whips of their Spanish masters had clambered with baskets of ore.

"Sure," said Tass. "And they used these same blasted ladders, too, I bet." To keep from wishing he were back above the Border riding the mesas again, he fastened his mind on his father's plight and the desperate need of the town for the packs they carried. Already Colorow Borrunda might be hurling his small army at the town, hurrying to break in before aid could arrive. When they rested, he strained his ears, listening for shot, although he knew

that Cobre Durango might as well have been on the other side of the world for all the sound that could penetrate the solid rock of the mountain.

Through more endless passages they toiled, at half a dozen different levels, to enter finally a tunnel which showed signs of recent work.

"Home," said Jeff Storm. "The Cobre Durango mine. It's not far now. And we don't have to climb up out of this mine. All you do is ring the bell for the elevator and yell out the floor you want."

They were still far below the surface when they reached the shaft. Jeff pulled on the signal rope to summon the hoist. The mine had been closed during the siege of the town, but, before he left, Storm had stationed a watchman to be ready, day and night, to receive the ammunition. No answer coming, Jeff jerked the rope again and again.

After which Jeff began to swear—maybe to cover his fear that Colorow might already have taken the town. "Know I shouldn't have trusted that Mexican watchman," he growled. "Damn this country, anyway. Nothing but grief down here for gringos. I wished I'd never put foot below the Border. Nothing to do now but to climb up and see what's wrong. The rest of you wait down here."

Taking a lantern, he began clambering up the shaft ladder, while Tass followed. Pasqual had a gun to watch the rest, who were too exhausted to try any tricks, anyway. And Jeff Storm might need help; the big mining man seemed too far gone to climb even ten feet.

But Storm made it up the long ladder without faltering, and, reaching the top, hammered on two outer doors of iron which closed in the shaft. No answer coming, both

Storm and Tass hammered on the iron with their six-shooters and shouted at the top of their voices. Still no answer and Jeff growled out threats of the particular kind of horrible deaths he would deal to the watchman.

Then Jeff Storm abruptly gave up, slumping to the rock floor. "We're too late," he growled. "Colorow's got in."

Tass, listening, could hear a few shots coming faintly from a distance, and then silence. Which could mean that either the town was still holding out or that Colorow's buzzards were hunting down the poor devils that hid after the town had been taken.

Tass grunted and kicked the doors and shouted, and finally a sleepy answer sounded. Then closer to the door, some man called "*Quién es?*"

"*Quién es*, is it?" bellowed Jeff Storm, leaping to his feet. "Unlock this door, you, so I can squeeze your throat out so damn thin I can tie a bowknot in it."

Outside, Jeff brushed aside the Mexican watchman and ran to a little shed. Steam had been kept up in a donkey engine, according to Storm's orders, and in ten minutes the hoist had been sent down and had returned bringing the men and their packs.

Tass, meanwhile, had stepped out of the shaft house to his first sight of the little mining village of Cobre Durango. Bathed in moonlight, its brown adobe shoe boxes of houses lay sprawled out over the bottom and sides of a narrow, short canyon that began in a precipitous cliff wall.

It was easy to see how the town had been able to hold out for so long. Attack was possible only on the lower side of the town. On the sides and at its back, Cobre Durango was

hemmed in by cliffs that no army could have descended.

The loud crash of guns suddenly broke out downcanyon, and Jeff Storm planted a kick in the pants of Deever Drew.

"*Andale*, you pack mules!" Storm shouted. And at a shuffling trot the weary men got into motion, while guns and yells below raised a deepening uproar.

CHAPTER VI.

SIEGE OF COBRE DURANGO.

WITH the moon shining squarely into the narrow trough of the canyon, they passed the huge hulks of the mine buildings, the iron-sided boilerhouse, the stamp mill and smelter. Below they came into a crooked little street lined with adobe houses. There were no lights in any of these, but Tass could see blackshawled women peering from doorways.

The gunfire downcanyon was increasing in volume, filling the narrow canyon with a heavy thunder. The high rock cliffs surrounding the town on three sides made a huge sounding box in which rifle shots and their echoes battled madly to produce an uproar more nearly like that from cannons. Mingled with the detonations of the guns came the wild clanging of church bells, raising an alarm to summon defenders to posts.

"Sounds like we got here just in time," Jeff Storm muttered as they dragged along under their packs.

They came out into the plaza, a triangular space with a towered stone church at its apex, its base closed by a long adobe-walled building stretching across from one out-jutting cliff wall of the canyon to the other. This long building was like a fort, completely blocking en-

trance to the town, while its flat roof provided a convenient space for defending riflemen. Midway along the building was a break in the walls closed by a stout plank gate, with a squat square tower of adobe above it.

As a little lull came in the firing, Tass identified his father's voice coming from the roof. Jeff Storm raised a shout and clambered up a ladder with Tass at his heels. The long flat roof lay before him, powder smoke swirling in whitish layers above it. The Cobre Durango miners, Americans and Mexicans alike, were lined up behind the parapet at the outer edge of the roof. This had been built high enough so that even tall men could, with a little stooping, walk behind it in safety. At intervals the parapet was loopholed for rifles.

Dan Majors, a man of fifty, built much like his son, rushed up to grab Storm about the shoulders.

"Thank God, Jeff, you got here!" he exclaimed. "We couldn't have lasted another hour the way Colorow has been making us throw lead to keep him back. He's moving up all his bunch for a big try and—"

Dan Majors broke off his speech suddenly, catching sight of his son. "Tass!" he shouted, amazed. "You here? What are you doing in this hell hole? Jeff, why did you bring him here?" he demanded sternly.

"And who has a better right than your own son to be here, helping you?" retorted Jeff Storm. "Anyway, there was no keeping him back. If not for him, Colorow would be firing these cartridges at you. It's a long story, but Tass saved Don Marcial's life, same as he saved mine when Deever Drew double-crossed us and made a deal to deliver those guns and cartridges to Colorow."

Tass' father was worn, his face

deeply lined and haggard from sleepless days and nights of the siege. His left arm was in a neckerchief sling at his side. His good arm went around Tass' shoulders now, holding his soon close to him.

"Tass, I'm sorry I snarled out at you and Jeff just now. But the last thing I'd want was to see you mixed in this. We got a slim chance of holdin' out, even with plenty cartridges. Got twenty shot-up men a'ready in the hospital, and a lot of fresh graves in the churchyard. Yesterday they ended two American foremen. And tonight Colorow is meanin' business. Listen to that!"

The rifles downcanyon broke out in a furious bombardment that made speech almost impossible. Colorow's men were pushing up along the canyon bottom and laying down a barrage to cover their advance. Shots gnawed away at the top of the parapet; whined overhead. The half-dozen bells in the church tower were still raising a clamor.

Dan Majors raised to look over the parapet, ignoring flying bullets, and using a pair of glasses to scan the moonlit canyon bottom. Tass stepped to his father's side for a look-see, also. Directly below the long building the bottom of the canyon had been cleared of brush, and some yards below that, a nasty-looking tangle of barbed wire filled the canyon from cliff to cliff.

"All same as a war—that barbed wire," said Dan Majors. "It's stopped Colorow from smashing through horseback."

The packs of cartridges were hastily lifted to the roof and Jeff Storm and Dan Majors scattered them in piles within easy reach of the riflemen. They would be needed; every indication was that the bandit-rebel leader was going to make every effort to end the long siege.

Men were advancing close to the wire defense, keeping under cover of the rocky canyon bottom, evidently preparing for a rush. Then a bugle emitted a wobbly series of toots, but instead of a charge, another lull came in the firing.

A few seconds later the silence was broken by a terrific boom, an explosion that shook the whole canyon. Tass, staring over the parapet, saw a spouting geyser of rock and dirt mounting high in the air, obscuring the face of the moon. Through the murk appeared converging groups of men, running forward, some carrying ladders to climb the walls, others maintaining a rapid fire as they advanced. Then the showering dust shut down, making a cloak for them.

Frantically the men on the roof emptied guns, firing as fast as they could pull trigger, shooting blindly into the dust. Before their fire the attack faltered, and suddenly Colorow's men could be seen going back in a wild flight, leaving their ladders behind them.

"Look out!" called Dan Majors. "More's to come. That mine blasted a hole in the barbed wire so horses can get through."

A chorus of savage yells came from downcanyon, then there was a clatter of hoofs and a column of horsemen swept toward them in a wild charge. The leaders vanished in the pall of dust that still hovered over the pit left by the exploded mine. Once more the guns behind the parapet went into action.

Evidently all of the wire entanglement had not been destroyed by the explosion, for some of the lead horses struck wires and were halted, piling up the riders that followed. In five seconds there was a shouting, cursing turmoil into which the guns poured death from the parapet loop-

holes. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. The horsemen who had been trying to untangle themselves had had enough. Those that could extricate themselves turned tail and raced down the canyon in a retreat as impetuous as their charge. Wounded horses and dismounted riders could be seen clambering from the death trap of the pit.

When the dust haze cleared and the moon shone brightly again on the canyon bottom, it revealed a dozen dead horses and a few riders piled in a heap in the hole made by the exploded mine.

On the roof top men, too weary to cheer their temporary victory, began cleaning their rifles, preparing grimly for another attack. Dan Majors moved along the roof, speaking an encouraging word to each man. It was plain to Tass that the defenders of Cobre Durango, American and Mexican alike, held unlimited faith in his father. Which was true: more than anything else during the weary weeks of the siege Dan Majors' leadership and ability to inspire a steadfast courage through his own example had held the town against Borrunda.

"Exploded a mine, did they?" muttered Dan Majors to Tass. "We been expecting that before. They've got a lot of powder; stole all the explosives from the mines in this vicinity. But we've had a lot of blasting powder here, too—and it's laid in a mine to receive them if they ever break through to the plaza."

He took Tass to the squat tower above the plank gate. Inside was a small room with its walls loopholed. On a shelf sat an iron chest, and in it was one of the boxes used to detonate charges of powder and dynamite from a distance.

"All we got to do is push that plunger down," explained Majors, "and the lower end of the plaza goes up into the air. Not this building—just the ground. If Colorow ever rides into the plaza, we'll hand him a surprise."

Women were bringing food to the roof, steaming pots of chile-flavored frijoles with a few hunks of carne that Tass suspected was mostly burro. Meat was scarce in Cobre Durango, but beans they had a plenty, and in Mexico for centuries, men had marched and ridden and fought on the lowly frijole.

Dan and Tass Majors sat apart from the others as they ate. Dan Majors asked details about Don Marcial Robles and the trip with Jeff Storm to Cobre Durango. Then he inquired about the ranch which he had left on what was to be a short trip into Mañana-land. He spoke cheerfully, but Tass guessed that his father had little hope of ever seeing that ranch again.

Colorow was determined as never before to capture the town. He had wasted too much time here already. Federal troops would be moving north before long. Borrunda's hope was to smash into the town, get money from the mine to buy arms, and collect a large enough army to whip Federal troops when they arrived.

"Son, I wish you hadn't come in here," Majors said gravely. "This is none of your quarrel. I owed Don Marcial a debt and I couldn't turn him down when he asked me to take charge of the defense here. Jeff Storm was an old friend of mine; that hellion and I were rampagin' round Mexico long before you were born. And on top I've got a small interest in this mine."

"Yeah?" replied Tass. "Jeff said

that this was one of the richest mines in Mexico."

"It's going to be," said his father. "Jeff struck a big vein here a few weeks ago—silver ore that may be as rich as that they found in the Bonanzo Espanola. Jeff claims there's a million dollars' worth of silver in sight—which is a lot of money in any man's country. Which is why that polecat Colorow wants it so bad—and is liable to get it. We've got plenty cartridges now, but the odds are big against us. The odds are always against Americans in Mexico when there's a revolution erupting."

Jeff Storm came up, waving a bottle of tequila in one paw and a stack of tortillas in the other. A small, plainly hungry dog trailed him.

"Nothin' like Mex flapjacks and cactus juice for keepin' up your strength," Jeff stated, putting the bottle to his mouth and dropping the tortillas into the waiting mouth of the dog.

"What became of that Colorow lieutenant and Drew?" asked Tass.

"I sent the officer to the hospital," said Jeff. "Seemed in a bad way from that slug you put in his shoulder. I reckon Deever Drew has found himself a bed to crawl under until the fightin' is over."

"You better go to the hospital yourself, Jeff," said Dan Majors. "You're half-dead and don't know it. All you're going on is your nerve."

"And don't forget the tequila," returned Jeff Storm, and suddenly raised his voice to bellow out his one and only song. He got as far as "*No tengo papel*," when a burst of shots from downcanyon made Jeff throw himself flat on the roof.

"I don't blame 'em," said Dan Majors. "Even a bandit has got ears too sensitive for your braying."

"They're just jealous of my voice,

that's all," retorted Storm, and cuddling his bottle of tequila to his face, promptly dropped off to sleep.

There seemed no danger of immediate attack, and all along the roof men were lying down to snatch a little shuteye. Jeff Storm's snores easily drowned out the efforts of the rest.

"I don't know if Jeff sounds worse when he snores or when he sings," chuckled Dan Majors. Tass grinned and while his mouth was still stretched in the grin, he leaned back against the parapet, and suddenly fell asleep.

He awoke after an hour or so to find that his father had covered him with a blanket. For a while he drowsed, dreaming of Don Marcial, of Ike Clasben, Coronel Colorow Borrunda, Jeff Storm, Deever Drew. Then he sat up with a start. The moon had gone down as far as Cobre Durango was concerned and stars could provide little light in the narrow canyon.

Half of the men were asleep; the others were watching at the parapet. All the guns were silent, and the quiet seemed unnatural.

Tass felt in need of a drink of water and climbed from the roof to head toward the well in the middle of the plaza descending a ladder near the big gate.

Tass yawned widely as he clambered down, only to snap wide awake as the flare of a match came at the foot of the gate under the big tower. The match had been shaded by the hand of the lighter, but there had been enough light to identify the big hulk of the gun-runner, Deever Drew. Drew was in a kneeling position.

"Drew!" he called. "What you up to? Get away from there."

A snarl came in return and the click of a gun being cocked. Tass

flung himself to the side, and a bullet spat into the wall close to him. Deever Drew got to his feet and started lumberingly toward Tass, and again the gun in Drew's paw spat flame and again missed. Tass whipped out his own six-shooter and fired from the hip. He could hardly miss the oncoming hulk. Drew stumbled and went down groaning, just as there came from the gate a short boom, made perhaps by a half stick of dynamite. The big gate was literally blown to pieces. A flying stick struck Tass in the head, and blood gushed down over his face.

Stunned, he kept himself erect and looked toward the gate, noting with astonishment that it was gone. Men were swarming down off the roof, Dan Majors in the lead.

Then Majors' voice rose in a sharp order. "Back! The gate's been blown away." And at once repeated it in Spanish.

"Son," muttered Dan Majors at Tass' side, "what hit you?"

"Just a piece of wood," said Tass, and groped for the ladder rungs. His father boosted him part way up and he climbed automatically to stumble onto the roof.

There his father had to leave him. The canyon below was alive with yells and the crash of rifles.

CHAPTER VII.

RIDERS TO KINGDOM COME.

AS it was made clear afterward, the wrecking of the gate opening into the plaza from downcanyon had been cooked up by the wounded lieutenant of Colorow and Deever Drew. The lieutenant by his pretense to a worse injury than his shoulder wound really amounted to, had been sent to the hospital. It had been easy for him to slip out

of his bed and make contact with Deever Drew. Once arrangements had been completed with the gun-runner, the officer had gone over the wall in the darkness to notify Colorow to be ready for the moment when Deever Drew would blow up the plank gate.

At the time there was no occasion to make investigations. Plain hell was erupting for the defenders of Cobre Durango. Wakened by the explosion, sleeping men rushed to reinforce those already at the parapet waiting to meet the tide of disaster rolling swiftly upcanyon.

Previously some of Colorow's men had crawled up to clear the pit of the remaining barbed wire, leaving the way open for a straight smash at the gate. And now out of the darkness downcanyon, came a loud hammer of hoofs that grew steadily louder. Dim shapes appeared in the darkness, making a solid river of riders racing up canyon toward the breach in the defense walls.

Jeff Storm and Dan Majors were shouting orders, steadying the men on the roof. They had prepared to meet a darkness attack, having ready bundles of pitch pine sticks soaked in kerosene. These flares, hastily lighted now and fitted to sockets in the parapet top, revealed a thrilling, blood-quickenng sight—the long column of racing horses and the yelling mob of riders spurring them on. Coronel Colorow Borrunda, to give him credit, rode at the head of his men, bareheaded, his long red hair streaming behind him.

At sight of Colorow and the long column that followed him, the guns on the roof had gone into action. Men were trying desperately to bring down Borrunda, but the rebel leader seemed to carry a charm that protected him from bullets. Men and horses went down immediately

behind him, but nothing apparently, could touch Borrunda.

Tass Majors, as his head slowly cleared, snatched up a rifle from the roof and ran to the parapet to begin emptying the gun. As the charging horde thundered nearer, horses were going down, saddles emptying, but there was no halting that mad charge with anything short of a cannon.

Riders flowed through the gateway and into the plaza, to open fire from their saddles. There was no parapet on the plaza side and the flaring torches made plain targets of the Cobre Durango men. They were forced to throw themselves flat on the roof.

Dan Majors' voice rose, encouraging the fighters, forming them into little groups that traded shots at short range with Colorow's force. Colorow's men began hurriedly to dismount, using their horses as barricades. Meanwhile, more and more riders were swarming into the plaza, half filling it, and the town seemed irrevocably lost.

Dan Majors, suddenly hurrying along the parapet, passed close to Tass. Tass, looking up, saw his father, in the light of one of the torches, halt, a bewildered look spreading over his face, the six-shooter falling from his nerveless hand.

As Dan Majors sagged, Tass leaped up to catch him and lower him to the roof.

"We'll never stop 'em," his father gasped. "Got one chance— That detonator box. Get to it—"

Tass released his father and ran toward the gate tower. As he ran, his body was illumined by the light from the flaring torches, and he became target for at least a dozen guns. A bullet struck him high in the rightleg, making him stumble,

but he recovered himself and plunged into the squat tower.

There was enough light inside to reveal the iron chest his father had previously shown him. He flung back the lid and put his hand on the plunger. He had never set off a charge before, but he knew that there was a miniature dynamo inside the box which produced a spark which would be transmitted by wires to giant powder planted in the plaza. He pressed the plunger down hard, and then as if the box had kicked him, he was flung to the floor.

Instantly there came a monster boom that wiped out the shots and yells as if they were but whispers. It dwarfed the mine explosion set off by Colorow a few hours before, producing a concussion so tremendous that the whole town seemed lifted from its foundations. The bellowing thunder clap smashed against the canyon walls with a force that all but burst in eardrums.

With the explosion came a brilliant flare of light that hung in the canyon for a second, illuminating the cliff walls, the brown adobe houses, the looming buildings of the mine upcanyon. Then as clouds of dirt filled the air, darkness shut down.

Tass, thrown to the floor of the tower, half stunned, realized that the bricks of the structure were falling. On his hands and knees, he made a desperate leap through the doorway, escaping barely in time to save himself from being smothered under the crumbling walls.

Outside, the roof was receiving a rain of dirt, small rocks, and mangled pieces of flesh, equine and human. Under that shower the pitch-pine torches were almost extinguished. Then they flared up again, but they could show nothing happening beneath the dense pall of

dust which blanketed the lower end of the triangular plaza. It was easy to imagine what was hidden there, however; from the thick cloud came the most agonizing sounds that Tass had ever heard—the shrill neighs of wounded horses, the high-pitched screams of men.

All the guns were still, as if shocked into silence. Then little by little, the cloud of dust settled, showing a wide shallow hole that had been ripped over a wide area of the lower side of the plaza. Here dimly could be seen the mangled bodies of men and horses.

Many of the riders in the plaza had not been touched by the explosion, and still others were coming upcanyon or had halted outside the gateway. Enough to take the town, and the guns on the roof started up again, sounding harshly above the blood-curdling cries of wounded men.

Jeff Storm's voice arose in a loud bellow. "That was a sock to the solar plexus; the next is to the chin! Haze 'em out of here."

There were few replies to the guns sounding off from the roof. Stunned by the disaster that had exterminated a score or more of their comrades, the survivors hesitated. Vainly they listened for the voice of their leader. Colorow Borrunda was no longer alive to give orders. Like many of his men he had disappeared literally from the face of the earth. There was no one of his officers who could replace him, and besides, his men had a belly full of fighting. They feared at any moment another mine might explode to send the rest of them to kingdom come.

The men outside the gateway started the retreat, heading pell-mell downcanyon, and then those in the plaza spurred their snorting, frightened horses across the soft

earth of the exploded area. Next moment hoofs were beating a panicky tattoo downcanyon. And there was no question about their return: the attack on Cobre Durango was over.

At the upper end of the plaza, the bells in the church tower were ringing wildly, the ropes pulled by a half-wit Mexican. The bells could be regarded now as ringing in celebration of victory, but someone hurried to stop them. What exultation the Cobre Durango men might feel could not be expressed while injured men lay groaning and calling for help.

Tass went to his father and, getting a man to help, lowered him to the ground and carried him to the hospital. Other injured men shot in the close-range fighting were removed from the roof and then lanterns were brought to search the plaza for the enemy wounded.

Dan Majors, on a cot in one of the rooms of the building used as mine hospital and which for three weeks had been used to take care of men shot during the siege, looked up at his son and forced a grin. A bandage was swathed about Dan Majors' head in addition to the arm he carried in a sling, but bandages in Cobre Durango were common enough. There was one about Tass Majors' leg where a bullet had made a clean puncture.

Jeff Storm who had finally been persuaded to have his several-days-old injury attended to, lay in a cot next to Majors. On a table by Jeff's cot sat a tequila bottle which Jeff had been using as a preventive against blood poisoning.

"That boy of yours, Dan," observed Jeff Storm, "shows a plumb natural ability at explodin' a charge at just the right time. He done a beautiful job o' scatterin' Colorow and his men all over the scenery.

We'll have to make a miner out of him."

"You'll never do that," said Dan Majors. "Tass is a rancher. He'll never be fool enough to waste his time digging around underground."

"All right," agreed Jeff. "Maybe we'll never make a miner out of him, but there's another thing we'll never make out of him, either—a fighter. Because he's one already. A fightin' hellion son of a fightin' hellion dad."

Which flattery embarrassed Tass Majors. "I figure you two can lay here and entertain yourselves for a few days," he remarked. "I'm going to fork a horse and ride up to see about Don Marcial."

"Catch yourself a little shuteye first," advised Storm. "The don will make out all right; he's tough. And on your way up there, dig up that gold we didn't pay Deever Drew for his arms. That's mining company money, and it's coming to you. Use it to buy yourself a ranch of your own."

Jeff Storm yawned and tilting up the tequila bottle, emptied it. "And now I'm going to sleep," he announced. "And if any hombre rings a church bell or fires a gun, or even speaks above a whisper around me for the next week, me, I'll get up from this cot and hang him from the nearest tree!"



A GHOST TOWN

WYOMING has many ghost towns, but South Pass City held out long after the rest of the roaring frontier communities had become ghosts. Most of its residents followed the miners, gamblers and dance-hall entertainers, who had moved on to busier places. In 1860, when the gold rush in this region began, gold seekers flocked to the wilderness of Wyoming. Gold-bearing ore was found in large quantities, and a rapid stream of gold seekers and adventurers of all kinds, soon came flocking into the new-found gold fields.

In a short time South Pass City was one of many rip-roaring mining towns of Wyoming. The echo of the clink of picks and shovels on rock was heard from morning till night, when the blaring music of the dance halls began, mingled with the crack of six-shooters, and the continual whining of the wind. Now the wind is the only sound that remains to disturb the stillness of the once lively boom town.

In 1878, with the exhaustion of metal-bearing ores, South Pass City survived the desertion of the other mining camps. While many of its residents left, this little town kept its post office and its place on the map, although most of the neighboring communities were empty and forgotten. But in the early 1920s some large mining companies opened offices near the once roaring town to extract gold from the surrounding hillsides—and South Pass City was kept busy for some time.

It had been estimated that about half a million dollars in gold was contained in the ore roundabout. When the mining firms had achieved the results they had come for they departed. The five thousand population of gold hunters and adventurers that filled South Pass City in the old days of gold have now vanished entirely. All that remains is a few tumbling frame shacks. South Pass City is just another ghost for the few old-timers that are left to talk about the town.



GUN STORM IN HUECO CITY

By C. William Harrison

***It was a hurricane of hate when Ben Flores
let loose his Colts on the Devil's Deputy.***

THE lead-colored thunderheads were sweeping across the evening sky ahead of a heat-leaden wind, rumbling, growling in their cloud battle-

ments as they piled into the jagged peaks of the looming Hueco Mountains.

Blacky Starr, his narrow, com-

pect shoulders swaying with the rolling gait of Big Red, his sorrel bronc, slanted worried, smoke-blue eyes up at the mounting storm clouds.

His lean young face was drawn with lines of weariness, and the head of his long-limbered horse drooped, showing the strain of the fast pace the Devil's Deputy had set in his two-day ride from Lodestone. It was only another four or five miles to Hueco City from the hogback, or so the puncher whom Blacky had spoken to back along the trail had said. Blacky leaned forward, and rubbed the sweaty neck of his bronc encouragingly.

"It ain't far now, Red," he muttered grimly. "If we can get to town afore them clouds bust open, yuh'll get all the oats an' rest yuh want. We twisted our trail around so that posse that's been doggin' us will think we headed for the Guadalupe country, an' there won't be many tracks left after this rain hits."

A ragged streak of lightning burned a gash across the sky and was followed by a sullen grumble of thunder. A pattering of rain splashed down on the lanky waddy, then was whisked across the range by a fitful gust of wind.

Boom!

Again the cannonade of thunder rolled to the tall rider's ears. It seemed nearer this time, a single muted blast of sound that came without the warning flash of lightning. It seemed to come from the direction of the town.

Blacky's eyes narrowed slightly, and a chilly light kindled in their smoke-blue depths. His lips pursed with the slow tightening of jaw muscles.

"Doggone," he drawled softly. "If it wasn't for this storm comin', I'd swear that was a dynamite blast."

He shook the thought from his mind. Hueco City was a peaceful town. The puncher back the trail had said so. It was a good place for a waddy on the trail to rest up with no questions asked.

Blacky relaxed in the saddle, and swung Big Red around a hump of granite that cropped out from the side of the hogback. The bronc angled down to the foot of the slope, then headed out across open range toward the distant cluster of lights that had appeared at the base of the looming Huecos.

Suddenly the tall rider jerked erect, lean body stiff and tense. He pulled his bronc to a quick halt, face bleak, eyes cold and alert.

His keenly attuned ears caught the faint drumming whisper of sound again, mounting swiftly into the distinct clatter of pounding hoofs. His long-fingered right hand dropped quickly to the battered old Colt laced low on his lean thigh. His lips flattened into a grim, thin line. The oncoming riders might only be a half dozen punchers trying to get back to their home ranch before the storm struck. Or they might be part of a law posse combing the range for the lanky, black-garbed youth who called himself the Devil's Deputy.

Blacky had only started to swing his bronc back toward the cover of the hogback when lightning raked the sky again. The flash sent white, bony fingers clawing through the lead-gray storm clouds, illuminating the range with pale, ghostly light. In that brief instant, Blacky saw the riders thundering toward him, dark blobs of men bending low over straining mounts. One of the men saw him and yelled a hoarse curse.

"Boss, over there! That jasper saw us. Cut him down, blast him."

The lightning burned out of the sky, and darkness closed in again.

Blacky slapped his bronc forward, face tight and hard. The long-barreled Colt seemed to leap into his hand, hammer eared back and ready. It didn't take much guessing to figure that these proddy gents were owl-hooters—yet he didn't want to take the chance of throwing down on honest punchers.

Pencils of orange light lanced through the thick darkness. Blacky felt hot lead breathe in his ears, fan past his cheek. Grimly, he held his fire, waiting for the killer pack to close in on him. Big Red pranced nimbly to one side, at the pressure of his knee. His gun tilted up, following the dark outlines of the outlaws.

"Here he is, boss! Over here. The spyin' son moved on us!"

The hammer dog dropped under Blacky's thumb. He felt the gun kick back in his hand, heard the shrill scream that split the night air. A man swayed drunkenly in his saddle, clutched for the horn, caught it, then thundered wildly off into the night as the frightened horse felt the reins go limp.

Then the night seemed torn apart by throbbing, pulsating gun thunder. Lightning flared across the sky to join the flames that gushed from leveled gun muzzles. The outlaws jerked their mounts to a bunch-footed halt, guns hammering, jumping.

The roar of the Colt in the hand of the Devil's Deputy was lost in the blaring six-gun crescendo. Lead whipped by the tall waddy, snicked through his clothes in a dozen places. Suddenly Big Red pitched under him. Blacky Starr had the sickening feeling of hanging in space. Then it seemed that a bolt of lightning speared down from the clouds, crashing over his brain. Abruptly Blacky felt a white-hot, blazing pain

that seared the length of his body, then died out after one fleeting instant of agony. After that there was nothing.

II.

Water that felt as cold as ice splashed into Blacky Starr's face, reached down into the black maw he was floating in and dragged him back to consciousness. He struggled savagely upward, sputtering for breath. Dimly he could see the outlines of the faces of men crowding around him, hear the harsh tones of their voices. But that cold water was still pouring down on him, and rough hands gripping him seemed to be trying to pull him down into that sea of black again.

He lashed out wildly with both hands, and felt his right fist shock into a man's blurry face. A snarling voice jarred against his ears:

"Hit me, will yuh?"

A gun-butt reached out of the darkness, cracked against the tall waddy's chin. He felt himself plunge forward toward the ground, head spinning crazily. But he didn't hit the ground. A pair of hands caught him, jerked him erect and held him there until his head cleared.

Gradually strength returned to his fagged muscles and he realized that the cold water he felt was rain sheeting down, drenching him to the skin. The side of his head throbbed with fitful jabs of pain, and he felt it gingerly with exploring fingers. The skin wasn't broken, but he winced when his fingers passed over the lump swollen just over his temple.

"His hoss throwed him, sheriff," a harsh-toned voice spoke. "His pards went on an' left the dirty son here where he fell. Reckon they figured one less would be that much more dinero for the rest of 'em."

Blacky's eyes narrowed, went cold. He singled out the man who had spoken, found himself locking stares with a hulking, hunch-shouldered hombre standing near a short, grim-faced gent wearing a sheriff's badge. The lips of the Devil's Deputy turned upward in a thin, chilly smile.

"Fella, yuh shore are a knowin' gent to hear yuh talk," he drawled coolly. "Who are yuh, an' how did yuh figure all that out so quick?"

The big jasper's puffy lips curled sneeringly. "Ben Flores is my name, if that's what's botherin' yuh," he bit out. "But yuh'll have more worries than that where yuh're goin'. Yuh're one of the skunks that blowed up the Hueco City bank. Yore hoss stumbled, an' yuh was knocked out when yuh fell. I know, 'cause I followed yore sign, an' the tracks of yore pards along the foot of the hogback till I got to the place where the rain washed them out."

The thin smile planed down from the tall youth's lips. There was something somber and deadly in the blank face of the youngster, in the black, rain-drenched clothes he wore, but the big gent didn't see it. Blacky's stare dropped to Flores' stumpy legs, narrowing slightly at the sight of red-brown mud splashes on the man's jeans and slant-heeled boots. The skinny gent and the chunky, pock-marked hombre who stood behind Flores had that same red-brown mud on their boots and jeans. Their horses, ground-hitched a few feet away, were muddy from fetlocks to bellies. Blacky looked up to see Flores eying him narrowly.

"Then yuh figure the gents that left me here headed into that sink-hole farther up the ridge?" the Devil's Deputy asked softly.

Ben Flores' shaggy head jerked down in a quick nod. "Shore, they—" He broke off, a dark tide

of rushing blood flooding his heavy face. "Durn it, how would I know? The tracks peter out afore I could follow 'em that far."

Blacky Starr chuckled bleakly. "Shore," he drawled mockingly. "Yuh said once b'fore that the rain had washed them out, didn't yuh?"

The skinny jasper, his bony, wedge-shaped face screwed into a scowl, cut in raspingly.

"Beaman, what's the use of all this talk? We got one of the skunks. Me, I don't see no sense of jawin' any longer. If I had my say, we'd save the county's money an' string this owl-hooter up right now. I lost some good dinero in that bank robbery."

Sheriff Matt Beaman's slight body stiffened. He leaped quickly to one side so that he faced both the tall, black-garbed youth and the men crowded close behind Ben Flores. His lantern jaw was hard-set and tinged with gray.

"My job's catchin' outlaws, not tryin' 'em," he snapped tightly. "If yuh got any hang-noose ideas, Joe Kells, yuh better get rid of 'em pronto. This youngster is goin' to jail."

Joe Kells laughed gratingly. "O. K., sheriff, but yuh don't need to get so proddy. Yuh can't shoot a gent for thinkin'."

Beaman growled under his breath. "No, but a gent can get in a heap of trouble for thinkin' out loud too much." He fastened cold eyes on a florid, loose-jowled man standing at Kell's side. "Clagley," he rapped, "a gent that figures on doin' his thinkin' with a cutter can get in trouble, too."

Clagley's bulging, china-blue eyes blinked rapidly, and he uncoiled blunt fingers from their grip on his gun. He cursed softly.

"Here we tear out in this rain to

help yuh catch a polecat, an' yuh start yowlin' 'cause we help yuh make shore he don't try to cut a rusty," he grunted peevishly. "Heck, yuh ain't even took his gun yet."

The little sheriff moved swiftly then. He slid in close to the tall youth. His hand darted out, deftly flicked the heavy Colt from Blacky's holster. Blacky didn't move, but the taunting smile on his thin lips widened into a bleak, humorless grin.

"Just to make shore," the sheriff growled. "Dutch is right. Yuh ain't said yuh wasn't one of that gang. Yuh're going' to the *carcel* till yuh decide to talk."

A fog of cold, deadly lights crept into the smoke-blue eyes of the Devil's Deputy, as he stared at Ben Flores.

"There's more'n one way to talk," he answered the sheriff softly, "an' I ain't started yet. What if I offered to lead that gang plumb into yore jail, sheriff?"

"Lead 'em into jail!" Beaman's words were suddenly hot, vibrant.

Joe Kells laughed shakily, his hand sneaking back down toward his gun. "See, sheriff! He's same as admittin' he's part of that gang. Now he's going to sell 'em out!"

The little lawman pressed close to the lanky waddy, and Blacky felt his own Colt bore into his flat middle.

"Talk fast, yuh blasted crook," Beaman rasped. "What makes yuh think yuh can lead that skunk pack into my jail?"

The Devil's Deputy smiled crookedly. His left hand slid into the pocket of his black shirt and brought out a black-enameled badge. Dutch Clagley uttered a choked curse.

"Blazes! The Devil's Deputy!"

"Yeah," Blacky drawled icily. "The Devil's Deputy. If I was to play my hunch an' track down them

bank crooks, I'd start out by loopin' plumb around this hogback an' head back to town."

Ben Flores' heavy face went sickly pale. Small, muddy eyes shuttled to the lawman's blank face then to Kells and Clagley crowding up close beside him.

"Don't yuh think that'd be a good hunch to follow, Flores?" Blacky pressed softly.

Ben Flores cursed again. "Shore," he croaked. "Shore, Beaman, this younker is crossin' his pards an' he ought to know what their plans are. They doubled back on us leavin' us to hold the bag."

Matt Beaman's leathery face went rock hard, etched by grim little lines that bracketed his drawn lips and crow-footed out from his narrowed eyes. He jerked around to face Ben Flores.

"Ben, I'm burnin' it back to town. I can make better time alone, an' I'll get there afore them skunks can slope across the south pass or change clothes in case they plan to stay here an' run a bluff. You an' yore boys bring this Devil's Deputy hombre in. I allus heard he was an honest sort of gent, but if he's turned lobo he'll be a ring-tailed terror. Keep yore eyes on him, an' don't let him get away."

The little lawman turned then and leaped onto his horse, spurred it off into the darkness toward the town. Blacky Starr stood there, his eyes hooded, mind racing with grim thoughts. Up above, the thunder boomed between the cloud battlements as if trying to smother out the lightning that blazed across the leaden sky. Rain came down in driving sheets. Blacky was wet to the skin, but he wasn't thinking of that. He was thinking of the killer lust that had flared in the eyes of

Ben Flores and his two men when the sheriff had ridden off into the night. He was gauging the distance to the Colts that had leaped out of Flores' holster and the pouches of Clagley and Joe Kells. Flores' voice rumbled in deadly flatness.

"Shore, we'll keep an eye on yuh, Mr. Devil's Deputy."

"Yeah," Kells mocked hollowly. "But yuh'll make a break, an' when yuh do—" He eared back the hammer dog suggestively.

Dutch Clagley fastened unblinking china-blue eyes on the tall waddy. A faint smile tilted up the corners of his puffy lips, as he played with the spiked hammer of his gun.

"He was a smart younker," he droned tonelessly. "Yeah, he shore was. He figured things out, an' was even goin' to lead the crooks plumb into the sheriff's jail. But the sheriff rode off, an' he tried to bust loose from the guys Beaman left to watch him. He shore played hob with his health when he done that."

The spiked hammer rocked back under Clagley's thumb, clicked. Blacky's mind clutched frantically at half-formed ideas. He had to stall the three killers off a minute, get them off balance. He knew the thoughts running through their minds. They would spin him around, slam lead into his back then claim they had been forced to shoot him when he had tried to get away.

"Turn around, fella," Ben Flores ordered harshly. "Yuh're goin' on a long trip. That black badge yuh're wearin' ought to make a good trade for a spade an' that's what yuh'll need on yore new job."

Bunched muscles played down the Devil's Deputy's lean jaw, leaving a trail of gray across his bronzed skin.

"Wait a minute," he said quickly. "I got one question." His right foot

slid forward imperceptibly in the mud, found a firm spot on a clump of bunch grass. He leaned forward slightly, range-hardened muscles tensing. "Just afore my hoss throwed me, I plugged one of yore pards. What happened to him?"

Ben Flores grinned thickly. "Yuh'll see," he snarled. "That's the second part of yore trip—into the sinkhole. There's a place in there where the sand sucks down anything it can get a hold on. Gyp Moran went down to see how deep it was, an' he didn't come back up. Yore slug drilled him center. He wasn't dead yet when we shoved him into the sand, but he allus was a bad luck hombre an' we couldn't take the chance of huntin' a doctor to patch him up. Maybe yuh'll catch up with him in time to have company, but—*Hey, you!*"

III.

Blacky's right leg exploded him forward in a low dive. Flores' gun roared. Lead snapped through the brim of Blacky's hat, raked a hot finger down the back of his shoulder. Clagley's gun blasted, but the slug only burned through empty space. Joe Kells' quick shot tugged at Blacky's shirt sleeve, even as he smashed into Flores' knees.

The big killer slid backward in the soft mud, knocked off balance by the drive of Blacky's shoulder. He crashed into Dutch Clagley's gun arm, and the chunky gunman triggered a convulsive shot that roared almost in Blacky's face.

Then everything was a tangled mass of churning legs and clubbing gun butts. The tall waddy was in too close now for the killers to chance shooting. He squirmed free of Flores' weight, snapped a wicked short-arm punch that buried his fist in Flores' middle. The big killer

collapse into Joe Kells as the skinny gunman was shoving to his feet.

Blacky heaved violently to his knees. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Dutch Clagley, hunkered down where he had slipped into the mud, swinging up his gun. Blacky's elbow whipped back, cracked full against the chunky killer's chin, snapping Clagley's head back. Then Blacky lurched to his feet, dived for Big Red standing a few feet away. He leaped into the saddle, swung the animal around, and prodded it with spurless heels. The bronc jumped into a burst of speed, as Flores reared up drunkenly from the ground, panting to regain the air that had been shocked from his lungs. His breath returned with a roar of rage.

"Get that dirty son! Dutch! Joe! Quit wallerin' around, an' get untangled. Yuh'll be fightin' a rope if that jasper gets away."

The gun in Flores' hand jumped into a throbbing blast of Colt thunder. Blacky grinned thinly, and leaned low over the neck of his straining bronc. The killer's shots were wild, raking the darkness for a man who was already but a faint shadow disappearing into the rain-drenched night.

For a half mile, Blacky held Big Red at full speed. The long-limbered animal, already tired, was blowing hard when he pulled it to a bunch-footed halt. He slid quickly from the saddle, slapped the bronc into the cover of a clump of cottonwoods.

"Good hoss," he muttered grimly. "Yuh stay here an' rest up. Yuh deserve it. If I get out of this mess, yuh'll get all the oats an' sugah yuh can eat."

He started off across the range in long strides, booted feet sloshing in the mud. He paused now and then,

straining to catch the sounds of Ben Flores and his men. Distantly he heard the storm-muffled boom of Flores' voice, the words unintelligible in the lash of the rain and the moan of the wind sweeping down from the higher reaches of the Huecos.

Blacky broke into a trot, making for the blurry lights of the town three or four miles away. An intangible warning of danger gnawed at his nerves. He had swung to the opposite slope of the valley in a wide circle, after riding out of the sight of the three killers, counting on this move throwing Flores and his men off his trail for a few moments. But nevertheless the sense of danger haunted him.

Then a faint sound reached his keenly attuned ears. He jerked to a halt, eyes flaring into the darkness that blanketed the valley, nerves taut, keened to the snapping point.

"Reach, mister!"

The harsh-toned voice rapped out from somewhere ahead of him. He caught the dim outline of a man hunkered down behind a dark, shapeless heap on the ground.

"I said reach!" the man's words jarred again.

Blacky's hands shot up shoulder high. His lips puckered into a grim, hard line; his smoke-blue eyes fogged with cold, deadly lights.

"Now come up an' let's have a look-see who yuh are," the voice grated. It was the sheriff's voice. Recognition came with a rush that traced a chill of apprehension down the tall waddy's spine. "My hoss fell in this danged mud an' busted his neck," the lawman went on. "I came to in time to hear all the ruckus over there. If them shots meant that the Devil's Deputy hombre busted loose—"

"He's loose all right," Blacky cut

in swiftly. It was a long chance to take, counting on the rain and the thick darkness to shield his identity. He pitched his voice low, trying to imitate Dutch Clagley's toneless drone. "Put up that cutter, Beaman. We got to find that crook afore he gets plumb away."

He took a slow step forward, placing him within a couple of yards of the little lawman. He was close enough now to make out Beaman's mud-covered body, leaning forward, peering at him. The sheriff's dry growl reached his ears.

"So it's you, Clagley! How in blazin' Hades did that jasper get the jump on you three—*The devil!* Yuh ain't Clagley! Yuh're—"

Blacky lurched forward recklessly. His right fist looped out, crashed along the side of Beaman's jaw before the sheriff could jerk up his gun. Beaman rocked back on his heels, then went down in a limp heap, sense jarred by the force of the blow.

Blacky knelt beside the lawman, his hands probing over the sheriff's clothes. He found his gun, and a warm glow of confidence surged through him, as he shoved the long-barreled Colt back into his holster.

Then he went through Beaman's pockets. The sheriff's senses were returning now, and he struggled savagely. Blacky chuckled bleakly when he found what he was looking for.

"I'm borrowin' yore jail keys, Beaman," he drawled thinly. "I'll do more than lead that pack of skunks to yore jail. I'll lock 'em in for yuh. Maybe yuh'll listen to sense then, which is more'n yuh'd do if I tried to talk to yuh now."

He shoved quickly to his feet, and broke into a run for the town. The rain had settled down now into a misty drizzle, as the storm clouds

swept across the sky. A crescent moon broke through the clouds for an instant, flooding the range with pale light.

Behind him, he heard Matt Beaman's curses break into a yelp of rage.

"Flores! Damn it, he's over here. He's headin' for town!"

Horses' hoofs beat hollowly over the night air, and Blacky knew the gun pack was once more on his trail. But he knew they would follow him slowly, wary of his gun and fearing he might double back on them. Maybe he could lead them to jail yet.

IV.

At the edge of town, the Devil's Deputy was panting from his exertions. His legs were tired from running in the loose mud, and his feet were cramped in the tight-fitting, slant-heeled boots he wore.

He halted, listening tensely. He could hear the slow plodding of horses' hoofs behind him, the muffled sound of men's voices. Flores and his men couldn't be more than a hundred yards behind him, coming forward cautiously.

He grinned thinly, and strode toward the town in long strides, angling around so that he came in at the rear of the buildings that bordered the single wide street.

The rain had stopped falling entirely now, and, up above, the storm clouds were breaking. In the distance he could hear the rumble of the storm sweeping on toward the Organ Mountains fifty miles away.

He paced between two of the buildings, pausing at the mouth of the gloomy maw to peer out on the street. Somewhere down the street he could hear the banging of a piano and the singing of a nasal tenor voice. A man clumped down the

boardwalk and disappeared into the general store fifty yards away. A steer bawled in the shipping pens at the far end of the town.

"Yuh'd never know their bank had been blasted an' robbed," the tall waddy muttered under his breath. "Reckon they're just leavin' everything up to their sheriff."

A minute dragged by. Blacky crouched there in the shadows between the buildings. He drew his gun, punched out spent shells and refilled the chambers. He blew through the muzzle to make sure it wasn't clogged with mud, then let the gun slide lightly back into its pouch. He waited.

Then at the edge of the town where the street opened onto the range, he heard the slow *clop-clop* of hoofs. Ben Flores' deep voice floated to his ears.

"He couldn't have doubled back on us. We kicked through every bit of brush he might have hid behind. He's here, all right. We'll round up every man in town, an' hunt the dirty son down."

Blacky heard broken fragments of the sheriff's growling reply. "... said he'd lead that gang plumb into jail. ... lock 'em up for me."

Blacky's lean muscles tensed. The riders were coming up the street now, riding abreast of each other, with the sheriff seated behind Flores' giant frame. Blacky's eyes slanted across the street, marked the frame building with the word "Jail" lettered on its front in dim, weather-peeled paint.

Then he stepped out from the buildings into the street. He saw Flores and his men jerk up their horses in surprise, then heard the hoarse yelp of triumph that burst from the big killer's lips.

"There he is! Get the dirty son!"
Matt Beaman's voice rang out.

"No shootin', men. Wait 'til he cuts loose."

The three riders raked their horses cruelly with barbed spurs. Blacky broke into a run, heading across the street toward the jail. His gun was in his hands, but he didn't try to use it.

Guns in the hands of Ben Flores and Kells and Clagley burst into a yammering roar. Lead whipped around the running waddy, exploding miniature volcanos of mud at his feet. He hurdled the hitch rail in front of the jail, dived through the open door, and slammed it shut behind him.

A single barred cell divided the room in half. There was no one in it, and the door was gaping half open. He leaped into the cell, jerked open a small closet built into the opposite wall, jammed his hat into the opening, and closed the door again. Then he was out of the cell again, hunkering his lanky frame behind the sheriff's heavy walnut desk.

An instant later heavy bodies shocked into the jail door. It exploded open, spilling Flores and Clagley and Joe Kells into the room, guns fisted, eyes red with murder lust.

Their darting gaze took in the open cell, the rain-drenched black felt hat jammed in the closet door inside the cell. Flores' bull voice roared throatily, thick with hatred.

"There he is! In that closet hidin' like the skunk he is. He's got a gun, men. Don't let him use it."

Heavy boots scuffed and clattered across the jail floor as the three killers surged toward the little cell. Blacky peered around the corner of the desk to see them clogging the cell door, fighting each other to get through.

Ben Flores, his elbows churning savagely, forced himself into the

cell. Clagley and Kells crowded through after him. From the corner of his eyes, Blacky saw Sheriff Beaman stumble into the jail, limping from a knee that had been wrenched by the fall of his horse.

"Boys, give him a chance!" Beaman's yell lashed across the room, only to be blotted into nothing by the blaring of the killers' Colts. He started to shove into the cell, but the tall waddy was suddenly beside him, stiff-arming him out of the way. Blacky jerked the iron door shut, fitted the key into the lock, twisted it savagely.

The three killers whirled at the sound of the cell door clanging shut. Amazement and fear mingled on their hard-bitten faces, bringing a sickly pallor. Their eyes shot from the tall, bleak-faced waddy to the sheriff leaning back against the wall he had been shoved to.

"Beaman, what in blazes are yuh up to?" Ben Flores thundered. "Yuh in with this crook? By Judas, if yuh think yuh can frame us yuh better think again."

The voice of the Devil's Deputy cracked out coldly:

"It ain't a frame, Flores. I said I'd lead the skunks that robbed the bank into jail an' I did. Yuh're that gang. Yuh tried to frame me for the job, kill me afore I could get to the sheriff with what I'd figured out, but it didn't work."

Matt Beaman burst out hoarsely. "Kid, yuh're loco. I chased that gang out of town alone. Flores an' his men followed after I was gone."

Blacky grinned crookedly, watching the slow tightening of Flores' grip on his gun.

"Yuh're wrong, sheriff," he coolly drawled. "They was the ones yuh chased out of town. Only they circled around the hogback, an' caught up with yuh so's yuh'd think they'd

been in town all the time an' had come out to help yuh catch the crooks. They was helpin' yuh chase *themselves!*"

The pallor left Ben Flores' heavy face, and was replaced with a dark tide of rushing blood. His muddy eyes screwed into slits, and his big body trembled.

"Yuh're a liar, Starr," he blustered harshly. "Beaman, yuh ain't believin' that, are yuh? He's tryin' to throw that job in our laps, an' I'm damned if I'll take it."

Blacky chuckled tonelessly. A sudden tenseness gripped him, brought the tightening of lean, range-hardened muscles, poised him alert for that split-second of rocking gun hammers and violent death.

"Yuh said yuh followed right behind the sheriff, Flores," he drawled softly. "Maybe yuh can explain that red mud you an' yore pards are all splashed up with. The sheriff ain't got none on him. Yuh got that mud in the sinkhole—*where yuh dumped Gyp Moran, killer!*"

A smothered oath burst past Dutch Clagley's puffy lips. His bugged-out eyes shot up to Ben Flores, glazed with murder lust.

"Boss—" he began.

But Ben Flores was already in movement. The gun in his hand suddenly tilted up, exploded in a spurt of flame and smoke. Clagley and Kells joined in instantly, their Colts blasting, kicking. But somehow their slugs failed to find the rapidly moving youth. He had faded swiftly to one side, gun throbbing, jumping in his fist.

Lead spatting into the cell bars, screamed off to thud into the walls. Skinny Joe Kells lurched to his toes, went into a pirouette, spinning madly across the floor to crumple in a far corner of the cell. Dutch Clagley began to sag, strength draining

from a slug that had torn into his paunchy middle. He caught himself, stiffened, hate contorting his face, bulging his china-blue eyes. He fired two quick shots that burned past the tall waddy's cheek, then the weight of the gun slowly dragged his hand down. Horror glazed his eyes, then a glint of savage humor.

"This is yore party—boss! Yuh thought it'd be a devil of a joke, robbin' the bank, then joinin' the sheriff, an' huntin' ourselves. Shore, an' we caught ourselves, too, blast yuh! Laugh—it's yore joke!"

Then slowly, Dutch Clagley wilted to the floor.

The Devil's Deputy leaped forward through his own gun smoke, gun snouting toward Ben Flores' big body. But the Colt was no longer in Flores' hand; it was spinning wildly across the floor, and the killer's hands were high over his head. His heavy face was green with fear. Blacky laughed icily.

"Crawl, polecat!" he bit out. "I figured yuh had too much bark to bite hard. Get to one side, I'm comin' inside after my hat."

It was when the lanky youth was backing slowly toward the front door that Sheriff Matt Beaman finally stirred into movement. He came forward slowly, ignoring the menace of the kid's Colt. He halted when Blacky bit out a sharp command.

"Far enough, sheriff. Don't let the reward on my head tempt yuh

into doin' something rash. I came here so's me an' my hoss could rest up. We'll move on some place else where it ain't so stormy."

The lawman's pale eyes worked over the lanky, black-garbed youth edging back to the door, noting the dull gleam of the battered, black-enameled badge pinned to the kid's shirt. Then his leathery face crinkled into a grin.

"I don't know nothin' about a reward out for yuh," he said slowly. "We're usually pretty peaceful down here, an' I never get none of them wanted dodgers. I was jest goin' to say I got a cabin up at the foot of the Huecos. It's at the head of the creek that cuts past the hog-back. I go there to fish, but it'd be a swell place for a gent to rest up."

He chuckled softly, and a twinkle came to his eyes.

"We don't get mail for two days yet, an' even if I did get a reward notice against yuh, it'd probably take a week more for me to find that cabin. I got a heck of a rotten memory."

He turned, grinning, and stalked across the room toward his desk. The Devil's Deputy had already disappeared out into the night.

Thet nickname of Blacky Starr's shore fits him. Sometimes, when he gits into gun action, it looks like he was linked up with Satan. Yuh'll meet up with him ag'in soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

CURSE OF THE TUMBLING T

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

*A weird curse damned the land, and men died like
flies to lie unclaimed in graves hidden and remote.*

DON'T MISS THIS COMPLETE NOVEL!
Coming in Next Week's Wild West Weekly

SCENTED TRAIL

By J. Allan Dunn

That polecat trail led to a fire-swept trap—and a keg of gunpowder under the flames!

It was after midnight, and the narrow lanes and alleys in the Mexican quarter of Cedarville were poorly lighted. Save where the pale moon touched them with occasional highlights, they were all dark, mysterious corridors that hinted of lurking danger and secret crime.

Bud Jones, of Company F, Texas Rangers, waiting for Kiowa Kenyon, ex-scalp hunter and retired Ranger, wondered if the message from Kenyon had anything to do with his own special mission. His hunch said yes.

Kenyon's message had been waiting for Bud at the hotel when he ar-

rived. His time of patrols could never be exact, with all the duties a Ranger had to take care of, the territory he had to cover. But Kenyon had been expecting him as though timed.

The old Ranger had asked Bud to be on hand at the Red Dog Cantina—called by the Mexies "El Perro Rubio"—close to midnight, and to watch for the man who had been trailing Kiowa for three nights. It was Kiowa's idea that this shadow had become suspicious of him, knowing that he still acted as a Ranger at times in company with Bud. Now Bud, if he arrived, might be able to shadow the shadow.



If Bud did not show up that night, Kiowa said in his note that he intended to "discourage the hombre" in some manner.

Bud wondered what had caused Kiowa to stay in Cedarville, at the hotel, for three nights. Kiowa had a log-lined stone shack high up on the sierra, a secret cabin he called "Casa Kiowa." He lived there with his jenny mule and two hounds, seldom came to town except to swap pelts, honey, or virgin silver from his mine for supplies.

Bud had arrived late, found the note, registered, got a meal at the Chinese café, and now here he was, watching the Red Dog, hidden in the shadows.

His roan horse, Pepper, was stabled.

The Rangers had word that El Relampago was active once again. The warning had been sent from headquarters at Austin to all companies, but it was Company F that was most likely to contact the famous bandit.

His name, in Spanish, meant "The Flash of Lightning," and it fitted him. He always struck swiftly, and usually in the darkness. The Mexican government had no use for him. Neither had the other governments of Central and South America.

The specialty of The Flash was promoting what he called revolutions, but which were never anything more than covers to raise money from recruits persuaded by the eloquence of The Flash that they were patriots. In reality they were only his tools, used by him in looting and raiding.

In such raids men and women were killed, even children; buildings burned and stock driven off. El Relampago smuggled arms—and sometimes drugs. He was badly "wanted." There were rewards out

for him. And it was always The Flash who profited by these so-called uprisings, slipping off with the proceeds.

It was Mexico that had warned of El Relampago's latest plan for working up Mexies on the eastern side of the Rio Grande. These were rated as United States citizens, voted as such. But in their hearts all of them hated gringos, and were ever ripe for such ideas as The Flash advanced.

He was going to take back the territory the *malditos* Americanos had stolen from Mexico, he would set up a new republic, with himself as dictator. He would ship weapons and ammunition across the river. He would pay off his faithful followers with the money obtained from a grand raid on American cattle outfits. After that they would all live on the fat of the land, tax free, rid of the impositions and the rule of the hated gringos.

"*Viva El Relampago!*"

Cedarville would make a fine central station for the development of the schemes of The Flash. Bud's hunch said that he would surely have agents and lieutenants there, might himself be present.

However, it was becoming generally known that Kiowa was still a Ranger at heart. If he had been hanging round Cedarville for three days and nights, it was very likely that he might be trailed by a sympathizer of The Flash.

II.

Kiowa came out of the cantina reeling a little, singing to himself and to all who cared to listen. As he emerged, the light from the doorway showed his tall, gaunt figure, clad in the garb he had worn ever since he first joined up with Sam

Houston after the fall of the Alamo.

Kiowa was spare, but he was wide of shoulders, deep of chest, and his spine was straight as the stem of a young pine. His hair and beard were long and white. Some Indian beadwork still clung to his fringed tunic and his moccasins. The tail of a coonskin cap dangled behind.

His deep voice held no quaver of age. He seemed in carefree and mellow humor, but his tread was not as uncertain as it seemed.

Bud saw a shadow detach itself from a dark recess and trail the old Ranger. The man was wrapped in a serape that muffled his features under his high-peaked sombrero. He went silently, without shuffling. His clothing was dark and he blended with the night—save when he hurried across a lighter spot, swift as a lizard.

But he did not go any more silently than Bud, who played this game of tag as cleverly as any Comanche tracking a subtle foe.

The weather seemed working up for a storm. Scud dimmed the starlight and veiled the moon with mist. Here and there dim lights showed through windows always barred. Bud caught the occasional strum of a guitar, of a voice singing. But Kiowa was the soloist of the occasion. He lifted up his basso lustily in an old Ranger ballad.

Bud knew through the town marshal of Cedarville that this was an inn with a shady reputation. It always seemed to be closed, but was always well patronized by men who came and went quietly and secretly. Mexies and Americans, the latter without question outlaws, likely enough mixed up in contraband.

They knew also that any raid on the place would find nothing but a few stupid *peones* drinking *pulque*. The *posada* was full of rat holes, of

ways of entry and exit that were concealed. It could not be entered except by the gate and crossing the inner patio, or courtyard.

It would be, Bud thought, as he glanced at the sign, an ideal place for The Flash to make his rendezvous and hide-out. Nobody could reach him, unless he so wished. Nobody could force their way into this Inn of the North without warning any of the inmates who did not want to be interviewed.

Kiowa was still singing:

"We eat an' we sleep, an' we live in the saddle,

An' bright on our breasts shines the lone silver star.

Ladrones observe it—an' swift they ske-daddle;

But you kin be sartin they never git far.

"Yi-yippe-yay, oh, we care not fer danger, Yi-yippy, oh, we—"

The song was cut off. Bud saw the Mexie shadow suddenly erupting backward out of the alley, spluttering, cursing. He had lost his sombrero, the lantern light and the moonlight glinted on his hair, coarse and black as a bear's. His serape trailed behind him. His hands clutched at his eyes, and then they clawed at his throat.

He leaned against the wall, seeming to be strangling, and he did not notice Bud as the young Ranger sped across the narrow street.

He held his breath as he did so. The air was filled with a pungent, evil, sickening odor that stung his eyes and seemed to sear his nostrils. It was a fairly familiar smell, to Bud, as he went through it.

He thought Kiowa had been attacked. He had routed his adversary in some strange manner, but he might be hurt.

Then he heard Kiowa gurgling

with subdued laughter. Bud called his name.

"Thet you, son? Glad you showed up. I reckon you see the hombre thet was trailin' me?"

"See him? I *smelled* him. What did you do to him, Kiowa?"

"I sprayed him, son. I sure christened him fer what he is. *Skunk juice*, plumb in his face an' ha'r, all over his front. He'll sure be easy to foller, an' he won't have to announce hisse'f, though I doubt he'll be popular.

Bud caught a whiff of mescale that got through the foul reek that hung in the alley. The old Ranger had a weakness at times for drinking more than was good for his health, though liquor never downed him. Right now it made him enjoy the method he had used to "discourage" the man who had shadowed him.

Bud doubled back, hearing Kiowa call out: "I'll be right with you, son."

He saw the hatless Mexie fumbling at the door in the adobe wall beneath the lantern.

The young Ranger knew that the protective liquid emitted by a polecat was a powerful weapon of offense. It could inflame eyes and mouth with its strong irritant, and could be classed as a poison. A victim bore the terrible odor for days. A dog would hide itself for a week, ashamed of the smell of its fur. A man had to bury or burn his clothing, scrub his hide raw. The stink would remain in his hair, and until he was free of it he would be treated like a leper.

But this Mexie was a spy. Bud believed he would seek his friends, however they might receive him. He needed a bath—dire punishment for a Mexie like him—and he wanted fresh clothes. He was half-maddened, seeking refuge. And he would

surely want to report what had happened.

The door opened, and the man slid through. Bud thought he had found some secret way of opening, or else he had given a signal. The Ranger saw no sign of latch or handle. It was foolish to give a wrong signal.

Bud stepped back, made a run and a leap for the coping of the adobe wall, his feet scrabbling for holds where the plaster had come away from the bricks.

There was a patio on the far side, a courtyard like the center of a U. It was paved, and there was a fountain in its center where water played feebly. Slits of lights showed here and there through closed, inside shutters. Along the three sides stretched veranda posts and lattice, screened by vines.

The patio appeared empty. Bud listened, hearing nothing. The skunk scent hung plain. He sat on top the wall, slid off and landed lightly.

Something came hurtling out of the darkness to his right. He heard no sound, caught no motion, but he had an impression of something thrown.

And *something* hollow crashed and shattered against the side of his skull. For the brief moment of consciousness before he lost it completely, Bud was not sure whether the crash belonged to his skull or the object that had contacted with it.

He was suddenly plunged into a black void, through which he seemed to sink slowly, as if floating down. There was a confusion of noise, a flare of light—then nothing.

III.

Bud sat up against the outer wall of the patio. His head throbbed and ached, one side of his face was sticky

with blood. He had been struck by a thrown olla, one of the porous water jars kept swinging between veranda posts. He was not himself yet, too dizzy to stand.

Kiowa squatted beside him. Bud listened, content for the moment to do so.

"I trailed thet skunk perfoom like I was my own hound, son. Figgered you'd gone in here. Didn't try the gate. I jest took to the wall. Don't climb as good as I did once, but I made it. See you lyin' on the ground an' I took a shot at the hombre sneakin' into the house.

"I was winded, an' I plumb missed him. He got through an' bolted up. I thought you was dead, son. So I busted in, but it warn't easy. 'Pears to me the house is plumb vacated."

Kiowa thrust his hand into his tunic with a foolish look on his face. He brought out a box and put it back with a sigh of relief.

"Wonder if I didn't smash thet itemizer, comin' over the wall. Though I'd sure have knowed it before this. Have a tech of this mescale, son. You look like you needed it."

Bud refused the liquor, but Kiowa took a swig.

"You see, I bit down on a bone an' cracked a tooth, Bud. Got so bad I had to come to town to git a tooth butcher to fix me up. He had to treat it, 'count it was infected. Yanked it today. Fust fang I've lost since my milk teeth. I didn't sleep good, an' I sort of roamed nights. Found I was bein' trailed. So I left you a note, case you showed up, knowin' you was nigh due."

Bud could picture Kiowa visiting Mexie cantinas, looking for the mescale he was inclined to like too much, and thought eased his aching jaw.

"Whar does the skunk juice come

in?" asked Bud. He was beginning to feel better. Kiowa chuckled in his beard.

"I use skunk juice fer my rheumatiz. Last polecat I skinned an' tried out I kep' the scent gland. Didn't know rightly why, but I sure must have had a hunch. Yestiddy I went up to the cabin to see was the hounds an' mule all right. The idee come to me then to give this shadderin' hombre a lesson. So I went to the gen'ul store an' bought me one of them itemizers the dance-hall gals use to spray 'emselves with perfoom. I filled it up with my own speshul skunk scent. An' tonight I ducked between two shacks an' let him have it. I knowed I could trail him an' mebbe find out what he was up to."

"I think I know," Bud said. He told Kiowa about The Flash.

"Danged if I don't think you're right, son. I've picked up talk these last three nights about some sort of *demonstracione* bein' cooked up. My Spanish ain't as good as yours or I could've l'arned more."

Bud got to his feet, still a little shaky, but fit enough.

"Let's go through the *posada*, Kiowa."

They entered the main room, struck matches. There were side lamps whose chimneys were still warm. Bud found a lantern back of the bar in the main room. They explored the inn from top to bottom and found nobody, though there were plenty of signs of recent occupation.

"Must have all been in cahoots, an' they was sure guilty, the way they've all skedaddled," Kiowa said. "This is whar The Flash was holed up, Bud, gittin' ready to strike."

Back in the main room, Bud called attention to the floor. It was planked, where most places of this

type were content with clay, well tamped down, for the main room.

"Means a cellar," he said. "Let's find the trap."

The skunk smell was in the air, nauseating, especially strong near the floor as they stooped, searching for a hatch. They found it without much trouble, lifted it, prepared to descend the ladder it revealed. Kiowa sniffed.

"He went this way, son. No doubt of thet. Reckon the rest did, too. Mebbe they didn't crave to have him along, but you kin bet they didn't aim to have *us* find him an' make him talk, even if they did figger you was dead, or as good as."

Bud swung the lantern at a pile of stout wooden boxes. They were strapped with iron, and the wood was branded with a jagged stroke—the brand of El Relampago, The Flash of Lightning.

They forced open two—of them with their bowie knives. There were rifles in the one Kiowa handled. Bud's contained sticks of giant blasting powder, with fuse and fulminating caps.

"Looks like biz'ness," Bud said. "Reckon the rifles is mostly bait fer the men he figgered to recruit. What he reelly wanted 'em fer was to handle the raid on the cattle outfits. He'd use the blastin' powder to blow up bridges behind him as he drove the stock over the river. Thet's the way he works. All his talk about revolution is a come-on to git helpers fer rustlin'. Once on the Mexie side he'd sell the stock an' light out with the dinero, leavin' *them* to hold the bag."

Kiowa was examining the rifles. "You're dead right, son. These guns are all old types, worn out, not wuth a dang. Thing is now, whar did they go from here?"

He went down on his hands and knees, sniffing like a hunting dog.

"Skunk essence is heavy, hangs low," he said. "She's strongest over here."

Bud took the lantern to the spot. The cellar was ceiled with the flooring of the main room, heavily raftered. The walls were roughly boarded on two sides and at the back. He tapped the boarding at the spot where Kiowa had checked.

It sounded hollow, and Bud made a closer investigation. There was a door, roughly but cleverly concealed. They hacked at it with the heavy blades of the bowie knives, finding it fastened inside.

They got a board loose, yanked it free, and found that iron rods had been shackled into a post, and their hooked ends set into eyes in the cross timbers of the stout door.

There was a narrow passage. Air moved faintly through it, and the skunk odor was strong.

A body lay just inside, shrouded with a dark-colored serape. Bud knew who it was before he shone the lantern on the face of a man shot through the head from behind, the features a ghastly blotch of crimson. The serape, with the rest of the clothing, reeked with the offensive odor.

"Thought he could be too easy traced," said Kiowa. "Or mebbe they jest couldn't stand the smell. He didn't shoot *hissef*. No sign of blood in the cellar. They drug him in here—"

"He didn't hook the door an' commit suicide," Bud said. "I'll bet on thet. Thar's a way out, end of this passage."

A heavy clang, as of a falling object, sounded. The trapdoor was closed. It had not dropped by itself. They could not shift it. Standing

on the ladder, they heard furniture being dragged into place above it. There were voices above, coarse laughter, then retreating footsteps.

"Some of 'em sneaked back in," Bud said. "Sounds like they hauled the bar over it. Figger they got us trapped."

They went back to the narrow passage, stepping over the dead man. The way was blocked twenty feet in by stone, partly covered with dried clay and dirt. It looked like natural rock. A light current of air sifted through, above their heads, as if through a vein in the stone. If this was an exit, it was too well masked for them to discover it.

"Reckon we might slash through them floorboards same as we did the door," suggested Kiowa. "Best bet, I reckon. They're up to some deviltry."

The knife blades were long, forged from file steel, but the planks were thick and tough. They piled up the wooden boxes for a platform and went to work. At last Kiowa's point went through. His exclamation of pleasure broke off suddenly as he lifted his head, bent well back, his great beak of a nose against the slit he had made.

"Smoke, son," he said quietly. "Them devils have sot the place afire."

Bud felt the planks with the palms of his hands. They were hot.

"Listen," said Kiowa.

They could hear flames crackling above them. The adobe walls would not burn, but there was plenty of old, dry wood in the structure. It would soon be a furnace through which they could not pass.

"Son," Kiowa said quietly, "looks like they cooked our goose, unless we kin git out through thet passage."

They stepped gingerly across the

body once more, and Bud struck matches to test the direction of the slight draft. It was overhead, and he mounted on Kiowa's wide shoulders. The roof here was plain dirt when he prodded it with his knife. He tapped at the rock.

Behind them, in the cellar, the fire was mounting. They could hear the low roar of it. A beam fell somewhere, crashed through the flooring. A red glow showed in the gap it made. Smoke began to seep into the cellar, into the tunnel.

Bud got down from Kiowa's shoulders, began to scrape at the caked clay on the face of the stone that block them. It was a solid slab. He found chisel marks.

"It's some sort of door, Kiowa," he said, sweating with his efforts, but I'm danged if I kin figger it out. Thar's a crack, plumb down to the ground on the right side. Looks like another along the top."

"Got to figger it out right soon, son," Kiowa said. "Satan's cinders, she's gittin' *warm!* Thet old wood burns like tinder."

The ceiling floor of the cellar had given way at the trapdoor. Burning material fell into the cellar, smoke drifted into the tunnel.

"It's a mean way to die," said Kiowa, his voice choking.

"You dig under thet rock, Kiowa," Bud told him. "I think you kin do it all right."

"Take quite a while to tunnel through, son, even if the way's clear. Of course, they went through somehow. If we could only figger the trick of it."

"We'll *blast* through," Bud told him. "Thar's thet giant powder. It's a gamble."

"Rather be blowed up quick than roasted slow, son. You got a head on you."

He set to work. Bud went for the box he had opened up. There might be more of them with the same contents. There was no use in thinking about that. More flooring had fallen, the fire roared above, the big cross-beams were blazing as he carried the case back to the tunnel, prepared four sticks with caps and fuse.

They tamped them down in the little pit Kiowa had dug, lit the fuses and retreated, carrying the rest of the powder back to the cellar, standing aside from the tunnel for fear of the back blast.

The second story was falling in. A tile dropped from the roof. In the passage, the fuses sputtered like fiery serpents through the smoke that steadily increased.

"Touch and go," Bud said to himself. They could not guess what the explosion would do. It might cause the tunnel to cave in. It might fail to budge the rock. More heavy rafters, half burned, came tumbling down from above like rams. The floor above them was little better than a charred framework.

He saw Kiowa's rugged face by the fitful light. Smoke from the fallen beams stung their eyes and throats.

Suddenly a cataract of tiles descended. The roof had fallen in. Flames leaped and roared.

Boom! Boom-boom!

The first blast was the loudest. Now the smoke that had been rolling into the tunnel was blown out in a ragged cloud. A steady draft of air back of it drove out the wisps that remained, fanned the general conflagration.

It was getting unbearably hot in the cellar. They dared not go into the tunnel until they were sure of the fourth stick.

Boom!

They leaped the dead Mexie, with sparks falling about them, stinging like wasps on their exposed flesh.

Part of the top of the tunnel had fallen, one side had slid in semi-collapse. But the way was clear and they ran, leaping piles of dirt, while the fire licked into the tunnel.

The slab that had foiled them was split, fallen inward. Powder gas wreathed about it. They saw crude stone steps that led upward to an open hatchway. Bud saw the sky with its vague stars and troubled moon. He sucked sweet, cool air deep into his lungs.

"Hold on, son," said Kiowa. "Best not to be in too big a hurry. Every Mexie in the quarter is watchin' the fire. Most of 'em out front, I reckon. But The Flash, an' some of his *compadres*, may be hangin' round out back to make *sure* nobody comes out."

It was good advice. If El Relampago *was* there he might be suspicious of the blast.

Smoke from the main cellar now poured out through the tunnel as if through a chimney. It masked them as they crept up the steps, snaked over the sill of the hatch.

This was the compound back of the *posada*, a high wall around it, a gateway wide enough to admit wagons, barred across, outbuildings, and a well curb.

The inn was little better than a shell, with the fire leaping and falling inside it, glaring through the window gaps where the hard-wood grilles were almost consumed.

Streaks of light splayed over the compound between shifting pools of shadow. At first the place seemed deserted, then Bud thought he saw furtive movement by one of the buildings built up against the outer wall.

Then part of one of the *posada* walls toppled inward and flame spouted in a fiery geyser. For a moment it revealed them, in the open, starting to get to their feet.

Jets of flame lanced out from the shed by the wall, lead came humming. A blow hit Bud's calf like the lash of a whip. Kiowa let out a frontier oath and dropped to all fours.

"Nicked my shoulder, dang 'em," he muttered. "Make fer the well curb, son."

They ran, crouching for the scanty shelter that was little more than knee-high, shooting back at the flashes of gun flame as they went. The curb was not much of a protection, and it was not going to serve them long. The Flash and the men with him had split up, trying to surround them.

"Six of 'em," grunted Kiowa. He let out a shout as he pulled trigger, and his old-fashioned but efficient Colt roared. A Mexie had been caught in a gush of light from a lower window. Now he lay sprawling, kicking convulsively. "Five, I meant," he added.

Bud wriggled on his belly about the curb to the side away from the burning inn, where its shadow lay deepest and steadiest. He heard Kiowa reviling their foes in a jargon of mixed American and Spanish.

"Come on, you lousy *lagartos*! Show your scaly hides, you greasy *ladrones*. Rangers talkin'. Come out in the open, *cobardes*. Yippy-yi-hay! *Whoopee*!"

He let out the Texas rebel yell, the old taunting war whoop of the Comanches. Bud heard the heavier *wham* of his gun above the *cracks* of the others. Kiowa was trying to draw their fire, to coax them into a rush.

Bud was after bigger game. He had glimpsed one man as he leaped across a firelit space, caught the glint of bullion lace on a short *jaqueta* and the underside of his saucer-rimmed sombrero. This should be The Flash, gaudily clad. The figure disappeared behind an empty wagon.

The moon broke out for a moment, and Bud saw the wagon slowly moving toward the well curb. More than one man was pushing it. The young Ranger did not waste his lead. He might not have time to reload. The Mexies had their knives, used them better than they did guns, though they had scored on both the Rangers at the first volley.

Kiowa came creeping around the curb, tapped him on his foot.

"Got two, third one bolted back," he whispered. "You ain't hurt bad? Didn't hear you shootin'."

"You will," Bud answered softly. "Watch that wagon."

There were three Mexies left. He thought they were all now pushing the wagon on, covered by it. It came closer, faster. They were going to make a rush job of it.

"Fool 'em," Kiowa whispered. "Go right an' left. I'll take left."

They turned back to back, set themselves for the dash, sprang forward. Bud's leg wobbled, but it did not give way. A howl came from the wagon. A slug spoke into Bud's ear as he stopped and whirled. A man leaped on the wagon bed, and once more the moon cleared and he saw the gleam of bullion lace shining brightly.

It was all he wanted—a fair shot.

The man cried out, spun halfway round, crashed down. Bud heard Kiowa's yell again, triumphant. Bud ducked as he started to sprint for the wagon, and a thrown knife went over his head. The Mexies had

emptied their guns. One had hurled his steel—and lost it.

El Relampago was squirming, sobbing between his curses, sick with pain and the rage of defeat. Bud had hit where he had aimed, smashing the bandit's kneecap, shattering the thighbone.

The man who had flung his knife ran for the shed, leaped for the low roof, dragging himself up to it, making for the wall. Bud fired again and brought him rolling down to the ground, badly hurt.

Kiowa came striding over. Bud heard him chuckling in his long white beard, singed now.

"Present an' all accounted fer," he said. "Looks like The Flash is pestered out. 'Thar's one under the wagon an' one of 'em fell over the curb inter the well. I s'pose I shouldn't have shot him in the back, but I was feelin' sort of hasty."

El Relampago was moaning now.

"You gringo dog," he whined in Spanish to Bud, "you've killed me."

"The hangman gets *that* job," Bud answered in the same tongue. "You'll swing for killing that man in the tunnel, if for nothing else. Plenty for you to answer for. You'll never strike again, El Relampago!"

"Takin' 'em back to camp, son?"

asked Kiowa. "The one in the well, an' a couple more, anyways, are dead meat. Not wuth totin'."

"Town jail should hold 'em over-night," said Bud. "They'll have to be patched up. They won't try to escape."

Kiowa laughed, fished inside his tunic.

"Jest to make sure," he said, "I might spray 'em with this. It ought to smell natcheral to 'em, the skunks!"

He brought out the atomizer in its crumpled box.

"Best wait awhile, Kiowa. We got to handle 'em."

Kiowa stared at the atomizer. "Danged if she ain't cracked! Must have happened when I snaked round the well. She's jest startin' to ooze out."

He hurled the container away from him. It struck something hard, and smashed. The odor of the scented trail began to taint the air.

"Let's git goin'," said Bud, "before we all git to smell thataway. Open up that gate, Kiowa."

When Bud and Kiowa meet, things start to happen. J. Allan Dunn's planned plenty for them in his next Bud Jones story. Coming soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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SHEEP WAR FOR CIRCLE J

by CLEVE ENDICOTT

Author of "Chaps of Death," etc.



SHEEP WAR FOR CIRCLE J

By Cleve Endicott

A pack of hombres had to share that toothache with Buck Foster of the Circle J—because some sheepherd-in' galoots aimed to fill the cavity with six-gun lead!

CHAPTER I.

TREACHERY ON THE TRAIL.

THE ridge that humped its rocky spine into the fastnesses of the Bit-terroots was wild and windswept, with stunted jack pines and massive boulders shouldering the dim trail. Anything could happen along the ridge, or down in the jumbled green canyon where the wagon road twisted toward the cow town of Twin Rivers. Violence would not be out of place; even murder might be lurking behind the next big rock.

Just now, it sounded as if murder already had struck and barely missed its mark. From the shady side of the steep, scarred slope came the intermittent scraping of shod hoofs across rocky stretches, and above this noise lifted the groans of a man in agony.

The groans were hollow and awful. Now and then they grew in intensity until they resembled the bellow of a calf under the branding iron, and then they died away into fluttery incoherence. Anybody who might have seen the rider emerge from the thicket of jack pines and top the rocky ridge would have been amazed that a man suffering so badly could stay in his saddle.

He was a tough-looking, battle-scarred hombre who wore a rusty black Stetson and a moth-eaten vest made of bearskin. A .45 in a worn holster swung low on his woolly

chaps, and he sported a sorrel mustache which looked like a pair of inverted cowhorns. As he reached the ridge, his mouth was open, his bulging brown eyes seemed to be almost popping from under their shaggy brows, and his nose, twisted out of line by some old fracture, twitched with pain.

"*Oh-h-h!*" Buck Foster groaned, rocking in the saddle. "*Oh-h-h!* My tooth—*ow-w-w*—it's killin' me! Gid-dap, yuh mangy hunk o' buzzard bait! Git me to town before I die!"

The roan horse that wore the Circle J brand was neither mangy nor bait for buzzards. He proved this by a burst of speed as the old buckaroo's rowels touched his flanks, but the next instant Buck was groaning even more loudly and yanking hard on the bridle reins. Every jolt of the horse along the rough trail sent a spasm of pain through the Circle J puncher's jaw.

"Whoa!" he bawled. "*Ow-w-w!* I cain't stand it no longer! Mebbe I ought to try another one of them pills Sing Lo made—*oh-h-h!*"

Ordinarily, Buck Foster would have been suspicious of any remedy prepared by the little Chinaman who was the cook for the Circle J spread. But now he was desperate. Reaching into a pocket of his greasy vest, he drew forth several fair-sized pellets and eyed them hopefully.

The pills looked as if they had been concocted of soap and cayenne

pepper. As a matter of fact, Sing Lo had used these as his principal ingredients—without telling Buck, of course. Buck had tried one of the pills before leaving the ranch, only to be interrupted a few seconds later by Sing Lo's squeal of "Breakfast—you come catchee or Sing Lo thlow glub out!"

Now the sufferer remembered that his tooth had felt better after breakfast—it might have been the hot coffee he drank, and it might have been the pill.

Sing Lo, Buck grudgingly admitted as he eyed the pellets, was no ordinary Chinaman. For years he had traveled as an assistant to a magician. It occurred to Buck that Sing Lo might have used both Oriental knowledge of herbs and something of magic in preparation of the pills.

The old puncher groaned again and returned all but one pill to his pocket. This one he thrust gingerly into his mouth, rolled it into the hollow tooth with his tongue, and clamped his jaw down hard upon it. Sing Lo had told him to chew the pills thoroughly, and Buck began to follow directions.

It seemed to him that there was an almost immediate alleviation of the pain, and he failed to consider that this might have been brought about by his keeping his mouth closed for a change. Instead, as he looked down into the wild reaches of the canyon below him, he suddenly forgot all about the aching molar.

There were men riding down the Twin Rivers road. Six of them. From his observation point, Buck could see that they traveled warily, keeping under cover along the straight stretches and growing even more cautious as they rounded turns in the road.

"By ganny!" breathed the walrus-
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mustached veteran. "Looks to me like them jaspers is up to somethin'!"

He rose in his stirrups, still chewing vigorously on the soap pellet. Just as he did so, the six riders scattered into a pine thicket and hurriedly dismounted. They were taking shelter behind boulders and trees that commanded the road.

It looked like a gun trap to Buck Foster. He growled under his breath as he watched the men—and then, looking farther up the road that came from Twin Rivers, he saw a little swirl of hoof-powdered dust.

Out of it came a lone rider, traveling in a hurried lope and carrying a pair of leather saddlebags behind his cantle!

"Hold-up!" Buck gasped. A big soap bubble popped from his mouth, but he failed to notice it. "I'll be a sheepherder if them six buzzards ain't figgerin' on jumpin' one hombre!"

The man with the saddlebags was oblivious of danger ahead. He looked behind him once or twice, and spurred his dust-streaked sorrel to a faster pace. Buck Foster eased the worn-handled .45 from his holster and hit rowels to the roan cayuse.

It was dangerous going, down the treacherous slant. But the lone rider would reach the ambushade in another minute, and the Circle J puncher threw caution to the hot winds that billowed up over the drought-stricken Bitterroot country. He ducked a pine limb that threatened to scratch him from the saddle, he rode half on the side of the roan as another branch raked his dilapidated vest, and he let out a wild war whoop that was intended as a warning to the man with the saddlebags.

More soap bubbles streamed from his mustache. In his excitement,

Buck was chewing frantically on the pellet. The roan bunched hoofs and slid down a stretch of shale; the rider who was headed into a gun trap passed an open place on the road, and Buck could see that his shout of warning had been heard.

"Turn back, yuh locoed galoot!" Buck bellowed.

The wind caught his words and tossed them scattering. Buck groaned and reined the roan around to head directly for the thicket where the six men were in ambush. At the pace he was traveling, the Circle J cowboy would strike the road at the same time the other man reached the spot.

It was six to two. Buck let out another wild yell and yanked his six-gun up to send a shot crashing through the pines above the heads of the hidden men.

"Turn back, I told yuh!" he shouted. Foam dribbled from his lips. He thumbed back his hammer and let it fall on another crashing powder blast.

Answer broke from the thicket in a chorus of startled yells and a volley of gunfire. A slug nicked Buck's battered Stetson, another ripped hair from his bearskin vest. He heard the shrill whine of other bullets which went by with a safer margin, flattening on the rocks and screaming into space. He heard the gun of the ambushed man bark loud defiance, and the sorrel's hoofs drummed into a dead run.

Buck slammed another shot into the trees. A thrill of admiration surged through his veins as he realized the horseman was going on through the gun trap, and the Circle J waddy triggered twice more to help him.

"Six onto one ain't fair!" he frothed. "Damn if I don't scalp all six of yuh with lead! I'll learn yuh—"

But Buck was suddenly busy learning things, himself. Powder smoke whipped in a hot blue cloud from the trees, lead hailed around him, and his own gun thundered once more and then clicked emptily. He jerked rein on the horse, but the animal's momentum carried him to a shale bank that overhung the road, and there was no stopping there.

Buck felt the saddle lurch and twist under him. The roan had lost footing in the crumbling shale. In the blurred space of a second, the buckaroo saw the hard road shooting up at him and, out of the corner of his eye, caught the swift rush of men closing in. He let go a wild yell and jumped clear of his stirrups.

His horse fell sidewise and rolled. Buck Foster landed on his feet with a loud jingle of spurs and a jolting jar that drove a dagger of pain through his jaw. The next instant, a riata looped through the air and settled around his neck, and a jerk sent him sprawling.

For the space of a few strangling breaths, the tough old puncher from Circle J struggled on the brink of unconsciousness. As if far away, he heard the drumming tattoo of a horse's hoofs, and gradually he realized the man with the saddlebags had made his escape. Almost as distant, it seemed, were the voices he heard and the faces which blurred into a circle that closed threateningly around him. A little cloud of dust, thumped from the ground by Buck's fall, powdered over him. He gasped for breath and the soap foam frothed from his mouth.

"Get up!" commanded one of his captors. Buck saw the man moving forward, gun held menacingly. Behind this one, a younger, smooth-faced hombre was staring at Buck as if he were seeing a ghost.

The younger man's eyes went wide

and color suddenly drained from his face. "Don't!" he gasped. "Don't touch him, Saunders! He's—he's mad! He's got hydrophobia! Look at him!"

Saunders jumped back, and the noose that was strangling Buck Foster's leathery neck slackened a little. He climbed to his feet and saw his gun lying in the dust beyond his reach. The roan cayuse was up and unhurt, but Buck's saddle was twisted awry.

"He helped that stage robber get away!" Saunders growled. "I reckon he's one of the road agent's pards, and we ought to string him to a tree!"

The younger man swallowed hard. His voice was hoarse with the fear of a thing that cannot be fought with fists or guns, and he shuddered.

"He's got rabies, I tell yuh! Keep at the end of that rope, all of yuh! He might bite somebody!"

Saunders spat into the dust. "I ain't afraid o' him!" he retorted. "I say he ought to be hung!"

"That's right, Ames!" agreed a man behind Buck Foster. "Th' cattlemen in this part of Montana are up against things bad enough on account of this here drought, without havin' the bank money h'isted off a stage before the bank gits it! Lots of ranchers have been figgerin' on borryin' from that bank to carry 'em through!"

"Or they're figgerin' on sellin' out to Sag Weldy!" another said drily. He added: "The land-grabbin' shepherd!"

Buck's head was clearing. He opened his mouth to protest. "Yuh are all plumb locoed!" he sputtered, with a bubbling froth breaking between the words. "I ain't no stage robber, I'm—"

A vicious jerk on the rope choked off his speech in a strangled gasp,

but the bubbles kept coming. Men moved in, but the smooth-faced hombre who had been addressed as Ames yelled at them to keep back.

"I'm in command of this here posse!" he said hoarsely, with wide eyes still on Buck's face. "This hombre's got rabies, and he's got 'em bad. Keep away from him!"

Saunders growled, but backed away. Buck saw the deputy sheriff's star that gleamed on Ames' broad chest. The Circle J veteran groaned at this discovery; the men really were a posse, and he had helped a stage robber escape!

He gestured with his hands, but only a rattle came through the foam on his lips. His face was purple from the torture of empty lungs, dust had fogged over the froth and his bulging brown eyes were wild with the pain in his tooth. At the moment, the mossyhorn looked like a madman, indeed.

"We'll drag him to town on the end of the rope!" Deputy Ames said. "I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole. Get the hosses and let's move."

"I say let's hang him—" Saunders began again, but the deputy interrupted. He was gradually regaining his composure, but Buck could still see fear in the officer's eyes. A plan began to take shape in the Circle J puncher's mind. He had to escape. In Twin Rivers, he would be able to prove his identity and clear himself with the help of Billy West, the Circle J owner. But he might not live to reach Twin Rivers. Deputy Ames might not be able to keep his men in hand much longer.

"The law will take care of hangin' him if he's guilty!" Ames said, as he swung to the saddle. "Let's ride, men."

Buck Foster looked and felt half

saloon—a rendezvous for every gun-packing tough and law dodger in Montana. A chair crashed inside the place, and there was a stampede of booted feet toward the sidewalk.

The Circle J pards stopped in their tracks. Gunplay in the Oasis was no unusual occurrence, but now it sounded as if trouble had headed for the street.

And, just at this instant, a small, tow-headed and barefoot youngster, clad in overalls suspended by only one strap, came out of the post office only a few doors from the saloon.

The street was no place for a child when there was a threat of bullet-swapping. Billy West realized this, and started forward on the run, and Joe and Sing Lo were at his heels. Then, with another howl, the dog scurried under the doors of the Oasis and swung down the sidewalk.

The Circle J owner halted again. "Just somebody chasin' a dog out of the place," he said in a relieved tone.

Joe Scott caught his arm and pointed excitedly. The dog, a large animal that showed traces of collie ancestry, had run blindly into a tree at the edge of the wooden sidewalk. Now it stumbled into the side of the building itself, and then turned down the sidewalk in a queer, side-wise run. All three of the Circle J men saw the foam slaverling at the beast's jaws—

"Mad dog!" the redhead gasped. "Hey, sonny! Get out of th' way—get inside! *Get inside quick!*"

But the boy halted where he was, uncertainty on his freckled face giving way to fear. The dog caromed off a hitching post, snapping and snarling as if at an unseen enemy, and headed straight for the youngster. Too late, the boy started to run.

Billy West jumped for the street

as Joe and Sing Lo plunged forward. From this angle, the Circle J boss could separate boy and dog in his line of vision. He whisked the .45 from his holster and jerked the gun up to roll its thunder all along the sun-washed stretch of dusty street. The shot brought one agonized yelp, and the rabid animal leaped high in the air and landed kicking. By the time the crowd from the Oasis had reached the sidewalk, it was quivering in death, and Joe Scott had the frightened youngster in his arms.

"Who done that?" rasped a harsh voice. "Who's the skunk that shot my dawg?"

Joe Scott hastily shoved the tow-headed lad into the shelter of a store. Trouble was coming to the main street of Twin Rivers, after all. The man who claimed ownership of the dog was striding in advance of a gang of gun-toughs; he was a burly, bearded hombre who carried no gun himself, but his huge fists and the knuckle scars on his face advertised his brand of fighting.

"I said who shot my dawg?" he demanded again. "I'll wipe up the street with the polecat that done it!"

Billy West blew smoke from his gun barrel. "I guess I'm the man you're lookin' for," he said calmly. "The dog was mad, and there was a kid on the street."

"You're a liar!" flared the other man. "If yuh didn't pack that gun, I'd break yuh in two!"

He stopped ten feet away from the Circle J owner, and the crowd stopped behind him. There were cries of: "Whip him, Marty! Bust his jaw! Here—I'll loan yuh a gun!"

But the big man didn't need a gun. Billy West, a cold anger flaming in his gray eyes, was unbuckling his cartridge belt and handing it to Sing Lo. Joe Scott crowded close to the ranchman.

"Don't fight that buzzard his way, Billy!" Joe pleaded. "That's Marty Hoag—one o' Sag Weldy's sheep-herders! He used to be a lumberjack, and he weighs about thirty pounds more'n you do! Besides, he's a dirty fighter—they say he stomped a man's face in down at Cheyenne!"

Billy West faced Hoag. "Well, what are you waitin' for?" he asked.

Hoag wasn't waiting any longer. He came in a rush, clubbed fists flailing, big head lowered, grunting and snarling with each blow. The sheer force of his attack sent Billy reeling to the street, and the crowd of lawless hangers-on of the Oasis saloon whooped its delight and crowded around in a circle.

Joe Scott yanked his six-gun. "This here's goin' to be a fair fight!" he announced. "I'll plug the first hombre who tries to horn in!"

"Flight, Mistle West!" screamed Sing Lo. "Flight ha'd!"

A big fist jarred Billy's jaw and stars burst before his eyes. He rocked back on his boot heels. Hoag bellowed triumphantly, and then launched his thick body in a dive with the intention of butting the ranchman into unconsciousness. Sing Lo squealed a warning that would have been too late, but it was not needed.

Panting and dazed, Billy managed to leap aside. As Marty Hoag dived past, the Circle J boss flashed his right fist up in a hooking blow that smashed into the lumberjack's face and spun him around. Hoag grunted and rushed again, his little eyes red with rage.

Once more a whirlwind of hammering blows descended on the smaller man, thumping the wind out of his body, ripping along the side of his head with a force that felt as if an ear had been torn away. He gasped and drove a fist hard at

Hoag's middle, but the big man was tough; the blow had little effect. The next instant, Hoag's knuckles slammed Billy's jaw and sent him sprawling into the dust.

There was a roar from the crowd. Joe Scott shouted: "Keep back, there!" and waved the .45. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hoag leap and pull his booted feet high into the air, aiming them for the man beneath him. Hoag had stomped a man nearly to death in Cheyenne—

But now he was fighting a man who was quicker and more resourceful. As Hoag's weight descended toward him, Billy West jerked his own boots up and lashed out with both feet, twisting his body just out of range at the same time. His spurs caught Hoag's legs and raked them cruelly; the big lumberjack howled with pain and lost his balance.

Billy was on his feet before Hoag could get up. When the latter arose, still bellowing and grunting like an enraged beast, it was the Circle J owner who charged.

Hoag's head snapped back as the ranchman's knuckles drove against his chin. The lumberjack staggered, recovered his balance, and then met Billy's rush with changed tactics. He flung his big arms wide and grabbed for his opponent, but Billy ducked underneath and cracked another hard punch under Hoag's ear.

The lumberjack went down like one of the trees he had felled. Once more he got to his feet—once more he rushed—

Billy West drove a left to Hoag's stomach. The big man grunted and doubled forward. The Circle J boss put everything he had behind a right to the bearded jaw.

Hoag sat down and stayed there, grunting, shaking his head. His glazed eyes stared at the man who

had whipped him at his own game. Joe Scott said, triumphantly: "I reckon that'll learn the dirty varmint who's a skunk!" and Sing Lo grinned and echoed, "So be," as he handed Billy his gun.

The Circle J owner blew hard and grinned with battered lips. Just as he was buckling the cartridge belt, another big man shoved his way through the crowd.

"What's goin' on here? What's happened?" he demanded.

Billy turned to face the speaker, and saw Sag Weldy—the rich sheepman who had come to the Bitter-roots only a few months before and who already owned two of the biggest ranches in the section.

Joe Scott answered. "This facestompin' sheepherder of yores bit off more'n he could chew!" chuckled the redhead. "Yuh better turn him loose with the lambs till he gets his strength back."

Weldy grunted, and glanced in surprise at the sturdy Circle J boss, then frowned at Marty Hoag. The sheepman was clean-shaven and well dressed; he would have been mistaken in any gathering for a quiet, prosperous cattle ranchman. About him was an air of honesty and squareness which appealed at once to Billy West; the latter thought perhaps Weldy was not nearly so bad as he had been painted.

Just now, Weldy wore a slightly soiled bandage on his left hand and wrist. His .45 was holstered on the left side, but the butt of the gun was turned forward for a cross-body draw.

The sheepman faced Billy with a slow grin. "First time this has happened to Marty," he said. "I reckon it's a good thing—reckon he had it comin' because he's a mite too quarrelsome. Especially when he gets a few snorts o' redeye under his belt.

That's why I won't let him pack a gun. I hope yuh won't hold this ruckus against *me*, West!"

Billy shook his head. "You had nothin' to do with it," he said.

"Glad yuh feel that way," Weldy smiled. He turned to Marty Hoag, who was recovering consciousness. "Hightail it to the ranch, Marty!" he ordered sharply.

The ex-lumberjack muttered a surly something through bruised lips, and slunk away with a look of hatred at Billy. But the red battle light was gone from his eyes.

Weldy looked at Billy again. "The drought's hangin' on, West. If yuh decide to sell all or part of the Circle J—"

"I won't decide that!" Billy answered. He beckoned to Joe and Sing Lo. The pards went on to where their horses were tethered, and Sheriff Jim Hawks rode up at the head of a dozen discouraged-looking men astride dust-streaked horses. The gray-headed officer sighted Billy West and came straight to him.

"Hoped I'd find yuh, Billy," he said. There was worry behind Hawks' blue eyes, and he lowered his voice. "Hear about the stage holdup?"

Billy shook his head. The sheriff drew a relieved breath. "Then the news ain't spread, yet. I told the stage office to keep it quiet long as they could, because of the bank. Billy, there was fifty thousand bucks bein' shipped in for the bank to use as loans. It didn't get here—the stage was robbed on the road from Rawhide!"

The Circle J owner jumped. "Fifty thousand!" he echoed.

"Yep, and that would buy a lot o' feed! I been out with one posse all day, but we lost the trail. Best we can figger, there was just one hom-

bre who lit out with the dinero. He headed for th' Bitterroots. I got Jack Ames—my new deputy—headin' a posse over in that direction. But that trail's gettin' colder every minute!"

"What did the robber look like?" demanded Joe Scott.

"There wasn't nobody left to say," Hawks said wearily. "It could have been that young buzzard that calls hisself the Cheyenne Kid, or it might have been one of them hombres from down around the Jackson Hole country. We got to find him. In the meanwhile, Billy, I wish yuh'd talk to the ranchmen—and talk fast! If they get cold feet and start a run on the bank, she'll go bust. And then they'll start sellin'. But if yuh tell 'em to hold on and not sell for hell, they'll listen!"

Billy's jaw tightened. There was a hard glint in his gray eyes as he turned to Danger, the beautiful chestnut saddle horse that was part bronc and part thoroughbred.

"Mebbe they'd listen, mebbe not!" he said. "I'll tell 'em—later. Right now, I'm goin' to take Joe Scott out on the road and see if he can pick up that trail. Sing Lo, yuh better hit for the ranch. Tell Buck what's happened, and send him out to help us."

"So be, Mistle Billy!"

The Circle J boss forked Danger, and Joe Scott threw his leg over a rangy clayback. Sheriff Hawks watched them leave town at a gallop, and shook his head pessimistically as the dust swirled in behind them. The red-headed Circle J puncher was known as one of the best readers of trail sign in all Montana, but the chance of cutting sign on one man in all the wild upheaval of the Bitterroots was slender, indeed.

The sun was still a couple of hours

high when Billy and Joe rode into the first shaded canyon of the foothills. Here the beak-nosed cowboy held up his hand in a warning to halt, and Billy heard the *slog-slog* of horsemen coming from the opposite direction.

Both laid hands on their holsters, and pulled their horses into the thick shadow of the pines. A second later, the group of riders appeared. In front was a tall young hombre with a star on his vest, and Billy knew this must be Jack Ames, the new deputy.

The Circle J owner held up his hand. "Any luck?" he asked eagerly.

Ames shook his head, and the men from Circle J noticed that he looked peculiarly pale and shaken. The big man named Saunders spat disgustedly into the dust.

"He got away," Ames said in a colorless tone. "We seen him from up on the ridge. We rode down to cut him off. And then"—his voice went to a higher, strained pitch—"and then a man with rabies—a madman—busted into our gun trap, yellin' and shootin' and foammin' at the mouth. His pard got away."

Billy frowned. "A man with rabies?"

Ames nodded. "Yes—an ugly buzzard with a big mustache and a busted nose. Yuh better be on the lookout for him. He got away. He—he might bite somebody!"

The Circle J pards exchanged glances. Both knew about the soap pellets Sing Lo had mixed for Buck Foster's aching tooth. Joe Scott, who loved to tease the old mossy-horn, had been enjoying a few quiet chuckles over the effects the remedy might have.

"Where'd this . . . this hydrophobia hombre go?" Billy asked.

Ames explained. "He's mad—plumb mad!" he added, licking his

dusty lips. "Yuh better be careful. We're goin' on back to town—the bandit got too much of a start."

Billy and Joe Scott rode on along the canyon trail until they came to the spot plainly marked by hoof-prints and boot heels. Here, Joe's keen eyes picked out the shreds of mohair caught by the brush that had snagged Buck's chaps.

"We'll follow Buck's trail," Billy decided promptly. "Chances are, he's tailin' the robber by now. Otherwise, he wouldn't have busted loose. And mebbe he needs us by this time. Holdin' up a stage carryin' fifty thousand dollars isn't a one-man job!"

CHAPTER III.

BUCKAROO ON FOOT.

BUCK FOSTER was, indeed, in need of help at that very moment. When he flung himself over the rim of the road and clawed his way through the brush with bullets crashing above his head, there ensued a frantic struggle to put as much distance as possible between him and Jack Ames' posse.

The thick canyon growth favored Buck in this matter. He reached the bottom of the rocky gulch and pumped his lanky, saddle-bowed legs at top speed along the twisting bed of the dry watercourse while the lawmen shouted and swore and fought the brush above him.

Finally the noise of pursuit died away. Buck sat down on a boulder, his ribs heaving. All at once he noticed that his mouth tasted like sun-scorched saddle leather. He spat soap foam on the gravel, and his tooth began jerking again.

The tooth wouldn't let Buck stay still. The pain of it was a driving, relentless pain, and he had to be doing something, going somewhere. If he didn't move, the pain would drive

him crazy. He rocked on the boulder for a minute, holding his jaw in his hands and moaning to himself.

Then he remembered the hombre on the sorrel cayuse—the man with the saddlebags. Saunders had called the rider of the sorrel a stage robber—

"Got to git that buzzard!" the Circle J puncher croaked in the aching dryness of his throat. "Got to find that mazuma!"

He stood, deliberating the course he should follow. Nobody knew this section of the sprawled, humping Bitterroots any better than Buck. If the robber stayed on the trail, it would take him through the narrow pass at the head of the canyon, traverse the rocky ridge, and drop into another twisting gulch where it doubled back toward Twin Rivers for a few miles before turning again.

Buck began a panting, groaning climb up the western slope of the canyon. The bandit would stay on the trail, he reasoned. Presence of the robber on the trail in the first place was an indication that he didn't know the country any too well—a man carrying loot in his saddlebags would be likely to strike for the Canadian border.

"By ganny!" Buck muttered between groans. "I'll bet that coyote is the Cheyenne Kid! I helped him git away, but I'll be a sheepherder if I don't scalp him with hot lead afore long!"

He instinctively reached for the smooth-handled .45 at his side, and then he groaned all the louder. The gun had been left back in the trail where it had fallen. All Buck had for a weapon was the rope that had been around his neck.

There was but one thing to do. If he could make it over the ridge on foot, through brush where no horse could go, he might cut the trail in

the farther canyon before the rider got there. Then he could rope the outlaw.

Buck increased his pace, blowing hard, scrambling through buckthorn and stunted pines, momentarily forgetting the torture in his jaw. He saw bright visions of himself roping the notorious Cheyenne Kid, yanking him from the saddle and grabbing his gun. Buck Foster would be a hero, riding into Twin Rivers with the Cheyenne Kid at the end of a tether and the stolen money jingling in the saddlebags.

With this spurring him on, the lanky veteran finally topped the ridge and felt the hot wind blast his mustache. Keeping carefully behind the cover of boulders, he moved to the farther rim and looked down, searching the trail that twisted in and out of the screen of trees.

There was no rider in sight. But Buck's bulging eyes detected something just as good—a moving cloud of powdery dust swirling above the pines to the north.

He grunted with satisfaction. That would be his man, still keeping to the trail, doubling back to the south.

For a minute, the Circle J puncher watched while he regained his breath. The hot wind blasting up the rocky slope of the hill brought a pungent smell that set Buck's battered nose twitching. He sniffed suspiciously, and then let out an explosive roar.

"Sheep, by ganny! I'll be a horned toad if I ain't gittin' into the Sag Weldy's woolly range!"

Then he plunged forward recklessly to dare the steep descent with cowboy boots that were not designed for mountain climbing. The odor of sheep dip and sun-scorched wool was like a red flag flaunted in the face of a bull, so far as Buck Foster was concerned. This spread had been a

cattle range until a few months before—until Sag Weldy came up from the Southwest with money and men and set about buying the land of ranchers who were going bankrupt because of the drought—

Half a mile down the canyon side, slipping, sliding, holding on to buckbrush and sage that was uprooted and sent him sprawling, Buck came to the road and crouched beside it, his heart hammering a tattoo against his heaving ribs.

Above this drumming within him, he could hear the pounding of horse's hoofs approaching on the road. Hastily, and yet with care, he built a loop in the riata and settled himself down to wait.

It wasn't long. The rider of the sorrel horse came into view around a turn. For the first time, Buck Foster got a good look at the man who was suspected of holding up the Twin Rivers stage.

The hombre's face was strangely pale. His hair and eyebrows were black in contrast, and his eyes looked like smoking bullet holes burned into the pallor of thin, sunken cheeks. He was dressed in an odd fashion for the cattle country—he wore a blue work shirt with a red bandanna that hid half of his chin and undoubtedly had been used as a mask, and faded, dirty jeans that were bloused over the tops of laced boots. He had no spurs, but as he rode there was an accompaniment of dull jingling from the bulging saddlebags.

Buck Foster was holding his breath as he watched the rider approach. Now he opened his mouth to suck in lungfuls of air, and he lifted his lanky arm for the throw.

The air struck the exposed nerve in Buck's hollow tooth. Pain shot through his jaw in a sharp, terrible spasm. He clasped his hand to his

mouth to stifle the involuntary groan that wrenched from his lips, and shut his eyes tight against the torture.

In that second, when the Circle J buckaroo was powerless to act, the stage robber went past the trap Buck had set for him. The mossy-horn groaned again and jerked his eyes open to the realization that he had failed.

Then he flattened himself against the trunk of a pine and held his breath again. The rider had halted, speaking sharply to his horse. For a few seconds, he sat the sorrel in the middle of the road, looking keenly around him with the eyes that looked like bullet holes burned through paper.

Buck Foster expected discovery, then. He was waiting for the roar of a gun, the stinging tear of a bullet ripping into his lanky body—

Then the man with the saddlebags turned sharply to the right, ducked low under the overhanging branches of a tree, and left the road.

Hope surged into Buck's heart again. With the hombre turning off, there was a possibility that he was going to camp. The Circle J cowboy moved stealthily across the trail and ducked under the same branches. Then he halted, staring in surprise at a fairly plain horse path that had been concealed by the branches.

Now the wind brought the smell of sheep, stronger than ever before. A sudden suspicion broke like a bombshell in Buck's brain.

"By ganny!" he told himself in fierce joy. "It was a sheepherder that robbed that stage! And damn if yores truly can't clean up all the sheepherders between here and the Rio Grande!"

The sorrel was in a lope again. Buck Foster went down the trail after the rider, on the run. He topped

a little rise, turned the shoulder of a box canyon that was set back in the farther hills—and then abruptly stopped to gawk and gasp at the scene spread before him.

The sun was behind the hills and shadows lay thick and sinister on the floor of the box canyon. Set against the precipitous back wall, gloomy and forbidding among the somber pines, was a huge stone building that reared two stories above the canyon floor. In its upper portion, two curtainless windows stared like hollow, brooding eyes over the trail by which the rider of the sorrel approached.

Buck Foster had never seen a castle, with its moat and turrets. But this bleak, gloomy structure looked like a castle to him—it was out of place here in the Bitterroots, and yet it belonged, somehow, to the mystery and majesty of the mountains. Watching it, he forgot his toothache, and a shiver crept along his spine.

Then he gave a fierce tug at his mustache. The stage robber was riding up to the gate in a stone wall; two other men appeared here as if they had been on guard.

The rider dismounted and tethered the sweat-streaked sorrel to a tree. When he had disappeared within the gate with the others, Buck moved cautiously forward.

Somebody had told him that the new sheep outfit was building a house on its lately acquired cattle range. The smell of sheep was strong here, and the house was new despite its shadowy bleakness. This, then, was the stronghold of the sheepmen—and Buck Foster could whip any half dozen woolly wranglers he had ever seen!

Besides, there was a horse tethered outside the gate, and Buck

needed a horse. A man on foot in the Bitterroots is no man at all.

There was nobody in sight, now. Buck's thick-headed blundering courage bolstered him. He remembered that the stage robber had never seen him, and if he were challenged he could say that he had lost his horse and had come to borrow one.

His tooth jumped again. Buck strode boldly across the open space and entered the shadows that were thickening over the macabre-looking place—

"Stick up yore hands!"

Buck's heart leaped and hammered. He caught the glint of a gun in the twilight. Boots crunched on gravel and the vague shape of a man came toward him. Slowly, he raised his lanky arms.

"What's the idee o' this?" Buck began. "I just wanted to borry a hoss and—"

"Reach high!" growled the other. He was close, now. Buck saw a slouch black Stetson, a tangled, matted beard. The smell of sheep was heavy on the slovenly, burly hombre; Buck sniffed and rage surged through him. There was only one of them—

With a grunt, the Circle J buckaroo suddenly jerked his arms down and dived for the thick middle of the man with the gun. His bony fingers closed over the man's wrist, his head slammed against a belt buckle.

The shepherd gasped and doubled. There was a loud roar not far from Buck's ear as they rolled on the ground, and he saw the lurch of powder flame in the dusk. He drove his free fist against a tangle of beard, and clutched at the man's throat.

Then men came running. Buck hammered desperately at his adversary's face and felt the skin rip from his knuckles. Something crashed

against the side of his head with shattering force, and the whole solar system seemed to concentrate in one whirling brightness before his eyes.

Then the brightness exploded, and Buck was falling endlessly through a soft blackness.

They were dragging him up the stone steps when he came to his senses. At once, he planted his boots and lashed out with a knotted fist, and a man went sprawling against the door jamb. The others yelled and grabbed him again. There were three of them on their feet; the door opened to splash the porch with yellow lantern light, and Buck saw that one of the hombres was the man with the jeans bloused over laced boots.

With a yell, the buckaroo tore away and leaped on this man. They rolled through the door and into the lantern light. The stone floor was cold against Buck's fevered cheek. He saw the glint of light on a gun barrel that came down in a smashing swing, and felt it thud and glance from his skull.

The rusty black Stetson cushioned the blow, but there was still force enough behind it to knock Buck dizzy. He lifted himself on hands and knees, fighting vainly to get to his feet. He saw one of Sing Lo's soap pellets fall from his vest pocket and roll across the floor, and he watched it with a curious detachment, as if it had been somebody else who crouched there unable to move—

"Take him upstairs!" panted the man with the laced boots. "We'll learn him a lesson he won't fergit!"

Two of the others seized Buck's arms and jerked him roughly to his feet. Somebody brought a lantern that shed its bobbing circle of light over the gloomy walls. At the top of rickety, creaking steps, Buck was shoved reeling into a dark room

which smelled of dampness and rats.

He toppled to the floor and heard the door click behind him. A key rasped in the lock. For a long time he lay there while his strength gradually ebbed back into his battered body. There was a single, narrow window, too high up to reach. Buck struck a match and looked around him as the shadows leaped and wavered.

The room was bare. A rat scurried across the floor by the farther wall. Overhead, a bat swooped down toward the flame on gusty wings, squeaking. Buck's tooth stabbed him with pain, and he sank to the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

RENDEZVOUS WITH DANGER.

THE trail left by Buck Foster was plain enough so long as daylight lasted, but a hard one to follow on horseback. There were times when Billy West and Joe Scott had to dismount and lead their horses through the tangle of brush.

They came to the dry stream bed and Joe's keen eyes spotted a wisp of mohair caught in the roughness of the boulder top. Beside the rock, boots had scuffed the gravel.

"He set down here to rest!" the redhead exclaimed. A note of concern for the pard he loved to tease entered his voice: "Say . . . yuh . . . yuh suppose the old mossyhorn got plugged? I don't see any sign of it, but he shore must be hurt, somehow. Mebbe he busted an arm or some-thin'!"

Billy grunted. "It's his tooth!" he surmised. "I reckon them soap pills of Sing Lo's didn't do him any good—except to scare the daylights out of that young deputy. We'd better move on before it gets dark."

Joe Scott led the way up toward

the ridge. Billy turned his Danger horse after the redhead's claybank. For a long time, they fought the brush again, and then came out on the ridge overlooking the farther canyon.

The sun was low, and the canyon itself was bathed in the purpling shadows of dusk. Joe reined the claybank and let him blow.

"Mebbe he turned back along th' road, down there," he said hopefully. "There won't be a moon. We'd better get to th' road pronto, and if we find his tracks on it, we can figger he stuck to th' trail. Mebbe he's hoofin' it toward town."

Billy shook his head. "I still think Buck was aimin' to foller that stage robber, some way. Right now, he's headin' into sheep territory. Smell 'em?"

"Yeah!" growled the carrot-topped puncher, with a sniff of disgust. "Here's where he went down. Come on, Billy."

The going was easier except on the shale banks. Across these, the Circle J pards walked and led their horses. It was fully dark by the time they came out on the road.

At this point the trail was gravel, and even Joe Scott's trained eyes failed to pick up Buck's trail. They struck matches until their supply was gone, but it was impossible to tell which way the fugitive cowpuncher had turned.

"Tain't any use!" Joe said wearily. "We'll have to take a guess on it. I figger he headed for town on account of that toothache."

"Not if the stage robber headed the other way!" insisted Billy. "Yuh know how stubborn the old coot is. He'd foller that buzzard till he starved to death!"

Joe grunted and cinched up his belt. "I'm already starved to death!" he complained. "I could eat

a sheep, even, th' way I feel right now!"

Billy West considered. It had been a long time since morning, and the fight with Marty Hoag had interrupted plans to go to a restaurant in Twin Rivers.

"Mebbe that's just what you'll do," he said. "Because Weldy's headquarters ranch is somewhere close here. We'll go see if we can find the place, and we'll bum a meal. Mebbe they will have seen Buck, or mebbe he's even there to borry a hoss."

"Not Buck Foster!" snorted Joe. "Not th' way he hates sheep. Gosh, th' smell is terrible down here! I'd sooner ride trail herd on a passel of skunks!"

The Circle J boss strained his eyes into the darkness. Stars had come out, sprinkling the dim sky above the humping hills and giving off the faintest illumination. He swung astride the chestnut and turned him through a break in the trees.

"It won't do any harm to ask," he said. "Sag Weldy hisself seems like a pretty square sort—for a land grabber. Let's make a stab at findin' his place."

Joe reluctantly followed. "All yuh got to do is foller yore nose!" he grumbled.

Sheep had grazed here, taking the brush with them and leaving easier going. The ground was stripped of grass and weeds; little spirals of dust drifted into the dim starlight behind the horses. It was easy to understand why Weldy needed more range—the drought had made it a tough year even for sheep.

The Circle J pards rounded the shoulder of a box canyon and came suddenly into a trail. At the same instant, Billy West looked ahead and saw the square of yellow lantern light from a ranch window.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "That must be Weldy's place—the stone house he built. He ought to be home from town by now. We'll ask about Buck."

They rode, unchallenged, to the gate. Seen from here, the stone structure bulked vaguely, its two narrow windows on the second floor staring darkly over the canyon. There was a wind moaning softly about the house and sighing in the pines, and far up on the rocky ridge a coyote pointed his sharp nose to the stars and lifted his wailing of hunger and lonesomeness.

The Circle J men looked at each other, both a little ashamed of the shuddery feeling that tingled their spines. Billy's voice sounded a little strained.

"Tie your hoss here. Let's go in—somebody's home!"

The gate creaked forlornly on rusty hinges, and the gravel crunched under their boots. They could hear no sound from the house except that sobbing moan of the soft wind. The coyote ended his lament on a thin treble, and Billy rapped at the door.

Boot heels stilted across the stone floor. Billy counted them unconsciously. Three men were walking toward the door—two were taking up positions at the side. The Circle J owner smiled faintly in the darkness. He didn't blame Sag Weldy for being cautious, out here in the rim of the Bitterroots; nobody knew how many men were dodging the law after that stage holdup—

Lantern light spilled in his face. He saw a slovenly, whiskered man, and there was neither friendliness nor recognition in the sheepman's pale blue eyes. His hand was resting on the butt of a .45.

"Who are yuh?" growled the hombre. "What d'ye want?"

"I'm Billy West of the Circle J spread—northeast of here. Is Weldy home?"

The eyes narrowed. "No, he ain't—he's in town. What d'ye want with him?"

Billy flicked a cool glance over the other two. One of them wore laced boots and jeans bloused over them. This would be the hombre they called Turk Baxter—one of Weldy's lieutenants. The instant he saw Baxter's pale face and smoky eyes, the Circle J owner knew a feeling of distrust. Weldy himself might be on the square, but it appeared he had been incautious in picking his ranch crew.

Billy stepped forward, and the trio allowed him and Joe Scott to enter. But both of the Circle J pards knew they were being closely watched, and both sensed the cold hostility behind Baxter's smoky glance and the bearded man's surly question.

"I said what d'ye want here?" the latter repeated.

"We're lookin' for one of our pards who lost his hoss," Billy said. "Buck Foster. He's a lanky hombre with a droopin' mustache and a crooked nose. Right now, he's got a tooth that's gone bronc and is drivin' him plumb loco. He—"

Baxter took a step forward. "We ain't seen him!" he said. "He ain't been here."

"Much obliged," answered Billy. "One other thing. Me and my pard—Joe Scott—are plumb starved. If we could talk yuh out of a little chuck, we'd sure appreciate it."

The whiskered hombre turned toward other men who stood at the farther end of the big room, where they had risen from a card game. There were four or five of these, all

roughly dressed, all contributing to the smell of sheep dip and wool that hung like a fog in the place.

"Valdez!" called the man with the beard. "Git *Mister* West some o' that cold mutton. I reckon when a cattelman is hungry, he ain't too good to eat sheep!"

The Circle J owner flushed hotly, but managed to control his temper. There was nothing to be gained by losing control and starting trouble with eight men. He glanced curiously over the room, noting the long corridor that opened to the left and stretched dimly away from the light of three lanterns hung in the place. A big fireplace was beyond the table where the four had been playing cards, and the skins of bears and mountain lions adorned the rough walls. Two rifles were racked on deer antlers.

A saddle-colored Mexican glided away from the group by the table, and disappeared down the corridor toward the kitchen. Even mutton would taste good, Billy reflected. He thanked the whiskered man and grinned at Turk Baxter.

Outside the wind was whining around the stone walls; the rest of the place was silent and filled with a strange presentiment of danger. Somewhere inside the house, a dog was barking, the sound muffled as if by heavy walls and doors.

Through the silence, Joe Scott's voice was suddenly ringing in anger. The redhead pointed to the floor; Billy West saw what Joe's keen eyes had discovered—one of Sing Lo's little soap pellets lying in a crack of the stones.

"Baxter, yuh're a lym' coyote!" flared the redhead. "Buck Foster was here! Where is he now?"

Turk Baxter whirled, hunching forward. The pallor of his face was unchanged, but muscles snapped un-

der it and went rigid. His eyes slitted, and there was an angry flame behind their smokiness.

"I said we ain't seen nobody!" he growled.

"And I'm callin' yuh a liar!" Joe shouted.

It was coming, then. Men moved from the card table. There were boot heels clicking up the corridor; a heavier man than Valdez walked there. Out of the corner of his eye, Billy West saw the battered features of Marty Hoag taking shape as he neared the lantern light. Hoag's growl of recognition fell on the tenseness and snapped it into action. The dog was still barking.

The Circle J pards slapped gun leather and sprang shoulder to shoulder with their backs against the open door. The lantern light glinted on their .45s, and on eight guns that were only half way out of their holsters.

"Get your hands up!" barked the Circle J boss. "Try to draw, and—"

Hoag tried it. Hoag bellowed wordlessly and whipped up the gun he had strapped around his thick middle immediately upon returning to the Weldy ranchhouse after his defeat in town.

But the former lumberjack was built more for power than speed. Before his big arm had the revolver halfway up, Billy's .45 flicked sideways and sent flame streaking into the dimness of the corridor.

The roar filled the room and rolled from the stone walls. It echoed and re-echoed down the emptiness of the long corridor, and it drowned the horrible, gasping grunt that tore from Marty Hoag's puffed lips. It drowned the crash he made as he spun sidewise and toppled across the weapon in his twitching hand.

There was silence again. Out of the corner of his mouth, Billy said:

"Keep your eyes peeled for Valdez. All right, you mangy sheep prod-ders! Grab the rafters. Get their guns, Joe, while I keep 'em covered."

The Circle J pards read something in the eyes of the seven men who faced them. But the lantern light failed to show what it was—and then the cold muzzle of a .45 pressed against the back of Billy's neck and a voice said:

"Drop yore gun! Both of yuh—or I'll blow West's head off!"

Joe Scott felt a gun barrel gouge him at the same time. Twisting his head, he saw the swarthy, cruel features of the Mexican, Valdez. Ranged beside the latter was Sag Weldy, back from Twin Rivers, his .45 jammed against Billy's neck.

The square shoulders of the cattleman dropped wearily, and his weapon clanged on the stone floor. He nodded to Joe Scott; there was no use resisting. Joe growled under his breath and let his gun fall.

"Tryin' to hold up my place while I'm away, eh?" Weldy sneered. He kicked Billy's gun aside as he came around in front. Valdez shut the door and turned a key in the big lock.

"This wasn't a holdup, Weldy!" the Circle J owner flared. "We come here lookin' for Buck Foster. These hombres lied to us—we know that Buck has been here. Then Hoag went for his gun."

"And yuh killed him!" Weldy's voice was cold and rasping; the smoothness he had worn in town dropped away like a mask. He held his bandaged arm up with his hand thrust inside the vent of his shirt, and Billy saw a spasm of pain flicker through his frosty eyes.

"He ain't dead, Sag!" reported Baxter, and Weldy moved swiftly to the side of the man Billy's bullet had cut down.

Marty Hoag raised his head, a rattle in his throat. "That dawg!" he croaked. "That dawg . . . was—"

The rattle came again, louder. Marty Hoag's head dropped, and he was a silent huddle on the floor, at the edge of the lantern light.

Weldy straightened. "He's dead now," he said, as if speaking to himself. He stirred the silent form with his boot toe. "He's dead now. Yuh killed him, West—he was a fool to try fightin' yuh with a gun. But yuh killed him, and he was one of my men. I'm goin' to make yuh pay plenty for this!"

Billy West was silent, eying the guns that covered him and Joe, weighing their chances and finding them slender indeed. He knew, now, that Sag Weldy was more than a land grabber, worse than unscrupulous. Weldy would stop at nothing. He came back to face the two prisoners, and there was a murderous, feverish light in his frosty eyes. Once more, Billy saw that spasm of pain flick across the sheepman's face.

Baxter whispered something in Weldy's ear. The sheep rancher nodded. "Good!" he said. "Take these buzzards up and throw 'em in with him! I got an idea they'll do what I want 'em to do! If they don't—"

Guns prodded the men from Circle J. They ascended the creaking stairs, and the lantern the Mexican carried showed them a heavy door. There was a feeble moaning from the other side, and when Baxter unlocked the door the lantern light showed Buck Foster.

He was holding his jaw, and he stared dazedly at them. There was caked crimson on his cheek from an ugly gash across his temple.

"Billy!" he groaned. "Joe! They . . . they got yuh, too!"

The door slammed behind them, and there was only the pale shaft of starlight through the loophole of a window. Somewhere in the gloomy big house that penned-up dog kept barking, barking.

CHAPTER V.

A SHEEPMAN SHOWS HIS HAND.

DOWNSTAIRS, Sag Weldy nervously paced the floor until Baxter and the others returned. His boot-heels clicked back and forth across the cold stones; he halted at the end of each little journey in the shadows where Marty Hoag's body lay, and then walked back to the table that was scattered with greasy cards.

The other men watched him, silently. Weldy rolled a smoke and thrust it between his tight lips; after two puffs he flung the glowing butt into the fireplace and cursed savagely. Then he stopped at the table and picked up a card at random.

When he turned the pasteboard over, it was the ace of diamonds.

"That's it!" Weldy howled. "I'm holdin' aces! I'll be the richest man in Montana inside of a year!"

He broke off with a groan and nursed his injured hand. Turk Baxter's pale face split in a mirthless grin.

"Yuh're already one of the richest, Sag," he said. "That fifty thousand—"

"Shut up" barked Weldy. Then he approached the man with the bloused jeans. "We got these blasted cattlemen where we want 'em! We got the Twin Rivers bank on the edge—one little push, now, and she'll go broke. And then we'll see how many cattle ranchers change their tune and want to sell; we can buy their spreads at our price!"

Baxter's grin was fixed and cold. The bearded man went to a cup-

board by the fireplace and came back with a bottle. "Yuh need a drink, boss," he said. "Yuh don't look well."

Weldy snatched the bottle with a ruthless gesture, and drew the cork with his teeth. He spat the cork on the floor and tilted the whiskey until it gurgled down his throat.

"There are other hombres where *you* come from, Turk!" he said. "I can get other men out of the pen down in Arizona. They'll do what I say. Hell, there's money in sheep but it won't be a drop in the bucket to what we can make when we get about a dozen good gun-toters up here! The law can't touch us in this stone house; it's as good a fort as ever stood. And we'll have a strip of land reachin' from the Wyomin' border to Canada. We'll take cattle through at night, and move our sheep right across the trail behind the herds. And we can operate all the way down to the Black Hills—where there's plenty of gold!"

He took another drink and passed the bottle to Baxter. The other man's smoky eyes gleamed; he drank, and then ran his tongue around his lips. His mouth was like a vivid, ugly saber slash in the prison pallor of his face.

"And there's lots of Chinks in Canada, willin' to pay five hundred bucks a head to get into this country," he said with a cold chuckle. "I know that game. I used to run Chinks across down—"

"We got to get the land, first," Weldy said. He held his bandaged wrist and fought an inner struggle against pain. Once more he poured the raw liquor down his throat and resumed his clicking stride back and forth. "We got to get the land. And I know how we can get it. This Circle J hombre carries a lot of influence around here. If he says it's a good

idea to sell out now, before the bank goes busted, they'll all sell! If he allows he's beat, they'll figger they're beat, too!"

Turk shook his head. "But he won't. Not West. I looked over his spread day before yestiddy. He's got a live creek, and his cattle are in purty good shape compared to the others. Besides, he's a fighter and—"

There was a rattle of Sag Weldy's fist on the table. The cards jumped, and a tin coffee cup clattered to the floor. Weldy reached for the whiskey bottle, swaying slightly as he leaned against the table and drank.

"He'll do what I say, time I'm through with him!" he said harshly, wiping his lips. "Go up and bring all three of 'em down. Tie their hands, good and tight. Valdez, git that roll of rawhide out of the cupboard and cut me some long strips. Soak 'em in water and bring 'em to me. Pronto, now!"

Five men ascended the creaking steps, carrying ropes. Valdez, moving as softly as a snake, took the roll of rawhide down the long corridor. Marty Hoag's body was still lying there in the edge of the shadows—

Sag Weldy chuckled to himself as he waited. Once the spasm of pain came, and his dry mirth changed to a groan between his clenched teeth. But he swiftly mastered himself and chuckled again.

"Have to soak my hand in hot salt water!" he said. "It'll be all right—I'll lick it! I'll lick 'em all—I'll be the richest man in Montana!"

He lifted the bottle again, and let the last of the liquor burn down his throat. It was a toast to the outlaw empire he plotted to build, with herds of sheep as a blind.

The stairs creaked. In front of five menacing guns, the three men from Circle J descended to the big room. Sag Weldy leaned against the

table and eyed them with a cold smile.

"What do yuh want with us, now, Weldy?" demanded Billy West. "When we get out of here, we—"

"If yuh get out!" interrupted Weldy. He was still smiling; except for the feverish burning in his eyes, his face might have been the face of a grinning mummy. "I'm goin' to give yuh a chance, West. Set down at this table and write." He pulled open a drawer and produced writing materials. "Write what I tell yuh. Say that yuh have thought it all out and have decided the smartest thing to do is to sell out to Sag Weldy. Address the letter to all the cattlemen of this part o' Montana, and—"

Billy West, hands behind his back and thongs biting cruelly into his wrists, snapped his head up.

"Go straight to hell!" he told Weldy.

Weldy turned to the Mexican. "Bring me the rawhide!" he said, and took a yard-long strip of the wet stuff. "See this, West? You're a cattleman—yuh know how this rawhide stretches when it's wet. When it dries, yuh know it'll cut an oak limb in two! Well, figger what it'll do to yore neck, West!"

Joe Scott gasped, and Buck Foster bellowed: "Why, yuh dirty back-bitin' sheepherder! Yuh can't do nothin' like—"

"Shut up!" roared the bearded man. He swung the flat of a huge hand around and whipped it across Buck's mouth, nearly knocking the mossyhorn to the floor.

"Take it easy, Karnes!" Weldy said. "I'm givin' 'em a chance. Will yuh write that letter, West?"

Billy shook his head, and there was steel in his gray eyes. "You can kill me first!" he said through taut lips.

Weldy's smile clicked off his face.

"Bring him here and shove his neck down on the table!" he ordered.

Karnes and Baxter, both powerful men, shoved the ranchman forward. Joe Scott swore and would have moved to the side of his boss, even though helpless under his bonds. But the five other men blocked the way with guns, and hammers clicked back.

"Don't get yoreselves hurt, boys!" Billy warned quietly. "You can't do any good. Nothin' can make me write that letter!"

Weldy sneered. "We'll see! When this stuff shuts off yore wind, yuh might change yore mind!"

Baxter and Karnes pushed the Circle J owner's head forward and down until the table was bruising his face. The sheepman began twisting the wet rawhide around his throat, winding it so tightly it was already shutting off his wind.

"Ready to write?" he asked.

Billy's answer was almost unintelligible. "Go to hell!" he repeated.

Sag Weldy gave the rawhide another turn. Dirty water trickled from it and was cold against Billy's tortured throat. He could feel the thong constricting, tightening like the supple length of a snake throttling its prey. Lights danced before his eyes; his breathing was a loud, hoarse whistling. The rawhide was cutting into his windpipe, and a numb dizziness began taking possession of him. He could no longer feel the table against his face—

Weldy loosened the rawhide a trifle. "Now," he growled, "are yuh ready to sign?"

Billy's purple lips framed the words with difficulty. "I told you that you could kill me first!"

Sag Weldy jerked the rawhide free in a sudden anger. "All right; We'll do it another way! Yuh got nerve, West, but it won't do yuh no good

now! Set him down in that chair, Turk, where the pen and ink will be right handy!"

Head swimming, throat aching from the pressure, the Circle J boss sank weakly into the seat and wondered dimly what Weldy's tactics would be now. He was not long in finding out.

The sheepman swung around and glared at the other two prisoners. Buck Foster, with his hands tied, couldn't hold his aching jaw. The old buckaroo was rocking on his feet, moaning softly to himself, and his scarred, mustached face was contorted with the pain.

"What's eatin' *you?*" Weldy demanded.

Buck glared back at him under shaggy brows. "*Oh-h-h!* My tooth! It' killin' me! I hope yuh fall in a vat o' sheep dip and drown, yuh . . . yuh mangy—"

Weldy grinned again. "Bring him over here!" he ordered. "Put him on his back on the floor, and untie his arms so he can squirm a little better. Valdez, get a bucket of cold water—right out of the spring!"

Billy West raised his head and watched, powerless to help. Two men had gun muzzles pointed at Joe Scott, and now they had to crowd closer and jab the weapons against his head before he would keep quiet. It took four hombres to put Buck Foster on the floor in spread-eagle fashion, while his bellows and grunts filled the stone building.

They were going to wet more rawhide and wrap the mossyhorn in it, Billy thought. He set his jaw hard and tried to turn his eyes away, but Baxter swung the chair around and held the Circle J boss with a headlock, facing the man on the floor.

Weldy knelt by Buck's head and thrust the barrel of his gun between the cowboy's lips. Using this as a

lever, he pried open the veteran's mouth.

"Gimme a cup of that cold water!" he said.

Buck let out a mighty groan and tried to struggle again. There was a man sitting on each arm and each leg. Billy could see the veins standing out in purple ridges on the mossyhorn's temples; a cold, agonized perspiration beaded Buck's forehead.

Sag Weldy took the cold spring water and poured it into Buck's mouth. It struck the exposed nerve of the hollow tooth with a shock that the sufferer felt clear down into his boots.

He choked on the water, and the breath rattled in his throat. When his voice finally came through, it was in a high-pitched animal shriek.

Billy West clenched his teeth and shut his eyes. He heard Buck's low, whimpering moans, and then another splash and the shriek again. As it died away, Weldy said: "Wrap a strip of that rawhide around his belly! Gimme another cup o' water!" - "Don't!" Buck Foster moaned. "Don't— *Oh-h-h!*"

The Circle J owner jerked open his eyes. "Stop it, Weldy!" he shouted. "Stop it! I'll sign the letter!"

Joe Scott's protest cut into the moans of the man on the floor. "Yuh cain't, Billy! Yuh cain't! If yuh sign, Weldy can grab any spread he wants! Th' whole country will be overrun by stinkin' snivelin' wool-lies! Yut cain't do it!"

"You're talkin' sense, now, West!" grinned Weldy. "Let the old buzzard up, boys, but keep yore guns on him. All right, West. Get busy and write what I told yuh. Untie his arms, Turk!"

Buck Foster was on his feet again, swaying with the pain that still surged through him. Baxter freed

the arms of the Circle J boss, and Billy West dipped the pen in the bottle of ink.

Buck bit his lips to keep from moaning. A silence fell in the big room; there was only the softness of the wind outside, and the dry scratching of the pen across the sheet of paper as Billy West wrote: "To the Cattle Ranchers of the Bitterroots—"

He put the pen down. Redheaded Joe Scott pleaded: "Tell 'em to go to hell, Billy! Don't write it!"

But Billy West saw the crimson that trickled from Buck's mouth, and the sweat that mottled the mossyhorn's brow. That strip of wet rawhide was still about the old puncher's lanky middle. Buck opened his mouth to say: "Don't—" and the word died in an involuntary moan as the air struck his tooth.

The Circle J boss shook his head, and put the pen to paper again.

CHAPTER VI.

SIX-GUN SETTLEMENT.

BUCK FOSTER listened to the scratching sound. It grated on his jangled nerves; it was like the sound made when a fingernail scratches across slate. He rocked with the pain of his tooth, and held his jaw in both hands. Sag Weldy was nursing his bandaged wrist again, and Buck could see the feverish light in the sheepman's cold eyes.

A sudden, weakening rage surged through the veteran's lanky frame. Here was a shepherd who was able to stifle his moans, while Buck, he told himself with angry shame, had been bellowing like a stuck pig!

And there sat Billy West, writing a letter that would cause half the cattlemen in the Bitterroots to sell their spreads to Sag Weldy for what they could get. Weldy had money

to buy the land—somewhere in the house was fifty thousand dollars in cash, and Weldy was rich besides—

All this, Buck told himself as the torture tore through his mind and body, was because he couldn't stand the pain Weldy had inflicted upon him. And because Billy West couldn't stand to see one of his men suffer.

Buck lifted his bulging eyes and tried to draw a deep breath. The rawhide was squeezing him. Joe Scott was looking at him accusingly.

"By ganny!" Buck breathed helplessly. "By ganny!"

If his tooth would only stop hurting, he could think. He could figure out a way to get a gun, even though eight guns were ready to blast him down—

Then he remembered Sing Lo's soap pellets. There were still several of them in his vest pocket. They hadn't really helped the tooth, but they had helped Buck get away from that posse headed by young Jack Ames—

A crafty thought drove the pain from his mind. He reached surreptitiously into the pocket of the old bearskin vest, and took a big pill between his thumb and forefinger.

Billy West was still writing. The wind was still moaning eerily around the big stone house that would become a stronghold of lawlessness and crooked power—

Joe Scott let out another yell. "Stop it, Billy! Yuh cain't write that, I tell yuh! Let 'em kill us all, first!"

The redhead's outburst gave Buck his chance. He slipped the soap pellet into his mouth and began chewing fast and hard. He ran his tongue around over the tenderness of the tooth, working up a foam.

Billy was nearly through with the letter. There were guns covering

Buck—guns covering the others. But Billy's hands were free, and so were his own.

He blew, and a soap bubble escaped from his lips. His mouth was full of foam that was about to choke him. It was time to act, now.

The spine-chilling roar Buck Foster turned loose in the big room was worse than a panther's scream. He jumped into the air and came down on all fours; he rolled over, spitting and snarling, and foaming at the mouth—

"*Yow-e-e-e-e! Yow-o-o-o-o!*" Buck howled, and Turk Baxter let out a scared yelp and leaped away from the mossyhorn. Baxter stumbled over a chair and fell, and Valdez, his eyes wide and frightened in his leathery face, sprawled over Baxter.

"He's mad!" Karnes shouted. "Look at him—foamin' at the mouth! He's mad—shoot him afore he bites somebody!"

Sag Weldy shouted something above the turmoil; and Billy West swung around in alarm. It was Baxter who recovered his feet and rushed in toward Buck, a .45 thrust before him, the hammer of the gun rising menacingly to full cock.

Then Joe Scott flung himself forward in a hurtling dive. His hard shoulder crashed into the small of Baxter's back and the ex-convict gasped and rolled. There was a roar. Gunflame mushroomed on the stone floor, and the bullet splattered into a flattened, screaming missile that slammed against the wall.

The next instant, still roaring and foaming at the mouth, Buck Foster had snatched the .45 from Baxter's hand.

It whipped around and flamed. A lantern shattered. Joe Scott lurched against the shins of another man and sent him sprawling. Billy West was on his feet, clutching at Karnes'

shoulder to spin the slovenly man around, letting drive with his right.

Karnes' head snapped back and the thumb he had on his gun hammer went limp. Billy whisked the weapon out of his hand and swung it squarely into the swarthy, contorted face of Valdez.

The hammer fell on a thunder that was the last thing Valdez ever heard. Billy triggered again, and another man dropped; a bullet burned a long furrow across his chest, and staggered him back against the table. There were two men rushing him with guns flaming; the roar of shots was now continuous and terrible in the stone-walled room. Into the clatter and echoed thunder, Sag Weldy's rasping voice shouted orders.

Buck Foster's gun lanced flame and another lantern spattered flaming oil on the floor. There was a lurid glare for a few seconds, then the shuffle of boots trampled out the flame, and the one lantern left shed only a feeble glow. Buck was roaring as he charged in after the men who rushed Billy.

"Help me, Hannah!" the Circle J owner heard the old buckaroo shout. His gun crashed, and then, "Take thet, by ganny!" and the hammer fell on another blast.

There were still four or five of the sheepmen on their feet. Buck Foster's gun went empty; he flung it angrily at the last lantern and the room went in darkness that was split by streaks of powder flame.

Billy West circled around the table to make a stand against the rush of Weldy and two or three others. Buck was coming on the run, roaring and grabbing for a loaded gun in the dead hand of Valdez.

Flame flashed in Billy's face; the bullet was so close he felt the hot whip of it along his cheek. His own gun clicked emptily, and he leaned

across the table to swing it in a smashing arc that sent one man down with a gash across his scalp.

Then the table lifted in front of him, and slid grotesquely forward as bullets ripped into it. Joe Scott, his hands still tied behind him, was beneath the table, hoisting it on his head and shoulders. At the same time, he kicked out lustily with a heavy boot, and Sag Weldy's angry shout turned into a cry of pain.

Buck bounced up with Valdez's gun. It cracked so close against the ribs of a sheepman that the shot sounded muffled. The man pitched sidewise without a sound, literally blown across the upturned table by the force of the bullet's impact. His body struck Billy's legs, he clutched once at the Circle J ranchman's knees, and then went limp. Billy felt the gun slam against his boots.

He ducked to grab this weapon. A shot blazed where his head had been. There was a sudden stampede of stilted boots across the stone floor; several men were running, and the thunder of gunfire died.

Weldy yelled: "Get the dinero, Turk! Get the dinero!"

Billy slammed a shot in the direction of the voice, but the slug glanced harmlessly from a stone wall. The cattleman moved cautiously around from behind the table.

"Buck!" he called. "Joe! Are you all right?"

"Cut my hands free!" Joe yelled in a tone that made it certain he was unscathed. "Let me get in on this fight!"

Buck Foster uttered an unearthly moan. "My tooth's killin' me!" he complained. "I cain't stand it!"

Billy reached into his pocket and drew out his knife. "Where are you, Joe?" he asked. "Here—wait."

He scratched a match on the stone floor. The flame cupped in his hand

showed four men lying where they had fallen, and another was dragging himself toward the door. There were three still alive besides the wounded man—and Sag Weldy and Baxter were among them.

"Look out, Billy!" Joe yelled.

Flame jetted from the darkness of the long corridor. The bullet whizzed under Billy's upraised arm as he held the match aloft, and in the flash of the gun he saw Sag Weldy's face, contorted, grimacing. There was a wild, staring look in the sheepman's feverish eyes.

Billy triggered and the sheep rancher fled. The Circle J owner thrust his pocketknife into Buck Foster's hand.

"Cut Joe loose!" he panted. "Take care of things here. I'll handle Weldy!"

He stumbled over a broken chair and recovered his balance in a run. The corridor stretched away dimly, echoing his footsteps hollowly as he dashed along it. He stopped, listening, and above the trip-hammer tattoo of his heart, he could hear Sag Weldy still in flight.

Billy yanked up his gun and let go a shot that ricocheted down the narrow walls. Weldy cursed incoherently and fired back. The powder flash showed a blank wall, and Billy ran into it with bruising force before he could stop.

Pulling himself away, he held the gun at full cock and listened. Shots rang out back in the big room; Buck's roaring rant was a meaningless jumble as it drifted to Billy's ears and he could only see the split-second glimmering of the gunflame at the entrance to the corridor.

He groped for a door and found one that resisted all his efforts to open it. A damp wind seemed to be blowing through the keyhole—a wind that smelled of the mustiness

one that Billy had shot in town. Weldy had misunderstood Hoag's last words, as had Billy till now. Delirium from the other infected bite had done the rest. Sag really thought he *was* going mad.

The Circle J boss gave a desperate tug. His shirt collar ripped. His good left hand shot around and up as he ducked. It caught Weldy under the chin.

The sheepman's teeth clicked together over his last word. He lurched and toppled, and his boots caught on the skylight rim. One horrible scream floated up from the blackness, then there was a crash and a bumping sound that ended in silence.

And then, as Billy West climbed painfully through the skylight and began his slow descent, a lantern bobbed along the corridor. It was accompanied by three sounds: Buck Foster's groans, the dull clink of coins, and the faraway barking of the dog. In the circle of the lantern, Billy could see Joe and the mossyhorn.

Billy shouted down to them, and

they waited. Joe Scott was grinning triumphantly as he shifted heavy saddlebags to his other shoulder.

"I got Turk Baxter—as he was tryin' to hightail it with the dinero!" he said. "Part of it's in greenbacks, and part in gold. Fifty thousand—"

"*Oh-h-h!*" groaned Buck. "By ganny, I fooled 'em, didn't I? They shore thought yores truly was mad. They shore—"

"Well, wasn't yuh?" the redhead asked innocently.

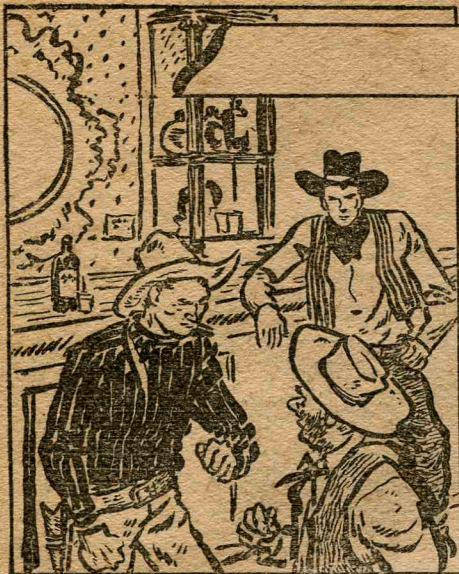
"Who, me?" Buck roared. "Why, yuh dumb sorrel-topped slickear, I just acted that way so's I could save yuh two buzzards! Of all the on-grateful whelps! Why, I'll be a horned toad if—"

"What you need, Buck," Billy grinned, "is another one of those pills Sing Lo made! I'll get him to make you one when I find that yippin' dog and turn him loose."

A spasm of pain twisted the old buckaroo's face. "*Ow-w-w!*" he howled. "Just wait till I get my hands on that slant-eyed heathen! I'll make him eat six of them—*Oh-h-h!* My tooth's killin' me!"

IF YOU FEAR DEATH, DREAD THE MYSTERIOUS AND AWFUL, think twice before you read the "*Curse of the Tumbling T,*" by C. William Harrison, in next week's issue. It's a blood-curdling, driving story that is guaranteed to turn the stoutest heart. And there's "*Bullet Ballots from the Bar U Twins,*" by Charles E. Barnes. The ballot box of destiny was stuffed with lobo treachery, and Tom and Jerry Carter cast lead-red votes! Also something brand new and different in novelettes, "*Death Rides Black Gorge Pass,*" a story by George Michener, who writes with the fury of a man who has looked Death in the face! And there's a Jeff and Bugeye story, by Frank J. Litchfield, "*A Cure for Stutterin',*" that'll have you rolling on the floor. And Part IV of Ed Earl Repp's "*Canyon of the Forgotten,*" where Bronc Maverick and Panamint Joe are trapped by a weird twist of Fate! **DON'T MISS NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE—TEN CENTS AT YOUR OWN NEWS DEALER'S!**

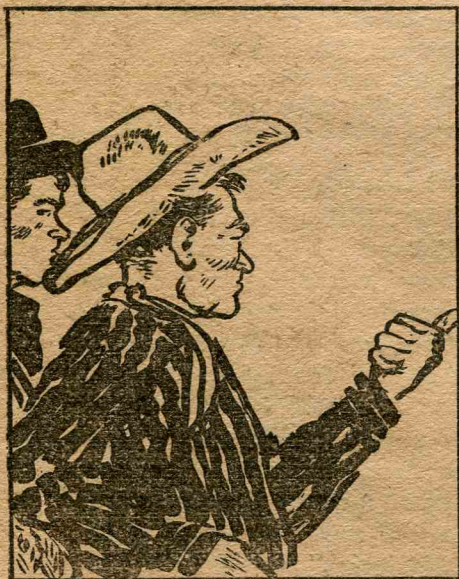
BRONC EVANS



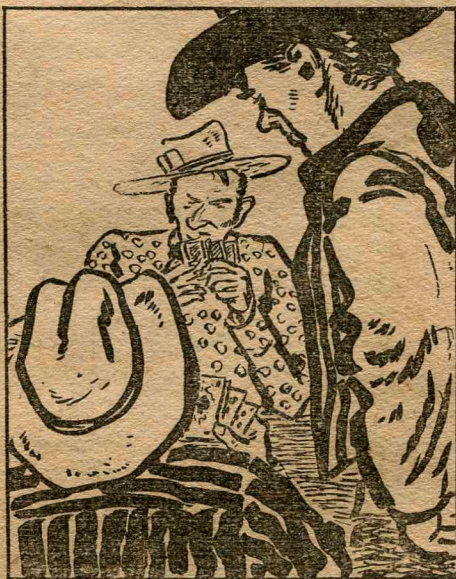
1. Sol Meggs, the Bar A foreman, had taken a liking to Bronc Evans, so the day after pay day, they rode to Latigo together to "paint the town red." In a saloon, a tough hombre jostled Sol and hoorawed him to get him in a fist fight.



2. The tough had picked the wrong gent, for Sol had been a hard rough-and-tumble fighter in his day. He let fly a punch that folded up the tough in two spittoons. "Yipee! Thet's the ticket, pard!" Bronc cheered as the jasper went down.



3. Picking himself up, the tough slunk away. "He's Lefty Ide," Sol told Bronc. "He worked fer me as a cowhand onct, an' I fired him. He's spillin' fer a fight every time I ride to town. Waal, this time he got what he's been askin' fer."

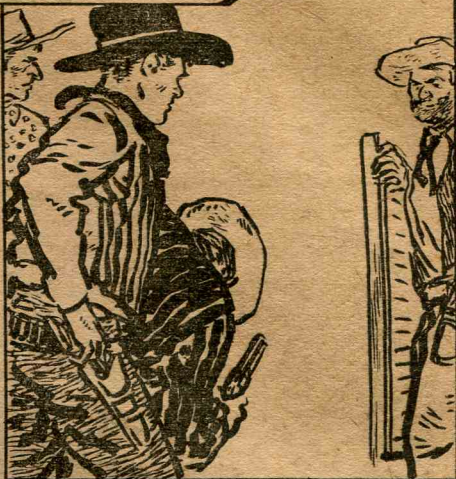


4. Bronc wanted to go, but Sol spotted an empty chair at a card table, and took a hand in a poker game. Opposite him sat a mean-looking jasper, shuffling the pasteboards. The other two players were small ranchers. Bronc looked on.

PAINTS THE TOWN



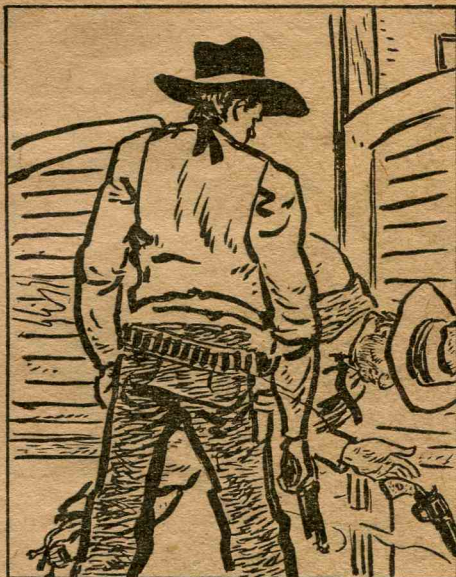
5. Suddenly, Sol and the card player opposite him leaped to their feet, both reaching for their six-guns. "Yuh cheated, yuh buzzard!" the jasper accused Sol. At the swing doors behind them stood Lefty Ide, who had slunk back unnoticed.



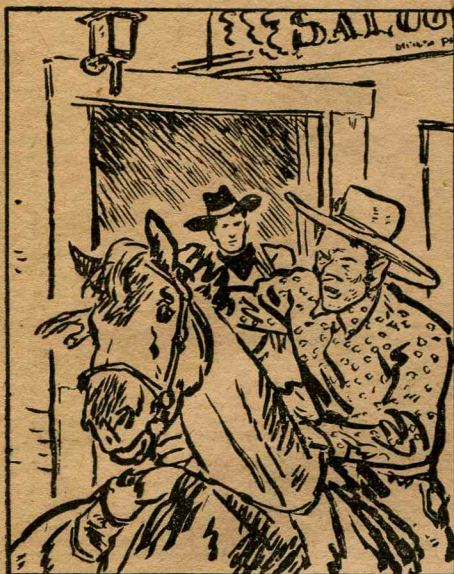
6. Bang! The jasper got his Colt clear of leather first and triggered at Sol, who fell, beaten to the draw, his gun in hand, unfired. Bronc and Lefty reached for their six-guns. The crowd ducked for cover as the poker game broke up.



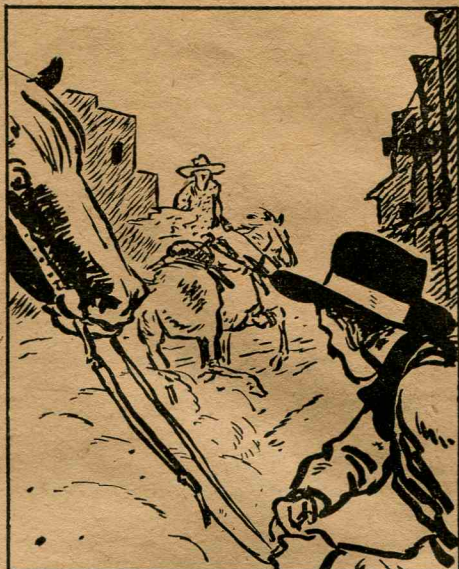
7. Bang-bang! Bronc and Lefty triggered at each other. Through the swing doors which Lefty had been guarding, the jasper who had shot Sol made his getaway. He held his Colt, but didn't have to use it, for nobody made a move to stop him.



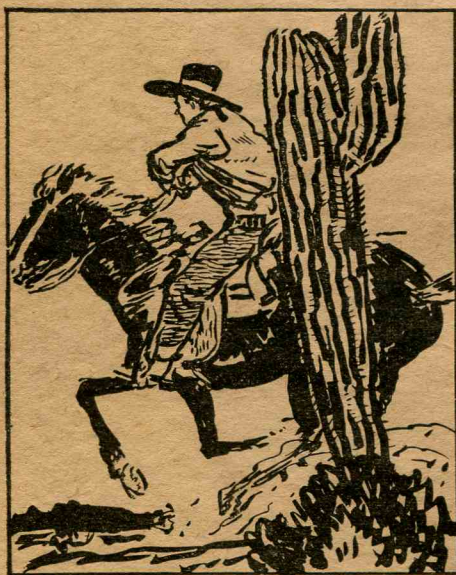
8. In that swap of lead, Bronc's six-gun had cleared leather a split second faster than Lefty's. Bronc was on the alert, watching for a trick, ready for anything, his eyes on the crowd as heads rose from hiding behind tables and the bar.



9. Out of the saloon raced Bronco in hot pursuit of the jasper with whom Sol had tangled. The gunman sprinted to the hitch rack in front of the saloon, where he unhitched his cayuse and swung aboard it. Down the main street he hightailed it.



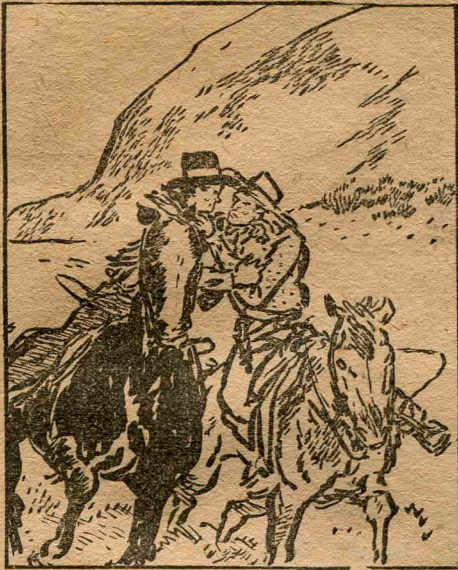
10. Bronco sped to the hitch rack, unhitched his horse and put chase. With clattering hoofs, the two cayuses burned the breeze through the cow town. The jasper fired his six-gun at Bronco, but on a galloping horse, his aim was bad.



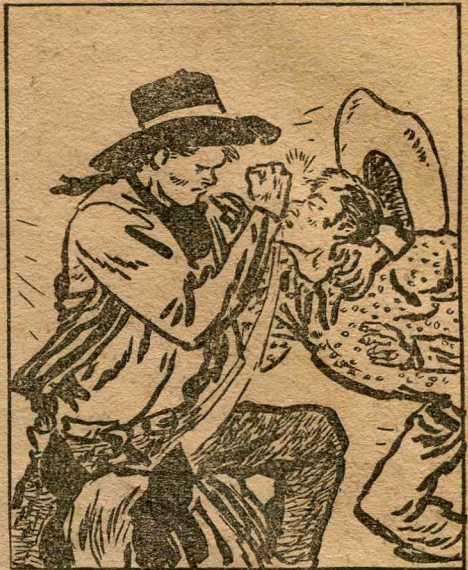
11. The road led into open country, where it narrowed to a trail. Bronco was fast overhauling the rider ahead, who wasn't turning in his saddle and shooting now. Bronco had counted the jasper's shots and knew that his gun was empty.



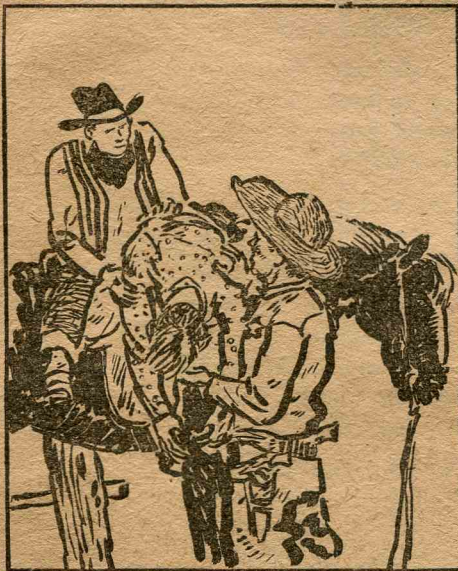
12. Riding up beside the hombre, Bronco reined his horse in and kept it running alongside the other cayuse. He didn't have to depend on his six-gun when he could work one of his circus tricks. The horses raced neck and neck.



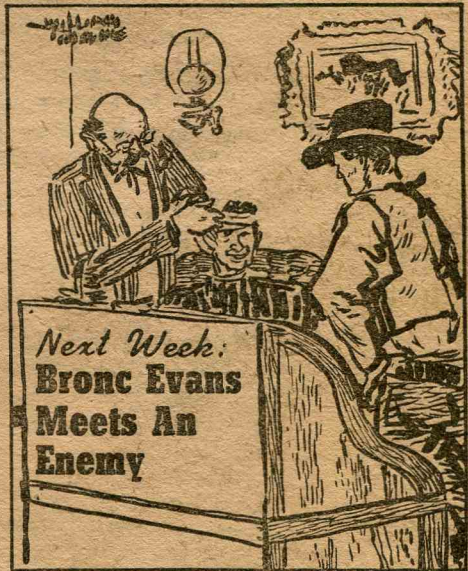
13. Leaning from his saddle, he grappled with the surprised jasper, and they wrestled, the horses plunging ahead under them as they struggled. In the circus, Bronc had wrestled on horseback in one of his riding acts. Now it was no mere act.



14. In Bronc's experienced hands, the jasper was soon overpowered, but Bronc wanted to make sure of him. Hauling him across to his own saddle, Bronc held him in one arm while he drove an uppercut to the point of his captive's chin.



15. Holding the reviving jasper, Bronc rode back to town. There, the marshal came out to meet them. He hauled the prisoner down and said: "He's Lefty's pard, Poke Enos. If Sol dies, he'll swing. If Sol don't die, Poke'd better drift."



16. In the saloon office, Bronc found a sawbones bandaging Sol's wounded shoulder. "Poke won't hang, kid," Sol laughed. "'Tain't nothin' but a scratch. We'll finish paintin' the town next pay day. Yuh shore got a plumb good start this trip."

Callin' A Bluff

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

As we hang around for the evenin' mail
 An' listen to Sunset Simpson talk,
 A strange galoot comes up the trail
 On a hoss slowed down to a shamblin' walk.

He joins the crowd that's standin' there
 As Sunset's doin' himself real proud
 With a tale of rasslin' a grizzly bear,
 An' the new-come hombre laughs out loud.

Waal, Sunset gits tarnation mad,
 But the strange galoot don't give a darn,
 For he shore looks tough—yeah, tough an' bad.
 Then Sunset starts his fav'rite yarn.

How he fought MacKay, the bandit chief,
 In Palomar 'bout a year ago,
 An' knocked the daylights out of the thief
 An' chased him clear to Mexico.

Then the stranger yells: "That's a doggone lie!"
 An' shoves the fellers out of his way
 Till he's starin' at Sunset eye to eye,
 An' says: "Yo're lookin' at Rod MacKay."

Then Sunset sneers: "I'm usin' my eyes;
 An' mebbe I ain't so easy to fool.
 I know that MacKay is twicet yore size—"
 An' the stranger pulls his shootin' tool.

But Sunset grabs the hombre's gun
 An' roars: "Yuh carried yore bluff too far.
 Now I'm goin' to show yuh what I done
 To the real MacKay in Palomar."

He slams that bird agin' Cohen's store
 An' busts the wall with the back of his head.
 Then socks him a dozen wallops more
 An' the stranger drops an' lays like dead.

The Fargo guard who's watchin' the fight,
 Looks over the coot as he lays in the road,
 An' cries: "It's MacKay himself, all right.
 We'd better be tyin' the pizen toad."

Then Sunset growls: "I'd never know
 This skunk was MacKay, the bird I beat.
 Them bangs on the head a year ago
 Must 'a' shortened him down a couple of feet."



CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN

by ED EARL REPP

Part III

Author of "Yuma Bill—Hangnosed Deputy," etc.

CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN

By Ed Earl Repp

**Blood stains Maverick's hands—and
death guilt rides his innocent shoulders.**

The Story So Far:

BRONC MAVERICK, slab-muscled, young assistant to old blacksmith,

PANAMINT JOE, waits in Mesquite Flat in the hope that a red-bearded man, whom he vaguely remembers from his past, will some day pass through the town. For Maverick has forgotten all details of his life. Even his name has been given to him by Panamint, who picked him up, dazed, at the desert's edge some six years before.

While at work in the blacksmith shop, the two hear an unearthly sound strike in from the desert. Racing out into the dreaded South Sink, they find old

BURRO BOB, leading in an overladen pack burro. The old man is exhausted and in deadly fear of some strange peril from which he is rushing. As Bronc speeds to aid him, an Indian arrow just misses his head. Though Bronc and Panamint search the hills as old Bob staggers toward Mesquite Flat, they can find no one.

Returning to town, they walk into a large group of men gathered about Bob's pack mule from which a bulky pack filled with gold has fallen to the ground. Men have pushed old Bob aside and are trying to help themselves. This gold-crazy mob is spurred on by

HIGHGRADE HALEY and his henchmen, who plan to grab the gold for themselves. Bronc rushes Haley, knocks his guns from his hands, and saves the gold for Burro Bob.

But the latter refuses the bullion as not his. He insists on taking it to the Wells Fargo office where he wants it held for a boy named

PIKE FRAZER. Years before this lad had escaped from a massacre of a gold caravan. The lad's father,

LONG TOM FRANK FRAZER, the leader of the gold train, had placed a ring made of a gold nugget on the boy's finger for identification. Long Tom has been ac-

cused by rumor of killing off the members of the gold train to get all the bullion.

Highgrade Haley threatens to produce the son of Frazer and claim the lost gold.

When Bronc and Panamint return to the blacksmith shop, Panamint tells Bronc that he, Maverick, is really the missing heir and that the ring is hidden in the desert under a piebald rock.

One of Haley's owl-hooters overhears Panamint; a gun fight ensues, but the man escapes to warn Haley, who rushes to get the ring first and sets a trail trap for Panamint and Bronc.

CHAPTER IX.

VISION FROM THE PAST.

OLD PANAMINT JOE was down in a pitiful heap. Sight of his old pard, who had been like a father to him, lying there in the dust filled Bronc Maverick with a fierce hatred for those responsible. His throat clogged and ached and the fury that scorched his soul gave devastating speed to his corded muscles. Like bull bats, diving in feeding flight, his big hands shot gunward.

Lead sent up geysers of dust and sand about his scuffed boots and whined like Satan's harp past his long, steel-thewed body. But he hardly noticed it. He had eyes only for the pair of slatlike gunmen advancing upon him from the ring of boulders that surrounded Coyote Wells. Gunflame and death poured in a steady stream from the muzzles of their weapons and with Panamint down, both gunnies were directing their shots at Bronc. The giant

young blacksmith realized only vaguely that the trickiness of the moonlight was all that had saved him so far. He steeled himself to the expectant snag of lead through his solid flesh.

It seemed ages before he got his guns unsheathed, but it had been only a second or two. Now they were up and he was earing back the hammers. Lead scored the side of one of his boots. Another plucked at his sleeve, its passage jerking his left arm back as he let the hammers fall. Muzzle flame high-lighted the big bones of his set face and the thin slits of his eyes. Frozen-faced the hired killers walked relentlessly as death toward him.

Bronc crouched over his bucking Colts. He had trained himself to use those guns, but not against men. Now that he had been crowded too far, it would be root hog or die. No one, he avowed, was going to keep him from finding Forgotten Canyon and proving or disproving his identity. The chance he'd dreamed of had come at last, and these men bearing down upon him threatened to snatch it away.

With the cold steadiness of a veteran gun-slammer, Bronc set himself, legs wide apart. The two Shroud brothers were no more than twenty feet from him now. It didn't seem possible to Bronc that he could stand against them, and yet he was still on his feet. Once again he felt the guns buck in his hands. A piercing scream filled the air as lead found lodging in Ace Shroud.

The small, slatlike killer seemed to break in the middle. Strength drained from his skinny legs like water from a punctured canteen. He fell forward on his face, and for the first time the chill mask on the other's face changed. Surprise con-

torted his visage then gave way to insane hatred.

"You can't kill a Shroud, Maverick!" he bit out and flipped up his guns again. "Yo're on your way to hell now!" He leaped forward, hammers eared back.

Bronc triggered at the same instant, the spearing flashes of their weapons mingling like fiery tongues. Pain stabbed the side of his neck, but he paid no attention to it, for twin slugs from his own gun punched Hoag Shroud squarely in the brisket. Their force drove him backward like a wind-whipped sapling. Then he was writhing down, his thin body racked by a fit of coughing.

Bronc could see that he was through, but the little renegade was still game. Weakly he struggled to line his hot guns on the young blacksmith's chest, but the effort was too much for him. He sagged back, gasping.

"Yo're top dog this time, mister," Hoag Shroud sighed heavily. "First man to face Shroud guns an' live. The damn moonlight spoiled our aim."

And by that same moonlight Bronc saw bloody froth bubble from the gunman's slackening lips. His fingers dug into the sand. Hoag Shroud had spoken his last words.

With a pity for them that they didn't deserve, Bronc stooped and covered the hatchet faces of the Shroud brothers with their own battered sombreros. Then stiffly, like a man in a dream, he turned to sprint toward his fallen partner.

The old desert rat was lying a dozen feet away, a pathetic crumpled figure in the moonlight. His battered hat had fallen off, showing an ominous patch of blood along the temple. Bronc saw the wound as he reached his partner's side.

"Panamint," the word groaned

from his lips. "Pard, yuh ain't dead! Them two buzzards couldn't 'a' killed you. Dang it, fella, the boot-hill ain't been made that you'd fit!"

Swiftly Bronc ripped open his partner's ragged shirt. In a moment he'd know the answer. Fear clutched at Bronc, but he steeled himself, placed his fingers against Panamint's breast. Beneath the bony framework of the prospector's ribs Bronc felt the steady beat of his heart. Panamint was alive!

Reaction dizzied the young smithy for an instant, then he leaped to his feet. Running to his Gila horse, Bronc snatched a canteen from behind the cante, and hurried back.

Panamint was already stirring by the time he got there, but his eyes weren't open yet. Bronc forced the muzzle of the canteen between his partner's lips. He could see now that Panamint had only been creased, that the wound was probably not serious, if the old-timer was coming to so quickly.

The water turned the trick. Panamint came out of his stupor with a spitting roar. Water sprayed from beneath his mustache to wet Bronc's shirt front. He reared up, grabbing at Maverick's arms.

"What in the name of Tophet yuh tryin' to do, drown me?" he demanded hoarsely. "Don't yuh know thet busthaid is what yuh feed a wounded jasper like me? Damn it, Bronc, if I got to go jine Satan's crew, I shore don't wanta make the trip without a drap for reinforcements! What happened to them dry-gulchers?"

Relief surged through Bronc. Panamint was his old self again. He told his partner of the outcome of the battle. "Only recruits for hell so far tonight is Madden, and these two gents. I'm bettin' yuh High-grade Haley's goin' to be a mighty

surprised jasper when he sees us bouncin' right back at him."

"Glory be," Panamint croaked. "I'll bet yuh saved the ring. It's probably in the pocket of one of those dirty dry-gulchers!"

But the ring wasn't. They discovered that fact fifteen minutes later. Bronc had bathed and bandaged the bullet crease in Panamint's scalp with a clean strip torn from his undershirt. Panamint was a little unsteady on his pins, but he professed himself to be as good as new.

"Mebbe thet crease will do me some good," he growled disgustedly. "A feller that's fit Apaches and Plains Sioux, and kept his hair oughta have sense enough not to bust smack into a tight like yuh jest got us out of, Bronc. 'Tain't yore fault we walked into this trap. I'm takin' the full blame, and thankin' yuh at the same time fer savin' my worthless pelt."

Expertly the old prospector went over the bodies of the two dead gunnies, emptying their pockets. But the nugget ring wasn't in them. Frantically he went over the rest of their bodies, even pulling off their boots. But at last he had to admit defeat. His weathered old face was the picture of despair as he glanced up at Bronc who had been watching him.

"Kid, it ain't here, and there's no sense in diggin' out my old war bag to look in there. Yuh can see where one of these rannies tamped the sand back to cover it. Dang it, Bronc, I'm jest as sorry about this as a gent can be. They must 'a' been a third hombre with these killers, and he ambled outa here with the one shore proof thet yore name is Frazer. It ain't much to hope for, but mebbe we can cut his sign and run him down. You circle the Wells, an' I'll take a squint at thet rubble hill yon-

der. Holler if yuh cut the third gent's sign afore I do."

On creaky knees, Panamint clambered to his feet, hooked his arm through Satan's dangling reins. Then for just an instant both of them paused, looking down at the dead Shroud brothers. The presence of death was close about them. Awed by the feeling, Bronc stared down at the dead men. He had killed them both. It was still hard for him to comprehend. Now he himself was a killer. Some men could be proud of a thing like that, but not he.

Panamint seemed to sense his feelings.

"Kid," he said softly, "don't feel too bad about this. Yuh want to remember that it was either them or us. We're playin' for the biggest stakes, against the wust stacked deck the good Lord ever concocted. Haley ain't goin' to stop at nothin'. We got to remember that, and try and outsmart him. He's a mighty savvy hombre; we know that, too. Thinkin' about how to steal a million in *dinero* has shore greased his brains!"

Hating himself for the thought, Bronc could keep only half of his attention on his search for the tracks of the third jasper who had gotten away with the ring. Panamint was right. A million dollars in raw gold was enough to grease the brains of any gent. Had such thoughts stimulated his old pard's think tank also? Bronc wondered.

But he had no time to carry through his reasoning, for a muffled hail from behind the rubble hill on the other side of Coyote Wells made him swing to Gila's back and spur toward Panamint. The old-timer was already in the saddle, swooping away through the shimmering moonlight like a bird dog on the scent. Bronc realized that his partner had

found the trail of the hombre who had gotten away with the ring.

For half an hour they followed the imprint of shod hoofs straight as a crow flight toward Mesquite Flat. Then the marks disappeared along a spiny ridge of lava. With desperate patience they searched the ridge while the moon and the red desert stars swung slowly across the velvet sky above.

Finally Panamint called a halt. "'Tain't no use to waste any more time," he said bitterly. "We've been outsmarted again. Haley's got that ring on a redhead's finger by now, jest as shore as shootin'. An' he ain't goin' to have much trouble convincin' Judge Peek an' Winslow that his man is Pike Frazer with it to back his argyments."

Bronc's blocky chin jutted stubbornly. "Which ain't goin' to keep us from tryin'," he asserted stoutly. "Come on, pard, let's ramble back to town."

But he knew as he swung once again to Gila's saddle, that his words were empty, that their cause looked mighty hopeless. Panamint Joe, he realized, had waited too long before coming forward with his story that Bronc Maverick was indeed Pike Frazer. Judge Peek would use that one point of logic to poke a big hole in their story. The same hole that he was, himself, trying to overlook. How, Bronc asked himself bitterly, could he expect the judge and Winslow to believe Panamint's yarn when there was a shadow of doubt concerning it in his own heart? If only his memory would come back so that he could ease the doubt in his own mind!

The thought seared him with its intensity. And, as though his very wish had conjured it, an odd picture came into his mind. Like a film unrolling, he got a mental view of a

long train of tall Conestogas lurching over almost the same trail they were following! Yoked cattle pulled the wagons. Men with goads in their hands kept prodding them along, and in the lead of the train a mighty figure with red hair flowing down about his shoulders scouted the way ahead from the back of a big bay horse.

Bronc blinked, startled, as the picture faded. That vision had been so real that he could hardly believe that it wasn't really happening before his eyes. Then a wave of excitement such as he had never felt before set every muscle in his lanky body to trembling. Had he just imagined it all?—Bronc asked himself. Was he just dreaming? For clearly he had seen the face of that red-haired giant scouting ahead of the wagon train. A face that bore a strong resemblance to his own. The face of Long Tom Frank Frazer! He found that his hands, clenched on the nubbin of his kak, were wet with perspiration.

Head bowed, Bronc's lips moved in a silent prayer.

"God," he whispered without shame, "take care of this situation. Help me to find the answers I'm looking for. If it's right and fitten I should find 'em through gun smoke, I'll sling my share."

Those words he had whispered seemed to make him feel better. Strain suddenly left his mind. The doubt was still there, but time, and time alone, would answer his questions. Right now the stacked cards of the present needed all his attention.

Bronc was so engrossed with his thoughts that it came as a shock to see that they were once more in Mesquite Flat. Though midnight was long gone, he saw that every saloon and gambling house on the street

was still alight, going full blast. They were turning night into day here, waking the sleepy crossroads village into a hell town.

Somewhere up ahead a drunken miner triggered his six-gun at the moon. Bronc saw the ugly flashes of the weapon against the night. It reminded him of the lead he had faced in the space of the last few hours—enough of it to fill a dozen men. And there'd likely be more to come!

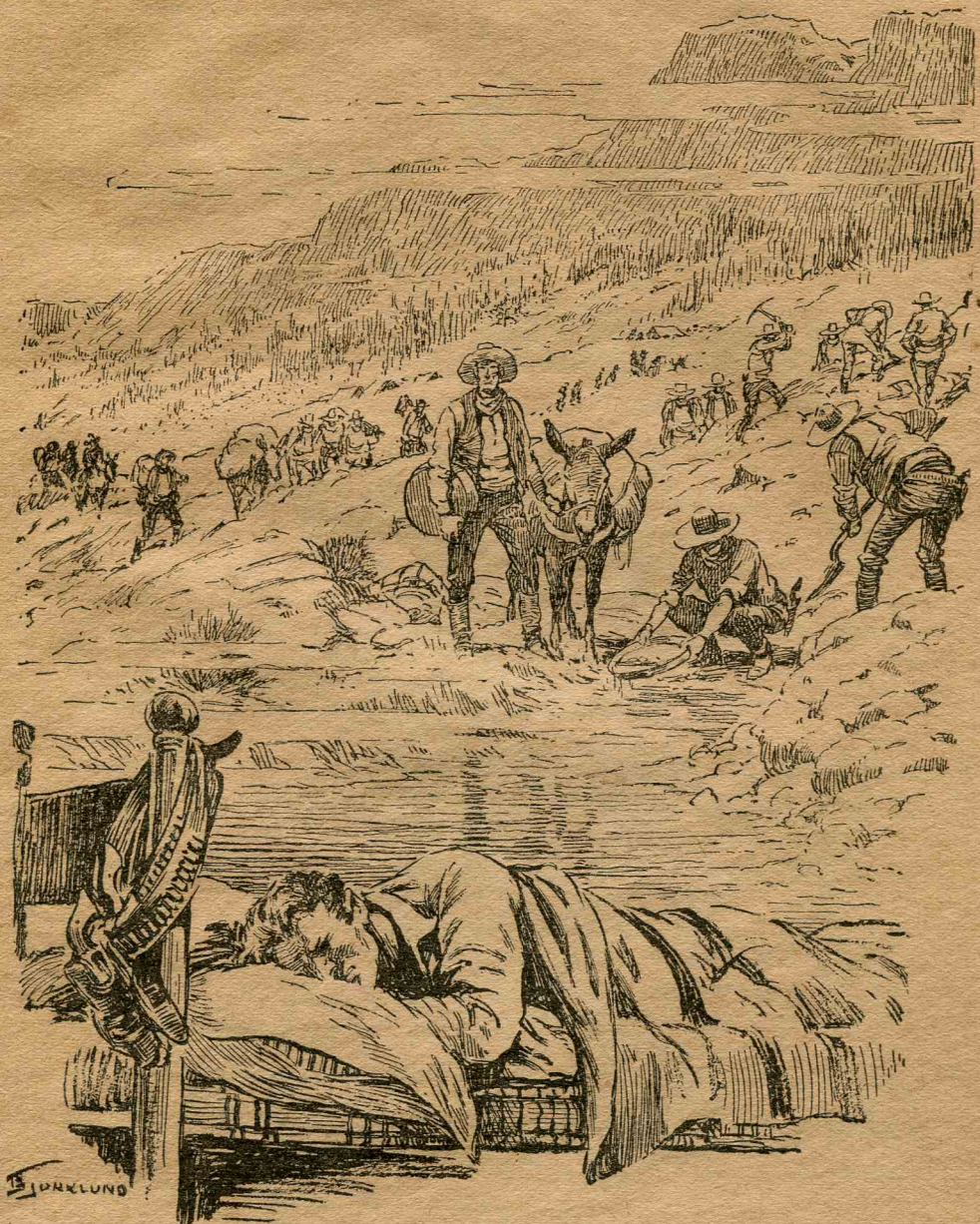
The thought made him drop his lean fingers to loosen guns jammed tight in their holsters by the ride they had made in from Coyote Wells. Just what Highgrade Haley's next move might be he didn't know, but from now on he was going to be ready for anything.

Panamint swung down before the hitch rail in front of the Mirage Saloon. Bronc followed him to the ground, a question in his gray eyes. "What yuh stoppin' here for, Joe?" he inquired softly.

"Archie Gabb, the tender inside, has lived up to his rep more'n once. His ears pick up more truck about what's goin' on around town than anybody else, an' he spills it with a loose lip. Let's go in and see if he's heard anything about thet hombre Haley claims is Pike Frazer. We might as well know the wust and git it over with."

Bronc nodded and jingled his spurs across the boardwalk after his old pard. Panamint resembled a gaunt old hawk, with his Sharps tucked in the crook of his arm. A wave of admiration for the old-timer who had given up so much to raise him, surged through Bronc. He had no right to doubt Panamint Joe's motives.

Side by side they breasted through the bat-wing doors of the Mirage.



Dreams came to him, strange and fantastic!

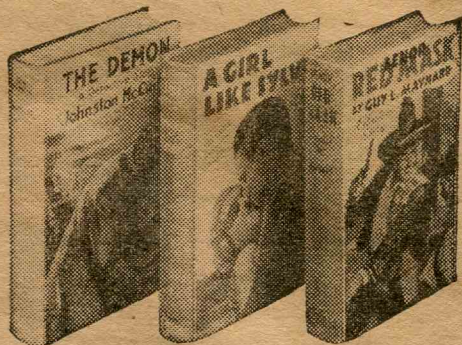
The place had its share of patrons, Bronc saw, as they headed for the scarred pine bar, but most of them were gambling at the layouts spread about the room.

Archie Gabb was idly polishing

glasses behind the bar. He was a short, stocky gent, with a round moon of a face. It lighted with pleasure at sight of the newcomers.

"Hi, yuh old fossil," he greeted Panamint, "an' how are you, Mav-

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erick? Where in hell you gents been all evenin'?" he burred on.

Panamint Joe draped his lanky length against the bar.

"Busy," he drawled briefly. "What's new, Gabby? Yuh look all swelled up like a pizened pup."

The bartender's watery eyes started to glitter. "Boy, howdy!" he exclaimed. "They's plenty to tell. Damned if a gal, callin' herself Dorita Nelson, didn't breeze in on the evenin' stage from Shasta, claimin' herself to be the datter of Hattie Nelson, who was lost with the rest when Frazer's Gold Train disappeared. Swears she's one of the survivors, she does, an' therefore entitled to a share of the pack of bullion Burro Bob snaked in from the desert!"

CHAPTER X.

THE LAW TAKES A HAND.

THIS was news! Bronc saw Panamint's jaw sag with surprise. It was something neither of them had considered, and something Haley probably hadn't thought of either. And it was likely to throw a monkey wrench into the judge's proceedings. Bronc grinned in spite of himself.

"Haley know it yet?" he asked.

"Haley?" Archie Gabb chuckled. "The cuss is fit to be tied, I hear. Sage Winslow has done set the hearin' for tomorrer noon in the stage station, claimin' he wants to git the responsibility fer that pack of *dinero* off his shoulders. Pussonally, I think he's afeared some more gents may show up to clutter up their proceedin's."

Panamint glanced obliquely at his young partner. Bronc wondered if the same thought that had come to him had entered Panamint's mind. He could sense Highgrade Haley's hand behind Winslow's decision to

hold their gold court so soon. Haley wanted it all in the bag, he realized, before anybody discovered their bodies out at Coyote Wells. A grim smile tugged at the corners of his clean-cut lips. Haley was going to be in for a surprise when somebody did bring in the dead men!

Then he turned his attention back to the bartender, for Archie Gabb was talking again. "I don't see myself why Haley's worryin'," he drawled. "The gal, who I hear is a looker, hasn't got a chance. This hombre Haley claims is Pike Frazer, has done showed up. He's been goin' under the name of Lon Sykes, up Shasta way, but here he's proclaimin' to one an' all thet his handle is Frazer. An' he's sportin' a big nugget ring on his finger to prove it!"

Panamint's shoulders jerked as though at a blow as the bartender told them that, but he said nothing, for Gabb was piling shock on shock like the repeated lashing of a bull whip. Bronc heard him out, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Yep," the bartender went on, "this feller Sykes looks like the real ticket. He's big, redheaded. I even hear thet some of the old-timers who remember Long Tom Frazer well, claim the younker's the spittin' image of his dad! But I shore wish somebody else had brought him to town aside of Haley. Thet hombre's slicker'n a greased pig—" Then Gabb's voice choked off. His words ended in a high-pitched squeak as though somebody had clamped fingers about his windpipe.

Bronc saw the bartender's watery blue eyes bug at something right behind them. He started his whirl as Haley's deep voice roared, "Maverick, I'm callin' yo're hand. Alf Saunders o' the Nugget Bar sez yuh killed Bull Madden, but talked yore

way outa it. Yuh may be able to fool Sheriff Hartley, but yuh cain't pull the wool over my eyes."

Racing thoughts caromed through Bronc's brain as he spun. Haley had evidently spotted their horses outside and entered to finish the task in which his gun-slammers had failed! His lightning fast, cross-hand draw was clearing his guns of leather. Bronc saw that he could never finish his own draw before Haley's guns spouted death at him. And this time the big outcast wouldn't miss. Unnoticed, he had drawn to within a few paces of them. But keyed to lightning pitch, his trained muscles reacted with instinctive speed to the emergency.

Bronc leaped forward. His balled right fist arched toward Haley's shaven chin. Close enough to make it count, his whistling blow landed as Haley pronged back the spiked hammers of his guns. The force of his punch sent the big gun boss reeling backward. His weapons blared throatily at the ceiling.

Then a number of things seemed to happen all at once. Patrons who had been engrossed in their games, slid out of their chairs. A gaming table crashed as someone upended it to give himself some protection from flying bullets and fists, for what Haley had expected to finish in one burst of gunflame had turned into something entirely different. Three men had entered the Mirage with him. Two of them were squat, swarthy, slit-eyed gents. Gun-slammers of the worst ilk, they were leaping forward now to join in the fracas Highgrade had started. The third of his band was a brutish-faced redhead, with a perpetually sullen expression in his small, shoe-button eyes. Tousled red hair covered his head. A lock of it dangled across his low forehead. Bronc needed no one

to tell him that the redhead was the pseudo Pike Frazer!

His blow to Haley's jaw had given him a momentary advantage. Haley stumbled backward into Lon Sykes, who, in turn, had banged into Haley's lieutenant gunnies, George Nate, and Spider Bane.

Bronc followed up his advantage with flailing fists. He could have dragged his twin Colts, but sometimes a man could swing his dukes faster than he could fan lead. There was the added hazard of drilling some innocent bystander if lead started flying. But Haley didn't seem to care about that. His Colts were lifting once again, and this time there was nothing Bronc could do about it. He had his hands full with Lon Sykes, who had charged him like a butting bull. But out of the corner of his eye he saw the lanky shadow of his partner speed past him, old Sharps clubbed.

"No, yuh don't, Haley!" Bronc heard Panamint yell. "Yuh ain't gunnin' my pard when he's got his hands full." His rifle butt swung like a scythe to smash both of Haley's weapons from his hands. That was all Bronc had time to see, for Lon Sykes' shoulders that were almost as wide as a door, blocked out his view.

He ducked a whistling fist that would have felled an ox, and drove a short hard punch of his own to the other redhead's middle. It felt to Bronc like he'd socked a stove lid. Sykes' body was hard as rock. He tried to side-step the lunging jasper, but a table got in the way. They met head-on like a pair of battering-rams. The table that had stopped Bronc turned to kindling as they both fell against it.

One of Sykes' hamlike fists whizzed by his ear. Bronc saw the redhead's stubbly visage right above

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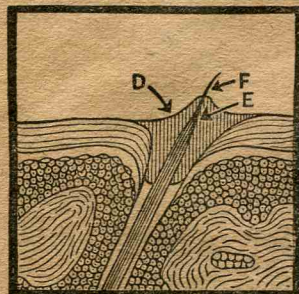
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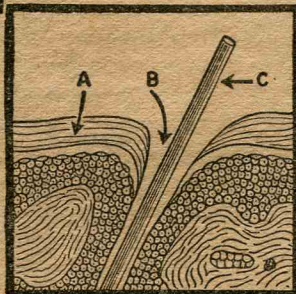
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him. The man's weight was across his chest, pinning him down in the tangled mass of the table. A snarling grin of elation curled Sykes' lips. His thick fingers grabbed for Maverrick's ears.

"The swamper'll sweep yore brains out in the mornin' with the rest of the sawdust!" he growled throatily.

A nail torn from the wreck of the table was gouging Bronc's thigh. One hand was pinned under his back, but his right was free. Unless he did something in a hurry, Sykes stood a fair chance of making good his threat. Again that nail gouged him. Bronc reached for it as Sykes' big fingers closed about his ears. Blinding lights flashed before his eyes as Sykes smashed his head against the floor, but it did not alter his purpose. He knew the horror some men had of steel. And Sykes was one of the breed who did, Bronc hoped. His right had clamped the square of board that held the nail, yanked it from beneath his leg. Again lights flashed like the sparks from an anvil across his vision. Then his right swung out and around. The nail bit through Sykes' taut shirt, scraped across his ribs.

Terror replaced the look of triumph on the pseudo Pike Frazer's face. A yell burst from his lips. "I been stabbed! Gawd-a-mighty, he stabbed me!"

As though moved by springs, Lon Sykes leaped upright, grabbed for his side. Head still spinning from the couple of bumps it had taken, Bronc staggered to his feet. A shadow fell athwart his feet. He heard the scrape of a spur. Spinning desperately, Bronc caught a glimpse of a descending Colt barrel, of Highgrade Haley's face behind the gun. He tried to bring up an arm to fend off the blow, but his muscles were leaden from the beat-

ing he had already taken. The descending steel beat down across the young smithy's forelock. Bronc felt his knees caving. Blackness was washing up from the floor to engulf him. But like an island, Haley loomed above it, and there was death in his sooty eyes, and death in the weapons he tipped toward Bronc's chest.

There was a great roaring in his ears, like the sound of surf on a stony shore, but through it he heard an authoritative voice yell, "Stand yore hand, Haley. The law's drawin' cards!"

Pudgy Archie Gabb was standing in the middle of the saloon wringing his hands and swearing monotonously. The sound was soothing as a lullaby to Bronc's ears as consciousness returned. It told him that he hadn't been out long, and that the battle was finished. Then he remembered the last words he'd heard, and looked around for the sheriff. For a minute or two the Mirage lived up to its name by shimmering like one of those odd illusions, then slowly it settled into solidity. Patrons were beginning to clamber out cautiously from the places where they'd taken refuge. The saloon looked as if a cyclone had struck it. Bronc didn't blame Archie Gabb for cursing.

Then he spotted the graying sheriff, Greg Hartley, talking in crackling tones to Haley, who looked blandly innocent now. The gent could change face as fast as a chameleon lizard changed its color. Bronc's respect for the hombre went up a notch. Then his view of the gun boss was cut off by a pair of spindly shanks that came between him and them. Panamint Joe dropped to his knees beside Bronc, faded old eyes staring anxiously at his young pard.

"Here, take a snort of this brew, kid. It's guaranteed to cure anything from busted noggins to chill-blains!"

Bronc grinned and gingerly touched the swelling lump on his forehead where Haley's weapon had struck. "It ain't busted," he grunted, "so I guess I'll let you drink that rattlesnake juice for me. Yuh look like you could stand it."

His eyes passed over his lanky pard. Panamint had not fared so badly in the brawling battle, but action had started that bullet crease above his ear bleeding again. One side of his neck and a stringy end of his mustache was plastered with gore.

But before he could say more, Sheriff Hartley pushed his heavy body through the group of curious customers who had crowded around the two bunches now that the battle was over. Hartley's bulging brown eyes were blazing with righteous anger. He planted himself directly before Panamint Joe as Bronc crawled to his feet. Weaving a little from dizziness, he clutched his partner's arm to steady himself. Sheriff Hartley, Bronc realized, had saved him by his timely intervention, but from the bulldog look on the sheriff's face, it wasn't going to help matters a bit to tell him so. He remembered how Panamint had got the drop on the officer down at Gateway House. Hartley was thinking about that, too, Bronc could see, and not pleasantly.

"Well, yuh old sidewinder," Hartley addressed Panamint in harsh tones, "what yuh got to say for yoreself? I've heerd Haley's story, an' now I wanta hear yores."

Panamint Joe's mustache seemed to bristle. "Jest what is thet hombre's story?" he purred softly.

"Why, Mr. Haley tells me thet

he saw yore hosses outside an' come in here to find out if either of yuh had cut the sign of the gent thet murdered his pard, Bull Madden. An' the fust thing he knew, Maverick, here, was lightin' into him with his fists. Course he natcherly had to perteck hisself."

The sheer audacity of Haley's story seemed to strike Panamint dumb for an instant. It was Bronc who answered, his big fists balled once more.

"Why, that lyin' tarantler," he got out heatedly. "Ask Archie Gabb what he heard. His guns wuz half out of leather when he tried to sneak up on me. The only chance I had was to slug him. In the end he damn near got me anyway. He would have, if yuh hadn't heard the racket and busted in when yuh did."

Haley stepped forward, his face still innocent-looking, and laid his fingers on the sheriff's arm. "Let's forget the whole affair, Mr. Hartley," he said pleasantly. "I'll pay for what damage has been done."

But the sheriff was not to be put off so easily. He shook his gray head stubbornly. "Nope," he snapped, "I'm siftin' this thing to the bottom. 'Pears to me thet you an' Maverick have been goin' at each other lately like a coupla game cocks. I wanta know why—an' I wanta know right now!"

Panamint Joe grinned wolfishly. "I'll tell yuh," he said promptly. "It's time yuh oughta know. Haley's done been doin' his dangedest to take my pard's taw, because *he* knows, jest like I do, thet Bronc Maverick is really Pike Frazer! Him, an' not this hunk, Lon Sykes, is the heir to Burro Bob's pack o' gold!"

A gasp like the sound of escaping steam whispered from the bunch who had drawn around them.

"Glory be," Archie Gabb ex-

claimed, "now we have got something to talk about!"

But Panamint was going on again, rapidly now that he had broken the ice. "This ain't the fust time to-night, either, sheriff, thet Haley's tried to lead us up. Yore dead man, Bull Madden, tried it fust. If yuh want proof, go down to our shack, an' look at the broken winder, and the bullet scars on the table. I'm also bettin' yuh thet Haley kilt Madden hisself, because the hombre didn't manage to salt us down. Howsomever, I cain't prove it. Yuh remember when we left thet Gateway House? Well, we rode out to Coyote Wells to git thet ring yuh see on Sykes' finger. Haley'd beat us to it, an' to top the play, he left a coupla gents to greet us with lead when we did show up. Yuh better send somebody out there with a pick an' shovel, if yuh don't want the buzzards to have a feast!"

"Yuh mean yuh've killed two gents tonight?" Sheriff Hartley gasped.

"Yuh damned right we did!" Panamint said hotly. "An' we're goin' to salivate anybody else thet tries to keep us from being at thet hearin' tomorrer afternoon!"

Sheriff Hartley scratched his head soberly.

Bronc watched him. There was a ring of truth to Panamint's words that he hoped the sheriff had caught. If they could convince Hartley that he, and not Sykes, was Pike Frazer, the weight of the lawman's opinion might at least convince the judges to give them an open-minded hearing. Hopefully he waited for the sheriff to speak.

After a moment the graying lawman turned to study Bronc. Silently his eyes passed over the young smithy, took in his matted auburn hair, the battered lines of his blocky

countenance. His eyes drifted over Bronc's spread of shoulders, tapering waist and long legs. Bronc stood the scrutiny without changing expression. Everybody else here was looking at him, too. It gave him the feeling of a slave on the auction block—and yet he knew it might be the turning point of the tide that had favored Haley's claimant for the gold.

Finally the sheriff looked back at Panamint. "This is the damndest mess I ever been mixed up in," he muttered dismally. "I ain't the kind of gent who makes hasty decisions, so I'm goin' to let the pot ride. One of you hombres is lyin', an' when I find out which one it is, I'm goin' to make it tough for him. Till I do, I'm warnin' you, Haley, an' you, Maverick, to stay away from each other. The next one of yuh that starts anything is goin' to land in the hoosegow. Tomorrer noon you'll all get yore chance to tell yore stories to the judge. An' I'm glad I ain't the one who's got to make the decision of who thet gold belongs to!"

Greg Hartley turned to go, but Bronc stepped forward and laid his hand on the lawman's sleeve. "Wait a minute, sheriff," he said earnestly. "There's something I want to know."

Impatiently the lawman paused. "Well, what is it, Maverick?"

"Yuh remember down at Gateway House I warned yuh to put a guard with Burro Bob till trial time? Did yuh take my advice?"

The sheriff's hearty laugh boomed through the silent saloon. "Lemme see," he drawled, "yuh were worryin' about some Injun thet follered him from the desert takin' his taw, weren't yuh?"

Bronc nodded.

"Well, yuh can fergit it, fella. Ain't no Injun goin' to git within

spittin' distance of Mesquite Flat. Bob's been put up in style at the Desert Hotel, so yuh needn't worry about anything happenin' to him."

CHAPTER XI.

DESERT HELLION.

SILENTLY Bronc watched the sheriff clump toward the door. There was another stir as High-grade Haley, Lon Sykes, and Haley's two swarthy lieutenants straggled out after him. Sykes gave Bronc a malevolent glare.

"Yuth tricked me," he muttered, "with thet danged nail. An' I ain't forgettin' it."

Bronc didn't bother to answer him. He had other thoughts to worry him. Touching Panamint on the arm, he led him to one side, ignoring the stares of the crowd, who seemed suddenly to have grown aware of his importance since his partner's announcement.

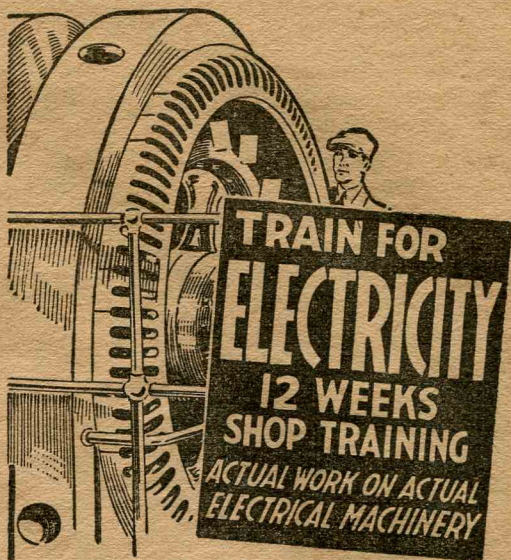
He centered Panamint with a bleak gaze when they were beyond hearing range of the Mirage patrons.

"Listen, Joe," he said in low tones, "that sheriff ain't done a thing to perreck Burro Bob. He acts like he thinks we're kiddin' him."

"Which we ain't," Panamint growled.

Bronc Maverick nodded. "We've seen that green-eyed hombre, an' I know what his arrows feel like. The way he acted in the blacksmith shop makes me think thet he's either a mighty cool-haided gent, or a damned desperatè one. We don't know a thing about what customs them Lost Piutes may have, but yuh know as well as me, thet most tribes punish their braves with death when they fall down on a scalp hunt important as the one this hombre was sent on."

Panamint tugged reflectively at his mustache. "Damned if I don't see yore point, kid. Thet brave is likely to be tortured to death if he



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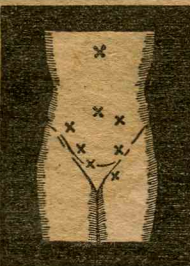


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goes back to Forgotten Canyon without finishin' his job. Nothin' wuss can happen to him here. So he's goin' to stick around, an' keep tryin' to nail Burro—an', if that old coot should kick off afore he tells where Forgotten Canyon is, yore daddy will be stuck there till he rots!"

"That's jest the way I feel," nodded Bronc emphatically. "Mebbe we're wrong, but there's too much at stake to take chances. Let's get out of here and go put up at the Desert for the rest of the night. They's a balcony on the side of the hotel thet looks into the best rooms, and I figger Bob'll have one of them. If we can get a room on the same side we can divide the time an' watch Burro's spot from the balcony."

"We don't wanta let anybody know what we're aimin' to do," Panamint cautioned as they started toward the bat wings. "We're in enough dutch now with Hartley. Every danged thing we've done thet cuss Haley has turned against us. Thet hombre's mighty savvy, but mebbe we'll outfox him yet."

"You got the right spirit, anyway," Bronc agreed as they angled across the dusty street.

The moon was a sickle swinging low above the sawtoothed peaks of the Panamint range from whence Panamint Joe had come by his name. He had spent more time prospecting those mountains than anybody else, Bronc guessed. Overhead the stars were waning. Some of the more distant ones had already pinched out. It wasn't more than an hour from dawn, Bronc saw. Their vigil would be a short one.

A sleepy clerk showed them a room that Bronc ascertained casually was next door to the one occupied by Burro Bob. Once alone he examined his guns and settled them back into their slick holsters. His eyes found Panamint's.

"You take the fust sleep, fella,"

Bronc offered. "I got plenty to think about to keep me awake."

With the silent, pantherish grace that characterized him, Bronc stepped out to the balcony. From this second-story vantage point he could see most of the town, which had at last quieted down. The stillness of Death Valley itself flowed about him, and Bronc welcomed it. He did have plenty to think about, he reflected, as he leaned a shoulder against the wall and relaxed his aching muscles. He hadn't told Panamint about that queer vision he'd had coming in from the desert. For Panamint, Bronc felt, was just as interested as himself in seeing his memory return, and he didn't want to raise his old pard's hopes and then have things fall the wrong way. But since that trouble in the Mirage, Bronc had evolved a theory for that vision he'd had.

Those stories he'd heard the afternoon before about the Lost Gold Train had touched with life some sluggish cord of his lost memory. It had wakened long inactive cells. The past somehow did not seem so blank to Bronc now. He couldn't put his feelings into words, but it was there. The blankness that had been like a fog in his mind seemed to be disappearing.

"An' mebbe," Bronc said to himself, "if I could git Burro Bob to tell me about Long Tom Frank, an' more about them wagons and everything, it'd joggle the rest of that fog outa my noggin."

Subconsciously he had been hearing the rhythmic snoring that was floating from the open window of Burro Bob's room that looked out on the balcony. Now Bronc's thoughts were disturbed by the sudden realization that those sounds had ceased. He had heard no other noise, but all at once his breathing

quickened. It might be only imagination, but the feeling came to him that there was danger near—not for him, but for Burro Bob!

The thought was barely through his mind before he was stealing down the balcony, one gun palmed. His goal was that open window. Four long strides carried him abreast of it. The night was paling where he was, but it was still dark inside. Straining his eyes against the gloom, Bronc peered through the open window. He could make out the shape of a bed on the far side, near the door that led into the main hall. A cocoonlike figure was swathed in the blankets on the four-poster. The snore Bronc had heard had fallen to a soft buzzing, not audible from where he had been standing. Everything looked all right in there, and yet that feeling of danger was still strong in him.

For a moment Bronc hesitated, weighing consequences should he enter the desert rat's room. If Burro Bob awoke and let out a yell, it might bring the clerk or someone else. Caught in there, he would have a hard time explaining his presence. Nobody seemed to believe his warnings concerning the Piute brave. A false move might jeopardize their standing at the hearing, and yet the urge to crawl through the open window was overpowering.

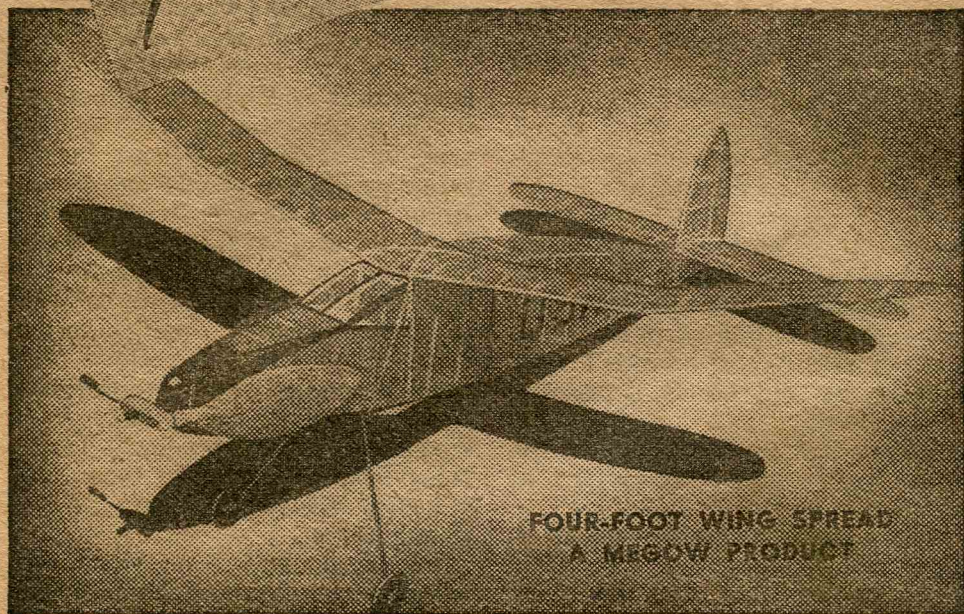
Tight-lipped, Bronc cast caution to the winds. He thrust one booted leg through the aperture, found the floor on the other side. Ducking, he pushed his head and shoulders through the opening. And instantly he saw that his hunch had been a right one!

Pressed flat against the wall alongside the window was a stocky, barrel-chested figure. They saw each other at the same instant, though obvi-

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ously the Indian had been waiting there for him. Cold steel flashed against the murk as the Piute brave leaped forward, knife upraised. His moccasins whispered sibilantly across the floor.

Caught half in and half out of the window, Bronc was at a bad disadvantage. Desperately he flung himself to the left away from the awesome figure of the Indian. Death gleamed in the Piute's green, catlike eyes, seemed to drip from the long blade in his fist. There was no time for him to fire. That blade would fall even if he managed to drive a bullet through the Piute's chest.

Bronc flung up his long Colt at the last second. Steel grated against steel, then the Indian's hard knee caught Bronc in the ribs. Off balance anyway, the shock sent the young smithy sprawling to the floor, knocking his Colt from his hand. Bronc saw the Piute's arm whip back across his shoulder, knife flat against his palm. That blade was going to snuff his life unless he did something mighty quick.

Bronc had spun half around in falling. He had landed on his empty holster. And that was the only thing that saved him, for it left his other gun in the clear. Fast as thought, his fingers flipped the big Colt from leather. The long weapon jarred back against his palm a split second before the Indian loosed his lethal blade.

A cry, sharp, low, and as savage as any wounded animal's, sprang from the Piute's lips. His knife lifted from numbed fingers, but like a conjurer, he caught the blade before it could hit the floor. Powder smoke fogged Bronc's vision for a second. He caught a confused glimpse of a gleaming body eel through the open window as his Colt thundered a second time. Chips

lifted from the window frame, but he knew that his lead had missed. That ominous shape which had come out of the desert wastes seemed to bear a charmed life!

The man was gone like a wraith by the time Bronc scrambled to his feet, and reached the window. The balcony was empty. "Greased lightning an' then some," he marveled.

Burro Bob's naked feet hit the floor behind him. "What inarnation's goin' on around hyar?" he demanded querulously. "Cain't a gent sleep in this damn town without somebody firin' cannons in his room?"

Bronc had swung back into the room, but before he could say anything the door from the main hall burst open. Aroused sleepers were crowding into Burro Bob's quarters. Some of them carried guns they'd snatched from beneath their pillows.

Sheriff Greg Hartley was the first man to cross the threshold, and right behind him came Sage Winslow, who lived here at the hotel.

Bronc eyed them with a coolness he did not feel as he picked up the Colt he had dropped and shoved both weapons back into their holsters. He ignored the naked six-gun Sheriff Hartley swung menacingly to cover him, directing his words to Burro Bob as though he were the only man in the room.

"Yuh wanted to know what wuz goin' on around here, Bob," Bronc began, "and these gents busted in afore I had a chance to tell you. Fact is, yuh oughta dig the two chunks of lead I fired outa the walls, and hang 'em on yore watch chain fer charms. You'd 'a' been knockin' at the pearly gates by now if I hadn't showed up. That Injun yuh beat outa the desert was about ready to scalp you when I poked my haid through the window."

Sage Winslow had touched a match to a coal-oil lamp that hung in a wall bracket at the foot of the bed. His cold eyes turned from the grim young smithy to Burro Bob. Bronc's eyes were on the desert rat, too. Grayness swept across the prospector's hairy visage at Maverick's explanation. His knobby fingers clutched at his throat. That old terror, which had given him the superhuman strength to reach civilization, was filling him again.

"Hell's hounds," Burro Bob husked, "yuh mean one of them yowlin' devils was in my room? I shore enough figgered none of 'em would have the sand to make a try fer me here. Maverick, I'm mighty obleeged to you."

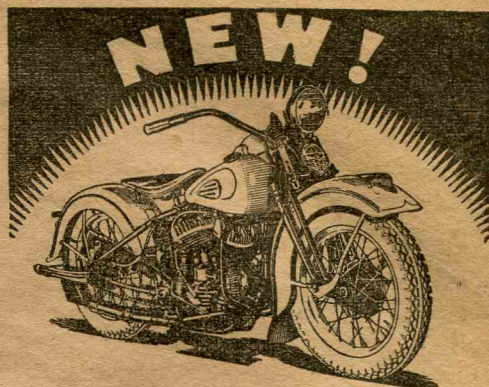
"Yuh better save them thanks, old-timer," Highgrade Haley's heavy voice drawled from the doorway, "until yuh know *for shore* they was an Injun here!"

Bronc had heard some other gents enter the bed chamber, but he hadn't paid them any attention. Now, like a spurred mustang, he whirled, crouched. His narrowed gray gaze whipped across the Mesquite Flat gun boss. Bronc's temper, frayed by all that had happened, snapped completely.

"Haley, if yuh don't know the truth when yun hear it, the least you can do is keep yore trap shut. I ain't used to havin' people accuse me of lyin'."

"Now hold on hyar, yuh game cocks!" Sheriff Greg Hartley warned. "Haley, I think yuh owe Maverick an apology. He warned me twice tonight to put a guard here in Bob's room, an' I was too bullheaded to do it. Now to looks as though we all owe him a vote o' thanks. What right you got to question his word?"

Haley's still puffy lips curved sardonically. "Plenty," he drawled meaningly, "an' what yuh jest said about his warning yuh of somethin' "



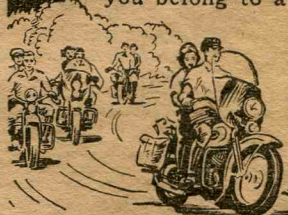
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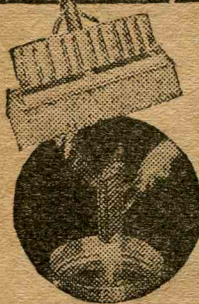
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like this happenin' makes me even surer of what I got to say. Don't it look kinda coincidental, sheriff, thet Maverick should pull an Injun outa the bag so soon after warnin' yuh about the cuss?"

"Go on," Hartley growled in puzzled tones.

Haley nodded his heavy head of sandy hair. "Yuh don't see no dead Injun, do you? Well, neither do I. Course now, if this hombre's pard hadn't told us all that Maverick, here, claims to be Pike Frazer, I wouldn't be so skeptical. But a smart gent like this hombre might figure to put hisself in solid with Burro afore jury time by pullin' a fake stunt like he jest done. Convin' Bob here thet he done saved his bacon ain't goin' to hurt his cause none—if yuh get what I mean!"

"A gent would shore have to be mighty dumb to miss yore meanin'," Greg Hartley admitted. "Mind yuh, I ain't sayin' yore right, an' I ain't sayin' yore wrong, Haley." He swung to face Bronc Maverick. "What yuh got to say for yoreself, fella? Can yuh prove they wuz an Injun in here?"

And Bronc realized with a sinking heart that he didn't have a shred of proof to back his story. Taut-lipped, he shrugged. "Nothin' but my word," he said flatly. "If it's good enough for Burro Bob, it oughta be good enough for you."

"Yuh danged right it's good enough for me!" Burro Bob said raspily. "I didn't see the hellion Maverick jest mentioned, but nobody knows better'n me thet them red devils are after my law."

Haley smirked. "Yuh see, sheriff, Burro Bob didn't see the Injun. Is it natcheral thet he'd be sleepin' so heavy Maverick could plug two holes in the walls, scuffle with the feller he claims was here, an' let the gent git away afore Burro opened his eyes?"

Burro Bob's barrel chest puffed out like a pigeon's. The brush of whiskers that covered his leathery visage seemed to bristle. "Now yuh listen hyar, Haley, if thet's yore handle. A gent whose slept with one eye open long as me is goin' to really drop off solidlike when he hits a bed soft as thish'."

Sheriff Greg Hartley interposed again. "All this talk ain't gettin' us nowhere. Winslow, yuh got a stage driver yuh can trust? Well, then, git him over hyar pronto, an' tell him to come heeled. Burro, I'm puttin' yuh under technical arrest till trial time at noon. Winslow's driver ain't goin' to let yuh outa his sight. Both of yuh are to stay hyar in this room till yo're called to the meetin' at the stage station. This bizness is gittin' too much outa hand to have you traipsin' around loose!"

CHAPTER XII.

MURDER.

HE'D succeeded in getting himself in more trouble, Bronc saw as he walked somberly back down the hall with Panamint, who had joined the crowd in Burro Bob's room, but had been only a silent listener. However, he had one thing to be thankful for. Burro Bob would be taken care of until noon, at least. Afterward, when the judges decided whether he or Lon Sykes deserved the pack of gold, Burro would hand over that small packet of burro skin he'd kept in his own custody. He'd also probably tell the hombre who got it, all that he knew of Forgotten Canyon. And that was what Bronc wanted to hear most of all.

"If that bullet-headed Injun is any sample of what's waitin' for the gent who tries to rescue Long Tom

Frazer," he drawled wryly to his partner, "the hombre's goin' to earn everything he gits outa thet canyon!"

Panamint shook his gray head morosely. "If Sykes is picked by the jury, yuh don't need to worry about Long Tom ever gittin' out alive. They'll salivate him so fast it'd make yore head swim. Damn it, kid, yuh got a tough break on thet Injun bizness in Burro's room. Bob acts like the only fella who believes yuh really saw somebody. Nobody'd ever have doubted yuh, either, if thet tarantler Haley hadn't rattled off at the mouth. Somebody's got to trim thet gent's wings!"

"Let's hope it's the judges," Bronc grunted as he tugged off his boots and tumbled his weary body into bed. He was asleep almost instantly, nature taking its toll at last of even his whipcord strength that had seen him through so much in less than twenty-four hours. His body slept, but his mind, as though in answer to that prayer he had voiced on the way back from Coyote Wells, remained active. Dreams came to him, strange dreams, like picture cards plucked from a pack. Scenes of wide rivers, the bars alive as ant hills with miners handling cradles, picks and shovels, swirling gold pans. Pine clad to their summits, towering mountains rose behind the camps he saw. Everything was green, a whole lot different from this here desert land. And there came another dream, of barren, drab mountains, and in their midst he seemed to see an oasis. A canyon with painted walls towering sheer to battlements a thousand feet high. Huts made from the same slags of painted rock that dotted the floor of the canyon. Stocky figures watched herds of burros, and towering above them like

the painted walls above the desert was one figure, a giant with red hair. The Sun Man, Burro Bob had said the Piute called him. He seemed familiar to the sleeping smithy, as familiar as his forge or his boots. He knew that man, knew Long Tom Frank Frazer—for that man was his father!

A hand shook Bronc awake. He blinked his eyes, almost expecting to see Long Tom Frazer bending over him. But all he saw was Panamint Joe's wrinkled visage. And with waking, all of his doubts rushed back. Was he being a party to a lie? Was Panamint just using him as Haley was using Lon Sykes? A wave of disgust surged through him. A fine partner he was to question Panamint's motives. Panamint, who had saved his life out there on the forsaken salt flats of Death Valley!

Panamint had no way of knowing why Bronc grasped the hand that had been on his shoulder. "Fella," he said softly, "mebbe we ain't got much chance, but we'll play out our string together!"

"I'll second them sentiments!" Panamint agreed in his creaky voice. "Wash up now, an' climb into yore boots. We got jist time enough to visit the chink's for a hunk of grub afore the meetin' gits under way. Too danged bad yuh ain't got the makin's to shave with handy," he added slyly, eying Bronc's stalwart frame. "I hear this gal who claims to be Dorita Nelson, ain't hard on the eyes. Shore'd be funny," he rambled on, as Bronc dressed, "if she did happen to be Hattie's datter. Yore daddy an' Hattie had it all figgered out thet some day you an' her young un would git hitched up."

Bronc flushed. Panamint was just ragging him, but it made him ill at

ease anyway. "Any gal that ropes me is goin' to have to carry a mighty hungry loop," he growled stiffly. "Come on, let's go."

Outside, Bronc had to narrow his gray eyes against the glare until they became accustomed to the light. It had been many a day since he had slept until almost noon! Quickly they made their way to the restaurant Panamint had named. Eyes followed them wherever they moved. Bronc could see that they were marked men with a vengeance now. Without a hat, the sunlight gilded his darkly red hair, focused all eyes upon it. He could hear buzzing conversation rise behind them. Every man in Mesquite Flat, Bronc saw, was speculating over the outcome of the unusual trial.

After they had finished their belated breakfast, Panamint led the way through the hot sun to the stage station. His eyes turned once to the tall young smithy. "Kid, I'm goin' to make a clean breast of things," he told Bronc. "Mebbe it'll help us win out."

No one but the actual participants were allowed to enter the station. Bronc read that penciled order tacked to the porch post where everybody could see it. An armed coach driver leaned alongside the doorway to enforce it. The man nodded briefly at Bronc and Panamint as they passed.

"The show's about to begin," he said with a grin. "Wish yuh luck, Maverick."

The kindly words of the stage guard warmed Bronc. But that feeling faded swiftly into one of surprise. He had stepped into the station after Panamint. In front of them a rough table served as a judge's bench. Behind it sat two of the three judges. Burro Bob

wasn't here yet, Bronc saw. Sage Winslow sat stiffly in a rawhide-bottomed chair, dapper as usual, his wedge-shaped face impassive. Beside him Judge Peek slouched in his seat, a big chair that was yet hardly big enough to hold his bulk. Short curly white hair topped his massive head. A waistcoat that had once been white covered his bulging middle. Ruddy-faced, impressive, he looked like a mastiff alongside a terrier. His heavy head swung to measure Bronc Maverick with keen blue eyes. He had seen the young man many times at Panamint Joe's blacksmith shop, knew his history, knew of his loss of memory. But the thought that the tall, lean red-head might be the son of Long Tom Frank Frazer had never entered his mind until now.

Bronc was aware of Judge Peek's scrutiny subconsciously, but he had eyes only for the girl who sat in the row of chairs lined up in front of the judge's table. Her eyes fell on Maverick. She stiffened suddenly, as he had done.

Surprise and consternation swept through Bronc. He knew that he should have suspected her identity before now, but he had been too busy to think about her. For he saw now that the girl who claimed to be Dorita Nelson was the same one he had seen the night before in the Desert Hotel!

Her dark eyes met his levelly, and Bronc was filled with a confusion he couldn't name. He hardly noticed Highgrade Haley and Lon Sykes sitting on two of the end seats, with Sheriff Greg Hartley just behind them.

Judge Peek cleared his throat. It sounded like a frog croaking. "Gentlemen, and ladies, it looks like we're about set to proceed with this unusual hearing. Whereat is that pesky prospector, Burro Bob?"

Sage Winslow's traplike mouth

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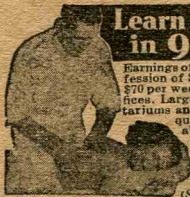
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drooped ludicrously. "Damned if I haven't forgotten to notify him, jedge, that it was time to come over."

Bronc tore his eyes from Dorita Nelson's face. "I'll run over and fetch him," he offered eagerly. "No need for you gents to leave yore chairs."

Judge Jim Peek, who was in charge of the hearing, nodded.

"Run along, son. Tell the old scalawag he's holding up the show."

Leaving Panamint behind him, Bronc whirled. Long, decisive strides carried him out of the station. His mind was in a turmoil over the shock of seeing this girl he'd never expected to see again. To bring himself back to normal was the reason he'd offered to go after Burro. His brain was in a whirl. The girl, Bronc felt certain, was Dorita Nelson. She did not look like any of the hard-faced denizens of the dance halls that he had ever seen. A share of that gold in the pack Burro Bob had brought from the desert was hers, regardless of the orders Long Tom Frazer had sent out to give it to his only son. But what would happen to her if Highgrade Haley and Sykes won the pack?

Bronc asked himself that question as he crossed the street and entered the Desert. Engrossed with his own thoughts, he did not see Sheriff Greg Hartley standing in the doorway of the station he had just left, watching him.

Nodding curtly to the clerk on duty, Bronc climbed upstairs. Turning to the right he passed their own room, and tapped on the old prospector's door. No one answered. Bronc tapped again, waited. A frown creased his brow. "Danged funny nobody answers," he muttered half aloud. "Steve Sorbo's supposed to be guardin' Burro."

Bronc's left hand found the door-knob, tested it. The door was locked.

Had something happened to both Bob and Sorbo? Had that Piute brave come back in daylight to finish what he had started just before dawn? It was possible, Bronc conceded to himself, but there was never a chance in hell that the Indian could down both Bob and Sorbo before one of them got into action, and there'd been no sound of shots if they hadn't started fighting.

The Desert drowded in the stifling midday heat. Bronc felt perspiration start on his body, then he relaxed. Bob and Sorbo had probably gone out on the balcony to try and catch a cooler breath of air. A hotel room in this heat would be about as comfortable as sitting in a hot frying pan. Automatically he knocked again before turning to find his way out to the balcony at the end of the hall. And this time he got his answer.

A muffled cry knifed through the door panels. Bronc pressed closer, hardly believing he heard straight, the sound was so faint. Then the cry came again, thin and faint, a plea for help. The stifling heat of the hall seemed suddenly more oppressive than ever. For the third time that cry came in the space of a minute and Bronc felt the short hairs along the back of his neck stiffen like hackles.

Something had happened in there to Burro Bob and Sorbo. If the old prospector should die without talking, Long Tom Frazer would rot in Forgotten Canyon. Those thoughts caromed through Bronc's brain as his fingers slapped down to the curved stocks of his guns. He had saved Burro once and gotten himself in bad with the sheriff for doing it. The wise thing to do now was get word across the street to the station advising Hartley that some-

thing was evidently wrong inside. But the minutes that would take might spell the difference between life and death, Bronc realized. He'd have to take another chance.

His right-hand gun was already half out of leather. Bronc whipped it the rest of the way, pressed the muzzle against the door lock. Splinters flew as he triggered, once and again. The echoing roar of the shots filled the narrow hall with thunder. The shots would draw a crowd *very pronto*, but Bronc was past caring, for his lead had shattered the lock. The door sagged open in front of him.

Death had struck and this time it had taken a grisly toll. A single raking glance showed Bronc that Steve Sorbo was past helping. The stage driver guard lay in a pool of his own blood near the window through which he, himself, had crawled earlier that morning. The driver's skull was crushed, the force of the blow sending blood gushing from each nostril to dye the boards under him.

Bronc's swinging gaze searched for Burro Bob. For an instant he thought the old desert rat had vanished, then he saw his wrinkled boots protruding from beneath the bed. For, striving to crawl to the door, Burro Bob had evidently missed his mark and crawled under the bed instead.

Almost like a madman, the young smithy grasped the foot of the bed. Muscles crawled in his arms, knotted across his brawny shoulders as he hurled the bed from its place against the wall. It hid the open door, smashed it shut again, but Bronc had no eyes for anything but old Burro Bob, writhing helplessly on the floor. He had been horribly beaten, tortured. Bronc felt a stab

of pity go through him when he saw the bloodied tips of Burro Bob's fingers. Some fiend had pulled out his fingernails. Blood swelled from a jagged wound in his chest with every weak beat of his heart. He was past aid, dying, Bronc realized instantly. How he had survived this long was a mystery past understanding.

A little light of recognition seemed to brighten Burro Bob's eyes as Bronc bent down beside him. He whipped a bandanna handkerchief from his hip pocket, started to wad it as a plug for the wound that was draining the old desert rat's life. Then he saw Burro Bob's head shake ever so little. One of his maimed hands moved feebly.

"No use tryin' to patch me up, son," Bronc has to strain to catch the words. "Jest listen. *Get a wild jack if yuh wanta find Forgotten Canyon. Look at its neck. Look for—*"

Burro Bob's barrel chest seemed to deflate. A long, tired sigh slipped

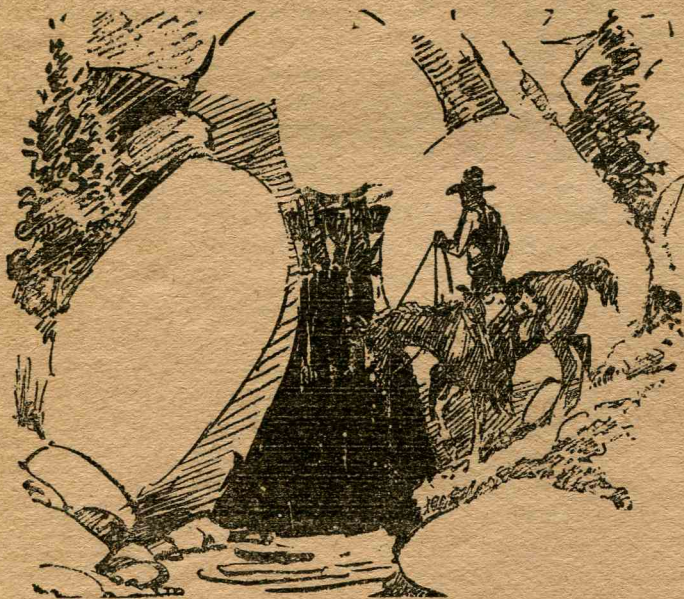
from his lips. His jaw dropped slackly. Faded eyes that had searched for the end of the rainbow and found it, closed like a tired child's. Bronc knew without a closer look that Burro Bob had spoken his last words. Words that failed to make any sense to him, and yet they had meant something to Burro Bob!

Bronc's eyes fell again on that hole in the dead prospector's chest, and stiffened. It was at the exact spot where Bob had carried the small packet of burro skin. Now it was gone!

His gaze dropped again to the mutilated stumps of Burro Bob's fingers, and horror that was like a hot wave washed over him like wind off the desert.

"Feller," he whispered above the dead man, "I'll run down the skunk that did this to you, if I have to do it on borrowed time!"

Hunkered there beside the dead man, Bronc had been subconsciously



aware for some time of fists and gun butts battering at the door. Now a panel splintered. The big bed that his heave had knocked against the portal, screeched across the floor as shoulders slammed the door open again.

Bronc's eyes were luminous lamps of fire as he looked up. The complete savagery of his face halted Sheriff Hartley in his tracks, but not so the big outcast from the northern gold camps whose shoulder had battered in the door.

Surprise marked Haley's beefy visage for only a moment, then it was quickly transformed to one of gloating triumph. All this Bronc saw before he had time to rise, or wonder why Haley's expression should change so swiftly.

But as he started to climb up from beside the dead man, he learned the reason for the mocking triumph flooding Haley's visage. The man's hands swept inside his black box coat in that fantastically fast cross-hand draw. A draw, Bronc realized somberly, that he might some day have to match. But now was not the time. His slitted eyes settled on Sheriff Hartley, who was staring horror-struck at the two dead men on the floor of the room.

"Sheriff, the door was locked from the inside when I come up here," Bronc explained. "I knocked a couple times, then I heard Burro call for help. Yuh must 'a' heard my guns when I shot the lock off the door. This is what I found. Look at Bob. What they done to his hands. Mister," he added jerkily, "hangin's too good for the gents who murdered these hombres!"

"Yuh said it, Maverick," Haley's voice was wickedly soft. The click of cocking gun hammers under his thumbs punctuated his words. "Yuh said it. Hangin's too good for you. We've caught yuh red-handed this time. *I'm accusin' yuh of murderin'*

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Burro Bob an' Steve Sorbo. Sheriff, yuh better lock this coyote up, afore I fergit myself an' let go these ham-mers!"

A girl's voice cried out sharply from the doorway at those words, and at the horrible sight that met her eyes. She swayed, and Bronc saw Panamint circle her shoulders with a long arm to steady her. All of them who had been at the stage station were here now. They had followed the sheriff and Haley across the street to the hotel.

Moving lightly for a man of his girth and weight, white-haired Judge Jim Peek slipped in front of the girl to cut off her vision of the dead men. But his eyes were not for them. Bronc saw them sweep over him. It was the sheriff, however, who spoke first.

His kindly face was grim suddenly as red desert sandstone, and he appeared for once in his life to have made an instant decision. "Maverick," he said sternly, "yuh've been mixed up in too many killin's. This time I'm arrestin' yuh on suspicion of murder, an' takin' yore pard along with yuh. This warn't no one-man job. Mr. Haley, yuh got yore cutters trained on this gent. Blast daylight through him if he moves a peg!"

"Nobody," Judge Jim Peek roared, "is goin' to move a peg till I'm finished with 'em. I'm holdin' the hearin' for thet lost gold here and now—where a couple of dead men can listen to yore lies! After that, mister sheriff, yuh can lock the whole damned bunch up as fer as I'm concerned!"

This time Haley has caught Bronc with the blood on his hands, and, though it is the innocent stain of old Bob's death wounds which Bronc tried to stanch, it looks like certain evidence against him! What will Panamint do to help Bronc, and what can Bronc do to help himself? Read the answer in next week's installment.

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If you're an old-timer, we don't have to tell you that things have changed a heap since Hannah died. If you're a youngster, you'd turn up your nose and sneer if you had to read some of the books we oldsters cut our literary teeth on. You see, the youngsters sort of keep their eyes wide open in the times they're living

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in more than we oldsters did at their age.

That isn't surprising. Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill did pretty durned well with the shooting tools they could get hold of in their day, but what could they do with the weapons that have been invented since then? The world doesn't turn around too fast, but it sure keeps going too steadily to suit some of us; we mean those who say the younger generation is going plumb to the devil. We couldn't go back to covered-wagon days even if we wanted to.

The point we're making is that we can feed a youngster of today a juvenile story now and then, but they want 'em to be more mature as a steady diet. In fact, there isn't much difference between the oldsters' choice of stories and the youngsters'. None of us cottons much to the old-fashioned stories we had to like in the old days or go without.

That means that you amateur story writers don't have to worry over the age of your heroes, whether they're juvenile enough or not. You aren't writing for any special age of readers, but readers of all ages, with tastes that are probably like your own. Your only worry is whether your story's good enough or not.

Well, here are this week's stories that we thought are good enough for checks:

SUICIDE RANGE

By W. O. Snook—Age 43

Long Beach, California

They said it was suicide range—suicide for strangers. But Jed Dillon went anyway. Jimmy O'Brien had been hanged for murder. Jed Dillon knew that Laughing Jimmy O'Brien wouldn't murder anyone. Jed got there in time to claim Jimmy's body and to find a locket containing a picture of Jimmy's mother. Jed knew where Jimmy always carried the locket—pinned inside his shirt close to his heart.

"That's one thing they didn't find," mused Jed, turning the locket over in his hand.

Later he sauntered into the saloon. "Beer," he said, letting his eyes flick from one face to another without apparently noticing anyone. He nodded to the bartender, a stalky, black-bearded man with honest, brown eyes, and decided to ask some questions.

It seemed Jimmy had simply murdered a man for his money, had been found with the man. The man had creased Jimmy in the mix-up. Jimmy's supposed accomplice had made his getaway with the money.

"What did Jimmy say about it?" asked Jed.

"Said he just happened along and was shot by the real killer."

Jed leaned forward.

"If Jimmy said that, it's the truth!"

Three men stood at the bar. One of them was tall, rawboned, dressed in the habitual garb of a professional gambler. Pearl-handled guns occasionally peeked from under his long-tailed coat. The other two men were stalky, unshaven. These men always seemed to be around, Jed reflected.

"Faro Mike, here, he can tell you all about it." The bartender nodded at the tall gambler.

"Yeah! Glad to oblige," said the man. Jed sensed a sneer beneath the gambler's suave exterior and immediately a daring plan sprang full-born to his mind.

"Who found Jimmy first?" asked Jed.

"I did," Faro Mike said.

"Didn't Jimmy get a look at the killer?"

"According to his story, no."

Jed was thoughtful a second. "Of course," he went on, "the real bandit would have been masked, I reckon, anyway."

Faro Mike smiled. "Not unless he was afraid he'd be recognized."

"This bandit," said Jed significantly, "knew he'd be recognized."

His left hand went to his vest pocket and he pulled out that little heart-shaped locket he had found on Jimmy's body. There was a look of triumph on his face.

"The murderer made one slip," he said. He took two quick steps toward the door and whirled to face the crowded saloon. "I found this locket on Jimmy. There was a note in it. Dead men *do* talk, it seems!"

He snapped the locket shut, replaced it in his pocket. His hands dropped low, close to his twin guns. His eyes were slitted. He might have been eying most anyone.

"Masked Rider," he gritted, "I'm countin' three! Jist to give yuh a chance to go for your gun."

Faro Mike's face twisted into a sneer. At the count of three, his hand darted downward.

Guns flamed, and powder smoke floated lazily in the still air. Faro Mike dropped his pearl-handled gun, sank to the floor and lay still.

Jed Dillon's smoking guns held the crowd at bay as he backed toward the door. He was grinning a little. "It might interest you-all to know," he drawled, "that there wasn't any note in that locket. Jimmy never left a clue! The man that drewed gave himself away, of course."

The plot of this story could easily be built into a much longer yarn, and that's a pretty good test for the plot of a story condensed into five hundred words. The trick employed by the hero has been worked many times before, but it is handled a little differently from the run-of-the-mill stories based on pretty much the same plot. The author could have made more of his characters, and that's our main criticism.

Keep at it, pard! You may be getting closer to the front in 3W than you think.

And here's:

FOOL FOR LUCK

By Walter Blackmore—Age 25

Lamar, Missouri

Lucky Larkin found two things apparent when he struck the Sun Rock country. The first was that the only job open was that of deputy sheriff and no one would have it. The second was that the whole country was in terror of a person they had dubbed the Ghost. He struck without warning, anywhere there was a sizable sum of money, picking places where he could remain concealed. Those who had been unfortunate enough to get sight of him had died instantly under the blaze of his guns. In the last month, three deputy sheriffs had died in encounters with this superman.

Because he was Lucky Larkin and broke, Lucky promptly hunted up Sheriff Knowles. Knowles was a big, surly individual, who wore two walnut-handled guns tied low.

"Want to be deputy sheriff, huh?" he grunted. "Well, you must feel lucky!"

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"I'm a fool for luck." Larkin grinned cheerfully.

Knowles looked him over bleakly. "O. K., cowboy. Get your star inside."

Three days later, Knowles came out of his office and squinted down at Lucky, lazily leaning back in a rickety chair against the side of the office.

"Come on, I got a tip to watch for the Ghost in Sun Rock Pass. The Condor Mine pay roll is coming through."

They rode in silence till they reached the Pass. "I'll watch this end, you ride through and watch the other," Knowles said.

Lucky nodded and rode off. Scanning the sides, he saw that the walls of Sun Rock Pass rose almost perpendicularly for over two hundred feet. About three-quarters of a mile up the Pass he noted a ledge, perhaps ten feet wide jutting out from the wall about fifty feet up. A break in the wall afforded a possible trail upward from the ledge.

Lucky shook his head. "Now if I was the Ghost—"

At the far end of the Pass he sent his horse lunging up the steep side.

At the top he heard the rumble of the approaching stage. "Might as well amble along and watch from the top," he soliloquized.

He found the going rough, and the stage soon passed him. He was riding well back from the edge when from below came a single, muffled explosion of a .45. Swiftly he dropped to the ground and drew his rifle from its boot. Worming himself up to the edge, he peered over. Almost directly below him, concealed behind a boulder on the ledge, crouched a masked figure. The stage was stopped below him and the guard lay sprawled on the ground. The driver was hurriedly tugging at the strong box.

"Drop that gun, hombre!" Lucky called down.

Swiftly, savagely, the masked man whirled, firing upward. Calmly, Lucky nestled his cheek against his Sharps and fired once. The bandit stumbled backward and plunged to a grotesque heap beside the stage.

The driver, who had frozen at the drama unfolded before him, came to life and leaped to unmask the man.

"My gosh," he shouted, "it's Sheriff Knowles!"

There you are, amigos. Send in your stories and poems and true Western experiences. *Hasta la vista.*

THE RANGE BOSS.