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JUNE 5, 1943

WILD WEST

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STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

FOUNDED 1902

CONTENTS JUNE 5, 1943

VOL. 161, No. 6

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DAPPER DONNELLY IN A FAST-ACTION NOVELETTE

STRONG MEDICINE FOR OUTLAWS Clay Starr 9

It was a little outside his line, but Dr. Dapper Donnelly didn't mind mixing up a powder-smoke potion for Tombstone's trigger-touchy wild bunch.

THREE SUSPENSE-PACKED COMPLETE NOVELS

DEATH WEARS GOLDEN HANDCUFFS Walker Tompkins 34

What chance did Tommy Rockford have against a lynch-primed mob when his own golden handcuffs branded him a murdering bandit?

DESERT-RAT SHOWDOWN Andrew A. Griffin 64

Aside from the menace of halfling bandits and a sidewinder set-up, Johnny Forty-five also had to outblast his fat pard's loose tongue!

VIGILANTE ARMY Sam H. Nickels 107

"You two cub Rangers're due to learn somethin'," the killer told Hungry and Rusty—and he spoke red-hot dangerous truth.

SHORT STORIES

FOKER FACE Hapsburg Liebe 29

The newest member of Gunpowder Burns' gang didn't have much to say for himself—he wanted to do his talking with a smoke pole.

TWO TRAILS TO TUSCOLA Melvin W. Holt 58

"A gun's for a man," Big Del Buxton told his nephew. And Big Del didn't live to see the day young Tag grew up.

NO-GOOD COWBOY Gunnison Steele 89

No cow waddy gets paid for whittling, but young Paint McCabe sure put his hobby on a paying basis!

MURDER-TRAP BOOMERANG Wayne D. Overholser 96

There was something mighty weird about the way Rimrock's fortune teller was able to predict a man's death.

A SADDLE FOR LARRY Stephen Payne 139

How could one tame tenderfoot hope to top a gun-loco killer?

WESTERN FEATURES

A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS 6**WESTERN CUSTOMS (Fact Story)** George Cory Franklin 88**¿QUIEN SABE? (Western Quiz)** 95**READERS' BRANDING IRONS** 135

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)



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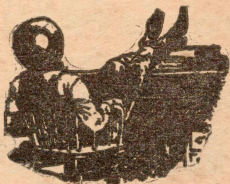
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

NEXT to getting paid for a story there ain't nothing a writer likes better than a little praise. Makes him feel the world's a pretty good place to be, in spite of the ruckus that's going on. Course, once in a while an editor will thaw out just enough to tell a tall-tale teller that his tall tale was to'able, but such a statement doesn't move a writer near as much as when some reader or readers write in and say how much they liked it. All of which leads up to a letter from Author Paul S. Powers:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: It makes a writer feel mighty pleased (if he has something besides ink in his veins) when his readers like a story well enough to ask for more about the same characters. To all you hombres and gals who wrote in about "The Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T"—thanks. Curly Steve thanks you, too; as does Toot Smith in his roarin' voice. As for Beautiful Bill, he doesn't say a thing—just stands there lookin' more beautiful.

I—and they—hope all you galoots will like their next adventure as well as you did their first.

Yores,

PAUL S. POWERS.

We might add, to all of you who've been inquiren' about Beauti-

ful Bill lately, that Paul is hard at work on another "Fightin' Three" opus.

Clay Starr, whose yarn "Strong Medicine for Outlaws," appears in this issue, sort of gets proddy about Joe Vaquero's criticism of him some weeks back. He writes:

DEAR BOSS: I note with interest the letter published awhile back in your column accusing me of being an Easterner, writing hog-wash and pointing out my errors concerning diamondback rattlers. He also accuses me of being a scissorbill.

Any gent is smart who is right only half the time. So this "Joe Vaquero" hombre is half right. I'll explain that in a minute. Meanwhile, let me say that no man alive can vibrate a set of rattles like El Cascabel himself—when alive. But during a five-month period this year I killed fourteen diamondbacks on my own spread. The largest one was sixty-six inches long and had ten rattles and a button.

I skun him out, removed the rattles and fastened them to a coiled wire. One day when I rode to town for the mail I stopped in a saloon for a short beer. There were six men standing at the bar, and eight saddle tramps playing penny ante in the back room. I took out the rattles, shook the wire—and fourteen rough-tough hombres stamped for the wide open spaces. Of course, these fellows weren't educated like Joe. They couldn't tell the difference between a live rattler and a dead one.

Just to settle this little argument, I'm sending you the warning end of a small diamondback. Only five rattles and a button, but the snake was three feet long and as thick as my wrist. I killed it with the end of my quirt while out doing patrol.

Now, about Joe Vaquero being only half right. "Vaquero" is a Spanish word meaning "cowboy," and usually referring to a Mexican. Such being the case, Joe's first name should be "José." But maybe he's an American. If so, his name should be "Joe Cowboy." Either way, he's faking.

I've lived in the West only forty years, spending the other ten seeing how folks existed in Europe, Asia and the Far East. Anyhow, I enjoyed José Vaquero's *carta*, so let's hope he rattles again. I like to hear him sound off; but, hang it all, why should he be ashamed of his right name?

Now for a brief note about "Strong

Medicine For Outlaws." Even as late as twenty years ago, the medicine-show doctors were numerous and popular in the Southwest. Many of these "doctors" really had a knowledge of medicine, and all were pitch artists of the first water.

One old gent I heard so much about down in east Texas was a wizard with a six-shooter, and he wasn't much bigger than a fair-sized bar of soap. I modeled Dapper Donnelly from what I heard about this old gent. As for Napoleon Calhoun, he could be any one of the dozens of old colored folks I knew where I was raised.

Mebbeso the readers will like Dapper Donnelly. If so, there's many a tale of his doings left in the old grab bag where I go for my ideas and plots.

Yours,

CLAY STARR.

Got the little present, Clay—for which many thanks. All of us here view it with a great deal of pride. Sort of keeps us in touch with the old West. There's talk as to how we're gonna use it for a warning buzzer the next time some long-jawed, long-winded ranny starts sounding off about any more of our favorite authors.

About that Dapper Donnelly hombre. Mebbeso the readers will like him, and mebbeso they'll let us know. I got a hunch they will, pard—*muy pronto*.

Got a note from Joseph D. MacLaughlin of Lowell, Arizona, who writes in to talk about Tombstone, Arizona. Don't know just what the information is in connection with, but friend Joe's letters are always welcome.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Tombstone was not a *gold* camp—it was a *silver* camp. The ore never pinched out but was drowned out. The San Pedro River flooded it—and still floods it.

Until 1929, Tombstone was the county seat of Cochise County—then the county seat was moved to Bisbee, the site of the Copper Queen Mine.

Tombstone was never a ghost town. The 1940 census gave the population as 847. Today there are over 2,000 people living there.

If you doubt the above facts, ask Chuck Martin.

Yours truly,

JOSEPH D. MACLAUGHLIN.

Don't doubt those figures one bit, Joe. But if Chuck wants to do a little jawin' about Tombstone, this is an invitation.

Meantime, how are all you folks doing in the War Bond and Stamp business?

THE RANGE BOSS.



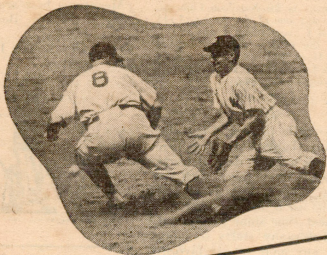
OUR WAY CAPTAINS SHORTS AND STAMPS

Got somethin' comin' up all you hands have been waitin' for. It's "The Curse of Rancho Paloma," a Señor Red Mask story by Guy L. Maynard, and if you ask us, it's the saltiest thing Guy's done in a coon's age.

Hal Dunning's checked in with "Trigger Twins," a White Wolf story you won't forget for a long time to come. Then Brad Buckner tells us "Freighters Can't Be Cowards," and Ed Earl Repp almost puts Yuma Bill in a "Colorado Coffin."

And if all that isn't enough, there's a Flash Moran story by William F. Bragg, plus a full cavvy of other shorts and features. Take the old Range Boss' tip, guys and gals—don't miss the next issue of Wild West.

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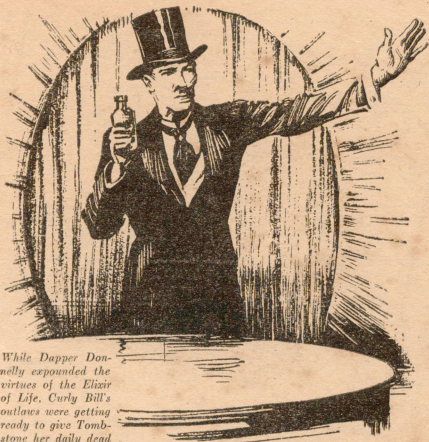
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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS



While Dapper Donnelly expounded the virtues of the Elixir of Life, Curly Bill's outlaws were getting ready to give Tombstone her daily dead man.

STRONG MEDICINE FOR OUTLAWS

by CLAY STARR

"A man for breakfast" was Tombstone's motto, but Dr. Dapper Donnelly had a powder-smoke prescription guaranteed either to kill or cure that renegade-rodde town!

CHAPTER I.

STAND AND DELIVER.

ROUNDING a turn in the road which connected Charleston and Tombstone, Curly Bill Black slid his

horse to a stop and stared at something he had never before seen in Arizona. As the nine hard-faced men who comprised his outlaw pack crowded up behind him, he passed his right hand before his eyes sev-

eral times, shook his head dubiously and finally put the issue up to Long Tom Ketchum, his *segundo*.

"Do I see a bright-red wagon down there by the San Pedro River, Long Tom? Are there two big white horses, and two black?"

"That's readin' the sign correct, Bill," Long Tom assured his chief. "On top of that, there's a pair of litty-bitty men. The white feller might be about thirty-five an' that little darky with him must be crowdin' sixty years old. What d'ya reckon they're doing out here with an outfit like that?"

Curly Bill stood up in his stirrups and stroked his long mustache. The outlaw was six feet and a bit, wide across the shoulders, and he wore the crossed gun belts of the two-gun man.

"That gold spelling on the wagon," he said musingly, "says 'Dr. Dapper Donnelly's Medicine Show.' I've heard of that little squirt. He studied medicine some, but he never got him a degree. Makes plenty dinero, and he's right handy with a six-shooter. Saw him down in Texas once."

"Money, eh?" Long Tom muttered, scratching his stubbled chin. "Let's surround him and the darky, shake them down, and have us some fun."

Dr. Dapper Donnelly was taking his ease on the vestibule at the rear of the big red wagon. Five feet four in his hig-heeled boots, Dapper Donnelly wore a black broadcloth suit, immaculate linen, and a .45 Colt Peacemaker thonged low on his right leg. His eyes were coal-black like the tiny mustache on his long upper lip.

Dapper Donnelly seemed to be staring at the distant Dragoon Mountains while he lolled in his chair. Near him Napoleon Calhoun was stirring an amber-colored liquid in a small barrel. The little colored

man nodded his gray kinky head without looking up, and listened to the droning voice of his boss.

"We're going to be held up, Napoleon. Don't offer any resistance when Curly Bill and his gang come along. And don't overdose that Nostrum of Liberty you're concocting, but put a few drops of that special ingredient in from the small bottle in your left vest pocket. Yonder they come."

CURLY BILL and his gang charged across the river flat with six-shooters in their grimy hands. Long Tom Ketchum rode right up to the red wagon, stopped at the vestibule and covered Dapper Donnelly with his twin six-shooters.

"She's a stick-up, doc!" the tall outlaw bellowed. "Stand and deliver, you rusty son!"

Dapper rose without haste, looked Ketchum over from scarred boots to battered Stetson, and smiled ruefully.

"Sorry to disappoint you long-riders," he drawled in a smooth deep voice. "Napoleon and I've been taking a vacation, and our funds are low. My wallet is in my left hip pocket; shall I get it for you?"

"Hands high!" barked Ketchum. "You go reaching for a hide-out, I'll salivate you until you won't hold water. Reach high and turn around!"

His face devoid of expression, Dapper Donnelly turned without answering, and Long Tom Ketchum lifted his wallet. The little man's teeth clicked together as he felt the weight lifted from his holster. His voice flat with menace, he turned to face the grinning holdup man.

"Toss my pistol to the ground, mister. You can have my money, but I balanced that old Colt to fit my own hand."

Long Tom Ketchum threw the captured weapon under the wagon,

holstered his left-hand gun, and opened the flat wallet. After counting out a hundred dollars in currency, he threw the wallet back to Donnelly.

"Hey, boss," he yelled at Curly Bill. "This holdup nets us ten bucks per each. Let's search the wagon."

Curly Bill and his men were gathered around Napoleon Calhoun, watching the little colored man stir his mixture in the barrel. Napoleon bowed respectfully, removed his battered black Stetson, and began to imitate the doctor's spiel.

"Gather around", one and all, gents. The Nostrum of Liberty is good for man and beast, yas, suh. Made fum the finest condiments and ingredients gathered from the far-flung corners of the earth, an' fum the dark ocean caves deep under the sea. Two dollars a bottle, gents; three for five. Good for all the ills of the flesh, de Nostrum of Liberty will build you up where you is all tore down!"

Curly Bill Black kicked out with his right boot, tripping the colored man to the ground. Napoleon rolled backward, did a tip-up and came to his feet with a grin on his wrinkled face.

"What kind of drinking likker you put in that Nostrum?" Curly Bill demanded. "It's just about first-drink time, and we mean to irrigate."

"Don't you do it, boss," Napoleon warned. "This yere ain't forty-rod which you-all guzzles by the bottle. This yere Nostrum of Liberty is strong medicine, yas, suh. You takes two tablespoonfuls before meals on account of it packs a kick like a jassax."

"Look, feller," Curly Bill said slowly, as he cocked his heavy six-shooter. "Can you dance?"

"Upon occasion I shakes a mean bunch of toenails, boss man," Napoleon answered. "I does my best

shuffle up dere on the vestibule, beggin' you-all's pardon."

"Hit a high lope and start the go-around," Curly Bill ordered.

His pistol blasted. Napoleon started for the vestibule. The little colored man did not hurry. He ignored the explosion. After climbing the vestibule railing, he began a slow heel-and-toe shuffle, humming a Mississippi River song for music.

CURLY BILL picked up a glass from a little table near the barrel containing the Nostrum of Liberty. Dipping up a drink which he tossed off at a gulp, he nodded his head for his followers to help themselves. As Long Tom Ketchum moved away to join the drinkers, the deep voice of Dapper Donnelly spoke a warning.

"Drink sparingly, my swashbuckling friends. The Nostrum of Liberty stood out all night, and a sidewinder might have got into it."

"Drink hearty, gents," Curly Bill invited his men. "We can drink rattlesnakes, as long as we don't see the critters. Have another one on the house!"

Dapper Donnelly watched the drinking party with a veiled gleam of amusement in his dark eyes. The Nostrum of Liberty was harmless but potent, and the outlaws were dipping often. One short-legged buscadero whose pants had been made for a larger man staggered away from the barrel and leaned against the bright-red wagon.

"I can taste it now," he muttered, his voice thick and fuzzy. "But the sarpint which crawled into that barrel wasn't no sidewinder. It was a diamondback."

Napoleon stopped dancing and crawled back into the wagon. Dapper Donnelly did not change expression as he felt the mate to his captured six-shooter shoved down into his molded holster under the tails

of his frock coat. Then Napoleon opened a little window in the side of the wagon, facing the outlaws.

"Give de go-ahead, boss," he whispered to Donnelly. "This yere scattergun runs nine buckshot to de barrel, times two. I seen dat tall busky lift you-all's leather, and I means to get it back. Say when, doc!"

"Put that shotgun down, Napoleon." Dapper Donnelly spoke without moving his lips. "You forget that little bottle."

"Dat's right, boss," Napoleon chuckled. "Four drops made dat Nostrum of Liberty a Mickey Finn, but I dumped in de whole works just to make sure."

Suddenly Curly Bill Black rocked back on his heels, smothering a hiccup with his left hand. A greenish pallor was displacing the tan of his lean face and he seemed to be trying to force open his leaden eyelids.

"I feel sleepy, Long Tom," he said with drunken dignity. "You better stay sober so's you can watch that runty pair."

Long Tom Ketchum nodded and dipped his glass deep. Two outlaws were lying on the grass, another was trying to mount his horse.

Dapper Donnelly elbowed the tail of his coat aside, made a smooth pass for his holstered gun, and shot from the hip. Ketchum jerked as the glass splattered between his fingers.

Then Donnelly went around the circle like a rifleman shooting targets in a gallery. At each roaring shot, a glass disintegrated between the fingers of a drinker.

Curly Bill stabbed for his gun and fell flat on his face. Four men sat down suddenly, flopping over like sodden bedrolls. Long Tom Ketchum, sick to his stomach, swayed like a bent reed in a strong wind. As he crashed on his back and straightened out, Dapper spoke softly to Napoleon Calhoun.

"Span in the horses, Napoleon. These outlaws will sleep until after dark, and we'll be in Tombstone before then. Dump out that Mickey Finn in the barrel; I'll make up a fresh batch while we're riding. We can get water when we cross the San Pedro."

"You going to let that Long Tom get away with our money, boss?" Napoleon asked anxiously.

"He got only a hundred; the rest is well hidden," Donnelly answered with a smile, as he walked over to the sleeping Ketchum.

Dipping a thumb and forefinger into the outlaw's lower vest pocket, Dr. Dapper Donnelly retrieved his loss, returned the paper money to his wallet, and called Napoleon's attention to his gun which Ketchum had pitched under the vestibule of the big red wagon.

"We sho mixed this bunch a mess of panther sweat," Napoleon said with a chuckle, as he handed Donnelly the gun from under the wagon. "They tole us to stand and deliver when they rode up brash and brave, but they won't be standing when they deliver up. That 'make-em'-sick' oil won't do that bunch of owl-hooters a bit of good. Spanning the teams in right away, boss. Yas, suh!"

CHAPTER II.

TOMBSTONE PISTOLEERS.

NAPOLION CALHOUN stopped his four-horse hitch at the top of a long hill, giving the big animals a chance to blow. Dr. Dapper Donnelly, resplendent in his town clothes, sat on the driver's seat beside Napoleon. The colored man rolled his eyes and nudged his boss, pointing to the left.

"Looky yonderly, boss," he murmured, his voice a bare whisper. "We's in the presence of the daid, and they's plenty of 'em."

"That's Tombstone's boothill."

Donnelly explained, but he removed his tall silk hat. "Mostly outlaws and cow thieves buried there; men who got their needings. Drive on, Napoleon."

"Yas, suh; drivin' right along," Napoleon agreed, and clucked to his horses.

Allen Street was the main thoroughfare through the tough little mining town which was built upon deposits of rich silver. Napoleon started to announce their coming with his bugle as the wagon crossed Fifth Street. Cowboys and miners turned to stare at the big red wagon which rolled along on heavy leather springs, turning up Third Street toward Fremont.

"What for we goin' disaway, boss?" Napoleon asked, as Dapper Donnelly pointed to a big corral. "Ain't we goin' to play to the trade on the main drag like usual?"

"That's the O. K. Corral, Napoleon," explained Donnelly. "Horse thieves are thick in these parts of the Territory of Arizona, and we mustn't take any chances. The natives will come a-running when we start our evening show."

"Yas, suh, but what about those owlhooters back by the river?" Napoleon asked. "They bound for to make us some trouble, sho nuff."

"They won't bother us tonight," Dapper Donnelly answered confidently. "Pull into the corral so the vestibule will face on Fremont Street."

Napoleon obeyed and then began to unspan his teams. Dapper Donnelly walked inside the big barn to make a deal with the stableman, Peg-leg Brown, who slid down from a feed box with hand outstretched.

"Long time no see, doc," he greeted Dapper Donnelly heartily. "I want for you to meet up with Buck Gray, sheriff of Tombstone. Buck, this is my old friend, Dr. Dapper Donnelly."

"The whole town knows that," the sheriff said dryly, as he shook hands. "I could read those signs on your wagon three blocks away. Going to stay long in Tombstone?"

"I might," Donnelly answered guardedly. "But not too long."

"You travel fully dressed," the sheriff remarked, studying the six-shooter on the little doctor's right leg. "Don't let Curly Bill's gang catch you with both hands full of guitar."

"I've met Curly Bill," Donnelly answered with a slow smile. "It was out near the San Pedro, and when we left, the whole gang was sound asleep."

Puzzled, Sheriff Gray tried to read what was going on behind Donnelly's inscrutable black eyes. Curly Bill was a dangerous man with many notches on his gun. He had helped Tombstone have her "man for breakfast every morning," but the deceased were usually other bad men seeking glory.

"Asleep?" the sheriff repeated. "In the middle of the day?"

"A gang of vandals if you ask me," Dapper Donnelly said quietly. "My helper was preparing a secret potion which Curly Bill and his gang mistook for trade whiskey. It contained certain powerful but harmless ingredients which not only induce sleep, but taken in excessive quantities, also produce a violent nausea."

"Haw," Peg-leg chuckled. "The doctor slipped those road agents a Mickey Finn, and he means that the whole outfit will tie the calf," he explained to the puzzled lawman. "You won't have to worry about the Benson stage being held up today, sheriff."

"Doctor," Gray said slowly, "you're in grave danger. Curly Bill Black and Long Tom Ketchum are both very dangerous hombres. Quick

on the trigger, and they can both call their shots."

Dapper Donnelly remarked carelessly that he could take care of himself, saying nothing about the holdup. He gave Peg-leg Brown some money for grain and hay, bowed to the sheriff, and returned to his wagon where Napoleon was removing the harness from the four sleek horses.

"I'll eat supper in town tonight, 'Napoleon,'" Dapper told the little colored man. "If anyone should ask for me, I'll be up at the Oriental Hotel. You stay with the wagon, and I'll have a meal sent over. We'll start our evening show at eight o'clock."

A shrill whistle blew from across the gulch where the big silver mines were disgorging red-shirted muckers. Cowboys from the Jinglebob spread mingled with rough-looking men who had no visible means of support. They stared at the dapper doctor as he strolled along the board sidewalks under the wooden awnings, and behind his back gestured at his high silk hat.

As Dapper Donnelly was passing the Crystal Palace Bar, a two-gun man swaggered from the saloon, blocking the sidewalk. Dapper attempted to pass the burly gun slick, who was evidently in his cups.

"Stand hitched, pilgrim!" the gunman roared. "I'm Two-gun Bill McCarty, and I don't like that silk topper you're sportin'!"

Dapper Donnelly gave no sign that he noticed the gathering crowd. Taking three backward steps, he placed himself beyond the reach of Two-gun McCarty and watched the big man with piercing black eyes that did not wink.

McCarty tightened his loose lips as he snarled in his throat. He was just drunk enough to be mean, and to be careless of the danger signs which were unmistakable in the

crouch of his intended victim.

Two-gun slapped down for both holstered guns at the same time. Heavy muscles rippled under the rough wool of his buttoned shirt as he completed his draw, but his calloused thumbs failed to ear back the hammers of his .45 Colts.

Like a coiled snake, and with the same deadly swiftness, Dapper Donnelly struck. His burnished six-shooter roared as it cleared leather, smashing the gun from McCarty's right hand. The speeding slug also severed the gun slick's trigger finger and the big man flopped to the board sidewalk with both guns spilling to the thick dust in the street.

Slowly Dapper Donnelly swiveled to eye the crowd. His smoking gun cocked and ready for war, he studied the hard faces. Some eyes glanced away, others smiled approval; Donnelly did the honors in true frontier style.

"Was Two-gun alone in his merri-ment, or has he friends who do not like the shape of my topper?" Dapper asked in his slow Southern drawl.

"By dogies, Donnelly, you trimmed that busky's horns right down to the nubs," an old cattleman answered in a deep booming voice. "I'm Shanghai Pierce from down Texas way; last time I saw you was in Tascosa. I'll consider it an honor if you'll dine with me at the Russ House. Nellie Cashman is the best cook in this settlement of sin."

"I'll consider it a pleasure, Shanghai Pierce," Dapper Donnelly answered courteously, but he jacked the spent shell from his gun, reloaded, and holstered the weapon before turning to shake hands with his old friend.

"You, Two-gun," Pierce roared at McCarty. "You ain't hurt none to speak of, so you better drag yore spurs down to see old Doc White, the croaker. You've been ripe for a reefin' for quite a spell of time, and

you're lucky Dapper didn't drill you center. C'mon, doc."

The two old friends talked of Texas and the long trails as Shanghai Pierce led the way to Nellie Cashman's boardinghouse down on Toughnut Street. Pierce pointed out the jail and courthouse, explained some of the politics of the tough mining town. When they reached the Russ House, he paused at the door.

"You'll like Nellie Cashman," he said, in a low earnest tone. "Every man in town calls her the 'Angel of Tombstone,' and that's what she is. Feeds the prisoners and reads the Bible to them as is going to be hung. Wait till you see our Nell."

Dapper Donnelly followed the big cattleman into a long room filled with tables. A comely woman in her thirties greeted Pierce with a smile, shook hands, and turned to Donnelly.

"Welcome to Tombstone, Dapper Donnelly," she said, surprising the little doctor.

Among other things, Dapper Donnelly was a gambler who had learned to control his features. Only his dark eyes brightened as Nellie Cashman offered her hand.

"I am honored, Miss Nellie," he said, bowing low from the hips. "Of course, I've heard of you, but I am at a loss to understand how you knew my name."

Nellie Cashman stopped smiling, and she did not speak until she had seated her guests at a table in the rear of the big room. Then her lips barely moved as she leaned above Dapper Donnelly.

"You must be careful, doctor. Shorty Haines rode in this afternoon from the river. He was very sick, and I gave him something to settle his stomach. Curly Bill has threatened to kill you. . . . Our roast beef is very good tonight."

"Thank you, I'll have some.

Medium rare," Dapper answered with a smile. "Jinglebob beef?"

"So you've heard of John Slaughter's famous brand," Shanghai Pierce interrupted, although he had taken in every word of the whispered conversation. "Yeah, it's Jinglebob beef, but I brought those critters up the trail from down Texas way. Make mine the same, Miss Nellie."

As Nellie Cashman walked away, Shanghai Pierce turned to Donnelly. His face was grave and he twisted one end of his longhorn mustache mechanically.

"You want to watch both Curly Bill and Long Tom," he warned quietly. "Keep a gun close to your hand when you do those fancy tricks for the crowds. There ain't too much law in Tombstone, except what men carry in their scabbards, and the strongest evidence in court is proving self-defense."

Dapper nodded, but he did not answer. He was thinking back to the days of the war when men learned to take care of themselves. Size made little difference where Judge Colt ruled the court, but Dapper Donnelly watched the front door as he chatted quietly with Shanghai Pierce from Texas.

CHAPTER III.

A SIGN OF PEACE.

GARISH yellow lamps lighted Allen Street as Dapper Donnelly walked to his wagon. Shanghai Pierce was returning to his trail crew who were camped just beyond town out on the river flats. Napoleon was waiting anxiously as Donnelly turned into the O. K. Corral.

"You haven't lighted the lamps yet, Napoleon," Donnelly chided the little colored man. "It lacks only about twenty minutes until we open our show."

"I'se scared to light up, boss,"

Napoleon confessed in a whisper. "You mind that long white man who held us up and took you-all's wallet this mawnin'?"

"You mean Long Tom Ketchum?" Donnelly asked quietly.

"Yas, suh, he just stabled his hoss not more than a half-hour ago. He took a good look at the wagon before he rolled his spurs down Allen Street fo' to get him a bait of hot grub. He don't mean us no good, boss!"

Dapper shrugged carelessly. If Ketchum was going to eat, it would be graveyard stew. Hot milk with crackers; perhaps a mug or two of strong black coffee.

"I done put the hosses in the barn where Mr. Peg-leg could kind o' watch 'em," Napoleon continued. "Case bullets begin to chink around here, dem hosses will be safe. Shall I begin to commence now, boss?"

"Set out the tables and instruments," ordered Donnelly. "Light the lamps on the vestibule, and have plenty of medicine on hand. We ought to do a good business here in Tombstone."

Twenty minutes later Napoleon Calhoun blew a ringing call on his polished brass bugle. Dapper Donnelly stroked the gut strings on a Spanish guitar, which was suspended by a silken cord around his neck and began to sing a song of the cow trails in a rich baritone voice. Soon a crowd had gathered in front of the vestibule of the big red wagon.

"Come all ye!" Donnelly called, as he fastened a mouth organ to a wire frame which fitted under his coat collar. "Free entertainment is provided for one and all," and he blew in the harmonica before starting the hoe-down favorite, "Turkey in the Straw."

Dapper Donnelly played easily, his dark eyes roving over the crowd. His glance stopped for a moment as he saw Shorty Haines in the back

row, with hat pulled low over his piggish eyes. After finishing the dance tune, Donnelly removed the harp and smiled at the crowd.

"Allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "I am Dr. Dapper Donnelly, a citizen of the wide open spaces. My assistant is Napoleon Calhoun, who will now join me in a song of the sunny South."

As the sweet melody of Stephen Foster's "Suwanee River" rose on the night air, the crowd became very still. Here and there a red-shirted miner would hum a word or two. One voice, coming from the far fringe of the crowd, attracted Donnelly's attention. His glance passed across the face of Long Tom Ketchum without hesitation. Sheriff Buck Gray was behind the outlaw.

DAPPER DONNELLY removed the harp frame and guitar, talking all the while in a smooth, persuasive voice. A pitch artist of the first water, he kept the crowd interested while Napoleon removed the instruments and set up the table for the doctor's tricks.

"The hand is quicker than the eye, my friends," Donnelly went on with his patter.

Picking up a large silk handkerchief, he jerked the cloth away. A snowy-white rabbit sat in his right hand until Napoleon removed it to a cage.

Between stories and tricks, Dapper Donnelly informed the crowd of the remarkable curative powers of his Nostrum of Liberty, which was good for man and beast. Two dollars a bottle, or three for five. The supply was unlimited as long as it lasted.

"The Elixir of Life," Donnelly announced softly. "If you have a spavin or a gunshot wound, you cannot afford to be without the Elixir. When the misery gets you down on

bed ground, come winter, the Elixir will put you on your feet again. Step out of the gutter and let the water run by, sonny," he whispered to a small boy.

Napoleon passed out bottles and made change. Dapper Donnelly came to his favorite trick. Placing his silk hat on the table with the brim up, he covered the hat with a silk cloth. His small well-shaped hands made several passes as he glibly muttered foreign words of magic.

"I bring you a sign of peace, gentlemen," he said reverently, jerking the silk cloth from the hat.

Two white doves flew from the hat, circled the crowd, and alighted on a small wooden perch at the top of the wagon, directly over Dapper Donnelly's black head. They cooed musically as the crowd watched with fascination. Suddenly Donnelly shook his right arm and spoke sharply:

"Don't draw your pistol, Shorty Haines. I want peace so much that I'm willing to fight for it!"

Shorty Haines stared at the tiny two-shot derringer which had leaped to Dapper Donnelly's right hand. Shoving his half-drawn six-shooter deep into his holster, Haines raised both hands.

"Cavin', doc," he admitted defeat, in a whining tone. "But these gents will have yore scalp if you sell them any of that rat p'izen. I dang near died after drinking some of that Nostrum of Liberty."

"You mean out by the San Pedro River this morning where I was held up and robbed?" Donnelly asked quickly.

"The whole gang was p'izenen," blurted Haines.

Dapper Donnelly turned swiftly as he saw a move at the fringe of the crowd. Long Tom Ketchum had his gun clear of leather when he noticed the tiny pistol in Donnelly's

right hand. A heavy .45 struck Ketchum's hand as Sheriff Gray made his law play, and the hard case dropped his weapon with a howl of pain. Covering Ketchum, Sheriff Gray stated the charge.

"I arrest you and Shorty Haines for highway robbery, Ketchum," he said clearly. "We have *prima facie* evidence, and you better come peaceable."

"Wait a minute, shur'uff," growled Ketchum. "That medicine man fed me knockout drops, and rolled me while I was dead to the world. He taken a hundred bucks from me, all in twenties."

"That's right, sheriff," Dapper Donnelly admitted. "If Ketchum insists upon washing his soiled linen in public, he can wash mine at the same time. That long hombre took a hundred dollars from my wallet at the point of a gun, and when he became drowsy, I retrieved my loss. Ask Shorty Haines."

THE sheriff turned to question the short-legged cowboy, but Haines had disappeared in the outer darkness. Long John Ketchum smiled triumphantly and turned to the sheriff.

"It's this gent's word against mine, Gray. I'll call it quits if he will."

"I have preferred no charges against you," Donnelly answered with a shrug. "Tombstone is a town that's too tough to die; she boasts that she has a man for breakfast every morning. I am a man of peace, but I concoct strong medicine for outlaws who ride gun sign on me and mine. Turn him loose, sheriff."

Ketchum grinned as he faced the crowd. He had killed five men in Tombstone for which deeds he had paid five fines of twenty-five dollars each for discharging firearms within the city limits.

"Don't buy any of that Nostrum

of Liberty, pards," he warned the crowd. "This runty son is a faker!"

Dapper Donnelly started to elbow his coat tails back, but he stopped the move as a big, wide-shouldered man forced his way through the crowd. Shanghai Pierce came right up to the vestibule and laid a five-dollar bill on the table.

"Three bottles of the Nostrum to prove that Long Tom Ketchum is a hoss thief and a liar!" he bellowed.

Napoleon Calhoun handed out the three bottles. Shanghai Pierce drew the cork from one bottle with his teeth, made a mark with a rope-burned finger, and drank down to the mark. Giving a deep sigh of satisfaction, he wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand.

"Had me a mite of stomach misery," he explained to the crowd. "The pain is all gone now. I've used this Nostrum for years and years. The directions are on the label, but a man hadn't ought to slop it down like bar whiskey. What'd you say, Ketchum?"

"Who you calling a liar?" demanded Ketchum, as he made a stab for his empty holster.

Sheriff Gray held up a hand to stop Shanghai Pierce, whose Texas pistol had already cleared leather.

"Hold your fire, Shanghai! This *malo hombre* forgot about dropping his hogleg a while back. It would be murder, and him gun-naked."

"Give him his shooting iron, and we'll start from scratch," the big Texan growled. "Him and his pards have been rustling cattle for more than a year, but up to now I've been lucky."

"Them's fighting words, *Tejano*," Ketchum muttered, but he made no move to pick up his gun. "I'll settle with you later."

"You'll settle with *me* now," Dapper Donnelly interrupted, and his voice was a thin thread of sound. "I demand an apology; pass him

that bottle, Shanghai. He either takes a drink in front of the crowd, or Tombstone will have her man for breakfast. There's nothing better than a dram of the Nostrum of Liberty for an upset stomach."

SHANGHAI PIERCE grinned and passed the bottle to the man nearest him. It traveled from hand to hand until it reached Long Tom Ketchum. The outlaw knew that he was in a tight with escape cut off. Taking the bottle, he drank a generous portion.

"Say, doc," he admitted presently, "that stuff really does the trick. I'm making my manners, unsaying my words, and swearing I never said them. Give me three bottles of that pain killer!"

Dapper Donnelly was a salesman who had faith in his wares. He smiled as Napoleon took Ketchum's money and handed the outlaw three bottles of medicine made from the herbs gathered from many lands, mixed with the water from the San Pedro River.

"Step right up and free your flesh from the aches and pains common to all mankind," Donnelly told the crowd. "All's well that ends well, and the dove of peace has descended upon Tombstone."

Shanghai Pierce waited around until the supply of medicine was sold out. After the crowd had drifted toward the brighter lights of Allen Street, the old cattleman studied Donnelly's face with a quizzical smile.

"You reckon that Nostrum built Long Tom up where he was all tore down?" he asked. "Or was he buying his way out for five dollars?"

"Never thought of that," Donnelly admitted honestly. "He saved his face, and twenty dollars in cash which he would have had to pay for disturbing the peace. Even the

sheriff forgot that he had placed Ketchum under arrest."

"Naw, suh, boss," old Napoleon interrupted. "That Nostrum will heal up and hair over a cut in two days flat. "You want a haircut before we close up, Mistah Shanghai, suh?"

CHAPTER IV.

MAN FOR BREAKFAST.

DAPPER DONNELLY raised his head from the pillow of his bunk in the forward part of the big red wagon. Some vagrant sound had disturbed his slumbers, and the quavering whispered voice of Napoleon told Donnelly that the sound he had heard was not imaginary.

"Seemed like I heard a big thump, boss," Napoleon whispered. "Was going to drag on my britches and take a look at the hosses."

Both men began to dress in the inky darkness. They could hear horses stomping over in the big livery barn, and Dapper Donnelly judged the time to be an hour or so after midnight. Instead of leaving the wagon by the side door, Donnelly followed Napoleon through the little opening which led to the vestibule.

"Looky, boss," Napoleon whispered. "There's one of our white leaders in the yard at the corner of the barn!"

Dapper Donnelly stared at the big white horse with anger quickening his pulses. Peg-leg Brown was an old friend, and something must have happened to the owner of the O. K. Corral or the white horse would be in its stall. Donnelly drew his six-shooter as another large white shape loomed up from the entrance of the barn. A small man was leading the second horse, and Donnelly called sharply:

"Stop where you are, hombre!"

Even as he spoke, Dapper Donnelly changed his position, running

lightly across the corral to a place where he could see the entrance to the big barn. Orange flame stabbed at the place where he had stood, and the big white horses shied as a gun roared from just inside the barn.

Dapper Donnelly took careful aim and triggered two shots at the gun flash. The fall of a heavy body echoed the roar of his second shot, but Donnelly was watching the short man who had led the second white horse from the barn.

"Step out with both hands high, Shorty," Donnelly called to the horse thief. "I've got you under my sights!"

"Don't shoot, doc," a husky voice pleaded. "I'm shuckin' my hardware, and reachin' for sky!"

Dapper Donnelly went into a crouch, turning his body sideways to thin the target he presented. He recognized the voice of Shorty Haines and he did not trust the wide-shouldered outlaw. A gun roared savagely from between the two white horses, but Dapper Donnelly did not return the fire. The horse thief was hiding behind one of the nervous horses.

Dapper Donnelly could see the black of the rustler's legs under the belly of one of the snorting horses. He clenched his teeth as he lined his sights, waiting for the horse to make another step. Then the gun roared savagely, followed by a yell of pain.

"I caved, doc! You busted my off leg!"

Dapper Donnelly made no answer. He began to move toward the barn, keeping to the shelter of the adobe wall which surrounded the corral. When he came to the end of the big barn, he crept closer until he could see the light from a lantern, hanging from a box stall.

A deep groan came from a place near the door, just inside the barn. A man was stretched out in the

straw; a tall hombre who was babbling softly to himself. Donnelly crept closer, keeping out of sight as he listened with head cocked to one side.

"Bleedin' out. Man for breakfast!"

Clicking his teeth, Dapper Donnelly crossed the barn entrance on the run. He stopped at the corner, knowing he would be behind Shorty Haines. Bellying low to the ground, Donnelly moved his head around the corner.

SHORTY HAINES was lined against the body of one of the white horses, nursing his wounded leg. He called fretfully, not knowing that Dapper Donnelly was behind him.

"I'm bleeding out, doc. You must have killed Long Tom, and I'm ready to give up head!"

Dapper Donnelly flattened out on the ground, watching the rustler. Shorty Haines, holding a cocked six-shooter in his right hand, was staring at the spot from which he had been shot. He was pleading for help—and waiting to kill Donnelly if he fell for the ruse.

Dapper Donnelly rose to his knees without making a sound. Keen-eyed, he could see in the dark and his gun was gripped firmly in his right hand as he made a leap from the corner of the barn. The barrel of his six-shooter struck Shorty Haines on the side of the head and knocked the rustler sprawling, discharging the outlaw's cocked gun as it clattered across the ground.

"You git both of 'em, boss?" Napoleon called softly from the darkness.

"Come and take over the horses, Napoleon," Dapper Donnelly answered. "Hold them here at the corner, while I have a look at Long Tom Ketchum. I think he's cashing in his chips."

Napoleon showed up with flashing white teeth as Donnelly finished speaking. Boots could be heard running toward Fifth Street from Allen, thudding on the board sidewalks. Sheriff Buck Gray called out hoarsely as he kept down behind the shelter of the adobe wall:

"What's going on in there?"

"Dapper Donnelly speaking, sheriff. We caught a pair of horse thieves. Long Tom Ketchum is wounded inside the barn, so circle off away from that entrance. I'm here to the left."

Donnelly waited until he heard the thud of boots which told him that the lawman had scaled the low wall. He guided the sheriff with a soft call, and both men heard a smothered groan just as the sheriff reached Donnelly's hiding place.

"Hold it, sheriff," Donnelly whispered. "That groan came from back in the barn. Ketchum is lying on the straw just inside the door, and to the left. They must have tied up Peg-leg Brown."

"Brown can wait," the sheriff grunted. "But that Long Tom Ketchum, he's like a sidewinder. You can't trust his breed until they're dead all over. You, Ketchum!"

No answer came from the wounded outlaw inside the barn. Fumbling on the ground, the sheriff found a billet of wood which he tossed on the ground just inside the barn.

A gun roared instantly from the pile of straw as the chunk of wood struck the ground. Dapper Donnelly tripped trigger in the brief second or so that the outlaw's gunfire lighted the barn. Before the echoes had died away, Donnelly was racing through the entrance.

Dapper Donnelly felt no remorse as he kept to the shadows, making his way to an empty stall from which the hollow groan had come.

Stopping at the barred gate, he called softly:

"Peg-leg. You in there?"

A muffled grunt answered his call, and Dapper pushed through the gate. Groans guided him to the hay-filled manger where he found the stableman bound hand and foot. Taking a small knife from his pocket, Donnelly severed the piggin' strings which bound Peg-leg.

THE stableman sat up, clawing a dirty neckerchief from between his jaws. He gripped Donnelly's arms as he clambered out of the manger, and finally found his tongue.

"Long Tom Ketchum and Shorty Haines," he gasped. "Shorty sneaked up behind me while I was talking to Ketchum. He clubbed me with his hogleg, but I didn't pass out. They tied and gagged me, dumped me into the manger, but I heard them talking. They meant to steal your horses."

"Sh-h-h," Donnelly warned softly. "Ketchum is up front, and so is the sheriff."

"Come on out, doc," Buck Gray called. "Long Tom is a good outlaw, but I want a witness when I frisk his corpse."

Dapper Donnelly was helping Peg-leg, who was stiff in his good leg from his cramped position in the manger. The stableman took the lantern from its peg, turned up the wick, and walked toward the sheriff.

Talking the lantern, the sheriff held it close to the dead man's face. A murmur of approval gusted from the lawman's stern lips. He pointed to a little black hole in the outlaw's forehead, squarely between the wide staring eyes.

"Square shooting, Dapper," he said quietly. "But you always was a square-shooter, from what I've heard."

"Snakes, that whole Curly Bill gang," Peg-leg said acidly. "I heard

doc give Shorty Haines a chance, and Shorty let on like he'd surrendered. Then he took a shot at doc, and this hombre did likewise. There's mighty little law in Tombstone, was you to ask me, Buck Gray."

"Which I didn't," the sheriff answered sourly. "I was up here within five minutes after the shooting. If doc hadn't got Ketchum, I meant to keep on shooting at this straw pile until my gun ran dry."

"We're wasting time, men," Dapper Donnelly reminded quietly. "Shorty Haines ought to be coming around, and he said he wanted to give up head. Perhaps he's ready to talk."

"Come a-runnin', boss. Yonder comes a hang mob!"

The three men in the barn sped out through the door as the voice of old Napoleon Calhoun shouted the warning. News about the fight at the O. K. Corral must have spread to Allen Street where the saloons were still doing a brisk business.

Napoleon had led his big white horses away to the shelter of the adobe wall, but the hang mob was milling about the big corral, searching for a victim.

A triumphant yell went up as some of the crowd found Shorty Haines trying to get up from the ground. The outlaw was surrounded instantly, jerked to his feet and a rope placed around his neck.

"String the hoss thief up over that crossbar!"

Dapper Donnelly nudged the sheriff as a lusty voice shouted for the blood of Shorty Haines. Gray shook his head and made a rough tally of the mob.

"Must be fifty men in that crowd, doc," he declared. "I don't think enough of Shorty Haines to get killed tryin' to keep him from dancin' on air!"

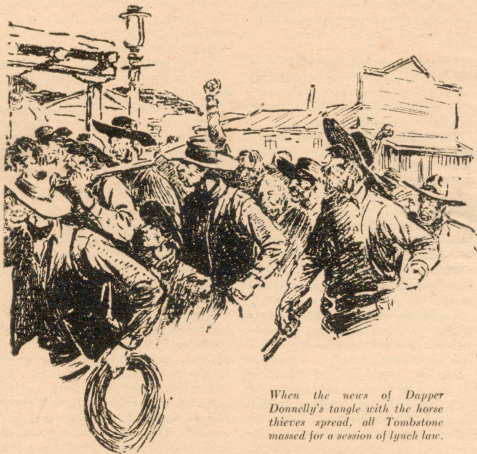
CHAPTER V.

THE ANGEL OF TOMBSTONE.

DAPPER DONNELLY reloaded his six-shooter and watched the hang mob. Red-shirted miners, tough cowboys from the long trails,

Buck Gray hedged. "I hadn't put him under arrest, and he isn't worth fighting about."

"You're the law here in Tombstone," reminded Donnelly. "Shorty Haines is entitled to a fair trial. On top of that, dead men don't talk."



When the news of Dapper Donnelly's tangle with the horse thieves spread, all Tombstone massed for a session of lynch law.

they were men who held life cheaply. They had seen the workings of the law in Tombstone where outlaw killers paid fines of twenty-five dollars after murdering anyone who challenged their ruthlessness. Here was a chance to pay off an old score.

"I'll side you if you want to take your prisoner," Dapper Donnelly told the sheriff.

"He wasn't rightly my prisoner,"

"Look, doc," the sheriff said earnestly. "I've arrested well-known outlaws right after they had killed innocent men. It's always been the same. The killers plead self-defense and are fined twenty-five dollars for discharging firearms within the city limits."

"That's whatever, Dapper," Peg-leg Brown broke in. "I knew you years ago down in Texas. What

did they do to hoss thieves down Texas way?"

Dapper Donnelly remained silent. He knew what they did to horse thieves anywhere in the West. Shorty Haines was treacherous, had even tried to kill Donnelly after offering to surrender. Haines had also tried to steal the big white leaders. The little outlaw had a hanging coming to him.

Dapper Donnelly argued with himself, but he was not satisfied. He tried to convince himself that if the duly elected law realized the futility of trying to effect a rescue, he would have little chance if he tried to save Shorty Haines.

Buck Gray tried to stop Dapper Donnelly, but the little doctor eluded the sheriff's grasp. Two tall burly cowboys were half carrying the prisoner between them toward the big gate over which a heavy crossbar offered a ready-made gallows.

Shorty Haines was shouting with fright, and he would have fallen except for the two cowboys who gripped him by the arms. A hangman's noose rested behind the outlaw's left ear, and a red-shirted miner was throwing the end of the rope up over the crossbar.

Dapper Donnelly moved in close, keeping to the shadow of the adobe wall. His .45 six-shooter in his right hand, he spoke in a loud firm voice:

"Wait a moment, men. Don't pull on that rope!"

A HUSH fell over the crowd. Every man turned to see the speaker. Twenty guns centered on Dapper Donnelly's heart as he stood silhouetted against the lights of Allen Street. Donnelly had climbed to the top of the adobe wall.

"Save your spiel for your business, doc," a rough voice shouted. "This hoss thief is guilty, and you

know it as well as we do. He tried to steal your hosses, and we aim to string him up."

"I didn't make a complaint," Dapper Donnelly said, without raising his deep vibrant voice. "Every man is entitled to a fair trial; that's all I'm asking for the accused. If he's found guilty, the law will execute him legally."

"Save your breath, doc," the tall leader shouted. "We've seen the law work here in Tombstone. Up to now, Tombstone has had her man for breakfast every morning, and this one won't be no different, except that the gallows bait will be an outlaw."

"I said wait," Dapper Donnelly answered grimly, swinging his six-shooter around to cover the leader. "I don't care any more about life than you do. I'll get several of you hombres before I go down!"

An angry murmur rose from the crowd, but Donnelly stood his ground. His dark eyes narrowed as a big man shouldered his way through the crowd; a man with long-horn mustaches, and the drawl of south Texas in his wind-roughened voice.

"Come down from that wall, doc! This runty hoss thief ain't worth fighting about, and he's bound to stretch rope, anyway!"

"That's telling him, Shanghai," the crowd yelled. "We don't want to kill Dapper Donnelly, but we aim to hang us a wood pussy. Tombstone has got to have her man for breakfast."

"Tombstone has had her man for breakfast," Donnelly said. "You'll find Long Tom Ketchum lying on some straw just inside the barn."

"Naw, you don't, doc," Shanghai Pierce shouted hoarsely. "You can't go clouding the sign thataway. This hombre is guilty, and he's going to dance on air!"

"He gets a fair trial," insisted Donnelly. "You heard me, Shanghai Pierce!"

The big Texan went into a crouch above his cocked pistol. His ten-gallon hat was tilted to the back of his white head and his longhorn mustaches were gleaming whitely against the rich bronze of his wind-tanned cheeks.

Dapper Donnelly watched Pierce with no change of expression, except for the glitter in his black eyes. Both men knew how to bluff; both would die to make that bluff good. The slightest move would set off taut muscles; neither man would give an inch.

So intent was the crowd on the silent duel of nerves that they failed to see another figure moving along the adobe wall on the outside. A gasp went up as the figure leaped lightly to the wall in front of Dapper Donnelly. It was the figure of a woman!

"Hold your fire, and shame on you, Shanghai Pierce," a deep feminine voice lashed at the big Texan. "You talk loudly of law and order, and here I find you leading a lynch mob!"

"Nellie Cashman!" a man murmured hoarsely, and another man added: "The Angel of Tombstone!"

Dapper Donnelly began to tremble with humiliation. Never in his life had he hidden behind the skirts of a woman; death was preferable to such shame. He jumped to the ground inside the corral facing the crowd, and then he groaned again.

He could see the white head of Shanghai Pierce, but the Texan could not see his smaller opponent because of the crowd. Dapper Donnelly lost his composure; his voice hurled a challenge at Shanghai Pierce.

"I'll meet you at sunrise if you swing Shorty Haines!"

"You'll meet me now, you banty rooster!" Pierce roared his answer. "Stand back, boys!"

"Stay where you are," Nellie Cashman ordered sternly. "You men are acting like animals, and most of you are my friends. I ask you to listen to me for a moment. Will you grant my request?"

Shanghai Pierce glared defiantly; then he slowly nodded his head and the fighting glare died in his fierce gray eyes. He holstered his gun in token of an armistice.

"We'll listen, Nellie. You was saying?"

"Thank you, Shanghai. And you, Dapper Donnelly. The law has prescribed certain penalties for certain crimes. Every one of us is guaranteed a fair trial, which is all that Dr. Donnelly is asking for the man he captured. Disperse this bang mob, and turn the prisoner over to Sheriff Buck Gray. If he's found guilty, the result will be the same, and much bloodshed will be avoided!"

SHANGHAI PIERCE turned as a small hand touched his arm. Dapper Donnelly had circled the crowd and had come up behind the big Texan. Pierce glared at the little man, who returned his stare without winking.

"Miss Nellie is right, Shanghai," Donnelly drawled softly. "If you still feel in the same mood after the trial, I will be at your service. Well?"

The veins stood out on the big Texan's throat. His lips puffed as he tried to control the anger which was seething through his veins. He had fought outlaws on the long trail from Texas and he hated a horse thief with every fiber of his being. Stretching forth his big right hand, Shanghai Pierce clenched his fist until his knuckles cracked like brittle twigs.

"I could take your neck in one hand like that," he whispered hoarsely.

"You couldn't cut 'er, Shanghai," contradicted Donnelly. "Size don't make any difference to old Judge Colt!"

"Stand back!" Shanghai Pierce roared at the crowd. "I never ate crow or backed water in all my sinful life, and I'm too old to start now. Draw, you runty bantam!"

"Gentlemen!"

Nellie Cashman spoke quietly, but just in time to stop practiced hands from drawing death-dealing guns from molded leather. Dapper Donnelly was the first to give way; he dropped his hand. Removing his black Stetson, he bowed from the hips.

"I ask your pardon, Miss Nellie. I forgot my manners."

"I forgot what few I have," Shanghai Pierce muttered through clenched teeth.

"And I'll shoot the next man who forgets his," the stern voice of Sheriff Buck Gray boomed from on top of the adobe wall behind the hang mob. "I'm taking the prisoner to jail down on Toughnut Street, and he gets a fair trial, the blasted hoss thief!"

The two big cowboys who were holding the prisoner stared at Shanghai Pierce, their boss. Shorty Haines dangled between them, a pool of blood on the ground under his wounded left leg. One of the cowboys made a suggestion.

"This hombre wanted to talk with his mouth wide open; there's no time like right now!"

"That's right," Dapper Donnelly agreed instantly. "The sheriff and I were about to give a listen when you boys took the play away from the law. Start talking, Shorty!"

"You should have killed me, doc," the wounded prisoner moaned. "I'll

get it anyhow, but I don't want to stretch hemp."

"Who sent you down here to steal my horses?" Donnelly asked. "Was it Curly Bill Black?"

Shorty Haines moaned again and nodded his head. His eyes were wide with fear, his face like yellow parchment.

"We robbed the stages," he began to talk. "We meant to rustle—"

A whipping shot cracked out to halt the wounded rustler's confession. Haines went suddenly limp between the two husky cowhands; they lowered him to the ground. A brown spot had appeared over his heart, and bannered out in the folds of his dirty hickory shirt. Racing hoofs began to roar in the darkness behind Fremont Street, fading away to a murmuring patter of sound.

A sob broke the stillness as Nellie Cashman slipped from the wall and walked alone to the Russ House. Shanghai Pierce cleared his throat loudly and offered his hand to Dapper Donnelly.

"You're the biggest man, doc," he said huskily.

"There goes a greater courage than you or I will ever know, Shanghai," murmured Dapper Donnelly, gripping the big cattleman's hand.

Shanghai Pierce nodded. "Yeah, doc; she's the Angel of Tombstone!"

CHAPTER VI.

SUNRISE SHOWDOWN.

SHANGHAI PIERCE walked down to the jail with Sheriff Buck Gray. The crowd from the Bird Cage Opera House was coming down Allen Street for food and refreshments before putting Tombstone away from the night. The sheriff nudged Pierce gently as a tall handsome man pushed through the swinging doors of the Crystal Palace Bar.

"Yonder goes Curly Bill Black. It was him who shot Shorty Haines, but we can't prove a thing."

Pierce shrugged. "Why try?" He grunted. "Curly Bill sent word that he was going to get Dapper Donnelly, and you've seen doc work with his tools."

"Shorty Haines spilled the beans before he cashed in his chips," reminded the sheriff. "Said something about Curly Bill leading the gang which has been robbing the Benson stage."

"Shorty won't ever testify in court," Pierce pointed out. "Your job is to ramrod the law here in Cochise County, and you've got some help whether you want it or not. Dapper Donnelly is making some mighty strong medicine for outlaws, and he ain't going out of his way to look for fight."

Dapper Donnelly had gone to bed again in the front part of his big red wagon. He could hear Napoleon moving about restlessly on the vestibule, standing guard with the double-barreled sawed-off in his gnarled black hands. Cemetery Starbuck had driven into the O. K. Corral with his long black wagon; there would be a double funeral in boot-hill that same afternoon.

Dapper Donnelly pulled a blanket over himself without removing his clothing. He had loosened his black string tie, pulled off his hand-made boots and removed the black Stetson from his coal-black head. Sunrise would bring showdown, but a man took his sleep when he could.

Five minutes after his head had touched the down pillow, Dapper Donnelly was sound asleep. The last sound he remembered hearing was the soft whispering voice of old Napoleon singing a song of their birthland.

"Carry me back to ole Virginny."

Napoleon glanced through a peep-

hole, grinning as he saw his boss asleep on the front bunk. He had looked after the 'doctah' since Dapper Donnelly had been a boy. Donnelly's father has given Napoleon his freedom, but the colored man had refused to leave his young master.

"Come sunup in about two-three hours," Napoleon murmured to himself. "Dey hung Jawn Brown's body fum a sour-apple tree."

Napoleon stood on his feet, afraid that he would fall asleep if he allowed himself the luxury of a comfortable chair. At four o'clock the lights went out over on Allen Street. Reaching under his coat, Napoleon brought out a bottle of the Nosttrum of Liberty from his left hip pocket. Measuring a dram with a wrinkled forefinger, he drank down to the mark, and took a chaser of the same.

"Builds a man up where he's all tore down," the little colored man whispered to himself: "Yas, sub; way down upon de Suwanee River."

A FAINT light showed across the desert floor, reflected from the high peaks of the Chiricahua Mountains. Horses were beginning to stir inside the big barn; dishes were rattling down in Coffee Joe's lunch room over on Fifth Street. A new day was coming to life in Tombstone.

Napoleon puckered his lips and whistled softly. He was watching the sleeping man inside the wagon which had been their home for nearly five years. Then Napoleon whistled a trifle louder; the call was—retrell's guerrillas.

Dapper Donnelly threw back the blanket and came to his feet wide-awake. He had answered that call for four long years; it was engraved indelibly upon his memory. Turning to a tin basin, he bathed his face and hands in cold water, dried

himself on a linen towel, and looked to his gun.

The beautiful weapon, a .45 Peace-maker Colt, had been balanced to fit his small hand. Placing the hammer on half-cock, Donnelly spun the cylinder just to make sure. There were five gleaming brass shells, with the hammer riding on an empty for safety.

The little doctor straightened up and sheathed his six-shooter. His right hand was steady; he held his arm straight out from the shoulder. Came a downward flash—Dapper Donnelly went through his daily routine. The heavy six-shooter leaped to his hand as though he had picked the weapon out of thin air, then disappeared quickly beneath the tail of Donnelly's frock coat.

"They's a tall dark man standing over in front of Mistah Fly's photograph gallery, boss," Napoleon whispered softly. "Lookin' dis-away, and it just sunup."

There was no excitement in Napoleon's voice as he announced the coming of Curly Bill Black. He gripped his scattergun in his black hands until Dapper Donnelly opened the side door and stepped down to the ground. Then, lowering his shotgun, Napoleon stepped back into the wagon. There was a small window in the side facing Fremont Street.

Dapper Donnelly shrugged to make his broadcloth coat fit the square set of his shoulders. His black Stetson was tugged down to shield his eyes from the sun and the two ends of his string necktie stood out in bold relief against the snowy white of his linen shirt.

Donnelly clicked his heels together smartly from long practice. His stride was measured as he began to walk across the O. K. Corral. Curly Bill Black started forward at the same time with military precision. He had ridden with Quantrell's guerrillas.

BOTH men halted with a snappy one-two when about ten paces separated them. The sun slanted over the Chiricahuas, picking out the impassive features under Dapper Donnelly's black Stetson.

Someone had to perform the preliminaries, and after a long pause, Curly Bill started to talk.

"You killed Tom Ketchum, my pard," he said harshly. "Long Tom was off his feed, but even at that, you shot him on a sneak."

"Like the sneak that he was," Dapper Donnelly corrected in his soft drawling voice. "He was hiding back in the dark, and he never did see the light."

"You made a grandstand play to save Shorty Haines," Curly Bill sneered, barely moving his thin lips. "You figured Shorty would talk; I bet that he wouldn't."

"He talked some before your bush-whack lead killed him," Dapper Donnelly retorted. "The sheriff heard his confession. The Benson stage came through safely yesterday; it carried ten thousand in gold."

Curly Bill lost his composure as rage twisted his dark face. His waxed mustache writhed at the corners of his mouth. He was recalling that at the time the stage was coming through he and his gang had been sound asleep under the powerful influence of strong medicine, concocted by this man who faced him without a tremor of fear.

"Meat on the table," he growled in a husky voice. "Tombstone will have another man for breakfast."

"That's right," Donnelly agreed. "On a stone table in Cemetery Starbuck's back room. The undertaker wants cash at the graveside; twenty-five dollars extra if he hauls the deceased to boothill in the glass hearse."

"How you fixed for cash?" Curly Bill asked bluntly.

"I've got better than five thousand cached away in currency and gold," Dapper Donnelly answered quietly. "There's a double bottom in that oak barrel from which you drank yesterday. How about yourself?"

"There's that much and more in a pocket under the left skirt of my saddle," the outlaw answered without hesitation. "I came here to kill you; give the go-ahead."

Dapper Donnelly took a deep breath. Curly Bill had passed the deal to him. The outlaw would play what he caught on the draw. The sun was getting warmer. Curly Bill's tall frame cast a shadow on the ground between the two men.

"Don't move," Dapper Donnelly said, his voice very soft. "The shadow from your J. B. is only two inches away from that little stick on the ground between us. The sun is coming up fast. When your shadow reaches the stick—"

Instead of speaking, Curly Bill nodded his head in agreement. The movement sent the shadow of his hat speeding across the little stick—sent two educated right hands hurtling toward holster leather.

ANOTHER man might have short-changed himself in the matter of time, but Dapper Donnelly was waiting for just such a display of treachery. A man who would jump the gun would cheat himself at solitaire.

Curly Bill's long fingers wrapped around the ivory handle of his six-shooter, his thumb earing back the hammer on the draw. His lips were pulled back in a snarl to show clenched white teeth, but he made the mistake of pulling high for a throw-down.

Dapper Donnelly didn't have so far to go because of his diminutive stature and the length of his arms.

He had trained himself to shoot as his gun was coming up. Another fraction of a second was whittled from his time because of the filed hammer which eliminated the use of his trigger. Little things which massed big when the difference between life and death was measured by the wink of an eye.

Dapper Donnelly's Peacemaker roared from his hip just as Curly Bill was throwing down for a chopping shot. The outlaw's bellowing six-shooter blended to make a stuttering echo to the explosion of Donnelly's gun; an echo means that someone has shot—*second*.

Donnelly leaned against his bucking gun as Curly Bill swayed back under the impact of battering lead. The outlaw tried to bring his gun up with the last vagrant strength of his flagging muscles. Dapper Donnelly watched with a peculiar detachment, his well-shaped head cocked a trifle to one side.

Curly Bill's eyes began to glaze as life drained swiftly from his stricken shell. He rocked back, teetered on his high heels and fell flat on his back without moving his polished boots. A little cloud of dust plumed up, catching the heat waves as it settled again to the ground. Napoleon Calhoun removed his hat.

"Dust to dust," he murmured softly. "Yas, suh!"

Sheriff Buck Gray came across the O. K. Corral as Dapper Donnelly holstered his smoke-grimed pistol and turned toward the big red wagon. The sheriff held out his hand, acquitting Donnelly at the same time.

"Self-defense, doc. You sure make strong medicine for outlaws!"

Another fast-action novel featuring Dapper Donnelly will appear in Wild West soon. Watch for it!



No one was at the campfire as the kid rode up, but he knew hidden guns were covering him.

POKERFACE by HAPSBURG LIEBE

The kid who joined Gunpowder Burns' gang didn't mind wrangling pots and pans, but he needed a six-shooter for one of his chores!

HE couldn't have been older than eighteen, the slim, ragged youth who forked a patchwork saddle on a lean buckskin cow pony. Riding into the circle of firelight, he pulled to a halt with his blue eyes searching around the trees and boulders that showed on every side.

"Anybody home?" he called.

A silent moment passed. Then the darkness answered: "There's somebody home, all right. Better

tell the truth, kid—what's your name, where you from, where you going', and who's with you?"

"Ain't perlite, askin' a fella's name," the ragamuffin youth said. "I'm from a good many places. Allus follered my nose anywhere it took me. Nary a soul is with me. This here is a cow camp, ain't it?"

"See any cattle?"

"Not bein' a cat, I cain't see in the dark. If this here is a cow

camp, how about a job?"

"Range tramp, eh?" The voice from the blackness was as hard as rock. "You're from below, I take it. Follered your nose up the creek. Get it shot off, some day. What's the news, down there below?"

"Most folks," the youthful stranger said, "is busy talkin' about a stage holdup which was pulled by a fella knowed as Gunsmoke Burns, and his three-man gang. They shot up the driver, and a sheriff who was along as guard, and got away with the strong box and a heap o' dinero . . . If this here is a cow camp, how about a job?"

A tall, wolf-lean, hawk-eyed man walked out of the shadows. His holstered six-shooter had a nine-inch barrel. "The name, kid," he growled, "is Gunpowder Burns, not Gunsmoke Burns. Come on out, boys. No harm in this range tramp. Off and tie, kid."

The kid's face might have been cast in bronze, for all the expression it showed, as he said:

"Gunpowder Burns hisself. Seen you only onct before. The time you shot up Hondo City, last year. Off and tie? Don't mean you're invitin' me to join up with you, do you, Gunsmoke?"

"Gunpowder," rasped the outlaw. "Not Gunsmoke. Join up with us, nothing. You ain't even got a gun!"

Burns liked his nickname. Coupled to his surname, it sounded just right.

The kid's blue eyes narrowed a little. "Fer as a gun's concerned, you could furnish me one. Lost mine through a hole in my shirt, fordin' a river last night. My pony stepped into a hole and we both had to swim."

THREE lean, wiry men, with faces as hard as Burns', had followed the owlhooter into the firelight. They, too, had long-barreled six-

shooters. The newcomer dismounted. After a covert wink at the man nearest him, the gang leader said:

"Why, yeah, kid, sure you can join up with us." Let the youngster ride on and tell where this foot-hills hide-out was? Gunpowder Burns wasn't a fool. He'd put the youngster to good use. "I mean, son, if you'll do the cookin' and see after the hosses while we're in camp this way. *Bueno?*"

"*Bueno*. How about a gun?"

Burns studied the kid's face. It was perfectly blank. There was a chance that Burns' long string of successes as a bandit had made him a little careless, but only a little.

"Don't worry about a gun," he said, and switched the subject: "We'll need some sort o' name for you."

Before they went to sleep that night, Gunpowder was calling the newcomer Pokerface. It was a fit, and it stuck.

The four outlaws took advantage of the kid's willingness. In addition to cooking and washing pots and pans, he washed the outlaws' clothing. He must have hated the latter menial task, but he did not complain.

Not a day went by without his asking Gunpowder for a weapon. Each time, Gunpowder put him off.

A week after the stage holdup in which the Burns gang had shot it out with the driver and the sheriff guard, the three lesser lights of the gang began showing evidence of restlessness. Gunpowder had won all their money playing stud, for one thing. For another, food supplies had petered down to fat bacon and flapjacks. Burns himself was sick of that.

"You can get too much o' anything, even if it's sugar," he growled early one morning. "All right—see to your guns and trappin's, boys!"

Pokerface turned. "So we're

gonna ride. You can gimme the gun now. You got a extry one, I know, because I seen it. Huh?"

Burns scowled. "Look, Pokerface. You don't noways sabby what you're talkin' about. You cain't realize that it's a job for men chock-full o' steel nerves who can shoot fast and plumb straight. All o' the boot-hills is crowded with jiggers who was shy on one or the other or both. Get it?"

"Yeah," Pokerface said. "Reckon so. But I could go with you fellers and hold the hosses. Where's the stick-up gonna be?"

"Never mind!" Burns' bad temper was riding him. But he throttled it quickly. "Son, you stay right here until we come back. We'll give you a equal share o' what we bring in. Also, I'll fetch you a brand-new gun and belt."

"You ain't jest tellin' me that?"

Gunpowder tried to make up a smile. "It's straight stuff, Pokerface. And after you've practiced a little on shootin', you can ride with us. *Bueno?*"

THE youth nodded and tackled a greasy skillet with sand and a rag. Burns continued:

"Now get this careful, son. We'll be chased, no doubt o' that. Hour before sundown, if no law dogs nor strangers has been around here anywheres, you hang your shirt on the very tiptop o' the highest one o' these trees. We can see it a mile. Get me?"

"Yeah, sure," Pokerface said. "The shirt, no danger. No shirt, danger. But if you don't come back, what then?"

"Don't worry, kid. We'll be back."

"*Bueno*. Luck, Gunsmoke."

"Gunpowder!" barked the hawk-eyed outlaw. "How many more times have I got to tell you that?"

Pokerface said nothing, went on with his scouring. Burns and his men were soon in the saddle and riding down the creek bank. After a while one of the three underlings spoke:

"I never did cotton to the cut o' that kid's eye. Think he could be up to somethin', Gunpowder?"

"What?" asked Burns quickly.

There was no answer. One of the other outlaws said: "Me, I ain't no ways certain about the little tramp, neither. He's never had a chanst to pull anything, on account he's been watched day and night and he knew it. Mebbe you was smart, Gunpowder, in not lettin' him have a gun."

"Yeah," Burns said sourly. "Maybe so. On the other hand, Gloomy Gus, maybe I was only afraid the fool kid would let the iron go off accidental and kill somebody, or even cripple a good hoss. He saves us a lot o' work. We gotta keep him. After I've teachied him things, he'll be all right. But I ain't buyin' him any gun just yet."

The four riders followed a narrow, dim trail that crossed the creek down near the edge of the foothills. They rode about twelve miles before a road that took them out to grass country. They grew more and more wary. The bare sight of a lone rider a few hundred yards ahead was enough to stop them.

"Better hide until we see who that is," Burns decided.

Roadside chaparral swallowed them. The lone rider came on. He was a thin, wizened oldster in tatters, with a six-shooter that had one ivory and one wooden handle, wired together through the butt frame. His horse was bony and his saddle, like Pokerface's, was patchwork. Burns didn't know him.

Burns rode out of the scrub. "Hi-yah, pilgrim. Looks like you been

to town. What's the news there?"

The old man reined in. Apparently he had been drinking, and he seemed glad of an opportunity to talk.

"Pardner, I never see so many people," he declared. "I've traveled a heap, too. Been at plenty o' fun'rals, but I never see so many people as went to that pore old stage driver's buryin' the other day. Some skunk road agents had shot him up so bad he fin'ly died. Made me right sad!"

"I . . . er . . . I heard that a sheriff was also drilled in that holdup," Gunpowder said. "How about him? He cash in, too?"

"No. Up and around," the oldster said. "In fack, he's ridin' the country with one o' the biggest posses which was ever got together—every able-bodied man he could find, and all madder'n Tophet because the pore old driver was liked so much. I hopes they ketch them low-down sidewinders!"

"I sure hope so, too," Burns said heartily. "Nobody will be safe until they're caught an' hung. Y'know, I think I'll join that big posse and help. Which way'd they go?"

"They rid into the nawtheast, pardner."

Fine, thought Gunpowder Burns. The present hide-out was due west of town, and should be all right for a few more days at least. The elderly unknown waved a bony hand and rode on. Burns pulled his horse back into the scrub.

"Heard that, boys, didn't you?" he asked his men.

"Yeah. Every able-bodied man. Good time to hit town and take over the bank, a store for grub, and mebbe a saloon. Right, Gunpowder?"

"We don't know that the big posse kept goin' northeast," Burns said thoughtfully. "Don't know that it

wasn't split up and sent in different directions, come to think of it. But we'll take the chanst. I've always hated that sheriff, and I'd risk a heap to put a long hoss laugh on him. Le's go!"

THEY reached the county seat at noon, the favorite hour for a holdup, since most people were at dinner. One by one, the owlhooters rode in, to meet in an alleyway behind the bank. The town was as quiet as any boothill. Almost without sound the bandits dismounted, dropped rein and pulled guns.

Burns stepped to the back door of the bank and tried the knob. The door was locked. But a window beside it was opened invitingly, and through this crept the little band. There were no customers. An old man, bald and bespectacled, stood at the teller's wicket, adding figures. Not much cash in sight. The bulk of it would be in the vault, of course, locked up. The old man's back was to the robber gang. Apparently a little deaf, he turned, blinking owlishly, at Burns' low but threatening snarl.

"Eh?" he said, blinking again. "Eh?" Then he looked into the muzzle of the long-barreled six-shooter, and he knew. "Why, you . . . you can't do this! You can't get—"

"Open the vault!" ordered Gunpowder Burns. "Quick!"

The clerk went death-white. In sheer desperation he reached for a double-action .38 that he kept on a tiny shelf underneath. Burns sprang like a puma, snatched the little weapon and tossed it behind him.

"You old fool—you want to die?" Open that vault quick or I'll sure bust you!"

One of Burns' men had slipped to the front doorway and was peer-

ing into the hot, dusty street. Nobody was in sight anywhere. Another of the four, leaning out the open back window, had the same luck. The old man fumbled the vault combination, steadied, and after a moment swung the iron door wide.

Gunpowder Burns gasped. Never before had he seen so much money in one place.

"Out of the way old man!" he barked.

"Eh? Oh, I—"

The long barrel of Burns' six-shooter drove against the oldster's temple and knocked him aside and down. In that same split second of time, the front doorway roared and belched flame and smoke and lead. Burns swayed with the shock of the heavy slug, then fell across the limp form of the bank employee with his six-shooter clattering yards off. He got a few words together:

"Trap! Look out . . . trap—"

Two of his men were firing into the gun smoke that boiled through the front doorway. A side window blazed and bellowed. One of the two bandits dropped, the other shot at the new smoke. Instantly from a rear window came a blast and a bullet—and three of the robbers were on the floor.

All this in less than half a minute's time. Gunpowder Burns was both brains and nervous system of the gang, and he had gone down first.

"Don't shoot any more!" yelled the one man who was on his feet. He let his weapon fall and jerked empty hands high.

ELDERLY townsmen began trooping into the big room. Most of these carried firearms of one kind or another. They picked up the four

long-barreled six-shooters dropped by the owlhooters. It was a bearded doctor who closed the vault door. He knelt beside the old bank clerk.

"Unconscious, that's all." He said. He knew Burns. "What went wrong, Gunpowder? You fellows didn't fall out and go to shooting each other?"

Burns swore in the pain of his broken right shoulder as the doctor rolled him off the insensible old man.

"Look," Burns said weakly. "Look there. That's what happened, doc. That's what went wrong. I saw him too late, just as he cut loose at me."

Shakily he pointed to a shabbily dressed youth who had just come in through a back window. Pokerface! In one hand Pokerface carried an old six-shooter with ivory-and-wood grips wired on. The kid said nothing; his countenance was a perfect blank.

"Trailed us, and got the gun from a old-timer you met!" Burns snarled.

Pokerface spoke now. "Sure did. I was out to get your hides from the start. Didn't rightly know how. But when I'd learnt that the old stage driver had cashed in, and got a gun in my paws onct more, I rightly knowed how then. Doc, will any o' these here low-down side-winders cash in?"

"Why, likely not, I'd say, except at the end of a scaffold rope. You did a fine, fast job, kid," the medico declared.

"Yeah!" One of Burns' men gave a sickly laugh. "Yeah! And so, Gunpowder, you was goin' to teach Pokerface things—how to dodge from one place to another like he was three men, mebbe, and how to shoot. Haw, haw!"

"You, Gunsmoke," Pokerface said. "Reckon I better tell you. That old stage driver you rattlesnakes killed . . . he just happened to be my granddaddy."



Their guns ready in case the killer of old man Burton was still lurking nearby, Rockford and Morse studied the ground for sign.

DEATH WEARS GOLDEN HANDCUFFS

by WALKER TOMPKINS

Roped and hogtied by the law, Border Patrolman Tommy Rockford needed an alibi that would stack up against the bloodstained golden handcuffs that branded him a killer

CHAPTER I.

GOLD-PLATED HANDCUFFS.

THE telegraph wires were humming a message of doom to the lonely water-tank station of Mas-

sacre Wells, in the heart of Arizona's Frying Pan Desert.

Grizzled old Luke Burton, tank tender and telegraph operator who lived in the adobe shack alongside the Arizona & Western rails, felt his

pulse pound faster as he scribbled down the message which ticked off the sounder beside his elbow. Not often did the singing wires break the monotony of his lonely existence:

MASSACRE WELLS STATION
ATTENTION OPERATOR

TODAY'S DESERT EXPRESS IS GOING TO BE ROBBED BY NOTORIOUS BANDIT BULL CRAGMONT NOW HIDING IN GUNHAMMER HILLS. OBJECT OF HOLDUP IS SECRET GOLD SHIPMENT PUT ABOARD EXPRESS CAR TODAY BY MORTON HALSEY, PRESIDENT OF LAVATOWN BANK. HAVE CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION THAT CRAGMONT WILL STAGE HOLDUP BETWEEN YOUR STATION AND GUNHAMMER HILLS.

HOLD TRAIN WHEN IT ARRIVES. I WILL REACH YOUR STATION AROUND TWO P. M. AND WILL BOARD EXPRESS CAR TO HELP GUARD GOLD SHIPMENT WHEN CRAGMONT STRIKES.

The message in itself was dramatic enough, in that it concerned the bandit chief, Bull Cragmont. A veteran border hopper, Cragmont had derailed and looted A. & W. trains more than once in the past, and the railroad company had a standing offer of \$5,000, dead or alive, for the outlaw's capture.

But what sent Burton's pulse racing was the signature of the telegram: CAPTAIN TOMMY ROCKFORD, U. S. BORDER PATROL.

Luke Burton had been a brass pounder for Western railroad companies for more than forty years. During the past decade, the name of Tommy Rockford had become closely identified with frontier railroad annals, for the young Texas cowpuncher had been an ace railway detective. His name was almost a byword to Luke Burton.

Three years ago, Rockford had taken his famous gold-plated handcuffs and his equally celebrated golden six-guns into the employ of

Uncle Sam. As a border patrolman, his exploits had been even more sensational than his deeds while wearing a railroad detective's star.

Burton had never met Rockford in person, but seeing his name on a telegram was almost like getting a letter from an old friend. The wire had been dispatched from Summit, a lonely station on the A. & W. line some fifty miles southeast of Massacre Wells.

"Rockford knows he can't wait for the Desert Express to reach Summit, because Bull Cragmont aims to pull his holdup between here an' Summit," Burton exclaimed, switching off his instruments and rising from his stool. "It's danged lucky the Express is runnin' behind schedule today—"

Even as he glanced at his battered alarm clock, its hands indicating five minutes to two, the old operator's ears picked up the far-off *whooom* of a locomotive whistle from across the bleak cactus-dotted expanse of desert west of his tank stop.

CLAPPING on his battered Stetson, Burton rushed outside. About a mile to the west, the Desert Express was roaring up the shimmering bands of steel at a ground-eating clip, making up for time lost as a result of a burned-out trestle some fifty miles farther back.

Ordinarily the crack flyer did not halt at Massacre Wells; only slow-moving freights and cattle trains had to replenish their boilers at Burton's tank.

With trembling haste, the telegraph operator unlocked the lever which operated his lofty manual-type semaphore, and set the red board against the engineer.

"Rockford's message must've been delayed, if he was fingerin' on reachin' here at two o'clock," Burton grunted, as he saw the oncoming Desert Express began to lose speed,

the hoghead putting his engine in neutral and letting it coast down the arrow-straight tracks. "Rockford must be somewheres close, already."

A clip-clop of steel-shod hoofs from the chaparral which encroached on the Massacre Wells station diverted Burton's attention from the approaching train.

Turning, the telegraph operator saw a lone rider emerging from the mesquites and pipe-organ cactus growth, his horse lathered and badly gaunted from a long, fast trip over the rolling desert wastes from the Gunhammer Hills.

The westering sunlight showed a law badge pinned to the hombre's pinch-crowned Stetson. He was dressed in a cowpuncher's gaudy rodeo shirt, batwing chaps and high-heeled boots.

"Tommy Rockford?" inquired Burton excitedly as the dusty-faced rider swung out of stirrups in front of the adobe-walled depot. "Your message just come through."

The rider nodded, his flint-black eyes flashing with relief as the Desert Express came thundering toward the lonely tank stop.

The rider nodded. "I'm Rockford. Would you mind takin' care of my hoss till I get back, amigo? I'll come back and get him as soon as I've dabbled my twine on Bull Cragmont."

The jangle of the locomotive bell and the hiss of pent-up steam from the cylinder cocks drowned out Burton's reply. The fast express grated to a halt, the baggage car coming alongside the telegrapher and the star totter who called himself Tom Rockford.

THE engineer swung down from his cab and stalked down the right-of-way, his florid Irish countenance red with impatience.

"How come you give me the red board, brass pounder?" he demanded

testily. "We're already runnin' three hours late—"

The steel doors of the express car trundled open to reveal the anxious faces of two shotgun-armed guards, as Luke Burton spoke up apologetically:

"This here is Tommy Rockford, the railway detective," he explained. "He got tipped off that Bull Cragmont aims to stick up your train somewhere between here an' the Gunhammer foothills—"

"Yes," put in Rockford, as he saw the engineer's face turn the color of putty. "I knew you wouldn't stop if I tried to flag you down myself, so I wired Massacre Wells to hold you till I got here. You bein' late anyway, it don't make any difference."

The engineer cuffed sweat from his forehead with a canvas gauntlet. Bull Cragmont had a sinister reputation for shooting railway engineers whenever he held up a train.

"That's different," the engineer said nervously. "I'll . . . I'll keep an eye peeled for any loose spikes up ahead."

Burton touched Rockford's arm. "Climb into the mail car, Tom, so this express can get highballin'. There's a local passenger due here in thirty minutes, an' the main line's got to be clear."

The two mail-car guards reached down to grip Rockford's hands as the United States Border Patrolman set foot on the iron step below the door. As the lawman climbed aboard and the engineer turned to head for his locomotive, a sharp voice arrested them from down the tracks:

"Hold on, men. Who're you takin' aboard here?"

Rockford turned to stare at Pop Segrum, the veteran conductor of the Desert Express. Raw suspicion was in Segrum's faded eyes as he stared up at the weary-faced stran-

ger standing between the two mail guards.

His voice revealing his excitement, Luke Burion explained the cause of the unscheduled stop, proffering Rockford's telegram by way of proof.

"That's all very well and good," retorted the railroad conductor, "but what proof have we got that this stranger is really Tom Rockford?"

The border patrolman started to speak, but Segrum hurried on:

"Tommy Rockford, as I remember it, always carries a pair o' gold-plated handcuffs with him. There ain't another pair of wrist irons on earth like them. Can you produce them handcuffs, feller? If not, I can't permit you to board a U. S. mail car."

"Sure enough, conductor. You're only doing your duty."

As Rockford spoke, he unbuttoned a flap of his chaps pocket and drew out a pair of handcuffs, which glinted in the Arizona sun like molten fire.

Segrum nodded curtly.

"That's good enough for me," the conductor grunted, with a gesture at the engineer. "Get 'er rolling, hoghead. And good luck, Mr. Rockford, in case this train gets held up."

The mail-car door trundled shut and a moment later the locomotive, snorting like an impatient race horse eager to be gone, got the Desert Express rolling. Conductor Segrum swung aboard the last coach as it passed, and then the fast flyer was thundering eastward toward the desolate Gunhammer Hills, to keep its tryst with Arizona's most-wanted train robber.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER!

IN the light of the swaying coal-oil lamps inside the mail car, Tommy Rockford seated himself on a crate and rolled himself a brown-paper cigarette.

The two mail guards had introduced themselves as Joe Deane and Rip Walters. Both were edgy with nervous tension, as much from finding themselves in the company of the West's most celebrated railway detective as from the prospects of a showdown with Bull Cragmont.

"How'd you find out Cragmont was going to hold us up, Mr. Rockford?" inquired Walters as he busily poked mail into rows of racked pouches.

The lawman shrugged, smoke curling from his hawk-beak nose.

"That information is confidential," he said evasively. "But take it from me, boys. Cragmont aims to stick up this rattler, all right. Somewhere in the desert this side of the Gunhammers."

The mail guards left off their regular work to inspect their shotguns.

"Whoever gave you that info sure had the correct dope," Joe Deane commented, a few miles farther on. "That shipment of gold from the Lavatown Bank was supposed to be a secret. The banker who put that *oro* aboard—Mort Halsey, his name was—told us to keep our lips tight-buttoned about it. Fifteen thousand bucks is in that strong box of his."

Rockford's eyes narrowed with interest as Deane pointed to a small, brass-bound box piled up with other express packages in one end of the car.

Getting to his feet, the border patrolman made his way to the small barred window, and stood watching the desolate badlands blur past. The car swayed monotonously as the Desert Express pounded over the rails.

"Cragmont's prob'ly loosened some rails up ahead," Rip Walters said nervously. "The Express is goin' to be ditched, sure as shootin'. Even an owlhooter like Cragmont

couldn't hope to stop a train goin' as fast as this one."

Rockford made no reply, his eyes thoughtful as he kept his gaze riveted on the hazy slopes of the Gunhammer Hills, now only about ten miles to the east.

When the train hit the long grade leading to the summit, its speed slackened appreciably. Soon the locomotive up ahead was snorting under forced draft, the fireman feeding sand to the drivers as the train struggled up the mountain grade.

"We've slowed down," Rockford broke his silence at last, turning to face Walters and Deane. "So Cragmont will probably try to derail us at any time now, or else he's piled an obstruction over the tracks. We better get ready for action."

The two mail guards seemed to be awaiting orders from the patrolman, and the orders were not long in forthcoming.

"Walters, you handle the right-hand door," commanded Rockford. "Deane, you take the left door. When the train stops, Cragmont will probably threaten to dynamite this car if we don't open up."

Sweat was pouring copiously down the express guards' faces. Shotguns ready, they stationed themselves at either door.

"When Cragmont gives his order, open up the doors—the one on whichever side Cragmont is on," Rockford continued. "Pretend like you're going to surrender without a protest. I'll keep back out of sight. When Cragmont climbs aboard, I'll let him have it."

Rockford's guns were in his hands, now. They were not the gold-plated Peacemakers which were a legendary part of Rockford's equipment, but in the strain of the moment they did not seem to notice the discrepancy.

"We've got loopholes we could shoot through, Mr. Rockford," Rip

Walters spoke up. "We could drill Cragmont without havin' to open the car."

Rockford's face darkened impatiently.

"Obey my orders!" he said, his voice sharp. "Cragmont is my responsibility. He won't gun you boys down, if you show yourselves with your arms reachin' for the sky."

Minutes dragged. The Desert Express was now passing the first of a series of corrugated, lava-strewn hogbacks, and the train was laboring up the grade at less than twenty miles an hour.

"Gunbore Tunnel is just ahead," Rockford called out above the clickety-click of trucks over rail joints. "I got a hunch that's the spot Cragmont has chosen to stop the train. Remember what I told you, now. This thing has got to go off without a hitch."

A MOMENT later the Desert Express was rumbling into a long tunnel which had been blasted through a foothill ridge. Almost frozen with suspense, Walters and Deane glued their eyes to portholes in either door.

That was why neither of the mail-car guards noticed what Tommy Rockford was doing, in that moment.

Lifting his twin six-guns with cold deliberation, the detective drew a bead on each of the guards.

Cr-rack! Flame spat simultaneously from the bores of the border patrolman's guns, the thunder of the Colt .45s lost in the deafening rumble of the train passing through the tunnel.

Walters and Deane pitched flat on the car floor, shot through the lungs with point-blank lead.

With a cold laugh, Tommy Rockford pouched his smoking .45s and strode over to the right-hand car door. He rolled the heavy steel door

open by eighteen inches, admitting a stifling cloud of smoke and cinders.

By the light of the ceiling lamps, Rockford picked up the strong box which bore the waybill of the Lavatown bank. Moving as if by a carefully rehearsed plan, the killer tossed the strong box out the door, heard it strike the granite walls of the tunnel.

Then Rockford paused to make sure both of the train guards was dead. An instant later sunlight again poured into the death car, as the train emerged from the maw of Gunbore Tunnel.

Gripping the hand rails of the car door, Rockford timed his jump carefully and leaped away from the moving train. He landed in a cushion of tepala brush which encroached on the right-of-way, the heavy foliage breaking his fall and landing him unhurt on solid roadbed ballast.

Rockford lay motionless in the weeds, out of sight of the passengers peering through the day-coach windows. When the last car had passed, he got cautiously to his feet, grinning with satisfaction as he saw the Desert Express vanish into another tunnel about a hundred yards from the Gunbore.

Not until the train reached Summit station, thirty-five miles away, would the tragedy in the baggage car be brought to light by the train crew. By then it would be too late to apprehend the slayer.

SWATTING dust from his chaps, Rockford crawled out of the roadbed brush and swung his gaze toward the chaparral-choked mouth of a barranca midway between the two railway tunnels.

"*Sta bueno*, Bannister!" he shouted. "Come on out. I'll go fetch the strong box."

In answer to the bandit's call, the brush parted and a beefy, frock-coated figure strode out of the gulch, leading two saddle horses.

He waved jubilantly as the killer vanished into Gunbore Tunnel to emerge a moment after, carrying the battered but still intact strong box in his arms.

"It went off without a hitch, just like I knew it would, judge!" The killer chuckled. "All we got to do is bury this strong box an' then light a shuck for Lavatown."

Judge Bannister nodded. He looked nervous.

"I wouldn't go through this ag'in for a strong box loaded with cut diamonds," he confided. "But at that, it was better than headin' for Mexico, I reckon."

The bandit's eyes flashed with amusement.

"Your idea of using those gold-plated handcuffs was a stroke of genius, judge," he complimented the other. "That conductor was fooled complete."

CHAPTER III.

BORDER PATROLMAN.

TOMMY ROCKFORD rode out of the Gunhammer Hills with a throbbing gunshot wound in his left hip and with his rugged frame cut down to the point of emaciation from the long and grueling man hunt which had taken him, two weeks before, into one of the wildest corners of Arizona Territory.

It had been a successful man hunt, although he had ridden his luck hard and heavy in order to come back in one piece.

Bull Cragmont, the veteran smuggler boss and train robber, had been the object of Rockford's search. The chase had led all the way from the Mexican border to the desolate reaches of the Frying Pan Mesa country, in the heart of the Gunhammer badlands.

But now, Bull Cragmont was Rockford's prisoner. The famous killer rode at his stirrups, slumped

in saddle, his eyes bleak with the hopeless look of a case-hardened criminal who knew that he had played out his string at last and that hang-rope justice lay at the end of the trail.

Cragmont had shot his way out of a border patrolman trap at the Mexican border between Nogales and Sasabe, two of Tommy Rockford's patrol partners had died before Cragmont's blazing guns, and single-handedly the famous detective had set off in pursuit of the fleeing killer.

For two weeks, while the outside world, after waiting in breathless anticipation, to decide finally that Rockford's sensational career had ended in a gun-smoke showdown somewhere back in the Gunhammer waste lands, Rockford had played a grim game of hide-and-seek with Bull Cragmont.

Rockford owed his final success to the horse he was riding. Kentucky, his magnificent mahogany roan thoroughbred and partner on uncounted danger trails in the past, had stood up under the ruthless chase long after Cragmont's mustang had played out. That was why Rockford had finally trapped his quarry, over on Frying Pan Mesa.

For twenty-four hellish hours, Cragmont had stood off a siege, forted up in a boulder nest atop a rocky knoll.

Running low on ammunition, Rockford had forced the issue by crawling up the slope and invading Cragmont's hide-out under cover of darkness.

Cragmont's last bullet had drilled the border patrolman's leg, and then it had been primitive, hand-to-hand combat. Weakened by the shock of the bullet he carried in his hip, there had been times when Tommy Rockford believed his number was up.

But in the end a powerful uppercut to Cragmont's jaw had decided

the issue. Next morning their slow trek back to civilization had begun.

Shackled with Rockford's gold-plated handcuffs, Cragmont had been a sullen, brooding prisoner. Their food supply exhausted, they kept alive only because Rockford had been able to bag an occasional jackrabbit with his Winchester.

Cragmont hadn't been able to understand the border patrolman sharing his scanty fare.

"Why are you keepin' me from starvin', Rockford?" the owlhooter had demanded a dozen times. "The reward on my topknot is payable dead or alive. You need grub worse than I do."

Rockford's answer had been accompanied by an enigmatic smile.

"Corpses don't keep in this climate—assumin' I was interested in the bounty you're packin', Cragmont. My job ain't over until I see you stretch hang rope."

They rested up at a Mexican's lonely sheep camp, where Rockford got sorely needed medical attention for his wound.

A FEW days later, reaching a remote cow town, Rockford sent a message by Wells Fargo express stage that he was bringing his prisoner to the nearest jailhouse, at Lavatown. The message would allay the worries of his chief, Captain Sam Lodge, over at El Paso.

The late-afternoon sun was blistering their backs as they topped a desert ridge and came in sight of Lavatown, sprawled in a hook of Arivaca River some twenty miles north of the Mexican border.

A group of riders was coming out from the cow town in their direction, but after a brief glance Tommy Rockford gave them scant attention. A bunch of cowboys, no doubt, heading for their home ranch back in the hills.

A half-hour later, however, a

twinge of alarm shot through the border patrolman as he saw the oncoming riders swing off the wagon road they were following and head out as if to intercept the line of travel taken by Rockford and his prisoner. Sun rays glinted on field glasses, indicating that the horsemen were studying the identity of the two men and had decided to overtake them out in the middle of the barren sage flats.

Then Rockford remembered that Bull Cragmont was a lone wolf. According to reports, the outlaw had no friends in the border underworld who, hearing of Cragmont's capture, might attempt to rescue him from the law.

Nevertheless, Rockford loosened his gold-plated Colts in their holsters, as he saw the riders fan out and come galloping up with the obvious intention of surrounding them.

"John Laws," grunted Cragmont, speaking for the first time in two days. "Every jasper in that posse is wearin' a star. You're more gutless than I figgered you, Rockford—sendin' for a young army to make sure you landed me behind bars!"

Rockford reined up Kentucky and jerked on the hackmore with which he was trailing Cragmont's mustang. Cragmont was right. As the riders closed in to encircle them, the border patrolman saw that all wore law badges.

"Are you Tom Rockford?" beloned the leader of the group, as they came into earshot. "This is the law talkin'—Sheriff Mose Ackley o' Lavatown."

Sunlight was flashing on drawn guns as Ackley's posse drew closer. Before Rockford could shout back an affirmation of the cow-town sheriff's hail, another voice cut the silence:

"Sure it's Tom Rockford. Take it easy, amigo!"

Rockford's jaw gaped in surprise

as he recognized the lean, hard-bit-ten rider who had spoken. It was Dale Morse, the Texas Ranger whom Rockford counted his best friend.

"*Como 'sta, Morse?*" greeted Rockford, as the Ranger galloped up and drew rein in a flurry of dust. "Boy, are you a sight for sore eyes—"

Morse's eyes shuttled between Rockford and his prisoner as he leaned from his saddle to shake hands with the border patrolman.

"Where you been lately, Tom?" demanded Morse, worry putting a sharp edge on his words. "The law's been combin' the Gunhammer Hills tryin' to cut your sign. Then when your message was relayed from headquarters in El Paso, my chief sent me up to see what's back of this business."

Something in Morse's tone made Rockford stiffen. He saw that Morse's fellow riders were closing in behind a ring of guns—which were leveled at him, rather than at Bull Cragmont.

"You ask me where I been, Morse?" Rockford's voice was edgy. "I been smokin' a rattler out of his den. Bull Cragmont. Why should the law be curryin' the Hills huntin' me?"

MORSE averted his eyes, and in that instant Rockford realized that trouble was brewing. Mysterious trouble, that accounted for the drawn guns and the ring of hostile eyes hemming him in.

"He's askin' why the law's been after him!" Sheriff Ackley's voice was contemptuous. "Get your hands up, Rockford. I'm arrestin' you for murder and train robbery. Any offside moves an' we'll turn you into a pepper box!"

Rockford stared at Dale Morse for explanation, but the Texas Ranger's eyes were averted. Something strange, indeed, accounted for Morse

being so far from the Lone Star State. A ranger's jurisdiction did not embrace the Territory of Arizona.

"Murder? Train robbery?" Rockford gasped as he saw Sheriff Mose Ackley spur closer to him and whip a pair of wrist irons from his Levis pocket. "I don't get it. What are these rannihans drivin' at, Morse?"

The Texas Ranger cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"You've . . . you've been positively identified as the robber who killed two express guards an' looted the Desert Express a week ago, Tom," he explained. "It's tommy rot, o' course. But the sheriff here has the word of a telegraph agent who knows you, and the testimony of one o' those mail guards who branded you as the robber just before he died."

Ackley rattled his handcuffs under Rockford's nose, but the dumfounded lawman was only vaguely aware of the sheriff's snarl:

"Reach out your dew claws, Rockford. I'm slappin' you in my *juzgado* over in Lavatown, an' if you're innocent, that's for a judge an' jury to decide. Personally, I think you're on a one-way road to boothill, no matter what this Texas Ranger has been sayin' about your innocence!"

CHAPTER IV.

SHADOW OF THE NOOSE.

JUSTICE—Lavatown the version—
U moved with the rapidity of a slug leaving a gun bore. Owlhooters avoided the desolate little county seat, knowing that Sheriff Mose Ackley worked on the unorthodox but typically old-school theory that a man was guilty until proven innocent, the statute books to the contrary notwithstanding.

Booked in Ackley's adobe-walled calaboose on a Sunday evening, Border Patrolman Tommy Rock-

ford found his trial well under way by ten o'clock the following morning. The trial was held in the stuffy barn which passed for the Border County courthouse.

Except for Texas Ranger Dale Morse, the courtroom was crowded with men hostile to the prisoner before the bar. There being no lawyer available to plead his case, Rockford was handling his own defense.

Apparently the prosecuting attorney had anticipated Rockford's early arrest, for he had spent the past week getting witnesses together.

Presiding over the proceedings which meant life or death to Rockford was a black-coated, onion-bald circuit judge, Toke Bannister, who covered three of Arizona's sparsely populated border counties in the role of presiding justice.

A jury composed of local cattlemen and miners had been sworn in even before Tommy Rockford got a clear-cut idea of the odds which faced him. But he was not long in learning the facts, or what the turkey-necked prosecutor, Sam Yogollon, believed were the facts.

"Yore honor," Yogollon droned, this here is an airtight case if I ever seen one. The defendant, Tom Rockford, has been missin' for two weeks back in the Gunhammer Hills—"

A bellow from Texas Ranger Dale Morse, back among the spectators, interrupted the lawyer's harangue.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Of course Rockford was missin' for two weeks! The border patrol sent him after Bull Cragmont, an' he brought that buscadero back with him, didn't he? If that ain't an alibi, I don't—"

Judge Bannister's eyes flamed wrathfully as he hammered on the bench with his scarred gavel.

"Silence in the courtroom" the judge thundered. "One more crack out of you, *Tejano*, and I'll remand you to the custody of the sheriff for

contempt o' court. Proceed, Mr. Yogollon."

The prosecuting attorney sent a baleful glare at Rockford, seated at the defense table between Sheriff Ackley and a gun-hung deputy, and continued:

"The Desert Express was robbed of an important gold shipment put aboard the mail car by one of our local citizens, Mort Halsey, of the Lavatown Bank. The Express was halted at Massacre Wells and Tommy Rockford got aboard—"

SUSPENSE was at fever pitch as Yogollon went on to describe the discovery of the two mail guards when the train halted at Summit. One of them, Rip Walters, died shortly after giving his testimony—words which had been scribbled down verbatim by the train conductor, Pop Segrum.

"Tommy Rockford shot me and Joe Deane when we were passing through Gunbore Tunnel," Walters' dying testimony was read to the jury. "He threw out the Lavatown Bank strong box and jumped off the train when it left Gunbore Tunnel—"

The reading of the dead man's words had a profound effect on the jury. Rockford saw the raw hate which was kindling in the eyes of the dozen Arizonans, saw the odds against him rising inexorably as Yogollon continued his case.

"You say Rockford stopped the train with a telegram to the tank tender at Massacre Wells," cut in Judge Bannister. "Have you subpoenaed this here telegraph operator, Mr. Prosecutor?"

Yogollon had. Beaming triumphantly, he produced white-headed old Luke Burton as the first witness for the prosecution.

The veteran telegrapher was trembling visibly as he took the witness stand. Tommy Rockford tried to

catch Burton's eye, but the old man stared at the floor, never raising his glance.

"Tell your story, Mr. Burton," snapped the prosecutor. "Exactly as you told it to me when I went over to Massacre Wells to subpoena you as a witness."

Burton gulped audibly in the tense stillness which followed.

"Well . . . I . . . you see—" The brass pounder's voice trailed off as he locked glances with Tommy Rockford, and he stared out over the sea of faces which crowded the courtroom as if he were in mortal fear.

"Go on, go on!" the judge said impatiently. "Remember you're on oath, witness."

Burton started talking, his voice a husky whisper which barely carried to the ears of Rockford and the tense jury.

"Rockford . . . came to the station . . . at the same time that I was flaggin' down the Desert Express. He got aboard the mail car, sayin' he had a tip that Bull Cragmont was goin' to stick up the train an' he wanted to be in on the showdown—"

He paused as the prosecutor leaned toward him, a grin of triumph exposing his crooked teeth.

"Do you know the defendant?" Yogollon demanded. "Is he the same man you see settin' in this courtroom?"

Tommy Rockford gripped the arms of his chair, his ice-blue gaze burning into the witness' face. Burton shot an appealing glance at the judge, then seemed to shrivel visibly under Bannister's blinkless gaze.

"Yes." Burton's whisper drained the color from Tommy Rockford's face. "Sure . . . I know . . . Rockford. Known him for . . . years. When he used to be a . . . a railway dick. Ain't seed him since he j'ined up with the border patrol."

Judge Bannister slammed his gavel like a pistol shot.

"Is Rockford in this courtroom?" he thundered.

Burton nodded, pointing a trembling finger at the border patrolman seated by the Lavatown sheriff.

"Yeah. That's Rockford . . . settin' there. He's the man who . . . who got aboard the Desert Express—"

Rockford sprang to his feet.

"You're perjuring yourself, Burton!" he charged furiously. "You never saw me before in your life. Are you trying to put a rope around an innocent man's neck?"

PANDEMONIUM swept the courtroom, and when Bannister had restored order, Luke Burton was dismissed. The old man was so near collapse that the prosecutor had to assist him to his chair.

"One more thing, an' I rest my case," Sam Yogollon said. "I have here an affidavit from Pop Segrum, the conductor of the Desert Express. If yore honor pleases, I will read it to the jury. Segrum was unable to take time off to attend this here trial."

Judge Bannister nodded.

"Read the conductor's affidavit," he ordered.

Yogollon adjusted a pair of pince-nez spectacles on his bony nose, shot a jubilant glance at Rockford, and read from a sheet of paper:

"I, Ezra Segrum, being duly sworn, hereby testify that on the above date the Desert Express, on which I am a conductor, was halted at Massacre Wells tank station and a person claiming to be Border Patrol Captain Tommy Rockford got aboard. Not being personally acquainted with Rockford, I demanded proof of his identity before permitting him to ride on the U. S. mail car. Rockford thereupon produced a pair of gold-plated handcuffs, which I accepted as evidence of his identity. It is my belief that the

murderer of Joseph Deane and Rip Walters was the aforesaid Tommy Rockford."

The court had a noon recess at this juncture and when Judge Bannister reconvened the session at one o'clock, Tommy Rockford took the stand in his own defense.

"All I can say," Rockford testified grimly, "is that I've been framed. An impostor with a pair of fake handcuffs, resembling the ones I own, must have committed this crime. I have no way of proving my own whereabouts during the past two weeks, unless you call in Bull Cragmont, my prisoner. And he would hardly be likely to give any testimony that would help my case."

The jury filed out to study its verdict at one thirty, and five minutes later returned with a decision of guilty.

Thus it was that Tommy Rockford, shackled to the wrist of Lavatown's sheriff, stood before Judge Toke Bannister's bar of justice to receive sentence.

"By virtue of the authority vested in me as a circuit judge of the Territory of Arizona," pronounced the judge pompously, "I hereby sentence you, Thomas H. Rockford, to hang by the neck until dead, for the wanton murders of Joseph Deane and Rip Walters. Time of said execution to be tomorrow at high noon, on the Border County gallows in this city. And may God have mercy on you."

Ten minutes later found Rockford occupying a cell at Lavatown's jail house, next to that in which his erstwhile prisoner, Bull Cragmont, had been lodged the day before.

CHAPTER V.

RANGER ON THE DODGE.

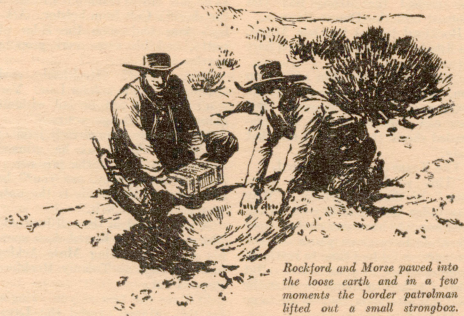
ON extradition warrant from Texas II brought Sheriff Ackley to the jail at sundown to remove Bull Cragmont from Lavatown.

"I'll stretch hemp a sight happier for knowin' that you'll be waitin' in Hades when I get there, Rockford!" jeered the train robber, as he was led past the lawman's cell. "Especially seein' as how you tried to pin that train job onto me."

When the jail door clanged shut on the departing figures of Cragmont and the sheriff, Tommy Rockford was alone for the first time since his arrest, with a chance to figure things out.

fetters figured in Rockford's law career that they had become synonymous with the man, tagging him like a brand. Knowing that, Rockford could see where Conductor Segrum had accepted the unknown bandit's golden handcuffs as proof that he was the border patrolman he was impersonating.

"That bandit was somebody who knew about that secret gold shipment," Rockford decided. "If I could see the Lavatown banker who



Rockford and Morse paxed into the loose earth and in a few moments the border patrolman lifted out a small strongbox.

But his reasoning met up with a blank wall at every turn. Obviously, Luke Burton had been bribed or intimidated into giving false testimony at the trial; it was even possible that the county prosecutor, Sam Yogollon, could have been linked with that angle.

But the most puzzling fact of the entire frame-up was the pair of gold-plated handcuffs which had figured so prominently in the affidavit of the Desert Express' conductor.

So predominately had the gilded

shipped that *oro*, maybe I could get a line on something."

Supper was brought to the prisoner shortly after nightfall by the turnkey, but Rockford's urgent demands that he be allowed a chance to interview the sheriff met with noncommittal shrugs from the *mes-tizo* jailer.

Nor was Rockford permitted to receive a visit from Texas Ranger Dale Morse. Thus he was unable to instruct his Texican friend to look up Mort Halsey, the local banker,

in a search for clues. Sheriff Mose Ackley had given terse orders to his jailer to allow no visitors to the condemned man's cell.

It was nearly midnight when the half-breed jailer was relieved by the sheriff. When Ackley entered the cell block, Rockford's spirits leaped as he saw that the lawman was accompanied by Dale Morse.

"You're due to stretch hemp in less than twelve hours, Rockford," grunted the sheriff. "I'm in hopes, before then, that you'll tell me where you cached the strong box you choused offn the Desert Express."

Rockford turned to Dale Morse, his fists locked on the cold steel bars between them.

"You don't think I'm guilty, do you, pardner?" he appealed to the lawman. "I've been framed. But how can I convince this knuckle-headed sheriff that I didn't rob that train?"

The Texas Ranger shrugged.

"This whole case smells fishy, Tom," he declared grimly. "Why was Judge Bannister in such an all-fired hurry to have you stretch rope? He could have given you a delayed sentence so I'd had time to rustle up some evidence in your behalf. But when I talked to Bannister after the trial this afternoon, he told me to go to blazes."

Rockford turned to the sheriff imploringly.

"Round up that telegraph operator, Luke Burton," he requested earnestly. "In five minutes I could convince you that Burton lied to that jury, sheriff. That's a small enough favor to ask."

Ackley shook his head decisively.

"Burton lit a shuck back to Massacre Wells as soon as the trial was over," he told Rockford. "By the time I sent for him an' he got back here acrost Fryin' Pan Desert, you'd already be in boothill. The law's got to take its course."

DALE MORSE'S right hand had moved casually to his side. An instant later the jail office lamplight was flickering on the barrel of the Texas Ranger's six-gun, its muzzle reamed in Mose Ackley's side.

"Fish out the keys to Rockford's cell, sheriff!" ordered the Ranger crisply. "I ain't standin' by an' seein' an innocent man go to the rope No matter what your trumped-up jury decided agin' him. Savvy that?"

Tommy Rockford's face was grim as he saw Morse reach out to snatch the sheriff's Colt from holster. Ackley's face had gone the color of putty, and his arms were groping overhead.

"No, Dale!" Rockford said sharply. "You're a John Law. You can't bust me out of jail without going on the dodge yourself!"

The jail keys were already jingling in Morse's hands as he grinned through the bars at the prisoner.

"You ain't guilty, are you?" he countered. "Well, this is the only way we can handle it."

A key grated in the cell lock and Morse swung the barred door open, his six-gun prodding Mose Ackley into the cage as Tommy Rockford stepped out.

"I'll see the two of you swingin' for this, Morse!" raged the Lava-town sheriff, finding his voice at last. "The only reason I let you inside the jail was because you was a Ranger."

His lips compressed grimly, Morse brought up his gun and rapped it sharply across the sheriff's temple.

Without even a moan, the lawman crumpled on the jail floor, and Morse closed the cell door and pocketed the keys.

"By the time the birdies stop tweeterin' in his noggin, we'll be to heck an' gone, Tom!" The Ranger chuckled. "Let's rattle our hocks. We can decide our next move when

we're well away from this rat-hole town."

Rockford's head was swimming with confused thoughts as he followed his rescuer out into Ackley's office. He paused a moment after Morse blew out the lamp, to recover his goldplated handcuffs and .45 Peacemakers from the desk drawer where Ackley had placed them the day before.

"I ought to skin you alive for this, Morse," commented the border patrolman, as they stepped out into the night. "But I reckon I'd have done as much for you. My Kentucky hoss is out in the county stables. As long as I'm outlawed, I want a good cayuse under me."

TEN minutes later they were heading through the outskirts of the cow town, bound southward toward the nearby Mexican border, retreat of all wanted men.

But when an intervening ridge shut out the twinkling lights of Lavatown, Tommy Rockford swung his Kentucky horse to the west, hip-hipping about in saddle to peer off at the bleak expanse of Frying Pan Desert.

"Seein' as how we're both wanted men," Dale Morse spoke up, tossing the Lavatown jail keys into a thicket of yucca, "I reckon we better hit for the border, Tom. Down there we can sort of figger things out."

As Morse spurred his mustang alongside Rockford's stirrup, the border patrolman shook his head grimly.

"We're splittin' trails here, amigo. You've already done something to-night that I'll never be able to repay. You head for Mexico an' hide out a spell."

Dale Morse's grin was bleak under the starshine. "What are you aimin' to do, Tom?"

Rockford was already wheeling his horse to the northward.

"I'm lightin' a shuck to Massaere Wells to make *habla* with that Luke Burton jasper, Dale. I reckon this is adios."

They shook hands then, and a moment later Tommy Rockford was spurring his horse into a swift gallop which the Ranger's heavier mustang could not hope to match.

Dawn was breaking over the Arizona desert when Rockford gighed his exhausted mount up to the Arizona & Western tracks at the Massaere Wells tank siding. Throughout the night he had followed the trail of Luke Burton's pony, which he now saw munching oats in a manger behind the water-tank structure.

Dismounting, Rockford headed toward the telegraph operator's adobe shack. Suddenly a thud of hoofbeats beyond the chaparral across the tracks brought him whirling around, six-guns palmed.

Then he relaxed, as Dale Morse spurred his lather-flecked mustang over the roadbed and waved a hand in greeting.

"Morse!" the border patrolman exclaimed. "Don't you know that Lavatown sheriff will have posesses followin' our sign?"

The Ranger dismounted and ground-tied his horse.

"We're hobbled with the same rope, Tom," he reminded. "It's too late for you to auger with me now. The Mex border will be watched so close a whip-tail lizard couldn't cross it."

Rockford shrugged helplessly, pouching one gun as they reached the door of the telegraph operator's shack.

Hand on knob, the patrolman whispered: "Luke Burton's one man I'm certain can clear up this mystery for us."

Blazing sunlight poured into the telegraph operator's shack as Rock-

ford drew a .45 and shoved open the door. Then, in the act of stepping over the threshold, the border patrolman froze in his tracks.

On the floor beside the table holding his telegraph instruments, Luke Burton lay sprawled in a puddle of his own blood.

The old brass pounder would never explain why he had borne false witness against Tommy Rockford at the Lavatown murder trial. A bullet through the back of the head had seen to that.

CHAPTER VI.

GUNBORE TUNNEL CLUE.

THE dead man was clad in an old-fashioned nightgown, and his bunk showed evidence that he had risen during the night to head for the door, probably in response to his slayer's knock. The little telegraph station showed no other signs of foul play.

"Well, that's that," grunted Rockford. "Whoever was back of Burton's false testimony had made certain that the old man didn't get cold feet an' spill the truth."

Dale Morse, kneeling beside the murdered oldster, shook his head bleakly.

"You know, Tom," he said thoughtfully, "all the time this old codger was on the witness stand, I had a feelin' he was in mortal terror. I got a hunch somebody in that courtroom was fixed to put a slug in his brisket if he faltered in his testimony."

Rockford thrust his gilded Peacemaker back in its holster and stepped outdoors.

"I had the same feelin' myself, durin' that trial," he admitted. "Well, one thing we do know: Burton's killer come out here ahead of us last night, woke up the old man, an' shot him, prob'ly through that open window yonder. That bein'

the case, he ought to have left his tracks behind."

They found the murderer's sign, a little later. Still visible in the dirt under the shack window were a set of boot tracks which revealed where the unknown assassin had crept up to Burton's shack during the night.

"They ain't cow boots," grunted Rockford. "Too broad a heel for that. It's possible some train brakeman could have made 'em—in which case the killer didn't ride out from Lavatown last night."

Like two hounds with fresh scent in their nostrils, the lawman searched both sides of the railroad track, following the killer's tracks out to the edge of the nearby chaparral.

There they found evidence showing that the killer had reached Massacre Wells on horseback. The tracks of steel-shod hoofs led over to a trough by the water tank where the outlaw had watered his horse. Then the trail led to the cinder-balasted roadbed of the Arizona & Western tracks, and wast lost on the cross ties, heading west.

"I'd recognize them hoofprints anywhere, if I spotted 'em ag'in," commented Tommy Rockford. "The shoe on the off front foot has a loose nail, an' one o' the hind shoes has a bar acrost it. But that's pretty slim sign to go on, Morse."

DEMOUNTING, the two lawmen rode out to the railroad tracks, their faces fanned by a hot wind which was sweeping off Frying Pan Desert like the breath from an open oven.

"No use ridin' east down the tracks in the hope of cuttin' that buskie's sign when he leaves the railroad," Morse said. "Even if he headed into the desert, that wind would wipe out his sign. It looks like we're buckin' an impossible job, Tom."

Rockford fished in his shirt pocket

for makings and rolled a smoke with thoughtful abstraction.

"No," he said finally. "We ain't exhausted our possibilities yet, pardner. I reckon we better take a *pasear* over into the Gunhammer foothills, where the Desert Express was robbed. The hombre who was posin' as me got off the train on the other side of Gunbore Tunnel."

They paused at the Massacre Wells station long enough to drape a blanket over the telegrapher's body and close the door and window against encroaching coyotes. The next freight train which stopped at Burton's station would lead to the discovery of the murder.

With saddlebags stocked with food from Burton's shelves, the two lawmen headed westward toward the looming Gunhammers, following the tracks of the A. & W.

Twice during the hours which followed they were forced to take refuge in gulches near the right-of-way, to avoid being seen by the crews of cattle trains which rumbled by. Both lawmen knew that by now, posses would be combing the badlands in search of them. And, having sampled Lavatown's brand of justice, neither Rockford nor Morse had any desire to bring things to a head.

The sun was westering down the brassy Arizona sky by the time their jaded horses entered the long, shadowy stretches of Gunbore Tunnel.

Reaching the east end of the tunnel, the weary riders pulled up to study the brush-choked ravine where, according to the dying mail guard's testimony, the robber of the Desert Express had leaped off the running train.

Nine days had elapsed since the robbery, which meant that their arrival at the scene of the holdup would net them a very cold trail indeed. But, here between the sheltering spurs of the Gunhammer foothills,

it was possible that clues still remained.

"See how that brush is tromped down, yonder?" pointed out Rockford. "That's prob'ly where this fake Tommy Rockford jumped off the train. An' somewhere close to where he tossed off that Lavatown Bank strong box."

Dismounting, the Texas Ranger and the border patrolman made a careful search of the brushy right-of-way flanking the tracks. But the loose rubble held no trace of the train bandit who had leaped off the Desert Express at this end of Gunbore Tunnel nine days before.

Dale Morse scanned the mouth of a nearby draw, fifty yards up the slope from the railroad tracks.

"This robbery was planned in advance," muttered the Ranger. "The killer must have had a hoss waitin' here, especially since he had that bank strong box to tote away. Let's rattle our hocks up yonder an' take a look-see, Tom."

A QUARTER of an hour later, Rockford's excited cry brought Dale Morse scrambling up the brush-choked ravine. He found the border patrolman squatting beside a small spring which trickled out of the rocks, leaving a wide area of wet clay around the waterhole.

"There's the hoofprints of the same hoss we saw over at Massacre Wells, Morse!" exclaimed the lawman. "A hind hoof with a barred shoe on it. Right?"

The Ranger nodded excitedly.

"No doubt of it," he agreed. Then his elation faded. "But what does that tell us? Only that the feller who was impersonatin' you is the same jasper who trailed Luke Burton an' killed him. Which ain't exactly startling news to either of us."

Rockford shook his head.

"Here's another set of tracks," he pointed out, waving a hand over the sun-dried mud. "That bandit had a partner, or at least an extra horse. More likely a confederate, who was waitin' here with broncs for their getaway."

Unable to find any sign of the direction the escaping outlaws had taken, the two lawmen sized up the barranca as being too steep to follow into the Gunhammer Hills, in which case the bandits had either departed by way of the railroad tunnel, or else had headed due south down the ravine. The latter route would bring them out on the wide-open expanse of Frying Pan Desert, which was the trail toward Lavatown, the nearest settlement.

"It's gettin' on toward night," Rockford said finally. "I reckon we'll head for Lavatown, Dale."

Morse grinned. "Which same is toward the border," he said. "That suits me, son. You aimin' to look up that banker, Mort Halsey, an' find out what he knows?"

Rockford nodded. "Yeah. An' it's got to be done tonight, pard. Lavatown would be a death trap for us in daylight. The only thing in our favor is that Sheriff Ackley wouldn't look for us in the town—we escaped from."

Fate dealt them a lucky hand for the first time since their flight from the Lavatown jail, as they were heading down the ravine south of the A. & W. Railroad, on their way toward the desert.

Ruddy sunset glow, shafting into the gully, picked up a glint of light dead ahead of them, causing both of their horses to shy violently.

Reining up, Tommy Rockford saw a ring of metal glinting on the edge of a small hole which, from the nature of the excavation, had been made by a foraging coyote or a badger.

SWINGING out of his saddle, Rockford strode over to the animal burrow and fingered through the loose dirt to pick up the ring of metal which had attracted their attention.

"Handcuffs!" yelled Dale Morse, as he saw the yellow-colored fetters which Rockford was dangling from his fingers. "And *gold-plated handcuffs*, at that! Son, you're really on the track of something important!"

The Texas Ranger hurried over to the mound of dirt in time to see Rockford scratching the surface of the gilded manacles with a knife blade. Under the yellow coating was the glint of plain iron.

"An ordinary pair of handcuffs, painted with gilt that a man can buy at any store," commented the border patrolman. "The Desert Express bandit chucked 'em into a badger hole, it looks like, an' Señor Badger shoved 'em out along with this dirt."

Closer inspection, however, proved that the excavation was not the burrow of a wild animal, but rather a spot where a coyote or a timber wolf had been digging for a buried object, in the belief that the hole contained carrion of some sort.

Pawing into the loose earth with both hands, Rockford had dug less than a foot when his fingers encountered a brass-bound box. A moment later he was tugging at a corroded handle, to reveal a small strong box which bore a painted label: STOCK-MAN'S BANK, LAVATOWN, ARIZONA TERRITORY.

"This is where that busky cached his loot, eh?" exulted Dale Morse. "He aimed to come back here for his ore when he figgered the coast was clear."

For a long minute, Tommy Rockford hunkered over the strong box, hefting its weight, studying the padlock which closed it.

Finally, acting on a sudden hunch,

the border patrolman drew one of his gold-plated six-guns and, backing off, triggered a slug at the padlock. When the gun smoke cleared, Rockford knelt down to rip off the shattered lock. Tugging open the hasp, he broke the express company's wax seals and pried back the lid.

"I thought so," mused the lawman. "It didn't weigh enough to have been full of gold like the way-bill said."

Dale Morse stared down over Rockford's shoulder, unable to believe his eyes. The loot of the Desert Express consisted of a box filled with ordinary rocks!

CHAPTER VII.

LAVATOWN LAW.

MORSE groaned. "That bandit who was impersonatin' you—he took the bank's *oro an'* replaced it with stones!"

Rockford shook his head grimly as he closed the lid and hoisted the strong box to one shoulder.

"No, pardner. You notice I busted the sealin' wax around the lid? That means Mort Halsey, the Lavatown banker, shipped this box of rocks, labelin' the contents as gold. It means that Halsey himself planned the robbery of the Desert Express!"

Dale Morse could only stare as Rockford lashed the strong box be-

hind the cantle of his Kentucky thoroughbred.

"You mean that banker's our man?"

Rockford swung into the saddle, thrusting the gold-painted handcuffs into a pocket of his chaps.

"What better way could an embezzler cover a shortage in his accounts?" demanded the border patrolman. "I got a hunch that Halsey robbed his own bank, maybe to speculate on the cattle market or something. The auditors were due, and he couldn't cover his losses. So he pretended to ship gold dust which prospectors had deposited at his bank, to the mint in Denver. If the box was stolen en route, who'd be the wiser?"

They rode in thoughtful silence out of the Gunhammer Hills, their eyes fixed on the remote, twinkling lights which marked Lavatown, near the Mexican border.

Somewhere in the cow town they would find Mort Halsey, and from him they might be able to reassemble the mad jigsaw puzzle which had put two lawmen under the shadow of the noose.

Ten miles inside Frying Pan Desert, Rockford and Morse got their first proof that the badlands were swarming with law posses, tracking down the jail breakers who had left Sheriff Mose Ackley incarcerated in



his own cell block.

Etched against the star-dusted sky line to westward, was a long file of horsemen, headed toward Lavatown and coming from the direction of Massacre Wells.

Hiding in a *rincon* of volcanic boulders, the fugitives held their horses' muzzles to prevent them from whinnying to the passing cavalcade, so close did the file of possemen pass their hide-out.

Two of the riders were mounted double, the extra horse carrying a tarp-wrapped burden which they realized must be the corpse of old Luke Burton, the railroad telegrapher.

Red-coaled cigarettes wafted the odor of tobacco smoke to the crouching fugitives, as the saddle-weary posse passed out of sight over a sandy ridge.

It had been close, that one.

"They trailed us to Massacre Wells an' found Burton," whispered Rockford, as he and Morse led their horses out of the *rincon* and climbed back in saddle. "Like as not, we'll be blamed for bushwhackin' that old-timer."

SWINGING in a wide loop to avoid the homeward-bound posse, they pushed their mounts hard over the sandy wastes, keeping a stirrup eye peeled for other posses which Sheriff Ackley undoubtedly had combing the Frying Pan malpais.

Rockford's bullet wound, received during his showdown with Bull Cragmont back in the Gunhammer badlands, pained him intolerably, taking the edge off his alertness and filling him with a slow, deviling nausea.

But he kept doggedly on toward the nearing lights of Lavatown. Not only the clearing of his own name was at stake. The destiny of his Texas Ranger friend was in the bal-

ance, as a result of what Dale Morse had done to release him from the death cell of Mose Ackley's *juzgado*.

They dismounted in the Mexican section of Lavatown and secreted their hoof-sore ponies in a deserted sheep barn. It was past midnight when they gained the main street, eyes slitted against the glare of saloon windows.

"Mort Halsey wouldn't be at the Stockman's Bank this time o' night," Morse whispered in Rockford's ear. "We got to locate some hombre who won't know who we are, an' find out where that bankin' son lives."

Rockford nodded, his brain wrestling with the same problem that was worryin' Morse. It would be suicidal for them to be seen in daylight, here in Lavatown. Most of the town had attended Rockford's trial, and would know both him and the Texas Ranger by sight.

Four hours of darkness remained, and during that time they must locate the banker's home and take Halsey out to where the rock-filled strong box from the Desert Express was waiting on Rockford's saddle. Faced by that evidence, Halsey would surely crack up and admit his guilt. If not, there were ways of persuading him to talk.

"There's a *pelado* hostler in that livery barn across the street, Tom," suggested Morse. "It's dark over there. We could ask him where Mort Halsey lives."

Rockford agreed that that was a good idea and he and the Texas Ranger headed for the looming stable directly across the deserted street. They had barely moved into the shadow of the big barn when a lone horseman galloped into town from the west, reining up in front of the stable and bellowing hoarsely to rouse the attendant.

Retreating into shadow, the two lawmen recognized the beefy, frock-

coated figure of Judge Toke Bannister, who had presided at Rockford's trial the day before.

"*Muchacho!*" snarled the judge, as a sleepy hostler shuffled out of the barn. "My horse has thrown a shoe. See that he's shod. And give him a grooming and graining. I'll call for him first thing in the morning. *Sabe usted?*"

The Mexican boy took the reins as Bannister went on harshly:

"I'm looking for Banker Halsey. I understand he spends half his nights gambling at some dive on the main street."

The hostler yawned.

"*Si*, Señor Bannister. You weel find heem at the Seelver Saddle bar-room. He plays the roulette wheel there."

Bannister tugged off his gloves and taking a coin from a pocket of his Prince Albert coat, thrust it into the boy's hand.

AS the stable hand started to lead the lame pony into the barn, Judge Bannister called:

"Just a minute, son. I heard over in Las Vacas today that there was as jail break here in Lavatown. That a Texas Ranger conked Mose Ackley over the head and took his keys and helped a prisoner escape—the one I had on trial yesterday. Was there any truth to that rumor?"

From the depths of the livery stable the Mexican hostler replied drowsily:

"*Es verdad*. The sheriff, he an' hees men, they are out on the desert now, señor. Hunting thos' jail busters."

With a muffled oath, Bannister spun on his heel and strode away, headed undoubtedly for the Silver Saddle, Lavatown's biggest gambling dive, where the hostler had said he could find Mort Halsey.

Light glowed in the stable as the

Mexican boy lit a lantern and started stripping the saddle from Bannister's lame horse. The hostler started nervously as Tommy Rockford and Dale Morse trailed their spurs through the doorway.

"Mind if we take a look at that pony's hoofs, *muchacho?*" demanded the border patrolman. "He looks in bad shape."

Without waiting for the hostler's reply. Rockford lifted the mustang's off hind leg. Its horseshoe had a bar extending under a frog.

"Is it the horse, Tom?" whispered Morse.

Rockford nodded to confirm the hunch which had gripped them the moment of Bannister's arrival. Range-wise, the two lawmen knew beyond doubt that the circuit judge's pony had visited Massacre Wells when Luke Burton had been dry-gulched. And a pony with a loose front shoe and a barred hind shoe had been waiting at Gunbore Pass when the Desert Express had been looted.

"I'm almost positive of it," Rockford said. "It ties up. A—"

A frantic shriek from the Mexican hostler interrupted the lawman. With a scream as if the devil were pursuing him, the stable hand sprinted for the street door.

"The kid recognized us!" bit out Morse.

Even as he leaped to extinguish the barn lantern, Tommy Rockford saw the hostler come to a halt in mid-street, waving his arms frantically to stop a group of horsemen who had been in the act of riding past the livery barn.

"Señor Ackley!" squalled the stable hand frantically. "Eenside the barn—the Texas Rangero an' Señor Tom Rockford! The *bandidos* you have been hunting—they are een my barn, *si!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAITOR'S PAYOFF.

THINGS moved fast, then. Even as he blew out the stable lantern, the posse riders who had just returned to Lavatown from their fruitless man hunt caught a glimpse of Tommy Rockford and the Texas Ranger standing beside Bannister's horse, just inside the barn.

With incredible speed, Sheriff Mort Ackley and his deputies piled out of their saddles, gun blazing.

A fusillade of lead ripped through the yawning doorway of the barn, bringing a squeal of pain from Bannister's jaded pony. Bullets thudded into the stalls and harness racks behind the two bayed lawmen, as they ran into the long corridor flanking the rows of stalls.

"Ride around to the back, Perkins!" came the Lavatown sheriff's brusque order. "We got 'em trapped. Heycox, you an' Trumbull watch the side windows. They'll try gettin' out into the corrals."

Saddle-weary though they were, Ackley's deputies went into action with a speed which would have done credit to a well-disciplined cavalry brigade.

Mounted gunmen spurred into the alley between the stable and a feed store to take positions behind the barn, preventing any escape by that route. Other deputies, guns palmed, hit the dirt and took stations under the various windows where the stable hands cleaned out the stalls.

Within the minute, Ackley's sharpshooters had the barn completely surrounded, and news of the man trap was spreading through Lavatown like an uncontrolled fire.

Crouched in the blackness midway down the barn corridor, Rockford and Morse held a hurried council of war.

"We're surrounded an' we're buckin' impossible odds, pardner,"

whispered Rockford. "Our only chance is to climb into the hayloft an' try jumping to the roof of a nearby building. There ought to be a ladder somewhere along here."

Lanterns bobbing on the main street revealed a growing throng of townspeople gathering before the stable, its numbers swelling rapidly as drinkers and gamblers trooped from nearby saloons. The night was a bedlam outside, with Sheriff Ackley howling orders at the top of his voice.

Finally a gunshot stilled the clamor, just as the trapped lawmen were ascending a wall ladder up into the barn's huge haymow.

"Come out o' there with your hands up, Rockford an' Morse!" belled the sheriff, from somewhere near the front door. If you don't, we'll set fire to this place an' burn you out!"

Straw creaked as Dale Morse made his way through deep piles of hay to reach the front of the livery barn. Peering out through the cracks, he saw a hundred or more men grouped before the stable, the glow of lanterns and torches winking off drawn gun steel.

Tommy Rockford, meanwhile, had located a ladder leading to a ventilating cupola on the roof. Climbing it, he peered out through a narrow opening to see the roof of the feed barn directly opposite and a few feet below. It was an easy jump from the barn eaves to the flat roof of the feed store. But at any moment, the Lavatown sheriff might detail a gunman to mount the feed-store room and block any escape through the barn ventilator.

A LOW cry from Rockford brought the Texas Ranger scrambling across the hay to the foot of the ladder.

"This is our one chance, amigo!" the border patrolman whispered. "If

they spot us jumpin' the alley, we're done for. Remember, we can't very well shoot our way out o' this mess, like we could if we weren't star toters."

Sheriff Ackley's strident voice once more vollied through the barn, as Dale Morse swung his way up the ventilator ladder:

"You buskies are outnumbered. We know you're inside somewhere. All the doors an' windows are blocked. We'll give you five minutes to make up your minds, an' then we're comin' after you!"

The cool night breeze fanned Rockford's cheek as he wriggled out through the cupola opening and started skidding down the gentle slope of shingled roof toward the eaves.

Dale Morse was straddling the ventilator opening as Rockford made the leap and landed on hands and knees on the flat tar-paper roof of the feed store.

For a moment the border patrolman lay flat, holding his breath as he awaited a yell which would indicate that his hurtling body had been spotted from the narrow alley below. But apparently that side of the stable was unguarded.

Rockford rolled over and beckoned to Morse who waited at the cupola on the barn roof. A moment later and the Texas Ranger was sliding down the roof. At the edge of the eaves he straightened his knees and, arms outstretched to cushion his fall, vaulted the narrow gulf between the two buildings and landed beside Rockford.

"Looks like we fooled 'em," exulted the border patrolman, as they started crawling toward the rear end of the feed store. "Unless they got this buildin' surrounded too."

A roar of excitement came from the mob in front of the livery barn as the sheriff yelled to his men,

poised for the storming of the barn:

"Let's go, men! Inside that stable—an' don't nobody show a light. We'll drag them buscaderos out by their heels!"

The attention of Lavatown was centered on the rush of men darting into the stable building from a dozen points. It would be a matter of minutes, perhaps an hour, before the groping man hunters would discover that their quarry had flown the coop.

Reaching the back end of the feed store, Rockford and Morse were confronted by a twelve-foot drop to the shadow-blocked street behind the building.

Gripping the cornice with both hands, they made the drop without difficulty, though the shock on his wounded leg left Rockford spent and gasping.

"We can reach our hosses over in the Mex quarter," Dale Morse whispered. "Lavatown ain't safe for us any more tonight, I reckon. We can come back for Halsey later."

Rockford gripped Morse's arm and pulled him back, just as they were in the act of heading across the weed-grown lot on their way to the Mexican section.

A thud of running feet had caused Rockford's alarm, and a moment later they saw a lone man sprinting down the side street past the feed store.

For a moment they believed that the man was a deputy sent around back to cover the feed-store roof. But the runner kept on in the direction of the residential section of Lavatown, to be lost a moment later behind a row of squalid shacks.

IN the act of moving once more out of the feed store's shadow, the two fugitives froze in their tracks. Another hombre was sprinting at top speed down the street, his frock coat bannered in the wind, the brilliant

starlight glinting on a drawn six-gun.

"What is this—a foot race?" grumbled Morse under his breath. "You'd think—"

"Wait!" Rockford cut in. "That second hombre is our friend the judge. Toke Bannister. Somethin' tells me he's followin' that other busky. An' I got a hunch who the feller is."

Exchanging grins, the two lawmen waited until Judge Bannister, puffing like a steam engine, vanished among the houses where the first runner had disappeared.

Then, discarding caution, Rockford and Morse headed in pursuit. It took them less than two minutes to reach the row of shacks, and they were in time to see the circuit judge, clearly outlined against a white-painted cottage, stalking his way stealthily up the cottage steps.

"Come on, pard!" said Rockford, as they saw a light glow behind the drawn blind of a window in the white cottage. "Somethin' tells me that Mort Halsey lives in that *casa*. And the judge has got the idea that the bankin' son has got skittery an' wants to get out of town before the sheriff captures the two of us."

At reckless speed, the two lawmen vaulted a low fence and crossed the side street, heading for the cottage where Judge Toke Bannister, without the formality of a knock, had slipped into the front door.

Rockford and his Ranger friend slowed to a prudent walk as they approached the lighted window. Peering through an open slit between the blind and the sill, they saw a bare-headed man feverishly going through the contents of a wall safe, stuffing objects into a pair of saddlebags. The objects were buckskin pokes, the type of containers which desert prospectors used for storing gold dust and nuggets.

"Mort Halsey—I'll stake my

badge on that!" whispered Tom Rockford, his lips against Morse's ear. "Apparently our friend the judge ain't showed up yet."

The man at the open safe leaped to his feet and whirled around at that moment, as the towering figure of Judge Toke Bannister appeared at an inner doorway. The judge's face was grim as a thundercloud, and the six-gun in his fist was leveled at the other man's brisket.

"Goin' somewhere, Halsey?" Bannister's voice had the quality of a snake's hiss.

The cow-town banker gulped audibly, his face paling.

"I . . . that is . . . you heard the talk that's goin' around . . . Judge," stammered Halsey. "Rockford an' that Texas Ranger were trailed up to Massacre Wells, an' they found where you'd bushwhacked old man Burton—"

Judge Bannister seated himself on the arm of a chair, toying with his cocked six-gun.

"So you decided to skip for Mexico—with the swag that you took from your bank, eh?" he said ominously. "You knew I'd gone to Las Vacas to preside over the court there, so you thought you could double-cross me."

Mort Halsey sank to his knees, arms upraised in an attitude of pitiful supplication.

"I wasn't double-crossing you, judge!" he protested. "After all, I got my hide to look out for. You were in the clear. Nobody knew you give me the idea of how to short-change the bank—"

Bannister's laugh was like the snarling of an animal.

"You brainless skunk!" he said angrily. "Who was it that thought of pinning this job on Tommy Rockford, while he was out chasing down Bull Cragmont in the Gunhammer Hills? Who had the brains to send that telegram to stop the Desert Ex-

press, and who set fire to that trestle to make sure the train would be at Massacre Wells when you got there?"

Mort Halsey made a gagging sound.

"I ain't . . . sayin' you don't deserve . . . the lion's share o' that swag, judge," he moaned. "I'd never've got on that train at all if you hadn't give me those gold-plated handcuffs. But tonight when I seen that Rockford an' Morse were trapped in that stable, I knew they'd come back to Lavatown to gun me down. I knew they were wise—"

SOMETHING metallic hit the floor between the two men at that instant, and Bannister was the first to recognize the object which had been tossed through the open window at Halsey's back. It was a pair of gold-plated handcuffs—or rather, ordinary manacles which had been given a coating of gilt paint.

Before Judge Bannister could jerk his head toward the window, the spring shade rolled up with a clap like a pistol shot. In the act of swinging his gun around, Bannister seemed struck by paralysis as he saw a Stetson-hatted chap-clad figure straddle the sill and step into the room, behind a pair of jutting gold-plated .45s.

"Tommy Rockford!"

Even as Bannister choked out the name, he saw Texas Ranger Dale Morse climb through the open window behind the border patrolman.

"Drop your hogleg, Bannister!" Rockford commanded, "You're goin' to tell the whole town how you and Halsey ganged up to short-change the Stockman's Bank. And when it's all blown over, I reckon the two of you are goin' to swing. Halsey for killin' two mail guards while impersonatin' a lawman, and you for bushwhacking Luke Burton up at Massac—"

Judge Bannister's gun hit the floor and exploded to send a bullet furrowing across the carpet, as the outlaw raised his hands in surrender before the menace of a four-way drop.

But Mort Halsey was of a different breed. The man who had had the cold nerve to hold up the Desert Express did not choose to hit the gallows trail without attempting to shoot his way to freedom.

With a berserk oath, the banker leaped to snatch up Bannister's smoking Colt. His leap carried him behind the black-coated judge, and his own gun was leaping from its holster as he opened fire on the two lawmen crouched by the window.

Flame spat from Rockford's gold-plated .45s, and the twin slugs fanned Bannister's either cheek on their way to their target behind the judge.

His skull smashed by converging lead, Mort Halsey crumpled on the floor even as he was backing toward the open door.

Then through the open window behind him, Texas Ranger Dale Morse heard the mob roar from the direction of the livery stable, as Border Patrolman Tommy Rockford snapped his celebrated handcuffs over Judge Bannister's palsied wrists. That roar would be directed against a different victim when Bannister told his story of the Desert Express holdup.

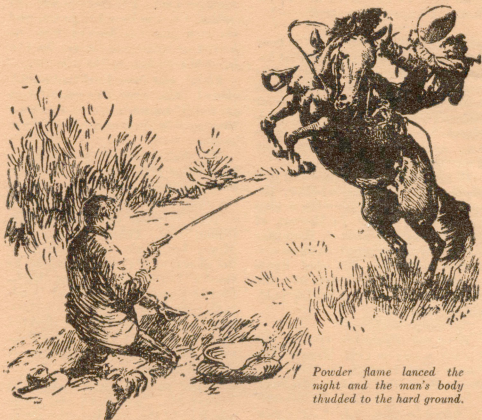
"I just wonder," Morse spoke up irrelevantly, "who'll be the judge who'll hand this here judge his death sentence, anyway? It'll be a sort of a mix-up!"

There are more thrilling law jobs awaiting Tommy Rockford down in the great Southwest. He'll show up in a great new tale one of these times. Rockford appears only in Street & Smith's Wild West.

"Watch out for Red Corson," Del Buxton warned young Tag. "He's a kid-killer." And Tag remembered his uncle's last words when he realized there were

TWO TRAILS TO TUSCOLA

by MELVIN W. HOLT



Powder flame lanced the night and the man's body thudded to the hard ground.

THE blazing sun that hovered over the rugged White Horse Mountains and beat down mercilessly on the Packsaddle Canyon hide-out increased the venomous hatred that reached the boiling point in the minds of the three renegades in the

weather-beaten little shack hidden back in the cedars.

Boot heels thudded hollowly on the plank flooring as Big Del Buxton, the leader, moved slowly across the room toward the two gunmen confronting him in the doorway.

Pent-up rage glowed in Big Del's gray-green eyes and flushed his hawkish face beneath its tan. He wasn't in the habit of having his owlhoot hirelings attempt to give him orders.

Tobe Macklin and Red Corson knew that, but they no longer cared whether they stayed in Buxton's favor or not. And Big Del returned their loathing contempt with compound interest.

Things had been that way for three days now, since the night Big Del's outlaw band had plundered the bank down in Tuscola and been trapped by the sheriff's cordon of deputized citizens. Big Del had escaped with the loot, all right, but he'd tasted the bitter dregs of defeat at the same time.

Nine men had ridden down to Tuscola that fateful night. Only three, including himself, had returned to Packsaddle Canyon. The rest had perished in the streets amidst a terrible inferno of acrid powder smoke and flying lead.

Now Macklin and Corson, anxious to pull up stakes and drift yonderly, wanted to divvy up the bank loot. But Big Del had warily cached the money somewhere along the trail during their hasty flight from Tuscola, and refused to divulge the hiding place.

"So you're *demandin'* your split of the dinero, are you?" Buxton grated as he halted before the two gun hawks. "Well, you're outa luck. Corson, you forfeited your right to a split when you plugged that kid in Tuscola, just because he was unlucky enough to be on the street when the shootin' started. You know how much I hate a kill-crazy gunslinger. And you're no better, Macklin, you coyote!"

The thin, scar-faced outlaw, Macklin, snarled. Corson thrust out his jaw belligerently, and his fiery-

red beard seemed to bristle with anger.

"Callin' us names don't scare us none, Buxton," Corson growled. "We don't aim to be double-crossed by you, savvy? Now—where's that dinero?"

He and Macklin crouched tensely, prepared for the inevitable showdown. Only the icy glint in Buxton's narrowed eyes stayed their gun hands.

"Somehow, that money's goin' to be returned." Big Del's blunt declaration startled them. "Seein' that kid killed in Tuscola started me to thinkin'. All of a sudden I'm plumb fed up with this whole rotten business. It's no life for a youngster like Tag. I've been a fool, makin' him live here in this hell hole with a gang of human snakes, includin' myself. So I'm takin' him away from here and givin' him a chance to lead a decent life. Maybe I'll even try goin' straight myself, if it's not too late."

HE was referring to young Tag Buxton, his nephew. He'd taken Tag into his care nearly four years ago, after Tag's father—Big Del's brother—had been killed in a railroad accident over in Stiletto Basin. Save for a few secret visits to Tuscola with his uncle, Tag had spent every day of the past four years here in Packsaddle Canyon. Big Del thought a lot of the youngster, and had never allowed him to accompany the outlaw band on their raids.

"If you've gone lily-livered and want to quit, that's your business," Macklin ground out. "You'd never be able to get together another good gang—not here, anyway. But we took our chances for part of that money, and there'll be trouble if we don't get it."

"Reckon there'll be trouble, all right," Buxton said angrily. "I wouldn't have a damned cent that's

tainted with the blood of a kid, and neither will you. Now both of you get outa my sight or you'll get paid in lead!"

THE wiping out of Big Del's gang had worn his nerves down to the quick. Suddenly he was no longer capable of containing his rage. He was standing nearest to Red Corson, and his open hand slapped sharply against the renegade's bearded face.

That was the spark that ignited the powder keg. It was a mistake on Buxton's part, losing control of himself. As he struck Corson, his gaze flicked away from Tobe Macklin for an instant.

Macklin, realizing they'd never be able to make the hard-bitten leader reveal his secret, jerked out his six-gun and blasted Buxton from the side at point-blank range. Big Del was blown halfway across the room by the smashing force of the slug. Crimson staining his shirt, he stumbled against a chair and crumpled to the floor.

Macklin leered down at him through the smoke of his gun. Corson laughed a little, sardonically. But Big Del was tough—as tough as whang leather. He proved it by somehow pulling the big Colt from his holster and lining the sights on the treacherous Macklin.

About to pouch his six-gun, Macklin cursed surprisedly and tried to throw himself sidewise. But the next instant he was wilting in the doorway, chest tunneled by Big Del's lead.

Red Corson, his ears still ringing from the slap on his cheek, opened fire on Big Del and saw the writhing renegade leader stiffen, heard his agonized but defiant gasp. Then Corson hurdled Tobe Macklin's sprawled body and sprinted out the door, while Big Del tried desperately to lift his gun again.

Corson was panicky, stricken by

the fear that Buxton might somehow climb to his feet and give chase. He didn't stop running until he'd reached the saddled horse that browsed on the lush grass near the pole corral.

Mounting hastily, Corson rolled his spurs and rode madly out of the canyon without looking back even once.

Big Del heard footsteps a few minutes later, and realized that a figure had darkened the doorway of the shack. Had it been Corson returning, Big Del could have done nothing, for his life was ebbing with the blood that gushed onto the floor from the bullet wounds in his brawny body.

It was young Tag, who'd been washing a shirt for Big Del down at the waterhole. The kid's eyes were wide with horror. He'd dwelt with Buxton's lobo pack for four years, yet violent death was still a new experience to him.

Scarcely noticing Macklin's corpse, he stepped over it and sprang across the room and he tried to lift Big Del's head up a little.

"Never mind, Tag," the bullet-riddled man whispered, managing a wan smile.

"Big Del," the kid said. "What is—"

"Don't worry about it. The bad life I've lived is just catchin' up with me, that's all. I . . . I was figurin' on you and me leavin' here today and goin' away, sorta as a birthday present for you. Looks like you'll have to be ridin' alone, though. Today . . . is your birthday, ain't it?"

"That's right," Tag Buxton said softly. "I'm sixteen today."

"I sneaked into town the other night before . . . the trouble started. Bought a present for you at Abner Skagg's store, but I—"

Big Del lapsed into a series of painful, racking coughs. "Promise

... me somethin', kid," he went on finally. "Promise me you'll always be straight and honest ... no matter what."

Tag's mouth tightened with determination. "I promise, Big Del."

"One ... more thing." The big outlaw's voice had grown so faint that the kid had to lean forward to hear him. "There's a sack of money hid under a rock in that plum thicket ... this side of Tuscola. Belongs to the bank. See they get it back ... somehow. And watch out for Red Corson. He's a kid-killer. He's ... he's—"

Big Del Buxton's owlhoot reign had ended. He was dead.

A BITTER tear coursed down Tag Buxton's cheek as he dug the grave on the knoll behind the shack. There'd been a strong bond of friendship and understanding between Big Del and himself, a bond that went beyond kinship.

There was a lot of Big Del in Tag's make-up. The kid had big Del's piercing gray-green eyes, his brawny frame, his big hands that were capable of holding a six-gun as if it were a toy. But Tag had no gun of his own; Big Del had never permitted him to carry one, telling him there'd be plenty of time for that in the future.

"Totin' a heavy cutter around is liable to stunt your growth, kid," he'd said, laughing. "A gun's for a man."

That was how Big Del had wanted it. That's how it would be, Tag told himself. After he'd dragged the corpse to the side of the grave, he solemnly replaced the black-butted, powder-grimed Colt in the dead man's holster. Then he rolled the heavy, lifeless body into the shallow hole and slowly covered it with fresh dirt.

The grim ritual finished, Tag went back to the shack and filled a pair of

saddlebags with grub from the cupboard.

He threw a saddle on the buckskin pony Big Del had given him, tied the saddlebags securely in place, then mounted and rode away from Packsaddle Canyon to face the world.

He didn't start facing it right away, however. First he had a job to do. He'd promised that he'd return the cached loot to the bank in Tuscola, which was Big Del's way of settling accounts for the wanton murder of a kid he hadn't even known.

After that was accomplished, he'd drift on to some faraway range where the Buxton name wouldn't be held against him. He'd get a job on a ranch somewhere and work hard. Some day, maybe, he might even have a cow spread of his own.

Halfway to the town, an alarming thought struck him. Grief-ridden and confused, he hadn't thought of it before. What of Red Corson? The bearded outlaw would stop at nothing to get his hands on that loot.

A sudden uneasiness, a feeling that maybe he was being watched, caused Tag to draw rein. Vividly he recalled Big Del's last warning. Perhaps Corson, guessing the purpose of his mission, was trailing him even now.

The kid decided to play it safe. Warily he doubled back, then angled his mount sharply to the left. Hitting the bottom of a dry, winding arroyo, he heeled the pony into a run.

For two miles he held that reckless pace, riding as though a band of blood-thirsty Apaches were in hot pursuit. Then, feeling safer, he eased the buckskin into a steady gallop.

Nightfall found him far back in the wild country west of Packsaddle Canyon, camped at the foot of a towering sandstone bluff. A seep

spring nearby furnished plenty of water for himself and his mount. That, a meal, and the tangy, invigorating odor of the cedars around him soon made him forget his weariness. He slept soundly.

The kid stayed there a whole week, living mostly on canned beans and hardtack. On the seventh morning he decided he no longer had to worry over the possibility of Red Corson still lurking in the vicinity of Tuscola. Wanted by the law there, Corson could ill afford to risk capture. Surely, by now, he would be far, far away.

Pleased with the precaution he'd exercised, Tag broke camp and again headed for Tuscola.

THE wild-plum thicket that Big Del had mentioned was located near the stage road, three or four miles this side of the town. Tag remembered the place well. More than once in the past he'd stayed there in hiding while Big Del slipped into town to purchase supplies.

Night closed in again before Tag reached his destination. A full moon looked down blandly as he crossed the stage road and rode toward the plum thicket. Dismounting at the edge of it, he went forward on foot, holding his arms in front of him to protect his face from the scratchy limbs.

He located the boulder in the center of the thicket, and managed to roll it aside, despite its weight. A hole had been scooped out in the ground beneath it. Tag's heart raced exultantly when he pulled out the dirty canvas bag.

He swung the bulky bag over his shoulder and made his way out of the thicket. He'd decided the best thing to do was leave the money with Abner Skagg, a Tuscola storekeeper. Skagg was the only man in town who could be trusted to carry out Tag's instructions and keep his

lip buttoned. No one in Tuscola knew it, but Skagg was Del Buxton's cousin.

Tag dropped the sack on the ground beside his pony, and opened it to examine its contents. His questing fingers encountered numerous packets of paper money and heavy coin. And there was something else—

"Hand over that dinero, kid!"

Tag stiffened at the sound of the flat, snarling voice that seemed to lash out at him from nowhere. A choking tightness rising in his throat, he turned around slowly. There, less than twenty feet away from him, stood Red Corson, hand resting menacingly on the handle of his holstered six-gun!

"Surprised to see me?" Corson grinned wolfishly and moved closer to the motionless, wide-eyed kid. "Well, I made up my mind I wasn't goin' to be cheated outa that sack of mazuma you're holdin'. Figured Buxton might tell you where he'd hid it before he cashed in, the dirty four-flusher. I knew it had to be somewhere near here, and decided that if I took my chances and laid low long enough, you'd save me a lot of trouble by findin' it for me. That much cash is worth waitin' for."

Tag's momentary fear gave way to anger at himself for having been so careless, and cold disdain for the red-bearded renegade who'd shared in the killing of Big Del. Corson would have no qualms against killing him, either; Big Del had called Corson a kid-killer with his dying breath. But Tag, with a surprising ace up his sleeve, found himself suddenly unafraid.

"Don't come any closer, Corson," he gritted. "The only way you'll get your hands on this sack is over my dead body."

Red Corson chuckled gloatingly. "That's a good one," he taunted. "How else do you reckon I aim to

take it? What could a whelp like you do to stop me, even if you had a gun? So far I've been lucky enough to stay clear of the law, and you might get funny notions about settin' them right on my trail, if I was fool enough to let you live. Now—will you hand me that sack, or do I have to cut you loose from it with a slug and *then* take it?"

Still clutching the bag, Tag straightened, his somber-eyed stare clashing squarely with Corson's.

"You'll have to try takin' it, Corson," he said quietly.

Red Corson's long-barreled Colt slithered from leather as he moved in for the kill. Then, at the last moment, a glint of suspicion leaped into his eyes, but the instinctive warning came too late.

Tag's right hand jerked out of the bag, and powder flame lanced the moonlight. The thunderous explosion that accompanied it deafened the kid momentarily. He didn't hear Corson's dying curse or the thud of the outlaw's body on the hard ground.

A gentle breeze sighed through the thicket and wafted away the haze of powder smoke, revealing Corson's inert figure to Tag's vision. The unsightly hole in the center of Corson's forehead sickened the kid a little.

"I . . . I couldn't help it, Big Del," he whispered. "It was him or me."

Moonlight played along the barrel of the pearl-handled Colt .45 in his hand. Fascinated, Tag stared at the shiny new weapon that had saved his life. Lucky for him that Big Del had loaded it before stuffing it into the sack with the loot!

For this was the birthday present Big Del had mentioned before he died. Tag was certain of it; the gun was a dead ringer to the one Big Del had often seen him admire in an old mail-order catalogue he'd found in the hide-out shack.

"It sure came in handy, Big Del," the kid said reverently, balancing the gun proudly in his hand. "Guess when you bought it you'd decided I'd reached my growth—that I am a *man*, after all. I'll sure try to be."

THE END.

**DON'T BE CHEEKY,
MISTER!**

**WHY NOT?
I SHAVE WITH
STAR BLADES!**



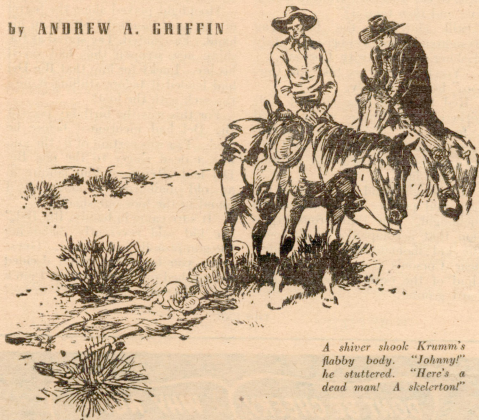
4 for 10¢



His fat pard's loose tongue was just as menacing to Johnny Forty-five as those baffling bandits and a sidewinder set-up when the little deputy marshal headed into that

DESERT-RAT SHOWDOWN

by ANDREW A. GRIFFIN



A shiver shook Krumm's flabby body. "Johnny!" he stuttered. "Here's a dead man! A skelerton!"

CHAPTER I.

THE SKELETON'S LEG.

GEORGE KRUMM, United States deputy marshal, yanked his cayuse to a halt with a thin yelp of fearful surprise. His round, fat face and triple chins, blistered red by the sun, blanched to a mottled pink. In spite of the fierce heat of the eastern California desert, a shiver shook Krumm's flabby body—all two hundred and fifty-odd pounds of it.

"Johnny!" he stuttered. "Here's a d-d-d-dead man! A skelerton!"

Deputy Marshal Johnny Forty-five, hardly half the size of his big partner, dismounted and tethered his mount and the pack mule to a clump of mesquite. He had glimpsed what Krumm had seen, but didn't seem unduly excited over it. Unlike his companion, who wore a long black frock coat, checkered vest, and store pants, Johnny was in typical cowhand attire: faded flannel shirt,

floppy Stetson, wide batwing chaps and tall-heeled Coffeyville boots. Nor was it a disguise; young John Socrates Forty-five hadn't got his bowed legs by doing paper work in the United States marshal's office. He was a top-hand puncher.

"You guessed it, George," he drawled. "There's too many of this hombre's bones showing for him to be anything else than dead."

Deputy Marshal Krumm believed that an officer should have dignity, and he frowned in disapproval when he saw Johnny rapidly shake up a brown cigarette in the fingers of his left hand and then toss it away unlit, to repeat the quirky-building operation with his right hand. Johnny flipped the second cigarette away, too. He never smoked. He rolled them, he claimed, only to keep his trigger fingers limber and well exercised. This greatly annoyed Krumm, as did Johnny's impudent grin and cocky manner. Right now, however, the fat deputy was too much upset to criticize. He gingerly eased his weight from the saddle and blinked nervously at the white-bleached skeleton that was stretched out near the edge of the arroyo.

The few shreds of clothing that still clung to the grisly remains indicated that the man had been a miner, a prospector, perhaps, though there were no tools or belongings in evidence. The skeleton was dried and mummified by the moistureless air of the waste land so that it was impossible to tell what he had looked like in life. A square gold filling in one of the grinning front teeth seemed the only possible means of identification.

"How long do you reckon he's been dead, Johnny?" queried Krumm.

Johnny Forty-five bent over the skeleton and with some difficulty removed the revolver from the belt that was now looped with an empty

and grotesque looseness about the spinal column. It was an off-make weapon of about .44 caliber, much corroded, the cylinder and mechanism clogged with rust. Johnny could learn more from the gun than he could from the state of the body.

"He's been lyin' here, I'd say, about two years," the sawed-off deputy marshal decided. "Died of thirst, probably." He glanced toward their pack mule and its load, the most important items of which were two large canteens.

Krumm followed his eyes and brightened up a little. "Can't we have a drink now, Johnny? My throat's as hot and dry as a chimley flue."

Johnny Forty-five squinted at the sun, which was almost noon-high. "Bueno. We can wet our whistles now, I guess, if we go easy. I hope you didn't roil the water too much when you filled the canteens at the spring this morning."

"When I filled 'em?" Deputy Krumm said blankly. "What do you mean? I thought *you* filled up them canteens." Stumbling up to the mule, he tapped the tin containers.

The fat officer's face was paler than ever. He turned it toward Johnny. "I didn't know it was *my* chore. I didn't hear you tell me—"

Johnny Forty-five's comment came in a musical chant:

"I'm really not surprised, George;
Your wits were never nimble;
And when the brains were dished around
You sure held out a thimble."

KRUMM snorted indignantly. This was another irritating thing about his brash young pard—Johnny was always reciting "fool rhymes" on the spur of the moment. And sometimes, as in this case, they carried a sting. But this time Krumm dimly realized that the fault had been his;

after all, he himself had loaded the mule that morning, and without noticing that the canteens were strangely light. Quaveringly, he suggested that they turn around and go back the way they had come.

Johnny shook his head. "No, we're more than halfway to Chuckawalla now, and we'll take a chance and push on. We'll prob'ly suffer some, but our best bet is to try to reach that town."

Krumm groaned dismally. "I'm practic'ly dyin' of thirst right now," he mourned. "I'll leave my bones here in the desert like this pore hombre did."

The rhyming deputy eyed him skeptically. "You really mean you've got bones under all that tal-low?" He started toward his cayuse, then stopped for a final look at the skeleton. "Hold on, George!" He whistled. "Looks like this man didn't die of thirst, after all. Not of thirst alone, anyhow. Look at the left leg."

"I ain't much interested in no skelerton's leg, but—well, what about it?"

Johnny showed him a splintered round hole near the top of the heavy long bone of the upper part of the left leg. It unquestionably had been made by a bullet. The man had been murdered, had been shot and left to die here. He hadn't accidentally wounded himself: each chamber of the rusted revolver was loaded.

Another thing that took the young deputy's attention was a small stack of pebbles near the skeleton's right arm. It was in the shape of a rough pyramid, and the little stones that composed it were of a grayish green color. Had the dying man arranged them there just to pass the time? But there were no other green-gray rocks in the immediate vicinity. Johnny examined the pebbles more attentively. To his surprise, he

found two of them that were mottled with a metal that was unquestionably pure silver.

"Ore samples," Krumm said wisely. "The hombre had 'em in his pocket and before he died he stacked 'em up thataway."

But Johnny was puzzled. All except two of those bits of rock were worthless, showing no sign of silver, and no prospector in his right mind would have weighted himself down with them. It was all a mystery and seemed likely to remain so—for he and Krumm couldn't waste more time here; their lives depended upon reaching Chuckawalla before night-fall. The California desert, in summer, showed little mercy to men without water.

"Let's vamoose, George," the younger deputy urged as he swung aboard his horse. "We're a couple years too late to help this hombre, and I guess it's no good to palaver about him."

They headed westward again, much thirstier now than when they had halted, for the thought that they were without water was an added torment. The animals would suffer, too, for Johnny had planned to give them the larger share of the supply. They were desert-bred, however, and he was confident they would carry through.

There was no trail to follow across that smoldering, burnt-out waste, and Johnny was guided only by the landmarks. They had toiled painfully down one of the alluvial fans that spread outward from a dry canyon of the Misery Mountains. This jumble of washed-out sand, rock and shale was thinning out now as they came out upon the scorched floor of the desert itself.

It stretched ahead of them into the dim, heat-hazy distance, not a level expanse, but a broken, rolling badland cut by innumerable washes and arroyos. Far on the left were

the Desolation Mountains, naked and chocolate-brown, and these swung westward to join with the hideous, volcanic range known as the Nightmares. Snuggled among these latter peaks should be their destination, the town of Chuckawalla.

WITH the coming of afternoon the temperature increased until Johnny Forty-five estimated that a thermometer reading would approach one hundred and thirty degrees in the sun. There was no humidity, but the dry heat sapped the body fluids until the deputy marshals felt like withered husks of their normal selves. This desert was below sea level, and the sky above seemed a high ceiling of polished blue steel. The round, terribly glittering hole in this ceiling was the sun, and its rays were focused upon them as if concentrated by a burning glass.

"This is all your fault, Johnny!" Krumm bleated accusingly. "It was your idea. We should never have tried reachin' that town from the east, across country thisaway. I'm the senior deputy and I ought to have made the plans. This hoss of mine is about ready to fold up like a busted accordeon."

"Then let's walk, and save the horses," Johnny suggested, much to the fat officer's disgust. He set the example by dismounting and leading his horse and the mule, and Krumm complainingly followed suit. Johnny grinned; he was used to his big pard's bellyaching; it came whenever any exertion was called for. But the weary, heat-weakened animals showed their appreciation, pushing on with new vigor while the men trudged alongside. Two blazing hours went by, then another, and the Nightmare Range seemed as provokingly distant as ever.

Krumm, who had been lagging
WW—SF

behind, suddenly gave a squawk of delight and rushed past Johnny like a stampeding steer.

"Water!" he whooped, his huge boots churning the gravel.

They had reached the shore line of an ancient lake, the level, dazzling white bed of an inland sea that had been dry for perhaps millions of years. Out toward the middle of the miles-wide expanse of salt and alkali something glimmered, blue and cool.

Krumm was lumbering toward the vision as fast as his elephant legs could take him, but Johnny's tuneful warning surely reached him, even though the fat man failed to heed it:

"George, that's only a mirage!
That water isn't there!
I thought I had one jackass mule.
But it seems I've got a pair!"

The pack mule, in fact, was wiser than Deputy Marshal Krumm, for neither it nor either of the horses showed any excitement, but plodded onward, out over the flat surface of the lake bed. The mirage did look beautifully real, however, and it made the rhyming deputy thirsty, even though he knew it to be a mockery.

A little later he saw that Krumm had halted in bewilderment. As Johnny approached with the horses the fat man began to turn slowly round and round.

"Where's the water? It was here a minute ago, Johnny!" he wailed.

"You're standing knee-deep in it." His partner chuckled, for at a little distance the trickery of the dry, heated air had placed Krumm in the midst of the false water. When Johnny came a few yards nearer the whole thing vanished except the fat deputy and acres of burning sand.

"Better take it easy, amigo," the young law officer advised. "We've got a dozen miles to go before we get

our tongues wet. Don't make it any harder than it is."

They struggled on to the tune of dirgelike groaning from Krumm and the slow clinking of the horses' shod hoofs. The phantom water did not appear again, but as they neared the western shore of the vast, dry bowl something else loomed up to stupefy Krumm further. It was another mirage, this time in the sky, a row of ghostly mountains superimposed above the real ones. Krumm only grunted at the sight of this foolery. He wasn't interested, even, when a wagon pulled by a twenty-mule team could be seen rounding the shoulder of one of the sky mountains.

"But this mirage is different," Forty-five tried to explain. "That's a real team and wagon. It's reflected up above the skyline. If we cut over toward the south a little, we've got a chance of meetin' it."

"I ain't goin' to be fooled a second time, no, siree," Krumm stated stubbornly. "There ain't no wagon, no more than there was any water a while back. You're loco, Johnny."

The fat deputy marshal wouldn't believe it, until, half an hour later, he heard the rumbling of the wagon wheels and the roaring profanity of the mule-skinner. There was no mistaking that latter—those sulphurous words, reeking of Hades and brimstone, *couldn't* have been a mirage!

CHAPTER II.

FORTY-FIVE'S NAMESAKES.

AS the wagon drew closer they could see that it was really two vehicles chained closely together. They were borax wagons, evidently on a return trip from the railhead, for instead of the borax they were loaded with only a few packing boxes. Pulling were eighteen mules, the wheel animals being a pair of powerful horses.

Although the team of twenty was making brisk time along the twisting road, the skinner was punishing unmercifully all the animals within range of his long whip. With him rode the swamper, who was provided with a box of rocks which he hurled with uncanny accuracy at the mules that were out of reach of the skinner's lash.

"Halp! Hold on! Halp!" Krumm yelled croakingly, his voice sounding like the *jugarum* of a bullfrog.

The vehicles crash-banged to a jerking stop. The skinner tossed the jerk line to his swamper and, much to the astonishment of Krumm and Forty-five, he began to unload the front wagon, tossing boxes out onto the sand at the roadside. He was a tall, powerfully made man of about forty, beak-nosed and with jutting black eyebrows. His jagged teeth were showing in a broad grin, and Johnny wondered what he was so pleased about. The swamper, a clean-cut young man of about twenty, looked more carefully at the two thirsty travelers. "This ain't no stick-up, Black!" he sang out to the skinner. "These gents look all right—they ain't Death Cats."

The driver's toothy grin faded and became a scowl. He stared hard at the dusty, alkali-covered pair who had hailed him. Neither Johnny nor Krumm wore a badge, for their work at Chuckawalla was to be an undercover job.

"What do you pilgrims want?" the skinner rasped, punctuating his demand with ill-natured profanity.

Johnny Forty-five glanced at the boxes that had been thrown from the wagon. They were cases of high-quality bonded whiskey, liquor worth a fabulous price in this remote desert wilderness.

"It's water we crave, not whiskey;
Our throats are dry as powder;
How about a barrel or two,
Or must we holler louder?"

The skinner blinked at Johnny, after this outburst, as if at a man demented, and he made no move to satisfy the wants of the two lawmen. The swamper, however, hastened to bring out a big water bag. Evaporation had kept the contents cool and never had they tasted anything so fine.

"If you're goin' to Chuckawalla," Krumm said importantly, after he had nearly emptied the water bag, "we'll just tie our cayuses on behind and ride in with you. My name is Krumm—knowned throughout the country as Fearless George," he added modestly. He was about to boast of his job and record as a deputy marshal, as he usually did, but he remembered just in time that his mission was a secret one. "This friend of mine here," he said condescendingly, "is Johnny Forty-five. Don't mind his fool po'try—it's just a crazy streak he has."

Johnny grinned, as he helped reload the boxes.

The swamper, who was very friendly, said his name was Sid Waldon and that the skinner's was Black Campion. The skinner was not responsive; he glared at the two "saddle tramps" and only grudgingly permitted them to ride. He seemed to dislike and suspect Johnny, especially, and when Forty-five nonchalantly rolled two cigarettes and tossed them away unlighted, Black Campion put him down as absolutely and hopelessly insane.

THE linked wagons rumbled on, jolting over the rocky, winding trail that rose steeply now from the region of the dry lake to enter the greasewood-dotted foothills of the Nightmares. Sid Waldon tossed rocks, not hard but never once missing, at the foremost mules, and Black Campion plied his whip with profanity. Johnny's dislike for the skinner was growing rapidly; he

didn't like the man's savage punishing of the wheel horses. Campion could hit a fly with his long whip at forty feet, and he used unnecessary muscle in wielding it.

"You're almost as clever with that snapper as I am with a gun," Krumm told the skinner.

"You good with a hogleg?" Campion sneered.

"Dead-shot Krumm," said the fat deputy diffidently. "That's what they call me. I'm chain lightnin' on the trigger, and I never miss. Was you expectin' robbers? Mebbe it's a good thing you've got me along."

Johnny Forty-five was doing some thinking. It seemed to him that Campion had not only expected, but welcomed robbers. He had certainly hurried to unload that valuable whiskey. And what had Sid Waldon said about Death Cats? Johnny had heard of that murderous organization. In fact, it was what was bringing him and Krumm to Chuckawalla.

The wagons, with the lawmen's animals tied on behind, went booming along for two or three miles, and then, as they rounded a looping turn, three mounted men came jogging out onto the road from a clump of paloverdes. Bandannas were carelessly swathed around the lower part of their faces and they were flourishing revolvers. Black Campion clawed at the brake. The swamper yelled that it was a stick-up—which seemed pretty evident.

Fearless Krumm forgot all about being a crack shot, and with a thin screech he dived to the floor of the wagon, somehow wedging his bulky form between two packing cases.

"Don't be a fool, kid," the skinner snarled at his swamper, who had started to reach for his gun. Once again he started to heave the liquor cases out of the wagon.

But he didn't reckon on Johnny Forty-five, or on Forty-five's Colt

single-action namesakes! On each of the singsong deputy's lean thighs one of those big-calibered guns was holstered, and they came leaping into Johnny's smallish hands now as if attracted by a magnet.

Johnny's left-hand 45 flashed flame and smoke, and the conical sombrero of the foremost bandit took wings like a bird, flew into the branches of the paloverde and stayed there! Or the heel of the first came two other shots in rapid succession, this time from the ambidextrous deputy's right-hand Colt. Another highwayman, a short, wide-shouldered man, screeched with pain and dropped his gun, grabbing at his upper arm where a bullet had nipped it. The third bandit, his Stetson also ventilated with Johnny's hot lead, whirled his cayuse and spurred frantically into the brush, his body bent low over the pommel.

"If you want some more of the same,
Just say the word, owlhooters!
I'll sing another little song
To the tune of these six-shooters!"

But the two remaining bandits wanted no more of that kind of music! The one who had worn the steeple-crowned hat took a hasty shot at Johnny—it missed by yards—and then he went crashing into the mesquites. The one with the nicked arm was only a few feet behind him. In a few moments all three were out of sight around a jutting spur of rock.

"Man alive! That was what I call shootin'!" Sid Waldon gasped when he could fetch his breath.

Swearing under his breath, Black Campion for the second time put the liquor cases back on the wagon. He didn't seem grateful to Johnny for saving his cargo, though he grumbled his thanks. As for Krumm, he finally crawled from his hiding place, brandishing his gun.

"Where are they? Let me at

'em!" he barked fiercely. "So they're gone, eh? It's a good thing for *them* I lost my footin' just as as I was gettin' ready to blast 'em down! Those mules jerked the wagon just as I drewed."

"The only thing you drewed, George, was your breath—and you held it until the shootin' was over," chortled the singsong deputy.

They saw no more of the would-be bandits who, Sid Waldon told Johnny in an awed voice, were members of the Death Cats outfit.

Another two miles brought them into the town of Chuckawalla. There the deputies thanked Campion and Waldon for the lift, and took charge of their saddle horses again, as the wagons were bound for the borax works at Lizard Hill, five miles farther on.

Chuckawall was the county seat, and reputed to be the toughest as well as the hottest town west of the Colorado River. Johnny Forty-five grinned; he looked forward to his stay here with great pleasure.

CHAPTER III.

A TIP FROM PIOUS PERKINS.

THERE was but one lodginghouse in town, the deputy marshals discovered. It was a rambling adobe building at the end of the wide, baking Main Street, and bore the pretentious name of Perkins' Palace Hotel. After seeing that their horses were taken care of, Forty-five and Krumm went to their rooms to clean up. By that time the sun was down, and the dry air was already cooler.

"Now, Johnny"—the fat deputy sighed, plumping himself down on the edge of his partner's bed—"let's have another look at that letter again, the one that brought us to this forsaken place."

Forty-five obligingly produced the letter, which was addressed to their

chief, the United States marshal. It ran:

SIR: I am a citizen of Chuckawalla, Calif. I am not signing this, but will make myself known to any of your officers that you send here. You have probably heard of the gang of robbers and cutthroat killers who operate around here and call themselves the Death Cats. Things are intolerable for a good citizen like myself. You may say, Mr. Marshal, that this is a job for our sheriff and you are right, but I have proof that the sheriff himself is the headman of the Cats! Heaven help me and the other good and law-abiding citizens of this town, if any! So please send investigators to arrest and remove the sheriff. Heaven will bless you!

Krumm studied this anonymous communication, his little brown, close-clipped mustache pursed, his fat forehead creased with thought.

"Sounds pretty convincing. He says he has proof that the sheriff is behind that Death Cats bunch. Death Cats—what a name!" Krumm shivered a little.

"There's about a dozen gunnies in the bandit outfit, from what I hear," said Johnny Forty-five. "If they're all as chicken-livered as those three jaspers were today, we ought to be able to handle 'em."

Deputy Krumm got up and strutted back and forth across the hotel-room carpet, his chest thrust out like a pouter pigeon's. "Fearless Krumm, the Terror of Evildoers, that's me, and I didn't get that moniker for nothin', no, sree!" he said sternly. "I will smash this ring of criminals; I will cr-r-r-rush that guilty sheriff. And from you, Johnny, my assistant on this case, I shall expect some co-operation and— Who's that?" A knock had sounded on the door panel, and Krumm frantically reached toward his holstered gun, at the same time dodging behind the bureau.

"Come in," Johnny drawled.

The door opened cautiously, and a tall, gangling man stepped in and

closed it softly after him. Johnny recognized him as Perkins, the proprietor of the hotel.

"Could I have a few words with you gents?" he requested squeakily.

Perkins was of middle age, and his gaunt shoulders had a pronounced stoop. His bony hands were continually in motion as if he were washing them, and his long, thin-jawed head unceasingly nodded as though affected by the palsy.

"They call me Pious Perkins," he said with a sort of humble pride. "A name I try to live up to, gents. I'm a good citizen, and—"

"How do you spell 'citizen'?" Forty-five demanded, and then as Perkins only blinked, he asked directly: "Didn't you write a certain letter a while back?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here to see you," Perkins said in a low tone. "Are you U. S. deputy marshals?"

The fat deputy marshal deemed it time to put in his two cents' worth. "Yes, I am Deputy Krumm," he said magnificently, "knowed all over the West as Gets-his-man George, the Bad Man's Nemesis. Of Uncle Sam's long arm of the law. I am the iron fingers! And, oh, yes—this is my young helper, Johnny Forty-five. He ain't quite as crazy as he acts—fact is, he shows promise. By observin' my methods he'll soon learn the deputy-marshal business."

Johnny's reply to all this, much to Perkins' surprise, came in an impudent carol:

"Your praise is overwhelmin'.

It takes my breath away;

But if you'll excuse my sayin' so,

I think you're full of hay."

WHEN the Chuckawalla hotel man had recovered sufficiently he got down to cases on the local crime situation, speaking in confidential whispers. There was no question, he said, but that Sheriff Gideon

Horn was the ringleader of the Death Cats.

"You say you have proof?" Johnny asked mildly.

Pious Perkins nodded vigorously, continuing to wash his hands with invisible soap and water. "A few weeks ago, Mr. Krumm," he said, addressing himself to the deputy he thought the more important, "a few weeks ago, the express company was robbed of several thousand dollars. A friend of mine—who I won't name at present—saw Sheriff Horn with the empty Wells Fargo pouch, saw Horn bury it under the floor of his bedroom! I'd suspected Horn before, but that cinches it."

"You want to come with us and accuse the sheriff?" Johnny suggested.

"Heaven forbid! It might lead to violence, and I'm a man of peace," murmured Pious Perkins. "You're the investigators and I've given you the tip, so I must wash my hands of the matter," he said, rubbing his palms together. "I've done my duty, Heaven knows, as a citizen and honest man."

"*He-r-rumph!*" Krumm cleared his throat majestically. "This reminds me of a case I solved over in Texas. At the wind-up I fought and whipped seven men, single-handed and—"

"You had your other hand tied behind your back?" Johnny interrupted.

"Yes, I always— No, of course not, and I wish you wouldn't horn in, Johnny!" Krumm stated. "These hombres I was tellin' about charged me from different directions after my revolver was empty, and all I had was a single-barrel shotgun. I dropped every one of 'em."

"With your shotgun?"

"Shore," explained the fat deputy. "You see, I had it loaded with a special slow-burnin' powder I invented, and seven buckshot. Those buck-

shot came out one at a time, just like from a Roman candle, and I had a chance to swing around and take aim between shots. But it was a mighty close call. Yes, siree!"

Johnny chanted:

"George, I wouldn't accuse you;
You're always true as a die;
Your word's as good as a bonded oath—
But that's a whoppin' lie!"

[EARLY the next morning Johnny Forty-five made a social call at the sheriff's office. Krumm was still snoring away at Perkins' Palace, sleeping off the effects of his exhausting travel of the day before, and the rhyming deputy had pity on him and let him slumber.

"Sheriff Horn ain't here yet, but I'm the undersheriff," Johnny was told, when he entered the combined office and jail. "Anything I can do for you, half-pint?" The man sneered with a curl of his lip.

The undersheriff, who wore a neatly trimmed red beard and mustache, was immaculately dressed in white silk shirt with black tie, fawn-colored trousers tucked into richly embroidered boots, and a forty-dollar Stetson. On each of his hips rode a silvered Colt six-gun. Johnny gave him a quick once-over and made his business known in a tuneless warble:

"My name is Johnny Forty-five,
An agent for real estate;
And I also sell insurance
At the very lowest rate."

The undersheriff took the cigar from his mouth, which remained open for a few moments. "You don't look like an agent," he grunted presently. "Is the heat gettin' you? No, I ain't interested in no real estate. If you want the sheriff, he's at home, I guess. His house is down at the south end of the next street. Now don't bother me, peewee."

The deputy marshal found the

place without difficulty; it was a neatly made adobe dwelling surrounded by date palms. Johnny nonchalantly helped himself to a handful of the fruit, and was nibbling at it when he knocked.

The door was opened by a leathery-faced man with snow-white hair and penetrating gray eyes. He was plainly dressed, unlike his undersheriff, and his sheriff's star was pinned upside down to his left suspender.

"I'm here, dear sir, on business;

I'm a land-investment ace;

I'm not here to make a sale;

I want to buy this place."

Sheriff Gideon Horn gulped and for a moment was speechless. "My property ain't for sale," he said finally. "Where you from, stranger? And what do you want with—"

"Would three thousand dollars for this house interest you?" Johnny asked persuasively.

"Why, that's twice what I— I'd be a fool, I guess, not to consider such an offer," Horn admitted. "Come in, will you? I was just finishin' my breakfast java."

He admitted his visitor to the tidy little kitchen. Johnny thanked him politely, and pretended to inspect the house's construction, tapping at the plastered walls. Wonderingly, the old sheriff showed him into the other room, the sleeping quarters.

"I had this house built under my own supervision," the sheriff said. "I'm a bachelor, as you see, and I never expected to sell. In fact, I'm not sure— You aimin' to locate in this town, young feller?"

JOHNNY seemed not to hear. He was stamping about on the floor of the bedroom. "I'm real particular about the floorin'." He sighed. "Now this plank seems a bit loose. Any objections if I lift it up, and kind of inspect the foundations?"

"Why, no. Go ahead, if you have a mind to," Horn invited. "I hadn't noticed that unnailed board."

The deputy pried it up without difficulty, reached down into the aperture and groped until his fingers found an object lying on the loose-banked dirt underneath. He drew it out smilingly and held it up for the sheriff to see. It was a leather pouch stamped. "Wells Fargo," equipped with double hasps and two padlocks. The sack had been opened along one side by a sharp knife.

"It's the missing Fargo money pouch! The one that the Death Cats—" Sheriff Horn's eyes were protruding like bright agate marbles. "But how in blazes did it get under there?"

"It's a plant, sheriff." Forty-five chuckled.

Horn's face grew beet-red and his hands knotted into gnarled fists. "And *you* planted it! Your buyin' this house was only a stall—"

"I'm afraid it was, and I apologize," Johnny admitted. "But I didn't put this pouch here. And after watchin' the way you acted—you let me raise the plank without turnin' a hair—I know *you* didn't know about the pouch. Mr. Horn, I'm a U. S. deputy marshal, and here's my credentials."

The sheriff examined the badge and papers that his visitor had taken from an inner pocket. "John Socrates Forty-five," he read, "'duly appointed—' Seems all right. I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Forty-five," he said respectfully. "And now may I ask who in the Sam Hill is trying to frame me to hellangone on that Fargo deal?"

"Pious Perkins told me about the pouch being here—he says a *friend* said he saw you hide it," Johnny disclosed, and briefly he told Horn what he knew.

"Perkins might be sincere in this—someone must have lied to him,"

said the sheriff, thoughtfully rubbing his jaw. "Because Perkins is really a good citizen. An upright man, as far as I know."

"So's a corkscrew upright—and crooked. He's a bit too sanctimonious, I think, though you *may* be right." Johnny grinned. "Now I want to ask you some questions. But first, I'm goin' to put you under arrest!"

CHAPTER IV.

JOHNNY SPINS A WEB.

GIDEON HORN looked so astonished, so pathetically bewildered, that Forty-five released laughter he couldn't hold back. However, he soon put the sheriff's mind at ease. The arrest would be only a part of a trap to entangle the plotters, whoever they were.

"How about these Death Cats, as they call themselves—got any idea who they are?" the deputy asked his "prisoner."

Horn shook his head in the negative. "No, I'm sure only about the ones I shot," he said. "I've killed three of those skunkaroos durin' the last five months. They're masked when they pull their murderin' jobs, as you probably know."

"You've downed three? They've sure got no reason to love you, and it's no wonder they want you out of Chuckawalla for keeps." Johnny whistled. "But I'm wondering. Why don't they get you out of the way with a bullet and have done with it. They could call on you just as I did this morning, and you wouldn't have much of a chance. Why don't they assassinate you, instead of takin' the big risk of gettin' Uncle Sam on their necks?"

"I'm not so easy to down," Horn protested stubbornly.

"Nonsense. Anybody can be shot in the back, and nights are as dark in Chuckawalla as anywhere else," Forty-five reminded him. "If you

should be killed—Heaven forbid, as Pious Perkins would say—if you were killed, who would be sheriff here?"

"There'd be an immediate special election," Horn replied.

"And if I took you as a prisoner to the Federal authorities it would be the same, would it?"

"No, in that case, Mike Pooler would take over and finish out my term," said the sheriff. "Mike is my undersheriff."

"I've met the man," Johnny said.

"This county has some peculiar laws, and that is one of 'em," Horn grunted. "Only in case of my death would there be a special election. In that case Jones, who's a storekeeper here, would probably be the new sheriff. He's popular with the law-abiding element. Say!" he ejaculated. "You think the Death Cats are tryin' to get Pooler in, instead of me? That what you're drivin' at, Forty-five?"

"That seems to be it. Who handles the biggest money hereabouts? Wells Fargo?"

"No. The White Queen Borax Co. at Lizard Hill brings in a pay roll each month that tops anything in the county," said Sheriff Horn. "That's *one* haul that the Death Cats have never yet tapped," he added proudly.

"And why not?" asked Forty-five, perplexing the sheriff by absently rolling and tossing away a couple of quirries.

"Because every month I head a posse of my own selection and escort the pay roll from the railroad at Daggett to its destination."

"And with you under arrest, it would be Undersheriff Mike Pooler's job to guard that money?" Johnny inquired. Seeing Horn nod, the deputy marshal stated: "Then it seems that Pooler is in cahoots with the Death Cats; either that or they think he'd be a soft touch. I've

studied him, and in my opinion he's no *bueno*, and as slippery as wet straw."

"I can't believe that Mike would play ball with those cutthroats!" Horn groaned.

It seemed to Johnny Forty-five that the Chuckawalla sheriff was a little too trusting to his fellow man. "When is the next pay roll due in from Daggett?"

"Day after tomorrow. What do you plan to do, Forty-five?"

Johnny Forty-five told him. "First thing, Horn, I'm goin' to lock you up in your own jail. Forward, march!"

WHEN Johnny walked into the office with Horn and announced that the sheriff was to be made a prisoner, Undersheriff Mike Pooler was both astonished and indignant. But Johnny felt that Pooler's act was all a pretense. Although Pooler glowered over the deputy marshal's credentials, Johnny shrewdly guessed that he was putting on the act further. In all likelihood Pious Perkins had talked to Pooler within the last hour or two, and Pooler was secretly overjoyed at the way the scheme was turning out.

"This means that I'll have to take over the duties of sheriff—immediately," Pooler said with seeming reluctance, after the jail door had clanged behind Gideon Horn.

"Looks like it. Tomorrow I'll take the prisoner off your hands," Forty-five told him. "My partner and I will take him to Frisco. We'll hire a rig of some kind to get to the railroad and start from here after the worst heat of the day is over. What's the best train connection?"

He studied the timetable that Pooler showed him, and soon sauntered out into the street, which was already blazing with sunlight. Seeking the shaded side, Johnny paused before a building on the corner, a

familiar odor, sourish but far from unpleasant, reminding him that he was thirsty. Re-entering the saloon, he perched a booted foot on the brass rail and ordered a schooner of beer.

"Howdy, Mr. Forty-five," greeted a somewhat familiar voice.

The deputy marshal was pleased to recognize Sid Waldon, the honest-eyed young man who had been swamper on that borax wagon. He joined Waldon at the end of the bar.

"Not workin' today, Sid?"

"No, I got into an argument with Black Campion, and quit." Waldon shrugged. He hesitated, making wet rings on the bar top with his beer glass. "I don't want to blab, but it was kind of on account of you. He didn't seem to like your shootin' up them Death Cats. I accused him of being' sympathetic with 'em. That's what our argument was about."

"Sympathetic is too mild a word." Johnny laughed. "Sid, do you know where I can hire a rig for tomorrow?"

"Why, I own a team and buckboard, if that'll do you any good," Waldon said eagerly. "And I can drive for you, if you want. Figgerin' on makin' a trip?"

"Yes, I've arrested Sheriff Horn and am taking him to the railroad tomorrow," Johnny said casually.

Sid Waldon gulped air instead of beer, and slowly began sidling away from the apparently dangerously delirious waddy with the low-holstered guns.

"I'm not loco." The deputy laughed. "At least, not very. The whole town will soon know it, so I might as well tell you—my partner and I are U. S. deputy marshals."

Young Waldon thought it over. "You arrestin' a good hombre like Sheriff Horn?" he questioned doubtfully.

"I've a good reason," drawled

Forty-five. "You be at the jail with your rig tomorrow afternoon at four."

CHAPTER V.

NIGHTMARE RIDERS.

IT was noon of the following day, and Deputy Marshal George Krumm was taking it easy in his room at Perkins' Palace. Johnny Forty-five was busy elsewhere, doing "some fool thing or other," and the fat officer wasn't going out into the blistering heat if he could possibly help it. He was sprawled out on his bed, languidly stirring a breeze with a palm-leaf fan and clad only in his underwear.

"Is that you, Johnny?" He yawned, as a tapping sounded on the door.

The door opened and the long, stooped-form of Pious Perkins came in on tiptoe. The hotel man was carrying a tray that held a tall bottle, a glass, a dish of mint leaves, and something that tinkled deliciously. Krumm sat straight up, his double chins joggling.

"For the love of— Where did that ice come from here on the desert?"

"From Daggett, at two bits per pound." Perkins smiled faintly. "I thought maybe you'd like some mint juleps. I try to give my guests service, Heaven knows, especially an important one like you, Mr. Krumm."

The talk, as well as the drinks, was right up Krumm's alley. "This is mighty nice of you, Perkins." He beamed as he hastened to concoct what might have passed, except in Kentucky, for a mint julep. He poured in a more-than-generous dose of whiskey for flavoring. "Will you join me?" he invited.

"Heavens, no! As the Good Book says: 'Look not upon the wine when it is red, for at the last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an

adder,'" the hotel man quoted sonorously.

"Then it's a good thing this whiskey is yella-colored," observed the big deputy as he gulped thirstily. "This hitteth the spot. I never drink, myself, except for a cold or snake bite—or, well, for a sunstroke like I got today."

"Have another? I'll stir up this one," Perkins offered generously.

"I don't care if I do." Krumm sighed, wiggling his pink toes.

A couple of hours passed, delightful ones for the fat deputy marshal, who was becoming more mellow with each jingling julep.

"Johnny aims to start out for the railroad at four o'clock, so I'd better get fortified," Krumm said as he chewed a sprig of mint. "I can't say I fancy travelin' through this here country. If I owned this country and Hades, I'd rent out this and live in Hades."

"That young partner of yours seems to be a right sharp fellow," Perkins said, observing Krumm through half-closed eyelids.

"Oh, he'll learn—if he patterns enough after me," said the heavy deputy, waving his cigar. "Trouble with him, he's too talkative, spouts off too much, usually in that loco po'try of his. Now me, I'm as close-mouthed as a clam, as the . . . the Sphinx. Yes, that's what they call me. Sphinx Krumm, the Six-shooter Sage, strong, silent, secretive. That's me! Now Johnny, he makes mistakes, and ever' once in a while he pulls a boner. For instance, on this here Chuckawalla case—"

"Yes?" Pious Perkins encouraged.

The deputy marshal's tongue was getting a little thick, so that the hotel man had to pay particular attention to what he said.

"Johnny's got it in his thick *cabeza* that Sheriff Horn ain't really guilty—now, this is confidential,

mind you. Just for a stall, he's takin' him out of town, but not to the railroad. He's got some fool thing up his sleeve, Johnny has, but he won't tell me what it is. He's too . . . too talkative. Now how 'bout another drinksh?"

FORTY-FIVE signed the jail record as a receipt for the prisoner, said good-by to the foppish undersheriff, and snapped a pair of handcuffs around the gnarled wrists of Gideon Horn. Outside Sid Waldon and the buckboard were waiting. A rear seat had been rigged up, so that the buckboard would comfortably accommodate four passengers.

"Hasn't Krumm showed up yet?" Johnny asked the driver. "Is he going to sleep all day? We'll drive past the hotel and pick him up."

But in the next block they met the massive deputy. He was puffing grandly on a cigar, and the "sign" he was leaving in his wake was, to put it politely, rather zigzag. Johnny groaned at the sight of him, and recited dolefully:

"My fightin' pard's been fightin' booze;
He's stewed to the very gills.
I'd shorely hate to dig the graves.
For the bottles that he kills."

Krumm came lurching up to the buckboard. "Johnny, my left foot hurts," he said plaintively.

"Then put on your left boot instead of carryin' it around in your hand that way," Johnny suggested. "Now get aboard! Maybe the fresh air will sober you up."

The inebriated deputy twice missed the step of the buckboard, then toppled in and fell into a seat. "Sphinx Krumm," he mumbled, "the Shix-shooter Shage, shtrong, shilent, and seeretive. Thash me!"

WHILE Fearless Krumm was sleeping off his potations, Sid Waldon drove the buckboard out of Chuckawalla, following the sand-drifted

wagon road that crawled upward into the Nightmare Mountains. As soon as they were out of sight of the town Johnny surprised Waldon by unlocking Sheriff Horn's handcuffs.

"I'm goin' to let you in on this, Sid," the deputy marshal told the young swamper. "Mr. Horn isn't really under arrest, and we're not headed for the railroad. We're planin' to outwit those Death Cats—if we can. Want to help us?"

"I shore do, Mr. Forty-five." Sid grinned broadly. "I'll do whatever you and the sheriff say."

A tarpaulin on the floor of the vehicle covered plenty of food, water and camping supplies. At Johnny's suggestion they left the main road for a side trail as soon as one presented itself. The plan was to camp that night in some remote spot, then to swing about and keep track of the White Queen pay roll, which would be on its way, the next day, from Daggett to Lizard Hill.

"Mike Pooler and his so-called posse will be guarding it, and I think they intend to turn it over to the Death Cats—the *other* Cats, rather, for Pooler is surely a member," explained Forty-five. "That's where *we'll* come in."

"The company paymaster travels in a buggy, so we won't have much trouble ridin' herd on him." Sheriff Horn chuckled.

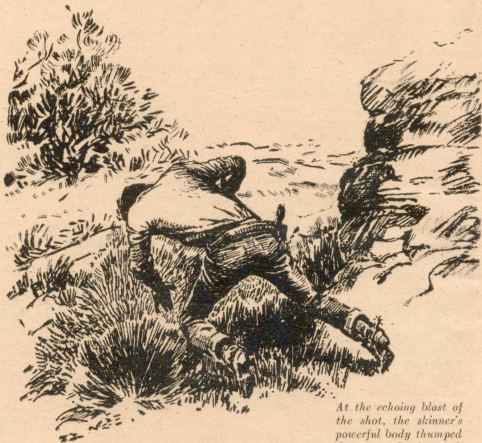
Johnny soon found that the Nightmare Mountains were very appropriately christened. This jumbled range of gaunt and barren peaks was like something seen in some tormenting dream. Palo-verdes and smoke trees grew in the gullies, but the hillsides were like piles of slag and cinders. The rocks were of a thousand weird shapes and shades of color, eroded by the sand-laden winds of centuries.

It seemed impossible that a good camping place could be found in this

wilderness of scorched stone, but Sid Waldon and the sheriff knew the country well, and a little after sundown the bouncing buckboard entered a sheltered canyon where a few real trees were growing. At the

feebly. "I won't live the night through. Ooooh, my head! I've learned my lesson—I'll never chew a leaf of mint again!"

That evening Johnny and Sheriff Horn talked long by the dying fire,



At the echoing blast of the shot, the skinner's powerful body thumped flat to the ground.

base of a crimson-colored cliff a spring of pure water was bubbling.

They unhitched the horses in the gathering twilight and made camp. A little fire was built and Johnny and Sheriff Horn cooked supper. Krumm, who was not feeling well, was able to take only coffee.

"I'm sorry for you, George," Johnny told him, "but by usin' all my will power, I think I can keep from bustin' out cryin'."

"I'm dyin'," the fat deputy piped

and the rhyming deputy got better acquainted with Sid Waldon. The borax-wagon swamper had been in the desert for nearly two years, having come from Kansas in a vain search for his father, Dave Waldon.

"I never found him, and I figger he must be dead," Sid told Johnny soberly. "Anyhow, I've been around Chuckawalla ever since."

"I did all I could to trace your father, Waldon," the sheriff said sympathetically. "But being as he

had six thousand dollars on him, as you say, it's possible that he was robbed and murdered."

Certain facts were beginning to fit into a design in Johnny's mind. "Was your father a prospector, Sid? Looking for . . . silver, maybe?"

"He wouldn't know silver ore if he saw it," young Waldon said. "He was a contractor. Came to California to dig wells. But do you know anything, Johnny, that might help—"

"I'm afraid not, Sid," the deputy replied, for this wasn't the time or place to break bad news. Besides, he wasn't sure that he *had* news.

THEY rolled out at dawn. The light was still only a vague grayness, and the east was banded with delicate pink when Johnny and his friends hunkered themselves around the tiny breakfast fire. A hard, and probably dangerous, day's work lay ahead, and they planned to be on the Daggett road before sunup.

Krumm's long sleep had worn off his dissipation of the day before, and he was his old, pompous self again, bragging about what he would do when, and if, they met the Death Cats.

"Those Cats had better have nine lives apiece when they meet Dead-shot Krumm," he said fiercely. With his chest out, he strode over to where Johnny was filling the canteens with fresh water. This time, Forty-five wasn't going to trust the chore to his fat partner!

Krumm sniffed the freshness of the morning air. "At a time like this, Johnny, I feel almost like a poet, myself. It's so peaceful and all. I think I could make up a pome as good as any you spout off. Let's see now, how's this?

"I love the birds in the trees;
I . . . er . . . I love the bugs and the bees;
Yonder mountains are mighty purple
And . . . er . . . er—"

Johnny furnished the rhyme that his pard couldn't think of:

"And the spring, and Krumm, go *burple-burple*."

Krumm was about to make an indignant protest when all thoughts of "po'try" were instantly forgotten. From the brush on the opposite side of the spring stepped three bleak-faced buscaderos with guns in their hands, followed by two others. At the same moment a group of riders charged toward the sheriff and Sid Waldon at the campfire. Leading them was a man in expensive range clothes—the Chuckawalla undersheriff!

"Don't try to reach, any of you!" Mike Pooler snarled. "We got the drop! All right, boys. Take their guns."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TORTURE WHIP.

TAKEN entirely by surprise, Johnny and his friends hadn't even a slim chance to make a fight of it. With a dozen revolvers covering them at forty-foot range, they raised their hands while Pooler's ill-favored crew swarmed forward to disarm them. Johnny wasn't greatly surprised to see the mule-skinner, Black Campeon, among the gang. He had a gun in one big paw, and under his other arm was coiled his long black-snake whip.

But it was the presence of Pooler that sent Sheriff Horn into storming anger. "Even after Deputy Marshal Forty-five told me, I could hardly believe it, Mike!" the sheriff roared. "You're a betrayer of your trust, a sneakin', low-down—"

"Better save your breath, Gideon," the traitorous undersheriff sneered. "Because you won't have many breaths to draw! I would have killed you long ago, you old fool, if I could have done it without bringing on a special election. But

now, thanks to these fool government men, you'll simply vanish from the picture, and we'll fix it so nobody will find the bodies of any of you."

In the meantime, Black Campion was taking it out on his one-time swamper, smashing the defenseless youth to the ground with the barrel of his gun.

Mike Pooler spat contemptuously into the sand at Forty-five's feet. "Not so smart after all, are you, my poetical real-estate agent?" he taunted. "You're goin' to have some real estate measurin' six feet by three. That lard-stuffed pard of yours blabbed everything."

Johnny, whose twin namesakes had been yanked from their holsters by one of the bandits, sent a side-long glance toward Krumm. The younger lawman understood now what had happened, but this was no time for reproaches, and he couldn't help feeling a little sorry for his muddling partner. Being short on courage, the fat officer was suffering more than any of them; his double chins were quivering like colorless jelly, and cold perspiration was trickling down his moonlike face and into his little mustache.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," he moaned faintly. "It was them juleps. Perkins must've put loco weed in 'em instead of mint!"

After the four prisoners had been herded beneath the cliff and searched for concealed weapons, Mike Pooler announced his program.

"Me and the . . . uh . . . posse"—he laughed, as he looked at his watch—"will have to hightail it now in order to reach Daggett in time to escort the paymaster. Campion, you take a couple of men and make buzzard bait out of these four sneaks—do it in any way you like, and if they suffer a little, it'll suit me plenty. Then ride to Chile Hill and join the men I'll have posted there for the stick-up. Savvy?"

The mule-skinner's lips expanded in a cruel grin. "Just leave 'em to me, boss," he gloated. "Me and the boys will have a little fun with these sons before we bed 'em down."

Pooler swung back aboard his cayuse, and as he and his henchmen left the spring he flung a last taunt at Deputy Forty-five:

"Adios! And if you're so good at rhymin', why don't you make up an epitaph for yourself, lawman?"

Johnny Forty-five, never at a loss, no matter how deadly the predicament, had something for him instead. It came as ominously as the clacking of a six-gun hammer:

"Uncle Samuel never forgets,
And he'll get you soon, you skunk!
It will be the jiggin' rope for you,
Or hot lead by the chunk!"

"I'm goin' to take all that cuteness out of you, Forty-five," rasped Black Campion when Pooler's bunch had cantered out of the canyon. Slowly and deliberately the skinner uncoiled his long bull whip, shaking it out and popping it experimentally.

"You goin' to take a few cuts at 'em afore we give 'em the quietus, Black?" asked one of the two assistants who had been left with Campion. Johnny noted with a certain satisfaction that this bandit's arm was bound up in a stained bandage—a memento he had received from the young deputy a few days before.

The other buscadero might have been one of that trio, also, for there was a bullet hole in his tall-crowned sombrero. He was a half-breed with a slanted, thin-lipped mouth and eyes like black pin points.

"I'm goin' to give my whip arm some exercise," Campion chortled evilly. "See that biggest tree yonder? Well, tie 'em to that, one at a time. Take the fat feller first. Pedro, you rope him to it so he can't

move his head, while Dexter keeps the others covered."

KRUMM didn't know yet what was in store for him, but he guessed that it would be unpleasant and he groaned dismally while the breed laced him to the tree with lariat rope. Meanwhile, Black Campion was toying with his long whip.

"I'm goin' to put out the eyes of you low rats at thirty feet!" he said chillingly. "It won't take me but eight licks to blind the four of you."

"He can do it, too," Sid Waldon whispered to Johnny. "I've seen him cut a mule's ear off at forty. The low-lived devil—"

Black Campion had rolled up the sleeve on his hard-muscled right arm, and now he measured off thirty feet from his target and stood poised. The rippling whip was like some slender reptile; for a fang it was tipped with a long popper of leather that had been artificially hardened to a steely temper.

Tight against the tree, the fat deputy tried vainly to avert his head, but a cleverly placed strand of rope prevented him. His eyes squinted shut, he howled and clamored for mercy.

"Yell away, lard belly!" Campion grinned, for Krumm's uproar only added to his amusement. "And it won't do no good to shut your peepers—I'll tear 'em out, lids and all."

Johnny was going to rush these fiends, even though he knew he hadn't a chance in a hundred. His guns had been tossed into the buckboard and were far out of reach, but the bandit with the injured arm stood within ten feet of him. If he could only edge within leaping distance—

Then he saw that Sid Waldon, too, was planning some kind of move.

He was backed close to the cliff, and Johnny watched Sid's right hand slowly and cautiously closing over a smooth stone weighing about a pound. Johnny's pulses jumped with hope—he remembered how accurately Sid could throw rocks! If he could heave just one, Johnny could take advantage of that split instant of surprise to get his hands on something more deadly.

"Listen, Campion," Sheriff Horn was pleading, "if you're going to kill us, do it, but don't pull this Apache business. It's not human!"

The skinner gnawed off a big chew of tobacco, then squared his massive shoulders and drew back on the long, squirming whip. "Watch this, sheriff! While you've still got eyes!"

Then, as the lash whistled back to gather momentum for the slashing blow, Sid Waldon hurled the stone. With the same precision he used when pegging at lagging mules, he sent the rock whizzing to its mark. It caught Black Campion just behind the right ear and the skinner went down like a stunned beef.

That was the diversion that Deputy Forty-five needed. As the bandit with the wounded arm lowered his revolver in surprise, Johnny charged him like a spitting cougar!

"Duck low, Horn!" he yelled at the sheriff, knowing that lead was going to fly.

"*Cuidado!* Look out!" screeched Pedro, the half-breed, his gun barrel swinging in an arc. "That Forty-hombre, he ees—"

JOHNNY had two or three seconds and he made them count! Striking cunningly with the edge of his hand, he paralyzed the nerves of the desperado's elbow and the gun dropped from the man's numb fingers into Johnny's active ones. The

deputy marshal spun half around and the gun belched flame and thunder.

Pedro's relaxing fingers bobbled the shot he had tried an instant too late. The half-breed's gun thudded to the sand. He hinged crazily at the knees and flopped, threshing like a dying fish. Johnny had dusted his shirt, back and front.

"Halt!" the deputy marshal shouted at Dexter, the bandit he had disarmed. But the man kept running. He was almost at the buckboard into which the lawmen's guns had been tossed. The deputy marshal gave him another chance to change his mind, but when he saw Dexter snatch up a Colt and whirl with it, Johnny triggered again. The bandit fell with the roar of the explosion, his head cracking against the wheel.

"Why, you . . . you tricky half-pint—" rasped the thick voice of Black Campion. He was recovering from his momentary loss of consciousness and was lifting himself to a kneeling position, supporting his weight with his left arm and reaching for his gun with his big right hand.

"Don't touch it, Black!" advised Forty-five.

As he didn't take the advice, Black Campion took something else. Johnny threw a snap shot from the hip, and at the echoing blast of the shot the skinner's powerful body thumped flat to the ground—permanently.

Taking long breaths of relief, Sid and the sheriff busied themselves at releasing Krumm, who was recovering from what seemed to have been a dead faint.

"Did . . . did we down 'em, Johnny?" he piped.

"Now don't tell us *you* had anything to do with it, Iron-man." Forty-five smiled sarcastically.

"That was good work, Sid," he told the delighted Waldon. "If you hadn't pegged that rock we'd be in a bad way."

Sheriff Horn bent over the crumpled form of Black Campion. "This devil got, instead of gave, Johnny. Look! You plugged him square through the left eye!"

Johnny Forty-five, who was already helping Sid with the horses, chanted that he had his mind on other problems:

"Let's shake a leg, amigos,
For our date at Chile Hill;
Pooler's got a debt to pay,
So let's present the bill!"

CHAPTER VII.

HOLDUP LETDOWN.

DRIVEN at a hot pace, the buckboard went careening over the treacherous mountain trails toward the Daggett road. Descending from the foothills of the Nightmare range, Sid sent the vehicle rolling across country, cutting through the hard-surfaced bed of another dry lake. Mike Pooler had divided his men, posting some of them at Chile Hill to do the actual holding up of the stage, and using the others as fake guards for the pay roll. It was Forty-five's plan to deal first with the bandits at the ambush.

"I think it would be a b-b-better idea," stammered Krumm, who was becoming more uneasy at every mile, "a b-b-better idea for us to go back to Chuckawalla and arrest Pooler and his men when they come back to t-t-town."

"Not scared are you, George?" Johnny Forty-five grinned.

"O' course not. Me, Fearless Krumm, the Terror of Evildoers, afraid?" the fat deputy marshal protested feebly. "Wasn't it my brainwork that set this whole trap by tellin' Perkins part of our plans? If

this day's work is a success it's all because of my courage and foresight. Yes, siree!"

It was about nine o'clock when they reached the Daggett road, and they slowed their pace and proceeded more cautiously. As the sheriff was familiar with the lay of the land, he was directing matters.

"See the tip of that bright-red mountain yonder? That's Chile Hill," Horn told them. "Now, before we reach that next turn we'd better leave the wagon and slip in on foot. If we're careful, we ought to get the drop on those skunks. They sure won't be expectin' us!"

They were within a mile of barren Chile Hill when they abandoned the buckboard, leaving it in a clump of desert willow. Then they approached in a cautious half circle, taking advantage of all possible cover and following a concealing arroyo for the last two hundred yards. They could see their enemies—seated on horseback and waiting behind a brush thicket that screened them from the road were five men wearing bandanna masks.

"We'll try to cover 'em, but if any resist, we'll have to shoot to kill," Johnny said grimly. "Same goes if any try to escape on their horses. There's a lot at stake now. And, George, don't crowd behind me that-away—I'm more afraid of you shootin' me by mistake than I am of those

rannycavoos. Easy, now!"

Aided by scattered boulders and creosote bushes, the law party worked its way to within thirty yards of the quarry, then twenty—

The mounted bandits, who were facing toward the white ribbon that was the Daggett road, turned in their saddles when Krumm stepped upon a dry mesquite twig that snapped like the report of a .22 pistol.

"Who in blazes—"

Johnny immediately let them know who! He came from cover at a low crouch, a .45 Colt six-shooter in each hand as he chanted his command:

"It's our turn now to have the drop,
So stick up your dainty mittens!
Don't any of you make a move,
Or we'll cut you Cats to Kittens!"

There was a burst of amazed profanity. One masked man, disregarding Johnny's warning, dug for his gun, an error in judgment with fatal consequences! With a .45-caliber souvenir spinning through his chest the bandit slid back over the tail of his horse and landed in a cactus.

Another of the quintet thought he could take advantage of this to spur his cayuse into the brush, but a slug from the Chuckawalla sheriff's Colt brought him down in a cloud of dust.

"We got enough! Don't shoot no



more!" This muffled yell came from one of the masked survivors.

THE lawmen made the surrendered trio dismount. Then the bandits were unmasked and disarmed. A bewildered, sorry-looking group—not nearly so swaggering and cocksure as they had been in the early morning!—they were marched back several hundred yards from the trail and hogtied with lariats.

"We'll take over your holdup chore," Johnny chuckled.

They returned to the road, masking themselves with their prisoners' neckerchiefs and mounting four of the bandits' horses. Then they waited at the point where the trail made a sharp turn around the base of Chile Hill. Half an hour passed while they kept their eyes intent on the horizon toward Daggett. It was a cloudy day, a rarity on the desert, and much cooler than usual.

"I think they're coming," Sheriff Horn announced at last. "It's either them or a dust devil."

"It's a rig, with some riders alongside," Sid added, a minute later.

Everything was working out fine—thus far. Pooler and his "guards" would be expecting the stick-up at this point and the masked men wouldn't be fired upon. Johnny could see the oncoming party very clearly now; a man in store clothes was driving the buggy; Mike Pooler and three companions were jogging along on either side.

Johnny adjusted his bandanna a little more closely over his mouth and nose. "Jump 'em when I say the word, *companeros*. We'll try to take 'em alive; but it'll be up to them! Pull up your mask, George; it's hangin' over your chins like a bib."

When the buggy was almost opposite, Johnny Forty-five and Sheriff Horn clattered out onto the road, with Krumm and Sid Waldon right

behind them. With drawn six-guns they closed in. The sheriff shouted "Halt!" in a hoarse, disguised voice.

The borax-company paymaster, a withered little man of sixty, gave a shrill cry of alarm. He would have dropped the reins and snatched up the sawed-off shotgun that lay on the seat beside him if Mike Pooler hadn't advised him otherwise.

"No use to resist, Rayburn," he groaned. "They'll kill us if we do! They got the drop on us all!" His hands were aloft.

The paymaster submissively threw a black leather satchel into the dust beside the buggy. It was the White Queen Borax Co.'s monthly pay roll.

FOR the first time, Mike Pooler seemed to be realizing that something was amiss. He was staring hard at Johnny Forty-five. It took something more than a bandanna to hide the personality of the runty deputy marshal!

Forty-five didn't keep him and his buzzard companions long in doubt. The low-down came in a grimly cheerful warble:

"I reckon you have lost your game;
It's time to pay up, Pooler!
It will either be the hangman's noose
Or a lifetime in the cooler!"

The color drained from the undersheriff's weakly handsome face, his eyes dilated with terror and despair. His move to lower his shaky hands toward his silver-mounted guns was desperate—suicidal.

Bellowing his rage, Sheriff Horn clawed the bandanna from his face with one gnarled hand and lined his gun sights with the other.

"All right, Mike! Take what you're askin' for!"

And Horn's gun sent a slug crashing through Pooler's traitorous heart. The murderous undersheriff hadn't accepted either of Johnny

Forty-five's alternatives, but what he had chosen was satisfactory enough to the deputy marshal. And also to Gideon Horn! The others didn't show fight, surrendering like whipped dogs.

It was all very perplexing to the mystified paymaster, and even after he had heard Sheriff Horn's explanation he wasn't sure what had really happened. But the return of the pay-roll satchel to the buggy was something he could understand! Soon he was warmly shaking Forty-five's hand.

"The White Queen Co. will reward you for your work, lawman," he promised enthusiastically.

Krumm looked hopeful—until Johnny courteously informed the borax-company official that United States deputy marshals didn't accept gratuities of any sort.

"I'm glad to hear you praise my assistant, sir," Krumm said grandly. "As he said, he was only doin' his bounden duty, carryin' out my instructions. This was one of my most successful cases, carried out to my entire satisfaction in spite of the dangers involved, sir, and I—"

Johnny cut short the fat deputy's boasting with something borrowed from Mother Goose:

"Little boy Krumm
Shore blows his horn;
Sheepherders in the meadow,
And Krumm's full of corn."

CHAPTER VIII.

SECRET OF THE DESERT.

THE work of the deputy marshals wasn't yet finished, even after the prisoners had been taken to Chuckawalla and lodged in Sheriff Horn's jail. Johnny reminded Krumm that there still remained one man to settle accounts with, and that man was Pious Perkins.

"But, Johnny, I don't think he's

guilty of anything except talkin'," objected the fat deputy. "He just repeated what I told him that day, and we can't arrest him for that."

"Can't we? You watch," drawled Forty-five.

"He's not a criminal; he's just a crank," Krumm continued obstinately. "He's not really a bad hombre—"

"George, you can forgive your enemies if you want to," Johnny said patiently. "But you can't forgive mine, or the law's. I'm going to arrest Perkins, and pronto."

Pious Perkins was highly indignant when Johnny informed him that he was in government custody. He was much surprised, as well. Johnny paid little attention to his Bible reciting, however. He knew the old saying that "the devil can quote Scripture." Perkins was jailed along with the others.

That night Johnny made extensive inquiries regarding Perkins and his career, and he learned some interesting facts. The man had been around Chuckawalla, broke, down-and-out, for a long time, and then had suddenly vanished and reappeared with money. That had been about two years before. With his mysterious new wealth he had bought the Palace Hotel.

"I'm going to take Perkins on a little trip tomorrow morning," Johnny told Gideon Horn. "We'll go in Sid Waldon's buckboard."

"Well, I hope you'll find some evidence to hold Perkins on," the sheriff said. "The other prisoners made full confessions, but they don't seem to know anything about Perkins' connection with the Death Cat outfit. Old Pious probably dealt higher up—with Pooler himself."

"The trip won't have anything to do with this case, I'm afraid," said Johnny. "But there's no telling what may come of it."

AT sunrise the next morning Sid Waldon and the two deputy marshals drove up in front of the jail. Pious Perkins, squeakily defiant and protesting at every breath, was taken from his cell and handcuffed to the iron brace of the seat of the buckboard.

"You can't do this to me!" he shrilled as the wheels of the buckboard began turning. "I'll have your job for this, Forty-five! Where are you taking me in this lawless, high-handed way? By Heaven, I'll get you for kidnaping as well as false imprisonment!"

"We're taking a little trip into the desert, Pious," Johnny said pleasantly. "Remember where you and Campion picked up Krumm and me that day, Sid?" he asked young Waldon. "When you reach that spot, pull off the road and we'll walk the rest of the way."

Krumm was almost as disgusted as Pious Perkins. "Walk! With my feet?" the fat man groaned.

"Yeah, with your feet. We'll use ours." Johnny grinned, laced and flipped away a couple of tan-paper cigarettes.

He was not as easy in his mind as he appeared to be. As Pious kept insisting, the lawman really had no proof of his guilt, although Johnny was morally certain of it. This would probably be an unpleasant journey, especially for Sid, though Johnny had prepared the youth for the shock.

Reaching the spot where the twenty-mule wagons had picked up the two thirsty marshals a few days before, the buckboard was halted and the team secured. Johnny unlocked Perkins' manacles, and they began their trek into the sandy wilderness, this time well supplied with water. It was another cloudy, comparatively cool day, and compared with the torture of the deputy marshals' former journey across the des-

ert, this trip would be an easy one.

They crossed the wide expanse of the dry lake, and this time there were no mirages to mock them. There was no danger of their losing the way, for the tracks made by the deputy marshals and their horses were still quite distinct in the light crust of alkali.

"You've made this walk yourself, haven't you, Pious? Or did you ride a burro that day about two years ago?" Johnny asked suddenly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Perkins said after a moment's pause. "Heaven knows I've never been in this part of the desert."

THEY came upon the skeleton quite suddenly. Krumm had guessed that they were returning to it, but he was nearly as frightened at the gruesome, whitening bones as he had been the first time.

"Johnny, would you mind tellin' me what your fool idea is?" the fat man demanded, averting his eyes from the remains of the dead man.

Forty-five quieted Krumm. "Now, Sid," Johnny said sympathetically, "would you mind examining this skull and see if you can identify it? Did your father have such a filling in a front tooth?"

Sid Waldon had gone pale. He bent over the skeleton with an exclamation, then jerked his eyes away.

"It's him," he said in faint but positive tones. "There can't be any mistake about it. He was . . . was murdered, you say, Johnny?"

"Yes, amigo—shot and left here to die," said Forty-five. "Somebody killed him for the six thousand dollars he was carrying, and I think I know who that somebody was."

Pious Perkins put the tips of his long fingers together. "Poor man, whoever he is. 'Death hath no more dominion over him,' as the Good

Book says. Probably he died of thirst."

"Yes, they do get thirsty with lead poisonin'," said Johnny, pointing out the bullet-shattered thighbone.

The little cairn of greenish pebbles still stood near the skeleton, and Johnny called their attention to it. "Know what made that, Perkins?"

Pious Perkins rubbed his hands together. "Maybe the dead man did it, before he passed away."

"That was done," Johnny said, "by a rat. Oh, I don't mean the two-legged kind—not your kind, Perkins—and I don't mean that it was made by a prospector, who is called a desert rat sometimes. These rocks were piled up by a pack rat."

"Don't they call them critters trade rats, too?" Sid asked, though he couldn't savvy what the deputy was driving at.

"Yes—because when they steal something, they always bring back something else in place of it," Johnny said gravely. "And a rat took something from this body, leaving these stones in place of what it carried off. Now, these stones are green-colored—and so heavy a rat couldn't have carried them far, so we must look for a greenish ledge of rock somewhere close by."

Krumm blinked at him. "What for?"

"I think I get it." Sid gulped. "Johnny thinks we might find that rat's nest and whatever it was that the rat dragged away from here."

Perkins looked startled, but he seemed to think of something and smiled to himself. "What kind of evidence could a rat have carried off? There was noth—I mean, there's no chance that anything could be found after all this time."

"I don't know, myself, what we'll find, if anything," Forty-five admitted. "But we're sure goin' to make a search."

It was Sid Waldon who found the greenish formation, half an hour later. It was an outcropping about sixty feet in length, almost hidden by bottleweed and bladder sage. And Johnny, after hunting a bit longer, uncovered the nest of a pack rat, long unused.

"For the love o'—" Krumm paused, speechless.

JOHNNY'S surmise had been correct. The industrious little rodent had utilized a number of things in building its home.

Jumbled amid the twigs of dead mesquite and pieces of rotting cactus were the things it had taken from the dead man. There was a watch chain, detached somehow from the watch, which was in pieces. The chain had been cleverly woven into the nest, along with a short bit of yellow lead pencil, a pair of spectacles, a much-weathered dollar bill and several coins. There was also the warped leather back of a notebook and about a dozen crumpled pieces of paper.

Johnny examined these latter with great care. He had somehow hoped that the dying man had managed to leave a message of some kind.

He was not mistaken.

On one of the notebook leaves, preserved by the dry air of below sea level, he found a shakily written but quite legible signed message. He read it aloud:

"To Whoever Finds This:

"I have been shot and robbed and left here to die by Henry (called Pious) Perkins, who pretended to be my friend. This is my dying statement and true.

"DAVID WALDON."

This terrible accusation from beyond eternity was too much for Pious Perkins to endure. Gibbering like a maniac, he collapsed to his knees, groveling at the feet of Sid

Waldon. He babbled out a full confession, weeping and wringing his bony hands. It was an unpleasant spectacle, and quite unnecessary, for no confession was needed now to send this murderous hypocrite to the gallows.

Johnny expressed his feelings in a bit of a rhyme:

"The mills of the gods grind slow, they say,
But they shore know what they're at;
And that's the end of Perkins:
Brought to justice—by a rat."

For that was the way it had worked out. If the trade rat hadn't put the death note safely away, the wind and weather of two years would certainly have destroyed it.

"Now let's look around this outcroppin' of green rock a little closer," said Johnny. "A couple of those stones were rich in silver, and it's a cinch they came from here."

Further search disclosed a wide vein of ore—one of the most valuable that the deputy had ever seen. It dipped from sight after a few yards, but from all indications the discovery was worth a small fortune. The six thousand dollars that Sid's father had lost had gathered immense interest!

"Something else you owe to your

good friend, the rat." Johnny Forty-five chuckled. "This is yours, Sid. And here's wishin' you luck with it!"

As they started back toward the wagon road, Johnny thought of the two great mistakes that Pious Perkins had made. The first was in not making sure that Dave Waldon was dead before he left him; the second was the accusing letter Perkins had written to the government authorities. That had been a fool thing—asking Uncle Sam to pull his and Mike Pooler's crooked chestnuts out of the fire for him!

"This has been one of my most interestin' jobs," Deputy George Krumm said proudly. "It was most instructive. And I hope my young assistant learned something from it. He's coming right along—the time will come, some day, when he will be able to get along without my help and advice."

Johnny modestly said that he doubted it.

Well, Fearless Krumm will be giving Johnny Forty-five more splendid assistance in their forthcoming thrilling new adventure. Watch for it. They appear only in Street & Smith's Wild West.

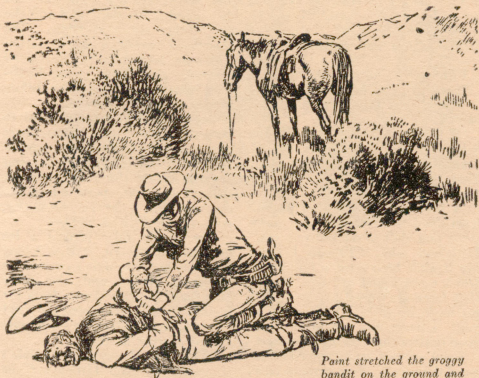
WESTERN CUSTOMS

THE Westerner has always been progressive. Fashions and customs change as the years go by. For instance, the ten-gallon hat that was so popular a few years back has largely given place to the broad-brimmed crown hat of the '80s. Fringed chaps patterned after the deerskin clothes of the pioneers gave way, first, to a light strip of thin leather where the fringe had been; and this gradually changed to the wider flap or batwing of today. What the well-dressed cowboy wore in the '80s would look as out of date today on the range as the women's dresses of that period would appear now. Except for the long fringe on the chaps, the outfit of the old-time cowboy was reduced to sheer utility. There was almost always some ornament on the bridle. He might even wear gauntlet gloves with silver stars on the cuffs, but in the main he avoided anything that might attract the attention of a sharp-eyed Indian, or catch on a projecting cat's-claw or scrub oak.

NO-GOOD COWBOY

by GUNNISON STEELE

Old Sam Littlejohn took young Paint McCabe off the Horsehead pay roll—but the youngster managed to whittle himself right back on!



Paint stretched the groggy bandit on the ground and bound his hands and feet.

SLENDER, red-haired Paint McCabe sat in the Horsehead bunk-house doorway, in the warm sunshine, doing what he liked best to do—whittling. Not aimless whittling, but carving out amazingly accurate objects, even animal and human figures, from the soft pine.

So engrossed was he that he didn't see old Sam Littlejohn as the grumpy, white-haired Horsehead

owner rounded a corner of the bunk-house. Littlejohn paused, frowning, and watched the cowboy a moment. A dozen times the crusty old rancher had threatened to fire Paint McCabe—a threat he'd never carried out, and never would, because he was secretly very fond of the easy-going redhead.

Sam Littlejohn cleared his throat, strode forward.

"Hell's hogpen!" he said, scowling. "What you doin' here? Thought I told you to ride out to Bullhide Canyon and fix that drift fence."

Paint grinned up at the irate older. "Was just fixin' to, boss. Wanted to finish this stagecoach before I started. Ain't she a beaut?"

"Humph! What good is it?"

"Why, I dunno. Gives a gent somethin' to do, sort of."

"Hell's hinges, ain't you got plenty to do? Kid, I dunno why I've put up with you this long. I won't, much longer, by gum! Now, you light a shuck and patch up that fence."

Paint got unhurriedly to his feet. "Where you headin', boss?"

"Ridin' into Ute River after the payroll."

"Better watch out for Rango Sable's gang," Paint warned. "I hear they're on the prowl ag'in. That thousand dollars you'll be packin' ain't chicken feed."

"I been packin' my own payroll from the Ute River bank for thirty years and ain't never lost one yet," Littlejohn said. "Though I don't say it ain't been tried a few times. Don't worry about me, kid. And if that fence ain't fixed by the time I get back, by grabs, I'll tie a can to you! I never was one to have no-good critters clutterin' up my place!"

Paint grinned again, moved off toward the corral. Five minutes later, as he rode away from the Horsehead buildings, he saw the dust raised by Littlejohn's big black as the old rancher rode at a fast clip toward the cow town of Ute River. Then Paint rode on out to the head of Bullhide Canyon, where a drift fence needed mending. That didn't take long, for once the slim redhead set his hand to a task he worked fast. He knew that he more than earned his pay.

And he didn't take seriously Sam Littlejohn's threats to can him.

Paint's parents had died six years before; when Paint was fourteen, and Littlejohn had given him a man's job then when other men wouldn't. He'd been with him ever since. Though the Horsehead was a big outfit, it hadn't made much money lately. But Littlejohn kept his troubles to himself.

It was almost sundown when Paint got back to the Horsehead. Littlejohn hadn't returned. The sun went down, and it got dark, and still the old rancher didn't show up. The Horsehead cowboys knew Littlejohn's unshakable habits, and grew worried. For thirty years, Littlejohn hadn't failed to arrive before sundown with the payroll.

Just when Paint had decided to start on a search for his boss there was a sound of hoofbeats, and a rider came out of the darkness and stopped before the bunkhouse. A shaft of dim light, spearing from the doorway, caught the rider—a stocky, powerful, dark-faced hombre.

The stocky rider hooked a leg over his saddlehorn, started rolling a smoke, but that didn't conceal his wariness. Paint and the other Horsehead punchers came from the bunkhouse and surrounded the night rider. The dark hombre's cold eyes flicked sharply at them.

"This is the Horsehead outfit, ain't it, owned by Sam Littlejohn?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Gent named Paint McCabe here?"

"Me," Paint said, stepping forward. "What of it?"

"Got a note for you here."

The rider fished in a vest pocket, brought out a folded slip of paper and handed it to Paint. Paint stepped to the bunkhouse door and read what was scrawled on the piece of paper. He read it again, very

carefully. Then he turned back to the rider.

"I know that skunk now," a Horsehead puncher was growling. "His name's Ben Tow, and he rides with Rango Sable's bunch. I've seen his pictures on reward posters. And I've got an idea he knows where Sam Littlejohn is."

"A bull's-eye, friend," the blocky man said, grinning. "But I'll let the kid, there, tell you about it."

Paint felt cold and hot inside at the same time. Beyond a doubt, Littlejohn had written what he'd just read.

"This note is from Littlejohn," Paint said. "Rango Sable's bunch roped Littlejohn from his saddle out on the trail, and they're holdin' him prisoner."

"The filthy buzzards!" a waddy burst out. "For the payroll?"

"Yeah, but that didn't satisfy Rango Sable. He wants twenty thousand dollars, cash. He says that if he don't get it, we won't ever see Littlejohn ag'in. It's all here, and Littlejohn wrote it." He looked up at the shadowy Ben Tow, asked abruptly, "Where're you holdin' Sam Littlejohn?"

Ben Tow laughed, sneered, "Smart, ain't you? It wouldn't do you any good to know that, because there ain't a thing you can do about it."

An angry murmur started and grew among the punchers. "We can't, huh?" one said flatly. "We'll make you tell where old Sam is, if we have to tear you apart. Get a rope, somebody!"

The dark-faced outlaw didn't try to get away, didn't make a move toward his gun.

"Sure, you can kill me," he said calmly. "But that wouldn't help you, and it'd be the same as you killin' Sam Littlejohn. If I don't show up at the hideout by daylight, and with twenty thousand dollars,

the old man will die. That's a promise."

HALF a dozen pairs of hands reached for Ben Tow, but Paint McCabe said sharply, "Wait!" and they turned him loose.

"Another break like that, and the whole deal's off," Tow said angrily. "You, kid, get your bronc—you're comin' with me."

"In this note," Paint countered, "Littlejohn says somethin' about a check. Where is it?"

Ben Tow said, "In my pocket. Made out for twenty thousand dollars, and signed by Sam Littlejohn. He was stubborn at first, but it didn't take long to make him see things our way. He knows his only chance to live is for me to bring that money back. You're ridin' to Ute River with me, kid, and get the dinero."

"The bank'll be closed tonight."

"Think I don't know that? I'll stop on the edge of town, but you'll ride on in with this check and wake up Tom Suggs, the banker. You tell Suggs that Sam Littlejohn wants the money, quick, and Suggs'll go down and open up the vault. Then you'll bring the twenty thousand to me. Just one thing: You—or any of these buckos here—try anything funny, and Littlejohn'll wish a thousand times he was dead before he really dies!"

There was more talk, more angry threats, among the Horsehead punchers. But Paint saw clearly what had to be done; and, because he was closest to old Littlejohn, they listened to him.

"They got us cold turkey," Paint declared. "I'll have to do what they say. Besides, that's what Littlejohn wants done, or he wouldn't have sent along the check. I'll ride with this snake into Ute River—and don't you gents break your hobbies till I get back."

Tow smiled. "That's sense, friend. Now, let's ride!"

Five minutes later, Paint rode away from the Horsehead with Ben Tow. He was thinking hard as he rode along the dark trail toward Ute River. It was pretty plain that old Sam meant for him to get that money and turn it over to Tow. But Paint happened to know that losing twenty thousand dollars would clean Littlejohn out, maybe ruin him.

"Littlejohn said you was dumb as mud," the stocky outlaw grunted as they rode along. "Said you'd know what to do, though."

The slim redhead frowned. That made it seem like Littlejohn didn't mean for him to get that money and turn it over to Tow.

Halfway to Ute River, they came to a tiny stream and paused to let their horses drink. In the shadows, Paint had eased his six-shooter from its holster. Now he jabbed his off spur into his buckskin's ribs, and the wiry beast snorted and leaped sidewise, bumping violently into Ben Tow's mount.

Tow swore, snarled, "What the hell—"

Paint swung his clubbed gun, and it caught the burly outlaw a glancing blow behind the ear. Tow grunted, tumbled off into the shallow water. Paint was on top of him almost before he landed. Tow wasn't exactly unconscious, but he was groggy, helpless. He offered no resistance as Paint dragged him from the water and stretched him on the hard ground, and tied him up.

After the fourth hatful of water in his face, Tow came wide awake. He tried to sit up and started cursing viciously when he found that his arms and legs were bound.

Bluntly, Paint said, "That won't help. You're takin' me to where Sam Littlejohn is."

The outlaw was snarling mad. "Like blazes I am! Kid, you'll regret this—if you live long enough. Turn me loose and get the money, and I'll forget about this."

"Where's your hide-out?" Paint asked.

"Try and find out!"

"I will," Paint said.

PAIN'T gathered grass and dry branches and built a fire. Then he dropped several rocks into the fire. Ben Tow watched, uneasiness stirring in his black eyes.

"What you aimin' to do, kid?" he blurted.

"Make you talk," Paint told him.

The outlaw's Adam's apple bobbed convulsively. He knew what fiery rocks, dropped down the front and back of a man's shirt, would do. He looked at Paint's set, pale face, and decided that the slim redhead wasn't bluffing. As Paint took a stick and started raking the glowing rocks from the coals, he said hoarsely:

"No need to do that, younker. I'll talk!"

Paint looked thoughtfully at him. "I figured you would. I can see, though, that you're aimin' to lie, mebber try to lead me into a trap. Don't do it."

Ben Tow's eyes wavered. He *had* figured on that.

"I'm leavin' you back in the brush, tied good and tight," the redhead went on. "If I don't come back, you'll die slowly. If I come back and find you've lied, then you'll wish you *had* died. Now, where's Rango Sable's hide-out?"

Sullenly, Tow said, "In the Big Rocks, in a cabin back in a blind canyon."

"How many men's Sable got there?"

"Just two, besides me. Look, kid, you ain't so smart. If I don't show up with that money—"

"You worry too much," Paint said. "Now tell me how to get to the hideout—and you'd better talk straight."

Tow told just how to get to the outlaw hideout in the badlands. Paint had no way of knowing whether the blocky hombre was lying. But he figured that Tow was talking straight. He dragged the outlaw two hundred feet back into the brush and left him there, after making sure he was securely tied.

Then Paint got back on his buckskin and rode swiftly to the north. The Big Rocks was a wild, desolate stretch of country where Rango Sable had long been thought to have his hideout—a fantastic world of red cliffs and deep canyons. Paint wondered whether he was being dumb or smart. If he succeeded, he would save Littlejohn twenty thousand precious dollars; if he failed, neither of them would have any need for money.

The prairie merged with low, dark hills, which in turn became gaunt bare ridges, ravines and weirdly carved cliffs. The cowboy pressed on, and two hours after leaving Ben Tow he knew he was very close to the canyonlike valley where Tow had said the hideout was located.

Warily, Paint stopped. There, just ahead, was the narrow mouth of the canyon which, according to Tow, spread out, diamond-shaped, into a tiny valley a mile long. The outlaw cabin was at the far end of the valley. The entrance, fashioned by towering cliffs, was no more than twenty feet wide, and very dark.

Paint waited a moment, watching and listening. Then he touched steel to the buckskin and moved into the canyon mouth.

Suddenly something caught him under the chin and jerked upward and backward. He grunted, grabbed with his spurs in an effort

to stay in the saddle. Startled, the buckskin leaped forward. Paint left the saddle and was slammed with a breath-taking jar against the hard earth.

In that instant, he knew that a rope had been stretched across the entrance just high enough to hook under a rider's chin and drag him from the saddle. Tow had known about the rope, would have ducked under it. A watcher nearby would know that this wasn't Ben Tow returning.

Stunned, Paint McCabe rolled over, clawed to his knees. He saw a shadow rushing at him. Then something came out of the darkness and slammed against his head, smashing him back to the ground again.

WHEN Paint opened his eyes he saw what he thought was a monstrous star above. Then he saw that it was a lighted lantern on a rude table. He groaned, clutching at his aching head, and sat up.

"Hurts, does it?" a voice said. "Well, by hell and hocks, I hope it keeps on hurtin'! I allus knowed you was wuthless, kid, but I didn't think you was crazy, too!"

Paint slowly turned his head. Old Sam Littlejohn sat humped on a bunk across the room, watching him. Littlejohn looked tired and beat-out.

"How'd I get here?" Paint asked.

"Them owlhooters dumped you in here, couple of hours ago. What'd you think you was up to?"

"I aimed to rescue you," Paint said. "I aimed to save you twenty thousand dollars. But looks like I made a mess of it."

"I'll say you have! Didn't you read that note I sent?"

"Yeah, but I thought—"

"You ain't supposed to think!" Littlejohn hollered. "You was sup-

posed to do what I said. Now we're sure in a tight."

"Where're them owlhooters?"

"Somewhere close by. Come daylight, they'll give us the works. They don't know what happened yet, but they know you tried to double-cross 'em, and they're sore as turpentine cats. What did happen?"

Paint told him. "If we just had a hogleg—"

"But we ain't. Younker, this is all your fault. As of right now, you're fired!"

"Reckon I got it comin'," Paint said ruefully.

He looked about the one-room cabin. It was windowless, had but one door, and the door was barred from outside. The mud chimney was much too small to allow the passage of even his slender body. Except for the bunk, and several boxes that served as chairs, the room was empty of furnishings.

"Ain't got as much chance as a muskrat caught in a bear trap," Littlejohn said. "Unless we had some guns."

It lacked only a couple of hours until daylight. But to Paint and the old rancher those hours seemed interminable. At daylight, Littlejohn had predicted, Rango Sable and his two henchmen would start working on them.

And now, as gray fingers of light poked through the mists that shrouded the Big Rocks, Paint saw that Littlejohn was right. Through a chink between two logs he had been watching the three outlaws as they drank and washed their faces at a spring fifty yards below the cabin. Rango Sable was a big, blond, bucktoothed hombre; one of his followers was squat, bald; the other tall and hawk-faced.

The three had been talking, and now Paint saw Sable look toward the cabin and say something to the

squat, bald hombre. The squat outlaw turned and came toward the cabin, grinning. Then Paint and Littlejohn could hear him lifting the bar outside.

THE door opened a trifle and the burly outlaw called, "Stand back, you two—I'm not takin' any chances on gettin' beaned."

He peered through and saw the shadowy figures of Paint and Littlejohn standing against the far wall. Then he pushed open the door and entered, hand on gun butt, and crossed to the center of the room.

"Hope you two slept good," he said. "'Cause you've got a hard day—" The squat outlaw broke off, eyes flaring wide with surprise as he looked at the long-barreled gun in Paint McCabe's hand.

Sharply, Paint said, "Don't move, don't make a sound, or I'll cut you down! You better believe that. Get his gun, Littlejohn!"

"You— Where'd you get that gun?"

Paint didn't answer. And the bald outlaw didn't move as Sam Littlejohn inched forward and eased the black .45 from its holster. Littlejohn gave the gun to Paint.

"Now get over on that bunk and lay down," Paint ordered.

The outlaw obeyed, a stunned look in his eyes, and Littlejohn tore strips from a dirty blanket and bound his wrists and ankles.

Then Paint said, "Yell to them other two skunks and tell 'em to come up here. Tell 'em you got something to show 'em."

"You can go to blazes! If you think I'm gonna—"

Paint jammed the gun against his stomach. "It's your funeral, mister. You got just five seconds."

It didn't take the burly hombre that long to make his decision. He yelled, "Rango! Jake! Come up

here. Got somethin' funny to show you!"

The two outlaws at the spring grinned, turned and strode swiftly toward the shack. They didn't expect trouble. The sight of Paint McCabe, standing there with the gun in his hand, and their henchman sprawled on the bunk, rocked them back on their heels and slackened their jaws with surprise.

Sable yelped, "You, Baldy—what's happenin' here?"

"Just about to happen, if you two don't stand hitched," Paint clipped. "Littlejohn, get their—"

Rango Sable snarled a curse, leaped backward, big hand slapping downward for his six-shooter. Paint had half expected them to shoot it out. The gun in his hand roared, and Sable, carried on by his momentum, tumbled backward through the doorway and sprawled on the wet ground. He tried to get up, seemed puzzled that he couldn't, then sank back to the ground and lay there still.

Jake, the tall outlaw, had reached

for his gun. But now, seeing his leader go down, seeing Paint's smoking gun muzzle swivel toward him, he changed his mind and froze motionless with gun half drawn from its holster.

"Get it, Littlejohn," Paint said.

The old rancher eased forward and took the tall bandit's gun. He hefted the weapon, grinning. "That makes one apiece," he said. "By hell and hominy, kid, mebber you ain't so dumb and wuthless as I figured. Takes plenty savvy to do what you done, and nerve, too."

Paint shrugged. "Mostly luck. How was they to know I always carried my whittlin' knife in my boot, just in case—"

But Littlejohn hooted him down.

"Like hogwash it was luck! Any waddy that can whittle out a six-shooter from a slab of pine, black it up with chimney soot, and make it look real enough to fool an owl-hooter, has got a lot more than luck. I'm rehirin' you, kid, right now—with a raise and all the time you want for whittlin' throwed in!"

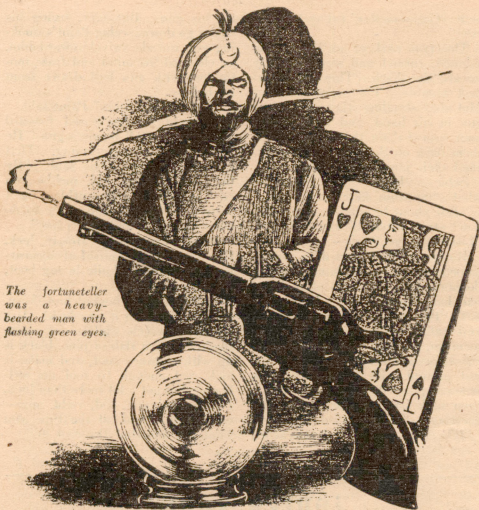
THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *Where was Big Sandy, and what happened there?*
2. *What famous Western characters met at Farson, Wyoming?*
3. *What does a cowboy mean by "bicycling," "branding chute," "a blow"?*
4. *What were the "Deadwood cats"?*
5. *How did bison hunters save themselves from dying of thirst on a desert?*
6. *Are most Wyoming mountain sheep found in Yellowstone Park?*
7. *What is a charavari, or shivaree, and what does it follow?*
8. *What Indian tribe occupies another's reservation?*
9. *Where is the Shoshone Reservation, and what is its area?*
10. *Was a wolf ever employed by Uncle Sam?*

Answers on page 146



The fortuneteller was a heavy-bearded man with flashing green eyes.

When the fortuneteller set up shop in Rimrock, Town Marshal Boyd knew there was going to be trouble mighty soon—but he didn't know his own brother would be mixed up in a

MURDER-TRAP BOOMERANG

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

A MAN'S scared bleat brought Rimrock's town marshal, Lee Boyd, tumbling out of his office and into the street, grabbing his gun as he

came. The instant he hit the sidewalk he saw what was happening. An oath rumbled in his throat as his gun dropped back into leather. Al

Boyd, the marshal's hot-tempered young brother, had old banker Jeff Cawley shoved against the front wall of Hank Grider's store, and was waving a clenched fist under his chin. Lee couldn't hear what was being said, but he had a pretty good idea what it was.

The frightened look on Cawley's round face would have been comical if the situation hadn't been serious. A dozen men were standing motionless on the sidewalk watching the ruckus, and not one was offering to give the banker a hand. Al had a gun on his hip, and his hair-trigger temper was too well known around Rimrock. Lee Boyd was the only man in the country who could handle Al, and handle Al he did. He went across the dust strip in long strides, grabbed Al by the shoulder, whipped him around.

"Get over to the office, Al," Lee grated.

"Do you know what this old goat is figuring on doing?" Al shouted, waving a sheet of paper under his brother's nose. "I just got this out of the post office. He's—"

"Git," Lee ordered, "or I'll let you cool your heels in the calaboose."

For a second Al glared at Lee, blue eyes sparking with anger. Suddenly he wheeled and strode across the street to the marshal's office.

Lee stooped and picked up the banker's hat. "I'm sure sorry about this, Jeff. I'll knock the kid's ears down so far mebbe he'll behave himself for a spell."

Mechanically Cawley took the hat, his fear-glazed eyes following Al until he disappeared. Slowly he raised an arm, and rubbed the sleeve across his forehead.

"I . . . I thought he was going to kill me," Cawley muttered. "I can't understand it, Lee. He was yelling something about a letter, and taking the Cross Bar. I never wrote him

a letter. I've tried to be a good friend to you boys."

"You have," Lee said soberly. "A damned good one—just like you have to the rest of the folks in Antler Valley."

Lee hadn't seen Ross Moser, the bank cashier, come up until he heard the man's harsh voice. "A good friend doesn't deserve that kind of treatment, Boyd. It's a damned shame a hot-headed heller like your brother is allowed to have the run of the town, threatening peaceful folks' lives. He wouldn't if his brother wasn't the marshal. It's a damned shame, sir."

Lee eyed the burly cashier contemptuously. Moser had little black eyes set too close together, a sharp, saberlike nose, and a slit of a mouth that could hold a chilly grin when he was cussing a man down. He was grinning now, and it took all of Lee's self-control to hold back the impulse to lash out with a fist and wipe the grin from Moser's face. Al Boyd had done exactly that last winter, a licking that accounted for the venom in Moser's voice.

"You can see the council if you figure the town needs a new marshal," Lee said coolly.

"I didn't say that," Moser growled. "I say your brother has a temper that will make a killer out of him some day."

"It makes a hell-for-leather fighting man out of him," Lee taunted. "Which same you oughtta know."

"No use getting heated up over this, boys," Jeff Cawley cut in. "Nobody got hurt."

"I'm plumb sorry, Jeff," Lee turned his back to Moser. "I reckon Al will say the same thing to you when he gets cooled down."

It was in Lee's mind to give Al a good word mauling, but when he was in his office and looking at Al's face, he didn't.

"I know what you're thinking,"

Al said miserably, "and I reckon you're right. I had no business bracing Jeff. He's a swell old gent. It's Ross Moser I should have tangled with, but I saw Jeff first, and I figured he was to blame. Take a look at that letter, Lee."

FOR a moment Lee didn't move. In some ways they were much alike, these two. They had the same high-bridged nose and full jaw, the same light-blue eyes that had a way of laying a level gaze on a man's face, the same long, slim-hipped body. In other ways they were opposites. Al had a temper that made him crazy at times. Lee never let his temper get away from him. Al was twenty. Lee was twenty-six. Both parents had died the same night from pneumonia eight years ago. Since then Lee had done his best to raise Al, and now he was thinking his best had been far from good enough.

"Go on, look at it," Al said heavily.

Lee came around his desk and sat down. He picked up the sheet of paper and read:

MR. AL BOYD,
Cross Bar Ranch,
Rimrock, Oregon.
Dear sir:

This is to notify you that your mortgage, due June 1st, will not be renewed. In view of the recent dry years and the unbusinesslike manner in which the Cross Bar has been run of late, the bank cannot take the risk of renewing your loan.

Yours truly,

ROSS MOSER, CASHIER.

"'Dry years.'" Lee snorted. "Unbusinesslike manner in which the Cross Bar has been run.' Hell's bells, Al, you've been doing all right. The Cross Bar is worth twice what the mortgage is. Jeff never foreclosed on a spread in his life. I'd like—" Lee stopped, his eyes narrowing. "Al, it's my hunch Jeff didn't know about this."

"I sure went off half cocked," Al

groaned. "I didn't stop to think. I figured Moser wouldn't have written the letter if Jeff hadn't told him to. Jeff runs the bank, don't he?"

"I don't know what the deal is," Lee admitted. "Moser's got an interest. Jeff's getting old. Maybe he's giving Moser more rope. If Jeff is stepping out Heaven help Antler Valley."

Anger kindled again in Al Boyd's eyes. "I'm gonna get hold of Moser, and—"

"You've already got hold of Moser," Lee said sharply. "You don't need to do it again. I'll handle this job." He glanced out of the window at the western sun. "Reckon Jeff's gone on home. I'll have a talk with him in the morning. Now you fork your bronc, and high-tail for home."

Al shook his head. "I'm staying in town, Lee. No use of riding back tomorrow, and I'll sure want to know what we're up against. Even if we cleaned our range, we couldn't pay that mortgage off by the first of June."

"O. K." Lee nodded. "Just stay out of trouble."

AFTER Al had left, Lee sat behind his desk thoughtfully staring at the ceiling. If he'd been in town the night Al had whipped Moser, he'd have thrown both of them into jail for disturbing the peace. Rimrock had been well on the road of becoming a tough town when Lee had taken the marshal's job. It was far from being a tough town now. Lee's method of dealing with tinhorn gamblers, gunslicks, and proddy cowpokes was brief but effective.

Now, as he tipped back in his chair, Lee wondered if all of Moser's motive in writing the letter to Al stemmed from the licking he'd taken. Nobody in Rimrock, except maybe Jeff Cawley, knew much about Moser. He'd come to town, and

had been a cashier a little longer than Lee had been the town marshal. Lee was good at judging men. From the first he'd seen a sort of animal cunning in Moser's little black eyes that had made him distrust the cashier. Of one thing he was sure. Ross Moser was the kind of gent who would never forget an enemy.

A little after six, Lee left the jail and strode down the boardwalk toward the Hoof and Horn Saloon. Halfway to the saloon he stopped and stared unbelievably into the window of the Harney building, so called because for years it had housed Mike Harney's saddlery. More than a month ago, Hank Grider, the storekeeper, had bought it and Mike had moved to a side street. Since then the building had been deserted, its one window fly-specked and dirt-smeared.

Now the window was clean, cleaner than Mike Harney had even kept it. Inside was a placard announcing that Beni Sing would foretell the future for the folks of Antler Valley, two dollars a consultation. All business or personal problems would be cleared up by visiting Beni Sing. Hours for consultation were from two to five in the afternoon and seven to nine in the evening.

Lee tried the door. It was locked. He came back to the window. A black curtain had been hung a foot or more from the window so that the interior of the room could not be seen from the street. On one side of Beni Sing's placard was a glass ball. On the other side a deck of cards had been spread face up.

This was something new for Rimrock. Lee mentally cursed Beni Sing, whoever he was, for picking Rimrock as a roosting place while he cheated the gullible folks of Antler Valley. Lee circled the building, tried the back door; but it, like the front, was locked.

Rimrock had no law forbidding

Beni Sing setting up a fortunetelling business, but a pile of trouble could come out of it. Besides, to Lee's way of thinking, transient fortunetellers were nothing but cheap thieves and it went against his grain to allow Beni Sing to ply his trade in Rimrock.

For a time Lee stood there, staring into the window, and presently it came to him that there was a slim chance he might get something out of Hank Grider about the fortuneteller. He crossed the street to the store.

"What'll it be, marshal?" Grider asked in his unctuous voice.

"Just some information," Lee answered. He eyed Grider a moment. The storekeeper, a brother of Mrs. Jeff Cawley, had come to Rimrock last fall and bought the store. He was a gaunt, hollow-chested man who claimed he'd come to the high country for his health. Lee doubted it. He'd always sensed a furtiveness about the storekeeper that made him doubt everything Grider said. "Do you know who you rented that building to—where Mike had his shop?"

Grider laughed sourly. "Yeah, I know now. A fortuneteller."

"How'd you come to do that? He sure won't be any addition to the town."

"I've been thinking that, too." Grider nodded his thin head. "I didn't know who he was. I had a letter a couple of weeks ago asking to rent the place. Said he wanted to set up a consulting business."

"How'd he sign the letter?" Lee asked.

"Beni Sing. It didn't mean nothing to me. I thought he was some kind of a doctor. He showed up this afternoon, said he was Beni Sing, paid a month's rent, and got the key. I didn't know nothing more about it until Jupe Riley came in a

while ago and told me what was in the window."

"What did this Beni Sing look like?"

"He could be a fortuneteller all right," Grider admitted. "Medium-sized. Dark-complected. Had a black beard and bushy brows. The damndest eyes you ever saw. They was green, and sort of looked plumb through a man."

"I don't like it," Lee said worriedly.

"It won't hurt my feelings none if you chase him out of town the first time he jumps the track," Grider said.

"He'll get chased all right," Lee said, and went out.

THERE were a dozen men or more bellied up against the bar in the Hoof and Horn when Lee went in. Old Mike Harney; Jupe Riley, the liveryman; Fred Mills, the hotel owner; Ross Moser, and a half dozen punchers. There was one man Lee didn't know, a medium-sized, black-haired gent who was paying for a beer. Lee watched him take his drink, then cross the room to a table next to the wall. It was when he swung away from the bar that Lee saw the guns thonged low on his thighs, butts flaring wide. A man didn't pack his Colts that way unless he was a gunman, and Antler Valley had no need of gunmen.

When Lee finished his drink, he asked the apron, "Who's the two-gunman?"

The bartender shrugged. "Dunno, Lee. Walked in here 'bout half an hour ago. That's the third beer he's had. Just sits there at the table watching the door."

"Thanks." Lee nodded. He walked to the table where the gunman sat. "Rimrock's a peaceful town, friend," Lee said softly. "It'll stay peaceful long as there ain't no

gun slicks hanging around. We usually encourage 'em to keep going."

The gunman raised his head and looked Lee over. For the first time Lee saw his eyes. They were green with a sort of piercing quality that seemed to look through a person instead of at him. The man's slit of a mouth widened into a mirthless grin. "Reckon you're Lee Boyd," he said in a hard, metallic voice. "Rimrock's famous fighting marshal. Well, you ain't getting a fight out of me unless you make it, hombre, and I'm staying here a spell. I don't scare like a lot of the soft-bellied gents you've been giving the nudge to lately."

Lee said, his tone still soft, "I don't reckon I'm so famous, friend, and I ain't looking for a fight. I'm telling you so you'll get it plain. We don't want no gun ruckus in Rimrock. Either you ride close herd on that hardware you're packing, or drift."

Lee wheeled out of the saloon. Usually a warning like this was enough, but if Lee Boyd had read the man right, it would take more than a warning to get him out of town. If the gun slick had come to Rimrock for a purpose there was nothing more Lee could do until that purpose became apparent.

Lee went up to Al's room and the two of them had supper in the hotel dining room. When they were done, Lee walked by the fortuneteller's place, planning to go in, but Mrs. Printon, the town washwoman, was sitting inside the door, her work-redened hands folded over her ample bosom. A black drape had been hung across the room. Lee guessed that Beni Sing was holding a consultation with somebody behind the drape. Lee decided that what he had to say had better be said to the fortuneteller alone.

[T was an hour or more later when Al burst into Lee's office, his eyes wide and scared, his face whiter than Lee had ever seen it. He started to talk, but his words came in an unintelligible rush of gibberish.

"What the hell's happened, boy?" Lee demanded. "Sit down and cool off."

Al sank into a chair. He drew a hand across his face. "I . . . I—Damn it, Lee, I'm heading into a murder! That fortuneteller said so."

"Fortuneteller!" Lee roared. He stared at Al. "You mean to say you've been visiting that faker?"

"He's no faker." Al shook his head. "He's the real McCoy."

Lee wanted to tell Al how big a fool he thought he was, but the desperation in his brother's face held back the words. "Let's have the yarn," was all he said.

"I was going along the walk toward the Hoof and Horn, and then I don't just remember what happened. First thing I knew this Sing jasper was bowing and palavering in a funny talk and having me come back into a little room he's got fenced off in the center of the building. He sat down behind a table with a glass ball on it. I sat down in front of him and told him my name. He said I didn't need to tell him. Claimed he could tell who I was. Then he starts off telling how old I am, that I was running the Cross Bar and I was having trouble with a mortgage."

Al stopped. He pulled tobacco and paper out of his pocket and tried to roll a smoke. He couldn't seem to get it twisted, and finally threw it on the floor.

"Go ahead," Lee said.

"He said I was headed for a lot of trouble. Claimed he could see blood all around me and on me. There was a dead man beside me. Said he couldn't see who it was."

Lee threw up his hands. "Hog-

wash," he snorted. "Just a lot of dressed-up hogwash. What are you getting all lathered up about that kind of gab for, son?"

"Call it hogwash if you want to," Al said stiffly. "Mebbe if you'd sat there watching him look into that glass ball and listening to his funny lingo and having him look at you with them green eyes, you wouldn't say it was hogwash."

"Mebbe not," Lee admitted. "I've heard about how some of them jaspers work. Best try to forget it, and don't waste another two bucks on him."

Al got up. "I'm going to bed. I thought I'd go down to the Hoof and Horn and have a drink, but reckon I'd be better off in bed."

[EE waited until Al had time to get to his hotel room, then he left the jail and headed for the fortuneteller's place. It was almost nine now



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and dark. A lamp burned on a small table inside the door, and nobody was waiting.

"Mestaire marshal," a soft voice came through the black drapes, "won't you come een?"

"That's what I came for," Lee said testily. He found an opening in the solid black of the curtains and went through it.

It was just as Al had described. The drapes made a small room in the center of the building. Beni Sing sat behind a table covered with a black cloth. He was staring down at the glass ball in front of him. On another table beside him was a lamp.

"Seet down, my frien'," the fortuneteller purred, "and I weel—"

"Throw a loop on your gab, fella," Lee snapped. "I'll stand up so I can get hold of my hogleg quick if I need it. I can't see your hands, and I'm not sure what you've got in 'em."

For the first time Beni Sing looked up. Lee couldn't see much of his face. There was a turban around the top of his head with a glittering crescent pinned in front. He had a heavy black beard that covered most of his face, and bushy black brows. From under them piercing green eyes raked Lee from head to foot. Lee had never seen this man before, yet he was sure he'd seen those eyes. Then he remembered: the gunman in the Hoof and Horn.

"You do not have an understand-eeng heart, my frien'," Beni Sing said. "I cannot get a picture of the future unless you try to understand."

"No two bucks from me, hombre," Lee grated. "That's not what I came in for. To me you're a two-bit faker with a put-on kind of gab, and unless I'm mistaken, that alfalfa you're wearing ain't the real stuff either. I wish to hell there was a law that would let me boot you out of town. Seeing as there ain't, I'm telling you to ride slow and easy,

I'm watching you for your first misstep."

The green eyes hadn't left Lee's face. "You may watch, Meestaire Marshal, and you will find no meesstep as you say. Like your brothaire, you have bad troubale before you."

"Trouble, friend, is my meat. Might be my trouble will be with you. Or mebbe that gun-toting hombre I met up with in the Hoof and Horn." He watched Beni Sing closely when he said that, but there was no change in the man's eyes. "What's more," Lee went on, "I'd twist your neck for two cents. I'd have a good time doing it after you put out that hogwash to my brother."

"The truth is not hogwash, Meestaire Marshal. The crectal ball neveraire lies."

"Mebbe you better take a look at your own future, fella," Lee said. "If I'm any judge, you're in for a pile of trouble yourself."

Lee turned, found the opening in the curtain, and went out. There was no way he could be sure, but he had a hunch the gunman and Beni Sing were one and the same. Why the masquerade, he couldn't guess. But this man, whoever he really was, wouldn't go to that trouble unless he was playing some kind of a sinister game for big stakes.

There was one thing Lee could do. He went immediately to the Hoof and Horn. The saloon was crowded, but the gunman wasn't there.

"When did that gun slick slope out of here?" Lee asked the barkeep.

"I don't just rightly know, Lee," the apron answered. "He ain't been here for quite a spell. Two, three hours I'd say. He left with Ross Moser."

Lee stayed in the saloon until almost midnight, but the gunman did not return. The fact that the gun-

man was not in the saloon when Lee came back bore out Lee's hunch, but it was far from proof. Even if his suspicion that Beni Sing and the gunman were the same, he still had no clue to what crooked game the man was playing.

Lee walked back to the jail where he slept and went to bed. Before he slept he thought again of the letter Ross Moser had sent to Al, and of Moser leaving the saloon with the gunman, and he wondered what part the cashier had in bringing the gunman and Beni Sing to Rimrock. He thought, too, of Hank Grider, and asked himself if it were mere coincidence that the fortuneteller had rented a building belonging to the oily-tongued storekeeper.

WHEN Lee woke up in the morning, all the questions that had been in his mind the night before crowded back, but sleep had brought no answer. Nor would there be any answers until trouble came to a boil. And it came to a boil when Lee was eating breakfast in the dining room. He heard a terror-filled scream above him, the patter of a man's running feet on the hall and down the stairs. Then Al Boyd burst into the dining room. He didn't have anything on but his drawers, and his face mirrored the horror that was in him.

"Lee!" Al gulped. He opened his mouth again, but no more words came.

The hotel man, Fred Mills, Hank Grider and a couple of cattlemen came over to Lee's table.

"What's the matter with the kid?" Mills asked. "Is he having a fit?"

"I sure don't know." Lee pulled out a chair and shoved Al into it. "You having a nightmare about what that fortuneteller told you?"

This time Al's words came in a rush. "It happened like the fortuneteller said. It's no nightmare. He's lying dead in my bed! He was there

when I woke up just now. Blood on him. It's on the sheets. It's on me just like Beni Sing said." Al held out an arm. The brown stain was unmistakably blood.

Lee went up the stairs three at a time—Mills, Grider, and the cattlemen close behind. Al trailed behind as if he didn't want to see the body again. The door was open. Lee took one look, and let his breath out in an audible gasp. Old Jeff Cawley lay on the outside edge of Al's bed. His shoes, black suit, white shirt and string tie were still on him. He'd been stabbed several times in the chest. Bloodstains were all over the front of his shirt.

"That's a hell of a trick," Grider snarled, swinging to face Al. "You murdered my brother-in-law, stuck his body into bed with you, and then came tearing down the hall like you was scared to death."

"Shut up!" Lee ordered.

Al looked as if he were going to faint. "I didn't beef him, Lee. I just woke up and there he was."

"That's a hell of a yarn," Grider jeered. "How could a man sleep while a corpse crawled into bed with him? I heard you threaten to kill Jeff yesterday in front of my store. Sure looks like you wasn't bluffing."

"If you open that mug of yours again, I'll fix you so you won't talk for a week!" Lee grated. He swung to face Mills. "Got any idea why Jeff would be here in the hotel?"

"Yeah, I know," Mills said uneasily. "We had a poker game going till about one o'clock. Me and Moser and Clint here." He nodded at one of the cattlemen. "Jeff got too sleepy to play and said he was going home."

"When did Moser leave?"

"Maybe an hour later," Mills said. "I ain't sure. Lee, you can shoot me for saying this, but looks like Grider was right in one thing. How come Al didn't wake up if somebody

shoved Jeff's body into bed with him?"

"I dunno, but I know one thing. Al wouldn't kill Jeff and then stay in the room with him till morning. I know Al too well for that." Lee looked at his brother. "Did you go to sleep right away?"

Al nodded. "I was so sleepy I just about couldn't get my pants off. I don't remember nothing more till I woke up and saw him lying there."

An idea had come to Lee. It wasn't natural for Al to go to bed at nine, nor to sleep so soundly. "Did you have a drink anywhere before you went to bed?" Lee asked.

"The fortuneteller gave me a drink of whiskey. That was all," Al answered.

"Then you got a slug of something," Lee said tersely. "Fred, see that nobody bothers the body till Doc Moody gets here."

Lee went down the stairs and out of the hotel on the run. There was no doubt now in his mind about Beni Sing. The fortuneteller was the man he wanted. The whole scheme was too pat. Too neat. In the few seconds that it took Lee to reach Beni Sing's place, the urgency of corralling Jeff Cawley's murderer came to him. If he didn't, Al would be caught in the murder trap. Folks would think, just as Grider and Mills did, that Al couldn't sleep so hard that he'd be unaware of the corpse being left in his bed.

Beni Sing's front door was locked. Lee pounded on it but there was no sound from inside the little building. Lee drew his gun. "Open up!" he shouted. "Open up or I'll bust in!" Still no sound. Lee put his shoulder to the door and shoved. The flimsy lock gave way. The door opened with a crash. Lee spilled into the room and fell. As he went down he glimpsed a beardless man throwing down on him with a .45,

but that wasn't the gun which roared. It was another from across the street.

Lee rolled over and came up with the hammer of his Colt pronged back, but he didn't fire. The beardless man was bent over, blood spurt-ing from between the fingers he was holding to his chest, green eyes glazed with death. Then his knees buckled and he pitched forward on the floor. If this was Beni Sing, he wouldn't be doing any talking. He wasn't the green-eyed gunman, either, Lee saw. There was a horrible, livid scar on his right cheek. Aside from the scar, he was almost the exact image of the gunman.

If Lee was guessing right, the fortuneteller had died with a slug in him that had been ticketed for Lee Boyd. Directly across the street was an alley with a wagon standing in its mouth. The chances were the bushwhacker had stood behind that wagon when he'd fired.

Lee raced across the street. Hastily he examined the dust-covered ground around the wagon. Tracks were there all right, the tracks of a man's high-heeled boots. Lee followed them until they petered out, half the length of the alley. On the opposite side of the block was Ross Moser's house. Lee played his hunch and crossed Moser's back yard. The cashier hadn't killed Jeff Cawley, but he could easily have been the bushwhacker.

There were fresh traces of dust on Moser's back porch. Lee didn't knock. He opened the back door and eased in, gun palmed. As he catfooted across the kitchen and down a dark hall, he heard the gunman's hard, metallic voice, "I killed my brother. I had that damned marshal's back square in my sights, but he musta tripped when he went in. The way Ben went down, I—"

Lee shoved the door open. The gunman stood in the center of

Moser's front room facing the cashier, his Colt still in his hand.

"Elevate," Lee barked, "and let that iron drop."

The gunman wheeled, Colt thundering as he turned. But it was a wild shot. Lee's .45 had spoken first. The gunman lurched two steps toward Lee, trying to raise his Colt for another shot, green eyes blazing their vicious hate. He fell, got to his knees, and went down again.

Ross Moser had jerked a gun from a shoulder holster. He got in one shot that sliced a gash of meat from Lee's ribs, and that was all Moser fired, for Lee had whipped his .45 away from the reeling gunman and drove a bullet into the cashier's right arm. Moser squalled, reached for his dropped gun with his left hand, but he never got it. Lee grabbed him by the neck and a shoulder, and shoved him into a chair.

Blood was spurting from Moser's arm. "Looks like I got an artery, Moser. Jeff was knifed to death in the hotel last night. I reckon it'd be fair enough to let you bleed to death."

"I didn't kill him," Moser squealed. "Don't let me die."

"You'll die if you don't talk," Lee said quietly.

"I'll talk," Moser said through white lips. "Just get that blood stopped."

WHILE Lee twisted a tourniquet around Moser's arm, the cashier talked.

"Hank Grider killed Jeff. He's Mrs. Cawley's only kin. He got me my job. Knew me in Colorado. I'd served a stretch there. I couldn't get a job till Grider got me on here, so I had to play his game. He sent for the Norton brothers. The oldest one was Beni Sing. That's Rod, the youngest one, you just beefed. They've worked in carnivals. Ben was a fortuneteller and a hypnotist. Rod was the trigger man. Grider

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hid 'em in his house till the sign was right."

"I suppose the sign was right when Al got proddy and made a pass at Jeff," Lee said.

"That's right. Grider made me fix up the poker game. I kept it going till Jeff got sleepy. Rod had taken a room down the hall from the one where he was playing. I suppose Grider was in it and called Jeff as he went by. They musta knifed him then. He figured Mrs. Cawley would let him run the bank. If she didn't, he was going to beef her so he'd get the bank anyway."

"What happened to Al in Beni Sing's place last night?"

"Grider saw Al coming down the street. Norton went out and got him. When Al was inside Ben gave him a drink. Reckon it knocked Al out till this morning."

"A very pretty story." Hank Grider was standing in the doorway, his gun lined on Lee's middle. "You've been spilling your guts to a dead man, Ross. You always was yellow, and you sure as hell still are. It's a damned good thing I thought of looking in-over here."

Grider's words flowed out of him in the same smooth, oily voice he always used, but Lee sensed a difference in him. It was there in the sinister narrowing of his eyes, the flat, hard line that was his mouth. Hank Grider had become a killer. One or two more murders would make no difference to him now, and Lee Boyd's gun was on the table ten feet away where he'd laid it when he'd started to put the tourniquet on Moser's arm.

"When I get done, you'll both be dead," Grider went on. "I'll tell the boys you'd killed the marshal, Ross, and I got you. There won't be nobody around to contradict—"

Lee Boyd never moved faster in his life. The only chance he had

was Moser's gun on the floor at his feet. He dived. There was the roar of Grider's six, the scream of lead above Lee. His own gun was in his hand and he was bringing it up when Grider's second shot ripped into his thigh. Then Lee's gun was leveled and spewing out its leaden hail of death. Grider paced toward him, gun blazing wildly, his head back in the queer, stricken way of a mortally hit man. Suddenly he jackknifed at the knees and sprawled headlong to the floor.

"Looks like I got here too late for the party." Al Boyd was standing in the doorway, staring at Grider. "Is he the huckleberry that knifed Jeff?"

"He's the one," Lee said. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw him leave his store, and I was kinda leery of him after he tried to pin Jeff's killing onto me."

"The whole town will be here pretty soon. Tell 'em to stay away. All I need is the doc."

After Ross Moser was locked up in a cell and Lee's bullet wounds were cleaned and bandaged, Lee told Al the yarn. "I don't reckon you got any worrying to do about the Cross Bar. Mrs. Cawley will see we get taken care of. And, Al, do you recollect how many times I've rawhided you about your temper?"

Al nodded, looked at the floor.

"Well, the next time you feel it beginning to burn your innards," Lee said severely, "remember it just about got your neck stretched for murder. A bad temper—"

Al wasn't listening. "We won't have to clean our range, Lee. Won't have to worry about no doggoned mortgage. We'll make a good spread out of that Cross Bar."

Lee smiled. That was like Al. "Yeah," he said softly, "you go on home—and keep running that Cross Bar just like you been doing."



Hungry heard a faint scraping sound followed by a barely audible click. His gaze swiveled to the closet door.

VIGILANTE ARMY

by SAM H. NICKELS

What buscadero bushwhack trap awaited Hungry and Rusty when the two Rangers barged in to investigate that salted sidewinder mining town?

CHAPTER I.

JOB FOR A KILLER.

SPURRING at a dead run, their sweat-lathered horses staggering beneath them, the two cursing riders circled swiftly through the tall brush that partly hid them. As they

reached the shelter of a motte of wind-twisted piñons on top of the rise, they pulled to a plunging halt and turned for a careful look behind them.

Dust of many trails lay thick on their saddle skirts and powdered their clothes. Dirty, unshaven for

days or weeks, and their eyes black-rimmed from humping at night over countless concealed campfires, the two fugitives peered with the unblinking deadliness of cornered lobos through the branches of the piñons.

They stared warily down the long brush-choked draw, and at the zacaton-covered flat beyond. A faint haze of gray dust hung in the still air above the bushes along their back trail, but there were no signs of any pursuers to be seen in any direction.

The wiry, slope-shouldered man in the torn silk shirt and gaudy silver-studded chaps dropped his slender, long-fingered gunman's hands upon the saddlehorn. Then he stood up in his stirrups for a more careful look in the direction of the flat. He shaded his pale, almost colorless eyes for a moment with his wide-brimmed hat. Finally his thin lips tightened over his straggly teeth in a wolfish grin and he replaced his hat.

"We've shook 'em off at last, Blackie." He chuckled sneeringly, dropped back into his saddle seat. "Not a sign of 'em anywhere."

Blackie Garth nodded and mopped his puffy, sun-reddened face with a once-white handkerchief. He growled an oath and shifted his heavy, thick-shouldered figure to a more comfortable position in his saddle. Mouthing the long-dead stump of an expensive cigar, he glared disgustedly and slapped some of the dust and dirt from the sleeves of his long-tailed black coat. A huge diamond glittered on his right hand as he reached up and pulled off his big black Stetson. When he had wiped the sweatband and replaced his hat, he rolled the soggy cigar stump to the corner of his thick lips and looked heavily at his gun-hung companion.

"I ought to go ahead an' kill you right now," Garth grunted, his coal-black eyes smoldering with suppressed fury. "Some day, Scorp,

you're goin' to go a step too far an' I'm goin' to have to."

Scorp Moran's queer eyes twinkled glassily and he again showed his straggly teeth in a twisted grimace that passed for a grin on his wizened, pockmarked face. He chuckled tauntingly, but he did not bother to reach toward the heavily notched guns that sagged his criss-crossed cartridge belts in whanged-down holsters. He merely glanced at Blackie's pearl-handled Colts and went on grinning.

"Yes, some day it's goin' to be either me or you, Scorp," Blackie went on, nodding heavily. "You're just a trigger finger an' no brains. I'm going to have to kill you."

"You ain't fast enough, Blackie," Scorp taunted, still grinning. "You're plenty fast, but not *that* fast. If you ever shoot me, you'll have to do it from behind—an' you know it right well."

Blackie Garth continued to stare, his gambler's face as expressionless as a rock. He made no move toward the fancy gold-plated guns that swung in spring-clipped holsters inside the front of his long-tailed coat.

"Nope, you ain't goin' to shoot me for another reason, Blackie," Scorp went on. "You need me an' these guns of mine too much. Yep, you need me, an' I need you. I'm admittin' that. Without me, you'd have wound up with yore back in the sawdust long ago. An' without what passes for brains in that head of yores, I'd soon be either gettin' a one-way ticket to the pen or have my neck stretched. Together we're a team, an' we're stayin' that way. Savvy? We'll soon be in the money again an' ridin' high like we always do."

GARTH kept staring, but the murderous gleam had gone from his black eyes, leaving them as dull and expressionless as those of a dead

fish. He grunted and mouthed his soggy cigar stump.

"There wasn't any call for you to pull that last shootin'," he stated sourly. "I was all set to clean up big with that saloon an' gamblin' house there in Cheyenne, but you had to spoil it with them guns of yores. Them was both deputy sheriffs that you shot."

Scorp's grin widened. "Yep." He chuckled. "An' that was the sheriff's brother-in-law that you had just fleeced out of eight thousand dollars in cattle money when them deputies went for their guns. It's lucky you didn't lose it when we made our getaway. It'll give us another start somewhere else. I ain't worried none."

Blackie's thick lips tightened on his cigar stump in a dry smile in which his dead-fish eyes took no part. He was thinking, and a half-formed scheme for starting something and making a quick clean-up was already being swiftly planned by the steel-trap mind behind those expressionless eyes. And to work it, he might have plenty of need for Scorp's lightning gun speed and warped killer's brain.

"Well"—Scorp chuckled, watching him shrewdly—"what're you figgerin' on now? Fella, if you was to ever go straight, you could be a millionaire. What're you cookin' up for us to get into next?"

Blackie pulled the cigar stump from his mouth and spat into the bush beside him. "Plenty," he grunted, after a moment of heavy silence. "An' if it works, we're due for a real clean-up. We ought to be close to that outlaw hang-out where we're headed. I'm anxious to get there an' get things lined out."

"And?" Scorp prompted, eying him. "Go on, Blackie. Spill it. That's just an old ghost town, an' just a few others like us are all who live there now. If we was told right,

them mines around there all petered out years ago. You couldn't find a speck of gold within ten miles of the place. What could we do in a deserted dump like that?"

Blackie spat again and shoved the cigar stump back between his even teeth. "We'll start minin'," he grunted. "The place was made to order for us. I wouldn't be surprised to see another big gold rush start there at any time, an' I figure to be somewhere around with everything from booze to roulette an' all the trimmin's while it lasts. Let's go."

Scorp blinked and grinned inquiringly. Blackie Garth took another careful look back in the direction whence they had come. Blackie then touched his jaded horse with his spurs and led the way on down the opposite side of the rise.

"Yes, I wouldn't be none surprised to see a gold rush start there plumb soon," Garth mused aloud as Scorp reined over beside him. "A few gold coins whittled up an' shot into some old prospect holes would do the trick. Or maybe a few nuggets, that I've got in my pocket for that very purpose, could be shown in the right places. I might even have you made the town marshal, but I'll most likely need you in my saloon as my personal bodyguard. We're down here in Ranger country now, an' them Texas Rangers can get down-right troublesome at times. Once in a while, nothin' will satisfy a snoopin' Ranger's curiosity like a well-placed bushwhack bullet right where his suspenders cross."

Scorp grinned and patted the notched walnut butt of his right-hand gun. "An' that's where I'll come on." He chuckled, the laugh rattling in his skinny throat like the deadly whir of a rattlesnake. "Just turn yore Rangers over to me, an' nobody'll ever know who shot 'em. They'll be took care of, an' I reckon

"we'll find more gunnies already holed up in that ghost town who'll be will-in' to chip in if we're ganged up on. I'm goin' to like this job."

CHAPTER II.

ROOM 13.

PIDING slowly along the mesa trail that wound back and forth through the brush near the edge of the granite rimrock, Hungry Hawkins and little Rusty Bolivar stared down at a crowd of busy miners who were laboring with picks and shovels in the bed of the shallow canyon below them. The two young Texas Rangers watched for a moment, then exchanged inquiring glances.

"What do the pore fools think they'll find down there?" Rusty said, scowling. "That place was gophered out years ago. Look at them old diggins' along that other side of the canyon. Them jaspers won't find enough gold there to load a shotgun."

Hungry's homely, lantern-jawed face hardened grimly, and he nodded. Pulling his tired horse to a halt behind a taller clump of bushes, he shifted his tall, slat-thin figure to a more comfortable position in his saddle and reached lazily into his hip pocket for his battered plug of strong tobacco. A puzzled frown wrinkled his forehead as he bit off a huge chew and tongued it into his cheek.

"I don't savvy this." He grunted, shoved the much-gnawed plug back into his pocket. "Gold rushes don't just start themselves. Somebody has to start a stampede like this."

A glare of quick suspicion twisted Rusty's freckled face. "You're right," he snapped, jerking tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket. "An' to start one, you've got to find some gold. But when that gold is found where there maybe hasn't

been any in forty years, it begins to smell fishy to me."

Hungry nodded again and spat a brown stream among the rocks beside his horse. He started to reply, but suddenly stopped and pulled a folded paper from his shirt pocket. Flipping it open, he looked at it carefully for a moment, then grunted and handed it to Rusty.

"Take a good look at that," Hungry drawled quietly. "It's a bill for a couple of bad killers who're wanted up in Wyoming. One of 'em is a crooked gambler, an' a big gold rush like this would sure be a likely spot to draw a pair of buzzards like them. What's more, they managed to dodge a posse over beyond the Pecos not long ago. This might be a good place to watch for 'em while we're lookin' around."

Shifting his half-smoked cigarette to the corner of his mouth, Rusty took the "wanted" poster and hooked one chap-clad leg around his saddlehorn. He spread the paper carelessly on his knee, but before he could read it, the sudden muffled bark of a gun brought him erect in his saddle.

A second shot cracked faintly from out in front of them. He hastily crammed the paper into his chaps pocket and snatched up his bridle reins.

"Come on!" Hungry barked, spurring past him. "That shootin' is comin' from the head of the canyon. Roll the steel to yore horse!"

Racing at top speed along the canyon rim, both cowboy Rangers tried to see what was happening. The tangled brush tugged at their stirrups and slashed at the legs of their chaps as they spurred through a wide crack in the rimrock and drove their plunging horses down the dangerous slope beyond. They hit the canyon bed in a cloud of dust and flying gravel, then again

raked their mounts into a dead run and sped on.

"Better watch yoreselves, Rangers!" a bearded miner called guardedly as they rocketed past. "There's only two of yuh, an' yuh may need eyes in the back of yore head where yuh're goin'."

Rusty darted a quick look around at several men who had paused with their work and stood leaning on their picks or shovels. Other miners beyond them had turned back to their digging, and Rusty noticed that not one of them had moved in the direction of the shooting.

"Hey!" the smaller Ranger barked, pulling his straining mount over beside his lanky partner. "Did you get that? Did you hear what that fella said? Does that spell anything to you?"

Hungry nodded. "Plenty," he drawled grimly, without turning his head. "It tells me that we're up against a gang of killers, an' they may be makin' plenty of use of this gold rush. Keep yore eyes peeled. If we run into gunplay, shoot to hit."

RUSTY started to snap an angry reply, but as their panting horses shot around a bend of the canyon wall and he caught sight of a sprawled figure which lay partly across the trail in front of them, he jerked erect in his saddle with his right hand streaking to a holstered gun.

"Hold it!" Hungry barked, spurring past him. "Wait! Let's find out what's happened here!"

Hungry threw his leggy buckskin back on its haunches in a plunging halt and darted a searching look at several miners who were at work on nearby claims. A glance told the lanky Ranger that the men were pretending not to have seen him, and his face hardened with quick understanding when he saw all but two of them turn their backs and go silently

on with their digging.

Hungry's steely gaze swung accusingly to the pair who still faced him. Both men glared back sneeringly. They were tough-looking lobos, and Hungry's thin lips came together in a grim line when he saw that they were keeping their thumbs hooked in expert readiness in their cartridge-filled belts just above the notched butts of their whanged-down guns.

"Well," the larger of the two men flared impudently after a moment of heavy silence, "take a good look at us, Rangers. But it won't do yuh no good. This is our claim, an' them two fellers we shot was tryin' to take it away from us. There ain't no law says we can't defend what's ours."

"There's a law against plain murder, mister," Rusty barked as he and Hungry caught sight of still another crumpled body that was almost hidden in the hole behind the two killers. "Yore hands are too lily-white an' soft-lookin' to belong to a miner, an' I'm bettin' that neither one of you ever done an honest day's work in yore rotten lives. Don't try to reach them notched guns yuh're packin'. You're pinched, both of you!"

For a split second, the pair of killers stood glaring. Suddenly snarling oaths, they hurled themselves backwards with their hands stabbing wickedly to their Colt butts.

"Hold it, gents!" Hungry ordered harshly. His and Rusty's guns cleared leather in a blurring draw that caught the killers with their own weapons only half out of their holsters. "Finish that draw an' it'll be the finish of you. Let go of them guns kinda easylike an' put yore hands up where we can watch 'em. Like my pard here says, you're pinched—in case you maybe didn't hear him."

The killers' eyes widened. They

found themselves staring into the muzzles of the Rangers' hip-high guns. Cursing sullenly, the two miners let their half-drawn weapons slide back into their holsters, and slowly lifted their hands to a level with their shoulders.

"That's better," Hungry drawled lazily. "Now stand hitched till my pard collects yore fightin' tools. I see a town up the canyon a ways, an' if they've got a jail there, you're goin' to be in it soon, whether you think so or not. Keep them hands high."

Grinning, Rusty holstered one gun and swung from his horse. When he had jerked the weapons from the killers' holsters and tossed them aside, he hurriedly searched them for hide-out weapons. He then linked them together with a pair of light steel handcuffs and stepped back.

"All right, you rats," he snapped, jerking a thumb toward the trail. "If there's any law in that town up there, yore murderin' days are over. An' if there ain't any law there, we'll bring 'em some. Get goin'!"

The pair of killers glared for a moment in sullen silence. Then, as if a load had been lifted from their minds, they suddenly grinned. The taller one let out a guffaw of jeering laughter. They clumped with suspicious willingness toward the trail.

THE two Rangers exchanged quick glances, and a fighting scowl twisted little Rusty's freckled face as he swung hastily into his saddle. Hungry said nothing, but his thin lips came together in a grim line and a deadly greenish glint crept into his usually mild eyes. Holstering his left-hand gun, he touched his mount lightly with his spurs.

"Yuh think yuh're pullin' somethin', don't yuh?" the wiry rat-eyed killer sneered sarcastically as Hungry and Rusty pulled in behind

them. "Well, yuh ain't. We'll never see the inside of no jail. You two cub Rangers're due to learn somethin'."

"Yeah?" Rusty flared, eying him angrily. "Got some amigos up there, have you? Just what we'd already figured. Well, if any of yore gun pals tries hornin' in to save yore rotten hides, you'll be the first ones we shoot. Move on before you get a quirt wrapped around yore mangy necks!"

The man glared around and started to bellow an angry reply. But when he saw Rusty holster his gun and grip the shot-loaded quirt that was looped by a thong about his wrist, the killer hastily turned and hurried on beside his companion.

The sun was down and the supper fires of many of the miners were already burning on both sides of them when the two cowboy Rangers and their scowling prisoners drew closer to the head of the canyon. At the next bend of the trail, Hungry and Rusty found themselves near the end of a single dusty street that split a cluster of weather-beaten shacks, old mine buildings, saloons and gambling dens in front of them. A little farther on, they could see a huge, weed-covered mine dump which stood out clearly in the red glow of the evening sky below a black hole in the canyon wall.

"Hold on a minute!" Rusty barked. His eyes swung from the mine dump back to the huddle of old buildings. "Wait! I know this place. I picked up a horse thief about a mile from here a couple of years ago, an' was told that this was a ghost town an' plumb deserted. I heard later that it was bein' used as a hide-out by outlaws from both sides of the border."

Hungry nodded without taking his eyes from their prisoners. When he saw the two killers exchange sly glances and grin wickedly, his thin

lips tightened and he spat a brown stream to one side. "I reckon you heard right," he drawled lazily. "That bein' the case, I figger we couldn't have come to a place where we might be needed worse. Let's get on."

Lamps had already been lighted in most of the ramshackle buildings, and hurrying crowds covered the old plank sidewalks on both sides of them as Hungry and Rusty herded their prisoners into the street. Keeping their hands near the butts of their low-swung guns, they watched closely to right and left from beneath the brims of their sombreros.

The two Rangers drew closer to the middle of town. They could hear a tinny piano banging noisily from a big saloon just in front of them. They were almost in front of the place when a sudden bellowed oath from the sidewalk sent their hands sliding to their guns. Answering yells sounded from every direction. Rusty's right-hand Colt cleared leather in a split-second draw and he spurred closer to their prisoners.

"Stand hitched, you two!" Rusty barked to the pair of killers, as gunhung men sprang from the sidewalks into the street. "Like I already told you, if shootin' starts, you'll be the first ones to get it. If them is amigos of yores, keep 'em back!"

"Look out, fellers!" one of the startled prisoners hastily bawled. "Keep back, or we'll git shot! Wait! Where's the boss?"

AT that instant, the batwing doors were hurled open and a man rushed from the saloon to the porch. It was Scorp Moran, and a big marshal's badge now gleamed from the front of the slope-shouldered killer's gaudy shirt. Scorp rushed across the porch with both hands stabbing to the twin guns that rode at his

hips in tied-down holsters. The jerking batwing doors stopped and were pushed partly open by another man.

"Hold it, Scorp!" a heavy voice ordered sharply. "No shootin' yet! Steady out there, everybody!"

The Rangers' guns were out and held rock-steady. Weapons glinted in the fading light all around them. The crowds on the sidewalks were scattering in every direction to get out of the way of smashing bullets when there came another sharp command—and Blackie Garth shoved through the batwings.

But it was no longer a dirty, unshaven Blackie Garth who darted a warning look at Scorp Moran and strode impressively to the edge of the porch. Garth was once more clad in finely tailored black broadcloth, and a huge diamond glittered in the front of his white shirt. An oily smile twisted his thick lips as his dead-fish eyes spotted the badges on Hungry's and Rusty's flannel shirts. Garth motioned several cursing gunmen back.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded, striding into the street. "A pair of Texas Rangers, eh? An' you've brought in a couple of prisoners. Well, there'll be no lynchin' of any prisoners while I'm around. Back, men, an' let these prisoners alone. This is goin' to be a law-abidin' town as long as I'm mayor. Put up your guns."

Rusty darted a sidelong glance at his lanky partner. He scowled inquiringly. The angry crowd began to move back away from them. Some of the men were grinning now. They holstered their weapons.

"What's happened, Rangers?" Blackie inquired, looking sternly at the two prisoners. "What are these men accused of?"

Hungry looked quietly around him and at the porch before replying. That queer greenish glint was

again smoldering in his eyes. He looked back at Blackie.

"I'm Mayor Gorman," Blackie said heavily. "Now about these prisoners: I asked you what—"

"I heard you the first time," Hungry interrupted calmly, his unblinking gaze riveted upon Blackie's puffy, blue-jowled face. "The charge against these hombres is murder. An' I figger that claim jumpin' is back of it."

"Murder!" Blackie blustered heavily. "A serious charge. I had already heard that crooks had been suspicioned of doin' some claim-jumpin' around here. I'll have these polecats locked up for you. We'll try them in the mornin', an' if they're guilty, we'll stretch their thievin' necks for them. This way, marshal. Lock these prisoners up, an' see that they don't escape. Put a guard around the jail."

Scorp Moran grinned and stepped down off the porch. "Claim jumpers are they?" he snapped as he swaggered importantly over to the two prisoners and jerked his guns. "Git goin', you ornery coyotes! You're goin' to git to see what the inside of a jail looks like. Come mornin', you can tell it to the judge."

Scorp drove the two prisoners hurriedly away. Hungry stared after them for a moment. He then looked thoughtfully at the faces of the men on the sidewalks and slowly holstered his guns.

"Well," Blackie said, smiling suavely, "now that your prisoners are being taken care of, let's go in an' have a drink."

Hungry spat a huge stream of tobacco juice to one side and shook his head. "No, thanks," he drawled, glancing across at Rusty. "It's eatin' time for us. We ain't et a bite since breakfast, an' we're plenty tired. We're eatin' an' hittin' the hay. See you in the mornin'—Mayor Gorman."

TOUCHING their mounts with their spurs, the two cowboy Rangers rode on. As they halted before a big livery corral a short distance down the street, Rusty looked back and saw Blackie Garth standing at the saloon door. Blackie was watching them.

"Mayor Gorman!" Rusty snarled sarcastically, and he glared around at Hungry. "If that hombre's a real an' duly elected mayor of this sinkhole of orneriness, then I'm Sittin' Bull—which I ain't. You long-legged pelican, didn't you get next to the slick trick that was bein' pulled on us back there? Them prisoners we had will be long gone from here when we wake up in the mornin'."

"I savvy," Hungry drawled softly. He swung from his saddle. "I caught everything, but I figgered that it was better to risk losin' a couple of cubs than to let the old he-bear get away on us."

Rusty stiffened and batted his eyes. "He-bear!" he snorted. "Who was talkin' about bears? I said—"

"I heard you," Hungry cut in dryly. He shifted his big chew of tobacco to the other cheek. "Things have been addin' up fast since we first sighted these diggin's. When that first miner said we might need eyes in the backs of our head, he said a mouthful. We're sittin' right on top of a powder keg here, an' us nabbin' them two killers is the fuse that's goin' to let it off. Savvy?"

Rusty scowled. "Meanin' just what?" he demanded sharply. "If you're hintin' that we've landed in the middle of a polecats' den, you've guessed it. I began to smell skunk the minute that sleek-lookin' Mayor Gorman stuck his head out of that saloon. That hombre is as slippery as a barrel of greased eels, an' when we crack down on the nest of polecats that's hangin' out here, you'll find him in the clear with an alibi

that you couldn't dent with a sledge hammer."

"Maybe," Hungry said grimly. "We'll see when that powder keg lets go. Yore slippery mayor may go up with it."

The two tired Rangers led their horses into the livery corral and left them to be fed and cared for by a knife-armed Mexican hostler. It was entirely dark, and noisy crowds filled the dimly lighted street when they finally started in search of a place to eat.

"Keep yore eyes everlastin'ly peeled from now on," Hungry drawled softly as they turned away from the corral. "I've got a hunch that spotters have already been sent to watch every move we make, an' there's plenty of gunnies in this crowd that'd like nothin' better than to put bullets in our backs the first chance they get."

"You ain't tellin' me nothin' I don't already know," Rusty rasped, darting a quick glance back along the street. "I got next to the whole set-up here when that fake mayor worked his slick trick to get our prisoners away from us and stop a gun showdown in front of his place. He was also puttin' himself in the clear with listenin' witnesses so that we could be bumped off later. We should've pinched him, an' shot him the first one when the ruckus started."

Hungry shook his head. "We'll pinch him when we can get somethin' on him. I think I've seen that hombre somewhere before. When I can think of where it was, I figger we'll be ready to nab him in spite of his alibis."

Rusty started to snap a grouchy remark, but stopped and stared sharply as Hungry suddenly turned and led the way toward a weather-beaten building across the street. There was a newly painted sign above the sidewalk which announced

that it was a hotel. There were several Colt-armed men on the porch, and Rusty moved his hands closer to his holsters. He and Hungry shoved past them to the door. A guffaw of muffled laughter sounded from behind them as they stepped into the hotel office.

In spite of the crowd on the porch, the place seemed entirely deserted, except for a tough-looking one-eyed clerk who stood watching them from behind a rough pine desk on the opposite side of the room. He glared insultingly as the two Rangers came toward him.

"Well," the man snarled, eying their badges, "if it's supper yuh're lookin' for, yuh can git on into the dinin' room. Our regular boarders has done et. If you'll be wantin' a place to sleep, I'll have it ready for yuh when yuh come out."

"Pleasant cuss, ain't he?" Rusty snapped when he and Hungry had gone on into the dining room. "Fella, this is one night when I'm goin' to do my sleepin' with one eye open an' my guns right in bed with me."

RUSTY started to say something else, but at that moment a stocky, bushy-whiskered waiter in a greasy, flour-sack apron came in with a tray of dishes and a pot of steaming coffee. Scowling, he set the dishes around them and clumped grouchyly away.

Hungry and Rusty ate hurriedly, and were almost through when the waiter came back. "Anything else you snoopin' Rangers want?" he snarled, stopping beside Rusty and glaring down. "Talk fast. I got dishes to wash."

Hot-tempered little Rusty choked on the last of his coffee and slammed his cup on the table. He started to kick back his chair and lunge to his feet for a swing at the waiter's jaw. But at that moment the man hissed a low warning and deliberately

winked. Rusty caught himself and stared inquiringly. The waiter reached and began gathering up the empty dishes. As he did so, a tiny bit of folded paper fell beside Rusty's plate.

"Read that," the man managed to whisper while he reached for Rusty's empty cup. "Read it an' get rid of it."

Rusty instantly dropped his hand over the bit of paper, and as the waiter turned away, the little Ranger warily picked it up. Yawning drowsily and tilting back his chair, he managed to slip the note into his shirt pocket. Hungry looked at him inquiringly when Rusty began rolling a cigarette.

"I reckon we'd better be gettin' to bed," Rusty grumbled, yawning again. "I'm so sleepy I could go to sleep standin' up."

Hungry nodded understandingly and reached lazily into his hip pocket for his plug of tobacco. When he had gnawed off a huge chew and tongued it into his cheek, he pushed back his chair. He started to get up, but suddenly he stiffened and his slitted eyes swiveled toward the nearest window. A face, that had appeared for a moment in the lamp-light beyond the dingy glass, had hastily pulled back.

"What was it?" Rusty whispered sharply as he and Hungry rose to their feet. "What did you see?"

"Plenty," Hungry drawled softly. "Don't look now. I'll tell you when we get to our room. Come on an' be ready to do some of the fastest shootin' you've ever done if anything starts. I'm beginnin' to smell the fuse to that powder keg we was talkin' about, an' it may blow up any minute. Savvy?"

As they entered the office, the clerk scowled at them and picked up a smoky lamp from the end of the desk. "I'll show you Rangers where to sleep," he grunted sourly. "Yuh

can foller me. Yuh git Room. 13."

Holding the lamp above his head, he led the way through a side door and up a rickety stairway to the floor above. Reaching the top of the steps, he shouldered through a doorway to one side and set the lamp upon a big box which served as a table.

"Yuh can blow that lamp out when yuh go to bed," he snapped, turning away. "An' yuh needn't try to open that closet over there. It's locked, an' there ain't nothin' in it except some stuff we got stored."

The two Rangers waited until the man had clumped on down the stairway. When certain that he was gone, Rusty closed the door while Hungry crossed the room and hastily pulled down the flimsy blind at the window.

"Well," Rusty snapped softly, "you can now tell me what it was you saw at that window in the dinin' room."

Hungry nodded and glanced toward the closet in the corner. "It was one of them prisoners we had," the tall Ranger whispered grimly. "He was watching us through the window, an' I'm bettin' that his partner was there with him. Now what's in that paper you've got?"

Rusty scowled and fumbled hastily in his shirt pocket. Jerking out the bit of paper that had been dropped beside his plate, he unfolded it and read:

Watch yourselves, Rangers. You been lucky up to now, but you've walked right into a death trap. If you get Room 13, it means you're goin' to get bumped off this very night. Don't risk goin' to sleep. Keep your eyes open and your guns handy. Burn this note.

"Uh-huh!" Hungry grunted softly as Rusty lifted the lamp chimney and held the note to the flame. "An' we're now in that Room 13. Well, I reckon there ain't nothin' for us to

do but wait an' see what happens. I figger that powder keg is about ready to let go."

CHAPTER III.

KILLER TREACHERY.

HUNGRY looked again at the window and toward the closet. Dropping his right hand to a gun and hooking his thumb ready on the weapon's hammer for a lightning shot in any direction, he hastily jerked open the door and looked out into the hallway. Seeing nothing and hearing only a faint rumble of voices from the floor below, he stepped back and softly closed the door.

"We might as well start gettin' some rest," he told Rusty. "An' don't get between that lamp an' the window unless you want to risk git-ting a bullet through you."

Rusty scowled. "Why don't we go back downstairs an' nab them two prisoners they let loose on us?" he grumbled. "If we're to be jumped tonight, we can upset their little scheme by jumpin' them first."

Hungry shook his head. "An' play right into their hands," he drawled quietly. "Just now, we're stayin' right here an' lettin' 'em come to us. In the mornin', we're startin' a killers roundup in this town by goin' after the mayor an' his own marshal. That mayor is the leader of the wild bunch here, an' we've already seen enough to know it. What's more, that note you got tells me we'll be plenty able to prove it."

"We can prove it *after* we've got him, but never *before*," Rusty said grouchyly. He began pulling off his chaps. "That hombre an' his gun flunkies has got people here buffalood, an' nobody's talkin' as long as they're on the loose. They—"

Something dropped from his chaps pocket. Rusty stopped speak-

ing and looked down. When he saw that it was the "wanted" poster that Hungry had given him back at the edge of the mesa, he picked it up and glanced at it. He started to toss it on the side of the bed. Then his eyes suddenly widened and he gave a startled grunt.

"What the—!" He broke off, staring. "Hey, take a look at this! You dumb-lookin', bat-eared pelican, you was right when you said you'd seen that ornery mayor somewhere before. Him an' that glassy-eyed marshal has both got their ugly mugs right at the top of this 'wanted' notice. If it ain't them, it's their twin brothers."

Hungry snatched the wrinkled poster and glanced at it. Moving over near the lamp, he smoothed it out and studied it carefully.

"You're right," he grunted, clamping his teeth on his chew of tobacco. "He's got a hat on in this picture. That's why I didn't recognize him right off. An' this other one is that marshal. He's wearin' a little stringy mustache in this picture, but it's him."

Leaning still closer to the light, Hungry read:

WANTED FOR MURDER

BLACKIE GARTH AND SCORP MORAN

Garth is the brains of the pair, and is an all-around crook and confidence man as well as a professional gambler and treacherous killer. Moran is a professional gunman of the most deadly type, and is probably one of the fastest men on the draw in the entire West.

TAKE NO CHANCES ON THESE MEN
THEY ARE DANGEROUS

Five thousand dollars will be paid for either of them dead or alive, but we prefer them dead, as that would save the expense of trying them.

There was more to the notice, but as it went on with merely a closer description of the wanted men, Hungry glanced toward the bottom of the page and folded the paper.

"Well," little Rusty snarled impatiently, "what're we waitin' for? Mayor Gorman is Blackie Garth, an' that glassy-eyed marshal of his is Moran. Garth is more'n likely the very hombre who ramrodded this fake gold rush so that him an' the outlaws he found holed-up here could take a bunch of miners to a cleanin'. Let's go get 'em!"

Hungry shook his head and pocketed the poster. "We'll do that little chore in the mornin'," he drawled lazily. "Right now we're goin' to fasten this door an' that window an' see if we can grab off a little sleep. If we're interrupted, we'll start from there."

HUNGRY unbuckled his chaps and kicked out of them. As he sat down on the side of the bed and pulled off his old boots, he looked toward the closet and at the few cheap pictures about the walls. He glanced at the window, then his eyes swung back to the closet and he munched his tobacco thoughtfully, set his boots on the floor and stood up.

"I reckon we might as well turn in," he said, yawning noisily. He then leaned closer to Rusty. "You can lie down," he whispered. "Keep yore guns with you, an' don't sleep too sound. I'm settin' up to keep watch."

Rusty scowled and looked at him sharply, but Hungry closed one eye warningly and jerked a thumb toward the bed. Rusty nodded and began pulling off his shirt. Hungry moved noiselessly on to the door.

There was no key in the flimsy lock, but the lanky Ranger managed to fasten the door by shoving the back of a hide-bottomed chair beneath the knob and propping it there as best he could. As Rusty crawled into bed and pulled the blankets up around him, Hungry blew out the lamp and crept over to the window.

Warily raising the curtain to the top, he glanced hastily down at the street. He then moved back and hunkered down in the shadow against the wall where he could not be easily seen. Settling himself comfortably and biting off a fresh chew of tobacco, he shifted his heavy guns into position for a speedy draw and looked grimly toward the door.

The moon was now shining through the window, and Hungry could easily see to all parts of the room. He could still hear a faint rumble of voices from the floor below as he silently munched his tobacco.

Minutes passed, and Rusty was soon breathing heavily. Hungry glanced toward him and spat a stream of tobacco juice into a corner. He had just looked back toward the door when a slight movement in the shadow beyond the closet sent his right hand toward a gun. He had the weapon clear of his holster and his thumb hooked ready on the hammer when a big rat scampered into view from the wall. Hungry smiled and watched as it sat up and cocked its head to one side to look around. In a moment, it scuttled on toward the bed.

Hungry placed the gun across his knees and remained motionless while the animal played around near the foot of the bed. He watched as it located his boots and sniffed around them inquiringly. Apparently satisfied, it moved on and began examining his chaps.

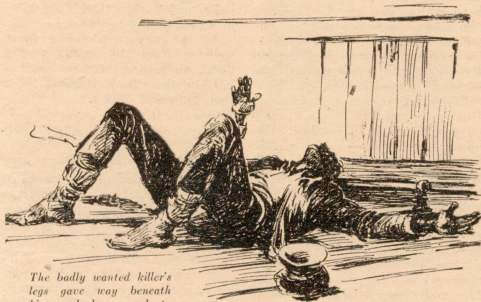
But suddenly the big rat jerked around and sat up, its beady eyes riveted alertly toward the corner. Instantly tightening his grip on his gun, Hungry darted a quick glance in the direction it was looking. Seeing nothing, he looked hastily back at the rat. Almost as he did so, there came a faint sound that sent the animal scurrying at top speed to its hole in the wall.

The rat had barely disappeared

when Hungry's second gun came from his holster and he flattened himself against the wall with both weapons cocked and held ready for a lightning shot in any direction. He started to hiss a warning to Rusty, but caught himself. Another slight noise sent Hungry's gaze swinging toward the corner.

The door stopped moving for a moment, as if someone behind it had paused to peer cautiously into the room. A hand appeared, and Hungry caught the gleam of a murderous-looking knife in the moonlight as the door again began moving slowly outward.

Hungry's right-hand gun chopped



The badly wanted killer's legs gave way beneath him and he sagged to the floor near the bar.

For a time, the lanky Ranger watched and waited. He could no longer hear the low rumble of voices from below, and Rusty's heavy breathing was the only sound that reached him. The noise from the street in front of the hotel had even died away.

THE moonlight was shining brightly on one corner of the closet when Hungry heard a faint scraping sound that was followed by a barely audible click. His gaze swiveled to the closet door, and he saw the door move slightly outward. Instantly bracing himself, the Ranger raised his guns.

to a level and steadied. A head appeared warily around the edge of the door. Keeping his eyes riveted upon the bed, which was now partly hidden in shadow, the prowler moved as silently as a big cat into the room. The blade of his poised knife glinted again in the moonlight; he crept stealthily on across the floor.

Motionless, his guns gripped ready, Hungry waited. The man was almost to the bed when the lanky Ranger suddenly lunged to his feet.

"Drop that sticker!" Hungry hissed, springing toward him. "Drop it, you sneakin' coyote, or I'll—"

A wicked snarl cut short what Hungry meant to say. The prowler ducked like a flash beneath Hungry's leveled guns and drove the big knife at the tall Ranger's throat in a savage slash. The razor-sharp blade grazed the lanky lawman's collar and slit his flannel shirt across the top of his left shoulder. But before the would-be killer could cut at him again, Hungry hit him across the head with a gun barrel, staggering him. As the man dropped his knife and tried dazedly to drag a gun from his holster, another blow of the tall Ranger's Colt barrel smashed him backward across the bed.

"Whoosh!" came a gasp from Rusty. "Hey, what the— Sleep on yore own side of the bed! Get offn my side or I'll—"

"Sh-h-h!" Hungry hissed, gripping Rusty's shoulder. "Wake up an' grab yore guns! We maybe ain't got a minute to lose!"

Rusty gave a startled grunt and struggled to sit up. Hungry heard the floor creak behind him and ducked back just in time to dodge a thrown knife that whizzed past his face and chugged into the wall at the end of the bed. Whirling and darting aside as sharp clicks of Colt hammers sounded from the closet, he fired from the hip and heard a gasped oath. The red blaze of a gun stabbed toward him, but the heavy bullet merely plowed a shower of splinters from the floor beside Hungry as the crash of his twin .45s made the window rattle. Instantly there was a groan and the sound of a falling body.

"Now what?" Rusty yelped, scrambling from the bed with his own guns poised. "Where did this polecat come from, an' where's that other one you was shootin' at?"

Hungry nodded toward the closet, but before he could reply, there was an uproar of muffled shouts from below. As if a door had been jerked

open, the noise grew suddenly louder, and there was a pounding of feet on the stairway. Swiftly thumbing fresh cartridges into the chambers of his guns, Hungry rushed around the foot of the bed.

"Watch yoreself!" Hungry barked. "We've got to keep 'em out if we can. Garth an' Moran are the main ones we want, an' they won't be with that bunch. Garth is too slick to show himself where there's any fightin' unless he has to. Look out!"

At that instant a pounding of feet sounded from the hallway. The doorknob rattled as they heard a harsh oath. Both Rangers lifted their guns and waited.

"Hey!" It was an impatient yell. "What's holdin' this door? Open up in there!"

Keeping their eyes riveted upon the door and gripping their guns, Hungry and Rusty made no reply.

"What's goin' on in there?" came another shout. "Golcher, are you an' Manuel in there? Open this door or we'll bust it down!"

A fighting scowl twisted little Rusty's freckled face. "Bust it down an' see if we care!" he yelled back before Hungry could stop him. "Fella, you start messin' with that door an' you'll run the next time you see a door!"

A BELLOWED oath sounded from the hallway and the door was almost knocked from its hinges. It shook crazily under another smashing blow. Rusty's left-hand gun flamed. There was a hoarse gasp and the jar of a falling body. Savage yells instantly sounded from outside, and there was a quick pounding of feet which told the two listening Rangers that the crowd was scattering to get out of the way of another bullet.

"I got one of 'em," Rusty snapped, hastily punching the exploded shell

from his gun. "Maybe that'll let 'em know we—"

A sudden roar of gunfire drowned the sound of his voice and a hail of searching bullets whizzed all around them. Both Rangers crouched beside the bed and began shooting through the panels of the flimsy door as fast as they could thumb their Colt hammers.

"Don't plumb empty yore guns," Hungry called softly when he could make himself heard. "Keep one of 'em at least partly loaded in case that door goes down. We're not figgerin' a finish fight with these hombres till after we've collected Garth-an' Moran. Garth'll be the brains of the outfit, an' he comes first on our list."

Jumping hastily back, Hungry threw up the window and left it open so that he and Rusty could get away in that direction in case they were unable to beat off the crowd in the hallway. Rapidly shoving fresh cartridges into his guns, the tall Ranger crouched again near his partner.

Bullets through the battered door were now throwing splinters all over the little room, and Hungry felt the wind of a whizzing slug that almost grazed his cheek. Snapping the loading gates on his hot guns, he began firing carefully through the thin plank walls on both sides of the door. A bellow of savage oaths instantly sounded from outside and the shooting increased in fury.

Just then, the would-be killer on the bed began muttering dazedly. He lifted his head and tried to sit up, but a bullet through the door smashed into him and he fell back with a shuddering groan. His body began jerking feebly.

At that instant, something crashed against the door and almost knocked the chair from beneath the knob. In spite of flying bullets that cut the air all around him, Hungry darted forward and shoved it back into place.

He had just kicked the chair tight under the knob and threw himself aside when a bullet struck the lamp, showering him with oil and bits of shattered glass. Blinking and wiping his eyes on his sleeve, he ducked down.

Another splintering crash shook the door. Then there came a yelp and a second crash from beyond the bed that brought Hungry lunging erect. Peering through the pall of powder smoke that filled the room, he tried to see what had happened.

"Rusty!" he called sharply. "Rusty, where are you?"

Getting no reply, Hungry rushed around the bed and looked hastily in every direction. He glanced hurriedly at the closet and rushed on to the open window. Rusty was gone.

Hungry sprang back to the bed for a closer look at the floor beside it. There came another thudding blow and the door sagged crazily. A blaze of gunfire ringed him with a hail of shrieking lead. He drove a pair of hurried shots through the splintered panels and backed swiftly to the window. Throwing a leg over the sill, he jumped out onto the roof of the porch just as the door went down with a crash—and the yelling crowd plunged into the room. An answering owlhoot yell instantly sounded from the street, and a bullet smashed into the plank wall above Hungry's head.

Pausing only long enough to fire a hasty shot at the next gun flash below him, Hungry sped on over the loose shingles toward another window.

CHAPTER IV.

GUNFIRE AND DYNAMITE.

AT that moment, Rusty lay sprawled in a pile of old rubbish and tin cans somewhere in the inky darkness. Hungry had just rushed to prop the

chair against the door when Rusty saw a slight movement in the direction of the closet. Turning hastily as a bulky form appeared dimly in the fog of powder smoke, Rusty swung his guns and pressed their triggers, only to have the hot weapons click hollowly on empty cylinders.

Like a flash, Rusty hurled one of his useless guns at the man's face and dived toward him with the other weapon clubbed for a smashing blow at his head. Instantly locked in a death struggle, they reeled backward into the door of the closet. Rusty gave an angry yelp and tried again to use his clubbed gun, but they suddenly toppled into a hole in the closet floor and plunged downward into the darkness.

Something struck Rusty's shoulder and his gun flew from his hand. He and the man he was fighting were knocked apart, and Rusty was grabbing desperately at the walls on both sides of him in an effort to stop his fall when he struck with a thud that knocked the breath out of him.

Stunned, Rusty lay for a moment without moving. Choking clouds of dust filled the air around him when he was finally able to heave himself up on one elbow. Gasping weakly, he tried to look around him.

"Now what?" he grunted, coughing the dust out of his lungs. "An' what's become of that hombre I tangled with? I hope he's broke his infernal neck. If he ain't—"

The muffled, far-off blasts of guns reached him. Rusty sat up hastily and tried again to peer around him in the inky darkness. The shooting stopped, but he heard a chorus of faint yells. He scrambled shakily to his feet and fumbled in his torn shirt pocket for a match.

"I've got to find a gun an' get back to Hungry," he snarled softly. "That yellin' sounds like I'm maybe too late to save him. If I am, I'll

shoot all the paunch offn that Blackie Garth, even if I've got to wade through hell to get at him."

Quickly locating a match, Rusty snapped it alight on his thumbnail and shielded the flame with the palms of his hands. A hurried glance showed him that he had tumbled into some kind of cellar, and he looked sharply at a stout ladder which led up to a hole in the floor above. As he turned hastily toward it, he almost stumbled over a sprawled form in the rubbish beside him.

"Uh-huh!" Rusty grunted, staring. "So you're the polecat I locked horns with. I—"

"No, he ain't the one," came a complaining voice from behind him. "I'm the gent you rode down that ladder on! That's a jasper one of you Rangers shot. He almost fell on top of me when I started up to help you."

Rusty had started to hurl his match aside and duck out of the way. But as the man went on talking, he turned warily and looked down. It was the waiter who had left him the note.

"So it's you, is it?" Rusty said, rushing over beside him. "Fella, why in blazes didn't you tell me who you was?"

"You didn't give me time," the waiter grumbled sourly. "First you throwed a gun at me, an' while I was dodgin' that, you jumped straddle of me an' here we come mighty fast down that ladder. Help me loose an' see if I'm all here. If my brains ain't knocked out, it won't be yore fault!"

By the light of a second match, Rusty hurriedly pulled a twisted mass of old baling wire from around the waiter's legs and hips and helped him to his feet. The waiter had collected the wire as he fell.

"You're all right?" Rusty asked impatiently when the man had taken

a step and tenderly rubbed a skinned place on the side of his face. "Hurry an' get the kinks out of you, fella. I've got to find one of them guns I lost an' get back to that pard of mine. I've still got fightin' to do."

HOLDING the half-burned match above his head, Rusty rushed back to the foot of the ladder. He searched swiftly among the litter of paper, old tin cans and rubbish around it. The waiter muttered an oath and followed him.

"We maybe won't find our guns down here," the man grumbled. "They're most likely on the floor above us. There's a stairway leadin' from there into that closet in the room you had, an' guns would hardly have bounced an' rolled as far as we did. They'd have stopped somewhere."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" Rusty snapped angrily. "Of course them guns won't be down here. Come on, fella!"

The match burned his fingers. Rusty hurled it aside and jerked another from his shirt pocket. He could still hear a muffled sound of voices above him. He snapped the match alight on his thumbnail and started swiftly up the ladder. He was halfway to the next floor when the rumble of voices grew suddenly louder, as if a door had been pulled open. Instantly there was a belated oath. The thudding blast of a gun stabbed the darkness above him with a streak of powder flame and a bullet tugged viciously at the sleeve of his shirt.

Hurling the match aside as another bullet split the air past his face, Rusty threw himself clear of the ladder. He landed among the scattered rubbish and scrambled up. There came a chorus of triumphant shouts, and a hail of bullets kicked up spurts of dust all around him.

"There's one of 'em, men!" It



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was a savage roar. "We've got that one! He can't get out of there except up that ladder. Head him off!"

"Hey, hash wrangler!" Rusty snarled to the waiter. "If we can't get out, we can keep *them* from gettin' down here. Grab onto this ladder!"

Without waiting for his companion to help him, Rusty grasped the heavy ladder and heaved with all his wiry strength. For a moment, he failed to move it. The waiter jumped forward and got a shoulder under it, and there was a sudden creak of nails as they tore it from its fastening on the thick joist above them. It crashed down, hurling up choking clouds of dust and dirt. A thud of feet sounded around the hole in the floor and another volley of bullets smashed into the ground all around them.

"Come right on down!" Rusty yelled sarcastically. He ducked back out of the way and pawed among the rubbish for something he could use to fight with. "Come right on! Don't let me stop you!"

Snarled oaths sounded from above him, and more bullets tore into the ground near the little Ranger. He snatched up a heavy chunk of wood and moved farther away from the hole. Shifting the chunk to his left hand, he groped hastily around him with his right until he located an empty whiskey bottle. The shooting stopped, and he stood up with the bottle gripped ready.

"Put that ladder back up here, Ranger!" ordered a rasping voice, and Rusty heard the stealthy click of Colt hammers. "Put it up an' surrender peaceable an' we'll let yuh live. Yuh can't git out of there."

Rusty started to bark a sarcastic reply, but caught himself and stood motionless. He could hear the waiter's heavy breathing close behind him, and he hissed a low warning as

the man started to whisper something. He knew that the outlaws were waiting for him to speak or move so that they would know where to place their bullets.

"Well?" This yell stabbed down after a moment of silence. "Are yuh puttin' up that ladder, or do we have to gun yuh out of there?"

A rough voice cut in impatiently: "Light a match so we can *see* to blast him down. He's either shot hisself out of ca'tridges or lost his guns, or he'd have been shootin' at us. He ain't got nothin' to fight with. Ginme a match, somebody!"

An uproar of shouts sounded from above the little Ranger. Rusty braced himself and drew back his arm. The waiter moved closer and tried to tell him something, but Rusty shoved him aside out of the way.

JUST then a match flared up and a circle of faces appeared around the hole in the floor. The match was held lower and several guns were shoved into the opening.

Rusty hurled the bottle with all his strength and ducked aside out of the way.

A thundering blast of gunfire was instantly cut short by a splintering crash, and a chorus of yells told the scrappy little Ranger that his flying bottle had not missed. One of those yells was a howl of pain, and Rusty caught a fleeting glimpse of a falling gun as the light winked out.

"Look out, men!" one of the outlaws whooped. "Strike another match, somebody! He knocked one of my guns out of my hand with somethin'! Don't let him git *his* hands on the gun! Strike a light, quick!"

Rusty had darted forward when the man began speaking, and as the falling gun struck with a clatter among the rubbish and tin cans, the Ranger stooped and groped swiftly

in the direction of the sound. Another match flame split the darkness. Rusty snatched the gun and made a flying jump to one side—as several hastily fired shots tore into the ground where he had been.

"You would, would you?" Rusty yelped, moving again and tilting the muzzle of his captured gun upward. "You was just goin' to gun somebody down, was you? Take this an' see how you like it."

The heavy Colt bucked and roared in the little bowlegged Ranger's slim hand. He drove two shots up through the opening as fast as his trigger finger could trip the weapon's hammer. The light vanished, and there was a hoarse cry of agony, a quick shuffle of feet. A heavy body crashed down into the heaped rubbish. Rusty heard a gasp and a shuddering groan.

"You got one!" the waiter called softly. "I heard him land down here."

"I meant to get one," Rusty cut in sarcastically. He fired another shot up through the floor that sent the startled outlaws scrambling farther back away from the hole. "You didn't think I'd be just shootin' to celebrate somethin' like the Fourth of July, did you? Find that galoot's guns while I keep the rest of his polecat amigos back. Hurry!"

"Hey!" This was a startled bawl from one of the listening outlaws. "There's more'n one of 'em down there! An' it ain't that long-legged one. He got away through the window. There may be a bunch of Rangers we don't know about scattered around town. Go warn Scorp an' Blackie, an' tell 'em to send help here to get these two!"

As a thud of feet told him that one of the outlaws had hurried away to bring help, Rusty grinned crookedly. He now knew that Hungry had gotten out of the room. But the grin was quickly wiped from his freckled

face when he realized what would doubtless happen if his lanky partner came hunting him and attempted to shoot it out with the crowd above singlehanded. Rapidly reloading the empty chambers in his captured gun with fresh cartridges from his crisscrossed belts, Rusty moved warily closer to the opening in the floor.

"Work fast, fella!" he whispered sharply to the waiter. "You located that galoot's guns yet?"

"Got 'em," the waiter grunted, limping over beside him. "Got a pair of .45s, an' one short-barreled one that he was packin' in a shoulder holster for a hide-out. I also got his belt of ca'tridges."

"Good," Rusty said softly. "Now we're heeled again. Business is goin' to start pickin' up around these diggin's from now on."

Rusty took one of the dead man's guns and ran his fingers expertly around the front of its heavy cylinder to make certain that it was fully loaded. Listening carefully to every sound from above him, he punched out an exploded shell and swiftly replaced it with a fresh cartridge from his belt.

"All right," he whispered as he snapped the loading gate on the gun. "We've got to find a way to get out of here. I've got to try locatin' that pard of mine 'fore he busts in here huntin' me an' gets hisself shot. He may already be in trouble an' needin' me."

"That's what I tried to tell you a while ago when you stopped me," the waiter complained softly. "There's a place down here in that end wall that looks like somebody had started a tunnel there a long time ago. It's almost filled up with rubbish now, but we might dig into it an' see if it's a way out."

"Then what're we waitin' for?" Rusty whispered impatiently. "Lead me to it an' stop talkin'. Hurry!"

THE waiter turned and moved carefully toward the back of the old cellar with Rusty close behind him. They had taken only a few steps when a bottle suddenly rolled beneath Rusty's foot and he almost went down. A thundering bellow of hastily fired guns instantly jarred the building. Rusty threw himself aside and jerked up his own weapons. A volley of bullets smashed into the ground behind him.

Crouching farther back and throwing his own guns to a level, he fired several quick shots at the flash of the outlaws' weapons and sent them scrambling away from the hole. Dropping to one knee and listening closely, he hurriedly reloaded. He had just started to call to the waiter when he heard a muttered remark and a faint clatter behind him.

"All right, Ranger," came a low call. "Here it is. I've found it. This may not lead nowhere, but tryin' it will beat settin' down an' waitin' to git our innards shot out."

Rusty holstered his guns and hurried over beside him. Stooping, he raked into a huge mass of loose dirt and rubbish that almost filled a big hole in the old cellar's damp wall. When he had cleared a small opening, he ran a hand into it and felt carefully in every direction. He shoved farther into the hole, and could smell the sickening odor of rats and rotted wood.

"This thing leads somewhere," he snapped softly. "It may not lead out, but we'll soon know if it does or not. Grab on here an' start gopherin'."

Down on both knees and pawing into the loosely packed mass with both hands, Rusty began swiftly throwing the dirt behind him. The waiter stooped to help. There was a sudden crash of gunfire from above and several bullets split the air around them.

"Figgerin' to try gittin' away on

us, was yuh?" came a jeering yell. "We been listenin' to yuh. Keep right on diggin'. We can use that hole to bury yuh in."

"Throw that dirt faster!" Rusty snarled softly to his companion as more bullets hit the crumbly wall above their heads. "An' throw it to one side so's we'll have somethin' to work behind. If them polecats gets too personal with their shootin', I'll see if I can punctuate a couple more of 'em with .45 slugs."

At that instant, a sudden rumble of voices and a clatter of feet on the floor above told Rusty that more outlaws had arrived. The shooting increased in fury and searching bullets zipped wickedly above his head. The game little Ranger snatched up a piece of broken board and used it as a shovel to rake their dirt into a pile between them and the opening in the floor.

"Keep down, fella!" he barked to the waiter. "An' don't stop diggin'. We'll soon have enough dirt moved to see what's behind it. Maybe it'll—"

"Are you ready to give up yet?" an interrupting whoop inquired. "You might as well surrender or we'll get another ladder an' come down after yuh. Either that or we'll drop a stick of dynamite down there. That'll fix yuh."

"Turn yore wolf loose an' see if I care!" Rusty yelled back. "You try comin' down here after us an' I'll take plenty of you with me 'fore I pass out. I'll—"

Angry oaths and a terrific blast of gunfire drowned the sound of his voice. Rusty and the waiter began raking dirt from the hole as fast as they could throw it behind them. The odor of rats and decayed wood grew sickening when Rusty shoved into the opening and smashed through a half-rotted door. He leaned hastily back to catch his

breath. Then a sudden glimmer of light from behind him sent his hands streaking to his holsters.

"All right, Rangers!" an outlaw jeered. A light was held closer to the opening so that it threw a yellow gleam to all parts of the old cellar. "You asked for it. Here comes a stick of dynamite. If this don't finish yuh, we'll drop another one down there!"

Rusty threw up both guns, but the light was being held too high for him to hit it with a bullet. He tried a couple of hasty shots through the opening in the floor, but the outlaws were keeping out of reach.

"Here it is, Rangers!" The voice was a wicked snarl. "Here's that stick of dynamite I promised yuh. See how yuh like it."

A hand appeared for a split second in the opening in the floor—and before Rusty could shoot, a stick of dynamite with a short fuse smoking in one end hurtled end-over-end through the air toward him. It landed a few feet from where he stood, and the little Ranger made a flying jump toward it.

"Git back out of the way!" he barked to the waiter. "Git away from that hole. Quick!"

SNATCHING up the dynamite as he spoke, Rusty hurled it straight back into the opening they had dug and threw himself swiftly to one side out of the way. The waiter had barely time to dive headlong over the pile of dirt and flatten himself on the ground when a jarring blast rocked the walls. Smoke, dirt and debris belched from the hole as if fired from a giant gun, and a swirling fog of smoke and dust instantly filled the cellar.

His ears ringing with the noise of the blast, Rusty scrambled shakily to his feet. Blinking and gripping his guns, he took a step and tried to

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look around him. He started to call to the waiter, then he almost bumped into him.

"You all right, Ranger?" the man whispered sharply. "I thought you was done for."

Rusty started to reply, but before he could speak, he caught a faint glow of light from the inside of the hole. Rushing forward, he stooped and crept into it. He stumbled and almost fell over a huge mass of loose earth and rocks that had fallen from above, but in a moment, he felt clean air against his face and found himself staring up at the stars.

"This way, fella!" he called softly to the waiter. "That dynamite turned the trick. If we can climb the side of this hole it jarred in the dirt roof, we're as good as out."

The waiter was beside him before he could finish speaking, and he looked up at the hole above them. An excited rumble of voices sounded from behind them. The waiter and Rusty jabbed their guns into their holsters and began climbing. Angry yells and a sudden crash of shots roared from the cellar mouth of the passage back of them and below as they scrambled out among some greasewood bushes a few steps from the side of the old hotel.

"This way, men!" The outlaw order was muffled. "Here's the way they went. Outside an' after 'em before they have a chance to git plumb away!"

"Git ready!" Rusty said harshly to his companion. "When them polecats start stickin' their heads up out of that hole, we'll see how many of 'em we can roll back into it 'fore we leave here. Get set!"

"Not me, Ranger," the waiter grunted, darting a worried look behind him. "I know about how many outlaws there are in this town an' you don't. When we start shootin' out here in the open where it can be heard, more outlaws will be com-

in' on the run to horn in against us. No two men livin' could hope to buck the whole mob. I'm leavin' here while I'm all in one piece."

Rusty started to snarl a blistering reply, but at that instant a pair of heads appeared over the edge of the hole. Jerking around, the Ranger fired a hurried shot that threw dirt on the outlaws' faces and sent them ducking back out of sight.

"Come on, Ranger!" the waiter pleaded worriedly. "If you've just plumb got the itch to fight a mob the size of this gang, I know some miners who've been wantin' to start 'em a vigilance committee. Up to now they ain't been able to find anybody with the nerve to lead 'em. Vigilantes not bein' exactly legal an' accordin' to law, maybe—"

"What?" Rusty yelped as he fired another shot into the hole. "Vigilantes? Vigilante law may not be legal, but I know a way to make it legal. Lead me to 'em, fella, an' watch my smoke!"

At that instant, shouts and the pounding of feet sounded from the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Answering yells sounded from inside the hole, and several hastily fired shots roared from the corner of the building. With more bullets whizzing around them, Rusty and the waiter ducked back and sped away through the greasewood in the direction of the canyon.

CHAPTER V.

A PAIR OF KILLERS.

HUNGRY HAWKINS was almost to the next window when he stumbled on the loose shingles and almost went down. Throwing out his arms and fighting desperately to catch his balance, he staggered to the edge of the porch roof. There the rotted boards gave way beneath him and he hurtled to the ground below.

The lanky Ranger landed in a pile of wind-blown sand against some greasewoods that partly broke his fall. Shaken but not badly hurt, he sat for a moment clutching his guns and catching his breath.

Remembering the shots that had been fired at him from the street, Hungry heaved himself up on one knee for a quick look around him. He had just caught sight of a sprawled form near the edge of the warped sidewalk when angry yells from above sent him darting around the corner of the building.

Suddenly he stopped and turned back. He was thinking of Rusty, and wondering where his bowlegged little partner had gone. He had taken a quick look in the closet and around the bed, and he knew that Rusty was no longer in the room. Hungry wrinkled his forehead worriedly and looked in every direction.

"Rusty wouldn't have left me in that room unless somethin' was plumb wrong," he told himself. "Somethin's happened to him. If he came out of that window ahead of me, he may have been hurt an' didn't know what he was doin'. Maybe—"

As he thought again of the man he had shot in the street, Hungry's lips came together and he peered around the corner of the building. In spite of the danger of being riddled by bullets from above, he rushed back to the sprawled figure of the man he had shot and made certain that he had not killed Rusty by mistake. He started to turn away, but stopped and looked down.

"I reckon I can use those," he thought, eying the dead man's boots. "Bein' as I left mine in that bedroom, I may need 'em."

After a wary glance up in the direction of the window, Hungry hurriedly jerked off the slain man's boots and sped back with them to the corner of the hotel. He had just pulled them on when the faint sound

of a shot suddenly reached him from somewhere. He came erect with both hands again gripping his guns, and heard muffled shouts and another crash of shots.

Hungry instantly rushed to the front of the building. He darted a look up at the window and sped on to the edge of the porch. The shooting had stopped, and there was no longer any light showing in the hotel office. Hearing only some faint whoops and the whine of a squeaky fiddle from the direction of the saloon, he ran around to the back of the building.

"No lights nowhere," he told himself, his eyes flitting to every door and window. "The place looks plumb deserted. Those hombres we were fightin' have either gone to chase Rusty or they're—"

The faint muffled blast of still another gunshot reached him. Hungry looked sharply toward the saloon. He stared for a moment, then rushed away in that direction.

"I don't know if that shootin' is coming from there or where it is," he told himself. "It won't take me long to find out."

CIRCLING swiftly around some old sheds and keeping well back from the street, Hungry hurried on toward the big saloon. He had just paused beside a small building when he heard a faint volley of shots that seemed to come from behind him. He turned for a hasty look in that direction—the hollow click of gun hammers suddenly sounded from the darkness near him.

"Hands in the air, Ranger!" It was a deadly snarl. "I happened to see yuh comin', an' this is as far as yuh're goin'. Hoist 'em an' stand hitched!"

Hungry jerked around with both guns ready at his hips. The voice seemed to come from beside some old boxes and barrels near the build-

ing, but he was unable to locate the speaker.

"Yore orders was to hoist, Ranger!" he was reminded harshly. "Don't try to use them guns yuh're packin'. Yuh can't see me, but I can see you, an' my orders are to kill yuh on sight."

Hungry's first thought was to hurl himself aside and fire at the first flash of the hidden watcher's guns. But he caught himself in time and decided to wait and try to keep the man talking. In that way, he might be able to get him located. He might also learn what had become of Rusty.

"Well"—this was an impatient snarl—"if yuh ain't liftin' them hands like I said, here goes—"

"Just a minute, mister!" Hungry cut in harshly. "I reckon it was Blackie Garth who gave you the orders to wipe us out, eh? Him an' Scorp Moran figger they're foolin' somebody, but they're not. They're usin' a bunch of you as gun flunkies to help 'em clean up on this fake gold rush, but they're not going to get away with it. Knowin' what I do, an' puttin' two an' two together, I savvy the whole set-up."

"Gettin' ideas, are you, Ranger?" It was a purring reply. "Bein' as you've guessed right, it's goin' to be the very last idea yuh'll ever have this side of hell. Now I—"

The interrupting blast of Hungry's right-hand gun drowned the sound of the man's voice. Two bellying shots roared answer from between some stacked barrels. Staggering, his knees buckling under him, the lanky Ranger was trying dazedly to fire again when there was another shot from among the barrels.

WHEN Hungry began to come to himself, he took a long breath and rolled over on his side. Blinking and shaking his head in an ef-

fort to clear it, he pulled himself up on one elbow. Mumbling thickly, he sat up and tried to look around him. He pressed a hand to his aching head, and as his fingers touched a cut above his left ear, he winced and clenched his teeth.

"I've been hit," he muttered. Another stab of pain shot through him. "I—"

Suddenly remembering the shots that had been fired at him, he turned and looked quickly in the direction of the stacked barrels. Groping hastily around him, he located his guns and heaved himself shakily to his feet. When no more shots blazed toward him, he crept warily in the direction of the hidden marksman.

Holding both guns ready, Hungry peered cautiously among the barrels and at the boxes beside them. He had started to move past them when he saw a dark object between two old whiskey barrels. Leaning closer with his right-hand gun poised for a lightning shot, he saw that it was the sprawled body of a man.

"I got him," the Ranger told himself, staring grimly. "I don't savvy that. I shot only once, an' I *know* I shot first. He must've pulled the triggers of his guns as my bullet hit him. I wonder how long I've been lyin' here knocked out."

Holstering his guns, Hungry felt again of his injured head. The cut, though painful, was hardly large enough to have been made by a bullet. But when he picked up his old hat, he saw what had happened. He had been wearing a rawhide hatband that was thickly studded with heavy metal conchas, and it was one of those conchas that had saved his life. The bullet had struck it a glancing blow, driving it against the side of his head hard enough to knock him unconscious.

"Hub!" He grunted, looking at the bit of twisted metal and the big hole that had been torn in his hat.

"That's one time I was lucky. I hope I can be that lucky in locatin' Rusty."

Hungry tossed his now-useless hat aside and hurriedly tied his bandanna carefully around his injured head. He had just finished reloading the exploded chamber in his right-hand gun when the snap of a stick from a short distance away sent him ducking back against the stack of barrels.

He had barely hidden himself when several skulking figures crept into view around the corner of a fence. They moved stealthily on and vanished behind a low shed, and several more skulking shadows appeared for a moment in the starlight behind a patch of mesquite. The last crowd had hardly disappeared when a low growl of voices sounded from another direction. Fully a dozen more heavily armed men crept past his hiding place and moved on to vanish in the darkness. Hungry's thin lips came together and he stared grimly.

"It looks like Garth's got his gunnies out searchin' for me," he told himself. "In that case, I know what to do. When a man hisses his dogs onto me, I don't stop to fight the dogs. I go get the man who hissed 'em, an' that hombre will be Garth—him an' that gun artist, Scorp Moran. While this crowd is huntin' *me* will be a good time for me to hunt Garth, an' maybe find out what's happened to Rusty."

Motionless, the lanky Ranger stared grimly as another small bunch of armed men crept past near him. They were hardly out of sight around the corner of a shed when he turned hastily to the outlaw he had shot. Groping beside the body, he snatched up the dead man's ivory-handled guns and swiftly reloaded their spent chambers. He then shoved both weapons down inside

the waistband of his trousers and stood up.

Listening carefully, Hungry darted a searching look in every direction. The street was now almost deserted, but a rumble of voices and a click of pool balls sounded from the big saloon which was only a short distance farther on and across the street. He looked sharply at the brightly lighted windows, and at a couple of drunken miners who were walking unsteadily along the opposite sidewalk.

Watching closely to right and left and keeping in the thicker darkness beside the building beyond the stack of barrels, Hungry crept close to the edge of the sidewalk. When the two miners had passed on, he raced across the street and crouched against the side of an old tool shed for a quick look behind him. Pausing only a moment, he darted a measuring glance at the few small windows along the side of the saloon and circled on toward the back door.

THE tall Ranger had reached the shelter of a broken fence at the corner of the building when he suddenly stopped to stare at a man who had just crouched beside the shack across the street. Another skulking shadow showed for a moment near the man, and Hungry saw a few more skulking figures drop down behind a patch of weeds farther on.

"Uh-huh!" Hungry grunted, watching grimly. "Garth's got gunmen on guard to see that nobody gets close to him, has he? Well, if he an' Moran are in that saloon, their gun guards are goin' to be just a little too late to save 'em."

With a parting glance at two more men who had hidden themselves beyond the opposite sidewalk, Hungry crept hastily on to the back of the saloon. A guffaw of laughter sounded from inside. He peered

through a partly open window and saw Blackie Garth and Scorp Moran at a card table near the middle of the room. Blackie had his chair tilted back on two legs, and was chewing on an unlighted cigar while he listened to the crowd of heavily armed men who were drinking at the bar. Scorp Moran sat across the table from him, a half-smoked cigarette pasted to his sagging under lip and his pale eyes flitting to all parts of the room.

Hungry's thin lips tightened. His steely gaze swiveled to the noisy crowd at the bar and snapped back to Garth and Moran. "One of the fastest gunmen in the West, is he?" the Ranger asked himself as he studied Moran's wiry, slope-shouldered figure. "I reckon the time has come for me to sample him an' see if he's so all-fired fast. An' that 'wanted' poster says dead or alive. Well, there's only two of 'em, an' I got two hands."

Hungry shifted the pair of ivory-handled guns to a better position inside the waistband of his trousers and made certain they would not hang and hamper his draw if he needed them. Then, gripping his own familiar walnut-handled .45s, he crept on to the partly open door and stepped warily inside.

Moving cautiously, the tall cowboy Ranger was almost to the table where Garth and Moran sat when Scorp Moran's glassy eyes suddenly flicked toward him. Like a flash, the slope-shouldered killer jerked to his feet, his chair crashing backward. His slim hands dipped with the speed of a striking sidewinder at his whanged-down guns.

"Hold it, Moran!" Hungry barked harshly, his own hip-high guns already out and poised for a lightning shot in any direction. "Finish that draw an' you're a dead polecat. Get them hands up—you, too, Garth. The law says you're wanted!"

As if a bomb had exploded beneath him, Garth bounded up. Gasping oaths, the drinkers at the bar dropped their glasses and jerked around, their hands clawed for a downward swoop to their holsters.

"Steady, everybody!" Hungry warned with cold deadliness. "The first man that tries draggin' a gun will be the first one I kill. If anybody feels plumb lucky, he might see if I mean it. That goes double for you, Moran. Make one phony move an' I'll shoot all the belly offn you. Get them hands up!"

Blackie Garth had started a hand toward a hide-out gun beneath his long-tailed coat, but he instantly realized that he would be too late. Quickly gaining control of himself, he motioned hastily to Scorp and the men at the bar.

"Don't shoot, men!" he called, an oily professional smile creasing his puffy face. "Put up your hands like he tells you. Wait! This Ranger has evidently made some mistake. He just called me Garth. Most likely, he takes me for that lobo hombre we hung here last week. He—"

"That'll do, Garth!" Hungry cut in, jabbing the muzzle of his left-hand gun roughly against the big gambler's paunchy stomach. "You an' Moran are the ones who made all the mistakes. An' you'll be makin' another one if you think I won't kill you. What's become of that little pard of mine? Talk fast!"

At that instant, the bartender suddenly saw his chance, and hurled a half-empty whiskey bottle that he had been holding ready beneath the edge of the bar. Hungry saw it coming, and he ducked and fired in one lightning movement. Scorp Moran's hands stabbed down in a blurring draw and he threw himself aside with both guns blazing as they cleared the leather. The old saloon was instantly shaking with the

thunder of bellowing weapons that jarred it to its foundation.

His own guns bucking in both hands, Hungry hurled himself around the table and crouched behind it against the wall. He felt the sting of a bullet that grazed his left arm and another that pierced his shirt along the side. With more bullets smashing through the flimsy wall all around his bobbing form, he fired as fast as he could work his Colt hammers.

ANOTHER slug fanned Hungry's cheek from one side. The fighting Ranger glanced around in time to see Blackie Garth come up from beside a pool table where he had thrown himself in a headlong leap. But as Blackie's guns chopped down, Hungry got him with a cross-arm shot and knocked him backward against the bar. Blackie's fancy guns clattered on the floor and he pawed frantically at his stomach where a bullet had torn through him.

At that instant, a bullet plowed a groove across the table top, stinging Hungry's face with flying splinters. Another bullet tugged at his left sleeve, and he caught a glimpse of Scorp Moran's snarling face behind his smoking guns near the end of the bar. Throwing himself farther to one side to dodge another bottle aimed at his head, Hungry drove a snap shot at Moran and dropped again to one knee. Peering through the pall of powder smoke that now filled the room, Hungry saw Moran spin partly around and grab weakly at the corner of the bar. As the badly wanted killer's legs gave way beneath him and he sagged to the floor, Hungry fired a hasty shot at the bartender and crouched closer to the table.

Just then a sheet of flame and smoke belched from the door and windows, and a crashing roar from

guns of every kind almost burst Hungry's eardrums. Bottles and glassware flew from the bar, and the huge mirror behind it flew into hurtling fragments under the hail of bullets, buckshot and slugs from the windows.

Hungry gave a startled grunt and snatched the second pair of guns from inside his waistband. He saw an outlaw go down at the end of the bar. Another pair, who tried desperately to reach the back door, fell just inside, their bodies riddled with lead before they hit the floor. Blinking in amazement, Hungry stared as the rest of Garth's gunnies threw down their smoking weapons and lifted their hands in sudden terror.

"Now what?" Hungry grunted, peering around him. "I thought I was goin' to be plumb wiped out, but—"

"That'll do, gang!" This interrupting yell came in through a shattered front window. "Stop shootin' till I can get in there an' look for that long-legged pard of mine. If he ain't somewhere in the middle of that rookus, I miss my guess. I hope he ain't done gone an' got himself killed."

Hungry's eyes widened and he reached hastily for a chew of tobacco. "Rusty!" he gasped when he recognized his little partner through the swirling gun smoke. "An' I was

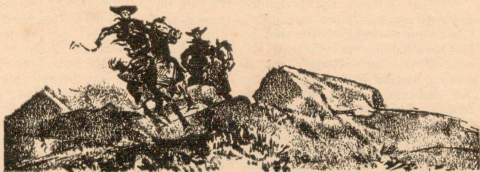
figgerin' that *you* had maybe done been killed."

Rusty sniffed. "Not up to now I ain't," he stated carelessly. "I been gettin' ready to round up that polecat Garth an' his side-kick, Moran. Did they git away on us?"

Hungry shrugged and jerked a thumb lazily toward Garth's and Moran's sprawled bodies. "They're over there," he drawled. "Directions read 'dead or alive,' an' that's how I had get 'em. An' those two killers that we arrested in the canyon are reposin' just inside that back door with their hides full of buckshot and bullets. Now where have *you* been, an' where in heck did you pick up the army?"

Rusty grinned, wiped a trickle of crimson from his cheek where a piece of flying glass had hit him. "Them?" he chuckled. "Them was a bunch of would-be vigilantes until I swore 'em all in as deputy Rangers. That ex-waiter over there with his face in that window is my top sergeant on this job. All right, sergeant. Get the army in here an' start tyin' up these prisoners. I think some of 'em are still hangable!"

Hungry and Rusty will fight their way through another jackpot of trouble in a forthcoming issue of Wild West. Don't miss their next tangle with renegade guns!





READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.

LIKES IT BETTER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've read your magazine for two years and have always liked it. But in its present publication as 2W, every other week, I like it even better.

My favorite characters are Tommy Rockford, Trig Trenton (the Border Eagle), White Wolf and others.

Boss, do you savvy a great deal about horses and cattle? Will you tell me how to bulldog a steer? I have learned a lot about horses and cattle from your magazine and expect to learn more. So please, tell me how to throw a steer and I'll tell my friends about you. I've got all three of my brothers reading Wild West.

Yours till we win this war,
Waco, Texas. MAURICE MANNING.

Waal, Señor Manning, it's difficult to explain on the printed page just how to bulldog a steer. It's dangerous work and I wouldn't advise you to try it unless you weigh over two hundred pounds and have been shown by an experienced cowpoke. There are quite a few punchers in Texas. Why not ask one of them?

I never have had anything to say in either of the magazines, but when Mr. H. B. called some gal loco just because she said girls are as tough as a boot, I burned up. I guess that was just the girl letter writer's way of saying the fair sex can take it. Believe me, they can take it plenty.

I've seen them welding and I've seen hot metal get to their skin—and it wasn't "Oh, my!" that they said! Also, I've seen them as mechanics, trailer-truck drivers and so on—but it wasn't make-up that they had on their faces! I've seen them doing jobs that perhaps Mr. H. B. couldn't do—and they were doing the jobs well.

If I were Mr. H. B., I'd go crawl into a gopher hole for the duration.

Thank you. JUNGLE RHODES.
Danville, Va.

Yep, yo're right about it. Jungle. Women're provin' they can do a heap of things we men never figured they could do—and sometimes they do their jobs plumb better than men can do 'em. My hat's off to 'em. They're really bearin' down to work for the war effort, and showin' the same fine spirit that our brave pioneer women displayed.

DEFENDER OF LADIES


DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading Wild West and Western Story, the companion Street & Smith magazine, ever since my dad brought a couple of copies home with him one day right after the First World War.

DOUBLE W?

DEAR BOSS: Just want to let you know what I think of your mag. Well, I think it's better than it was, now that it's a biweekly. Instead of calling it 2W, why not call it Double W?

Yours, E. W. KURT.
Deep in the Heart o' Texas.

Don't know if I got yore name right, pardner. It was kinda difficult to decipher. Anyway, much obliged.



OUR SPANISH SOUR

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Your issue for March 13th contained a letter from a Mr. Sam Hunter. His last sentence reads: "Muy gracias, as my Spanish friends would say." I wish to call attention to this "muy gracias." I have never heard a Spaniard or a Mexican make that mistake. I saw "muy" used incorrectly in another issue, some time ago.


"Muy," which means "very," is an adverb. In Spanish, as in English, adverbs are used only to qualify adjectives, verbs and other adverbs. "Gracias," which is a noun meaning "thanks," is feminine in gender. The adjective "muchos," which means "many," is used in this case—"muchos" changing to "muchas," the feminine termination, to agree with the feminine "gracias."

So "muchas gracias," meaning "many thanks," is correct.

And muchas gracias to you for the many good stories in Wild West.

Un amigo,
Randolph, Texas. J. M. GILBERT.

I'm inclined to agree with you, Señor Gilbert. One of the purposes of the recent feature Cow Country Spanish, by S. Omar Barker, was to help readers become acquainted with the Spanish language as it is spoken in Mexico—which differs in some respects from the Spanish that's spoken in Spain or, again, in a large part of Central and South America.




WHAT BIG WINDIES?

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Every time I read yore magazine I like it better. I sure enjoyed the big-windies section in the March 13th edition.

Wild West should satisfy anybody. Let's have more of Johnny Forty-five and the Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T.

Yores till Beautiful Bill Barbee becomes really beautiful,
Buck.
Denver, Col.

Suh! Are you referrin' to this hyar department as the big-windies section? I'll have you know all our readers are honest, even when they dislike somethin' in the magazine.



HOMESICK BUT CONSOLED

MR. EDITOR: The State of Oregon is my home. A defense job brought me back here


for the duration—and, in short, I'm what you might call homesick, just for a look at my mountain cabin. But I do have one mighty good chunk of consolation—the privilege of reading a near-true-to-life magazine—Street & Smith's Wild West.

I've read your magazine for years, but didn't realize just how much it meant to me until I came back here among strangers and a new kind of country!

By the way—did your author Clay Starr have me in mind when he wrote that recent story entitled "Triple Trigger"? Ha, ha. The story character's name was Curly Jack Stambough—which is pretty close to my own name.

Sincerely,
Springfield, Ill. CURLY DICK STAMBOUGH.

Waal, pard, that's just one of those coincidences that happen once in a while. All our stories are strictly fiction and the names of real people are never knowingly used. But, of course, an author is bound to use a name that really belongs to some living person, quite unknown to the author, occasionally. We're mighty glad our magazine gives you so much pleasure. Your praise is a mighty good compliment, coming as it does from a dyed-in-the-wool Westerner.




A BOMB AT BOYDSTON

DEAR BOSS: I just read a certain Howard Boydston's letter in the February 6th issue of your magazine. Tell Boydston he is the one who has been eating loco weed! He ought to be made to sit in a patch of cactus full of rattlesnakes until he repents, and he ought to be thrown into the calaboose! Tell him I don't like him for what he said about us women! Gr-r-r! Mumble, mumble, grumble!

I think your magazine is the best on the newsstands. But bring back the Silver Kid. And the Wranglers Corner.

Yours,
West Palm Beach, Fla. MARY M.



TRIPLE POWERS

DEAR EDITOR: I like your 2W as well as I liked 3W, if not more. My favorite character is Dapper Donnelly. Let's have more of him. Trailing right along up close are King Kelt and Rowdy Lang. Say, have Author L. P. Holmes give us some more of Rusty Ryan.

Have one of George C. Franklin's fact stories in every issue of Wild West if you possibly can. I think they are very interesting. Give his fact stories a little more space, too, if you can manage it.

Say, Boss, does Paul S. Powers like the num-

ber three? I notice King Kolt has his six-guns three—and now Powers has created those salty characters, the Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T. Makes no difference anyway, though, because they are all good characters and he is a very good author.

Yours truly,
Akron, Ohio. R. D. GRAHAM.



WORTH WAITING FOR

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just finished reading your first issue of the new Wild West—the March 13th issue. Although I'm going to miss seeing it every week, it'll be well worth waiting for. Besides, it gives us three or four prime-favorite characters in each issue.

Here's my rating of the best stories in that issue:

1. "Bullet Aces to Beat," by Paul S. Powers. Always admired his style of writin', and the Fightin' Three are great.
2. "Gold for Gunhawks," by Cleve Endicott. Cleve must be fond of Buck Foster.
3. "Ghost of the Border Eagle," by Philip F. Deere. Best Trig Trenton yarn yet. Surprise ending.
4. "Blizzard Buscadero," by Hal Dunning. Not so good as other White Wolf yarns. Jim-twin is better with his brother, Jack-twin.

Not so good were: "Gunsmith's Gamble," by Archie Joscelyn; "Triple Trigger," by Clay Starr; "Judge Colt Rules Again," by Philip Ketchum. But I liked "Sodbuster Showdown," by Melvin W. Holt, because it was a story told in the first person, and I'm particularly fond of that style of writing. Made me think of the Jeff an' Bugeye stories; I sure miss 'em.

Saw Bob Stratton's recent letter and am glad to know he's studyin' journalism. We 2W Club members are all interested in writing. Hope we all make the Wild West contents page some day—especially Bill James, Bob Stratton, and a certain other 2W Club member. I'd like to meet Charnesky, though. If he's anything like Stratton, he's O. K.

Yours till Bill Barbree turns beautiful,
MARION HENDERSON.
New Bedford, Mass. (Member #6, 2W Club)

Mighty glad to hear from you, Marion. And it's right good to learn pore old young Stratton has a friend.



IF WISHES WERE HOSSES

DEAR BOSS: I've been reading your magazine for about five years. It is the best Western magazine published. I wish I'd started reading it sooner, because I missed a lot of

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4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

fine stories. (There'll be plenty more fine ones in the future, pard, so don't worry about it!—Ed.)

My favorites are Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf (with his drawl), Border Eagle, King Kolt, Shorty Masters, Silver Kid, Rowdy Lang, Sonny Tabor (as an outlaw) and the Whistlin' Kid.

Yours till Kid Wolf turns outlaw,

JERRY HEIBERGER.

Oelwein, Iowa.



EVER FAITHFUL

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I'm a faithful reader of Wild West and it's my favorite magazine.

My favorite character is the Oklahoma Kid. Sonny Tabor and Rowdy Lang are my next favorites, but I like all the Wild West characters.

Keep serials and gals out of yore magazine. Gals don't mix with guns and outlaws. I disagree with Señor Howard Boydston, who had a letter in yore February 6th issue. He said that there should be a law against gals reading Wild West. I'm a gal myself and I know no man enjoys reading Wild West any better than I do.

Yours till the Oklahoma Kid goes to boothill,

EDNA WILLIAMS.

Jarratt, Virginia.



NO LIKEE PACKETS

DEAR RANGE BOSS: How that story of several months ago, "The Port of Missing Packets," ever got into the pages of Wild West is something I can't understand. Archie Joscelyn should go in for writing stories for an Eastern magazine. Who ever heard of a Western story ever taking place on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers? Of course, the Big Muddy in the last part of the story was supposed to be up in Montana, but as far as my estimations go, the whole story was just a plain bunch of "mush."

Give us some trail-herd and rodeo stories. Yours until the readers quit complaining about a magazine otherwise tops,

RUSSELL COX.

Sandstone, West Virginia.



STRATTON, SPELLING, SNAKES

DEAR BOSS: I see by a recent issue of this here now magazine, that saddle tramp, Tiny Bob Stratton, has bestowed his corny presence once again on the hallowed pages of the Branding Irons. He speaks of me, don't he? I guess I'll

have to own up—yeah, I know the guy, but can I help it? Me, I'm just victim of circumstances.

As for Stratton's spelling—he's the world's second worst speller, and me, I'm the first worst. And he ain't as smart as Two-gun Tommy Tompkins would have you believe. It isn't really so marvelous, him memorizing the contents pages for as far back as he has. It might be considered somewhat of an accomplishment on Stratton's part, but it so happens that he put in so much time memorizing those pages that he just never learned nothing else. He's about the dumbest creature that walks on four legs.

It sure tickled me when Stratton asked you if there was such a word, and you says that there ain't the way he spells it. How could anybody spell "comandation" wrong, except a fool?

Walker Tompkins also mentioned that Stratton was bit by a rattlesnake, but he didn't tell it all, because Stratton was too ashamed to tell it. But for Stratton's own good, I'm going to tell it all. He was walking along (Stratton) when he comes on this snake, and it (the snake) ups and bites Stratton. Well, the old snake begins to roll its eyes, and then it turns green, and then pale as a sheet, and a few seconds later it rolls over deader than a doornail. Yep, that's a fact.

Stratton harvests quite a crop of corn each year. Why, one year he had an awful big crop, and he piled as much of it as he could out of doors, and the rest of the crop he stored in the barn.

Be careful when you read his letters, because he may try to spring one of his l---y jokes on you and, brother, that's bad!

By the way, I'm inclosing a little ink sketch of Stratton in action. You see him there as you can always expect to see him. He had to take out a pilot's license. He's got a callous on the back of his lap, too.

At least I was glad to see that he cracked down on these guys who have swiped the idea of our 2W Club. As Stratton said, we have a copyright and a patent number on that idea. Stratton, Powers, Sparks, Charnesky, Henderson and two or three more that I'm not acquainted with. Tell them guys to give their outfit another name, and we'll duel 'em.

Well, I think Stratton's face and ears are red enough now (his nose is always red), so I'll sign off with the hope that you'll put Stratton in his place again as good as you did this time.

Buena fortuna.

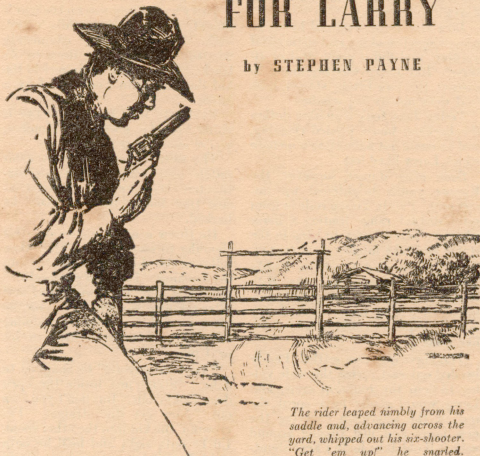
BILL JAMES, Esq. (2W Club Member, No. 4).

Madison, Wisconsin.

Waal, you gents have quite a time, don't you? Sorry I can't reproduce yore picture of Señor Stratton, Señor James. For benefit of readers, I'll state that it portrays Señor Stratton leaving a refreshment resort somewhat hastily by the air route, by benefit of boot rather than wings. Good robust fun, pards. Keep it up. Pleasant insult is good for the soul.

A SADDLE FOR LARRY

by STEPHEN PAYNE



The rider leaped nimbly from his saddle and, advancing across the yard, whipped out his six-shooter. "Get 'em up!" he snarled.

That gun-loco bandit was crafty and cunning like a lobo—and all he had to do was outsmart an old man and a tame tenderfoot!

RIGHT up to the last minute, Larry Edmond hoped the Kite outfit would take him along when they started the beef roundup, but the boss couldn't see it that way.

"Some other time, maybe," Bill Clay said. "When you get a saddle of your own."

That was the rub—a saddle of his own. But when a young man wasn't

even getting wages yet, how was he ever going to get a punching outfit?

Larry, who had come from Kansas and had been mighty glad to get a job choring for his board and a place to sleep, didn't know exactly.

After the chuck wagon, the waddies and the cavvy had pulled out now, he felt as low as a sick steer mired in a bog hole plumb to its ears.

Still he wasn't all alone on the ranch, which now seemed the loneliest place in the world. The funny, decrepit old-timer called Jake Farr was Larry's companion.

Jake was a stove-up old has-been who enjoyed smoking and sitting and yarning, and did a great deal of all three. But Larry was beginning to suspect the hair-lifting stories Jake told were merely big windies.

Today Jake took a sudden notion the bachelor house needed cleaning, and he could not have chosen a chore which Larry liked less.

Soon after dinner, however, the Kansas youth brightened up immensely. Paddy Young rode in from some distant range leading a horse which he asked Larry to keep in the stable and take mighty good care of.

Larry was glad to oblige Paddy Young, for Paddy was the Kite Ranch bronco buster—a genial, sun-leathered young man whom Larry secretly hoped he could be something like some day.

The horse question settled, Paddy headed out east across the wide valley to join the roundup crew, and Larry would gladly have spent the rest of the afternoon currying the new horse and just fussing around with it if old Jake hadn't kept shouting to him: "Come on to the shack and get busy, you long-gear'd scarecrow!"

Reluctantly Larry headed toward the house, but midway of the yard he stopped and stared in amazement at a rider who had flashed into sight on a hillside west of the ranch and was spurring and whipping his mount as if a wolf pack were hot on his trail. Observing that Jake had waddled outside the low log house, Larry joined the elder man.

"What you suppose—" he began.

But the rider had arrived. A rough-hewn, blond gunman, he raked the old-timer and the kid with savage,

bloodshot eyes, and snapped a question:

"Just the two of you here?"

"Uh-huh," Jake admitted.

Larry's attention was on the man's mount, which stood spraddle-legged, with drooping head, completely winded, and ready to drop in its tracks. Rage began to simmer in the kid that any man would so abuse a horse.

Evidently Jake Farr didn't like it either, for he growled: "Hombre, you're sure a hoss-killin'—"

The rider leaped nimbly from his saddle and whipped out his six-shooter. "Get 'em up! And get inside that house, both of you!" he barked.

He threw a quick glance over his shoulder to scan his back trail, then followed the old hand and Larry into the dwelling. "Either of you heeled?" He made sure they were not, and after taking a moment to size up the kitchen and its adjoining dining room, he evidently decided on his next play.

"You, old coyote!" he snapped to Jake. "Stand just inside the open door, lookin' out. But don't you *step* out. Now get this straight. I'm crowdin' the kid into the other room. I'll be outa sight and he'll be outa sight, but I'll have an eye on you, old man, and if you make a false move I'll let daylight through the kid first and you next. Savvy?"

"Yeah, I kinda savvy," stammered old Jake through white lips. "But what—"

"Posse after me," the man rapped out. "But I seen a rider lopin' away from this ranch, headed east. From atop the hill the posse'll see that same rider. You, old-timer, are to tell the lawman and his posse that I grabbed a fresh hoss here, and lit a shuck. Savvy?"

"Uh . . . sure." Jake Farr gulped.

Larry found his voice. "But . . .

that's a lie." He had some ideas about lying under any circumstances. An honest man just didn't do it.

The bandit—Larry was now sure he was a bandit—whirled on the kid and snarled, "Of course it's a lie! If your old friend don't tell it—and lie some more if necessary—you'll kick the bucket. Get in there!" He almost shoved Larry into the dining room and then partly closed the door.

"Not a squeak outa you, kid," he threatened, jabbing his gun savagely against Larry's ribs. "I'm desperate. Old man, if they start to describe me, you shut 'em off by tellin' 'em, 'Yeah, that's the buzzard, and he fogged east in a hurry.' Here they come!"

TENSE as never before, and wondering how he could turn the tables, Larry heard the thud and hammer of many hoofs beating into the yard. There was the rattle of spurs and bits and the squeak of saddle leather as horses were reined to an abrupt halt. But, because the windows of this room faced north, Larry could not see any of the riders, who were all on the south side of the house.

Jake Farr, of course, could see them. The possemen would naturally believe that he had stepped to the open door to look out. Already someone was shooting a question at him in a tense, grim voice:

"Hi, Jake. About that fagged-out hoss there. You see the reptile who was ridin' it? Where'd he go?"

Jake cleared his throat loudly. On edge, Larry waited to hear his reply. The bandit was holding his breath. His eyes, glaring at the helpless youth, looked as merciless and cold as a gray wolf's.

"Wh— Hello, sheriff," said Jake. "What's up?"

"He's stallin'," rasped the bandit, in a whisper. "But he won't dare to—"

The sheriff was explaining to Jake,

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his choppy words running together, "Outlaw Trig Hall robbed the bank back in Hillside. Killed Curtin McAndrews in cold blood. We hit his trail, pronto. He outrode us, but that's his loss. You must have seen him, Jake. Talk fast. Where'd he go?"

In the next sliced second Larry made up his mind he'd grapple with the outlaw. He was sure to be shot, yet he might stop the snaky bandit from killing Jake Farr, and the posse would be sure to get their man! However, to the kid's surprise, Jake was saying:

"Sure I seen him. He throwed his gun on me, then grabbed him a fresh hoss and fogged east. You must've sighted—"

"Grabbed a fresh hoss here!" the sheriff clipped. "We sorta figured that when we caught sight of that rider away in the distance. It must be the bandit. Come on, men. We'll get 'im yet."

With a thunderous rush of hoofs the lawman and the posse swept out of the yard even faster than they had poured into it.

Larry thought, "That proves how resourceful and brave Jake is in a pinch! He couldn't think of one thing to do to turn the tables. But . . . I couldn't either."

"It worked!" Trig Hall exulted in a low voice. "It worked! What a break for me that a rider was headin' away from this ranch!"

He motioned Larry out into the kitchen, and after a swift, furtive look through a window to make sure that every one of the posse was gone, he ordered the youth to tie Jake hand and foot.

"No!" flared Larry.

"Either that or I'll plug you!"

"Go ahead and shoot! If I had a gun—"

"Good thing you haven't! You'd be dead'n a mackerel," snapped

Jake. "Do as the buzzard says, Kansas."

"So you're a young fire-eater, huh?" The bandit snorted contemptuously. "Tie the old coot pronto or I'll shot *him*."

"That makes it different," Larry muttered.

Trig Hall tossed him a couple of pigging strings and Larry tied Jake's ankles and wrists. He did it right, too, because the bandit stood over him with menacing six-shooter.

"Now what?" the Kansas youth asked.

"You'll drift along ahead of me through the house and the bunkhouse and we'll collect all the shootin' irons. And don't try to hold out on me!"

THERE was a rifle in the house, and Jake Farr's short gun in its holster was in the bunkhouse. Larry could figure no way of stopping the bandit from getting both weapons. Trig Hall rendered them useless by using the woodpile ax to bend their barrels. Larry was compelled to stand helplessly by while this was being done. If only he were a man full-grown and a match for the burly outlaw, he'd tear into him despite Hall's gun.

"Now unsaddle my hoss," Trig Hall commanded. "Make it snappy! Lug my saddle to the barn."

Larry carried the man's saddle and bridle and saddle blanket to the stable. The saddle was a prime one, just the kind Larry wanted. But he didn't think much about that, for he now realized that the bandit was going to steal a horse.

What would Paddy Young say and think and do if Trig Hall got away with Paddy's new sorrel horse named Comet? Naturally Paddy had told Larry several things about that horse and, recalling those things, the Kansas youth had an idea!

Keeping close behind Larry, the

bandit observed with satisfaction, "Two hosses here in the barn, I see. Which one is the best, kid?"

"The sorrel, I reckon," said Larry. "But—" He stopped. He must be very careful of his words now, if his plan was to work.

"But what?"

"But I'm warnin' you, you better take the other horse—the bay."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean one of these nags is a ring-tailed outlaw. He can turn it on plenty strong."

"Hogwash! You're stallin'. And I'm in a hurry to get gone before the posse overtakes that rider and then fogs back this way. Untie the sorrel and—"

"You'd better believe me, hombre. Take the bay hoss," Larry cut in forcefully.

"Are you tryin' to tell me the sorrel's the unbroke buckin' hoss and the bay's gentle?"

"That's just what I'm tryin' to tell you! Take the bay." Larry stepped quickly up to the bay horse's stall and slapped it sharply on its rump. "Get over!"

The bay let out a wild snort, jumped and kicked. As a swinging hoof narrowly missed Larry, he dodged back and turned to face Trig Hall with a quite rueful expression on his young face.

Larry said very quickly: "Course this bay hoss is a mite snorty, but he's just bluffin'. He . . . he does it for fun."

The bandit measured him with narrowed eyes. In that instant Trig Hall looked as wise as a fox and as wily as a wolf. "Oh, yeah?" he said softly. "The play don't work, cub. You'd sure like to see me get piled in a heap offn a bad hoss. But you ain't very smart! Saddle that sorrel, and hustle!"

Larry shrugged and backed the sorrel out of its stall. "Wish I had a

saddle like yourn," he said. "It's a humdinger! Pretty near new, too. Just broke in nice."

"Yeah?" The outlaw grinned crookedly. "Waal, I'll bet that sher-iff'd give my top-hand saddle to you—if you was to tie me up for him. Har! Fat chance you got of doin' that!"

He looked to see that the sorrel was properly cinched and bridled, then snapped: "Lead that bay bad egg outside and turn 'im loose."

"Wh-why?"

"That posse'll be back here, sure. One of 'em might be able to ride that bay bunch o' snorts and I don't want no fresh hoss on my smokin'-hot trail. Get him out and turn him loose."

NASMUCH he could not refuse, Larry backed the bay out of its stall and took off its halter. Snorting and shying, the horse scooted out through the door.

Trig Hall gave Larry a slanting look freighted with sardonic amusement: "Now that you're plumb afoot and gunless, I reckon your teeth are pulled, kid."

The bandit led the sorrel outside, threw a glance at the house, where Jake Farr had somehow managed to wriggle to the door and was sitting up in it, glaring across the yard. Hall threw another glance eastward across the valley, assuring himself that the posse was not in sight, and then he swung to saddle. "So long, cub. You and the old coot have been a big help to me. I'd like to listen in when the law hawk hears how I put it over on you hombres and on him!"

Larry's lower jaw dropped. Yes, Sheriff Burns would have plenty to say, all bitterly sarcastic, if Trig Hall escaped. And now the bandit was mounted and moving away. Larry's one hope of thwarting him began to die. Nevertheless, he turned back

into the stable to get a rope—for which he might yet have use.

He picked up a lariat, and while his back was still turned he heard a noise, whirled and raced to the door.

The sorrel, its head buried between its front legs, its back bowed into a horseshoe arch, was "turning it on"—bucking berserkly.

Larry yelled encouragement as the horse shot up in the air, then plummeted to earth, landing with terrific impact and with front feet thrown slantwise. The horse was up again and down again all in a second, and now Larry clearly saw the set, strained, thunderstruck face of the bandit. It seemed that Trig Hall saw the Kansas youth in that self-same instant, for Hall's lips moved as if he were swearing at Larry. He was no longer as wise as a fox and wily as a wolf. He now knew he had been outsmarted!

The sorrel squealed as it swapped ends and thudded to earth with a spine-cracking jolt. Larry heard Jake cheering the horse. But he had eyes only for the bucking horse and its rider. This rider was in bad trouble. Trig Hall's head was snapping back and forth as if his neck were hinged; he'd been jolted halfway out of his saddle; he had lost one stirrup. He was frantically reaching now for leather.

But his groping right hand could not find the saddlehorn. At the next terrific pitch the horse hurled the bandit high into the air. Trig Hall landed on his head, turned over in a somersault, and his body thumped the earth soundly.

The sorrel stopped almost at once and raised its head, looking at the fallen man, and—Larry always afterward believed—laughing in horse language.

Meanwhile, the kid from Kansas raced to the thrown bandit and made good use of the lariat!

[T was nearly two hours before Sheriff Burns and the posse came riding back to the Kite Ranch, a most disgusted and disgruntled bunch of men. Broncbuster Paddy Young, looking very somber, was with them. Eight dust-coated, weary men, on leg-weary horses, they entered the yard—and stared with bewilderment as Larry and Jake Farr prodded Trig Hall out of the barn for them to see.

"You . . . you nailed him?" the sheriff gasped.

"Yep. Me and the kid caught him," crowed Jake. "We figured you all'd be back. Got a late dinner a-waitin' for you, too. But afore I forget it, sheriff, can you fix it so's Larry here'll get this dirty killer's saddle?"

"Get Trig Hall's saddle? You bet I can fix it so Larry'll get it! He'll get more'n that. There'll be a couple hundred dollars reward for you two to split. Did the kid really help any, Jake?"

"Waal, yeah, he done pretty good. Though o' course it was me figured out the trick we'd use. 'Light off and I'll tell you all about it."

Larry, walking on air because he now was sure he would get the top-hand saddle, moved over to Paddy Young, looked up at the broncbuster with shining eyes, and said low: "It was really your sorrel bucking horse Comet that turned the trick for us. It's a good thing Comet is gentle to saddle and that the old bay wranglin' horse is snorty! I'll tell you the truth while Jake is spilling his big windy for the possemen. Telling the truth sure pays."

"What you gettin' at, kid?" asked Paddy.

"I told Trig Hall the truth about Comet. But Hall was so plumb certain I was trying to trick him that I knew he wouldn't believe me!"

THE END.

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: ¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers

Continued from page 95

1. It was a Pony Express station near Farson, Wyoming, and the Big Sandy River. In 1862 it was burned by Indians.
2. Brigham Young met Jim Bridger there in 1847. They conferred on westward routes and the best one to follow, also the possibility of a large and thriving population in the Great Salt Lake Valley.
3. In order, he means: Holding one foot under a horse's surcingle, scratching the horse with a spur on the other foot, then alternating; a narrow lane from which horses or cattle are led to be branded; a rest a rider permits a horse to recover its wind after great exertion, also the loss of a stirrup while riding.
4. They were pet cats which an enterprising gentleman of Cheyenne, Wyoming, employed small boys to capture at twenty-five cents per cat. The receiver of the abducted tabbies shipped them to Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1877, and there they were sold to pet-craving dance-hall girls at the price of twenty-five dollars the puss, irrespective of sex or age.
5. They cut open a bison they had killed, and drank the water contained in its stomach.
6. No. They are found in the Gros Ventre Mountains, the highest peaks of which rise to 12,000 feet.
7. It is a serenade of gunshots, banging of tin pans and general noise-making following a Western wedding, a custom originating in frontier days. The din is continued until the bride and groom invite the crowd in to be fed.
8. The Arapahoos occupy the Shoshone Reservation, and have dwelled there for sixty years. For this concession, the United States has paid the Shoshones more than four million dollars.
9. It includes 2,343,540 acres of Wyoming land, and is inhabited by 1,000 Arapahoos.
10. Yes. In 1913, a timber wolf in Wyoming was trained to carry mail over otherwise impassable snowdrifts.



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