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WEEKLY

AUG. 27, 1938

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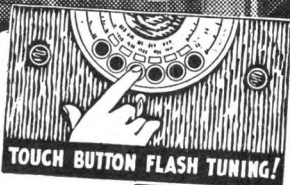
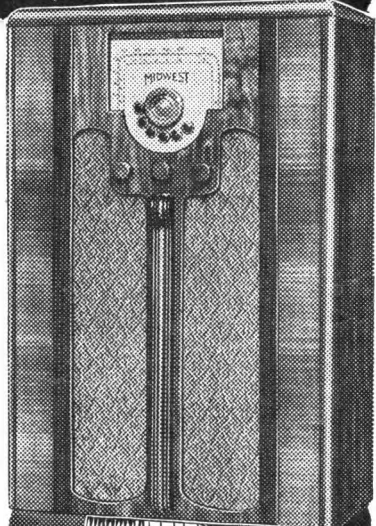
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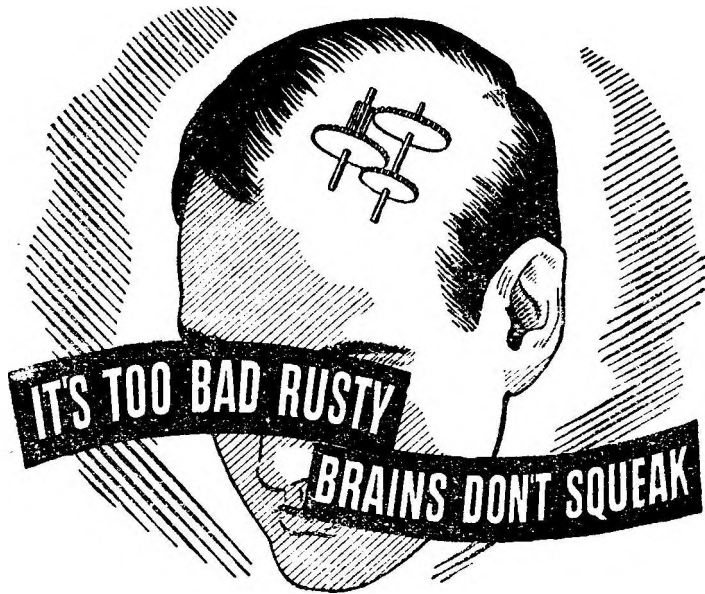
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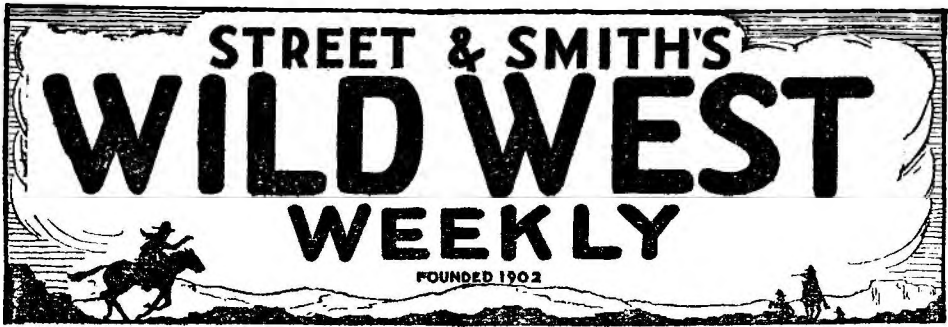
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Vol. 122, No. 1 CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 27, 1938 Whole No. 1871

Cover Picture—Scene from
 "The Cougar's Claws" Painted by Saunders

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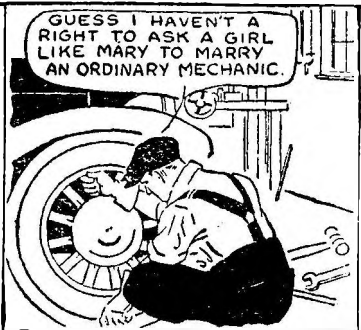
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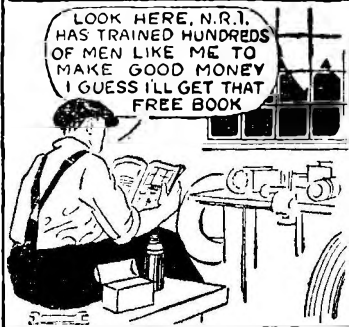
BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.



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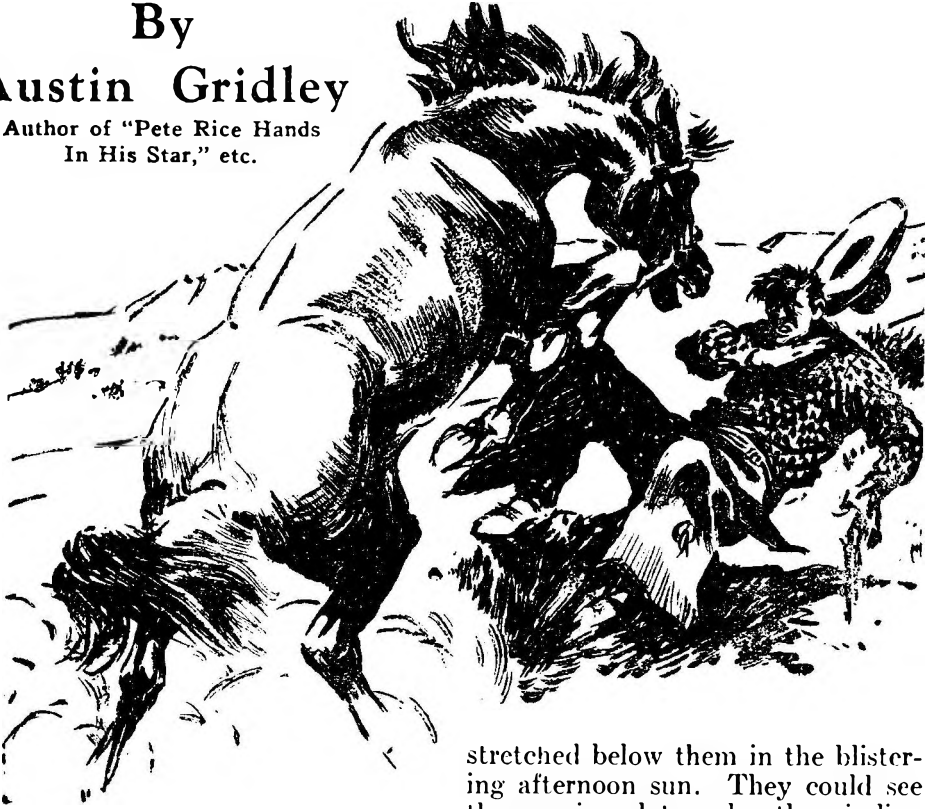


Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

The Cougar's Claws

By
Austin Gridley

Author of "Pete Rice Hands
In His Star," etc.



CHAPTER I.

A DEAD MAN RIDES.

BLACK shapes wheeled in the white-hot, metallic sky. They came down on lazy motionless wings, then lifted and wheeled some more. The death they knew was there puzzled them. The buzzards were close enough to see that the man's eyes were closed. But the horse was alive, and the dead man continued riding.

Two men were watching the black scavengers of death. They were crouched among scrub piñon at the lip of a sheer canyon cliff. Miles of shimmering desert bad lands

stretched below them in the blistering afternoon sun. They could see the moving dot under the circling buzzards.

One man held field glasses with a scuffed leather case to his smoky-gray eyes. His lanky, powerful body stiffened. His broad mouth tightened to a straight line. Grim lips shaped a bitter, silent oath as a hard hand pushed back a cowlick from his tanned, sweat-wet forehead.

"Reckon Jim Jones guessed it rightly, Misery," he said between clenched teeth. "The Cougar's struck again. An' there's a heap more to it than just runnin' beef tuh the border. See what yuh think."

The second man was undersized and scrawny. His wizened face was

Pete Rice falls into the hands of the cruelest of killers, an' he l'arns what torture kin mean.



lost under the big Stetson he wore. He took the field glasses and peered through them, getting the right focus. Then his small body shook all over.

"Howlin' calamity, Pete!" he gritted. "Them flyin' pallbearers doan't nowise make mistakes! The hoss is still fresh, but the thing in the saddle shore looks like one o' them gypsy mummies!"

"Like them other uns," said the lanky man. "It's a bet that's the missin' Crescent U waddy, wrapped in green bullhide an' his innards squeezed plumb fatal by that furnace sun."

The lanky man took the glasses again. He lifted his ten-gallon hat brim to have another look. He was Pete Rice, sheriff of Trinchera County. He was noted as a lawman far outside his county and his State of Arizona.

The little man, still shivering over

the ghastly thing he had seen, was Deputy Lawrence Michael Hicks. He was known as "Misery" Hicks, and when he wasn't following Sheriff Pete Rice on some danger trail, he was the barber of Buzzard Gap, the county-seat town.

"He's ridin' straight fer the trail over this top pass," stated Sheriff Pete. "Them vultures won't start peekin' so long as the cayuse is movin'. Low we could ride down an' meet 'im, but there ain't much chance o' cuttin' back-trail sign in them desert rocks."

Pete Rice removed the field glasses. His smoky-gray eyes were the only part of him that moved in the next ten seconds. A metallic glint off to one side among the scrub piñon had caught his keen vision.

Pete Rice knew instantly it would be unnecessary to cut for sign on the back trail of the dead man rid-

ing up from the desert. One glint of metal showed, then another, and another. The dull rocks among the piñon never could reflect the sun like that.

Those glinting objects must be gun barrels. They were in a half circle among the rocks and scrub trees. With the silence and stealth of the mountain cat that had given him his name, the "Cougar" and his outlaws had crept upon Pete Rice and his deputy. The position of the gleaming guns told the lawman that they were cut off at the rim of the sheer two-hundred-foot canyon wall.

Yet such was the cold nerve of Pete Rice that he gave no immediate sign of his discovery. Only one hand reached slowly to touch the leg of Misery Hicks. The sheriff's mouth shaped whispered words as he passed the field glasses to Misery.

"Talk fast an' loud," said the whisper. "Cuss the Cougar some, an' say we'll have tuh get Hopi Joe tuh track 'im down."

Misery Hicks had steel nerves strung in his runty frame. That was why he was one of Pete Rice's deputies. So he didn't ask why. He could cuss an' he did, loudly. Saying what a tough job it would be cutting trail sign back across the desert bad lands.

Pete Rice agreed with him in a hard voice. But his hands slid down casually to the butts of the .45s slung low on his hips. There was not so much as a click or a rustle of movement in that sinister half circle of guns. The lawman's eyes were apparently still fixed upon the lazily wheeling buzzards.

But Pete Rice saw the small-eared head with the short-cropped hair that lifted in a cleft of rocks. The face appeared. Except that it was free of hair, it was remarkably

like that of the cowardly mountain cat that stalks prey weaker than itself.

The nose was broad and flat. The eyes, even at a distance, seemed to glow. The forehead sloped abruptly. Pete Rice knew he was looking at the Cougar himself. The Cougar, who always struck in isolated canyon meadows. Who ran off only small herds of beef. Who had been sending back riders bound upon their horses—riders wrapped and tortured to death in green bullhide that had dried in the desert sun.

This latest dead rider was coming closer now. The black scavengers of the sky were wheeling in toward the tall cliff. The dead waddy's pony was drooping, but he was starting up the trail that passed close by in the scrub piñon back of the cliff's edge.

Pete Rice knew that the Cougar and his outlaws must have spotted Misery Hicks and himself when they ascended the canyon butte. That meant that they had probably been stalked for more than an hour. Their horses were ground tied back beyond the trail, otherwise Pete Rice's big sorrel, Sonny, would have nickered a warning.

Pete Rice gave no sign that he had seen the Cougar's face. He took the glasses again from Misery Hicks. His hand was as steady as a piñon stub.

"Would yuh look at what's been done to that pore devil!" he grated through his teeth, loud enough to be heard by the ambushers.

The rider coming up from the desert had suffered a horrible death. His legs were bound down to the girth straps of the saddle. Clothing had been stripped from his body above the waist. Broad strips of green bullhide were wrapped tightly about him. They inclosed his ribs

and his arms, and circled his throat.

The blazing sun had dried and tightened the rawhide as he rode. He had no doubt been alive when he had started his last ride back to the Crescent U. Now his face and head were swollen enormously. The squeezing bullhide had slowly choked him to death.

It was difficult for even the cold-nerved Pete Rice to restrain his mounting rage. But he had to do it now. His keen brain was seeking any slight scrap of advantage that might be gained. Misery Hicks and he had been silently, hopelessly ambushed, or so it seemed. They were out in the open at the rim of the cliff. The Cougar and his outlaws were well protected by the rocks.

One false move, the slightest hint that he had become aware of the dry-gulchers, and he and Misery would be blasted into eternity. There was no shelter to be had among the scrubby piñon, and the outlaws held the nearest jutting boulders. After his swift, cautious look-see, the head of the Cougar had disappeared.

Pete Rice had survived more than one tight spot because he could use his head. He used it now. The Cougar had proved he was an inhuman torturer, but he could not torture dead men. Then this creeping ambush could mean only that the Cougar wanted to take the lawman and his barber-deputy alive.

Pete Rice acted upon this belief. There was a slight crevasse at the edge of the cliff, just big enough for Misery Hicks to get into.

"Don't move now, Misery," whispered Pete. "Keep lookin' at the dead rider. But when somethin' starts, scrooch into that crack."

Then Pete stood up. He spoke loudly now.

"Watch that them vultures don't

start peckin', Misery! I'll be catchin' up the hosses, an' we'll ride down to meet that pore devil!"

Misery Hicks obeyed implicitly. He kept looking at the desert. Pete Rice stretched his cramped legs, then started walking slowly toward the rocks a few yards away. His bony hands swung loosely, as free of guns as if he believed no living enemy to be within miles.

Six steps and he muttered, "Blame it all!" He kicked one boot as if a pebble had got into the top. His back was to the ambushers in the rocks as he pulled off the boot and shook it. Putting the boot back on, he rose again.

Pete Rice resumed walking. He could almost hear the chuckle of satisfaction that must have been in the throats of the outlaws. Then he was passing carelessly around the rock where he had seen the Cougar's head.

The Cougar must have been sure that his slinking ambush had been a complete success. He was a lean, lithe man himself. He shot up with a six-gun reversed in his hand as Pete Rice stepped past his concealing rocks.

The Cougar's butted gun rose and fell. Pete would have been batted into oblivion if it had landed. But Pete's head was not there. He had twisted sidewise and pivoted. One bony fist shot up and crossed over the Cougar's hard chin with a crack like rock meeting rock.

"Scrooch down, Misery!" yelled Pete. "Hold yore fire!"

Pete's steel fingers had clamped on the Cougar's gun wrist as he struck. The Cougar spat out a surprised oath as his head was driven back. His gun hand was trapped. The Colt bounced on the rocks as Pete applied a viselike wrench.

"Git 'em, Cougar!" shouted one

of his men. "We'll take keer o' thet other law skunk!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The outlaws started blasting and cursing. Even as the Cougar slammed a hard knee into his stomach, Pete saw that Misery had dropped from view. Lead was splattering and leaving gray streaks around the crack at the rim of the cliff. Misery poked up a gun and it flamed. One of the outlaws reared into view, then flopped on his face.

Misery didn't miss often, but he failed to see two men crawling toward him on the rim.

Though the Cougar's knee had partly driven out his breath, Pete hit him again. The Cougar's nose became flatter, but the Cougar was a strong man. He crossed over a left that pounded Pete's ear and dizzied him. Pete countered by burying his knuckles under the Cougar's ribs.

Pete could see that there must be a dozen outlaws in the rocks. He was safe from their guns for the moment, being tangled with the Cougar. As the outlaw leader doubled over from the punch to his stomach, Pete's .45 whipped into his hand. He jammed it into the Cougar's thick neck.

"Tell yore men tuh drop their irons pronto, or I'm drillin' yuh plumb permanent!" rasped Pete.

He was holding the Cougar by one of his small ears. The bore of the Colt was biting into the flesh under his hair. The Cougar emitted a gasping oath. He might have been as game as he was cruel, but he knew sudden death when he saw it in Pete's smoky eyes.

"Hold up!" he squawked. "Drop yore——"

He never finished the command. A bearded, beady-eyed outlaw let out a coarse, roaring laugh.

"Pete Rice hain't doin' no drillin'!" he mocked loudly. "If he does, his pack-rat depity's shore'nough buzzard meat on them rocks down thar!"

CHAPTER II.

BAIT FOR THE BUZZARDS.

PETE RICE let his hand slowly relax. His gun left the Cougar's neck and dropped to the ground. The Cougar put out a hand and took Pete's other .45 from its leather. He slapped his knuckles across Pete's grim mouth; still the sheriff kept silent. Crimson oozed from a cut lip.

"Yuh got tuh have brains when yuh start buckin' the Cougar's owl-hoots, an' yuh'll find it don't pay to come honin' in!" jeered the Cougar.

"Yuh hold the cards fer the minute," said Pete with deadly calmness. "But the game ain't nowise played out. Yuh can bring 'im up."

The one and only thing that could have stopped Pete Rice at the minute had happened. Misery Hicks was trapped. A lass' rope of woven hair had been looped swiftly around his ankles and the other end wrapped around a piñon. Only his waving feet projected above the rim of the two-hundred-foot cliff.

The beady-eyed outlaw who had guffawed and upset Pete's stratagem was standing beside the taut lariat. A dark-faced mestizo was holding a sharp knife across the rope. The black shapes of the buzzards that had followed the dead waddy from the Crescent U were wheeling in closer to the cliff.

Already the eyes of the scavengers were upon the dead outlaw who had been gunned down by Misery Hicks. Likewise the wise vultures were watching the body of Misery Hicks as he hung head downward.

"Don't yuh pay no attention to 'em, Pete!" came Misery's thin but defiant voice from below the cliff's rim.

Misery could not see that Pete already had dropped his gun. The pint-size barber-deputy was as game as they came, even though he was looking at the jagged rocks of the canyon and the blood rushing to his head was making him dizzy.

There was sudden, cruel craftiness in the Cougar's glowing black eyes.

"So yuh think yuh'd maybe outsmart the Cougar?" he taunted. "Yuh been the law in Trinchera County fer so long, yuh think yuh can't be licked, huh? So yuh wasn't smart enough tuh stay outn the Bajadas an' the Lumas Negras! This yere's the Cougar country, Pete Rice, an' it'll allus stay that way!"

Pete Rice's smoky-gray eyes could not be read. He was thinking bitterly. And he had to admit that the Cougar's reign in the Lumas Negras range of the Bajada Mountains near the border had extended, off and on, over more than five years. Five years before, the Cougar had first struck in Trinchera County.

Then the Cougar and his outlaws had disappeared. They had come back only a few weeks before. Come back to bring death and terror into the small grama-grass kingdom—a kingdom created by abundant water and pasture in a few small valleys of the towering Lumas Negras range.

"So yuh think we'll be pullin' up that ornery, hair-cuttin' depity o' yours?" went on the Cougar mockingly. "Ho! Pete Rice! Yuh bin the cause o' more'n one jasper swingin', an' I'm thinkin' we'll be passellin' out some o' the same

medicine! Bring that thar bullhide, Bart!"

Pete Rice was never a man to waste words. He didn't resist when he was seized and the bullhide was brought. The odds were overpowering. He saw what was coming. It would be foolish to invite having his senses knocked out; he was going to need them.

The bullhide strip was no doubt of the same kind as that wrapped around the dead waddy who had come riding back. Pete saw the dead man now, his pony having halted on the trail not far away. A steer's hide had been cut green into a single broad strip, making a rope of it. The Cougar watched, thin lips curled back from his teeth, as the end of the strip was secured around Pete's ankles.

"Lower that depity some more!" rasped the Cougar. "These two have been the cause of others swingin' side by side by the neck! But thet wouldn't be nowise fit fer the great Pete Rice! No, sir! In a minute now, Mister Sheriff o' Trinchera County, yuh'll be buzzard bait bakin' in the sun!"

Rough hands shoved Pete Rice to the rim of the cliff. Misery Hicks was swaying, turning, the length of a lass' rope below. Strung by the ankles, his Stetson was gone, and the white sun was beating fiercely upon his head and face.

"Jest tuh pay yuh back fer that lick on the nose!" grunted the Cougar. "But not so's yuh'll miss any o' seein' them buzzards waitin'."

His knuckles smashed into Pete's nose. Pete went over backward off the rim of the cliff. It felt as if his leg bones had been jerked from their sockets as the bullhide snapped taut. But that hide was tough, much stronger than any hair rope would have been.

Then Pete's body was swaying like a pendulum. He was hanging only a few feet from Misery Hicks. The voices of the Cougar and his men were jeering from above.

"See them buzzards, Pete Rice? While they're waitin' fer the feed that's comin' due, yuh'll be cookin' fer 'em in thet sun!"

"We ought tuh made yuh strip yore duds, but we hain't got the time! Got a little business waitin'!"

"Buzzard Gap'll be wonderin' what's 'come o' the law when we git the Bonanza River stage an' help curselss to a passell o' grulla stock out of Uncle Johnny James's hoss corral!"

The taunting jeers of the Cougar's dozen outlaws floated down. Pete Rice heard only the words of the Cougar himself. So they were planning to hold up the gold shipment on the Bonanza River stage. A raid was in prospect on the grulla horse corrals of crippled "Uncle Johnny" James, at the head of the Lamas Negras grass range?

"Jiminettec, boss!" groaned Misery Hicks, as Pete swung facing him. "Yuh ought tuh lemme go! Now I get you into this!"

"Ease your mind, Misery," said Pete quietly. "It just goes tuh prove yuh never should underestimate the other feller. I should 'a' done a heap more figgerin' afore I walked into a trap. Foresight's got hindsight beat every time."

The outlaws were still talking loudly. Pete checked Misery from more talk with a lifted hand. The Cougar's harsh voice floated down.

"You two hombres kin high-tail fer the desert below Hopi Crick," said the Cougar. "Yuh'll meet Trig Ramer thar, an' he's the fastest gun slick this side o' the line. Yuh'll be up down thar tuh-night an' meet the stage come 'long noon tuh-

morrer. The rest o' us'll lay low an' raid the Uncle Johnny corrals after dark. Yuh'll bring Trig Ramer back with the passell o' gold out o' Bonanza, an' we ain't cuttin' the boss in on the gold neither."

Though he was upside down, that did not keep excitement from Misery Hicks's wizened face.

"Yuh hear that, Pete?" he said. "They're plannin' to stick up the stage, an' grab off some new saddle stock from Uncle Johnny James. If there was only some way we could make out to git word to Teeny!"

That was Misery Hicks, forgetting for the moment his own plight. "Teeny" was William Alamo Butler, Pete Rice's other deputy. He made up in size what Misery lacked, and then some, for he weighed better than three hundred pounds and stood well above six feet. And right now Teeny Butler was on his way to the mountain-meadow horse ranch of Uncle Johnny James, having been sent there by Pete Rice.

"I'm afraid that, for the time, Misery, we have another problem tuh consider," advised Pete dryly. "As for example, how long we'll be spinnin' on our heads before them dratted buzzards find out our eyes are closed."

"Great Jasper!" grunted Misery. "I reckon that's so, Pete!"

Misery lapsed into silence while he considered this.

Pete Rice was listening intently. The voices of the Cougar's dozen outlaws were fading out. Pete heard the angry squeal of a horse and smiled grimly.

The Cougar had come upon Pete's big sorrel, Sonny, and Sonny never took kindly to any one but Pete. But Pete could hear Sonny being led away. Then the voices of the outlaws died out altogether. Pete and Misery were alone with the

wise, repulsive buzzards and the blistering sun of Arizona.

If ever a hombre was in position to do some fast thinking, Pete Rice was that hombre. His head had begun to clear after the first rush of blood. He judged that his loose-jointed frame was still intact though aching in every bone. The temperature in the desert sun was somewhere around one hundred and ten. Pete's and Misery's hats were gone and the heat beat down upon their unprotected faces.

Their plight seemed hopeless. Soon the heat would get them. Already Pete's body was passing from pain to drowsiness. The squawking of the black, watching birds was like the gobbling of turkeys. At any distance, the scavengers could see their eyes. Let those eyes close, and the buzzards would swoop in and begin their pecking.

Their tortured finish would be fully as horrible as that of the waddies who had been bound in green rawhide. Pete Rice was considering their presence here. Five years before, the Cougar had raided this same Lumas Negras region. The same cruelty had been practiced upon captured riders.

The Cougar had raided isolated mountain meadows. He had driven off young beef. Riders had been captured, and they had come riding back dead, just like this rider today. Uncle Johnny James had lost his big ranch at that time. He had been shot in the back and paralyzed.

"Checkers" Morgan, another big rancher, had lost some beef and one of his riders had come back dead and tortured. Uncle Johnny had retired to a mountain meadow where, with a niece, Mary James, he had existed by trapping mountain grulla broncs. Then the Cou-

gar's outlaws had vanished before Sheriff Pete Rice of Buzzard Gap could find a trail.

Five years had passed. About a month ago the Cougar had come back. Jim Jones, owner of the Crescent U brand, had reported to Pete Rice that, in a month, three of his small pocket herds had been driven off. And three riders had come riding back, tortured and dead.

Pete Rice had arrived in the rich grama-grass valleys of the Lumas Negras range with Misery Hicks and his other deputy, Teeny Butler. The fourth raid had taken place; the fourth rider had disappeared. When Pete Rice and his deputies arrived at the Crescent U, they were told that Jim Jones had ridden up to Uncle Johnny James's horse ranch to see Mary James.

Pete Rice had sent Teeny Butler on to Uncle Johnny's ranch to bring Jim Jones. Then Pete and Misery had set about seeking a trail sign of the Cougar on this fourth and latest raid. They had cut some sign. They had seen the fourth rider coming back, bound in dried bullhide.

And the Cougar had ambushed them, and struck. This flashed through Pete's dizzying brain. It brought everything up to this minute and time, except that two things had been added. Pete now knew that the Bonanza River stage's monthly consignment of gold was to be seized.

Pete Rice had just heard the Cougar say that "the boss" was not in on this. It supplied a new thought. The shrewd sheriff had suspected there must be some reason back of the torturing of captured waddies. Jim Jones had reported he was ready to quit the Crescent U. If he could have hired more riding hands,

he would not expose more men to the terror of torture.

There were now two big ranches remaining in the grama-grass valleys of the Lumas Negras, the Crescent U and the C M brand, owned by Checkers Morgan. One of Checkers Morgan's small herds had been run off into the bad lands. And one of his riders also had been sent back, squeezed to death in a bullhide shroud.

Misery Hicks broke in on Pete's thinking.

"I had the misery all over when they dropped me down," wailed the barber-deputy. "Now I ain't got no misery worth speakin' about."

Pete Rice was beginning to feel the same way. A numbness was creeping over him. He tried flexing his muscles. His arms felt as heavy as lead. All sounds of the outlaws had died away. Pete's eyes wanted to close. He looked at the circling buzzards and snapped them open.

CHAPTER III.

PETE RICE NEVER QUILTS.

MISERY HICKS must have closed his eyes. A black shape soared toward him. Pistol Pete Rice yelled suddenly. The buzzard veered off, moving on broad wings without effort.

"Lemme alone," mumbled Misery.

The beating sun was having its effect. The heat was clogging his brain. He had ceased to sway. His body hung as inertly as a sack at the end of the hair rope.

Pete Rice's own yelling voice seemed to give him new life. The torture of the sun was blistering. It was like being suspended head downward over a furnace. The pain of the bullhide around his ankles had given way to a deadening numbness.

The space beside the canyon wall was windless. Pete's eyeballs felt as if they had been scoured with sand. He could see the jagged rocks far below. He was compelled to think, against his will, how much quicker it would have been to have been dropped straight upon those rocks.

"Get a hitch on yourself, Pete Rice," he muttered. "Yuh ain't no-wise dead yet."

Lifting his arms, his hands went over his clothes. Then he gave a yell that brought Misery out of stupor again.

"Look, Misery! I've got it!"

He was holding his horn-handled pocketknife in his hand. It had been left in a pocket.

"Yeah?" said Misery dully. "Yeah. Yuh mean the blamed buzzards won't git yuh? Yuh kin cut yourself loose, Pete, but yuh won't. Yuh can't git tuh me, anyway."

But Pete wasn't listening to Misery's sleepy, suicidal idea. He was attempting to double his lean, muscular body until his hands could reach his tied ankles. The movement thoroughly aroused Misery.

Pete was performing an amazing feat. He was going through the contortions of a man climbing up his own legs with his hands. He failed the first time and the second. Each time he dropped back he felt as though it were useless.

But the effort had warmed his muscles, had started his circulation again. The third time he tried, his hands gripped the green bullhide strip. He hung on tenaciously, pulling. The heat of the sun had helped. The bullhide had dried some, and his vising fingers found a hold.

Misery Hicks became goggle-eyed.

"Hey, boss!" he squealed. "Don't

try that! Yuh'll send yoreself tuh perdition on them rocks!"

But with every muscle strained to its utmost, averting his eyes from the space under him, Pete had sliced his knife into the middle of the wide rawhide strip. The hide was tough; a slip of the sharp blade and it would have been the finish. Cold sweat popped out, though it was immediately lapped up by the thirsty heat of the sun.

The first slit was cut. An agony of suspense ensued. In order to put a foot into that tricky step, Pete was forced to double himself and slice free the loop of hide around his ankles. The blade slipped through. For a long minute, it seemed, Pete was suspended by the grip of one hand on the bullhide.

The rocks two hundred feet below appeared to be leaping up at him. His single handhold slipped, and he was slowing sliding down, free of all restraint.

An effort to reach that first cut slit with a toe was a failure. His long body was dropping inch by inch. The grip of his fingers was insufficient to support his weight.

He could no longer reach the slit he had cut, with either foot.

Misery groaned loudly. "Pete! Pete!" he cried out. "Yuh caim't go! Grab on, Pete! Grab on!"

The slippery rawhide afforded no hold. Pete brought his knife hand up desperately. And the hand went through the slit already cut. He hung there a long half-minute, suspended by his arm and shoulder.

Misery had closed his eyes. He opened them and looked down. He didn't see Pete on the rocks below. He brought his gaze back to the rawhide. Then he shouted.

"Good boy, Pete! Now all yuh got tuh do is cut more slits!"

Yes, that was all he had to do.

Suspended by one arm, using the other hand, Pete accomplished the feat. He had two slits now and he could shift his weight off an arm that was rapidly becoming useless.

Minutes fled. It seemed like an age to Pete before he had cut four slits, climbing with his arms. He had to use care. One slip of the sharp blade to either side and the weakened strip would have parted.

The going became easier after he had managed to get a foot in the first slit he had cut. He had about twenty feet to climb, which meant as many slits a foot apart. The bullhide became slippery with the sweat of his hands. His breath was short and his thirsty, swollen tongue seemed to fill his throat.

Then he was at the edge of the cliff. The last ounce of his strength was required to pull himself to the level rock. He was forced to lie there for minutes before he had the strength to tackle the hair rope by which Misery was suspended.

They faced each other at last, safe on the top. Their bodies were beginning to throb with the pain of the reversed blood stream.

Misery panted: "I ain't never had no such good misery in all my life before."

All pains and aches, from whatever source, were "miseries" to the small barber-deputy. He concocted tonics in his Buzzard Gap barber shop for all the various miseries. Some were remarkably effective.

"We have no time tuh waste," stated Pete. "They've left yore nag, Misery, but the Cougar took Sonny. If I catch up with him an' find out he's mistreated that hoss, I'll personally hamstring him. Misery, yo're takin' yore cayuse an' ridin' tuh warn the driver o' the Bonanza River stage. If yuh go by

way o' Scissors canyon, yuh can meet it in the morning before it gets to Hopi Creek."

"If them owl-hooters hadn't took my guns, I'd hunt up this yere Trig Ramer they said was gonna hold up the stage," said Misery.

"Maybe it's just as well yuh ain't got yore irons," grinned Pete Rice. "Yuh can let the guard on the stage take care o' the gun play. I'm takin' the dead waddy's hoss an' makin' for Uncle Johnny's. If I take a short cut, I can be there 'fore dark. I'll meet up with Teny and Jim Jones, an' we'll have a hot reception ready for the Cougar."

Misery became downcast. The little deputy smelled a gun fight and he was being cut out of it to make a peaceable ride to warn the stage. Right there he made up his mind he would make it a point to meet up with this Cougar gun slick, "Trig" Ramer. But he didn't mention that to Pete Rice.

Pete and Misery swore through clenched teeth as they buried the tortured waddy under a pile of rocks where the buzzards could not get at the body. The cowboy's nag had stayed there, grazing near Misery's cayuse.

Five minutes after the hurried burial, Pete Rice and Misery Hicks rode off. Miraculously saved from death by torture, unarmed, one went to save the Bonanza River gold stage, and the other to meet the Cougar in his raid upon the grulla corrals of Uncle Johnny James.

Though he had seldom been in this Lunas Negras range country, Pete Rice was familiar with every short-cut trail. He felt certain he would be in time to see that the Cougar received a warm welcome in his proposed attempt to steal saddle stock.

The sun was dropping rapidly. Pete Rice rode the dead waddy's nag down into the cooler trail of the grass range. He debated turning aside to enlist Checkers Morgan and some of his riders, but decided too much time would be lost.

Pete's mind kept straying to the Cougar's reference to "a boss." It looped up with the fiendish torturing of range waddies. There must be a definite purpose in spreading terror. The outlaws were out for some greater reward than the price of the beef they ran over the border.

The sheriff made slow progress. His mount, the horse of the dead waddy, was pretty far spent. Pete didn't push him. He followed along deep, cool canyons, which were freshened by frequent water holes. Grama grass grew lush, making good pasturage.

Uncle Johnny's horse ranch was in a big grassy pocket at the head of a narrow twisting draw. This was the only open approach. Pete rode cautiously. He saw no signs of the Cougar and his outlaws. They were planning to raid the horse corrals after darkness came.

A steep, pointed shoulder of the canyon wall concealed the horse ranch. Pete was coming close to this. A tearing, animal scream broke from beyond the shoulder. When a man has once heard a mad stallion voice killing rage, he never mistakes it for any other sound.

The first scream was followed by others. They came from beyond the shoulder. Pete roweled his weary horse and the cayuse broke into a lope. The stallion was still screaming as Pete rounded the shoulder.

He first saw the rearing head and striking forefeet of a blue grulla stallion in a pole-bar corral. The grulla was the color of a blue crane

and had smoky eyes. The hoofs of his forefeet were driving into the poles of the corral.

Inside, between the killer horse and the bars, was the figure of a man. He was trapped between the striking animal and the poles. But he was alive, for his high, cracked voice was filling the air with lurid lingo.

"Yuh blamed off-color hunk o' hoss meat!" came his yell. "Git 'im or I'll lambast the livin' daylight out o' yuh!"

Pete sent his mount leaping ahead as the stallion's killer screams echoed from the mountain walls. Crippled Uncle Johnny, whose legs were paralyzed, was inside the corral fence.

CHAPTER IV.

TEENY TURNS RATTLER.

ANOTHER hombre heard the killer scream of the blue grulla stallion. He cut off his singing, and reined up sharply. He was a man who would have made a sway-back of an ordinary horse. There was more than three hundred pounds of him overflowing a special saddle.

But the blood bay gelding he rode was as big a horse as he was a man. The pair of them took up a lot of space. For the rider was Teeny Butler, the giant deputy of Pete Rice. When he wasn't mad, he had a smooth, placid face. His voice, when he spoke or sang, had the soft drawl of the Lone Star State.

Sometimes his voice stayed soft when he was mad clear through. That fooled a lot of tough hombres. His weight fooled them, too. For he had catlike muscles under his bulging layers of fat.

Teeny had taken the wrong fork at a canyon creek. He had been sent ahead to find Jim Jones at Uncle Johnny's hoss ranch. Now

he was not far from the ranch, but he was cut off from it by a steep, spiny ridge. He had been hopelessly astray for two hours.

The stallion's scream came from beyond the spine ridge. There was no possible trail over or through it. Teeny pulled up and cursed a little under his breath. He realized he would have to ride back several miles to find the horse-ranch trail.

"Ah allus knowed Ah was dumb," he muttered. "Seems as how I keep on gittin' dumbah. If that snake-tongued barbah finds out Ah got mahself lost, he——"

Whatever he might have feared from the sharp tongue of Misery Hicks was abruptly forgotten. Teeny was in a space thick with cholla cactus and scrub trees. The wall of the steep cliff appeared to be broken by washed-out caves. He still heard the far-away screams of the stallion, but there was something else.

"Now I bet Ah done got mahself in a jam," murmured Teeny.

Steel-shod hoofs clinked on the rocks. Hoarse voices muttered.

Teeny swiftly judged that nearly a dozen riders were approaching. He reined the blood bay into the nearest scrub thicket. The dropping sun made the shadows deep.

"We'll hole up here an' give the nags a breathin' spell," growled a strange voice. "After we run off thet new grulla stock, we'll be havin' fresh hosses."

"Pears tuh me, Cougar, thet big sorrel o' Pete Rice's is fresh enough," said another voice.

"Yup!" spat out the leading rider, as they rode into view. "He's plenty ornery, but when I git 'im tamed, I'm keepin' 'im fer myself!"

Teeny Butler had his first glimpse then of the flat-nosed Cougar. The ugly outlaw leader was

riding a big, restless sorrel. And Pete Rice's horse was making every effort to get the bit between his teeth. He had been doing that for the past two hours.

Teeny's blood bay recognized Sonny. Only a tightened rein kept him from nickering. But there wasn't any rein on Teeny Butler, and he was suddenly sick and mad all over. Something had happened to Pete Rice and Misery Hicks. The Cougar was handling Pete's horse with a rough and cruel hand.

Teeny never had been noted for any especially good judgment. When he was mad he didn't have any to speak of. He didn't even take time to count the eight or ten riders stringing behind the Cougar.

"Git yo' greasy hands offn thet Sonny hoss!" he yelled.

His spurs raked the sides of the blood bay. He charged from the thicket with all the roaring noise and weight of a thunderbolt. Teeny never counted the odds against him. One big hand had closed over the butt of a long whip hooked on his hull.

Teeny called the whip his "bull-whacker." It was a bull whip with a long and heavy lash. In Teeny's hand it was as effective at short range as another hombre's six-gun.

Before the startled outlaws could get their seared, rearing horses under control, the long whip lashed out. The end of its heavy lash cracked like a rifle. The Cougar let out a howl of pain and surprise. The lash had wrapped around his thick neck. He was being snapped from Sonny's saddle as he yelled.

Teeny's charging blood bay rushed on past. The Cougar somersaulted to the ground. He squawked loudly, making an effort to draw his shooting irons. The bull-whacker was ripped free.

Teeny's big arm snapped out. The whiplash rifted again and a good chunk came off one of the Cougar's small ears.

Pete Rice's Sonny horse squealed, reared, whirled on his hind legs and saved Teeny's life. The two nearest outlaws had dragged out their irons. The guns belched. But Sonny hit on all fours, running. His plunging weight knocked over the gunmen and their nags. Then Sonny settled down to do some real running, back down the trail.

"It's another'n' of them fool Pete Rice depities!" yelled a beady-eyed white outlaw, the same who had sent Misery Hicks over the cliff. "Git 'im alive! We'll give 'im the same dose we handed Pete Rice!"

Teeny had seen his mistake. He was big and fast, but there was only one of him. His one-man war was due to end in disaster. The slashing whip kept the Cougar too busy to draw his guns. Teeny dived toward him in an effort to use him as a shield. Guns cracked and lead plucked at Teeny's body.

Teeny's left hand filled with a six-gun. Though he did it fast, he put lead carefully into the legs of two outlaws, and one tumbled from the hull. The horses were plunging. Teeny always disliked shooting a horse. That was his undoing.

The cursing Cougar reared to his feet. His hands at last dived for his guns. Teeny snapped the bull whip over and slammed its butt across the Cougar's flat nose. The outlaw leader's encounters with Pete Rice's outfit were beginning to scramble his features a lot.

The Cougar went down and Teeny lunged and rolled with him. The beady-eyed outlaw sent his horse forward. Teeny snapped his six-gun around, but his only target was a pair of descending, iron-shod

hoofs. He was hit a glancing blow on the head. His Colt and his whip fell from nerveless hands.

Teeny's one-man war was ended.

When he awoke, Teeny Butler felt as if he had been buried alive. Either that, or he had died and was already where Misery Hicks always said he would end up. Anyway, it was hot. He could not move at first.

His big body and his arms were tightly bound with green bullhide. His massive legs were wrapped with rope. A piñon-knot fire was burning close to him. The heat was drying the rawhide and it was tightening, viselike, on his arms and ribs.

He heard the voice of the Cougar outside.

"Yuh stick right here, Ramo, until we git back with them grullas offn Uncle Johnny's ranch," he ordered. "Then we'll be cuttin' Jim Jones loose an' high-tailin' it tuh meet that gold offn the stage. The big depity o' Pete Rice's'll be jest so much more buzzard bait by thet time."

The Cougar and his men mounted and rode away. Teeny saw another man tied with a lass' rope on the other side of the fire. He recognized Jim Jones, the owner of the Crescent U. Jones saw that Teeny was conscious, and he gave him a hard grin.

"I got yuh an' Pete Rice in a tight loop," he said. "The low-down sidewinders roped me on the way to Uncle Johnny's hoss spread. Sorry I can't git loose enough to do yuh any good, Teeny."

"If I git loose, what I'll be doin' won't be good!" spat out Teeny. "Blame 'em, I heered 'em say they'd got Pete! They had his hoss!"

The Mexican called "Ramo" heard them talking. He came in

and his black eyes glittered. He gave Teeny a brutal kick in the side and grinned, satisfied that neither prisoner could escape. He spat in Teeny's face and went outside, crouching in a rocky doorway. Teeny saw then that they were in a small cave under the spine ridge.

"Yuh heard 'em say they was turnin' me loose," said Jim Jones. "I think I know why, Teeny. They're only aimin' tuh drive me offn the Crescent U, so's it can be grabbed all legal. If Checkers Morgan hadn't lost beef an' a rider, I'd think as how he wuz behind the torturin' of my waddies. Old Uncle Johnny swears he is."

Teeny didn't reply. He was finding it hard to breathe. The green rawhide was tightening fast as he lay close to the piñon-knot fire; a strip around his throat was beginning to choke him. But he found that one of his huge arms could be moved a little and he applied his tremendous strength.

Still the rawhide held. He tried to roll away from the blaze, and a sibilant buzz stopped him and chilled his backbone. Teeny turned his head slowly. The firelight shone upon the slimy, glistening coils of a diamond-backed rattlesnake lying in the loose rocks.

Teeny was paralyzed for several seconds. He heard Jim Jones cry out. Then he saw the big sidewinder lifting its head, its red tongue darting. The snake had quit buzzing and was drawing back to strike.

Teeny gave his body one mighty heave. The rattler unleashed itself like a coiled spring. Its fangs struck and hooked into Teeny's body at the side. Then all of Teeny's three hundred pounds crushed down upon the snake.

The rattler squirmed a little, then

lay still. Teeny knew he had been hit by the deadly poison fangs, yet he felt no pain as yet. Ramo, the cruel little mestizo, heard the commotion. He came running in with a knife in his hand.

Teeny had never thought or acted faster. The tail of the rattler was close to his face and he managed to seize it in his teeth just above the dozen or more dry rattles. The crafty Mexican looked at Jim Jones and at Teeny. He could see nothing wrong. He started to walk around Teeny.

Teeny's big head gave a quivering, vibrating shake. The snake's rattles buzzed as if it were alive. The mestizo swore, turned in fright, and bent over. He was looking for the snake in the darkness.

Teeny doubled his bound body back on his shoulders and his tied legs bent and kicked out. His huge feet caught the Mexican in the pit of his stomach. The mestizo emitted one gasping groan and his light body went as limp as a rag. He struck in the blaze of piñon knots and rolled on through it. After that, he didn't move.

Teeny had literally kicked the mestizo into oblivion.

The rattler was dead. Its fangs were still stuck in the tough, green bullhide wrapped about Teeny's ribs. It had been the Cougar's intention to kill by torture. Instead, he had done Teeny a big favor. The snake's fangs had not touched his skin.

The Mexican's knife lay near the blaze. Wheezing and puffing, Teeny finally managed to roll and get it in his teeth. It was a matter of long minutes, but with the help of Jim Jones the blade sliced the rope from the rancher's wrists.

In another few minutes they were free. Teeny drew in a long breath.

His ribs felt as if they had collapsed. Jim Jones tied up the unconscious mestizo. The Mexican had two guns, and they each took one.

It was still light outside. Teeny groaned.

"It's a long way back to the fork in the trail," he complained. "Be-foah we can make it, the Cougar will be raidin' Uncle Johnny's."

"Maybe so," said Jim Jones. "But there's a short trail through the spine. We may be able to make it. I'm afraid of what might happen to Uncle Johnny and Mary James."

Teeny was still sick over the possible fate of Pete Rice and Misery.

CHAPTER V.

BLUE STALLION KILLER.

ABOUT the time Teeny Butler was starting his one-man war with the Cougar's outlaws, Pete Rice flashed around the canyon shoulder and saw the blue grulla stallion screaming and striking. The cracked voice of Uncle Johnny continued for a second or two, then quit.

Unarmed, Pete sent his horse in a rush toward the pole corral. He could see little between the corral poles. The stallion, apparently gone loco, was smashing with its front feet. There was what looked like a bundle of rags being tromped into the ground.

Pete Rice leaped from his horse while the cayuse was still running. He hit lightly on his toes, kept his balance.

Just outside the corral bars was a queer contraption. Two buck-board wheels were fastened to a shortened axle. A leather sling that would fit a man's body was across the axle.

Pete knew this was crippled Uncle

Johnny's "wheel chair." He had made it himself. Paralyzed by a bullet in his spine from the hips down, Uncle Johnny still had double strength in his arms and shoulders. He got around with his wheels and tended his grulla stock.

His niece, Mary James, had been with him for five years. She was a smart, riding gal. Smart enough to round up and trap wild mountain horses and herd them to Uncle Johnny's pens. The blue grulla saddle stock was prized throughout Trinchera County.

As Pete bounded off his horse, his eyes were upon a holstered six-gun slung over Uncle Johnny's wheeled sling. He was close enough to see the rolling whites of the grulla stallion's eyes. The air quivered and shook with the screams of rage. Pete slid, jerked the Colt from the leather on the sling, and whirled to face the stallion across the bars.

"Hiyuh, Pete Rice!" rang out a clear, shrill voice. "Drop that shootin' iron 'fore I ride yuh down!"

The cry of the girl's voice would not have been enough. Pete could see only that he must shoot quick and straight. Then a pony's feet clattered. Mary James cried out again, angrily. Her rushing pony crashed into one wheel of the sling. The contraption swept Pete off his feet and the six-gun exploded with the lead flying wild.

Slim and tanned Mary James, pretty and blue-eyed, reined her pony to its haunches. She brought the animal around as Pete climbed to his feet.

"Don't shoot, Pete Rice!" she cried out again. "It's only Blaze puttin' on a show! Uncle Johnny ain't hurt! Look!"

Inside the corral, Uncle Johnny James was heaving himself up by his long arms.

"Git down, Blaze!" he commanded the grulla stallion. "Yuh off-color, lopsided hunk o' hoss meat! Whoa, now!"

Pete Rice brushed the cowlick off his forehead and looked again. Uncle Johnny was on the top rail of the corral. The blue grulla stallion had dropped to all fours. He stood there shivering. Uncle Johnny's hand came from a pocket. The animal that a minute before had been screaming with rage came over and stretched a muzzle, taking sugar from Uncle Johnny's hand.

Then the stallion was trotting across the corral toward a blue grulla mare. Pete saw Uncle Johnny's hand snaking inside his shirt. He was putting away a whip. There were marks across the stallion's shoulders.

"Seems as how it's about time the sheriff o' Trinchera was lookin' inter the goin's on o' the grama-grass range," said Uncle Johnny in a complaining voice. "Been enough o' them Cougar killin's again."

Uncle Johnny swung off the corral. He hitched himself into the sling between the wheels. His face under a white stubble of beard was wrinkled and his blue eyes were sunken.

"Yuh got a funny idea o' foolin' with that stallion," said Pete Rice. "Thought fer sure he'd tromped yuh. Maybe yuh'd be wantin' to say somethin' about it, Uncle Johnny?"

Uncle Johnny's sunken eyes gleamed as he looked at the sheriff.

"What the law ain't knowin' won't keep it awake nights, Pete Rice," said Uncle Johnny. "Seems as how Checkers Morgan'd a'mighty like tuh own thet Blaze stallion. Come ridin' an' wantin' tuh buy the hoss, but I hain't sellin'. Wouldn't put it past Morgan tuh be lettin'

down them corral bars some dark night."

Pete was looking through the bars. He saw what might have been a tromped man in the corral dust. It was a figure with a shirt that was torn and beaten into the ground. But Pete could still see the black-and-white bars of a checkered shirt. The tromped thing was a rigged-up dummy.

"Yuh don't trust Checkers Morgan none, Uncle Johnny?" said Pete. "But yuh wouldn't go so far as to be wantin' him to have a bad accident, would yuh?"

"Accident?" exploded Uncle Johnny. "Reckon it wasn't no accident that made me inter a half-an'-half man! Sure, I'm knowin' Checkers Morgan lost beef when I did five years ago, an' he's lost some more since the Cougar come back! Yuh cain't pin nothin' on 'im, neither! Maybe he wouldn't go so far as tuh steal a hoss hisself, but if he ever tries——"

"Uncle Johnny!" cried out Mary James. "Yo're gittin' yoreself all het up! Sheriff Pete, yuh seen Jim Jones? I been expectin' him to come ridin' all day."

"I thought he was up here," said Pete.

He saw the quick consternation in Mary's face. "But maybe he met up with Teeny Butler an' they're havin' a look-see around the range," he added.

Pete knew now that neither Jim Jones nor Teeny Butler had arrived at Uncle Johnny's ranch. And somewhere in the canyons not far away, the Cougar and his outlaws were waiting for darkness before striking the ranch and running off the grulla saddle stock. It was almost sunset now.

"How are yuh fixed fer guns,

Uncle Johnny?" asked Pete, trying to make his voice sound casual.

"Guns?" said Uncle Johnny. "Got this one ol' Betsy here, an' a lion rifle up to the cabin. What's on yore mind, Pete?"

Pete started to speak, but the running feet of a horse coming up the canyon trail stopped him. He could tell it was a single animal, but he tightened his grip on Uncle Johnny's gun which he still held in his hand.

"Yuh'd best get tuh the cabin, Mary," he said quickly. "Yuh might as well know it. Misery an' me had some trouble with the Cougar, an' he's fixin' tuh raid yore grulla stock, come dark. Great catamounts! It's old Sonny hisself!"

Pete started forward as he exclaimed. The riderless horse was coming into the clearing, his leathers flying and the saddle half worked off. The sorrel had been running until he was lathered and his nostrils flared. But he obeyed Pete's sharp command instantly and quieted.

"Get to the cabin, Uncle Johnny!" barked Pete. "The Cougar had Sonny! That means the outlaws can't be far away! One six-gun and a rifle ain't much, but we'll do the best we can!"

Spang!

The gun cracked at the shoulder of the canyon around which Sonny had come running. The first lead clanged on a tire of one of Uncle Johnny's sling wheels and whirred viciously past Pete Rice's ear. Pete dropped to one knee and waited.

Uncle Johnny was starting to wheel away toward the shake cabin set back of the first horse corral. Mary had ridden her pony to the cabin door and turned him loose. She ran into the shack and emerged almost immediately with a rifle.

A rider came from behind the canyon shoulder, and Pete Rice fired his first shot. The rider was the Cougar himself. He was close enough now that he could see Pete Rice, and he reined up sharply, his horse rearing.

Pete let out a yell and came up so he could be sure the Cougar saw him plainly. He could tell that it was seeing him there that halted the Cougar for the moment. Up to this time, the bandit had believed him to be buzzard bait, along with Misery Hicks. The Cougar seemed to be ahead of his outlaws, and probably was set upon recapturing Sonny.

Pete could have killed the Cougar at this minute. But he had suddenly decided he wanted the outlaw leader alive. He couldn't talk if he was dead. And Pete Rice wanted very much to know several things. Who "the boss" was was one of them.

Behind Pete, Mary whipped up the rifle and fired.

"Wait, Mary!" shouted Pete. "Get into the rocks above the corrals! You do the same, Uncle Johnny!"

But the rifle bullet had stung the Cougar's horse on the flank. Perhaps the Cougar was glad that it had. The animal reared, then dropped and disappeared around the canyon shoulder.

At that instant, half a dozen six-guns started banging. Bullets kicked up dust and whined around Pete. The other outlaws had come up and were covering the Cougar's sudden and unexpected retreat. They had apparently hoped to ride into Uncle Johnny's canyon meadow without meeting resistance.

Without knowing how many guns were there, they did not want to

make easy targets of themselves by riding together from the narrow canyon trail. The other outlaws had seen Pete Rice. They may not have been superstitious, but there had been many stories about the charmed life of the sheriff of Buzzard Gap.

Pete saw that Mary had obeyed and had got into rocks between the corrals. He helped Uncle Johnny wheel to temporary safety in another patch of boulders to one side. Pete had just time to reload Uncle Johnny's six-gun before the outlaws collected their nerve.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GRULLA STAMPEDE.

PETE RICE was crouched beside Uncle Johnny. Mary James had her rifle stuck over rocks down between the horse corrals. But the outlaws were sticking behind the canyon shoulder. The trail was too narrow for them to emerge without becoming bullet bait.

"Thar hain't no need o' hurryin'!" rang out the Cougar's voice. "It'll be comin' on dark, an' then we'll root 'em out!"

The walls of the canyon were too steep for anything but a pack rat to climb. In the remaining few minutes before dark, the defenders of the little horse ranch had it their own way. But when blackness cloaked the movements of the outlaws, it would be a different story.

"These all the shells yuh got, Uncle Johnny?" said Pete.

He had counted those in the belt, and there were but twelve.

"Yup, them's all, blame it!" grunted Uncle Johnny. "Never looked fer no trouble from the Cougar up this way!"

Pete was thinking fast. In the darkness they would have little

chance against the greater number of outlaws.

"If yuh've got another trail out tuh the meadow, maybe yuh'd best be takin' it, Uncle Johnny," suggested Pete.

"Thar hain't nothin' but a foot track up over the spine, an' I hain't leavin' my grullas tuh them killin' varmints!" spat out Uncle Johnny. "'Sides, the foot track is right down thar whar the canyon trail comes in, so's we couldn't nowise make it! If yo're wantin'——"

"Never mind it," interrupted Pete.

He had not been thinking of himself, but of Mary James. It would be almost impossible to get Uncle Johnny up a canyon foot trail. He had to figure out something else, and that quickly.

The muttering voices of the outlaws told that they were ready and willing to wait for darkness. Then it would be easy enough to creep in and stampede the grullas into the upper horse pen.

Stampede the half-wild mountain grullas?

An idea flashed into Pete's brain. The outlaws were crowded into the narrow canyon trail with no way out except up into the meadow.

Stirred up by the shooting, fifty or more blue grullas were milling around in the upper horse pen. Pete could hear them squealing. Their hoofs were cracking the corral poles. What he had in mind had to happen unexpectedly to the outlaws. And they had to be held back of that rock shoulder.

"Here, Uncle Johnny," he said. "Take yore ol' Betsy. Whang blazes out o' the first owl-hooters yuh see. I'll tell Mary to do the same as I go past her shelter."

Pete thrust the six-gun into Uncle Johnny's hand. He was out of the

rocks before Uncle Johnny could protest. His appearance was a surprise. He ran forward several yards before a wild yell burst from the Cougar's men.

"It's Pete Rice hisself!" yelled the Cougar. "Blast 'im down!"

Pete went down on his stomach as the guns started banging. The open meadow around him suddenly seemed to be filled with buzzing bees. One of the outlaws came into the open and Uncle Johnny's ol' Betsy whanged.

The outlaw screamed and fell on his face. The air around Pete became instantly more filled with lead. He felt a jolt on one hip and his left leg went numb. But he could still crawl. He was close to the rocks where Mary James was crouched.

"Pete Rice!" she cried out. "Yuh gone crazy? I know now! They got Jim Jones! An' they'll git you, too, if——"

Her rifle cracked and she was levering it with small, brown hands. No more outlaws tried coming into the open, though the dusk was becoming deeper. But the fusillade of bullets could hardly miss Pete Rice altogether. Already he had that one wound in his leg, and he wasn't sure that he had not stopped another bullet or two.

An open stretch of ten yards or more lay ahead. There he would be fully exposed. But it was darker now. Another few minutes and the guns of Uncle Johnny and Mary could no longer hold the Cougar's killers in the canyon trail. Pete had to take the chance.

He leaped up. There could be no crawling now. He ran, zigzagging, though his wounded leg had begun to throb with pain. It seemed to him then that an army must have been shooting at him. The ground around him jetted and spurted dust.

A bullet struck a boot heel and almost tripped him.

He made the first five yards. Something like a hot iron ran around his ribs. He heard rifles crack among the belching six-guns. It seemed that no living man could ever pass through the hail of lead in that last few feet.

There came what felt like a light tap over one ear. It made him suddenly dizzy, and from the warm liquid spilling down his neck he knew that his skull had been creased. The barred gate of the pole corral was almost under his hands, and then it seemed as if the bars were moving away from him.

Pete caught a pole, pulled himself up and jerked it free. He got the second pole down. Then it was that the slow-witted Cougar outlaws saw his purpose.

"He's heein' tuh stampede them grullas!" yelled the Cougar himself. "Git tuhgether, men! We've got tuh rush 'em!"

Pete dragged at the lower bar. A bullet struck it and whipped blood from the back of his hand. Splinters stuck into one cheek, but he got the pole loose. He heard the break of the outlaws and the whamming of Uncle Johnny's gun. If Mary was still shooting, the crack of her rifle was lost in the heavier banging of other guns.

The rearing, plunging blue grullas had found the opening. They were pouring from the corral like water freed from a broken dam. Pete put all his strength into yelling as he climbed the corral back of the gate.

Mary James was a smart hoss gal. She knew those grullas had to be turned toward the canyon trail. She sprang from her rocky shelter, running heedlessly toward the horse

pen. Pete swayed on the corral and yelled hoarsely.

"Go back, Mary! Yuh'll be gunned down!"

He realized she could not hear him. He saw her falter and one hand catch at her shoulder. Then she fell, only a little to one side of where the panic-mad grullas were becoming a roaring stream of pounding hoofs. It made Pete sick. It seemed as if the stampeded ponies would swerve and trample the girl into the ground.

Then Mary had lifted herself. She was shooting and levering the rifle again. A grulla screamed with pain and plunged to his knees. Bullets were stinging others near him. The flaming rifle turned the leaders and they strung out across the open meadow, stampeding now toward the narrow canyon trail where the outlaws had remained sheltered.

Pete could not hear voices now. But he saw the outlaws of the Cougar making another break for the open meadow. Once they were out of the narrow trail with the canyon walls trapping them, they would scatter.

But the first outlaws in sight did not go far. High above the meadow, two guns started exploding. One outlaw went down; the second staggered and started back. By this time the wave of grullas was half-way across the meadow.

Pete saw the Cougar leap out. He could not hear his command, but he knew that the outlaw was ordering the men to flee on their horses. And, coming down a broken foot trail, Pete saw the bulky figure of Teeny Butler, a six-gun belching. Back of him came Jim Jones and his iron was also talking.

The pair had arrived in the nick of time to prevent any possible escape of the outlaws into the

meadow. Their pounding lead was blocking that exit. Three outlaws lay still, and the wave of grullas went over them.

Pete knew the others, including the Cougar, must have made their horses. The stampede choked the canyon mouth. Pete was down, weaving on his feet, but making his way toward Mary James. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Yo're a game gal, Mary," grinned Pete. "Yuh'll make Jim Jones a right smart wife. Lemme see that shoulder."

"Humph! It's nothin' but a nick, Pete Rice! But you're hurt! Let me——"

Pete waved her away. The thick muscles of his left leg hurt. His head ached and his ribs were sore. But there was a fast trail to be picked up.

"Hi, Pete!" hailed Teeny Butler. "Could yo' have Mary James git on some hot water? Jim is sho' bad hit!"

Mary James and Pete Rice were the kind who could promptly forget their own minor wounds. Teeny was striding across the meadow with Jim Jones in his huge arms. Jim's skull was furrowed and his face was crimson-smear'd. He looked like a dead man.

Mary didn't seem to know that her own shoulder was wounded. Uncle Johnny was wheeling over in his sling, his sunken eyes hard.

"If Jim passes out, I'm ridin' to git Checkers Morgan!" he gritted.

"Reckon the law o' Trinchera will do all the ridin' yet a spell," said Pete Rice. "Mary, you look out fer Jim an' see that Uncle Johnny stays here. Teeny, grab up them dead outlaws' guns. Seein' yuh lost yore blood bay, reckon yuh'll have to do with Sonny. I'll be takin'

Mary's pony. We'll try beatin' the Cougar to the desert pass."

The desert pass was the only possible way back to the bad lands for the outlaws. Pete Rice was figuring a short cut over the mountains. He waited only to see that Jim Jones was still alive. They left him in Mary's hands.

The dust of the grulla stampede was still in the canyon. Pete led the way into a fork trail. The stampede would force the Cougar to ride the long way around.

"Looks as how Uncle Johnny's dead-set on pinnin' this ruckus onto Checkers Morgan," said Pete to Teeny. "Maybe he has grounds fer the same, but Morgan's smart enough tuh keep from gettin' a loop tangled up with the law."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DISAPPEARING COUGAR.

SHERIFF PETE RICE swung from the ground into his saddle. No man could read trail sign with matches better than the Trinchera sheriff.

"I figger, Teeny, that the Cougar never come back this way," stated Pete. "Maybe they was swung off by the grulla stampede, but I'm thinkin' the Cougar had somethin' else in mind."

"Meanin', boss, that them owl-hoots rode fo' the Morgan range 'stead o' back to the bad lands?"

"That's the way of it," said Pete. "We'll ride."

Pete Rice had made sure that the Cougar had not passed from the grama-grass valleys containing the Crescent U and the CM spreads. It was possible that the outlaws were hiding out in some of the draws. But Pete's gray eyes were smoky in the darkness. The two men were in the summit pass.

Perhaps the Cougar was on his way to collect pay for his torturing devilment? If so, it was impossible to overlook the direct suspicion of Uncle Johnny. It might be well to pay a visit to Checkers Morgan.

Pete's flesh wounds were sore, and he was stiff and tired. Teeny's bruised body was far from as fit as it should be. Teeny was wearing a shirt taken off a dead outlaw, and it fitted too quick in too many places.

Sure that the Cougar could not have left the valleys, Pete headed their horses back into the grama grass. They crossed a line fence that marked the boundary between the Crescent U and Morgan's CM spread.

There was no moon. The faint starlight left the grassy pasture in darkness. The Checkers Morgan ranch house was some two miles ahead. They were crossing open grazing space when Pete's hand suddenly went out and gripped Teeny's bridle bit, pulling up their horses.

A single horse was thudding toward them in the night. Then the sound of its running was joined by others. All were invisible in the blackness.

Brang! Bang!

Gunfire stabbed from two directions. Teeny's big hands dropped to the holstered outlaw irons on his bulging hips. Pete gripped his wrist hard.

"Wouldn't be too sudden, Teeny!" gritted Pete. "We ain't been seen, an' yuh always want tuh be sure yuh ain't shootin' a friend in the dark!"

A voice yelled with pain. It was a Mex yell; it might be one of the Cougar's mestizos. A horse screamed as lead scorched his hide. Then a horse and rider went down with thumping impact not far away.

The guns of several other riders still whanged away. Suddenly the shooting ceased. Pete and Teeny could hear groans from the wounded rider. Teeny was mounted on Sonny, Pete's horse. Sonny lifted his head and whinnied loudly.

"Now yo' done it," groaned Teeny. "Let's ride into 'em, Pete."

"Get off, Teeny," Pete advised. "They're goin' away. Rein-hobble the nags until we have a look-see."

The riders who had gunned down the lone man and his horse were going off. Their horses were being turned in the darkness. Voices shouted, and the animals broke into a run.

Pete was thinking fast. The riding gunmen might be Checkers Morgan's waddies, or they might be the Cougar's outlaws. Anyway, their shooting down a lone rider and their abrupt retreat was strange. Perhaps it had been Sonny's whinnying that had sent them off.

Pete and Teeny went forward cautiously. They could still hear the groans of the fallen man. They sounded like dying moans. All noise of the riding killers had died away on the grassy range.

Pete thumbed a sulphur match and bent over a huddled figure. A wrinkled, brown face streaked with crimson appeared. A pair of black eyes already were glazing with the dullness of death.

"Old Pedro!" rasped Pete harshly. "Uncle Johnny's cook! He's been slingin' grub on the Morgan spread since Uncle Johnny quit five years ago."

The wrinkled Mexican looked at Pete Rice and tried to smile.

"Law come. Señor Pete—— Ect ees good."

Teeny swore savagely. Pete Rice lifted the Mexican's head. Crimson was bubbling from his lips. Bullets

had punctured him in several places.

"Who shot yuh, Pedro?" demanded Pete. "Yuh know?"

Old Pedro gasped: "Señor Morgan—Cougar ces keel. Geeve thees to Uncle Johnnee—hee's wait."

Pedro's chin dropped upon his chest; he was dead. Pete's match went out and Teeny struck another one. Pete was holding old Pedro and he felt a curious bulge under his shirt. When he opened it there was another shirt wadded around his body inside. It was loudly checkered in black and white.

"One of Morgan's shirts," said Pete. "So that explains where Uncle Johnny got the shirt for that dummy."

"Dummy?" questioned Teeny, staring at Pete. "Yo' head ain't hurtin' much from that bullet scrape, is it, boss?"

Pete's whimsical mouth wore a hard grin.

"It ain't hurtin' none, Teeny," he said. "But Uncle Johnny's been sort o' fixin' up a man trap for a certain hombre in his stallion hoss pen. That hombre's Checkers Morgan, an' I'd been wonderin' some how he got Morgan's old shirts. Now I know."

It was clear enough now. Uncle Johnny had made no bones about training the grulla stallion to tromp Checkers Morgan if the rancher attempted to turn horse thief. Pete was thinking of Uncle Johnny's whip, the shirt on the dummy. No doubt he had been teaching that stallion colt to hate the smell of Checkers Morgan's shirts.

The fact that they were checkered would not mean much. Horses are more or less color blind. But they have a keen sense of smell. And Blaze, the blue grulla, had been taught to hate the smell of Checkers Morgan. Old Pedro had been sup-

plying the shirts. He wanted this last shirt to go to Uncle Johnny.

"Po' devil," said Teeny. "Ah reckon he wuz plumb loyal to his ol' boss tuh the last."

"Yup," said Pete shortly. "But that ain't sayin' who gunned him out—Morgan or the Cougar."

"An' it hain't makin no difference tuh yuh which of us done it!" rapped out a harsh voice. "Git up yore paws, Pete Rice, an' yuh all-fired smart depity!"

Teeny was big, but fast. His hands streaked to his guns and the match he had been holding went out. But Pete Rice had seen the gleaming ring of irons centered upon them in the darkness.

"Lay off 'em, Teeny!" he barked. "So it was you, Cougar?"

"Keep them paws up!" snapped the Cougar. "It'd pleasure the boys plenty tuh make a pair o' lead statues out o' yuh! Grab 'em, hombres!"

The Cougar's half a dozen men closed in. Pete and Teeny were swiftly disarmed. The Cougar slammed his knuckles across Pete's face. Possibly he was getting revenge for his flattened nose.

Then Pete's own big steel handcuffs clinked onto his wrists behind his back. Their horses were brought up and they were boosted onto them. A lass' rope was wound around Teeny until he looked like a mummy. The Cougar was taking no chances with the giant deputy.

"Thunk we'd high-tailed it when yuh heered them hosses runnin' off, eh, Pete Rice?" boasted the Cougar. "Thunk we didn't hear yore hoss whinnyin'? Yuh got tuh git up early tuh fool the Cougar. We run off our nags, but we didn't nowise go with 'em."

It had been a smart trick. The men who had shot down old Pedro

had heard Pete's Sonny horse. They had sent their own cayuses loping away and had crept upon the sheriff and Teeny on foot. A couple of men had caught up their horses now.

Pete and Teeny were being herded across the grazing land, straight toward Checkers Morgan's home layout.

CHAPTER VIII.

MORGAN'S DOUBLE-CROSS.

SHERIFF PETE RICE sat with his back to the timbered wall, his lanky arms behind him. His aching body could take no rest. His wrists were locked in his own big handcuffs and his arms were against a heavy plank.

Teeny Butler lay flat on a damp, dirt floor beside him. Teeny looked like a mummied roll in all the lariat cawrapping his massive arms and legs. That did not prevent Teeny from snoring.

Daylight had come and gone. Pete Rice had slept some. They were in the partly underground root house on the Checkers Morgan spread. This dirt-banked cellar was meant to preserve potatoes and other vegetables during the cold mountain winters.

Now it was night again. The low, narrow root-house door was open. A fire blazed up brightly a short distance outside. One drowsy, oily-skinned Mexican outlaw scrooched in the doorway, sleeping part of the time.

The few outlaws of the Cougar and a few of Morgan's tough riders were passing bottles of redeye around the fire outside.

Pete Rice's thoughts were none too pleasant. He always figured he was dumb when he let himself be trapped as he had been by the Cougar.

Neither the Cougar nor Morgan's men had troubled to bring any grub to the prisoners. Teeny quit snoring, opened his eyes, and groaned.

"Blame it all, Pete!" he complained. "Seems as how mah belly's plumb shrunk tight tuh mah backbone! Maybe they's figgerin' on stahvin' us tuh death?"

"Yuh'll starve a long time, Teeny, 'fore yore belly ever gets acquainted with yore spine," said Pete, grinning. "I been thinkin' things out. You an' me's got tuh have a lot o' luck. Hain't no sense tuh havin' trick handcuffs lessn we get a break."

Pete Rice knew something about his own handcuffs that his captors didn't. But that meant nothing at this moment.

It might be too late, but all of the Cougar's torture raids had become clear to the Buzzard Gap lawman. Uncle Johnny had been correct. Checkers Morgan had used the Cougar's raids five years before to drive Uncle Johnny off a range that Morgan had annexed in the guise of friendship.

Now Morgan was using the Cougar again to drive Jim Jones off the Crescent U. Jones would sell out cheap rather than hire more cow-punchers to be horribly murdered. Then the raids of the Cougar would be stopped.

Checkers Morgan would have complete control of the grama-grass kingdom. Morgan had twice permitted the Cougar to murder his own waddies and run off some of his beef to make it look good. But now that Pete Rice and his deputies had horned in, one thing was more certain than anything else.

Pete Rice and Teeny Butler could not be permitted to live. In some manner, no doubt, Morgan intended to have it look as if the law-

men had been rubbed out by the Cougar. Perhaps Morgan even had an eye on the pretty Mary James.

Then Uncle Johnny would have to die, too.

And there was Misery Hicks. The Cougar knew by this time that Misery had not died on the cliff. He might believe that Pete Rice had sent Misery back to Buzzard Gap for help.

For, right now, the Cougar was waiting for his hired gun slick, Trig Ramer, and the two outlaws he had sent to rob the Bonanza River stage. He was waiting for them to arrive with the gold consignment taken from the stage.

This made Pete wonder what had happened to Misery Hicks. The little barber-deputy was too fiery to overlook a chance for a fight. Had he followed Pete's orders and warned the stage driver at Hopi Creek, or had he recklessly pitted himself against Trig Ramer, the gunman?

Seeing that grub was lacking, Teeny evidently decided it would be better to starve to death asleep than to stay awake and suffer.

Pete shifted his lanky body. Then he was looking up along the heavy timber, and he could see two stars. A square, wooden ventilator projected upward from the back of the root house.

And just as Pete discovered this, an angry voice sounded. It was the booming tone of Checkers Morgan, and then the Cougar's edged voice replying. They were back of the root house where their men could not hear their words. But neither could have been thinking of that root-house ventilator.

"Yuh know blamed well, Cougar, yuh wasn't tuh take on nothin' outside until this job was rounded up!"

growled Morgan. "Yo're gittin' yore gold offn me, an' yuh agreed tuh high-tail over the border! Now it comes tuh me that yo're usin' Trig Ramer tuh rob the Bonanza stage!"

"Yeah! An' whut of it?" snarled the Cougar. "What I'm gittin' off the desert stage is my own! I'm takin' yore pay, an' when Trig Ramer gits here with the stage loot, we're hittin' fer the border pronto!"

"Yuh'd better do jest thet!" rasped Morgan. "An' in case yuh git yoreself looped up, I'll be the fust tuh help out the law gittin' yuh!"

The Cougar's sneering laugh was not pleasant. The two men moved away. Pete strained forward. He saw the Cougar move out into the firelight with his men. A Morgan rider got up and walked back around the root house. Apparently he had been summoned by Checkers Morgan.

Teeny's snores were raucous. Pete poked him with his foot and ended the unearthly noise. Morgan had been joined by his rider. Again voices were coming through the ventilator pipe, out of hearing of the Cougar's outlaws.

"We're only waitin', Smoke, until Trig Ramer gits yere with thet stage gold," Morgan was saying. "Yuh got the other boys ready?"

"Shore, boss," said the Morgan rider. "Like yuh said. We got the Cougar's passell o' owl-hooters covered right now.

Morgan's voice was gloating.

"Wait until I give the word," he said. "We gun out the Cougar, an' we wrap Pete Rice an' thet depity in green hide, the same as if the Cougar had done it. We drill this yere Trig Ramer gun slick, an' we turn back the stage gold. An' then

"I'll have the Jim Jones spread an' the hull valley, an' I reckon with us havin' cleaned up the Cougar, it won't be no trouble at all tuh be electin' my own sheriff o' Trinchera County."

Pete Rice's hard wrists twisted in his steel handcuffs.

Checkers Morgan and his rider were moving away, unaware that the words of their plot had come straight to the ears of the lawman. Pete Rice seldom gave away to anger, but the fiendish simplicity of Morgan's murderous plot started his blood boiling.

And at this minute, even if he were free, Pete could see that the odds were stacked against anything he might do. Still he clinked the handcuffs against the plank behind him. He estimated the distance to the half-breed in the doorway. At least he might be able to lay his hands on one pair of guns.

At that instant there was a loud hail from beyond the fire. The outlaws and Morgan stopped drinking redeye and heaved to their feet.

"It's him, Trig Ramer!" shouted the Cougar, moving forward.

Pete could see across the fire. His stomach went cold. Three riders were coming up. Two were wearing outlaw clothes, as Pete had seen them the day before. The rider in the lead, with heavy saddlebags on his glossy black gelding, would never have been mistaken for other than a gun slick.

He looked small in his big saddle, and wide, black sombrero, on which silver spangles gleamed. Glittering ornaments tinkled on hand-tooled chaps of bullhide. Ivory-handled guns were slung low on his thighs, and the butt of a Winchester stuck from his saddle boot.

His swaggering slouch in the sad-

dle was the mark of a gun slick in any man's country. His black sombrero, with its fancy doodads, was pulled down over his eyes, shielding his face as he sent the black gelding toward the Cougar. One of the gun slick's hands gently caressed an ivory butt of a gun. The other reached back and lifted a heavy saddlebag.

"Yuh git the stage loot, Trig?" demanded the Cougar.

"Yup!" barked a hard voice. "We brung it!"

The two men in outlaw clothes riding with Trig Ramer suddenly pulled their horses to one side. In the twinkling of an eye the ivory-butted gun whipped into the fancy-clad gun slick's hand and was coming down in line with the Cougar's breastbone.

And in that same instant, Pete Rice gave his wrists a twist, banged his big handcuffs against the plank and jerked his arms free. A trick link in the steel chain had parted. It was well that the sheriff's prisoners, who often wore those cuffs, were unaware of how easily they could be separated if the wearers had known how.

Pete came to his toes, lunging head foremost toward the sleepy mestizo in the root-house doorway. His smoky-gray eyes never left the fancy gun dude on that big black horse. For that flashing gun and the movement of the other riders with the supposed Trig Ramer had told him the startling truth.

This "Trig Ramer" was none other than Misery Hicks, his barber-deputy. Those other two riders in outlaw clothes were from Buzzard Gap, and they had been guards on that Bonanza River stage.

Somehow, Pete knew, the fighting barber must have tricked Trig

Ramer and taken his clothes, his guns, and his horse. Likewise, the two outlaws sent by the Cougar had been captured.

And the fighting Misery Hicks had come riding straight into the Cougar's camp, supposedly bringing the gold for which they had been waiting.

Even as his hard shoulder drove into the Mexican guard, Pete Rice let out a deep groan. Guns had started banging from three sides. Morgan's own riders had attacked the Cougar. Misery Hicks reeled from the saddle.

CHAPTER IX.

KILL OF A LOCO STALLION.

SHERIFF PETE RICE barely missed batting the mestizo on guard into eternity. Ribs cracked under Pete's driving shoulder. The Mexican's jaw received a mule-kick punch from Pete's fist, and his neck went limp.

Pete's hands streaked for the Mex's holstered irons. The flame of belching .45s was lancing cross-wise over the camp fire. Misery Hicks hit the ground, spun from his saddle by a hunk of lead from a Morgan gun.

But Misery wasn't out and he rolled over, the ivory-handled Colt stabbing with fire at the surprised and cursing Cougar. The Cougar went to a knee, yelling.

"Git to yore hosses, hombres!" It was the Cougar's command. "We been tricked by Checkers Morgan! Git 'im, men!"

The Cougar realized too late what was happening. But his most pressing trouble was right in front of him.

Misery was up on one knee, the big sombrero swept from his face. He was steadying the outlaw Colt

he had taken from Trig Ramer, when he had tricked him in the desert and left him tied with the outlaws in the Bonanza stage.

Cougar outlaws and Morgan riders, mixed around the camp fire, were so confused and bewildered for the first few seconds that the withering lead from the darkness cut down a third of their number.

It was then that Pete Rice realized the blackness of Morgan's soul. He was as ready to sacrifice a few of his own men as he was to kill the outlaws, just so he could gain his own greedy ends.

With the Mex guns in his hands, Pete leaped outside the root house. He was intent upon one part of the crisscross battle. That was the sudden duel between the Cougar and Misery Hicks. Both were balanced on their knees and both guns were blazing.

One of the stage guards who had come with Misery Hicks let out a yell and rolled from his saddle, crimson streaming from his throat. The other man was trying to get his rearing bronc around to help out Misery Hicks. If ever there was excuse to shoot another man in the back, Pete Rice had it then. The Cougar's broad back was toward him, as he faced Misery.

Pete could almost feel the thudding of lead that must have hit Misery from the Cougar's gun. But they were man to man, and they were even, and Pete ran toward the fire. He sought to find Morgan's checkered shirt looming among the riders on horses who had attacked in the double cross of the Cougar's outlaws.

Pete wanted Morgan, and he wanted him alive.

Then he saw the Cougar rear to his toes. His short-cropped head

and his small ears made him look as much like a mountain cat from the back as the front. The Cougar threw out his hands and toppled. He fell heavily and a running horse without a rider suddenly trampled him.

Pete could see the hard grin on Misery's face. He could see blood there, too. Misery attempted to get to his feet, but failed. He sat down in a funny position, and Pete knew one of his legs must be broken.

Flying lead screamed across the camp fire, kicking its hot embers into Pete's face. Outlaws and Morgan riders around the fire were now making a dash for the shelter of darkness. Checkers Morgan belated an order.

A full dozen riders came charging into the light with Morgan's brightly checkered shirt showing up. Some of the Cougar outlaws were beginning to get set and their irons were spouting.

"Git thet tricky depity, Misery Hicks!" yelled Morgan. "The Cougar said he was dead! Then we'll finish off Pete Rice an' that other un."

Pete saw Misery attempt to lift his gun, but he couldn't make it.

Morgan's rearing horse was plunging straight toward him. The other CM riders were grouped with him. Morgan's six-gun was being held, waiting sure aim.

Pete Rice stepped in. He dropped to one knee between Misery and the oncoming riders. His calloused thumbs rippled across the hammers of the six-guns he had taken from the Mexican guard. Right and left, like a tune on strung wires. If he had been triggering a machine gun, his bullets could not have been temporarily more effective.

Riders went down on both sides

of Checkers Morgan. Morgan emitted a surprised squawk and reined his plunging horse to one side. Pete Rice became his target instead of the wounded Misery Hicks.

But Sheriff Pete had decided to take Checkers Morgan alive. The lawman of Buzzard Gap was stubborn about things like that. Though Morgan's mount was coming fast and Morgan's guns were talking, chewing up the ground around him, Pete did no more than turn the wild charge away from Misery Hicks.

Then Pete rolled with lightning, catlike agility. Morgan's horse missed him with his hoofs by only a few inches. Morgan was reining and bringing his mount around. Wild oaths were slaving from his thick lips.

Pete had him now where he could place a bullet neatly without making it fatal. He aimed and thumbed the gun. It made a clinking sound. He thumbed the other one swiftly. It clinked, too. Both had been emptied.

Morgan saw that. "The smart Pete Rice, huh?" he shouted.

Then the murderous rancher was rolling from his saddle, holding both his guns. He struck on booted feet and started toward Pete Rice. The Buzzard Gap lawman could see the black holes in Morgan's guns. He could see death in his bloodshot eyes.

The other riders had rolled past. Shooting was becoming scattered. At this instant it seemed to Pete Rice that he was alone with Checkers Morgan, a desperate, armed killer who was playing for big stakes.

"I want yuh should know 'fore yuh eat lead that I'm aimin' to be the law o' Trinchera from this time on, Pete Rice!" taunted the rancher. "I want yuh——"

Despite the stiffness of his wounded leg, Pete sprang from his toes, diving, as straight as an arrow. One of Morgan's guns blasted and Pete felt a searing pain as if a branding iron had been applied to his backbone. But his shoulder hit Morgan's knees with a jolting drive.

Both men hit the ground, rolled apart. Morgan's thick lips were slavering as he came up, one gun knocked from his hand, but the other iron steady and deadly.

Pete kept rolling. Lead struck the ground and flattened bits of it stung his body. He became dizzy and there was a roaring sound in his ears.

That sound suddenly became a scream. Pete shook the red fog from his eyes, imagining that all the noise and fury was inside his brain. But it wasn't.

Scream upon scream was coming from the throat of a plunging, maddened animal. Seeming almost to jump forward like a kangaroo on its hind legs, a blue grulla stallion flashed like a living thunderbolt between Pete and Checkers Morgan.

Pete saw a black-and-white-checked shirt being torn to shreds under sharp, driving hoofs. There were other screams now, horrible sounds. They came from Morgan's open and crimson-flecked mouth. Then he abruptly quit screaming.

For Checkers Morgan was a terrible bundle of flesh and clothing that rolled on the ground and then lay still, as the blue grulla stallion vented the hate that had been drilled into him for the smell of the checked shirts.

The Cougar's outlaws had been wiped out to the last man. And to the last man, the few surviving Morgan riders were high-tailing it off the grama-grass range as fast as

their broncs could carry them. Some had seen the end of Checkers Morgan, and they had seen the rising up of the terrible figure of Sheriff Pistol Pete Rice.

It would not be good for any of them to be found again in Trinchera County.

Crippled Uncle Johnny looked up at Pistol Pete Rice from his sling between the buckboard wheels. It was hitched by a rope harness to the brood mare mother of the stallion, Blaze.

"I cain't understand how thet colt come tuh break out o' the corral," said Uncle Johnny solemnly. "Nigh busted all my bones chasin' 'im. Now he's gone an' I reckon he'll be runnin' free range from this on."

Sheriff Pete spoke reflectively, as a lawman does when he comes to a decision.

"Low I must 'a' been mistook, Uncle Johnny, in thinkin' I saw a lead rope trailin' tuh the stallion's halter," he said. "Yup. Yuh shore must 'a' done yore best tuh stop 'im. Reckon now Mary an' Jim Jones'll be gittin' hitched, an' yuh'll be comin' down to Buzzard Gap to live human?"

"Yeah," said Uncle Johnny. "Cain't do much hoss ranchin' without Mary tuh trap 'em. Jim wuz comin' along all right when I left tuh chase thet blasted off-color stallion. Mary'll be movin' onto the Crescent U, I 'spect."

Misery Hicks wouldn't be walking for quite a spell. The hombres who wanted shaves and hair cuts in his Buzzard Gap shop would have to wait. He had a busted leg and several other wounds.

Teeny Butler had been released. The big deputy complained bitterly.

"Stahve a man fo' a whole day an' cheat 'im out o' gittin' into the big

ruckus," he said. "Ah'm goin' out an' rope me a yeahlin', an' eat 'im, hide an' all."

Havin' Pete Rice back is like meetin' up with an old pard, ain't it? Pete

doesn't join up with us often, but when he does, yo're always shore of a mighty good gun war. But the sheriff o' Trinchera County has a standin' invitation tuh be with us in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, an' talk has it thet he'll be back plumb soon.

THE SALT OF THE BRAZOS

A MILITARY expedition was requested to report on the amount of salt contained in the waters of the Brazos, which were brackish and unfit for use by human beings, although the horses seemed to relish the taste. An analysis was made and the young officer who was detailed to make the report was told that he should write: "The doctor finds that the Brazos water contains one ounce of salt to each quart."

The officer considered that the quantity of salt given was incorrect and ridiculous, declaring that every one would laugh at such a finding. But the other replied, "The doctor is supposed to be an authority, and that is his finding, so put it that way."

There was an old Prussian orderly in the company named Stroop. The officer learned that this veteran had been connected with the analyzing of the water, and he asked him about it. The solemn old fellow took him behind the camp, and there told him

with great secrecy how the experiment had been made.

He had been ordered to take a pail, obtain one gallon of water from the river, place it in a shallow pan and boil it slowly until it evaporated to half the quantity.

Overcome by the heat of the sun and fire combined, Stroop fell asleep and was awakened by the colonel shouting, "Orderly, isn't that done yet?" Stroop jumped up and found that the water had nearly all boiled away. To save himself from a bad scolding, he seized a handful of salt, threw it into the pan, and added as much water as should have been there. Then he reported that the task was done.

The doctor drained off the water and weighed the salt, thus arriving at the astounding result of one ounce of salt to one quart of water. The story got out, and was even published, but no names were mentioned, and it passed off as a good joke on the doctor.

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A Thrilling Rescue From Indians

IN the days when Indians were fierce, dangerous, and swift in their attacks, a young man named Logan van Deveer made a daring rescue of a captive white girl. Muriel King, a young belle of San Antonio, had been carried off by a raiding tribe of Comanches, the most savage and the most bloodthirsty of all the hostile Indians. Thirteen white settlers in all had been taken by the raiders, and Van Deveer set out with two Rangers to follow the trail.

As they rode toward the Colorado River, they saw a small, lace-trimmed handkerchief in the the grass, and a little farther on a bit of ribbon was fluttering on a bush. This was plain sign that the Indians had a white woman among their prisoners, and it spurred the fearless pursuers to the point of recklessness.

The trail of the Comanches led to an enormous cave. One opening was near Burnet, another in the cedar brush some miles westward, and its outlet was in Backbone Valley, ten miles from Burnet. An army could have hidden in the dark passages and intricate chambers of this natural shelter, known as Sherrard's Cave.

The pursuers decided to try the entrance in the cedar brake, as they could keep hidden as they advanced. At dusk, they crept on all fours to the opening, where they could smell venison being cooked, and could hear the hum of voices. As they drew near, they saw a group of painted Comanches squatted around a fire, preparing the evening meal.

They also saw a white girl, securely bound, leaning against the wall of the cave.

Each of the three men selected his Injun, and at the first crash three Indians fell dead. The others took to mad flight dashing into the passages. One big warrior lingered, raised his hatchet, and was about to bring it down on the girl's head, when Van Deveer bore down on him, and the uplifted tomahawk was buried in the Indian's skull.

When the Comanches discovered that only three men were attacking them, their courage was renewed, and they charged them, uttering blood-curdling war whoops. But the white men fought like enraged tigers, using their guns for clubs, and sinking their knives into the Indians' bodies again and again.

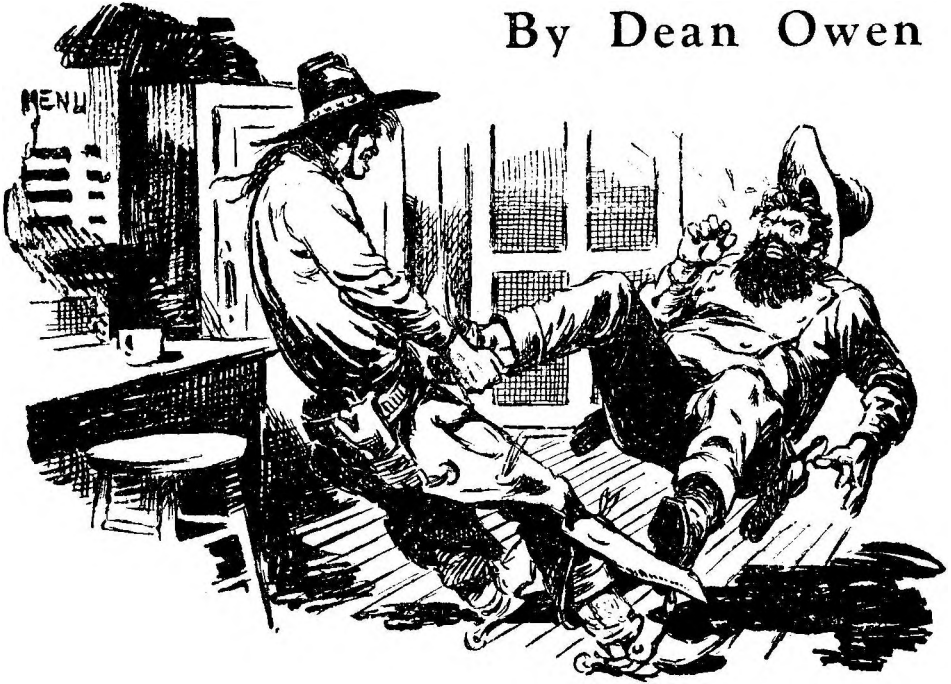
One Indian seemed determined to get the girl's scalp. Darting toward her, he clutched her long tresses and raised his scalping knife to sever them from her head. Van Deveer sprang upon him, and drove his big knife into the redskin's heart.

When the Indian fell dead at the white man's feet, he caught the girl in his arms and, with the two other rescuers protecting his retreat, he climbed up the rocky passageway leading to the opening. All reached their horses safely and made their way to the settlement, where their arrival was received with great rejoicing.

Not long after this adventure, the marriage of the rescued girl and the hero was celebrated. And it is said that "they lived happily ever after."

Gunsmoke Tornado

By Dean Owen



**Chuck joins up with the Halfmoon Bar,
an' it's a one-way ticket to perdition.**

CHUCK" TOPPING balled his fists and his chunky jaw hardened. His blue eyes speared a hot glance into the face of the skinny jasper who stood with his right hand near his gun. The five other men at the lunch counter in the chink's paused with food half-way to their mouths.

Chuck's voice was edged like the blade of a newly whetted fighting blade. He addressed the gent who stood tall and thin, like a crooked corral post. The man had laughed when Chuck asked for work.

"Feller, I don't know you, but I was told over at the livery stable that

the Halfmoon Bar was needin' hands. Hostler told me I'd find the crew eatin' here. Now pick the b'ar meat out o' yore teeth an' lemme know whether yuh kin use another name on the pay roll."

Bill Slag, *segundo* on the Halfmoon Bar, picked his horse teeth with a quill pick. His little eyes were red from too much whisky.

"Halfmoon Bar ain't needin' no whiskerless yearlin's," he growled. "Now git, afore I have the chink put yuh in the soup pot."

Chuck had been riding the grub line for three months. He was flat broke since his last job had petered

out over in Sunshine Valley. He had drifted into San Carlos an hour before and had spent his last dinero for oats for his bronc. The hostler had told him that the Halfmoon Bar might put him on, so Chuck had crossed the street to the chink's café and confronted Bill Slag.

A big man at the counter turned and eyed Chuck. Steak grease was in his stringy black beard.

"Mebbe we need another hand, Slag," he said in a voice that sounded like the rasp of a hacksaw on rusty iron. "I'm Ed Beazle, foreman of the Halfmoon Bar, younker. Here"—he motioned a seat next to him—"yuh look plumb peterd. Git some coffee under yore belt."

Chuck eyed the foreman. He was thick-necked, with shoulders and arms that reminded Chuck of slabs of beef. He wore double guns hitched around his fat middle. Chuck saw the grin that passed between the foreman and Bill Slag. Slag was talking as he plunked his bony frame down on a hard stool near the dirty front window.

"Yep, mebbe I was wrong in sizin' up a tough un, Beazle," he grunted. "Halfmoon Bar shore needs gents who kin stick their heads in a powder-smoke cloud an' not blink."

A slow grin slanted Chuck's mouth. His blue eyes burned strangely. He had a habit of walking into trouble, and it looked as if he was stepping right into it now. This bunch aimed to have some fun with him. Well, he'd accommodate them.

Chuck threw a long leg over the stool and sat down next to Beazle. He was on the end. The rest of the Halfmoon Bar crew were strung along the pine counter toward the front of the café. Chuck could smell the horse sweat on Beazle. The fore-

man was shouting at the slant-eyed chink.

"Git a fire under yore carcass, Hop Lee. Scrape thet coffeepot or I'll cut off yore queue an' shove it down yore yaller throat."

Hop Lee jumped and bowed as he set a steaming cup of black coffee in front of Chuck Topping. Chuck let his gaze sweep up and down the line of hard faces toward his right.

There was a small mirror on the wall back of the lunch counter. Chuck studied the polished glass and saw Beazle and Slag exchange winks. So they were going to hooraw him. That they mistook him for an wet-eared kid, he didn't doubt. In his early twenties, Chuck's appearance didn't give a stranger the impression that he had taken part in two range wars, had owned his own spread in Wigwam Hills, and now, flat broke, was ready to start again.

Slowly Bill Slag got to his feet. His heavy boots clumped on the pine floor as he moved to Chuck's side and leaned over the counter. Chuck could smell the stale whisky on his breath. He stood between Chuck and the foreman so that the waddy couldn't see what Beazle was doing.

"Kin yuh dab yore rope on yore bronc yet or do yuh have ter have help snakin' him out o' the corral of a mornin'?" Slag sneered. His voice was husky from too much whisky. He grinned.

Chuck looked up from his coffee cup. His eyes burned into Slag's features so hard that the hombre grunted and dropped his gaze. From the corner of his eyes, Chuck saw his coffee cup mysteriously being switched for another. Ed Beazle's hairy left hand was doing the switching. The lid was screwed off the salt shaker and Chuck could guess the rest.

"I don't have no trouble ropin' a hoss," Chuck finally answered. "I'm jist bothered with hot wind in my ears when gents like you stand too close."

Slag straightened. His thin-lipped mouth twisted in rage.

"Fer a busted 'dobe dollar——"

"Sit down, Slag!" roared Beazle. "Don't yuh see the pilgrim eyin' thet steamin' cup o' Hop Lee's java?"

Slag growled under his breath and moved up the counter and sat on a stool.

There was a hushed silence in the room as Chuck picked up the coffee cup, blew the steam away, then set the cup back on the counter.

"Too hot," he said innocently.

Held breath squeezed out of the lungs of every man at the counter. They had been ready to burst into laughter.

Through the front window, Chuck could see four riders jogging slowly past the café. Chuck had no particular interest in the men, but a plan was forming in his mind. He had heard of hoorawing jobs back-firing. He aimed this to be one.

"Who are them fellers?" he yipped suddenly, pointing a slim finger toward the street.

He was not quite prepared for what followed. Every Halfmoon Bar rannihan followed Chuck's pointing finger.

Ed Beazle growled like a bullet-nicked grizzly. "Them blasted McClellans! Rustlers, water-hole poisoners! We'll hang their hides on their own corral fence! They won't last long!"

During this bit of talk, Ed Beazle's coffee cup had mysteriously been exchanged for Chuck's. Hop Lee had witnessed the switch and stood behind the counter, his slanted eyes wide with fright.

Beazle was still grumbling about the McClellans when he turned around. Chuck's words caused him to forget about the trouble between the Halfmoon Bar and the McClellans.

"I think this java is cool enough ter guzzle now," Chuck was saying. "I never drink liquor. So seein' yuh bought this here drink fer me, I'd like to use barroom manners. Boys, I shore hates ter drink alone. Let's pour this black ink in one gulp."

"Spoken like a heavy drinker," chuckled Beazle. He winked at the other men and picked up his coffee cup in his hairy hand.

Tense as a coiled spring, Chuck sat on the edge of his stool, his first finger hooked through the handle of his heavy cup. A laugh ran down the line of men. Beazle grinned.

"Let's hist one fer the pilgrim," he said.

As if from a signal, the men tilted back their heads and let the steaming liquid pour down their throats.

Big Ed Beazle's jump left a foot of daylight between him and the stool top. His yell sounded like the war cry of a drunken Comanche. Coffee dribbled through his black beard. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open like a hound dog's on a hot day.

"Water; Water!" he bellowed. Beazle grabbed a glass and poured water into his mouth, hopping and yelping like a coyote in a bear trap.

At that first yell from their boss, the Halfmoon Bar cowboys had jumped to their feet, their hands pawing for guns. The first thing they had figured was that the McClellans had planted a bullet in Beazle's hide. But when they didn't hear the boom of a gun, or see blood spurting from a hole in Beazle's carcass, they holstered their guns and began whacking him on the back.

"Take 'er easy, Beazle!" shouted Slag. "Thet coffee must 'a' slid down the wrong pipe!"

Beazle shoved Slag aside. He was so mad, his big body shook as though he were barefoot in a snowstorm. He kept running his tongue out of his mouth and blowing.

"Where's thet blamed pilgrim?" he bellowed. "Lemme see thet mangy-haired skunk. He give me the salty cup we doctored fer him. The double-crossin', smooth-faced——" Ed Beazle swung his head around. "Where is he?"

"There he is," cried Slag. "Standin' in the corner with his arms folded acrost his chest. Lookin' like an innocent pup what's jist chewed the seat out o' his boss's Sunday pants. Tromp him, Beazle!"

"Tromp him I will!" Ed raged. He shook a hairy fist at Chuck as he slowly advanced. "Feller, I'm goin' to chaw yuh up an' spit yuh in the wood stove! Put yore hands up, come fightin'! Yo're meetin' the toughest barroom brawler in San Carlos County!"

II.

That tantalizing grin was still stuck on Chuck's big mouth. He realized now more than ever that his old habit of bumping into trouble was still with him. His blue eyes shuttled to the faces of the other four men who watched the coming battle with hard eyes and cold smiles. Slag stood there in the center of the room, one hand draped over his gun handle.

Beazle was coming closer like a huge bear. He was big, fast. Chuck had heard of him. He had stomped a Mex to death in the Blue Chip Bar up the street last week, so the bestler had told him. Well, Chuck

knew a few tricks, too, and he intended to use them.

"Come yere little boy," Beazle was saying.

With a roar, Beazle uncorked a long right from somewhere near his boot tops and brought it up. But he wasn't fast enough. Chuck stepped in close, jabbed a left fist into Beazle's mouth. The Halfmoon Bar foreman went back on his heels, slammed against a stool and wound up on the floor. Coffee from a spilled cup on the counter, dripped on his shaggy black head. He had lost his hat.

"Rip him apart!" yelled Slag. "The hombre jist landed a lucky one. Tear his hide off an' make him eat it!"

Hop Lee was yelling and wringing his hands as Beazle sprang to his feet and charged. Chuck dodged a swift kick aimed at his groin, grabbed Beazle's booted foot as it arced up and dumped the big man on his back in the middle of the floor.

Hair and beard soaked with coffee, Ed Beazle looked like a shaggy grizzly caught in the rain. He got to his feet slower this time.

Chuck was watching him, that grin still on his lips. Also he was keeping one eye on the five other men. If he whipped Beazle, he would have to use gunsmoke to cover his exit from Hop Lee's.

Suddenly Beazle grinned, his right hand blasting down toward his holstered gun. He never drew. A roaring Colt .45 jutted from Chuck Topping's right hand. Smoke spewed from the muzzle. Beazle yelled and grabbed his right ear lobe. Crimson seeped through his fingers.

Chuck Topping's voice wasn't the voice of a dumb grub-line rider. It was hard, cold, like the drive of winter sleet.

"Lay offn thet gun, Beazle!" he warned, his gun sweeping to cover the rest of the Halfmoon Bar crowd. "I won't nick yore ear lobe next time. I'll move my muzzle an inch over an' nick yore brain, if yuh got one."

"Yuh'll never live tuh git out o' this country," Beazle raged. I'll see——"

The front door slammed and a hard voice knifed through the café. "Shut up, Beazle! I'm runnin' the Halfmoon Bar!"

All eyes shifted to the newcomer, who stood just inside the doorway. He was tall, rangy. A black Stetson was pulled low over black brows. He wore store clothes. Chuck found himself looking into the frostiest pair of eyes he had ever seen. The stranger was moving slowly across the room. He halted, folded arms across his chest, his hands near bulges under his armpits which Chuck knew were hide-out guns.

"I'm Reg Danker," he growled at Chuck. "I own the Halfmoon Bar. I jist seen yuh handle Beazle. A feller thet kin do that kin breathe powdersmoke without chokin'. I need an hombre like you. Want to work?"

"Shore, I'll draw Halfmoon Bar pay," drawled Chuck.

"But remember," Danker snapped quickly, "you an' Beazle is goin' to git along. If yuh don't you'll wake up findin' sod in yore face an' the worms borin' holes in yore carcass!"

Chuck let his eyes sweep over the faces of the men in the café. Ed Beazle was glowering darkly. Slag fingered his gun handle and grinned as if at some secret joke.

That he was in with a tough crew, Chuck didn't doubt. But years on the range, holding spitting guns, seeing men die, had left him callous to

personal danger. He figured when it came time to get his, he'd get it if he was sitting in the sun on a corral fence or facing blazing Colts.

He didn't like the Halfmoon outfit, but Beazle had said they were fighting rustlers and water-hole poisoners in the person of the McClellan tribe. Chuck figured he was on the right side of the fence.

"Besides," he thought to himself. "I'm mighty tired takin' extra notches in my belt."

The Halfmoon Bar men trooped outside, unhitched their broncs from the tie rack, and rode slowly out of town. Reg Danker told Chuck to meet them at the ranch. If Chuck could have seen the earnest conversation held between Ed Beazle and Reg Danker as they jogged toward the Halfmoon Bar, he would have thought twice about throwing in with the outfit.

On his third day at the Halfmoon Bar, Reg Danker called Chuck into the office of the flat-roofed adobe ranch house. Chuck stepped into the cool interior. A desk, two chairs, a bottle of wrisky, and some old guns were strewn about the place. Danker sat in a swivel chair, his hat and coat on. Chuck saw the bulge of his two shoulder-holstered guns beneath his frock coat.

"Yo're a new man around this part of the country," Danker said slowly, measuring the young waddy with his cold eyes. "I'm sendin' you to guard Dead Man Springs. You don't know nothin' about the trouble we been havin' with them McClellans of the Rockin' Chair spread. They poisoned Dead Man Springs, so I put up a fence. When I find ten head o' cattle layin' there dead, I figger it's time fer gunsmoke an' not palaver. You guard thet fence. If

they come, fire three shots. A crew will be near yuh runnin' cows out o' the brush."

"I won't let 'em through," Chuck promised.

"I'm givin' this job to you," Danker went on. "Yo're a good man. I been watchin' yuh handle cattle. You know yore way. Git goin'."

A puzzled frown ridged Chuck's forehead as he stepped out into the bright sunlight and headed for the corral. He roped his horse, screwed on the hull, and loped out of the ranch yard. There was more to this set-up than appeared on the surface. All the time Danker had been talking Chuck had seen the mocking light in his eyes. All the pieces of this puzzle didn't fit. But Chuck had drawn cards in the game and he was determined to play it out.

At the big gate, he met Ed Beazle and Slag. Beazle glowered darkly as he sat his horse, fingering his beard. Slag showed two wide-spaced front teeth in a grin. He was drunk.

"Don't git yore feet wet at Dead Man Springs," he chuckled. Slag turned to Beazle as they rode toward the ranch house. "Reckon we're goin' to have to call it Two Dead Men Springs after to-day."

"Shut up," Beazle growled. "Yo're drunk."

Chuck felt icy shocks of warning race up his spine. Something told him to quit this country fast. But his stubborn pride held and brought that devil-may-care grin to his lips.

"Don't git the idea I'm easy to kill," he yelled after the two horsemen. "I'm like a cat. I'll have eight more to go."

With those words, he set spurs to his bronc and clattered down the dusty road at a trot. Mesquite and sage lined the trail where he turned

off the road. Danker had drawn him a rough map. The sun was boiling when he set his sweaty horse down a rocky gulch, crossed a ridge of hills and came to a cottonwood grove.

Chuck jogged to the spot where the springs poured out of green rocks and spilled down into Dead Man Creek, only to vanish into the sandy soil a few feet further on. The rest of the creek bed was as dry as a sun-bleached steer bone this time of year.

He threw off his saddle and staked the horse near by. With his Winchester in his hand, Chuck strode to where the shiny new fence had been erected about fifteen feet the other side of Dead Man Springs. The ground around the fence posts was freshly turned.

"Looks mighty funny," Chuck said to himself. "If I'm any judge of fences I'll bet this one ain't been up more than a day. Why didn't Danker tell me that? He give me the impression this had been here a long time."

The more the cowboy observed the surrounding country, the more puzzled he became. Cows wearing Rocking Chair brands hugged the fence, smelling water and bawling piteously.

"Ain't human to keep them cows from water," Chuck growled. "Yet Danker says them McClellans poisoned the water hole." Suddenly he stiffened and his eyes narrowed. "Why in blazes would McClellan poison Dead Man Springs when his own cows was usin' it. That don't make sense."

Chuck sat on a rock, rolled a smoke, and let his gaze sweep across the expanse of sage and mesquite to the distant purple ridges of the Wigwam Mountains.

"Mebbe I drew cards in the

wrong game," he said. "But I ain't got no use fer rustlers. An' if them McClellans is slappin' Halfmoon Bar cattle across the border, I reckon I'll draw my fightin' pay from Danker."

But still Chuck's mind would not rest. Then suddenly across the flat tableland four horsemen appeared, bobbing dots at first, that finally grew larger minute by minute. And Chuck knew instinctively that he was going to have a gunsmoke palaver with the McClellans of the Rockin' Chair.

III.

As the four horsemen drew nearer, Chuck remembered what Danker had said about firing the three shots to bring the Halfmoon Bar crew to his aid. He was not afraid, but he figured the had better obey orders. Chuck drew his six-gun, and thumbed three shots into the air. He plugged new shells into the gun and waited.

In a few minutes the four riders pulled up opposite the new fence. A gray-bearded old man led the crew. A stiff breeze whipped the brim of the battered old hat which was pulled low over his grizzled brows. He was weatherbeaten, bent from long years in the saddle. But his eyes were clear and burned with dangerous lights.

The other three were big, muscular men with narrowed eyes. Chuck could see their resemblance to one another. He figured this must be McClellan and his three sons.

"If yo're aimin' on gun talk, yuh better fan the breeze back to the Rockin' Chair," Chuck warned the old man.

"We ain't fannin' nowheres, feller," the old man growled. "I'm Jed McClellan. I've run this range peaceable fer twenty years. When

Baxter owned the Halfmoon Bar we both used Dead Man Springs. But since Danker's got it, he's tryin' to freeze me out. He threatened to string wire across the springs. I told him I'd stretch the neck of the hombre I ketchin' guardin' the fence. Yo're it!"

Realization burst in Chuck Topping's brain. Danker had used him. It was a frame-up. And he was equally convinced that those three shots he had fired would not bring the Halfmoon Bar to his aid.

One look at McClellan and his grim-lipped boys convinced Chuck that he couldn't throw bullets at them. And yet he was between two fires, with the flames licking his boot tops.

"Danker has framed me," Chuck said coldly. "I knowed there was a smell to this deal some place, but I couldn't locate it till now."

The biggest of the three boys drew wire cutters from his pocket. "We ain't listenin' to yore speech. We're hangin' yuh as shore as my name is Tip McClellan."

"This is jist what Danker wants," Chuck argued. "You hang me an' it'll give Danker a good excuse fer burnin' you all out. You string up his man an' he'll have a right to gun the hull crew of the Rockin' Chair. He picked on me, a stranger, fer the goat. I'll nail his carcass in a coffin or die tryin'."

Chuck saw Tip McClellan cut the fence wires, heard the *sping* as they were snipped and fell to the ground. With a bellow and a trample of hoofs, the twenty-odd Rockin' Chair cows lowered their heads and charged for the pool of water near the springs, trying to crowd each other away from the edge as they drank thirstily.

Then the four McClellans spurred

their mounts forward, surrounding Chuck. He saw the cold anger in their eyes, read the hate that was stamped on their features.

"You comin' peaceable, or are we goin' to have to lead-fill yore mangy hide," snapped Tip McClellan. The others crowded nearer.

"Let him draw," raged the youngest, whom Chuck had heard called Roy. "I'd like a chance to fasten his belt with lead."

Chuck let the Winchester slip from his fingers, stepped quickly backward so that his shoulder blades were pressed against a huge boulder.

"I jist went to work fer the Halfmoon Bar three days ago," he ripped out. "I knowed nothin' about this fence. I knowed Danker was havin' trouble with you, but he accused you of rustlin' an' poisonin' water holes."

Old Jed McClellan's seamed face went red with anger. "Thet dirty sway-backed horse thief. He wants my ranch. He's makin' any kind of an excuse to find trouble so's he kin run us out. I fought Injuns an' renegade whites in the old days, an' I kin still swap lead with fellers that wear skunk stripe like Danker."

Chuck knew he couldn't fight these men. That they were honest cattlemen he had no doubt now. They didn't have the mark of rustlers. Yet he couldn't allow himself to die at the end of a rope without a struggle. He stiffened and his blue eyes shot frigid lights. Roy McClellan had a rope in his hand.

"Yo're doin' a cottonwood shuffle," he snapped. "Die like a man -- not like a blamed Halfmoon Bar skunk!"

Overhead a vulture swooped low. The heat boiled down Chuck's back. Sweat ran into his slitted eyes as he watched the four men sitting their saddles. Saw the sunlight sparkle on

the guns that suddenly snapped into the hands of the riders. He would shoot to wound them, that's all he could do. The McClellans were hot-heads. They were fighting for their home.

Like a blast of thunder, gunfire rolled across the flat. Bullets tunneled the air. Jed McClellan was yelling. Chuck yanked his gun, whirled. To his right a line of horsemen charged. He recognized the Halfmoon Bar crew. Ed Beazle led them, his black beard streaming out in the wind.

"The fools ain't hanged him yet!" yelled Beazle.

"Burn 'em down anyhow!" shouted Slag, pumping slugs from blazing Colts.

Chuck thumbed quick shots. Only the fact that the Halfmoon Bar crew were riding at top speed saved the McClellans and Chuck from being riddled. Their aim was bad. Chuck fired again.

"I'm fightin' for the McClellans!" he shouted. Already the McClellans were opening up. Beazle and his riders swerved for the protection of some boulders. One horse screamed, up-ended, spilling its rider into the brush.

Beazle had blundered, Chuck knew. He figured to find the strange new waddy hanging from a cottonwood tree. He had come too soon. They had probably been watching the proceedings through field glasses, had saddled up and ridden here.

"Come out an' fight!" Chuck yelled. He blasted another shot.

One was all he raked out of his gun. Something crashed against the side of his head. A funnel of white light coned his brain. He dropped into a black pit with the shouts of men and the sharp crang of spitting guns in his ears.

IV.

Chuck Topping pried his eyes open and found he was lying on his back in a roofless adobe shack. Pain snapped his eyes shut. The roar and crash of Colts sent shots of pain spearing through his aching head. Slanting sun rays boiled through the open space above the thick adobe walls. This adobe had obviously been built as a line shack, then never completed.

Old Jed McClellan crouched at a window, his face blurred in the swirl of powder-smoke from the long gun he was using. Roy and Tip held the door. The other McClellan, whom Chuck later learned was Sam, was hunkered down on the hard-packed floor reloading a brace of six-guns. Roy had a crimson-soaked rag around his left ankle.

Chuck's first impression was that he had been hit a glancing blow on the head with a bullet. He could feel the dried blood on his cheek. His hands were lashed behind his back.

But when Chuck sat up and propped his back against the adobe wall, he found Roy looking at him, hatred burning in his black eyes.

"Thought I'd busted yore skull when I bent my Colt barrel over yore head!" he yelled above the roar of gunfire. "If them Halfmoon Bar killers don't git us, you'll live to hang!"

Red anger roared through Chuck Topping's veins. Roy had deliberately slugged him. The McClellans still thought he was one of Danker's gunmen. Chuck's feet were untied and he stood dizzily erect. The McClellans had taken refuge here in this adobe.

Outside, Chuck could hear the shouts of Danker and his crew. The Halfmoon Bar owner had evidently joined the fight himself.

"McClellan!" Chuck yelled at the old man. "Let me loose! Gimme a gun an' I'll do my share of fightin'!"

"The only fightin' you'll do will be at the end of a rope!" the old man answered grimly. "We ain't lettin' yuh loose so's yuh kin run to Danker an' mebbe shoot us in the back!"

A rifle barked from outside. Chuck saw Tip McClellan pitch over on his face and lay still. Crimson stained the dirt floor of the roofless adobe.

"They got Tip!" Roy yelled. He ducked low and hobbled to his brother's side. Roy stuck his hand inside the fallen man's shirt. His fingers were crimson-stained when he pulled them out. "He's dead!"

Old Jed McClellan bit the lip, and Chuck could see the mist that suddenly fogged his eyes.

"My boy," he groaned. That was all he said. His gnarled hands clutched his rifle; he sighted, squeezed trigger. Out there in the gathering twilight, a man screamed.

"You ain't got a chance!" Chuck pleaded. "Lemme throw some lead! We kin lick 'em!"

"Shut up!" Roy snarled. "My brother was kilt by Halfmoon Bar lead! I'm savin' you fer a neck-stretchin' or bullet in yore carcass!"

Chuck tried to loosen the rope that held his wrists. He had been tied by some one who knew his business. Through the haze of gun-smoke, Chuck could see where the Halfmoon Bar killers had taken refuge fifty yards away behind a nest of boulders.

A bullet plowed into the adobe an inch from his head, throwing dried mud in his face. His cheeks stung. The firing from outside had practically ceased. Through narrowed eyes, the cowboy swept his gaze from the huddled figure of Tip McClellan there on the floor to Jed McClellan and his two boys.

"Wonder what they're up to," Roy was saying. "It's blamed quiet all of a sudden. They got us covered from the front an' sides. We cain't escape through the back on account of the cliff that's there."

Through the rear door, Chuck could see the sheer wall of rock which rose skyward about ten feet from the adobe wall. There was no escape that way.

Suddenly the air screamed with the rush of hot lead. Guns sang there in the twilight. All the firing was coming from in front of the house. Chuck saw the spurts of smoke, heard the yells of the Halfmoon Bar men.

"Everybody at the front window!" yelled old Jed McClellan. "They may be tryin' to rush us!"

Chuck suspected a trick. He wanted to warn the McClellans, but knew he would only be wasting his breath. He tugged at his bonds.

Suddenly an icy shock speared up his backbone. Through the side window he saw Slag and another man standing in the semigloom. Slag had a grin on his face. Both men were sheltered by a waist-high boulder. A match flickered and Chuck saw the sputter of fire which licked the end of a fuse.

Slag held a long cylinder in his hand. He heaved back and threw the sputtering object through the air.

"Here's a one-way ticket to perdition!" he yelled.

Through slitted eyes, Chuck saw the cylinder plop to the hard-packed floor. The fuse burned quickly. It was a length of dynamite, split at the end with a cap and fuse inserted in the cut.

All these things Chuck Topping saw in a shaved second. Roy McClellan wheeled around.

"Dynamite!" he roared. "Git it!"

He was too far away and knew it. Chuck was already moving. The fire moved toward the end of the cylinder. He rushed forward, gauging his distance. Acting on instinct his right toe caught the stick of lighted dynamite. Chuck saw it sail through the air, to land at the base of the rock that sheltered Slag.

Only for an instant did Chuck see the thin face of Slag over the edge of the rock. The Halfmoon Bar man at his side was already turning to run. A hoarse cry burst from Slag's lips. The scream blended with a roar as Chuck Topping flung himself face down.

The adobe walls shook as if wrenched by a giant's hand. Rocks rained through the opening above. A huge slab of shale split the dirt an inch from Chuck's head. Dust hung like a curtain.

Chuck opened his eyes. The McClellans were picking themselves from the floor. Old Jed had a cut on his cheek. Sam shook his head dazedly. Roy limped as he hobbled to the shelter of the wall.

Bullets suddenly ceased to slice through the front windows. The Halfmoon Bar hands in front had seen what had happened to Slag and his pard. They knew there wouldn't be enough left of them to put in a saddlebag.

Chuck saw old Jed whip out a knife and come toward him. McClellan solemnly stepped behind the cowboy and sawed the ropes that bound his wrists.

"I reckon you done saved your own life an' ours as well," he said. "I'm givin' yuh a chance to prove yo're on the right side of the fence an' ain't believin' in that killin' Danker."

Chuck felt a surge of joy rush through his body. The ropes fell

away. He rubbed his wrists to restore the circulation.

"I'll make Danker an' Ed Beazle pay fer killin' yore boy," he promised, looking into the old man's pale eyes.

With his guns once more in their holsters, Chuck sought a way to dislodge the Halfmoon Bar killers. They were safely entrenched behind boulders.

"If they had one stick of dynamite, chances are they got more," Chuck told Jed McClellan. "Drunken Slag is dead. The next man who tries tossin' a stick o' the stuff in here may git away with it. I got an idea that may work."

In the corner of the shack was a pile of pine sticks, evidently left there by a saddle tramp for a camp fire. A broken lamp was tipped over near by. Chuck unscrewed the cap on the lamp. A few drops of kerosene remained inside. While he worked, Roy McClellan made his way to his father's side, leaving Sam to guard the front of the house. The firing had ceased.

"I don't trust this feller yet," Roy growled. "How do we know——"

Old Jed held up his hand. "Take a look at what the kid's doin'."

Chuck was tying a piece of the rope, which had bound his hands, to the end of a foot-long pine stick. He carefully poured the kerosene on the hemp.

"I got an idea this might work," Chuck told them. "I'm sneakin' out. You guard the adobe. I'll tend to Danker an' Beazle. From the sounds of the firin', I think there's about four hombres left. Blast away at 'em so's to give me a chance to git out!"

Chuck slipped to the rear door, the stick clutched in one hand, a match in the other. It would soon be dark. He had to work fast.

"I'm goin' with him," Roy was saying. "He'll bear watchin'!"

"We'll trust the feller," snapped old Jed. "He's the only one with brains—not a McClellan hot-head. We'll play his game."

A burst of gunfire rattled from the front of the adobe. At that instant, Chuck sprinted from a corner of the adobe. He bent low, his booted feet digging into the soft ground. Expecting every second to feel the bite of lead in his body, Chuck reached the shelter of a rock. The Halfmoon Bar waddies were answering the fire of the McClellans.

With the boom of six-guns and rifles in his ears, Chuck scrambled over the rocks until he reached a point where he could look directly down into the Halfmoon Bar stronghold. Three men lay motionless on the ground. But Chuck saw with satisfaction that Danker, Beazle and two others were still alive. Danker was yelling and firing through a crack in the rock at the adobe shack.

It was getting dark fast. Chuck bent low, scraped a match on his boot sole, and lighted the length of rope attached to the end of the pine stick. For a second he thought the rope wouldn't burn. Then suddenly the flame caught a spot where the kerosene had soaked into the hemp.

"Here's yore own lobo medicine!" Chuck shouted. "Halfmoon Bar, take yore needin's!"

One of the men saw him and screamed. A gun flamed. The bullet sliced the air an inch from the cowboy's cheek. Then Chuck threw that burning thing right in the middle of the circle of rocks.

"Run!" yelled Ed Beazle as he spotted that length of wood with the burning rope at his feet. "It's dynamite!"

Danker whirled, his frock coat fly-

ing open at the movement. Beazle tried to run, got his foot caught between two rocks and sprawled on his face. Danker bellowed an oath and tripped over his black-bearded foreman.

The other two Halfmoon Bar hands scrambled over the rocks, running as if a herd of stampeding steers tickled their pants with pointed horns.

Chuck drew his guns and raced down the trail. Beazle was swearing and trying to get his foot out of the rock wedge. Danker scrambled erect as the fire at the end of the rope died out.

"Come back!" he yelled at his two retreating punchers, but they were out of earshot by this time. Danker's guns funneled orange flame.

Chuck felt the slam of lead crash into his left leg. He sprawled face down, one gun slipping from his fingers. He had his right-hand weapon. Danker blasted again. Bullets chugged into the ground by Chuck's body. He got to his knees. In the gathering shadows, he saw Danker's cold eyes, saw the smoking guns in his hands.

Automatically Chuck dropped his

Colt hammer. The gun roared and Danker folded at his belt line, sprawled on his face and lay motionless.

Black-bearded Ed Beazle got his foot loose. He jumped erect, leveled Colts in his hands. Chuck rolled sidewise as a blanket of hot lead raked the spot where he had been an instant before.

"Yuh salted my coffee!" Chuck yelled. "Now I'm saltin' yore hide!" Pain shot along his left leg. His Levis were red, sippy.

His .45 jerked in his right fist. Beazle clawed at the crimson which suddenly drenched his black beard. The Halfmoon Bar foreman wriggled like a fish on a bent pin, then fell across the body of his dead boss.

The McClellans were piling over the rocks, guns in hand. They saw the bodies of Danker and Beazle. Roy McClellan came to Chuck's side to bandage the cowboy's wounded leg.

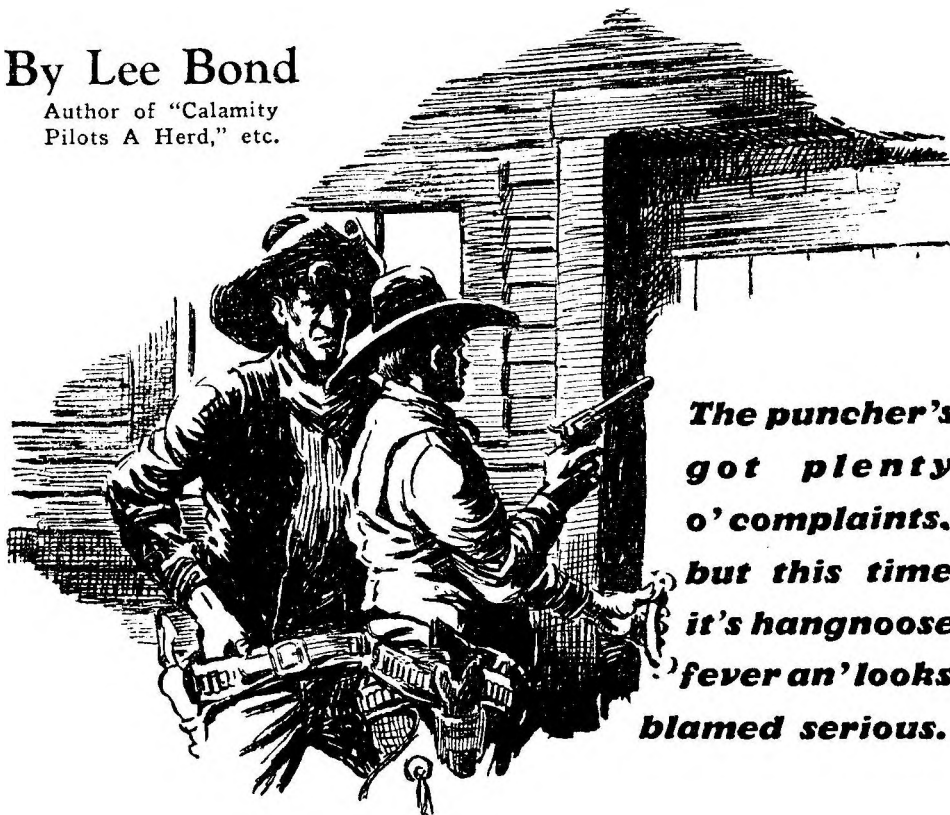
"I reckon I was plumb mistaken about you," he said. "Now that Tip's gone, I think we need a new hand on the Rockin' Chair. Thanks to you, the Halfmoon Bar shore got hit by a gunsmoke tornado!"



Calamity Hubs A Frame-up

By Lee Bond

Author of "Calamity
Pilots A Herd," etc.



*The puncher's
got plenty
o' complaints,
but this time
it's hangnoose
fever an' looks
blamed serious.*

THE two wandering cowpokes sensed something sinister in the very silence of the little old line shack. They had been drawn to the place by the yellow glow of lamp-light showing through the two small windows. But after sitting their horses outside and hailing the place lustily for several minutes they had received no answer.

"What in blazes do yuh make o' this deal, Calamity?" bantam-sized "Shorty" Stevens demanded, glancing over at his big saddle pard, "Calamity" Boggs.

The two wandering punchers had ridden far that day and were weary in every muscle. The thought of bedding down at this lonely little line camp had cheered them for a few moments. But it was beginning to look as if they would get no invitation to enter.

"This jist goes ter show what awful luck I always have, pard," Calamity Boggs rumbled.

His voice was as sad as a dirge, and his expression was even less cheerful.

"Yuh stop spoutin' yore blasted

gloom!" Shorty came back hotly. "What I want to know is why we ain't gittin' an answer from whoever is in that shack."

Shorty flung his wiry body from the saddle. He bow-legged to the warped door, drew one of the twin six-guns he carried in low-slung holsters, and fairly rattled the shack by whacking the door savagely with gun barrel.

"If some deaf jasper is holed up in there, I'll fetch him!" Shorty declared, and whammed the door a few more blows. But there was no answer to the pounding, and with a grunt of disgust Shorty holstered his gun, grasped the door latch, and opened the portal wide.

Calamity Boggs swung lithely down from his dun bronc's saddle, and was beside Shorty as the little waddy flung open the shack door. Calamity was a huge, powerfully built young hombre, with keen black eyes, curly black hair, and the expression of a lost bloodhound.

"I'll git shot fer bustin' inter this feller's domycile," he predicted sourly. "The signs have allus been agin' me, Shorty, an' yuh know it."

"Shut up!" advised the peppery little puncher, and stepped boldly into the room.

Calamity followed, and the two stood surveying the interior of the shack in swift glances. There were two rumped, dirty bunks at the far end of the room, a table in the center of the floor was set for two, and a stove at the far wall glowed warmly. Upon the stove a coffeepot steamed, and a big stew pot bubbled merrily, giving off odors that made the two staring cowpokes realize how hungry they were. To the left of the stove a narrow back door stood slightly ajar, as if some one had departed hastily.

"Well, this beats me," fumed

Shorty Stevens. "Whoever the two jaspers are that hang out here, they shore must be skittish. They run when we hollered outside."

"But they'll be back," Calamity gloomed. "An' they'll shoot me down an' leave me ter die horrible. Pard, we better high-tail it while we've got a chance. I'm scairt."

Shorty's gray eyes glared up at Calamity. But before he could answer horses snorted somewhere out back, then shod hoofs thudded swiftly away into the night. The two punchers whirled to the door, darting outside just in time to see two shadowy figures vanish over a little ridge fifty yards away.

"I've got it!" Shorty cackled. "Them two galoots are owl-hooters, Calamity. An' they lit a shuck fearin' we was lawmen."

"They're likely honest fellers who are headin' fer Sentinel town ter fetch the law," Calamity moaned. "My orful past has caught up with me at last, Shorty. I'll die horrible, with a hang-noose around muh neck."

"Yuh make me sick!" fumed Shorty. "The law ain't got no call to be lookin' fer yuh, an' yuh know it. Come on, yuh big moose. We'll stall our brones in yonder barn an' take a look in that stew pot I seen on the stove."

"I'll never live ter see daylight," Calamity gulped. "Them fellers likely pizened that stew they left behind. I'll die with a belly full o' wolf pizen, an' chawin' my tongue in fits."

Shorty blistered the air with a retort, snatched up his little roan's reins, and headed angrily for the small barn and corral, which he could see dimly through the darkness.

Calamity followed, and the two punchers were surprised to find their brones rearing and snorting when

they led them into the little barn. But the waddies were tired, and forced their snorting, lunging mounts into stalls. They found grain and hay, fed the two uneasy cow horses, and headed back for the cabin, Calamity groaning dire predictions at every step.

"I tell yuh I'll never live ter finish this meal!" groaned Calamity as they sat down to steaming plates of stêw. "This hyar is trail's end fer me, pard. I feel it in my bones."

But Calamity did live to finish his stew. In fact, he got through the third helping without any noticeable signs of weakening. And once they were filled with warm food, the two drifting punchers were so drowsy they could barely keep awake long enough to wash the dishes they had used.

They had brought their own bed rolls in from the barn after having seen the bunks at the far end of the room. Calamity spread his blankets close to one wall, and was soon in bed.

"I feel the pizen takin' hold, pard," he grunted wearily. "But I allus knowed I'd come ter some turrrible end. But even if the pizen don't kill me, I'll git hung fer stealin' food from this hyar house."

"Shut up, yuh big moose!" Shorty growled. "If yuh ever had a cheerful thought pop into that head o' yores it'd blow yore skull open."

Shorty blew out the lamp, then crawled into his own blankets, which he had spread beneath one of the small windows. The pards were asleep within a moment. Yet it seemed to them that they had barely closed their eyes when the shack door banged noisily open, and shadowy figures poured into the room.

"Don't move, either one o' yuh snakes!" an authoritative voice or-

dered. "We've got the cold drop on you killers."

Shorty and Calamity sat up so violently that their beds seemed actually exploding. And to their amazement, daylight was streaking through the two windows and through the door which stood ajar.

Five men stood there in the little room; five grim-lipped, hard-eyed men who held cocked guns leveled at the two blinking, slack-jawed punchers who had just awakened. Shorty and Calamity both saw the big sheriff's badge pinned to the shirt of a chunky, grizzled man who stood slightly in the lead of the other four hombres.

"Wh-what in blazes is into you fellers?" Shorty spluttered.

"We'll trigger a flock o' hot lead into you two if yuh don't elevate them paws!" the sheriff told him. "We jist found Deputy Jim Horn's body hid in the manger out yonder in the barn. We've got you rats dead to rights!"

"I knowed it!" Calamity moaned. "Shorty, didn't I tell yuh this hyar would be trail's end fer me? An' yuh'll git hung, too, jist fer keepin' bad company with the likes o' me."

"Whoever yuh are, I arrest yuh two for the murder o' young Jim Horn, my deputy!" The sheriff's voice was dangerously thin. "An', unofficial, o' course, I sort o' wish yuh'd try to grab yore guns. Jim was a fine younker."

Shorty and Calamity shivered as they lifted their hands. That grizzled little sheriff wasn't bluffing!

II.

Under the blazing eyes and watchful guns of the five hombres in the room, Shorty Stevens and Calamity Boggs crawled into pants and boots, then backed over against one wall.

A tall, grizzled man with dark, hawkish features and boring gray eyes stepped forward, holstered a Colt, and picked up the guns and belts that belonged to the two waddies. A blocky, tow-headed man with blunt features and sharp blue eyes holstered twin guns, moved up beside the tall old fellow.

The grizzled man drew Shorty's two guns, sniffing at the muzzles. He scowled, shoved them back in leather, then drew the single .45 that belonged to Calamity. A sniff at Calamity's gun deepened the frown on the tall man's brow.

"Ain't they been fired, boss?" The blocky towhead sounded disappointed.

"These guns ain't been fired recent," the tall one replied.

He lifted his keen glance, hawkish features settling into hard lines as he glared at the two helpless punchers against the wall.

"I'm Tex Colby, owner o' this here U X range," he said. "Who are yuh two, an' why did yuh bushwhack Deputy Jim Horn, then fetch him here an' hide the body in the manger?"

"Yuh jaspers have got yore loops plenty tangled, Colby," Shorty Stevens clipped.

In quick, angry sentences Shorty told how he and his pard had arrived the evening before, finally making themselves at home after two men had mysteriously high-tailed it from the shack.

"I remember now that Calamity an' me had trouble makin' our brones go into the barn," the little waddy finished. "An' I reckon that body was in the manger then."

"Blamed if these boys look like cold killers to me, boss," the blocky towhead frowned.

Calamity Boggs was paying little attention to what was being said.

The big waddy looked sadder than ever, yet from behind drooping lids his eagle-keen black eyes were studying two of the five men keenly. Those two had sidled off a few paces, and were exchanging swift, stiff-lipped words.

"I've got a hunch, Tex, that these two are at least part of the rustler gang that have been strippin' yore range lately," the sheriff whispered. "Keep the whelps covered while I search 'em for hide-out guns."

The officer slogged forward, holstered his own Colt, and glowered at the two helpless cowpokes. "I'm Fred Polk, sheriff o' this county," he pronounced grimly. "Anything yuh say will be used agin' yuh, shore. But yuh might at least tell yore names."

"I'm Shorty Stevens," the little puncher snapped. "An' this big, cheerful feller with me is my pard, Calamity Boggs."

"Yuh mean I *was* yore pard," Calamity corrected dismally. "I'm so nigh dead from hang-noose fever right now thet I don't even count no more."

Calamity was not looking down at the sheriff as he spoke, however. He was still watching those two jaspers who had moved off to one side. The pair had holstered their guns and were strolling about the cabin.

Suddenly Calamity felt an electric something shoot through him. The big, burly, red-faced fellow and the little, shriveled jasper he had been studying had moseyed over to the smelly bunks. And as Calamity watched, the burly one flipped back the covers on one bunk, ran his hand underneath, and drew out a brown wallet.

The big hombre's action had been speedy, and he stuffed the wallet inside his shirt in a single stabbing mo-

tion. Then he and the shriveled jasper exchanged relieved glances, and came sauntering back down the room.

Calamity jumped when hands ran over him. But it was only the sheriff, searching him for hide-out guns. Suddenly the sheriff let out a yip and almost tore Calamity's shirt and undershirt from the big waddy's powerful shoulders.

"A money belt!" the officer cried. "An' it's as fat as a blacksnake that has jist robbed a hen's nest. I'll fix——"

"Jist a minnit," Calamity cut in. "No need in tearin' me in half, sheriff. Hyar, take the dinero if yo're so blamed keen ter rob a man."

Calamity snaked out the belt and banded it over. Tex Colby and the blocky towhead pressed forward excitedly. The two jaspers who had sidled down the room to retrieve that wallet rushed up, their eyes bulging as they watched the sheriff take sheaf after sheaf of bank notes out of that leather belt.

"Mr. Colby, do some o' yore punchers stay hyar at this line shack?" Calamity asked mildly.

"Yuh tryin' to be funny?" snorted the rancher. "Of course I don't keep any o' my men out here at this season o' the year. So far as me an' my men here knowed, this shack hadn't been used in months."

Calamity felt another thrill of excitement, for Colby had jerked a hand briefly toward the blocky towhead and the two jaspers who had known where to find a wallet in the shack when he said "my men."

"Oh, so these three fellers are U X cowpokes, are they?" Calamity still sounded meek.

Shorty Stevens shot the big waddy a quick glance, for when Calamity sounded meek and half afraid, the

big waddy's keen mind was mighty apt to be struggling with some very important problem.

"Shore, these are my men," Colby frowned. "This is Joe Allred, my ramrod." He motioned at the blocky towhead. "This feller," Colby went on swiftly, "is Lon Jerome, U X bronc peeler." Colby pointed to the big, red-faced hombre who had gotten the wallet from the bunk.

"An' the other feller there is Jumpy Hudson, one o' my best punchers," Colby finished as he flicked a thumb toward the shriveled, mean-faced little jasper who was sticking close to big Lon Jerome.

"What business is it o' yores who we aire, yuh sour-lookin' whelp?" scrawny little "Jumpy" Hudson demanded thinly.

"Yeah, keep yore nose out of our affairs, Boggs," Lon Jerome leered. "Seems ter me yo're in trouble enough now."

"Holy cats!" yelped the sheriff. "Boys, I jist finished countin' this dinero for the second time. There's danged nigh four thousand dollars in this money belt."

"That cinches it, Fred," Tex Colby rapped thinly. "These two are rustlers, for no honest punchers would be runnin' around with that much dinero."

"Yeah, an' they kilt pore Jim because he was gettin' hot on their trail," thundered Lon Jerome. "If yuh ask me, we ought ter save the expense of a trial an' swing these two galoots right now!"

"Shore, men, Lon's right!" Jumpy Hudson shrilled. "Why spend good money tryin' guilty whelps like these two? Git a rope an'——"

"That'll be enough o' such palaver!" Sheriff Polk cut in stonily. "These two go to jail—an' I'll have the devil's own time provin' 'em

guilty. We've got no evidence to speak of."

"An' I still say these boys don't look like killers or thieves to me," grumbled Joe Allred.

"I suppose, Stevens, that you an' Boggs have got an alibi cooked up as to how yuh got this money?" the sheriff stated coolly.

Shorty's hair-trigger temper was simmering, and his gray eyes fairly shot fire. "Since when," he yelled, "did a man have to have an alibi fer packin' honest money with him?"

"Honest money?" the sheriff echoed sourly.

"Shore, Polk, that money is honest." Calamity's usual gloom was gone. "Besides workin' as regular hands, Shorty an' me buy an' sell a few head o' hosses or cattle whenever we git the chance ter make a profit. An' we've bought a small spread or two that we could turn quick fer a little profit."

"If that's true, yo're sharper than any two range hands I ever run into," Tex Colby snorted. "Mostly, cowpokes whoop off their dinero as fast as they make it."

"Yeah, but I'll bet these boys are tellin' it straight," Joe Allred put in stoutly. "I tell yuh——"

Allred broke off, for booted feet slapped noisily outside. Lon Jerome and Jumpy Hudson charged into the room, ugly lights glittering in their hard eyes.

"Look what fell out o' the saddlebags of one of them saddles we started to gear on them brones out in the stable!" Jerome yelled. And he held up the brown wallet Calamity had seen him sneak from the bunk not long ago.

"That's Jim Horn's wallet!" ejaculated the sheriff. "I ought to know, for I give it to the boy as a present last Christmas!"

"It was in the saddle that's got the longest stirrups, which means the saddle belongs ter that Boggs cuss thar," Jumpy Hudson shrilled. "Yuh kin look at him an' tell he's jist dumb enough ter keep some important piece of evidence like that after he done murder!"

"I knowed it!" Calamity almost sobbed the words. "My orful past has finally overtook me, Shorty. I'll die horrible, chokin' ter death at the end o' a hang rope. This is shore my finish!"

III.

By the time night settled over the busy little town of Sentinel, Shorty Stevens was worn out. All day long the little puncher had paced up and down the narrow, hot cell where he and Calamity had been confined. But Calamity had lain sprawled lazily on one of the two narrow cots, dozing most of the time. Shorty whirled away from the tiny barred window now, glowering down through the thick gloom at his big pard.

"Fer the thousandth time, Calamity, I'm askin' yuh to call the sheriff in here an' tell him what yuh seen out in that shack!" cried Shorty. "If yuh'd only tell Polk about that wallet business, he'd listen."

"An' he'd git excited, if he did believe me, an' go talkin'," murmured Calamity with a yawn. "We're stayin' right hyar until the sheriff checks up on them references we give."

"That'll take a week or more, an' yuh know it," Shorty fumed. "Besides that, jist because we've got a good reputation along our back trail don't mean we can jerk our necks out o' this mess."

"Them two U X snakes framed

us," Calamity rumbled. "Lon Jerome an' Jumpy Hudson are the whelps thet run away from thet shack."

"Then why not tell the sheriff?" demanded Shorty.

"Because the sheriff would spill the beans," Calamity answered. "An' when we're finally let out o' this coop, I want ter git on the trail o' them U X snakes an' ketch 'em red-handed."

"But what if we don't git out o' jail?" Shorty worried. "What if this here murder charge was to stick against us? That young deputy was mighty popular, as yuh've already found out."

"Shore, thet's the way it'll turn out, Shorty," Calamity opined gloomily. "The murder charge will stick, an' we'll git hung, thet's certain."

Before Shorty could voice the blistering reply which came to his tongue, the sound of shots and wild yelling came in through the barred window. The little waddy whirled, glanced through the bars and yipped excitedly. Calamity sprang nimbly up from the cot, joined his pard at the window.

They stared out over the town to where a great, spreading flare of flame and smoke and sparks lifted high into the night sky. They could see the black outline of doomed buildings beneath the ugly red flare.

"Fire! Fire!" The cry was ringing through the whole town. Guns blasted the alarm, and men were swarming madly along the street.

"By thunder, that's some fire!" gasped Shorty. "Looks like six-eight houses all blazin' at once."

A man came racing along the sidewalk, his boots pounding loudly over the warped old boards. He turned in at the front of the jail building, which was the sheriff's office.

"Sheriff Polk!" the hombre's excited voice reached Calamity and Shorty.

They heard the sheriff grunt something. Then the excited hombre was shouting the news of the fire, asking the sheriff to come "a-runnin'." The sheriff cursed uneasily, a chair scraped, and a moment later Polk and the other man were galloping back along the warped sidewalk.

"It's them old shacks out at the edge o' town," the man who had come for the sheriff was explaining. "But if that fire was to spread up to the main drag——"

Distance pinched the hombre's voice off. But Calamity and Shorty knew well enough what would happen if that fire ever reached the buildings along the main street.

They were wondering if the townsmen would get to the fire in time to stop it when two shadowy figures darted along the wall beneath their cell window. The two figures turned the front corner of the building, and a moment later boots thudded in the corridor beyond the cells.

The two pards whirled, their eyes widening as they saw Lon Jerome and Jumpy Hudson. Jerome was fumbling with a big key ring, cursing in a choked, gasping whisper as he fitted a key into the cell lock. Jumpy Hudson had a gun in each bony fist, and the corridor lamp showed his face twisted into a savage, murderous scowl.

"Either one o' you two fools make a sound an' I'll slam lead into yore teeth!" the waspy little gunman panted. "When this door opens, march out o' thar. An' move like yore boots was red-hot."

The cell door swung open, and Lon Jerome snatched twin guns, leveling them at the dumfounded pards.

"Outside, jailbirds!" Jerome husked. "An' move, or by the liv-

in', I'll beat yore brains out with a gun barrel."

Shorty started to hurl a defiant reply, but felt Calamity's powerful hand grip his arm and pinch down in warning. Then Calamity was shuffling forward, a silly, almost stupid grin on his craggy face.

"This is shore nice o' yuh gents," the big puncher observed. "Maybe my orful luck has changed at last."

The note of laughter which slithered past Jumpy Hudson's gash lips was enough to tell a much dumber hombre than Calamity Boggs that whatever change his luck had taken was certainly for the worse.

"Run, you two!" rasped Lon Jerome.

With guns gouging savagely at their backs, Shorty and Calamity could do little else except run. They were forced out through the sheriff's office, around a corner of the building, and came racing finally to the brushy vacant lots behind the adobe jail. Then they saw three horsemen sitting there ahead of them, holding the reins of four riderless mounts.

"Good work so far, Lon," a deep voice called. "That fire we started shore took the town's attention."

Shorty and Calamity were forced aboard two of the riderless horses. Jumpy Hudson and Lon Jerome mounted the other two, crowding Shorty and Calamity closely.

"I—I shorely do thank you hombres fer rescuin' us," panted Calamity.

"He thanks us," Lon Jerome laughed nastily. "Gaff, you an' yore two punchers hear that?"

Calamity and Shorty were surrounded by the five riders, forced to gallop madly away into the night. They could see the wink of starlight on gun metal all about them, and knew that they were covered from all sides.

But they had gone little more than a mile from town when the horses dipped steeply downward toward black timber. There was the smell of water and green foliage in the air, and trees loomed darkly ahead. Suddenly the horses were being reined in, to halt within the black shadow of big cottonwoods.

"Gaff, you or one o' yore punchers jump off an' light that dry brush we fixed," Jumpy Hudson shrilled. "Rest o' yuh help me keep a eye on this runt of a Stevens. That big Boggs critter is too dumb ter do anything."

"Say, what in blue blazes do you jaspers think yo're up to?" Shorty snarled. "Somethin' tells me——"

Shorty broke off. A few paces ahead a match flared and dipped down beneath a sizable heap of dry brush. Cured grass caught beneath the brush, and almost instantly a cheery red glow cut through the night. As the glow became a bright flare, Shorty and Calamity saw two grim hang nooses swinging just ahead of them!

Beside the fire stood a huge, flabby man in grimy clothing who stared up at them out of evil, bulging eyes. The dumfounded pards glanced toward the two strangers who sat slouching in saddles. One of the hombres was built like a rail and had a long horse face. The other jasper was squat and powerfully set, and looked as if he could slit a man's throat without losing that twisted, evil grin.

"All right, Gaff!" Lon Jerome barked. "Crawl back on yore bronc an' give us a hand. Five men ain't many ter pull a hangin'. On top o' that, we've got ter work fast."

The huge, slovenly Gaff rumbled mean laughter and came waddling forward.

Shorty Stevens snarled like a bobcat, whirling toward Jumpy Hudson, who was nearest him. Lon Jerome spun his horse and edged in closer to Shorty.

"Pat, you an' Carl snag this little Stevens snake an' git his hands tied!" Jumpy Hudson shrilled. "He's gonna show fight, like I reckoned he would."

The cutthroats were completely ignoring Calamity Boggs—and making a very grave error. With a speed that none of the killer crew would have believed he possessed, Calamity was out of the saddle.

The huge Gaff, just reaching for saddle horn, saw Calamity and tried to yell. But a massive fist that was as hard as a chunk of freshly chipped granite smacked Gaff on his triple chins. The big man rocked backward, grunting. Calamity slid over a left cross that popped dully against Gaff's jawbone. Gaff shuddered, bent at the knees, and started pitching forward. Calamity caught him across one powerful arm, snatched a gun from holster, then dropped the big walloper.

The big puncher had moved so swiftly that he had the gun palmed and was leaping clear of the senseless Gaff before a gun blazed at him. Calamity ducked from the hiss of a bullet, and the Colt in his right hand spewed lead and flame.

One of Gaff's punchers screamed, twisted sidewise, and fell across Shorty Stevens's lap. And Shorty's war whoop split the night as his chubby hands flashed down, found a pair of guns, and wrenched them from the dead tough's twitching fingers.

"That big feller!" Jumpy Hudson screamed. "He's went loco. He's so dumb——"

Guns beat out the puny voice of

the excited killer. Shorty Stevens rolled from the saddle, whooping shrilly, the guns in his chubby hands ripping the night with red-tipped thunder. And suddenly Gaff's second puncher was rolling from leather, a death wail in his throat.

Calamity Boggs dodged when Lon Jerome rode straight at him with spitting guns. The big waddy staggered, crimson leaping from a bullet gash along his left cheek. Another slug burned his ribs, and Calamity fired point-blank into the snarling, rage-mottled face that swam above him. He saw the face jerk, stiffen, then disappear as Lon Jerome flipped loosely over the tail of his spur-maddened horse.

Jerome hit like a sack of grain, a black dot under one ugly eye. Calamity turned, just in time to see Shorty Stevens blast Jumpy Hudson from leather with a double roar of hot guns.

The pards stood for a moment, blinking a little dazedly, hardly realizing that the deadly battle was over. And before they could even speak, riders came thundering down the slope.

"Sky them paws, killers!" Sheriff Fred Polk squalled, and a slug whistled past Calamity's crimson-painted face.

"Hold it, yuh galoots!" yelled Shorty Stevens.

Shorty and Calamity dropped their guns, lifted their hands. Sheriff Polk and half a dozen men circled them on blowing horses, their guns leveled.

"Yuh've shore played hob now!" snarled the badge-toter. "We seen yuh downin' these men, yuh ornery killers!"

"Now you listen a spell," Calamity Boggs cut in grimly. Swiftly he told how he had seen Lon Jerome get

the wallet out in the shack that day. Calamity explained how he and Shorty had been taken from jail. He pointed to the two hang ropes, then lowered his voice a little and spoke a few more seconds in a swift, tense voice.

The sheriff and the townsmen stared goggle-eyed, their guns lowering a little, but still ready for action.

"By gosh, Boggs, that Gaff Nash an' his two tough U X punchers, Pat Grady an' Carl Turner, are a salty lot," said the sheriff. "If this plan yuh jist suggested works out, then you an' yore pard will be free."

"An' the epidemic o' rustlin' in this country will be over," a red-headed young rancher snapped.

Gaff Nash was moaning, rolling to one side. Calamity stalked over to the big, sloven jasper, and caught him by the collar. He jerked Nash up to a sitting position, slapped him smartly across the face. Nash cursed, struck out blindly, and tried to jerk free.

"It'll do yuh no good ter squirm, feller," Calamity growled. "The sheriff is hyar, so we've got yuh cold turkey. Yuh'll hang fer murderin' Deputy Jim Horn."

Gaff Nash bucked to his feet, staring wildly about. And at sight of the four sprawled, lifeless jaspers who had been his partners in crime, the big hombre let out a wailing howl of alarm.

"I told that fool Lon Jerome not ter kill that depity!" bawled Nash. "But him an' Hudson wouldn't listen. They was scairt because Horn was suspicious."

"The depity was watchin' thet

U X line shack yuh skunks used as a meetin' place, wasn't he?" growled Calamity.

"Shore he was," Nash jabbered. "An' I told Lon that us fellers ought ter quit rustlin' an' lay low fer a spell. But Lon—— Say, I never done that killin'. Yuh can't hang me, sheriff. I've rustled, shore. But I never——"

"I've heard enough," the sheriff cut in grimly. "Stevens, I owe you an' Boggs an apology, an' the county owes yuh a vote o' thanks."

"The thanks I'll git will be a shaller grave hyar under these trees," Calamity moaned. "I've got blood pizenin' in these orful wounds, my stomach is likely punctured, an' I'll die afore yuh kin ever hang me fer shootin' up these fellers, sheriff."

"Take it easy, son," the sheriff gulped. "Yo're wounded, I can see. But if it takes every sawbones in the territory to do the trick, yuh'll git well. The ranchers around here will——"

"Say, don't waste any sympathy on that big moose," Shorty Stevens chuckled. "When Calamity belly-aches, he's feelin' fit as a fiddle."

"This is orful," Calamity croaked. "Jist when I'm drawin' my dyin' breath, my own pard turns on me. Thet proves the signs are shore agin' me."

When a puncher comes through with bandits like that, it looks like the signs are plumb with 'im, Calamity. An' listen, feller, don't fergit that you an' yore pard, Shorty, are due back with us hyar in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly plumb soon. Thar's a lot o' readers goin' tuh be watchin' fer yuh, ain't that right, folks?



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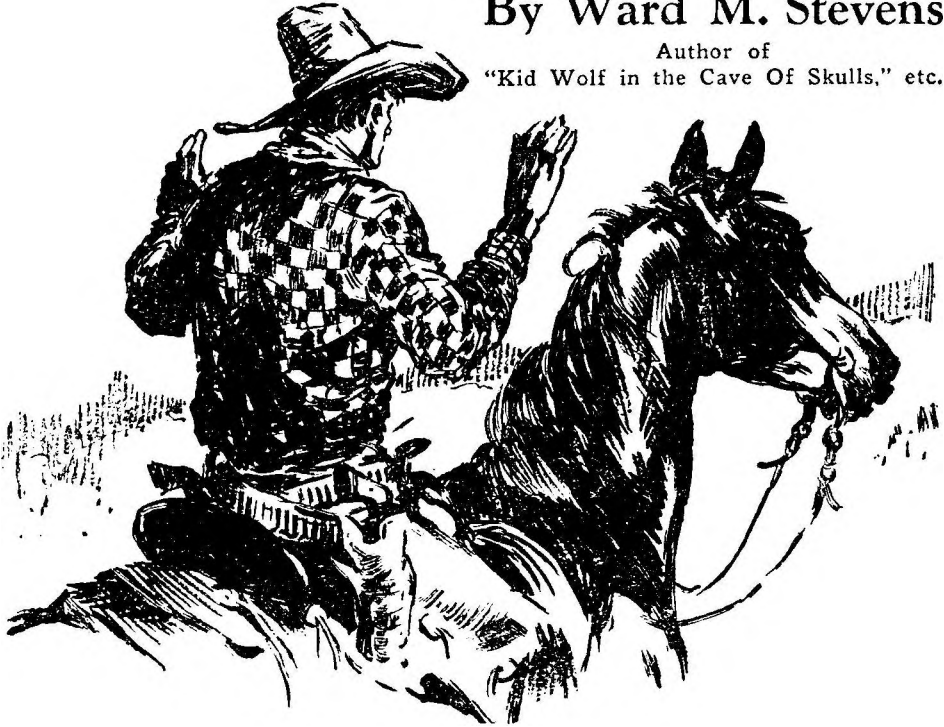
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CITY & STATE

A Murder Brand For

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of
"Kid Wolf in the Cave Of Skulls," etc.



CHAPTER I.

A GRIM DISCOVERY.

THE three riders came jogging into Tanque Canyon and fanned out through the olive-green mesquites that dotted the floor of the steep-walled ravine. They rode slowly with eyes cast down, as though they were looking for something and were more than half afraid they would find it. One of the trio kept to the center, another urged his bronc off toward the south, while the third hombre, who was the oldest of the three and red-faced and unshaven, kept close to the nearest sandstone cliff.

Before the riders had time to separate far, the middle-aged hombre

sharply pulled up his horse and stared down at an object that was half-concealed by the brush. Then he turned in his saddle and shouted through his cupped hands:

"Frank! Tony! Come over yere! I've found him! It's him."

At the sound of his shout, the two younger men whirled their horses and came racing back to join the one who had made the discovery. Judging from their strong resemblance, they were brothers. Frank Rhodes was in his mid-twenties, while Tony was a few years his junior.

Both waddies looked tired and worried, and even before they reached the spot at the base of the cliff, their faces had taken on ex-

Sonny Tabor



***When the owl-hooter's name is found on
the murdered gent's forehead, it's as good
as his death warrant.***

pressions of dread and dismay. They knew what was meant by "him." It was their brother. Their stepuncle's hunch had been right, after all.

In the meantime, Ben Plummer, who shared the Circle K A with the Rhodes boys, had dismounted from his sweating cayuse. Kicking aside the growth of brush with his clumsy, run-over boots, he stared down at what lay at his feet. Plummer was a heavy-featured man with thick lips and a fleshy nose, and even now there wasn't much expression in his face, hardly even any surprise.

"Is it really Jim? Is he—dead?" faltered Tony Rhodes as he and his brother came pounding up.

Frank didn't say anything, but there was pain in his dark eyes and

his lips were tightly compressed as he stepped from his stirrup to the ground. Jim, the youngest of the brothers, had been the apple of his eye.

"He's been dead for two-three days, looks like," Ben Plummer said, wagging his shaggy head sorrowfully. "Yuh know, I felt all the time thet Jim had met up with foul play. I sort o' felt it in my bones."

The two young Circle K A men exchanged shocked glances then stared down at the crumpled body in the brush with a sort of numb and growing horror. It was murder, no doubt of that, but the full enormity of the crime that had been committed grew upon them slowly.

The body was outstretched on its

side, the head pillowed on one arm, and the bullet wound was in the back. The eyes were closed and the quiet face was so peaceful that Jim Rhodes might have only been asleep.

It was evident that the slain youth hadn't suffered much; the mutilations had been done after his death. The forehead, however, was disfigured in so ghastly a manner that the two brothers cried out involuntarily at the sight of it. It had been done deliberately by the murderer, it couldn't have been caused by the dead man's fall.

Plummer awkwardly turned the body over on its back so that the strangely mutilated face could be more easily seen.

"Look at that, will yuh," he ejaculated. "Pore Jim."

The curious markings on Jim Rhode's forehead held the attention of all three. Frank Rhodes thought that they had been made with a knife, but Ben Plummer was of the opinion that something duller had been used, probably the sights of a Colt six-gun.

"Some low-lived skunk gun-marked him!" he growled. "It's a reg'lar half-breed trick! And them marks *mean* somethin', too, looks like."

"What do yuh mean, Ben?" Tony demanded unsteadily.

"Them marks spell out somethin', or I'm loco," Plummer insisted. "Wait until I show yuh what I mean."

The brothers were still too stunned by the tragedy to think connectedly, and they watched in bewilderment while their foster uncle took the canteen from his saddle, moistened his bandanna and began to wipe some of the dried, red-brown stains from the slain waddy's face.

"Now," grunted Ben Plummer, when he had finished his scrubbing,

"look at them scratches! Read out them letters. The fust one looks like a 'T' and thet second one is shorely an 'A.'"

"Those marks *do* look like print-in'," Frank Rhodes muttered in surprise. "What do yuh think, Tony? Ain't the third letter in thet brand a 'B'?"

"T — A — B — O — R — *Tabor*," Tony spelled out slowly, and then with a sharp intake of breath he stared at his companions.

The name of "Tabor" was known to them, nearly every one in Arizona had heard it, time and again. It was the name of one of the most dreaded and notorious outlaws in the Southwest. There was a price on his head, dead or alive, and while he was called "Sonny" because of his extreme youth he had killed more than a score of men, so rumor had it. Every peace officer in the Territory was on the lookout for him. Yes, Ben Plummer and his nephews had heard plenty about Sonny Tabor!

"So it was thet rat Tabor who shot Jim in the back, and put his ornery gun-blaze on him jist like a Mexie would!" cried Frank Rhodes furiously. "But why did he do it? Jim wouldn't have hurt a fly."

"Mebbe they met up here accidental, and Jim recognized him," suggested Plummer. "Then Tabor shot him to keep him from talking."

"But how would Jim have knowed Tabor?" Frank growled. "I'm sure I wouldn't have."

"Let's look around for sign," gritted the younger of the Rhodes brothers. "Mebbe we can find out how it was done. If I ever git a chance at thet murderin' skunk——"

While they were searching among the mesquites for hoofprints and other evidence, they became aware of the sound of approaching hoofs

accompanied by the creak of saddle leather and the jangling of bit-chains. A group of horsemen, five in number, was swinging down the canyon toward them. In their overwrought state, the Rhodes brothers were so startled that they reached for their holstered guns. Plummer, however, had recognized at least one member of the oncoming party.

"Hold on, boys," he grunted. "It's Sheriff Early—jist the man we want to see!"

The little posse had already sighted the Circle K A waddies. Plummer waved his greasy black sombrero at them by way of a signal, but it wasn't needed. The lawmen had changed their course a little and were riding straight toward them. The Rhodes boys and their uncle were well acquainted with the Rio Cinco County sheriff, and now they recognized several other members of the group. Two of them were deputies—Al Newton and Bill Blake.

When the sheriff caught sight of the body that was sprawled in the brush, he put the spurs to his horse and came up at a gallop. He was a big-boned man of fifty, without an ounce of spare flesh on his rugged frame. His iron-gray hair and mustach and his piercing gray eyes lent a bulldog expression to his angular features. Sheriff Early was one of the most efficient man hunters in Arizona.

"Why, hello, Plummer," he greeted in a dry tone that seemed to have a hint of dislike in it. His voice was more friendly as he addressed the Rhodes brothers. "'Lo, Frank. Howdy, Tony. What's the matter? What's wrong here?" Then, as the full import of the situation dawned on him, he quieted his snorting bronc and jumped to the ground with an exclamation. In the meantime, the other riders had come up.

"It's Jim, sheriff," said Tony brokenly. "He's been dry-gulched! And we knew who done it, too! Look how the killer carved his moniker on my brother's face! Read it out!"

The sheriff and his men gathered closely about the gruesome exhibit. Hardened though they were to violent death, more than one of them turned aside at the sight. Even Early's bleak face paled for a moment. Then, as he deciphered the brutally made disfigurement, it flushed to an angry and excited crimson.

"Tabor!" he roared, as he spelled out the significant name. "Tabor, by gorries! Why, it's Tabor that we've all been *a-trailin'* fer the last two-three days!"

The posse and the Circle K A waddies were equally amazed, but they would have been even more astonished if they had known one thing: Sonny Tabor was within two dozen yards of them and listening to every word they said!

CHAPTER II.

A "PIN WHEEL" EXPLODES.

BOTH sides of Tanque Canyon, except where the walls were too steep and rocky to support vegetation, were covered with cedars, vines and thick shrubs, all growing in a mat so thick that it was easy to find cover there. And Sonny Tabor, the subject of all the excited discussion, was so close to the sheriff's posse that he could have tossed a pebble at the lawman's feet.

The outlaw had been in his place of concealment for several minutes. He had been threading his way through the brush above, when Ben Plummer had found the murdered man's body, and what he had seen and heard had rooted him to the

spot, dangerous as it was for him to remain.

Hidden by a dense growth of thorny bramble, he was crouching and peering through. Standing by him was Paint, his black-and-white pinto pony. The intelligent animal's ears were twitching as if it, too, were listening to what was taking place. Neither the brone nor its master made the slightest sound; their attention was fixed intently on the scene below them.

Sonny Tabor wasn't a bit surprised to know that a posse of lawmen were after him—he was used to that—but he was shocked and angered to learn that he was believed guilty of Jim Rhodes's murder.

He was accustomed to being blamed for other hombres' crimes—almost every unsolved killing had been chalked up to him, it seemed, but this was one of which he could never have been capable.

Sonny was in a pretty ticklish spot. He couldn't make a get-away now without attracting attention, but he was too angry to worry about the danger he was in. He was wondering just what kind of fiend these men thought he was!

Although Sonny Tabor had been a fugitive from justice for more years than he cared to think about, he didn't look much like the accepted notion of an outlaw. He was in his early twenties, but with his boyish face and his innocent blue eyes, he looked even younger than that. The bullet scar that puckered one bronze cheek looked very like a deep and babyish dimple. With Sonny, appearances were deceptive.

As far as his outfit was concerned, he might have been an ordinary cowhand. He was wearing smooth leather chaparajos over copper-riveted Levis, a blue-and-white-checked

flannel shirt, small and tall-heeled Coffeyville boots, and a cream-colored Stetson that was slanted back from his forehead. There was nothing unusual about him, unless it was his armament.

The latter was heavier than was ordinary, even in the frontier country of the Southwest. Sloping from Sonny's trim waist were crisscrossed gun belts, and snuggled low on each thigh was a Colt .45 single-action in a greased, thonged-down holster. He was a two-gun man.

"Looks like somebody framed us, Paint," he whispered in the ear of his statue-still pinto pony.

He was so near that he could see the puzzled and indignant expression on Sheriff Early's face as he stood over the body.

"I don't quite savvy this killin'," the peace officer was saying. "I'm not stickin' up fer thet scamp Tabor, mind yuh, but this dry-gulchin' job don't look like his work. I don't think he'd be so proud of a back-shootin' job thet he'd leave his brand behind."

"Yuh never kin tell what a killer of Tabor's stamp will do, chief," Deputy Blake reminded his superior. He was a short, thickset officer and he carried a carbine in the crook of his muscular arm.

"It's a cinch thet the kid done this," was the wise opinion of one of the others. "Thet younker ought to be shot like a mad dawg."

"Thet's so," sighed Ben Plummer as he looked down at the sprawled figure of his youngest nephew. "It was an unlucky day fer Jim when he run into Tabor. When his hoss came home from the line camp with an empty saddle, I felt in my bones thet we'd find him dead."

"When was thet?" demanded Sheriff Early.

"Well, it was a couple days ago when Jim's sorrel turned up."

The Rio Cinco sheriff scratched thoughtfully at his grizzled mustache. "Thet's queer," he growled. "Body looks like it might have been layin' yere for two or three days, too. Him-m-m! Tabor was in Cinco City yisterday, and I think the day afore thet. It's funny thet he should have headed right back this way if he'd done this killin'."

"They say thet murderers allus return to the scene of their crime," one of the posse men put in brightly.

Frank and Tony Rhodes stood by with their heads bared and bowed with grief. They were too overcome to say much.

"Jim had been to yore line camp, had he?" the sheriff questioned. "Tell me, did he have any enemies? Have yuh got any hired punchers on the Circle K A these days?"

Frank Rhodes's answer was a shake of the head. "No, we've been workin' the spread alone, bein' as this is the slack time o' year," he said. "Enemies? Nope, sheriff. Everybody liked Jim."

The sheriff said something more that the listening outlaw was unable to make out. A brisk little wind had sprung up, carrying a flurry of sand with it.

Then something happened—one of those things, unimportant in themselves, yet upon which life and death sometimes depend. While leaning forward to hear what was being said, Sonny Tabor lost his balance.

He clutched desperately at a vine, but it gave way and the outlaw felt himself plunging and sliding down the fifteen-foot bank in spite of all his efforts to save himself. The crashing of the brush and the jingling of his big-roweled spurs made a tremendous racket. He landed in a cloud of dust, scrambling on his

hands and knees down at the posse's feet.

"What the thunderation——" was the sheriff's sputtering, unfinished roar.

"It's Tabor! It's Tabor hisself!" shrilled the lanky Deputy Newton.

The posse was taken by surprise, but was quick to go into action. There were excited yells, oaths, and every man reached for his gun. They meant to shoot first and ask for surrender afterward.

Not that Sonny had any intentions of surrendering! He knew that capture meant the hangman's noose, and he wasn't going to be taken if he could help it. The posse had been quick to whip out their six-guns, but the outlaw, with his life at stake, was even quicker. His Colt .45s were in his hands even before he was fairly on his feet again. His guns were the first to roar.

As Sonny rocked back the hammers of his Colts he whistled sharply for Paint. He had only a faint chance of escape, at best, and without his faithful cayuse he would have none at all. In response to his signal he heard Paint's nicker, then the clatter of hoofs before everything else was blotted out by the clamor of heavy-calibered guns.

Some one in the posse said afterward that when Sonny cut loose it was "like a pin wheel explodin'." That was putting it mildly.

Strangely enough, Sonny bore no grudge against officers of the law, for they only were doing their duty. It was true that he had been forced to kill, many times, too, in his smoky career, but lawmen weren't numbered among his victims. And now, trapped though he was, he controlled his fire.

But weaving and side-stepping, he dodged through gun smoke of his own making and was as hard to hit

as a moving shadow. From the level of his hips his .45s flashed with amazing rapidity. The shots came so close together that the reports were blended into the ear-shattering roar.

That volley was intended to blast the way clear for him and it served its purpose. He drove some of the slugs into the ground at the very feet of the posse, showering them with sand and half blinding them. One bullet lifted the sheriff's Stetson from his head, and another smashed the stock of Deputy Blake's carbine before the stocky officer could get it to his shoulder.

"Paint!" shouted the outlaw desperately, and in response he saw the gallant pinto come plunging down the embankment with reins and stirrups flying. Spinning half about, he holstered a gun and leaped to meet his pony.

"Look out!" clamored Ben Plummer. "He's——"

Just as Sonny hit the saddle, a bullet struck him. He felt an impact like the blow of a heavy club in his side just under the shoulder blade. The shock of it sent him reeling, and his breath seemed suddenly sucked from his lungs. By clutching the saddle horn, however, he managed to stick on. Another split moment and Paint was hammering down Tanque Canyon at a furious gallop.

Yelling excitedly, the posse accompanied by Ben Plummer and the Rhodes boys, scrambled aboard their broncs and gave chase.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHACK.

AS many an Arizona peace officer had discovered to his sorrow, Sonny Tabor's black-and-white-spotted pinto could run like wildfire.

Now Sheriff Early, too, discovered Paint's gift for speed. He was quick to organize pursuit, but he soon found that he would have his hands full and more, in overtaking his quarry.

The sheriff was overconfident at first, too, for he knew that Sonny had been hit, and he thought the chase would be a brief one. He underestimated both the bronc's speed and the rider's grit and nerve.

Only a few hundred yards down, at a point where the cliffs ended in gentle slopes, Tanque Canyon opened out into the larger valley. Almost before the sheriff's men realized what was going on, Sonny, had shot out into the open. He was now in a country that was made to order for a get-away.

There were many hills and dunes, covered with yucca and clumps of pear, while on the higher slopes were thickets of cedar. A maze of arroyos, too, fell away toward the distant San Pablo River. The outlaw was a master rider and with such a horse as Paint between his knees, his situation wasn't as hopeless as it seemed.

"Let's show 'em our heels, Paint Boy!" he muttered. "Let's give 'em all we've got!"

His wound was serious, as he could tell by the strange lightness of his head and the sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach. He had been shot up before, and he knew that he was in for a tough time of it now. All would be over with him if he lost consciousness now. Until he shook the posse off, he would have to keep a grip on all his faculties.

Guns cracked viciously behind him, but unless his pursuers gained, he hadn't much to fear from gunfire. The bullets were kicking up spurts of gravel far behind him. Before long the shooting ceased. The game

settled down to a steady race, and then it became one of hide-and-seek. Slowly but surely, Paint was drawing away, and before long Sonny had room enough to do some maneuvering.

There were plenty of tricks in the outlaw's bag, and he played them craftily. Taking advantage of the hills and network of gulleys, he shuttled back and forth in a bewildering series of zigzags. Time after time he changed his course, and his few hundred yards of lead became a mile, then a mile and a half.

From that time on, more cunning than speed was called for. He began to keep to the rocky hillsides, skirting them carefully so as to leave as little sign as possible. Paint seemed to understand the need for this as well as his master. It would have taken a sharp eye, indeed, to follow the trail left by the intelligent little pinto.

By the time an hour had dragged by, the posse was out of sight and hearing. The outlaw knew, though, that the grim game of tag had just begun. Sheriff Early wouldn't give up easily, and neither would the brothers of the murdered Jim Rhodes.

Sonny headed in the general direction of a sharply chiseled range of blue mountains that guarded the far rim of the valley. He might not be able to reach them before nightfall, might not be able to reach them at all, but he meant to go as far as he could before his strength failed him. The boring pain in his side was gnawing deeper.

Mile after mile drifted beneath Paint's rhythmic hoofs, and the sun quivered over the roof of the range, bathed it with fire for a flaming minute, and then slid out of sight. Mauve shadows lengthened and turned to purple as the long twilight

gripped the wilderness. The evening star burned like a lamp, in the west.

The wounded fugitive began to be tormented by thirst, in spite of the welcome coolness that had come with sundown. He turned Paint's head a little to the left, where prospects for water seemed more promising. There was no sign of pursuit behind him now, not even a hint of dust against the skyline. He seemed alone in a vast and empty wilderness.

He headed now toward a line of ghostly trees that stood like sentinels at the mouth of a side canyon at the foothill's edge. Bunch grass displaced the mesquite and cactus as they climbed upward, and Paint, scenting water, gave an eager snort.

A few minutes later they reached a spot where a trickling spring spread long silver fingers across the sands. Both horse and rider drank long and thirstily at the shallow, lukewarm rivulets. When his thirst was slackened, the outlaw swayed unsteadily to his feet and looked about him. The queer faintness was overpowering him. He couldn't go much farther.

He thought, at first, that he was becoming delirious when he saw a small but well built shack a few hundred yards above him on the cedar-dotted hillside. Near it was a large water tank and an empty horse corral. The wounded outlaw decided to shelter himself there for the night. A risky thing, perhaps, but he was so weak and in such pain, he could go no farther.

As he hoped and expected, the place was deserted. There were some fairly recent tracks about the shack, but Sonny was too sick just then to give them much attention. Leaving Paint to find his own supper in the lush grass that grew around the tank, Sonny tottered to the door.

It opened at his touch, and he found himself in the cabin's one large room. There was no one there, but Sonny got the impression that some one *had* been there, and quite recently, too. There were pans on the little pot-bellied stove, and on the rough table were the remains of a meal. Several articles of clothing, all too good to have been discarded, hung from pegs on the unpainted walls.

The outlaw didn't wonder much; he was past caring. He had eyes only for the bunk on the opposite side of the room. Throwing himself down upon the blankets, Sonny was soon in a deep and welcome sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

SEVERAL days passed, days that Sonny Tabor was unable to count or keep track of. At times he must have been out of his head altogether, but his fever slowly passed and his mind became clear. His bullet wound had touched the lung, but thanks to the outlaw's wiriness, his strength, and his perfect physical condition, his wound began to mend. His strength would return but it would take time. In the meanwhile, the shack was a good place to recuperate.

Luckily for him, Sheriff Early and his posse hadn't shown up, though there was a chance they might still do so. As the time went by, the recovering fugitive felt more and more secure. He hoped that Early had given up looking for him.

During the days when his wound was so bad, he had eaten nothing and had only managed to crawl out once or twice for water. When his appetite returned to him, he found that there was plenty of provisions in the shack, enough food to last him

several weeks. There was plenty of flour, beans, and jerked meat in the snugly built cupboard. And this set Sonny wondering. To whom did the shack belong?

On the second day he'd managed to add to Paint's comfort by unsaddling him. The little pinto was getting a good rest; it was needed, too, after that furious run from the law.

Sonny Tabor was having plenty of time to think. Time after time he reviewed in his mind the things he had seen and heard in Tanque Canyon. Who was Jim Rhodes's murderer? And why had he branded his victim with Sonny's name? The more he thought about it, the angrier the young outlaw became.

He'd never been the kind of hombre who is proud of his "notches," and if Sonny had killed Rhodes he wouldn't have been so stupid as to carve his name on the kid's face for evidence.

Sonny was becoming pretty much resigned to being blamed for things he didn't do. It wasn't through any fault of his own that he was a fugitive. He had never committed any crimes, either, but that was something the lawmen didn't give him credit for.

"I shore would like to clear myself of that gun-brand killin'," he muttered. "And maybe I can—some day. But I reckon there's nothin' I can do now."

One of the first things he learned, after he had begun getting better, was the disagreeable fact that he was practically without ammunition. The loops of his gun belts were empty, and the cylinders of his .45s held but one cartridge between them. He hadn't realized that he was so short of shells. The lead and brass of cartridges was sometimes more precious than gold.

He rummaged the cabin ther-

oughly in search of more. There was a chance that he might find a stray slug or two in some nook or corner, or better still, a whole box of them. It was while searching through an old leather vest that hung on one of the walls that he made an unlooked-for discovery. He found no ammunition, but he did find a letter.

The envelope which was unsealed, was addressed to Frank and Tony Rhodes. Sonny was startled, for he remembered having heard those names in Tanque Canyon. He was still more amazed, after he had glanced through the pencil-scrawled inclosure, to learn that it was from the murdered youth himself. The older brothers quite evidently had never received it. The letter ran as follows:

DEAR FRANK AND TONY:

I will mail this at the crossroads if I get a chance. What I have to tell you seems mighty important to me, but mebbey you will think I'm loco, and if so the joke will be on me. I hope I'm wrong, but for quite a while now I've been suspicioning Uncle Ben. He has let out things in front of me that he wouldn't in front of you, because he probly thinks I ain't dry behind the ears yet. I think he wants to get us three out of the way so he will have the Circle K A to himself. I dont think he would even stop at murder.

Now I may be wrong, but I got a hunch I ain't. I will tell you more when I see you. Beleive me, I am going to watch myself and you two rannies had better do the same.

Hopin that everything's O. K. at hd-quarters. I remane, your brother,

JIM.

This shed a great light, according to Sonny's way of thinking, upon the murder in Tanque Canyon. Jim had either forgotten the letter or had been prevented from mailing it at the crossroads as he'd intended. That big, hard-faced hombre that Sonny had first seen standing over the body was the actual killer!

"And he marked it with my name to throw the blame on me!" the outlaw thought explosively. "Jim's hunch was shore right! As soon as I can, I'm goin' to see that the brothers get this letter. They'll be plumb glad to see it."

First of all, he would have to recover his strength; then he'd get in touch, somehow, with the Rhodes pair, though he had no idea where their ranch headquarters was located. The shack that he was now occupying was probably one of their line camps. Jim had been the last person to sleep there, no doubt. It gave Sonny quite a start to think about it.

"In a couple days more I'll be able to leave here," he told himself as he gingerly felt of his healing side. "Maybe sooner."

Nothing restored strength as much as sleep, and the wounded outlaw was resting himself as much as he could. Normally he was awake at the crack of dawn, but on the morning after his discovery of the letter he slept late. He was awakened by the hot sunlight shining on his face through the dusty window—by that, and the sound of voices!

"It's all up with you, Tabor! Pile out of thar with yore hands up!"

"We saw yore hoss out thar, and we reckoned yuh'd be vere," barked another voice. "Don't try no funny business, 'cause we got yuh covered!"

CHAPTER V.

AN UNDERSTANDING.

SONNY TABOR had reached instinctively for the guns at his bedside, almost before his eyes were opened. But seeing that his uninvited guests had the drop on him at point-blank range, the outlaw followed the sensible course and lifted his empty hands as he sat up slowly.

The newcomers were Frank and Tony Rhodes, and as far as he could see, they were alone.

"Good mornin'. I'm glad to see you two," Sonny said pleasantly, and truthfully enough.

The young Circle K A pair seemed to have aged years in the few days that had passed since their brother's slaying. Frank's lean, seamed face was as bleak as rim rock, and Tony's had a hardness that it hadn't possessed before.

"None of yore back talk, savvy?" Tony cried with a harshness foreign to his natural character. "I got a notion to let yuh have it yere and now, instead of turnin' yuh over to the law, yuh low-down sidewinder."

"Take his guns, and search him, Tonio," said the elder brother. "From what the sheriff told us, he's a crafty un. We thought mebber we might find yuh, Tabor," he snarled at the outlaw, "but we didn't hardly expect findin' yuh on Circle K A property. Wounded, eh? Well, that won't save yuh from comin' with us. Git on yore boots, hombre, yo're a-ridin'!"

Sonny met their accusing gaze unflinchingly. "I didn't kill yore brother," he told them quietly.

"And yuh denyin' that yo're Sonny Tabor?" Frank demanded fiercely.

"That's my name," the fugitive admitted. "But I'm not guilty of Jim's murder. Here, amigos, I want yuh to read this letter. Yuh'll recognize the handwritin', I think. I found it here in that old vest yonder."

Frank Rhodes took the letter that the outlaw was extending toward him. His features were still dark with suspicion, and he was on the lookout for trickery. There was something so open and sincere about Sonny, however, that both Frank

and Tony had relaxed in spite of themselves, and they were hardly so hostile.

"By golly, it *is*—it is in Jim's hand!" exclaimed the elder brother incredulously. He opened the letter and Tony read it over his shoulder.

They were so anxious to see the message that they forgot their prisoner for a moment, and if Sonny had been so minded he might have taken advantage of them by a quick leap, as ill as he was.

"What do yuh think of it?" he asked mildly when they had finished reading the dead youth's note.

Frank and Tony, who had just buried the writer of that letter, were deeply affected. They seemed dazed at first, and then both gave way to fury. They, too, it appeared, had been halfway suspecting their step-uncle's actions. They didn't believe him to be overly honest, but until now they hadn't dreamed of linking him with the murder. For fully a minute they were speechless.

"No wonder Ben had a hunch that Jim had met up with foul play!" Tony burst out finally. "And it ain't no wonder that he knowed jist whar to find the body!"

Jim's letter was so convincing, so illuminating, that the brothers just had to believe it. Sonny was glad to see them give way to anger, for it kept them from brooding over Jim's death. And now that they knew the truth, their manner changed. They soon became friendly with the outlaw, and that wasn't hard to do. Sonny grew to like them, as well.

From them he learned that the posse had not given up the chase that day till long after dark. Sheriff Early had been much disgusted, and had vowed to catch the outlaw if it took him a month.

"So youh'd better lay low," Frank advised. "Early is out now with a

bigger posse than ever. Last I heard, though, he's searchin' up Agua Fria way."

Sonny stared at him in surprise. "Then yo're not—turnin' me in?"

The brothers looked at each other. "No, I reckon not," mumbled the elder one. "We ain't got nothin' agin' yuh now. The fact is, Sonny, yuh've done us a mighty big favor by showing us this letter."

"We don't think yo're as bad as yo're cracked up to be," blurted out the younger brother.

"Thanks, amigos," said the outlaw simply, and the bullet scar in his tan cheek looked more than ever like a dimple as he smiled. "But what are yore plans? What do yuh intend doing about that Ben Plummer hombre?"

"Frank's jaw tightened. "We'll fix things, right enough! Ben's in Cinco City to-day; he's been runnin' with a pretty tough an' no-good crowd thar lately. But when he comes back to the ranch——"

Tony nodded, frowning. "Injun Flack and Cole McCall is cronies of his, among others. An hombre that would run with the Flack gang is bound to go to the bad. But I never thought he'd go so far as to murder! The mangy skunk is goin' to pay with his life for what he done!"

"Will yuh let me help?" the outlaw asked eagerly. "I'm anxious to clear my name of this, and—well, I'd shore like to throw in with yuh. If Plummer has pards he might be more dangerous than yuh think."

The brothers were greatly pleased at Sonny's offer. They agreed to do or say nothing until Sonny could get in touch with them at the Circle K A. In a day or two, Sonny believed, he would be able to travel.

"But yuh'll have to tell me where yore ranch house is," he reminded them.

"Jist climb the hill back of this shack and yuh'll see the trail thet'll take yuh thar," Tony told him. "Our layout is in Red Gulch, 'bout eleven-twelve miles from yere. We'll be countin' on yuh, Sonny."

They shook hands, and after making sure that the outlaw lacked nothing in the way of food or firewood, they cantered toward home. Frank was riding a big black cayuse, while Tony was astride a lively *bayo coyote*.

Sonny watched them ride away, his heart lighter than it had been for many days. The Rhodes boys, at least, believed in him. It seemed now as if Jim's death would soon be avenged. After cooking and eating a hearty breakfast, Sonny tottered out of doors to tell Paint all about it.

"Yuh'd better take it easy to-day, caballo," he said as he stroked the pinto's glossy neck. "We're goin' to have plenty to do mañana."

Sonny didn't know, then, how near to him trouble really was. There would be plenty to do, and long before the darn of mañana!

He spent the rest of the morning in cleaning and oiling his blued and case-hardened .45s. He had forgotten to borrow some ammunition from the Circle K A men, a serious oversight.

It was about noon when Sonny caught sight of something that caused his pulse to miss a beat. Coming toward the shack from the valley were five mounted men!

CHAPTER VI.

BEN PLUMMER'S PARDS.

SHERIFF EARLY'S posse! That was the first thought that flashed through Sonny's mind. A moment later, however, he was able to make out their faces. The newcomer cer-

tainly weren't lawmen. The burly hombre in the lead was Ben Plummer, and with him were four sullen-faced gunmen whom Sonny had never seen before. They were already within fifty yards of the cabin.

There was no time for the outlaw to attempt a get-away. He was cornered by these men, and he knew what he could expect at their evil hands. An hombre with a six-thousand-dollar price on his head, dead or alive, could look for no mercy from men of this caliber! Sonny was in a trap.

Judging from the way Plummer and his pals were approaching the shack they had no inkling that any one was there, for they came boldly and at a leisurely pace, talking loudly. Paint, fortunately, was on the other side of the house, out of sight.

It was impossible for the fugitive to defend himself—these desperadoes weren't the sort to surrender to a lone man, even when the lone man had the drop on them. And he couldn't risk a gun fight with only a single cartridge in the cylinders of his Colts!

There didn't seem to be any place in that one-room shanty for him to hide. There were two cupboards, however, and Sonny sprang toward the larger of these just as the squeaking of leather warned him that his unwelcome visitors were dismounting outside. It was a tight squeeze, but he managed to get inside and pull shut the flimsy door. He had just concealed himself, when Plummer and his friends trooped in. One of the men remained outside to see to the watering of the horses.

"Shore a hot day, Flack," rumbled Plummer's coarse voice. "We'll rest up a leetle afore we mosey on to the K A."

It certainly *was* a hot day, and the

ovenlike heat inside the cupboard was almost stifling. Fortunately, there were a few chinks in the rough-hewn door, and Sonny was able to breathe as well as to see and hear what went on.

So this murderous-looking crew was on its way to the Circle K A! Sonny didn't miss a word of the loud and profane talk that followed. And he learned plenty!

They looked like professional killers, an unsavory outfit to say the least. Sonny heard the names they called each other and he sized each one of them up.

Judging from his high cheek bones and his coppery complexion, the hombre called Flack had a strain of Indian in him. His beady black eyes were cruel and ferocious, and his almost lipless mouth was as ugly as a knife slash. He seemed to be the leader of the gang, and even Plummer respected his orders.

The other men in the cabin were "Notches" Dutra and Cole McCall. The former was the sort of professional gunman who likes to boast of his killings, and his habit of fling grooves in the back straps of his Colt six-guns had given him his name. Twelve notches meant twelve victims. He was a gaunt, sardonic hombre of forty, and he was chewing an unlighted cigar.

Cole McCall was the youngest of the bunch, but probably as dangerous as any. He was elaborately dressed in batwing chaps of carved leather, purple silk shirt with yellow neckerchief, and expensive boots. With his curly auburn hair and his regular features he would have been handsome, in a way, had it not been for the viciousness of his greenish eyes and the weak looseness of his mouth.

"I still have tuh laugh when I think of how yuh fooled the lawdogs

into thinkin' Tabor done the Jim Rhodes job," Flack chortled.

"Yeah," sniggered Ben Plummer. "And Early don't suspicion me nary a bit! He's still runnin' hisself ragged tryin' to lay Tabor by the heels."

"Smart work, Ben," nodded McCall approvingly.

"Speakin' of Tabor"—Dutra grinned wolfishly—"I'd like to run across that so-called gun artist some day." And he significantly tapped the notched handles of his Colts.

Plummer's lip curled in a sneer. "He ain't so much," he giped. "He burnt up a dozen ca'tridges that day without makin' a single hit."

"But he got away, didn't he?"

"He's probly layin' dead somewhere," shrugged Plummer.

"If he is, I'd like to find him. That's a big reward fer the kid, dead or kickin'," said Dutra, licking his lips.

"What do yuh say we eat somethin' afore we shove on?" Plummer suggested, walking toward the cupboard that adjoined the one in which Sonny was hiding.

The outlaw thought all was lost, then! If Plummer opened the other cupboard—

"Say! Somebody's been yere! Somebody's been raidin' the grub," snarled Plummer as he fumbled among the provisions.

"A driftin' saddle tramp, more'n likely," Flack grunted. "Never mind, Ben. We ain't hungry. We'll all take a swig o' likker, instead."

Sonny breathed more easily in his little prison when the bandit leader produced a pint flask of whisky and passed it around to the others. It didn't last long, and Plummer hurled the empty bottle into a corner of the room just as Pedro, the fifth member of the gang, finished water-

ing the horses and came into the shack.

"We ready to go now, Señor Flack?" he questioned while lighting a corn-husk *cigarillo*.

"*Poco tiempo*," the gang leader growled. He turned to Plummer. "Do yuh think we'll find them nephews of yores at home, Ben?"

"They'll be thar," replied Plummer confidently. "and puttin' 'em out o' the way will be as easy as blazes. We'll take it slow and easy, so's to git thar jist about supper time."

"Remember the split, after yuh've got control of the spread," Flack reminded him.

"Don't worry," said the Circle K A schemer with a snaggle-toothed grin. "You boys will git yore cut. Well, let's be movin'."

Sonny Tabor, who had been fighting back a sneeze for several minutes, was plenty glad to hear them go. As soon as he heard their snorting brones moving away from the shack, he crawled stiffly from his dusty hiding place and filled his lungs gratefully with fresh air. It had been a close call for him!

However, there was no time to lose now! Frank and Tony were in great peril, and unless Sonny could head off their murderous stepuncle, they would meet the same fate as their brother.

He whistled softly for his pony. "Come on, Paint!" he sang out as the willing little pinto came trotting over the rim of the hill. "We've rested long enough. Let's vamoze."

Quickly saddling his loyal cayuse, he swung aboard. Hammering up to the crest of the hill, he drew up and looked down into the rolling range lands beyond. From this point he could see for many miles.

He soon spotted the trail that led to Red Gulch and the Circle K A; he could see the brown thread of it

twist away into the far distance and disappear around a shoulder of mountain. Upon it were several black dots, moving very slowly in a faint haze of dust—Ben Plummer and his pards on their way to their rendezvous with murder.

After figuring out a way to circle around them without them seeing him, Sonny urged Paint into a fast gallop. The outlaw wasn't in top shape yet, but what he lacked in strength he made up in sheer nerve. The grueling pace set his half-healed wound throbbing, but his mind was on the Rhodes boys' troubles and not on his own. He couldn't let them be butchered!

He passed the Flack gang without them being any the wiser, and after a few miles, he swung back onto the trail ahead of them.

"We'll beat 'em there by more than an hour, Paint," he murmured.

It was a torrid afternoon even for Arizona. The sun was a disk of molten copper and the skyline was warped by flickering heat waves. The air was heavy with the pungent scent of broiling mesquite. No breeze was stirring, but above the peaks in the north, a great, dark cloud was churning.

He was a little more than halfway to the Circle K A, he judged, when he found himself descending a long, treeless slope. At the bottom the dim trail disappeared in a scrubby thicket of cedar. To keep from tiring Paint unnecessarily, Sonny had slackened the pace a little. He didn't dream that danger might lurk behind that screen of evergreen!

The outlaw had just entered it when things began to happen with terrifying suddenness. Even if Sonny had had plenty of ammunition to fight with he wouldn't have had much of a chance.

From the bush leaped seven or

eight hombres with leveled guns. Several of them jumped for Paint's bridle reins, and above the commotion rose the triumphant cry of Sheriff Early:

"Sonny Tabor, yo're under arrest!"

The posse had caught sight of Sonny at a distance, and had concealed themselves in the cedars while he had made the long descent. Knowing that they had the drop on him, the outlaw lifted empty hands in token of surrender.

CHAPTER VII.

A STORM BREAKS.

SHERIFF EARLY was jubilant over his lucky capture, and his gray mustache fairly bristled with excitement while Sonny Tabor's six-guns were being taken from him. The sheriff's humiliation in Tanque Canyon was more than made up for now!

"Waal, young feller," the Rio Cinco officer chuckled grimly, "we've got yuh at last. Yuh were purty lucky, last time, but now I reckon yore game has played out. Surprised to see us, eh? Waal, Tabor, I'd have got yuh if it took me till doom's day."

"Tabor looks kind o' peaked," laughed Deputy Blake unfeelingly. He hadn't forgotten how Sonny had shot the carbine out of his hand. "He looks as if he felt the hangin' rope around his neck already."

It seemed to Sonny that his heart had dropped to the region of his boots. Never had the world looked darker.

"I haven't got any handcuffs along," said the sheriff regretfully, "but we'll keep our eyes sharpened, and if he makes one move we'll shoot to kill. Every one keep close to him. We're headin' fer Cinco City."

The law party, with the prisoner in its midst, turned off the Circle K A trail and headed across country toward the distant county seat town of Cinco. By this time the sun had disappeared, obscured by the rapidly gathering clouds. It was very sultry, and it became strangely dark.

They had gone a mile or more before Sonny found heart to say anything. He had decided to tell Sheriff Early everything.

The sheriff and his party listened incredulously while the outlaw told of what had happened since he'd taken refuge in the line-camp shack. He explained how he'd found the letter, of his understanding with the Rhodes boys, and of what he'd heard when Plummer and his cronies had visited the cabin.

"I'm not carin' what yuh do with me later, sheriff," he said earnestly, "but before yuh take me to jail in Cinco, I want yuh to go to the Rhodes Ranch. Plummer, an' Flack, an' those others I told yuh about, are on their way there now. They're plannin' to kill Tony an' Frank! They will, too, unless we stop 'em!"

Not a single member of the posse took Sonny's story seriously. They simply thought that he was trying to talk himself out of a tight jam. Even the sheriff, who was a pretty sensible hombre, thought he was stalling. Some of the man hunters laughed jeeringly.

"That's the biggest cock-and-bull story I ever heard!" snorted the spindling Deputy Newton. "If he expects us to believe that——"

"Do yuh really mean to say that Ben Plummer kilt Jim Rhodes?" Sheriff Early grunted.

"It's true," the outlaw snapped. "At least, sheriff, yuh can take me to the K A and find out if I'm tellin' the truth or not."

"Nope, Tabor, we're not loco

enough to let *you* give the orders!" Early barked. "Yo're a fast talker, kid, but it's doing yuh no good. Yo're comin' with us, straight to the Cinco City lockup!"

There was no help for it—or was there? The sheriff's words were interrupted by a crack of distant thunder. Looking upward as they rode along, Sonny noticed that the heavens were now completely overcast by livid and angry clouds.

A storm was at hand, one of those fierce and unexpected storms that sometimes strike the arid country during the hottest summer months. Sonny could read weather sign like an Apache. Something was due to snap soon!

The electric storm struck, just as the outlaw hoped it would, with suddenness and fury. A jagged streak of purple lightning, blinding and terrible, gashed the sky. It seemed to leap from rock to rock, and it left a noise behind it like a thousand pistol shots. The bolt was instantly followed by others, and globes of violet-colored ball lightning seemed to roll along the ground. The monstrous thunder peals, amplified and thrown back by the rocky mountain walls, were deafening.

The horses, naturally enough, were terrorized. They began to rear and plunge until they were almost uncontrollable.

Sonny Tabor instantly took advantage of the confusion. Years of desperate adventure had taught his brain and body to act with instinctive, machinelike precision. Roweling Paint with his blunt spurs, he breathed an inward prayer and dropped low over his saddle pommel.

Paint knew what was required of him! *He* wasn't afraid of the thunder! The spotted bronc took the bit in its teeth, bowled over a rearing

horse that blocked its way, and was away like a black-and-white rocket!

Once again Sonny Tabor was showing his pony's heels to the sheriff of Rio Cinco County! Only this time the barrage was being furnished by Mother Nature's fireworks.

"Look out! He's gittin' away!" somebody yelled between thunder crashes. "Drop him, afore he——"

The storm drowned out the rest, and Sonny scarcely heard the shots that were fired at him, for the reports of the guns were far feebler than the mightier artillery from above. Nor did any of the bullets come close.

Luck was with him, but it was the outlaw's quick thinking and Paint's speed that turned the trick. The posse tried to follow, but by that time, the rain was coming down in torrents, and soon all pursuit was shaken off.

"Good work again, pard!" Sonny chuckled as they splashed through the rain at a gallop. "That was another close one."

Like all summer cloudbursts, the storm was over almost as suddenly as it had begun. The pelting drops ceased to fall, and the misty skies cleared rapidly. The sun shone again, and there was a quickly fading double rainbow. Soon the only thing to remind him of the deluge was the roaring of a near-by arroyo, which was running nearly bank-full.

Just as soon as he could get the directions fixed in his mind again, Sonny sloped back to the little trail he had been following when captured. It would have been far safer for him, of course, if he had taken an entirely different direction. But he couldn't let Frank and Tony down.

"If the John Laws nab us again—well, it just can't be helped, Paint," he muttered.

He rode hard, hoping that he was still ahead of Plummer and his pards, and feeling sure that he was. The sun was still two hours above the western horizon when he came into a narrow, fertile valley rimmed by rocks of a beautiful crimson color. This, without a doubt, was Red Gulch, and he kept his eyes peeled for signs of the ranch headquarters.

He soon came in sight of what he sought, a neat, white-painted house of one story, surrounded by corrals and a cluster of small outbuildings, all shaded by enormous cottonwoods.

As he neared the place at a gallop, he saw the familiar figures of Frank and Tony Rhodes hurrying from the long gallery to meet him. Both were grinning a welcome.

"How yuh, Sonny!" the elder waddy hailed. "So yuh decided to come to-day, after all! Shore glad yuh did."

But Tony had already noted the gravity of the outlaw's face. "What's the matter, amigo? Has anything happened?"

Sonny was so relieved to find himself in time that he couldn't find words until he had dismounted.

"Plenty's happened! I'll tell yuh all about it later, but the big thing is that Ben Plummer is on his way here with the Flack gang! Let's go into the house, and we can talk it over while we're gettin' ready for 'em. If yuh've got ammunition and a Colt or two that I can borrow, *compadres*, we'll fix 'em up with a plumb hot welcome!"

CHAPTER VIII.

GUNS DO THE TALKING!

THE odds, in the impending conflict, were five to three against Sonny and his friends. At least those were the odds as far as numbers were concerned, but in the boy-

ishly smiling outlaw, dreaded from one end of Arizona to the other, the Rhodes brothers had a powerful ally.

There were plenty of cartridges at the ranch headquarters and they found a couple of Colt single-actions for Sonny to use, both .45s and in perfect condition. He wasn't sure, yet, how true their barrels were. He would probably soon have an opportunity to find out.

In the kitchen of the ranch house they waited for what the next few minutes might bring. The killers were due at any time, and the first move would be up to them.

"So Ben has got Flack and his gang to help him with his dirty work!" Frank Rhodes clipped out, his eyes alight with fury. "Well, it'll be jist too bad fer all of 'em!"

"If those sidewinders are comin', I wish they'd hurry!" muttered Tony through clinched teeth.

Sonny knew that the brothers could be relied upon to give a good account of themselves. There were no streaks of cowardice in the make-up of either, and while they weren't practiced gun fighters by any means, they were more than willing to face anything that the Flack gang could dish out.

Paint had been led to a place of safety, and the stage was set. The long, low-roofed kitchen was as good a place as any for the show-down. From the door, which they had left open, they could see the entire ranch yard. It was still empty.

Sonny had told them of his lucky escape, for the second time, from Early and his posse. Frank had chuckled.

"I'll bet ol' Early is b'ilin' mad; he wasn't exactly what yuh'd call *lukewarm* about it that other time in Tanque Canyon."

"We was shore batin' yuh plenty

thet day, Sonny," said Tony apologetically.

They were all outwardly cool enough, though the brothers kept pacing the floor anxiously, with their attention riveted on the trail. They consumed several cigarettes between them. Sonny, who didn't use tobacco, found an apple in a dish on the kitchen table and munched it with calm enjoyment.

"Here they come!" Tony said suddenly, and his body stiffened with anticipation. Yes, thar's five of 'em, all right. And Ben is ridin' in front with Flack, as cocky as yuh please!"

The young outlaw had already tentatively mapped out their tactics, for he was more used to gun play than the Rhodes boys. They weren't to show their hand until the last moment—the gang would be allowed to enter the house, or practically so, before any shooting started.

The plotters halted at the long hitch rail some twenty yards from the porch, tying their horses there. Those inside could hear the hoarse rumbling of their voices as they laughed and talked among themselves. Then Ben Plummer, with the others following, came walking slowly toward the shaded ranch house.

"Frank! Tony! Arc yuh in thar?" Plummer bellowed out in a tone he meant to sound casual and everyday. "I'm bringin' in some friends o' mine fer supper."

Tigerish grins were on the evil faces of the others, and they walked with their hands hovering close to the butts of their holstered guns. Ben Plummer, though, seemed a bit nervous, although he believed his victims to be alone, unprepared and unsuspecting. Maybe he thought it was all going to be *too easy*. Perhaps—but this was not likely—his conscience was bothering him.

Sonny Tabor knew that there would be no chance of disarming the desperadoes by getting the drop on them. No, it was to be a fight now, a fight to the bitter finish.

Still, Sonny wanted to give them a chance, anyway, to surrender. When the men were all on the porch, and Plummer was striding through the doorway, the outlaw's voice rang out like a silver bell:

"All right, yuh cutthroats! Put up yore dirty paws!"

Plummer tried to jump backward, but his pards were so close behind him that he was prevented from doing so.

"It's—it's Tabor!" he yammered shrilly. "Fer the love o'—"

Plummer's repulsive face had faded to a sickly yellow; his piggish eyes had dilated.

Flack and his gunnies, too, were astounded at the unexpected turn that events had taken. But it was too late for them to back out now, even if they'd wanted to. Besides, they hardly knew yet, what they were in for. They had still to learn what a terrible antagonist this icily smiling young stranger would prove to be.

"Burn 'em down!" yelled Flack at the top of his lungs. "Drop the three of 'em!"

Frank and Tony already had their guns in their hands, but although Sonny had been the one to jump forward, his fingers were still empty. Or rather, the gang thought they were! They were filled as if by magic, his Colt six-guns fairly leaped from their holsters, his double draw was so swift that it was only a blur.

Br-r-rang, bang, cr-r-r-rang! Deadly flames darted from the muzzles of Sonny Tabor's .45s as he dropped into a battle crouch and let them go from the region of his knees. He wasn't merely laying down a bar-

rage now! The defenders of the Circle K A had either to kill, or be killed! These men were mad dogs, and they would have to be snuffed out like mad dogs.

Instantly the low-ceilinged room became thick with acrid gun smoke as the gunshots rose to a deafening crescendo. Plaster was knocked from the walls by the force of the concussions alone, and bullets hissed their vicious death song.

Ben Plummer's coarse lips writhed back from his yellowed teeth as a brace of slugs from Sonny's belching guns plowed into his bloated body. He stumbled forward with a hideous scream and landed on his hands and knees in the center of the room. A surge of crimson widened around him like a red tide, and he collapsed like a half-empty grain sack.

Pedro, the pock-faced Mexican member of the evil crew, fell lifeless at almost the same instant, caught in the deadly cross fire of the Rhodes brothers' guns.

The Flack gang, composed as it was of professionals, knew all the ins and outs of gun fighting, but the savageness of the reception had unnerved them all. Their shooting was fast, but not fast enough. Nor was it accurate. Of all the shots that were fired at Sonny, the closest only skinned his knee as it ripped through the batwing of his chaparajos. He kept moving, and he was hard to hit.

The Rhodes brothers were fighting with their teeth bared like angry cougars. They were avenging their brother! Although their shooting was hardly as effective as Sonny's they were doing plenty of it!

"Let's git out o' this!" screeched Cole McCall between the bursts of gunfire. "They've got—"

But it was too late now for them to get out of it! Flack, the Indian leader of the gang, was already badly

hit. With his chest smashed by another slug from Frank Rhodes's gun, he slithered into the wall, then fell violently against the cookstove. His bandit days were forever over. His cruel lipless mouth was drooling scarlet.

Nor would Notches Dutra ever file another notch on the handles of his pistols. A bullet from Sonny Tabor caught him full in the throat.

Cole McCall was the only one of the crew who was still on his feet, and he wasn't destined to be there long. His dandified cowboy gear was red-spattered as he turned to make a dash for the door. A bullet caught him, then another and another. Sonny had holstered his smoking guns, but the Rhodes boys hardly knew when to stop, or that the battle was won. McCall staggered across the porch, leaving a crimson trail. Then, making a retching sound, he crashed through the railing and thudded to the ground below.

"Are yuh hurt, *compadres*?" Sonny gasped as he turned to Frank and Tony.

Neither was hurt much. The former had a creased shoulder, while Tony had received a ricocheting bullet in his left forearm. Now that it was all over, both seemed a little dazed, and Tony's teeth were clicking together. He floundered unsteadily for words.

"By—by golly, Sonny!" he stammered out incredulously. "We—we w-w-w-whipped 'em!"

Frank and Tony Rhodes were waiting in the middle of the Circle K A ranch yard when Sheriff Early and his Rio Cinco posse came riding up a little later. The sun had set, a few stars were already out, but the long summer twilight still lingered.

The sheriff's excitement knew no bounds when he had heard the story. For once in his life, at least, he was stunned speechless. He nearly tumbled from his horse when he tried to dismount, and with his men at his heels, he reached the scene of the battle at a dead run.

The kitchen had been cleaned up a bit, but it was still ghastly enough! Four dead men were stiffening there and a fifth—Cole McCall—was dying.

The sheriff was almost too upset to hear and write down McCall's dying statement. In it the desperado bore out Frank Rhodes's story by confessing everything. It had been Ben Plummer's scheme from start to finish.

And now Plummer was dead, and the slate wiped clean—thanks to a smiling young outlaw!

"So he was tellin' us the truth, after all!" the sheriff ejaculated. "I thought he was lyin'—we all thought so. Fact is, we came mighty near not comin' yere to-night, at all."

The lanky Deputy Newton tugged thoughtfully at his ear and stared down at the line of bodies.

"If I wasn't seein' this with my own eyes," he sighed, "I wouldn't believe it if it was sworn to!"

That reminded the sheriff of something. "Which way did he go?" he roared out.

"Did who go?" asked Frank Rhodes blankly.

"Yuh know blamed well who I mean!" Early shouted. "I know Tabor done you boys a favor, but I've got my duty to do, and it's *yore* duty to help out law and order! Which way is Tabor heading now?"

"Back toward Cinco City," Frank Rhodes said with apparent unwillingness. "I reckon he thinks he can outguess yuh by doin' thet."

"He did, eh?" growled the officer,

and then he flung an order at his posse. "Come, on, men! We're headin' back toward town. And *this* time, when we catch Tabor, we'll keep him!"

When the lawmen had left the Circle K A in a cloud of dust and profanity, Sonny Tabor came smilingly from his hiding place.

"Well, amigos," he said as he wrung the hands of his new-found friends, "now I *will* be gin.' Thanks for coverin' me up. I didn't expect yuh to tell that lie for me," he added with a chuckle.

"I didn't lie," grinned Frank Rhodes. "He asked which way yuh were headin', and for all I know, yuh really *might* be headin' back to Cinco."

"I'll think it over," the outlaw laughed, swinging aboard his eager pinto pony.

He cantered blithely away—but *not* in the direction of Cinco City. He'd already escaped twice from Sheriff Early, and he hardly thought a third try would be advisable!

The great voice of the desert wilderness was calling to Paint and his master and together, to the thrilling tune of throbbing hoofs, they heeded the call.

But yuh kin bank on it thet the little owl-hooter isn't goin' tuh keep out o' trouble long. Purty soon he'll be ridin' through the pages o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly in a thunderin' yarn yuh won't want tuh miss. An' he'll be bankin' on yuh tuh pard up with 'im ag'in, so don't let 'im down.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

DEAD MAN'S RANCHO

Novelette

By T. W. FORD

The gent wears the brand o' death, but he's plumb innocent an' the Silver Kid's got to save 'im.

GUN BAIT AT GRIZZLY GAP

Novelette

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

Flash Moran is startin' out to fish, an' he knows he's apt to catch plenty o' trouble.

TOMESTONE TRAIL BRAND BLOTTERS

Novelette

By PHILIP F. DEERE

Dead Squaw Valley's only law is that o' bullet an' knife, an' the waddy's drivin' his herd right into a trap thar.

*Also stories of Blackstone Bangs, by Dean McKinley;
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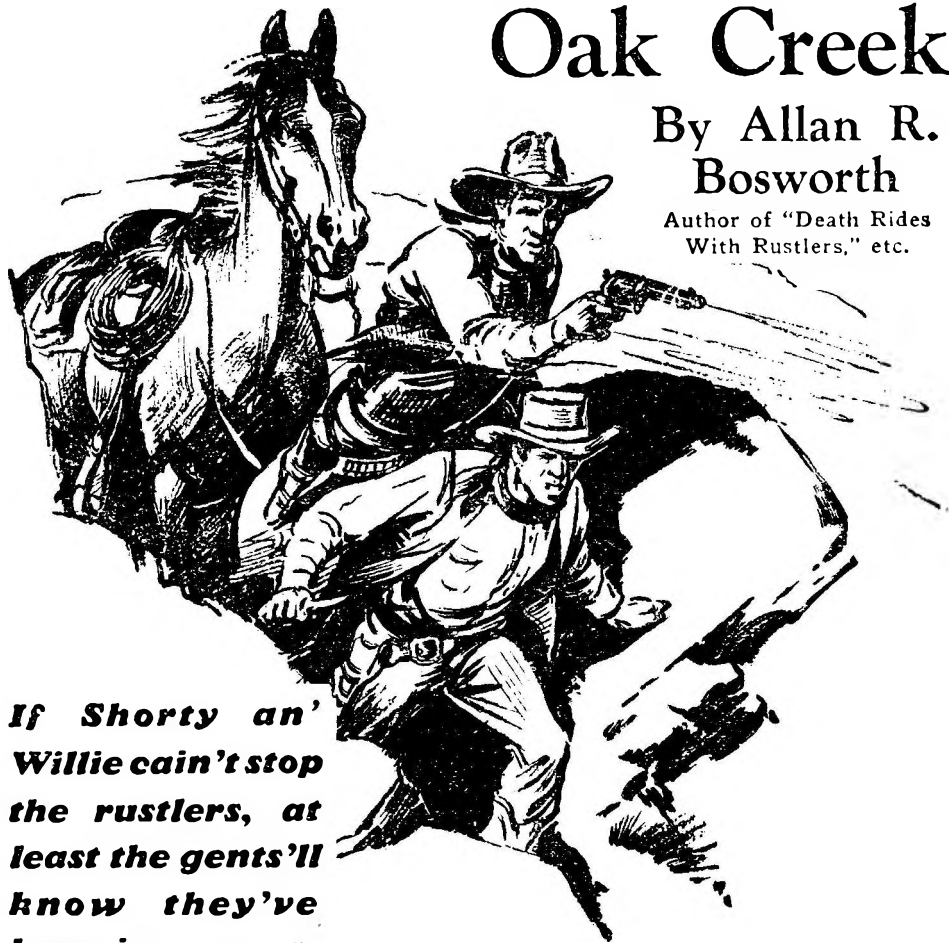
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ORDER IN ADVANCE FROM YOUR NEWS DEALER

The Hangin' On Live Oak Creek

By Allan R.
Bosworth

Author of "Death Rides
With Rustlers," etc.



If Shorty an' Willie cain't stop the rustlers, at least the gents'll know they've been in a scrap.

THE freight wagons, drawn by six sleek mules, rattled emptily down into the valley of the Pecos where the shadows of twilight lay deep and sinister. At any other time, the short, bow-legged waddy on the driver's seat and the tall cowboy who rode alongside might have been expecting trouble down there on the gun-ruled river.

But not now. "Shorty" Masters, M. D. (mule driver), pulled his spurred cowboy boots down from the

footboard and stood up, peering at a twisting dark line of live oaks that cut halfway across the valley.

"That's Live Oak Creek," the freighter said. "Yuh say that's the spot where yuh caught the big ones?"

Willie Wetherbee, more widely known wherever cattle ranged and guns roared as the "Sonora Kid," flashed a likable smile that was as quick as his drawl was slow.

"Yep, that's it!" said the tall puncher. "Jest below where the

creek empties into the Pecos. Yuh can see what's left of old Fort Lancaster down there on the slope. Last time I was here, we throwed a trotline acrost the Pecos and caught six big catfish. The biggest was about forty pounds, and we had to string it up to a live-oak limb to skin it."

The mule-skinner's mouth watered. Catfish for breakfast—rolled in corn meal and fried in deep, smoking-hot bacon grease! Not even fried chicken could touch it. And there was no reason why the trail pards shouldn't camp overnight on the Pecos and try their luck.

Shorty glanced back over his three wagons. The freight business was slack. In the first lumbering vehicle, he had his own saddle, two new saddles from a Del Rio shop, and a stout canvas bag that jingled because it was filled with just the things the partners needed—fishhooks, of assorted sizes.

In the second wagon was a stout lumber cage, almost big enough for a man to stand upright inside, and equipped with a padlock and chain. It was being hauled to Pete Wilson's General Store at the cow town of Tarantula, with the saddles and the hooks. Pete had two bear cubs that were growing too large to be classed as pets any longer, and were soon to be shipped to an Eastern zoo.

"And I reckon there ain't nothin' we're haulin' that anybody could be in a hurry to git!" Shorty breathed with immense satisfaction. "We got the trotline, we got the hooks, and we——"

He clamped his jaw shut with a click, and pulled leather on the mule team. The Sonora Kid jerked rein on Tumbleweed, his glossy sorrel cayuse.

Both sat tense and listening, their dreams of a peaceful fishing expedition rudely shattered by the rolling

blast of six-gun fire somewhere down there in the valley of the Pecos.

The mules breathed heavily, shot their long ears forward as the sound echoed from the rim rocks of the cedar-dotted hills, and then relaxed. Everything was quiet again.

Shorty and the Sonora Kid exchanged glances. There was disappointment on the freighter's freckled face. But the tall cowboy's dark eyes lighted with anticipation. Willie Wetherbee was never so happy as when there was a gun fight near enough for him to take a hand.

"Shucks!" observed the mule driver. "Mebbe them shots meant somethin', mebbe not. Couple of cowboys might have been tryin' to cut down a coyote on the run."

"Yeah, and mebbe the coyote had two laigs!" said the tall waddy, hopefully.

The quiet remained. Shorty drew a long breath. "Well, all I hope is it's settled. I shore have got my mouth fixed fer a nice mess o' catfish. Giddap, Tschaikowsky!"

Willie chuckled as the outfit rolled down the slanting trail again, but there was a note of admiration in his mirth. The gun-slinging puncher wouldn't have admitted that any other mule in Texas was worth one sorrel hair out of Tumbleweed's mane. But the six mules Shorty had named for famous composers were different, as any long-cared bray-factory called "Tschaikowsky" should be. Shorty was fond of music, and because all six of the animals were the offspring of a mare named Lucy, he called the team the "Sextet from Lucia."

"You don't want to mention that mule's name above a whisper, when we git down by the river!" the Sonora Kid advised Shorty with mock seriousness. "One time I was with an hombre who had hay fever. We

could see them big catfish jest about to snag onto our hooks, when he up and sneezed, and skeered 'em all away!"

Shorty grunted good-naturedly at this jest, and looked at the ruined chimneys of the old fort, catching the rays of the setting sun. This country had been wild when Fort Lancaster was a stop on the San Antonio-El Paso stage route. It was still wild, the freighter reflected. Only lately, there had been reports of rustling raids in the Pecos valley.

He eased the black-butted .45 around to a more handy position on his hip, and then forgot about it. Catfish, rolled in corn meal and fried in deep bacon grease! Shorty began digging in his pocket, producing a ball of stout cord. Pete Wilson wouldn't mind if they used a few of the fishhooks. The freighter untied the canvas bag that jingled as if it contained money, and selected half a dozen of the barbs.

The wagons struck the mesquite-covered flat and followed the line of live oaks that marked the course of the creek. The Sonora Kid rode a little way ahead of the Sextet, and halted suddenly at a spot where the trees spread out in a motte.

"Here it is!" he called. "The mouth of the creek's jest a little ways down there, and this is the best spot to camp. If the Pecos ain't changed its channel too many times, there are some trees on the bank where we can tie the trotline. Come over here and I'll show yuh where we strung up that big one!"

Shorty dallied his reins around the brake handle and jumped down, eager to make camp and get at the fishing. As the tall rider swung to the ground, the hoofs of a startled animal crashed into the brush ahead of them.

"Jest a steer, I reckon!" the mule

driver said, as Willie made ready to go for his .45. "This is on the spread of the JH Connected, and it's likely——"

"Look!" gasped the Sonora Kid. "That's the limb where we hung our big fish! Look at it!"

Shorty took one swift glance in the thickening twilight, and then he and his pard sprinted forward as fast as they could travel.

There was no catfish hanging from the stout live-oak limb, now. Instead, a man dangled there, his hands tied behind him and his boots kicking two feet above the ground!

II.

The teamster whipped out his knife as he ran, for the noose victim was still alive. But Willie Wetherbee's six-gun was faster.

Braang!

A slug ripped through two of the triple strands that formed the rope. It twisted, and the strangling man spun grotesquely. Once more the tall puncher's .45 blazed.

The man dropped, pitched forward on his face with a choking gasp that sucked precious air into his tortured lungs. Thoughts of fishing forgotten, the freighter leaped to kneel beside him and yank the noose slack. Then he cut the piece of rope that bound the hombre's wrists.

The man rolled over, sat up, and rubbed at his chafed throat while he breathed in labored gasps. He was a heavy-set, sandy-haired hombre of middle age; his garb was that of any cowboy with the exception that his cartridge belt and gun were gone. The purple of strangulation slowly ebbed out of his broad face, and he climbed weakly to his feet, reaching out and tottering to the trunk of the live oak.

"Much—obliged!" he panted.

"Yuh come—jest in time. They—left me settin' on my hoss. He stayed pat—till jest a minute ago. But he wouldn't have, much longer."

Shorty remembered the crashing of hoofs. "Who are they?" the freighter demanded. "And who are you?"

The hanging victim drew another long breath. "My name's Hines—Joe Hines. I own the JH Connected. Me and my men jest had a run-in with a bunch o' rustlers a while ago. Pecos Vance and his gang o' skunks are roundin' up my herd, down the river, right now!"

Wetherbee whirled. "I'll git my hoss!" he exclaimed. "Mebbe we can overtake 'em. Where's yore men?"

Hines shook his head. "Two of 'em got plugged. Three more was left tied up, up at the old fort, and their hosses was stole. But if yuh can help us, mebbe we can stop them buzzards. They're bringin' the herd up the river!"

"Upriver?" Shorty asked sharply. "How come? That's a funny move fer cow thieves. They most always head for the Rio and take 'em into Mexico!"

"Yeah," the rancher nodded. "But that's jest how smart this Pecos Vance is. He's headin' fer the New Mexico line, and he's got a gang up there that takes all his rustled stock. Yuh can always trust Vance to do somethin' unexpected. I heard 'em talk it over while they was leavin' me to hang. Reason they done that is because the ranchers around here have formed a vigilante committee and sent word to Vance they was goin' to string him up. Yuh got any hosses?"

Shorty groaned. He had just remembered the quiet evening he had planned, catching catfish.

"No, but we got some mighty smart mules!" he said. "Come on—

we'll sling some saddles on 'em and go after yore men!"

The Sonora Kid suddenly hit spurs to the sorrel and went crashing into the brush. He was out again, by the time Hines and the mule-skinner had reached the wagons, leading the rancher's horse.

"Here yuh are!" he called. "Now, if we jest had some guns for yuh, we'd be a cinch to stop them rustlers. How many men they got?"

"About six, I reckon," Hines answered. "I don't care if they got forty! I'll stop 'em, some way. I've got to—if they git away with that herd, I'm busted!"

Shorty was yanking the mules out of harness. He slung his own saddle on Chopin, the biggest and blackest jack of the lot. He threw a new saddle from the wagon, and Hines cinched it on Mozart, the red left-hand leader. The Sonora Kid speeded operations by putting the other new saddle on the mule called Tschaikowsky.

"One of yore men will have to ride bareback!" the tall cowboy said. "Andale! Let's git up there and turn 'em loose. How far down the river is yore herd?"

Hines shook his head. "They'll be drivin' up this way any minute, now! If I jest had my gun!"

Swinging into their saddles, the three horsemen headed at a gallop through the mesquites, up the slope toward the old fort, with the three mules led behind them. The distance was only a little over a mile, and they were soon jumping to the ground to run around a crumbling wall in answer to a chorus of yells.

The trail pards saw the JH Connected riders, left trussed up hog-fashion, and lying in a heap against a pile of fallen masonry. Hines let out a yell of encouragement.

"We're comin', boys!" he said.

"This here's Bill Pease, and this is Llano Nicholson, while the skinny goat is Pete Curry. I didn't git yore names."

Shorty introduced himself and the Sonora Kid. Pease was a veteran with a drooping mustache, "Llano" Nicholson was just a youngster, but a crooked nose and scarred face indicated he had crowded years of experience and action into a short lifetime. Pete Curry was indeed skinny, to the point of being built like a string bean.

"Thought we was goin' to have to stay here and starve fer water!" declared Pease. "Have yuh got a gun for me?"

"No guns," Shorty told him. "But mebbe we can fool them rustlers. Me and my pard will rush the point of the herd, and we'll do enough shootin' fer six men. The rest of yuh ride hard, and look for a chance to grab a gun in case we knock anybody out of the saddle, savvy?"

They did. Joe Hines shook his head. "It shore is mighty nice of yuh to do this!" he said. "I'd rather yuh would let me take yore gun. Time we went to the ranch and back, they'd have too much of a start. But I can't ask yuh to run the risk of git'in' plugged, fighting *my* fight. If yuh would give me that gun, and let Llano have the Sonora Kid's—"

Wetherbee snorted. "Me and Shorty wouldn't miss this chance fer anything! Not even fer—well, not even fer all the catfish in the Pecos! Would we, Shorty?"

"Nope!" the freighter said with a trace of sadness, as he thought of that breakfast he had planned. "Let's go!"

They traveled more cautiously down slope, and headed at a slant that would bring them to the Pecos a couple of miles downstream. And before they had gone a mile, the

confused, discordant medley of hard-driven cattle floated to their ears through the gathering darkness.

"There they come!" muttered Joe Hines. "Eight hundred longhorn cows! All I got in the world!"

"Don't worry none!" Shorty reassured him. "If we can't stop Pecos Vance and his gang, they're shore goin' to know they was in a scrap!"

He and Willie pulled ahead. Another mile, and the treeless banks of the shifting, treacherous river could be seen dimly over to the right, marked by a thin straggle of salt-cedar shrubs.

The Sonora Kid was as cool as if he were still going fishing. "Over yonder," he drawled, "is jest about the spot where we strung that trotline, and—"

"Don't mention it!" Shorty begged, sighing. "I reckon we'll be eatin' bacon and beans fer breakfast, after all. I shore would like to go fishin' some time without snaggin' a mess of trouble. Listen!"

The herd was getting close. Now the men who waited in the edge of the chaparral could hear the shouts of riders urging the stolen cattle on. Shorty always carried an empty chamber under the hammer of his .45, but now he inserted a sixth cartridge in his gun, and saw Willie doing the same. They had to do enough shooting to make it sound like six men.

"Let's go!" said the eager cowboy, and raked spurs to Tumbleweed.

Shorty hit steel against the black mule's flanks. Chopin was powerful, and almost as fast as a cow horse. He shot from the chaparral, into the dimness of thin moonlight that lay over the alkali flat.

Like a huge, black caterpillar, the point of the herd breasted the rim of a brush-choked gully and wavered toward them. Off to the left, holding

the cattle on a course along the bank of the Pecos, the pards could see the first two horsemen.

Braang! Bang! Br-room!

They were still too far away for effective fire, but shooting would lend an impression of strength. Leaning forward in his saddle, the bow-legged mule-skinner thumbed back his hammer and let it fall.

III.

Behind them, holding back a little because they were unarmed, the JH Connected outfit pounded leather. Before the third rider on Tschalkowsky's bare back came hammering from the strip of mesquites, rustler guns had opened up, and shouts of anger and surprise were bringing up more of the herd drivers from the rear.

Bang! Wham!

A heavy slug fanned Shorty's freckled cheek, jarring him to the sudden realization that they were within range, now. He spurred the mule to greater speed, lest the Sonora Kid face most of the danger alone. Chopin pounded gallantly up alongside the sleek sorrel. Flame ripped from the muzzle of the tall rider's gun.

Then something happened. Shorty heard a startled yell from Willie Wetherbee—a yell that was choked off short. He felt a sharp blow across his forehead that left him blinded and jerked him from the saddle. Falling, he was conscious of the fact that the Sonora Kid also was going down.

If this was the sensation of being shot, it was strange. There was no tearing pain—only that smart blow as if he had been struck by a whip. Then the ground came up.

Shorty struck hard, sprawling, his gun flying out of his hand. Lights

whirled and flashed, then faded. He still seemed to be falling, but the rough earth was already touching his bruised cheek.

He came back to consciousness to feel oppressive weight on his back and a tug on his wrists. They were behind him.

"That'll hold him!" growled a voice. "All right—git up, yuh mangy rustler!"

"Rustler?" repeated the Sonora Kid, and there was steel in his drawl. "Yuh got a lot of room to be callin' anybody that name, Vance!"

"Listen, yuh can't call me by that skunk's handle!" roared the man who had just straightened from tying Shorty's hands behind him. "I'm Joe Hines, and I own these steers with the JH Connected brand on 'em! And if yuh hadn't run into that old trotline stretched between a couple of trees, you two hombres would have shot somebody and helped Vance steal my cows. So he told yuh *I* was Vance, eh?"

Shorty gasped, his head whirling at the suddenness of things. Looking around, he saw a big man striding back and forth angrily as he talked—the man who now claimed to be Joe Hines. He was square-jawed, neatly dressed, respectable in appearance.

"You're a liar, Vance!" came the bitter voice of the hombre Shorty and Willie had saved from hanging. "Purty slick, tryin' to impersonate me. But yuh can't get away with it!"

The cattle were still going by, but more slowly now with only a couple of riders urging them on up the river. There were three hombres beside the big man, standing close gun guard over their prisoners. Shorty saw that all three of the men who had been introduced as JH Connected riders—Bill Pease, Llano

Nicholson and Pete Curry—had been captured.

"Git up!" The big man's gun prodded Shorty. "Where was yuh hidin' when we strung Pecos to the trees? Must have been headin' fer the Rio with my cattle!"

"You're makin' a mistake!" the freighter flared. "I don't savvy who's who in this mess, but me and Willie never had nothin' to do with rustlers. We was haulin' some freight from Del Rio to Tarantula. Them mules are mine—and my waggins are up yonder by the mottle!"

There was a smile of disbelief on the face of the square-jawed man. "Haulin' supplies for Pecos Vance, I reckon!" he said. "Git up and walk. We'll see them waggins!"

The six prisoners walked in a huddle. Riders strung along with Shorty's mules, the sorrel Tumbleweed, and the horse of the heavy-set, sandy-haired man who had come so near to death by the noose.

The latter was at Shorty's side. He glanced over at the sawed-off mule-skinner appealingly. "That skunk, Vance, is lyin'!" he said. "Yuh don't believe him, do yuh? I'm Joe Hines!"

Shorty shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know who to believe! There's a couple of things that look kind o' bad for yore story. First—yuh was hangin', which is what the vigilantes swore they'd do if they caught Vance or any of his men. Second, the cattle *was* headed fer the Rio. Now they're bein' brought back away from the border. That looks more natural, to me."

"He's takin' 'em to New Mexico, I told yuh!" the sandy-haired man growled.

"Shut up that trap of yourn, Pecos," the big hombre shouted, "an' move along faster!"

They approached the wagons,

where the other three mules were tethered. The Sonora Kid, his hands helplessly bound behind his back, edged closer to Shorty. "What do yuh make o' this?" he whispered. "Who's Vance, and who's the rancher?"

"I don't know," answered the teamster. "I'm afraid we came dawg-gone near helpin' rustle a herd! There ain't but one way out of this, as far as I can see. If we could git loose, grab a couple of guns, and corral everybody on both sides, we could take 'em in to Pecos Junction or Stockton and have 'em identified!"

"Yeah!" The daring of the plan almost took the Sonora Kid's breath with delight. "Yeah, if we can do that!"

They halted at the wagons. There was a hasty, low-voiced conference between the square-jawed, No. 2 claimant to the name of Joe Hines, and one of his men. The others held guns on the six prisoners.

The square-jawed man turned with sudden decision. "Boys," he said, "we'll bed the herd down by the old fort and wait till daylight. If a couple of the vigilante committee don't come along afore then, I'll be surprised. If they do, I'll be surprised if there ain't a six-ply necktie party fer you gents! Here—untie the wagon driver's hands and let him hitch his mules. What yuh haulin'?"

Shorty grunted. It wouldn't do much good to explain that he had borrowed the saddles. There was only the bear cage, and the sack of assorted fishhooks.

"Swell calaboose, this here cage will make!" the square-jawed hombre announced with a coarse laugh. "I reckon it'll hold a couple of yuh. So, yuh claim to be a freighter, and this is all yuh got! I've knowed

freight waggins that was haulin' dinero, or somethin' valuable!"

A sudden thought flashed in the freighter's mind. There might be a way to test the honesty of the big man, after all. If he really was Joe Hines, he wouldn't molest the cargo in the wagons. If he was Pecos Vance, it would be different.

"Leave that there sack alone!" Shorty howled as the big hombre strode by the first wagon after inspecting the cage. "That ain't mine!"

"Sack? What sack, yuh sawed-off shorthorn? Oh, I see!"

The square-jawed man peered in the wagon, lifted the canvas bag of fishhooks with a grunt. It was heavy, and it jingled as he dropped it back to the wagon bed.

"Money, eh?" the searcher drawled, turning to face the mule-skinner. "Mebbe yuh are a freighter, after all. Whose dinero is that?"

There was avarice gleaming in his eyes, as the moonlight fell on his square face. Shorty shook his head.

"That's my business!" he said stubbornly. "Yuh better leave that sack alone!"

The big man jerked his head. "Come on, hitch them mules!"

Shorty replaced the harness on Chopin, Mozart, and Tschaiakowsky, and buckled the traces on the other members of the Sextet from Lucia. A guard mounted the wagon seat with him, and kept a gun in his ribs. The Sonora Kid was allowed to ride Tumbleweed, and the sandy-haired claimant to the name of Hines straddled the horse that had walked out from beneath him and left him to dance on air.

The other three men—Pease, Nicholson, and Curry—walked, and the hands of all but Shorty were tied. The freight outfit rolled slowly

up toward the old fort, through the grazing herd of disputed cattle.

"Git down!" the big hombre ordered when they reached the ruined chimneys. "Yuh got the key to that lock on the cage? Fork it over. Now—lock 'em in there, boys. This here mule-skinner and the tall gent!"

IV.

Shorty and Willie had the use of their hands, but it did them no good. The cage was left where it stood, on the second wagon, and the trail pards either had to sit on its stout wooden floor, or stand in a half-crouching position that was extremely uncomfortable for the tall cowboy.

Both tried the supports that formed bars of their cell, but they were too strong to budge. Between the slats, they watched the square-jawed hombre direct the secure tying of the feet of the other four prisoners, who were then stretched out in a row by the first wagon, with a long reata running through their leg bonds and secured at both ends to spokes of the wheels.

It was a thorough job, and there was little chance that anybody would be able to escape. The square-jawed man then assigned men to night-herd, and the freighter's bewilderment was increased when he heard him address three of them as Pease, Nicholson, and Curry!

"This here six-up is gittin' worse and worse!" he told the Sonora Kid. "It shore is a fine mess we run into, in place of a mess of catfish!"

The tall waddy's jaw was grim. "It'll be worse if that big buzzard *is* Hines! And if the vigilantes come along, we'll all be decoratin' trees!"

Shorty was watching the big man spread his tarp just below the wagon on which the cage stood. He laid his

saddle at the head of it, unbuckled his cartridge belt with its pair of big-butted .45s, and removed his boots. The guns were under the skirt of the saddle as he lay down to sleep.

Four of the men had bedding rolls scattered near by; two were on night herd. They sang softly to the steers as they rode around the herd in a wide circle. Listening, Shorty found it hard to believe that these punchers were rustlers.

"I reckon we shore was took in!" he growled, half to himself. "That sandy-haired gent said that Pecos Vance was plumb slick. And I reckon he was jest complimentin' himself when he said it!"

The Sonora Kid grunted, and tried to make the best of things by stretching his long body out on the floor of the new bear cage. Soon he was gently snorting. Shorty shook his head with admiration. Wetherbee was always like this when there was danger around—as cool as if he were on ice.

But sleep wouldn't come to the freighter. He sat against the bars of the cage and tried to think up a way out. For a while, he wished he had been one of the men tied up to the wagon wheels. At least, then, there'd be no bars and a strong padlock between him and a chance to escape.

There was his knife. Perhaps he could whittle through the stout slats, but it would be a miracle if this failed to awaken any of the sleeping men. Shorty reached in his pocket.

Then he drew out his hand, and a grin split his freckled face. It wasn't the knife he was holding, but the ball of cord with the fishhooks attached to it.

"Reckon I'll do some fishin', after all!" he declared. "Mebbe it won't

be catfish fer breakfast, but mebbe it won't be a necktie party, neither!"

Slowly, cautiously, he unrolled about eight feet of the line. He tied a heavy hook at its end, reached through the bars, and let the hook down over the side of the wagon.

It was necessary to throw the hook as skillfully as if he had been casting for trout. Two inches to the right, and he'd strike the face of the square-jawed man and their slender chance of escape would go for nothing.

With every nerve tense, every muscle taut, the mule-skinner made his throw. He was overcareful; the hook struck bare ground to the left of the saddle skirt and the tarp. Frowning, Shorty drew it in and prepared to try again.

One of the sleepers stirred and muttered something. The big hombre turned over, lying on his left side. This move gave Shorty a little more leeway, but he waited a full five minutes for fear that the man was awake.

Then he threw the hook, dragged it across the saddle skirt, and hauled it in. Again and again he painstakingly made the cast. In an hour or so, there would be no moon, and there was no camp fire to show him his target.

Then, when nerves were at the snapping point and his patience was beginning to wear out, the hook caught!

Shorty gave it a quick little jerk to make sure the hold was secure. It stayed. Now he began pulling in, and he crept down to the far end of the cage, passing the line from hand to hand outside the bars, so he could get a more sidewise haul.

It was necessary to draw the line in by inches; any sudden pull would awaken the square-jawed hombre.

There was cold perspiration bathing the mule driver's face, oozing from every pore of his taut body, as he worked.

Little by little, a heavy cartridge belt with two black-butted guns in its twin holsters slid out from beneath the shelter of the saddle skirts, with a fishhook securely caught in one of the ammunition loops.

Now it was dragging across the ground, so slowly as to make no noise. And at any minute, one of the riders might come in to awaken his relief for the night herd.

Finally the guns were below. Shorty hauled in quickly, now, until he could reach through the bars and seize the belt with eager hand.

There was a .45 for him, and one for the quick-shooting Sonora Kid, with plenty of ammunition in the cartridge belt. But the pards were still locked in a cage that offered scant shelter from flying bullets, in its exposed position on the wagon bed.

"Willie!" Shorty squatted by the tall sleeper and gently shook his shoulder. "Willie!"

The whisper cut into the Sonora Kid's dreams. He lifted himself on one elbow, bewildered for a moment. Shorty laid his hand across his pard's mouth, and thrust a .45 into the cowboy's grasp.

"Here yuh are!" he whispered. "But don't start shootin' yet. We've got to figger out somethin'—some way to git out of here!"

Willie's quick smile lighted his dark, lean face. "How'd yuh git this?" he asked in delight.

"Catfishin'! But we ain't out, by a jugful. Mebbe——"

Both pards dropped noiselessly to the floor of the cage, huddling over the guns. The square-jawed man was stirring.

Shorty watched through one half-opened eye. The big hombre got to his feet after looking around to make sure nobody was moving. If any of the four bound prisoners were awake, they were tied too tightly to move.

The big man threw back his tarp and got to his feet. Shorty held his breath and listened to the mad drumming of his heart. But the big hombre didn't look for his guns, nor did he bother to put on his boots. Instead, he crept to the first wagon, skirted the row of prisoners tied to the wheels, and climbed up by the driver's seat.

Sudden conviction was hammering at Shorty's brain. It was certain when he heard the jingle of the canvas sack. The square-jawed hombre lifted it, climbed back down, and returned to his bedding roll. He sat down, and looked around at the sleeping men once more. A glance at the cage convinced him that Shorty and Willie also were slumbering, and a realistic snore from the Sonora Kid made him sure.

He untied the string that bunched the top of the canvas bag, and reached one hand greedily inside.

Then there was a yell of pain that brought the four sleeping hombres to their feet, guns in hand!

V.

"Owwww!" howled the big man. "What the—— Ohhh!"

He tried to jerk his hand out of the nest of cruel barbs, but the half dozen that had jabbed his fingers only took a more painful hold. The other four men came crowding around him.

"What's the matter?" demanded one of them. "What's got yuh?"

"I dunno—feels like fishhooks!"

Blame that freighter! He said there was dinero in here! No, I reckon he didn't, either. But he shore tried to make me think there was! Here—hold the sack open!"

Groaning and rocking back and forth, the big hombre carefully began freeing the bars from his cut hand. Other hooks were snarled with the ones that had caught his fingers, and it was a painful process. The four riders huddled around, trying to help.

Shorty cautiously lifted himself, bringing the big gun out from beneath his body. The Sonora Kid also knew that this was the time to strike.

The mule-skinner thumbed back his hammer, shoved the gun barrel between the slats to glisten in the moonlight.

"Pecos, I hope yuh got them fishhooks in yore throat!" yelled the sandy-haired rider who first claimed to be Joe Hines. "Hangin' is too good fer yuh!"

"Shut up!" roared the square-jawed victim. "And don't call me Pecos Vance, or I'll come over and kick yore slats in!"

The mule-skinner saw that his cowboy pard was ready. "I'm callin' yuh Pecos!" he shouted suddenly. "And yuh can shove them fishhooks in the air—and pronto!"

The four men whirled and started to scatter. The glint of gun steel was plain. But men in a cage didn't look dangerous, even with guns in their hands. Two of them went for their holsters, the other pair made dives for their bedding rolls, where they had left their guns.

Braang! A gun roar drowned the square-jawed man's curse. Flame leaped upward in a hissing slant; a bullet splintered one of the slats on the bear cage. Fragments of wood

smashed into Shorty's face. He grimaced and let the hammer fall.

Bang! Wham! The Sonora Kid's gun hammered twice. Two of the men lurched backward, sprawling. The others were coming from their bedding, running in a twisting crouch, humped over flaming, spitting guns.

Braang! Bang! Br-room!

"Kill 'em!" howled the big hombre. "Shoot 'em like rats, the mangy, low-down——"

Br-raang!

There were hoofs drumming rapidly out of the chaparral, toward the chimneys of old Fort Lancaster. Gun flame flickered on its crumbling walls, pistol flashes made crimson streaks along the whiteness of the wagon-bowed canvas. Lead slammed into the cage where the trail pards crouched low; lead went whistling out of it as they returned the fire.

Bang! Boom!

One of the two hombres lurched backward and collapsed against a tumbled pile of rock, his head rolling from side to side, his gun hand going limp. With a roar, the square-jawed victim of the fishhooks jumped to his side, grabbed the gun, and rushed the wagon.

Shorty saw the two night-herd riders jump from their saddles and come on the run. It was still four to two. Then the Sonora Kid's gun cut down the remaining member of the four men who had been sleeping in camp.

Braang! A bullet burned down the mule driver's side, and another one glanced from the slats of the cage and nearly knocked the gun from his hand. Desperately, he set his teeth against the stinging pain, and let his hammer fall on another cartridge.

Bang!

The foremost of the night-herd riders dropped. The big man reached the shelter of the wagon just below the cage, where Shorty could not see him. There was a moment of gripping tenseness that couldn't be broken by the loud hammering of shots as the Sonora Kid and the night-herd rider dueled. And then a big hand gripped the sideboard of the wagon, the top of a Stetson showed over the rim, and a gun snaked forward to come within inches of the freighter's face.

Shorty whipped his own .45 around and let it thunder just as the gun exploded with a blinding flash. Powder flame singed his tow-colored hair, but the bullet was singing harmlessly past a chimney of the old fort.

The big man's body thudded heavily on the ground by his bedding roll. With a slug through his shoulder, the last night-herd rider was fleeing for his horse, while bullets from Wetherbee's gun sped him on his way.

Everything was over but the small, disturbing doubt in the freighter's mind. He was almost sure that it was Pecos Vance who lay on the ground with the bullet hole in his head—but not positively certain.

"I can git this lock off of here!" announced the Sonora Kid, and emphasized the claim with another shattering blast from the .45. Fragments of the padlock flew to the four winds. The chain rattled, and the tall puncher opened the door and went through, straightening to his full height with a sigh of relief.

Shorty crawled out, then jerked erect and tense. There were more riders hammering up from the direction of the Pecos!

No time to cut the other men loose, even if the mule-skinner had been

sure of the wisdom of that move. He shoved fresh ammunition into the gun, tossed the belt to the Sonora Kid, and made ready for another battle.

Four horsemen swept into the ruins of the fort. Shorty threw his gun down on them. "Pull up where yuh are!" he ordered grimly. "Now—who are yuh?"

The four gasped and raised their hands. The man in the lead, a tall, gaunt hombre, peered around at the bodies of dead and wounded men, saw the four who were tied up, and whistled.

"My gosh!" he said, jerking his head toward the sandy-haired individual who had come so near to death by the noose. "It's Joe Hines, tied up like a hawg! And here's Pecos Vance, pumped full o' lead! What in tarnation——"

Shorty shoved the gun into the waistband of his jeans. "That's all I wanted to know!" he said with a great feeling of relief. "When that buzzard of a Vance tried to steal a sack of fishhooks because he thought it was dinero, I figgered he *was* Vance, and not Hines, like he claimed. But when yuh got to shoot a man, yuh want to be shore who he is!"

"Yuh done the shootin', all right," admired the gaunt man. "Wiped out all of Vance's gang. My name's Henry—Sam Henry. I'm one of the ranchmen's vigilante committee, and so are these boys. We been doin' a little night ridin' tryin' to end up with Vance decoratin' a tree, but yuh saved us the trouble. Here, one of yuh cut Hines and his boys loose."

The sandy-haired man stretched and rubbed his wrists. Then he stuck his hand out at Shorty.

"Yuh not only saved my life a couple of time, but yuh saved the boys

and my herd!" he said earnestly. "I shore would like fer yuh to come over to the ranch with me, and——"

The trail pards exchanged glances. Shorty walked over and picked up the sack of assorted fishhooks.

"Much obliged, Hines," he said. "But yuh see, we've kind o' got our mouths fixed fer catfish fer breakfast. And I reckon it ain't too late. We'll string a trotline, but we won't

leave it so it'll be out in the flat the next time that river changes its course. Come on, Willie, they ought to be bitin' purty good about now!"

Now that the gun work is over, Shorty an' Willie kin probably have that fish fry they've been plannin'. But then, gun work is never over fer these two. An' they'll be comin' back soon in a gun-thunderin' story that'll shore be worth readin'. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



LOBO HOWL

IN the winter of 1839, a hunting party of Lipan Indians almost rode into a camp of Comanches on the San Gabriel River. As the two tribes were deadly enemies, and the Comanches were far superior in numbers, the Lipans withdrew discreetly. They hastened into the settlements and gave the alarm. Two companies of thirty men each were raised at once, for it was believed that the Comanches were planning a raid, or they would not be in the vicinity. The Lipans, under Chief Castro, joined the settlers.

When they reached the camp site, the Comanches had moved away. The pursuers followed the trail, but a storm of sleet and snow soon wiped it out. The storm raged for three days.

On the fourth day, one of the leaders took a Lipan with him and went in the direction in which the Comanches had headed. After a while they saw smoke rising from a camp fire, and, as the guide said he knew the exact spot of the camp, he promised to lead the settlers to it in the morning.

It began to get dark as they were riding on their back-trail, when suddenly the howl of a wolf was heard behind them. They stopped short, and the Indian assumed a listening attitude. In a moment or two an answering howl came from the right.

The Indian listened so intently that his body seemed as rigid as if it had turned to stone. From the left there soon came another prolonged howl. The Indian gave vent to a long breath of relief. "Ugh, lobo!" he muttered happily. He relaxed, touched his horse with his heels, and the two rode on.

Never had the sound of a wolf's howl given such pleasure. When the white man realized that even an Indian was uncertain for a time as to whether the howls came from wolves or Comanches making signals, he shuddered to think what would have happened if his guide had been mistaken.

The following morning the Lipan led them to the Comanche camp, and they routed the sleeping Indians by a surprise attack.

Death Rides Tombstone



CHAPTER I.

STAGECOACH GUARD.

FROM behind boarded-up windows of the abandoned saloon, six sombreroed outlaws peered through the cracks onto the main street of Tincup, Texas.

A fire had gutted the saloon in years past, leaving only the adobe walls. An enterprising hostler had roofed over the shell of the barroom to use it as a grain-storage room, and as a result the interior of the place was black with shadow, though the sun was at the noon position in the sky.

"Yuh right shore that stagecoach will have a gold shipment on her tuh-day, Chief?" queried one of the

outlaws, squinting through a knot-hole that looked out on the Wells-Fargo office, directly across the street. "They don't seem tuh be puttin' a extry guard on her or nothin'."

Back in the shadows, the hombre addressed as "Chief" grunted assent, his body hidden from view by a pile of sacked oats.

"Have I ever given you hombres a bum steer since I organized this Secret Six?" muttered the Chief. "I'm tellin' yuh, that Wells-Fargo strongbox will have dinero in it that's consigned tuh the bank up in Broken Hora. An' it'll be ours fer the takin'."

The crooks watched while a depot agent hitched a fresh span to the

Trail

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Treachery On Tombstone Trail," etc.



Anyone who bucks the Secret Six is headed fer Boot Hill, but that's a chance Lon Cole Has to take.

Wells-Fargo stagecoach across the street. The driver was climbing into the seat, picking up his lines and whip.

Inside the Concord, the hidden crooks could see a lone passenger—a white-headed old hombre whom they recognized as "Alamo" Judson, a stocky-built oldster wearing an El Stroud sombrero and expensive range clothing.

"Judson's herd is bein' hazed up 'Tombstone Trail," went on the Chief from his position behind the grain pile. "He's one o' the wealthiest ranchers in these parts, ownin' the big Lone Star outfit. Reckon yuh better frisk him fer that dinero he'll be packin' when yuh pull the holdup."

The stagecoach door slammed shut

and the regular shotgun guard climbed the front wheel and seated himself beside the driver. With a popping of whip, the northbound Concord pulled out of the station and into the main street, heading for the trail town of Broken Horn, up by the Oklahoma line.

As the dust thinned in the rear of the departing stage, the spying outlaws inside the darkened saloon building caught sight of a lean young rider climbing aboard a strawberry roan that had been hitched in front of the Wells-Fargo office, and hidden from view by the stagecoach.

"Oh-oh!" grunted one of the crooks, his eye glued to a crack. "Reckon they *are* puttin' on a special guard this mornin', Chief, an' a plenty salty one, at that. That jas-

per is Lon Cole, an' he can git a hog-leg from leather an' burn a cap quicker'n most of us could pull our hands out of a pocket an' p'int a finger."

The Chief peered through the boarded-up window to regard the special rider who was accompanying the stage to Broken Horn.

He saw a dark-haired young cow-puncher in his early twenties, wearing a coffee-brown Stetson and buckskin shirt. His legs were clad in Cheyenne chaps, and cartridge belts looped his middle, sagging on either side under the weight of holstered .45s.

Under the skirt of Lon Cole's saddle was a booted Winchester.

"I found out about Cole," grunted the Chief. "He jest got through bein' trail boss on Flint Trone's pay roll. He took this stagecoach job plumb temporary, until he gits another job drivin' beefstuff up tuh Dodge City. An' I reckon this is the last job that salty young buckaroo will ever hold."

The other members of the "Secret Six" gang nodded grimly as they saw Lon Cole spur to a trot to overtake the outbound stage. They took the Chief's latter words as a sure order to gun Cole from his saddle when the stagecoach holdup occurred.

"Waal, good luck, pard!" came the Chief's voice from behind the tiers of oat sacks. "I'll see yuh tomorrow mornin' in Broken Horn, an' we'll divide the swag."

Without further discussion, the five hombres walked out of the former saloon by a back door opening on a livery-barn corral. Tied to the pole fence were five horses. In a few minutes the killers had mounted and spurred boldly out into the main street of Tincup.

Porch loafers waved at the riders

as they headed out of town at a walk. Indeed, there was nothing about the five hombres to indicate that they were members of one of the most dreaded bandit gangs in the Texas Panhandle.

For three years, the Secret Six had been raiding banks, holding up stagecoaches and trains, and pulling off various other crimes. Yet the Texas Rangers and local sheriffs had been unable to make a single arrest, for the trail of the Secret Six always ended in the town of Broken Horn.

And there was a good reason why the Secret Six was never caught. Many times the crooks themselves rode in posses, following their own trail! Every one of the six was a well-known citizen of Broken Horn, and at least three of them had reported being held up by the Secret Six, thereby successfully diverting any trace of suspicion against themselves.

"We'll take the short cut over tuh Sweetwater Springs, boys," gruffed Joe Brooks, a Broken Horn saloon owner who was serving as leader of to-day's holdup plans. "As long as nobody catches sight of our hosses, I don't reckon we kin be identified."

Straight across the Texas prairies the quintette rode. Two hours later they had reached Sweetwater Springs, an oasis in the sagebrush plains marked by stunted cottonwoods and willow.

Near by was a ravine, into which the outlaws rode their horses and hobbled them. Then, unrolling oil-skin slickers from behind their cantles, the Secret Six bandits donned them. Bandanna masks covered their faces, and the slickers kept any detail of their garb from showing.

Making their way out of the ravine, the outlaws hid themselves in a dense thicket of salt cedars near the water hole where they knew the

stagecoach driver would water his horses before heading on to Broken Horn.

They did not have long to wait. Less than fifteen minutes had gone by when the rattle of wheels and the drumming of hoofs reached their ears, and the Wells-Fargo stage hove in sight around the base of a grease-wood-dotted knoll.

Riding in advance of the stage came Lon Cole, the waddy who had hired out as special guard for the Wells-Fargo people.

"He smells a rat!" grunted Joe Brooks, reaching for his Colt. "But wait till the coach gits hyar, boys."

Lon Cole, his eyes slitted warily as he looked over the brush around the springs, made a complete circuit of the water hole before waving to the driver of the oncoming stage.

A few minutes later the Concord rattled to a halt beside the water hole, and the driver wrapped his lines around the whipstock preparatory to unhitching his team and watering them.

Br-r-rang! Joe Brooks's six-gun barked harshly in the afternoon heat, and Lon Cole was knocked sprawling from his saddle, even as his strawberry roan was drinking at the springs.

Cole's body struck the sandy bank and then splashed into the spring, staining the water with crimson.

The shotgun guard reached for his 12-gauge scattergun, his eyes fixed to the spouting gunsmoke which fumed from Brooks's hide-out bush. But before the guard could lift his double-barreled weapon, a rattle of shots came from the ambushed crooks and the guard fell back across the stagecoach roof, his skull tunneled with slugs.

The driver clawed at his hip for a Colt, but a second volley of shots

rang out and the old stage man pitched forward over the whiffletrees, his corpse dangling over the wagon tongue at the heels of the restless team.

Out into the open rushed the five slicker-clad bandits, their six-guns trailing smoke as they surrounded the stage. Brooks yanked open a door and shoved his guns inside to cover Alamo Judson, the rancher who was the lone passenger.

"Yo're lucky you ain't heeled, feller!" snarled the masked bandit as he saw that the Lone Star rancher was not armed. "Git yore flippers up!"

One of the Secret Six killers leaped for the lead horses and held the plunging team down, while two other crooks swarmed aboard the stage and tossed out the Wells-Fargo strongbox.

Joe Brooks, moving with expert skill, frisked Alamo Judson and removed the latter's bulging wallet from an inner pocket.

Then, with a brutal oath, Brooks crashed his six-gun barrel against Judson's skull and the old rancher wilted in his tracks.

"O. K. Let's vamosel!" snarled Brooks. "Cain't tell when some jasper might happen over hyar tuh water his brone, an' we got tuh high-tail it."

Five minutes later the bandits were gone, the rumble of their horses' hoofs dying on the breeze. Behind them they left two dead men in a gore-spattered stage boot, an unconscious passenger sprawled between the wheels, and the motionless form of Lon Cole lying half submerged in the waters of the spring.

It was a typical Secret Six job—to strike with ruthless surprise, make off with their booty, and leave corpses behind.

CHAPTER II.

WYOMING WADDY.

THE cool waters in which Lon Cole lay from his chest down revived the young stage guard a half hour after the departure of the Secret Six outlaws. Opening his eyes, Cole peered up at the two dead men, then at the stirring figure of Alamo Judson, over in the shade of the Concord.

With an effort that brought a moan knifing through his teeth, Cole dragged his dripping body out of the water hole. Only the fact that he had fallen with his head away from the water had prevented him from being drowned, for his senses had snapped out like a light when an outlaw slug had grazed his temple.

Rojo, his leggy roan, nuzzled the waddy as he crawled out on the dry sand and got shakily to his feet. His head seemed to be splitting open, and when he reached up to finger the bullet crease above his right ear his hand came away sticky with crimson.

Horror cleared the waddy's senses as he read the mute evidence of the outlaw raid. He felt sick at the stomach as he lurched over to where Alamo Judson was coming to his senses, and dragged the old rancher out from under the wheels.

A sombrero filled with water served to rouse Judson to his senses, and the two men eyed each other groggily.

"A fine stage guard I turned out tuh be, Judson," groaned the Wyoming puncher. "The Wells-Fargo people in Tincup trusted me tuh keep us from bein' ambushed, an' blamed if I spotted any sign o' danger when we got hyar. But them crooks must 'a' been hidin' in them salt cedars yonder, judgin' from the boot prints."

Alamo Judson crawled shakily back into the stagecoach. His scalp had been cut open by the outlaw's clubbing gun barrel, and he seemed on the verge of another fainting spell.

"Let's—git tuh Broken Horn, an' a doc," moaned the rancher. "I reckon—it was the Secret Six—killers who pulled this job. They allus wear slickers."

Lon Cole tied his roan to the rear of the stage, and then climbed to the roof. He had a feeling of revulsion as he stretched the dead bodies of the shotgun guard and driver out on the stage roof, and then gathered up the reins himself.

"I don't reckon yo're hurt bad, Mr. Judson," panted the waddy as he whipped the team back to the stage road. "But I'll git yuh a medico plumb pronto."

Despair and rage churned in Cole's brain as he got the stage headed for Broken Horn. He would have preferred to track the escaping crooks while the trail was fresh, but he didn't know the extent of Judson's hurt, and his first duty was to the passenger.

"The dinero I earned from Flint Trone while I was hazin' his steers up Tombstone Trail was in that strongbox," muttered the waddy. "Every cent I had in the world. An' I reckon thar was gold in that strongbox in addition, seein's as how Wells-Fargo hired me as special guard."

Cole's job with the stage outfit had been only temporary, until he got to Broken Horn. His real work was in the saddle, for Cole, despite his years, was one of the best-known trail bosses on Tombstone Trail.

As such, he piloted beef herds up from Texas and Oklahoma to the railroad loading pens at Dodge City, Kansas. And Cole had been saving his money religiously, so that he

could return to Thundergust Valley, Wyoming, and settle down on a little spread.

"Reckon I'm right back whar I started from," groaned the waddy as he made out the ramshackle build-ings of Broken Horn on the northern horizon. "I'll have tuh write an' tell Vola Raine that us gittin' hitched will have tuh be postponed. That is, unless I kin git my dinero back from them Secret Six hombres, which same will probly be impossible."

Curious throngs pressed about the red-stained Concord as Lon Cole drove it up to the Wells-Fargo office in Broken Horn and briefly reported the robbery to the agent there.

"Jumpin' junipers!" gasped the Wells-Fargo agent as he helped Alamo Judson out of the Concord. "Thar was five thousand bucks in fresh-minted gold coin in that strong-box tuh-day, consigned tuh the Bank o' Texas. We'll have tuh stand good fer that."

Alamo Judson, briefly outlining what he knew about the stage robbery, wound up his report with start-ling news of his own loss.

"The bill o' sale tuh my Lone Star beef herd was in my wallet, along with six hundred in greenbacks," Judson said. "I wouldn't mind that if it hadn't been that a lot o' valu-able private papers was in that wal-let, too. I reckon them Secret Six skunks will just chuck that down a gopher hole when they look through my wallet."

Lon Cole elbowed his way through the gun-hung jam of cow-punchers and town citizens, and stopped in at "Alkali" Anderson's sheriff's office to report the holdup to the law. To his dismay, he found out that the sheriff was out chasing a rustling outfit in the Gunbore Hills near the Okla-homa border, and as a result would not be able to handle the matter.

"Waal, I'll report this tuh the Bank o' Texas," decided Cole bit-terly, "an' then blamed if I'm not goin' tuh do a little man huntin' my-self. I was a total failure as a guard, an' the least I kin do is tuh try an' git back that dinero fer Wells-Fargo."

Walking into the false-fronted shack which was marked Bank of Texas, Cole introduced himself to Mort Shackle, president of the cow-town bank. The latter was a white-headed hombre with the mean, nar-row face of a banker who had a repu-tation throughout Texas for being a penny-pincher. Cole dreaded the thought of breaking the news to Shackle as much as he would have dreaded facing the entire Secret Six gang over blazing guns.

"That's the size of it, Shackle," said Cole, after detailing the holdup as best he could with the informa-tion which Alamo Judson had learned while Cole himself had been lying unconscious. "They got away clean, while I was knocked out. Al-amo Judson kin testify that it was the Secret Six outfit, or hombres dressed in slickers like that gang wears."

A torrent of profanity came from Mort Shackle's thin lips.

"How do I know you weren't in league with them jaspers?" de-manded the banker, his face purple with fury. "Wells-Fargo was sup-posed tuh git that dinero safe tuh my bank, an' fer an extry guard they hire a two-bit cowprod!"

Cole flushed at the insult, but chose to overlook it.

"I'm well known in both Tincup an' Broken Horn," the waddy shot back. "What's more, I suffered a personal loss in that holdup, fer I'd deposited my last nickel in yore branch bank at Tincup an' said di-

nero was bein' sent up hyar along with the fresh oro from the mint."

Shackle snorted and pointed toward the door of his bank.

"Git out, yuh lyin' saddle bum!" shriled the banker angrily. "The money's gone, an' that's the size of it. 'This bank ain't goin' tuh try tuh ketch the Secret Six, because fer all we know them outlaws may be my next-door neighbors. I ain't takin' the risk o' gittin' my hile shot full o' holes. I'll let the Wells-Fargo people worry about gittin' it back!"

Lon Cole donned his hat and made his way outside, glad to be out of range of the banker's lashing tongue.

Making his way across the wheel-rutted street to get his Rojo horse, Cole bumped into his erstwhile stage passenger, Alamo Judson. The rancher's head had been swathed in bandages by the Broken Horn doctor, and Judson seemed to have recovered his usual wiry strength.

"Thar's plenty o' talk that you was in league with the Secret Six in tuh-day's robbery, Cole," said the old cowman, extending a horny palm. "But I witnessed more o' that holdup than you did, an' I'll testify that you was bullet-dumped out o' yore saddle afore them bandits showed theirselves in the open."

Cole smiled grimly as they shook hands.

"Thanks, Judson," he said. "I jest come from Shackle, in the bank. He's too yaller-bellied tuh want tuh organize a posse tuh run down them killers. The sheriff's out o' town, so I aim tuh ride back tuh Sweetwater Springs an' do a little trackin' on my own."

Judson's fiery blue eyes fairly snapped with excitement.

"You jest wait, son, until I kin rent myself a broomtail over at the livery barn," he requested. "I'm nigh ontuh seventy, but my shootin'

eye is still good. I'll ride with yuh, an' I got a hunch the two of us will prove a match fer them Secret Six skunks."

CHAPTER III.

HAIR FROM A CHAPS LEG.

AFTERNOON shadows were lengthening across the Texas plains when Lon Cole and Alamo Judson reined their broncs inside the circle of brush which hemmed in the Sweetwater Springs oasis.

No one had visited the water hole since the tragic happenings of mid-day. That was evidenced by the fact that the stagecoach tracks were still intact and there were no fresh hoofprints in the sandy clearing around the springs.

All too clearly, Lon Cole could see the marks he had made crawling back out of the water hole.

On the ride out from Broken Horn, Cole had busied himself cleaning out his six-guns and reloading from waterproof shells in the loops of his cartridge belts. Now, reaching the scene of the holdup, he was ready for action.

"Them skunks was hidin' in them salt cedars, Cole," said Alamo Judson. "They konked me with a Colt muzzle, so I don't have any idea whar they vamosed to."

But it did not take long for the Wyoming cow-puncher to discover the near-by ravine where the Secret Six riders had stashed their horses while they lay in wait for the Concord's arrival.

From the far end of the ravine the tracks of five horses headed off to the northwest, where the country was more hilly and broken by eroded washes and dry creek beds.

"Somewhar out in thar them skunks is prob'ly holin' up right now," surmised Alamo Judson, shad-

ing his eyes against the ruddy glare of the lowering sun.

"From what Shackle, the banker, told me," grunted Cole, "it's suspected that these Secret Six are men who live in Broken Horn. Shackle was afraid tuh do much about tuh-day's robbery fer fear he'd git bush-whacked."

Judson nodded grimly as they rode out across the sagebrush flats following the get-away trail of the outlaws.

"Ever' year I runs my Lone Star herd through Broken Horn on the way tuh Longhorn City," said Judson. "Fact is, the reason I was aboard that stage is because my steers is comin' up from Amarillo way now, an' I wanted tuh git tuh Dodge in time tuh do some dickerin' with the stock buyers. But what I started tuh say was, that every year I been hearin' about the Secret Six. They shore got the Broken Horn sheriff plumb buffaloeed."

Two miles from the water hole where the robbery and murders had occurred, Lon Cole came across the Wells-Fargo box. It had been smashed open and its contents removed.

A few feet away, lying in the shadow of a sumac clump, Alamo Judson found his wallet and thumbed through it gleefully.

"They stole my dinero, naturally," reported the Lone Star ranchman, "but my valuable papers is still hyar. Wish you was as lucky gittin' yore stake back, Lon."

Cole nodded bitterly as he scouted about, searching for clews.

"Reckon they took off their disguises hyar so's they could ride easier," said Cole, climbing back in the saddle. "I wouldn't be surprised if the trails didn't scatter purty quick. They prob'ly divvied up the

dinero while they was restin' their broncs at this place."

Cole's words were true. They had not ridden another hundred yards before the trails split fanwise, indicating that the five members of the Secret Six had agreed to scatter until another owl-hoot job called them together again.

"Thar's a ranch house, Judson!" spoke up Cole, pointing to buildings some three miles away, inside a pocket in the low hills. "Let's mosey over thar an' see if we kin find out anything from the boss."

And then, as they rode, they found their first exciting clew. One of the four outlaws had come this way, making in a bee line for the ranch.

And even as the two stalkers made this discovery they spotted a tuft of bright yellow hair clinging to a Spanish bayonet, a foot or so from the horse's trail.

"Hair from some Angora chaps!" cried Lon Cole, leaning from the saddle to pull the tuft of yellow strands from the cactus. "That means one o' them polecats was wearin' goat-hair chaps, an' that he'd taken off his oilskin-slicker disguise!"

Alamo Judson rolled himself a quirkly. He seemed dubious over the value of the waddy's discovery.

"Plenty of innocent men wear Angora chaps," he pointed out, as Cole thrust the tuft of yellow hair in a pocket of his buckskin shirt. "An' don't fergit, we're close tuh that ranch yonder. Lots o' riders been combin' this brush, prob'ly, huntin' mavericks."

Reaching the outskirts of the ranch where they hoped to get information concerning possible strange riders in the vicinity, Lon Cole eyed a wooden mail box.

"The L F Connected spread, Link Farber, owner," read the waddy.

"That mean anything to yuh, Judson?"

The rancher nodded.

"Link Farber's cashier o' the Texas Bank in Broken Horn, an' one o' the principal stockholders," said Judson. "I've done considerable business with the bank, an' Link Farber's handled several stock sales fer me."

Cole's brows gathered thoughtfully as they rode down a fenced lane and drew rein in front of Farber's flat-roofed, Mexican-style ranch house.

Could Link Farber be a member of the Secret Six? It would be a good way to divert suspicion from himself, by robbing cash consigned to his own bank. The Wells-Fargo company would have to stand good for the dinero, anyway.

"Howdy, gents!" came a voice from the doorway of the adobe-walled house. "Light an' cool yore saddles. Waal—if it isn't Alamo Judson! This is a surprise!"

Lon Cole's mouth went as tight as a split in a rock as he eyed the cashier of the Bank of Texas, as Farber shook hands with Alamo Judson. The two had not seen each other since a year ago.

Farber was a cadaverous-looking hombre with eyes that reminded Cole of a rattlesnake's. He was dressed in a flat-topped Stetson similar to Judson's expensive El Stroud model, and wore twin six-guns at his belts, butts slung frontwise for cross draw.

But the feature of Farber's garb which quickened Lon Cole's pulse was the fact that the cashier-rancher was wearing a pair of *armitas*, or apron-type chaps, which came only to his knees.

This type of chap was rapidly disappearing from the West, but had once been popular throughout Texas and below the border. They allowed

more freedom for the legs, but required the use of knee-high boots, and for that reason were rapidly being discarded by American cowboys.

But Farber's *armitas* were of bright-yellow Angora hair!

"The stagecoach I was ridin' tuh Broken Horn was held up this afternoon, Farber," said Alamo Judson, still seated on his rented bronc. "We're thinkin' the Secret Six pulled the job."

Farber's pasty face twisted into a mask of surprise.

"The devil!" cried Farber. "Our bank had five thousand——"

Lon Cole swung from the saddle and strode up to stand at arm's length from the cashier of the Texas Bank.

"That's right!" snapped the waddy. "Your bank's money was prob'ly what the Secret Six was after. We trailed one o' them road agents ontuh yore ranch, Farber."

The banker's snaky eyes bored into Cole's.

"Don't git proddy, stranger!" Farber snarled. "I know all o' the men I hire, an' they're plumb reliable. If a stage bandit rode ontuh L F Connected range, it ain't any o' my doin's."

Cole reached in his shirt pocket and drew forth the tuft of Angora hair he had discovered on a cactus bush out on the prairie. It matched Farber's *armitas* beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"One o' them robbers," snapped Lon Cole venomously, "was wearin' yaller goat-hair chaps."

Instead of recoiling under the brunt of Cole's thinly veiled accusation, Farber glanced up at the old rancher on the horse and laughed heartily.

"Yore pard here seems to doubt my integrity, Alamo!" chuckled Farber. "Suppose you tell him I ain't

the stripe tuh turn outlaw when I got more dinero than I'll ever be able tuh spend."

Cole glanced up at Alamo Judson, and in so doing made a dangerous error.

Leaping backward like a spider, Link Farber's hands came up in a lightning cross draw with six-guns flashing in the rays of afternoon sunlight. Before either of the men could move an eyelash they found themselves covered by the menacing bores of Farber's .45s.

"Git yore dewclaws up, buskies!" rasped Link Farber. "I think yo're bluffin', but I cain't gamble on it no longer. I should 'a' seen to it that both of yuh was croaked when we robbed that stage this afternoon!"

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH SENTENCE.

HANDS groping skyward under a double gun drop, Lon Cole and Alamo Judson saw their captor holster one gun in its cross-draw holster, then proceed to disarm them.

"Down off that cayuse, Alamo!" snarled the stage bandit. "You two've done yore last butlin' in!"

Judson's face was white as he climbed off his horse and stood at Cole's shoulder.

"Knowin' Farber like I do, this is hard tuh believe, son!" panted the old Lone Star boss. "I reckon we was caught nappin'!"

The door of the ranch house opened behind Farber, and a pair of evil-faced Mexican peons stepped forth, each with a coil of rawhide reata in their hands. Obviously they had been backing Farber's play ever since the two riders had appeared at the end of the lane.

"Hog tie these skunks, boys!" clipped Farber. "We got tuh make away with both of 'em afore Sheriff

Alkali Anderson gits tuh investigatin'!"

Cole and Judson were helpless to resist as they felt the two peons tie their arms behind their backs. The job was hardly finished when a rattle of hoofs reached their ears.

Farber snarled like a panther as he caught sight of five or six riders out on the prairie, heading toward the L F Connected gate. "That's Shackle bringin' the board o' directors o' the bank out tuh report tuh-day's robbery. We got tuh hide these polecats, *compañeros*."

The two Mexicans hustled Cole and Judson inside the house, while Link Farber hurried the two riderless horses around the corner of the ranch house.

Then, ducking through a side door into the room where his prisoners were standing in the custody of the peons, Farber rasped to one of the Mexicans:

"Pedro, take them hosses out tuh the south stable an' turn 'em loose in our cavy. "Durango, you take these hombres out tuh the slaughterhouse an' lock 'em up. I'll take care o' them bank directors."

Pedro hustled out to get the tell-tale horses away before the Broken Horn citizens arrived on the scene. Obviously the bank's board of directors had no idea that Link Farber was a member of the notorious Secret Six outfit.

The scrape-clad Mexican known as Durango slid a gun from his belt and herded Lon Cole and the veteran rancher out through a back door, across a tiled patio, and through an arched Spanish gateway overlooking the barns and corrals of the ranch.

Link Farber, sweating like a sponge from his narrow escape at exposure, made his way to the front door just as the five riders from Broken Horn dismounted and tied their

horses to an ornate metal hitch rack out front.

"We got plumb bad news, Farber!" panted the rat-faced president of the Bank of Texas, Mort Shackle. "Secin's as how yo're one o' the biggest stockholders in the bank, as well as actin' cashier, we rid right out byar tuh tell yuh."

The nervous-faced citizens accompanying Shackle eyed Farber in gaunt suspense, waiting for the bank president to break the news.

"Come on in, amigos!" laughed Farber, opening the ranch house door. "I'll have Manuelita mix us up some drinks. Don't tell me some o' our mortgage holders refuses tuh pay up, or that our bank's not in good financial condition. I know better."

Shackle waited until all the board of directors were seated around Farber's mahogany table before he gulped hard and commenced speaking.

"It ain't that bad, Link," confessed the bank president nervously. "But yuh remember that shipment o' fresh-minted gold coins that was comin' up from Tincup tuh-day? The cash we was goin' tuh use durin' the height o' the trail-drive season?"

Farber took a cheroot from a silver box and lighted up, after passing the costly Mexican *cigarros* to the pompous bank directors.

"I believe I remember that today's stage was bringing us the *oro*," said Link Farber with a smile. He tectered back in his chair, his eyes surveying the fidgety directors. "But what's the bur in yore cinch, Mort? Didn't the government ship that gold?"

The pot-bellied old chairman of the bank directors pushed to his feet and husked out:

"The Secret Six struck ag'in, Link. Kilt the driver an' stage guard over

by Sweetwater Springs an' vamesed with the kit an' caboodle o' the Wells-Fargo strongbox. It'll be months afore Wells-Fargo settles up—an' us needin' that dinero pronto, fer our reg'lar business!"

Farber's corpselike face darkened in well imitated surprise. He drummed the mahogany desk with manicured nails.

"The Secret Six ag'in, eh?" he growled. "That's the first time they've ever dared rob our bank, gentlemen, an' blamed if we won't bust that owl-hoot bunch wide open. So long as the Secret Six confines itself tuh robbin' trains or gamblin' halls, I ain't worried about 'em. Bat when they take property belongin' tuh the Bank o' Texas, we ain't standin' fer it!"

The directors and Mort Shackle settled back in their chairs, pleased at the fierce wrath of their rancher-cashier.

Farber got to his feet and excused himself, saying he was going out to the *cocina* after drinks. Once out of sight of the Broken Horn citizens, he hurried out through his ranch patio and made his way to a squatty adobe structure which was his slaughterhouse.

The peons, Pedro and Durango, lounged outside the door of the slaughterhouse, seemingly sleepy-eyed ranch loafers.

"Listen, *compañeros!*" hissed the outlaw. "I got them stuffed shirts stalled off a while, but we got tuh git rid o' Alamo Judson an' that cow-puncher plumb rapid."

Farber's brittle gaze ranged over the ranch yard until he spotted the location of a new building which his Mexican hands were erecting out of adobe bricks.

"This hull country will be combed over by posses huntin' the Secret Six," went on Farber, "so it'll be

hard as blazes hidin' the corpses o' them two jaspers. But I got an idea."

He pointed toward the half-built structure, in the shadow of which adobe bricks were drying in their forms.

"Knife our prisoners," ordered Farber, "an', come nightfall, we'll put 'em in the walls o' that bunk house we're buildin' an' brick it up tight an' solid with adobe mortar. Reckon Sheriff Anderson kin hunt all he's a mind tuh, an' he won't locate their carcasses!"

Having delivered the death sentence for Lon Cole and Alamo Judson, the bank cashier headed back to the main *casa* for further parley with Mort Shackle and the bank directors.

CHAPTER V.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE BATTLE.

Lon Cole and his rancher partner had found themselves hurled into the inky interior of the slaughterhouse as soon as Durango had received his orders to hurry the prisoners out of the *casa*. Now, as their pupils widened, they could make out details of their jail room by light which filtered through the heavily thatched roof of the structure.

Huge chopping blocks were the only furniture. There were chutes by which steers or hogs were hazed through slitlike doors in the opposite wall, to be butchered. The floor was of earth, brown with gore. Piles of smelly hides occupied one corner.

"If we don't git ourselves out o' this mess mighty pronto, it's the buzzards fer us, Judson!" panted Lon Cole, propping his back against the hard adobe wall and regarding his older companion in the semidarkness. "We'd 'a' been kilt afore now if it hadn't been fer the arrival o'

them bank directors from Broken Horn."

Alamo Judson nodded despairingly.

"Them two Mexes is guardin' the door," said the old rancher. "I kin hear 'em talkin' out thar. An' even if our hands was loose, how'd we git out? Thar ain't no windows, an' them animal chutes is padlocked."

Lon Cole got to his feet and groped across the slaughterhouse floor until he came to the nearest chopping block. Deeply embedded in the oak top was a meat cleaver.

"Reckon I kin take care o' our bonds," whispered Cole. "Just buck up an' don't lose hope. We'll be able tuh put up a battle when them greasers come in tuh murder us, anyhow."

Turning his side to the chopping block, Cole was able to rub his lariat bonds against the sharp blade of the meat cleaver. In less than a minute the lariat parted and Lon Cole was unwinding the bonds which held down his arms.

"Jumpin' bullfrogs!" panted Judson, his whisper shrill with excitement. "Yuh shore done that slick, son."

Even as Alamo's bonds were being untied by the waddy they heard Link Farber making his visit outside. Chills raced down their spines as they overheard Farber instructing them to kill both prisoners, their corpses to be mortared up in the wall of the new L F Connected bunk house.

"You git over in the corner whar them hides is," whispered Lon Cole as he finished releasing Judson. "I reckon I kin handle them Mexies when they come in."

Hanging on the wall next to the door were a number of butcher's tools—hacksaws, cleavers of various

sizes, butcher knives, and razor-edged meat axes.

Selecting a thick-bladed stock knife resembling a bowie, used for "sticking" cattle or hogs, Lon Cole gripped the leather-bound haft and stood back behind the doorway, his shoulder blades flattened against the adobe bricks.

Alamo Judson, realizing that his aged muscles would make him worth little in a hand-to-hand combat, obeyed the cowboy's orders and retired to the safety of a dark corner.

Sweat broke out on Cole's face as he heard the big lock of the slaughterhouse turning, then saw a crack of daylight show across the floor as the Mexicans opened the door.

"We must use the knife," whispered Durango, stepping inside. "If we kill the gringos with a gun, the bank hombres would hear from the *casa* and it would make Señor Farber angry."

"*Si, hermano.*"

Pedro slithered into the darkened interior of the slaughterhouse and the door closed. Lon Cole could dimly make out the forms of the two Mexicans as they paused, blinking their eyelids to accustom themselves to the darkness.

Bracing himself like a bobcat, Cole sprang out from his hiding place, even as Durango muttered in a shocked voice:

"Where are the gringos? They are not where we—"

Bam! Cole's left fist sped outward to connect with Durango's hairy jaw. The Mexican went spinning backwards, to crash hard against the chopping block.

"*Maños altos!*" snarled Cole as he leaped upon the startled Pedro, his knife point resting against the Mexican's ribs. "Git yore hands up, er yuh'll git yore heart cut out!"

Pedro fell back, his face draining

of color as he saw the dim light glinting off the knife in Cole's grasp. Then, with a choked Spanish oath, Pedro whipped a hand to his neck and came out with a long-bladed *cuchillo* which he carried in a scabbard down the back of his neck, a favorite Mexican trick.

Clang! The knife blades threw off sparks as Cole deftly parried Pedro's downward thrust.

No one can surpass a Mexican in a knife battle. Cole knew it was the favorite mode of fighting for a Mexican. But he was prepared for Pedro's desperate defense.

Ducking under the Mexican's second thrust, Cole sent his knife whizzing through space in a lightning-swift underhand throw.

Thud! The knife sank to the hilt in Pedro's heart, and the Mexican fell even as he jerked his own arm back to fling his wicked *cuchillo*.

"Look out, Cole!"

The half-voiced cry of warning came from Alamo Judson as the latter caught sight of Durango picking himself up from the chopping block and charging Cole with the meat cleaver he had wrenched from the block.

Cole danced aside as the cleaver whizzed down, fanning his very nose.

His own weapon embedded in Pedro's ribs, Cole was for the moment defenseless.

But Durango was off balance as his rush failed to connect with his gringo quarry. And even as the second burly Mexican whirled to renew the attack, Cole sprang under the greaser's guard and locked both hands around Durango's knife wrist.

They whirled about madly, grunting with effort. Sweat stood out on their bodies as they struggled to trip each other. Then, slipping on a loose hide underfoot, they both fell in a desperate grapple.

Alamo Judson leaped forward, hunting for a weapon to finish off the attacking Mexican as they rolled over and over in a grapple to the death, breath whistling through locked jaws.

Before Judson could lay hands on a meat ax or other weapon, the two battlers reared to their feet.

Putting his last ounce of strength into his arms, Lon Cole jerked downward with the Mexican's arm. Durango's steel-hard muscles relaxed under the terrific pressure, and the knife in his locked hand came downward.

There was a grisly sound as steel cut through gristle and bone, and Durango relaxed with a gurgling sigh. The knife had penetrated his own lung and embedded its point in Durango's heart.

Wheezing with the effort, Lon Cole stepped back, massaging his sore hands, his body wet with perspiration.

Durango kicked the slaughterhouse floor with feeble legs, then the breath left his body with a long sigh, and Durango had met the very fate which Link Farber had ordered him to deal out to Judson and Cole.

"Good work, son!" whispered Judson. "Them two Mexies won't carry out any more o' Farber's murder jobs, I reckon. An' we didn't make no noise tuh rouse anybody else on the ranch."

Lon Cole stooped, unbuckled Durango's gun belt and rolled the dead Mexican off the cartridge belt. He handed the holstered gun and belt to Judson, who strapped them on with experienced ease. Then Cole made his way over to Pedro's corpse and obtained the Mexican's gun for his own use.

"We got tuh make tracks, Alamo!" wheezed the waddy. "Ever' second

we stay inside o' this slaughterhouse our chances of escapin' are less."

They headed for the door, borrowed six-guns in hand. Then, as Cole was opening the slaughterhouse door for a glimpse outside, he drew back.

"Wait!" he gasped. "Farber's outside, tellin' them bank directors adios. If we tried tuh git out now, Farber'd prob'ly open fire on us, an' them bankers would back his play, figgerin' we was Secret Six killers."

Squinting through the crack in the doorway, they saw the Bank of Texas officials, together with President Mort Shackle, climbing into their saddles out in front of the L F Connected ranch house.

With farewell waves to the cashier, the bank directors wheeled their brones and galloped off down the lane, heading for Broken Horn.

"If Farber goes inside the *casa*, we'll be gittin' out!" whispered Cole. "Mebbe we kin capture him inside his own shack, an' then overtake them bankers an' tell 'em what kind of a four-flusher their cashier is."

But Farber, after watching his visitors depart, headed straight across his patio in the direction of the slaughterhouse.

"He's comin' out hyar tuh see if Durango an' Pedro have got us salivated yet!" whispered Cole, easing the door shut. "I reckon if we kin bait him inside, we'll make our capture easy enough, Judson!"

Cole holstered his gun and leaped over to where Pedro's body lay. Swiftly he rolled the corpse alongside Durango's body, and then stripped both Mexicans of their bright-colored serapes, which he threw back into the shadows.

The two made their way behind the door as they heard Link Farber come to a halt at the threshold.

"Durango!" came the outlaw's low

call. "Yuh finished croakin' them jaspers?"

Cole and Judson held their breath. A moment later the door opened and Farber stuck his head inside.

Farber's gaze met the two corpses lying back in the darkness. A low chuckle issued from the bank cashier's lips as he saw what he took to be the dead bodies of the two gringos who had ridden the Tincup stagecoach earlier that day.

"Good work, *compañeros!*" said Farber. "Come on out, while I give the Secret Six boys their signal. I reckon we'll help yuh dispose o' these bodies!"

CHAPTER VI.

BEHIND THE FORGE.

ALAMO JUDSON lifted his six-gun, notching the sights on the head of Link Farber as the crooked banker peered inside the slaughterhouse, his eyes gloating on the two indistinct corpses. But Lon Cole's rope-calloused hand closed over Judson's wrist and forced the gun back.

Until now, Cole had been depending on Farber's coming inside, where he could be knocked down and tied up before he knew what was happening to him. But the outlaw's words had changed the complexion of the whole affair to such an extent that Cole hoped Farber would not come inside at all.

"Durango! Pedro!" called out Farber in a louder voice.

Then, satisfied that his Mexican benchmen had gone elsewhere after their job of human butchery, Farber pulled his head outdoors and shut the door. They could hear him trailing his spurs out through the gravel.

"Yuh double-danged whelp!" chewed out Alamo Judson, facing Cole in the darkness. "I had a bead drawn on that rattlesnake's noggin,

an' you booger the play! What's the idea? We won't have a better chance tuh kill that double-crossin' cashier!"

Cole clapped a leathery palm over Judson's mouth.

"Button yore lip, Judson. Didn't yuh hear what Farber said when he figgered he was talkin' to his Mexies?"

Judson scratched his head in bewilderment.

"All I know," he growled, "is that we should 'a' grabbed our chance tuh finish off that Farber skunk."

Cole went to the door and opened it a tiny crack so that he could spy on the L F Connected boss's movements.

"Farber said he was fixin' tuh signal the rest of the Secret Six tuh come hyar!" whispered Cole. "That means, after the holdup, the Secret Six hombres scattered an' then met somewhar around hyar. They got their eyes on the ranch, an' when Farber gives 'em the signal that the coast is clear, they'll meet down hyar!"

Judson grinned, then clapped his jaw shut on an oath.

"The odds'll be five tuh one, then!" groaned the Lone Star boss. "Have yuh gone an' et loco weed, Cole?"

The waddy's face was grim in the dim wash of daylight filtering through the tiny crack in the slaughterhouse door.

"All I know," clipped the waddy from Wyoming, "is that this is our chance tuh corral the hull danged Secret Six outfit—or at least, them that pulled the stagecoach robbery at the springs this afternoon. Ain't that better than dabbin' our loop on one member o' the gang?"

Cole waved the old man to be quiet as he kept his eyes glued on Farber's actions.

The cashier of the Texas Bank had

entered his house, to emerge with a bright tin pie plate. Turning the plate so as to catch the last red beams of the setting sun, Farber directed the flashing tin in mirror fashion, up toward the crest of the brushy hills overlooking the ranch buildings.

From the angle of vision afforded by the door of the slaughterhouse, Lon Cole caught sight of an answering flash from the crest of the butte. Several times the bright glint of metal flashed sun rays from the top of the rise, then ceased.

With a grin of satisfaction, Link Farber quit his signaling and went back into his ranch house.

Lon Cole felt his heart leap as he caught sight of four riders emerge from the brushy rim of the butte overlooking the L F Connected spread.

Down the steep slope the riders came, making in a bee line for Farber's ranch.

"The Secret Six killers!" whispered Cole excitedly. "They been lyin' doggo up thar, waitin' fer Farber tuh signal 'em tuh come down. Judson, see if yuh recognize them skunks! They ain't wearin' masks or slickers."

Alamo Judson took Cole's place at the door as the four riders hit the flat ground and cantered into the ranch yard, heading past the half-built bunk house and riding directly past the slaughterhouse.

"Jumpin' junipers!" gasped Judson in a hoarse whisper. "Every blasted one o' them *buscaderos* is a well-known citizen o' Broken Horn, Cole! Joe Brooks, boss o' the Tequila Bar; Lafe Edwards, ramrod of a saddle shop in town; an' the Repley brothers who run the livery barns in Tincup an' Broken Horn!"

Link Farber emerged from his

ranch house and shook hands with the Secret Six hombres as they dismounted. Their low conversation reached the ears of the men hiding in the slaughterhouse.

"We'll divvy up the swag over in the tool-shed, boys. Manuelita is fixin' up supper in the house, an' no use rousin' her suspicions."

"Too bad the Chief cain't be with us—but that'd be apt tuh rouse suspicions in town if he left, especially after him bein' over in Tincup most o' the day, anyhow."

Farber jerked a thumb toward the slaughterhouse as the men started filing over toward a blacksmith shed.

"Got a couple stiffs in thar, boys. Judson, who was ridin' the stage-coach this mornin', an' Lon Cole, the special guard. He wasn't as dead as we figgered, an' we're plumb lucky they didn't lasso the hull passell of us."

Their voices died off as they vanished inside the blacksmith shop. Lon Cole, squinting at them from the slaughterhouse, saw a door open behind the forge as the five members of the Secret Six outfit filed into a tool house in the rear.

One of the outlaws, whom Judson had identified as the saloon owner, Joe Brooks, was carrying a pair of saddlebags which undoubtedly contained the Wells-Fargo loot.

The door of the tool house shut on the Secret Six conference, and no further sounds issued from the building.

"Waal, here's whar I go intuh action, Judson!" grinned Lon Cole. "Lend me yore hogleg, will yuh? Reckon I'll feel better with two guns when I buck that crowd."

Judson went ashen-pale at Cole's suggestion.

"They'd spot yuh crossin' the ranch yard an' sieve yuh with slugs,

Cole!" protested the Lone Star ranch boss. "Why, it'd be plumb suicide!"

But Cole was already unstrapping the gun belt from Judson's waist and buckling it about his own.

"All o' my life savin's is in them *elforjas*," he pointed out as he twirled the cylinders of the Mexican guns. "Besides, I owe a debt tuh Wells-Fargo. They hired me tuh pfect that load o' gold, an' I intend tuh git it back."

Making his way over to the corner where he had thrown the serapes from the dead Mexicans, Lon Cole returned with Durango's serape thrown over his own shoulders. He stooped to pick up Pedro's steeple-peaked sombrero with ball tassels around the brim.

"This'll disguise me while I'm crossin' the yard," grunted Cole, adjusting the chin strap of the big Chihuahua hat. "I reckon I got the element o' surprise on my side, too, Judson."

Before Judson could even shake the waddy's hand and wish him luck on his dangerous mission against five-to-one odds, Lon Cole had opened the slaughterhouse door and was striding out into the red glare of dusk.

While Judson watched in agonized silence from his hiding place, Lon Cole made his way in an arrow-straight course for the blacksmith shop.

A subdued mutter of voices reached Cole's ears as he stepped under the blacksmith shop's tiled roof. The door of the tool house was half ajar, and Cole's boots grated on the cinders around the cold forge as he made his way to the door.

Six-guns held ready, the Wyoming cow-puncher paused at the threshold of the council room where the bandit gang was in session, dividing their murder loot.

"I'll take the Chief's share in tuh Broken Horn in the mornin'," Farber was saying. "Reckon it's a right neat haul, eh, boys?"

Cole eased the door open with a kangaroo boot toe. His slitted eyes made out the figures of the Secret Six killers, grouped around a beer-bottle candle on a workbench.

The outlaws were counting out golden coins and other booty from their stagecoach robbery. All whirled about in alarm as the Mexican-disguised hombre stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"Take it easy, pard!" laughed Link Farber. "That's my *compadre*, Durango. Whar'd yuh go, Durango? I took a squint in the butcherin' house after yuh'd croaked Lon Cole an'——"

Farber broke off with a gasp of fear as he saw the supposed Mexican peon whip back his serape hem to reveal a pair of Colt .45s, muzzles weaving like snakes' heads over the group.

"Hoist 'em, Secret Six!" came the deadly voice under the big black brim of the Mexican sombrero. "This is Lon Cole doin' the talkin', with Judge Colt tuh back my play if any of yuh turn a hair!"

CHAPTER VII.

CHIEF OF THE SIX.

JOE BROOKS, standing the farthest back in shadow, shot out a hand to get at his holstered Colt.

Br-r-rang! Flame lanced from one of Cole's six-guns, and the outlaw who had dumped Cole from the saddle at the Sweetwater Springs ambush fell back with a spouting bullet hole between his eyes.

As Joe Brooks slumped in death behind the workbench, one of the Repley brothers made a snatch at

the candle, seeking to plunge the tool house in darkness.

Bang! Cole's .45 thundered a second time, and the livery-barn owner who ramrodded the deserted saloon in Tincup screamed with agony over a slug-creased arm.

"That'll be enough monkey business!" crackled Lon Cole as he stood spread-legged in the doorway. "Git yore flippers above yore ears afore I start tallyin' a few of yuh whar it'll hurt!"

Link Farber, swaying dizzily as his eyes followed the weaving bores of Cole's hoglegs, raised his arms jerkily. The unwounded Repley brother followed suit, after which Lafe Edwards gave up the idea of getting a gun from leather and raised his arms high overhead.

"That's better!" snarled Cole. "Now, start walkin' out, hands high. A false move an' I'll be makin' Boot Hill candidates out o' you buskies!"

Link Farber lurched forward, halting at the door long enough for Cole to holster a gun and use his free hand to divest Farber of his gun harness. Every second of the time he was disarming the crooked bank cashier, however, Cole held the drop on the remaining three crooks in the tool room.

Footsteps clattered as Alamo Judson came running across the ranch yard.

"Good work, Lon!" gasped the Lone Star boss as he saw four disarmed outlaws file out of the tool house, disarmed and with hands aloft. "Looks like yuh made a clean sweep!"

Cole pointed with a gun barrel to a pile of ropes in the corner of the blacksmith shop.

"Hog tie these proddy gents afore they decide tuh make a bust fer it!" ordered the waddy. "It's gittin' dark

fast, an' I ain't so sure I could plug four hombres!"

With great gusto, Alamo Judson went about the job of lashing the arms of their prisoners securely with old lass' rope. When the job was finished, the four dejected outlaws were herded out of the blacksmith shop at guns' points.

"What'll we do now?" asked Judson anxiously.

Lon Cole frowned, then squinted toward the near-by horse corrals.

"Cut out a good cayuse from that cavvy," ordered the cowboy. "Saddle up an' light a shuck fer Broken Horn. Bring a depity sheriff out hyar tuh take these wallopers intuh custody. I'm too skeered o' losin' 'em tuh give 'em hosses an' try gittin' 'em tuh the *calabozo* after dark!"

Judson hurried over to the corral, roped his own horse, which had been turned into the L. F. Connected cavvy, and slapped his hull aboard the animal.

"I'll be back *muy pronto*, Cole!" yelled Judson, wheeling his bronc toward the lane. "An' be sure yuh ride close herd on them long-loopin' skunks!"

Judson galloped off into the thickening dusk, leaving Lon Cole to regard his nervous, panic-stricken prisoners.

"Line up Injun fashion an' head fer the ranch house!" commanded the cowboy. "I don't like this bein' out in the open after dark. Too much chance o' you fellers gittin' ringy an' tryin' tuh vamose on me."

Cole did not breathe easily again until Farber, the two Repley brothers, and Lafe Edwards were safe inside the living room of Farber's Spanish home and seated in rawhide chairs where Cole could keep an easy eye on his prisoners by the light of kerosene lamps.

Out in the *cocina* Cole could hear the decrepit old Mexican cook, Manuelita, rattling her pots and pans. The deaf old peon woman did not know what fate had overtaken her employer.

The four prisoners were shaking with suspense. Farber's ratlike eyes were darting toward a gun rack in the opposite corner from the fireplace, but he was helpless in his bonds.

"Reckon Sheriff Alkali Anderson will be plumb delighted when he returns tuh Broken Horn an' finds the Secret Six all jugged in his calaboose," chuckled Lon Cole, beginning to relax and enjoy his triumph. "Thar's quite a bit o' bounty on your scalps, too, which same may help pay back some o' yore victims fer past robberies. That is, what victims yuh didn't murder in cold blood. Them are——"

A clatter of many hoofs out in the front yard made Cole twitch with alarm. It was far too early for Judson to have even gone halfway to Broken Horn, let alone to have returned with a deputy sheriff.

The prisoners sat up, fiendish leers beginning to cross their faces.

"Yuh better high-tail it, Cole!" advised Link Farber, his old poise returning as he heard the creak of saddle leather indicating that men were dismounting at his hitch bar outside. "Them's my waddies git-tin' back tuh the ranch fer supper, an' they'll make a pepper box out o' you when they see what's goin' on!"

Trembling with alarm, Lon Cole made his way to a front window and peered out, guns alert.

Then he recognized the half a dozen riders outside. They were the board of directors of the Bank of Texas, who had visited the ranch

only an hour before. Why were they returning so soon?

The bank president, Mort Shackle, was leading the men up the front path even now.

"Yore riders, eh?" sneered Cole, opening the front door. "Waal, it happens these hombres are the very ones who should be the first to know the identities o' the Secret Six!"

A moment later the startled bank directors were inside, squinting through the lamplight at the four trussed-up prisoners across the room.

"What—what's this?" gasped out Mort Shackle, trembling with anxiety as he turned to Lon Cole.

The waddy grinned and spun his Colts by the trigger guards as he scanned the bank president who had ordered him out of the Broken Horn bank earlier in the day.

"Yuh may recall I'm the special guard hired by Wells-Fargo tuh make certain yore bank got its dinero to-day," explained Lon Cole. "Waal, now that you hombres are here to guard these stage robbers, I'll rattle my hocks out tuh the blacksmith shop an' bring back yore stolen cash, down tuh the last peseta."

A pot-bellied bank director in business clothes stared at the prisoners with his jaw hanging agape.

"B-but these are Broken Horn citizens!" gasped the director. "How come yuh got men like our cashier hog tied, young feller?"

Lon Cole grinned and fired his bombshell.

"These jaspers may be respectable citizens in Broken Horn," Cole grinned, "but on the side they happen tuh be the Secret Six bandits. One other of 'em—Joe Brocks—is lyin' dead out in the tool house."

Mort Shackle and the bank directors stared at each other in dismay, then at the sullen-faced outlaws.

"We—we decided tuh come back tuh-night an' talk with our cashier about postin' a reward," panted Shackle, finding his voice at last. "I reckon it's lucky we come back, because yuh've captured those skunks for us, young feller!"

Broad grins began to replace the looks of shocked incredulity on the bankers' faces. Shackle strode forward, extending a congratulating hand to Lon Cole, who sat on the edge of a table.

"I reckon we owe yuh a bigger debt than we'll ever be able tuh repay, son!" panted Mort Shackle, pumping Cole's hand. "Fer years the Secret Six has been preyin' on Broken Horn an' our surroundin' range, an' we didn't even dream it was these men—let alone Link Farber, our own trusted cashier!"

Cole grinned in embarrassment and stood up.

"I'll go out an' git the dinero," he said, "an' turn it over to yuh. I reckon these hombres won't cause no trouble if yuh keep 'em covered."

Mort Shackle drew a six-gun, being the only one of the group who was armed. He pointed the .45 at his cashier, and his face was working in what Cole took to be speechless rage at his traitorous employee.

Then, as Cole started for a side door to get the bank loot out in the tool house, Mort Shackle's gun came up in a savage arc which smashed against Cole's skull.

Floored in a shower of pink stars, the waddy rolled over in time to see Mort Shackle's pinched, mean face turn into the mask of a berserk devil.

Swinging to cover the dismayed bank directors with his Colt, Mort Shackle screeched like a witch:

"Hands up, hombres! Thar's no use stallin' any further. I'm the Chief o' the Secret Six!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"KILL LON COLE!"

TOO weak and sick from the treacherous blow on his temple to lift a muscle in resistance, Lon Cole saw the white-faced bank directors lift shaky arms in surrender before the transformed fury of the bank president.

Covering the directors with his gun, Shackle stooped to jerk Cole's .45s from leather. Then he laid the guns on the table and backed across the room, hand pulling a pocket knife from his pants pocket.

Two swift slashes and the Chief of the Secret Six had cut Link Farber's bonds. A moment later the triumphant cashier was busy sawing loose the other three members of the Secret Six.

"Why this—this is impossible, Shackle!" bellowed the fat-paunched leader of the board of directors. "It can't be—that you been behind all o' these Secret Six killin'!"

Mort Shackle came forward, crouched like a gorilla. The cocked six-gun in his grasp was leveled at the director's chest.

"I been pullin' the wool over yore eyes fer years!" he spat out triumphantly. "Robbin' Broken Horn blind an' none of yuh suspected a totterin' old man like me. An' if it hadn't been fer this Lon Cole jigger exposin' us to-night, you never would 'a' guessed it!"

Link Farber came forward, leering like a hyena at the shocked citizens of Broken Horn.

"They ain't heeled, Chief!" rasped the cashier after frisking the scared directors for hidden weapons. "We'll herd 'em intuh a closet while we take care o' Cole!"

Farber opened a heavy door to reveal a small, dark closet. Into the tiny cubicle the bank directors

trooped, shivering with horror under the menace of Shackles's gun bore.

The door shoved shut and a key clicked the lock. Then Farber turned to stare down on the floor where Lon Cole lay, limp with despair.

"Chief," panted the outlaw cashier, "we'll be forced tuh kill off our directors."

Mort Shackle nodded, his lips compressed grimly.

"Yeah," he admitted. "An' that means Texas will be too hot fer the Secret Six. We'd never be able tuh hide the fact that we'd done away with them directors. The best we kin do is light a shuck fer Mexico, I reckon."

The five members of the Secret Six formed a ring about the prostrate waddy who had so nearly brought them to their dooms.

"Kill Lon Cole—that's the first job tuh-night!" snarled Link Farber, stooping to grab Cole's armpits with powerful hands. "Mort, I reckon we'll give you the pleasure o' firin' the shot!"

Powerless to move, Cole felt himself jerked erect by Link Farber and Lafe Edwards, the two outlaws holding him between them.

"Yeah," snarled Mort Shackle, lifting his six-gun. "Jest tuh think that a common waddy off o' Tombstone Trail is forcin' the Secret Six tuh disband an' skip the country!"

Mort Shackle lifted his Colt and pressed the cold steel muzzle against the waddy's forehead.

"What yuh got tuh say fer yoreself, Cole?" snarled Mort Shackle, his knuckle showing white on the trigger. "You only got another breath tuh draw in afore yuh'll be deader'n a tick in sheep-dip!"

Cole braced himself for the fatal bullet.

"I'm sayin'," he panted hoarsely,

"that yo're all sidewinders an' that I'll see yuh in blazes!"

With a brittle leer, Mort Shackle stepped back to brace his arm for the shock of the recoiling Peacemaker.

Then a jangle of breaking glass burst the tense silence of the room, and a six-gun roared like a cannon behind them.

Lon Cole, staring, saw a blue hole open magically in the side of the Chief's cheek bone.

The six-gun at his forehead slid down his face, and, at the same instant that Mort Shackle collapsed in death at Cole's feet, a second shot roared out to send a bullet into Lafe Edwards.

Brang! A third bullet smashed out the kerosene lamp on the table beside them, and Cole felt Link Farber's grasp loosen on his arm as the ranch boss leaped for the table to snatch up the twin .45s which lay there.

With gun thunder hammering in his ears, Lon Cole dropped in a squat to wrench the cocked Peacemaker from the Secret Six chief's dead grasp.

He palmed the gun and thrust the barrel forward, even as he heard the click of cocking guns as Link Farber thrust a pair of Colts in the cowboy's very face.

Brang! Lon Cole jerked trigger. At point-blank range the bullet zipped through the darkness to slice Link Farber's heart. A second later Cole felt the bulk of the cashier's corpse smash down against him.

Yells bit through the gloom. A winking gun made flashes from the broken window by the front door. Smoke seared Lon Cole's nostrils. From the locked closet came the frantic yells of the trapped bank directors.

"Yuh all right, Lon?" It was

Alamo Judson's frantic voice, yelling from the window as the Lone Star boss jackknifed his legs over the sill to climb into the room.

Cole laughed half hysterically. The room was silent, save for the groans of dying men.

"Reckon I am, Alamo!" panted the waddy gratefully. "Yuh shore got back hyar in the nick o' time!"

Cole scratched a match, found a wall lamp and lighted it. The flickering yellow flame revealed the Secret Six hombres collapsed in death, all but Farber the victims of Judson's crashing six-gun.

A moment later Judson and Cole were shaking hands over the criss-crossed bodies of the Chief, Mort Shackle, and his lieutenant, Link Farber.

"I passed them directors comin' back in the dark from Broken Horn," explained Judson, his face grinning behind the gunsmoke which thickened the room's atmosphere. "I figured mebber it was enemies, so I doubled back hyar an' peeked intuh the window. Lucky I did, I reckon."

Cole went over to the closet door to release the bank directors. As they tumbled forth, staring in goggle-eyed horror at the dead outlaws, the waddy grinned.

"I reckon this finishes my job o' bein' a Wells-Fargo stagecoach guard," he said. "Now I'm jest a Tombstone Trail boss, lookin' fer a job ag'in."

Alamo Judson broke through the excited babble of the Broken Horn bank directors to say:

"Yuh already got a job, son. I got a herd o' Herefords movin' up Tombstone Trail, an' you're hired tuh git 'em tuh Dodge. An' yuh got a job on my spread as long as yuh want, Cole!"

Reckon Lon Cole is mighty glad tuh have that job offered him. But Tombstone Trail is a dangerous place tuh work, an' chances are the new trail boss'll be hubbin' plenty o' trouble. Anyway, we're goin' tuh hear more about the fast-shootin' waddy in another story yuh'll shore want tuh be readin'. An' yuh'll find it in the next issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



Sailor Anson



1. The wagon pilgrims were hungry for fresh meat. Sailor Anson and Aaron Hopwell were stalking a deer, when they heard a shot. They found Bob Wallace with a young buck that he had killed. "That's my deer," Hopwell bullied. "Yuh knowed I was stalkin' it. Yuh sneaked a shot at it."



2. Hopwell's rifle was pointed at Bob. Grabbing the barrel, Sailor jerked it up. "We ain't got no claim on that deer," he told Hopwell. "Bob didn't know we was huntin' the same critter." Hopwell was both surprised and displeased. He expected Sailor to back up his claim.



3. Hopwell was wild with fury. He aimed an uppercut at Sailor's face. But Sailor, holding his own rifle, ducked under the blow. "Yuh can't go agin' me, yuh turncoat!" Hopwell snarled. While they scuffled, Bob saw his chance. He stooped and snatched up his rifle from the body of the deer.



4. Bob stood ready to cover Hopwell, beating him to the drop. Hopwell knew he didn't have a chance. "Yuh ain't gittin' no more'n yuh desearve," Sailor told him. "'Twas a low-down coyote trick, tryin' tuh bully Bob an' the Wallaces out o' their venison."

Splits The Herd



5. Hopwell returned to where he had left his horse, and spitefully swung up into the saddle. Sailor watched him ride back to the wagon camp. "I'll try tuh git a deer for us 'fore breakfast," Sailor called after him. "One we kin lay rightful claim tuh." But Hopwell was still sore. He didn't answer.



6. Sailor didn't get the deer, so he and Bob rode back to the wagon train, Bob's deer slung back of his saddle. As they rode, Sailor's horse, Injun, and Bob's cayuse were nervous. A dust cloud billowed up in the distance. "Buffalo stampede!" Bob cried.



7. The wagon train was still in its night circle when they reached it. Riding ahead of Sailor, Bob headed for Hopwell's wagon, where the pole could be swung to let them enter the night corral. The camp was in turmoil, men rushing about. The dust cloud rolled closer. A rumble shook the prairie.



8. At the wagon pole stood Hopwell, barring their way, six-guns leveled at them. "Try tuh come in, an' yuh'll stop lead!" he rasped. "Yuh won't be eatin' that venison. The buzzards'll do all the feasting, an' yuh'll be the feast!" He was lecturing savagely.



9. Sailor seized Bob's horse by the bridle, dragging it along with him as Injun plunged ahead of the stampede. Bob stared at him in amazement, but didn't resist. "Ride!" shouted Sailor. "We got tude split the herd! Hyar's hopin' our hosses is faster'n them buffler!"



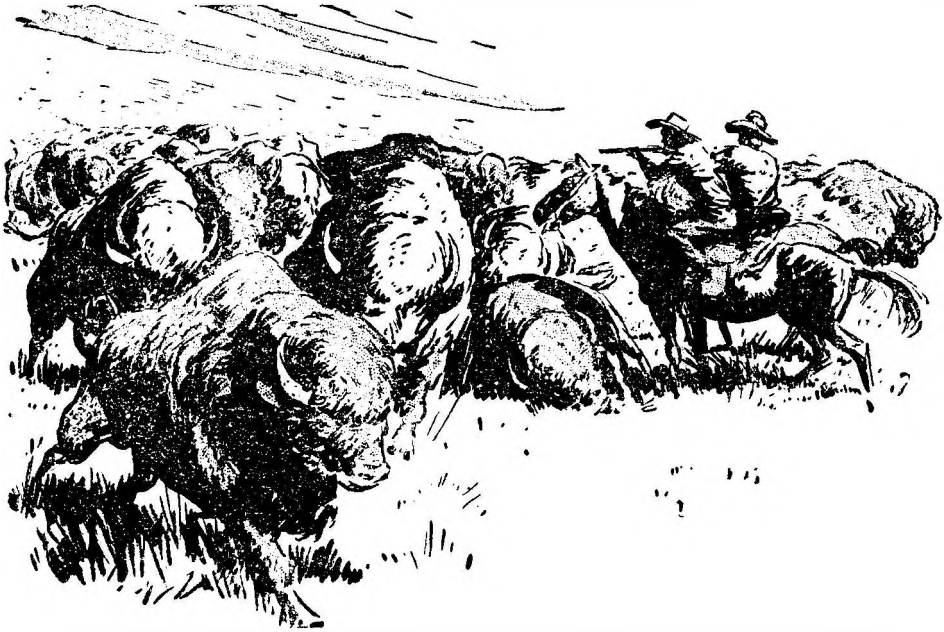
10. Before the stampede they rode, racing with death. Their terrified cayuses needed no quirt or spur to urge them to their topmost speed. Bob turned in his saddle and cut the deer's body loose. It was a heavy load and no extra weight could be carried now!



11. Suddenly drawing rein, Sailor whirled Injun about, facing the onrushing stampede. Injun squealed and rolled his eyes in terror, Sailor sawing on the reins to control him. Bob rode on before the stampede, not seeing what Sailor was doing. He had the idea that his pard was still with him.



12. Then Bob glanced behind him and whirled his cayuse. Back toward Sailor he reined the animal, fighting it every inch of the way. Side by side, he and Sailor held their horses in to meet the tidal wave of beef and hoofs. Bob understood Sailor's plan and was with him.



13. It was a trick every plainsman knew; Sailor and Bob had heard old-timers in the wagon train tell about it. As the leaders of the herd thundered down upon them, the two pards dropped them with well-aimed rifle bullets. Then they picked off others charging in the leaders' wake. The bodies of buffalo piled up. Those that followed them snerved aside, cleaving a lane through the great herd. Past the two pards streamed buffalo like the waters of a mighty river parted by a bulwark. Then only the dead were left on the prairie, the thunder of the living fading in the distance.



14. Inside the wagon corral after the stampede, Sailor and Bob met Hopwell. Before Hopwell recovered from his surprise at seeing them alive, Bob knocked the six-guns from his hands. Then he hammered Hopwell with both fists, beating him unmercifully. "Take that an' thet, yuh skunk!"



15. Rushing in, Sailor seized Bob's arms and wrestled him off to one side. He didn't blame Bob, but was afraid Hopwell would get a beating that might kill him. "Hopwell ain't yore man, no-how," he told Bob. "He's my own meat! I'll see thet he gits his needin's."

Next Week: "Sailor Anson Cuts A Gun Crew."



The Wranglers Corner

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from beginners and amateur writers and artists.

The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

Drawings should be in India ink on plain white paper. No pencil or crayon drawings can be used. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned, but an effort will be made to return drawings, provided it is especially requested, and a stamped, addressed envelope is inclosed for that purpose.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WERE pokin' our noses inter the fust mail bag, when thar's a clatter o' hoofs an' a "yipce," an' in barges three hombres thet look like they been in the saddle a plumb long spell. Shorty Masters hops off a soap box like 'twas a busted hornets' nest.

"Pete Rice!" hollers Shorty. "Welcome back tuh the 3W, pard!"

"An' Mis'ry Hicks!" yips up Calamity Boggs. "Put 'er thar, amigo!"

"Tuh say nothin' o' Teeny Butler," says Sonny Tabor, pumpin' the big third hombre's arm up an' down. "Thar's three law Johnnies I shore got a warm spot in my heart fer."

"Speakin' o' hearts," speaks up

Misery Hicks, "mine ain't been none too good lately. How's yourn, Calamity?"

"Turrible," groans Calamity Boggs. "It's got palperations an' flutterin's, an' I had tuh lay off mince pie 'count o' heartburn. Pard, take a long look at me, 'cause our trails may part ferever after tuh-night."

"I ain't liable tuh fergit yuh, Calamity," says Misery. "But I got some heart medicine all fixed up, an' I'll give yuh a dose thet'll——"

"Go outside an' do yore belly-achin', you two!" busts in Pete Rice. "The rest of us has got other things tuh talk over. What's new, Boss?"

"Plenty," we tells him. "Thet is, plenty o' new amachools. Seems like we meets 'em by the dozens every time we paws through the mail."

"Yeah, an' plenty of old amigos thet come back plumb reg'lar," says Sailor Anson. "Set yoreself fer a busy night, Pcte, 'cause we don't overlook none of 'em."

Calamity an' Misery quiets down, an' the rest listens while we reads:

GUNFIRE JUSTICE

By Oliver Whitmer—Age 16

Savanna, Illinois

An oppressive silence filled the prairie as "Big Jim" Wade spurred his tired mount through the chaparral. Jim, as all his friends knew him, was as straight a fellow as any one would want to know. At this moment, however, there was murder in his heart, murder to pay for the death of his younger brother, who was his partner in the ownership of the Double W Ranch.

A short half hour before, his brother had been shot in the back by a bushwhacker as he was leaving the ranch house. After finding his brother was beyond help, Jim made a quick examination of the spot where the killer had concealed himself; picked up the trail leading from the spot, and was now proceeding to follow it.

The trail led to the town in a roundabout way, and Jim cursed his fate as he neared the main street of the small town of Red Dog. What chance had he of picking the killer from the one thousand inhabitants?

As he neared the hitch rack of the White Diamond Saloon, he noticed a lathered mount tied there.

Big Jim tied his horse and eased himself through the batwing doors. He sidled up to the bar and ordered a cooling drink. As he drank it, he glanced quickly about the place with narrowed eyes. As he did so, he noticed Bart Tanlow, a hanger-on at the place, watching him furtively. Jim finished his drink and approached him. Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out part of a watch chain and said:

"I just noticed, Bart, that part of your watch chain is missing. I found it up by my place in the spot where the skunk hid when he shot my brother. I found this .44 cartridge in the same place. There are two missing from your belt, this one and

the one that replaced the slug that killed my brother. Reach, yuh polecat!"

Bart was clawing for his gun before Jim had finished, but Jim's gun roared before Bart could even pull the trigger of his gun. Bart went down with a hole between his eyes.

The sheriff, who had entered in time to witness the whole affair, nodded his head and said: "Bart pulled his shootin' iron first, so I guess you could call it self-defense." Then he turned and walked out.

Jim smiled a wan smile, and spoke in a low voice that no one could hear: "I'm square now, Tom. Your death is paid for."

"Yeah," says Teeny Butler, "Tom's death was shore paid fer. Jim knowed the kind o' dinero tuh do the payin' with."

"Same as I been payin' fer thet last hunk o' mince pie I eat," sighs Calamity. "I heerd tell o' heart-burn leadin' tuh wheezin' an' wheezin' tuh asthma. Yuh can't sleep, an' yuh waste away slow an' horrible."

"Yuh'll pass out horrible if yuh keep thet up," says Shorty Stevens, "an' it won't be slow. What's the verdict on thet one, waddies?"

It's all in favor of the story, an' we dives inter the mail bag fer this un:

CLEM STARS, DEPUTY MARSHAL

By Marion Correll—Age 25

Yoder, Colorado

It was by the merest chance that Deputy United States Marshal Clem Stars happened upon the scene. Riding along a seldom used trail, he cast a careless glance at the stagecoach road below him and saw several men hiding among the brush. Quietly he dismounted and sought cover. As one of the men turned his head slightly, the moonlight plainly revealed a mask.

"Stage robbers," gasped Clem.

Cautiously he began to stalk them. Clem might have taken the men by surprise and made them prisoners had he not caught one of his high heels in a root and tripped. He fell heavily and went rolling down the steep slope. As he crashed to the bottom, badly jarred and dazed, a gun crashed and darkness overcame him.

When Clem regained consciousness, a man who—Clem found out later—was Walt Maseland, a prominent citizen of the cow town, Wilder, was talking to a sheriff and a group of citizens.

"Yes, sheriff," he was saying, "I know him to be one of the stage robbers. I got a good look at him as he turned to flee. I was lucky enough to get a shot and crease him. I rode directly to town to get you, leaving things just as they were."

Clem started to deny the charge hotly and reveal his identity, but on second thought decided to wait until he was alone with the sheriff. Walt looked slightly familiar to Clem. After closely studying the fellow, Clem decided the man might be "Tex" Rawlins, a stagecoach robber, who had so far eluded capture.

Seeing Clem had regained consciousness, the sheriff stepped over to him and snapped manacles upon his wrists.

Midnight found Clem, along with the sheriff and several deputies, posted in places of advantage around Walt Maseland's home in which a light still burned. Clem had proven his identity to the sheriff. He had also revealed his suspicions of Walt Maseland. The sheriff had been reluctant to believe Walt to be in with the stage robbers, but finally consented to try Clem's plan. Now that he was here, he was all business.

Peering cautiously through a vine-covered window, he saw Walt and several other men seated about the room. The window had been opened slightly, for the night was warm, and the sheriff could plainly hear all that was said.

Walt's voice, filled with derision, came to him. "What a dupe our sheriff is. We pull a robbery right under his nose and he doesn't even suspect us. I never was in on an easier game."

The sheriff gave a signal and some of the posse covered the windows, while the sheriff and several others stepped grimly through the doorway with drawn guns. "You'd just as well give up," said the sheriff. "We're onto your game at last."

Taken by surprise, the odds against them, the thieves surrendered without a shot being fired. The sheriff was exultant.

Clem, also, was content. The long, hard trail after Tex Rawlins was ended.

"That's the way every durned outlaw'd ought tuh be treated," busts out Teeny Butler. "Ain't none of 'em with a thing."

"Meanin' me, too, Teeny?" asks Sonny Tabor, smilin' an' quietlike.

Teeny puffs an' hems an' haws, his face redder'n a beet.

"Vote on the story, waddies," we puts in ter keep lead or fists from flyin'.

But a wink from Sonny tells us he's only stringin' Teeny along. An' an all-round "yes" fer the story puts her inter the brandin' corral.

Next comes:

RANGER BAIT

By Arthur E. Becknell
Columbia, South Carolina

Ranger John Carter had just stepped inside the cantina run by Frumpy Gaul. His gaze roved over the men lined up at the bar rail, then stopped on the slouching figure leaning against the far end of the bar.

The man was talking in a low tone to the bartender, who flicked his eyes covertly around the room. Their interest in one another was interrupted when Carter walked up and spoke.

"All right, Kemper," the Ranger said, his voice cutting through the sudden quietness of the barroom. "git ready to come with me or pull yore cutter."

The lanky figure of "Slug" Kemper jerked at sound of the voice behind him. He knew that the owner of the voice was a Texas Ranger. He had heard that voice before.

Raising his hands above his shoulders, Kemper slowly turned around, the fear he felt showing in his eyes. And the bartender laid his hands flat on the counter, to show he wanted none of the affair.

A sickly grin crawled across Kemper's ugly face as he whined. "I ain't done nothing, Ranger. What chu want with me?"

While he was talking a door opened at the other end of the barroom and a pair of hate-filled eyes looked across the room at the Ranger, who seemed unaware of the scrutiny.

His eyes still on Kemper's face, the Ranger said: "I don't suppose you was along with the rustlers C'other night when they shot my pal, Jerry Lee. I guess it was another feller ridin' yore horse."

"Ain't nobody rides my grulla boss but me." Slug Kemper flared. Then went on, "Course I was along, but was follerin' the boss's orders."

Ranger John Carter's heart lifted a beat at the words, but his voice was cool and even when he said, "So it was yore boss's orders, eh? Well, who is your boss, Kemper?"

A brittle voice from the other end of the barroom rasped out: "It ain't any of yore bizness, Ranger, but I am."

The voice stopped and a gun fired, the bullet clipping through the Ranger's hat, burning his scalp. And as he swayed forward Carter saw Kemper pulling his gun.

His hands working automatically, John Carter jerked his own guns and started shooting. A bullet caught Kemper in the middle and he dropped, howling.

Another bullet from the unseen enemy's gun slashed across Carter's ribs, even as he turned and saw who it was. The Ranger was almost too slow, caught in the surprise of seeing his enemy. But as the other fired, Carter twisted to the right and fired too.

Crash! Carter's gun blazed out and the bullet tore through the outlaw's chest. He swayed and fell. The Ranger walked over and looked down at the dying man, who stared back at him.

As he grew weaker the outlaw said: "Don't blame Kemper, Carter. I killed Jerry. I—I didn't k-know it was m-my brother!"

Then as Ranger John Carter remained silent, he added: "S-sorry I d-done it—but I allus knowed I was nothing but Ranger bait!"

"I'm fer that un," says Shorty Masters. "Ain't Señor Becknell been in the Corner afore?"

"He shore has," we says.

"I'm right proud tuh git back on the 3W ag'in," says Pete Rice as we're bustin' up. "Me an' Teeny an' Misery hopes we'll be moseyin' this way afore long."

"No more'n the rest of us hopes yuh will," speaks up Sailor Anson. "How 'bout it, Calamity?"

But Calamity's sniffin' a bottle that Misery Hicks hands him; then thar's a gurgle. So till Calamity shows up ag'in, we'll be on the anxious seat, wonderin' if Misery's medicine has cured him fer keeps.

Hyar's one thing, though, we're shore of—Artists' Night next week!

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SAWMILL SIM

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

The boys was callin' him "Sawmill Sim"
This long, lean, lanky chap.
He never carried no shootin' tool,
An' we sized him up as a sleepin' fool,
For his days was one long nap.

He seemed painted onto the shady side
Of the Commonwealth Hotel.
His chair was tilted beside the door,
An' he shore did have the snottiest snore,
Sorter groan, an' whistle, an' yell.

Three strangers ride up through the dust an' beat,
One day, while Sawmill is snoozin'.
They're covered with dust from a long, hard ride.

While two go in, one stops outside,
An' this here bird's been boozin'.

An' the bird tips over Sawmill's chair,
By way of havin' some fun.
But it sorter aggrivates Sawmill Sim,
So he pulls the jasper on top of him,
An' tears him loose from his gun.

Then Sawmill bangs him over the head,
To stop his yellin' an' cussin'.
But his dusty pals have heard him shout,
An' they come a-runnin', with six-guns out,
To see what's causin' the fussin'.

Waal, Sawmill ain't got right end up,
When these strangers start to shoot.
So when he sees them six-guns flamin',
He shoots from the ground, without doin' no aimin',
An' he riddles each galoot.

Then the marshal comes tearin' down the street,
An' he stops, an' looks kinder funny.
An' he says: "Yo're the one that's been makin'
the noise!
Waal, yuh got Black Tim an' the Carver Boys.
Yuh'll be gittin' a pile of money."

Then Sawmill says: "That shore is nice,
But I'll leave it all in yore keepin'.
Just use it to hire some city police,
That'll keep these coots from disturbin' the peace."
An' he goes right back to his sleepin'.



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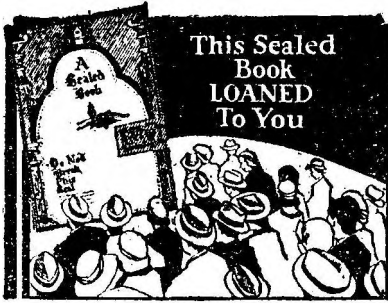


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Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HI, folks! Let's gather round the camp fire and sing of roll-in' prairie stretches an' cow-boys' days, full of tinglin' work an' hearty pleasures. Let's sing of the proud Western country, the home of pioneers an' fighters.

Folks can't leave the wide-open spaces an' be happy, once they've lived an' worked in 'em. Hyar's a song of an ol' cow-puncher who's left the good ol' carefree life.

OLD-TIME COW-PUNCHER*

By O. E. Enfield

With Stetson sombrero and boots with high heels.

How carefree and happy an old puncher feels:

* (Printed by courteous permission of the editors from the collection entitled "Old Trails," published by the Sublette Monitor Press, Kansas.)

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LASALLE EXTENSION, Dept. 865-H, Chicago

His broncho may snort and display a bad eye.
 With a touch of the stirrup he's off for the sky.
 His outlaw may "fence row" or "sun" his sleek side.
 The rider sticks to him as tight as the hide.
 Hi oh, little dogies, hi oh
 I long for a saddle and a bucking broncho.

The old-time cow-puncher was a very rare type.

You seldom find fellows of nobler stripe.
 He'd straddle a mustang, his mustache he'd twirl,

Take down his reata and give it a whirl;
 He'd hog-tie his longhorn and slap on a brand,

He'd shoot in a jiffy or he'd lend you a hand.

Hi oh, little dogies, hi oh
 I long for a saddle and a bucking broncho.

Fried steak and black coffee made on a camp fire—

Of eating such cooking a fellow can't tire;
 With an oven set over live coals all aglow,
 Old punchers, it's chuck time and here's your sour dough.

It's grab you a pie-pan and flop on the ground.

For soon we'll be milling the dogies around.

Hi oh, little dogies, hi oh
 I long for a saddle and a bucking broncho.

An' hyar's a song of the cowboy's way now, as it has been of old, an' probably will always be, regardless of whatever new inventions appear.

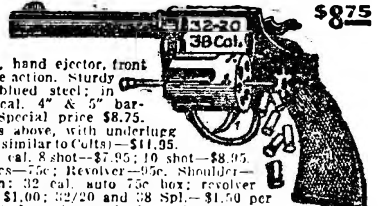
A COWBOY'S WAY

By M. L. Wiseman, of Mississippi

Some folks spend their money,
 On a sixteen-cylinder car;
 Then there's some that like to travel,
 Be it ever so near or far;

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Swing-out cylinder, hand ejector, front latch; 6 shot; double action. Sturdy construction; fine blued steel; in 32-32/20 and 38 cal. 4" & 5" barrels; wt. 30 oz. Special price \$8.75. Model 41—Same as above, with underlug and locked cylinder (similar to Colts)—\$11.95. **AUTOMATICS:** 32 cal. 8 shot—\$7.95; 10 shot—\$8.95. Holsters: Automatics—75¢; Revolver—95¢. Shoulders—\$1.50. Ammunition: 32 cal. auto 750 box; revolver cartridges—32 cal. \$1.00; 32/20 and 38 Spl.—\$1.50 per 50. Send M.O.—\$2 Deposit required on C.O.D.'s. None sold to minors. *New Bargain catalog: Colts; S & W; Rifles; Air guns; Binoculars; Telescopes; Police goods; Badges, etc. Send 3c stamp.* **LEE SALES CO. (Dept. 55) 35 West 32nd St., N. Y. City**

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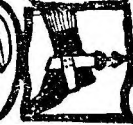
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And some folks hoard their salaries,
And tuck it on a shelf,
But a cowboy'll spend every cent he makes
For a rig for his horse and himself.

He doesn't mind spending forty bucks
For a pearl-gray Stetson hat,
And for the best of saddles, why
He'll even go deeper than that.
He gets his pay when the round-up's o'er
When only strays are left,
Then he goes and spends every cent he's earned.

For a rig for his horse and himself.
He chooses a bridle that's pliant and strong,

A saddle silver-trimmed to suit,
And spurs that jingle full of music,
And hand-turned, hand-sewn boots:
And though he rides a lonely trail
Or maybe a rocky shelf,
He'll still spend every cent he makes
For a rig for his horse and himself.

Though it's maybe all he'll ever own,
As he rides for his daily bread:
He may never have a string or a home
Nor ever own a spread,
Still he'll go on taking his forty a month
And spend till there's nothing left—
For the thing a cowboy wants most in this life

Is a rig for his horse and himself!

I reckon mebbe the reason why so many folks like tuh hear tell about cowboy life is that the cowboys love their jobs so much. When yuh come tuh think of it, thar's mighty few workin' people who like their work an' the trimmin's thet go with it, more than the pay they git.

Hyar's another song by our ol' friend, S. Omar Barker. We haven't had it up in this Corral fer a mighty long time. If some of you missed it before, hyar's the note that Mr. Barker sent along with it, too:

“‘Cattle King’ is one of the truest bits of Western life I have ever written. Time and again it has happened that nesters, crowding in on a cowman's range, have been saved from actual starvation only by the neighborly good-heartedness and generosity of the very man whose ranges they were gradually pulling out from under him.

“No kinder, more human men ever lived than the old cattlemen who

could hate a nester, hate what he was doing, and yet drive a fat yearling up to his door and tell him to get out his butcher knife.

"Kill what you need to eat," they often said, "but don't do it on the sly! Bring me the hide of every animal you slaughter in my brand, or the first one I catch you with you'll hang!"

An' now, here's

CATTLE KING

By S. Omar Barker

The nesters came, and barbed wire grew
Where the fenceless trails had been,
And the plow's tooth furrowed the morn-
ing dew

On the range of the cattlemen.

But the wilted wheat grew thin and poor
Where dry-land grass had bloomed,
In a sun-scorched land, with rains unsure,
The nester's hopes seemed doomed.

Old "Frosty" Simms had sweated hard
For his far-flung cattle range,
But he drew no gun for his high-trump
card

To fight this game of change.

"This range was made for cows," he
thought.

"And drought will keep it so.

And when their crops have come to naught,
These farmerfolk will go."

But the nesters stayed, and Simms could
see

As he rode contemptuous by,
Their womenfolks' gaunt misery,
And the hunger in their eye.

And he saw their children, lean and pale,
Limp round on thorn-bled feet,
And he swore that men deserve to fail
Who starve their young for meat.

Old Frosty Simms had earned his right
To a frontier cattle throne,
But these, his foes, he could not fight,
Who gnawed starvation's bone.

Grim-eyed, he saw their fences crowd
His empire to its doom;
His bottom grasslands yearly plowed,
His cattle pushed for room.

He saw the nesters stay—and more:
He went down to defeat,
Driving the hunger from their door,
Feeding their children meat.

Was, folks, I reckon those ought
to hold yuh till next week. So long,
an' good luck!

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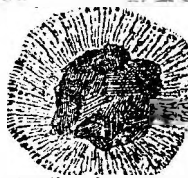
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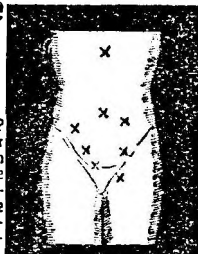
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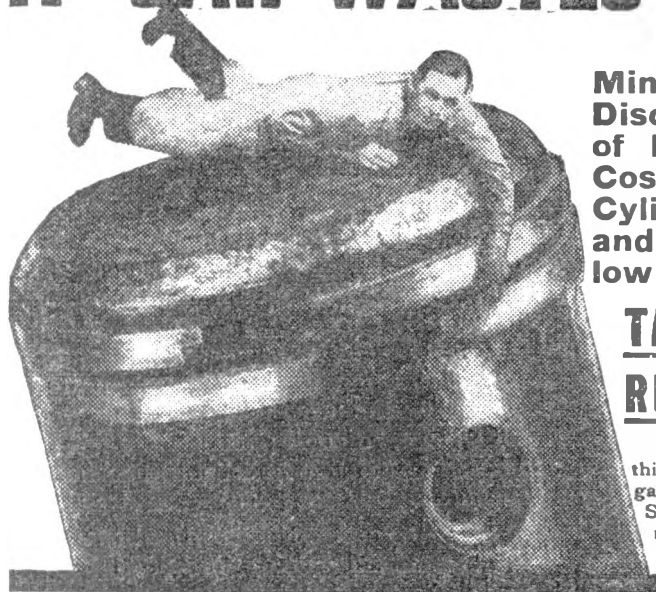
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WHY PAY UP TO \$151.37 For New Rings and Rebores?

If worn rings and cylinders cause your car to be an oil and gas eater—before you spend a lot of money, try Ovrhaul. Give it an opportunity to do for you what it has done for thousands of others. Here are costs of new rings and rebores on a few 1935 models:

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Dodge	66.20	2 days
Ford	\$50 to 55.00	2 days
Buick	80.00	2 1/2 days
Cadillac	161.37	2 days

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Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Baking Powder, Flour, Cocoa, Canned Goods, and other foods every day. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

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Send your free book telling how to start a local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or single persons) can make up to \$60.00 in a week. We will read it and then let you know if we want to accept this opportunity.

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