

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

NOV. 25, '39

WEEKLY

10¢

NOVEMBER
25, 1939



FIVE MEN OF VENGEANCE

Complete Novel
by WILLIAM A. TODD

ED EARL REPP
•
CHUCK MARTIN



**IF YOU'RE ASHAMED
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 by S. J. E.
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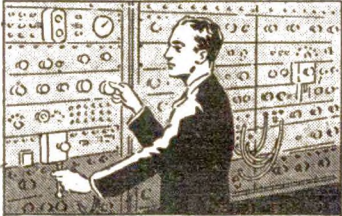
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."



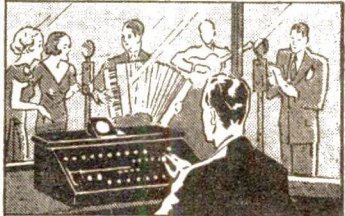
"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



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 The day you enroll, I start sending you

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 Dept. 9MD, National Radio Institute
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Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" which points out Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly).

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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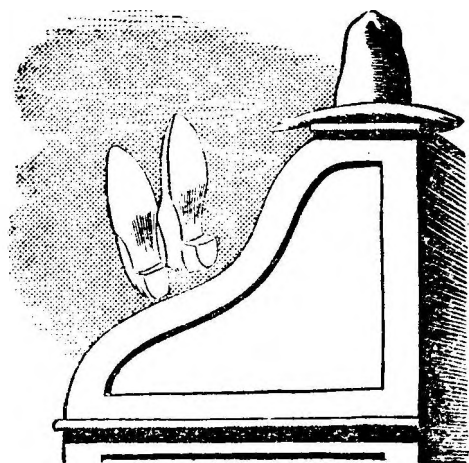


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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

ONE of the things I like about the Western cow country is the fact that it changes, and has changed, *less* than any other section of the nation. In the East and in the big cities everywhere, the citizens are forever busting their necks and rushing around like a mad mustang with a bur under the saddle trying to keep up with the latest wrinkles in modernity.

Cowpokes get along all right without yelling about how abused and underprivileged they are for not having a flock of new streamlined gadgets. Seems to me a heap of city people make themselves unhappy by clutterin' up their abodes with labor-saving devices. Life's apt to become insipid if the mechanical part of living becomes too easy.

Out West there're still vast sections of country where men and women live much the same as they did thirty or forty years ago—coal-oil lamps, old-fashioned heaters and cookstoves and hay-burner trans-

portation instead of sixteen-cylinder streamlined automobiles. Maybe some of these folks yearn to live in cities, where the air's unclean and everybody's busting his boiler to get somewhere or do something in a hurry—but that's because the ranch people don't really appreciate the advantages they have. I know that's so, because I've seen any number of ranch people move to some city and after a while hightail it back to the open spaces—and to 'ell with streamlined modernity plus noise and dirt and confusion!

Yes, it's plumb refreshing to live out in the open where you can saunter along through life, keep your nerves quiet and not have to scramble forty ways at once while worryin' your head off about inconsequential things.

Quite a few of our authors feel the same way about it. You'd be surprised how many live on ranches all the time, or most of the time, when they can well afford to live in luxurious city apartments. One of these is Chuck Martin. He has a ranch of his own in California and is well known as a rodeo judge and arena director for rodeos. He's sent us a few lines to cheer up you rannihans who're trying to hogtie a hunk of The Wranglers Corner:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: That shore is understanding advice you've been giving the non-professionals in The Corner these past few issues. Some of those shorts show promise.

When I started writing twenty years ago, I got 285 rejections before I sold my first yarn. I was thinking about that when I read what you told the beginners several issues ago. But since that first click I've sold 700 stories and twenty-one books (including three talkies starring Buck Jones). It was hard work, but I'd do the same thing all over.

Like Always,
CHUCK MARTIN.

Much obliged for that information, pard. I'm sure it'll hearten some of the citizens who haven't been able to put their brands on a piece of The Corner as yet. As for the advice I dish out in The Corner—well, I do my best to point out flaws and good points the way I see 'em. Maybe I'm not always exactly right—but remember that the best ball player who ever lived couldn't hit a homer every time up. It's the same way with editors and writers, except an editor or writer ought to be right nine times out of ten, as his judgment's supposed to develop with the years.

Here's another note:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Congratulations on the new form of The Wranglers Corner. As a help to amateur writers it's more than a success. From what criticism has been printed I've learned plenty. Certain points in my own writing have considerably improved. Keep up the good work!

Well, Boss, you know the old saying: "If at first you don't succeed—try, try again!" That maxim has certainly been an incentive to me, for there have been many times when it seemed easier to give up. But I'm at it again. I've already sent in three stories which rated no answer—but that's all in the game. I'm keeping on—trying! You have my whole-hearted support, come what may!

Sincerely

CARL POLLARD.

Birmingham, Alabama.

Those are the words of a good sport, Carl—the words of a man who can *take* it. Every writer has to, in some degree. Look at what Chuck Martin took—and today he's flourishing.

Another note, of a different complexion:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Your check was waiting for me when I came ashore and it goes without saying that I sure appreciate it. It's my first one. After countless rejection slips it was a wonderful feeling to open your letter and find a check—not just

another story returning home. Three cheers for 3W!

Yours Sincerely,

JOSEPH B. GUNTER.

West Palm Beach, Fla.

There's a sample of the way it goes, usually, if you just have fortitude enough. You sound like a sailor on horseback, Joe. Ridin' high. Some of those Florida ocean waves can outbuck a cayuse.

It's always interesting to hear from a cowhand who's following the rodeo business or riding with a circus. Plenty of genuine punchers have taken to the professional trail in the past twenty years or so. Good riders, ropers and bulldoggers make money, but it isn't a soft life—they take a pile of risks and some of them spend a big part of each season in a hospital.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just finished reading the late issue of Wild West Weekly. Have been reading it for ten years now. I think it's the best Western magazine on the market.

"Sonny Tabor Tracks the White Wolf" was swell. Let's have more stories of that type.

Salty Seabright has my vote to stay on the 3W spread.

What about that Tommy Rockford movie you mentioned a while back?

What happened to Pete Rice?

Yores,

VERNELL CORIELL.

c/o Downie Bros. Circus,
Stamford, Texas.

Rodeos are pretty much a part of circuses nowadays. It's a good colorful life. Wish I could print the pictures which are on Señor Coriell's stationery. Seven right pert scenes of rodeo and ranch life. Reckon I'll have to frame his letter for my trophy room, as it'll add a good touch. I'll try to get the latest information on the Rockford movie and let you know in an early issue, señor. Pete Rice is taking a vacation for a while.

Want him to come back? Write us another letter giving us some low-down on rodeos and circuses, amigo. I reckon our readers would like some inside stuff on the subject.

Wish more of you would complain about things oftener. As I've said before, we editor coyotes feel a heap more comfortable when you belly-ache about somethin' now and then. We *do* try to put out the best Western magazine published—but that doesn't mean we're egotistical enough to think it's plumb perfect all the time. When things're not the way you want 'em, we try to make 'em that way—and we can't do it unless you tell us what you think is wrong. So step up and unload yore pizen, *compadres*.

Here's a different kind of letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: My vacation was somewhat unusual, so I'm writing to you about it.

I've just returned from an eight-week trip to a real horse ranch in southeastern Utah, near the Colorado-Arizona borders. It was the first time I'd ever been West, and so it was quite an experience to see and to learn about some of the names, places, and things of which I've read in your magazine. For instance, I saw for the first time a blue roan and a chestnut sorrel. I witnessed the branding of colts and raw brones and also had pointed out to me many plants and trees which I had read about.

Went on a five-hundred-mile pack trip, too. Saw the junction of the Green and Colorado Rivers—which less than a hundred living people ever have seen. Most of the pack trip was on land which was either owned or controlled by Al Scarp. Scarp's spread, called the Indian Creek Ranch, is the third largest cattle outfit in the country.

I've benefitted very much from this trip and I think that every person who has read about the West, but has never seen it, should see it and enjoy its wonders and beauty.

I'm a steady reader of your magazine. Keep up the good work and I'll stick with you.

Most Sincerely,

BILL FOSTER.

Summit, N. J.

You're a mighty lucky hombre to have had that sort of vacation, Bill. Wish more Easterners had the time and the money. Bein' from the West myself, I'm kinda proud of that section and like to hear others praise it.

Next week we're starting a new continued novel: "Trail of the Iron Horse," by Walker Tompkins. It's a bit different from our former serials. It deals with the big part cowboys and other frontiersmen played in building the first transcontinental railroad. It's packed with drama, thrills and unusual plot twists from beginning to end. Mr. Tompkins is one of the best writers in these United States; he knows *how* to write, and he knows what he's writing *about*. Take an old gander's advice and climb aboard for a swift and hair-raisin' trip.

Also we've scheduled an unusually good complete novel for the coming issue. It's called "Gun Ghost of Dark Angel," and was written for us by Paul S. Powers, who's sometimes called High Powers, because of the vigorous, meaty quality of his writing. Top of that, there's plenty of other good reading. If you think I've given you a bum steer—send me a cactus to sit on. Or send me the bum steer itself an' I'll bulldog it. At my age it'd better be a *very* bum one, unless you want *my* shoulders pinned by the *critter*. Hasta la vista.

THE RANGE BOSS.



SCISSORS

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ALL-STAR
MAGAZINE

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

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

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

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

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



Athlete

ON SALE NOVEMBER 11th

FIVE MEN

OF VENGEANCE

by WILLIAM A. TODD



FIVE MEN OF VENGEANCE

A snaky ace of spades was digging Jingle Thatcher's grave the hard way—while four human lobos snarled for his death!

By William A. Todd

CHAPTER I.

ACE OF SPADES.

THE SLEET-EDGED storm was beating itself out against the cliffs of the Continental Divide. Dawn's cold, ghostly fingers gripped the black eastern horizon.

It was an hour that spelled doom for one of four men who squatted in a shallow cave before the pale light of a guttering candle. They were fugitives from the Buffalo Basin range feud, and a lynching posse was hard on their trail.

The leader of the quartet, Jim Skelton, was dealing cards from a greasy deck. A broad-chested man with a hard, chiseled face, dressed in black flannel shirt and denims tucked into cow boots.

"The ten of hearts to Sleepy," he said in a monotone. "The club king to Thatcher. The deuce of spades"—he paused—"to old Starvation. I take the diamond queen."

The man who caught the ace of spades was fated to remain behind and hold off the man hunters with rifle fire. One of the four ponies, standing with drooping heads in the rear of the cave, had pulled a tendon. The other animals were too exhausted to carry double. There was no other solution but to sacrifice one of the band, while the remaining three fled on down the ice-coated slants of the farther side of the divide.

"Once more around," Jim Skelton muttered. "It ought to fall this time. Anybody want to back out?"

There was a tightening of lips all around. They were a desperate lot, unshaven, caked with mud, red-eyed. Just they four were the survivors of the Spade outfit, owned by an Eastern cattle company, and rodded by Jim Skelton. For the past year he had been fighting small-fry grangers in Buffalo Basin for waterholes and meadow grass. He had picked his hands carefully for the scrap, paying a bonus for gun work.

"Sleepy takes the eight of clubs." Skelton dealt with a quick twist of the wrist that bespoke long experience at gaming tables. "Young Thatcher gets the—"

The group tensed, then relaxed, all except the cowboy who was nicknamed Jingle because of the size of his spurs.

Jingle Thatcher let the fateful ace of spades lie on the floor of the cave for a long moment. His heart picked up stride, galloping wildly. Steeling his nerves, he forced a crooked grin. He was scared. He had been scared ever since the shooting started in earnest a month ago in Buffalo Basin. Now it was up to him to prove whether he was a raw greenhorn or the tough two-fisted rider that he had tried to pretend.

"Just my luck," he finally breathed, picking up the pasteboard

with stiff fingers. "Reckon I'll tuck that card in here. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place."

He shoved the greasy pasteboard into the left breast pocket of his red silk shirt. It was a nonchalant gesture. There was no telling if it fooled Jim Skelton, Sleepy, and Starvation. They eyed the young hand suspiciously. He was not as old as he told them when hiring on the Spade outfit several months before. His beard hadn't sprouted any too thickly on this last trail. Clear blue eyes, a short, turned-up nose, a blunt chin, he looked pretty young for the task ahead of him.



SKELTON

Jim Skelton allowed a cold smile, then erased it.

"Good idea to protect the heart," the Spade foreman said. "Now here's the way to handle the job. We'll get a good head start before the posse turns up. Wait for 'em to start climbing the shale in the open. Pick 'em off one by one, the fellers in the back first, so they can't run. Save the leaders to the last. You might rope one of the stray hosses when it's over. Meet us in Fort Alliance across the Utah line. You

could even make it on foot in a week."

"Sure," Jingle Thatcher said. "All I need is plenty of ammunition."

The man called Starvation scowled. He was a lean, cadaverous specter, stoop-shouldered, with hollow gray eyes.

"If they wound you, kid," Starvation advised, "I don't think they'll hang you. Ten years in prison would be the most that the courts would hand out. A jury would think of your age. Those ranchers blame everything on the Eastern cattle company."

Sleepy was biting his lips, eyes shut tight, as if forcing thought. A pudgy figure of a man, he belied his name. He was as strong as a bear and twice as active.

"Ten years in the pen," Sleepy growled. "We'll spring you inside a month."

"Them rubes won't take me," Jingle promised savagely. But doubt was already eating into his mind. "The storm is over," he added. "Better get going."

Jim Skelton got up, buckled tight the two cartridge belts about his waist. He made a grotesque shadow on the wall as he turned to saddle his roan gelding. Back in Buffalo Basin it was whispered that Jim Skelton had been an outlaw before the cattle company hired him. He had ruled the Spade outfit with a hand of iron, and his war against the weaker ranchers had been ruthless.

Jingle Thatcher couldn't help but think now of the hatred those small-fry grangers held for every Spade rider. He watched Skelton, Starvation, and Sleepy cinch down their hulls, remembering how the small-fry ranchmen had gone so far as to ask the government for aid. A court order gave them the rights to the

waterholes. But Jim Skelton laughed at it. The Spade gunmen gave the grangers bullets instead of water when they showed up. But Skelton had misjudged the small fry. They formed a vigilante band, raided the Spade headquarters by surprise, and almost wiped out Skelton's crew. They were still pursuing Skelton, Sleepy, Starvation, and Jingle Thatcher.

"All right, kid," Jim Skelton said, leading his roan to the door of the cave. "Better come out with us. I'll show you where the best hunting lies."

Starvation offered a bony hand. "Good luck," he muttered in a strange voice. "If you want, I'll stick with you at the beginning."

"Nothing doing!" Jingle snapped.

Sleepy offered his fist. "Might not be such a good idea to kill anybody in that posse," he said seriously. "You got a clean slate with the law so far. Keep it. Just scare them riders. They won't be so anxious to climb the divide with lead whistling close to their ears."

"I know what to do," Jingle replied tartly, blowing out the candle.

"Come on," Jim Skelton ordered.

At the door of the cave, cold gray dawn met the fugitives. The wind had died to a swift flurry now and then. Flakes of snow fell intermittently. The slide rock was slippery from frozen sleet, so that the climb to the ridge top threatened disaster for another horse.

Skelton led, picking the trail carefully, sure that his roan did not slip. The clouds had lifted, but a low shroud would drift down and around them. Blinded, Skelton waited until the mist cleared, then went on.

The crest of the ridge was flat. It commanded a two-mile range down shale to the timber line. Crag, boulders, and pockets offered some

protection to an attacking party on foot. But they'd never ride up fast. And if they tried to circle around, cross the ridge to the north or south, they would have a hard time even then to rout the man who held them back.

Jim Skelton looked the ground over. "Build yourself a low wall of heavy rock," he advised the condemned puncher. "Keep your head down at all times. Don't shoot too much. Let 'em think we're all up here waiting until they get close."

Jingle tried to chuckle. "Be seeing you all in Fort Alliance. Watch out for a good green fast bronc for me. I reckon this will put me in the same wagon with you fellows for all time. We'll need to travel fast."

Jim Skelton moved away without shaking hands. Sleepy scowled and followed him. Starvation held back.

"Listen, kid," the tall thin man said. "I ain't got long to live. My lungs ain't so good. I'd just as soon take your place. It won't be easy."

"Think I'm yellow?" Jingle demanded angrily. "I hired with this outfit for gun pay. I'll earn it."

Starvation made a grimace. Wheeling, he went down the ridge mumbling under his breath something about a wild young fool.

Jingle watched the three until a cloud bank swallowed them, like figures in a cold gray dream.

"Hope nothing happens to the brones," he said grimly, turning to build a rampart with loopholes. "Skelton's got plenty of savvy. He's a good man to tie to. Nothing soft about him." He worked on, fingers growing raw from prying the icy rocks loose. The cold crept under his flimsy red silk shirt and his muddy denims. "It was my cayuse that got hurt last night," Jingle muttered to himself. "I got no kick coming. Skelton himself took a

chance to catch the ace. The cards don't lie."

Finished with his job, he glanced down the eastern pitch. The posse hadn't shown up. Most likely they were hunkered in a shelter, waiting for the mist in the canyons and below the timber line to dissolve.

There was no sound but the moan of the wind among the crags. Alone, with nothing to do but wait, the cowboy felt a current of empty despair go through him. It was a time for any man to take stock of himself, to wonder about the future, to remember mistakes in the past.

Born back in Dakota sheep country, Jingle had had a tough time making the grade. The romance of a cowboy's life had made him run away from home. It hadn't been soft at first, tending liveries, mending barbed-wire fence, driving crow-bait teams, cleaning stables. He'd put his money into saddles, guns, and ropes. Never remained long in one place. Bluffed his way into jobs, and got fired because of his youth and lack of rope training. He imitated swaggering riders, talked big, laughed at weakness.

It wasn't until he hit the Spade outfit that he clicked. They kidded him a bit at first. He showed them one night by downing a pint of moonshine in one breath, rode to town and shot out the windows. On the way back he fell in a ditch and slept it off like a drunken saddle tramp. The story of his reckless escapade beat him to headquarters, and Jim Skelton was waiting to slap him on the back and raise his pay.

"That'll put an Injun scare into those nesters," Skelton told him. "You showed 'em that my riders can spit in the face of the devil. Let 'em try stealing water again. You better take over Sleepy's job at the south hole. You know what to do."

The other hands said nothing. It was pretty lucky that the Buffalo Basin fighting started around a northern waterhole, and that Jingle missed most of it. Shooting for blood was not like smashing glass windows. It took nerve to kill a man. Or it took a warped mind.

Jingle was thinking about that problem as he stood on the ridge watching for the posse. What would he do when they attacked? If he laid low now, he could catch them in the open, drop them before they could duck.

"Nothing doing," he growled. "I don't want a bushwhacking reputation. I'll give 'em a chance. We'll trade bullets man to man. Wonder what's keeping them?"

He was talking to keep up his nerve. Try as he might, he could not cast the pictures of screaming men, blazing guns, and the gallows out of his mind. He rolled a cigarette, blowing on his fingers to warm flexibility into them. The smoke tasted flat.

The loneliness of his vigil created a sinking feeling in his stomach, which he put down as hunger. He worried about the posse's delay, wondering if they had given up the chase, hoping they had. But there was a good chance that the man hunters were sneaking over the ridge at the north or south. Jingle considered the danger.

"Better build myself another wall to the west," he said, and his voice sounded odd. "Mebbe I shouldn't show myself so plain."

Dropping to earth he found it wet, and his teeth chattered with cold. The day grew no lighter. The storm seemed to be coming back. Snow drifted downward, the flakes spinning into his face. The wind picked up. A fire would have been welcome, and so would a good beef

stew, with lots of coffee, and hot apple pie.

Jingle remembered days like this in an old logging camp, where he cut stove wood. He thought of the warmth of the bunkhouse, with the jacks sitting around spinning yarns, smoking pipes, peeling apples. With winter coming on, Jingle supposed the camp would be recruiting, and his old job would be waiting—

Zing-g-g! Without warning, a bullet knifed through the cone of his ten-gallon hat, and far down the eastern slant, a rifle cracked sharply.

He ducked with a gasp of surprise.

CHAPTER II.

ORDEAL BY GUNFIRE.

FOR a moment, Jingle lay silent, listening to the wind. His cramped muscles seemed to hold him in a strait-jacket. Panic gripped him. He had to drive himself to the low stone rampart. Jamming his rifle barrel into a loophole, he glanced down the sights, trembling with anxiety, unprepared for the nearness of the man hunters.

A dozen figures were climbing the trail rapidly, not two hundred feet below, dodging from boulder to crag, dropping flat to view the ridge top. They were attacking by plan, and they didn't seem to fear death. The appearance of Jingle's rifle barrel at the loophole brought a blast of red flame from their weapons. Bullets swept up the slide rock and into the cowboy's fort with brutal vengeance, making him rear back. Rock chips showered him, cutting his face.

The words of Jim Skelton flashed through his mind—"Wait for 'em to start climbing the shale in the open. Pick 'em off one by one, the fellers in back first, so they can't run." It was too late for that now.

Jingle drove himself to the loophole again, cursing himself for cowardice. His finger jerked the trigger of the Winchester before he took aim. It was his warning shot for the posse to watch out. But it didn't stop the attacking party. Their reply was a fusillade of bullets, a wild war whoop, and a sprint. They were not the kind of men who turned tail and fled.

Jingle reared back, his throat going dry. He thought of his body dangling from a gallows, of the gray walls of the penitentiary, of the men who had deserted him. An agonizing desire to live swept over him. He remembered that Sleepy had warned him against killing. He had been a fool to reject Starvation's offer to remain and help him.

Again the cowboy crawled to the loophole, fighting back the panic that urged him to flee. His youth was against him. This was nothing like the scraps that had filled his romantic dreams. He was up against it tough. He jammed his rifle through a loophole, glued his eyes to the sights, but the posse bullets hammered the rampart mercilessly, and a slug whipped through the loophole, gouging him in the left shoulder and throwing him back.

Terror sent him rolling to the far side of the ridge top. He could hear the shouts of the possemen. Like a colt trapped by a wolf pack, Jingle sprang to his feet, unable to get possession of his nerves. He was on the stampede without thinking. He went down the western grade at reckless speed, slipping, falling, scrambling up. He knew he was yellow, but so had many other men been yellow when they fled overwhelming forces. And like the defeated, he told himself that he'd hole up in a gully and timber, make a second stand, fight to the end.

Escape was most important now. He couldn't go back. The man hunters were reaching his fort. They'd string him up if they caught him. He'd serve no ten years in prison. He'd flee into country where their brones couldn't overtake him. Perhaps he was failing Jim Skelton, Sleepy, and Starvation. But he'd never see them again. He had to hurry. There was a cloud not twenty feet below him.

A shout from the high ridge behind! Jingle dodged. A bullet jerked at his sleeve. He dropped his rifle. Powder crashed. He threw himself flat, and bullets hammered the shale around him. But the cloud was over him, protecting him. He leaped up, raced crazily on, and a hot slug slashed his thigh, upsetting him. He rolled and slid down fifty feet of ice-coated rocks, piling up in brush.

The world was suddenly whirling with whiteness. The dull-gray cloud was the center of an early autumn blizzard from out of the north, driven by a freezing wind from the high altitudes. With swift magic the rocks caught the snow in pockets, built it up, and hid under the woolly blanket.

Jingle dragged himself to his feet, shivering miserably, aching from his bruises, stung by his flowing wounds. He fell again and again as he went on. But the crash of guns had died away with the shouts of his foes. He reached the timber, found the footing better, and groped through the trees like a man in a delirium. The panic ebbed in his mind, but fear of falling into a canyon took its place.

The snow deepened as he went on, so that he couldn't tell where the safer route lay. And when he left the pines, the whirling flakes blinded him. Now he knew that

there would be no pursuit until the storm let up. But he rejected the idea of holing up in another cave. He wanted to get as far away from the man hunters as possible. There wasn't time to bind his wounds.

"Yellow," he abused himself. "Just a mangy yellow-striped mongrel. Scared of my own shadow. Running like a sick coyote. I'll never live it down. The sheepherder is coming out in me. I'm through with cow country. I'm a disgrace, a greenhorn, a traitor to the Spade outfit."

But he couldn't talk himself into halting. He had thrown his rifle away like a Siwash Indian. He stood no chance with a six-gun. He better not try to catch up with Jim Skelton. He'd better turn south in the foothills, avoid Fort Alliance for good. Any death was better than the humiliation and scorn in store for him from the Spade outfit.

Jim Skelton, Sleepy, and Starvation halted in the lower altitude where the day had begun to melt the sleet from the game trails. They swung to their saddles and sat a moment staring back at the towering peaks of the divide, half hidden by approaching clouds. They were safe for at least a few hours, if the brones held out, and they could hide their trail in icy stream beds and thick woods.

"Looks like snow in those clouds," Jim Skelton remarked, lighting a cigarette. "If the vigilantes haven't started shooting, they might turn back. They can't cross the divide on hosses in a snowstorm."

Starvation made a wry face.

"Without a bronc, the kid is a goner," he said dismally. "He'll freeze to death. I don't like the deal, Jim."

Jim Skelton's eyes fastened upon

the cadaverous rider. Their mistrust of each other was obvious. Both had questionable pasts that they never mentioned. But Jim Skelton was still as cruel as the day he had killed his first man. Starvation had tempered with the years; and with his fatal illness pushing him closer to the grave, he seemed at times to regret old deeds, and to be anxious to make amends.

"What was wrong with the deal?" Jim Skelton asked slowly, flicking the cigarette away with his right gun hand. "The kid had his chance to back out. He didn't accept it. It ain't my fault if he wants to build himself a tough two-gun reputation. His kind don't last long. He don't know enough to think about himself first, last, and always. He signed on my outfit as a killer, and he knew what he was doing. I can't wet-nurse yearlings."

Starvation nodded solemnly.

"Mebbe so," he said. "But something tells me that kid has got real guts, and that he'll turn up again, Jim. If he gets away with the job up on the ridge, it will put the wolf brand on him for good. He'll never change. And if he ever learns that you dealt that ace of spades to him from the bottom of the deck, I wouldn't want to be in your boots."

Jim Skelton's hand whipped to his gun butt, but he didn't draw, for Sleepy spoke from behind him.

"Easy, Jim," Sleepy warned. "I saw you do it. No use fighting over it. We better be riding. We three are in the same boat. We all cheated that kid. He didn't know we were stealing stock from the nesters, and he didn't know we crooked the cattle company on every sale. I'm figuring that the young fool won't hang. Ten years in prison will do him more good than anything else. Let go of your gun.

Starvation never squealed on anybody in his life."



STARVATION

The Spade foreman drew his fingers away from his weapon. His face was as hard as chiseled granite.

"All right," he growled. "Let's go."

And Skelton led the way on down the draw. Starvation and Sleepy followed, casting one last glance back at the blizzard closing down on the divide. Their thoughts were their own. They were still alive after years of traveling perilous outlawed trails because they practiced the strict code of the hunted. The weaker, the sentimental, the ones who tried to buck a losing game, were always licked. Let the devil take the hindermost, according to their philosophy. Only the strong survived. A green puncher like Jingle Thatcher was but a pawn in the game they played. He must suffer for his inexperience and his romantic notions about men who rode the back trails.

For a moment Starvation had felt sorry for him. Just a moment. The lean rider recognized a fatal illness in Jingle. Not of the body,

like Starvation's, but of the mind. And perhaps as incurable. Advice wouldn't help Jingle any more than kindness would change the temper of a wolf. Hardship might tame him, but that was mere chance.

None of the three who rode toward Fort Alliance had accepted the lessons of life. They were outcasts.

CHAPTER III.

MAVERICKS ALL.

BEGINNER'S luck favored Jingle Thatcher's flight down the snow-covered cliffs of the ridge. His stumbling steps missed chasm and cliff rim. Half frozen, blinded when the wind tore at him, he staggered relentlessly on, trying desperately to build a plan. In the howling storm he thought he heard shouts and the crack of rifles. The trail of print left behind worried him. Common sense told him that pursuit was impossible, but he was afraid that the storm would pass on, and his foes would track him down.

Falling, picking himself up, he reeled crazily on for another hour of tortuous travel, his wounds draining his strength. Delirium gripped his mind. He fought to keep his senses. His legs buckled and he crawled on his hands and knees, leaving crimson spots on the snow. Now he had to hole up, but there was no shelter. Death was stalking him, waiting for him to stop. He cried out in fear, and it seemed that a voice answered him.

Was it Jim Skelton? Had Starvation come back? Perhaps it was his own echo. No, it was the posse. They had him at last. There was no escape. Better to die fighting now than to be taken back to a coward's cell in a prison.

Jingle clawed his gun from its holster with numb fingers. He was on

his knees, teeth bared like a cornered wolf's. He couldn't get a firm grip on the slippery butt. He took two hands, trying to work a finger through the trigger guard as he eared back the hammer. The weapon exploded accidentally, kicking loose from his grasp.

A voice shouted again. It was no echo. Jingle could see dark figures struggling through the swirling snow. He dug for his weapon in the drift, gasping with excitement, and he fell face down. He couldn't push himself back from the fleecy trap.

Hands gripped him, dragged him to his knees, held him. A bottle neck jammed between his teeth, and fiery liquid scorched his throat. A blanket went around his shoulders. Men were helping him up, talking to him, but Jingle was too far gone to understand. The last that he remembered was that they were carrying him.

Dreams tortured Jingle Thatcher for twenty-four hours. Dreams concocted of smarting wounds, exposure, and terror. He fought the battle on the divide over and over again, and he was licked each time, fleeing in cowardly panic. Jim Skelton's image leered at him from the feverish flames of his nightmare. He heard Starvation and Sleepy accusing him. He rolled and tossed, crying out, struggling against strong hands that pushed him back against a bed of cedar boughs.

The crisis of his illness passed as the young sinews of his body took another grip on life, and he dreamed of his home back in Dakota. He was going out with his collie dog to get the sheep in. He'd have a chance to sneak down a gully and practice with the six-gun that he had hidden there. His father would want to know what kept him so long when he got home, but Jingle would say

that some of the woollies had drifted. It was warm summer, and he was planning to run away in another month. There would be empty cattle trains going west to pick up the roundup cattle.

Jingle's eyes opened dazedly. Several men hovered over him like phantoms, and he wasn't certain that he was alive. Slowly he recognized a barren cabin, with sunlight shafting through chinks in the logs. A fire crackled on a hearth. The odor of food prickled his nostrils, and he stirred. He didn't seem to be able to tell the strangers apart.

"Alive and kicking," one of the men chuckled.

"Tell him we mean no harm," another said. "Don't scare him back into the jimjams again."

"I got some broth," a third offered. "Bet he kin eat a hull elk."

They were not vigilantes. But Jingle was wary. A warning instinct told him to pretend greater weakness than he felt. He must stall them off until he figured them out. Answer no questions. Find out their game.

It was another day before the puncher reached any sort of a conclusion. They coddled him like a sick yearling, keeping the cabin warm, cooking for him, dressing his wounds with fresh salves, letting him sleep. He studied them covertly. The odd resemblance they bore one another gave him his clue. At first Jingle thought his eyes were weak and fooling him.

They were brothers, all five of them, with not more than a year separating each from the other. Tall and gangly, they had black hair and hatchet faces. It was hard to distinguish between them, for they were dressed alike in gray flannel shirts and blue jeans. Wash was the eldest, and the boss, deadly seri-

ous. Ad liked to josh. Jeff could be identified by a slight stutter, while Mad and Munny were the youngest and quarreled continuously over trifles. Even Jingle Thatcher recognized that they had been named from the first presidents—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe.

He puzzled over his reply to the question that they were bound to ask.

"Who shot you?"

The serious and solemn Wash put it to him on the second morning. The others held silent, listening.

"Don't know," Jingle hedged. "Snow was blinding me."

Wash nodded. "Where was it? Up on the divide?"

"I was waiting out the night storm," Jingle muttered miserably. "When I tried to cross the ridge—" He hesitated. "I reckon they were laying for somebody. They just let go with lead."

The tall, hatchet-faced Wash nodded again. "That's what we figured. Where was you headed for?"

Jingle swallowed hard. "Looking anywhere for a job," he said, shutting his eyes in fear of detection. "I'm no good," he added quickly. "I owe my life to you fellows. I got no money, not even a hoss. You ought to let me die."

"A man may be down, but he's never out," the eldest of the brothers said quietly. "Ain't nothing wrong in being broke, cowboy. You got guts. We know you put up a man's fight."

"I didn't!" Jingle exclaimed, rearing up. "I run from them."

"They were too many for you," Wash replied. "We all know what kind of stuff you're made of. We listened to you raving in your fever and—"

"What did I say?" the cowboy demanded fearfully.

Wash chuckled. "You talked about skeletons and starving to death and how sleepy you was. A lot of other things. About gunmen stealing water. And about how sheep stink. We figured you out from that. We like you. It ain't often we run into a straight-shooting hombre who goes down with a gun in his hand."

Jingle sank back on the bed, wet with perspiration. He had talked about Skelton, Starvation, and Sleepy. The men listening to him didn't know who those three were. These brothers didn't even realize that he was a hunted coward. He couldn't let them know the truth. They were a different kind of men from Jingle's companions.

"I owe you my life," Jingle confessed. "Mebbe you'll let me work the debt out. I won't let you down."

"Don't owe us nothing," Wash said. "Mebbe we owe you."

Jingle mocked at the remark with a mirthless chuckle. "I was a goner. I know it. Don't try to kid me. I owe, and I'll pay up. Any way you like. This thing taught me something. I've been figuring it out all by myself."

The brothers moved closer and took seats on and near the bed. They looked at Wash, waiting for him. And he studied Jingle for several long moments.

"Them riders you run into was after us," Wash said seriously.

"You!"

"We're known as the Dixon brothers," Wash continued. "We got in trouble down in Mesa Verde country. We were chased all the way up here, and we doubled back over the divide. I reckon they had a trap waiting for us up on the ridge.

WW—2F

You sprung it. We owe you our lives."

Jingle's eyes were wide, his teeth clamped shut. He breathed heavily.

"What did you do down in the Mesa Verde?" he asked. Then he caught himself. "Wait! It don't make any difference." He flushed red. "I ain't got a right to ask. You treated me like a white man. I never did anything for you. If the law is on your trail, better strike out pronto. I'll make out here as best I can."

The brothers grinned.

"Ain't the law," the eldest said. "It would be easier if it was. No danger now. The blizzard saved us all. We'll be snowed in for another two days. Let the story wait. Mebbe it's asking too much for us to expect you to believe it now. You see, we've got to make a bargain with you, hombre. We don't want the world ever to know that there's five of us brothers. Down in Mesa Verde they think we're just three."



JINGLE

"What?" Jingle's brain whirled.

"We look so much alike," Wash replied, "that it's been hard for strangers to tell how many Dixon

brothers there are. We let on that there's just three. Take a sleep. You might think you're dreaming again."

Jingle stared pop-eyed at the five. As they stood about, it was not too difficult to see that there were no twins. But shuffle them up, pick three from the five, and ask their names. Surely he would have known Wash, the eldest, and Munny, the youngest. But which of the remainder was Jeff, Mad, or Ad? Their black hair was brushed back, their hatchet faces were deeply tanned, and they wore the same garb. By their eyes, different shades of brown, he might have told, but only after knowing the five longer.

A deep mistrust of their motives took root in Jingle Thatcher. He wanted to hear their whole story now, but caution bade him wait. If they were hunted men, so was Jingle, and his life was in their hands. Jingle had no business judging others when he, himself, had turned maverick and broken faith even with the wild bunch.

CHAPTER IV.

WOLF BRAND.

TWO weeks later, Jingle Thatcher rode toward the Mesa Verde country alone, carrying a deep secret in his heart. Like a drowning man grasping for a straw, Jingle had clutched at a perilous opportunity to win back his own self-respect and prove to the world that he was a man. He had suggested the plan when he heard the full story of the Dixon brothers. And it was only after days of argument that they had allowed him to join their fight against a cutthroat renegade known as the Iron Fist of Thief County.

It was a name that made Jingle's pulses throb. He had listened to the

eldest Dixon describe the man as a bald giant with a scarred face and tawny eyes. His history was a sulphurous series of massacres, tortures, and robberies. He had arrived in the Mesa Verde country on the heels of a dreadful plague of tick and hoof-and-mouth disease, when cattle died by the hundreds and were shot by the scores to save others. With the loot of a Mexican raid, he had bought ranges for a song when ranchers left them. He jumped other ranges, bludgeoned his way into power, and exterminated men who opposed him. He owned Thief County, lock, stock, and barrel. He was the law and the court. A dozen times he had been shot at, and lived with more than a few of the bullets in his body.

Jingle swallowed the story, hook, line, and sinker. The Dixons were a different breed from Jim Skelton, Starvation, and Sleepy, who waged war against law and order for wages, and who fled when things became too hot for them. They didn't care anything about settling down and building their own ranches. But with the Dixons it was different.

As Jingle rode southward into the country of green tablelands and rainbow-colored canyons, he recited again and again the tale of the five brothers, named from the first presidents of the country. They had trekked from far back in the Texas panhandle with a thousand head of prime cows, looking for free grass and clear running water. They had found it in Thief County, thrived for a year, and started to build a new home. Then, while two of the brothers were gone to Texas for household goods, the Iron Fist had struck. A crooked sheriff condemned their stock for disease which it did not have. The Dixons fought for their rights, lost, and took refuge

The gun blasted a second sooner than seemed possible!



in the mountains, waiting the arrival of the remaining two brothers. But they hadn't given up.

Jingle was now their under-cover operative. His business was to find the Dixon herd and other herds that the Iron Fist had stolen. He was no longer a reckless kid trying to build a tough reputation. He had a mission of trust. He had something more to fight for than wages. This was the second test of his courage and manhood. The lesson he had learned in the blizzard on the divide would not be forgotten. The next time he made a stand with a gun in his hand, he'd hold his ground until the end.

"I ain't a greenhorn any longer," he told himself. "I know what it is to be cold and hungry and up against it hard. I never got anything out of bluffing my hand like a tinhorn. There's land to spare in the Mesa Verde. The Dixons will give me a cut in the cattle we win back from that bald-headed crook. I'll build me a ranch and grow with the country."

The stage road met his eyes at the bottom of a grassy valley, and he turned with the dusty route to the southwest, dreaming on, filled with new hope, forgetting the past. The buckskin pony given him by the Dixons climbed to the higher plains. He came with the warm afternoon to a fork in the trail. To the west a sign pointed to Ute Indian country. To the south, the marker read: Dollar City. And there was a warning painted below for all strangers without legal business to turn back, upon penalty of thirty days in jail. It was signed by Justice Jack Fist, owner of Fist County, formerly called Thief County.

Jingle scowled darkly. "The Iron Fist," he muttered. "I see how he got the name. Well, I reckon I'm

due for thirty days in the hoosegow, where I won't be lonesome."

Gigging his pony, he rode southward to Dollar City, which the Dixons had called Siestaville. Evidently, things had changed quite a bit in the month they had been gone.

Twilight was curtaining the newly named Dollar City with soft purple shadows as Jingle cantered down a long gentle slope to a bare hundred adobe huts, frame dwellings, and false-fronted stores. Lights were awakening in windows. Somewhere a dog howled a lonesome warning of approaching death. And as Jingle turned into the rutted main street, the discordant sounds of a town finished with its supper greeted his ears.

From the saloon at the four corners a chorus of alcoholic laughter echoed. Farther down, a tinny piano was playing an unrecognizable tune. Spurs jangled on the plank sidewalks, and the figures of passing men melted into shadows. The glows of cigarettes showed where riders stood near hitch rails.

It was no different from other cow towns, but to Jingle it held a mysterious threat. He pulled aside to let a buckboard pass. Riding on, searching for a cheap restaurant, he noted a dark cement jail. Two men were locking the front door, and the lumbering size of one of them made Jingle tense. The shadows were deep. He noted the big fellow's wide span of shoulders, his thick neck and jowls, and his long, apelike arms hanging loose by his sides, hands near two tied-down holsters.

The pair turned up the plank sidewalk, conversing in low tones, the larger man on the inside, the other a mere sapling compared to him. They were both dressed in dark

shirts and trousers. The reflection of a silver star on the smaller fellow's breast branded him for the sheriff. And suddenly, as they crossed a patch of light, Jingle recognized something familiar about him.

"Jim Skelton!" he gasped, drawing back his reins.

His blood froze. The world seemed to drop out from under him. His first desire was to throw in his hooks and flee from Dollar City. It was incredible that the Spade foreman had arrived in the Mesa Verde from Fort Alliance so quickly, and had won himself an official position even more rapidly. He couldn't have done it as a stranger. Skelton must have known the Iron Fist from away far back.



SLEEPY

Jingle blinked at the disappearing figures, his heart pounding hard against his ribs. He was completely unaware that two men were crossing the road behind him. Their hands were on their gun butts. They came up from two angles, as if suspecting he meant harm to the pair who had gone down the road. One of the men was a tall, gangly specter, the

other a pudgy fellow with a bulldog face. The crunch of their boots made Jingle whirl in the saddle. He caught the glint of deputy badges on the shirts.

"Stand your hand, stranger," the tall, cadaverous man snapped. "You're under arrest."

Jingle choked. Here was the payoff for fleeing the posse.

"Starvation!" he managed at last. "Sleepy!"

The pair halted sharp. It was Starvation who spoke.

"Jingle! What are you doing in this town?"

The cowboy took a deep breath. He was trembling with excitement, and he wanted to get full possession of his nerves. All his plans were shattered in one quick fall from the high horse of dreams that he had been riding all the way southward. His luck had clattered again. His spirits sank. He was once more a common saddle tramp, busted, hungry, looking for anything that promised a warm bed.

"I reckon I'm just wandering through," Jingle said miserably. "I thought you fellows was in Fort Alliance."

Sleepy stepped close, blinking at him.

"You ain't gunning for Skelton, are you, kid?" he asked.

"What for?" Jingle asked stupidly.

Sleepy stepped back, grinning. "Just kidding you," he chuckled. "Light down from the bronc, partner. We owe you a big feed. You got to tell us how you smoked that posse up. You ain't got no worries from now on. You've made the grade for all time."

Starvation stood scowling, saying nothing. It was impossible to tell what was going on in his mind. Perhaps he knew the truth about Jin-

gle's flight from the ridge, or suspected it. Starvation had always been sharper than Sleepy. But he had also shown more friendship than any of the other Spade men—a curious kind of friendship, packed with advice and warnings. But now Starvation stood silent, his hollow eyes studying Jingle cruelly.

Jingle swung down to earth. For the first time he hated these men.

"I reckon you three got away all right," he muttered.

"You fixed that for us, partner," Sleepy laughed, slapping him on the back. "We all knowed that you'd turn up, like a bad penny." He laughed again. "But save the story of how you drove those rubes back with hot lead. Come fill your belly. The town is yours, Jingle. When Jim Skelton hears his fighting gunman—"

"Aw, dry up," Starvation interrupted. "The rotgut whiskey they sell here is making a talking machine out of you, Sleepy. Let's get on to the hash house before the chink throws out what's left of his garbage."

"Sure, Starvation," Sleepy said in a hurt tone. "But you're getting as grouchy as an old woman these days. Ain't you glad to see the kid?"

"If he'd had any sense," the tall, thin man growled, "he'd have gone back sod-busting where he come from." And he turned away.

A hot flush came to Jingle's cheeks. It was the first time that any puncher had ever accused him of being farm bred. He thought that he had hidden the secret carefully. Starvation's dismissal of him as of little account was like a sudden dash of cold water in the face. For all the lean Spade rider knew, Jingle had been through fire and brimstone for him, as well as for Sleepy and Jim Skelton. Jingle's

spirit was not completely gone. He had been taken aback by the sudden turn of events, but now anger tore at him.

"Hold it, Starvation," Jingle snapped. "You don't have to treat me like a poor relation. I owe you nothing. And if you think I've come begging for a cup of coffee and a flop in a hayloft, you've got another guess coming."

Starvation wheeled. His lips were curled.

"Still the same hotheaded rannihan, eh?" he questioned. "Well, you don't owe me nothing. But that goes both ways, kid. I don't owe you nothing. What's more, I don't want to hear any cock-and-bull brag about how you beefed any possemen up on the divide. This town won't be easy for your kind. You still got time to ride on. Hang around here and I ain't responsible for what happens."

It sounded like a challenge, and Jingle rose to it.

"Fair enough," he retorted. "But I'm sticking it out."

Starvation snorted and strode away, seeking the darker shadows, like a lean wolf crossing dangerous range.

Sleepy chuckled harshly. "Pay no attention to him," he said. "He ain't got much longer to live, Jingle. If Jim Skelton and me didn't need him in the job we've got lined up, we'd cut his string. Mebbe you can fill his saddle. Come put on the feedbag, and I'll tell you where to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

Jingle drew in his breath, still hot with anger, trembling a bit from the insults dealt by Starvation. The shame of having run from the posse was gone now. This was the way that Starvation paid him off for the past. Starvation didn't know that

Jingle had fled the divide. He thought the puncher had fought the vigilantes bullet for bullet, and then suffered cold and hunger so that the Spade riders could get away. Jingle realized that he had been a sucker.

And now Sleepy was trying to talk him into another game that sounded crooked. Jingle remembered the Dixon brothers and their story of the Iron Fist of Thief County. He was a fine type of hombre for Jim Skelton and Sleepy to be mixed up with. Perhaps Skelton and Sleepy were revealing their true character to Jingle for the first time. He wasn't as complete a fool as they thought him.

"Sure, let's eat," Jingle said sharply, taking a hitch in his gun belt. "I reckon you do owe me a good feed. And I'm collecting it now."

Sleepy shot him a quick, curious glance. There was alarm in it. Jingle looked grim and much older in experience than when the Spade outfit had left him on the divide.

CHAPTER V.

AN ORDER FOR A CORPSE.

JIM SKELTON was dining in state with an old outlaw friend in the ornate private gambling room of the Dollar City Bar.

Their table groaned under the weight of thick, juicy steaks, baked potatoes, canned vegetables, and cups of steaming coffee. At their elbows stood bottles of twenty-year-old bourbon. Skelton ate and drank slowly, as if turning some problem over in his mind. The lamplight reflected on the big silver star fastened to the left breast of his new black silk shirt. Well-groomed, clean-shaven, with red health stamping the high cheekbones of his chiseled

face, he looked a part of the luxurious room of red velvet curtains, gilt mirrors, black oak chairs, and carved tables.

But Skelton's host presented a different picture. Huge, with massive shoulders and a dark face sewn with scars, Jack Fist ate ravenously. His interest was completely in his food. His sleeves were rolled up, his black silk shirt open at the neck. As he chewed on his meat, his tawny eyes would glance at Skelton. The Iron Fist of Thief County was asking again for more praise for the quarters he had built himself in Dollar City.

"Must have cost you a pretty penny, Jack," Jim Skelton remarked in a bored tone. "Nothing like that old hide-out we had with the Apache tribe down near the border. Remember the lousy beds we slept on? I'm still sure they fed us dog meat."



FIST

Jack Fist growled disgustedly. "I'll never go back to that again. I ain't through yet, Jim. When more cash comes in, I'm pushing my stakes over into the next county. Stick along with me and you'll see

me build a castle some day. This ain't nothing."

A knock on the door, and Starvation's voice called. He entered, closing the door behind him quietly, and stood a moment, staring at the pair. The sight of so much food brought a frown to his brow.

"What is it?" Jack Fist demanded in an ugly tone. "Can't you let us eat without butting in?"

Starvation bit his lips.

"The kid's in town," he said coldly to Jim Skelton.

"What kid?" the Iron Fist demanded angrily.

Jim Skelton stiffened at the table. For a moment Jack Fist's question went unanswered. Skelton pushed back his chair and stood up.

"When did he come in?" the Spade foreman asked.

"Not ten minutes ago," Starvation replied flatly. "He ain't gunning for you. He looked like he'd been through it tough. Sleepy is feeding him."

"What kid is it?" Jack Fist demanded again.

Jim Skelton grinned. "Remember the kid we told you about leaving on the divide to hold back the posse? I told him to meet us in Fort Alliance. But after we met up with you we never went there." Skelton turned to Starvation. "How did he follow us?" he asked curiously.

"Don't know," Starvation replied. "He was just as surprised to see me and Sleepy as we were to see him. It might have been an accident."

Jack Fist swung around in his chair.

"Mebbe it was and mebbe it wasn't," he snarled. "He might have run into those three Dixon brothers that I was chasing up in that country. If you two can't figure it all out, I can. You say that

kid stayed on the divide to stop the posse. The Dixons were heading up for that pass, but the blizzard stopped them. What if the kid got away during the blizzard and ran into them? Just the way I bumped into you fellows down in the foothills. Don't it look funny if he cleaned up a whole posse and got away? There was too many riders in that neck of the woods for him to miss all of us. If he ran into the Dixons, that means he's up to something in my town."

Starvation snorted. "Don't go off half-cocked, Jack," he said. "You always was one to suspect the worst of everything."

"And that's how I've got away with so much," Jack Fist snarled. "I don't make no mistakes like you fellows. I put two and two together and I get four. Here's the way it reads now. You leave a whelp up on the divide to shoot your battle for you. A blizzard comes along. Nobody knows if he ever took one shot at that posse. The Dixons are trying to get through that pass. We give up chasing them. Now the kid turns up. If he didn't run into the Dixons, why didn't he run into us down in the foothills?"

Jim Skelton reached for the bottle on the table.

"Remember what you once said, Starvation?" he asked. "If the kid got away with the posse fight, it would put the wolf brand on him for good. And then there was that little matter about the ace of spades. I never did trust him. He's got sheepherder earmarks all over him. If he was fool enough to fall for the trick I played on him, he'll fall for any other game. We don't want him."

Skelton was staring hard at Starvation.

"I told him the same," Starvation said bluntly. "But Sleepy is treating him like a rich uncle."

Jack Fist spat at the red-carpeted floor.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he demanded. "I want to know if he's connected with the Dixons. We can burn it out of him with an iron."

Starvation scowled. "Not that kid," he said. "He might be a sod-busting maverick, but he's got nerve. Better to watch him, Jack. If what you think is true about him, he's down here spying on you. Give him enough rope to hang himself."

A cruel grin twisted the thick lips of the Iron Fist of Thief County.

"Smart, Starvation," he chuckled. "That's your job."

"No, not mine," the lean Spade man said quickly. "He don't like me. Give the job to Sleepy or Jim Skelton."

Jim Skelton sneered. "Why not you?" he demanded. "I remember that you offered to take his job on the divide. You ain't got a soft spot in your heart for that whelp, have you, Starvation?"

Starvation's face drew tight.

"Say what you will about me, Jim," he replied slowly, "but I never double-crossed a man in my life. It ain't no time to start now. I ain't got much longer to live. I'll play my string out like I always have done. I took this proposition with Jack Fist to drive a herd of stock to Mexico. I didn't hire out as a stool-pigeon or a spy. Get somebody else for the job if you don't want me. I'll draw my pay and ride."

Jack Fist grinned. "Then I reckon it's up to Skelton," he said. "Go talk with him, Jim. You ain't got much time."

Jim Skelton took another drink, swallowing it in one gulp.

"Fair enough," he said, turning to the door. "Mebbe shooting him would be the easiest way."

Jack Fist motioned for Starvation to wait. And when the door closed on Jim Skelton and the Spade foreman's spurs jingled down the corridor, the Iron Fist of Thief County sat down.

"Have a drink," he offered. "I want to talk with you."

"Can't drink no more," Starvation replied. "You know that."

Jack Fist scowled. "Better if you did," he said. "You wouldn't be so cool-headed." He paused. "How much money would it take for you to watch Jim Skelton for me?" he asked coldly. "I don't trust him."

Starvation sat down.

"Nobody trusts anybody in this business," he said. "You don't trust me, either. I told Skelton I wasn't a spy or a stool pigeon. That goes for you, too, Jack. You haven't got enough money to make me deal the ace of spades off the bottom of the deck to anybody."

"What do you mean by that?" the Iron Fist asked.

"Ask Jim Skelton," Starvation replied, getting up.

"You mean he gave it to the kid on the divide, from the bottom of the deck?"

"Ask him," Starvation growled, turning to the door. "It's past my bedtime. I'm turning in."

Jack Fist's eyes narrowed dangerously as the tall lean rider went out the door. There was something about Starvation that he had never been able to figure out. Nobody could get close to him. He kept to himself at all times, brooding over something that had happened in the far past, and many men said it was

a girl who had thrown him over. He had contracted his fatal illness in Yuma Prison, serving a sentence for a crime he never committed, and since then Starvation had lived beyond the law.

In the Chinese hash house, Jingle Thatcher was wolfing down his third piece of apple pie when Jim Skelton walked in. Their eyes met. Skelton halted short, finding some strange danger in the kid. Jingle's cheeks were pinched, his jaw blunt and hard. He looked entirely different from the reckless young cowhand who had hired on the Spade outfit months before.

Sleepy broke the tension.

"Don't you know him, Jim?" he called, winking.

Skelton forced a grin. "How are you, Jingle?" he asked, coming forward, right hand near his gun. "When did you get in?"

Jingle swallowed the food that was in his mouth.

"Hello, Skelton," he said coldly. "Sit down. The feed is on Sleepy."

Skelton frowned and slid up to a stool. "Already ate," he said, glancing at Sleepy for some explanation.

"I was telling him that we've got a herd of stock headed south," Sleepy said nervously. "He don't want no job. Figures he'll hang around Dollar City on his own hook for a spell."

Skelton rolled a cigarette as Jingle washed down his food with coffee.

"What's wrong, kid?" Skelton asked. "Ain't the Spade outfit good enough for you no more?" But Skelton was inwardly cursing Sleepy for telling about the cattle.

Jingle stood up, patted his stomach. "First decent meal I've had in weeks," he said, grinning

strangely. "No, I'm signing on no pay rolls for a spell," he continued. "Starvation called the trick for me. He said you fellows owe me nothing, and I owe you nothing. There's no money in driving steers, Skelton. I'm looking to make myself a real stake."

Skelton frowned, looking at Sleepy again, whose fat face was filled with cold suspicion that belied his appearance.

"Sounds like he meant to turn bronc on us," Sleepy said. "I was just warning him that you're the new sheriff in town, and that me and Starvation are deputies. Tell him that no rough stuff goes here. He's a bit sore about what Starvation said to him."

"It ain't Starvation," Jingle butted in. "It ain't the fact that I caught the ace of spades on the divide. But when a fellow is shot full of holes and he's cold and hungry he gets to thinking things over. Then he comes along and finds you fellows all wearing shiny badges. And he hears a story about an hombre who owns a whole county, lock, stock, and barrel. I'm wondering how you all do it. Mebbe it's a trick. Mebbe that stock you're driving toward Mexico ain't above-board. Mebbe the kingpin in this town ain't completely on the level. Before I dip my claws into any deal, I want to know what I'm going to pull out of the grab bag. If you men don't want to tell me, that means we're washed up. I'll operate alone."

It was a long speech, but every bit of it seemed to bear out Starvation's prediction on the divide. That Jingle Thatcher would turn outlaw. That he would be hard to handle. That some day he'd learn Jim Skelton had dealt from the bottom of the deck.

Jim Skelton climbed off the stool.

"Have it your way, kid," he said coldly. "But the old Spade outfit won't be responsible for what happens. When you sleep on a full stomach you might feel different. Tomorrow, I advise you to leave town, if you live that long."

Jingle tensed. "Meaning what, Skelton?" he demanded.

Sleepy stepped between them.

"He means," the pudgy man said to the kid, "that you might get into a shooting scrape before that time. We all work for a pretty hard boss. He don't like strangers around. There's a law here to jail any rider for thirty days if he ain't got business. We can't make no exception for you, unless you count tonight. That's all. Don't get excited."

Jingle fell back a step.

"See you tomorrow," he said. "I reckon I'll put my brone up."

Sleepy would have stopped him, but Jim Skelton gave him a warning gesture.

The door slammed behind the cowboy.

Skelton and Sleepy sat a moment, listening to the music of Jingle's spurs. The beat of his pony's hoofs lifted, and was gone. The Chinese cook entered the restaurant by a back door. Sleepy paid him.

"Jack Fist figured that he might be in cahoots with the Dixon brothers," Jim Skelton said to Sleepy in a low tone.

"What!" Sleepy exclaimed. "That's a joke! The kid don't even know about them."

"He knows about the Dixon cattle that we're driving south in a couple of days," Jim Skelton growled. "Thanks to you, Sleepy. And that means you've got to shoot him."

Sleepy's jaw went hard. "You're loco!" he cried. "Ain't nothing wrong with the kid. He'll fight for us again. Are you talking through your hat, Jim?"

Jim Skelton's eyes were hard as glacial ice. "This is between you and me, and nobody else will know about it," he said. "You told the kid about a cattle drive. Jack Fist must never know you did. Fist figures that we keep our mouths shut. That kid must die before he runs into Fist. It's up to you."

"Wait a minute, Jim?" Sleepy protested. "I ain't no bushwhacker. We can still win Jingle over. Why not cut him in on the cattle deal? We know Starvation won't go along with us. We need a third man to help out down at the border. Mebbe the kid will shoot it out with Starvation. They hate each other's guts. Let me talk to the kid again."

Jim Skelton flicked away his cigarette.

"He's carrying the ace of spades in his breast pocket," Jim Skelton said. "I want it with a bullet hole through it by tomorrow morning. That's all, Sleepy."

And Skelton turned to the door.

CHAPTER VI.

GUN CHALLENGE.

AT the end of the main street of Dollar City, Jingle Thatcher swung down before a rickety livery where a lantern stood near the drinking trough. His heart was beating rapidly. Common sense told him that his life hung by a thread. First Starvation, then Jim Skelton, had revealed their hands to him in unmistakable fashion. In addition, Jingle had seen the true worth of Sleepy's character.

There was no doubt that the

Dixon brothers had told the truth about the Iron Fist of Thief County. It amazed Jingle that his Spade partners were hand and glove with the crook. He realized now that Jim Skelton had tried to play the same game back in Buffalo Basin that Justice Jack Fist had won in the Mesa Verde. Only Fist had been smarter. He had gained his victory against the smaller ranchmen by ruining them with tick and hoof-and-mouth disease. The ranges had been burned, the cattle destroyed. And Jack Fist had got control of a ghost town, built it up to suit his own style, and run healthy stock onto the old ranges.

Jingle was certain he had the clue to the mystery of that new herd. Some of it had come from Buffalo Basin, where the small-fry ranchers had continuously accused the Spade outfit of rustling. Other critters had been inoculated and cured of their disease after being condemned in the Mesa Verde country. And still more had been condemned without disease, like the Dixon herd, and it had been hidden.

"No wonder the Spade outfit has got to drive it south to the border," he was telling himself. "If they head for market in this country, the law will grab them. Skelton knows that. Once that stock gets out of Thief County, Jack Fist is afraid the Dixons will crack down on him."

His eyes were on the livery door, from which a colored boy emerged, halted, and stared at him sleepily.

"I got a boss for you," Jingle said. "Want it grain fed, watered, and bedded down."

The stable boy advanced slowly.

"Stranger, ain't you, boss?" he asked. "Better first see the sheriff."

"Seen him," said Jingle. "What's your name?"

"Fishhooks," the stable boy replied, serious, the whites of his eyes shining in the lantern light.

"Fish biting these days?" Jingle asked, frowning.

"What kind of fish?" the boy asked quickly, casting a glance up the dark street.

"Fried fish, like back in the Texas country," Jingle answered.

A grin spread over the darky's face.

"What you want me to do, boss?" he asked.

"Can you ride to Holden's Ford and back before dawn?" Jingle asked.

"I done it twice."

"You know who you're to meet?"

The colored boy held up five fingers. "I ain't saying no more," he said breathlessly.

"Tell them this," Jingle spoke in a hushed tone. "Listen hard. The herd is going south any day now. There will be three men with badges driving it. That's nothing but a scheme to throw the smell off their trail. I'm staying on in Dollar City, and I'm paying off my debt to your five friends. Tell them I can't do any better. That's all. Tell it back to me."

The stable boy grinned. "I got a fine memory, boss," he said. "You mean them three new law gentlemen are making off with the Dixon stock to the border country—"

"Hush up," Jingle snapped. "Take my bronc. Someone is coming. Get going quick."

He swung around and stepped out of the lantern light. A pudgy figure was walking down the road. The man halted as Jingle slipped into the shadows. He came on slowly, right hand loose at his side.

"That you, Jingle?" Sleepy's voice

called. "Step out where I can see you."

Jingle tensed. "What you want, Sleepy?" he asked. "I'm just putting up my hoss."

"I want to ask you something," Sleepy called harshly. "Step out in the light."

A cold shudder went through Jingle. He had never heard the Spade man use that tone before. But he had heard plenty about Sleepy's speed with a gun. Jingle's hand dropped to his gun butt. Fear went through him. He shook it off. This was the supreme test.

Nerves as tight as fiddle strings, Jingle drove himself out of the shadow of the livery into the light of the lantern. His back was to the flame, so that it didn't bother his eyes. He could just see Sleepy's dark, pudgy figure. And the gunman came into the reflection of the light, eyes glinting, lips drawn tight.

"I hate to do it, Jingle," Sleepy breathed. "Go for your gun."

"You first," Jingle rasped. "Mebbe I run from the posse on the ridge, but I won't run from a dirty double-crossing pig like you."

Sleepy cursed and went for his gun, bending his right knee. He made a queer dodging motion to the left as his hand slapped the walnut butt. He was fast, but he miscalculated the kid. It might have been Sleepy was concentrating his aim too hard on Jingle's left breast pocket.

Jingle leaped to the right in the way he had practiced in the gully back in Dakota. He was as fast as a fox. He had his six-gun out, barrel jumping up. He fired hardly without taking aim, teeth gritted. The weapon bucked in his hand as red flame flashed from Sleepy's weapon. Jingle's bullet struck first, jolting Sleepy back, and the Spade

gunman's slug whistled through Jingle's hair.

Sleepy coughed as he went down, rolling over. "Gosh!" he gasped. "He beat me!"

Jingle drew back in horror, gun smoking. He heard shouts echo up the street. Spurs rang as men came running.

"I killed him," Jingle said, whirling.

He saw the colored boy staring at him.

"Want me still to go?" the stable boy asked.

"Quick," Jingle snapped. "Just two drovers with badges now. Give me my hoss. I'll lead them away."

With a quick run he hit the pony's saddle, threw in his hooks. He made for the corner of the livery, flashed around it. Men shouted at him. Jingle struck for the back of town.

His pony hadn't taken more than three jumps into the darkness, protected by the flank of the livery, when Jingle realized he was making another great mistake. Flight would gain him nothing. All Thief County would be combed for him. It was a question if he'd ever reach town again. He remembered his promise to meet Jim Skelton in the morning. He couldn't flee from his gun troubles again as he had on the ridge. He had to remain and settle them.

At the rear of the barn, he dragged the buckskin to a skidding halt, and leaped from the saddle. His hand came down hard on the animal's rump. The horse bounded away with a squeal of anger, and it ran on into the night.

Jingle turned to the back of the barn, listening to the cries out front in the main street. Jim Skelton's voice lifted angrily above the others.

A chase was being organized. Hoofs pounded. Jingle flattened himself on the earth against the barn, six-gun in hand. Soon horses raced past the corners of the big, rickety stable. He saw the dark figures of the riders, rifles and six-guns in their hands. They never took time to examine the shadows of the barn. They rode on in hot pursuit of Jingle's free-running buckskin.

Jingle crawled to the back door of the barn, opened it slowly and slid into the structure. He could see through the stables to the front doors and out into the street where men were bending over a prostrate form in the light of a lantern. Jingle recognized Jim Skelton by his black silk shirt, glinting sheriff's badge, and big black ten-gallon hat. Starvation was not present. But hanging back in the dark, the great form of the Iron Fist of Thief County stood, talking wrathfully.

"I told you to do the job yourself, Skelton," Jack Fist was saying. "How did the kid know that Sleepy was gunning for him? Where's the stable boy? He must have seen it all."

Jim Skelton blew out the lantern. Darkness hid him, the dead Sleepy, and Jack Fist.

"The darky ran for his life when we came along," Skelton's voice sounded. "He must have been pretty scared, but we'll find him tomorrow."

"Where's Starvation?" Jack Fist demanded.

Jingle moved closer to the front doors of the barn. He heard the rattle of spurs. He could just see Starvation's thin shape materialize from the shadows. He didn't know how long the man had been there.

"I'm here," Starvation's voice spoke out coldly. "We all better

get broncs and round up the kid. He can't go far in country he doesn't know."

"How long have you been watching us?" Jim Skelton asked suspiciously. "Where were you when it happened?"

Starvation moved closer. "I just came up," he said tonelessly. "You know better than to stand in lantern light when a good many fellows in this town would be glad to take a shot at you, Skelton. Don't cross-examine me."

Jack Fist bellowed into the night. "Fishhooks! Where are you?"

There was no answer.

Jingle knew the darky hadn't taken a bronc from the stable. Perhaps the boy had his horse in a corral outside of town.

"I can't figure out how Jingle beat Sleepy to the trigger," Jim Skelton said angrily. "The kid must be faster than I think."

"Come on," Jack Fist snarled. "Starvation, you plant Sleepy. He was a friend of yours. Skelton and I will do some riding. This whole thing looks bad to me. That kid is in cahoots with the Dixons, or I'm a Chinaman."

Jingle caught his breath. The surprise of his discovery that the Spade men and Jack Fist suspected him, sent him deeper into the barn. Now he had proof that his old outfit was double-crossing him. The horror of shooting Sleepy was gone. Cold rage took possession of him. Gripping his gun he listened to Jack Fist and Jim Skelton move away.

Starvation entered the dark barn, turned to the first stall and unfastened the halter rope of a horse. He led the animal to the front door, stood there a moment, looking up the street. Then he spoke in a low tone.

"Stay under cover, Jingle," Starvation said. "If you're in the barn, hide in the loft. I could have shot you when you sent that buckskin on the stampede. We better talk this thing over in private. I'll be back."

Jingle had eared back the hammer of his six-gun. Breathless, he saw Starvation's figure move out of the barn, leading the horse to pack Sleepy's body to an unmarked grave.

CHAPTER VII.

SHOWDOWN.

FISHHOOKS reached Holden's Ford not far after midnight.

The colored stableboy was a mere black shadow as he raced a roan pony down the bank of Green River and plunged into the shallows. In another jump or two the horse was up to its hocks in the water. Soon it was swimming, and Fishhooks swung out of the saddle and floated alongside of the roan's neck, turning the animal downstream.

Their progress was rapid, and by the time they reached the farther bank they were a good two hundred yards below the main crossing. Fishhooks climbed to the saddle. For a mile he splashed along the shallows by the light of the stars and then took a trail that led through a brushy arroyo.

A dark shack loomed up in the night.

Fishhooks halted. For a full minute he listened. Then, putting two fingers to his lips, he whistled softly.

"Who is it?" a voice called from the shack.

"Can't you tell by my sound, boss?" Fishhooks replied, dismounting to walk to the shack.

A tall, hatchet-faced man stepped outside, six-gun in hand.

"It's Fishhooks!" he exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

"I done come like I was told," the stableboy said.

"Already?" Washington Dixon asked in surprise. "We weren't expecting word for weeks."

Fishhooks followed the man into the shack. No lamp was lighted. The stableboy was aware of other men in bunks. He shivered from the wetting in the river. Washington Dixon heard his teeth chatter and threw a blanket around his shoulders.

"Awful thing happened, Mr. Dixon," Fishhooks said fearfully. "That young friend of yours shot one of the judge's new deputy sheriffs. I don't know if he got away or not. I'm scared to go back."

"Sit down, partner," Washington Dixon instructed. "What was the message he gave you?"

Fishhooks repeated Jingle's words as best he could, about the cattle herd leaving for the border country in the next few days. It wasn't the first time that the colored stableboy had acted as a messenger from friends of the Dixons who were laying low in Thief County. Fishhooks had come from Texas, and he took to the Dixons like a duck to water. They didn't come any better than Fishhooks.

"So you say Jack Fist hired himself a new sheriff and two new deputies not more than two weeks ago?" Wash Dixon asked. "What happened to the other men?"

"Don't know," Fishhooks replied. "Just vanished, like most white men do in that town, Mr. Dixon. Reckon the judge didn't like them. He brought them new men back with him after he got through chasing you. I think they knew that young

gentlemen who sent you the message."

The other Dixons stirred in their bunks.

"Don't it sound a bit peculiar, Wash?" Jefferson Dixon called. "Our young friend certainly found out things quick. Mebbe it's a trap."

"Better start back, Fishhooks," Wash Dixon advised. "I'll give you some dry jeans and a sweater to wear after you cross the river. We better change our hide-out. Next time come to Bald Mountain."

"Is that all, boss?" the stableboy asked. "I'm scared over that shooting. Old Judge Fist sure must be looking for me."

"You're the only person he's not spying on, partner," Wash said seriously. "We've got to count on you. If you don't want to go, we won't hold it against you. But things are moving fast, Fishhooks. I promise you that it won't be long now before your Judge Fist is as dead as a door-nail."

"You promise me that and I'll go, Mr. Dixon," the stableboy said. "I'll tell that big devil that I just run away after the shooting because I was scared. He won't get a thing out of me."

Wash shook hands with the boy. The other Dixons got up, crowded around him. Fishhooks left with a light heart. And when he was gone down the arroyo to the river, Wash Dixon turned to his brother.

"Do you think it's a trap?" he asked seriously.

"The Iron Fist has to move the cattle soon," Ad Dixon said. "Now would be the time, while he thinks he's chased us far up north."

"But how did Thatcher find out about it so quick?" Jeff Dixon asked.

"Mebbe those crooks tried to hire him as a drover right off the bat," Munny put in.

"Then what did he shoot a deputy for?" Mad demanded. "They might have suspected him. They won't drive the stock. We'll run into an ambush."

Washington Dixon nodded silently. He'd been tricked by Jack Fist twice before and almost lost his life. Jack Fist was the law in Thief County, even if he had got himself elected by crooked ballot. By making himself a judge, he had outlawed the Dixons, so that sheriffs were looking for three of the brothers in other counties. The Dixons couldn't take wild chances.

But unless they did, they'd never catch their cattle outside of Thief County, where they could prove their ownership before honest courts.

Three miles west of Dollar City, Jim Skelton and Jack Fist scared a saddled buckskin without a rider from a heavy clump of buck brush. They roped the horse and signaled for aid by firing their guns. The buck brush was choked with dry autumn leaves and tumbleweed, so the order was given to burn it. A dozen men stood watching the flames, guns ready.

A further search of surrounding clumps of brush, a gully, and two patches of woods failed to reveal Jingle Thatcher.

"He can't get away on foot," Jim Skelton said angrily. "We must have been close behind him or he wouldn't have given up the horse."

"You've got more crack-brained solutions to things than any man I ever knew," Jack Fist raged. "How do we know he ever left Dollar City? That coyote whelp is too smart for you Spade fellows. Give him credit for some brains. Expect the worst all the time, like I do, then you can't get surprised. Didn't the kid gun

down Sleepy? You never would have thought that of him, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," Jim Skelton replied, scowling. "But I saw him board the buckskin and go around the barn."

"He'd been riding the cayuse all day," Jack Fist snapped. "He knew it couldn't outrun every hoss in town. He must have left it pronto. It's a good bet that he's sneaked back into town to hide, figuring we won't look for him there."

Jim Skelton's face was taut. He was taking a lot of bullying from the big boss of Thief County, but there was such a thing as too much. Jack Fist's late success had made him unbearable. In the old days he had been easy to get on with. Now it was fatal to cross him, and Jim Skelton was waiting for a good chance to turn the tables.

But the appearance of Jingle Thatcher had put a wrinkle into Skelton's plans. The death of Sleepy was a loss, for Sleepy had been going along with Skelton, and if Starvation had stood in their way of stealing the cattle herd, that would have been Starvation's hard luck.

"Let's go back to town and look," Jim Skelton said quietly. "Leave the riders out all night. If Jingle sneaked back into Dollar City, Starvation ain't alive now. The kid has gone gun-crazy. Wants to build himself a bad rep. He's sore because we wouldn't make him a deputy. He ain't got nothing to do with the Dixons."

"That's what you say," Jack Fist flared up again. "You're just seared because you dealt him a card from the bottom of the deck."

"Who told you that?" Skelton demanded. "Starvation?"

"Figured it for myself," Jack Fist chuckled mirthlessly. "Let's ride."

They left a score of riders combing the gullies and brush, and loped back to Dollar City in the starlight. Jack Fist raged continuously about the Dixon brothers, accusing them of every bit of trouble that had happened to him in the last few months. It apparently had grown into a mania with him. When he got reports that the brothers were in a town south of Thief County, the next day they turned up in the north, when it was impossible to travel such a distance except by railroad, and there was none. They had secret ways of getting information about the movements of his stock. He'd set traps for the brothers and they had slipped out of them, warned at the last moment. He was certain they were forming a band of ranchers who had been crushed by Fist and fled the county.

"I'd like to lay my hands on that kid alive," Jack Fist said. "I'll find out if he's in cahoots with those fellows."

"Better go back to the livery," Skelton advised. "Mebbe the stable-boy has turned up."

They rode up to the rear of town and separated, each approaching the back of the livery from a different angle. Dismounting, they closed in, guns in hand. They didn't get very close before Starvation's voice called out.

"That you, Jim?"

Jack Fist answered. "What you doing hanging around the barn?"

Starvation slid into the starlight. "Protecting the hosses," he answered. "Thought the kid might come back and try to get a fresh one. That buckskin of his looked wore out."

"You got more sense than Skel-

ton," Jack Fist growled, walking up. "The kid is back in town, hiding. We found his buckskin out yonder. We're going to search the hull place. What about the loft here?"

"Ain't it full of hay?" Starvation asked coolly.

"Don't make no difference," Jack Fist exploded. "Get up there, Skelton. You caused all this trouble."

Jim Skelton turned to the back door in the deep shadow of the barn. His right hand was hidden: It shot down to his holster. With a sudden change of character he whirled upon Jack Fist and Starvation. The wolf in Jim Skelton appeared in one quick turn. His six-gun sprang up, catching the Iron Fist of Thief County and even the careful Starvation without warning. A snarl tore from Skelton's throat as he fell back against the livery. His eyes glinted in the shadow.

"Lift 'em!" he ordered. "Both of you! This is the payoff, Fist. For you, too, Starvation, if you make one false move. I'll put lead right through your carcasses and clear out to open range. Get those arms up!"

Starvation was as straight as a stick, chin tucked to his chest, arms half bent.

Jack Fist's chest swelled and the cords in his neck tightened. For a moment it looked as though he would throw his giant figure upon Jim Skelton's gun barrel, take its lethal dose, and then demolish the Spade foreman. But Jack Fist was no man to commit suicide in order to destroy a foe. He swayed from side to side, a horrible grimace twisting his ugly scarred face.

"I knew you'd do it some day," Jack Fist snarled. "But you won't get away with it. Shoot me, Skelton, and you'll be strung up by my riders."

Starvation said nothing.

"Get those arms up!" Jim Skelton ordered nervously. "I'm pulling out, Fist. I've had enough of your guff. But I'm putting you where you won't follow me. That goes for you, Starvation. I ain't afraid of Fist's gang of saddle tramps. Get those arms up, turn around, and unbuckle your gun belts. I ain't waiting any longer."

Starvation stepped back. "I reckon we part trails here, Skelton," he said coldly. "You wrote me off your slate when you double-crossed the kid on the divide. You turned me against you when you sent Sleepy to murder him. You'll never get out of town. Better shoot me now while you can."

Jack Fist was panting with excitement.

"Put down that gun, Skelton," he warned. "I'll let you go. I'll pay you off—"

"I'm shooting if you spew any more guff," Skelton threatened. "Turn around."

Jack Fist's arms raised slowly, and he turned.

Starvation grinned coldly. Then he turned.

CHAPTER VIII.

BULLET HOLE.

JINGLE THATCHER stood behind the front window of the Dollar City jail, looking out to a dark street. Starvation had let him into the calaboose not long before, as the one spot in Jack Fist's domain where he would be safe until he settled accounts with Jim Skelton. Jingle and Starvation had had a long talk in the livery and they had come to an understanding.

Now, as Jingle stood in the dark

jail office, looking out, he was wondering how he had misjudged Starvation so wrongly when he so rarely made mistakes.

"I should have had sense enough to figure out the truth after he offered to take my place on the divide," Jingle told himself bitterly. "I've been a big fool all along—until now. I'm playing the game square. I'm settling all accounts like Starvation is doing. I ain't a double-crossing rat. Skelton showed his stripe when he palmed that ace of spades off the bottom of the deck."

Jingle turned, glancing in the dark at the sheriff's desk, upon which lay the card that had come from Jingle's breast pocket.

It was that card that turned Starvation against Skelton and warned him that the Spade foreman was rotten clean through. And Starvation was biding his time against the moment that Skelton would try to double-cross him. As for Jingle, Starvation had suspected him of being too much wolf to change. Starvation was sure of it when Jingle turned up in Dollar City, and talked of being cut into crooked rewards. It was only when Starvation sneaked down to the livery, hoping to warn Jingle to leave town that Starvation learned the kid had changed character.

"He didn't blame me for running from the posse when I told him," Jingle said to himself quietly. "He said any hombre would have done the same. I ain't running now. I ain't double-crossing Jim Skelton. He showed me where I stood when he told me I wouldn't live long. Then the yellow coyote sent Sleepy to murder me. I'm working for the Dixons. They saved my life. I can't back out on the deal. I'm salivating Jim Skelton before he gets

me. And I'm putting a whizzer on the Iron Fist of Thief County—"

He broke off short, bending to the window. Three men were crossing the street. There was no mistaking the giant figure of Jack Fist. The man moved slowly, rocking from side to side like a bear. Beside him walked Starvation, stiff as a post, arms hanging loosely. And behind them and a little to the side, Jim Skelton walked with a shotgun cradled in his arm, the barrel pointing at the Iron Fist of Thief County. And then Jingle saw that Jack Fist and Starvation were handcuffed, wrist to wrist.

"Hell and lightning!" Jingle gasped, staggering back. "What's going on?"

He heard the crunch of their boots as they stepped around the hitch rail. The street was deserted except for them. Jack Fist's riders were out searching the range. Other men had retired to cabins and shacks. The town was dark.

Jingle fell back to the rear door of the sheriff's office, bewildered. He listened to the lock turn in the front door. Jim Skelton's voice sounded outside.

"You first, Starvation. Try to slam the door on me, and I'll let Fist have a barrel load in the spine. Move right in to the center of the floor and strike a match."

Jingle faded through the door to the cell corridor, left it slightly ajar. Gun cocked, he waited.

Starvation and Jack Fist entered the calaboose. A match flared, casting shadows about the walls. Jim Skelton shut the door behind him, stood covering them.

"Pull up the trapdoor in the floor," he ordered.

Jack Fist turned on him, jerking Starvation about, and the match

dropped from his fingers. Starlight was coming through the windows. Their figures were plain to Jingle, whose eyes had grown accustomed to the dark. He knew that Skelton could see them.

"Wait a minute, Skelton," Jack Fist snarled. "We ain't going down there. You said the cells in back."

"Changed my mind, Fist," Jim Skelton's voice replied coldly. "You built that cement hole so nobody could hear the fellows yell. You've got your choice. You can die now, or by degrees. I ain't waiting much longer."

The roots of Jingle's hair prickled. If he triggered he could put a .45-caliber slug through Jim Skelton's brisket. But Skelton's shotgun would drive a fatal load into Jack Fist and Starvation. Jingle stood in horror as Jack Fist kneeled and drew up a heavy trapdoor, leaving Starvation in full aim of Skelton's scattergun. With a curse, Jack Fist started down a ladder, drawing Starvation to the floor. Skelton advanced with his deadly weapon as Starvation was pulled into the trap and vanished.

Now was the time for Jingle. But a flash of wisdom stopped him. A fair shoot-out with Skelton was one thing. Murder was another. Jingle couldn't kill him in cold blood. Let the Spade foreman put away the deadly scatter-gun first.

"This evens the score between you and me, Fist," Jim Skelton called, and he slammed the trapdoor shut and locked it.

Jingle heard the muffled roar of the Iron Fist of Thief County.

Skelton drew back, pocketing a key, holding his shotgun in one hand. He stood listening for a long time, and Jingle was afraid the man heard his breathing. Fascinated, Jingle watched him turn to the front

door. The kid was thinking about Starvation now. Handcuffed to Jack Fist, the stricken Spade man might never get out of the dungeon alive. It was a question now of saving Starvation or killing Jim Skelton. Jingle held victory in his grasp, but he had to play every card carefully.

He let Jim Skelton move out the jail door. It closed tight. The lock turned.

Jingle crossed the office, stood at the window watching Skelton's dark figure go up the street. The Spade foreman would undoubtedly be back. Skelton was sheriff of Thief County. If he could win over Jack Fist's gunmen, Skelton could own the town. He wouldn't run out now. Skelton was as ambitious as any man.

Jingle turned to the floor, dropped to his hands and knees, struck a match to examine the lock to the trapdoor. It was a heavy piece of mechanism, and the hinges of the trapdoor would resist a crowbar. A key was needed.

Jingle ransacked the office. He was afraid to strike another match. He felt into drawers in the sheriff's desk. He tried a dozen keys to the cages in the cell block. But he couldn't find the key that fit the trapdoor.

An hour passed. Another. Skelton did not return. Riders galloped into Dollar City, halted at the jail, and called. Then they went on up the street to the saloon.

Jingle grew desperate. If he could find a brace-and-bit, he might bore a hole through the heavy trapdoor, drop a handcuff key to Starvation. Better if the man were free of Jack Fist when the worst happened.

Jingle thought of the livery across the road. He unlocked the front

door of the jail, slipped out. The street was dark, but a light showed in the windows of the Dollar City Bar. Horses stood at the hitch rail. Locking the jail door, Jingle darted across the road. He reached the livery just as men emerged from the Dollar City Bar, and the light went out.

Jingle dodged into the livery. The riders came down the street, passed him, and went on. Jim Skelton was not with them. He might have remained in Jack Fist's ornate quarters in the saloon.

It was long before Jingle found a tool chest in the livery. His trip back to the jail was at that darkest hour before dawn. Inside the jail, he worked feverishly, boring a two-inch hole through the floor, gathering up the shavings carefully. He applied his lips to the hole.

"Starvation!" he called.

A gruff voice came back faintly. "Who is it?"

Jingle tied a string to a key, lowered it. He struck a match. He could hear the men below him. The string jerked from his fingers. They had the handcuff key.

"Where's the key to the trapdoor?" Jingle called into the hole in the trapdoor.

The answer was long in coming. Evidently, Jack Fist and Starvation were in some argument. Then Starvation's voice sounded.

"Skelton's got the only one, Jingle. Watch your step."

Jingle answered, "Keep quiet. I'm laying for him. He's sent the riders away. They must be going out to the cattle herd. Mebbe he's moving it."

Jack Fist's voice spoke from below. "Get us out of here, kid, and you're set with me. Drill Skelton. Don't take no chances. I'm rooting

for you. I apologize for ever accusing you of being in cahoots with the Dixons."

Jingle drew back, his lips curled in a hard grin.

Dawn broke cold and gray over Dollar City. A shaft of light found Jim Skelton moving down the deserted main street, right hand on his gun butt, a satchel in his left hand. He carried the gleanings of a safe in Jack Fist's office and the till from the barroom. At the livery he halted and shouted inside.

"Fishhooks!"

A sleepy colored boy moved out of the livery.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Sheriff!"

"Where did you go last night?"

"I just run and hide, Mr. Sheriff. But I come back."

Skelton stared at the stableboy suspiciously. "Saddle me the best," he ordered. "I'll talk to you later."

Crossing the street, the Spade foreman unlocked the jail office, stepped inside, closed the door. He stood a moment, listening. Satisfied, he raised the shades on the side windows, letting daylight in. He moved to the big desk, put the satchel upon it. As he sat down, something caught his eye. His right hand shot forward, fingers clutching at a lone playing card. With a sharp intake of breath, Jim Skelton lifted the card.

It was the ace of spades.

Skelton didn't see the figure of a young puncher in blue denims, red silk shirt, and ten-gallon hat step out of the door of the cell block. A gun crashed. A bullet whipped through the card that Skelton held, passed the Spade foreman's cheek, and smashed into the wall.

Skelton hurled himself over backward, seeking shelter behind the desk.

"Jingle!" he shouted.

"Come out from behind shooting!" Jingle Thatcher yelled. "Come quick."

Skelton had his gun out as he hunkered low to the floor. He jerked off his hat, moved it to one corner of the desk, lifted it, expecting a bullet from Jingle Thatcher. The kid's laugh sounded.

"Slick as a snake, Skelton, and twice as crooked."

Skelton ground his teeth. He leaned to the right corner of the desk, gun cocked, poked the nose of the weapon around it, and triggered. The explosion brought no reply from Jingle. Skelton cursed.

"Help!" he shouted. "Come a-running! I've got me a killer cornered."

Something dark sailed across the top of the desk, flashing over Skelton's head. He sprang away from it, thinking it might be the kid leaping to find him. He saw too late it was Jingle's hat. Skelton was in the open. He swung his six-gun, trying to find the kid. He saw him too late. Jingle was throwing down into aim from a back corner of the room. Skelton glimpsed red flame. He tried to trigger, but something hit him hard between the eyes. His entire body constricted. An agonizing pain went through his brain, and he tasted sulphur. The pain vanished, and that was all he knew.

Jingle leaped to the front door, slammed it shut, locked it. He got the key from Jim Skelton's pocket, turned to the trapdoor. He could hear shouts in the street. Men were coming. The kid unlocked the trap.

"Come up!" he called. "You first, Starvation."

But it was Jack Fist's head that appeared in the hole in the floor. A horrible grin twisted the man's face.

"You done it, kid," he shouted. "You got me free!"

Jingle's heart skipped a beat.

"Get back, Fist!" he snapped. "What's happened to Starvation?"

"He's coming," Jack Fist replied, scrambling out of the hole. "He's all right!"

Jingle's six-gun came up into aim at the Iron Fist of Thief County.

"Stand back!" he ordered. "Where are you, Starvation?" he called.

He no more than finished than a dark shadow fell across the left window of the jail office. Jingle whirled, spied a face and a six-gun. He fired. The man at the window yelled.

Before Jingle could turn Jack Fist sprang at him. The kid ducked low and Fist went over him like a charging bear, slamming into the front door. Jingle slid out from under him as Fist's arms groped for him. A savage snarl tore from Fist's lips. Jingle twisted, jerking back his six-gun barrel. He brought the weapon hard down on Fist's forehead.

"Ugh!" Jack Fist's eyes bugged. But his right hand had caught Jingle's gun barrel. Dazed, the giant jerked the weapon away from Jingle's grasp. The kid smashed him with a left, and Jack Fist shook his head. The man grunted. Jingle hit him again as Jack Fist crawled dazedly toward him. There was no stopping the fellow.

Jingle sprang back, whirled, scuttled across the floor to Jim Skelton's body. He clawed up the Spade foreman's weapon, dodged behind the desk and came up quickly, wheeling to shoot.

Jack Fist was staggering up from the floor, blinking, earing back the hammer of his weapon. He saw Jingle and chuckled.

Jingle fired hard and fast for the

giant's heart. He saw Fist shudder. Then Fist drove a bullet that missed Jingle by an inch. And Jingle gave him a slug in the brisket. Fist closed his eyes, gasping. He swayed on his feet and fell his length, shaking the floor.

Shouts echoed outside.

Jingle dropped behind the desk, watching the windows.

"Starvation!" he called.

The lean figure of the Spade man was crawling out of the trapdoor.

"Jingle," Starvation said huskily, "did you get him? He crushed my ribs. I'm a goner. Clear out of town."

Jingle called to him. "Hold tight, partner. Nobody can get in here. We're safe until the Dixons come. We've got to wait it out."

Turning, he flung two shots out the windows. A shout of panic came from the street.

Jingle made for the front of the office. He peeked over a window sill. In the street, a dozen men were fleeing to safety. They were unarmed. He saw across to the livery, where Fishhooks was holding the bridle of a saddled bronc.

"Go tell the Dixons that Fist is dead!" Jingle shouted. "Quick!"

He watched Fishhooks spring to the saddle, bend over the pommel, speed away in a cloud of dust. Jingle covered his retreat with a cocked gun.

Starvation called to him.

"Can you hold out till they come, kid?"

Jingle was beside him. "What's wrong, Starvation?" he asked fearfully.

"I'm busted like a pipestem," Starvation groaned. "I'll do my best to help you. Give me a gun, put me at the window. I'll give you a chance to make a run for it."

"Like you wanted to do on the divide?" Jingle said scornfully. "Nothing doing. I hired out for this job and I'm sticking. The Dixons have got a dozen or more old ranchers from Thief County hidden out near the line. They'll be here pronto to take over. Lay still. We ain't got any more fight. Fist's riders are gone with the stock, or they're hunting me."

A hard grin pulled Starvation's lips.

"They don't come no better than you Jingle," he said in a low tone. "Adios."

He was gone in a flash.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

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

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use in here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.



LOBOS FOR LUCK

Devil's luck took dallies in a hang rope for Shorty Masters and Willie Weatherbee when the hides they were trail-toting showed the rustler brand.

By Allan R. Bosworth

THE freight wagons snaked out of Mexico in the windy dusk, behind six mules that splashed through the wide shallows of the crossing. Steel tires crunched into the dry gravel, the long-cared jacks rattled their dripping hocks on Texas soil, and the sawed-off hombre on the driver's seat pulled leather.

Five horsemen closed in around the outfit. Four of them were sinister shapes in the shadows, with cartridge belts crossing on their chests

and huge sombreros pulled low over faces that were the color of saddle leather.

The fifth was a tall, wide-shouldered puncher who wore a Stetson and rode a sorrel cayuse whose sleek, wet hide caught the last gleam of sundown and held it.

"*Bueno, señor!*" said Felipe de la Rosa, his white teeth glistening beneath fierce, black *mustachios*. He was a squat, powerfully-built Mexican with a barrel-chested body al-

most as wide as his sombrero brim. "From here on, you weel 'ave no trouble. Unless—"

The wide shoulders shrugged as De la Rosa rolled a cigarette. Shorty Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), caught the significance of the gesture.

"Unless what?" demanded the bowlegged teamster.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shorty saw the tall waddy straighten eagerly in his saddle. The mere mention of trouble was enough to send Willie Wetherbee, better known as the Sonora Kid, hunting for it.

De la Rosa struck a match and cupped it against his swarthy face. The wavering flame cast leaping, distorted shadows on his sombrero brim. He inhaled deeply of the corn-shuck cigarette before he went on:

"Unless you are afraid of the lobos, *señor*—the wild dogs. It may be they weel smell these hides and the *carne seco* you are hauling. Then they—"

"Shucks!" growled the Sonora Kid in a disappointed tone. "Jest wolves? I thought yuh meant *bandidos*!"

Again that shrug of the Mexican's shoulders. "They are not—how you say?—not ordinary wolves, *señor*. They are half dog and half lobo which run on the ol' Canyon Grande rancho, where one time evr'body was *muerte*—killed. Nobody live there for a long time, and the *perros*—the dogs—they 'ave run wild. They keel many cattle, *señor*."

Shorty grinned. "I reckon we can take care of this load of hides and jerky, Felipe," he said. "Much obliged for showin' us to this crossin'. We'll save a lot of time."

De la Rosa nodded politely. "*Adios, señores!*" he called, and turned to his men. Together, they started back across the border river.

Shorty Masters clicked his tongue,

and the mule team moved toward the mouth of Lobo Canyon. Willie Wetherbee, still grumbling at the prospect of meeting nothing more dangerous than a wolf pack, reined his sorrel Tumbleweed horse alongside the wheel mules.

"Jest like a Mex!" he complained. "Show 'em anything out of th' ordinary, like dogs that run wild and cross with lobo wolves, and they git plumb skeered and superstitious!"

Another grin split Shorty's face. The freckled, tow-headed mule-skinner was glad to get out of the bandit-infested strip of Mexican border just south of the Rio Grande without having his wagons attacked. He and Willie had just come from the town of Victorio, and were hauling one wagon load of green cowhides and another wagon filled with *carne seco*—jerked beef. The third wagon was empty.

"Say!" Shorty exclaimed. "Pete Wilson was tellin' me at th' store in Tarantula that one of his customers is lookin' for some dogs. Mebbe we could catch some of them wild animals for him!"

"Mebbe!" the Sonora Kid answered doubtfully. "But I doubt—"

The tall cowboy clamped his lean jaw on his words. Just as the wagons rolled into the mouth of the canyon, all the fading light seemed to be sucked suddenly out of the sky in a whistling blast of wind.

And, riding the welter over the cedar-dotted rimrocks, came the most unearthly howl the trail parads had ever heard!

The lead mules snorted and shied, flattening their ears as if the wild cry were unbearable. The swing mules tried to go one way, and the wheelers pulled in the opposite direction.

One long-drawn and shrill lament, and the sound died. There was only

the wind again, and the scrape of tossing branches against the wagon sheets.

"Whoa, Chopin!" Shorty called as he sawed on the reins. "Whoa, Tschaikowsky! You wouldn't be skeered at hearin' a coyote, would you?"

Wetherbee chuckled. "A coyote would turn white if he heard that mule's name!" he drawled. "Tsch—Tschai—shucks!"

Shorty pulled the mule back into the trail and drove on, grinning proudly in the darkness. His team was composed of no ordinary jacks. They were all offspring of a mare that had borne the name of Lucy. Shorty loved music, and he dubbed his outfit the "Sextet From Lucia." Furthermore, he had given each animal the name of a famous composer.

Stars blazed overhead, and a thin moon rode high over the ragged rim-rocks. The trail was a slender and crooked ribbon that clung precariously to the canyon wall and climbed. Ahead lay the Chisos—the Ghost Mountains. And they were well named.

"There it is again!" the freighter exclaimed suddenly. "Closer, this time!"

The Sonora Kid nodded, and loosened his .45 in its tied-down holster with a characteristic, involuntary gesture. Something in the eerie howling sounded almost supernatural all right, and it was easy to understand the Mexicans' fear of the wild pack. Now, there seemed to be a dozen lobos giving tongue, and the Sextet would have left the trail but for the screen of brush and boulders that bordered it.

"You would have a job, catchin' any of them critters!" the cowboy drawled. "I'll bet you couldn't git close enough to one to throw a loop on him—not in a thousand years!"

Shorty shook his head. The mules were coning out of the canyon, now, topping a grassy divide. The little teamster stood in the wagon bed and looked back down into the forbidding gloom of the lower places. It sounded as if the pack were on the back trail—somewhere down toward the Rio.

"Nope," he admitted. "But if they're hungry enough, and if they follered us, we might put some jerky in the last wagon and rig a high end gate so we could drop it with a rope—after they got in th' wagon. Then we—"

There was a smacking thud against the wagon box. Splinters flew. A flattened bullet dug through the wood and went whining into the wind.

Shorty Masters sat down with a jar, to grab the slack of the reins and whip his .45 from its leather in one swift sweep of his hands. The wind-dulled crack of a Winchester drifted out of the mesquites.

The Sonora Kid whirled Tumbleweed in his tracks, going for his own gun. And then both pards saw a long, ragged line of dancing flame come rolling over the lips of a canyon a quarter of a mile to their left!

"Range fire!" yelled Wetherbee, and hit spurs to the sorrel.

II.

Shorty put the Sextet from Lucia into a harness-slapping run, following the fire-framed silhouette of the tall waddy across the brush-dotted divide. For the moment, he ignored the bullet that came so menacingly close, and, when he found time to think about it, he concluded that the shot had only been meant for a warning.

Other guns were blasting the flame-lighted night now. Six-guns,

louder, duller than the rifle's sharp sound. Shorty saw jets of crimson stab skyward, and then made out the forms of riders who swung slickers frantically in an effort to beat out the wind-swept blaze.

The mule-skinner was range-trained. One look at the long, irregular trail of the grass fire bowling over the divide like a wall of crimson surf, and he knew slickers would never smother it.

"Willie!" he yelled into the teeth of the wind. "Willie—wait a minute!"

The cowboy was already ripping his own yellow slicker from behind his cante. He pulled Tumbleweed to a sliding halt, and Shorty swung the mules around to turn the wagons toward the blaze.

There was more than a mile of the flaming front, and the wind sent it leaping and dancing toward the wagons and toward the trail they had just left. Glowing wisps of grass and flaming leaves were sucked up by the blast, to travel high and then fall—advance messengers that started the fire in a hundred new places.

Wild shouts lifted above the crackle. A dozen men were battling, but they made no headway. Beyond the fire line, the blaze died quickly, and there was no telling how much range it had laid waste.

Wetherbee turned his lean face toward the freighter, and the fire-light sent shadows playing around his taut lips and grimly set jaw. "Yuh better hit the back trail, Shorty!" he said quietly. "Me and Tumbleweed can git out of the way. But them mules, with three wagons to—"

Shorty was already leaping to the ground. "These mules can pull the outfit out of the way!" he retorted. "I'm takin' Chopin. Grab a couple of them green hides from the wagon,

and tie your riata on one corner. We'll put out that fire for them hombres—if it can be put out at all!"

He ran to the head of the team and hastily shucked Chopin, the biggest and blackest mule of the Sextet, out of his harness. The rest of the animals swung their heads around and gazed apprehensively at the approaching fire.

The Sonora Kid had to admit that few horses would stand as quietly as the mules were doing. He didn't understand Shorty's plan for extinguishing the blaze, but long association on danger-ridden trails had given him a wholesome respect for the little freighter's strategic mind. So he hurried to the second wagon and threw two of the heavy green hides on the ground.

Shorty slung a saddle on Chopin in record time and tied his own rope to a corner of the double thickness of hides.

"Git in your saddle!" he directed. "You take the outside—I'll ride over the burned strip. Drag the hides right along the line of fire! Savvy?"

A quick smile leaped across Wetherbee's face. He understood, and he took a fierce joy in anything that meant action and danger.

"Let's go!" he yelled, and dallied the riata around his saddlehorn.

Horsemen swept past the freight outfit, a couple of hundred yards to the north. There was a yell from somebody on the fire line:

"Here's some help, boys! Here's Thad Egan and the Bridlebit men!"

Shorty heard the faint cheer that rose above the roar of the flame as the tired slicker swingers greeted reinforcements. But the fire was gaining; it would take a hundred men with slickers or wet grain sacks to conquer it now—

He swung a bowed leg over the

black mule, and rolled his spur rowels along Chopin's flanks.

"Hit it on the end, Willie!" he shouted, and the trail pards raced for the lurid, onrushing flames with the green cowhides sliding across the grass and bumping over cat's-claw bushes and prickly pears.

Nobody saw them as they swung in from the south, where the long line of fire curved out and ended on a little ridge where there were more rocks than grass. Chopin snorted and shied as Shorty swung him in at rope's length behind the blaze. The Sonora Kid vanished from the freighter's view, beyond a billowing blast of flame and rolling dun smoke.

The wet cowhides sizzled and smelled as the pards headed northward. A powdery black swirl of charred grass dust churned from beneath the mule's hoofs and fogged around Shorty before it was sucked into the inferno. He jerked his bandanna high over his mouth and nose, and fixed his smarting eyes on the moving fire line.

More yells to the north. Somebody had seen the wagons, with their white sheets catching the red gleam. The Sonora Kid shouted through the crimson-and-yellow curtain that the mules were moving slowly away from the blaze.

Shorty yelled back to let his pard know he understood, and spurred Chopin on. His tongue was like cinch leather in a tortured mouth. His lungs and nostrils felt as if the lining had been seared from them by the smoke. A smell of scorching leather came from the right leg of his chaps, and he knew that Chopin must be suffering intensely from the heat.

There was a cheer, now, from the other side of the fire. The Sonora Kid was passing a group of the men who swung their slickers against the

burning grass. Shorty looked behind him with eyes that felt as dry as a lizard's skin, and his lips cracked in a triumphant grin.

His scheme was working. The fire was smothered to the south.

They must be halfway through now. Chopin pulled farther to the left, and the dragging hides moved up more in a line with the mule. On the other side of that leaping wall, the Sonora Kid must be half dead with smoke and wind-flung blasts of heat.

A little farther—two hundred yards! One hundred, now. Ahead was blessed darkness and cool wind. Another rocky ridge where the fire could find no fuel—

A black mule and a sorrel horse stumbled out into the coolness of the wind-swept divide. Two thirst-choked hombres dragged themselves wearily out of their saddles. Shorty ran back to stamp a threatening glow from the smoking hides. They were no longer soggy and green; they were crisp and smelled like a corral at the height of branding time, with the acrid odor of burned hair and seared skin.

"You done it, stranger!" croaked a voice. "I'm Bill Carson of the Box C, and I can't tell you how much obliged I am!"

Shorty grinned and turned to face the tall man who was striding toward them, dragging what was left of a slicker. Beyond him others were coming, all on foot. Limping, blackened men who had seen the trick that saved sections of Box C range.

"It wasn't nothin'!" Shorty rasped back. "Glad we happened to come along with them hides."

"Hides?" Carson exclaimed. "That's right—you did use hides!" His manner changed suddenly, his eyes narrowing. "How many hides you got, stranger? And where'd

they come from? I reckon I'd better have a look at them, because—"

"Yeah!" a voice broke in. "I'm lookin' at them skins right here and now!"

The speaker shouldered his way forward. He was a burly, heavy-jowled man, and the flicker of a smoldering cat's-claw bush in the burned-over strip reflected in a yellow gleam in his little, close-set eyes.

"Now, jest a minute, Thad!" Carson began. "I'm jest lookin' on general principles. Not that I ain't grateful to these men—"

"Gratitude ain't got nothin' to do with it!" the other blustered. He moved heavily toward Shorty and Willie. Other men crowded behind him. Shorty remembered the shout that had greeted the arrival of reinforcements. Thad Steel and the Bridlebit boys—this would be Steel and his bunch, now.

"Go ahead, Steel!" the mule driver invited. "If you think we killed somebody's steers and skinned 'em so we could fight this fire, you must figger we are mighty quick with a skinnin' blade. We hauled them hides and a couple hundred others out of Mexico. These happened to be green."

Egan looked around, his eyes narrowing. "You hear that?" he asked. "A couple of hundred hides!"

Bill Carson frowned at the pards, and Shorty could sense the hostility that spread around the group. A glance showed him Willie was ready for trouble.

III.

And then trouble cracked, in the rasping growl of Steel's voice. The big man stooped over the half-burned cowhides and spread them out. He swore under his breath and straightened.

His hand was hovering over the

butt of his six-gun. "Thought so!" he snarled. "Carson, both them hides are totin' your Box C brand!"

"What's the meanin' of this, stranger?" Carson demanded in a cold, level tone. "I've been losin' quite a few steers—"

"Yeah—so have I!" Steel declared. "In driblets. Fives and sixes. These are the buzzards, Carson—skinnin' thieves. Workin' down here with a wagon outfit! What did you do with the beef, you two?"

Rage whipped through Shorty with a flame as fierce as the one he had just conquered. But he watched Steel's little eyes for the flash that would tell him the big man was drawing, and he checked his temper.

"You can take that back, Steel!" he gritted. "Me and my pard are haulin' that stuff from Mexico to Pete Wilson's store in Tarantula. And we can prove it."

"You won't be provin' nothin'?" retorted Steel. "We've got you with th' goods. No tellin' how many of my hides you got. And there ain't but one way to deal with a couple of sneakin' coyotes caught as skinnin' thieves!"

The flash came then. The fire's flicker gleamed in another flash of metal as a gun cleared Steel's holster.

Shorty drew. But the Sonora Kid had anticipated Steel's move by the wink of an eyelid. There was a roar. Steel howled and let his gun slide from his hand, his fingers writhing in pain. The .45 hit the ground and exploded. Steel grabbed his wrist where the bullet had nicked him.

Bill Carson was swearing under his breath. The other men gasped and tried to duck behind each other as smoke whipped away from the Sonora Kid's weapon.

Shorty's .45 swung around in a

menacing arc, covering them all impartially.

"Hold it, Willie!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. Then: "All right, you ungrateful skunks! Lift your guns out with your thumbs and one finger—and let 'em drop on the ground. And keep your dewclaws away from them triggers!"

Sullenly, the men obeyed. There was a clatter on the ground. The Sonora Kid chuckled.

"You better go off somewhere and practice that draw, Steel," he advised. "It's slower than Christmas."

"I'll git you for this!" threatened the Bridlebit owner. "You can't git that wagon outfit out of the Chisos without bein' filled full of lead! I'll see—"

"You'll turn around and march!" Shorty said. "Lift 'em high, gents. Start east, and keep goin'! Come on, Willie!"

The Sonora Kid swung into his saddle. There were fourteen men trudging across the divide with their hands in the air—fourteen growling, swearing men. Even Bill Carson of the Box C seemed to have forgotten that the freighter and his pard had saved many sections of grass.

"What'll we do with 'em?" Willie chuckled as Shorty straddled the mule.

"Make 'em walk as far as the wagons, jest to keep us company," the freighter said, grinning. "Then they can go back and git their hosses and guns. And if Thad Steel wants more of the same, he can foller us."

"We'll tail you, all right!" Steel swore. "You'll never git to town alive, you mangy hide thieves. There ain't nothin' lower than an hombre who'd kill a cow fer its hide!"

"Except a buzzard who'd take a pot shot at somebody with a .30-30!" Shorty retorted, remembering that mysterious bullet. "Now—jest stand

by here while I hitch up!"

He put the black mule back into the traces and climbed to the wagon seat. The Sonora Kid was holding the bunch under his gun and greatly enjoying their discomfiture. Shorty shook the reins over the Sextet and waved to Willie.

"Let 'em go!" he said. "That'll make two bunches of dogs loose in these parts!"

Thad Steel started in a lumbering rush for the spot where he and the other men had left their horses, a safe distance from the fire line. Bill Carson and the rest strung along after him. Shorty's grin left his lips, and his face became suddenly grim.

"They meant what they said, Willie!" he declared in a low voice. "And there's fourteen of 'em to two of us. I reckon we won't head up the Tarantula road, after all!" Scorn edged his words: "We ain't goin' to let that pack of rats keep us off'n no road, are we?"

The mule driver shook his head. "Not for long. But I got a hunch. And beside—there's them wild dogs. We'll double back down into the hills, and we'll see if we can pick up two or three of them half lobos, jest for luck!"

He sent the Sextet into the road at a gallop. It would be only a matter of minutes until the ranchmen and their crews reached the horses. A little later they would retrieve their guns—and then they would come shooting. It wasn't fear of the odds against them that had caused Shorty to chage his plans about going on to town.

"You kinda hate to shoot an hombre jest because he makes a mistake," the teamster explained to his tall pard. "Them brands was plain enough, all right, I reckon you can't blame Steel and Carson for thinkin' mebbe we killed their beef steers!"

Wetherbee nodded, his face grim in the shadow of his Stetson. "That makes the Mex look mighty guilty!" he said. "Let's head back for Victorio and find out!"

"Not so pronto as all that," grinned Shorty. "De la Rosa and his men are in the business of hides and dried beef. They could have bought them cattle from any rustler. Let's lay around th' Rio first—and catch them dogs, or wolves, or whatever they are!"

"You sure are set on corralin' them lobos, ain't you?" Willie drawled. "I'll make you a little bet. I'll bet you a new collar for Tscha—for Tschai—well, I'll bet you a new collar for Chopin against a new saddle blanket for Tumbleweed that we don't git to town with a single dog!"

The mules went down into a dip, and the wagon wheels clattered on draw rocks. This was what Shorty had been hoping for. He turned the Sextet sharply and went down the bed of the dry wash, where the outfit would leave no tracks.

"I'll take that bet!" he told the Sonora Kid quietly, and grinned to himself in the darkness.

The draw wound southeast, cutting deeper and deeper into the level of the divide until it became a canyon. Shorty slowed the mules to a walk, and twice he halted them entirely too listen. There was no sound of pursuit. Steel and Bill Carson had lost the trail, and it would scarcely occur to them that a pair of hombres accused of being skinning thieves would hide out at the very scene of the supposed crime.

The second time Shorty pulled leather on the mules, the trail parads heard more than the wind over the canyon rim.

Once more the wild pack was giving tongue—and once more they seemed to be behind the wagons.

"Them lobos like the smell of that jerky!" Shorty drawled. "Little farther toward the Rio, and we'll set a trap for 'em!"

IV.

The freight outfit rumbled to a halt beneath the point of a hill that was less than half a mile from the Rio Grande, and Shorty dallied his reins around the brake handle and swung down to unhitch and hobble the mules.

There was a grove of live oaks to screen the wagons from the eyes of any rider who might pass along the brow of the hill, and the camp was still near enough the Lobo Canyon trail for Shorty to watch in the hope that the slender hunch he had would prove correct.

Felipe de la Rosa might be the cattle thief. But it was inconceivable that a Mexican outfit could raid Texas cattle over a period of months and not be suspected—not be seen on the northern side of the river.

Staccato yelps broke out suddenly and trailed into an eerie, howling wail. The mule driver jerked a glance up the slope of the rocky point. The Sonora Kid, peeling his saddle off Tumbleweed, whirled and looked.

Both saw the lean, gaunt shapes that moved against the sprinkle of stars, there on the rimrock. Lobos! The wild pack had trailed the smell of jerky and green hides.

"Reckon I'll stake these here mules, instead of hobblin' 'em!" Shorty breathed. "You better do Tumbleweed the same way. Only let's put 'em out here in the trees, away from the wagons. I'm goin' to set my trap!"

Shorty tied a piece o' stout tarp from the wagon bow to the top of the end gate. He raised the end gate as high as it would lift in the slotted

side boards, then propped it there with a stick of mesquite. From the stick, he led his rope through the wagon and through the small vent in the front of the wagon sheet.

Then he spread his bedding roll in the middle vehicle, on top of the tarp that covered the green hides, and he lifted the canvas over the jerky and got a few chunks of the meat. This he scattered on the floor of the last wagon for bait.

Willie understood, now. A jerk on that rope would pull the prop out and let the end gate fall. The wolves couldn't jump over it, because of the tarp Shorty had hung. And the front vent of the wagon sheet was too small for a lobo to go through.

"I'm goin' to sleep under the wagon!" announced the cowboy. "Them critters are wild and smart, Shorty. You know what I think you are goin' to catch? Instead of catchin' some lobos for luck, I figger you are goin' to catch a cold from sleepin' on them green hides!"

Shorty chuckled as he crawled into his bedding. "You better be measurin' Chopin for that new collar!" he retorted good-naturedly.

For a long time, the mule driver lay with his eyes wide, watching the stars as they swung slowly past the vent in the bowed canvas. The wild pack howled again, then was silent for a space. Shorty tried to reason out the mystery of the cattle that disappeared by fives and sixes. Anybody crossing the Rio to rustle cattle surely would take a greater number than that.

Maybe, he thought, the ranchmen's first theory was correct. Perhaps these half-breed dogs did what lobos seldom, if ever, accomplished. Perhaps they pulled down grown steers, instead of the usual calves or an occasional yearling.

"Mebbe," Shorty muttered, drowsily, "that's where Felipe gits his beef to jerk—from the cattle the lobos killed. Only they woudn't leave much, and the hides would be chewed up somewhat."

He drifted into slumber, then. And when he awoke, dawn was in the sky—and there was scratching and snarling in the last wagon.

Shorty remembered at once, and retached for the end of the riata. For a few tense seconds he held it, waiting to make sure that more than one of the marauders was in the trap he had set.

Then he jerked the line. There was a crash as the end gate fell, a yelp and a violence of claws that dug at the wagon's side boards.

Shorty jumped to his hands and knees and started to go out the front of the wagon to inspect his catch. At that instant he caught the wink of gun flame outside the bowed canvas, and heard Willie Wetherbee's shout in the flattening echoes of the shot:

"Shorty! Somebody's after the mules and Tumbleweed!"

The Sonora Kid's gun blazed again. Lead came flying back, to scream from a wagon tire, and the gun cracked in the live oaks.

Shorty Masters tumbled out the front of the wagon, still minus his boots. But his .45 was in his grip, and he carried the cartridge belt and holster in his other hand.

Flame stabbed the shadows that were still deep under the trees. The mule driver whipped up his gun and let the hammer fall as the flash winked into nothingness.

Something struck the dry leaves and threshed there. A dark shape scurried behind the bole of a live oak, then dodged for another tree, farther on.

Shorty and Willie both cracked down at this hombre. A man's voice

lifted in a harsh command: "Fog it, boys!" There was a sudden clatter of horses' hoofs, a straggle of gunfire that thrust back at the camp.

"We got one!" Shorty panted. "Let's see who he is!"

He limped forward, still holding the gun ready. A man lay huddled in the drift of oak leaves, and the Sonora Kid turned him over. He was a Mexican, his teeth bared by lips that had frozen in a twisted spasm of pain, and he was dead.

Neither of the trail pards had seen him before.

"This don't clear up nothin'!" Shorty exclaimed. "We got to git to the bottom of this, Willie, else when we start for town we'll have every outfit in this part of the country on our tails! And right now we got to move camp again!"

"I'm sure tired of movin' camp!" protested the hotheaded puncher. "I'd rather have a shoot-out with Steel and Carson and the rest of them buzzards!"

Shorty shook his head. "Not till we can prove—"

A bark from the wagons interrupted him. He whirled and beckoned for Willie to follow. In the excitement of the attempted raid on the team, he had forgotten that there were lobos in his trap.

Now the wagon was filled with snarls and growls, followed by a vicious snapping of teeth and a sharp howl of pain.

"You won't ever git 'em back to Tarantula alive!" said the Sonora Kid. "They'll kill each other. Lobos are the most ferocious kind of wolves there are, I reckon."

"Let's take a look and see how many there are," Shorty muttered.

He approached the wagon cautiously. As he stepped on a spoke of the rear wheel, there was a distance-dulled crack floating up from

the direction of the Rio Grande.

"Listen!" breathed Wetherbee. "That's a .30-30!"

Shorty nodded. The rifle barked again. Three—four—six shots. The last came in rapid-fire order; the way a deer hunter might pump the lever of his gun when a buck was on the run across the canyon from him.

"Come on!" urged the Sonora Kid. "Them may be the same buzzards that tried to steal Tumbleweed and the mules. If they was Mexicans, they would head for the Rio! Sling a saddle on Chopin, and let's go!"

Shorty climbed on up the wheel. "Jest as soon as I see how many lobos I caught!" he said, and took hold of the side of the wagon sheet. Then he lifted the stout tarp, and peered into the gloomy interior of the wagon bed with slowly-widening eyes.

"Willie!" he gasped. "Come, look!"

The tall waddy hurried to the wheel and climbed up. As he saw the animals Shorty had caught in his lobo trap, the Sonora Kid first gasped with amazement, then let out a roar of laughter.

There were three dogs in the wagon, and none had ever remotely known wild-wolf blood! All three were long-eared, spotted hounds—and as docile, now that all the scraps of jerky had disappeared, as any lap dog!

V.

Willie slapped his knee. "There's your lobos!" he yelled. "Them ain't even wild dogs—they're jest ordinary hounds from some ranch!"

"Yeah!" Shorty muttered in disgust. Then he brightened. "Sure—that's it, Willie. They're from some ranch, and probably it's th' outfit that tried to rustle our stock!"

He jumped down then, and hurried to get his boots out of the

wagon where he had slept. Then he dragged his saddle out to where Chopin was tethered, and grimly cinched the hull on the black mule.

The Sonora Kid's eyes lighted at the prospect of action. He threw his own gear on Tumbleweed. "You mean—" he began.

"I mean them pups will head for home. They probably follered the gents that sneaked down here a while ago. And if we foller the dogs, we can find out a couple of things!"

"I savvy!" said Willie. "Let's go!"

Shorty lifted the end gate, and the three hounds leaped out joyously, to run with their noses to the ground, in widening circles. The trail pards swung into their saddles and watched.

Out past the dead Mexican the dogs went, and one lifted a mournful howl. Up on the rimrocks, in the gray of dawn, a lobo answered. There was a wild pack, all right, but as the Sonora Kid had suspected, it was too wild to come around the wagons.

Then the hounds struck the trail of the man who had run from tree to tree to reach his horse. They started in a swift trot, noses still close to the ground and tails wagging. The freighter and his cowboy sidekick spurred their mounts after them.

"Headin' toward the divide!" exclaimed Willie. "It's some of them same highbinders that accused us of bein' skinnin' thieves!"

"Mebbe!" said Shorty, keeping his eyes glued on the swiftly moving hounds.

The dogs were going up toward the rimrock, all right. But, just below the limestone cap on the rocky point, they halted and acted as if confused. For a minute they milled, sniffing the cold rocks—and then they turned over the brow of the slant and

headed down toward the Rio Grande!

The black mule, as sure-footed as a mountain goat, breasted the rise before Tumbleweed. Shorty Masters looked down to see the border river, twisting silver in the first light of day. Up there was the shallow crossing where Felipe de la Rosa had guided him and Willie, and had seemed so solicitous about their safety.

Shorty Masters jerked rein suddenly and stared. There was something on the Rio Grande. Two—three objects, mirrored in the stream. They moved, and the water rippled. Shorty could see, now, that they were rowboats, heading for the Texas shore.

He pulled the black mule back out of sight, and surveyed the strip of wild desolation that lay between the hill and the river. Yonder went the dogs—at the bottom of the slope, now. And beyond them were horsemen. Four—six riders.

The Sonora Kid rode up. Shorty pointed without a word, and the tall puncher's eyes narrowed.

"Somethin' crooked!" he drawled. "I cain't figger what it is. But there's five or six hombres in them boats."

The horsemen disappeared in a fringe of willows. Shorty reined the mule around to go downhill and still keep out of sight of the boatman.

Those riders might have had warning of a rustlers' raid on Texas range, and were moving in to head the *bandidos* off. But, on the other hand, rustlers would be crippled without horses, and you couldn't bring horses over in rowboats.

The mule-skinner and his pard were coming in behind the line of willows, now, and the boats were out of sight. A few cattle hurried up from the fringe of trees as if frightened at something. Shorty motioned

for the Sonora Kid to slow his horse and ride cautiously.

He eased the six-gun out of its leather and gripped it firmly. At any instant now the fighting might start!

The boats' prows grated on the sand, and the oars were dropped. Shorty peered through the willows, drawing a thick branch aside. He saw the group of Americans, and the men who wore sombreros coming up the bank toward them. Then he saw more—five dead steers lying on the gravel bar beside the water!

There was a voice, then, harsh and strangely familiar. Thad Steel's voice.

"Felipe, you're a fool! I told you to do your killin' at sundown, when the Box C beef comes down to drink. Then you can come over and git the carcasses while it's dark. Now, time you git back over, it'll be broad daylight!"

Felipe de la Rosa's broad face creased in a smile, and he shrugged his thick shoulders. "Tonight," he said, "we keel more!"

"No!" Thad Steel shook his head. "Not yet. You got to take it easy for a spell. That business of sellin' the stuff in Tarantula backfired. Carson seen the wagons."

"But I sent the mule-skinner up the Lobo Canyon trail!"

"I know," Steel nodded. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, nobody would have spotted him on that trail. It jest happened there was a fire in Carson's pasture—and the mule driver helped put it out. I seen it would be a good idea to put the suspicion on him, and I done it. But he got away. My dogs trailed him for me. He got the best of that little visit this mornin'—but we're goin' back with more men. I heard you shootin' and come down here to

warn you. Take it easy fer a few days, till Carson calms down. Meantime, we'll string that mule-skinner and his pard up for a lesson. Savvy?"

De la Rosa understood, all right. And so did Shorty and the Sonora Kid.

There was a sharp click beside the freighter. Willie had thumbed his hammer back to full cock, and was impatient to start slinging lead.

The mule driver let the willow branch swing back in place. There was no use waiting any longer. Now they knew the secret of the cattle that vanished in dribbles—when a rifle cracked in Mexico at the Box C steers' watering time—and they knew why Thad Steel was bent on seeing that the trail pards didn't get out of the country alive.

Shorty swung the black mule around to find the trail that broke through the willows. It lay ahead of him, a narrow path between two walls of green.

He dug spurs into Chopin's flanks. There was a wild Comanche yell on the lips of the tall puncher who crowded up beside him.

"Reach, you buzzards!" shouted Shorty, and let his hammer down on a thundering blast.

Gun flame licked brightly past the green leaves. A bullet struck the gravel bar, and the three dogs howled and fled. Thad Steel whirled with curse words dripping from his thick, sagging lips. His little eyes were hard and slitted as his gun cleared leather.

It spouted smoke and flame. The slug clipped a green branch at Shorty's ear, and was the first of a dozen bullets to pour into the willows.

The Mexicans ran for their boats, with De la Rosa bellowing like an angry bull, but the freighter knew they

would be back. He slammed another shot into the ranks of the Bridlebit men, and saw a skirny hombre measure his length in the gravel, clawing at it.

"Off your hoss, Willie!" Shorty said in a low voice, and went plunging sidewise into the springy willow branches from the mule's back.

Lead screamed over the saddle he had just quitted. There was a triumphant shout from Thad Steel as the Sonora Kid half fell into the brush on the other side of the trail.

Chopin and Tumbleweed wheeled and dashed back the way they had come, stirrups rattling emptily. And now Thad Steel and the four remaining Bridlebit hombres were on the run in a confident charge.

Shorty hugged the ground and peered along the trail as he thumbed back his hammer again. The Sonora Kid understood this strategy. The trail was narrow, and when four men entered it at once—

Shots crashed. Two of the four went down hard. Thad Steel mouthed another curse and plunged on, his heavy face twisted in a murderous frenzy. He thrust a flaming gun at the leafy covert where Shorty crouched, and the freighter felt a bullet rip through his jumper sleeve and tear the skin from his wrist to his elbow.

He triggered again then, without feeling the gun or its shock. But he saw Thad Steel's knees buckle and saw the big hombre stumble to pitch forward and smear his face in the dirt, a froth of crimson on the coarse lips that were framing another oath.

The fourth man tried to retreat. Felipe de la Rosa collided with him—De la Rosa and the .30-30 with which he killed cattle across the Rio Grande. The Mexican whipped up

the rifle and pulled trigger once.

As the sharp *spang* of the Winchester ripped through the willows, the Sonora Kid and Shorty fired together.

Both men were down, De la Rosa grunting and squealing like a pig, and the American coughing horribly. And now the other Mexicans made a run for their boats.

Wetherbee leaped to his feet and sent shots crashing after them. One howled and fell, to pull himself up and limp into the edge of the stream in time to tumble into a boat. Shorty's gun was empty, and he was reloading when the hoofbeats came hammering out of the north.

The pards sprang to the other side of the thicket, ready to meet another attack. But it was Bill Carson and the Box C riders, and Shorty holstered his gun.

Carson rode up at the head of his men. Without a word, he looked over the scene, then turned to Shorty.

"From the way the bodies are lyin', I'd figger Egan and the Mexicans was on the same side," he drawled.

Shorty nodded. "Yeah. They been shootin' your cattle and sellin' the hides and the jerked beef."

"Egan said there wasn't nothin' lower than a skinnin' thief," the rancher observed. "I reckon he ought to know. I'm plumb sorry you two hombres had to git mixed up in it."

The Sonora Kid chuckled. "We shore had some fun while it lasted," he said. "And luck, too. Them lobos you caught, Shorty—they brung us luck, I reckon."

The mule driver grinned. "And Tumbleweed a new blanket," he said. "That's one bet I don't mind payin' at all, Willie!"

RAWHIDE RUNYAN'S QUICKSAND TRAIL

by CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "Obey the Law," etc.



RAWHIDE RUNYAN'S QUICKSAND TRAIL

It was a trail in quicksand—and it stayed clear to the gun-red end!

By Chuck Martin

CHAPTER I.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

SLOW JOE HILL was feeding the horses in the big new barn when Rawhide Runyan heard a horse gallop into the Diamond Double R yard, and stop at the rail in front of his house. Rawhide was cooking breakfast in the kitchen, with a flour-sack apron tied around his lean hips.

"Light down and cool your saddle," he called cordially, and flipped a pancake dexterously. Slow Joe liked his cakes browned on both sides, and Rawhide slid the skillet under the flapjack with the certainty of long practice.

"Set up and have scoffins with Joe and me," he invited, and turned his head to identify the early visitor.

His left hand pushed the skillet aside as he stared at the muzzle of a .45 six-gun. A pair of angry brown eyes stared back at him from over the cocked weapon, and the slim hand holding the gun was steady as a rock. Then a husky humming voice gave him his first order of the day.

"Stand hitched or I'll press trigger, Rawhide Runyan. I'm just the outrider for the posse, and I'm holding you until they ride in!"

Rawhide frowned and reached out to set the boiling coffeepot away from the fire. The speaker behind the threatening six-gun was a pretty girl, with strong rounded shoulders

and curly brown hair. He smiled as a sudden thought came to him.

"I don't know what caused you to get up your hackles, Bonnie Ferguson," he said quietly. "But you are the first woman ever to set foot in the Diamond Double R house. Have your breakfast yet?"

The girl tightened her red lips and leaned back against the wall. She wore a divided leather skirt and high-heeled boots, and her gray flannel shirt was tight across her full, high-breasted figure. A leather quirt dangled from her left wrist, and a small-brimmed black Stetson was pushed back on her curly head, hanging from the latch under her tanned throat.

"I'll eat later," she said sharply. "Keep your hands high!"

Rawhide Runyan stopped his right hand that had swept down as the thud of hoofs sounded in the front yard. He smiled ruefully, remembering that his holster was under the flour-sack apron, and his gray eyes narrowed when the thump of boots rattled on the front porch.

The muscles tensed in his wide shoulders as he raised both hands and leaned forward. He seemed taller than his five feet nine when he teetered on the toes of his boots. His upper body was like a tempered wedge, sloping down to lean hips, and there was but little curve in his powerful legs that could grip the barrel of a mustang like whalebone stays.

"Why the stick-up?" he asked quietly. "I'd like to know what put you on the prod thisaway."

Three stern-faced men stepped into the kitchen before the girl could answer. Jud Brannigan and Cole Fenton both had six-guns in their hands, with the hammers back for quick shooting. Jay Cummings was holding Rawhide's heavy reefer coat in his left hand, while he pointed to a bulge in one pocket with his right.

"Howdy, neighbors," Rawhide murmured, but his eyes turned smoky when Jay Cummings ran his hand down into the pocket of the heavy coat.

Jay Cummings was about the same size as Rawhide Runyan, and several years older. Rawhide was twenty-four, but experience counted for more than years in the wild range country bordering the Arizona Strip. Cummings ran the J Bar C brand, and his home spread consisted of a section of deeded land, with his herd running into the badlands on open range.

Cummings took a deep breath and stared at Runyan while his hand fumbled in the coat pocket. Then he slowly withdrew his hand and held out a heavy leather moneybag. Breath hissed from the tight lips of the other two men as they jabbed forward with their cocked six-guns.

"That's dad's moneybag," Bonnie Ferguson gasped, and the humming vibrations in her husky voice brought Rawhide Runyan up straight.

"How did Donald Ferguson's bag get in my coat pocket?" he asked slowly, and he was talking to himself. "Old Donald had that bag last night when I rode in to pay my bill."

"After which you sneaked back like a wolf after dad and I went to bed," the girl accused through tightly clenched teeth. "You beat him over

the head with your gun while he was asleep, and you robbed him!"

Her brown eyes blazed, and she leaned forward across her gun with her finger trembling on the trigger. A sudden move would trip the hammer, and Rawhide Runyan almost stopped breathing while he watched the angry color drain slowly from the girl's face. Then she moaned softly and dropped her right arm to her side.

"I nearly shot you," she whispered shakily, and her shoulders began to droop. "You pretended to be dad's friend."



RAWHIDE RUNYAN

Rawhide glanced away from the girl and studied the face of Jay Cummings. He knew what had happened without asking foolish questions. Someone had bludgeoned the storekeeper at Quicksand, and had robbed Donald Ferguson of three thousand dollars. The tall, rawboned Scot had showed Rawhide the money, and had told him of the mortgage he intended to clear at the bank in Rainbow.

"You had us all fooled, Runyan," Jud Brannigan spoke up thickly.

"We thought you was law-abiding, and all the time you were waiting your time, waiting for a chance. We found the prints of your boots down there at Ferguson's store, and Jay found a concha ripped from your reefer!"

Rawhide Runyan stared at the two cattlemen with a question in his smoky gray eyes. Jud Brannigan and Cole Fenton were both old-timers in high Arizona. Every rancher from Rainbow to the Strip would listen when they began to talk. Jay Cummings was different, and Rawhide took a deep breath and turned to face the J Bar C owner.

Cummings was holding out Runyan's heavy storm coat, pointing to a button torn from the woolen cloth. Three silver conchas were fastened with stout linen thread, engraved with Runyan's Diamond Double R brand. Cummings opened his right hand and spoke in a slow tone of regret.

"I wouldn't have believed it, Rawhide, but we found this button in Ferguson's bedroom."

"Bonnie came roaring up to my place just after daybreak," Jud Brannigan added gruffly. "I saddled up and rode over to get Cole Fenton, and we picked up Jay on the way to the crossing. We found that concha like Cummings said."

Rawhide Runyan listened like a man in a dream. Old Donald Ferguson had loaned him a thousand dollars with which to buy some weaner calves. He had paid back that loan the previous night, and had left the store about ten o'clock. His eyes narrowed as he turned to Bonnie Ferguson and asked a sharp question:

"Is old Donald—dead?"

The girl whirled around and half raised the gun in her right hand.

"You sneak!" she blazed furiously,

and then her shoulders began to sag as she caught the look in his gray eyes. "He isn't dead," she whispered. "But he is still unconscious."

"I didn't rob Ferguson," Runyan said slowly. "He was one of the best friends I had. You know that, Bonnie. You know what I did last night when I paid him what I owed him."

"We heard about that," Jay Cummings sneered softly. "You paid Donald that thousand, and you loaned him five hundred more to clean up his note. It might go easier for you if you want to come clean. Where did you hide that three thousand dollars?"

Rawhide Runyan felt his muscles jerk, but he controlled the impulse to leap at his accuser and choke the lie down Jay Cummings' throat. Brannigan and Fenton were watching with the hammers of their guns under calloused thumbs, and Rawhide relaxed when he saw Cummings smile.

"The gent who robbed old Donald must have left some sign," Rawhide said slowly, and his voice was harsh with the anger that throbbled through his muscular frame. "I'd like to ride over there and take a look."

"You'll ride to the jail at Rainbow," Jay Cummings corrected grimly. "There were two men in that holdup, and Bonnie saw them ride away!"

Rawhide Runyan glanced at the girl with a question in his eyes. Bonnie Ferguson bit her lips, and her husky voice answered his unspoken question.

"It was you and that outlaw you took in!" she accused. "That big killer who can break a man with his hands. I'd know Slow Joe Hill anywhere!"

Rawhide Runyan recoiled as though he had been struck a blow in

the face. Slow Joe knew about the payment of Rawhide's loan, but the big ex-outlaw had been asleep in his room when Rawhide returned from the store at Quicksand. He would have trusted Joe with his life. Yet Bonnie Ferguson had a reputation for honesty and courage. The girl was evidently telling the truth.

"It couldn't have been Joe," he heard himself saying just above his breath, and then he turned to face Jay Cummings.

"I'll surrender my gun, but I demand the right to ride down to the crossing for a look," he said harshly.

"You'll surrender your gun, and you'll ride to jail," Cummings corrected bluntly. "Cover him, men, and I'll trim his horns!"

CHAPTER II.

A CHANCE FOR HIS TAW.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN spread his boots, and his eyes began to gleam through narrow slits. Jay Cummings dropped the coat and took a step forward, but he jumped back when a deep voice bellowed from the door behind Runyan.

"Drop those cutters, hombres! Or I'll trip both hammers on that scatter gun, and it's loaded with buckshot!"

Rawhide Runyan held his hands high and steady while he watched the six-guns in the hands of Jud Brannigan and Cole Fenton. He knew that Slow Joe Hill was not bluffing about that shotgun, and he could tell from the faces of the three men that they also knew it. Both guns thudded to the floor, and Rawhide moved like a cat when Bonnie Ferguson recovered from the shock of surprise.

The dangling gun came up in the girl's hand just as Rawhide reached her. She was facing Slow Joe, who

stood in the back doorway, and Rawhide slapped at the gun and caught the spiked hammer on his thumb just as Bonnie Ferguson pressed the trigger.

Rawhide jerked the gun away and held the girl with his left arm. She struggled furiously until his slow, deep voice penetrated her anger, lashing at her conduct like the thongs of a whip.

"Nobody but a woman would try a fool play like that," Rawhide continued. "You figured Joe wouldn't press trigger agin' you, but you wasn't above shooting him. You figure a woman is different from a man, even though she has a gun in her fist!"

Jay Cummings had gone pale when Slow Joe had shifted the double-barreled shotgun in his huge freckled hands. Rawhide drew the girl back out of the line of fire, and he jabbed with the six-gun he had taken from Bonnie as Cummings shifted to use the girl as a shield.

"Stay back there, Cummings," Rawhide barked. "A gun is a gun to Slow Joe, no matter who holds it. Now you stand hitched while I do some talking on my own!"

"Birds of a feather flock together," Cummings growled softly. "You couldn't change that outlaw pard of yores, so you decided to join up with him."

"That's an idea," Rawhide answered, and released his hold on Bonnie Ferguson. "You gents branded me outlaw without waiting to hear my side of the story, and I mean to have the chance to prove you wrong."

"You won't get far," Cummings sneered. "I'm riding to Rainbow for the sheriff."

"You're staying right here," Rawhide contradicted bluntly. "Now I

want to know how that moneybag got in my coat pocket."

He turned to Jud Brannigan when no one made answer. Brannigan was past fifty, but his tall frame was like seasoned oak from long days in the saddle. The J B cattleman was scratching his chin while his narrowed blue eyes watched the face of Cummings.

"Your coat was hanging on a chair in the front room," he told Rawhide. "Cummings reached it first and picked it up, but we all saw him pull that leather sack from the left-hand pocket."

Rawhide growled in his throat and stepped back while he tried to solve the puzzle. He had declared war on the outlaws that infested the badlands back in the Strip, and every cattleman in the country owed him a debt of gratitude because of his efforts to stop rustling.

His own Diamond Double R spread had been bought with the money he had earned from recovering stolen stock. His barns and corals had been burned once, but the outlaw who started the fire had more than paid for the damage. Now Rawhide was marked as an outlaw, and he knew the temper of the Arizona ranchers.

"I'm asking for a chance, and I mean to take it," he announced grimly. "Cummings found that concha off my coat, and he found Ferguson's money sack in my coat pocket. It's my guess that he knows too much about me and Slow Joe, but a few hours one way or another won't matter much."

"You might fool Brannigan and Fenton," Cummings said nastily. "But you can't fool me with all that palaver. You saw a good chance to pay what you owed, and get a nice stake in the bargain, but Bonnie and me mean to make you pay."

"Bonnie and you, eh?" Rawhide echoed, and turned to study the girl.

Bonnie Ferguson flushed and tossed her curly head. "I'll find the man who robbed dad if it takes me all my life," she promised in her husky voice. "And I didn't ask *you* for any help, Jay Cummings!"

"That's the way I had it figured," Rawhide murmured with a nod. "You've ramrodded every play so far, Cummings. Now I'm taking over, and I'm coming to take your gun!"

Jay Cummings scowled, but he kept both hands high when Rawhide advanced behind the girl's gun and emptied his holster. Rawhide picked up the other weapons from the floor, and motioned with his head for Slow Joe to come into the room.

"Bonnie and me are going to ride over to Quicksand and take a look around," he said quietly. "You won't have any trouble with Jud and Cole, but you want to watch Cummings, Joe. Cut down on him if he tries to get away."

"This sawed-off runs nine shot to the barrel," Joe said pointedly. "I never left the spread last night, and it's up to you to prove it, Rawhide. We'll all be here when you and the gal ride back."

Jud Brannigan glanced at Cole Fenton and drew a deep breath. Fenton lowered his hands and sat down on his boot heels, smiling wryly.

"A feller ought to have a chance for his law," he said slowly. "Ride on over to the crossing, Rawhide, but if you're shooting square, you better send Bonnie into Rainbow town for the sheriff."

"If he could slug an old man in his sleep, he could do the same to Bonnie and make his getaway," Cummings growled. "I never did



"Let me see that gun, Rawhide!"

trust that Jasper since the day he rode into the Strip!"

Rawhide controlled the swift anger that rippled through his wiry body. Then he ignored Cummings and spoke softly to Jud Brannigan.

"My outfit is worth all of fifteen thousand, Jud. You and Cole Fen-

ton are witnesses, and you can turn the whole works over to Bonnie if I don't come back."

"This outfit won't do a dead woman any good," Cummings insinuated harshly. "Let's jump him, men. He can't get all of us!"

Rawhide faced the J Bar C man and stuck Bonnie Ferguson's captured gun down in his belt. His gray eyes were smoldering as he stepped in front of Slow Joe's shotgun, and the huge wide-shouldered ex-outlaw growled and covered Brannigan and Fenton.

"You jump me," Rawhide invited softly.

Jay Cummings uncoiled like a steel spring and leaped from the wall. Rawhide stepped to the side and struck once with his right fist. The blow caught Cummings on the chin while he was in midair, and he dropped to the floor on his face.



BONNIE FERGUSON

Brannigan and Fenton grunted and leaned back against the wall. Bonnie Ferguson stared at the fallen man, but it was the deep voice of Slow Joe which broke the silence.

"Better slip a piggin' string around that hombre's wrists, Rawhide. I won't hit him with my fist if he rouses round and goes on the prod," and he tapped the stock of his shotgun with his left hand.

Rawhide caught a thong from a peg and slipped the loop over the unconscious man's left wrist. Then he caught the right hand and drew it up tight, and Cummings was trussed with his hands behind his back when Rawhide finished his ties and picked Cummings up easily and propped him against the side wall. After that

he straightened up and turned to the girl.

"Do you want to ride over to the store with me or stay here?" he asked her quietly.

"I'll ride," Bonnie Ferguson answered without hesitation.

"Yore Shadow hoss is saddled and tied to the rail," Slow Joe told Rawhide. "Keep yore eyes skinned, and don't stay away too long."

"I'll be back within two hours," Rawhide promised, and watched the faces of his neighbors while he spoke.

Jud Brannigan nodded and reached for his papers and tobacco. "So far, you've always played with the law, Rawhide," he said quietly. "If you've changed now, the law will catch up with you eventually, and on top of that you stand to lose a nice start here!"

Rawhide nodded and turned to the girl. He stood aside and pointed to the front door, and Bonnie Ferguson passed him and walked through the front room. Rawhide followed and waited until she had mounted her horse, and the girl rode over to the tie rail where a big black was tethered.

Rawhide pulled the slipknot and climbed his handmade saddle. Then he neck-reined and rode beside the girl as they left the ranch yard and started toward the low hills beyond the fringe of timber that bordered the Diamond Double R.

They rode in silence until they topped the first rolling hill. Down below they could see Wolf Creek gleaming in the bright yellow sunlight. Rawhide drew the girl's six-gun and extended it to her by the barrel.

"I didn't rob old Donald," he said simply. "He was the best friend I had up here, and I mean to get the men who beat him up. Here's your gun, Bonnie!"

The girl gasped and stared at the light weapon with surprise mirrored in her dark eyes. Then she slowly reached out and took the six-gun, and for a moment she hesitated while the muzzle covered the cowboy's heart. He smiled as she holstered the weapon on her right leg.

"Here's the cartridges," he murmured, and held out his left hand.

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPED.

BONNIE FERGUSON bit her lips and stared at the five brass shells in his palm. She flushed as she remembered the moment of hesitation when she had been tempted to take advantage of his carelessness, with the gun in her hand, while his own weapon was snugged down in the holster.

"Thanks, Rawhide," she said in her low, humming voice. "I promise not to take advantage of my sex again."

Rawhide watched as she thumbed the shells through the loading gate of her six-gun. Bonnie Ferguson seated the weapon in her holster, and she rode in silence with her head down, while her dark eyes squinted thoughtfully.

"Slow Joe Hill," she whispered suddenly—"I saw him riding into the timber on the other side of the creek. I'd know those wide shoulders anywhere, and he was an outlaw until you beat him half to death and then gave him a job."

"It wasn't Joe," Rawhide contradicted positively. "I sleep like a cat, and Joe was pounding his ear when I got up this morning."

"We should have looked at his horse," the girl sighed. "You cooked breakfast while he fed the saddle stock. You didn't go inside the barn before we left."

"Joe is slow all over," he told the girl. "That goes for his mind, too, and the gent who robbed your father was a fast thinker, or had someone to do his thinking for him."

Bonnie Ferguson flashed a look at Rawhide with a sudden intake of breath. He read the suspicion in her eyes and in the thrust of her shoulders, and his face clouded with the knowledge that some of her suspicion was again directed against himself.

"Someone had it all planned carefully," Bonnie Ferguson said, as though talking to herself. "Someone who did the thinking for the both of them."

The horses had climbed to the top of the rise while they had been talking, and the girl nicked with her spurs when the store building down below reminded her sharply of her father. Runyan's black tried to take the lead, but the cowboy held it back and followed Bonnie Ferguson down the steep trail leading to the back of the store.

"Jud Brannigan's wife is with dad," she told Rawhide, and touched her lips for silence when she grounded her horse and started for the kitchen.

Mary Brannigan met them at the bedroom door when Bonnie led the way through the neat kitchen. Jud Brannigan's wife was a big woman of middle age, and her gray eyes swept past the girl and studied Rawhide Runyan's hard face. Then she advanced slowly and held out her right hand.

"Let me see your gun, Rawhide," she said quietly, in a firm, deep voice.

Rawhide gave back a step and leaned forward with his right hand dipping down to his holster. He could not conceal his surprise, but he reversed the gun and handed it to Mary Brannigan.

She took the balanced weapon and handled it expertly. The girl had entered the bedroom, and Mary Brannigan smiled and returned Rawhide's six-gun.

"Donald Ferguson was clubbed on the head with a six-gun, but not with this one," she told him quietly. "There was a break in the handle right close to the butt, and I'm wishing you luck in your hunting, Rawhide. Come in and take a look."

She turned slowly and entered the bedroom with Runyan following on his tiptoes. Bonnie Ferguson was kneeling beside the bed, biting her lips to keep back the tears. Donald Ferguson looked like a dead man with his gray head heavily bandaged and his blue eyes staring glassily at the ceiling.

His thin face was like parchment except for the carefully trimmed Vandyke beard of graying black. Suddenly his pallid lips began to move, and then they heard his weak voice with the burr of Scotland even in his delirium.

"I dinna like that mon, Rawhide, or the way he looks at my Bonnie."

Rawhide Runyan dropped to his knees and touched the wounded man's right hand. He racked his brain to remember something that Ferguson had said that would give him a clue, and then he glanced at the girl.

Bonnie Ferguson was staring at her father's face with a startled gleam in her dark eyes. Mary Brannigan touched them both on the shoulders and jerked her head toward the kitchen. Her face was grim when she tightened her lips and spoke to Bonnie.

"Name this man, child. And you, Rawhide Runyan. Do some thinking and remembering!"

Bonnie Ferguson shuddered and slowly shook her head. Donald Fer-

guson was a tight-mouthed Scot, and, like his kind, he kept his suspicions to himself until he was sure of them. There was no doubt as to her honesty as she shook her head slowly and spoke in a low whisper.

"Dad said nothing to me," she answered Mary Brannigan. "All the cattlemen trade here with us, but I can't imagine who dad meant."

"Would it be Jay Cummings?" Rawhide asked coldly. "Back there at my place, he said that you and him meant to make me pay."

"I went to a dance with him last Saturday night," the girl said under her breath, and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Jay told me that he didn't trust Slow Joe Hill, but he didn't mention you by name, Rawhide."



JAY CUMMINGS

"You stay here and talk to Aunt Mary," Rawhide grunted. "I want to have a look around outside."

He turned quickly and made his way through the kitchen and walked slowly to a window he had noticed just above Ferguson's bed. A clump of Scotch broom was planted under the window, and Runyan's eyes narrowed when he saw a broken branch

with the fragrant yellow blossoms beginning to wilt.

Someone had stood outside that window. Rawhide lowered his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Donald Ferguson watered the broom every day, and two deep impressions were plain in the moist ground. The imprint of two big boots with the marks of high heels sunk deep to show where the intruder had set himself for the leap to the window sill.

Rawhide Runyan's heart began to beat faster while he stared at the telltale evidence. Slow Joe Hill was the only man he knew who wore footgear of that unusual size.

"I don't believe it," Rawhide muttered, but his face was hard and cold as he leaned forward for a closer look. Then he caught his breath and pushed the bush aside. "Two of them," he whispered. "And the second gent had a mighty small boot with pointed toes!"

He remembered what Bonnie had said about seeing a big man disappear in the bushes across the creek. He ran to his horse and vaulted to the saddle, and his nostrils were flaring when he rode to the creek and followed the prints of two shod horses.

The tracks led away from the regular crossing where the sand was hard and firm. Rawhide leaned over when he made a startling discovery. Now there was only one set of hoofprints, and they were pointing to the badlands. The fugitive would have to cross Wolf Creek to reach the edge of the desert.

Rawhide heard animal sounds as he rounded a bend and stopped his horse on the high bank of the creek. A big roan horse was in the water, bogged down to his shoulders. The animal's eyes were bulging to tell of his struggles, and only his head re-

mained above the surface of the muddy water.

Rawhide heard his breath whistle from between his lips when another object suddenly bobbed up ten feet from the mired horse. He knew at once that the rider was a stranger, or he would have crossed the creek down by the store. Now horse and rider were bogged down in the treacherous sand trap for which the trading post at Quicksand was named!

A low moan of pity escaped the cowboy's lips when he rode down the steep bank and swiftly drew his six-gun. No power on earth could pull the big roan from those sucking sands, and now his flaring nostrils were sinking beneath the water.

Rawhide raised his gun and slowly squeezed the trigger. The roan's head jerked and sank beneath the surface, and then a hoarse voice screamed to echo the explosion of the mercy shot.

"Save me, stranger! Throw me a rope!"

Rawhide Runyan holstered his gun and reached for his coiled rope. He sent his horse sliding down the steep bank, but Shadow circled away when he approached the water's edge. The big black horse snorted with terror when the man in the creek screamed again and began to thrash the water with his arms.

Rawhide soothed Shadow and urged him forward with spur and voice. The loop whirled swiftly and snaked out over the struggling man's head, and Rawhide fought his horse to a fiddle-footing pause when the victim caught the rope and slipped it under his arms.

"Tread with your boots," Rawhide warned, and took a turn around the saddlehorn when Shadow tightened the twist rope.

CHAPTER IV.

MOOSE CONWAY, OUTLAW.

THE man in the creek threw himself forward and kicked with all his strength. Rawhide could see the terror in the bulging eyes, set deep in a heavy growth of reddish beard. He was holding Shadow down to a slow pull to keep from tearing the helpless man apart. A slow sucking noise told him that the victim's boots were pulling free, and then Rawhide jerked in the saddle as an incredibly wide pair of shoulders rose above the water.

He eased off on the rope for a second to relax the cutting pressure of the binding noose. Shadow was more quiet now, and he took up the slack without jerking when Rawhide tightened his dally. Then he leaned forward against the rope and brought his catch skittering through the shallow waters, and Rawhide held his purchase on the rope until the man was up on the sandy bank.

Rawhide quit his saddle and ran back to the motionless dripping huddle. Shadow backed a step to slack the rope, and Rawhide pulled the loop free. It required all his strength to lift the dead weight of the wide, heavy shoulders, and Rawhide whistled softly with surprise.

"This hombre is heavier than Joe by fifty pounds," he muttered, and eased back on his haunches to stare at the big, soggy boats. "Bigger boot than Joe's, too," he checked to himself.

He leaned forward to study the big man's face, and slowly shook his head. The fellow was a stranger to him, but he guessed his age at thirty-five. He reached forward and drew the heavy six-gun from the wet holster as Mary Brannigan's warning came to him.

The gun was a Peacemaker fron-

tier-model, single-action .45. The yellowed ivory handles were smooth and without a break. Rawhide ran a hand inside the heavy woolen shirt to feel for a heartbeat.

"Ticking strong," he muttered, and then he jerked when his fingers touched a money belt draped across the big swelling chest from the left shoulder.

He opened the soggy shirt and fumbled for the buckle of the doe-skin belt. There were four small pockets sewed to the belt, and Rawhide opened the first and drew out a folded sheath of water-soaked bills. He spread the paper money on his knee and reached to his upper vest pocket for a paper.

Now he knew why he had copied the numbers of the bills he had drawn from the bank at Rainbow, to pay Donald Ferguson. It had been a suggestion of the bank teller's as he had counted out the hundred-dollar bills. The teller had promised to watch for them when they came back to the bank.

"It's the same money, or part of it," Rawhide grunted softly, and finished his count. "There's a thousand here, and that leaves two thousand for the brains of this robbery."

He was so interested in his discovery that he did not hear the soft tread of boots behind him. Something hard hit him on the head and toppled him across the body of the big stranger. Blinding lights flashed across his brain, and he sighed and stretched out his legs.

Water was dripping from his face as he slowly opened his eyes and tried to struggle to a sitting position. His gray eyes blazed with anger when he discovered that his hands were tied behind his back. For a moment he strained against

the leather thongs, before he saw a pair of tiny boots off to one side.

He turned his head with difficulty and raised his eyes. Bonnie Ferguson was watching him, and she held his own gun in her right hand. Her brown eyes were glittering with anger and loathing as she held out the soggy roll of money.

"I followed you when you rode away from the store," she told him sharply, and her husky voice vibrated like the tail of a rattler. "I saw you take that money from your pard, and he don't fool me any with those false whiskers."

Rawhide struggled to a sitting position. His head ached from the blow of her gun, and he blinked his eyes to clear away the fog. His teeth clicked together, and his voice was weak when he spoke and jerked his head toward the water-logged stranger.

"Step over there and try to pull his whiskers loose," he suggested.

Bonnie Ferguson stared and slowly turned her head. Then she walked gingerly to the stranger and went to her knees with the gun covering his big chest. She reached out her left hand and touched the bloated face, and the gun dropped from her hand.

"It isn't Slow Joe," she cried. "I never saw this man before!"

"Neither did I," Rawhide said wryly. "Now, perhaps, you had better take these hobbles off my hands before he wakes up. He was bogged down in the quicksand, and I had to shoot his horse to keep it from drowning."

Bonnie Ferguson moaned and ran quickly to his side. The stranger was beginning to stir when she finally untied the hard knots that bound Rawhide, and he threw the piggin' string aside and caught up his gun.

The big stranger rolled over sluggishly, and his right hand swept

down and pawed for his gun as he rested on his knees. Creek water was running from his loose mouth, and he stopped the movement of his hand when Rawhide spoke softly.

"I dehorned you while you was asleep, hombre. How come you to get in the creek down yonder?"

The big man was breathing heavily, and then he began to vomit water. Bonnie Ferguson moaned and turned her face away, but Rawhide Runyan waited and watched in stony silence. At last the stranger coughed and caught his breath.

His big hands came up and felt under his soggy shirt. He stretched to his feet when he found the garment open from neck to waist. He was panting like a dog as he turned his head and saw Bonnie Ferguson with the money belt in her left hand.

"You owl-hooters," he mouthed hoarsely. "You save a man from that pit down yonder, and then you rob him of his earnings!"

Rawhide Runyan shifted the gun to his left hand. His right picked up his loop and twitched it over the stranger's head. Then he tightened the loop about the powerful arms and swelling chest.

"Your name, hombre," he said crisply. "And you better tell it straight."

"Are you the law?" the stranger asked thickly.

"I'm Rawhide Runyan," the cowboy answered quietly. "You might have heard of me."

"Don't shoot, Rawhide," and a sudden change came over the big stranger. "You've got the money, and all I want is a chance to get back to Utah."

"Owl-hooter, eh?" Rawhide muttered, and studied the bearded face closely. "Don't know that I ever saw you before. What's your handle?"

"Moose Conway, and you've got nothing on me," the bearded stranger muttered. "Keep the money, and I'll hit out on foot."

"You'd never make it across the Strip," Rawhide answered quietly. "I might give you a chance if you want to come clean. How did you come to ride into that quicksand, instead of taking the crossing down by the store?"

The big man clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. His thick lips skinned back like a cornered wolf's, and then his shoulders began to sag.

"I'll get that feller one of these days," he muttered. "He showed me this spot last night. Said it was a short cut to Hell's Kitchen."

"It is," Rawhide said dryly, "but not that hide-out there in the badlands beyond the cliffs. Put a name on this pard of yores."

"You ain't the law," the stranger grunted. "I'll settle my own scores!"

Rawhide whistled to his horse and stepped across the saddle. He took a dally around the horn and tightened the rope, and then he pointed Shadow toward the steep bank.

"Mebbe you've forgot about that short cut to Hell's Kitchen," he said grimly. "I found your tracks under old man Ferguson's window, and I found some of the money you stole from him. Now you start talking before I drag you back to that quicksand."

The veins stood out on the big outlaw's forehead. Once more he was feeling the terrible clutch of the slipping sand, and his little bulging eyes told of the terror he was reliving. His loose lips began to tremble, and he went suddenly to his knees, facing the girl.

"Don't let him do it, gal," he pleaded. "Tell him to shoot me like he done for my hoss when the critter was drowning!"

Rawhide nudged his horse when Bonnie Ferguson closed her eyes and turned her back. Moose Conway let out a scream and threw his weight against the taut rope. Shadow dug in and dragged the screaming man a few feet, and Conway came to his knees as Rawhide stopped with the rope tight.

"You hit a sleeping man," he accused sternly. "Now you talk before I sink my spurs!"

Moose Conway moaned and stared at the cowboy's boots poised above the flanks of the black horse. He walked ludicrously on his knees to slack the rope, but Shadow backed away and leaned against the manila.

"I'll talk," Conway blurted, and the sweat poured down into his bulging eyes. "I didn't hit the old man!"

CHAPTER V.

THE WITNESS.

THERE was no pity in Rawhide Runyan's hard gray eyes as he lowered his boots and eased back in the saddle. Shadow would keep the rope tight, and Rawhide waited for Moose Conway to catch his breath.

"I met a fellow by the name of Turner," the big man began hoarsely. "He caught me down in Hell's Kitchen. I was slow-elkin' a yearling for camp meat, and he threatened to turn me in to the law."

"You're wanted for horse stealing," Rawhide said quietly. "I saw your mug on a poster, and the reward was a hundred bucks."

"They hang a man for hoss stealing over in Utah," Conway muttered, and rubbed his throat with one big hand. "I had to do what this deputy told me, and he offered me a chance to make a getaway stake in the bargain."

"There's no deputy by the name

of Turner in these parts," Rawhide said slowly. "What did this feller look like?"

"A bit taller than you, but about the same build," Conway answered. "He wore rimmed glasses and sported a dinky mustache, and he was uncommonly handy with his hogleg. He had his gun on me all the way from the Kitchen, and we rode across the creek just before daylight."

"You stood under a window back there by the store," Rawhide prompted. "And it's lucky for you that I found your tracks when I did. Five minutes more and you'd have been under the water for good."

Moose Conway shuddered and glanced at the muddy creek. Then his huge shoulders straightened with a sudden thought.

"Turner!" he said hoarsely. "He knew I wouldn't have a chance in that quicksand, and he sent me through there purposely!"

"Looks like," Rawhide agreed carelessly. "But you were waiting outside that window up yonder at the store."

"Turner slipped in through the kitchen door," Conway continued sullenly, his little eyes glowing with anger. "I rattled the window when I saw Turner at the bedroom door, and the old man raised up in bed for a look. Turner let him have it with the butt of his gun, and then he grabbed up a leather sack from a little table."

He wet his thick lips and glanced at the muddy creek with a shudder. Rawhide stepped his horse up, and Conway threw off the noose with a deep sigh of relief. He leaned forward to stare at Rawhide's heavy coat, and pointed to the missing button.

"You lost one of yore conchas,"

he wheezed, and studied Rawhide's hard face for a long moment.

"This Turner hombre," he said, as though he had made a sudden decision. "He meant for me to drown there in the quicksand. Did you get blamed for robbing the old man?"

Rawhide smiled coldly. "That missing concha was found in Ferguson's bedroom," he explained to the outlaw. "And the leather moneybag was found in my coat pocket. What do you think?"

"The dirty—" the big man murmured, forgetting the girl. "I saw him lay that concha down on the floor right beside the bed. Then he ran out, and I hightailed it to the horses. I saw a light come on through a window just as we crossed the creek, but Turner just laughed and stopped his horse."

"I saw you ride away," Bonnie Ferguson said angrily. "And I thought you was Slow Joe Hill."

"Turner mentioned that feller," Conway answered. "He said Hill was about my size, and would get blamed for the robbery. Then he gave me a thousand dollars in big bills and told me about that short cut down into Hell's Kitchen."

"How long was you in the bog?" Rawhide asked curiously.

"Must have been an hour," Conway whispered hoarsely. "I finally unloaded to give my hoss a chance, but he couldn't make it. I went under twice, but I fought my way up just as you shot old Buck to save him from drowning. What you going to do with me?"

Rawhide frowned and turned to the girl. Bonnie Ferguson met his eyes and came closer to speak in a low voice.

"He was forced to do what he did, Rawhide. We've got to find this

man Turner, and we will need Conway as a witness. Let him stay at the store, and he can hide if anyone comes."

Rawhide turned to the big man and studied him closely. Conway was much like Slow Joe Hill, and he was utterly exhausted from his struggles in the sand. He couldn't get far without a horse, and Rawhide told him so.

"The sheriff won't hold you for that hoss-thieving charge over across the Utah line," he promised. "You need food and sleep, and we are going to give you a chance. You can stay at the store while I take a look for Turner."

"That pore old man," Conway muttered. "He was looking right at me when Turner buffaloed him with his gun." He squared his shoulders and nodded his shaggy head. "You can trust me, Rawhide," he said earnestly. "I won't try to make a run for it."

"Follow Miss Bonnie up to the store," Rawhide answered, and turned to the girl. "I've got to ride back and turn those others loose before Joe gets in trouble," he told her. "I'll be back as soon as they leave."

He coiled up his wet rope and hung it on the horn. His hand went to his belt and touched Conway's captured gun, and then he twitched his shoulders. The gun could wait until he had returned from the Diamond Double R.

"Tell Aunt Mary I'll ride back with Jud," he said to Bonnie, and sent his horse up the bank.

He was trying to place the man Turner while he rode swiftly across the brushy grazing land toward the Diamond Double R. He had never heard of a deputy named Turner, unless the sheriff at Rainbow had taken on some new help. He was

still puzzling over the problem as he rode into his own yard and dismounted at the back door.



SLOW JOE HILL

Something warned him just as he stepped inside, but the warning came too late. Two guns pressed against his arched chest, and the stern voice of Jud Brannigan ordered him to raise his hands.

Rawhide stopped the move that was hurtling his right hand down to his holster. Jud Brannigan and Cole Fenton were watching him with hammers curled under their thumbs. Jay Cummings was holding a gun on Slow Joe Hill, and Joe was down on the floor on hands and knees in a crouch.

"Jump, you killing owl-hooter," Cummings taunted the big man. "And I'll blow the top of yore head loose!"

Rawhide caught his breath when he saw the twin-barreled shotgun in the cattleman's hands. Jud Brannigan spoke sharply over his shoulder.

"Don't trip those hammers, Jay! Every man is entitled to a chance, and we'll hold these two for the sheriff. Now you get yore hoss and

burn the breeze to Rainbow. Get the sheriff, and bring him back to the store. We'll be waiting down at Quicksand!"

"Ease off, Joe," Rawhide warned the big man, and Slow Joe relaxed and leaned back to sit against the wall.

Jay Cummings handed the shotgun to Cole Fenton and ran out to his horse. He hit the saddle like a relay rider, and Rawhide waited until the sound of drumming hoofs had died away.

"Get it said," Brannigan grunted. "I can see yo're busting with news, and it better be all good!"

"I caught one of the robbers," Rawhide answered quietly. "He looks like Slow Joe, only he's bigger. He was bogged down in the quicksands not more than half a mile from the regular crossing, but I snaked him out."

Jud Brannigan lowered his gun with surprise. "Another one like Joe?" he repeated.

Rawhide nodded and told the story. Cole Fenton lowered the sawed-off and shoved out his hand to Slow Joe. The big man grinned through the bruises on his heavy face, and then he shook hands with Fenton and walked to the table.

"You fellers has ruined the grub, but I'm hongry," he said with a smile. "I'll just rustle together some hot vittles while Rawhide figgers out the play."

He put on the skillet and stirred the flapjack batter while the three men took chairs. Rawhide drew the soggy roll of bills from his pocket, and showed Brannigan the paper with the numbers. Cole Fenton scratched his chin and squinted at the ceiling.

"We liked to beat pore Joe to death," he said regretfully. "He got careless for a minute, and Jay Cum-

mings jumped him and knocked the gun from Joe's hands. Took all three of us to get Joe down, and he didn't quit until Jay got that sawed-off. Then we heard you riding in, and we'd have burned powder if you hadn't caved when you did. Just goes to show that you can't put no trust in circumstantial evidence. We was sure you and Joe did that job."

"I know it looked bad," Rawhide admitted without resentment. "But do either of you two old-timers know a feller by the name of Turner?"

"Never heard of him," Brannigan answered promptly, and Fenton shook his head. "We'll find out when Cummings gets back with the sheriff. Chances are it's some outlaw who drifted into the Strip."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAW CLOSES IN.

SLOW JOE HILL rode knee and stirrup with his young boss when the four men started for the Ferguson store. Rawhide glanced at Joe's horse and spoke gently.

"Your horse hasn't turned a hair, Joe," he began, just loud enough for the big fellow to hear. "I was doubting you some for a while, because Bonnie was so sure she had seen you."

Joe smiled slowly and chuckled.

"Fine gal, Miss Bonnie. She had a gun on you when I came in from the barn, and Jay Cummings pulled that moneybag from your coat pocket. I knew you had been over to the store last night, and then there was that silver button they found in the old man's bedroom. It looked bad for you, boss, but I was siding you all the way, regardless."

Rawhide Runyou frowned for a moment. Slow Joe had doubted him. Then he glanced at the big fellow with a smile softening the hard

lines of his rugged face. He started to speak, but Jud Brannigan rode up to interrupt. The old cattleman stroked his long mustache and cleared his throat a time or two. Rawhide read the question in Brannigan's eyes and nodded assuringly.

"Aunt Mary is all right," he said, and then his face hardened. "She's got right good eyes, Jud. Told me that the gun that hit old Donald had a broken handle at the butt. She made it out from the wound on Ferguson's scalp."

"The sheriff might know of such a gun," Brannigan answered slowly. "If he hired a new deputy by the name of Turner, mebbe the feller will be with him and Cummings. Who's that riding across the creek down yonder?"

They were topping the grade leading down to Ferguson's store, and Rawhide stood up in his stirrups and shaded his eyes. He whistled softly.

"It's big Moose Conway riding with Bonnie," he muttered quietly. "I told that big feller to stay hid in the store!"

Brannigan and Fenton dropped hands to their holsters and loosened their guns. Slow Joe was staring at Moose Conway, measuring the outlaw's long arms and breadth of shoulders. Joe was kneading his big freckled fists, and the muscles writhed across his broad back.

"I'll take him if trouble breaks," he told Rawhide grimly. "Just leave that big Moose to me."

Rawhide spurred his black horse down the slope without answering. Bonnie and Conway had ridden on some errand of their own across the regular ford, and they were dismounting at the stable behind the store when the four men rode up fast.

"We found something, Rawhide," Bonnie Ferguson cried excitedly, and

held out a bundle. "Moose remembered about Turner riding across the ford, and we followed the tracks of his horse to a little cave!"

Rawhide dismounted and reached for the bundle. It was a black-and-white calfskin vest, identical with the one he was wearing. Something glittered from an upper pocket, and Moose Conway growled when Rawhide drew out a pair of heavy-rimmed spectacles. A bunch of hair was caught in the corner of one ear-piece, and Conway found his voice.

"That's the dinky mustache this Turner deputy wore," he barked hoarsely. "Those are the glasses, but we didn't find the money in that vest!"

Jud Brannigan left the group and walked through the kitchen to find his wife. He was back in a moment, calling to Runyan.

"Old Donald wants to see you, Rawhide," and he whispered when the cowboy reached his side. "He's wandering some in his mind, so take it easy."

Rawhide nodded and walked softly through the kitchen to Ferguson's bedroom. The old storekeeper was propped up on some pillows, and his left hand was plucking nervously at his Vandyke beard. He reached for Rawhide's hand and pulled him to a seat on the edge of the bed.

"That note I owe the bank, Rawhide," he whispered with his lips almost touching the cowboy's ear. "The collector from the bank will be over this afternoon. Ask him to wait six months."

"Don't worry about it, old pard," Rawhide murmured. "You can pay part of it, because we found a thousand of that money. Did you get a look at the man who slugged you?"

"He wore glasses," Ferguson murmured, and then he sank back on

the pillows. "Cummings offered to lend me the money," he whispered.

Jud Brannigan caught Rawhide's eye and beckoned with a crooked forefinger. Bonnie Ferguson came in and sat beside her father, and Rawhide joined Brannigan at the kitchen door.

"Yonder comes the sheriff and Cummings," the old cattleman said quietly. "I made a mistake back there on the Diamond Double R, Rawhide. I untied Cummings after you left to ride over here with Bonnie, and he came within a wink of killing Slow Joe. Keep your eyes on Cummings when they come inside."

Rawhide felt a change come over him as he watched Jay Cummings ride up with Sheriff Blaine of Rainbow. Slow Joe and Moose Conway had disappeared behind the barn, and Rawhide breathed a sigh of relief when Blaine and Cummings dismounted at the rail in front of the store.

The sheriff was a tall, lean man in his late fifties. His gray eyes were watchful as he approached Rawhide, and his right hand was close to the gun on his leg. He stopped a few feet from Runyan and spoke sternly.

"Consider yourself under arrest, Rawhide. Cummings told me about finding that button from your coat, and the money in your coat pocket. I'd like to talk to Jud Brannigan and Bonnie Ferguson."

Brannigan came outside with the girl when he heard the sheriff mention his name. The old cattleman walked between Rawhide and the sheriff, and Jay Cummings rapped down for his holster. He got the drop on the Diamond Double R cowboy before Rawhide saw his hand move.

"I'm coming to get your cutter, you sneaking killer," Cummings

rasped, and clicked the hammer back under his thumb.

Sheriff Blaine had acted instinctively. His law gun was in his hand as he faced Cummings, and his deep voice rang with authority when he stepped in front of Rawhide.

"I'm the law in this county, Cummings. Holster your iron!"

Jay Cummings snarled in his throat and slowly lowered his weapon. Jud Brannigan smiled coldly and addressed the frowning sheriff.

"Did you hire a deputy by the name of Turner lately, Sheriff Blaine? Lean jigger about Rawhide's build, wearing rimmed glasses and a dinky mustache?"

The sheriff stared for a moment and slowly shook his head. "Never heard of the gent," he answered quietly. "What about him?"



SHERIFF BLAINE

"He's your man, Blaine," Brannigan answered positively. "He slipped in through the kitchen and hammered old Donald on the skull with the butt of his gun. Then he dropped a silver concha on the floor near the

bed, took Ferguson's moneybag, and rode across the creek with his pard!"

"We caught this other man," Bonnie Ferguson explained to the puzzled sheriff. "He's a big man, bigger than Slow Joe Hill. He had a thousand dollars of the money on him, and he gave us the description of this man who calls himself Turner."

Sheriff Blaine raised his head and smiled at Rawhide Runyan. He glanced at Jay Cummings when he spoke.

"Looks like that lets you out, Rawhide," he said quietly, but with evident satisfaction. "I heard about Slow Joe holding Jud and Cole up at your place, while you rode over here to hunt for sign. What about this big feller you mentioned?"

"Name of Moose Conway," Rawhide explained. "He's wanted across the line in Utah for stealing a horse, and this fake deputy held it over Moose to make him help with the holdup. Moose stood outside old Donald's window while Turner sneaked inside and clubbed the old man."

"And you let him get away," Jay Cummings sneered.

"I can produce him as a witness, after we come up on Turner," Rawhide answered quietly. "Mary Brannigan wants to talk to you, sheriff," he told Blaine.

"I'll go along," Cummings offered, and followed the sheriff into the kitchen.

Rawhide Runyan raised his head and listened. A running horse was coming over the rise from the direction of the Diamond Double R, but Brannigan was walking toward the house. Rawhide twitched his gun and ran to his horse, and he stopped uncertainly when another rumble of hoofs came from behind the barn.

He had a glimpse of Slow Joe

through the dense brush before he turned Shadow and rode up the slope to meet the rider from Rainbow. He clicked his teeth when he recognized the teller from the bank, and then he sent his horse racing to meet the newcomer.

"Howdy, Parkins," he greeted the teller. "Don't bother old Donald about that note today. Ferguson has been badly hurt, but he will square up soon!"

"I rode over mostly to see you," the bank man answered, and failed to hide the excitement in his voice. "Five of those bills I paid you came back to the bank today, and I saw Sheriff Blaine ride out of town with Jay Cummings. Who did you pay that money to?"

"To old Donald Ferguson," Rawhide answered. "He was robbed early this morning. Who put that money in the bank?"

CHAPTER VII.

BORN TO BE HANGED.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN was walking stiff-legged when he came through the kitchen with the bank teller following closely. His hand was hooked in his belt above his gun when he stepped into Donald Ferguson's bedroom. His breath hissed sharply from his lips when something round and hard bored into his spine.

"Up them hands, killer!" a snarling voice grated behind him. "I can prove that this Conway owl-hooter was a pard of yours!"

Rawhide raised his hands and turned slowly to face Jay Cummings. He held his breath when he saw the yellow flecks dancing in his captor's slitted eyes. Then he lowered his gaze and stared at the gun centered on his heart.

"I surrender, sheriff," Rawhide said softly to Blaine. "Take my gun

and see if the handle is broken close to the butt!"

He saw the light of understanding that widened the sheriff's eyes when the old peace officer got his message. If Blaine could get a gun in his hand, the law might have a chance.

Mary Brannigan was staring at Jay Cummings. She leaned forward with a scream before Blaine could touch Rawhide's holster.

"That's the gun that hit old Donald! The one Jay Cummings is holding, and you can see some of the hairs from the old man's head sticking to that broken place in the handle!"

Jay Cummings crouched low and skinned back his lips. "Stand hitched, sheriff," he barked. "I'll kill the first man who moves!"

Rawhide Runyan tensed his muscles and leaned forward. His eyes were smoky as he gauged his chances, and Sheriff Blaine spoke softly when he recognized the signs.

"Don't do it, Rawhide. He'd get us all before we could clear leather. Let him go for now."

Rawhide relaxed, but his lips were stiff with anger. Jay Cummings was backing toward the door, but he stopped when Rawhide began to talk.

"I'll run you down, Cummings," he promised grimly. "And we'll get that money you took from old Donald. I had the numbers of all those bills, and you deposited them in the bank over at Rainbow before you saw Sheriff Blaine!"

Jay Cummings bared his teeth and jabbed with his gun. Then he laughed scornfully and spoke:

"You, Bonnie," he clipped. "Walk up here close and don't try any tricks. You're riding with me until I cross the creek, and I'll shoot you first if any of these gents follow us!"

Rawhide Runyan stiffened and fought down the impulse to match his draw against Jay Cummings' drop. Bonnie Ferguson was moving slowly toward the open door, and Rawhide groaned when she stepped through with Cummings holding her in front of him for a shield.

"Easy, Rawhide," the sheriff warned quietly. "We got to think about the womenfolks."

Jay Cummings backed to the rail where the horses were waiting. He swung up without losing the drop, and then he jerked his head at the sheriff's horse. Bonnie Ferguson mounted Blaine's tall sorrel, and all the color had drained from her face to leave it pale and drawn.

"I'll shoot the girl if any of you gents send a shot my way," Cummings threatened, and motioned for the girl to start for the crossing.

He whirled his horse when a clatter of hoofs came from the road leading up from the creek. Slow Joe Hill and big Moose Conway bobbed into view, blocking off the regular crossing. Cummings fired a shot and crowded his horse against the girl's mount, and Bonnie Ferguson was knocked from the saddle.

Rawhide Runyan leaped through the door like a steel spring. His hand went to his gun just as his boots hit the ground, but he held his shot when Jay Cummings whipped into the brush and raced along the creek bank. Rawhide jumped his black horse and rode his spurs in pursuit.

Jay Cummings was half turned in the saddle, with the smoking gun in his right hand. His horse was stretched out and racing at full speed. The big roan went down suddenly as though it had been shot, and Cummings flew through the air and disappeared from sight.

Rawhide checked the racing black

when he heard a loud splash. He fought Shadow down to a trot, and swerved sharply into the brush to avoid a rope stretched tight across the sandy trail. Now he knew why the big roan had gone down so fast, and he circled the trail and stood his horse at the top of the bank.

The muddy water in the creek was sending little waves against the treacherous bank. A head shot suddenly above the surface, and a pair of clutching hands began to beat wildly. Shadow began to spook with little snorts of terror, and he lunged up the bank when Jay Cummings screamed:

"Throw me a rope! It's sucking me down!"

Rawhide Runyan tried to control his horse as Slow Joe Hill and Moose Conway came through the brush. Conway shuddered violently when he saw Cummings in the water, and his voice was a sobbing plea as he spoke to Rawhide.

"Throw him a rope, Rawhide. Get him out of that hell."

Slow Joe shrugged and grunted coldly. "He got you into that bog, didn't he, Moose? And he was going to lay the blame on me and Rawhide. I wouldn't throw him a rock to help him out of his misery!"

Moose Conway hid his face behind his thick arms. Rawhide shook out a loop and tried to get Shadow down the steep bank. The black horse snorted and whirled like a top, and Jay Cummings sank beneath the muddy water with a gurgling scream.

Rawhide stepped from his saddle and ran down the bank. He called back to Moose Conway while he watched the water for Cummings to come up.

"Shake out your rope and get ready to tie it to mine, Moose. I'll have to make a try on foot!"

The loop whirled about his head

while he watched the sucking little hole where Jay Cummings had gone down. The water broke suddenly, and the nose shot out and settled over the drowning man's head. Jay Cummings grabbed the rope when it slipped under his arms, and he almost jerked Rawhide into the creek.

Big Moose Conway caught the rope behind Rawhide and threw his big bulk against the slack. Jay Cummings was pulled forward under the water, and Conway's breath was whistling through his teeth as he tied the two ropes together.

Slow Joe rode his horse down the bank until the animal balked. Moose Conway handed him the end of the rope, and Joe took his dallies around the saddlehorn.

"Stand away," Joe shouted, and sent his horse plunging up the steep sandy bank.

Jay Cummings was jerked from the sucking grip of the quicksand when the rope snapped taut. His lean body came skittering across the muddy water like a skip jack, and Slow Joe couldn't stop his horse until he was at the top of the bank. Then he threw off his turns and slid from the saddle, and Rawhide was bending over Cummings when Joe lumbered down the slide.

"I couldn't hold that brone of mine, Rawhide," Joe muttered, and his eyes widened when he stooped to stare at the soggy rope. "It hung him," he whispered hoarsely. "The noose slipped from under his arms and tightened around his neck!"

Rawhide Runyan went to his knees and felt inside the shirt for a heartbeat. He shook his head slowly, and then he ripped open the heavy shirt. The two big men watched silently while he slowly unfolded some soggy papers and spread them out on his knee.

"'Wanted' posters," Moose Con-

way whispered, and stared at a picture of himself. "What's the other one?" he growled.

Rawhide carefully removed the top paper. He leaned forward to stare at the picture of a man wearing glasses and a small black mustache. Moose Conway crowded up and swore softly under his breath.

"That's Turner," he said positively. "The deputy who robbed old man Ferguson."

"That's what the poster calls him," Rawhide said quietly. "Jay Turner, wanted in Texas for killing a deputy in a bank holdup."

"I had a hunch," Moose Conway murmured. "So me and Slow Joe rode down here and stretched that rope across the trail. Yonder comes the sheriff, and I better slope."

"Didn't Joe tell you?" Rawhide asked quietly. "Sheriff Blaine isn't looking for you, and there's a job on the Diamond Double R if you want it. Now keep quiet and let me do the talking."

Sheriff Blaine rode up with Cole Fenton and Jud Brannigan. Rawhide told his story and handed the poster to Blaine. If the sheriff saw him throw another paper into the creek, he gave no sign.

"Jay Turner, eh?" he muttered, after reading the poster. "That proves what I've always said. You can't drown a man who was born to be hanged."

"He got a lucky break at that," Moose Conway whispered to Slow Joe. "It's hell out there in that quicksand!"

MOST OF YOU HAVE RIDDEN AN IRON HORSE. For an iron horse, in everyday language, is a train. In next week's issue we begin Walker Tompkins' great continued novel, "Trail of the Iron Horse," which tells the story of the building of the first coast-to-coast railway. It's a yarn full of hatred and bravery, disaster and triumph, courage and revenge. And every bit of it is just as things happened in the West of those days. The Indians' hatred of the steel ribbon that despoiled their land, the crooks and villains who robbed and cheated under the protection of a great corporation, the cowpokes who vainly fought to stem the tide that was pushing westward. It's a tremendous story of gun-swift times that'll leave you breathless. Also, there's "Gun Ghost of Dark Angel," by Paul S. Powers, a complete novelette that'll have you on the edge of your chair. And there's a Jeff and Bugeye story, "Some Jobs Are Dynamite," by Frank J. Litchfield— And the smashing, dynamite-packed final installment of Ed Earl Repp's "Canyon of the Forgotten," where Bronc Maverick crashes through to solve the mystery of his long-lost father and of the fabulous train of gold! DON'T MISS THIS ISSUE. IT'S STILL ONLY 10 CENTS AT YOUR OWN NEWS DEALER'S!



BLACK CARDS OF THE OWLHOOT

By Hapsburg Liebe

IT WAS wild country, stick-up country. Old Zeke Franey pulled rein nervously at a call from the thick roadside scrub. As the stagecoach lurched to a stop, a slim young man in dusty cowboy clothing walked into view. His hands were up. He had no weapon. His very blue eyes were both weary and hard, much too hard.

"I want a ride, old-timer, that's all." Indicating a swiftly growing dark cloudbank on the near horizon: "See that, don't you? You've got desert to cross, and that'll be a sand-storm, and maybe I can be of some help."

He snatched a stage door open

and was inside before the driver had time to object, even if the driver had so wished. The vehicle started with a jerk, rocked on briskly southward.

There were three other passengers. A girl in dark blue, and two men. One of the latter-named was past forty and tall, sober-countenanced, dressed in the black worn so much by ministers, gamblers, and lawmen of the better grade; he occupied the rear seat with the girl. The newcomer dropped to the front seat, facing backward with the other man. This fellow's hard hands and costly clothing proclaimed him a miner who had recently cleaned up.

A slow voice came from under the



***It was a game of Death—but the winner
got something as precious as life itself!***

rim of the black Stetson worn by the sober-visaged passenger.

"Where you goin', Pecos?"

The cowboy jerked erect on the rocking seat. The somberly garbed stranger had no gun in sight.

"So you know me," said Pecos Slim. "Well, who're you?"

"John Doe," the other answered, one eye narrow.

The old legal alias brought a grin to the miner's face. Pecos Slim could feel the eyes of the girl upon him. They were dark, and her hair was dark, but her skin was fair. Handsome, she was, and she had poise; he could see that easily. Then he saw something else.

The shining manacles that he had been keeping pushed up his sleeves and out of sight—most of the little connecting chain was gone—had slipped down to his hands in his lap!

He did not attempt to hide them

again. "I reckon, John Doe," he drawled, "I'll tell you where I'm goin' now. I'm huntin' the one man on earth who can save me from hangin'. Understood he was in the section below the desert, ridin' range for a big cow outfit owned by a man named Brennan."

John Doe said nothing. Not much had escaped the miner. Curious, he muttered, "Le's see, Pecos: what was it you done?"

"I don't mind tellin'," the cowboy fugitive said. "Back north of here a jigger I didn't like caught me without a gun and sort of played horse with me. Hornet mad, I told him next time we met he'd better drag his iron and start shootin', because I'd be heeled then and meant to do that same thing. Hornet mad, you know.

"Well, two days later he was found dead, shot. I hadn't done that, but I got the blame. Had a wild reputa-

tion, and this cinched it. Wild reputation and hard luck. The black cards of the owlhoot trail. It's happened so many times."

"Yes, sirree," said the miner. "There was the Gales. Old Jim Gale and his four sons. Accused o' crimes they never committed, I'm told, then outlawed and fought back—holy terrors—just been wiped out complete. Believe I did hear that one o' the boys got away, come to think of it. You get any news about that, Miss Sanna, up where you come from?"

The young woman's dark eyes were riveted oddly upon Pecos Slim when she answered the miner's question.

"I understand that one of the Gales did get away alive."

This talk died there. The stage-coach rocked on. The weary fugitive moved some of the baggage that lay in between the seats, stretched his legs out and tried to relax. The skies were darkening fast when they reached the desert. The driver kept whipping his horses up.

After the interior of the vehicle had grown dim, Pecos whispered to the friendly miner, "Who's John Doe, and who's the girl?"

"All I know is, I seen her name on the stopover hotel register last night, and it's Sanna Linster," the man beside Pecos whispered back. "The John Doe fella, I figure he's a lawman after you, bidin' his time. You got away from the law once, I see. How'd you manage to cut that handcuffs chain off?"

"Had a friend, blacksmith. Would took too much time to file through the cuffs. Sheriff too close. Notice whether Doe has got a gun?"

The miner shook his head in the dimness. "Bet he has, though."

The big wind struck. Sand and dust swirled and rolled. The passengers found it necessary to tie bandannas over mouth and nose because of the infiltrating grit. After a while, Pecos Slim got ready to spell the driver. The man who had called himself whimsically John Doe advised against it, and Pecos subsided.

An hour went by, and another, and black darkness came. The Red Rock City road was long lost to the half suffocate driver. But old Franey kept his horses moving doggedly, giving them their heads as a rule.

The skies cleared to reveal a high, gibbous moon. They were in cattle country now. Pecos Slim's mind was filled with thoughts of escape. He'd have to be sly about that, and fast, and he couldn't wait too long. Driver Zeke Franey called down to tell his passengers that he had struck the Palomito road, which would serve almost as well as the road he had been on when the storm hit.

Then it happened.

The stage halted with a jerk that very nearly unseated the girl and the black-clad man beside her. There was a clattering of hoofs outside and ahead, and a disguised, harsh, guttural voice:

"Don't reach for hardware, driver! Kick that iron box off"—two gun blasts and two bullets close over Franey's head—"pronto, or we'll sure cut you down, driver!"

Instantly two more shots jarred the night. One of these had been fired by a genuinely mad Zeke Franey. Like an echo there was a moan from old Zeke's lips, and the passengers knew that he had been hit. John Doe cut into that moan:

"This stage carries no strong box. Mistaken for the Palomito stage—"

Franey's six-gun roared again. This was in grim concert with four other guns. A heavy slug crashed into the stagecoach. Pecos Slim cried, "Down, Miss Sanna, and keep low! Somebody let me have a gun—you, John Doe, you can trust me with—"

He was on his feet. The stage horses, frightened, sprang hard against their collars. Pecos was thrown sprawling across the baggage. The would-be robbers stopped the horses. Pecos rose in the dimness. A six-gun holstered to a belt of cartridges found its way swiftly into his groping hands, and he began to speak fast in low tones:

"Outside with me, John—you, too, miner, if you got anything to throw bullets with. We'll draw the fire away from Miss Sanna, and maybe we can rout that gang. Don't let 'em see you when you jump for the scrub!"

He opened the nearest door, sprang across a moonlit gantlet and landed in waist-high bushes on hands and knees. On the driver's high seat wounded Zeke Franey now was trying to tell the stick-ups that he carried no treasure. The leader of the gang, at present not bothering to disguise his bass voice, cursed Franey for a liar.

Pecos Slim had reached the shelter of a small roadside boulder. He caught his breath on a deep, hoarse gasp. He had recognized the voice of the holdup leader. It was that of Bill Sessard, the man he had come down here looking for, the one man on earth who could save him from the hangman's noose! And Sessard hated him.

So this was the Brennan range. Pecos remembered what he had to do now. But Sessard must not be killed! In desperation he called across, "Hiyah there, Bill! Girl in

the stagecoach—don't shoot that way any more!"

"Who the devil are you?" growled Sessard from the back of his horse. But he must have known Pecos Slim's voice, for he had known Pecos half his life. Then: "Get him!" he barked at his companion, and seven six-guns blazed toward the sheltering small boulder.

Sessard must not be killed! So Pecos did not shoot back. But somebody else fired at the gang. It came from three points in rock and scrub on the other side of the road. John Doe, the miner—and the girl!

They, too, had shelter, and their fire was withering. Bill Sessard and his companions jabbed the steel of their spurs clean to rib bone and vanished eastward on the Palomito road.

Zeb Franey had a bullet deep in his chest, was weak and dizzy from pain, but he managed to hold his four uneasy horses until Pecos Slim got up beside him and took the reins from his wavering grip. Pecos had buckled the gun belt on, had both hands free. Miss Sanna, the miner, and John Doe came hurrying out of the scrub. The miner was nervous. The girl may have been, but she didn't show it.

"By thunderation!" the miner cried. "Hot stuff, wasn't it? Bet no more gun powder was burnt when they wiped out them wild Gales!"

Pecos ignored that and called down, "Old-timer's in awful bad fix. I think we better try to find the Brennan place and take him there, then send to Red Rock City for a doctor. He'll rest easier if we'll lay him on the back seat below."

They did that. The girl and the miner took the front seat, and set themselves to watching over old Zeke. Pecos elected to do the driv-

ing. John Doe climbed up beside him. As the horses moved off, the cowboy fugitive started some difficult thinking.

Bill Sessard would be at Brennan's, and there were any number of possibilities in the set-up. For one thing, Sessard would doubtless try to kill him in order to close his mouth about the holdup thing, if for no other reason.

Turning the horses toward lighted windows that showed across the range, he said, "Wonder you'd let me keep this gun on, lawman."

"Cowboy," earnestly replied the man in black, "I've decided you'll do to ride the river with, as the sayin' goes. I'd sure like to help you out. You told me this man you're lookin' for down here could save you from hangin'; now tell me just how, eh?"

"Sort of strikes me," thoughtfully drawled Pecos Slim, "that you'll do to ride the river with yourself. That girl down there, Miss Sanna, I'm sure she will. I'd be stuck to death on her, if it was any use! I've got a sneakin' idea she thinks I'm . . . er . . . that Gale which got away. Fightin' with you, she was. Where'd she get the gun?"

"The miner's," Doe said. "A new one, with the steel still blue; saw it in the moonlight. Will you tell me what I asked you, Pecos?"

"Think I will," Pecos decided. He did not lose sight of the horses or the lighted ranchhouse windows beyond while he was talking:

"It's Bill Sessard who can clear me. Red and heavy-set. Close pal of the man it's supposed I shot; they had a little drift mine together in the hills, and the pal was found dead in their shack—it was Sessard who took the news to the sheriff. The answer is just bound to be that Bill himself killed his pal. Quarrel, of

course. And so I'm down here to get the truth out o' Sessard."

John Doe whistled. "That'll be one large job!"

"I know it! But I've got no other chance, don't you see?"

He told of Sessard's having led in the recent bootless holdup, and hastened on:

"I'm sure puzzled about you, mister. Must be a new sheriff that I've not heard about yet. Funny, but I've not seen any badge or gun on you. Under your coat, maybe. And why would you call yourself John Doe?"

"Never mind that," the somberly-clad man said. "If Sessard led the stick-up, probably the rest of the gang also work for Brennan. So when we send to Red Rock City for the doctor, we'll send for the sheriff and some deputies. Something is going to pop here, I'll bet!"

"I'd bet on that myself!" said Pecos Slim, and he certainly meant it. "Well, here we are. I'll whoop Brennan out."

A big, florid man, Brennan was a good man and hospitable. Except for a one-eyed old ex-cowboy who did the cooking and house cleaning, he lived alone in the rambling frame-and-adobe ranchhouse. The wounded Zeke Franey was carried to a couch in the lighted living room. Then John Doe drew his host into gallery shadows and whispered the surprising news.

Very soon after this, a rider whom Brennan could trust, left for Red Rock City on a fast horse. The distance was eight miles.

Pecos Slim and the girl, aided by the miner and the old ex-cowboy, cleansed and bandaged Franey's wound. John Doe had vanished. Pecos wondered whether he wasn't

poking around the quarters of the range crew in order to see what he would see and hear what he would hear. And again the cowboy fugitive wished he knew the identity of John Doe.

Brennan then herded the weary girl, dog-tired Pecos Slim and the miner into the dining room. Pecos drew the window shades all the way down.

The meal was barely finished when Bill Sessard walked in. He had on two gun belts, and he did not remove his hat at sight of the girl.

"What is it?" growled the ranchman, frowning hard.

"Me and six more boys is leavin' you, boss," growled Sessard. "We'll trouble you for the pay we got comin'. Nearly a month, as you know."

The six others, of course, had been his companions in the stick-up of the wrong stagecoach. Plainly, Sessard has guessed why the lone horseman had put out for town shortly before. Brennan said:

"Why, Sessard, I—"

The stockily built, reddish newcomer interrupted sourly, "You got the money, boss. No stallin'. Come across with it!"

His thumbs were hooked into his trouser's waistband, close over his guns; the attitude was menace itself. Pecos Slim wished he dared horn in. But Sessard must not be killed! And there was the girl, whom gunplay would endanger. The miner spoke.

"How many range hands you got, Mr. Brennan?"

"Twenty, and I can really swear by three," bluntly and hotly answered the cattleman. "Half the crew is decent enough except that the Sessard faction keeps them more

or less buffaloed. Trouble now is, nearly all the decent ones have gone to a dance on Tomahawk Creek. See where we are? If you don't, I'll tell you. Sitting on a powder keg!"

This answered a question that had been big in the mind of Pecos Slim, since cattlemen were usually absolute monarchs. Bill Sessard was a fast worker. He hadn't been down here for two months! Brennan said then:

"Sessard, I'm not prepared—"

"Give you ten minutes," interrupted Sessard. He had ignored the presence of Pecos Slim. Now he cut a pale, mean eye over to Pecos and snarled, "You keep clear o' this!"

He back-stepped out of the dining room and vanished in the shadowy hall. The cowboy fugitive noted that the girl was watching him closely. There was a decided friendliness in her fine dark eyes. He tried to smile, so did she. Brennan groaned, rising.

"At least two hours before the Red Rock sheriff can get here. Anything can happen! What became of that man who had on black?"

Pecos was uneasy about this same thing. Foul play? He'd better investigate, slyly. For the first time it occurred to him to examine the gun that had been pressed into his hands in the semidark stagecoach.

It was a .44, and so new that the blue hadn't worn off the steel. John Doc had said that the miner had lent Sanna Linster one like it. How many blue-steel .44s was that miner carrying, anyway?

"Be careful, Pecos," breathed Sanna as he snapped erect and made for the hallway dimness. Concerned about him? He grinned.

He stopped behind a back gallery post and peered cautiously into the moonlight. Off a few rods toward

the bunkhouse, in the spotted shade of live oaks, two men stood talking in low voices. One of them was Bill Sessard, and he was in a rage. The other was John Doe!

Pecos had not seen a weapon on the black-clad stranger. With a dozen guns, Doe was likely no match for Bill Sessard. Pecos ducked into shadows and crept swiftly toward the pair. Then Sessard's right hand was streaking for a holster. He must not be killed, for dead he couldn't talk.

And yet, Pecos Slim also went for shooting hardware, and he was faster.

Bill Sessard jerked around at the shot, fired back, and crumpled like a boiled rag. Pecos also wilted into an abyss of nothingness.

After hours, he came to in a bed. Lamplight showed him the anxious faces of Sanna Linster, John Doe, the miner, and a Red Rock City doctor.

Pecos mumbled, "What happened, anyway?"

"More than you could possibly guess," John Doe said. "I'd though I was handy at getting my iron out of its shoulder holster. But I'd have been a gone gosling if you hadn't cut down on Sessard just when you did. With Sessard out of it, his pals were putty. The Red Rock sheriff got them all. Zeke Franey will make it, and so will you, so don't worry—"

"Sessard," cut in Pecos Slim. "Is he—"

"Dead?" supplied the miner, as Pecos faltered. "No, but he thought he'd cash, and did he talk! Should had brains enough to not try shoot-in' it out with a Gale. I guessed it, cowboy. But everything's O. K. Tell him, Doc."

"Sessard has pulled stick-up before," Doc explained. "Carried off

a mail bag once. In that same robbery his pal—the man it was supposed you shot—was killed, and it was simple to put the blame on you. He sure did spill everything when he thought the Old Reaper had him! Since he had taken a mail bag, Federal offense, I hit his trail. Deputy United States marshal, I am. Name too well known, so I used an alias. All clear now, Pecos?"

"Yes. But I . . . I'm not that Gale," the cowboy stammered.

The doctor ran them out, went out himself. At dawn the girl came back. Her voice lacked a little of being steady.

"Another driver has been sent for our stage, Pecos. I'm sorry—to say good-by."

He sat up in bed. His head wound pounded. His brain reeled. Hadn't been able to think of anything but her.

"Don't go," he heard himself saying—"I know where I can get a start in cattle, and we . . . we could—" Abashed, he broke off there. Dark eyes soft, yet filled with pain, the girl said:

"I'll have to tell you. It was something I couldn't help, though I tried so hard. Too late then to beat what you called the black cards of the owl-hoot—wild deeds they had nothing to do with, pinned on them by their wild reputations! I'm running from the disgrace now. Pecos, I'm Sanna Linster Gale, the only living Gale. Almost from the first minute I saw you, I've wished that I could take care of you—for with you it would not be too late—and keep you from going the way my father and brothers went!"

Pecos Slim found himself unable to talk. But he did the next best thing. He reached for her, and he got her. And he kept her.

Thanksgiving Grub

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Lonesome an' Shorty draw their pay
 An' head for town 'Thanksgivin' Day
 With jest the money they think they'll need
 To buy a bang-up turkey feed.
 They meet Jim Hill, who borrs a smoke,
 An' Jim's been gamblin' an' gone dead broke.
 Then Lonesome whispers: "We'll shake this cuss;
 He's gittin' ready to sponge on us."
 But Jim starts cussin' at what he did,
 Then he pulls his gun like a loco kid
 An' drills the sign of The Golden Goose.
 That gits him a bunk in the calaboose.
 When that there fuss has petered out
 It's powerful quiet hereabout,
 An' it's kinder early to start the meal,
 So the boys git thinkin' they'll watch the wheel,
 There's a fascination about roulette,
 An' after a while they make a bet.
 Two hours later they're back in the street,
 Broke an' hungry an' wantin' to eat.
 So they sidle up to the Grand Hotel,
 That's fairly oozin' a turkey smell,
 An' try to persuade ol' Hornbeak Minners
 To hang up two 'Thanksgivin' dinners.
 He growls: "Yuh oughter know by now
 I don't trust nobody for their chow.
 But I got some stew that's two days old
 Yuh kin have fer naught if yuh'll eat it cold."
 It was tough an' stringy an' hard to chew,
 But the boys piled into the pot of stew.
 Then Shorty says: "I'm thinkin' of Jim.
 We'll bring the leavin's round to him."
 The door of the jail is open wide
 With nobody nigh, so they go inside.
 They find Jim scrapin' a big tin plate,
 An' he says: "Set down for a while an' wait.
 The deputy come an' set me free
 When he brought this turkey meal to me,
 The finest I et in all my life,
 From my aunt Liz, the sheriff's wife."

BRONC EVANS



1. Bart Albers was suspicious of his new line rider, Steve Chase, so he sent Bronc Evans to check up on him. Near the line camp, Bronc spotted Mike Orr, a neighbor rancher, driving off a cow. "That's a Bar A critter," muttered Bronc. "Mike's rustlin'!"



2. Drawing his six-gun, Bronc rode out from behind the brush that had hidden him. "Halt, yuh dirty cow thief!" Bronc shouted. "Stick 'em up!" Mike hoisted his arms. "Git goin' toward camp," Bronc ordered him.



3. While Bronc was herding Mike to the line camp, a cowboy stepped out from behind a horse shed and roped him. Tightening the rope, the cowboy pulled him out of the saddle. "Steve Chase!" Bronc gasped, as he saw that the roper was the line rider,



4. Mike swung down from his saddle and picked up Bronc's Colt. Steve took off the rope. "Yuh shore worked that slick, Steve," Mike said. "We'll earn Bart Albers that he can't send no nosy cow nurse tuh snoop on us." Steve growled.

RIDES LINE



5. They dragged Bronc to a stretch of woodland near the line-rider's shack. "Bronc knows we're in cahoots," Steve snarled. "We can't let him live tuh squeal on us. We'll shoot him an' git rid of his carcass." Mike agreed.



6. Bronc let them haul him along, but he was waiting for a chance to make a break. At the edge of the woods, he gave a sudden wrench and twist and tore himself out of their clutches. "Burn him down!" yelled Mike.



7. Bronc knew that there was a cliff on the other side of the woods, and he dashed to reach it before a bullet downed him, for Steve and Mike had put chase and were snoking lead at him. Then the cliff yawned before him, and he jumped!



8. The cliff had been formed when the trees were cut off and rains wore the ground away, so it was a gradual and not a sheer drop; Bronc had counted on that to help him. He rolled down the cliffside in a shower of dirt and rubble.



9. He landed on a pile of dirt and small stones at the bottom of the cliff. Looking about, he saw a stone bigger than the others lying on top of the pile that had cascaded down with him. "Reckon this may come in handy," he said.



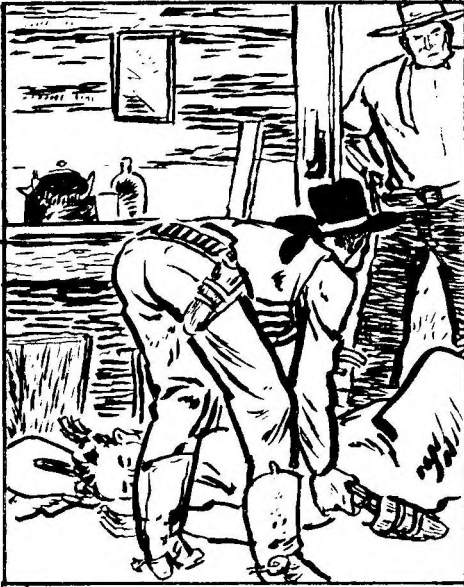
10. He climbed to the top of the cliff by a cattle path he knew, taking the stone with him. Returning to the line shack, he cautiously peered in at the door. Steve was ransacking the warbag which Bronc had brought with him in his saddle roll.



11. Mike and Steve evidently thought they had shot Bronc at the cliff. Holding the stone in his right hand, Bronc poised to pitch it at Steve. But Steve saw him first and jumped back from the warbag, clawing wildly at the butt of his six-gun.



12. Bronc threw the stone before Steve's six-gun cleared leather. *Crack!* It hit Steve squarely between the eyes. His knees buckled, and he slumped to the floor, unconscious. "Thet stone shore *did* come in plumb handy," Bronc thought.



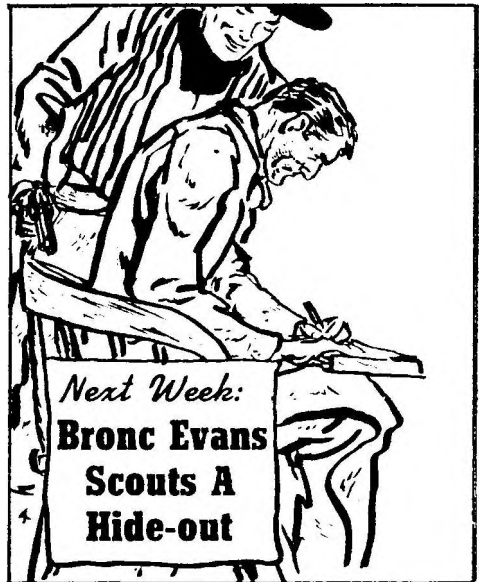
13. Bronc drew Steve's six-gun from its holster. Hearing a slight sound outside the door, he turned his head and saw Mike, who had sneaked up and now stood in the doorway, reaching for his six-gun. "I'm killin' yuh, cow nurse," Mike rasped.



14. *Bang!* Both Colts cleared leather, but only Bronc's thundered. He had beaten Mike to the trigger squeeze. Mike reeled and pitched to the floor, blood drenching his shirt pocket, the gun in his hand unfired, his face wearing a foolish expression.



15. When Steve revived, he found Bronc covering him. "Write a confession thet yuh an' Mike was in cahoots, rustlin' one steer at a time from Bar A." Bronc said. "I'll promise yuh a fair trial if yuh do. If yuh don't, I can't promise anything."



16. Rather than be lynched, Steve wrote out a full confession of his rustling combine with Mike. Bronc looked over his shoulder, grinning as Steve wrote. The mystery of the disappearance of a Bar A cow now and then was cleared up.

THE FIRST COLONIST TO TEXAS FROM MEXICO

THE first colonist to settle in southwest Texas from Mexico was Don Martin de Leon, whose parents were from Spain. He made his first trip through Texas in 1805 and was struck by the beauty and fertility of the country. He saw herds of deer, buffalo and antelope grazing on grass from four to six feet high, while thousands of mustangs ran wild, strangers to bridle and bit, wanderers from the herds of their Spanish owners. All this made him feel that here was a dream come true, a paradise for the hunter and rancher. And here he decided to make his home for the future.

He had a wife who was in full sympathy with his project. So they loaded their carts with household goods necessary for a temporary home, and with two servants and their only child, Fernando, they drove overland and settled on the east bank of the Aransas River.

Don Martin applied several times for a grant of land in Texas on which he could place colonists. This was refused repeatedly, but after long delays, his request was granted in 1824. His wife was overjoyed at the prospect of planting a colony, and once again they set out to make a new home. This time it was to be a permanent one. With them went their forty-one colonists and their large family, the youngest only six years old. Little Fernando had now ten brothers and sisters, all born in their first Texas home on the east

bank of the Aransas River. This time they chose the banks of the Guadalupe River for their site. Here they built houses close together, so as to afford protection against possible raiders.

Solid, comfortable homes, where everyone felt safe, were soon erected, for Don Martin knew how to keep on friendly terms with the Indians. On one occasion a large band of Caranchuas came to his ranch when only the family and two servants were on the place. A big cannon was planted at the door, the two servants shoved guns from the port-holes, while Don Martin, fully armed, stood outside. This warlike display surprised the warriors, and the chief made signs for a friendly powwow. This resulted in a fat beef for their dinner, blankets, trinkets, tobacco, and other presents.

Don Martin became known to the Indians as Mucha Vaca, Plenty Cow, because he always fed them with good beef when they came. As soon as they showed up, whether in war paint or not, he would raise the white flag and give them a good meal. Often when a large band came he would have five or six steers killed, and they would eat until all warlike intentions would vanish. The pipe of peace would pass around, followed by presents, and the Indians would go away chuckling and laughing and praising Mucha Vaca for his generosity.



SCISSORS

CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN

by ED EARL REPP

Author of "Yuma Bill—Hangnoose Deputy," etc.

Part V



CANYON OF THE FORGOTTEN

**A murder-mad mob singing their death
song, Maverick and Joe face hell on earth!**

By Ed Earl Repp

The Story So Far:

BRONC MAVERICK, slab-muscled, young assistant to old blacksmith,

PANAMINT JOE, waits in Mesquite Flat in the hope that a red-bearded man, whom he vaguely remembers from his past, will some day pass through the town. For Maverick has forgotten all details of his life. Even his name has been given to him by Panamint who picked him up, dazed, at the desert's edge some six years before.

While at work in the blacksmith shop, the two hear an unearthly sound strike in from the desert's edge. Racing out into the dreaded South Sink, they find,

BURRO BOB, leading in an overladen pack burro. The old man is exhausted and in deadly fear of some strange peril from which he is rushing. As Bronc speeds to aid him, a queer Indian arrow just misses his head. Though Bronc and Panamint search the hills as old Bob staggers toward Mesquite Flat, they can find no one.

Returning to town, they encounter a large group of men gathered about Bob's pack mule from which a bulky pack has fallen. It is filled with gold! Men have pushed old Bob aside and are trying to help themselves. This gold-crazy mob is spurred on by

HIGHGRADE HALEY and his henchmen who plan to grab the gold for themselves. Bronc rushes Haley, knocks his guns down, and saves the gold for Burro Bob.

But the latter refuses the bullion as not his. He insists on taking it to the Wells Fargo office where he wants it held for a boy named

PIKE FRAZER. Years before this lad had escaped from a massacre of a gold train, led by his father,

LONG TOM FRANK FRAZER, who had placed a golden-nugget ring on the boy's finger for identification. Long Tom has been accused by rumor of killing off the members of the gold train to seize the money for himself.

Highgrade Haley threatens to produce the son of Frazer and claim the gold. But Panamint confides to Bronc the amazing news that Maverick is really the missing heir and that the ring is hidden in the desert under a piebald rock.

One of Haley's owl-hooters overhears this, and warns Haley who beats the two to the hiding place of the ring.

Haley then plants false evidence which convinces the townsfolk that Panamint and Bronc have killed Burro Bob and one Steve Sorbo. They are brought to trial; and Haley eggs on the sheriff and judge and twists Maverick's truthful statements into seeming lies. Panamint and Bronc get the drop on their tormentors and are about to take the owl-hoot trail until they can prove their innocence when the sheriff recaptures them.

They are jailed, and Haley is working up a hang-noose mob when Dorita Nelson brings a lunch basket to the jail. In it they find a six-gun. Hastily they make up a story to clear Dorita Nelson of purposefully bringing the gun, and they are trying to make this story convincing in all details when the murder-mad mob is heard coming for them.

CHAPTER XVII.

ESCAPE.

BRONC MAVERICK whirled back, word of the mob's coming trembling on his lips. But he could see at a glance that talk was unnecessary. The taut expression of alarm on the long face of his partner, and on Dorita Nelson's face told him they, too, had heard the sullen rumble of the hang-crazy crowd. It penetrated the small office like the muted sound of distant thunder. A thunder, Bronc noticed grimly, that was rap-

idly growing louder. Dorita Nelson's eyes searched his, and Bronc felt a stab of pity at sight of the sudden terror mirrored in them. He didn't blame her. The sound of that drunken mob surging toward the jail was enough to frighten anybody!

A shudder slid the length of the young smithy's spine at the thought of what might have happened to them if the girl's timely aid hadn't made their escape from the jail cell possible. But despite his efforts to convince Sheriff Hartley of the girl's innocence in bringing them that hide-out gun in the basket of food, Bronc felt that the sheriff was still secretly suspicious of her. Somehow he had to allay the lawman's feeling and at the same time protect the girl from falling into the mob's hands. It was a tough order.

That thought tightened Bronc's wide lips, narrowed his lids over glittering eyes. His gaze had been whipping about the office. Now his eyes fastened on a small closet in the far wall of the room, which was closed by a wooden door. At sight of the closet, Bronc came to a quick decision. Two long strides carried him to the girl's side. He circled one of her arms with his big hand.

She tried to jerk free as he propelled her toward the cupboard. "Bronc, don't worry about me. Save yourselves. I . . . I'll try and make the crowd believe you've holed up in back, and are holding the sheriff hostage."

Bronc shook his head.

"Don't worry about our getaway, Dorita," he rapped. "Yore good name's the thing that counts now. Yuh've helped us more than anybody else in Mesquite Flat, by bringin' us that hide-out gun, and I ain't goin' to see you suffer for it!"

"And I'll do more," Dorita Nelson cried, her dark eyes shining with

eagerness. "I'll have horses for you at your cabin before moonrise tonight. But now, oh, hurry!"

They had reached the closet, and Bronc had flung the door open while the girl had been speaking. A litter of musty junk filled the closet. A couple of old coats, a few empty cartridge boxes and some cleaning rags.

"It ain't goin' to be very nice in here, Dorita," Bronc said as his eyes swept over the dark cubby, "but it'll give yuh a clean bill of health with Sheriff Hartley. The mob'll let him out, an' when yuh hear his voice yell, and they'll come and get you. Tell 'em we locked you up, because we were afraid you'd spoil our getaway. It'll prove to the sheriff that yuh didn't help us escape his *juzgado* on purpose."

"Thet idee shines, kid," Panamint spoke hurriedly from near the door, "but if yuh waste any more time talkin' about it, we'll never git outa here. Come runnin', fella. We ain't got a second to lose—less yuh feel like doin' a rope dance!"

The girl's soft hands brushed fleetingly across Bronc's bronzed cheeks, then he shut the door, flushing at the unexpected touch of her fingers. Hastily he dropped a nail through the hasp, whirled to find Panamint crouched in the opening at the front, six-gun poised.

By the time he made his pard's side, the hang mob was close enough for them to pick out individual shouts above the general uproar. Highgrade Haley's voice was predominant.

Both guns palmed, Bronc paused to issue only brief instructions.

"Thet bunch is coming down the main street, fella," he bit out tensely, "so we'll cut the other way. If we can git behind the buildings that line this side of it, mebbe we can git to the Pillars without bein' seen."

Panamint's faded eyes opened with surprise. "Yuh ain't plannin' on hikin' into the South Sink on foot, are ye?"

Bronc grinned. "Not so's yuh'd notice it," he drawled. "But we've got to have a hide-out till dark, an' they ain't a better place than Haley's stronghold."

Panamint's jaw sagged. "Yuh mean Gateway House?"

Bronc nodded. "It's one place none of thet hang mob will search. Come on, fella, let's go!"

But they had dallied an instant too long making their plans. Bronc saw that the minute they jumped into view. The vanguard of the mob was already streaming into sight. Doubled over, they raced toward the right, down the side of the jail house. But a hoarse shout, punctuated by the wild thunder of a hastily triggered six-gun, told them they had been spotted. Lead gouged a long streak in the adobe wall alongside the young smithy's red head. A second slug tugged at the rim of Panamint's old slouch hat.

"Things is gittin' warm," the old-timer muttered. "Fella, lift them feet. The devil hates a laggard!"

Their run had carried them to the end of the jail. Boot heels gouging, they spun to cover behind the corner of another structure. Bronc paused long enough to glance back. At least fifty gents had streamed around the far corner of the jail, and were pell-melling down the alley they had just left. Grimly, Bronc swung his left-hand gun beyond the wall. He sent three shots winging above the heads of the approaching pursuers.

Panamint, who had paused beside him, chuckled.

The result was almost comical. Full of cheap whiskey, the lead from Maverick's smoke pole had melted

their courage as fast as they'd gained it. Bronc grinned gleefully at the sight. The six gents who had been in the lead, whirled around at his first shot, right into the faces of the running men who had been behind them. Now the whole bunch were tangled in a cursing, fighting mass. It would take them two or three minutes, at least, to get separated and on their trail again. And two or three minutes to the hard-pressed pard was worth an hour of normal time!

Once again Bronc led the way at an awkward run in his high-heeled boots. They passed behind the open back door of their blacksmith shop, and he could not refrain from glancing that way. Graven indelibly on his mind was the memory of that wraithlike Piute brave, whose silhouette he had seen slipping through the portal. Involuntarily Bronc wondered if the mysterious Indian had gone back to the wastes from which he had come, without knowing that the task assigned him had been done by another. Would the Piute be tortured to death by his tribe for failing his duty? Was he to be another sacrifice to the lure of gold lost since '49? Six men were already dead, and there'd be more, he realized grimly, before that Conestoga treasure was brought from its hidden canyon.

A voice cut like a knife through the gathering dusk behind them. "Thar they go, *amigos*. Git the whelps! Hangin' too damn good for 'em after what they done to Burro Bob an' Steve Sorbo, but mebbe they'll pay in hell!"

"The gents thet killed them two will pay in hell if I got anything to say about it," panted Panamint, "an' it won't be us!"

Bronc wasted no breath on words. His long legs carried him forward in

six-foot strides past the last building on the street. Ahead stretched an expanse of sandy soil that led to the rim of the ridge on which Mesquite Flat was built. It was a good two hundred yards to the looming spires of sandstone that marked the trail down to the South Sink. Once they reached the Pillars, temporary safety would be theirs, Bronc decided. But that no man's land of open sand in between looked like a mile to the hard-pressed smith.

Panamint put into words the thought that was in Bronc's mind. "I'm hopin' them pillars ain't the pearly gates in disguise!"

Gun flame mushroomed behind them again, and the ugly crack of lead through the atmosphere sped them on their way into the open. Sand caught at their stilted heels, slowed them. Every step now was agony to Bronc. This run had reopened that slight arrow wound in his leg. Pain lanced clear to his hip with each step, but he kept the fact to himself, praying Panamint wouldn't notice the limp he had developed. It would be just like his loyal old pard to urge him on alone, while he tried to stand off the bunch who were hot after them single-handed.

Little geysers of sand were spurting up all about them. Only the dim light had saved them from eating lead already. Finally, with sweat pouring into his eyes so that he could scarcely see, Bronc staggered between the pillars. A bullet twanged like an off-key harp from the spindle of stone above his head.

"Let's slow 'em down again, fella," he gasped, steadying himself against the stone.

"Yuh took the words right outa my mouth," Panamint choked.

Their guns spoke together in measured cadence. "Don't shoot to

hit 'em," Bronc warned above the thunder of their bucking weapons. "We ain't givin' that damn fool sheriff a chance to pin anything more on us!"

Then a frown corrugated his brow as the stringy line of lynch-hungry gents who had chased them from town spread out like a covey of quail. Some flung themselves frantically behind little windrows of sand, others tried just as hard to beat a quick retreat to town.

Panamint chuckled and blew smoke from the barrel of the six-gun Dorita Nelson had given them in the jail. "Amazin'," he drawled, "how each of them brave gents figgers we're aimin' our lead jest at him. That's called ego or somethin'." Then his glance whipped to his young partner when Bronc made no reply. "Hey, kid, what's wrong?" he asked in sudden anxiety, for Bronc Maverick was standing stiff as a statue, a frown corrugating his brow.

But Bronc, without answering, continued to stare at the gents who had trailed them. Then slowly he turned. "We can talk as we head for Gateway House," he flung across his shoulder. "An', fella, looks to me like we've got something to talk about. The reason those hellers behind us scare so easy is because Haley an' his gunnies *ain't leadin' 'em!* They're somewhere else, an' yuh can bet they ain't up to no good. I'd give aplenty right now to know what they're doin'."

"'Tain't what they're doin' now that worries me," Panamint growled. "It's what's goin' to happen next. When Hartley gits loose he'll have a posse combin' this hillside with a fine drag. And we can't set a foot in the South Sink without water an' grub, an' some clothes thet ain't been chawed up like these."

But Bronc continued to puzzle over Haley's reason for abandoning the chase after stirring up the townspeople to hang-noose frenzy. Where was the gun boss, and the sullen-faced Lon Sykes, who had claimed to be Long Tom Frazer's son, Pike? Where were his two evil-eyed, swarthy gunnies, Spider Bane and George Nate? Why hadn't they joined in the chase after them? Certainly no one wanted them dead more than the gold-camp outcast!

Those questions bothered Bronc all the way down the twisting trail to the floor of the narrow arroyo which led to the old abandoned roadhouse where Haley made his headquarters. The bottom of it was almost pitch dark. Beavertail cactus clawed at the ribboned legs of their pants as they stumbled toward the sagging outline of Gateway House, but Bronc hardly felt it. An inner sensation that was almost like the prompting of a sixth sense warned him that what had happened so far to them was nothing but a prelude to what they could expect the future to bring.

He was so busy with his own troubles, and Panamint was so worn out from their long run that neither of them saw a stocky, wasp-waisted shadow rise silently from behind a nearby boulder. Long, narrow eyes, green as a cat's, studied them, then nimble fingers whipped across a gleaming bare shoulder, returned with a long, feathered shaft. Deftly the shaft snugged a taut bowstring. Black against the night, the bow in the Piute's hand arched. Bronc's broad shoulders loomed in front of the razor-sharp head of flint.

But in the heartbeat of time before the brave could release the bowstring, a number of things seemed to happen all at once. The sudden strike of steel and shod hoofs be-

tween the pillars rang clearly down to the three in the arroyo, and Bronc and Panamint lifted forward to full speed again as Highgrade Haley's sneering laughter echoed the sound. His back was no longer a target for death, for it had passed from the Piute's gaze, hidden by a thick clump of stunted mesquite trees. And like the Sphinx waiting forever in voiceless solitude, the bronze shape melted once more into hiding.

Unaware of the lucky number he'd drawn on Fate's wheel of chance, Bronc was racing up the rocky trail that led to Gateway House, Panamint hard on his heels.

A horror-struck whisper whipped from the old desert rat's lips as he saw Bronc push over the sagging door that led to the dark interior of the old roadhouse.

"Feller, Haley's right behind us. Yuh cain't hide in there now. Let's circle out back of his corral an' hole up there. If he ketches us inside with all his bunch to back him, we're goners shore as shootin'!"

"And if we circle the place," Bronc answered savagely, "the spare cayuses corralled out there will smell us, an' raise enough hullabaloo to bring Haley an' his wolves on the jump. Nope, we got to go in, pard, and trust to luck. Mebbysso we'll learn what that gent's got to laugh about!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALIBIS FOR A GUNNY.

BRONC cursed under his breath as he plunged into the dark interior of the old roadhouse, for his weight had sent one boot crashing through a rotten floor board. It took him only a moment to draw his foot free, but it was time enough for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. He could make out Panamint, heading like a gaunt shadow for the sag-



"Don't shoot to hit 'em!"

ging remains of an old bar that still stood across the western end of the room. Quickly he followed his pard to the hiding place he had selected. Broken spider webs clung like gossamer chains to their wrists, and veiled their hats as they settled themselves. A lizard scuttled away through the mess of trash pack rats had deposited here. But these signs of animal life pleased Bronc. It meant that neither Haley nor any of his men had bothered to poke around this old bar since taking possession of Gateway House.

"We're better off here than anyplace else we could be," he whispered to Panamint Joe.

"Yeah, if yuh like the lizards an' tarantlers fer company!" his old pard muttered disgustedly. "We—"

But Bronc's fingers, clamping his arm suddenly, cut off Panamint's words. He had heard the sound of hoofs outside. Taut in the silence they crouched there in the dark. They couldn't see anything, but Bronc could imagine what was taking place from the sounds he could hear. Bridles jingled, and spurs set

up their sudden music as at least three gents pushed in through the door that Bronc had thoughtfully shut behind them. Then suddenly the young smithy's blood ran cold. Again he heard the crack of rotten wood, followed by a savage curse. Someone else had stepped into the hole his boot had made.

"Hey, git thet lantern lit, Spider. I done broke through the floor. My leg's stuck." Bronc recognized the surly tones of the Shasta swamper, Lon Sykes.

A lucifer match sputtered out in the room, then the dull glow of a lantern's light drove the shadows up to pool against the sagging roof. By the grunts and exclamations that came to their ears, Bronc decided that some of Haley's bunch were helping pull Sykes' leg from the hole his boot had made through the rotten floor boards. But where was Highgrade himself?

The thought had barely crossed his mind when he heard the door creak again, and Haley's good-humored question as to what had happened.

"I fell through a hole in the floor," Sykes growled, "an' like to twisted my knee outa its socket. Thet danged hole wasn't there this mornin' when we went uptown. Somebuddy's been messin' around here, boss!"

Bronc could feel his partner's hand steal to the revolver he had shoved into his waistband. He reached out and clamped Panamint's fingers. If anybody started trouble, it was going to be Haley. Caught as they were behind the old bar, they dared make no move, Bronc realized. Then he drew a free breath again. It appeared as though the gun boss of Mesquite Flat was going to let the matter slide. He seemed to be in a high, good humor.

"Fergit it, Lon," Haley chuckled. "Ain't nobody been here. Yo're sech a heavyweight yuh probably busted thet old board yoreself."

"Mebbe I did an' mebbe I didn't," Sykes muttered as he got his feet back on solid flooring. "But all I'm sayin' is that I got a hunch thet the quicker we haid outa this neck of the woods the better, even if yuh did manage to pull the wool over Sheriff Hartley's eyes."

Haley had fooled the sheriff? Tensely Bronc listened. What did Sykes mean? The question had hardly passed through his mind before he got the answer—an answer that set his brain spinning.

Haley's oily laughter filled the ratty barroom. "Yuh're shore right about our fixin' thet old fossil lawdog," he roared delightedly. "Damned if it ain't the smartest thing I've done in many a day, outside of framin' thet little job we done at the hotel on Maverick an' his old pard. The old coot's rifle came in mighty handy to bash Sorbo to eternity. But I'd never 'a' thought thet Burro Bob had the guts to stand his nails bein' pulled out without spillin' all he knew about Forgotten Canyon. We got his map all right, but damn me, what I wanted to know is *where he got it*. Shore as shootin' he never found thet canyon where the gold's hid without it."

"Heck," Lon Sykes cut in again, "I don't see as it matters much, Highgrade. We got the map, an' we got a free hand to do anything we want once we're out in the Sink."

"We hev, at that," Bronc heard Haley chuckle, as the gun boss came back to his original train of thought. "Goin' into the jail instead of chasin' thet slippery Maverick was the smartest thing I ever done. Hartley was shore glad to have me let him outa thet cell, an' the things he called

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Maverick an' his pard was enough to do credit to a mule-skinner."

"Yuh ain't tellin' me nothin'," Sykes agreed. "I was there. The way yuh laid it on about doin' yore duty as an honorable citizen was a sight. An' Hartley swallowed yore gab, hook, line and sinker, when yuh told him Maverick an' his pard would probably be foxy enough to git away from a posse and make the Sink with the map thet'd lead them to Forgotten Canyon."

Sykes mimicked Haley's rich, oily drawl:

"Pin a deputy's badge on my shirt, Sheriff Hartley, an' me'n' my boys will follow them skunks to hell if we have to. We're willin' to brave heat an' thirst, even death to bring them hellers back to the law. We'll take their trail tonight."

So that was what Haley had been laughing about! Bronc felt his heart sink like a lump of clay to the pit of his stomach. Sheriff Hartley had been so heated over the trick they had played on him that he had named Highgrade Haley a deputy. Now any deviltry that Haley planned would be covered by the mantle of the law! On some other occasion the irony of it might have amused the young smith, but not now. Too much was at stake. With wanton brazenness that bunch out there had admitted their murder of old Burro Bob and the stage driver. Every nerve in his body jumped with the desire to leap from his hiding place, with his guns bucking in his fists, but caution overrode that desire. Even Burro Bob would not want his death avenged in this fashion. The risk was too great, for there were others to consider, many others. Long Tom Frazer and Dorita Nelson headed the list, and behind them trooped a shadowy horde who still had a claim to that gold dust, held

these long years in some lost Death Valley canyon.

Long Tom Frank Frazer, captain of the gold train, would die like the Piutes in that lost canyon if Haley ever reached there. He'd leave no one alive to refute whatever story he might tell on returning to civilization. And if Long Tom Frazer died, the last link with his forgotten past might be gone. For Frazer, Bronc had come to realize, was, as Judge Peek had said in his decision, the only man who could prove or disprove whether he, Bronc Maverick, was his son.

Then he cursed under his breath, realizing that he had been so busy with his own thoughts that he hadn't listened to the veering tone of the conversation, for suddenly again Lon Sykes had mentioned that hole in the floor. And this time the Shasta swamper was following up his talk with action! Bronc heard his heavy boots stamping over the floor, while he quested the boards for some telltale mark of who had broken that board. Bronc held his breath, hoping that they'd left no tracks.

But that hope was shattered by a hoarse shout from midroom. "Highgrade," Sykes yelled excitedly, "come a-runnin'. They's boot tracks in the dust hyar, leadin' to the old bar!"

Bronc caught a glimpse of Lon Sykes' burly shadow against one of the dusty front windows as the Shasta swamper passed across the lantern's beam. Haley's hoarse curse echoed Sykes' words. The sound of gun steel slithering from leather came to the young smith and his trapped pard. Old Panamint Joe had already snaked his borrowed six-gun from his waist, then his eyes followed the direction of his young pard's gaze. Bronc's fingers were frozen about the butts of his half-

drawn Colts. He was staring intently at the dusty square of the front window, his gray-blue eyes bugging, his wide lips momentarily slack. Then as swiftly as it had come, the expression vanished. His fingers slapped back to hold his old pard motionless, but Panamint had seen it, too—a pair of slanting, greenish eyes behind that dirty pane of glass.

Almost, Bronc thought, he had been dreaming, then he realized that Sykes had seen those blazing orbs likewise. A hoarse shout beat suddenly from the Shasta swamper's lips, and the shadow of his right arm, big against the wall, jerked up swiftly. Gun flame gashed from his hand like an obbligato to his surprised shout.

The jangle of breaking glass mingled with the roar of Sykes big weapon. Again the gun sent lurid flame and lead toward the aperture, and by the flash Bronc got a view of an unforgettable face. Framed by jagged slivers of glass, gun flame highlighted the coppery cheekbones of the Piute wraith, his thin, predatory nose. The Indian's flat, thick lips were pulled back until his yellow teeth showed, like the fangs of a wolf. That single eagle feather fastened into the scalplock atop that shaven head, bobbed defiantly. Light flowed down off the corded neck of the desert savage, across his sloping, naked shoulders. Mighty muscles flowed beneath his sleek skin like sleeping serpents.

Incredibly fast, the streak of a black bow showed in the window frame. It twanged just once before Sykes could trigger a third time. A horrified yelp of pain spewed from the lips of the Shasta swamper. And again, in shadowy pantomime against the wall, Bronc saw Sykes stagger backward, heard the thump

of his six-gun hitting the floor, for the arrow from the Piute's bow had skewered his wrist!

And now once again, that strange, coyotelike cry that seemed to come out of the very air itself, filled the old barroom. The sound faded like sardonic laughter, then rose again eerily.

From somewhere in the room beyond his vision, Bronc heard the quick beat of twin shots, then Haley's hoarse shout: "After him. Git thet cuss, boys! I'll pay a hundred gold to the gent who brings me his topknot!"

Boots pounded toward the door, faded into the night outside. Bronc drew a deep breath and looked at his old partner. Panamint Joe's leathery cheeks were pale. His faded eyes appeared as big as saucers. A sigh whistled from between his snaggy teeth. "Of all the ongawdly things I've seen in nigh on to sixty years, thet wuz the tops. Kid, is thet critter real? Or does his hide bounce bullets? I'll swear Sykes' slug went through him, an' yet he didn't budge a hair. He shore saved our bacon! Come on, fella, let's skedaddle outa here afore Haley gives up tryin' to find thet hombre, and comes back to look for us. We'd 'a' been dead meat ifn thet Piute hadn't a showed up."

"You're right there," Bronc agreed. Pushing to his feet, he headed for the door that Haley and his bunch in their hasty exit had left open. "We ain't outa it yet, though, fella," he warned. "But at least we got a fightin' chance now."

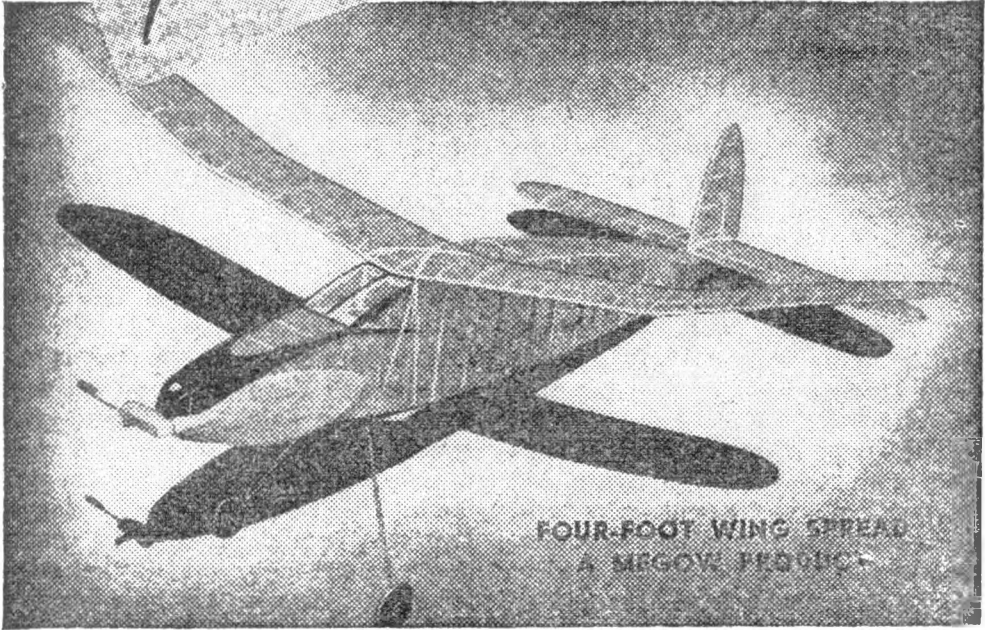
Doubled over to make as small a target of his six-foot length of bone and sinew as possible, Bronc sprinted through the open portal. But his hunch had been a good one.

A surprised yell, followed by gash-

Continued on page 104

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Continued from page 101

ing gun flame greeted them as they appeared in the doorway. Lead plucked at the sleeve of Bronc's shirt, then one of his Colts bucked a hot answer to the shadowy figure of Spider Bane down the path. Leaping sidewise out of the lighted frame of the doorway, Bronc triggered again without hope of hitting the stocky shape of the gunny, for he was moving too fast for accurate shooting. Like a jackknife, shoulders and knees almost touching with each running step, Panamint plunged past his young pard.

"Come runnin', fella," he yelped grimly, "yo're wastin' lead and time!"

Bronc knew that Panamint was right. Another slug slapped into the wooden siding at his back. Things were getting too hot for comfort! He flung one last defiant shot from his left-hand weapon, heard the hammer click on an empty. Shoving the useless weapon back into leather, Bronc leaped after Panamint, who had rounded a corner of the old roadhouse.

Behind him a shout lifted. "Boss, they're gittin' away. It's them damned pards ag'in."

Haley's reply came from farther down the black gulch where he and the others had spread out to search for the Piute brave. It was so faint that Bronc could hardly credit his ears with hearing aright.

"Let 'em go. We don't want 'em salivated yit. They're our alibi for usin' the map we got!"

At the back of the old roadhouse, Bronc found his partner already astride one of the four saddled mounts tethered to a sagging hitch rail there. They were the cayuses, Bronc saw, that Haley and his bunch had hidden here from Mesquite Flat.

"Help yoreself," greeted Panamint with an airy wave of his hand. "We might as well *be* hoss thieves; they've called us everything else!"

Nodding, Bronc vaulted to the saddle atop a tall dun. Touching the animal lightly with the blunt spur rowels on his heels, he followed Panamint's lead toward a narrow trail that curled to the rim of the narrow gulch.

No shots followed them, and that fact brought the grim realization home to him that he hadn't misunderstood Haley's shouted orders to his henchmen. The canny gun boss was indeed letting them escape unmolested. Bronc shook his head in sheer disgust.

"An' damned if we ain't playin' right into his hands by doin' it!" he muttered. "But they's one way we can spike his play, if we work fast." The new idea that had come to him crashed through Bronc's mind like the flash of a comet.

Setting spurs to the dun's flanks, he surged up alongside Panamint as his old pard breasted the rim and angled away on a long siant toward their cabin a half mile or more away.

"What you been muttering about, kid?" asked Panamint as the young smith drew abreast.

Bronc Maverick's slitted eyes were glittering as he turned them on his old pard. "Feller," he said grimly, "we're turnin' our guns over to Sheriff Hartley. *Pronto!*"

Bugeyed with surprise, Panamint could only gasp. "Kid," he finally brought out, "have yuh gone daft?"

CHAPTER XIX.

MURDER DEPUTY.

G RIMLY, Bronc shook his head. He explained the scheme that had come into his mind as they rode at a fast clip across the now starlit

ridge, telling of that eye-opening remark he had heard Highgrade Haley utter.

"Fella," he summed up earnestly as they came in sight of their own small cabin, "can't yuh see that it's our only chance? As it stands now Haley's got the law on his side, by hoodwinkin' the sheriff into appointin' him a deputy. But he got thet commission by dangling the bait of our scalps under Hartley's nose. That's why he wanted us to escape tonight. If his hellers had nailed us, he'd have no excuse to go into the South Sink with the law to back his trip. An' he wants thet backin' bad. Under the law the cuss can run hog-wild, an' nobody can stop him. I'm goin' to spike his guns if I have to let Hartley stretch my neck to do it! If yuh don't feel the way I do about it, yuh can back out an' hit the owl-hoot now. But me, I'm goin' to send Dorita up to town to git the sheriff!"

"Looks like she's at the cabin, all right," Panamint observed, nodding toward the square of a lighted window in their shack. "And I'd say offhand that looks like Sheriff Hartley's hoss tethered out front. Yuh won't have to go far to hand over yore guns, fella!"

"What about you?" Bronc asked bluntly. His eyes were sharp on his partner. He couldn't forget the doubt that was still hounding him, the doubt that he was in reality Pike Frazer, as Panamint Joe claimed. Haley, Bronc knew, had run in a ringer, whom Judge Peek had cleverly exposed. But was he, himself, another ringer? Had Panamint Joe tried to pull the wool over his eyes in an effort to make him a party to getting possession of Burro Bob's pack of gold? His question, he realized, was a test of Panamint's sincerity.

The old desert rat measured up. "Son, they's jest one answer," he said quietly. "Yuh know I'll back yuh up!"

Bronc nodded as they dismounted alongside the sheriff's mount. Panamint had come through. But oddly enough, doubt smote him now. Were they doing the wise thing? Was his plan going to sway the sheriff? Hartley was bullheaded, and they had made a fool of him twice during the day. He wasn't going to forget it! Would he be prejudiced?

"They's jest one way to find out," the young smith muttered. Followed by his gangly pard, Bronc pushed open the door of their shack. He had already drawn his twin guns, but he was holding them by the barrels, bone handles extended as with his head high he stalked into the single room of their cabin.

A gasp that was echoed by the click of cocking gun hammers from one side came to him, but he had eyes only for the slender shape of Dorita Nelson, who stood across the scarred table from him.

Her hand went to her throat at sight of the tall young smith. "Bronc," she whispered, "Bronc, why did you come? Didn't you see the sheriff's horse?" Then she noticed the reversed guns in his hands, and her eyes, dark as her curly hair, dilated with surprise. "You're—" she began.

"Giving up my guns," Bronc cut her off curtly. He turned toward the shadows at the edge of the lantern light, his eyes catching the glint of Sheriff Hartley's drawn weapons. The sheriff crouched behind them, a puzzled frown on his brow. He seemed to be completely taken aback by Bronc's move.

"Yuh heerd what the kid said, Hartley," Panamint drawled. "We're givin' ourselves up to you for better

or worse as the parsons say when they marry a gent."

Bronc tossed his guns to the table top, where the scar of Bull Madden's lead showed plainly. "We're ready to go to jail, sheriff, when you say the word," he informed the lawman.



The grizzled old Shasta sheriff still crouched behind his drawn guns, but he was plainly ill at ease. "What in hell yuh doin' this fer?" he asked suspiciously. "Yuh've tricked me so much already thet damned if I know whether to trust yuh or not. Mr. Haley told me you'd probably be out in the desert by now, hightailin' it fer Forgotten Canyon, and Long Tom Frazer's gold. I imagine Haley's out in the Sink now, scoutin' for yore trail."

Bronc grinned mirthlessly. "He may be headin' fer the South Sink all right, but he ain't worryin' about us, amigo. He's followin' the sign Burro Bob brought back with him."

Sheriff Hartley's gun wavered, drooped toward his holsters. "Yuh . . . yuh still claimin' he's got Burro's map?" he stuttered.

It was the opening Bronc Maverick had been angling for. "I am,"

he said grimly. "Fact is, we heard him say so, not more'n thirty minutes ago. Fact is, too, that he had us cornered, but that Piute none of yuh believe is around hyar, saved our bacon. Haley an' his gun-slingers chased after the Injun, and we got out. They spent some powder on us, an' then I heard Haley yell to let us go."

There was a ring of truth to the young smith's words that Sheriff Hartley caught. It showed in his reply. "Why'n hell should he do that?"

"Because he needs us for an alibi, to cover up his dirty work," Bronc snapped. "Any killin' he pulls to get that gold he can blame on us. If we're daid yuh can't prove him wrong. If we're alive an' yuh can't catch us, yuh can't call him a liar either. That's why we rid up here to give ourselves up, sheriff. We've done told yuh from the beginnin' that we had no part in the killin' of Burro Bob an' Sorbo. Do yuh think if we had we'd have been dumb enough to leave a bloody rifle an' such stuff in our rooms for yuh to find?"

Bronc watched the sheriff holster one gun, and lift his free hand to scratch his thatch of iron-gray hair. "Thet p'int did seem a leetle funny," he admitted. "Any gents," he added ruefully, "who could lock me in my own jail, ain't dummies!"

Bronc nodded. His plan was proceeding better than he had hoped, but there was one more point he wanted to drive home.

"You'll agree, too, sheriff, thet Haley was the chief gent who stirred up enough feelin' around town to have a bunch come lookin' for us with a rope."

"Yeah, I guess yo're right there"—Hartley agreed doubtfully—"but

GOING BALD?

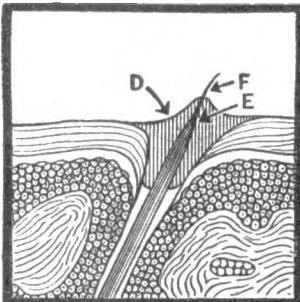
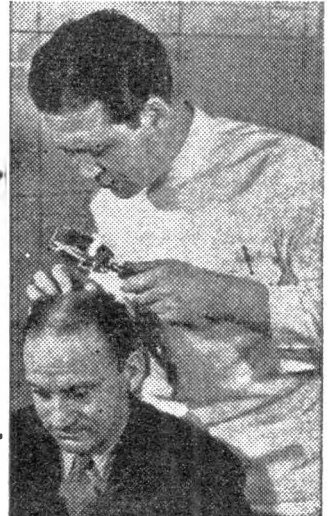
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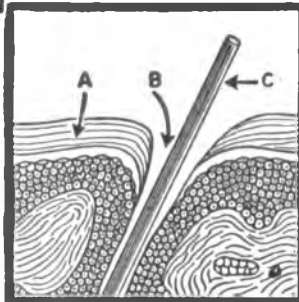
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Alf Saunders was the one passin' out the free whiskey."

"Mebbe he was, but I bet if yuh turn the heat on him you'll find thet Highgrade was payin' for it," Bronc retorted. Howsomever, thet ain't important. The thing to remember, sheriff, is thet after we got out, Haley didn't lead the chase after us. He walked right in an' let you out, or so we heerd him say, when we was hidin' behind the bar in Gate-way House. Him an' thet red-headed swamper, Lon Sykes, was laughin' about it fit to kill. Laughin' about the way Haley had pulled the wool over yore eyes—usin' us fer bait so's you'd deputize him, and give him a free hand to go into the South Sink lookin' fer us. Cain't yuh see, sheriff, thet all yuh've done is appoint a murder deputy, dedicated to the scheme of seein' that Long Tom Frazer don't ever come out of For-gotten Canyon?"

Sheriff Hartley was a man who made mistakes, but he was also a man who was big enough to admit and try to rectify them. Bronc watched him step heavily to the table. Without a word he picked up the young smith's guns and handed them butt first to Bronc. His old eyes found Maverick's young ones.

"Fella," he said simply, "yuh wanta help me git back that badge?"

Through the night the three of them thundered back along the ridge top. Dorita Nelson had made an impassioned plea to accompany them, but Bronc and the sheriff had vetoed any such move.

"You wait for us right here, young lady," the sheriff had admonished. "Flyin' lead an' ladies don't mix, an' there's apt to be some of it flyin', too, when I ask Haley for his badge. If he wants to go into the South Sink to hunt for Forgotten Canyon in an effort to prove Lon Sykes' identity, that's his business. But he

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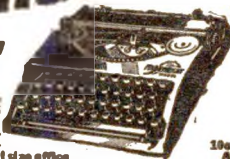
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ain't goin' with the law to back him—if I can help it!"

The sheriff, Bronc recalled, had also given them the same chance. "Mebbe it ain't exactly legal to turn loose a coupla gents accused of murder, but lackin' more prof thet yuh done it, I guess I can take the responsibility for lettin' yuh go."

It was what he had hoped the sheriff would say, Bronc reflected, and yet this, their first real victory over the oily outcast from the northern gold camps, turned hollow almost immediately. For Gateway House was empty when they approached it.

"The bird's flown the coop!" Panamint growled. He eyed the open, sagging door of the old roadhouse with marked disgust. "Take a look if yuh wanta, sheriff," he grunted, "but yo're wastin' yore time. Haley's already haided into the Sink. He'll be long gone come mornin'—an' he'll be wearin' the badge yuh give him! Damned if he ain't stole another march on us, jest when I thought we'd won a pot."

"Listen!" Bronc cut in tensely. He turned his head toward the pillars which were silhouetted against the night sky like a pair of gaunt arms. Through the notch between them moved dark blobs of horseflesh, heading down the trail toward the South Sink. It looked like a desert caravan was getting underway.

Bronc whirled his mount as he came to that decision. "Come on, you hombres," he said grimly, "let's see who else is honin' for a taste of Death Valley!"

Touching spurs to the borrowed dun under him, Bronc lined back down the gulch that led to the intersection of the trail. Were other outfits planning to venture into the Sink of Death to try and locate that fabulous horde of gold? It was pos-

sible, Bronc realized grimly. And if they were, they had about as good a chance as he and Panamint. All they had to go on were the last words of the dying prospector, Burns Bob. Those words rang like a bell in his mind. "Find a wild jack—look at its neck—"

Involuntarily he glanced down at his tattered rags of clothing, and bitterness surged through him. Time was the most precious thing of all now, and much of it would be wasted in gathering equipment of their own together. It would have to be done under cover, too. For, though the sheriff had saved them from the owl-hoot, he wasn't going to advertise the fact around Mesquite Flat just yet.

His fast run down the gulch had carried him to a point now where he could see the intersection of the two trails, and what met his eyes brought Bronc to a skidding halt. Panamint and the sheriff, riding close behind him, almost bumped into his dun, he had stopped so suddenly.

"Damn me for a horn toad!" Panamint yipped behind him, "look what we got here."

But Bronc hardly heard his partner. For milling a bit in all this sudden excitement were four pack burros, tarpaulin-wrapped packs slung expertly on their crosstrees. His own short-coupled dun pony, Gila, on lead with Panamint Joe's bony black gelding, Satan, snorted a welcome. Managing the outfit was a slim stripling in blue Levis and plaid shirt. At least the rider, forking the dapple gray looked like a boy, then Bronc realized that it was Dorita Nelson in man's garb.

"Howdy, partners," she called gayly. "You boys ready to take a little ride?"

Powdery alkali dust, kicked up by the milling feet of the pack animals,

stung Bronc's nostrils and brought him back to the sharp reality of the present. For one short moment joy had filled him at sight of the girl, and the pack train she had brought from town. He remembered she had promised them in the jail that she would ready a string for them, but the fact had slipped his mind until now. Yet, here she was with the pack outfit. None of the time that was so important would be wasted in getting under way. Then ruefully Bronc had to revise that thought. It was easy to see, from the way Dorita was dressed and from the number of pack animals, that she was planning to accompany them into Death Valley. And that was something she just couldn't do!

Those thoughts ran through Bronc's mind as he dismounted. All the others were on the ground, too, and Dorita Nelson, with a calm assurance she didn't feel spoke to the sheriff.

"You can take the horses, Bronc and Panamint are riding back to town with you, sheriff. We won't need them any longer."

Sheriff Hartley eyed the brown-eyed, brown-haired lass. "You sure you won't be taking yourself back with me, too?" he asked dryly.

The light from the low-flung stars close overhead was bright enough for Bronc to see the flush that mantled the girl's oval face. But her square little chin set stubbornly.

"I'm not going back," she said calmly. "Perhaps you gentlemen forget that I have as much interest in recovering the lost gold in Forgotten Canyon as any of you. A share of that gold is mine, and I'm going to see that I get it!"

"If we're lucky enough to reach Forgotten Canyon and bring back what's there," Bronc cut in, "we'll see to it that you get your share.

Dorita"—he stepped closer to her—"you jest can't go with us. My gosh, girl, you don't know what you're askin'."

Panamint was standing by, nervously gnawing a corner of his flowing mustache. "I'll say yuh don't, Miz Nelson," he exploded. "Hee'n' blazes, gal, yuh got about as much right in the valley as a fish outa water, an' about as much chance of comin' back alive! Where we're goin' the country is warmer than Satan's griddle. I've seen it so hot thet yore fingernails feel like somebuddy's usin' pinchers on 'em. I've taken a drink, and watched it ooze outa my skin fast as it goes down. Gal, yuh don't know what yo're thinkin' about," he went on earnestly. "Salt dries on yuh. Yore skin cracks like a piece of parchment. An' if the waterholes are dry when yuh reach 'em its jest the end for yuh, an' dyin' of thirst is about the wust way of passin' on I can think of. Then there's Highgrade Haley. Yuh don't want to forget thet cuss. Darned if he ain't proved thet he's tougher'n the valley itself! They's goin' to be heat and lead to face, lady—not to mention the snaky Piutes guardin' the trail to Forgotten Canyon."

Bronc's Gila horse flung up its head, ears pricking sharply toward the rimrock of the gulch. The young smith's eyes whipped about to follow the animal's gaze. Then he was flinging himself forward toward Dorita Nelson, a cry of warning on his lips. Bronc's muscle-corded arm swept up like a flail, the picture of horror he had seen up there still plain in his mind. The picture of a stocky, naked figure, rising silent as a shadow from behind a cactus clump, sprung bow an arrogant arch against the night sky. The arrow notched to that bowstring was aimed directly at the upright girl. Then his swing-

ing arm hit Dorita in the side, knocked her sprawling.

The arrow meant for her sobbed across Bronc's shoulder. It hit the earth almost at the girl's feet, buried itself quivering in the sandy earth.

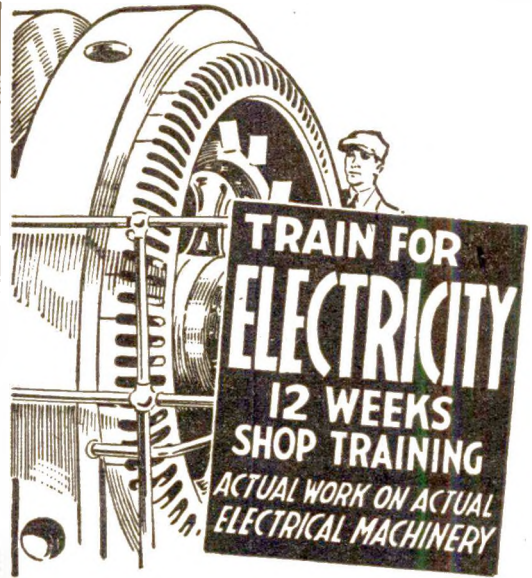
Panamint's Colt thundered twice, but Bronc Maverick knew without turning that his lead had missed. A chill of hopelessness swept over him as that coyotelike laughter filled the night. Could any man run that gantlet of silent, waiting death between here and Forgotten Canyon? He didn't think so. And yet they had to try!

CHAPTER XX.
CORNERED IN HELL.

ONE day blended into another without any difference. It was like moving on an endless treadmill. The only thing that made them realize that they were making progress was the fact that gradually, out of the west, the iron flanks of the gaunt Panamint Range became clearer to their red-rimmed eyes. Barbaric in coloring, those shimmering walls came over closer to them. They were near enough now to see the gray gravel fans that poured like frozen rivers from the mouths of giant canyons, fans that looked smooth as velvet. But actually, Bronc knew, they were channeled by water, studded by giant boulders, a labyrinthine Devil's Playground, where more than one desert rat had found float, and gone to his death trying to trace the ore brought down from the peaks by winter freshets.

Slouched uncomfortably in his sticky saddle, Bronc led the way ever onward toward those deceptive talus slopes, for it was there that the wild burros lived. His partner's last words before leaving Mesquite Flat rang in his mind like a song.

"Burro said to find a wild jack



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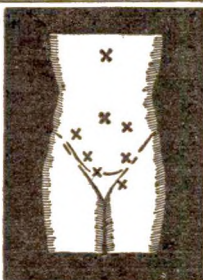


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and look at its neck. Fella, mebbe it's jest a hunch, but I'm figgerin' thet wild jacks and Forgotten Canyon mix. An' the only place in Death-Valley thet I know of any wild burros is on the talus slopes at the foot of the Panamints. We'll haid thataway, and git us a jack. It's the only chance we got of ever findin' yore daddy."

Gray-blue eyes narrowed to slits against the glare of the molten sun that had already passed the zenith, Bronc twisted in his hot seat to glance across his shoulders. His glance was not for the humped scarecrowlike figure of his partner. Panamint Joe had gained his name and fame from this barren land. He could look after himself. Bronc's eyes were for Dorita Nelson, who rode just behind him, head bobbing listlessly to every forward step of her gray mount. She was in bad shape, Bronc realized. His blood chilled despite the heat at the thought of what might happen to her, and them, for that matter, if the waterhole they were heading for should be dry.

If only she had stayed behind! But it was too late to worry about that now, he told himself. She had insisted on coming with them. That Piute arrow which had so narrowly missed taking her life had hardened her resolve. And, too, they owed her something. The chances were that she had saved their lives by bringing them that gun when they had been jailed. But there was also the grim suspicion in Bronc's mind that she didn't wholly trust him. Where gold was concerned, he realized bitterly, trust went out the door. He remembered with equal bitterness that he had doubted Panamint. The old-timer claimed that he, a desert waif, with a blank past, was in reality Long Tom Frazer's son.

Bronc's eyes turned forward again to scan the towering range they were

so slowly approaching, and involuntarily his breathing quickened. Somewhere, in one of those shadowed canyons, might lie the answer to all his questions! And they'd find it! Nothing was going to stop them.

But grim logic mocked at him. There was plenty to stop them. Like an answer to his thought, a statuesque figure showed suddenly against the ridge line of a distant sand hill. Sharp-cut against the brilliant light, it stood there unmoving, watching them.

Behind him he heard the snick of Panamint's Winchester, as the old-timer thumbed back the hammer. Then his partner groaned. "Damned varmints. They know we won't shoot."



Bronc saw the Indian drop from sight like the figment of a bad dream. Bleakly he focused his gaze forward again. That had been going on ever since they had pulled out. All along the dreary miles behind them, those figures with the single eagle feather in their scalplocks had shown themselves. That was all. Just showed themselves.

He heard Dorita Nelson's voice behind him, like the dry croak of a raven.

"Why do they do that?" she whispered. "My God, if they want to kill us, why don't they come and do it? I . . . I can't stand this suspense much longer. This knowing we're being watched, that they're just playing with us, like a cat does with a mouse. They know we won't shoot, that the sound will only tell Haley where we are."

That night they ate meagerly, with only a swallow of water from nearly empty water casks to bolster them. The balance was given to their livestock, for all of them that meant the difference between life and death!

"It's tough to keep movin'," Panamint husked at the conclusion of their meal, "but we've got to make Burro Wells afore mornin', or we're done for. Gal, if yuh know how to pray, yuh better do it. Pray thet there's water in the wells! I've seen 'em dry this time of year, and I've seen 'em full. Yuh can't never tell what—"

Slowly the red stars wheeled westward across a velvet-black sky. Heat lifted from the saturated sands. It was almost as hot traveling through the dark as through the day. Sleep jerked at Bronc's heavy eyelids. Time and again he caught himself half falling from his saddle.

Then the way they were following began to tip up. Like mountains of the moon, Panamint Range, lifted into the obsidian sky above them. Gigantic boulders marched back toward the high, steep slopes on either side of them. Gravel slid from beneath the hoofs of their footsore mounts.

Old Panamint took the lead, reining along the talus slope. He ges-

tured to the notch of a narrow gulch only a little distance ahead. "Thet's where the wild jacks drink, if there's water. We'll soon know—"

And water was there! A spring of it welling out of a fissure in the rocks to form a shallow pool. Stars reflected in its mirrored surface. It was the most beautiful sight the young smith had ever seen!

They drank sparingly, again and again, so as to give their pinched stomachs a chance to absorb the moisture slowly. otherwise it would have sickened them.

Finally Panamint called a halt. Stretching out on a blanket beside the spring, he sighed luxuriously, looking out of his canny old eyes at Bronc and Dorita who were seated side by side on a boulder across the pool from him. They had already thoroughly scouted about the spring for sign of horse tracks that might show them whether Highgrade Haley and his bunch had been here, but they had found none.

It was about that ruthless band that Panamint spoke first.

"Findin' no trace of Haley hereabouts means one of two things," he drawled soberly. "Either them polecats airc behind us, or they're so far ahead the wind's had a chance tuh wipe out their marks."

Bronc shook his red head. "Or we're off the track," he said grimly. "They got Burro's map. We got nothin' but a hunch. Fella, they's sign of wild jack about the spring here, but with us around yuh ain't goin' to see any of 'em comin' here to drink. They're wilder'n jackrabbits. So we ain't goin' to ketch one by waitin' here. We got to go after 'em. Mebbe you got a better idee, but I figure the best thing we can do is use this for our base camp, leave Dorita here, and start on a still

hunt for one of them pesky little critters."

Dawn found the pards skirting the edge of the talus slopes. They had cautioned Dorita before leaving to make no smoke, and to keep a rifle handy. It was dangerous for the girl to remain at the springs alone, but both of them knew that they would never be able to get within rifle range of one of the sharp-eyed burros if they had the whole pack train along.

Squinting out over the shimmering, bone-white alkali flats, Bronc rode tensely, Winchester across the bows of his saddle. They had decided against trying to ride and rope one of the little gray animals, for such a chase would probably wear out their mounts, already fagged by days and nights of travel.

"I hate like hell to shoot one of the little devils," Panamint had said, "fer more reasons than one. If Haley's anywhere around he'll hear the sound of the shot an' come for a look-see. But it's the only thing we can do."

They had, however, taken the precaution of riding a few miles from their base camp before even attempting to hunt in earnest. Such a move at least, Bronc felt, would keep Dorita's hiding place intact. He refused to let himself think of what would happen to her if one of those Piutes that had been hounding them should find her.

The red ball of the sun lifted above the tangled ranges of the Funerals and Grapevines far to the eastward. Sheeted flame seemed to spring instantly from the earth to sear the pards.

Panamint tugged the brim of his old slouch hat lower over his faded eyes. "Damned funny," he grumbled, "thet we ain't seen none of

them pesky jacks. Usually they's a dozen of 'em cavortin' around the gravel fans, an' croppin' at the coviella an' salt grass. Looks like we ain't goin' to need to worry about shootin' near camp!" he ended grimly.

In ever widening circles, with fear clawing at them like the cauldron rays of the sun, they kept up their search. Thirst began to add its tortures. The wild jacks seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth!

The thought chilled Bronc with its intensity. They had been steadily threading their way toward the ridge line of one of the gravel fans as his thoughts ran on. Now, as they crossed the crest, Bronc's ear caught the rattle of gravel, the crackle of mesquite brush ahead. He caught a glimpse of big ears, a scrawny gray shape that blended with the brush. A wild jack!

Quicker than thought his hands snapped the Winchester he'd been carrying across the bows of his saddle to his shoulder. The wild burro was a good hundred yards away, and rapidly gaining speed. Agile as a jackrabbit, it zigzagged through the short brush and boulders as though it knew the fate in store for it.

Cold to the core, Bronc followed its run through the sights. He'd get one shot, no more. His fingers squeezed the trigger gently. Through muzzle smoke he saw the burro seem to trip. The wild jack somersaulted. Gray against the gray brush it seemed to blend into nothingness, but Panamint had it spotted.

With a wild whoop, he set spurs to his bony black mount, pellmelled at a fast run down the gravelly slope ahead. Hard on his heels, Bronc followed, the hot blood of excitement pounding like hammers against his eardrums.

It took them ten minutes to reach the fallen animal. The instant remorse that Bronc had felt at killing the little beast faded at his first sight of it. The burro was scrawny, potbellied. Tick sores scarred its flanks.

"The critter's better off dead than alive," Panamint grunted, voicing Bronc's own thoughts.

Side by side they flung themselves down and hurried to the dead burro. The animal lay on its side. Bronc's eyes passed over its outstretched neck. Then without a word he heaved the dead jack onto its other side. Silence held between them for a long, hopeless moment. There was nothing the matter with that wild burro's scrawny neck!

The sound of his single shot had gone winging out over this land of vast silence like a clarion call. And from here and there along the talus slopes other small sounds came suddenly to their ears. Wild burros, feeding in hidden draws and among boulder clumps had heard that alien sound, and were scattering like a covey of frightened quail. But for a moment that seemed to lengthen into a year, Bronc hardly realized what was happening. Like a man dazed by a blow he stared at the dead burro at their feet. They'd pinned their faith on Burro Bob's dying words. And those words, as it looked now, had been only the maudlin expression of a man in the clutches of death. They'd come on a wild-goose chase. No wonder those Piutes had only watched them from distant sandhills, making no effort to attack.

"Kid, look alive!" Panamint's words, harshened by disappointment, jerked him back to the realities of the present. "The hill's a-swarmin' with jacks now. Mebbe another

one—" the crash of his own rifle broke the sound of his speech.

"Got one!" he exclaimed, "jest as it hit the salt flats down below. Come runnin', fella. Looks to me like it had somethin' danglin' from its neck!"

The burro Panamint's lead had dropped lay a hundred feet out on the alkali flats. Leaving their mounts where they had ground-hitched them, Bronc led the way at a run down the last short slant of the talus slope. Panamint kept pace with him, unspoken hope whipping them both on.

And this time there was no mistake. There was something dangling from the wild jack's neck! Bronc saw it as he flung himself down on the hot sands beside the animal.

With trembling fingers Panamint whipped out the bowie he always carried at his belt. "Cut the string, kid," he said huskily. "Let's see what's in thet little bundle."

A roll of unborn burro skin was thonged by buckskin whangs to the animal's throat like the pendant to a necklace. Bronc's hands were trembling so with excitement that he could hardly untie the packet. But finally he got it spread on the ground, holding it down with his arms.

Red-rimmed eyes filled with eagerness, they scanned their find. The inside of the roll of parchment was covered with faint lines that formed a chart. But it meant more to Panamint than to Bronc. The old-timer had not prospected this country for nothing. That crude map was like an open book in his hand.

"Glory be," he exclaimed. "They's Burro Wells, an' Sidewinder Canyon marked out. An' Forgotten Canyon cuts off it a few miles in. Gosh-a'mighty, Bronc, I've done walked

right past the entrance to Forgotten Canyon a half dozen times in my life, an' never paid it a bit of attention!"

But Bronc hardly heard his partner. His eyes had found the dim handwriting at the bottom of the parchment:

If the gent who finds this will foller directions he can git to me. They's more gold hyar than fifty hombres can spend, an' I'm willin' to give my share to the feller who can git in here an' snake me out. I've been hangin' these maps to the necks of a few burros every year, hopin' somebuddy'd git ahold of one. If yuh come for me, though, watch out fer the Piutes that are holdin' me prisoner.

Signed,

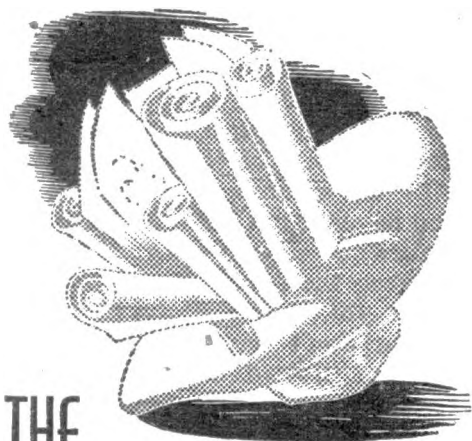
LONG TOM FRANK FRAZER,
Captain, Gold Train.

Sight of that name signed in a bold, flowing hand, seemed to open a door long shut in Bronc Maverick's mind. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. He had seen that signature before, in the years that he had lost!

Lead horneted viciously past his blocky shoulder, whining spitefully as the buzz of a sidewinder. But it was not until the following whip-crash of a rifle reached his ears that Bronc moved.

Panamint's gnarled fingers were on his arm, dragging him to his feet. "Kid," he was crying, "git behind that dead jack. Haley's got us spotted. His bunch is holed up along thet gravel fan over thar, an' they got us where the hair's short!"

With the note from the living dead man in their hands, a map to mountains of gold spread before them, Panamint and Bronc are ambushed by the scurrilous Highgrade Haley and his men? What will happen to Dorita Nelson, left alone and at the mercy of these human wolves? And what will happen to the pards themselves? Read next week's issue for a thrilling answer.



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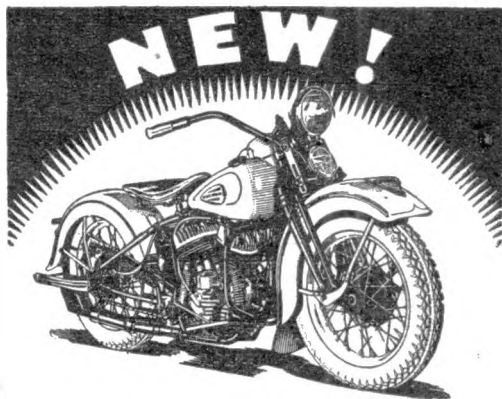
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Now THAT you're sending in your true Western experiences, a lot of you seem to have got the idea that they're taking the place of the fiction stories by you amateurs in the Corner. Shucks, pards, we reckoned we'd set you to rights on that weeks ago. We explained it all in the strongest language we could without resorting to cusswords. For your benefit, we're repeating it, so none of you can have the alibi that you headed up the wrong fork of the trail.

The true Western experiences are



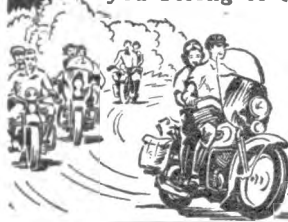
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an addition to the Corner, not taking the place of the fiction stories by you amateurs. We want 'em both, and we'll pay you just as much for one as the other, according to its length. Some of you have had true Western experiences, and some of you haven't, but have to shape your stories out of your imagination. So between the two, you ought to find where you belong.

You don't have to swear on a stack of Bibles that your true story really happened. If you're a gifted liar and can get away with it, more power to you. We never sat in with a crowd of punchers who confined themselves strictly to the truth in their stories of what were supposed to be real happenings. But don't make 'em too tall. We may be dumb, but not that dumb.

Well, here's a true Western experience that caught our eye. We're printing the author's letter because we *do* fix stories up if the writing's sort of shaky. Here are the letter and the true adventure that Señor Fines had:

I am sending in a true adventure of mine. I will confess that I'm not much of a writer, but maybe you can fix it up and polish it. I am a soldier, and am in the hospital with a bad leg, and I'm writing this while I'm lying flat on my back. So please pardon the writing.

LUCKY BREAK

By Loren Fines

Fort F. E. Warren, Cheyenne, Wyoming

Coming to a sudden halt, I scented something amiss. I had just returned from the lower ranch after finding that my uncle wasn't at home, and was on my way back to the old ranch where I cared for my uncle's blooded stock.

But now the stock was "cutting up"—something the pure-breds had never done before.

Walking around behind the barn, I saw four of the toughest-looking men I had ever seen, loading the stock onto a truck.

Suddenly, I hit upon a daring plan, and

got my rifle. Then I quietly stole up behind them. In the strongest voice I could muster, I commanded: "Stick 'em up!"

Turning around, four surprised jaspers looked into the muzzle of my gun and hastily raised their hands.

"March!" I ordered them, and herded them toward town.

About four hours later we reached town. There I found the sheriff and had the four would-be rustlers locked up.

When he had done that, the sheriff picked up my rifle and threw back the bolt.

"Why," he exclaimed, "it's empty!"

For a moment, I stared at him unbelievably. Then I remembered. I had cleaned the rifle that day and hadn't thought to reload it.

It's a good thing I didn't remember it while I was covering those cow thieves. I'd have dropped dead, I guess.

If the author hadn't been a soldier, maybe he wouldn't have had nerve enough to send this in, because a story written while you're lying flat on your back is no specimen of perfect penmanship. But we're sure glad that he did send it in, and we bet the rest of you are. Send in your true Western experiences if you have to stand on your heads to write 'em. If we like 'em, we'll mail you the check pronto, then fix 'em up ourselves.

We like to think that these true Western experiences are going to grow into a yarn-swapping roundup of trail pards each week. Maybe we're all waiting for you to spin yours. Won't you try?

Now for the first fiction story by an amateur:

A SIDEWINDER'S REWARD

By Glenn Speck—Age 19

Coffeyville, Kansas

The stinky kerosene lamps lighted up the Deuce of Diamonds Saloon. Bellied up to the bar, a handful of men washed down raw whiskey—half a dozen joking cowpunchers, two sorry-looking Mexicans, and one tinhorn gambler. Behind the group a big stranger weeded out with hot eyes

each hombre individually. Not a sign of Red Travers!

The stranger lighted a hand-made cigarette. Beneath a week's growth of beard and stoic features the ghost of a young man showed through. The hot gray eyes once may have been amiable. This hombre's words were like knives:

"My handle's Stan Starring, hombres. And I'm lookin' for a rat named Red Travers! Any of you gents know his whereabouts?"

The men spun about and saw the stranger planted there like an animated scarecrow. The long-faced, bald bartender spoke first.

"What's yore trouble with Red Travers, stranger? When you cross with him you'll gun with a gent who's tough as the devil."

Stan laughed sardonically. "Devil! Don't feed me that line. He's yellow as a sidewinder!"

"Yellow as a sidewinder, huh!"

The angry voice boomed from behind. The loafers' eyes popped out. They quieted. Stan turned around and saw in the parted bat-wing doors, Red Travers. Tall, heavy-set, he had a thumb hooked in his cartridge belt ready for a lightning draw; a mop of red hair covered his wolfish face. Recognition lighted his face. Then:

"Starring! I . . . I thought you were . . . dead!" he gulped.

"Don't get yellow, Red. I'm not a ghost. And I'm not rat enough to plug you in the back; I'll give you an even break." Stan paused to let the words sink in. "You thought, back in Wyomin', you'd feed me to the buzzards and live high on my dough, but I couldn't die and leave you here, so I lived—pulled through on guts alone. What did you do to my bronc, Smoky?"

In Travers' beady eyes fear welled up, but he tried to act indifferently. "Yore hoss? He's on the Circle T, eatin' and sleepin'. Go ahead—play your cards, Starring. Remember, I've always got four aces!"

Stan snarled: "You bushwhacked me and stole my bronc. I'm goin' to fill you with hot lead!"

They drew. Suddenly the lights crashed out and curtained the saloon in blackness; the cowpunchers had shot them out. Orange-and-blue flame sprouted out in the darkness as the guns spoke like fireworks in hell. A scream knifed the room. Someone dashed from the room, forked a bronc, and thundered out of town.

When a lantern was lighted a moment

later, the men saw a figure sprawled in a pool of blood—dead. Red Sanders. Where had Stan Starring gone?

Hours later a lone rider dismounted by a fence in a pasture. In the moonlight he eagerly approached a coal-black bronc; the bronc whinnied and nuzzled the figure.

"Smoky!" he called. "Smoky, old boy! We're goin' home. You don't need to worry about that skunk who stole you; he won't bother anyone any more."

Maybe some of you new writers in the Corner never heard us harping on what we claim constitutes a good story, but you sure are shooting plumb close to the bull's-eye. In this story, for example, the characters are real people, not mere names. They have traits that come out as the plot unfolds. Their physical aspect is marked by quick strokes of color rather than lengthy descriptions.

The plot isn't bad, and it has some suspense, which often saves an otherwise weak story. It has human interest, thanks to the cayuse Smoky.

You've turned out a plumb promising story, pard, and we advise you to keep at it. Any hombre who handles his characters so well is bound to make the grade to the front of a magazine some day, with study and elbow grease.

And now:

THE BRAVEST MAN

By John Gillese—Age 19

Rochfort Bridge, Alberta, Canada

Outside, the wind howled keenly across the prairie darkness. Inside his office, Sheriff Bill Weber, lean and brown, sighed happily, strangely content with the knowledge of a day's work well done.

The door opened suddenly and three men were in the office. The tall, thin leader, Gib Garble, was smiling tightly. Mex Siluex was fingering his gun butts, and Red Nixon was running a hand abstractedly through his flaming hair.

Bill Weber paled as he faced them. The most famous sheriff in the Southwest did

not streak for the equally famous guns at his side.

"You three," he managed bleakly, "are wanted by every lawman in America!"

"Yeah," drawled Gib Garble, in amusement. "But yuh wouldn't hand us over, would yuh, Bill?"

"I kin jest imagine," guffawed Red, "what the citizens would think o' their famous sheriff if they knew his past."

"All right," snapped Bill bitterly. "Maybe I did get drunk once when I was a kid of twenty and helped you three stage a robbery. You kept telling me it was just a little joke—and I didn't know different till it was all over. Then I gave myself up. For the while I was in jail, I learned to love law and order. When I got out, I came to Dustville here, and I've been an honest, hard-working sheriff ever since. Boys, I love my job. Leave me alone."

"Oh, no," smirked Garble cruelly. "We're goin' to rob Dustville's bank tomorrow, Bill. An' we don't want yuh to be on hand. Otherwise we'll have to tell the folks about yer past. Yuh know what that means: no more stars fer Billy!"

Without another word, the three left.

For many minutes Bill sat there, bowed and tortured. To do his duty and lose his job, as he must surely do when the people learned of his past? Or, to be absent to-morrow? Which?

Slowly he arose and oiled his guns.

Next day, as the three outlaws entered the bank, Bill Weber was watching from across the street. A second later he was in action. Mex Siluex resisted and never grew older. The other two surrendered with their hands up.

"Folks," said Bill Weber, to the crowd that quickly gathered, "I have a story to relate." And he told them of his past. "Now," he concluded quietly, "soon as I see these two locked up, I'm ready to turn in my star."

"Anyway, it cost yuh the job yuh loved!" snarled Garble venomously.

"Folks," Mayor Knowles addressed the crowd, "was ever Dustville more peaceful before Bill became sheriff? Has any previous lawman every captured more criminals? And is there anyone here who hasn't got drunk and made some mistake in his youth? The answer is NO! Only the bravest man will risk the job he loves to do his duty. So I'm thinking Bill will always be our sheriff, aren't you?"

And the deafening roar of agreement

brought tears of joy to the eyes of the most famous lawman in the Southwest.

At first, we didn't like this story; then we read it again and decided that it has more in it, both good and bad, than appears on the surface. The sheriff is a good character, but the plot is pretty weak and doesn't give him an opportunity to rise to his full stature. The fight at the finish gives him that chance, but the most isn't made of its dramatic possibilities. The story has human interest, but that doesn't get under the reader's skin as it should.

If we seem harsh, pard, it's because we're talking straight from the shoulder for your own good. You have a story, all right, but it has a lot of faults that need ironing out before it can be called a finished product, and then the plot will never be strong. It shows the importance of doping out a good plot before you begin to write.

We know you can do better than this, amigo. Try it.

And here's another that hit the bull's-eye:

KILLER TRAP

By George Graham—Age 24
Pine Bluff, Arkansas

Deputy Morton Smith sat his pony and watched the rider pass out of sight down the canyon trail back toward town. A frown twisted his lean face and a hunch that trouble was in the air grew on him. The distance had been far and the rider had been burning the wind, but he was certain that the rider who had passed below was Frank Jackson.

There was something sinister about the man who had drifted into Prairie a month before and written the name of Frank Jackson on the register of the town's shabby hotel. There was nothing tangible to go on, but Jackson hadn't seemed to be looking for a job and had seemed to have plenty of money. Most of his time was spent in Joe's Saloon. He had talked little—none about himself. He had just seemed to be listening—and waiting.

What could the mysterious stranger be doing out here in this barren spot? There was nothing out here to attract anyone.



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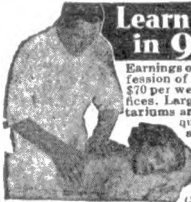
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Then suddenly Morton straightened in his saddle and put the spurs to his pony. Yes, there was something. The cabin of Carter Latour, the old and eccentric hermit.

In a matter of minutes he hit the dirt before the tumble-down house. He strode to the door and somehow even before he opened it, he knew what he would find. He stepped into the littered room and halted. There on the rough floor was huddled the bullet-torn body of old Latour. Folks had always said that he would be killed for the money that was said to be hidden in his squalid shack, and now it seemed that it had happened.

A few minutes later, the young deputy remounted and headed for town, a plan of action sprouting in his mind.

He found Jackson calmly drinking before the bar in Joe's Saloon. Jackson slowly turned as he walked over to him.

"Jackson, what were you doing out at Latour's place about an hour ago?" There was a sharp edge to the deputy's voice.

"Who is Latour, star-toter? I never heard of him, and I haven't been out of town all day," answered Jackson, with the light of a trapped wolf in his eyes.

"There's no use lying, Jackson. I saw you hightailing from his place. Besides that, he put his brand on you. There's blood on your boots!" rasped Morton.

"That's a dirty lie!" snarled Jackson, "I didn't get that close to him." At the same time, as if drawn by magnets, his eyes dropped to his boots.

Then, realizing how he had given himself away, he choked out a curse and went for his gun.

Two guns blasted the sudden silence. The young deputy felt a hot iron sear his shoulder, but Jackson was beyond feeling. Squarely between his mean eyes a black, red-rimmed hole had appeared.

Then the loafers in the room gathered slowly around and looked with fearful curiosity at the prone body. Somebody said: "Morton, there ain't no blood on his boots!"

Morton's answer was only a pain-twisted smile.

You haven't heard us tell any of you amateurs to quit the amateur ranks and turn professional. But that's just what we're advising Señor Graham to do now. We've seen his stories grow better and better. Now we wouldn't believe that an amateur wrote this one if he were a stranger, but he isn't. We reckon that he's

just outgrown the Corner, and that he's on his way to being a top hand.

This story has good characters, a good plot, and a good trick to give it the right punch at the finish. There isn't much more we can say, is there?

Best of luck, pard! We'll be watching for your name in the front of SW one of these days.

Now we're winding up with these poems:

STOVE-UP COWBOY

By M. E. Kibblewhite—Age 18

I'm tired of ramblin' an' roamin'.
Just driftin' an' not knowin' where.
I'm tired of gettin' the go-by
From folks who don't know an' don't care.

I'd like to roll out in the mornin'.
An' know that the day held three squares,
An' ride with some cowboys who wouldn't
object
To have my hat hang 'long with theirs.

I'd like a long hard-ridin' side kick
To argue with, bunk with an' ride
Till we reach the end of our lass ropes
An' pull up at last side by side.

I'd like some good hay for my pony,
An' stablin' for him when it snows.
A place on a rack for my saddle an' rope
In the land where the buffalo grass
grows.

But I'm just a broken-down cowboy;
I'm old an' I'm useless an' slow.
I'll saddle ol' Bob an' I'll just shove along
To the land where the good cowboys go.

DOWN THE TRAIL

By Ollie Warrenburg—Age 41

Langley, Oklahoma

Someday in the distant future
I will wander down the trail
That leads to the purple sunset
And to One who never fails.

At night by a lonely campfire
Under the Western sky,
In the stillness of the desert
I'll hear the coyote's cry.

When I come to Peaceful Valley,
With its waters pure and sweet,
I'll rest in the cool of the evening
To the echo of tramping feet.

I'll never be blue or lonesome,
For all my dearest friends
Will be waiting at the sunset
When I reach my journey's end.

SOUND ADVICE

By M. G. Seidel—Age 14

Dinant, Alberta, Canada

I was a bold and daring lad,
I left my friends at home.
I did not think I would regret,
That I should ever roam.

I worked on ranches, I rode the trail.
I'd broken wild hosses,
And now I ride the owl-hoot trail,
And sadly bemoan my losses.

I had joined a bandit gang
(I've only myself to blame),
I robbed and shot, and made a fuss,
And then the sheriff came.

I broke jail late last night.
I stole a horse and fled,
How I wish I'd stayed at home,
For I shall soon be dead.

I see the buzzards circling high,
They seem to know my fate.
Take my advice, don't go astray,
You'll find your mistake too late.

LAW RIDES

By Nora White—Age 33

Huntingdon, Tennessee

Through the night a blasting rumble
Shook the little town of Shale.
"Bank's been robbed!" The word spread
quickly.

Soon a posse found the trail.

Toward the Sawtooth range it led them.
Daylight came, the pace was slow.
Hours passed, the way grew tortuous—
Cliffs above, sheer depths below.

Up ahead, the crack of rifles;
Bullets flew in leaden hail.
Possemen on rearing horses
Plunged back down the narrow trail.

Round a curve among the boulders,
Sheriff and posse formed a plan.
Up the steep rock wall behind them
Climbed a slender, youthful man.

Lawmen's guns kept up their thunder;
 Soon he reached the gang's stronghold.
 Caught between two fires, they wilted—
 Gave up guns and stolen gold.

CONTENTMENT

By Hazel McDonald—Age 19
 Vernonia, Oregon

The blizzard is howling,
 But I'm snug and warm.
 With my dog and my pipe
 I'm safe from the storm.

My cabin's real cozy.
 My hearthfire burns bright.
 My old kerosene lamp
 Gives me a bright cheery light.

I hear a wolf howling
 As he looks for prey,
 Perhaps a poor doggie
 Who has gone astray.

But mine are all stabled
 And fed for the night.
 Let the wolf howl
 For I know they're all right.

So I'll sit by the fire
 And blow misty smoke rings,
 Just dreaming of home
 And the joy that it brings.

We honestly want to help you beginning authors get a start in this writing game—and nothing makes your old pard, the Range Boss, feel happier than those times a good yarn falls out of an envelope addressed to the Wranglers Corner. Because there is always a good chance that a writer will get from the back to the front of the WWW spread.

Don't forget to send in your true Western experiences, you hombres and gals who've had 'em. And you who haven't, remember that your chances with short stories and poems are just as good as the next fellow's.

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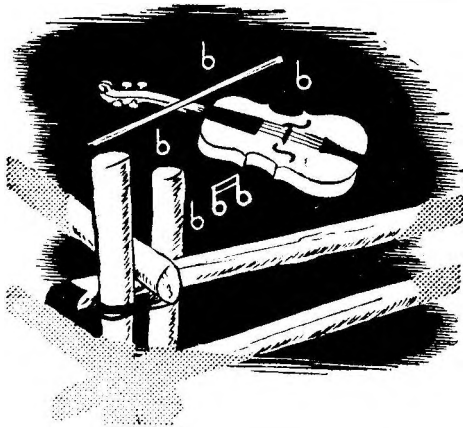
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This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, 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.

As the railroad inched its way westward and halted every so often for a breathing space, a town would spring up at its head and for a while it would flourish like a wildflower in the spring—except that it was no such gentle thing! It had its own law. It was crude and rough and ready. There was no sense of permanence about it; for men knew that when the railroad took another march the town would lose its main source of life. If it kept on as a town, that would be because somehow, out of the blue, a few real homemakers had come in and were bound to keep it going.

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to put law and order in the place of vandalism and a careless disregard of human life. Crude the frontiers had to be in the beginning, but for life to persist and the nation to be moulded into an empire that had substance, there had to be a smoothing-down all along the way.

Reform usually came from within the town, not from strangers; hence such a town meeting as the following poem describes was the usual preamble to change:

THE COYOTEVILLE PEACE MEETING

By Joseph Mills Hanson

We held a peace convention in Coyoteville last night.

A regular Haygue Tribunal for order, law, an' right.

For we'd about concluded that fightin' come too free

An' municipal conditions wasn't all they ought to be.

Dad Sykes had been to Denver an' Blake to Omaha,

An' they come back a-preachin' of the sights which they had saw,

How no one carried weapons, an' folks was nice an' mild.

An' compared with them there cities, Coyotesville was wild.

In Coyotesville the habit of some gentlemen at nights,

If they felt in pleasant spirits, was to punctuate out the lights,

Also, in questions dealin' with a social poker game

They was prone to draw their irons an' argue with the same.

All which, from Dad Sykes' viewpoint, an' likewise Mr. Blake's

Was morally pervertin' an' the biggest of mistakes.

Since Coyoteville's best people had begun a-takin' pride

In makin' her the model of the cattle countryside.

Therefore, we held a meetin' in the Frou-Frou Dancin' Hall:

Dad Sykes he played first fiddle an' Blake was there to call—

I mean that Sykes persided an' Billy wrote it down.

When motions was perpounded on how to run the town.

Bat Blareum broached the idee, supported by a speech.

That the closin' of the thirst-joints was the only thing would reach.

Since liquor bred dissension which only blood could stop

As he knew from observation, though he "never touched a drop."

Then Pierpont Robyn Stebbins arose an' begged to say

That the road to civic virtue lay quite another way;

To punish weepion-toters would be the proper feat,

Jest confiscate their weepions an' make 'em clean the street.

But Bobby Earl was doubtful of Pierpont Robyn's plan:

He thought that cleanin' roadways would humiliate a man.

Bat Blareum felt as Earl did, an' inferred that Stebbins' scheme

Was degenerate an' Eastern an' an iridescent dream.

Then Pierpont stood up coldly an' stated to the Chair

That Mr. Earl's opinions would be weighty anywhere,

Therefore he meekly yielded, lest he be crushed indeed

By the most substantial leader of the law an' order breed.

Now Bobby weighed three hundred an' it somewhat nettled him

To be ridiculed there in public by Stebbins, who was slim;

But the chairman wouldn't hear him till Pierpont's partner, Drew,

Had made some observations about Bat Blareum, too.

Which last, he said he hated to cast aspersions around,

But he felt Bat's plan of action was very far from sound,

An' he questioned these reformers whose reform was brought about

Through a hate for rum engendered by the Keeley curin' route.

He finished; whereat Bobby raised objections an' was pained

At the style of Stebbins' language—an' Bobby was sustained.

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Then Stebbins said the chairman might be
strong an' somethin' more,
But he dared not try sustainin' Mr. Earl
down on the floor!

By this time indications made it plain to
persons there
That a spirit of contention was a-breedin'
in the air,
Fer Drew jumped through a window as
Blarcum slowly rose,
While Bobby Earl was aimin' fer Pierpont
Stebbins' nose.

The other folks concluded it was gettin'
time they went
An' started fer the doorway by unanimous
consent,
While the chair came down on Stebbins re-
gardless of the law,
An' Blake propelled the minutes at Mr.
Blarcum's jaw.

There'll be a bunch of fun'erals in Coyote-
ville today;
Some well-known ex-reformers in the lead-
in' parts will play;
An' Coyoteville's considerin' this lesson o'er
an' o'er,
That peace may have its battles as well,
sometimes, as war.

Gerald J. McIntosh, of Arkansas, sent that one in from the book "Frontier Ballads," by Joseph Mills Hanson, now out of print. Which reminds me, folks; look through your books or those of your friends and see whether you find any old-timers on the West. I'd be mighty interested to know about them, especially if they happen to have any ballads in them.

In the old days they didn't print such large quantities of each book, and thus, a lot of the volumes that contain ballads or folklore are now out of print and rather hard to get. You might happen to have one of them forgotten among your books.

Let's have another old-time song before we call it a day:

But first, here's a poem by Bill Smart, the Texas cowboy poet. It

was sent to us by Kenneth Ireland, of New York, and it has a familiar title though I can assure you it is a different song from the ones you have had under the same title.

THE COWBOY'S DREAM

By Bill Smart

The cowboy dreamed a dream one night—
He dreamed that he was dead
And straightway to the Pearly Gates
His sin-stained spirit fled,
And as he stood before the Saint
His face was drawn and pale;
"My record's pretty tough," he said,
"Jest let me tell my tale.

"I've drank a lot, I've smoked a lot—
Confess it all I must,
Played poker, too, and then besides,
Great Heavens, how I've cussed,
And I wrote a million letters
To pretty Eastern lasses
Who flirted with us cowhands
And many other classes.

"I've grazed my dun herds on the range—
And down each hill and cove;
And if a nester made complaint—
That nester had to move,
And back there on the other side
I shot a man, you see,
For drivin' off a yearlin' calf
That certainly belonged to me."

St. Peter looked at him and said
With kind and smiling face,
"You think you are not good enough
To live here in this place?
But let me ask a question, sir,
Are you a Texas cowboy?"
The sinner bowed his head;
The thought gave him no joy.

The good man turned upon his feet
A twinkle in his eyes,
And from a nearby shelf he took
A book of ponderous size—
From page to page and leaf to leaf
Quite eagerly he quested
Until he found the precedents
On which this question rested.

"I've your record here," he said,
" 'Tis brought quite up to date,
But you have got a lot of nerve
To try to crash our gate."

So one by one he tolled them off;
 It was a wild array
 For that poor shade had surely been
 A rounder in his day.

"You've ridden mustang horses
 O'er valley, plain and heather,
 And e'en the snakiest brones
 Ne'er cause you to claw leather;
 Oft when the clouds obscured the sky
 And the stars would fade from sight
 You'd hobble out your tired horse
 And there you'd spend the night.

"Upon a grassy bed you'd lie
 Among rattlesnakes and things—
 With centipedes on every hand
 That had a hundred stings;
 And while you slept upon the grass
 Beneath the soft moonbeams
 The stampede of the frightened herd
 Would wake you from your dreams.

"Then you would mount your trusted horse
 And cross the canyon speed
 To mill the flying cattle—
 It was a hero's deed;
 All night long you'd stand on guard
 Around the restless steers,
 While memory brought up pleasant scenes
 Back from your boyhood years.

"And when the watch was over
 And chuck-a-way was spread
 You'd help yourself quite bountifully
 To bacon, beans and bread;
 And when the crops of yearlin's
 Was very fine and fair
 You'd swing a long and swift lass
 And always get your share.

"Your work would be so pressing
 Upon the busy range
 You'd have no time to go to town
 Just for a little change;
 But when the calves were branded
 And roundup days were done
 You'd run up to the city
 To have a little fun.

"And while the cheap red whiskey flowed
 You'd greedily drink it down
 While your Colt six was barking loud
 A-shootin' up the town."
 "All this is so," the cowboy said,
 "Give me my hat, I'll go
 And I will take the cellar route
 That leads one down below."

"Hold on," the good man cried aloud
 And his smile was blithe and gay
 "We're very glad to see you,
 Just kindly step this way;

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We'll try to make you happy here,
 We'll try to give you joy
 For you have seen your part of Hell
 When you were a Texas cowboy."

And heres:

GHOST TOWN
 (Curley W. Fletcher)

The grim stars gaze down
 On this ghastly ghost town,
 A militant moon beams overhead;
 And arid winds moan,
 In monotonous tone,
 The decadent dirge of the dead.

Like old fabled gnomes,
 In great tabled domes,
 Stand scarified hills, mute and blind,
 And weary wolves wail
 Over untrodden trail,
 The discordant cry of their kind.

Tanned tumbleweeds lag,
 Where drunken doors sag,
 A grinning skull gleams in the gloom,
 And drifting sands rain
 Through long-shattered pane,
 In dissonant whispers of doom.

The sidewinder crawls
 Beneath weather-warped walls,
 The tarantula lurks in his den,
 And reptile eyes glare
 From the staggering stair,
 In this ancient beehive of men.

Taloned and thorned
 And toothed and horned,
 The fanged and the venomous thrive,
 Destroying the meek,
 Devouring the weak,
 That only the fit may survive.

'Tis a graveyard of hope,
 Where silent shapes grope,
 Where ghastly ghosts stalk in despair;
 Where vengeance was loosed,
 And grim buzzards roost
 On limbs that are leafless and bare.

Sired of the seed
 Of man's lust and greed,
 And cribbed in the cradle of crime,
 It lived, loved, and lied,
 Then it sickened and died,
 And was tossed to the tellers of time.

The hopes and despair,
 Of men who lived there,
 Are inscribed on inscrutable scrolls,
 We know what they did—
 Where their bleached bones are hid,
 But what did it do to their souls?

That will do for this week, I reckon. So long and good luck!

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I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.
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I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.
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Wouldn't Take \$1,000 for Course
The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.
*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



Surprised Friends
I want to say that my friends are greatly surprised at the different pieces I can already play. I am very happy to have chosen your method of learning.
*H. F., Bronx, N. Y.



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Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.
*A. O., Minn.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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