

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

★
★

15¢

WEEKLY

CONTENTS COPYRIGHTED 1935

JAN. 12

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

GUN SMOKE RANGE

by
LEE BOND



HEIGHT
5FT. 8 IN.
WEIGHT
160 LBS.

NECK
15 1/4 IN.

CHEST
40 IN.

WAIST
31 IN.

THIGH
22 IN.

CALF
14 3/4 IN.

ANKLE
8 1/2 IN.

Posed by
professional
model

SKINNY MEN

Get this news!

Amazing easy way adds solid pounds Quick!

Thousands gain 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks with new double tonic. Richest imported brewers' ale yeast concentrated 7 times, iron added.

THOUSANDS who were once scrawny, sickly, weak, praise this new easy way to gain weight, strength and health.

As you know, doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now with this new yeast discovery in pleasant tablet form, you can get far greater tonic results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on pounds of solid flesh—and in a far shorter time.

Not only are thousands quickly gaining husky, good-looking pounds—but also clear, ruddy skin, freedom from constipation and indigestion, new strength and pep.

2 greatest body-builders in 1

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new scientific process is concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

But that is not all! This marvelous, health-building yeast is then ironized with 3 special kinds of strengthening iron.

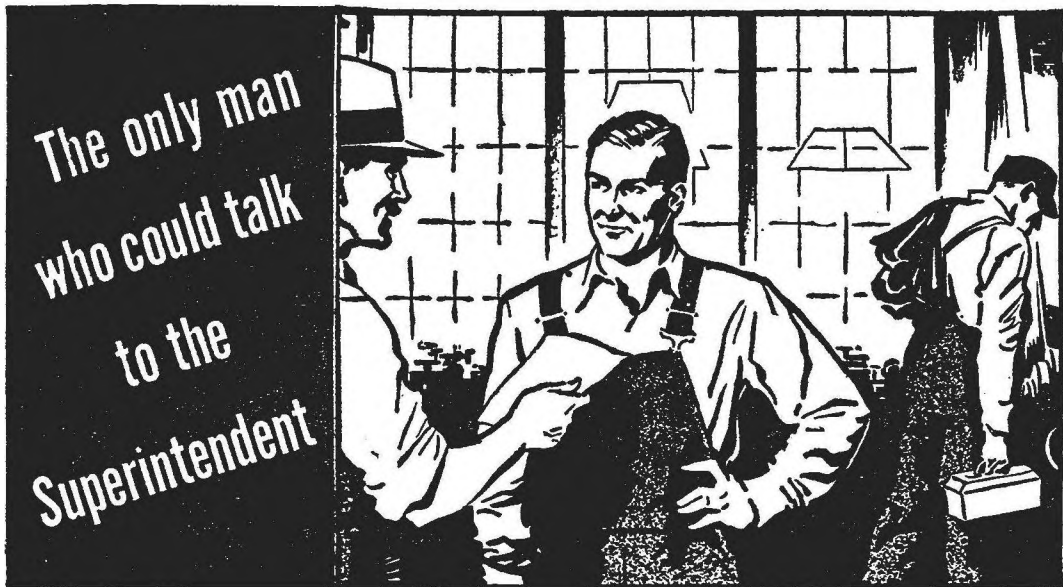
Day after day, as you take pleasant little Ironized Yeast tablets, watch flat chest develop, skinny limbs round out attractively, complexion clear—you're an entirely new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If you are not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health *right away*, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body," by a well-known authority. Remember, results are guaranteed with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 502, Atlanta, Ga.



The only man
who could talk
to the
Superintendent

For several years, he was just like a score of other men in the plant—a good, honest, fairly capable worker, but only that. There was nothing distinctive about him or his ability—nothing to make him stand out from the crowd—no reason, as a matter of fact, why he should ever receive a raise.

Then one fortunate day he decided that the reason he wasn't getting anywhere was because he lacked special training. He searched around a bit—asked a great many questions—and then enrolled for a home-study course with the International Correspondence Schools.

"Soon after I began studying," he wrote to us the other day, "we had a change in management at our plant. The new superintendent said that only

men who had really studied their work were in line for positions as foremen.

"I certainly was glad then that I had decided to study in my spare time. For, thanks to my I. C. S. course, I was the only man in the organization who could talk to the superintendent in his own language. As a result, I was promoted over men who had been here from ten to twenty years."

What are you doing with the hours after supper? Can you afford to let them slip by unimproved when you can easily make them mean so much?

One hour a day, spent with the I. C. S. in the quiet of your own home, will prepare you for success in the work you like best. *Yes, it will!* Put it up to us to prove it. Mail this coupon today.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University"

BOX 4908-F, SCRANTON, PENNA.

★ Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject before which I have marked X: ★

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

- | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Heating | <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building Estimating | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Worker | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wood Millworking | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engineer | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder | <input type="checkbox"/> Machinist | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Electric Engineer | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineer | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals | <input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inventing and Patenting | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Refrigeration | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge and Building Foreman | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Locomotives | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electric Lighting | <input type="checkbox"/> Gas Engines | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Section Foreman | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Welding, Electric and Gas | <input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Bridge and Building Foreman | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints | <input type="checkbox"/> Aviation Engines | | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Automobile Mechanic | | |

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|--|---|---|--|
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Office Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping | <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College | <input type="checkbox"/> Grade School Subjects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence | <input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish | <input type="checkbox"/> Lettering Show Cards | <input type="checkbox"/> College Preparatory |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenography and Typing | <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accountant | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning |

Name.....Age.....Address.....

City.....State.....Occupation.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

WW-1D

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements



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Vol. 90, No. 4 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 12, 1935 Whole No. 1682

Cover Picture—Scene from
 “Gun Smoke Range” Painted by Kiemle

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Gun Smoke Range *Lee Bond* 10
 It shore lives up to its name when a young waddy turns loose his pet Colts.
- Rustlers Of Redfork *Cleve Endicott* 60
 They make a plumb bad mistake when they pick on Circle J.
- Señor Red Mask At Haunted Mesa . . . *Guy L. Maynard* 99
 An' when he leaves there's a lot more ghosts.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- The Whistlin' Kid Sees Red *Emery Jackson* 38
 Which same shore spells trouble fer Red.
- A Rep For Lanky Lufe *Hal Davenport* 51
 He uses it ter outsluck a bunch o' rustlin' crooks.
- Dead Hombre *Frank J. Litchfield* 88
 Jimmy Quick makes a plumb lively corpse.
- The Caliente Sheep War *Allan R. Bosworth* 122
 Shorty Masters an' the Sonora Kid enlist—an' the war ends pronto."

DEPARTMENTS

- Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral 134
- Western Pen Pals *Conducted by Sam Wills* . 137
- The Wranglers Corner 141

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



I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME

In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Mail the coupon now. Get the facts about Radio—the field with a future. N. R. I. training fits you for jobs in connection with the manufacture, sale and operation of Radio equipment. It fits you to go in business for yourself, service sets, operate on board ships, in broadcasting, television, aviation, police Radio and many other jobs. My FREE book tells how you quickly learn at home in spare time to be a Radio Expert.

Many Radio Experts Make \$40, \$60, \$75 a Week
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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5AD
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.



J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute

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Owen Hia Success to Radio Training "Since 1929 I have earned my living in Radio. I owe my last three jobs to N. R. I. I am now in the main control room of one of the large broadcasting chains." Serge A. De Somer, 1516 Library Ave., New York City.



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5AD
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare-time and full-time job opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts.

(Please print plainly)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

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M. H. C. Lewis
President



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...it won't cost you one cent!

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YOU can become a Finger Print Expert at home, in your spare time, at small cost. Write for essential full report and details. Literature will NOT be sent to boys under 17 years of age.

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Catalog—S&W, Colts, Rifles, Automatics, Binoculars, etc. Send 3c stamp.

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HEXANOL, our safe, prompt acting Tablet for Bladder Weakness or Bladder Irritation that causes annoyance and discomfort, day and night. Used by Thousands, young and old.

50c Package FREE

Also New Booklet mailed on request. Let HEXANOL prove its merits in your own case. WRITE TODAY.

WORTH CO., 74 Cortlandt Street, Dept. 41-E, New York

Now You Can Have A New Skin in 3 Days' Time!

Visible Ugly Blemishes Disappear!

GET THIS FREE

—and learn that what was considered impossible before—the removal of pimples, blackheads, freckles, tan, oily skin, large pores, wrinkles and other defects in the outer skin—can now be done harmlessly and economically at home in three days' time in many instances as stated by legions of men and women, young and old. It is all explained in a new treatise called

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29x4.40 21

2.40
30x4.50

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THESE TIRES SURE DO LOOK GOOD

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28x4-60-20	2.38	0.85	30x3 1/4	2.32	0.75
30x4-60-21	2.40	0.85	31x4	2.93	0.85
28x4-75-19	2.45	0.95	32x4	2.95	0.85
28x4-75-20	2.50	0.95	32x4	2.95	0.85
28x4-50-19	2.55	1.05	34x4	3.23	0.85
30x4-50-20	2.55	1.05			
28x4-35-18	2.59	1.15			
29x4-25-19	2.95	1.15			
30x4-25-20	2.95	1.15			
31x4-25-21	3.25	1.15			
28x4-50-18	3.35	1.15			
28x4-50-19	3.35	1.15			
30x4-50-19	3.40	1.15			
32x4-60-20	3.45	1.25			
32x4-60-21	3.45	1.25			
32x4-50-20	3.75	1.35			

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Size	Tires/Tubes	Size	Tires/Tubes
30x5	\$4.25	31.95	3.95
34x5	4.25	2.90	3.47
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			12.45
			4.25
			3.65

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SEND ONLY \$1.00 DEPOSIT with each tire ordered. (\$2.00 deposit on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C.O.D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. **ALL 12 months' service replaced at half price. ORDER NOW!**

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Photo by Tornello

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BY CHARLES ATLAS

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CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 381
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I want the proof that your system of Dynamic Tension will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body, and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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Address.....

City..... State.....

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WANTED MEN

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An enlarged, inflamed or faulty Prostate Gland very often causes Lameback, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Pelvic Pains, Lost Vigor, Insomnia, etc. Many physicians endorse massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd edition). Use "PROSAGER," a new invention which enables any man to massage Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home. It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

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DR. W. D. SMITH
INVENTOR

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Here's a Queer Way to Learn Music!

NO teacher—no monotonous exercises or confusing details. Just a simple, easy, home-study method. Takes only a few minutes averages only few cents a day. No 'grind' or hard work. Every step is clear as crystal—simple as A-B-C throughout. You'll be surprised at your own rapid progress. From the start you are playing real tunes perfectly by note. Quickly learn to play any "jazz" or classical selection—right at home in your spare time.

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Kidneys Cause Much Trouble Says Doctor

Successful Prescription Helps Remove Acids—Works in 15 Minutes.

Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous English scientist, Doctor of Medicine and Surgeon, says: "You can't feel well if your Kidneys do not function right, because your Kidneys affect your entire body."

Your blood circulates 4 times a minute through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes in your Kidneys which are endangered by drastic, irritating drugs, modern foods and drinks, worry, and exposure. Beware of Kidney dysfunction if you suffer from Night Rising, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes, Acidity, or Loss of Peep.



Dr. W. R. George

Dr. W. R. George, for many years Health Director of Indianapolis, says: "Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with Aching Back, Frequent Night Rising, Itching, Smarting, Burning, Painful Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Headaches, and a generally run-down body. I am of the opinion that the prescription Cystex corrects such functional conditions. It aids in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, and in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Cystex deserves the indorsement of all doctors." If you suffer from Kidney and Bladder dysfunction, delay endangers your vitality, and you should not lose a single minute in starting to take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It starts work in 15 minutes; Gently tones, soothes, and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today.

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OLD MONEY WANTED \$5.00 to \$2500.00 each paid for old coins. Buying catalogue 10c. Bob Cohen, Muskogee, Okla.

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Male Help Wanted

MAN WANTED—Old established manufacturer will finance responsible man with complete stock guaranteed food products, farm and household necessities. Very pleasant work. Excellent opportunity for good living and extra money to save every week. Pays better than most occupations. O. W. Jack sold \$308, B. M. Anderson \$330 in one week. No slack seasons or layoffs. Experience unnecessary. Write today. McCannon & Company, Room 71MT, Winona, Minnesota.

Bow-legs & Knock Knees Straightened

WITHOUT INTERRUPTING daily routine. Inexpensive. Write, New York Surgical Appliance, 132 Lexington Avenue, New York.

Agents

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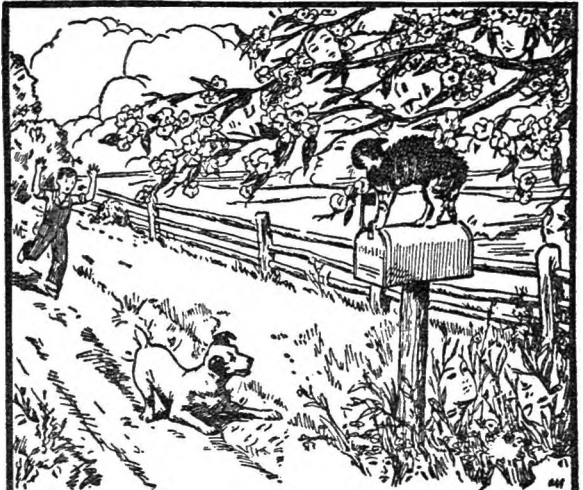
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CHAPTER I.

"SELL THE V BAR."

THE big, jug-headed *grulla* bronc between Bert Vail's long legs was wabby-kneed and spent. But the ugly, mean-tempered beast had stood up on a ride that would have killed two ordinary horses.

Ahead now, just below the long slope down which the weary cayuse fox-trotted, was a big, rambling ranch house. That ranch was the V Bar.

Bert Vail was not thinking of the ranch at the moment, however, for in the pocket of his crimson shirt

was a hastily scrawled note which had put him in the saddle more than forty hours before.

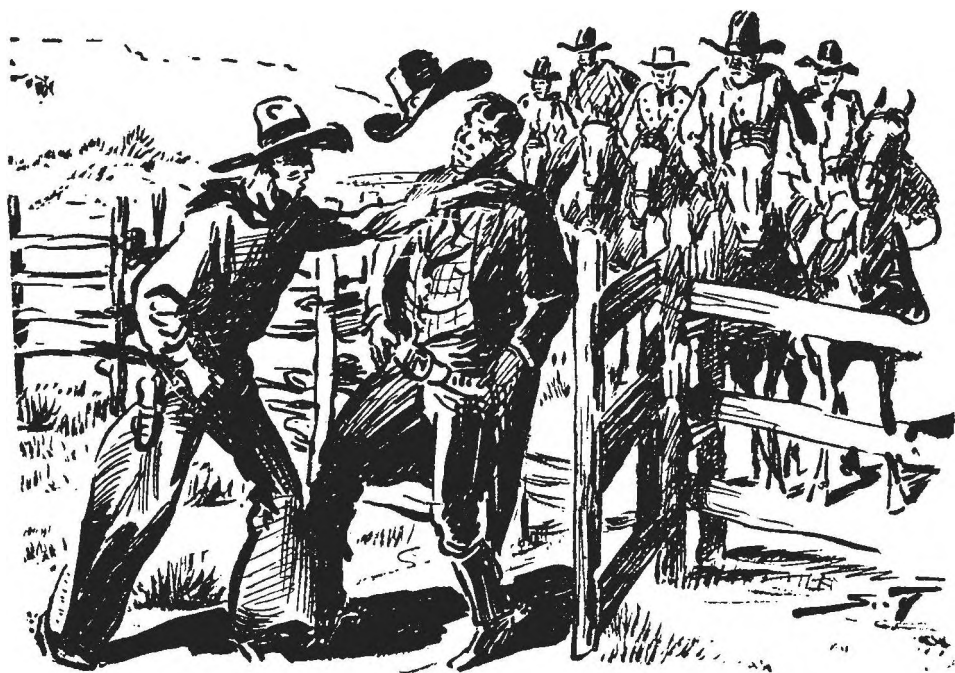
He had slept little since then—slept only when he was forced to let his horse feed and rest on the long trek up from the border.

Bert Vail's slim right hand lifted now and fished the note from the pocket of his shirt. He unfolded the paper and read:

Come home son. Them Cross T snakes has finally got me. Mebbe you will git here before I cash in.

Your uncle,
ALF WALTON.

Bert Vail straightened his lean



young body slowly, put the note back in his pocket, and sent the weary bronc on toward the ranch house at a little faster pace. He removed his wide-brimmed gray Stetson, slapped what dust he could from crimson shirt and brown bathing chaps, then combed at brick-red hair with long fingers before putting the hat back on.

His long-jawed face was pale and set, and the nostrils of his thin nose flared above lips that were a gray line. He loosened the green-and-white neckerchief at his throat as if it choked him as he reined in before the yard gate, slid stiffly from the saddle, and went slogging up the gravel walk toward the house.

Orphaned before he was two years old, Bert Vail had been raised here—raised by gruff, stubborn old Alf Walton, the only living relative he had. But three years ago, Bert had drifted down to the border, found the excitement he sought, and stayed on with a reckless ranchman

who ran cattle in one of the wildest spots in Arizona.

But remorse rode heavily on Bert Vail's shoulders as he stalked through the early-morning sunlight toward the wide porch he had known since childhood. Many questions hammered through his weary brain.

Mace Lillard and his Cross T men had never been friendly. But Bert had had no hint of actual trouble between Lillard and his uncle. Yet there was that note in his pocket—and an air about the place that no man could mistake.

Death was there, lurking somewhere within those adobe walls of the great house. There was a hush over the whole place.

Standing patiently before the corral gate were saddled horses and a buckboard. That rig would be Doctor Fletcher's. The fat, bald little medico had dosed Bert for measles, mumps, whooping cough, and such things that beset youngsters.

Under ordinary circumstances Bert would have gone yowling for the doctor to shake his fat hand, and kid him about making life miserable for people and then charging them for it. But no thought of humor entered Bert's mind as he neared the steps, started up.

He felt his feet dragging, hesitating. There were cold fingers of fear squeezing his heart. He dreaded to enter that door, dreaded the trip down the long hallway to his uncle's bedroom.

Only the fact that Doctor Fletcher's rig was still there gave the weary youth the courage to cross the porch and enter the huge living room. If old Alf Walton had cashed in, then the doctor would not be there. Or had there been a fight of some sort in which other V Bar men had been wounded?

Bert Vail shivered from something besides the clammy cold of the living room. Teeth locked until knots of muscle ridged his lean jaws, he stalked across the room, turned into the long hallway, and went slowly toward a door that stood ajar. He heard voices now, low, cautious voices that made him wince. Death! The whole place fairly screamed of death.

Like a man in a dream, Bert Vail went down the hall, removed his hat, and stepped softly through the open door. There were sharp whistling sounds as men caught their breath.

Bert Vail's eyes flashed about the bedroom, raking the eight grim-lipped, hard-eyed cowboys who squatted on their heels along one wall. Then he saw the fat little doctor staring at him.

Bert nodded briefly, swung his eyes to the big bed at last. He flinched as if suffering a physical blow. There, propped high on pil-

lows, was old Alf Walton, white-haired boss of the mighty V Bar.

The old fellow's eyes were open, beginning to kindle slowly as he studied the dusty youth who stepped swiftly forward. The old man lifted one worn hand, and Bert Vail almost groaned aloud when he saw what an effort it was. He grasped the cold hand, trying hard to keep his eyes steady.

"Gosh, Uncle Alf, yore note throwed a scare into me." Bert tried desperately to make his voice sound natural, tinged with humor. "I rode my Snake hoss down to a nub gittin' here. But yuh look chipper enough. So I reckon yuh're comin' along fine."

The cold hand Bert still gripped quivered a little. He saw the sunken eyes of his uncle glaze, then brighten swiftly. Bert Vail groaned despite himself, for he knew that he was looking into the face of death.

"Sorry I had to fetch yuh back, Bert." Alf Walton's voice was toneless, flat. "But yo're all I've got in the way o' heirs."

"Take it easy now, Alf," Doctor Fletcher spoke almost gruffly. "I've told you that when Bert came you must not get excited."

"Don't try kiddin' me any longer, doc," Alf Walton answered wearily. "I'm done, an' know it. Them blue whistlers chawed my back plumb in two."

There were hoarse oaths from some of the grim-eyed punchers squatted against the wall. Bert Vail was trembling and could not have spoken had he wanted to.

"Trouble here, Bert," his uncle's voice was droning weakly. "Bad trouble, boy. Mace Lillard wants all o' Mustang Basin. He'll git yuh like he got me unless yuh do what I say. Kin yuh hear me, son?"

Bert Vail groaned through locked

teeth. That lean old hand he still gripped was colder than ever. The fingers had quit trembling and were becoming stiff. "Yes, Uncle Alf, I hear yuh," Bert managed to squeeze the words through his aching throat.

"Bert," the old fellow croaked, "yuh've got to sell out. If yuh don't, Lillard an' his crew will kill yuh, like they've killed me. Raise yore right hand, an' promise—promise—that ——" A heavy sigh passed those blue lips, then the white head rolled slowly sidewise and down.

Somewhere against the wall a cowboy swore thickly. Then spurs were tinkling, boots thumped the floor, and Bert felt the pudgy little doctor steering him out into the hallway.

"How that man lived until you got here, Bert, I'll never know," the doctor spoke grimly. "But he did—and you know what he wanted you to promise."

"Yeah, I know." Bert Vail's voice was like a dull file on tough metal. "But I didn't git to make the promise, doc—not the one Uncle Alf wanted me to make."

"Too bad," the doctor sighed.

"But I'm makin' one now," Bert continued. "I'll put a slug in the man that killed Uncle Alf if it takes me the rest of my life!"

"Which ain't liable ter be a long life," came a sneering voice from the doorway of the death room. "Better do like the ol' man wanted yuh to an' sell this place. This is gun smoke range, an' a slick-ear like yuh can't last."

CHAPTER II.

LILLARD HUBS TROUBLE.

BERT VAIL whirled before the doctor could stop him and took three long strides back down the hallway. His long right arm shot out, and the squat jasper who had spoken tried to dodge.

But Bert's steely fingers had closed over the collar of a greasy yellow shirt. He yanked mightily, and a squall of alarm was wrenched from the frog-eyed hombre's throat.

He snarled a savage oath and dug for the twin guns that were thonged to his saddle-warped thighs. But Bert Vail whirled him, lifted him in both strong hands, and went at a staggering run down the hallway.

Other men were pouring from the room where Alf Walton's body lay now—men who called frantically to Bert Vail. But those calls fell on deaf ears.

Down the hall and into the living room Bert charged, his squirming burden held high. He made the front door, stalked out onto the porch, and sent "Frog-eyes" rocketing into the sandy yard. The fellow lit on his round paunch, grunted mightily, and crawled shakily to his feet.

"Gun smoke range, is it?" Bert snarled, coming down the steps in measured strides. "Yo're packin' a pair of cutters, so start grabbin' for 'em. Who are you to be tellin' me whether I can stay here or not?"

Feet hit the porch behind Bert, then strong arms were about him, pinioning his arms to his side.

He had never seen that squat jasper until this day. Something in the man's voice, something more threatening than the mere words he had spoken, had driven Bert into a sudden frenzy of rage.

He was cooling now, however, for lean, grizzled old Lew Gary, V Bar foreman since Bert could remember, was talking calmly in his ear:

"Take it easy, son. Toby Yates needed what he got fer poppin' off like he did. But don't go smokin' him, boy."

Toby Yates was whimpering oaths, his frog-eyes rolling uneasily.

Not until he gathered his wits enough to see that Bert was helpless in old Lew's strong arms did he regain his natural color. He spat out a mouthful of sand, straightened his twisted clothing, and dropped a pair of grimy hands to the guns at his hips.

"Toss me out on my ear, will yuh?" he snarled. "Leave him go, Gary. I'll put a slug——"

"Yuh'll put yore tail betwixt yore legs an' scoot!" Lew Gary roared. "Git, Toby, an' take them two side kicks o' yores with yuh. I been layin' off to fire yuh three fer a month now."

"Pertectin' the shorthorn, huh?" Toby Yates sneered. "Waal, mebbe yuh won't allus be handy ter do his fightin' fer him. Jud, yuh an' Pete come on."

Turning on his heel, Toby Yates stalked away. From the porch stepped two men, one of them a hulking, mean-eyed towhead. The other was a gangly hombre, with an ugly white scar running down along his left cheek. The two glared balefully at Bert, but said nothing as they slogged across the yard after Yates.

"The scar-faced galoot is Pete Tinker, an' he's plenty sudden with his cutters," old Lew Gary whispered in Bert's ear. "The big yaller-headed cuss is Jud Ames, a salty scrapper in any man's language. Yuh made three bad enemies, Bert."

Bert's anger had died as suddenly as it had flared. He stepped away from the old foreman, wide shoulders sagging, weariness and grief stamped on his brown face.

"Sorry I blowed up," he spoke slowly. "But that jasper got under my skin. Where's the rest of the boys, Lew?"

The lean old foreman seemed to sag. He swung a gnarled hand,

pointing off toward a hill where a grove of pepper trees nodded in the early-morning breeze.

"Yonder, son," the foreman spoke slowly. "Dick Fowler, Laughin' Joe Bates, Shorty Stearne, Happy Larsen, Stub Moss, an' three men that was hired after yuh left are sleepin' beside the mammy an' daddy yuh never hardly knowed. But them eight boys didn't die o' smallpox like yore folks did."

Bert Vail was staring, too dumfounded to speak for the moment. Dick Fowler, "Laughin' Joe" Bates, "Shorty" Stearne, "Happy" Larsen, "Stub" Moss—men he had ridden with, grown up with—dead!

"That Toby Yates spoke some truth, at that, Bert," the foreman's voice growled out. "This here shore is gun smoke range. Every sage bush is scorched by powder smoke, every rock is freckled with bullet marks. She's bad, boy."

Bert nodded as if he understood. But he did not understand. Three years ago, no man could have found a more peaceful place than Mustang Basin. In fact, it had been so peaceful that Bert had drifted, in search of excitement.

"What happened?" he asked suddenly, turning to look squarely at the gray old foreman who had taught him to ride, rope, and shoot.

"Range war," the old fellow said almost simply. "Six months after yuh left, Mace Lillard set out to grab this whole basin. Why, nobody knows. There's plenty o' grass an' water fer both outfits, but Lillard—— Speakin' o' the devil, hyar he comes."

Hoofs clattering at the gate jerked Bert around. He saw a tightly knotted band of riders there, and felt anger soaring once more through his jagged nerves. But he was in control of his temper this time as he

stalked out to the gate, Lew Gary behind him.

There at the gate a big, heavily built man had dismounted and was coming down the gravel walk. He had the bulging, tallowy look of a freshly shaved pig. And his eyes, too, were the round, half hidden eyes of an overfed hog. In one corner of his flabby mouth was a cigar that wiggled as he chewed it.

Bert Vail halted suddenly, hard eyes raking the man up and down. He had known Mace Lillard for years, so needed no introduction to the dough-faced jasper.

Lillard muttered something, swinging his big head to glance briefly back at his men. "Heard ol' Alf's nevvay had returned," he grunted hoarsely. "Thought I'd ride by an' see fer shore. Yuh've put on size, Bert. Aim to be with us long?"

"Long enough," Bert measured his words carefully, "to lay a bullet into the jasper that hired my uncle put out of the way.

"Eh?" Lillard's big body seemed to shiver a little. "What yuh spout-in', kid? What makes yuh think anybody hired ol' Alf salted?"

"I figure it that way," Bert said, voice dangerously thin. "An' the gent I've got figured as the one who done the hirin' is the one I aim to tally when the sign comes right. He's too sneakin' yaller to do anything out in the open."

Lillard's face tinged with red, and his little eyes glowed hotly behind their thick pouches of flesh. Despite the soft look about Lillard and his apparently clumsy manner, he was one of the saltiest fighters in the whole Territory.

His eyes held dangerous sparks now, and his thick lips were curling into a mean grin. He flashed a glance at Lew Gary, then brought

his eyes back to Bert Vail's set features.

"Talkin' mighty free an' big, ain't yuh?" Lillard grunted. "But I don't blame yuh fer bein' hot."

"What do yuh want here, Lillard?" Bert rapped harshly. "You're lyin' when yuh say yuh heard that I was here, 'cause I've been here less than an hour, an' I didn't ride through Sage on my way out."

Old Lew Gary swore in alarm, for no man had ever talked to Mace Lillard like that before and lived to tell about it. The men out at the gate heard, too, and began shifting their horses apart. Bert Vail saw that movement, and his long-jawed face twisted into a mirthless grin.

Mace Lillard, sure of himself and used to seeing men cower before him, had overplayed his hand this time. And nobody knew that any better than Mace Lillard.

His face went purple, then changed to a sickly color. Something in Bert Vail's eyes made him strangely uneasy. He glanced toward his men, then swore in a hoarse undertone.

Bert Vail was watching him with that set sort of gaze that meant extremely cool nerves. Mace Lillard was in a dangerous spot and realized it only too well. But beneath the mop of kinky black hair covering his broad, flat skull lay a brain that was extremely keen.

Lillard forced a smile to his face, started to turn. "Sorry yuh feel so upset yuh can't act decent ter a neighbor, Vail," he rumbled. "But I understand. So——"

"So do one of two things," Bert Vail's voice rang loudly. "Either go for the hardware yuh pack under the tails of that mangy coat, or else show yore hired flunkies yonder that yo're too yaller to handle yore own fightin'."

CHAPTER III.

TOBY YATES BLUNDERS.

THE mounted men at the gate swore loudly, yanking guns as they crouched over saddle horns. Mace Lillard was crouching now, huge body rolled into a crude half circle. But his hands trembled above his coat tails, hesitating.

Bert Vail's laugh popped out like a whip. He leaned, and deliberately slapped Mace Lillard across one big cheek. Lillard flinched, swore in choked rage, but still hesitated to reach for his guns.

Mace Lillard was looking into the eyes of a man who could—and would—kill him. He knew that, just as he knew that those men out at the gate would not understand, would think him yellow.

In his heart, Mace Lillard realized that he would not have the ghost of a show against that gangly redhead who stood grinning wolfishly at him.

"Yuh—yuh'll pay fer this, Vail!" he roared. "Yuh can't treat me like this an' live, yuh mangy little snake! I'll——"

"Yuh'll hire me shot, like yuh've hired other V Bar men killed," Bert's voice interrupted. "But meb-be yore hired gunnies will be a little slower about takin' yore orders now. Git, afore I put a slug in that paunch of yores!"

Mace Lillard turned then, and ran clumsily down the gravel path to his horse. But rage, not fear, made him run. He was whimpering hoarsely as he mounted. Then his hands went to those hidden gun butts, thick fingers wrapping greedily about the polished walnut.

But again Mace Lillard hesitated. He had noticed the way his men were looking at him and knew that they would never back his play if he made it now. And backing he would

need, for besides Bert Vail and old Lew Gary there were four other V Bar men on the porch.

"Come on, fools!" Lillard bellowed suddenly, and whirled his big horse to go charging away.

His men followed, ashamed even to glance at each other. Not until they were well away from the V Bar did Mace Lillard rein in, slip to the ground, and stand on widespread feet, facing his six hirelings.

Gunmen, those six were, and not a man among them had less than two notches on his gun butts.

None of them would have taken what Mace Lillard had taken, however. Their looks of scorn as they sat facing their boss told him so.

"Think I'm yaller, huh?" he hurled at them. "Think that kid run a blazer on me, do yuh? Have any o' yuh got the sand to start fer a gun? Go ahead, yuh rats! I'll give yuh first shot, then drill yuh."

"Say, yuh loco?" one of them blurted. "After what happened up yonder yo're talkin' mighty cocky, Lillard."

"If yuh don't like my talk, do somethin' to stop it!" the Cross T owner bawled. "It takes more sand ter keep from gittin' killed than it does ter grab fer a iron when yuh know yo're beat."

"Meanin' what?" another of the six asked.

"Meanin' that that red-headed kid is gun pizen!" Mace Lillard roared wildly. "It was in his eyes, in the way he held his gun arm. I seen it an' knowed I was a goner if I made a play."

"An' it took sand, Mace, to take the kid's abuse," a grizzled, wolf-eyed old gunman spoke up. "Don't mind these five gents. They'll likely not live long enough ter find out that a gunman has ter know when *not* to shuck his irons."

Mace Lillard was in a dangerous mood, and the five younger men who ranged about the old lobo who had spoken decided that perhaps they had made a mistake in judgment, after all. The wolf-eyed old rascal was Kirk Perry, and they knew that he was one of the smoothest gun artists who ever drew fighting pay.

"Aw, we didn't mean nothin', boss," one of the younger men blurted. "It did look bad, but I reckon we see now how things stood."

Mace Lillard swore savagely and was mounting his horse when hoofs pounded in a draw near by. The seven men stiffened, for they were still on V Bar range.

But they relaxed instantly, for out of the draw fogged Toby Yates, Jud Ames, and Pete Tinker. Toby Yates yelled a greeting when he spotted the Cross T men and came spurting toward them, his two pardes close behind him.

"Howdy, boss," he greeted Mace Lillard. "Waal, our playhouse is tore down. Me an' these two got fired. So we can't tip yuh off no more to what's happenin' at the V Bar."

"What happened?" Mace Lillard snarled, and the three men who had been V Bar traitors flinched at the tone of his voice.

Toby Yates explained swiftly what had happened, his frog-eyes blazing dangerously as he talked. "All I said," he finished, "was that that red-topped younker ought ter sell out like his uncle tried ter make him promise. An' the skunk jumped me. He's pizen, boss, but I'll fix 'im."

"Yeah, but yuh better handle it like yuh handled ol' Alf," Mace Lillard growled thickly. "That red-headed Bert Vail is plumb pizen."

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"I'll show him who's pizen!" Toby Yates snarled. "I'm headin' fer Sage an' waitin' ontill Vail comes in. An' when he does——"

"When he does," Mace Lillard interrupted, "yuh be hid out on the trail like yuh was when Alf Walton come ter town. But don't kill him."

"Huh?" Toby Yates gasped. "What do yuh think I'll do, kiss him?"

"Do what I tell yuh an' don't talk back!" Mace Lillard roared. "I want that kid alive, hear? When I'm done with him, yuh kin have what's left. He slapped my face an' made me like it. Now git!"

Toby Yates spurred away, shivering at what he saw in Mace Lillard's eyes. Jud Ames and Pete Tinker started after him, but Lillard's booming voice called them back. Toby Yates swore uneasily, for he wanted help if he was to take Bert Vail alive.

But he knew better than to tarry any longer. Muttering, he headed down the trail toward Sage, trying to figure out just how he could get his man—alive.

He could see the sprawling little town of Sage ahead now, and realized that he was just opposite the bluffs where he had hidden the shotgun with which he had shot Alf Walton, a few days before.

"I better see if that ol' cannon is still in workin' order," he snarled uneasily, turning off the trail. "That Vail hombre might force my hand—which would shore tickle me."

He dismounted beneath the little bluff, bow-legged to a wide crevice, and ran his arm deep into the aperture. He withdrew a double-barreled shotgun, opened the weapon and pulled out two shells.

One of them had been fired, and Toby Yates grinned fiendishly as he thought of how those buckshot had

made old Alf Walton lurch in the saddle. The empty shell was tossed carelessly aside, and Toby Yates began examining the gun.

He shoved the good shell into his jacket pocket, snapped the gun shut, and tried both hammers by cocking them and pulling the triggers.

He repeated the operation for several moments, and the loud smacking of the big hammers as they dropped drowned out the sound of boots moving stealthily forward along the bluff behind Toby Yates.

"Yes, sir," he cackled suddenly, reaching for the shell he had placed in his pocket, "this ol' cannon will still work, even if it has rusted a mite."

"So will this six-gun, yuh mangy little snake! Move, an' I'll drill yuh."

The big shotgun tumbled from Toby Yates's hands, and he stood there like part of the bluff. He did not have to turn to know the man behind him was Bert Vail.

CHAPTER IV.

TOBY YATES TALKS.

A SICKENING fear gripped Toby Yates, turning his muscles to useless things that refused to budge. He felt the guns stripped from his thonged-down holsters, felt an expert hand flash over him, pluck the hide-out derringer from his waist-band.

But he was not thinking of those things. There at his feet lay the shotgun with which he had killed Bert Vail's uncle. And there beside the big gun lay the empty shell that had held those buckshot before powder sent them crashing into Alf Walton's back.

Bert Vail was looking at those things now, squatting on his heels before Toby Yates, hard blue eyes

studying the shotgun, the empty shell and the full one Bert had taken from Toby Yates's pocket.

"I follered yuh an' them other two, figgerin' yuh'd do just what yuh did—go report to Mace Lillard." Bert Vail's voice was quiet—too quiet.

Toby Yates shivered as if he were standing chin deep in ice water, shivered and wondered if he could leap astride that powerfully curving back and wrest a gun from Bert Vail.

Then Bert Vail stood up, and what Toby Yates saw in the lean face and blazing eyes caused him to cower back against the bluff, screaming in terror.

"You killed my uncle, Yates!" Bert Vail's voice was a low, humming sound. "This is the gun yuh killed him with. Come back to see that it was safe, didn't yuh?"

Bert advanced, treading slowly, that awful light playing in his unwinking eyes like tongues of flame licking against cold glass.

Toby Yates screamed shrilly, dropped to the ground. He clawed at his throat as if he could already feel Bert Vail's fingers there, choking him to death.

Bert advanced slowly, beginning to lean forward. Toby kicked at his face, saw crimson spurt from the brown skin. But Bert Vail came on, barely staggered by the blow.

"Don't!" Yates screamed shrilly. "Don't kill me, Vail. I had ter drill yore uncle, I tell yuh. Mace Lillard made me do it. Do yuh hear, Vail? Mace Lillard made me——"

Toby Yates's voice trailed off into a bubbling sob. He was still sobbing, half an hour later, when Bert called a halt before the little combination jail and sheriff's office in Sage. A crowd had formed, for men had seen Bert Vail ride down Main

Street, herding Toby Yates ahead of him.

Bert dismounted now, cut the ropes with which he had bound Yates to the saddle, and literally hurled the killer through the door and into the sheriff's tiny office. There was a grilled-off space beyond, which served as jail.

Bert closed the street door on the staring crowd and motioned Yates into a chair. Then he seated himself on a corner of the sheriff's desk.

Bert was panting as if he had just run a hard race, and the nostrils of his thin nose were flared white.

"Yuh better pray that the sheriff shows up soon, blast yore murderin' hide!" he snarled through set teeth. "Yates, keepin' my hands ofn that gullet of yores is the hardest job I ever had."

Blubbering, his nerve completely gone, Toby Yates slumped in his seat, whining like an uneasy dog. There was a sudden creak as the door swung inward, and the killer leaped up.

But Yates dropped as if he were shot when Bert Vail stood up and stepped toward him. Inside the room stood a chunky, round-faced little hombre who glanced first at Bert Vail then at Toby Yates.

"Ace Fisher, yo're sheriff, an' it's yore job ter perreck citizens," Toby Yates blurted. "Make—make this jasper leave me be, do yuh hear?"

The round little sheriff frowned, then turned to look at Bert Vail. His wide-set eyes popped out when he got a good look at Bert's face.

"Sheriff, I'm Bert Vail. Arrest that little snake there, afore I lose my head an' kill him with my bare hands. He's the sneak who filled Alf Walton's back full of blue whistlers a few days ago. Walton was my uncle."

Sheriff Fisher held out a chubby

hand which Bert gripped briefly. "Glad to know yuh, Bert," the officer clipped. "Alf Walton was my friend, swung votes in this end o' the county that put me in office. Yuh—yuh shore yuh've got the skunk that drilled him? If yuh have, an' Walton dies——"

"He's dead!" Bert's voice was edged. "Uncle Alf died less than three hours ago. Ask that dirty little snake there who killed him. Or else go out on some errand an' let me git——"

"No!" Toby Yates screamed. "Sheriff, don't yuh dast leave me with him. I—I kilt ol' Walton all right, but——"

"Why, yuh mangy-hided little varmint!" Sheriff Fisher roared, and would have landed atop the shivering killer if Bert Vail had not caught him.

"Yo're an officer, Fisher, an' he's yore prisoner," Bert reminded. "Besides, he has other things to say."

"Shore I have," Toby Yates stammered. "I ain't in this alone. Mace Lillard made me do it, like he's made me an' the rest o' his men drill other V Bar hombres. But he's got money. He kin hire slick lawyers an' git——"

"Git back into that bull pen, yuh snake!" Sheriff Fisher cut in angrily. "I'll give yuh a chance to find out whether slick lawyers will help yuh or not. Lillard planned this, did he?"

A well-planted boot sent Toby Yates crashing through the gateway and into the bull pen. The sheriff slammed and locked the door, his moon face white with rage.

He turned to look at Bert Vail, who seemed suddenly very tired. Bert explained quietly what had happened, how he had trailed Yates on a hunch.

"I seen him an' the other two meet up with Lillard," he finished. "Then Yates hit out this way, an' since I was comin' to town I decided to keep an eye on him. When he turned off the trail I followed, an' found him there at the cliff."

"How did yuh know it was him killed yore uncle, Vail?" the sheriff asked.

"Because the little snake looked scared to death when I found him lookin' that ol' scattergun over," Bert rasped thinly. "I didn't know for shore, however, until he got panicky an' talked, like he done a few minutes ago."

"Phew!" the sheriff whistled. "Vail, do yuh realize what this means?"

"I do." The red-headed waddy nodded grimly. "Yuh an' me are settin' on a keg of powder, sheriff."

"What do yuh reckon Mace Lillard will do when he hears o' this?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"That depends, sheriff." Bert shrugged.

"Depends on what?" the officer growled.

"On how bad Mace Lillard gits rattled," Bert answered.

He got up, motioned the sheriff into a corner where Toby Yates could not see them, and lowered his voice. "With no more than that jasper's word, it will be hard to build a case agin' Lillard that'll stick," he growled. "Heard what that murderin' Yates said about fancy lawyers, didn't yuh?"

"Fancy lawyers be danged!" the sheriff snarled. "Lillard wanted one o' his own men in office, an' has took his spite out on me 'cause the feller got beat. I'm goin' after that hombre right now."

"Nothin' doin'!" Bert growled. "Yuh set tight, sheriff, an' let Lillard come to yuh. An' if yo're smart

yuh'll see that he comes in that front door alone."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin'," Bert Vail told him calmly, "that yuh'll have to watch yore prisoner, yonder, mighty close if yuh keep him long. Give Lillard's outfit a chance, an' they'll gun yuh, shore."

The sheriff blinked, glancing uneasily toward the front door. He was excited, but not actually frightened. He was stepping toward the door, evidently intending to bar it when a high-pitched scream stopped him in his tracks.

But the sheriff was still for only a moment. That scream ended in a rattling cough, and he whirled back toward the bull pen at the rear of the room.

There, sprawled grotesquely on the cement floor, lay Toby Yates, hands clutching feebly at the hilt of a knife that stuck out from his neck. The ornery little killer was looking with bulging eyes toward a small, iron-barred window high in the wall of the bull pen at the back.

The sheriff opened the steel-grilled door and raced to the stricken killer's side. But Bert Vail stood still, too stunned even to think at the moment. Mace Lillard had lost no time in shutting Toby Yates's mouth!

CHAPTER V.

SURPRISED BUSHWHACKERS.

BERT VAIL knew before the white-faced sheriff came stomping back out of the bull pen that Toby Yates was dead. He knew it the minute he had whirled to see Yates lying there on the floor, the blade of a bowie hidden in the flesh of his scrawny neck.

Bert listened a moment to the sheriff's swearing, then led the way to the door. The crowd had moved

away up the street, scattering toward saloons and stores. Bert led the way around back of the jail, jerked a hand toward a box that had been upended beneath a window, and shrugged.

"Some of Lillard's men was listenin' at the door, likely, when Toby Yates give up head," he snarled. "I reckon we're out of luck now, so far as usin' Yates's testimony agin' Lillard is concerned."

"Like heck we're out o' luck!" the sheriff ranted. "That Yates cuss confessed an' named Lillard as the gey behind his dirty work."

Bert Vail shrugged, moved away. The sheriff was still talking, but Bert paid no further attention. He was dog-tired and suddenly remembered that he had not eaten in a good many hours. He sauntered along down the street, saw old Lew Gary, and went to him.

"I made arrangements fer the funeral, son," the old foreman told Bert. "Two o' the boys is diggin' the grave up by them pepper trees where the rest is buried."

Bert nodded, busy twisting a smoke. He got the quirly lighted, then told Lew Gary of what had happened. The old foreman danced with excitement at first, then stopped to swear savagely when Bert told him that Toby Yates would never testify.

"I'll bet it was Ed Mercer threwed that knife!" Lew cried suddenly. "Bert, yuh remember him, don't yuh?"

Bert nodded almost absently, but his brain was keenly active. He certainly did remember Ed Mercer, foreman of the vast Cross T outfit.

"Mercer could 'a' turned the trick, 'cause I've seen him show off in the Red Dog Saloon more than once by doin' fancy knife throwin'," he

gritted. "But mebbe he wasn't even in town."

"Oh, yes, he is!" old Lew snorted. "I passed the snake, not five minutes ago, an' he grinned real mean at me. Say, he was comin' from toward the jail, too."

"Then that's that," Bert Vail said coldly, and to Lew Gary's astonishment went stalking away down the wooden sidewalk.

Bert got his horse from in front of the jail, rode slowly along the street and out of town. To all appearances he was heading for home, and Lew Gary breathed a sigh of relief. But the old foreman would have been far from relieved had he seen what Bert Vail was up to.

Bert jogged out along the home trail until he was sure no one from town could see him, then turned quickly into a thicket that grew along the base of a hill and dismounted. He squatted where he could see the trail and yet remain hidden, a mirthless grin tugging at his lips.

"If I'm right," he mused aloud, "there'll be some one ridin' my back trail with a——"

Bert's voice trailed off into a hard chuckle. He was right, for out of town came two riders, laying the steel to their horses as they charged down the trail. Bert Vail nodded calmly, for the two riders were packing Winchesters.

Bert let them pass, then got back into the saddle and rode up to the top of the brushy ridge. Riding along up there, he kept the two men who had passed his hiding place in view until he saw them top a ridge below him and rein in to sit looking ahead down the trail.

They were waving their rifles excitedly now, evidently talking the thing over. Bert could easily enough understand what was wrong, for

from that high spot in the trail they should have sighted their quarry jogging along not far ahead.

The two remained there for a few moments, then turned back toward town, jamming their rifles into saddle boots as they rode.

Bert glanced down the slope that stretched away below him, grinned his mirthless grin, and turned his horse into the head of a ravine. He took it easy, for he was not on that jug-headed *grulla* now. But he had plenty of time, since the trail swerved back toward this spot in a wide loop.

He was well hidden behind a boulder when the two men came jogging back, one of them swearing sullenly. Bert let them get within ten paces of him, then stepped out into the trail, hands hanging at his sides.

The two riders squawked in genuine alarm, instinctively jerking their mounts to a halt. They were an evil-looking pair, and Bert Vail had no trouble figuring out what would have happened had he not guessed that some one would be sent after him.

"Yuh two must have mud in yore eyes," he gritted harshly. "What will Ed Mercer say when he finds out that yuh rode right past me instead of bushin' me?"

The pair jumped nervously, but they were swiftly getting over their fright. One of them, a thick-shouldered fellow with a very small, ill-shaped head, was beginning to laugh coarsely as he edged his mount aside. Bert Vail watched that thick-bodied man sharply, though he was apparently paying just as much attention to the gangly, one-eyed jasper who still sat gaping foolishly.

"Say, younker, yuh—yuh've got us wrong," blurted "One-eye" suddenly. "Gork an' me——"

Wham! The one-eyed hombre's

voice was drowned in the crashing roar of a Colt.

A man's scream lifted hoarsely, then died in a choked oath. The thick-bodied man known as Gork slid sidewise from his saddle, an unfired Colt spilling from the fingers of his left hand, a look of disbelief on his graying features.

Bert Vail stood slightly bent forward in the trail, a smoking Colt clutched against his right hip, hard eyes glinting as he gazed steadily up at One-eye.

"Yore pard thought he was pullin' a fast one when he slipped that gun up from the blind side," Bert said stonily. "Mebbe St. Peter will tell him that a man can't do that without wigglin' his arm an' shoulder."

"I ain't done nothin'," One-eye wailed. "D-don't plug me, Vail."

"Yuh know me, which proves what I already know," Bert clipped. "Ed Mercer slammed a knife into Toby Yates to keep him from talkin', then sent yuh two after me. That right?"

The one-eyed man rolled his single eye wildly, but showed a reluctance to answer. The gun against Bert Vail's hip smashed out three shots so swiftly that the explosions sounded like one mighty blast.

One-eye screamed in terror, for his hat was gone, there was a blister on the tip of his long nose, and the knot had been neatly clipped from the grimy blue neckerchief at his skinny throat.

The persuasion worked, for One-eye lost no time in blurting out the fact that Ed Mercer had sent him and Gork out to bring Bert Vail down with rifles. But One-eye stoutly vowed that he knew nothing of Ed Mercer slamming a knife into Toby Yates's neck.

Bert Vail saw that the evil jasper was too badly rattled to lie, and

sent him on down the trail with a broad hint that some other climate might be healthier for him. One-eye seemed well pleased with the idea, and left as fast as his horse could run.

Bert turned back to the brush, replaced the spent shells in his gun, and mounted. He reined out into the trail and went jogging in One-eye's wake, face a grim mask.

"Looks like," he mused harshly, "the best thing I can do is go call on Ed Mercer in person."

He knew that One-eye would head straight for Mercer and report. Bert figured on striking while Mercer was still rattled, catching the famous gun slinger when he was least expecting it.

But Bert's plans were due for a serious jolt. He had no way of knowing that the one-eyed hombre met Mercer at the edge of town as the Cross T ramrod started out to see how his two flunkies had come out with the bushwhacking he had sent them to do.

Nor did Bert know that he was watched as he jogged toward town—watched over the sights of a rifle that would flame the moment he got in range.

CHAPTER VI.

LILLARD GETS A SCARE.

A MESQUITE thorn saved Bert Vail's life. The thorn had jabbed deep into the leather of his tough chaps, and was reaching through to rake at his trousers where his knee bent.

Bert saw the thorn, reached down for it, and heard a high-speed bullet slap through the crown of his hat as his head lowered. Bert kept leaning, pitching straight down over one shoulder of his mount. The horse snorted, crow-hopped aside, and stood looking back inquiringly.

Bert Vail lay sprawled face down, right hand and arm hidden under his body, left side turned toward the spot from which he clutched his Colt, for he had drawn it as he wallowed briefly there in the dusty trail.

His eyes were only half closed, glued to the long-deserted adobe house from the corner of which the rifle shot had come. He saw a man's head poke out cautiously, then jerk back. Now two heads poked into view, and Bert wished that the range was shorter.

"One-eye an' Ed Mercer!" he breathed softly. "I'd know that Mercer snake's bony face a mile away."

The two heads poked further out, then two men stood looking toward Bert. He stiffened, fingers curling comfortably about the butt of the gun he held. If those two would only make the mistake of coming closer—

But they evidently thought there was no use, for they stood talking, Ed Mercer clutching a rifle in one big hand.

The two sauntered back around the corner of the house after a moment, and Bert Vail leaped to his feet. Like a sprinter leaving the mark he shot toward that old adobe, running with speed despite high-heeled boots and flapping chaps.

His hat lay back there in the trail. The wind whipped his red hair out behind his head like a battle flag.

He reached the adobe, leaped through a sagging door, and charged through two rooms to reach the opposite wall. There was a paneless window there in the thick wall, a window from which the shutters had long since been taken. Bert peered out, and his face, red from the hard run, twisted in a brief smile.

Twenty yards away were One-eye and Ed Mercer, ambling slowly

across a weed-grown lot toward other buildings. Bert yelled at the two, saw them whirl as if they were both set on the same pivot. One-eye dug for a holstered Colt. Ed Mercer whipped the rifle up, yellow eyes blazing wildly in their deep sockets.

Bert Vail leaped upon the window sill, left foot tucked under him for a brace, right leg sticking stiffly out and down as he balanced himself. He leaned slightly, right hand coming up and out with his Colt.

A rifle bullet whistled past his face, made a dull popping sound as it struck the adobe wall behind him. He slammed a bullet squarely through the powder fog that came from Mercer's rifle muzzle and heard it land with that dull chunking sound that means a hit.

A slug ripped across the knee of his outflung right leg then, causing him to flinch mightily. He lost his balance, wasted one slug as he fell, then leaped to his feet and triggered evenly with One-eye.

Bert felt the ornery jasper's bullet snick through his hair, but One-eye would never know that. He was toppling forward, a round black pit fairly above the bridge of his long nose. Ed Mercer was standing like a statue, rifle gripped tightly in both hands, eyes staring straight ahead.

Bert Vail advanced slowly, gun cocked and ready to flame. But he saw that Ed Mercer was out of the fight for keeps. There was an ominous red stain spreading over the center of Mercer's pale-blue shirt.

"Yuh—got me!" he panted as Bert halted before him.

He tried to lift the rifle. But his knees sagged, and Bert Vail had to side-step the toppling body.

There were voices sounding somewhere beyond the nearest buildings, and Bert turned quickly away. He

had nothing to hide, for he had given these two more than an even break by yelling at them instead of cutting them down from behind as they would have done him.

He reached the old adobe, slid around one corner, and trotted back to his horse. Creasing his hat so that the bullet hole did not show, he jogged on into town, Colt reloaded and holstered.

Men were racing up and down the street excitedly, and Bert Vail's lips stretched in a mirthless grin when he saw several Cross T punchers before the big Red Dog Saloon in earnest conversation. Mace Lillard would squirm plenty when he learned that three of his hirelings had been salted for keeps by a party or parties unknown.

"'Gun smoke range' they named this neck of the woods," Bert growled as he reined in before the sheriff's office, "but bushwhacker range would be better. No wonder so many graves have been dug at the V Bar."

He dismounted and entered the sheriff's office, closing the door behind him. Sheriff Fisher was there, a worried look on his round face. He jumped to his feet when Bert entered, but the redhead waved him back to his seat. Bert told what had happened in short time, and the sheriff was fairly sizzling with excitement.

"Good gosh, Vail, you're a caution!" the officer gasped. "Unless a slug stops yuh, yuh'll have Mace Lillard in a lather afore night."

"He's likely already in a lather," Bert grunted, dragging a chair over to a blank wall and seating himself. "That's why I'm here. I want to hear the skunk roar when he comes in to ask why the law ain't protectin' his killers."

The sheriff went purple with rage

at the very thought of having to protect Lillard's men. But there was some truth in what Bert had said. Until he had some reason to do otherwise, Sheriff "Ace" Fisher would have to make a stab at protecting Cross T men. He squirmed uneasily as that angle of the case became clear.

"Why did yuh have to come an' tell me what happened?" Fisher complained. "If Lillard gits wise to who salted his killers an' swears out a warrant fer yuh I'll have to——"

"Lillard won't swear out a warrant if I git a chance to do some talkin' to him," Bert Vail growled. "That's why I'm here."

"Don't go ribbin' a fight right where I can't help but arrest yuh when it's over," the officer wailed. "Bert, as a man, I'm fer yuh one hundred per cent. But as sheriff o' this county——"

"I know," Bert said. "But don't holler until yo're hit. Just keep what I told yuh under yore hat when Lillard shows an' let him do the talkin'."

The sheriff nodded glumly, plainly dissatisfied with the whole set-up. Bert tilted his chair against the wall and had dozed for nearly an hour when a heavy tread beyond the door awakened him. The door crashed open, and Mace Lillard stalked into the room, face purple with wrath.

"Settin' hyar while honest men git bushwhacked, are yuh?" Lillard thundered at the sheriff. "Dang yore hide, three o' my men has been kilt an' yuh——"

Mace Lillard broke off, jaws dropping open. Bert Vail had got to his feet and was sauntering across the room.

"Three of yore men killed, eh?" Bert asked. "Now ain't that too bad? Who done it, yuh reckon?"

For a moment, it seemed that Mace Lillard would whip his hands beneath those flaring coat tails for the guns he carried there. "You, that's who!" he roared. "Yuh kilt them men o' mine, Vail, shore as grass grows green."

"That's a pretty stiff charge, Lillard," the sheriff cut in uneasily, before Bert could answer. "Besides, I've got a little matter to talk over with yuh."

"Dang yuh an' yore little matter!" Mace Lillard yelled. "Arrest this young snake, or I'll——"

"What do yuh want me arrested for, Lillard?" Bert cut in smoothly.

"Fer killin' my men!" the Cross T owner bawled. "Yuh done it, blast yuh, an' yuh can't deny it!"

"But what reason," Bert asked slowly, "would I have fer drillin' any of yore men? Give the sheriff some sensible answer—some reason—an' he'll jail me."

Mace Lillard looked suddenly sick. He reeled back, eyes wild, moisture popping out over his ugly features. His jaws opened and closed, but no sound came from them.

Bert Vail laughed coldly, eyes boring into the flabby face of the larger man. He stepped close, so close his breath was hot on Lillard's jaw when he spoke.

"I snagged Toby Yates to-day, Lillard," Bert said so softly that only Mace Lillard could hear. "He talked plenty afore he cashed in. Remember what I said about some one hirin' my uncle killed?"

Mace Lillard was crouched like a wolf at bay, eyes glowing wildly through their folds of fat.

"What if I wrote what I know an' put it where the sheriff could git it the minute somethin' happened to me, Lillard?" Bert hissed softly. "Mebbe yuh better call yore dry-

gulchers together an' tell 'em that killin' V Bar men is off, savvy?"

"Yuh—yuh ain't told him?" Lillard gasped, jerking a shaky hand toward the staring sheriff.

"Keep yore killers chained, an' I'll not put any letters where the sheriff will see 'em," Bert said. "I've got yuh, skunk. Better do what I say."

Mace Lillard nodded emphatically, backed to the door, then whirled to slam outside, a look of mingling rage and terror on his puffy face. For once the Cross T owner was in a jack pot where neither his wits nor his money offered comfort.

CHAPTER VII.

BERT SCENTS DANGER.

THERE was a new grave beside the main trail leading into Sage—a grave that caused considerable comment. For a footstone it had a saddle, boots, and spurs. The headboard was a wicked-looking old double-barreled shotgun, the barrels rammed deep into the freshly turned mound.

The big hammers were at full cock, and no man could have looked at the gun without the feeling that it was being held dead center on the man beneath that mound by unseen hands.

The grave with its queer headboard was discovered just after daylight on the day after Mace Lillard lost four of his pet killers. It had been put there beside the trail, where no rider would miss seeing it. And on the walnut stock of the gun were carved these words:

Here Lies Toby Yates.

He Murdered Alf Walton With This Gun

A Cross T hand rode a good horse limber-legged getting home to re-

port the matter to Mace Lillard. It took nearly a quart of hard liquor to pull the Cross T owner out of the nervous condition that news put him in.

By noon the news had spread all over the range, and the earth about the grave was trampled smooth by booted feet. Rumors flew like wild-fire, yet even the wildest rumor did not explain who had killed Toby Yates and buried him there.

Sheriff Ace Fisher sat in his gloomy office with the sulks, glowering whenever people passed the closed door, snarling like a bobcat when any one came in to ask him if he had seen the grave beside the trail.

The sheriff's round face was a picture of misery, and he kept telling himself that this grave business would be his undoing. He had let Bert Vail talk him into carting Toby Yates out there and burying him.

It was not according to law, in the sheriff's mind, and he cursed himself for letting Bert Vail talk him into such a stunt. If the voters at large found out that he had helped lug a dead prisoner out and bury him in such a manner—well, it would be just too bad, come election time.

The thoroughly miserable sheriff had not slept a wink all night. Nor had he eaten. He was trying desperately to think of some way out of the situation, when Bert Vail and the V Bar hands all trooped into town about noon.

The sheriff saw them as he stood at a window, and began swearing anew. He was still swearing when Bert Vail sauntered through the front door, took a seat on one corner of the desk, and rolled a cigarette. Bert was haggard, weary-looking.

"We buried Uncle Alf a while ago," he said tonelessly.

The sheriff jumped, then lunged forward to shake a pudgy fist under Bert's long nose. "Buried!" he snarled. "I wish I'd never listened to yuh, Bert Vail. That grave out yonder by the trail is stirrin' folks up somethin' scandalous."

"Good!" the lean redhead grunted heavily. "It's about time somethin' stirred yuh jaspers up. Another year, an' Mace Lillard would 'a' had yuh all killed off."

"What if Lillard finds out I helped plant Yates out there?" the sheriff wheezed. "If that story gits noised around, it would——"

"It would bring Lillard an' his outfit on the shoot an' win yuh more votes than any campaign speech ever did," Bert snapped. "Yuh'd git the credit fer cleanin' up a mess of skunks, an' mebbe I'd git the pleasure of drillin' Mace Lillard."

"Yuh an' yore schemes!" the sheriff faunched. "Bert Vail, fer two cents I'd make a clean breast o' the hull thing an' slam yuh in jail fer them killin's yesterday."

"Go ahead!" Bert drawled. "But afore yuh lock me up come down the street. I want to show yuh somethin'."

"Now what?" the sheriff blurted suspiciously. "Feller, if yuh've done somethin' else crazy, I'll jail yuh! So help me."

Bert grinned twistedly at the sheriff and headed for the door. He led the way down the street at a stiff walk, and Sheriff Fisher began having uneasy notions when he saw Bert turn toward the Red Dog Saloon. But the sheriff's curiosity was getting the better of his anger, and he followed the lanky cowboy inside the big barroom.

The long bar was lined, and men were bunched here and there at the tables scattered over the back part of the room. But the place was so

silent when the sheriff and Bert Vail stepped in that the sudden crash of a whisky glass dropped from nervous fingers sounded like a gunshot. Mace Lillard had dropped that glass, and was swaying on his feet as if about to fall. He stood at one end of the bar, huge body shivering, face lined and drawn by mental suffering.

His piggish little eyes were popping out from the bulges of fat that ringed them, and his thick lips formed a question that he dared not voice. He was staring at Bert Vail and the sheriff—staring with a sort of horror that brought a chuckle from Bert.

But Sheriff Ace Fisher was not chuckling. There were V Bar men scattered over the room—grim-eyed, tight-lipped men who glared coldly at the Cross T hirelings.

Under ordinary circumstances there would have been plenty happening with those two outfits under the same roof. But the Cross T bunch seemed strangely meek, and for the first time Sheriff Ace Fisher saw through Bert Vail's scheme.

Bert was deliberately baiting Lillard, forcing him to the wall, breaking his nerve. Lillard looked now as if he could stand the strain no longer, looked as if he would dig for the guns under his coat tails and end the thing. But Bert Vail's hard chuckle seemed to freeze every muscle in Mace Lillard's big body.

"Howdy!" Bert sang out to the room in general. "The sheriff an' me just dropped in for a minute. He needs a snifter. Coldlike this mornin', ain't it?"

A sigh that sounded like escaping steam passed Mace Lillard's puffy lips. He turned to the bar, fumbling for the glass he did not realize was missing.

The barkeep shoved out another,

and Mace Lillard spilled as much liquor on the bar as he poured into the glass. Bert Vail sauntered up beside him, deliberately took the bottle out of his hands, and passed it to the sheriff.

A groan ran around the room, for no man had ever taken a drink of Mace Lillard's private stock, much less taken a bottle of it from his hands.

But Lillard seemed not to mind. Leaning heavily against the bar, he bent his head close to Bert Vail's hat brim. "Yuh—yuh been gabbin' any to the sheriff?" he whispered.

"I ain't put no writin' where the sheriff kin find it, if that's what yuh mean," Bert grunted. "The sheriff knows no more than he did yesterday."

"What was the idea in—in buryin' Yates like yuh did an' whittlin' on that gun stock what yuh did?" Mace Lillard growled, and there was a note of his old overbearingness in his voice.

Bert looked sidewise at him, then shrugged slightly. If either Ed Mercer, Gork, or One-eye had lived, Bert could not have had this hold over the rascal beside him.

But Gork, One-eye, and Ed Mercer had paid for their bushwhacking tricks, and Mace Lillard had no way of knowing that the uneasy sheriff had heard what Toby Yates had had to say.

Bert Vail thought of those things now. Mace Lillard was badly frightened, but Bert was not fooled in the least. Lillard would get a hold on his nerves sooner or later and start thinking the thing over coolly. And when he did, he would begin to see that Bert Vail would have a hard time proving anything he might tell the sheriff.

"Vail, I've got to talk to yuh—alone." Mace Lillard's voice cut

sharply into Bert's thoughts. "I'll ride out o' town. Yuh foller me."

A warning jab went through Bert's taut nerves, and he felt the short hair along the back of his neck bristling. Something in Mace Lillard's voice and eyes gave Bert the warning that Lillard was up to something—had some trick up his sleeve.

Had he finally seen the weak side of Bert's hold?

But Bert Vail knew that he could not back up now. He nodded slowly, and wondered just how far he would follow Mace Lillard before he found himself in some sort of trap. Or were his own nerves getting just a little jumpy?

CHAPTER VIII.

WATERY DEATH?

BERT VAIL looked the Cross T men over quickly as he sauntered toward the swing doors through which Mace Lillard had already vanished. Something was trying to form in Bert's mind—something that he knew he should remember.

But the feeling was hazy, uncertain. He frowned, slowing his pace to run keen eyes over the big room once more.

The sheriff was at the bar, looking a lot happier as he talked with a couple of merchants who had joined him. But that, Bert knew, was not the information that was trying to take form in his brain.

Something was wrong. He was forgetting something. At least that was the way he felt. It was as if he were starting out on a trip and had a hunch that he was leaving some necessary article behind.

He stopped at the doors, built a cigarette, and thought as hard as he could. He gave it up at last, sauntered through the doors, and

clumped to where Snake stood dozing at a hitch rack. The *grulla* bronc had had a day and night's rest, and was feeling as fit as ever.

The big, ugly head jerked up, and Bert neatly dodged a vicious snap that would have broken a man's shoulder. He grinned, snatched the trailing reins, and vaulted into the saddle before Snake could try any of his other ornery tricks.

Mean, that *grulla* was, but it had a fighting heart that had won Bert's respect, under its ugly hide.

"Come on, yuh ornery jigger!" Bert growled, swinging the *grulla* to ride down the street. "If a hunch of mine is right, yuh'll mebbe have a new master to fight."

He let Snake jog-trot down the street, then turned out into the main trail. Ahead, riding leisurely, was Mace Lillard, apparently unaware that a rider was jogging along behind him.

Bert frowned, puzzled. He had half expected to see Lillard far ahead, traveling fast. Or at least Bert, had he himself been snake enough to lead a man into a trap, would have been traveling fast, hoping to make his intended victim rush forward without thinking. But Mace Lillard was traveling slowly, which meant that Bert was free to overtake him at any time.

The feeling of uneasiness gradually left Bert, and he grinned twistedly at his own fears. "Shucks," he said aloud, "I'm gittin' jumpy my own self. Lillard likely wants to see if his filthy money will have any effect on me."

Grim-eyed, hard-lipped, Bert rode on, trying to figure just what he would do. He could overtake Lillard, force him to reach for a gun, and then fill his soft hide full of lead. Lillard deserved that, for hadn't he hired Alf Walton and others killed?

But somehow Bert did not like the idea of avenging his uncle and the other V Bar men in that manner. He wanted some concrete evidence against Mace Lillard—wanted to see him in the toils of the law with a case against him that the sharpest lawyer could not break down.

Spending week after week in jail, knowing that each day brought the noose closer to his fat neck, was what Mace Lillard deserved. Bullets—quick death, were too easy a payment for the scheming murderer to make.

Bert was deliberately goading Lillard, hoping he would overplay his hand somehow, make some sort of blunder that would land him in jail. But would he? Mace Lillard was no fool, Bert knew that.

He was again becoming uneasy when he saw Mace Lillard rein up to sit waiting for him. They were beyond the sight of any one who might be riding out of Sage now.

"All right, Lillard!" Bert called as he reined in beside the hulking jasper. "Make yore gab short. I don't like yore company none."

"An' I don't like yores, either!" Lillard snarled—and jammed a gun deep into Bert's middle.

The redhead sat there for a full minute, simply staring in disbelief. Lillard had held that left-hand gun low, had sneaked it out, likely, even as Bert rode up. It was an old trick, yet one that had worked on more than one shrewd gun fighter.

Mace Lillard's face was a blotch of mottled color beneath his hat brim, and the look in his evil little eyes was far from pleasant.

Bert Vail controlled himself, forced a slow, hard grin. "So yuh decided to do a little of yore own killin' fer a change, huh?" he drawled. "Yuh gone loco, Lillard?"

"Not by a danged sight, yuh mangy young cuss!" Mace Lillard snarled. "Ride ahead o' me up that draw thar, an' if yuh look back I'll blow yuh in two."

That Lillard meant to kill him Bert knew. But he was too much at sea to be overly worried about it.

"Not afraid the sheriff will find some writin' if yuh drill me, are yuh?" he asked without looking back as he guided Snake into the side draw.

He heard a gloating chuckle, then a hand ripped the gun from the holster at his right hip.

"There ain't no writin' fer that star-toter to lay his paws on," Mace Lillard snarled, reining back to a safer distance behind his prisoner.

"No?" Bert drawled, trying desperately to keep the uneasiness out of his voice. "How come yuh figgerin' like that?"

"Down yonder in the saloon," Mace Lillard laughed jarringly. "I asked yuh if yuh'd spouted to the sheriff. An' yuh says: 'Nope, I ain't put any writin' where the sheriff kin git it.' An' yuh never will."

Bert groaned inwardly, suddenly angry at himself for having been so clumsy. Why hadn't he worded his reply more carefully? He savvied now what was to come—knew that he would never return from these hills alive unless he could do some mighty smooth thinking and acting.

But he was still trying to find some plan of action, two hours later, when Mace Lillard forced him into the mouth of a deep draw where a line shack sat hunkered against a slope.

Smoke poured from the rusty stovepipe, and Bert groaned aloud when he saw Jud Ames and the scar-faced Pete Tinker step outside. The pair stared a moment, then be-

gan grinning evilly as they recognized Bert.

"Howdy, boss!" Pete Tinker cackled. "Looks like yuh ketched yuh a prize stingaree."

"He's nothin' but a loud-mouthed popshot, boys," Mace Lillard chuckled heavily. "But I reckon it's time he was put away."

"Shore, blast him, that'll be a pleasure!" hulking Jud Ames snarled. "One o' the boys rode past a hour or so ago an' told us about that grave beside the town trail."

"Toby was our pard," Pete Tinker rasped. "An' we'd shore admire to handle this skunk fer killin' him."

"Brave, ain't yuh?" Bert Vail growled hoarsely. "If I had a gun in my holster all three of yuh yaller-hearted coyotes would be huntin' yore holes."

A terrific blow across the back of his neck sent Bert sprawling down at the feet of the evil pair who had come from the cabin. Pete Tinker kicked him savagely in the stomach, and Jud Ames leaned over to smash a hard fist into Bert's face.

Dazed though he was, by the blow that had knocked him from his horse, Bert jerked to his knees, drove a fist fairly into Jud Ames's evil face, and sent the hulking jasper spinning backward. At the same moment, Bert whirled, grabbed Pete Tinker's ankle as the scar-faced hombre kicked out at him, and gave a terrific sidewise twist.

There was a dull popping sound, and Pete Tinker's scream lifted shrilly above Mace Lillard's oaths. Bert got his feet under him, and was leaping up when another blow from behind sent him crashing forward on his face.

Dazed and sick, he lay panting heavily until his swimming brain cleared, then sat up slowly. The

three men were ringed before him, Mace Lillard and Jud Ames grinning wolfishly, Pete Tinker white and shaken from the pain of a dislocated ankle.

"Go ahead, yuh three yaller sons, an' git it over with!" Bert growled at them. "Shoot me, blast yuh! I deserve it fer lettin' a skunk like yuh outthink me, Lillard."

"Shoot yuh?" Mace Lillard grinned hatefully. "Not much, younker. I've covered my tracks keerful afore, an' I'm coverin' 'em now."

Lillard turned to his two men with an expansive grin. He was himself now, swaggering evilly, glorying in the murderous scheme his brain had hatched.

"We'll graze Cross T stuff on V Bar range now," he chuckled. "Wipin' out ol' Lew Gary an' them punchers he's got left will be simple, come early mornin'."

"But how about this tricky cuss, boss?" Pete Tinker asked, jerking a hand toward Bert.

"Him?" Mace Lillard grinned. "Why, I figure that well we dug, yonder, will take keer o' this smart-Aleck."

Pete Tinker and Jud Ames began grinning now, their evil eyes fairly gloating. Bert Vail shivered as his eyes traveled to the plank curbing of a well that was down the wash a short distance. He was seized roughly by Mace Lillard and Pete Ames, dragged to his feet, and booted toward the well.

"Swim as long as yuh kin, blast yuh!" Lillard snarled, and gave Bert a boost over the well curbing.

The redhead grabbed frantically for one of the uprights supporting the crossbeam from which the pulley hung. But his fingers missed their mark, and he felt himself rocketing down and down into dank air.

He struck water with a great splash and began flailing out wildly with arms and legs. But Bert Vail had never learned to swim!

CHAPTER IX.

A SLIM CHANCE.

FOR seconds that seemed hours, Bert was under that icy water, so numbed he could not tell whether the fall had hurt him or not. Then his head bobbed above the ripples, and he gulped hungrily at the strangely warm air.

He knew better than to struggle and thresh about, knew that it would only hasten his sinking again. He reached out, found a tiny handhold on one wall, and managed to catch several good breaths before the small stone to which he clung slipped its moorings and let him slide back beneath the surface of the icy water.

Again it seemed ages before his head came to the surface. But he was more fortunate this time. His groping fingers, numbed and stiff from cold, found a rough stone sticking out from the wall that did not budge when he gripped it.

His legs and body were sinking slowly again, but Bert kept his head above the surface by hanging grimly onto that projecting stone. Above him he could see three faces—leering, evil faces that were grinning fiendishly down at him.

"We'll be goin' now, Vail," Mace Lillard's voice boomed down into the well. "I'll git back to town, while these two boys round up the rest o' my men. We're wipin' yore outfit off the earth."

"Have a good swim, dang yuh!" Pete Tinker snarled down at him. "Yo're only twelve feet or so from the surface, but it may as well be a mile."

The three laughed hoarsely, then their heads were withdrawn. Twelve feet to the top of that well? It looked like a hundred to Bert Vail as he hung there, shivering from the cold.

He could see the tin water bucket up there against the pulley, and the rope that ran around the pulley wheel. If that bucket would only drop!

The rope had been swung out of the pulley and left wedged between the rim of the wheel and the cast-iron frame. A twitch at the other end of the rope and it would drop in place, letting the big tin bucket come rocketing down into the well. But unless some one came along to give that rope the necessary twitch it might hang there until it rotted without budging an inch.

Bert heard a rumbling noise, felt the walls of the well about him shiver, and knew that the men were leaving. Then Mace Lillard's voice was booming once more.

"I rode past ter tell yuh," Lillard yelled from somewhere on top, "that we're leavin' yore hoss stand hyar. He'll be found sooner or later, an' folks will allus wonder how yuh was clumsy enough ter fall in a well an' drown yore fool self."

Mace Lillard's laugh brought a snarl to Bert's lips. Then hoofs pounded away, and an eerie silence settled over the place.

Bert wiggled—and lost his grip on the stone. He went under once more, struggling in spite of himself. But he held his breath doggedly, waiting until he felt warm air on his wet head. But he had moved away from that projecting rock!

He clutched frantically at the wall, frightened at the knowledge that he had lost perhaps his only chance of survival. His fingers held on the pebbly surface for a moment,

then he was sliding down into the water again.

But he was going down feet first this time, and suddenly there was a solid jar against his boot heels. He let out the breath he had instinctively caught, a yelp of joy ringing from his lips.

He was standing on solid bottom, and the water barely covered his shoulders. He felt carefully about with a boot toe, wondering if he had found some little ledge. But everywhere he felt there was sand and rock beneath his feet.

Becoming bolder, he strode forward until he had crossed the well. Nowhere did the water touch his chin. And in one spot the tops of his shoulders stuck out.

Knowing nothing about how to handle himself in water, Bert had unconsciously doubled up each time he sank, otherwise he might have discovered sooner that he could wade the water safely.

Thanks to an unusually dry fall, the well was much lower than Lillard and his two hirelings had thought it to be.

New hope surged through Bert's brain—and died almost instantly. What if he could wade the water? His chances of escape were slim indeed, for he might never be found here.

Circling, shivering from the icy water, he kept his eyes turned to that pulley above. If he could only do something to dislodge that rope, he would have a chance of escaping. But what could he do?

His hand, brushing along the wall, gripped an egg-sized stone as he stumbled over something on the bottom. When Bert caught his balance, the stone was in his cold palm.

He started to drop it, then stiffened suddenly, a wild hope surging through him. If he could hit that

rope just behind the pulley the blow would unquestionably flip the rope into the groove. And once that happened, the weight of that big tin bucket would do the rest.

He waded to the most shallow place in the well, studied the pulley carefully, then hurled the stone. It went three feet wide of its mark.

But Bert seemed not to mind. The walls about him were filled with stones from the size of a pea to the size of a man's head. He began plucking at them, using the ones that would tire his arms the least.

Hour after hour he kept at it, pausing only when his arms became so sore and tired he had to rest. Then he would gather more stones and continue, throwing them as hard as he could under the circumstances.

He hit the pulley several times, and struck the rope once. But the stone only brushed the rope enough to make it wiggle. The light in the patch of sky over his head began fading, and something akin to panic seized Bert.

He was already so weary he could barely keep his feet under him. Sometime during the night he would cramp from the chill of that water and go under never to rise again.

But strangely enough it was old Lew Gary and the V Bar hands Bert Vail thought of. They would be trapped as they slept, for Bert had told them they need not fear Lillard and his bushwhackers for the time being.

Frantically Bert clawed at the wall, tore out a larger stone than he had been using, and hurled it with an angry growl up at the rope. He saw that his aim was as poor as ever, for the stone went almost straight up above the pulley.

Then it struck the crossbeam to which the pulley was wired and dropped into the tin bucket with a

loud clang. The bucket lurched violently—then Bert Vail was whooping hoarsely, churning the water about him with clenched fists.

That rock landing in the bucket had done the trick!

The pulley squealed shrilly, then the tin pail landed with a dull splash before Bert's face. He seized it eagerly. The other end of the rope, he knew, would be tied solidly to some part of the curbing, for no man takes the risk of letting all the rope shoot through the pulley and fall into the well. He took up the slack, gave a joyous yelp, and started up hand over hand.

The flimsy crossbeam sagged, groaning a warning. Bert steadied his actions, went up with the utmost caution, his heart fairly hammering in fear. If that crossbeam broke — But it held.

A few moments later, Bert was out on top, dripping wet and shivering so that his teeth rattled. But he was grinning, for the sun had just set, which meant that he would have plenty of time to get to the V Bar and warn his men.

He trotted to where his hat lay trampled before the line-shack door, thankful for at least one dry garment. Then he sloshed to where Snake stood regarding him intently. Bert crawled up into the saddle, pointed the *grulla's* ugly head into the hills, and jammed home the hooks.

"Sift, yuh full brother to a side-winder!" he chattered through blue lips. "Fog it, pard, an' we'll lay a trap fer Lillard that'll land him in the jug."

Snake's ugly temper seemed to flame at the rake of spurs. Instead of bolting away at a run he dropped his head, grunted, and tried to swap ends.

But the sand there in the wash

was very loose. Snake lurched drunkenly, then turned over on one shoulder. Bert, stiff and wet though he was, quit the saddle in time to save himself.

The waddy plowed head-first into the sand, then sat up, spitting dirt and glaring.

"Why, yuh ornery, jug-headed critter!" he gasped. "I'll make yuh — Good gosh!"

Bert's voice ended in a groan, for Snake had scrambled up to stand quivering and snorting, favoring his off front leg. Something like horror swept over Bert Vail, for he thought a lot of that ornery *grulla* horse.

"Busted leg!" Bert moaned, and went trudging to the horse.

He was wrong in his diagnosis, for Snake's leg was not broken. But it was badly sprained, and Snake would be unable to carry a rider for weeks.

Bert Vail glanced helplessly about, groaning as if suffering some physical pain. Afoot, he would never be able to reach the V Bar in time to save his men from Cross T guns.

CHAPTER X.

GUN-SMOKE SHOWDOWN.

BERT stripped riding gear from his crippled horse, rubbed the *grulla's* head affectionately, then turned his face to the hills which were already ghostly under the mantle of descending dusk.

It was ten or twelve miles to the V Bar. A man with footgear suited to walking could make such a distance across level ground in less than three hours even at night. But Bert Vail's high-heeled boots were not built for walking, and the ground he had to cover was hilly, with many brush-choked draws.

Pale with helpless rage at Lillard and his gunmen crew, Bert stripped

off chaps, spurs and gun belt, caching them beyond the line shack with his saddle and bridle. With that much weight removed he struck out, setting an even stride which he hoped to hold for hours.

But the first hour's march broke his stride, made him reel like a drunken man as he forged ahead. On the hills, his breath came in great sobbing gasps, for those steep climbs were hard enough to make a tough horse sweat.

Then Bert would hit brushy canyons, to flounder through what seemed mile on mile of thorny limbs that clawed and gouged, reducing his shirt to fluttering red strings that managed somehow to hang about his neck and wrists.

The open, sandy washes were equally tiring, for the waddy's boots slipped and slithered under him until he had the sensation of sliding back two steps every time he took one forward.

He lost track of time, and only the knowledge that unless he reached the V Bar ahead of Lillard, old Lew Gary and the other four V Bar men would be murdered as they slept kept him on his feet.

His feet were raw things that made him wince at each step, and his whole body was one huge, throbbing pain that hammered at his brain until the scarred landscape danced crazily before his bloodshot eyes. But Bert Vail limped on and on, forcing his legs to carry him forward when every nerve in his body cried out for rest.

He stumbled across a water hole once, realized dimly that he was on his own range, then reeled on after drinking thirstily of the brackish liquid.

How long it was before he caught the distant rumble of guns, Bert Vail never knew. But the sound whipped

new strength into his quivering muscles, and he began trotting forward.

He could not have kept that pace if the sound of those guns and the realization of what they meant had not driven his own suffering from his mind. Breathless, too numbed now to know much pain, he finally topped a rise and looked out and down into a shallow basin.

From the gloom down there came winks of flame, and the roar of guns lifted booming to Bert Vail as he went on down the slope at a long trot. He fell once, and lay for a few moments half stunned.

But those blasting guns, and the grim determination that had kept him on his feet for hours past brought him up. He reeled on into the shallow valley, more cautious now, realizing at last that Lew Gary and the other four had not been caught napping, after all.

Bert could make out the long, dark bulk of the bunk house, and see red ribbons of fire ripping from it before he thought of caution. He slowed down, aware that he had advanced much too close already.

There were men moving yonder in the line of pomegranate bushes that ran from the windmill up to the house. And as Bert saw those men it dawned on him for the first time that he was unarmed, helpless to defend himself!

"Lew an' the boys are makin' a stand, but they can't last," Bert panted, sliding back to the shadow of a corral he had just passed. "Gosh, there must be twenty guns slammin' lead at the bunk house. If I only had a gun, an' could locate that Lillard snake——"

A plan popped into Bert's mind at that moment, but he had to have a gun if he was to put that plan into action. Groping about, he found a

stout piece of two-by-two lumber that had been tossed down beside the pole corral.

Bert gripped it, a hard grin on his face, eyes glinting coldly as he sought out the nearest gun. He saw a rifle spurting from behind a wagon box not ten yards away and started crawling forward boldly.

The night was inky black, for clouds were spread over the sky until the stars showed only as pale freckles in the great dim canopy overhead. Bert was almost within arm's reach of the wagon box before he saw the man stretched out there.

"What luck?" he called gruffly, and slithered up closer.

"None, dang the luck!" the man behind the wagon box snarled. "So dark a man can't see the sights. If Lillard don't give the order ter rush, them V Bar snakes will pull a sneak on——"

The man's voice trailed off in a deep grunt, for the two-by-two landed hard across the top of his head. Bert Vail chuckled harshly, ran swift hands over his victim, and found a pair of Colt six-guns that felt good in his palms. He slipped ammunition from the Cross T man's belt loops, flung the rifle aside, and crawled away.

There was another gunman bushed up yonder by the saddle shed, and Bert was telling himself that the jasper needed a Colt massage when a voice lifted booming from behind him and to his left. Bert snarled like a wounded puma and whirled, for that was Mace Lillard doing the yelling.

"Listen, fools!" Lillard was roaring. "This ain't gittin' us no place. When I find the man that let his gun explode an' warn buzzards——"

"Aw, he's took keer of already, boss!" came a snarling answer from

almost beside Bert. "It was Wasp Keeler let his cannon off accidental as we closed in a while ago. An' danged if them cusses in the bunk house yonder didn't drop Wasp, first thing."

"Good!" Mace Lillard called back. "But that ain't what's botherin' me. On a still night like this, people kin hear these guns a long ways. We've got ter clean up an' git out o' hyar pronto, afore a bunch o' danged fools come ter investigate."

"How'll we do it?" some one called.

Mace Lillard's reply never came. There was a man walking toward Mace Lillard, and something in the bent figure gave the Cross T owner a chill. He opened his big mouth to call out—and forgot to close his mouth.

There was a gun in Lillard's fat paunch, and he could make out the dim outline of a face that struck something worse than terror to his heart. Now that shadowy form moved, and the gun in Mace Lillard's paunch shifted, rubbed along his side, and came to rest against his spine.

"Fer two cents, yuh hog-faced skunk, I'd blow yuh in two!" Bert Vail snarled, and Mace Lillard almost collapsed.

"Y-you!" he croaked. "H-how'd yuh git——"

A shrill, piercing whistle split the night, then Bert Vail's voice lifted in a ringing shout. Bert was running a supreme bluff, but with Mace Lillard snagged, he felt that his bluff had a chance of working.

"All right, sheriff!" he howled. "This is me, Bert Vail. I've got Lillard. Bring yore men an' close in, afore these snakes has a chance to scatter an' reach their hosses. Hurry!"

Bert had deliberately planted the idea of flight in the minds of those hired gunnies, saying just enough to make them believe they had a chance to escape if they hurried.

But of all the men there, Bert Vail was perhaps the most surprised. For harsh and clear on the night air came Sheriff Ace Fisher's voice in an answering whoop.

"Comin', Bert!" the sheriff cried. "Take to 'em, boys, an' shoot fer meat!"

Shrill cowboy yells split the air, then the pitch-black night was rocked with gun blasts and the wailing howls of men who felt lead tear their flesh.

But Bert Vail had little time to see and hear what was happening there in the V Bar ranch yard. His surprise at hearing the sheriff answer him was so great that he forgot, for the moment, that he had the man responsible for this crimson death that was crashing and snarling about him.

Bert had let the gun waver from that broad back before him. He felt rather than saw Mace Lillard moving now. Bert lurched aside instantly, but he was too slow.

There before his very eyes flared a thing of evil beauty—the greenish-yellow flare of exploding powder.

A great hammer seemed to strike Bert Vail along the side, driving him down and back. In that brief flare of muzzle flame, he had seen Mace Lillard's face—a hideous, hate-twisted face from which gleamed the eyes of a devil.

Bert's own gun was in his hand, whipping unwaveringly toward the spot where he had seen that evil face. But even as he fell he remembered that he wanted Lillard alive—wanted him to sit and wait for a noose to end his miserable life.

Bert's gun lowered, and from the

darkness that was the night about him came a nerve-jarring laugh.

"Downed yuh!" Mace Lillard panted. "But I'm makin' shore, yuh mangy young whelp!"

Again that gun flash lighted before Mace Lillard's face, and Bert Vail felt the slug smash into the earth bare inches from his body.

Bert gathered himself, forcing his reeling brain to function. He could hear hammer dogs clicking there dangerously close to him, knew that Mace Lillard was cocking his gun to fire again.

But as he came up, Bert Vail found the dim outline of the big man's head against the murky stars. He struck savagely at something blurred and white. His gun barrel hit with a soggy sound, and from a great bulk that shivered groundward came a moan of pain. Bert struck again, and the moaning ceased.

The pain in his side was making him sick, but he fought it off. The shooting had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and through the darkness trickled rough oaths, sharp commands, and the rattle of many spurred heels.

"Got 'em, Lew!" Bert heard Sheriff Fisher calling exultantly. "We got the snakes, an' some of 'em is done fer keeps. Yuh boys all right?"

"Yup, me an' the boys is all able tuh stand," old Lew Gary called. "Where's Bert? Thought I heard him hollerin' out hyar some place."

Bert sang out then, and men came rushing toward him. Some one brought a lantern, and Mace Lillard's face showed battered and crimsoned in the bobbing light.

"Say, Bert," the sheriff frowned, after he had handcuffed Mace Lillard, "how did yuh know that me an' the boys was out yonder pullin' a sneak-up to stop Lillard's outfit?"

"How come yuh here?" Bert countered.

"Lillard fetched his outfit in town to liquor up, afore he hit fer here," the sheriff growled. "Jud Ames an' Pete Tinker got loose-tongued an' spilled the whole thing to a barkeep friend o' mine. That barkeep wised me up. So I gathered twelve-fourteen men an' hit fer here. But how'd yuh know?"

Bert explained that he had simply been bluffing when he called for the sheriff to charge, and the little officer laughed grittily when he heard that.

"Anyway," Bert finished grimly, "that Lillard outfit is cleaned out. Mebbe a man kin ride these ranges now without gittin' his nose full of powder smoke an' his back full of lead."

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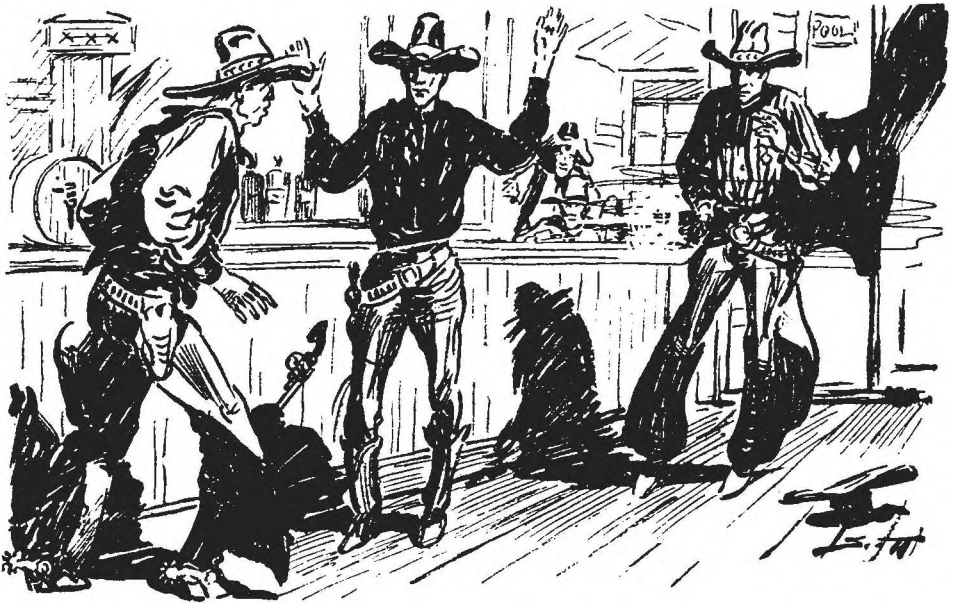
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The Whistlin' Kid Sees Red

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid And Three Wise Men," etc.

AT one end of the long bar stood the "Whistlin' Kid," resting an elbow upon it, as he rolled himself a brown-paper quiry. He was whistling softly.

At the other end of the bar, a man stood with his back to the room. The few who sat at the small tables could not see his face.

The Red Dog Saloon did not boast a mirror behind the bar. It was too likely to be shot up by punchers who were full of the strong redevye sold there.

There was a glimpse of red hair below this man's Stetson, which had a rattlesnake skin for its band. He wore silver conchas, larger than dol-

lars, on his chaps. The rowels of his silver spurs were the same size.

The bartender had left a bottle of whisky in front of him. It had been full when the man started on it. Now almost a half of it was gone.

But he showed no outward signs of being drunk. He was, the Kid told himself, the type of man who took his liquor by himself, likely to be sullen and dangerous.

The half doors swung open from the street. A tall, gangling cowboy entered. He had come in that morning with a shipping herd and did not mean to return to his ranch until late. Meantime, he had been enjoying himself.

His eyes had a vacant, set look as he gazed round the room with an amiable but foolish grin on his brown face. He nodded at the Kid, who nodded back, though he had never seen the puncher before.

Then the cowboy's grin widened. He strode, bow-legged and not too steadily, to where the red-headed man stood cuddling his bottle and hailed him.

"Seth Riddle, you old son of a gun!" With the greeting he swung his hand with a resounding thwack between the other's shoulder blades.

The bottle was almost knocked over, but caught and set upright. The red-headed man whirled, his back to the bar, the muzzle of his six-gun in the pit of the puncher's stomach. He had moved as swiftly as an angry cougar, his actions incredibly fast, his draw a marvel.

Now they saw his face. It was snarling and pitiless. His light-blue eyes blazed with hatred, with cruelty, with the desire to kill.

His teeth showed between drawn back lips in a hideous grimace. The humanity had gone out of him entirely. He was a wild beast, savage, and primed for slaughter.

The puncher had sobered up a little. His hands instinctively went above the level of his shoulders.

"There ain't no cause fer shootin'," he said. "I thought you was Seth Riddle, a buddy of mine. I ain't seen him since he repped fer the Lazy K, last fall. He's got red hair, he wears the same kind of hat-band, same kind of conchas an' spurs. My mistake, brother, an' I'll set up the drinks, fer everybody, seein' I was so dumb."

"My name's Luke Brill—Red Luke Brill," returned the other, and his voice had the bite of a circular saw cutting against the grain of the wood.

The Kid admired the attitude of the puncher. He had made a decent apology, and he had pride and courage, gazing into the flaming eyes of "Red Luke" Brill.

That was a name well known, and well hated. Not many of those in the Red Dog had ever seen him, but they had all heard of him. He was a lone wolf, a man who could be hired for gun play, a killer for pay, because he liked the work. He had not yet been declared a murderer by the law, but had often come close to it.

"There ain't nobody can take liberties with me," he said; "not without payin' fer it my way. You git down on your knees here an' now, an' mebbe I'll let you git up. Crawl, an' lick my boots," Red said venomously.

The puncher did not move. He stood there with his hands up, defenseless, quite sober now in the prospect of a violent death. He looked at Red with contempt, and the Kid's heart warmed to him. It took nerve to stand up like that.

"Crawl, or I'll blow your belt buckle inter your spine, you skunk!" snapped Red.

The Kid saw his grip closing about the butt of his six-gun, his trigger finger beginning to tense.

"If that's the kind of coyote you are," said the puncher, "shoot, an' git hanged fer it."

Flecks of foam showed on Red's distorted lips. His face twitched.

Wham! A gun crashed in the low barroom.

There was a pale jet of orange flame, blue smoke wisping from the muzzle of the Whistlin' Kid's gun as he thrust it back into the right-hand holster. For it was the Kid's gun that had come out for one swift shot, and then gone back as swiftly into the leather.

The Kid lounged against the bar once more, lighting his quiry. He was wearing two guns. Usually he packed only one, but this was two-gun territory.

His bullet had struck the barrel of Red's Colt where it joined the cylinder, just ahead of the trigger guard. The heavy slug had flung the weapon against the wall, tearing it from Red's numbed and tingling hand.

The puncher stepped back from him, his hands lowered, one of them hovering close to his six-gun, but he did not touch the weapon. The wonder of his escape was not yet out of his eyes, as he spoke to the Kid.

"Thanks, pardner! I won't be forgettin' thet."

Red Luke Brill was like a brute upon whose leg a trap has suddenly snapped.

"Give me a gun, somebody! Give me a gun!" he panted.

He glared at the bartender who shook his head. He glared about the room where now nobody stirred, nobody spoke.

"I'll loan you one," said the Kid, "but I'll expect it back, after you've used it."

The Kid's cool tone, the suggestion that Red Luke Brill would not be able to damage him, set Brill to raving almost insanely.

The Kid stood there at ease, his hawkish features composed, his dark eyes, matching his hair, watching Brill quietly, as he drew his left-hand gun, leaving the other still holstered.

He slid it, butt first, along the bar. It came to rest just within reach of Brill's clutching fingers.

The Kid started to stroll toward the other. Red Brill's hand closed convulsively into a fist, opened again. It was itching to grab the weapon, but there was something in the look of the young hombre who

had just demonstrated his own shooting ability that held Brill back.

For the first time in his life, he was not sure of himself. It was an even break. The Kid had to draw, the gun he had slid to Brill was in the open, but it lay on a polished surface. Red Luke would need a fraction of a second to grip it, to get his finger to the trigger.

And that fraction of a second might be the tiniest atom of time longer than the Kid would take.

The Kid was barely old enough to vote. Red Brill was thirty, with a record of killings behind him. But the sheer nerve of the Kid's move proved the Kid's confidence in himself. The light in his eyes as he came steadily along the bar was the pure flame of bravery.

Red Luke Brill did not pick up the gun.

The Kid did, leisurely, and holstered it. "Since you don't want it," he drawled.

"I'll kill you for this," Red said, with chilly ferocity and deadly purpose. He had got sudden control of himself. "But I'll do it with my own gun," he added.

He kicked aside his ruined weapon and went through the door, all eyes following him.

The puncher came over to the Kid, held out his hand.

"I've seen some shootin', brother," he said, "but none to match that, aside from what it meant to me. Thet lizard was fast, but you was fork lightnin'. My name's Ned Westlake, an' I work fer the Two X A. Will you drink?"

"Most folks call me the Kid," said the dark-haired young hombre.

His real name was Pete Prentiss, and he was star range detective of the Cattlemen's Association. It was his privilege not to mention his full name, especially after his showing.

Westlake did not resent it, and they gripped hands.

"I don't find hard stuff helps my draw," the Kid went on with a smile. "If you don't mind, I'll take a cigar."

"Suit yourself, pardner. All hands line up. I was goin' to say this is my funeral," said Westlake, "but it come too close to thet to make a joke of it."

"You lookin' fer work?" a man asked the Kid. "I'm straw boss fer the B-in-a-Box. We ain't been hirin', but——"

"Might be, later," the Kid told him. "Sort of driftin', right now, lookin' fer a li'l excitement."

"You'll likely find it," said another. "I wouldn't want Red Luke Brill gunnin' fer me—not even if I could draw a hawleg quick as you. You might be a mite slow, one time."

It was friendly, well meant, and serious advice. The Kid stuck his cigar in the pocket of his black-and-white-checked shirt.

"This Red Luke Brill, is he workin' fer any outfit round here?" he asked.

"You can bet he ain't loafin'. He can draw down a hundred a month from the kind thet hires him. It's hard to figure who they are, an' Brill works under cover. But he works, an' the work's plumb dirty, or he wouldn't be handlin' it."

When the Kid started to leave, Westlake and another puncher insisted upon going first to see if the way was clear. Brill was not in sight. He might be getting another gun, might wait until he got used to the weight and balance of it before he tried to make good his threat.

The Kid did not have the slightest doubt that Red meant to kill him. But he meant to see Red first.

He swung a leg over his buckskin

horse, Speed, and loped off down the street. As he rode, he whistled his favorite tune, "The Cowboy's Lament." The words of the popular border ballad were in his mind. There were times when they seemed very appropriate:

Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife
lowly,
Play the Dead March as you carry me
along,
Down to the graveyard to set the sod o'er
me;
I'm only a cowboy that knows he's done
wrong.

II.

The steers lay bedded down for the night in the round valley that was the best pasture of the Two X A (XXA). That was a comparatively small outfit, compared with other spreads in Rocalla County. But it was a prosperous one, or should have been.

Almy, the owner, believed in good stock. His steers were all primes, high-grades crossed with thoroughbred Hereford bulls. He had good range under wire, where the curly grama grass grew thick.

It was good range, even in winter. And in summer, when other spreads found their creeks dwindling to threads of sour water trickling through the mud, the springs of the Two X A never failed.

The land, some said, was worth far more than the stock Almy ran upon it. He had had many offers for the spread, but refused them.

It lay between other outfits that lacked his fertile range. Some of the owners envied him, others coveted his holding. He was quite sure that the superintendents of two spreads, both syndicate affairs, had tried to drive him out.

They had bought up his notes and a mortgage, threatened to foreclose on that, used their influence to pre-

vent new loans, managed to see that Almy had a hard time getting cars for shipment.

He had scraped through, by the skin of his teeth, though he had to sacrifice a lot of beef on a poor market to get by. They had almost stripped him. But he hung on, the third Almy to own and run that spread. A fourth was growing up, Almy's thirteen-year-old boy, Ted.

Now, mysterious things were happening on the Two X A. Wire was being cut, cattle strayed or was rustled, the dam that held the water from his two mountain springs was blown up. Some stock, cows and horses both, was found poisoned. The rock salt Almy had set out had been mixed with arsenic.

He had been forced to reduce his help, though his riders offered to stay without wages until the Two X A got caught up again.

Almy now had four men on wages. His boy helped as much as he could, but it was impossible for them to cover the territory. Most of their work had to be done by day. The disasters occurred at night.

Therefore, Almy had appealed to the Cattlemen's Association, to which the Almys had belonged since the organization had been founded.

They sent him a letter, that read, in part:

We are sending you our best man. He may not announce himself to you on his arrival. These things get out and often interfere with success.

Nor can we promise the exact day he will reach you. He is now closing another job, but he will be with you at the earliest moment and, since he is *the* man under the peculiar circumstances, we feel sure you will put up with some slight delay.

That night, Ned Westlake and another man were riding night-herd on a bunch of primes Almy had contracted for at a good price to be de-

livered to the road camp of the Highway Department of the State.

Neither Almy nor his riders dreamed that Pete Prentiss, otherwise known as the "Whistlin' Kid," was lying out on the hillside, watching, not so much the steers, as what trouble might be brewing.

Those steers meant much to Almy. They were being fattened up in the round valley, so they would come up to promise, bring a good sum of money to Almy's shrunken account.

It seemed logical to the Kid that anybody deliberately trying to wreck the outfit would strike at those steers. Their loss might not actually ruin Almy, but it would bring him very near to it.

It seemed possible that the Flying V and the 178 outfits might employ such methods. They were the syndicate spreads, and the Kid knew that their owners lived East, rarely visited the outfits, and were more interested in dividends than in live stock. The superintendents had salaries that could be greatly enlarged by bonuses on increased profits.

Almy had not suggested that these two had anything to do with his troubles. But the Kid had found out about the notes and the loans, listening to talk and confirming it. He knew it was foolish to accuse big concerns, unless there was absolute proof.

He was quite sure that if they were responsible for the crooked work, they would use somebody not on their pay rolls, somebody who would understand that he got paid well for success, but would be left holding the bag if he failed. There would be nothing to link him up with the outfits.

The Kid's thoughts concentrated in a hunch that pointed to Red Luke

Brill as the man. He would have others with him, of course, but he was just the sort to do that dirty work.

The Kid was not prejudiced because of his affair with Red in the saloon. But he meant to solve the riddle, and if in so doing, he ran up against Red Luke, it would not displease him.

About the round valley the hills rose gently. Once they had been higher, ridged with raw lava, and the valley had been desert. Now all was green to the crests of the hills, where eroded boulders lay loose above buried rock.

The stars shone brightly. The Kid could see the herd, comfortably bedded down, while Westlake and his partner rode slowly about them, singing to let the steers know they were being guarded. The night was serene, but to the Kid, it was charged with something that whispered to him of danger.

There was trouble in the air that barely stirred and was fragrant with the scent of sage and mesquite blossoms, piñon, and cedar.

Trouble, but he could not locate it, could not tell from which quarter it would come.

His buckskin, Speed, was lying down in a slight hollow.

The Kid recognized the tall figure of Westlake, riding a paint pony. He heard his voice:

"—and looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy,
Would land in that sweet by-and-by?
Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, li'e dogies, roll on, roll on.
Roll on, roll o——"

A red glare stabbed the sky line, spread like an opening fan of flame on the crest of a hill across from the Kid. The flare lighted up, for a moment, rolling clouds of heavy smoke, livid beneath and black above.

It was as if a crater had suddenly opened, spouting fire and rock. There was a tremendous explosion, that the sky seemed to send back in one, solid echo.

As if shot from mammoth canons, great rocks went hurtling through the air.

The startled steers got to their feet. The Kid saw one great boulder strike halfway down the slope, bounce like a rubber ball, and go bounding on, straight for the herd. Others followed it.

Crafty men had drilled into the sod and dirt beneath those loose rocks, set their giant powder, capped and fused it. Then they had crawled away. They would have sneaked up on foot to light the fuses, leaving their horses held by one man. By now they might be a mile away, waiting for the explosion to collect their pay before riding to their boss.

They were not even rustlers; they were butchers.

The boulders went crashing through the scattering, scared herd as the Kid whistled shrilly to Speed. He vaulted into the saddle as the buckskin got to its feet and raced down to try to stop the stampede.

He passed fallen steers, lowing pitifully, their legs broken by the catapulted rocks. He pricked Speed with his spurs, and the buckskin, champion sprinter of six States, forged ahead, catching up with Westlake and the other rider who were valiantly trying to check the frenzied steers.

The Kid ranged up alongside Westlake, saw him twisted in the saddle. He seemed hurt, but his thighs gripped his pinto mount that strove to keep even with Speed.

"Got to head 'em off!" gasped Westlake. "Wire jest a mile ahead. Four-strand, an' new posts."

The Kid knew what that meant. The fence might check the leaders, but the main mass would break through. They would all be badly torn, hard to round up. Almy's contract was smashed to smithereens, unless they were stopped.

"Go to it, Speed!" said the Kid, and pressed Speed's neck, high up toward his head, where a vein swelled.

They left Westlake and his pinto behind as if they were standing. The other rider fell behind, too.

The steers raged on, frantic, jostling each other, clicking horns. Their sight was none too good at any time, and now they were rushing at a fence they would not see until they were into it.

There was one big steer whose white-fronted head showed plainly ahead of the rest. Intentionally or not, he was the leader, stronger, swifter than the others.

The Kid touched Speed again and the buckskin's belly skimmed the grass as it answered with another burst of speed.

They rounded the front rank of the blundering steers. The wire was less than a hundred yards away.

The Kid fired and the white-faced leader stiffened in its stride. Its knees gave way and it turned a somersault. Other steers stumbled over it, piling up.

The Kid rode along that charging line, dangerous as a troop of lancers, shooting so that the powder flame seared the critters' noses. He had to shoot another steer as Speed spun about, and they rode back.

He wondered what had happened to Westlake and his comrade, but he had scant time to think about it. The stampede had slackened. He was turning them at last. But he was so close to the fence that the barbs of the wire tore snags in his

leather chaps and raked the flanks of Speed.

It was over. He had saved at least eighty per cent of the steers. The attempt to destroy them, or at least to scatter them, had failed. They would still weigh up to standard.

Then he saw Westlake and the other rider coming up slowly. Westlake was being supported in his saddle.

"Chunk o' rock hit him. Reckon it caved in his ribs," said the other. "We got to git him to the ranch. Those murderin' skunks got fooled, thanks to you."

Westlake was in bad shape, too ill to talk. His face was gray in the starlight.

"I'll take him in," said the Kid. "You get your stock bedded down again. I don't imagine they'll be bothered any more. Those coyotes prob'ly beat it, soon's they heard the blast. Which way is the quickest to your headquarters?"

The riders directed him, and the Kid and Westlake started.

The Kid did not believe they would find any sign left by the men who had tried the dastardly attack. Red Luke Brill might have thought of the plan, directed it, but there would be no trail leading to him this time. Red was too old a hand at making mischief and escaping consequences.

But he would know soon, if not already, that his effort had failed. And he would strike again.

III.

The ranch was asleep, but the Kid hailed the ranch house, and Almy was quickly down. They got Westlake on a bed and stripped off his outer clothing.

The Kid knew a good deal about

such matters. Westlake's side was badly bruised. There was no doubt that ribs had been broken, and the Kid feared that a broken one had pierced a lung.

Almy sent a man to town for a doctor. Mrs. Almy acted as nurse. Young Ted Almy wanted to go for the doctor, but his father forbade him, neither would he let him go to act as night-herd in Westlake's place.

"It ain't long till sunup," he said. "Some of those lizards might be hangin' round. You stay here, son."

"Then can I ride over there an' see what I can find where they blowed up the rocks?" begged young Ted.

The Kid smiled at the youngster's enthusiasm, understanding it.

"We'll see about that later," said Almy. "How'd you happen along so handy, mister?" he asked the Kid. "You sure saved me from a heap of trouble."

A murmur came from the bed where Westlake lay. Mrs. Almy had given him a drink of weak whisky and water. He had revived enough to talk.

"That's the hombre I told you about, boss—the one thet shot Red Brill's six-gun out of his hand. Saved my life. Calls himself the Kid."

"That's all the talkin' you want to let him do till the medico comes," said the Kid. "My right name is Prentiss," he went on to Almy. "I'm the range detective they promised to send you. Here's my credentials."

Almy waved them aside. "Looks to me like you've credentialed yourself plenty already," he said cordially. "Maw, Mr. Prentiss'll stay here ter-night, an' as long as he pleases."

Young Ted Almy was looking at the Kid with worshiping eyes.

"Gee!" he said. "Gee! It must be great to be a cattle detective. That's what I'm goin' after."

"You're going straight back to bed," said the boy's mother. "You can see Mr. Prentiss at breakfast."

"Good night," said Ted to the Kid. "I reckon you've killed plenty rustlers, ain't you?"

His mother hurried him away before the Kid had time to answer. The Kid went outside to look after Speed. He left the buckskin in the night corral, and turned in on a comfortable bed to snatch an hour or two of sleep.

Two hours later, as dawn was graying, the Kid heard the doctor arrive. The latter did not stay very long. The Kid could hear him talking in a low voice, outside, to Almy:

"Might pull through. I'm most afraid of infection and pneumonia. Can't be sure. Let Mrs. Almy follow my directions. Got to keep him quiet, try and keep the fever down."

There was the sound of the doctor's buckboard leaving. The Kid got another hour's sleep. There was nothing he could do to help Westlake, unless it was to land the skunks who had set off the blasts and nearly killed him. If Westlake died, it would be murder.

Young Ted did not see the Kid at breakfast. He had begged a snack from his mother, and had ridden off on his own roan pony.

"He aims to strike some sign and show you how good he is," said Mrs. Almy. "He's a fine boy, we think. He made a hero out of you before he met you. He heard Westlake telling about the trouble in the Red Dog. You look mighty young to do those things," she ended, as she handed the Kid the light biscuits she had made.

The herd was left in the round valley. There were only three riders now on the Two X A, not counting Almy, and the man who had been on night-herd with Westlake was sleeping.

"I've got to risk their rustlin' the steers," said Almy. "I don't think there's much chance of that. Not by daylight. Not right after what they tried last night. They'll think up something else," he added wearily. "Anyway, Ted is over there. He'll keep his eyes peeled, an' come in if he thinks anything is up. Thet pony of his is the fastest thing in the county."

The Kid wondered what the roan pony would have done last night in competition with Speed, but he did not say anything. He had found out, long ago, that the value of anything worth while is likely to be doubled if you keep quiet about its possession.

"Red Luke Brill is doin' all this," said Almy. "I can't prove it, but I know it. When you see a buzzard drop out of the sky, you know it's gone down to something thet's dead. It's the same with Brill. If it keeps up, they've got me licked," he added, his face showing deep lines of worry. "We was gittin' along fine—too fine, I reckon. They've nigh bankrupted me, one way and another. Now they've like to killed Westlake. I wonder what's comin' next."

So did the Kid. There was still trouble in the air. And no way of telling where it would strike, or when, or how.

They did not know it, but it had struck already.

Almy rode off to look at some wire. His two day-riders were on their rounds. They would not be back until sunset. They did not

bother about a noonday meal. Almy would return about the same time.

Mrs. Almy did not seem to bother about young Ted's staying out. The Kid sat with Westlake, worried about his mounting fever, fanning his flushed cheeks. The doctor was coming out later.

The Kid heard the *tap-tap* of hoofs. A Mexican lad on a sorry-looking cayuse, with only a blanket for saddle, rope for bridle, was loping up to the house.

He wore a straw sombrero that was as ragged as his jean shirt and patched overalls. He was bare-footed—a typical *muchacho*, a young peon, lazy and not over-intelligent.

He had a length of rawhide for a belt and, tucked beneath the strap, the Kid, looking from the window, saw the lad carried what looked like a note.

Then he heard Mrs. Almy call out sharply, and the Kid ran down the stairs, into the kitchen. There was no sign of the lad. Mrs. Almy sat in a chair, her face as white as the flour she had been mixing.

She held out a paper to the Kid, her hands trembling.

"Read that," she whispered. "They've got Ted. What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

The Kid did not wait to read it. He guessed something of its nature, and he darted from the house, looking for the messenger. He might be only what he seemed, a stupid lad who could tell nothing about where he got the message or from whom. On the other hand, he might supply a clew.

The Kid saw him disappearing in an arroyo. He shouted after him, and flung a bullet over his head, but the lad only lay flat on his mount,

which, carrying so light a weight, showed an astonishing fleetness.

The arroyo ended in thick mesquite, pierced by scores of narrow trails used by cattle and horses, crossing each other. By the time the Kid got on a horse, the chase would be useless.

He went back to the house and found Mrs. Almy wiping her eyes, her face set.

"They must have got Jerry—that's his pony—as well," she said, "or it would have come back. I'm goin' to saddle up an' ride for my husband. I know where to find him. He's got to do what they say, I reckon. Looks like there's no time to lose. I can still fork a horse," she added with a forced smile.

The Kid was reading the note, printed in capital letters with pencil on cheap, ruled paper. It had been sealed in an envelope bought at some post office, the stamp embossed upon it, not, of course used:

WE GOT YOUR KID AND IF YOU WANT HIM BACK GET BUSY. YOU HAD CASH OFFERS FOR YOUR RANCH AND THEY'RE STILL OPEN. YOU ACCEPT THE BEST OFFER AND GET THE CASH. WE'LL SWAP THE KID FOR THE DINERO. WE WANT FORTY THOUSAND DOLLARS AND WE'RE GIVING YOU JUST FORTY-EIGHT HOURS TO RAISE IT.

HAVE A MAN COME TO PAINTED ROCK TO-NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT. IF HE BRINGS WORD FROM YOU YOU'LL GET THE MONEY WE'LL TELL HIM HOW WE WANT IT DELIVERED. IF HE DON'T COME OR IF YOU WON'T GET THE MONEY YOU DON'T GET THE KID. EVER WE RECKON YOU SABE WHAT THAT MEANS.

THE NIGHT OWLS.

HAVE YOUR MAN HOOT LIKE AN OWL WHEN HE SHOWS UP. HIS WORD TO OUR MAN WILL BE PRONTO AND OUR MAN WILL SAY MUERTE. THAT'S ALL. GET BUSY.

"That just about finishes us," said the woman, her voice tense. "The 178 outfit offered us forty-four thousand dollars for the place, including stock. The Flying V people went five hundred dollars better. My man turned 'em both down. The ranch is worth more. But they said the offers were standin' ones. What they called firm, I think. Meanin' they're still good, I reckon."

The Kid nodded. It looked at first sight as if one of those outfits, employing Red Brill, meant to get the Two X A at their own price, and then get most of that price back, by kidnaping young Ted and collecting ransom.

But he did not believe it. They might have hired Brill, one or both of them, to get some men to do what damage they might, and so put Almy in the mind to sell, but the kidnaping was Red's own idea. The pay he was getting did not suit him, once he saw this chance to make a big winning.

The cowardly note, signed the Night Owls, its distinct threat of death if the money wasn't paid, and the actual mention of the word death in Spanish—"muerte"—as a password, was just Red's style.

The superintendents of the big outfits, however anxious they might be to get the spread, would never be mixed up with kidnaping.

If Red Luke Brill was ever shown to be mixed up with them in such a crime, it would make them let up entirely. But that "if" was a big one.

"We'll have three or four thousand left, mebber," Mrs. Almy went on bravely. "Enough to move. And, of course, we've got Ted, or we will have him, if Almy can—if he can get the money. But suppose he can't?" she asked, staring wide-eyed at the Kid.

"You ain't got to that bridge yet, ma'am," the Kid told her. "You've got forty-eight hours to raise it. You get hold of your husband, but don't let him be in a hurry to close a deal. Find out if the offers are still good, how soon he could get the money if he sold. It shouldn't take long. The supers and the bank could wire New York. There's time difference in our favor. I don't believe for a minute the big outfits are in this grab of the boy. So, if things work out the way they should, don't close, don't make any promise to close, or sign any papers, for twenty-four hours."

"You think it's this Red Luke Brill?" she asked. "But what good will twenty-four hours' delay do? Suppose anything went wrong?"

"I'm goin' to be that man to go to Painted Rock to-night," said the Kid. "If I come back, I'll bring your boy with me. If I don't, their offer'll still hold. I've tackled Red Luke before. I ain't worryin' about doin' it again. We're set to meet, sooner or later!"

"But why go alone?"

"It's the only way, ma'am. Your husband'll say so, when we talk this over. A posse ain't worth much, any time. Bound to be some one in it who's liable to blunder. Daytimes, they advertise themselves by dust. Nights, most of 'em don't know how to travel. Now you get goin'. I'll look out for Westlake."

Westlake was still sleeping, and his temperature did not seem to have gone up. The rider who had been on night-herd with him was turning out, looking for a snack to eat.

The Kid told him where Mrs. Almy had gone, but he did not say anything about the kidnaping.

The rider, with the best intentions in the world, might start something, ride to another ranch, get a posse started. The Kid meant to be firm

with Almy about that. But he put a question to the rider.

"You know a place called Painted Rock?" he asked.

"Sure do," said the other. "It's four miles from here. I'll show you the ridge you hit for. Lot of pines there, an' a valley, with a wooded hill in the middle of it. There's a lot of big rocks. Most of 'em are slate-colored, or black; only, at the foot of that hill, there's one that's red, streaked with white. How's Westy?"

"Doin' all right, so far. Thought you might like to sit with him till the doc shows, in case he wants somethin'. He'd be glad to see you when he wakes up."

"*Bueno!*" The rider was pleased.

So was the Kid. He went to the corral and saddled Speed. He knew he could overtake Mrs. Almy, and he wanted a talk with her husband.

There was just one way to save both the boy and the money—to say nothing of getting Red.

IV.

The valley was a dreary place at midnight, with a wind sighing through the pines, and the great rocks taking strange shapes. The Kid found the hill, circled it a ways, and found the painted rock, striking a match to make sure, before he hooted like an owl. It was so good an imitation that a real owl hooted back.

Suddenly he saw a figure walking toward him. The Kid had dismounted, and it was Speed's movement that called his attention.

The man who approached was short and very bow-legged. The rim of his sombrero was pinned back in front. On his face was a black mask.

"You lookin' fer some one?" he

asked in a rough voice that was evidently disguised.

"I am," said the Kid. "Sure hope that he'll turn up—*pronto*." He stressed the last word, with a pause in front of it.

"Reckon he will, if he ain't *muerte*," came the answer. "You got a message fer him?"

"I got a note," said the Kid. "There should be an answer."

"There won't be—not ter-night. The boss ain't made up his mind as to that. You're to come again tomorrow night. An' if any talk gits out, it's goin' to be just too bad. We'll hear if it does. Savvy?"

The Kid did not show his disappointment. He had hoped to be taken to Red, but this way might work out best, after all. He let Speed show in the open, swung to the saddle.

"I'll be goin'," he said.

But he did not go far. He watched the man disappear, noted the direction, rode Speed round the big rock, left him in a clump of high brush.

It would have been difficult trailing, but the man did what the Kid had hoped. The note from Almy, that said he was getting in touch with those who had offered to buy the ranch, was not in an envelope. And the man was curious. He lighted a match to read it, and the Kid got within ten feet of him before the other had finished reading.

It was easy going after that. No Indian was better at stalking than the Kid. Presently he made out the glow of a fire between tree trunks, flinging long shadows. Then he heard voices.

There were six men about a fire and a boy. The boy was Ted Almy, the man beside him Red Luke Brill, his cruel face lighted by the flames.

He was teasing the boy, but the youngster was game.

"I ain't scared, even if you should want to kill me," said the boy. "You won't because you want the money. But you forgot the range detective."

"What range detective?"

"The one that shot the gun out of your hand in the Red Dog. He's at the ranch now. He ain't afraid of you, any more than I am. I wouldn't wonder but what he was right close, now——"

The man who had met the Kid stepped forward now, gave Red the note. He read it with a grim face. "What kind of a jasper was the man who brought this Sam?" he demanded.

"It was dark. I didn't git to see him."

"See his hawss?"

"When he rode away. It was lightish. Might have been a buckskin or a palomino."

Red got to his feet. "Rode away *nothin'!*" he said. "Pedro, an' Ignacio, you two take the boy in the trees. You hear any one, see any one, shoot—but shoot the boy first! This range detective is snoopin' round. Might have more with him. We'll spread out an' round 'em up. An' the next time there's shootin' between us, I'll be doin' my share."

The Kid waited until the two Mexicans had grabbed the boy. To his delight they came toward him.

Sam had taken off his mask, and none of the others wore any, thinking themselves unobserved. Even now they did not try to put them on.

Red was nervous and showed it. The memory of what the Whistlin' Kid had done to him in the Red Dog was not only plain in his mind, but in those of his followers. It undermined the confidence of all of them.

The Kid photographed the faces of all present on his mind. If any

got away, and he survived, he would remember them.

The odds were heavy, but he proposed to reduce them. He sidled among the trees, in the shadows, while Red and the rest watched the boy being taken out of the firelight.

Then the range detective struck. He was wearing both his guns, and he had them out, one in each hand. He cracked the skull of Ignacio with his left-hand hogleg, and stunned Pedro with the other. They fell, and the Kid tapped Ted Almy on the shoulder.

"Back of me," he whispered. "Get behind a tree—and stay there!"

The boy obeyed. He was thrilled to the core. His hero in action, for him. He would have jumped off a cliff if the Kid had told him to.

The noise was slight, but some ears had caught it. Red and his men stood about the fire like hunting dogs on point, their eyes gleaming.

"This is the next time, Red," said the Kid. "Start your smoke."

He could have shot them down easily from where he stood, but the Kid did not do things that way. He stepped into the open, a tune on his lips, the Whistlin' Kid himself, shooting two-handed.

Red had his gun ready. So did others. Lead hummed. It bit deep into the bark of the tree behind the Kid. It bit into the thick of his leg, and scored high on one shoulder. It bored through one holster. But it did not bring him down.

He did not waste his shots. Two men started to escape, one limping, one crawling. The Kid let the second one go, knowing he would not travel far. He stopped the first, meaning to collect later. That was four. Red was the one he wanted.

And Red was not facing the issue. He was sneaking round to get behind the Kid.

The fifth man dropped. The Kid did not think he would get up again. He could not call his shots in that confusion. The sixth and the seventh flung up their hands, tossing away empty guns.

Then Ted Almy called out.

"Watch out, Kid! He's right back of you!"

Red Luke swore and shot at the boy. The Kid heard Ted cry out and knew he was hit. He swung about and saw Red Luke shoot at him, point-blank. The hammer clicked on an empty shell.

"Out of cartridges, Red?" said the Kid. "I'm not, but I don't think you rate 'em."

He holstered his guns and leaped.

Red snarled in the flickering firelight, struck out, using his empty gun as a club. But the Kid warded it off. His right fist crashed to Red's jaw, and Red Luke Brill went down—and out.

Ted Almy came forward.

"Gee!" he cried. "That was great! I ain't hurt, honest. He just clipped a bit off my ear. It'll be a swell scar."

The Kid inspected him. "You'll do," he said. "Know where your pony is? Good. Then you ride home fast an' tell what happened. I'll collect these lizards an' ride herd on 'em till you get back."

When the riders came, they found the Kid keeping up the fire, about which he had ranged his prisoners. He was whistling a favorite tune of his that seemed to fit the occasion. It was "The Cowboy's Lament."

When the Whistlin' Kid is sent out on a case by the C. A., that outfit might jest as well save time an' trouble by markin' said case "closed," right away. Fer there ain't no doubt a-tall about the results. Watch fer another adventure o' the Whistlin' Kid in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



A Rep For Lanky Lafe

By Hal Davenport

Author of "Washpan Bonanza," etc.

HE wasn't much to look at. The gangling, cotton-haired young hombre dragged in, grinning, through the slatted batwing doors. He lined up at the bar with many of the Election Day jam milling about Roaring Fork City.

"Whisky," he ordered, "and make 'er raw! I've got to git all set for some private oratory."

"Huh?" Pode Bradley, behind the bar, looked at him in faint surprise, then set out his fiercest liquor. "You ain't goin' to make a speech, are you, Lanky?"

"Lanky Lafe" Larkin shook his head. "Naw. Wouldn't nobody listen." Twin buckteeth showed in a grin. "Folks hereabouts don't cotton to me none."

His faded old shirt was thickly spattered with cattle dip. Everything about Lanky was slouchy.

But there was a gleam of sly humor in his pale-blue eyes as his knobby knuckles closed about the whisky glass.

"I jist aim to talk to an hombre here an' there. Do some electioneerin'," he said.

"Yeah? Who for?"

"Frank Meecham."

Lanky Lafe's words hadn't been loud, but everybody for ten feet around swung about to stare at him. Then a hard-faced hombre cut loose with a roaring guffaw:

"Frank Meecham! Haw-haw-haw! Thet's shore good, comin' from you. Bust my buttons, it shore is!"

"Huh? What's wrong with him?" the stringy young jasper demanded.

"Why, you fool shitepoke," the fellow growled, "he's done his dernedest, the last four terms of court, to slap you behind the bars." Meecham was district attorney. "Even now, in a few days, you're up fer cattle stealin'."

Lanky's grin was sheepish. "Shucks!" he said. "What o' thet? He ain't never proved it yit. Anyways, I shore feel safe any time he gits up to talk to a jury."

Lanky lifted his whisky glass. Men turned away, some in disgust, several with growls, and a few with quiet chuckles.

Lanky ran a two-bit spread, on a meager little homestead high up in the Buckhorns. Constantly suspected of rustling, he was just as regularly hauled into court by the stiff-backed, fierce-eyed Meecham.

And just as regularly, he went free. Meecham lashed and probed and tore into him with the ferocity of a tiger.

But somehow the evidence always slipped. Lanky, with his tallow hair, gangling frame, and buck-toothed grin, might not look so very smart, but on the witness stand, he was no fool.

Meecham was good, plenty good; but folks said that in his eagerness to send Lanky up, he was letting his judgment be badly warped. Flimsy evidence had proved worse than none at all. It simply let Lanky's lawyer, with good effect, raise the cry of persecution.

Anyway, as he stood at the bar, the young homesteader wasn't worried. He really meant to vote for Meecham.

"He ain't done me no hurt, far's I kin see," he said, with a grin, "except to my reputation. And that don't bother us none, does it,

Corb?" he drawled at the hard-faced jasper who had shown such surprise when the lanky youth remarked that he was electioneering.

Corb Elston answered with a growl: "Not if it's a two-bit one."

Lanky chuckled. "Kind o' got him there." Elston had turned and shouldered away. "That's for callin' me a shitepoke. I bet *he* don't vote for Meecham." He lifted his glass. "Well, ol' hoss, here's mud in yore eye," he remarked to the bartender.

Lanky tossed the liquor between his lips. "Ooogh-gow-w-w! Wow-ee!" he sputtered, spitting it forth upon the floor. Great tears were starting from his eyes. "That would tear the quills off a porcupine. I feel like"—he choked and gasped—"I'd done swallowed one already!"

"Why," said the barkeep, "you wanted it raw."

"But not that raw." The stringy youth blinked. "I shore overcalled my hand. If that's the kind o' stuff you serve, give me a beer, and make it light. My throat ain't as tough as my conscience."

But he didn't even drink the beer. He was toying with it when the batwing doors swung open.

Lanky straightened, then slouched again. Piercing black eyes sweeping the room, Frank Meecham was coming forward.

The district attorney's step was springy. Those quick eyes seemed to miss nothing. They were the outstanding feature in a tight-lipped face just a fraction too clean-cut to have been called rugged.

Still in his early thirties, Meecham was dressed in civilian attire, the only man within the place without a six-gun showing.

But a snug bulge beneath an armpit suggested a shoulder holster. It paid all officers, even a D. A., to go heeled in High Pine County.

No one had ever cleaned it up. But Frank Meecham, every one said, was making a good stab at it.

He stopped at sight of Lanky. For a moment, their eyes clashed. The attorney's back had stiffened. Call Lanky Larkin small fry if you will, but every man within the place seemed to sense feud tension.

Then Meecham nodded curtly as he passed by. He spoke, as if to save his face: "How do you do, Larkin?"

"Howdy, Frank." The other grinned. "Just goin' out to vote for you. I shore hope you're elected. Well, see you in court—but not in jail."

II.

Frank Meecham was elected. Lanky lounged about town getting the returns until the matter was settled beyond all doubt. Then he rode home, plainly satisfied.

For the next few days, he worked about his place. But at night, he was sometimes absent.

A faint moon broke through dappled clouds as he rode now through a high, rough pass, a cow and calf before him. Only the cow was branded.

Lanky's long wrist lazily twirled the end of a rope. Dead Hoss Thief Pass climbed on and on through wild, gorge-cut country.

As usual, Lanky chuckled. The brand on the cow was F Bar M. Occasionally, though, he shot a sharp glance to the rear.

But keen ears rather than eyes helped a man best at a time like this. Suddenly the slouchy youth all but straightened in the saddle.

"By golly! Somebody comin'!"

The tiny roll of a stone had sounded.

Now other small noises slipped to his ears, all from the same direction.

They came from the left, where Lanky knew a narrow gorge dropped into the main canyon. Over there, all still lay dark, but here moonlight outlined him faintly.

He whirled into action. He hurriedly threw cow and calf into thick, low bushes.

"Stay there, dern you!" he grunted.

The brush wasn't high enough to hide his horse's head. Hand upon his six-gun, the stringy young nester had almost reached the shadow of scrub pines off across the open, when a sudden shaft of brilliance from the widening moon splashed the scene with silver.

He saw three men on horses. He saw three cows. And he saw three hands leap instantly to weapons.

Lanky grinned. "Howdy, men. You shore do act plenty sudden."

"Pshaw!" said one. "Jist Lanky Lafe. It's all right."

Lanky peered from under the brim of his battered hat at the hard-faced speaker.

"Well, if it ain't Corb!" he said. "Corb Elston! Out gittin' a whiff of good night air. Good for a man. And his pocketbook, too, if he uses his head, I reckon."

"That so?"

"But you boys ain't very efficient," Lanky went on, with his bucktoothed grin. His glance had swept the cattle, all branded Rafter H—an outfit with which none of the men had the slightest connection. "Jist three cows. A cow to a man. I'd done thought better of you."

Elston growled. "This wasn't planned. Murt, hyar, jist happened on 'em. Since we was comin' up through the pass anyway——"

"The old thieves' pass." Lanky chuckled.

"Look a here, bird!" the third

jasper snapped—an hombre known as "Pecos." "Are yuh tryin' to get funny?"

"Why, no," Lanky said in some surprise. "Jist aimin' to be helpful. Seem' that this was a pick-up job, I thought mebbe you hadn't hit on a good place to take 'em vit. I reckon you fellas know me. Now I shore know the best derved spot to——"

"You shore ought to," Murt Rothery grunted, with a laugh. A heavy-built, thick-muscled hombre, Rothery shifted his glance to Elston. "What say, Corb? Shall we take him up? If it'll save time? He's slapped on many a hot iron in these hills."

"Why, I never stole a cow in all my life!" Lanky cried in indignation.

But scarcely had the words dropped from him when from out of the near-by thicket there came wandering into view the cow and calf he'd thrown in there barely two minutes earlier.

Derisive hoots already breaking from the toughs changed into roars and chuckles. They'd seen the brand upon the cow. Even Pecos Gery—tall, thin-eyed, and none too friendly—had to smile.

"F Bar M! Frank Meecham's iron!" Elston howled. The district attorney owned a fair-sized spread far down in the hills. "Lanky, you slippery son of a gun, you've shore got yore nerve with you!"

"Well, I'll be derved!" said Lanky. He scratched his tallow-colored hair. "Now, fellas, you jist couldn't rightly call that stealin'. That there cow jist seemed to want to come this way. All I done was ride behind. Anyway," he growled, "give a jasper name enough, and he may live up to it."

Elston laughed.

The look of sheepish confusion

was gone from the youth. "Come on!" he snapped. "There'll be room enough for all, till it's safe to brand the stuff and ease 'em from the country."

Hardly an hour later, Lanky Lafe sat his horse in a tiny basin. Sheer rim rock all but hid the moon, the men and cattle with him. The winding course into the place had led through a maze of crisscross draws and up across trailless ridges.

"Well," he said, "how you like it?"

They grunted in approval. Spring-fed water flowed at their feet through the secret pocket. Grass grew thick and rich. Behind them, a narrow section of stout brush fence masked the opening.

"Made that myself," Lanky declared. "And the brandin' corral off there a ways." There was pride in the nester's voice. "A handier place I never see. Took me a time to find her, though. Ain't she jist about perfect?"

"Yeah. Jist about," Elston growled. Throughout, he'd seemed the leader. "Thet is, fer a little jag of stuff like we got to-night. Fine fer a measly, two-bit job. But not big enough fer much else, Lanky."

"Oh," exclaimed Lanky in some surprise, "you ain't got need for a bigger, have you?"

The men looked at one another. "Not to-night, anyhow," Pecos Gery growled.

Elston, though, said: "Wait a minute. Lanky's kind o' got his feet wet with us. There's no use bein' skittish. Lanky, suppose you did know a place—about like this—but big enough to hold half a herd. Would you be interested in helpin' fill it?"

"Whew-w!" said Lanky. "Half

a herd! I ain't never tried nothin' as big as that. It—it ain't exactly in my line, Corb. Shucks, though, I reckon a feller kin grow at this game. I do know of a right big place. Dandy, too. How—how much would I make out of it?"

"Plenty," the other said shortly.

"Cash or cattle?" The stringy youth's face showed real interest now. Bait was dangling before him.

"You can take yore pick," Elston growled. "Well, you want to go in with us?"

Lanky considered a moment, then drew a deep breath.

"It better be cash," he blurted. "You all know how Frank Meecham is. If I got me many more critters than I've got now—zowie! What he wouldn't do! Say, suppose we raid Meecham's?"

The others smiled. Murt Rothery's thick lips grunted:

"Yuh and the D. A. settle it, kid. We ain't mixin' up in yore battles. This hyar job's already planned in another direction. Yuh know the old——"

"Tell him later," Pecos snapped.

Elston nodded. "Yeah, that's better."

"Suits me," Lanky grunted, without the slightest resentment.

So when they parted, Lanky had no slightest idea where the raid was slated to take him. All that he knew was that it was a big affair—grown bigger on his assurance that he knew ideal spots to hold any number of cattle. Elston's only instructions were:

"Meet us Saturday night, just at dark, down in Grapevine Canyon. Yuh kin be on time, I reckon."

"Shore," said Lanky. "Lessn that trial of mine don't hold me up. Derved thing's set fer Friday. But

ain't none of 'em ever took more'n a day of my time yit."

III.

The trial went off as usual. Lanky really enjoyed himself. The jury wasn't out twenty minutes.

"Meecham, you're gittin' good," he chuckled as he passed the district attorney on the way out. "Last time they didn't even leave the box 'fore findin' me not guilty. Jist keep it up, Frank—keep it up. First thing you know, folks'll be sayin' that you're really gainin'."

Meecham's eyes snapped. "I've got just one thing to say to you, Larkin. One of these days, there'll be a slip."

"Think so?" Lanky grinned, and sauntered on.

Meecham followed him with his eyes; then, his back stiff, he strode through the crowd and all but slammed the door of his office.

Nevertheless, the gangling young nester was mounted on his fastest horse when he joined the cattle raiders. Instead of three men, he found eight—all heavily armed, hard-eyed customers. Some he knew; some he didn't.

"Here, Corb, this ain't right," he growled. "Splittin' loot up nine ways won't bring nobody nothin'. What was the matter with jist us four? We don't need no army."

"Never can tell," Elston retorted shortly. "Anyway, these boys are in most everything I do. There'll be plenty to go around. This ain't no two-bit gamble. Might not even stop with the herd. You'll see, if you stick to us."

They headed south, silent. The raid came off neatly. Five hundred cattle from the Bench Y were soon in the hands of the rustlers. Lanky's

bucktoothed grin was like a half moon as his eyes went over the herd streaming out of the darkened pasture.

"Small fry, huh? I reckon not! If Meecham could only see me now!"

"Lead out," said Elston, beside him.

Lanky led. From remarks the men had dropped, he saw they knew the mountains well—Lost Injun Canyon, Wild Turkey Springs, the Upper Box, even the Red Gorge Meadows. Good hiding places all, but becoming known to some extent. But not a man in the gang had ever seen the place to which he led them.

Rocky portals in the midnight moon. A winding throat, rock-studded. Then a sudden turn into thick brush—a wide, low cave mouth before them. Moisture dripped from its sides. From within came the sound of water.

"A rustlers' paradise," Lanky chuckled. "An underground river comes up in there for a ways. Critters'll be jist as safe as back home on the Bench Y. Git 'em in! Haze 'em! Haze 'em!"

"But what about grass?" Elston growled. "They'll have to have feed. I've got connections, o' course, but I can't turn a herd for sale in a minute."

"Jist leave that to me." Lanky grinned. "I reckon I know these mountains."

The head of the herd was started in. Others, whooped on, followed. There were between four and five hundred in the haul.

But when all but the last hundred had been hustled within the entrance, those inside began to jam and mill. Lashing ropes and riders' shouts couldn't force them farther.

"What's the matter in there?" Elston snarled.

Pecos Gery spurred his horse out through the close-packed tangle.

"Matter!" he rasped. "There's plenty! This here cave won't hold 'em all." He glared at Lanky. "This long nitwit has balled things up! We'd 'a' done better without him."

"Yeah? How?" the nester drawled. "Trouble with you birds is, you cain't adapt yoreselves real quick to situations. I've knowed ever since we took the whole herd instead o' half, that this cave wasn't big enough. You don't see me a-frettin'."

"Yeah, but——"

"Four hundred are in there now," Lanky declared. "Won't be any trouble to hold 'em. The rest of us can drive these other critters to a place I know not much more'n four hours from here."

"That won't do," Corb Elston snapped. "We can't afford to separate. We've got another job on."

"Huh? To-night? Better let it ride," said Lanky.

"It can't wait," Elston growled. "It's a long ways from here to Point of Rocks. But there's where you're goin'!" The man's face was suddenly hard. "Now thet you're in this thing, you're in to yore neck. Who do you think we are—rustlers only?"

Lanky gaped. He breathed through his mouth. "Oh," he said. "Oh, that's what you mean. I ain't goin' on yore derned train holdup."

It was time now for the others to gap. Elston's face was a picture—blank amazement, followed by a surge of whiplike rage. The man whirled on the others.

"A leak!" he snarled. "Who let that out?"

"Why," said Lanky, "don't make no difference.-- You was agoin' to tell me, anyhow."

"The heck it don't!" Corb Elston's eyes were a glittering blaze as they swept his men in the moonlight. "A loose mouth has spoiled many a job. Come on!" he rasped. "Who told him?"

His hand was on his six-gun now. The man, in his sudden anger, stood out as a harsh, fierce leader. Every ruffian there made denial, though. Some muttered, faces sullen.

Elston whipped back to Lanky. "All right, you. Spit it out!" he rapped.

"No, siree bob!" Lanky shook his tallowy head. 'I ain't stirrin' up no trouble. Wasn't nothin' much, anyhow. Shucks! I didn't even know 'twas Point o' Rocks. Mebbe—mebbe it wasn't nobody here a-tall. I jist git around. I hear things."

"It was one of this gang!" Elston snarled. He spurred his horse close to Lanky. "But he won't be with us long. Now, homesteader, if yuh know what's good for yuh——"

"Dang!" said Lanky. "Yore breath is bad."

With a lift of a big red hand, he shoved the man's jutting chin away from his face. A furious oath ripped from Elston.

The fellow's gun jumped forth, came whamming down.

Lanky's other hand caught it.

"Gosh, Corb, you got a temper!"

The lanky nester's big bony knuckles showed white, though, with tension. His grip was tremendous. Now, with a twist, he had the gun. He backed his horse.

"Pecos," he drawled, "I wouldn't try to shoot. You ain't got much gumption. Here, Corb, I reckon you'll want yore gun. Now git on with yore holdup."

Lanky Lafe passed over the weapon. For once, the nester's face was firm.

"Corb, I ain't agoin'," he said.

"And I ain't spillin' nothin'. You don't want me in yore gang. I jist ain't that kind o' timber, I guess. Cattle, though—that's different."

He grinned. And suddenly he was giving orders: "Here, you men, block the mouth o' that cave. Them tilted rocks—that's what they're for. Dang it, heave! You're strong as me. There—four hundred head in, safe as you please! I'll take keer o' the others. Pull out, hombres! Here's mud in yore eye—if I had a drink. Every critter'll be a-waitin'."

That was a darned slick stunt of theirs, Lanky opined—rustling a herd and stickin' up a train, the Mountain Express, frequently carrying gold—all upon the selfsame night. Sheriff couldn't chase cattle and bandits, too. Point o' Rocks, on a steep grade, was a wild spot and lonely.

Elston still glared at him. "See that you don't lose a cow!" the hombre snapped. He swung his horse. "Come on, men!" They drummed away. "Me 'n' Lanky'll settle this later."

The slouchy nester watched them disappear, angling toward the foothills. He looked at the cattle still outside.

"Fella talks like a prophet," Lanky growled. He took down his rope, rode into the bunch. "Hi-yi! Git along, little dogies!"

IV.

The great wheels and drivers of the Mountain Express, Ogden, Utah, to Denver, pounded the rails with a humming roar. The headlight's white glare sliced the night in a sweeping arc as another steep curve was dropped behind. The train thundered through a rocky cut, the engine just beginning to labor.

Point o' Rocks lay three miles

ahead. Back in the last of the day coaches, two men were getting ready. Another crouched in the express-car blinds. They had boarded the train at the last stop. The headlight's clear brilliance, stabbing on, swept over a mountain siding. A mere box-car station, no longer used, the gaunt lines of a stockyard beside it.

Suddenly, with a startled oath, the engineer grabbed for the air brake. Out of nowhere, a great black mass had broken in a surge before him.

Wheels ground and screamed. Shots tore the air. Sparks flew from the rails and brake shoes. The train stopped with a clashing jar throughout its length that hurled half of the passengers from their seats.

The man on the blinds nearly lost his hold. An oath ripped from Pecos Gery.

"Dang! I didn't notice we'd passed Sellers Station!"

Then Pecos was scrambling from the blinds and up over the engine's tender. His job was to take engineer and fireman from behind. A gun in each hand, his face masked now, he slid down over the coal.

"Lift 'em!" he snarled at the trainmen.

Their hands went up in the coal-dust haze that filled the cab, both faces gray-white behind their grime. Outside, more shots had sounded. Cinders still spurted from the thud of a horse's hoofs alongside the locomotive.

"Lift 'em yoreself, Friend Pecos!"

Pecos whirled. His guns whipped up. The bandit shot on the instant.

But a long arm extending past the horse's ears just within the cab's narrow entrance gave quicker impulse to a trigger. Pecos went back. He went down.

The gangling rider barked at the

trainmen: "Hit him on the head, if he ain't already out! Then grab his guns, and follow me. Never mind them snorty cattle."

For a hundred head of Bench Y stuff, a confused mass, milling, jamming, filled the railroad right of way. Some crowded hard against the stockyards fence, while others still poured from the narrow gulch down which Lanky Lafe had furiously rushed them more than a mile in a desperate effort to beat the train when its headlight cut the distance.

Now he pounded on for the day coaches. Off his horse, the stringy young nester bounded up the steps of the last. Inside, passengers stood with their hands in the air, before the guns of a crouched bandit.

The man, nearly at the door, had a thick back to Lanky.

"Jist take it easy, birds!" the fellow growled. "We ain't robbin' no passengers, if the express car don't disappoint us. That's my pards yuh hear tearin' around outside. This thing won't take a minute."

"A minute's right," drawled Lanky.

Muscles gathered, he leaped as the jasper spun. A gun crashed down. Lafe Larkin chuckled:

"Another jigger's shore proved a prophet."

His long legs stepped over the senseless form. Then——

Crash-h! Bam! In the car ahead, shots ripped and roared.

Lanky went bounding down the aisle. He reached the vestibule as men surged out through its other door. Lanky yelled:

"Don't shoot! Did you git him?"

A figure lay sprawled before him.

"I shore did!" a ranchman snarled.

"He jerked his head around at a sudden noise in the car behind. I let the danged snake have it."

Lanky grinned. "That was me,

I guess, makin' that noise. I jist tunked a walloper on the head. Say, ain't there no more of 'em?"

"Reckon not," another man growled. "But what's happenin' outside? It's quiet."

"Pshaw!" said Lanky. "Thet's over. But this night's work shore ain't, not by a heap."

Engineer and fireman were in the coach now; likewise conductor and brakeman. More passengers were crowding up, among them a raw-boned rancher. Lanky's grin widened as he saw the man.

"Burt Yelton," he said, "you best git out there and clear the track. Yore cattle has done blocked it."

"Why—huh—what d'you mean?" exclaimed the astonished owner of the Bench Y. "My critters? How'd they get there?"

"Oh," said Lanky, "I brung 'em."

Ten minutes later, the train roared on—straight into waiting bandits. Boulders and ties heaped upon the track at Point o' Rock brought a grind of brakes, then a rush of men swarming for train steps and engine.

One leaped into the cab, to go down as a lump of coal took him behind the ear. He fell over the bound form of Pecos.

The door of the express car was tightly locked. Gun butts and savage fists pounded and crashed upon it.

"Open up in there!" Corb Elston roared. "We've got axes. And dynamite, too! You're carryin' thirty thousand. Pitch it out before we cut loose, or there won't be a man left to tell it!"

"Now, Corb, couldn't you be wrong?" A hand tapped him on the shoulder. "I rode the cowketcher so's to git here quick. I thought you was a better prophet."

"Huh?" Elston turned, to face a gun. With a roar, he grabbed it.

So quick was he, the shot rang high. The gang leader fired with his other hand. But Lanky's gangling knee, with a sound like a drum, had boomed into the hombre's stomach.

They went to the cinders, a battling mass. Men milled, shots ripped, in confusion. Elston lost his gun, grabbed for an ax.

The bandit tore free, with vicious strength. The blade swung, fierce, in the moonlight.

And so also did Lanky. Up on his feet with the ruffian, his balled right fist whistled even faster than the blade. It crashed to the jaw.

Elston went back through the air as if the train itself had hit him.

"Now, dern you!" said Lanky. "Git tough with a fella what's gone on cattle raids with you! Thet ain't no way to act a-tall. I'm goin' to tell Frank Meecham."

Trainmen and passengers had the rest of the gang, in a swoop that had been perfect. Lanky, with his slouchy grin, saw them bound, then turned to the conductor.

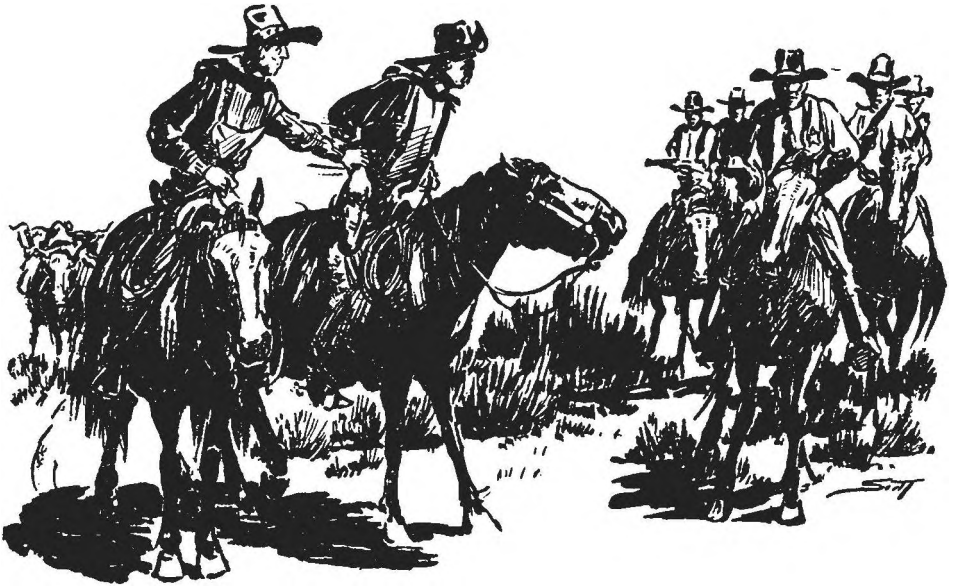
"All right. Let's get goin'," he said. "I've got to send a wire from the next town."

The wire read:

GOT EM FRANK STOP HOG TIED
AND READY FOR THE PEN STOP
YOURS IN CAHOOTS AS ALWAYS

Lanky grinned to himself as, on a borrowed horse, he rode homeward through the dawn. It had taken some mighty good acting and a heap of time as undercover man for Meecham, to land those crooks where they belonged. Once again, Lanky chuckled.

"Shore smashed that gang to heck and gone," he said. "And likewise my reputation."



Rustlers Of Redfork

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Maverick Feud," etc.

CHAPTER I.

DOUBLE TROUBLE.

THE smashing report of rifles and the hiss of bullets that came dangerously close to their heads were about the last things that "Buck" Foster and Joe Scott expected to hear. Buck and Joe were so dumfounded, in fact, that they merely sat there in their saddles, gaping foolishly at the three spirals of white smoke that rose from a clump of mesquite about eighty yards away.

The small herd of feeder cattle which Buck and Joe were driving began milling uneasily, and only

then did the two punchers come out of their daze. They moved barely in time, for once more those three hidden rifles roared, and three slugs came snarling through the warm desert air.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster bawled lustily. "Joe, them skunks am tryin' ter drill us!"

"I don' see how yuh ever figured that out!" Joe Scott yelled back sarcastically.

Joe Scott's freckled face was split in a hard grin, despite the fact that a rifle bullet had come close enough to knock his old gray Stetson from his red head. Buck Foster was grinning, too, showing snaggly teeth

as the wind whipped his grizzled gray mustache back flat against his leathery cheeks.

Nothing ever suited Buck and Joe any better than a good scrap. Hot-headed and harum-scarum at best, they plunged into the fight now without bothering to wonder why they had been fired on.

Joe, getting his gun clear first, headed straight for the three hidden riflemen. His red hair whipped in the wind, and his keen blue eyes were puckered as he watched his slugs rip twigs from the bushes where the riflemen were hidden. From that brush came a wild cry, and Joe's voice lifted in a shrill yell of victory.

Buck was ranging almost alongside Joe now, six-gun spitting and bouncing in his right hand. Side by side, the two charged, slamming bullets into the mesquite clump.

Buck's bulging brown eyes gleamed fiercely beneath his shaggy brows when he caught a brief glimpse of a yellow shirt bobbing in the twigs.

"Got 'im!" Buck whooped. "That's one danged bushwhacker what won't— Ow-e-e-e!"

Buck's voice died in a wowl of pain, for a bullet had raked along the back of his gun hand, bringing a smear of crimson to the leathery skin. Buck almost dropped his hot .45. But it would take more than a skinned hand to throw that old rooster out of a scrap.

He gripped his gun firmly and was trying to find a target when his horse crashed into the brush where the riflemen had been hidden. Joe Scott was at Buck's side, and they reined in to glance right and left, guns ready to flame at the first hombre they sighted.

But the thicket was empty of life. Buck and Joe were about to

spur on, when they heard the distant churning of hoofs, and looked up just in time to see three riders sky-lined as they crossed a ridge ahead.

Yelling wildly, Joe slammed the spurs to his gray bronc and headed straight for the ridge. Buck rammed the hooks to his black, and once more the rannicky pair charged the enemy with ear-splitting whoops.

But there were no bullets coming at them this time, and their whooping died to growls of disappointment when they topped the ridge and saw a maze of hills and draws stretching away before them. They sat there for some time, eagerly searching the broken country with keen eyes. But nowhere could they sight the three men who had vanished somewhere into the bad lands.

"By heifers, carrot-top, quit gawkin' like a plumb greenhorn an' git busy trailin' them jaspers!" Buck finally broke the strained silence. "Yuh am allus claimin' ter know so much about readin' sign, now's yore chance ter prove yuh kin do it."

Joe Scott was an expert at sign reading. A single glance at the sun-blistered soil told him that following the sign left by those three bushwhackers would be no great task. But Joe, being slightly more level-headed than his grizzled pard, was remembering those feeders they had been driving.

Young Billy West, half owner and boss of the big Circle J spread, had started Buck and Joe to Redfork that morning with the feeders. Billy had bought the cattle from old Will Sumpter, and meant to ship them from this Southwestern country up onto the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains in Montana, where the Circle J spread was located.

Billy West came down into the Southwest each winter on a combined business and pleasure trip. With Billy came Sing Lo—a little Chinaman who was cook and general handy man for the outfit—and the two cowboys, Buck Foster and Joe Scott.

"Will Sumpter an' Billy is expectin' us to be in Redfork afore night with them feeders," Joe Scott said, after a long pause. "I reckon we've got to let them bushwhackin' snakes go."

"What?" Buck yapped. "By hokies, Joe Scott, I allus knowed yuh was stallin' about bein' able ter read sign. Or am yuh scared ter foller them fellers?"

Joe's face flushed to the color of his hair, and there were angry lights in his eyes.

"Listen, yuh stove-up sheep nurse!" the redhead yelled. "I ain't scairt o' no passell o' bushwhackers, yuh hear? But Billy told us to git them dogies to town without no mix-up, an' we're doin' it."

Billy West had given rather pointed orders, for Buck and Joe had a habit of ramming into trouble where few other men could have found it. Besides, Joe knew, those feeders would scatter soon, and rounding them up again would be a plenty tough job in this brush country.

That Joe's reasoning was sound was proved when he spurred back toward the feeders. The critters had already scattered, and for the better part of three hours the two Montana waddies rode like mad, gathering the herd that had scattered into the brush.

Weary, sweat-soaked, and badly scratched from cat's-claw and mesquite, the two punchers had barely started the sullen critters down the trail toward Redfork when Joe, rid-

ing point at the moment, spotted a band of horsemen coming toward them at a fast clip.

"Hi, Buck!" Joe sang out, pointing down the trail. "Riders comin' yonder. I reckon Billy has finished his deal with Sumpter an' is bringin' us some help."

"We don't need no help!" Buck called angrily from the drag. "Do Billy think yores trully, Buck Foster, can't handle a measly herd like this?"

Joe Scott made no reply, for he was suddenly tense, eyes glued to those swiftly approaching horsemen. There were eight of the men, Joe saw, and he wondered about that. Joe also wondered why the men rode with unsheathed guns, and why they were spreading out as if they expected trouble.

"On yore toes, Buck!" Joe yipped suddenly. "Them jaspers comin' yonder are huntin' trouble."

Buck came spurring up to where Joe had halted. The eight riders swept still closer, and the two saddle pards saw that they were being covered by rifles and six-guns.

With a snarl Buck Foster went for his own smoke-pole. But Joe Scott grabbed his elbow.

"Steady, yuh ol' coot!" Joe snapped. "That hombre in the lead is a officer. See that star on his vest?"

There was no chance for Buck to reply, for the eight men were pinching in, guns leveled threateningly. The man in the lead was a short, heavily built hombre, with grim gray eyes and a blunt, stubborn chin. On his vest was a big five-pointed star with "Sheriff" lettered in black across its face.

"Reach, yuh two!" the thickset officer bawled harshly. "Lift yore paws, rustlers, or yuh'll git blowed in two!"

"Waugh!" Buck Foster roared. "Star-toter or no star-toter, yuh cross betwixt a frog an' a skunk, yuh can't call me no rustler!"

As Buck spoke he was digging hard for his gun, having wrenched his elbow free from Joe Scott's grip.

CHAPTER II.

BRADDOCK TAKES A HAND.

JOE SCOTT ignored the guns that were threatening him, leaned far out of the saddle, and clamped both hands over Buck's gun wrist just as the ranty veteran's weapon cleared leather.

Joe twisted sharply, grinned when Buck howled in pain, and began talking in a low, harsh tone. "Steady, bonehead! Want to git us both blowed to smithereens? Besides, yuh ol' goat, we can't go smokin' a officer, can we?"

Buck blinked rapidly, evidently realizing for the first time just what it meant to start slinging lead at these particular men. He glowered at Joe Scott, then holstered his gun.

"By heifers, star-toter, yuh nigh got yore gizzard shot out thet time," Buck snorted through his bent nose. "But it would 'a' served yuh right fer callin' us rustlers."

The sheriff was tensely alert, the six-gun in his blocky right hand never having wavered from target on Buck Foster's lanky middle.

"If yore pard hadn't stopped yuh, feller, I would have—with a slug!" the officer grunted thickly. "Lift 'em, yuh two, an' no more monkey-shines."

"Shore." Joe Scott grinned cheerfully, although he did not feel so cheerful at the moment. "We'll lift 'em, sheriff, if yuh say so. But what's the idea, huh?"

"That's what I'd like to know," a lanky, hard-jawed towhead who

wore a deputy's badge rapped out. "How in blazes did yuh two figure on gittin' away with Will Sumpter's cattle in broad daylight?"

"Never mind the fancy questions, Blaze Parker!" a thin, evil-looking hombre with a badly pock-marked face snarled from a lipless mouth. "Yuh an' Sheriff Snell ain't paid to ask fool questions. Arrest these two——"

"Yo're paid to ramrod Parson Braddock's Triangle B, Jack Leland, not tell me an' my deputy how to run things," Sheriff Snell cut in.

The pock-marked man stiffened, and for an instant it seemed that his sinewy hands would flash to the butts of the twin .45s he had holstered a moment earlier. His evil black eyes blazed hotly through slitted lids, but he evidently decided that bucking the sheriff would gain him nothing.

Shrugging, he laughed harshly, reached for the makin's, and began twisting a smoke into shape.

"Go ahead, lawman, run yore show!" he sneered over the crimped paper. "But don't let yore head swell too much. It wasn't yuh or yore depity that spotted these two rustlers operatin' in broad daylight."

The sheriff and the deputy flushed, but neither answered Leland's insulting remarks. The two officers turned, and began studying Buck and Joe narrowly.

"Strangers, ain't yuh?" the sheriff asked.

Joe Scott nodded, then told swiftly who he and Buck were and why they happened to be driving the feeders.

"Yuh've made a mistake, that's all, sheriff," Joe finished quietly. "We can ride on into town, locate Billy West and Will Sumpter easy enough."

The sheriff and his deputy looked uneasily at each other, then began glancing at Jack Leland, who was laughing grittily. The pock-marked man was evidently enjoying himself.

"What's funny about this, Leland?" the sheriff demanded bluntly. "Me, I think these boys are all right. Looks like a certain bunch tried to make monkeys out o' me an' Blaze, here."

"Blaze" Parker, the lanky young deputy, nodded his yellow head, dark eyes smoldering as he glanced at Jack Leland.

"I thought yuh two would be swallerin' that line!" Leland sneered at them. "Scott—if that's his name—claims him an' this ol' gent started from Sumpter's WS spread early this mornin'."

"Well, what o' that?" the tow-headed deputy growled.

"Oh, nothin'," Jack Leland observed sarcastically. "Only they would 'a' been in Redfork by now, that's all."

"An' we would 'a' been, too, if three mangy buzzards hadn't tried bushwhackin' us!" Joe Scott snarled.

Joe told about the three riflemen jumping him, and was feeling sick inside before he finished. The sheriff and the deputy were scowling at him, plainly disbelieving what he said.

Joe tried hard to make his story sound convincing, but the sheriff shook his head, and the gun he held was once more rigid.

"Two men couldn't gather cattle that scattered like yuh claim these was," he stated firmly. "Leastwise, I don't believe they could. Looks like Leland is right. Yuh two are under arrest."

"Am thet so?" Buck Foster roared. "Johnny Law, yuh an' thet scar-faced mess o' buzzard bait am

huntin' trouble when yuh starts acusin' me an' Joe o' bein' rustlers."

Jack Leland had gone white, and from his lipless mouth came a whining snarl. He reached for his twin guns—reached with a speed that few men could claim.

But before Leland's guns could clear leather Deputy Blaze Parker was beside him, poking his ribs with the muzzle of a cocked Colt.

"Take it easy, Leland!" the deputy warned grimly. "I know yo're touchy about that face o' yores, but yuh better not let it git yuh into trouble."

Leland swore wildly, but let his half-drawn guns fall back into leather. Joe Scott saw that much, then turned to see Buck Foster in the act of leaping from his horse, knobby fists flying.

One of those fists caught the sheriff on the jaw, and the officer flew from the saddle. He landed heavily, with Buck Foster on top of him. The rest of the possemen, excepting Deputy Parker, were quitting their saddles to help the sheriff.

Unnoticed for the moment, Joe Scott slid to the ground, leaped forward, and yanked Buck off the sheriff just as the others charged up, guns ready to club the Circle J veteran's grizzled head.

"Hold it, Buck!" Joe pleaded. "Dang it, yo're only makin' things worse by actin' this way."

"Leave me go, yuh carrot-topped pest!" Buck howled, trying to yank his pinioned arms free. "I'll make thet star-toter take back what he called us."

But Joe had a firm grip, this time, and kept it. The sheriff got to his feet, glowering sullenly, nose dribbling crimson and one eye looking somewhat swollen.

"If I wa'n't a officer," he snarled savagely at Buck, "I'd whup yuh

until yuh looked as mangy as that ol' moth-ate vest yo're wearin'."

"Try it, skunk!" Buck roared. "Make this sorrel-topped sage pup turn me loose, an' I'll mop up the dirt with yore fat carcass."

The sheriff turned away, purple with anger. "Mort Evans," he called. "Yuh an' Cliff Burt stay hyar with these stolen cattle an' see that they don't scatter. Rest of us will take these two thieves to town an' slam 'em in jail."

Buck Foster tried to start more trouble when he and Joe were disarmed, but the redhead made it a point to see that Buck behaved himself. Mounted once more, they headed for Redfork, flanked on all sides by men who held ready guns.

Joe tried to get the sheriff into a conversation, but the officer only grunted at him and refused to talk.

"All right, fella!" Joe grinned. "Yuh'll feel about like two bits when yuh find out that what I've told yuh is true."

"Shut yore face!" the sheriff advised, and refused to say more until they were at the edge of Redfork.

"Jack, yuh an' the others that rode out with Blaze an' me go on ahead now," the sheriff called. "No sense in makin' a parade out o' this. Blaze an' me kin——"

"Yip-e-e-e!" Joe Scott whooped suddenly. "Hi, Billy! Yuh an' Mr. Sumpter come over here."

From one of the warped wooden sidewalks stepped two men. One of them was old Will Sumpter, a small, elderly hombre, bent and white-haired.

The other man was Billy West, a medium-sized and blocky-shouldered young ranny who turned questioning gray eyes on Buck and Joe as he strode up.

Billy's wide lips settled into a grim line as he studied the men with

his two top hands. "So yuh two have hubbed trouble ag'in, huh?" he asked. "What is it this time?"

Sheriff Blake Snell was looking decidedly sick. His face had paled, and his bulging eyes were darting first to Billy West then to old Will Sumpter.

"Yuh—yuh know these fellers?" he gulped at Billy. "Yuh—yo're Billy West, their boss?"

"Shore, I'm Billy West." The Circle J boss nodded, frowning. "These two—Buck Foster an' Joe Scott—are a couple o' my punchers. Why?"

"Will, did yuh—did yuh sell West some feeders?" the sheriff asked huskily, eying Sumpter almost pleadingly. "An' did Foster an' Scott start from yore place with them feeders this mornin'?"

"That's whatever, Blake!" Will Sumpter grinned broadly. "But don't look so danged put out about it. What's wrong?"

"There's plenty wrong!" Buck Foster roared. "This star-toter an' these skunks with him jumped Joe an' me, tried bushwhackin' us. But we——"

"Say, Foster, don't git sich notions as that," the sheriff horned in swiftly. "Me an' the others——"

"Joe an' me smoked the skunks when they jumped us," Buck continued loudly. "They run, then come up at us from the front, after we gathered the dogies, an' arrested us. They're crooks, Billy, the hull works."

The sheriff glanced over the swiftly gathering crowd, groaning miserably. He looked pleadingly at Billy West, and found the Circle J boss's eyes friendly enough.

"I—I'm sorry, West," the miserable sheriff said huskily. "Looks like I made a mess o' things, dang the luck! I thought——"

"No, yuh didn't make a mess o' things, sheriff!" came a loud voice that sounded authoritative. "Fact is, yuh've done a good job. Lock those two rustlers up, an' put Will Sumpter in the cell with them."

Through the crowd shouldered a tall, broad-shouldered man, who was dressed in somber black from Stetson to boots. He stopped, facing the sheriff, letting his well-kept, soft-looking hands rest easily above the pearl grips of the twin six-guns that were thonged to his thighs.

The stranger's harshly lined face was white with anger, and there were dangerous lights in his gold-flecked gray eyes as he glanced at old Will Sumpter. The sheriff started, eying the newcomer with uneasiness.

"What yuh drivin' at?" the officer clipped. "Parson Braddock, it was one o' yore men that——"

"Never mind the details now," Braddock growled, cutting in harshly. "Will Sumpter had no right to sell those cattle of his without my sanction, for I happen to have a mortgage on them."

"In that case"—the sheriff grinned in vast relief—"I'll lock up Foster an' Scott, since they had no business drivin' them dogies. An' it looks bad for Sumpter, too."

CHAPTER III.

TWO DEAD MEN.

THE sheriff would have ridden on then, but for the fact that Billy West had stepped forward and fastened strong fingers in the officer's mount's bit ring.

"Not so fast, sheriff," Bill said calmly. "I reckon somebody besides this loud-mouthed Braddock jigger has a few things to say."

Men moved as if a mess of live rattlers had suddenly been dumped

among them. "Parson" Braddock was not only the wealthiest and most powerful citizen in the county, but one of the fastest gun slingers as well.

Nobody had ever dared cross him in the slightest way—that is, if they hoped to live. But here was a cool-eyed young ranny who had spoken of Parson Braddock as if the Triangle B owner was some saloon bum.

Even the sheriff gaped foolishly, and wondered how long it would take Braddock's famous guns to clear leather. But the tension was broken by Will Sumpter instead of the crash of six-guns.

"I wouldn't go gittin' my bristles up, Braddock, if I was yuh," he snapped. "Yo're in the wrong this time, feller. I had all the right in the world to sell them cattle."

Parson Braddock had gone purple, then pasty white. His gold-flecked eyes were the eyes of a man who wanted to kill when he whirled to glower at Will Sumpter.

"So yuh sold cattle without tellin' me, huh?" he snarled. "Waal, yuh'll wish yuh hadn't. I can stop that sale, yuh fool! I hold a mortgage on eighty head o' WS stuff, which is danged nigh all yuh own."

"That's where I outfoxed yuh, feller," old Will Sumpter laughed grimly. "I mortgaged yuh eighty head, an' there's still more than that many on my range. So yuh've got no legal kick."

"Besides that, Braddock, nobody has to run an' ask yuh anything," Billy West told him calmly. "Yuh didn't have a hand in my men bein' shot at, then arrested, did yuh?"

Being put on the defensive was a new experience for Parson Braddock. Sheer surprise drove some of the killing rage from his mind. He blinked uncertainly at Billy, looking

as if he could scarcely believe his ears.

But there was something else creeping into those gold-flecked eyes—a frightened, uneasy something that told Billy West a lot.

Since he had stopped at Sumpter's WS spread the day before, Billy had heard of little except Parson Braddock and the evil power the fellow seemed to hold over the whole range. It had been Billy West's keen mind that had figured the way past any legal action Braddock might try to take against Will Sumpter for selling mortgaged cattle.

Billy had learned that Sumpter had mortgaged only eighty head, but actually had over twice that many critters on his range. Since Sumpter was more than anxious to sell some of his stuff, Billy had bought, showing him how Braddock could not object legally.

Those things flashed through Billy's mind now as he stood watching the Triangle B owner, and he suddenly grinned. The big bombshell had not been exploded yet, and Billy was suddenly aware that now was the time.

The Circle J boss knew from the uneasy expression in Braddock's evil eyes that he had hit the nail on the head when he asked him if he happened to know anything about what had happened to Buck and Joe.

"Tongue-tied, Braddock?" Billy drawled. "I asked yuh a question, hombre. Or would yuh sort o' hate to give an honest answer right out in meetin' like this?"

Parson Braddock flinched, trembling noticeably. "Yuh lippy young fool!" he snarled suddenly. "Close that mouth o' yores, afore I do it for yuh. Men don't buck me, younker, an' live to brag about it."

"Regular ring-tailed stem-winder,

ain't yuh?" Billy jeered. "Listen, Braddock! Yuh ain't really bad. Yuh just smell bad—like a skunk does."

Men were moving again after that, for it was plain that Parson Braddock meant to flash his guns. But Sheriff Blake Snell had got his wits together, and suddenly leveled a gun that seemed pointed at a spot halfway between Billy West and Parson Braddock.

"Hold it, yuh two!" the sheriff barked. "I'll wing the first man that tries to draw."

"Yuh would horn in jist when I'm ready to salt this smart Aleck," Braddock sneered, but his relief was evident.

"Suits me, sheriff." Billy shrugged. "Fact is, I don't think there would 'a' been any gun play."

"Yuh'll do well to git yoreself out o' this country, feller!" Parson Braddock snarled. "Ever cross my trail ag'in, an' I'll make yuh wish yuh'd stayed in Montana." He spun slightly aside, eyes blazing wrathfully at old Will Sumpter.

Parson Braddock drew himself up to his full height, that he might glower down upon the white-haired little cattleman who stood grinning crookedly at him.

"As for yuh, Sumpter, I'll show yuh whether I kin stop that sale or not," Braddock thundered. "My lawyer will danged quick put a stop to yuh sellin' them cattle. An' when that note o' yores falls due next month, don't expect me to renew—after this trick yuh tried to play."

"Don't want no renewal," old Sumpter chuckled.

Billy West was grinning now, for this was the bombshell he had been waiting to explode.

"Don't want no renewal, hey?" Parson Braddock sneered. "Waal,

that suits me. But what if them rustlers that've been operatin' lately was to run off them cattle o' yores?"

"In case I owed yuh anything," old Will Sumpter said calmly, "I couldn't pay if my cattle got run off. That'd suit yuh, fer it's jist what yuh had in mind when I borrowed that dinero."

"Yuh tryin' to make out yuh don't owe me?" Braddock laughed nastily. "Waal, there's a note over to the bank which says——"

"There was a note, yuh mean," Will Sumpter cut in smilingly. "But I jist paid it off, Braddock, with part o' the cash Billy West, hyar, paid me fer my cattle."

Parson Braddock looked as if he was strangling to death. Before he could find his voice, Billy West caught Will Sumpter by the arm, pulling him away.

But the little old rancher wanted a last word. He hung back, twisting to look over one shoulder at the purple-faced Triangle B owner.

"That fat skunk yuh've got denned up in that bank o' yores was uncertain about takin' the dinero," Sumpter called shrilly. "But I told him yuh was expectin' me to pay off. So he took the money an' marked the note paid in front o' witnesses."

Billy pulled the old fellow away then, knowing that if he let him goad Braddock too far there might be serious trouble.

"Hey, Billy, what about Joe an' me?" Buck Foster called uneasily. "This skunk of a star-toter claims we're under arrest."

"I reckon the sheriff has changed his mind by now," Billy answered. "An' I'm hopin' he'll ride back out to that herd o' feeders with us."

"Shore, West, glad to," the sheriff called heartily.

Billy nodded and piloted old Will

Sumpter out of the crowd. The old fellow seemed anxious to get away. So Billy left him and crossed the street to where his big, deep-chested mount stood at a hitch rack. As Billy approached, the chestnut swung its intelligent head, whinnying softly.

"All right, Danger," Billy said as he swung up into the saddle. "I reckon yuh crave a little exercise after loafin' all mornin'."

Billy turned the horse and rode down and across the street to where Sheriff Snell, Buck Foster, and Joe Scott were waiting.

"West, I don't know how yuh got by with sayin' the things to Braddock yuh did," the officer admitted frankly as they jogged down the street.

"Braddock jist about runs this county, doesn't he?" Billy asked.

The sheriff turned beet-red, swore under his breath, then promptly changed the subject. Nor could Billy maneuver the conversation back to Braddock as they jogged out across the open range.

But Billy was still trying to get information about Braddock when hoarse yells lifted from Buck and Joe, who were riding slightly ahead. Billy and the sheriff snapped to attention, startled by the sudden yells.

"The herd!" Buck Foster howled. "By heifers, Billy, them feeders am gone!"

"They shore are," Joe Scott seconded. "We left 'em right yonder, Billy, where that draw swells out into that little basin."

Since the riders were on slightly higher ground, it was easy enough for them to look down into the shallow basin.

There certainly were no cattle there, and the four riders spurred forward at a stiff clip. But they had barely reached the spot where

the herd had been left when they all four reined in with one accord.

There before them, lying face up in some low brush, were Mort Evans and Cliff Burt, the two men whom the sheriff had left to guard the cattle. One look at the sightless, staring eyes and crimson-soaked clothing of the two men was enough to tell Billy West and the others that they were stone dead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHERIFF SMELLS TROUBLE.

SHERIFF BLAKE SNELL dismounted as if he were very weary. Billy West saw that the officer's face was deathly pale and guessed just about how the sheriff was feeling.

"Mort an' Cliff was good boys—mighty good boys!" the officer spoke hoarsely. "It—it's my fault, West, that they're dead. I should 'a' listened to what Scott told me. If I had, I wouldn't 'a' left these——"

"Don't blame yoreself, sheriff!" Billy West put in quietly. "The thing for us to do is try to figure out who done this an' bring the skunk or skunks to justice."

Billy had judged the sheriff to be a stubborn fighter, and was banking on that now. He saw that he had not guessed wrong, for the grief was swiftly replaced on the sheriff's face and in his eyes by a look of smoldering anger.

The Circle J pards had dismounted, and were examining the two dead men. Joe Scott bent over them, nodding his head slowly.

"Never had a chance," he said grimly. "Their guns are still holstered, and the slugs that got 'em came from behind."

The sheriff swore in a choked whisper, while Joe Scott began slowly circling about, keen eyes rak-

ing the ground. After nearly half an hour of that he came stalking back, lean face set in grim lines.

Billy had asked the sheriff to wait, explaining that Joe, being an expert at sign reading, should be given the first opportunity at looking over the ground. The sheriff had fumed and fretted, plainly anxious to be doing something besides standing and watching Joe circle about with bowed head.

But the sheriff's wait was rewarded, for Joe Scott recited what had happened as if he had read it in a book.

"Three fellers sneaked in from that draw over yonder"—Joe pointed a freckled hand—"an' shot these two men from behind. Them three are the same that jumped Buck an' me."

"How do yuh know that?" the sheriff asked sharply. "How could yuh tell by lookin' at the ground, Scott?"

"Why," Joe answered, flushing, "the hosses that come in from that draw yonder are the same ones that them three jaspers who Buck an' me swapped lead with rode. I know their tracks."

"What else did yuh find out, Joe?" Billy asked.

"Them three murderin' snakes was friendly with the two men they killed," the redhead growled.

The sheriff looked actually startled. Buck Foster began yanking at his mustache ends and glaring as he usually did when Joe read sign.

"How do yuh know that, Joe?" Billy asked quickly.

Joe pointed toward a tall ridge. "Them three rode in first from over yonder, which means that these two men, stationed right about where they lay now, would 'a' seen 'em comin'. The three rode in close—

right up to Mort Evans an' Cliff Burt, I figure.

"Then," Joe went on after a short pause, "them three rode down the trail yonder, like they was headin' fer town. I can likely find where they quit the trail later an' got back into that draw yonder if yuh want me to, sheriff."

The sheriff needed no more convincing, however. He eyed Joe Scott silently for a long moment, with something like awe in his eyes.

"I've heard o' these sign-readin' wizards afore," he said at last, "but yo're the first o' the breed I ever met up with, Scott. Reckon we've got a chance o' findin' them three killers?"

"I think so," Joe replied. "They rounded up them feeders of ours after the shootin' an' shoved 'em fast toward that big ridge back yonder. If we overtake that herd, we'll have our killers."

"Then come on!" Buck Foster roared. "We shore can't do these two pore fellers any good by stayin' hyar."

"That's right." Billy nodded. "Best thing we can do is light out after them killers. They can't move the cattle fast, that's a cinch."

The four whirled together, and were all forking leather at once. But Joe Scott was permitted to take the lead, since the man hunt depended solely on his sign-reading ability. There was little chance of losing that broad trail left by the cattle, however, and Joe led the others at a hard clip.

They climbed out of the little basin, crossed the big ridge, and dropped into choppy, broken country where many thousands of cattle could have been hidden. Joe slowed down only once, however, and that was when they reached a spot where the cattle had been

driven along a low ridge that was practically bare stone.

Even on such a place there was ample sign, and it took Joe only a few minutes to find where the feeders had been shunted from the ridge into the head of a deep draw. He was about to lead the others into that draw when he flung up a hand in the well-known signal which means halt.

"Listen!" Joe snapped. "Cattle bawlin' over yonder. Hear?"

The other three did hear the distant bawling of tired cattle. Buck and the sheriff were for charging headlong, but Billy and Joe vetoed that plan quickly enough.

"The thing to do is make for those cattle an' hold to every bit o' cover we can find," Billy West explained. "Go chargin' in, an' those three will scoot for cover."

"Let 'em scoot!" Buck growled. "With yores truly, Buck Foster, after 'em, they won't scoot far."

"All right, Billy, yuh lead the way!" the sheriff called grimly. "I'm too danged mad to use my head."

"We'll stick together until we sight the herd, then spread out," Billy directed. "If those three try runnin', we'll have a better chance o' snaggin' 'em if we fan out."

But the four trailers were due for a sad disappointment. They sighted the bawling cattle half an hour later—and sat staring in amazement. Instead of the small herd of feeders they expected to see, they saw a vast herd rolling slowly along a flat-topped ridge just ahead of them.

"Braddock's outfit!" the sheriff cried hoarsely. "Dang the luck, West, that's Parson Braddock's men, movin' a bunch o' his Triangle B stuff down from the high hills back yonder!"

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck Foster cried. "I knowed Joe Scott couldn't read sign. He led us on a wild-goose chase, that's what!"

"If we'd stuck to Joe's sign-readin' we wouldn't be messed up here," Billy growled. "Come on, Joe. Got to pick up that trail again."

Joe led the way back to where he had stopped reading sign, and took up the task once more. But within a short time the sign he followed led him straight to that broad-topped ridge down which the Triangle B herd had already passed.

"Triangle B herd an' our feeders met up right hyar!" Joe growled. "Which means Braddock's men must 'a' seen the three jaspers that was doin' the drivin'."

"But did our feeders fall in with that herd?" Billy asked sharply.

Joe began riding circles, leaning far out of the saddle to study the dusty ground. After a few minutes he returned, and there was a hard gleam in his blue eyes.

"Our feeders either took wings an' flew from hyar or else joined that herd," he growled. "An' I never have seen any dogies sprout wings."

"Enough said!" Billy West clipped. "We're cuttin' that Triangle B herd, boys."

"Which will be just about as healthy as hittin' a cougar in the mouth with a hot flapjack!" the sheriff grunted. "Ace Sheffield will likely be in charge o' that Triangle B herd, an' he'll have plenty tough hands to back his play."

"Huh!" Buck Foster snorted. "What in blazes do we care how many o' the skunks there is?"

"Yuh don't know Ace Sheffield!" the sheriff growled. "If Ace gits ringy, we'll have trouble cuttin' that herd."

CHAPTER V.

BUCK ON THE PROD.

LOCATING the huge Triangle B herd was not hard. It had passed along the broad top of the ridge and dipped into lower country where choppy draws and low hills were giving away to alkali flats. The big herd was just passing out onto one of those flats when Billy West and the sheriff sighted it.

"I heard Braddock say that he was movin' cattle, an' he mentioned that Ace Sheffield was in charge," the sheriff explained as they approached. "Yuh boys better let me do the talkin'. Ace is an ugly customer, but mebbe I can handle him."

Billy West nodded, but decided that that Triangle B herd would be cut whether "Ace" Sheffield liked it or not.

The sheriff hailed dusty, red-eyed punchers who worked the drags of the big herd, then galloped on toward the point, with the Circle J pards close behind him. Presently the sheriff reined away from the cattle, and went loping toward a lone horseman who had halted out on the open alkali flat and was signaling the men at the herd with arm and hand motions.

"That's Sheffield out yonder," the sheriff called to the Montana waddies. "From his signals, they must be aimin' to rest the cattle hyar a spell."

Ace Sheffield was a burly, powerfully built fellow, with coarse features and thick lips that were peeled back in a mean grin. His greenish eyes were squinted, and his huge hands had come to rest just above twin guns that were holstered at his thick thighs.

"The sheriff shore didn't mis-

name this jigger," Billy muttered, as he reined in.

"Howdy, sheriff," Sheffield was saying pleasantly enough. "What fetches yuh out on the Triangle B?"

"This hyar is Billy West, Montana ranchman," the sheriff introduced. "An' these other two is Buck Foster, there, an' Joe Scott, West's punchers."

The sheriff explained briefly about the feeders, swearing harshly when he related how Mort Evans and Cliff Burt had been killed.

Ace Sheffield nodded coolly to the Montana men, but made no offer to shake hands. His green eyes slit as he listened to the sheriff's account of the rustling and murder.

"So yuh come rompin' over, figurin' that mebbe me an' the boys with me had a hand in that bushwhackin', huh?" he rasped suddenly. "Snell, I don't like that ary bit."

"An' I don't like havin' two men that I left behind to guard them feeders murdered, either!" the sheriff flung back sharply. "Ace, did yuh an' yore boys spot a herd as yuh come down that ridge?"

The sheriff explained rapidly how the trail left by the rustled feeders ran into that left by the huge Triangle B herd. Ace Sheffield had turned from crimson to purple, and there were dangerous lights in his mean eyes.

Billy West was slouched sidewise in the saddle, hat slanted until his narrowly watchful eyes were well shaded. He looked lazy and half asleep, but was ready to go into action on a split second's notice.

"Snell, are yuh tryin' to accuse me an' the boys o' rustlin' a few measly feeders?" Ace Sheffield roared. "If yuh are, Johnny Law, I'll——"

Billy West cut in coolly. "Bet-

ter keep yore shirt on, hombre, unless yuh've got reasons to get het up. The sheriff asked yuh a civil question. Where's yore manners— an' the answer?"

Ace Sheffield lurched, eyes suddenly widening. He stared hard at Billy West for a moment, then grinned.

Billy heard the sheriff gasp, and knew that a grin from Ace Sheffield was unquestionably the last thing the officer had expected. In fact, Billy was somewhat surprised himself.

"Shucks, I reckon I did act up without no cause, men!" Sheffield chuckled. "But since me an' the other boys ain't seen no cattle except these we been drivin' since daylight, I sort o' got the notion, sheriff, that mebbe yuh was raw-hidin' me."

"Not a bit o' it, Ace," the sheriff answered quickly. "We follered that sign like we told yuh an' found where it joined the sign left by yore herd."

"That's funny." Sheffield frowned "Judgin' from the time an' all, me an' the boys would 'a' been in sight o' that spot yuh named as the place where them feeders struck our trail. But we didn't see 'em."

"Say," Joe Scott put in suddenly. "Mebbe them thieves crossed the feeders behind this herd an' went on over into the high hills. Come on, we'll go have a look!"

Billy West started, for that certainly was not like Joe Scott. Besides, Joe had already circled about the ridge top to make sure that the feeders had not been merely driven across the broad path left by the vast Triangle B herd. Joe had something on his mind, Billy knew, and decided to back the redhead's play.

"Yep, looks like we got fooled,"

Billy grinned. "Come on, men, we better amble."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster cried hoarsely. "Ain't we lookin' this hyar Triangle B outfit over afore we leave?"

Billy, Joe, and the sheriff went tense. Buck, they figured, had said about the best thing he could have said in case his aim was to start trouble.

Ace Sheffield flushed, and his thick, cracked lips settled into an ugly line. But he shrugged suddenly, waved a big hand toward the herd.

"Look all yuh please," he growled. "I'm havin' the boys bed the critters here fer the night. When they git 'em bunched——"

"Don't mind Buck," Joe Scott laughed, and winked at Sheffield. "The ol' coot herded sheep so long he's liable to say loco things now an' then."

Sheffield blinked, then grinned when Buck Foster let out a bellowing roar and spurred toward Joe Scott, one horny fist waving like a war club.

"Sheep-herder, am I?" Buck choked, purple with rage. "By heifers, Joe Scott, I'll knock them floppy ears o' yores clean off fer thet remark!"

Buck was denied the pleasure of walloping the redhead just then, however, for Joe rammed the hooks to his gray and went rocketing away, Buck hard on his heels. Billy got the sheriff's eye, passed him a wink, then turned to follow his pards. Ace Sheffield waved briefly, then turned to begin directing his men again.

"What in blazes is the idea?" the sheriff growled as he rode up to Billy's side. "I thought we come here to look this herd over."

"Joe savvies somethin'," Billy ex-

plained. "But just what it is I can't say. We'll have to overtake him to find out."

They spurred ahead then, and fifteen minutes later came up to where Buck and Joe had halted in the mouth of a draw, well out of sight of the Triangle B men and cattle now.

Buck was faunching plenty, but Joe seemed uninterested in arguing for once. The redhead came spurring up to meet Billy, his face flushed with excitement.

"Ace Sheffield is one o' the men that tried bushwhackin' Buck an' me!" Joe cried. "Which means that he's one o' the jaspers that helped kill those two men an' steal our cattle."

"What?" the sheriff cried, paling. "Scott, are yuh loco?"

"Shore he is!" Buck Foster roared. "The carrot-topped pest am loony, that's what!"

"I seen the tracks that that hoss o' Sheffield's left while we was settin' there talkin' to him," Joe explained. "An' they're one o' the three sets o' prints that I found down where those men were killed an' the feeders were stolen."

"Then, by golly, I'm smokin' Ace Sheffield or arrestin' him, one o' the six!" Sheriff Snell rasped. "Yuh couldn't be mistook, could yuh, Joe?"

"No chance, sheriff," Joe said calmly. "Besides, Sheffield was wearin' a yaller shirt, as yuh likely noticed. But did yuh notice that bullet hole in the back o' his shirt?"

"Well, what does that add up to?" The sheriff frowned.

"Buck an' me both seen a yaller shirt in the brush when we was bein' shot at," Joe explained. "Buck shot at it, an' his slug cut through the slack while the feller was movin'."

"By glory, thet's right!" Buck yelped. "Carrot-top, yuh told the truth fer onct in yore life. I'll l'arn thet skunk ter bushwhack me."

Before any one could stop him, Buck had spun his black, rammed in the spurs, and was streaking away, heading straight toward the Triangle B herd.

"He ain't got a chance!" the sheriff groaned. "Sheffield an' them others will shoot Foster ter ribbons, the minute he opens his mouth about what he knows!"

CHAPTER VI.

GUNS IN THE NIGHT.

BUCK FOSTER certainly would not have had a chance had he gone back to that Triangle B herd and started trouble. Billy West knew that, and acted instantly.

Half thoroughbred and half mustang, Billy's chestnut mount was both fast and tough. Billy raked Danger's flanks with dull rowels, leaned into the sudden rush of air, and overhauled Buck Foster before the rannicky old waddy had gone more than a quarter mile.

Buck cursed and fumed, but Billy did not mind that. He had stopped Buck in time, and was taking no chances on the hot-tempered ranny's making another break.

Billy had ripped his lariat loose as he raced forward. He simply dropped a noose over the neck of Buck's bronc, tightened slowly so as not to throw the animal, then circled back to where Joe Scott and the sheriff sat watching.

Buck was purple with rage, and his popping eyes fairly shot sparks as he glared about. It was humiliating to be treated like that, and Buck was ready to explode. But Billy, knowing his grizzled pard

mighty well, had already figured out a way to smooth Buck's temper.

"Now, bonehead, mebber yuh'll behave!" Joe Scott growled as Buck was led up. "Billy, yuh ought to tie the ol' fossil up like a rabbit-run-nin' houn' pup."

"Am thet so?" Buck roared. "By hokies, I'm through with this outfit. Yuh two young puppies am allus pesterin' me. Billy, yuh kin give me my time right now."

"Hurry, Billy, afore the ol' cuss kin change his mind," Joe Scott yipped. "Pay 'im off, an' mebber Circle J will know some peace."

"It's a good thing I know yuh well enough to know that yo're joshin', Buck!" Billy West grinned at the angry old waddy. "I'd shore hate to lose a top hand like yuh. But don't go tryin' to hog all the fun for yoreself after this."

Buck's jaw fell open, and there was a gleam of suspicion in his eyes as he studied Billy's smiling face.

"Thought yuh'd pull a fast one an' have the fun o' cleanin' up on that pack o' snakes all to yorself, didn't yuh?" Billy chuckled, as he flipped the noose from the neck of Buck's bronc and coiled the rope. "Don't yuh reckon Joe, the sheriff, an' me want some o' the fun, too, pard?"

Buck could find no trace of mockery in Billy's expression. He gulped a couple of times, then puffed out his chest importantly. "Waal," he allowed finally, "mebber I was sort o' hoggish, at thet. Reckon it would be a shame fer me to leave Circle J. Without me, the spread would go bust in no time."

Billy West almost strangled on that, but managed somehow to keep a straight face. Joe Scott made no bones about the way he felt, however. The redhead was ready to

start another row when Billy turned on him swiftly.

"Joe, we've got work to do," Billy clipped. "That bunch o' feeders ain't in the Triangle B herd, or Ace Sheffield never would 'a' said look it over."

"The thing fer us to do," the sheriff growled, "is go right back to that herd an' have it out with Sheffield. If he's one o' the skunks that killed Mort Evans an' Cliff Burt, we'll arrest or shoot him, dependin' on how he acts."

"We've got no real evidence against Sheffield," Billy West pointed out. "Buck an' Joe seen a yellow shirt when they was bein' fired at. But lots o' men wear yellow shirts."

"Dang the luck, yo're right!" the sheriff growled. "But mebber we can make Sheffield own up to his dirty work an' name the two that helped him."

"Not a chance," Billy growled. "Ace Sheffield is too tough for that. Besides, I want the man behind this—the man who gave Sheffield orders to steal them cattle o' mine."

"Meanin' who?" The sheriff almost gasped the words.

"Meanin' Parson Braddock!" Billy clipped. "That big-headed coyote has lorded it over folks so long, he figures he can get by with anything."

"Good gosh, West, are yuh loco?" the sheriff cried. "Don't yuh see that Braddock is too big a man to monkey with? Even if he is behind this, we could never prove it."

"Mebber not." Billy shrugged. "But I shore aim to try. If we can find them feeders that was run off, we'll have a fair chance o' locatin' the two jaspers that helped Ace Sheffield to-day."

"How yuh goin' to find them cattle o' yores onless yuh go back to

the Triangle B herd?" the sheriff demanded.

"Our cattle ain't in that herd," Billy mused. "Nor they didn't cross the trail left by the Triangle B herd an' go on into the hills. Which leaves only one thing they could 'a' done."

"What's that, Billy?" Buck and Joe asked in the same breath.

"Back up that ridge." Billy smiled faintly at the three men before him. "What else could they 'a' done besides turn into the trail that Triangle B herd had tromped out an' travel back up that ridge?"

"By gosh, West, yo're level-headed, even if yuh ain't so old!" the sheriff cried. "Why, that's the only way them feeders could 'a' got away so slick."

"An' we'll find where they quit that Triangle B herd's trail, too," Joe Scott clipped. "Come on, amigos! It's gittin' late."

"I'll have to head back fer town," the sheriff frowned. "Can't leave them two pore boys layin' out yonder where they was killed, yuh know. Mebber yuh boys better come along with me until we can organize a posse."

"Nope," Billy answered quickly. "We'll amble on, sheriff, an' try to locate them feeders. But there's somethin' I wish yuh would do for me when yuh get to town."

"Shore, West, anything yuh ask," the sheriff said. "I still feel like it's my fault that yore cattle is gone."

"If yuh don't mind"—Billy smiled—"I wish yuh'd go to the Plaza Hotel, ask for Sing Lo, my chink cook, an' tell him Buck, Joe, an' me will be in town some time tomorrow."

"An' if thet slant-eyed heathen am drunk," Buck Foster roared, "lock the critter up in yore jail. I'll

tan his hide the minute I sees him, if he's been guzzlin' booze."

Sing Lo, the little Chinese cook, seldom missed a chance to tank up on hard liquor, or "tanglefoot" as he called it. And nothing made Buck Foster any madder than to have the Chinaman get drunk, for Buck had made it his duty to see that Sing Lo stayed sober.

"All right, West, I'll look yore chink up an' tell him," the sheriff called, glancing at the lowering sun. "Adios, an' good luck. I'll head back this way in the mornin' with a posse." The sheriff whirled his horse and went galloping away.

Billy turned to his pards, face set into grim lines. "Come on!" he snapped. "We've got to hustle some. With luck, we might find where those feeders quit the Triangle B herd's path without havin' to wait ontill mornin'."

It was luck, indeed, that brought the Circle J pards to the spot where the feeders had quit the wide path left by the Triangle B herd. Joe Scott found where the feeders had turned off into some rough hills.

It was dark, however, by the time Joe had followed the sign of the feeders a mile.

"We might ride on an' take a chance o' spottin' a camp or somethin'," Joe suggested hopefully, when his keen eyes could no longer pick out the sign.

"Shore, that'll be the best thing to do," Buck Foster seconded quickly.

But Billy drew his mount to a halt, calling his pards back. Buck and Joe had already started forward. But they turned obediently at Billy's call.

"Can't risk doin' that, boys," Billy pointed out. "There's a chance that we could spot the camp

o' them thieves, sure. But there's more of a chance of our warnin' the skunks an' givin' them a chance to escape, if we go blunderin' around in the dark."

"But what'll we do?" Buck Foster growled. "By hokies, I don't aim ter roost out hyar in the cold all night, Billy."

"We don't have to," the Circle J boss told him. "I saw an old line shack back yonder a ways that'll give us shelter. Likely some canned food there, too."

Buck and Joe argued, but to no avail. Billy led the way back to the old line shack he had seen earlier and dismounted.

Grumbling and snarling at each other, Buck and Joe unsaddled, turning their horses loose to browse about the draw in which the old line shack stood. Billy freed Danger, then lugged his saddle inside the dark shack.

He had found and lighted a rusty lantern when Buck and Joe came tromping through the door to toss their riding gear down beside Billy's.

"Canned stuff, like I thought there might be," Billy said, pointing to a shelf. "An' there's wood in the box by the stove. This ain't so bad, boys."

Buck and Joe refused to be cheered up, however. Billy opened a tin of beans, built a fire in the stove, and was just taking down tin plates to serve the beans, when from outside came shrill yells and the smashing roar of half a dozen guns.

Bullets ripped through the shack's one window and thin door, screaming drearily as they whizzed across the room at different angles.

"Down!" Billy cried. "Hit the floor, pards. They've got us surrounded!"

CHAPTER VII.

BUCK AND JOE MAKE A MISTAKE.

JOE SCOTT had the presence of mind to grab the lantern from the table as he dropped to the floor. He lifted the chimney, blew out the flame, then put the lantern aside to draw his six-gun. Buck and Billy were already at the one window, shooting at the powder flashed outside.

Joe eased to the door, pulled it open slowly, and flattened out on the floor, peering around the jamb. He saw a gun flash, and fired toward it.

But the night was moonless, and answering those shots was guesswork to say the least. Those jaspers out there were mounted, for no powder flash came twice from the same place.

Billy West had evidently noticed that, too, for his voice lifted suddenly. "Save yore lead, boys!" he called to Buck and Joe. "We're not hittin' anything but the wind with our slugs."

"Wait till I git out thar!" Buck Foster's voice lifted angrily. "I'll l'arn them skunks plenty."

Buck whirled toward the door, but hooked his toes under Joe Scott's legs and fell heavily. By the time Billy settled the squabble which followed, there were no more shots coming from the raiders.

"Yuh two made so blamed much fuss arguin' that I couldn't tell whether those jaspers rode away or not," Billy told his quarrelsome pards disgustedly. "Now pipe down, an' let's listen for sounds."

Buck and Joe quieted down, and for half an hour the pards crouched there, ears straining. But there were no sounds from the darkness to tell them whether the raiders had bushed up or not.

"Dark as it is, I've got a hunch that they are figurin' on creepin' up an' surprisin' us," Billy whispered finally. "I know we didn't do damage enough to chase that pack away."

"Wonder what in blazes it's all about?" Joe growled. "What in thunder did that outfit raid us fer, do yuh reckon?"

"Looks like somebody didn't want us prowlin' around this neck o' the woods, come mornin'," Billy answered. "What stumps me is why that lead-slingin' pack is keepin' so quiet. It don't seem natural that they would 'a' left."

Billy West knew very well that a bunch of men would not come whooping down, fire a withering volley, and then ride away simply because they hoped to frighten him and his two pards. That those men were still lurking out there in the darkness seemed the more logical solution, and Billy decided that he could play the waiting game as well as the next fellow.

But the hours dragged by endlessly, and more than once the Circle J boss was ready to pile outside himself, simply to break the strain. But he knew that that would be suicide in case those men were still out there, for they would be down low, watching the door and window for a target.

Buck and Joe growled constantly, arguing that playing the waiting game would get them nothing. But Buck's voice finally trailed off sleepily, and the cabin had been rattling to heavy snores for some time when Billy West, numbed from cold and heavy-eyed from sleeplessness, saw the sky turning light in the east.

Billy leaned over, prodded Buck and Joe awake, warning them to keep quiet. "Daylight is comin'," he explained hoarsely, "an' those

jiggers will likely try rushin' us if they're out there."

But when the last shadows were gone from the little valley, Billy could see no sign of the men who had done the shooting the night before. He was shrewd enough to put his hat on the end of a Colt barrel and jiggle it at the window before showing himself, however.

The hat trick drew no bullets, and Billy finally stood up to peer out the window, grinning a little sheepishly. He moved to the door and stepped outside, Buck and Joe at his heels. The three of them passed completely around the shack, yet no shot came crashing from the brush and rocks about the valley.

"Well, it looks like I figured the deal wrong," Billy admitted as the three of them trooped back into the little cabin, "but I still can't see the point in them jaspers just takin' a few pot shots at the shack an' then ridin' on. It don't make sense."

"Mebbe yuh two young sprouts will l'arn ter mind what I say," Buck Foster snorted indignantly. "I wanted ter go out thar last night an' settle with them wallopers."

"Aw, go chaw yore whiskers, nit-wit!" Joe flung out sharply. "If Billy an' me listened to yuh, we'd git shot first rattle out o' the box."

"I'll be loco if I have to listen to yuh two wrangle any more!" Billy told the glaring pair. "Cut it out, an' we'll see if we can eat these beans we started to eat last night."

Joe built a fire in the stove, while Buck stubbornly held to the doorway, fierce eyes watching for some sight of the enemy who had so mysteriously vanished.

But when the beans were warmed Buck changed his mind about looking for skulkers and came to the rickety table which occupied the center of the floor. The pards ate

rapidly, then just as rapidly put the line shack in shipshape order before leaving it.

"Now we'll get our hosses an' take the trail o' them feeders," Billy said grimly as they filed outside carrying their gear. "An' unless I miss a guess, those murderin' rustlers will be expectin' us."

The pards deposited their riding gear handy, then hurried out into the little valley in search of their mounts. The horses were gentle, and could be caught easily enough. But there were no horses to catch.

Billy West's face wore a strained look when he finally trudged back toward the line shack. Buck and Joe were simply raving, for it was evident that their horses had been driven away the night before by those raiders.

"I told yuh the thing to do was hop outside an' lead them snakes last night!" Buck howled. "They was after our hosses, thet's what. An' they got 'em, too!"

"Much as I hate to admit it, bonehead, yo're right!" Joe Scott growled. "Them snakes shore drove our hosses off, which is likely why they left so quick."

Billy West turned then to face his pards. That chestnut Danger horse was Billy's pet, and the loss of it hurt deeply. Billy had raised Danger from a colt, gentled and broken him.

No one else had ever ridden the horse, though plenty had tried. But even in the face of his loss, Billy West could still think calmly.

"I still say it don't make sense," he growled. "Why would a hull band come swarmin' at us just to steal our hosses? If that had been all they wanted, they would 'a' worked quiet instead o' shootin' like they done."

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck roared.

"Dang it, Billy, yuh am plumb stubborn, thet's what! Our broncs is gone, yit yuh claim the thieves that took 'em didn't come after 'em."

Buck was too slow-witted to understand what Billy was thinking. And Billy was too weary to explain just then. The three of them turned back toward the shack, and were about to enter when the pound of hoofs jerked them around.

Three voices lifted in ringing whoops, for up the valley trotted the missing horses, Danger in the lead. The chestnut whistled shrilly at sight of Billy, and came on at a little faster pace.

"Our broncs jist wandered off a piece, thet's all!" Buck cried. "Now they're back an' we kin——" Buck's voice trailed off into a choked grunt.

The three horses had come trotting up, and even Buck could see that they were all but reeling with fatigue. They were sweat-soaked and hollow-flanked, and had worn saddles until a short time ago. The marks of the saddles were plain to the trained eyes of the three Montana waddies who stood staring in amazement.

Billy West was the first to leap forward, and there was a raspy growl of rage in his throat as he stood beside Danger. Along the chestnut's sides and shoulders were welted streaks that oozed crimson.

"Spur marks!" Billy West cried hoarsely. "Some dirty coyote rode Danger, boys, an' used rowels that had been filed sharp as needles. If I ever lay my hands on that buzzard, I'll make him eat them spurs."

"Nobody ever rode Danger more than a few jumps," Joe Scott put in. "We've seen some mighty good men try him an' git thrown afore they knowed what was happenin'."

"Somebody stayed on him long

enough to rip his hide," Billy snarled. "If I find——"

Billy never finished, for once more the little valley was echoing to the pound of hoofs. The Circle J pards turned to see a dozen or more men racing toward them—men who held unsheathed guns in a way that meant business.

Buck Foster and Joe Scott did not bother to see more. Both yelling wildly, they yanked their own guns, flipped them up, and began blazing away.

"It's them blasted snakes that stole our hosses!" Buck yowled. "Pour it to 'em, pards, afore they high-tail it!"

"Shore it's them!" Joe Scott yipped. "Who'd yuh think it was—Santy Claus?"

But Billy West was trying vainly to stop his two rannicky pards. For Billy had recognized the leader of that small army of armed men as "Blaze" Parker, Sheriff Snell's head deputy. Billy's voice was drowned out by the crash of guns, however, for Deputy Parker and the men with him had started firing.

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY MAKES A BREAK.

BILLY WEST saved the lives of his two pards, as well as his own, by doing some mighty quick acting and thinking. Leaping suddenly, Billy crashed into his two pards, hurling them around the corner of the shack.

"Hold it, yuh two!" he rasped at the startled pair. "That's a posse yuh started slingin' lead at."

"Good gosh, Billy, how do yuh know that?" Joe cried, looking decidedly uneasy as he hastily holstered his smoking Colt.

Billy explained briefly that he had seen Blaze Parker leading the oth-

ers, then stepped back to the corner of the house.

The possemen had dismounted, and Billy could see them working toward the cabin, ducking hastily from cover to cover as they advanced. Three or four of the men were hidden behind the bunched horses, pouring Winchester slugs at the shack while the rest made their advance.

"Hey, Parker!" Billy called loudly. "Yuh an' yore men hold yore fire. This is Billy West."

There was a moment's silence, yet Billy did not show himself. He heard some one talking loudly, then a voice lifted in an answering hail to Billy's call.

"All right, West, yuh an' yore men come with yore hands up. This is Blaze Parker speakin'."

Billy lifted his hands, but glanced over one shoulder at Buck and Joe before leaving shelter. Joe was coming forward, hands already starting up.

But not Buck Foster. The old ranny was glowering fiercely as he hastily stuffed fresh ammunition into his Colt cylinder.

"It's a trick, that's what!" Buck vowed stubbornly. "Them jaspers can't fool me. I'll waltz out thar an'——"

"An' get us all shot if yuh don't behave yoreself!" Billy West cut in sharply. "Buck, yuh an' Joe had no business startin' this. Shootin' at an officer an' his posse is mighty serious business."

Buck would have argued further, but Billy had no time for such stuff just now. He clipped an order that made Buck bristle, but the old ranny holstered his gun and stalked forward, gnarled hands lifting.

"Jist wait an' see," Buck snorted angrily. "This am a trap, I tell yuh!"

Billy had to admit a few moments later, that Buck was not far wrong at that. The three Circle J pards stepped around the corner of the house, and from rocks and brush on every side leaped armed men, who swore savagely at them down the barrels of cocked guns.

Blaze Parker was in the lead when the posse rushed forward, and Billy saw that the deputy's face was a mask of rage and hate.

"Stand hitched, yuh yaller killers, or I'll blow yuh in two!" the deputy rasped. "West, yuh an' these two are about the lowest specimens I ever seen. Murderin' a man jist fer spite is——"

"Take up the slack in yore tongue an' talk sense, Parker!" Billy West snapped. "Yuh've got no right to call me an' my punchers murderers or killers."

"No?" the lanky deputy growled. "Sheriff Snell, my boss, was found in his bed this mornin' with half a dozen slugs through his body."

"Good gosh!" Billy cried. "Any idea who pulled that stunt, Parker?"

"Good headwork, feller!" came a sneering voice. "But it'll do yuh no good. We follered three sets o' hoof-prints from the sheriff's house in Redfork right hyar. An' yonder stands the three hosses that made 'em."

Billy glanced sharply to the left, eyes centering on Parson Braddock, who stepped forward as he spoke. Close to Braddock's heels was his pock-marked foreman, Jack Leland. The pair were openly sneering, and Billy caught gleams of fiendish delight in their evil eyes as they looked him up and down insolently.

But Billy was paying little attention to what Braddock had said. The Triangle B owner limped badly as he moved, and one whole

side of his face looked as if he had been dragged through sharp gravel.

Something clicked in Billy's brain when he glanced down at Parson Braddock's spurs and saw that they were filed needle-sharp. The Circle J boss opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly thought better of it.

There were fully twenty men in the posse, and Billy guessed that a goodly number of them would be Triangle B hirelings. To say the wrong thing now might be dangerous indeed. But it was all Billy could do to keep from saying the things that were tumbling through his mind.

"Braddock," he rasped through set teeth, "yuh got throwed pretty hard last night, didn't yuh? A man that'd spur-mark a hoss ought to get worse than just throwed."

As Billy talked he edged forward, despite the fact that he was covered by many guns. Billy meant to say more, for he saw instantly that his words had startled Braddock badly. The Triangle B owner's yellow-flecked eyes had gone wide, and he paled as he stood blinking.

Before Billy could say more Deputy Blaze Parker took a hand. The deputy's gun barrel gouged hard against Billy West's middle, and the Circle J boss was halted in his tracks.

"Start somethin'," the deputy growled fiercely, "an' these boys will make hamburger out o' yuh three killers."

There was unquestionably truth in what the deputy said, for Billy West could see that the possemen were ready to pounce on Circle J at the slightest excuse. Billy backed up, smiled grimly at the deputy, and told simply but clearly what had happened the night before.

"Well, I've heard some crooks lie
WW-6D

in my time," Braddock sneered, when Billy had finished, "but that's about the thinnest yarn I ever heard."

"Feller," Billy told him quietly, "what that Danger hoss o' mine done to yuh is mild compared to what yuh'll get afore this is over."

Parson Braddock went pale again, ugly eyes rolling uneasily right and left. Billy saw Jack Leland nudge Braddock, and knew that the Triangle B ramrod was speaking softly from one corner of his mouth. But Billy seemed to be the only one who noticed such things.

"Take their guns, Stoke, an' we'll be headin' fer town," Deputy Parker snarled. "If they try anything funny, we'll see that they don't git by with it."

Billy twisted his head, shot Buck and Joe a warning look as a chunky, red-faced fellow stepped forward. The Circle J pards stood quietly while their guns were lifted, but Buck and Joe were plainly on the prod.

Before either of his rannicky pards could make a mess of things, Billy began trying to convince Deputy Parker that he and his posse were making a bad mistake. Billy wanted to know more about the sheriff's death, but each time he tried to speak Parson Braddock horned in, drowning out Billy's voice.

"Cut this out!" Blaze Parker finally ordered. "Braddock, save yore spoutin' fer the trial. West, keep yore lips buttoned."

"All right, all right," Braddock sang out as if peeved. "Parker, I reckon yuh an' yore friends can handle things now. Me an' my men will amble on home."

He turned swiftly, strode through the grim circle, and stalked away toward the bunched horses. Billy

nodded slowly when he saw that the majority of the possemen were following Braddock. In fact, there were only six men left now, including the deputy.

Billy waited until the Triangle B crowd had ridden away, then turned to Deputy Parker with a grim smile.

"All right, Blaze," Billy drawled; "yonder goes the men yuh really want. If yuh'll listen to me a few minutes, I'll prove it."

"What are yuh drivin' at?" the deputy growled. "If yuh think I'll let yuh soft soap me into believin' Parson Braddock or his men kilt the sheriff, yo're crazy."

"Look at those broncs." Billy pointed to the three weary Circle J horses as he spoke. "They've been rode hard. An' they've been rode with saddles, haven't they?"

"A half-blind man could see the saddle marks on them broncs," the deputy snorted. "But that don't matter. Yuh three start marchin' toward——"

"Here lays the ridin' gear my boys an' me use," Billy cut in calmly. "Look it over, Parker; yuh an' whoever else wants to. Unless yo're greener than yuh look, yuh'll savvy that that gear ain't been on hosses in a good many hours."

The deputy frowned heavily, hesitating uncertainly. But he finally stalked over to the Circle J saddles, rolled them over, and began examining them. He straightened suddenly, a look of genuine surprise on his hard face.

"By gollies, men, them saddles an' blankets ain't been used recent, at that," he gasped.

"West an' his two punchers likely figured that all out," a posseman grunted. "Mebbe they've hid the gear they used."

"I told yuh that we was raided

last night." Billy spoke directly to Deputy Parker. "Look that shack over, an' yuh'll find plenty o' fresh bullet holes in it."

Deputy Parker was evidently impressed by now, for he immediately turned to the shack. It took him only a moment to discover that it was liberally pitted with very fresh bullet holes.

"Yuh can see that most o' them holes was made by rifle bullets," Billy called. "In case yuh think my pards an' me done the shootin' ourselves, look our saddle guns over. Yuh'll find they ain't been fired recent."

Deputy Parker did examine the three Winchester carbines that were with the Circle J saddles. There was a perplexed look on his face, when he finally turned back to Billy West.

"Feller," the deputy growled, "there's shore somethin' to what yuh have said. Looks like it'll be hard to make a murder charge stick agin' yuh three."

"Parson Braddock wants yuh to slam my pards an' me in jail, so's he'll have time to get them feeders out o' the country!" Billy cried fiercely. "Parker, it was Braddock an' some o' his gang that killed the sheriff. Why? Because Sheriff Snell had got wise to Braddock's crookedness."

"That's one point yuh can't prove," the deputy said triumphantly.

Billy shrugged. "I can prove it to any man who has an open mind. Look my chestnut hoss over, an' yuh'll see that he's spur-marked plenty."

"I already seen that," the deputy grunted, "'cause I examined them three cayuses afore yuh jaspers surrendered."

"Good," Billy snapped. "Mebbe yuh also noticed that Parson Braddock was some stove up, an' that one side o' his face was skinned bad."

"Aw, let's quit wastin' time with these three," a posseman growled. "Blaze, we better hustle our prisoners to town, hadn't we?"

"That chestnut o' mine is a one-man hoss," Billy explained, completely ignoring the grumpy posseman. "Sometime last night, Parson tried to ride that Danger hoss—which no man besides me has ever done."

"That's what yuh say," Deputy Parker snorted. "West, yuh three come on. We've wasted time enough!"

"Braddock got throwed hard," Billy went on grimly. "But before Danger piled him, he used them filed spurs he wears. For that, I aim to work him over plenty."

"Braddock does wear filed rowels." Deputy Parker nodded. "But, West, all this stuff is out o' my line. Yuh three are goin' to jail. Come on!"

"Parson Braddock won't head for home," Billy rasped bitterly. "He'll head for wherever them feeders o' mine are bein' held. If yuh gents will ride to the top o' that big ridge, yonder, with me, I think I can prove that."

"Yuh an' yore palaver has got me groggy," Deputy Parker snarled. "Shut up, West, an' head fer them hosses. We—— What the——"

Billy West moved with the speed of desperation. His first leap carried him almost to the startled deputy's side. The officer tried to leap away, at the same time clawing at the Colt he had holstered while examining the shack and Circle J's riding gear.

But before Parker could draw, Billy West's left fist streaked out and up with the speed of a bullet. There came the dull crunch of flesh grinding flesh, and Deputy Parker went limp. Billy caught him, snatched the half-drawn Colt from Parker's lax fingers, and leveled it at the stunned possemen over their leader's sagging shoulder.

"Steady, yuh five!" Billy rapped. "Yuh can't drill me without killin' Blaze. So drop yore guns, an' start clawin' at the sky!"

CHAPTER IX.

RIM-ROCK SHOW-DOWN.

BILLY WEST had no intention of shooting the possemen. But those five badly surprised hombres did not know what. Swearing sullenly, they dropped their guns, seeing that to fire at Billy meant hitting Blaze Parker's limp body. Buck and Joe leaped forward, whooping their delight, grabbing up the fallen guns.

Then minutes later, a grim procession rode away from the old line shack where Circle J had spent the night. Blaze Parker was awake now, glowering sullenly about as he rode, tied hard and fast to his saddle.

Behind Blaze came the five possemen, all securely bound to their saddles. Billy West and Buck Foster held ropes that led the six horses. Ahead rode Joe Scott, making for the high ridge Billy had pointed out earlier.

But Billy had little hope of sighting Braddock and his men now, for too much time had elapsed since the Triangle B men had pulled out.

Billy's plan was to drop over the ridge, strike the sign left by the stolen feeders where the pards had had to turn back at dark the night

before, and follow the sign of the feeders on into the rough hills beyond. Billy explained that to Blaze Parker, whose only answer was a sullen glare.

"If yuh had listened to me, we could 'a' been up here in time to sight Braddock an' see which way he headed," Billy growled at the deputy. "Sorry I had to paste yuh one, Blaze. But I'm not lettin' Parson Braddock railroad me to jail just yet."

The deputy and his possemen refused to answer. So Billy turned his attention to the country ahead. They had already topped the ridge, and were well down the slope toward the rough country when Joe Scott spurred ahead, as Billy had directed.

Joe rode for several hundred yards, then began circling about slowly, leaning far out of the saddle. He straightened suddenly, waved one hand high over his head, then headed away on a straight course.

"Joe signaled that he's picked up the sign left by them feeders," Billy West explained to the sulky deputy. "We'll let Joe foller the sign, while we sort o' hang to the brush patches."

"Why don't yuh quit stallin' an' drill us hyar?" one of the possemen finally broke the stubborn silence. "That's what yuh skunks aim to do, ain't it?"

"I brought yuh jaspers along," Billy said, "because yuh'll be needed when we locate them feeders."

But in the hours that followed, Billy often wished that he and Buck did not have the prisoners on their hands. The six bound men could do nothing but sit their saddles while their horses seemed to take a mean delight in tangling themselves in every bush they got close to.

Billy and Buck lost sight of Joe Scott once, and did not locate the redhead until they climbed to a ridge and saw him far ahead, crossing a little clearing.

Billy tried to make better time after that, but those six prisoners were something to worry about. Billy caught one of the men deliberately spurring his mount so that the horse sashayed into two others, causing a general tangle.

"Do that again," Billy growled at the fellow when the tangled lead rope was finally straightened, "an' I'll make yuh hoof it."

Billy had just mounted and was about to ride on once more when Joe Scott came spurring up, freckled face beaming with excitement. "I've located 'em!" he cried. "They're right over that hump, holed up in a basin that's got high cliffs on all sides but one."

"By heifers, carrot-top, mebbe yuh am some good after all!" Buck Foster chortled. "Lead me to them jaspers an' I'll l'arn the skunks ter mess with Circle J."

"How many men there, Joe?" Billy West asked, excitement in his own voice.

"Plenty!" Joe growled, sobering. "Parson Braddock, Jack Leland, an' that murderin' Ace Sheffield are settin' up on a corral fence, watchin' mebbe a dozen more men rebrand them feeders."

Deputy Blaze Parker and his possemen had pricked up their ears, and were exchanging excited glances. But Billy West was not wasting time on his prisoners just then.

Calling an order for Joe to lead the way, Billy moved forward once more. Fifteen minutes later, the three Circle J pards were flattened out on sun-heated stone, looking down sheer rock walls into a deep

basin where men and cattle milled in a big corral.

Billy West growled something under his breath, crawled away, and trotted to where Deputy Parker and the others sat watching with evident interest.

"Parker," Billy snapped, "I'm takin' yuh over to the rim so yuh can have a look. If yo're half a man, yuh'll admit yore mistakes an' give me an' my boys a hand."

Billy cut the deputy's bonds, but stayed well out of reach as the lanky tow-head slid stiffly to the ground. Blaze Parker turned to his saddle pockets, and Billy yanked a gun to throw down on the deputy.

Parker grinned crookedly, fished out a pair of powerful field glasses, and strode away toward the rim with a sour smile on his hard face. Billy followed, and a moment later they were beside Buck and Joe.

"I know this canyon—often wondered why Braddock needed a corral in such a spot," the deputy grunted. "Yuh can't see brands this far, however. Mebbe that's some o' his own stuff that he's brandin' down there."

The lanky deputy lifted the glasses as he talked, focused them carefully—and began swearing in surprise. "By glory, West, it is them WS feeders they're brandin'!" he cried. "They're puttin' wings on the W an' makin' an 8 out o' the S. Crude work, but some cattle buyers ain't too particular."

Wham! Bra-aa-ng! Bang-bang! Four shots roared out, then Buck Foster's voice lifted in a mighty shout as he leaped up, smoking Colt waving.

"At 'em, pards!" Buck whooped. "We've got the skunks red-handed!"

"Why, you box-headed, wind-broke, pot-bellied ol' buzzard!" Joe Scott wailed. "Why in blazes did

yuh have to warn them snakes? Are yuh in cahoots with 'em?"

"Blast it, Foster, yuh've spoiled everything," Deputy Parker cried. "Look at them wallopers scatter fer cover. We'll never—"

"Get yore men loose, Blaze!" Billy called. "Their guns are in the sack behind my saddle. Hurry, an' try to block that pass down yonder."

Billy whirled then, and went racing up the rim. Buck and Joe were yelling insults at each other, too angry to pay any attention to what was happening around them. But Billy knew that the pair would soon forget their own squabbles and pitch into the fight that was now sure to come.

Buck's shots had done only one thing—warn the Triangle B crowd that they were in danger. The range had been impossible for six-gun shooting, though Buck had evidently failed to realize that.

But Billy was not wasting time worrying over Buck's mistake now. He had seen Braddock and Leland scoot toward the bluff and start up what appeared to be nothing more than a scar. But that, Billy knew, would be a trail—hazardous, perhaps, but a way up out of that basin.

Billy raced along the rim until he was directly above the trail, then stopped to peer over. He could see nothing, for brush clung to the face of the bluff here—tough little cedars that had taken root in crevices.

The whole basin below him was filled with sound now, and Billy saw many puffs of powder smoke lifting as the Triangle B men began firing up at the rim. Deputy Blaze Parker had evidently got his five friends untied and into action, for Billy heard many guns hammering a reply to the Triangle B gang's shooting. He heard Buck and Joe

whooping, and from that knew that the pair had forgotten their personal argument to plunge into the fight.

"If I could just get down this trail a ways I could snag Braddock an' his ramrod without much trouble," Billy growled aloud. "That pair will stand hitched if I can get the cold drop."

He eased over the rim, placing his feet carefully as he started down the dangerous path that was no more than a game trail. He had gone only a few rods when from the cedars just below came the sounds of scuffling boot soles.

Billy glanced sharply right and left, realizing that he could never get the drop on Braddock and the Triangle B foreman if he stayed out on the trail.

Just to his left, hanging dizzily to the face of the stony mountain, was a good-sized cedar. Billy moved swiftly toward it, but found that he had to scramble up and behind the bush if he was to conceal himself.

He had barely gained that position when he saw two hats bob into view, then Parson Braddock and Jack Leland came panting up the trail, both badly winded from the terrific strain of climbing that steep trail.

Billy West grinned thinly, drew his Colt, and let the evil-eyed pair struggle on past him. He held to the cedar bole with his left hand, leaned far out, and opened his lips to yell a command. But Billy's voice died in a sudden moan.

That little cedar shuddered, then gave away with a crashing sound that brought the two Triangle B killers whirling about, hands streaking to gun butts. Through thrashing limbs Billy saw that much. Then he was on the ground, rolling

at a dizzy speed down the face of the bluff, tangled in the boughs of the cedar.

He heard shots, and heard his name being yelled. Then he came to a jarring halt against a slanting boulder. He fought his way out of the cedar, leaped to his feet—and crashed backward, wincing from the terrific pain of a slug that plowed through the flesh of his left shoulder.

Above him, he saw Parson Braddock and Jack Leland crouched in the narrow trail, trying to steady their weaving guns. They were trying for a sure shot, and Billy West knew that split seconds counted now.

He had hung onto his own gun during that wild tumble. He brought the weapon up now, trying desperately to see through the pain fog that was glazing his eyes.

He fired two swift shots, more to rattle the pair of killers above him than anything else. He heard them swearing wildly, saw them moving jerkily as they hopped about.

Parson Braddock lost his footing, came slithering down the slope with a bellow of alarm. But Jack Leland was still on his feet, and bringing his guns down to take careful aim.

Propped on one elbow, Billy lifted his own weapon and thumbed the hammer twice. He saw Jack Leland fold at the middle, heard him scream chokingly as he came crashing down the mountain to trip Parson Braddock, who had just regained his feet.

Braddock had been in the very act of lining his sights on Billy. He swore hoarsely, kicked viciously at Leland's lifeless body, then sat up. He had rolled within a few feet of Billy West, and an exultant snarl started bubbling up in his throat.

But, as Parson Braddock's vision cleared, that snarl became a gasp

of fear. He was looking squarely into the yawning bore of Billy's colt. And behind that cocked and leveled gun was a pair of gray eyes that struck terror to Braddock's craven heart.

"Lift one o' them guns, yuh murderin' snake, an' I'll put a slug between yore eyes!" Billy rasped.

Parson Braddock flinched at that cold voice, knew instinctively that Billy West was running no bluff. The Triangle B owner saw his lifeless foreman there almost beside him, and realized suddenly that he had no help.

Pasty white, he swore one strangled oath, dropped his guns, and lifted trembling hands above his hatless head.

From above came a shout, then boots pounded down the steep trail. A moment later, Deputy Blaze Parker was there, snarling through a crimson mask as he took in the scene with flashing eyes.

The deputy holstered his guns, wiped once at the crease across his forehead, then stalked to where Parson Braddock sat shivering. But some of Braddock's nerve was returning, now that the deputy had arrived.

"All right, tin-star!" he sneered. "Reckon yuh've got me on a charge o' rustlin'. But I'll not stay in jail long—not with my influence an' money."

"No, yuh won't stay in jail long," Blaze Parker echoed grimly. "Thanks to Billy West, here, an' them two fire-eatin' pards o' his, yuh'll hang, Braddock!"

"Hang?" the Triangle B owner tried to sneer, but failed in sudden alarm. "It ain't a hangin' offense to steal a few cattle, yuh fool!"

"Nope, it ain't," the deputy snarled. "But some o' us hit Ace

Sheffield hard, afore the rest o' yore outfit surrendered, Braddock. An' Ace told us how yuh an' Jack Leland killed the sheriff last night an' tried to frame these Circle J ran——"

With a sudden scream of rage and alarm Parson Braddock grabbed at the guns he had dropped, his yellow-flecked eyes wild with killer lights. But Billy West had seen it coming. Billy's Colt thundered, shifted swiftly, then thundered again. Parson Braddock leaped to his feet, screaming hoarse oaths and waving a pair of bullet-gashed hands.

"Yo're still noose bait!" Billy told him harshly.

"I'm glad yuh saved him fer hangin'," the deputy growled, producing handcuffs which he forced over Braddock's wrists. "Come on, Billy," Blaze went on, a moment later. "We better git back to where yore two pards an' my men are guardin' them other prisoners. I hope yuh Circle J rannies will overlook the way I acted. If there's anything I could do to square myself——"

"There is." Billy grinned, moving gingerly on his wounded leg. "I reckon, if yuh overlook that wallop I handed yuh, we'll call the whole thing square."

"Done!" the deputy cried, and offered his hand in a firm grip that sealed the bargain.

Yuh really couldn't blame that deputy fer thinkin' Circle J was guilty o' murder. Braddock had shore framed 'em neat. Most anybody would 'a' fell fer the deal. But Circle J, in spite o' Buck Foster's dumb-headedness, proved more than a match fer thet bunch o' killers. Watch fer the next adventure o' the saddle pards. Cleve Endicott will tell about it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



Dead Hombre

A "Jimmy Quick" Novelette

By Frank J. Litchfield

Author of "Shoot-out At Pagosa," etc.

SUDDENLY adjusting his field glasses to a finer focus, Jimmy Quick held them on a rider who had come into view. His freckled face gradually lost its habitual drowsiness as he stared. Abruptly he arose, picking up a crisp, new hat of a vivid sky-blue, and legged it to where Socks, his big strawberry roan grazed on picket.

"Pay dirt, at last," he muttered, as he saddled with speed. "We've got to make tracks, Socks! There's a rustler workin' at his trade out there. But he's three miles away, an' the sun is about to quit us. We'll

have him dead to rights, if we don't lose him as it gets dark."

He didn't bother to roll his soogans. The redhead had been camped in this little cup on the soaring flanks of the Lobo Mountains for three days, doing little but using his field glasses on everything that moved on the spreading Wagonwheel range below.

He had been sent into the Wagonwheel to break up a rustling outfit that already had murdered three officers.

He hit the saddle, slapped his brace of black-handed guns around

to a better position, and sent Socks crashing downhill.

He raced two miles, then dismounted and ran to a sky line for a look. The sun had already gone.

It was a minute before Jimmy could locate his quarry. The rustler had shifted his position, and was now heading a cow and a calf into a little basin a mile away.

Jimmy saw the arm movement that denoted the throw. The cow went down. The rustler left the saddle and was upon the cow with a pigging string instantly. He arose from the helpless animal, swung into the saddle again, built another loop and caught the calf—all in less than a minute.

"Slittin' the calf's tongue to wean it," Jimmy gritted. "He'll trail it out o' the range after it learns to eat grass. He'll likely build up a crop of weaners that way."

Jimmy turned to race back to Socks. But he paused. He had sighted another rider. This one had come suddenly into view in the basin where the rustler was busy. Jimmy caught the glint of a gun in his hands. The rustler straightened from the side of the calf, his arms slowly rising above his head.

"Sufferin' snakes!" Jimmy exclaimed. "Somebody beat me to it. He sure got that calf thief with the goods."

He lifted the glasses and leveled them again on the scene. Then he gave a low cry of horror.

The rider had been suddenly sent reeling in his saddle as if struck by an invisible force. Jimmy could see him weakly grabbing at the horn.

Then something struck him again, smashing him from the saddle. He fell with that peculiar limpness that could not be mistaken. He was dead.

Jimmy had caught the flash of the

finishing shot. It had been fired from a clump of alders just at the back of the victim.

"Dry-gulched!" Jimmy rasped.

His hands automatically went to his holsters. But the range was too great even for a rifle.

Two men now appeared from the brush. They were on foot. They ran to their fallen victim, joining the other.

"Decoyed under their guns, an' shot down like a dog," Jimmy muttered, his eyes icy.

He whirled and sped back to Socks, hitting the saddle at a leap. There was a low ridge to the left of the basin. It would give him cover until he was within shooting distance.

But dusk was deepening, he had a mile to cover, and the trio who had staged this murderous deadfall would not linger long.

"If that poor hombre hadn't beat me to it, I'd have got it," he thought grimly. "I had a hunch that the rustler was workin' too much in the open. Now I savvy why. He *wanted* to be seen."

Crash! Socks, usually sure-footed, went down while racing at full speed.

A dead tree trunk, hidden in shadows, had tripped the roan. Jimmy cleared his feet from the stirrups, and threw himself clear with a desperate lunge as the horse went over. He escaped being crushed under Socks's weight, but he struck with a jar that left him gasping and unsteady as he arose.

He staggered toward the horse which had struggled to its feet. Relief came into his eyes.

"I thought you was killed," he said joyfully. "Dag-gone it, yuh sure picked the wrong time for your annual tumble, yuh pin-eared, hammer-brained bunch of cussedness!

Yuh shook me up so I'll likely not be able to get to sleep to-night."

Then he saw that his elation had been a bit sudden. Socks was favoring his left front leg. The redhead examined it with dismay, realizing that this delay already probably had cost him his chance to head the killers.

"Just a little sprain," he gritted. "But you're no good for fast ridin' right now, dang the luck!"

He faintly heard the roll of hoofs. His face went glum. The sounds grew faint and died quickly.

"Well, we'll go down an' look at the fella they cashed," he muttered.

It was so dark by the time Jimmy led the limping horse into the basin that he had to circle for a minute before he found the huddled body. The victim lay partly on his face, one arm curled as if even in death he had instinctively tried to ward off the bullet.

Jimmy tilted back his blue hat, knelt, and rolled the body over. He peered close in the gloom. It was a rugged face, and the vacant eyes were of a steely blue. This had been a man of nerve, if Jimmy was any judge. A fighting man.

The redhead now saw a slip of paper jutting from the pocket in the victim's weather-faded wool shirt. He pulled it and struck a match to decipher the penciled scrawl that had obviously been written with the left hand in order to disguise it.

As he read, Jimmy came to his feet, his eyes widening:

BILL HINCHLEY—Here's Jimmy Quick, in case you ain't never met him before. We was glad to meet him. Take warnin'. We're sick of them dicks you been sendin' to git us. The next one will git his toes toasted.

THE SECRET SIX.

Jimmy looked dazedly at the dead man. The victim had hair of a red-

dish hue, but not as brilliant as Jimmy's. And blue eyes. Beyond that there was little similarity.

Jimmy was at least ten years younger. They were of somewhat the same height, but the other was lean and somewhat wizened of face. Jimmy was inclined to roundness at the belt line.

"Great sufferin', *screechin'* cats!" Jimmy muttered in a stunned voice. "Those jiggers thought it was *me* they rubbed out."

Instinctively he whirled, eyeing the dark, silent brush with suspicion. The redhead had received a hard shock. He had believed that his presence in the Wagonwheel country was a secret.

In his pocket was a letter of introduction to this same Bill Hinchley, who was sheriff of this county. Hinchley had sent an appeal to the Texas governor for help in stamping out a mysterious gang of cattle thieves who were systematically cleaning out this range.

Jimmy had been given the job. The governor had sent word to Hinchley that the redhead was on his way, but the sheriff had been asked to say nothing about it.

It always was Jimmy's system to work quietly on rustling jobs. This explained his unheralded appearance in the Lobos and his three days of watching the range. He had not yet even reported his presence to Sheriff Hinchley.

But the "Secret Six" seemed to know about him.

Jimmy searched the body. He found nothing to identify the victim by name. But there was a little metal shield pinned inside the shirt. Jimmy nodded.

"A Cattle Association man," he murmured. "Now I savvy. The association must have sent this poor fellow in on the quiet. The rustlers

tabbed him snoopin' around and set this deadfall for me. But that doesn't explain how they knew I was around. Red hair, blue eyes. There's scads of hombres like that. But it cost this man his life."

Jimmy rounded up the victim's horse, and hoisted the body across the saddle. Then he set out afoot, leading both his own horse and the burdened animal.

"It's about eight miles to Wagon-wheel," he muttered. "A heck of a long walk. But I reckon the exercise will make me sleep plenty to-night—if I get the chance."

II.

Fast walking brought the redhead in sight of the cow town of Wagon-wheel two hours after full darkness had come. Jimmy left the dead detective and the horse in the brush of the creek that flanked the town, and rode in slowly alone on Socks, whose limp was now barely noticeable.

It was not difficult to locate the sheriff's office. There were half a dozen horses lined at its rail, and he could hear the rumble of angry voices within as he dismounted. His entrance into the unplastered, shabby office was not even noticed.

A rawboned, grizzled cowman was smashing a fist on the desk at which sat a beefy man wearing a star and red with anger. Four more chapped and spurred men were grouped about.

"I tell yuh we can't stand it no longer, Hinchley," the spokesman was frothing. "We're sick o' waitin' for you to do something. We're bein' rustled into the poorhouse. Where is this Jimmy——"

"Sh-h!" Sheriff Bill Hinchley stormed, waving a desperate hand for silence. "Not so loud, Tug.

Keep your shirt on! An' don't jab that finger into my face."

"We want to know if this Jimmy Qui——"

The sheriff leaped up. "Yuh blasted fools!" he groaned. "I was told not tuh say a word to a livin' soul about him. But you five boys plagued me so much about not doin' anything, I let yuh in on the secret. But so help me, if yuh let slip another word, I'll call the whole thing off an' turn in my star. You know what happened to three others, don't yuh?"

Jimmy could have told the sheriff that the grim figure now had reached a total of four. He already had learned how the news of his coming had leaked out.

Some one now noticed Jimmy. A general nudging took place.

Hinchley glared at Jimmy, who indulged in a prodigious, sleepy yawn.

"Who are you," the sheriff growled testily. "Whatever yuh want, I ain't got time to listen right now."

Jimmy concluded his yawn. "I'm —— Ee-ah!" Another mighty yawn overcame him.

One of the group of cowmen angrily took a stride toward him, jerking a calloused thumb toward the door. He was big, with a tight mouth and hard eyes. "Get goin', yuh tramp! What yuh mean by sneakin' in here? I ought to boot yuh through that door."

Jimmy looked at the door in sleepy surprise. "Yuh don't mean that door there," he yawned. "Shucks it ain't even open. Yuh couldn't really kick a man through a closed door—now could yuh?"

"Easy Del!" the sheriff cried hastily.

But the tight-mouthed man, realizing he was being baited, leaped

upon the drowsy-faced redhead, his big hands spread to grab his victim. Jimmy moved faster. He faded beneath the big man's arms, and came up behind him with startling speed.

The next instant, the big man felt hands grasp his shirt and belt at the back. He tried to whirl. But he was too late. He felt himself going. He gave a thick howl of fury. Then he was sent skidding across the floor.

Wham! He crashed against the door with a jar that made the building quiver.

Jimmy stood there, his face suddenly drowsy again, the picture of guileless innocence.

"Nope. The door held," he remarked. "I figured it couldn't be done."

The big man had sat down, blinking and gasping. But he came to his feet with a vicious snarl of pure, murderous fury. His hands streaked to the brace of ivory-handled guns at his sides.

Then he took root, his body going rigid. Jimmy's face was still sleepy. But his hands had sprouted twin .45s.

There was a moment of taut silence in the room. The big man glared unbelievably. Then his hands abruptly quit his guns and swung wide away from them.

"That's better," Jimmy remarked. "Seems to me that you asked my name a few minutes ago, sheriff. I'm Jimmy Quick."

There was an uneasy stir. Sheriff Bill Hinchley looked a little wild, as well as embarrassed. Jimmy smiled innocently as the ranchers came out of their trance and prepared to fire questions.

But the man he had hurled against the door was first to speak. "Quick?" he gasped incredulously. "You're lyin'— That is, I don't sav— I don't believe yuh!"

"What makes you doubt it?" Jimmy shot at him abruptly.

But a babble of voices saved the big man the trouble of answering. Jimmy was surrounded by cowmen who wanted to know things.

But the redhead only yawned widely. "Nope, I haven't caught any rustlers yet," he silenced them. "Right now, I need a little rest. Been ridin' all day. Whenever I miss out on my regular sleep it makes me feel meaner than a bear in April."

The cowmen glanced at each other, disappointment and disgust growing in their faces. The old, raw-boned one threw a sour look at Bill Hinchley. Then he turned toward the door.

"Come on, boys," he snorted. "I reckon the drinks are on Hinchley, hey?" He gave Jimmy a disparaging glare. "Don't let nothin' interfere with your rest," he advised caustically. "There's plenty o' time. We've been waitin' for the law to help us for six months now. We're kind o' used to it."

They filed out in disgruntled silence. The big man went with them, shooting a final baleful glance at the redhead.

Jimmy looked at the sheriff inquiringly. The sheriff answered:

"They're the ranchers that operate the Five Point Pool. That big moose is Del Markey what runs the Rafter M, just west of town. They're on the prod. Can't blame 'em much. They're bein' rustled blind, deaf, an' dumb. An' derved if I've been able to do anything about it. I've lost forty pounds an' wore out my saddle in the last six months with nary a result."

"Cattle always leave some kind of a trail," Jimmy observed.

Hinchley wagged his head gloomily. "Not the way these rustlers

work. They don't make any big steals. They must just drift one or two steers at a time up into the Lobos. The ranchers don't get hep until they discover that a range has been thinned out plenty."

"But they've got to collect the critters somewhere an' trail 'em out of the country," Jimmy argued.

"They must make 'em fly through the air, then," the sheriff growled. "I've had every pass an' canyon guarded on the other side of the Lobos for six months. Nary a sign of a rustled cow ever come out on that side."

Out of force of habit Jimmy started another face-cracking yawn. But he abruptly broke it off when it was right at its peak. He snapped impatient fingers, and whirled toward the door.

"Dang it!" he muttered. "I must be really gettin' sleepy—or loco. I sure come within an ace of missin' a good bet."

As an afterthought, he waved Hinchley to join him. The redhead's short legs took on surprising speed as he moved down the sidewalk, heading toward a general store which was still open.

"What's the——" Hinchley began.

"Maybe you better buy it for me," Jimmy muttered, halting suddenly. "Yeah, that'll be better. I don't want to take a chance on arousing their suspicions."

"Buy what?" Hinchley said testily. "Whose suspicions?"

"Iodine. The rustlers'." Jimmy's whispered answer was terse. "I need it. Got a little plan on foot to-night. Hustle now. An' I need a whale of a fast horse. Got one?"

Things were developing beyond Hinchley's comprehension. But he dazedly went into the store and returned with the iodine. But Jimmy

regarded the size of the bottle dubiously.

"Not enough," he said. "Get a couple more like it. Hustle. I've got to be ridin'. Dern it, here goes another night's sleep to the dogs. Sometimes I sure wish I *was* a dog. All they do is snooze an' eat."

Hinchley did as he was told, in spite of a growing suspicion that he was dealing with a crazy man. But he had heard so much of Jimmy Quick's reputation that he hesitated to object. And there was some hard edge of purpose in the redhead's manner in spite of an occasional sleepy yawn.

"Now for the horse," Jimmy said with satisfaction, as he pocketed the bottles. "Where is it? An' say. I almost forgot somethin'. I reckon my brain *is* softenin'. Down in the brush just the other side of the crick ford you'll find a saddled horse carryin' a dead man. Better——"

"A *what?*" Hinchley was almost floored.

"A dead man," Jimmy said with a yawn. "A Cattle Association man. The rustlers murdered him this evenin'. I saw 'em do it. An' I figure that I can——"

He paused and watched a big man emerge from a saloon down the street, mount a powerful black horse, and head out of town at a fast pacc. He was Del Markey.

Jimmy turned and prodded the sheriff. "Hustle. A fast horse. The best you can get in a hurry."

Hinchley dazedly led him to the barn at the rear of the jail and brought out a dun with long legs, and a high hog back. The animal had power and speed in every line.

Jimmy had raced to the street and led Socks back. He shifted his saddle to the dun with speed.

He mounted. Then he looked

keenly at Hinchley. "Black hat," he muttered.

He abruptly swept off his sky blue hat. In the next instant, he had snatched Hinchley's weather-beaten black headgear, and clapped the vivid blue sombrero in its place.

"Take care o' my horse until he loses that limp," were Jimmy's final instructions. "An' bring that dead man in on the quiet. Don't let anybody know about him until you hear from me."

With a rush he was gone, feeding the spurs to the dun. Hinchley, his jaw slack, watched the redhead head out of town and vanish toward the creek ford. Jimmy had donned the black hat.

With an exclamation the sheriff swept the new blue hat from his head, dashed it on the ground and jumped on it. Then he went striding angrily to find the dead man.

III.

Jimmy spared the roan only until the animal had warmed up to a slight sweat. Then he pushed it to the limit. The animal put eight miles behind it in little more than an hour.

That was highly satisfactory to the redhead. He didn't believe any one else had covered that route fast enough to reach his objective ahead of him.

Jimmy had a mind that photographed past trails and new ranges. He left the main road at exactly the spot where he had struck it while walking toward Wagonwheel a few hours earlier. And even in the deceiving starlight, he found his way back to the little basin where the cattle detective had been ambushed.

As a precaution he halted some distance from it, and worked to it afoot. But it remained silent. He

relaxed, and even indulged in a yawn.

He found a comfortable spot against a small boulder, and sat down. He even cautiously rolled a cigarette. Long silent minutes dragged by. Half an hour. The redhead fell into a cat nap. An hour.

Then he aroused suddenly. The faint drum of hoofbeats had grown audible. They were still well distant, but approaching this spot.

"I thought they'd come," Jimmy muttered, fully awake in an instant. He became busy.

With quick, sure fingers he uncorked the three little bottles of iodine. He bent forward and awkwardly emptied their contents on the back of his shirt. The cold fluid soaked to his skin, causing his flesh to pimple.

He moved out into the basin and lay down, curling up with one arm thrown over his face. He had removed the black hat and rolled it a few feet away from his head. He allowed his body to assume a stiff, stark rigidity, resembling death. He lay in almost the exact spot where the murdered detective had fallen.

Jimmy Quick was taking the rôle of a dead man. The murdered man had worn wrinkled, patched jeans. So did Jimmy. Jimmy's faded wool shirt was gray, and the victim's had been of a faded greenish hue. But that would hardly be detected in darkness. The blue hat would have been a dead give-away of course, but Hinchley's headgear had taken care of this point.

And as a final effect, Jimmy had thrust the scrawled note in his shirt, with its edge jutting out.

The hoofbeats grew louder. There were two riders and a spare horse. They came to the basin rim and paused for a moment. Satisfied that

they were safe, they came on, and dismounted in the darkness.

"That looks like the hombre right there, Ike," a voice hoarse with nervousness sounded. "Yeah. It's him all right."

They came striding up, breathing heavily. Whoever they were they had no liking for this job. Jimmy didn't blame them. He tensed, ready to draw and cover them. Then he relaxed.

"Bring up that other horse, Hunk," the second one said. "I don't savvy why the boss wants him taken in. If I had the say I'd bury him an' wouldn't waste no time about it."

"Me too. What dif does it make who he is. He's dead now, anyway. It looks like dang fool curiosity to me. I don't hanker to have a corpse layin' aroun'."

A match flared and Jimmy set himself for trouble again. But the pair only took a glimpse, then the match went out. A hand reached down and took the note from Jimmy's shirt.

"Git ahold of him," one growled. "We'll heave him across the saddle before that bronc knows what's up."

"Wait a minute," the other said greedily. "He's got a swell brace of sixes. Let's take 'em for ourselves."

Jimmy let them remove his guns. They were forced to roll him over a couple of times to get them free, and they were not gentle about it. He reflected that he would have to take his chances on getting them back. He had decided to play out this string of luck that he had not counted on. This pair seemed to be under orders to take the body in to their leader for identification.

They now seized him, and with a word, swung him over a saddle roughly. The horse, startled and resenting such a burden, gave a leap.

But one of them had seized the reins and it soon quieted.

"Tie him on," one said. Then he gave an oath of repugnance. His hand had encountered Jimmy's soaked shirt.

Jimmy had not counted on being tied. But it was too late to do anything about it. He dangled there, and dismay swept him as they lashed his limp arms and ankles tightly to the cinch rings. They touched him only gingerly, and that averted discovery of the true nature of the "corpse."

Jimmy's first hope had been that they would lead him far enough to give him an idea of their destination. He had then planned on capturing them, and going on ahead alone to scout the situation. That they were part of the rustling gang was certain. And that they were taking him to the leader of the Secret Six was also assured.

They wasted no time in starting, and they hit a trotting pace that was torture to the redhead. His horse was being led by the second man, and that fact, together with the shield of darkness, gave him a chance to squirm his body from side to side slightly. But dangling as he was with his head down on one side and his legs on the other, it was a trip that he would never want to repeat.

"I sure got my foot in it this time," he thought. "An' I'm likely to really be a corpse before this is ended."

He tried to work his hands free, but failed. His head began to drum because of its inverted position, and he occasionally took a desperate chance to lift it slightly and relieve the pressure.

He saw that they were heading north along the base of the Lobos.

From a bench he could see the lights of Wagonwheel a few miles away.

After what seemed endless hours to Jimmy, though he knew that not more than half a dozen miles had been passed, he saw far ahead the lights of a ranch. He realized that they were heading for it.

The redhead was not greatly surprised. He would soon know the secret of the rustling mystery. But it was knowledge that would likely never be of any benefit.

The pair pushed their horses faster and came boldly into the ranch yard. The ranch was surrounded by a wire fence, and they passed through an opened wagon gate. At the sound of their arrival the ranch door opened, and four men poured forth. Jimmy had allowed his head to turn. His eyes were open, and he saw the big, heavy-shouldered figure that strode in the lead.

He was Del Markey, one of the ranchers in the Five Point Pool. This was Markey's Rafter M.

The redhead now knew how the word of his coming to the Wagonwheel country had reached the Secret Six. Del Markey himself was their leader. In fact, Markey probably was the Secret Six in person. He likely had adopted that designation merely to cast mystery over his operations against the other members of the cattle pool.

No wonder Sheriff Hinchley had never been able to find a trace of stolen cattle beyond the Lobos. The steers had never even been taken off this range, Jimmy realized.

They had been brought to Markey's Rafter M, their brands worked over, and then no doubt had been shipped openly to market, with perhaps their real owners giving neighborly help on the trail. The pool members evidently trusted one an-

other fully, and Markey had taken the utmost advantage of them.

Jimmy had realized at the outset that some of the pool members must have been responsible for the leak. That had brought the realization that the guilty man would no doubt be alarmed on discovering that the wrong man had been murdered.

Jimmy had leaped to the conclusion that an attempt would be made immediately to hide the body, or at least destroy that note that had been placed on it. Therefore his quick departure from Wagonwheel.

Well, his idea had clicked up to a certain point. But now the redhead was in a desperate position. Del Markey was striding up eagerly. "Found him, huh?" Markey said. "Let's unload him an' take him inside an' see who the hombre is."

They surrounded him, and hands released the thongs that bound him. Jimmy remained inertly limp. It was dark enough out here to shield him. But two of them lugged him toward the open door of the lighted ranch. Markey was striding ahead.

They carried Jimmy in and laid him on the floor. Jimmy's head had lolled back, and he allowed his mouth to dangle open, knowing that Markey would not likely identify him while they were carrying him.

But now Markey was beginning to kneel. Jimmy's eyes were wide and staring. He saw the muscles around Markey's mouth leap in the first quiver of consternation. He had recognized Jimmy!

IV.

Instantly the redhead came alive. He drew up his legs, and shot them out like lightning into Markey's stomach. The big man, his breath gushing from him in a gasp of pain, was hurled flat on his back.

The redhead leaped to his feet. Five faces, stricken by utter, appalled consternation surrounded him. They were all leathery, hard faces. But now sheer astonishment, and superstitious dread transfixed their countenances, freezing their muscles for an instant.

Spat! Jimmy's fist went out like a sledge hammer.

It knocked one of them senseless against a wall. Hardly pausing in stride, the redhead was on another. His other fist caught its target a glancing blow. But this time he held the falling man long enough to jerk one of his six-guns.

The others had come out of their trance now. A wiry, little man with beady eyes had jerked his guns. Jimmy thumbed a roaring shot at him instantly. The little man was lifted up on his heels, his arms curving grotesquely in agony. His guns thundered into the floor as he fell.

With a sweep of an arm Jimmy knocked the oil lamp from the table. It crashed directly into the maw of the mud-and-rock fireplace. There were a few seconds of darkness before the spilled oil ignited from the guttering wick.

Jimmy used these seconds to full advantage. He whirled, ducked low and headed for the door, which was open. Yells, oaths, and groans resounded in the place. But the rustlers were forced to hold their fire for fear of hitting one another.

Jimmy encountered one of them. But the blocky redhead was charging like a battering-ram, and he knocked the man aside. A gun thundered at him as he whizzed through the door. But the shot was an instant too late.

Jimmy leaped three long strides clear of the door, then whirled, and sent two bullets into the opening.

This stopped the rush that had started for it.

"The back door. Out the other way." It was Del Markey's gasping voice. "Git him! Don't let him git away!"

The redhead turned and raced to the three saddled horses upon which he and the pair of rustlers had arrived. He landed astride one of them, and sank his spurs.

Guns began to roar from the rear corner of the house. The redhead bent low and aimed the animal for the gate a hundred yards away. He felt the horse leap and stagger slightly. A bullet had struck it. But the animal evidently wasn't seriously hurt, for it plunged ahead with even greater speed.

"Stop him! Stop him!" Del Markey was roaring the words desperately.

But Jimmy was almost beyond effective range already, and the darkness was swallowing him.

"Git horses!" Markey howled. "We got to run him down. It's our necks if we don't."

Jimmy heard their boots thudding. Markey and one other were racing to mount the two animals that stood already saddled. Two others were heading for the corral to saddle up.

The odds were four to one. But they had been six to one originally. A dead man, and another unconscious from the power of the redhead's fist, still lay in the ranch house.

"Four to one," Jimmy thought.

The ranch gate was looming up just ahead. Beyond it lay the dark prairie. There would not be a chance in a hundred of them finding him once he cleared the wired yard. He would be safe. But Markey and his killers would also be sure to head for the Lobos and escape.

There was a lariat on this saddle. Jimmy jerked the tie-string and lifted the coiled rope as the horse shot between the high posts marking the gate. In the next instant, the redhead's boots hit the ground. He had made a flying dismount.

Scarcely losing stride he came about, playing out the loop. He could hear horses coming. Four of them. Evidently there had been at least two more animals under saddle somewhere, for all of his foes were on their way in a body.

Jimmy whirled the loop, and it settled over the far post. He instantly ran to the nearest post and took two dallies around it.

Then he crouched down just as the mass of racing riders came looming up against the stars, their guns held aloft, their eyes keening the range for sight of their quarry.

Wham! Crash! The stretched rope caught them breast high, picking them from the saddles in a flash.

One horse stumbled and went down, but clear of the four riders.

Jimmy leaped into view. Del Markey was coming to his knees, his teeth bared. He had escaped with nothing more than a hard jar that he had shaken off instantly.

Jimmy saw Markey's guns swing toward him. The redhead fired automatically. Markey lurched to his feet, tried to bring his sights on the redhead again, then pitched forward on his face. He was dead.

Jimmy kicked the gun from the unsteady hands of another rustler who had been badly shaken up by his fall. The remaining pair were not even in condition to attempt resistance. They were tightly bound with the rope that had beaten them before they did regain their strength.

Sheriff Bill Hinchley had spent a sleepless night waiting for Jimmy to

come back. Dawn was breaking when he heard horses entering the town. He emerged from his office and gaped astounded at the procession that came filing down the street.

In the lead were four sullen prisoners, arms bound behind them, and legs tied to their stirrups. Two dead men dangled from the backs of other horses.

At the rear, his saddle festooned with gun belts, a brace of them dangling sleepily in his hands, came a drowsy-faced, round-bodied figure. Jimmy Quick's red hair was bared to the dawn chill.

"Here's your rustlers," Jimmy yawned, seeing Hinchley. "Took me all night to get 'em. I reckon it won't be hard to prove they done it. In fact some of 'em are ready to point out a lot of wet cattle that's wearing the Rafter M. After this, tell the men in the Five Point Pool not to trust their neighbors too far."

Then Jimmy noted that Hinchley was bareheaded, too.

"Where's my hat?" he asked with quick concern.

Hinchley feebly went into the office and returned with a battered, dusty object that had once been vividly blue.

"Now how in heck did that happen?" Jimmy said wrathfully. "Dern it, I can't keep a hat more'n a week without it bein' ruined! How did thet happen, Hinchley?"

But Sheriff Bill Hinchley was in no mood to answer a question like that at the moment.

An' yuh kin hardly blame the sheriff fer thet! Jimmy Quick may be sleepy most o' the time, but he kin move fast enough ter take an hombre's breath away when he wants ter. He shore cleaned up thet nest o' sidewinders, too. There'll be another story about him in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss it!



Señor Red Mask At Haunted Mesa

By Guy L. Maynard

Author of "Señor Red Mask's Border Trail," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH TRAIL.

EVERY stride of his big black horse carried "Señor Red Mask" nearer to the grim and merciless death that lay in wait for him on Haunted Mesa.

Yet the masked rider of the justice trails held to his course. Only the gleaming narrowed eyes that gazed out through the slits in his scarlet silk mask betrayed the fact that he sensed his danger.

"Reckon there ain't a worse stretch o' country south of the Rio Grande than this mesa," the young

caballero murmured to himself as he glanced over the desolate waste of cactus, sage and sandstone which was broken here and there by chaparral-choked canyons and barren ridges. "They say it's haunted, but I'll bet the spooks are all carryin' six-guns."

The fiery rays of a brazen Mexican sun flashed on the rows of silver conchas and beautifully designed filigree that ornamented the rider's fine *charro* costume of black velvet. The silver mountings of his saddle and bridle gleamed like mirrors.

From the massive black sombrero that covered the caballero's dark

curly hair to his silver-spurred boots of soft black kid, he was garbed like a rich *ranchero* of old Mexico.

Such a striking figure, riding openly across the lonely mesa, could not fail to attract the attention of any prowlers who might be abroad at that hour. And as if to add to the peril which his presence in that evil spot involved, Señor Red Mask recklessly raised his voice in song.

It was not a love tune or a simple air of the cattle ranges, but a grim Spanish fighting song which the Mexican *rurales* chanted as they chased bandits below the border:

"As the hawks of the Rio strike their prey,
We ride the dim trails and outlaws slay!"

The rich tenor voice of the masked singer carried far on the heated mid-day air. It was heard by three of the most evil cutthroats that ever infested that lawless region.

Crouching like cougars behind a clump of scrub mesquite, these hombres whipped out their six-guns and peered through the leafy cover for a glimpse of the bold singer.

"Eet ees the *maldito* Señor Red Mask!" hissed a scowling, leather-clad Mexican bandit. "Always he seengs that accursed song of the *rurales*, 'Camino de Muerte'—'The Death Trail.' An' when he seengs eet, somebody ees sure to die."

A husky, scar-faced gringo outlaw grinned wolfishly, thrusting his long-barreled .45 between the slim branches of a mesquite and lining the sight on the approaching horseman.

"Thet song is right fittin' fer the occasion, Lobo," jeered "Scar" Dugan. "Thet masked dude is shore ridin' his own death trail."

The third bushwhacker uttered a Spanish oath as he slapped at a crawling red ant on his bull neck.

He was a chunky, dish-faced half-breed.

"We weel all take a shot at thees caballero an' mak' sure of keeling heem," growled the breed, who was well nicknamed "Puerco," which is Spanish for "hog." "Me, I weesh to finish thees job ver' queeck an' leave Haunted Mesa."

The scarred gringo grunted his contempt of his two companions, without shifting his narrowed greenish eyes from the oncoming rider.

"Yuh two jaspers is skeered of ha'n'ts," sneered Scar Dugan. "But don't worry none. Soon as we plug Señor Red Mask, we'll high-tail it ter the shack where El Hiena an' the rest of the gang is waitin' fer us. Thar ain't no spooks goin' ter bother a bunch of tough rannies like us."

The red-masked horseman was by this time less than a hundred yards from the bushwhackers. As his quick-stepping mount brought him closer and closer to them, the border crooks could see, below his half mask, the brown-skinned jaws and the tiny spike-pointed mustache.

And as they watched, a jeering smile quirked a corner of their intended victim's mouth, disclosing strong white teeth. It was as if he sensed his murderous enemies' presence and was defying them.

"Quick, hombres, line yore sights!" Scar Dugan snapped in a hoarse whisper to his companions. "Lobo, yuh aim at the top button on his jacket. Puerco, draw yore bead on the center of his red sash. Me, I aims ter plug a hole in thet red mask, right between the eye slits."

So interested were the three bushwhackers in the murder they were about to commit, that not one of them sensed the sudden appearance of a fourth party in the chaparral at their backs.

Scar Dugan's trigger finger was already tightening, his thick lips were half open to give the word that would send three deadly slugs of hot lead hurtling at Señor Red Mask, when a voice that was edged like a knife rasped in Spanish:

"Drop those guns! Up with your hands!"

Taken completely by surprise, the icy fingers of death clutching at their evil hearts, the three killers let their six-guns drop to the ground. Slowly their hands lifted.

At a sharp prod of a six-gun muzzle in their backs, each of the three bushwhackers moved forward into the open trail.

This action of his skulking enemies was the signal for Señor Red Mask to touch spurs to his mount and dash up to the little group.

"Good work, Gray Eagle!" he shouted in Spanish, reining his black horse to a sliding halt and leaping to the ground. "The trap is sprung, and look what it's caught!"

A middle-aged Mexican Indian, tall, straight, and muscular, turned his bronzed face toward Señor Red Mask, although the heavy .45 in his hand still covered his captives. In spite of his ragged cotton garments and well-worn sandals, the redskin was as dignified as an ancient Aztec chief.

"*Si, señor*, it is as you say," said the Indian with a solemn nod. "But please do not set such a trap again. The Señor took a great chance of death if Gray Eagle had not got here in time."

Scar Dugan growled a bitter oath of chagrin. "What's this yo're gabblin' about? Yuh played a smart trick on us, huh?"

A grim smile lighted Señor Red Mask's dark-stained face. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes

as he peered through slits in his scarlet mask at the three ruffians.

"Eet was a game that two could play, *hombres*," said the caballero in broken English. "I saw you sneaking into the mesquite to hide, an' I sent my amigo, Gray Eagle, to stalk you like the cougar stalks the deer at the water hole, *si*. An' now we weel talk of your master, El Hiena. Ees eet true that he ees alive an' ees here on Haunted Mesa?"

"Yo're danged right the Hyena is alive," snapped Scar, the gringo gunman. "Yuh thought yuh killed him in thet big fight in the old jail at the Town of a Thousand Thieves, but yuh got fooled thet time. Yuh only cracked his ribs."

"That ees what I heard," coolly remarked Señor Red Mask. "So I hit the trail an' came to thees mesa een search of heem."

"An' thet ain't all yuh come hyar lookin' fer," retorted Scar Dugan. "Yo're aimin' ter locate another cache of the gold thet was hid by yore dead amigo, Jim Trent."

Señor Red Mask tensed at mention of that name. His eyes flashed in sudden anger.

Jim Trent had been the boyhood pard of Tom Goodwin, which was Señor Red Mask's real name. Tom's Bar G Ranch adjoined the Trent range. And when young Jim was horribly tortured to death by the fiendish bandit chief, "El Hiena," Señor Red Mask had sworn to bring the murderer to justice.

Also, he had determined to recover the gold which Trent had taken from his Mexican mine and cached in various spots as he tried to make his way to the border and safety. That treasure was sorely needed by Jim Trent's widowed mother, to pay off the mortgage on her ranch and replace rustled cattle.

"You are right about that gold," gritted Señor Red Mask. "I weel find eet as I did the other cache, but first I weel get the man who murder Jeem Trent. An' you weel all go weeth me an' show me where he hides."

Snarls and growls of rage from the three crooks greeted these words. They well knew what their fate would be if El Hiena found that they had betrayed him, in addition to allowing themselves to be tricked into an easy capture.

"Yuh'll never git away with it, yuh blasted dude!" declared Scar Dugan furiously. "The chief will cut the hide offn yuh with his bull-whip, same as he did thet young ranny, Trent, after chasin' him all over this part of Mexico tryin' ter git his gold away from him."

"*Andale!* Lead the way to those broncs wheech you have hide een the chaparral," sternly ordered Señor Red Mask.

Turning sullenly, the crooks started to circle the clump of mesquite in which they had made their ambush.

The Indian, Gray Eagle, strode swiftly toward a near-by coulee in which he had left his mount while stalking the bushwhackers.

Leading his black horse, Thunder, Señor Red Mask followed closely on the heels of the prisoners. Knowing their desperate character, he was on the alert for any move to escape. Yet it came, and in a way that took him by surprise.

Puerco, the half-breed, pretended to stumble over a sagebrush. His arms dropped. And as he straightened up, with a twist of his thick-set piggyish body, one hand darted under his greasy leather jacket. There was a flash of sunlight on steel.

Brang! The sudden roar of a .45

in Señor Red Mask's hand was followed by the thud of a heavy body striking the ground.

Puerco, the half-breed knifer, had almost succeeded in his treacherous attempt at murder. But he had pitted his speed and cunning against the matchless draw of a master of the six-gun.

In the split second in which Puerco's keen blade was poised for the throw, Señor Red Mask had snatched one of his pearl-handled Colts from its holster under the scarlet silk sash that encircled his waist. His bullet had beat the outlaw's knife.

Stooping, the caballero plucked two twigs of green sage from a bush at his feet. While the remaining pair of ruffians watched with fear-widened eyes, he stepped quickly to the side of their dead companion and placed the crossed bits of sage on the hombre's chest.

"Eet ees the bad man's brand," hoarsely muttered the Mexican called "Lobo."

"Eet was called that een the old days," said Señor Red Mask. "But now eet ees the mark of Señor Red Mask. Who knows when you weel be——"

The caballero suddenly checked himself, whirled to glance with startled eyes at a troop of horsemen who came thundering round the shoulder of a gaunt ridge a half mile distant.

"The rurales!" cried Señor Red Mask in dismay. "They heard the shot."

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY RIDER.

SEÑOR RED MASK bounded to the side of his black horse. At a single leap he gained the saddle. There was no time to try to get away with his captives.

His fate would be the same as theirs if all were caught. Those Mexican mounted police were grim fellows. They shot first and talked afterward.

The caballero wheeled his mount and rolled his blunted silver rowels on the black's satiny flanks. "Let's go!" he shouted.

Looking back a moment later, Señor Red Mask glimpsed the ruffianly Scar and Lobo streaking through the chaparral toward the horses they had left under cover. He had little doubt that they would escape, but it couldn't be helped.

It was Gray Eagle, the faithful Mexican Indian, about whom Señor Red Mask was most concerned. If the rurales discovered him in the coulee they might shoot him down before the buckskin pony he rode could carry him out of range.

Deliberately slowing the pace of his speedy mount, the daring caballero jerked a six-gun from his holster and blazed away over the heads of the oncoming rurales.

"That'll fetch 'em, or I don't savvy their fightin' temper," Señor Red Mask told himself grimly.

The ruse to draw the chase after himself, succeeded almost too well for the safety of the reckless masked rider. With angry yells, the whole troupe of about twenty rurales, led by a black-mustached captain, spurred furiously after him. Carabines began to crack viciously. Bullets buzzed over the lone fugitive's head like a swarm of hornets.

"Gosh, them hombres mean business an' no foolin', Thunder!" Señor Red Mask cried into the laid-back ears of his black. "Yuh got ter shove a lot of this mesa between us an' them, pronto."

The black was of mixed thoroughbred and mustang breeding. It had speed to spare and the spirit and

mettle to use it. The moment its master gave the word, it let out its stride with such amazing swiftness that the running mounts of the rurales were quickly left behind.

Señor Red Mask's object had been gained. While the rurales were chasing him, Gray Eagle dashed away in the opposite direction.

Nor were the two surviving outlaws slow in making their get-away. Familiar with every foot of the broken surface of the mesa, they dove into a sheltering arroyo and hit for El Hiena's hide-out.

Meanwhile, the rurales, seeing that they were playing a losing game all around, divided their force and apparently began to maneuver Señor Red Mask into a trap.

"They know the lay of the land up here, an' I don't," he told himself uneasily, as he glanced backward over his shoulder and saw what his pursuers were doing. "It sure looks as if they aim ter drive me into a box canyon or onto the rim of a cliff that Thunder can't go down. I got ter fool 'em quick."

Waiting until the rurales were well strung out, the caballero suddenly wheeled his racing mount at right angles to the course he had been taking.

A low ridge, like a huge pointing finger, extended far onto the mesa from a spur of mountains to the northward.

Once Señor Red Mask had rounded the shoulder of that ridge, he would be safe from bullets and spying eyes for a while—long enough to find a hiding place.

With the yells of his pursuers growing fainter with every stride of the black bronc, Señor Red Mask swept toward the ridge point. Almost to it, he saw a sight so strange that he caught his breath with a startled gasp.

"Fer Pete's sake! A skeleton on a white hoss!" he cried.

Then as he stared more closely at the weird figure on the crest of the ridge, he discovered that the bony framework was merely painted in white on a long black robe that covered the mysterious rider of the white horse. A black hood upon which a grinning white skull was drawn, completed the spooky horse-man's disguise.

Not being superstitious, Señor Red Mask drove ahead at top speed. There was real danger behind him. He would take his chances with what lay beyond that ridge.

But as the caballero raced past the point of the steep rise, he saw the phantom rider suddenly wheel back into cover of the piñon pines that bristled on the ridge crest.

A few moments later, Red Mask found himself in the mouth of a wide, brushy canyon.

For the time being, at least, he seemed safe from his enemies. Yet he would have to keep going deeper into the rough country that lay ahead. The rurales would soon be at his heels if he stayed out on the open mesa.

The tracks of shod horses warned him that the trail had been recently used. He rode warily round the first sharp turn of the canyon wall, alert for sight or sound of an enemy.

"Like as not that spook rider has been sashayin' up an' down this trail," Señor Red Mask told himself cautiously. "An' then again, mebbe it's been used by them ornery——"

The caballero stopped short, at the same instant reining his mount to a sudden halt. Almost dead ahead, out of the thick chaparral that lined the trail, the dark muzzles of three long-barreled six-guns frowned at him. The owners of the guns were completely hidden.

A quick glance at the brush on each side of the caballero revealed several other wicked-looking gun muzzles aimed full at his body. He was hemmed in with a ring of death—in the hands of silent, mysterious gunmen.

There was no chance of fighting his way out of their clutches. At the first move of his hands toward holstered guns, he would be riddled with a dozen bullets.

Slowly, the caballero lifted his hands in token of surrender. Then he heard a sound that sent an icy chill coursing through his veins.

"Hey-hey-y-y!" The fearful cry, like the laugh of a hyena, woke the echoes of the rock-walled canyon.

"It's El Hiena an' his gang—they'll kill me!" Señor Red Mask gasped, as a dozen evil figures stepped into view.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE MESSAGE.

OUT of the gang of scowling ruffians that ringed the helpless Señor Red Mask, stepped the hideous brute that was their leader, El Hiena—the "Hyena." The greasy leather garments that he wore, combined with the shaggy black hair that covered his head, chest and arms, gave the savage outlaw chief the appearance of an animal.

Peering at his captive with little, yellowish eyes that glittered with the evil joy of a fiend, El Hiena gave vent to another burst of the horrid hyena laughter that had given him his nickname.

"Hey-hey-hey-y-y! So the mighty Señor Red Mask has honored the poor El Hiena with a visit!" taunted the half-breed cutthroat. "But I was expecting it, and I sent some of my men to meet you. They came

back to tell me that you were in great trouble with the rurales, and I made ready to help you."

As he spoke, El Hiena holstered the heavy .45 he had been holding in his right hand. From his left hand he shifted a long-lashed bullwhip to the right.

"Give him a taste of the rawhide, chief!" growled a gringo outlaw. "He's shore got it comin' ter him fer sneakin' up on us an' shootin' Puerco in the back. We'd 'a' got him, out on the mesa, if he hadn't of been forkin' thet danged black race hoss."

Señor Red Mask turned in surprise at the familiar voice. At the edge of the chaparral stood the burly gringo outlaw, Scar Dugan. And close beside him was the ornery Mexican called Lobo. Not being chased by the rurales, they had ridden straight to their hide-out with a story that they hoped would save them from trouble with their murderous chief.

"That ees a lie, you yellow-striped skunk!" fearlessly declared Señor Red Mask. "You are the coward who are afraid to tell your buzzard-eating coyote of a master the truth about that shooting."

Doubtless fearing the effect of what the caballero might tell regarding their slip-up on the ambush, both the gringo and the Mexican instantly decided to silence him forever. But before they could get their guns clear of leather, the shrill, rasping voice of El Hiena warned them to lay off.

The outlaw chief's gloating good humor over his capture of such a dangerous and hated enemy changed to a furious, murderous rage.

The insults of the defiant Señor Red Mask rankled in his brain, already aflame with the desire for vengeance on the caballero. For in

a previous encounter with El Hiena, Señor Red Mask had recovered a cache of gold hidden in the outlaw's hide-out, had almost wiped out his gang of cutthroats, and had left the villainous outlaw chief himself for dead. Now, the tables were turned.

"You weel not dare to keel heem!" El Hiena howled in broken English to his henchmen. "That ees for me—weeth the bullwhip! Breeng heem to the *casa*, pronto!"

Rough hands grasped the reins of the caballero's nervous mount. Others bound the captive's hands covered with cocked six-guns. Then he was hustled up the trail.

A few minutes later, an old adobe ranch house with crumbling walls and dilapidated tile roof, came in sight. It was built on a narrow bench of ground at the foot of the canyon wall.

Dragged from his saddle and shoved through the sagging doorway of the house, Señor Red Mask came to a halt in a large room that was evidently used both for sleeping and eating purposes.

Remnants of a meal which had doubtless been hastily left a short while before, when the outlaws were warned to be on the watch for him, were still on a long, pine-board table. Bunks filled with tumbled blankets lined the walls.

Señor Red Mask glanced keenly over the room. This old ranch held a strong interest for him, and for a reason which was very soon to be shown.

"Search heem!" El Hiena sharply ordered a hulking gringo who stood beside the captive. "Eet may be that he ees carrying something that weel tell us where the gold of the dead Jeem Trent, ees hid."

Señor Red Mask started, but caught himself instantly. The cunning outlaw chief had guessed right.

There was something in his pocket that would tell where the gold which had finally cost young Jim Trent his life was cached.

But a moment's thought told the caballero that his captors were almost certain to be disappointed in what they found on him. They would hardly be able to make use of the strange object of their search.

"You will never find the gold, hombre," sneered Señor Red Mask. "But you will soon be very sure to find something which is much better for a skunk like you."

El Hiena snarled a Spanish oath. While his henchman roughly went through Señor Red Mask's pockets, the bandit leader stood glowering at his captive.

He was hunched over in a crouch as if he were about to spring upon the helpless Señor Red Mask. His extremely long arms dangled loosely, the blunt-fingered hands almost touching the floor. With short, spindle-shanked legs, his massive upper body still made him a man of tremendous strength.

"What is this thing you speak of?" the Hyena shrilled angrily.

The captive gave a grim chuckle. "A cross of sage on your chest—the bad man's brand which is the mark of Señor Red Mask," he said.

Growling deep in his corded throat, the furious El Hiena leaped at the caballero. But before his clutching hands could throttle the tormenting prisoner, he was interrupted by the outlaw who was searching Señor Red Mask.

"I got it! Hyar's a note thet'll likely tell whar the treasure is, chief!" suddenly called out the searcher, at the same time thrusting a scrap of paper into one of El Hiena's open hands.

"Ha! Who knows what thees is?" the bandit chief muttered as he hur-

riedly opened the paper and glanced at its crudely pencil-printed contents. "Eet ees written een Engleesh, wheech I no can read."

Turning to Scar Dugan, El Hiena ordered him to read the note.

"Shore, I kin read it, but it don't make no sense," said the scar-faced outlaw after he had looked at the scrawl on the paper. "Hyar's what it says:

"TOM: If thieves find gold where the grass is green in winter over my grandfather's cellar door they will talk of buying a big ranch with a fine house. But buzzards feed on the bodies of haunted crooks that cover mesa. JIM."

"Haw-haw! Thet's a good one about us buying a ranch with a fine house when we git the gold," guffawed a rawboned, gray-bearded old border crook. "Thet Jim Trent was plumb loco."

Lobo, the Mexican cutthroat, dragged deeply on a marihuana cigarette to give him the false courage he needed. His murky eyes rolled fearfully.

"But what of those ghosts which will haunt us till our bodies cover the mesa?" quavered Lobo superstitiously.

El Hiena snarled through the black beard which covered his face. "Fools!" he cried. "There is another meaning to that message. What it is, this *maldito* Señor Red Mask will tell us pronto."

As he spoke, El Hiena grabbed the paper and held it before the eyes of his captive. But Señor Red Mask had no intention of talking.

He knew the key to this cipher message which his dead pard had left in the first cache of gold the caballero had recovered. He had already figured out its real meaning, and he did not believe the crooks were smart enough to decipher it.

"I will tell you nothing," firmly declared Señor Red Mask.

"*Caramba*, we shall see," said El Hiena.

Under orders from their chief, two husky ruffians forced Señor Red Mask back against the ledge of an open window. His hands, which were already bound behind his back, were made fast to a wooden bar at the base of the low opening.

Helpless, the caballero faced his foes. He realized that the end was close at hand. The fiendish El Hiena, a mixture of Apache, Mexican, and gringo, delighted in torturing his victims to death with his terrible rawhide bullwhip.

And Señor Red Mask was not deceived into thinking that he could save his life by telling where the gold was cached. The Hyena had not forgotten the lashing and the bone-breaking which the caballero had given him, a few weeks before. Only the captive's life would pay for that.

"He aims ter finish me this time, whether he gets the gold or not," Señor Red Mask told himself. "He's so sure of it that he ain't even takin' my guns or pullin' off my mask. But I ain't givin' up, as long as I kin draw breath."

El Hiena stepped back several paces, to get the proper distance for using his long whip.

With fascinated eyes, the doomed caballero watched his murderous captor raise the sixteen-foot bullwhip in his big, hairy hand.

A deft twist of the bandit chief's powerful arm and wrist sent the keen rawhide lash hissing backward, ready for the first awful stroke.

In another moment, it would be ripping and slashing into the unprotected flesh of the victim's face and neck.

But in that moment, when he

waited for the agonizing torture to begin, Señor Red Mask heard a whispered word of encouragement at his back, so faint that he could scarcely tell it from the light rustling of leaves on a stunted cottonwood tree just outside the window.

Without giving the slightest sign that anything unusual had occurred, the caballero waited for the next move of his unseen friend.

"It must be Gray Eagle," he told himself hopefully. "But what kin he do against all this gang of killers thet's watchin' me like hungry lobo wolves."

Then he felt a slight tug on the rope which bound him to the bar on the window ledge. An arm had reached through the open window, its owner crouching out of sight. A knife began cutting at the caballero's bonds. But would it do its work in time?

"Hey-hey-y-y!" A shriek of hyena laughter rang through the room, bringing a shudder to the prisoner's tensed body. "Now, the whip will tear out your eyes, Señor Red Mask!" El Hiena shouted.

Horror-stricken, Señor Red Mask forced himself to stand perfectly still. He could still feel the cutting of the knife on the rope that bound his wrists.

Those few seconds since his would-be rescuer had arrived seemed like hours. Would he never finish severing the tough rawhide?

The thought burned into Señor Red Mask's brain that he would rather draw his guns and go down fighting the whole gang, than to have that terrible lash tear out his eyes.

El Hiena's long powerful right arm suddenly moved forward.

Swish! The long lash of the bullwhip hissed and darted like a striking snake.

Then something happened—something that left the watching cut-throat gang gasping in astonishment.

CHAPTER IV.

EL HIENA SCHEMES.

WITH the hissing lash almost biting his flesh, Señor Red Mask felt his hands freed. In the same instant, he jerked his head to one side. The rawhide snapper of the bull-whip whizzed past, missing its target by a fraction of an inch.

Before the surprised outlaws fully realized what had happened, Señor Red Mask's darting hands had whipped out the pair of long six-guns he still carried.

Crash! Bang! The blasting roar of the .45s held the gang at bay for the instant that the caballero needed to whirl and leap through the open window.

A moment later, he was running around a corner of the ranch house. Gray Eagle, his faithful Indian guide and helper, was gliding at his side.

"Where are the horses?" panted Señor Red Mask as the Indian motioned for him to follow into the heavy brush of the canyon bottom. "I left Thunder in front of the house, but I don't see him now."

"Gray Eagle took him into the chaparral when the outlaws entered the house," the Indian explained.

Soft nickers of affection from the big black stallion and from a clean-limbed buckskin pony greeted the caballero a few seconds later. Both horses were his most prized possessions, although he allowed Gray Eagle to ride the buckskin when he didn't need it.

A sudden uproar of yells from the direction of the adobe ranch house warned the two fugitives that they were still in plenty of danger.

"*Vamonos, amigo!*" urged Señor Red Mask, as he swung into his silver-mounted saddle and rolled his spurs.

Gray Eagle quickly mounted the buckskin and followed the caballero's lead.

The two horsemen streaked down the canyon trail with not a moment to spare. For they were sighted by the furious crooks just as they were rounding a bend of the canyon wall. In a hail of lead they made a narrow escape.

"Into your saddles and chase them!" El Hiena howled, and then, in the same breath, shouted for them to remain at the ranch. "It is no use. They have very fast *caballos* and we cannot catch them. But we have that locoed message we took from Señor Red Mask. You, Scar, try very hard to figure out what it means."

The scar-faced gringo ruffian took the cipher message from El Hiena and frowned over it for several minutes.

"It ain't no use tryin', chief. I cain't make head or tail out o' the danged crazy stuff," Scar finally admitted. "But if I was ter make a guess, I'd say thet it means the gold is hid somewheres in this old ranch house."

"Then we will tear the house to pieces and find it," El Hiena declared with a vicious oath.

The doubtful silence that followed this announcement made it plain that the lazy crooks had no relish for such a hard task as wrecking the ancient building. But a sudden shrill cackle of hyena laughter cut short their reflections.

"Hey-y-y! I have it!" cried El Hiena, cracking his great bull-whip like a pistol to give point to his words. "I have thought of a way to catch Señor Red Mask and

get the gold at the same time. Listen hombres!"

When the outlaws had gathered closely round their chief, El Hiena talked rapidly for a few moments.

"Buena, chief! That's a great idea!" shouted a gringo gunman, when the bandit leader had finished. "I knowed yuh could outsmart that red-masked dude!"

"Vamose, then!" ordered the grinning Hyena.

Rushing to their horses, the whole gang mounted and rode away down the canyon.

But when they had gained the open mesa, they made no attempt to follow the trail of Señor Red Mask and Gray Eagle. Instead, they rode slowly away in the direction of the border, making no effort to conceal their movements.

And this was a puzzling thing to the young caballero who had been so unexpectedly rescued from the outlaws. Reining up their mounts on the crest of a low knoll, Señor Red Mask and the Indian watched the departure of their enemies.

"I wonder, now, did them skunks figure out the cipher an' get the gold?" Señor Red Mask said.

But the sudden appearance of searching rurales, almost within rifle range of the fugitives, sent the caballero and his bronzed-skinned amigo dashing away to cover.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK PHANTOM'S SHOW-DOWN.

IN the pale light of a waning moon, Haunted Mesa was a fit place for ghostly happenings. Giant cactus cast weird shadows, and eerie cries of night birds added a spooky note to the place.

In the depths of a canyon, Tom Goodwin, still dressed as Señor Red Mask, crept silently toward the old

adobe ranch house to which he had been taken as a prisoner, that day. Thunder, the black horse, was safely hidden in a clump of piñons, in charge of Gray Eagle.

"Readin' only every fourth word of the cipher message which the crooks took offn me, it said: 'Gold is over door of ranch house on Haunted Mesa,'" the caballero muttered under his breath. "I'll soon find out if El Hiena got away with it."

The tumble-down ranch house was dark and deserted-looking. Bats skittered through the yawning holes that had once been windows and door. An owl hooted dismally from the sagging roof-tree.

"Plenty spooky, but it's only the kind of ghosts that carry six-guns I got ter be careful of," he told himself, although his scalp prickled as he slipped through the open doorway.

Pulling a rickety bench over to the threshold, he mounted it and began fumbling over the adobe wall above the door. He was not surprised to find that some of the dry-mud bricks were loose.

Hastily removing them, he discovered a hollow place in the thick wall. His searching fingers moved carefully about the small cavity, exploring every inch of it. But without success.

"It—it's gone!" Red Mask exclaimed in dismay. "Them ornery crooks must 'a' figured out the cipher. They've took the treasure an' high-tailed it fer the border."

Still making one last frantic search of the empty cache, Señor Red Mask suddenly heard a sound that froze his veins.

"Hey-hey-hey-y-y!" The mocking, unearthly laughter, like the cry of a grave-robbing hyena, rang through the ancient house.

"El Hiena—he's trapped me!" cried Señor Red Mask, whirling to glance over the dim room.

Dark forms came crowding through an inner doorway.

"Kill him!" screeched the voice of El Hiena. "He has found the gold, and now it is ours."

Señor Red Mask leaped to the floor. He could almost feel the ripping slugs that his enemies' guns would be hurling at him, in another instant.

He had no doubt that other gunmen were outside, ready to blast him down if he ran through the doorway. His hands darted to the gleaming pearl stocks of his long-barreled .45s.

Crash! Brang! Six-guns roared and blazed.

But it was neither the weapons of the caballero nor of the outlaws that shook the old adobe.

Wild yells of terror from the crooks answered the shots. The bloodcurdling laugh of El Hiena rose above the uproar.

"It is the Black Phantom! He has come to kill us for seeking a dead man's gold!" cried the superstitious Lobo.

Señor Red Mask turned quickly, to see a black-robed-and-hooded figure looming in a shaft of moonlight that flooded into the room through an open window.

Painted in white on the somber black cloth of the robe was a skeleton. On the front of the hood was a grinning skull. It was the same mysterious rider who had watched from the ridge-top while the rurales chased Señor Red Mask.

"Whoever the Black Phantom is, he ain't no friend of El Hiena an' his gang," Señor Red Mask decided instantly.

The spooky visitor was certainly throwing lead, and very much to the

dismay of the surprised crooks. Cries of pain and fright came from the milling outlaws in the big, gloomy room. But their own guns were beginning to flash. Bullets knocked chunks of adobe from the walls, ripped through the boards of bunks and table.

Brang! Bang! The big .45s in Señor Red Mask's hands bellowed their throaty challenge to the outlaws.

Two of the ruffians went down, whether dead or only wounded, the fighting caballero could not tell in the dim light.

Seeing that the "Black Phantom" was apparently firing only at crooks, Señor Red Mask worked over to his side of the room. Together, they would not be at such a disadvantage in battling against the gang.

For now the outlaws seemed to have recovered from their first fright. Almost invisible at the far end of the long room, they hid in bunks and behind heavy pieces of furniture, to pour a hail of hot lead at the two fighters who stood revealed in the moonlight.

Bang—bang—bang! The shots jarred the thick walls of the ranch house. The acrid fumes of gunpowder were suffocating.

With bullets buzzing all around him, Señor Red Mask turned to his unknown ally in the battle.

"Vamose, señor! Let us go before we are killed!" he shouted.

The Black Phantom nodded agreement, whirled toward the open window at his back. But before he had taken a step, he suddenly stumbled and went to his knees.

"They got me! Go on an' save yoreself!" cried the black-robed hombre in English, as Señor Red Mask bounded to his side.

"Come on, I weel help you to

your horse," Señor Red Mask encouraged the wounded man.

Half-dragged to the window, the Black Phantom made a valiant effort to keep on his feet. With Señor Red Mask's aid, he went through the low opening, while a hail of bullets showered them both with adobe dust and wood splinters.

A big white horse loomed in the shadow of some trees close by the house.

"Queeck, amigo! Up weeth you," urged Señor Red Mask as he helped the faltering Phantom into his saddle.

"An' you, caballero—what yuh aimin' ter do fer yoreself?" weakly inquired the Black Phantom.

For answer, Señor Red Mask gave the white horse a sharp slap on the flank. As it bounded forward, he caught a dangling saddle strap and swung himself to the animal's back, behind the saddle.

Fifty yards down the moonlit trail, Red Mask glimpsed a rider with a led horse, making his way through the chaparral. It was Gray Eagle, heading for the scene of battle.

"Amigo—I cain't—go no farther," gasped the black-robed man in front of Señor Red Mask. "I'm dyin'! Let me git off."

The caballero had little doubt that the wounded hombre was right. As near as he could tell, the fellow was shot both through the stomach and the lungs. He could not last long.

But this was a dangerous spot in which to stop. At any moment, the raging crooks might come riding down the canyon in chase of the fugitives.

Always resourceful, Señor Red Mask thought of a simple ruse to throw possible pursuers off the track.

Gray Eagle came riding up at that moment. He instantly took in the situation, as Señor Red Mask caught the white horse's reins from its dying owner's hands and pulled the animal to a halt.

"What is the señor's wish?" calmly asked the Indian.

"Carry this hombre to a safe place, pronto," Señor Red Mask ordered, at the same time sliding to the ground. "I will take care of the horses."

Quickly dismounting, Gray Eagle lifted the wounded man from the saddle and carried him into the shadowy chaparral.

Without losing a moment's time, Señor Red Mask hooked the white horse's reins over the horn of its saddle. Then a sharp word and a slap on its rump, sent the riderless bronc galloping down the trail. Its pounding hoofs could easily be heard as far as the ranch house.

"Thet will fool them crooks into thinkin' the Phantom an' me are still high-tailin' it out of the canyon," murmured the caballero. "Now, I got ter see if thet pore hombre in the spook outfit has got any last words ter say."

With Thunder, the black stallion, and the buckskin pony dogging his heels, Señor Red Mask hurried after the Indian and his helpless charge.

In a tiny, moonlit glade amid some junipers, Gray Eagle had made the dying Black Phantom as comfortable as possible. The man glanced up as Señor Red Mask reached his side. With weakened fingers, he pulled the hideous skull hood from his head.

"Lean down hyar clost, amigo, so's yuh kin hear some things I got ter tell yuh afore I pass out," the man whispered.

It was the honest, grizzled face of a man past sixty, that Señor Red

Mask looked into as he knelt down beside the unmasked Phantom.

"I take eet that you haf a ver' good reason for wearing thees dees-guize, señor," the caballero said gravely, talking in character. "But eef there ees any word I can geeve to your family for you, I am at your service."

The Phantom moaned, as if some painful memory had wrenched from him the expression of suffering which his mortal wounds could not bring forth.

"My family was murdered—my ranch was looted—by a gang of yaller sidewinders," he gasped. "My name is Matt Wilkins, an' I owned this hyar mesa. I stayed hyar, playin' spook, while I waited fer the crooks ter come back some day an' give me a chanct ter even the score. Thet's why it's called Haunted Mesa, an' some folks think the speerits of my dead ones roam the mesa."

"And the old house ees your home, *si?*" asked Señor Red Mask.

"Yeah, I still live in one of the back rooms, when thar ain't nobody else stoppin' thar," answered Wilkins. "About a month ago, I seen a young waddy chased acrost the mesa by El Hiena an' his gang—the same skunks as killed my—"

"He went to your ranch?" anxiously cut in Señor Red Mask.

"Went thar an' hid his poke o' gold over the front door—aimed ter come back an' git it later, if he lived—then he lit out fer—" Matt Wilkins's voice died away in an almost soundless whisper.

"He's going fast, Gray Eagle," Señor Red Mask said to the Indian, who stood like a statue in the moonlight. "And I've still got to find out if he knows what became of the gold."

Gray Eagle moved swiftly to the

side of the buckskin pony, took from a saddle pocket a small metal flask filled with a potent Indian herb tea that he always carried for emergencies.

"This will make him talk," muttered Gray Eagle, stooping to hold the flask to Matt Wilkins's gray lips.

"Thet's better," the wounded rancher whispered, after a moment's wait for the Indian's potion to give him strength.

"Thee gold—where ees it?" Señor Red Mask anxiously asked.

Wilkins turned pain-dulled eyes on the young caballero. He seemed to debate with himself as to the answer he would give, trying to reassure himself.

"Yuh did me a good turn, amigo. Yuh knew, somehow, whar ter look fer the gold. But, who are yuh?" demanded the grizzled rancher.

"I'm Tom Goodwin, of the Bar G spread, up acrost the border," instantly replied Señor Red Mask, dropping his Mexican accent and lapsing into his usual range lingo. "I was a pard of Jim Trent, the waddy who cached the gold in yore house. Jim's dead, but he left me directions fer locatin' his treasure. Then, El Hiena set a trap fer me, figurin' I knew where the gold was hid an' would come fer it. He aimed ter get me an' the gold at the same time, but the gold was gone."

Something like a chuckle came from Matt Wilkins's lips. "I fooled 'em!" he murmured. "When I seen El Hiena come back ter Haunted Mesa, I knowed he'd killed Trent an' was back-trailin' the younker—huntin' fer the gold thet Trent hid in diff'rent places along the trail from his mine ter the border. I was afraid the Hyena would tear down the house ter find the gold, so I took it an' cached it—whar they ain't no

chanct of them two-legged varmints ever findin' it."

"I'm askin' yuh ter tell me where thet cache is," said Señor Red Mask, "fer the sake of Jim Trent's home folks."

But Matt Wilkins was almost past speaking. His dry lips moved feebly. Moonlight shone on glazing eyes.

Señor Red Mask hastily put his ear close to the dying man's lips, listened intently to the faint whisper that came from them. Then, as a shudder passed over Matt Wilkins's lean body, the caballero rose to his feet. The Black Phantom was free of earthly trouble.

"We will bury him, amigo," Señor Red Mask told the Indian at his side, "and then we will sleep. Tomorrow there will be very much work to do."

CHAPTER VI.

EL MUCHACHO TURNS A TRICK.

THE rising sun shone on a lone rider on Haunted Mesa—a dark-skinned young hombre whose cheap cotton clothes, Indian sandals, and huge straw sombrero marked him as a Mexican of the lower class.

Yet the youthful hombre on the quick-stepping buckskin pony was not what he seemed to be. He was disguised, and so successfully that it is doubtful if Tom Goodwin's best friend would have recognized him as the wearer of that rig.

Certainly, this poorly dressed peon looked so different from Tom Goodwin disguised as the dashing, handsomely dressed caballero, Señor Red Mask, that no one would have taken them for one and the same person.

But Tom Goodwin, owner of the Bar G Ranch, occasionally found it to his advantage to lay aside his red mask and fine *charro* costume for a while, when he was riding the justice

trail. At such times, he would slip into the cheap garments of a peon and call himself "El Muchacho," which is Spainsh for the "Kid."

El Muchacho was riding warily that bright morning. He carefully avoided ridges and open stretches where he might be seen from a distance.

"Reckon I better not take any chances on runnin' into the rurales or them ornery cutthroats of El Hiena's," the brown-skinned youth told himself. "Mebbe I could get by with this peon disguise an' then ag'in, mebbe I couldn't."

Reining his pony into a dim cattle trail that wound in and out through the scattered growth of chaparral, he finally came out at the edge of a small sage flat. It lay at the foot of a low, cone-shaped butte which was a landmark of the mesa.

As the young peon scanned the country round him with keen dark eyes, he gave a start of surprise.

"Them willows over there at the foot of the butte show thet a water hole is there. jest like the Black Phantom told me there was," he muttered. "But fer gosh sake, look what's camped in 'em."

What was camped among the willows was very plainly a troop of rurales.

"Kin yuh beat thet fer tough luck?" El Muchacho asked himself in disgust. "How kin I git the poke of gold that the Phantom hid in the sand, under a flat rock at the edge of the water, when a whole bunch of hard-boiled Mex police are camped there?"

A few moments' thought over the situation brought the Muchacho to a daring decision.

"Mebbe them law rannies would like a little entertainment after their night's rest," he reflected. "If I kin make 'em happy, they ain't likely ter

mind me strollin' round their camp. An' thet'll mebbe give me a chance ter git the gold."

Although El Muchacho realized that he was crowding his luck in riding boldly into the camp of the very officers who had chased him all over Haunted Mesa the day before, he urged his pony straight toward the rurale camp. If they saw through his disguise, it would go hard with him. He would probably be shot for a bandit spy.

As he neared the camp, El Muchacho reached for a somewhat battered guitar that hung by a strap from his shoulder. After a few preliminary chords had been struck, he began a furious strumming of the lively Mexican tune, "Rancho Grande." Then his rich tenor voice took up the words.

The effect on the rurales, of this unexpected serenade, was all that the young musician had hoped for. They popped out of tents, left their varied duties around the camp, and came hurrying from all sides to enjoy the unusual treat.

Even the stern-faced, black-mustached captain came with clanking spurs and sword to join the audience that gathered round the singer on the buckskin pony.

Shouts of "*bueno*" and "*viva*" went up from the rurales as the player finished. Then in quick succession, he gave them their old favorites, "La Paloma," "La Golondrina," and "Estrellita," followed by lilting fandango dance tunes.

Apparently, no one suspected the musician to be other than the young peon that he looked to be.

But in spite of the fact that El Muchacho seemed to be succeeding his scheme to recover the gold from under the very eyes of the rurales, he was uneasy.

"I don't like the way thet cold-

eyed captain keeps watchin' me," he told himself. "I better be workin' fast, afore he gets suspicious an' starts askin' questions."

Winding up his program with a flourish of the old guitar, the young musician bowed to his audience.

"Very many thanks for listening to my poor music, señores," said El Muchacho. "And now, with your kind permission, I will give my pony a drink at the water hole."

The rurales jostled one another in their eagerness to give thanks and cigarettes to their entertainer. Only the stern captain of the troop remained cold.

As El Muchacho started to ride toward the water hole, he heard a sharp command to halt. With a sinking feeling, he pulled up the buckskin pony and turned to face the officer.

"Who are you, and what is your business on this mesa?" demanded the captain, giving his long black mustache a twist as he closely scanned the young musician.

El Muchacho dared not tell the truth about the gold he sought. He well knew that the treasure would be held by the police, and he would be thrown in jail. Neither would he stoop to lies. And in any case, he was aware that a good look at his face would convince the captain that something was wrong.

Despite the cheap headgear that covered his dark hair and the brown stain on his face, there was no concealing the strong, intelligent features that marked El Muchacho as being far from a lowly peon.

But Tom Goodwin was equal to the situation. He had been in many tight places and had always managed to get out. He thought of a scheme, now, on the spur of the moment. If successful in carrying it out, he would not only escape from

the rurales, but would also recover the gold.

Leaning out of his makeshift saddle of rawhide stretched over a rough wooden tree, El Muchacho beckoned mysteriously to the rurale officer.

"The brave captain is right, I am not a peon," whispered El Muchacho, as the curious officer came close. "I am here in thees camp on very important business, which the captain has been so unkind as to interrupt. But tell me, what is it that the captain feels on his neck?"

What the surprised and panic-stricken commander of the rurales felt, was the sharp point of a knife of finest Spanish steel, which the Muchacho had drawn from its sheath under his cotton sash and was now holding against the officer's throat.

So swiftly had El Muchacho moved, that no one in the scattered group of rurales had noticed anything wrong. And this, coupled with the fact that he had reined his pony between the officer and his men, as a screen, made possible the success of the young musician's trick.

"You—you are a bandit—a murderer?" gasped the captain, who seemed to fear immediate death.

El Muchacho suppressed a grin at his victim's expense. He had no doubt the rurale was a brave fighter in open battle, but with a knife at his throat—

"The captain flatters me," El Muchacho said sarcastically. "But he will be very careful not to cry out to his friends who love music, and he will also walk beside my *caballo* to the water hole."

Believing that his life was actually in danger, the officer promptly obeyed. To any of his men who

chanced to glance that way, it would seem that their captain was merely strolling down to the willow-fringed spring in company with the peon—perhaps getting information from him about the bandits and rustlers who infested this wild region.

Upon reaching the water hole, El Muchacho and his captive began circling its sandy bank. The willows soon cut them off from view of the camp.

"Under a flat rock at the edge of the water," El Muchacho repeated to himself the directions which the Black Phantom had given him with his dying breath.

But there were several rough slabs of sandstone scattered along the water's edge. Forced by his grim-faced young captor to move them, the rurale captain shed his dignity along with his uniform jacket, and toiled and sweated under the hot Mexican sun.

"You are loco. You will kill me with this terrible work," groaned the miserable officer, after many minutes of unaccustomed, back-breaking labor.

"Quién sabe?" muttered El Muchacho, who was beginning to get worried over the lack of success in finding the treasure. "I will be very angry if you do not turn those rocks faster. Who knows if some of your men come looking for you, pronto?"

El Muchacho's words were prophetic. A few seconds later, he heard voices, faint at first, but growing steadily louder. Had some of the rurales become suspicious of their leader's absence and started in search of him?

"I got ter move fast, an' no fool-in'," the alarmed rider told himself.

Leaping from his pony, he ran ahead of the toiling officer. He tipped over a stone. No sign of the

sandy soil having been disturbed under it. He turned over the next stone, with the same result.

"Gosh, them hombres will be here in another minute—no tellin' how many of 'em—an' I can't fight officers of the law," gasped El Muchacho as he bent and tugged at an extra heavy slab of stone.

"Help! *Andale!*" the rurale captain suddenly yelled to his approaching men, who were still beyond the screening willows.

El Muchacho groaned. He had a powerful hunch that the gold was hidden under the very stone at which he was tugging. And any second might see the rurales burst into view. Alarmed by their officer's cry for help, they would shoot him down without mercy.

Exerting all his strength, the Muchacho felt the big sandstone move. Slowly, it turned over. With feverish haste, he started clawing at the loose sand exposed to view. It came away in great handfuls. His fingers touched a solid object.

"Here's the gold!" exclaimed El Muchacho, dragging out a hefty buckskin poke.

Jerking to his feet, the brown-skinned youth darted toward his waiting pony. He could hear the rurales crashing through the willows. They caught sight of him as he grabbed bridle reins and bounded into the saddle.

Bang—bang—bang! Guns roared from the edge of the willows.

"Adios, captain—and many thanks for the good work which you so kindly did for me!" El Muchacho shouted to the furiously angry rurale officer.

Bending low over the withers of his speeding pony, the Kid quickly gained cover in a brushy swale and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER VII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

GRAY EAGLE, the Mexican Indian guide, crouching behind a clump of greasewood, awaited the arrival of a horseman whose mount was pounding across the sun-parched cactus flat.

The bronzed native rose to his feet as a buckskin pony slid to a halt and its dusty rider dismounted. With folded arms, he stood silently waiting for the other to speak.

El Muchacho, who had made good his escape from the rurales, lost not a moment in getting at a matter which was of great importance to him.

"In this saddlebag is the golden treasure of poor Jim Trent," he hastily told the Indian. "Take it to his mother in Verde Valley, across the Rio. You savvy?"

Gray Eagle reached for the buckskin pony's bridle reins, as if the long and dangerous trip through the Mexican bad lands to the border, was no more than the crossing of Haunted Mesa. Brave and trustworthy, the Indian would carry the gold to the widowed mother of dead Jim Trent, or die in the attempt.

"*Bueno, señor, I go!*" the Indian said briefly, and swung into the saddle. "And you, señor—you will stay on this evil mesa?"

"Only till I settle with El Hiena. Then I will ride to my ranch across the Rio," answered El Muchacho, with a grim tightening of his lips.

The Indian called a farewell, wheeled the buckskin pony, and was gone. Then El Muchacho walked quickly to the rim of an arroyo that gashed the mesa near at hand. In its depths, Thunder was waiting for his return.

Tom Goodwin was no longer garbed in the cheap clothes of a peon when he emerged from the arroyo, on his splendid black horse, a half hour later. Instead, he wore the handsome black velvet *charro* costume of Señor Red Mask.

"It's likely them crooks will keep hid out in the old ranch house durin' the day," reflected the caballero. "They'll figure that the rurales will be watchin' fer 'em on the open mesa, but they'd never think of me payin' 'em a visit at their hide-out."

Señor Red Mask's reasoning was good, as far as it went. His enemies should have been doing the very things he thought they would. The rurales were undoubtedly hunting for them on the mesa, as they were also hunting for Señor Red Mask. And the crooks certainly didn't expect a visit from the masked caballero who had fought his way out of their trap the night before.

But El Hiena was both crafty and determined. He figured that by some means unknown to him and his gang, Señor Red Mask and the Black Phantom had got away with the hidden gold. And he knew full well that unless he secured the treasure without delay, there would be small chance of ever getting his hands on it.

So it happened that the Hyena and his cutthroats were at that moment combing Haunted Mesa for their hated enemy, Señor Red Mask.

Unaware that death stalked him on all sides, Red Mask headed for the canyon in which the old ranch was located. He was within a mile of the mouth of the canyon when his ever watchful eyes glimpsed moving figures in the chaparral.

At the same time, he saw that those other riders had caught sight of him. They were spurring their mounts toward him, evidently

hoping to get in close range before he could get away.

"It's El Hiena an' his gang!" exclaimed the surprised caballero. "They've done spoiled my chances of slippin' up on 'em unawares."

Wheeling his mount sharply to the left, to avoid a shallow coulee that crossed his course, Señor Red Mask rolled his silver spurs on the stallion's flanks.

Thunder responded with a burst of speed that made his pursuers yell in furious rage. Their mounts were both tough and fast, but were no match for the racing black.

To Señor Red Mask's disappointment, however, the bandits did not give up the chase. El Hiena was as relentless as a lobo wolf on the trail. Cracking the great bullwhip which he always carried, the vicious outlaw urged his henchmen to keep going.

"We are ten to one, hombres!" shouted El Hiena. "We weel chase Señor Red Mask till he's stopped by a deep arroyo. Then we kill heem, like a coyote!"

But it was not an arroyo that caused the caballero trouble. Instead, it was a low ridge.

Racing away through the sparse and scrubby chaparral, rapidly widening the gap between himself and his pursuers, Señor Red Mask finally reached the foot of a small, brushy ridge. It was steep, but a horse as powerful and tough as Thunder could take it.

"Reckon I kin make the top afore them buzzards git clost enough ter use rifles," Señor Red Mask told himself. "Anyways, if I tried ter go around the end of the ridge, them crooks would cut across on me an' git my range pronto."

Promptly deciding to go over the top of the rise, the caballero slowed his mount to a gait that the black

could hold without danger of injury. His first thought was always for the welfare of the faithful animal that shared with him the dangers and hardships of the long trails.

But the ruthless border ruffians had no thought of sparing their mounts. With biting steel they drove their half-wild mustangs up the slope. Before their hard-pressed quarry had reached the ridge top, they were hurling a hail of bullets at him.

Señor Red Mask urged Thunder to a faster pace on the last few yards of the slope.

"Pick up yore hoofs, old-timer!" he called. "Thet lead is gettin' almost clost enough ter feel."

With bullets clipping twigs from the thorny chaparral that raked his legs, the caballero gained the crest of the ridge a few moments later. But the furious oaths and threats of his pursuers warned him that he was far from being out of danger. They, too, would soon be on top of the ridge, blazing at him with fire and lead as he went down the opposite slope.

"I got ter gain a good lead on them skunks while I'm out of their sight," Señor Red Mask told himself, and spurred his game bronc for a quick dash across the ridge top.

But the snorting black had taken barely a half dozen strides before his rider pulled him to a rearing halt. Up the other slope, a score of uniformed horsemen were charging toward him.

"It's the rurales, huntin' fer El Muchacho!" Señor Red Mask exclaimed bitterly. "They would come along here just in time ter hear the shootin'."

The crack of a carbine, down the slope, told the caballero that he had been seen by the rurales. He was caught between two fires.

CHAPTER VIII.

BANDIT TRAP.

CAPTAIN VERDUGO scowled as he gazed up at the dashing *charro*-clad horseman sky-lined on the crest of the ridge above him. He was sorely disappointed that it was not the young peon who had tricked and humbled him that morning.

"It is that red-masked bandit who escaped us yesterday," the vexed officer growled in Spanish, giving his lathered bay horse an extra sharp dig with his huge spurs.

"But we will shoot him, yes, my captain?" eagerly asked a swarthy, grim-faced sergeant who rode a pace behind his superior officer.

"We will not shoot him—not yet," snapped the captain. "We will take him alive, that I may question him. It may be that he knows where that miserable peon who found the gold under the rock, is now hiding himself. After that—a firing squad at sunrise."

"And those guns which we hear beyond the ridge—are they not of the outlaws who are led by this Señor Red Mask?" the sergeant asked.

"Who knows if he is their chief?" rejoined the captain. "He is a very strange hombre. Did we not find that he had put the bad man's brand on that pig-faced bandit whom we found dead in the trail yesterday?"

The puzzled sergeant shrugged his shoulders. "That is true, my captain," he admitted. "But he is loco with the heat, or a very big fool, to stay on the ridge while we ride to take him prisoner."

Which opinion was shared by the crooks who were spurring their mounts up the opposite side of the ridge. Their amazement, when the fugitive caballero halted

abruptly at the top of the slope, had been followed by wild exultation.

What had threatened to be a long, grueling chase under the hot sun, had suddenly ended, with an easy victory close at hand. They had only to riddle their hated foe with bullets and grab the gold which they believed he carried in his saddle pocket.

"Hey-y-y! Now we have heem!" El Hiena howled with glee.

"He must 'a' winded his hoss climbing the ridge," said Scar Dugan, whose crimsoned rowels had made a sorry mess of his dun bronc's flanks.

But only Señor Red Mask, holding his excited mount under tight rein up there on the crest of the rise, knew the real truth about the situation.

The caballero's dark eyes were gleaming through the slits in his scarlet silk mask like coals of fire. Little knots of tensed muscle stood out on his square jaws.

He glanced along the narrow crest of the ridge toward the spot where it joined a barren peak and realized that there was yet time for him to make a get-away in that direction.

"I ain't runnin'," Señor Red Mask muttered grimly. "I got the best little bandit trap here that was ever set, an' I'm the bait.

"Them murderin' crooks don't savvy that the rurales are comin' up the slope, 'count of the police not doin' any shootin'. An' if the rurales hear the crooks, they'll be all the more anxious ter come up here an' fight 'em. When them two outfits meet on top of the ridge, there's goin' ter be some fun."

It was a perfect set-up for Señor Red Mask's scheme to catch the outlaws. But it would fall flat unless

the daring caballero remained where he was, to lure El Hiena and his cutthroats into the deadly trap.

"If only them fightin' rurales would move faster," he muttered anxiously. "If the crooks get here first, they'll see the law an' scatter through the brush like a pack of scared coyotes."

And it soon became apparent that the outlaws would reach the crest first. With raking spurs, they were forcing their mounts at a killing pace.

Crash! Bang! Six-guns blazed and roared in the chaparral.

Bandit lead filled the air around the waiting caballero. His nervous mount tossed its head with a jingle of silver bit chains, stamped and pawed.

Señor Red Mask felt the warm color drain from his face, leaving it ashen-gray under its coat of brown stain. The strain on his nerves was terrific.

He knew that every bullet which came his way might be the end for him. And with every plunge of those wild-eyed broncs racing up the slope, his chances of escape grew less.

A glance down the opposite side of the ridge brought a groan of despair from the desperate caballero.

The rurales were coming at a lively pace, but not fast enough to top the ridge in time to catch the bandits.

Señor Red Mask saw the chances for success of his daring scheme fading fast. There was only one thing to do.

"I got ter hold them wolves back till the rurales get here!" cried the caballero.

Half turning in his saddle, Señor Red Mask faced the onrushing cut-

throat crew. Ten to one! Could he hold them?

His hands darted to the pearl-handled Colts under his scarlet silk sash.

Brang—bang—bang! The long .45s rocketed lead and flame.

An outlaw pitched from his saddle into a wiry ignota bush.

His companions vented their rage in wild yells and oaths. Their hot guns blazed. With furious jabs of steel rowels, they drove their heaving, lathered mounts to close in on their victim.

"Hey-hey-y-y!" The wild, fiendish laugh of El Hiena rang across the sun-drenched ridge. The long bullwhip in his hand popped like a rifle.

Close on his right, Scar Dugan rode a foundering dun bronc. On the left of the Hyena, a crimson-flecked sorrel carried Lobo, the Mexican.

An outlaw slug ripped through the high peak of Señor Red Mask's black sombrero. He felt the burning welt of another on his left arm. Powder fumes drifted up to his nostrils on the hot breeze.

"They're comin' too fast! The whole murderin' gang will be on top of me in a minute," Señor Red Mask gritted.

Then the thought flashed into his mind that he could hurry those lagging rurales. Instantly, his strong tenor voice lifted above the uproar of battle:

"With hot lead and steel I burn my brand
On outlaw mavericks of the Rio Grande."

It was a verse from "Camino de Muerte"—"The Death Trail."

"Thet ought ter bring 'em on the jump," the caballero told himself.

And the response of the rurales told him he was not mistaken. A wild cheer rent the air as the

mounted police recognized the grim words of their battle song.

A sharp order came from their leader. There was a furious pounding of steel-shod hoofs as Spanish spurs raked their mounts.

But Señor Red Mask was still in the thick of danger. His enemies were upon him. He saw Scar Dugan throw down on him with a .45. Lobo was closing in with a gun in each clawlike brown hand.

Crash! Wham! The defiant blasts of Señor Red Mask's Colts brought a yell of agony from Lobo. He toppled from his saddle, clutching at a hole in his chest.

Scar Dugan was driving in for the kill. A hot slug from his .45 caught Señor Red Mask in the thigh as the caballero wheeled his mount to meet him.

Brang! Señor Red Mask fired at close range, saw the scar-faced gringo gunman pitch headlong from the back of his frantic bronc.

"Hey-hey-hey-y-y!" El Hiena's bloodcurdling cry suddenly pierced through the mad uproar of battle.

Señor Red Mask whirled in his saddle, saw the hideous face of the outlaw leering at him through a drifting cloud of powder smoke. The long lash of the bullwhip in the Hyena's hand was already snaking forward.

Brang! Señor Red Mask's .45 crashed—a split second too late.

The hissing rawhide lash had curled in a strangling grip around his throat. His bullet went wild. He was almost jerked from the saddle.

With reeling senses, Señor Red Mask saw the outlaw chief spur toward him. Sunlight flashed on a needle-pointed dagger in El Hiena's upraised hand.

But dazed though he was, the

caballero had the grit and presence of mind to defend himself as best he could. The choking whiplash loosened as El Hiena surged forward. Snatching it from his throat, Señor Red Mask suddenly wheeled his mount aside.

The glittering blade in El Hiena's hand slit the sleeve of the caballero's black velvet jacket as the outlaw made his thrust.

Before his enemy could jerk back out of reach, Señor Red Mask's hand closed on his wrist. In the same instant, the caballero spurred his snorting mount.

A wild cry of pain and fright burst from El Hiena's hairy lips as he was yanked bodily from his saddle. Held in Señor Red Mask's iron grip, he dangled for a moment, his short legs whipped by the chaparral.

Then the caballero and his helpless captive were caught up in a wild swirl of charging horsemen. El Hiena was knocked from Señor Red Mask's grasp, to fall senseless on the ground.

"It's the rurales!" cried Señor Red Mask.

It was true. A mad din of pounding hoofs and battle shouts, mingled with the terrific crashing of many guns, announced that the rurales had gone into action. Señor Red Mask's daring scheme to trap his enemies had not failed.

Swept along in the midst of his new allies, the caballero emptied his guns at the surprised crooks. Outlaws fell on every side.

With such furious fighting, the battle was quickly over. The evil gang of border ruffians was wiped

out—killed or captured almost to the last hombre.

Señor Red Mask smiled grimly to himself as he slipped away through the cover of brush and trees, after the fight was over. For his last glance over the battlefield showed him El Hiena, struggling in the grasp of a couple of husky rurales.

The rurales had cleaned up the battlefield. Their grim-faced commander sat his bay horse on the crest of the ridge, listening to a report from his hard-boiled sergeant.

"And where is that very brave amigo, Señor Red Mask, who set the trap which caught all these hombres?" the captain asked.

"Ah, my captain, such a fighting caballero I have never seen before," answered the sergeant, glancing vaguely over the surrounding bad lands. "But he has disappeared, he is not——"

The sergeant checked himself with a grunt of surprise. His trigger finger suddenly thrust forward, pointing at a horseman on the distant spur of a ridge—a gallant, *charro*-clad caballero on a splendid black horse—who turned in his saddle and lifted a hand in farewell.

That shore looks like the end of El Hiena—and of Señor Red Mask's justice trail. That ornery bandit will have ter be plenty smart ter git away from them rurales. Howsomever, mebbe he kin work some slick trick on 'em. An' if he does—waal, trouble will be poppin' fer Tom Goodwin, alias Señor Red Mask, right pronto. Keep yore eyes peeled fer another story about the masked caballero in next week's issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



The Caliente Sheep War

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Gun Fog In Sundown Gap," etc.

THE team of six mules scented trouble lurking somewhere in the rain-wet chaparral that bordered the trail. And "Shorty" Masters and the tall cowboy who rode the sorrel cayuse knew that danger lay ahead of them.

But neither thought of turning back. The town of Caliente, four miles farther on, was as near starvation as any place could be in the cattle country, where there was always plenty of fresh meat.

There had been six weeks of rains, a continuous downpour that made the Stockton road impassable, while all canned goods and vegetables in the Caliente store dwindled and vanished.

The mud was hock-deep on Shorty's mules. And Tumbleweed, the sleek sorrel ridden by Willie Wetherbee, the "Sonora Kid," found tough going in the brush-bordered ruts.

"They'll shore be glad to see this

here chuck in Caliente!" drawled the bow-legged, little freighter. "Frijoles and beef git kind o' tiresome, especially when yore flour is gone, and yuh have to knock the weevils out of every hunk of corn bread!"

The Sonora Kid's white teeth flashed in a smile. "Yeah, it shore does!" he agreed. "Of course, they got mutton, now!"

The tall cowboy emphasized the extra item in Caliente's menu. On top of the town's sufferings in the food shortage was piled the peril of a range war—the Butler-Whitcomb feud that had flared anew when Jim Butler brought in five thousand sheep to range in the Caliente area.

"Listen!" Shorty cautioned his hot-headed, gun-slinging pard. "Don't forget what I've been tellin' yuh! As far as this sheep-and-cattle war at Caliente is concerned, we're plumb neutral! Savvy?"

The Sonora Kid, born and bred to the saddle and the handling of cattle, sniffed disdainfully.

"I reckon so!" he said. "Still, I don't know as I can blame the Whitcomb outfit. If I had open, unfenced range next to Butler's Bar B spread, I shore would kick when he brung in some dirty-nosed, bleatin', smellin' woollies!"

Shorty shifted the reins to his left hand and chuckled aloud. "Wouldn't want to see it myself!" he admitted. "But the sheep is jest another form of progress and civilization—jest the same as bob wire and windmills. And the courts fail to recognize that steers have any more rights to the grass than the woollies. So, as I told yuh before, we'll stay neutral."

The freight outfit rumbled through the mud while the partners remained silent, breaking a trail that had not been traveled since the fall

rains began. Across the sticky level of the divide the wagons crawled, dipping into boggy swags where the sturdy mules could barely pull out.

Crack! Shorty reached for his mule whip and let the popper explode two inches over the flattened ears of a laggard animal.

"Tschaikowsky!" he bellowed in a voice three sizes too large for his sawed-off frame. "If yuh ain't goin' to pull none, yuh might at least quit draggin' them big clod-hoppers of your'n!"

Wetherbee grinned. Shorty's musical names for the six offspring of a mare known as Lucy were a never-failing source of amusement to the tall rider. The little mule-skinner loved classical music, named his mules after great composers, and called the team the "Sextet from Lucia."

"Yuh hadn't ought to blame that mule none!" Willie protested. "He's so dawg-gone loaded down with that name of Tsch—Tsc—— Well, he shore is loaded down. Now yuh take the black one, Chopin, he can——"

"*Stick 'em up, hombres!*" A harsh voice rasped the command from behind a thick clump of cat's-claw.

Shorty sucked in a sharp breath and whirled toward the roadside. He saw the blue-black barrel of a .45 protruding from the brush.

Braang! The Sonora Kid had tried to go for his own weapon, but the ambushed gunman fired and Wetherbee's hat was ripped from his head by a heavy slug.

"I said reach!" roared the voice angrily. "Next time, I'll blow the top of yore head off. Now, keep 'em up!"

There was no chance of putting up resistance. The hidden man had the drop on them. He came out

into the road, while blue gun-smoke floated lazily upward on the damp air.

There was a bandanna knotted over the man's face. He was tall and spare of build, and his eyes were slitted and shifty. He had a .45 in each hand, and kept the partners covered expertly.

Shorty's gaze met the holdup man's eyes and then traveled down until the freighter saw his feet.

"All right, boys!" ordered the masked man over his shoulder. "Yuh know what we want. Come on and git it!"

Three other men emerged from the chaparral. Shorty and his tall sidekick heard a horse nicker out there in the brush, and knew the gang had been waiting to spring the trap. One of the newcomers carried a huge burlap sack.

Each picked a wagon and climbed aboard while the lanky one kept the two guns on the partners. Shorty flared into hot rage.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Yuh better call off yore pack o' coyotes. We're haulin' this here chuck to Caliente, where folks is dawg-gone near starvin'!"

"Jest keep yore shirt on, freighter!" remonstrated the man with the guns. "We ain't after grub. As long as other folks' beef is runnin' the range, we won't starve, will we, boys? Haw-haw! But yuh got somethin' we *do* want."

"Here it is!" called the man on the second wagon. "Two cases. .45 center-fire."

"Good!" grunted the leader. "Leave the boxes—they're too hard to carry on the saddle. Dump the cartons into that sack Pete has got. And hurry, all of yuh!"

Shorty understood, now. He squirmed on the wagon seat and exchanged meaning glances with the

Sonora Kid. So one or both of the warring factions at Caliente had run short of ammunition!

"Listen!" the little freighter said. "Would it make any difference to yuh if I told yuh that that ain't my ammunition? It don't even belong to the store at Caliente. It's due to go to the Ranger camp at Marfa."

"It *was* due to go there, mebbe!" drawled the lanky man. "Not now. Yuh see, the Rangers ain't fightin' no war, but *we* are. All right, boys—let's go!"

Nails squealed in the second pine box; the heavy cartons of cartridges thumped into the huge sack, and the robber climbed down into the mud and backed into the brush. The lanky man covered the retreat of his gang, then followed warily.

"If yuh savvy what's good fer yore health, yuh won't try to foller us!" he warned gruffly. "Adios!"

II.

The men vanished in the thick, dripping chaparral. Saddle leather creaked, and the *slog-slog* of hoofs reached the ears of the partners.

The Sonora Kid turned Tumbleweed as if to give chase, his tense right hand resting on the butt of his holstered .45. But Shorty waved him back.

"Wait a minute!" cautioned the mule skinner. "Yuh cain't catch 'em in this mud. Tumbleweed is a fast hoss when it's dry, but he ain't no mud lark. Besides, I reckon I've changed my mind!"

"About what?"

"About stayin' neutral in this here range war!" Shorty flared. "We're in it from now on, and when we git to town we'll find out a few things. All the good resolutions I had jest up and faded when I seen them sheep-herders stealin' the Rangers'

ammunition! Why, the Rangers may run short, now, when they got to chase some *bandidos* or some-thin'—"

"Sheep-herders?" Wetherbee interrupted, and the grin on his face showed he was eager to believe it was a sheepman who led the robbers. "How d'ye know?"

"Because in the first place, them buzzards had on shoes instead o' boots. And if that ain't enough, the sack they used was a wool sack—a whole lot bigger than any other tow-sack used on any ranch. Come on—let's git this chuck to Caliente!"

The Sextet strained against clanking trace chains and finally pulled the settling wagons out of the mud. A half hour passed as the outfit crawled slowly toward the divide rim and brought the town of Caliente into view.

Shorty reined in his mules at the top of the long slant. It would be hard going down there in the mesquite flat, where the scattered adobes of the little cow town sprawled in the gray of the sunless afternoon.

"Listen!" Wetherbee suddenly exclaimed.

Above the hard breathing of the Sextet, Shorty heard the hoofs of a horse, slogging through the mud of the trail behind them. He turned on the wagon seat and jerked his .45 out of its worn holster.

The rider kept coming, and made no move toward his own gun. He was broad-shouldered and wiry, and he sat the tired, sweat-streaked roan with an ease that told of years in the saddle.

"Howdy, Masters!" he boomed as he drew alongside them. "Howdy, Sonora!"

Shorty and his pard eyed the newcomer with open hostility. The rider grinned.

"It's all right!" he said. "Yuh don't know me, but I been on yore trail since mornin'—out o' Stockton. Yuh see, I'm Jack Malone of the Rangers."

He drew back his jumper and showed a badge. Shorty returned the grin.

"Mighty glad to know yuh!" he said. "Only yuh should have come along a little sooner."

"Made the best time I could," said Malone. "Yuh see, we decided somebody had better escort that ammunition yuh are haulin' for the camp at Marfa. It seems as how they are plumb out o' cartridges in Caliente, where the Whitcomb-Butler feud is ragin', and—"

"Not no more!" Shorty interrupted grimly. "We was jest held up by some o' Butler's sheep-herders. They took the two cases of ammunition yuh was speakin' about!"

Malone's jaw sagged, then he gave a low whistle of surprise. Shorty related details of the robbery.

"Did they seem to have any other ammunition at all?" asked the Ranger.

"They shore did—some!" drawled the Sonora Kid as he felt of the tear in the crown of his hat. "I don't know how much, but they used one cartridge jest to show me the folly of tryin' to draw when they had the drop."

Malone's jaw clamped grimly. "That settles it!" he said. "There'll be plenty trouble poppin' in Caliente—mebbe to-night. Yuh see, with things like they are, the town is full of hambres jest r'arin' to fight, only they all been short of ammunition fer several days. They used up most of what they had in a couple of battles already. There has been three men killed on each

side, and a half a dozen others are wounded!"

Shorty nodded. Reports of the range war had spread over the Pecos country and the Big Bend. Meanwhile, the women and children in the mud-marooned ranch town were actually short of food.

"I got to high-tail it on to town!" Malone announced. "I'll see yuh when yuh pull in, and mebbe yuh can help me put off this fight till they can settle the matter in a legal way. So long!"

He struck spurs to the jaded roan and was off down the divide hill. Shorty watched him out of sight in the gathering dusk.

"Anybody that tries to be the peacemaker in a scrap like this has shore got my sympathy!" the little teamster declared. "Yuh could settle it sooner with powder and lead. Giddap, mules!"

The scattered lights of Caliente glimmered ahead of them as the two partners reached the bottom of the divide hill and struck the black, waxy mud of the mesquite flat. Here their real troubles began. The Sextet struggled gamely. Twice Wetherbee was forced to tie on and lend Tumbleweed's efforts to haul the heavy wagons out of the bog.

The third time, within a mile of town, the wheels sank hub deep and the mules floundered in mud that grew deeper with every stab of a hoof.

"Dawg-gone!" Shorty ranted. "This means we got to uncouple the waggins and pull 'em out one by one. By the time we git to Caliente, folks are shore goin' to be hungry fer their supper! Well, here goes!"

He climbed down, hitched up his trousers, and plodded back to uncouple the first wagon. Wetherbee slid off the sorrel and lent a hand. In a few minutes, they were snaking

the lead vehicle to the comparatively dry higher ground a quarter of a mile distant.

There the mules were unhitched and the partners turned back. Shorty trudged wearily through the sticky mud, driving the mules before him. One wagon at a time, this process would take an hour or more.

He gasped and rubbed his eyes. The Sonora Kid spurred Tumbleweed ahead for a few yards.

It was the same bog, all right, with the wheel-marks and the loblolly where the mules had struggled. But the wagons were gone!

"Why, the dirty, low-down skunks!" Shorty exclaimed. "Yuh know what's happened?"

Wetherbee nodded. "Shore!" he said grimly. "Somebody jest come along and lifted yore waggins out and tucked 'em under their arms.

"Look here!" The freighter struck a match and bent over the mud. "Shoe prints! Not boots—shoes again. Them dang sheepherders come back, that's what. They come back with hosses and swiped the wagons that have all the chuck in 'em! There ain't nothin' in that first wagon that's good to eat."

"Here's the trail!" said the Sonora Kid. "They pulled out of the bog right here. It looks like they had a dozen hosses. Then they cut out through the mesquites—that way. Come on! Let's foller 'em!"

He swung to the saddle. Shorty made an impulsive move toward Chopin, then hesitated.

"Nope, it'll be better to go to town first!" he said. "We can always trail 'em down. They couldn't lose us in that mud, not in forty years. And even with twelve hosses, they cain't go fast. Let's go on to town so I can put the mules in the feed yard and tell Malone. We may need some help!"

III.

Quiet pervaded the town of Caliente. Shorty and Willie headed down the single street, the Sextet drawing a single wagon. A woman with a baby in her arms slammed a gate and ran out to meet them.

"You've got stuff for the store?" she asked. "Any condensed milk for the baby?"

Shorty looked at the child in the lamplight cast from the open door of their home. It couldn't have been more than a few months old; it looked delicate, sickly.

"Well, ma'am, not in this here wagon!" he stammered. "But, yuh see, two of my wagons was bogged down in the draw. Don't yuh worry, none, I'll have the milk and all the rest of the stuff here before mornin'!"

The mother flashed a smile of gratitude. Shorty gritted his teeth.

"The mangy high-binders!" he told himself. "I shore am beginnin' to take sides in this here range war! Jest wait till I can find Ranger Jack Malone and that hombre Whitcomb—the man that heads the cattlemen!"

The partners reached the feed yard. At Shorty's suggestion, Tumbleweed was left saddled, and the little mule driver threw a hull over the broad back of Chopin.

"Stand by, mule!" he muttered as he and Willie closed the feed corral gate. "May need yuh pronto!"

They loosened the six-guns in their holsters and stamped up the loose board sidewalk, shaking an accumulation of adobe mud from their boots. There were tight little knots of men at every corner—men who eyed the newcomers with suspicion and open hostility.

"Where yuh goin', strangers?" de-

manded a big man who separated himself from a group near the Longhorn Saloon. "Who are yuh, no-how?"

Shorty and Willie halted. The Sonora Kid had his right thumb hooked in his cartridge belt.

"Mebbe yuh would like to know!" he drawled. "Well, it don't pay to be——"

"Jest a minute!" Shorty interrupted. "This hombre looks like a cowman, to me. Am I right?"

The big man nodded.

"Thought so, on account of yore boots and spurs. Well, I'm Shorty Masters, M. D., the which means Mule Driver. I'm a freighter. We jest——"

"Oh, yuh brought the chuck from Stockton!" exclaimed the rancher. "I'm shore glad to see yuh. My name's Whitcomb. I own the Flyin' W spread!"

Shorty shook hands. This was the leader of the cattlemen in their fight against the invasion of the "woolies."

"I was bringin' the chuck from Stockton," the freighter said. "But the sheep crowd swiped it!"

"What's that? Great Scott, man, yuh don't mean——"

"Yep. First they held me up and took two cases of .45 cartridges. Then they come back and hooked the two wagons that have all the provisions in 'em. Where can I find Malone?"

Whitcomb was already taking long strides toward the saloon. Shorty and Willie followed. Men made way to let them pass. The word spread rapidly that the town's supplies had been stolen.

"String up the dirty thieves!" somebody shouted.

"That's right! Lynch 'em!"

Whitcomb turned at the saloon door. "Jest a minute, men!" he

yelled, holding up his hand for silence. "I'm goin' to put the case before the Ranger once more. Yuh all know the shape we are in. No ammunition. Well, the mule skinner, here, tells me that the Butler crowd stole two cases of cartridges off his wagons! So there yuh are. Don't do anything till I talk this over."

Malone was at a table inside, conferring with the Caliente justice of the peace and other town officials. Whitcomb strode up briskly.

"Look here, Malone!" he began. "It may still be yore idea to settle this thing peacefully, but it ain't mine! The dang sheep-herdin' coyotes have rustled yore ammunition and——"

Hoofs clattered in the hard-packed mud of the street outside. Boots struck the board sidewalk and spurs jingled into the Longhorn. Whitcomb whirled. Every man in the noisy saloon suddenly clamped his jaw shut and turned to face the door, ready for trouble.

It was a rangy cowboy, an old yellow slicker draped over his shoulders, who looked around the place, saw Whitcomb and made for him.

"It's rainin' on the divide again!" he exclaimed. "And I run into the Butler outfit. Here—they sent a message to the whole town!"

Whitcomb took a folded bit of dirty scratch paper. His face reddened angrily as he scanned the writing penciled upon it, then he handed it over to the Ranger.

"Read that!" he blazed. "Mebbe yuh wouldn't believe me when I told yuh that Butler's sheep are ruinin' the range of the Flyin' W and a couple of other outfits! Mebbe yuh couldn't take my word for it when I told yuh that Butler had brought in a bunch of tough hombres from Mexico to fight us when we tried to

argue with him and make him fence his range! But yuh can see this for yoreself!"

Jack Malone read it aloud, while men crowded around to hear:

"Notice to Ben Whitcomb and the town of Caliente: We have the ammunition and the grub. If you want to fight, come on. If you don't call off your men we will starve out the town. Either way we will beat you.
JIM BUTLER."

The Ranger whirled on the slickered cowboy. "Where are they?" he demanded.

"They're ganged up over at the old Miller place, a couple of miles northwest o' town!"

Malone crumpled the paper into his pocket. "All right!" he snapped. "I come down here to protect that ammunition and try and settle this here thing peaceable. A Ranger didn't have no business takin' sides. But when they try to shut off the chuck that's needed by women and children—well, that's goin' too far. If they want war, they are shore goin' to git it!"

Shorty crowded to the Ranger's side. "I've got five cartridges in my gun and a dozen in my belt!" he said. "The skunks have got two of my wagons. I'm with yuh."

"Same number o' cartridges here," drawled the Sonora Kid.

Malone made a hasty inspection. He had twenty slugs for his .45. Among the dozen men present, only Whitcomb and one other had a half dozen rounds apiece.

"Never heard of a town bein' in such a shape!" commented the Ranger. "How come there ain't more cartridges?"

"Because somebody set fire to the hardware store, jest a month ago!" Whitcomb explained grimly. "The evidence points to Butler's gang, too. That was right after the rains had

got bad, and all the ammunition in the store burned, and Masters, here, is the first freighter to git through!"

"Git yore hosses!" ordered Malone. "Now I want it understood, I'm in charge of this here expedition. I'm goin' to try and settle it peaceable. Nobody shoots till I give the word. Savvy?"

He looked around the circle of grim, determined faces. The cattlemen nodded. Jack Malone jerked his head toward the door. Shorty Masters held up his hand.

"Jest a minute!" he called. "The old Miller place—if I remember correct, that's down in the flat, jest about the same as bein' in a swag, ain't it?"

The rangy cowboy in the yellow slicker nodded emphatically.

"It shore is. When I rode out o' there with that message, I nearly bogged my hoss. Yore two wagons was standin' in the road that leads up to the house. The road itself is purty hard, but the wagons block it and I had to go out into the mud to git——"

"Thought so!" Shorty broke in. "And there's a couple o' wooden fences leadin' up toward the house?"

"Yep, that's right.

Shorty turned on Malone. "They got us outnumbered, and they got the ammunition. We got to use strategy. Now I'd say we ought to open fire——"

"We don't shoot unless I give the word!" insisted the Ranger sharply. "Remember that. Let's go."

Shorty and Willie hastened down the street and led Tumbleweed and the black mule out of the corral. A fine, misty drizzle had begun to fall, soaking into the ground and making it muddier than ever. Shorty turned the collar of his jumper up around his neck.

WW—9D

"Slicker might git in the way!" he observed, as he straddled Chopin. "This is the way it is in Texas—either so dawg-gone dry the ducks forget how to swim, or so wet the sand lizards git webbed feet. Well, it'll be a long time before more chuck can come through to Caliente, with it rainin' on the divide. Yuh know that lady that's expectin' condensed milk fer her baby in the mornin'? She's shore goin' to git it!"

The Sonora Kid chuckled as he slid his holster forward in easy reach. "You're the hombre that was goin' to stay plumb neutral!" he reminded his partner.

IV.

A thin glow came from the two windows of the old Miller place as the little party halted in the edge of the dripping, shadowy chaparral. There was moonlight made dim by the mist, and Shorty strained his eyes to make out the low, rambling adobe house, setting back in a yard shaded by chinaberry trees.

The road led straight toward the sagging front gate. As the cowboy had said, it was blocked now by Shorty's wagons. A hundred yards back of the house were corrals and a barn.

"Plenty mud on this stretch between us and the house!" Shorty whispered. "The chaparral has been cleared out, and there ain't no drainage. Now, I'd say we ought to slip up to them fences, three of us on one side and the other two on the other——"

"Climb down!" Malone ordered. "All four of yuh stay here and keep still. I'm goin' to the house and demand surrender of the chuck and the ammunition they stole. Remember—no shootin' till I give the word!"

Whitcomb muttered his doubts as he tethered his bay mustang to a mesquite limb and watched the Ranger plod forward across the open space. The other men ground-reined their mounts and waited.

The mud was nearly to Malone's boot tops. He proceeded slowly, painfully. Now his broad shoulders blotted out the yellow lamplight from one window.

"Butler! Jim Butler! Halloo in the house!"

The door opened to shed a thin crack of light. The yellow rays flickered on blue steel thrust outside.

"Stand where yuh are!" ordered a harsh voice. Shorty and Willie had heard it before. It belonged to the lanky man with the slitted, shifty eyes.

"Are you Jim Butler?" called Malone.

"Who wants to know?"

"Jack Malone—Texas Ranger!"

Strained hesitation from the house. Then the door hinges creaked into a tense silence as the crack of light widened a few inches more.

"Keep back!" ordered Butler. "How do I know yuh are a Ranger? And if yuh are, what of it? What d'ye want?"

"I'm here to tell yuh that yuh will have to give up them two wagons o' grub. And furthermore, yuh got to submit to arrest fer stealin' two boxes o' Ranger ammunition."

Braang! Gunfire licked out of the door, into the wet night.

It made a vivid slash of orange against the darkness of the china-berry trees growing near the door.

Ranger Jack Malone coughed and crumpled. His boots were so deep in the mud that his feet stayed planted, and he doubled grotesquely at the waist and knees.

Butler slammed the door to punctuate a profane outburst that had to do with "upholdin' my rights."

"We don't need orders, now!" said Shorty Masters slowly. "Come on! Look! Willie and me will take the fence here at the left. Whitcomb, you and yore other man go over to the fence on the right. Try to git to it without bein' heard. Then climb up on it, and edge along toward the house. Yuh can make better time that way, and yuh will have the boards between yuh and the shootin'. Savvy?"

The ranchman nodded grimly. "Come on, McIntyre!" he told the cowboy.

They moved forward, splitting into two pairs. The sticky mud sucked at their boots as if trying to hold them back, making each step a slow, torturous effort. The wet drizzle beat into their faces.

The murmur of voices could be heard from the old ranch house.

Three minutes—five minutes. Shorty laid thankful hands on the fence. There was a thick baseboard six inches above the soaked ground. The little freighter stepped on this and walked sidewise along it, toward the house.

Willie Wetherbee followed. The partners could see dim, shadowy shapes gliding just above the black outline of the other fence. Whitcomb and McIntyre had made their objective.

Crash! A board to which he clung to keep his balance snapped in Shorty's hands, and the mule skinner nearly fell in the mud. There was instant response from the house.

Braang! Braang! Br-room! Gunfire daggered the wet moonlight. Bullets hissed past Shorty and the tall cowboy, cutting the rain. Heavy slugs hammered into the wet fence

boards, hurling splinters into their faces, ripping through to scream out toward the mesquites.

Braang! The Sonora Kid's gun roared.

Glass shattered at the window that faced them. There was a howl of pain from inside.

"That pays fer Malone!" the tall waddy muttered between clenched teeth. "One down on each side!"

"Yeah, but look at the odds!" Shorty answered grimly. "They got a regular army, and they got two cases of ammunition. We still got to use strategy of some kind. We can't turn back, because they'd plug us shore if we crossed the mud and got bogged!"

Braang! Bang! Whitcomb and McIntyre opened up from the other side of the house.

More glass tinkled. The yellow lamplight flickered waveringly as a draft swept through the two shattered windows.

Braang! Br-room! Br-rang! A slug whipped Shorty's sleeve as he clung to the fence with one hand and jerked trigger with the other. The door was open, now, and several men came through it single file, to crouch in the shadows of the porch and send flame leaping from their guns.

Braang! Braang! The freighter and his pard sent hot lead raking across the adobe wall and the porch floor. A heavy body hit the planking with a thud.

Ammunition was getting low on the side of the attackers. The strategy Shorty had urged would have to be put into use in a few minutes more or—

"Git back, yuh skunks!" bellowed Butler.

The Sonora Kid and his sawed-off pard could see the lanky sheepman's frame at the shattered window.

Flame split the darkness which bordered the yellow square of lamplight. Another gun roared in concert with those which barked from the porch and the other window.

"Let him have it!" Shorty muttered as a bullet hurled wet splinters into his face.

Braang! Braang! Butler fired twice more, then the Sonora Kid yanked trigger.

The sheepman dropped to his knees, then toppled sidewise to melt into the shadows of the ranch-house floor.

There was an instant's hesitation. Somebody inside the adobe shouted that Jim Butler was killed. Angry oaths rang out, and then guns began blazing with new fury. There were still nine or ten men left to carry on the defense.

Shorty Masters edged a little nearer the besieged house. Then, creeping along on the baseboard of the fence, he suddenly halted. He could look right into the window, now. He could see the glass kerosene lamp, standing on a rickety table.

"I got it!" exclaimed the mule skinner. "I can drive 'em out of that house! And once we git 'em in the mud—"

"Yuh got what?" demanded the Sonora Kid. "Are yuh hit?"

Shorty shook his head silently. He rested his arm on the fence and sighted the heavy .45 as if he were aiming a rifle.

Braang! Glass crashed.

For the space of an eye-wink, the light went out in the adobe. And then there was more light than ever, with a hundred little tongues of leaping, lurid flame dancing along the floor, the table and the walls where the kerosene had splattered!

"Fire! Git out of here—the house is on fire!"

Yells of warning were not needed. Gunfire suddenly ceased, heavy boots hammered the planking to beat accompaniment to the sharp, vicious crackle of flames. The sheepmen came pouring out of the old Miller place.

"Grab the ammunition!" shouted somebody. Then, as an afterthought: "And git Jim off the floor! He may not be dead yet! Here, give me a hand!"

Shorty chuckled. The more weight they carried, the better. The flames leaped high, licking at the wet roof with hissing tongues. Smoke boiled from the windows and towered like a mighty, slanting pillar in the night wind.

The sheepmen hit the yard and broke out of the front gate, heading for the harder, higher ground of the road. But McIntyre and Whitcomb cut two of them down on the path between the chinaberry trees, and then the others found the wagons in their way.

They took to the mud. Two men carried the limp form of Jim Butler. They sank immediately into mire that topped their boots, dropped their gruesome burden and began to flounder.

The blazing house lighted the whole scene as bright as day. Shorty and Willie cut down on the bold targets. One of the men buckled in the same manner Jack Malone had fallen.

The sack of ammunition weighted a third man down. He plodded painfully in the mud, sinking deeper. He lifted his foot for a step back toward the road, and a slug ripped

through his heart and sent him falling face down in the mire.

"Don't shoot! We give up! We surrender!"

The scattered cries grew to a chorus. Guns splashed in the mud. Shorty and Willie advanced along the fence, while the sheepmen raised their hands toward the flame-lighted skies. From the other side came Whitcomb and McIntyre, keeping the sheep outfit covered.

"That's the stuff!" shouted a voice. "Go git 'em, Shorty!"

The freighter turned in surprise and nearly fell off the fence. It was Jack Malone, a smear across his temple where a bullet had gashed. The Ranger was trying hard to get out of the mud, but he would need help.

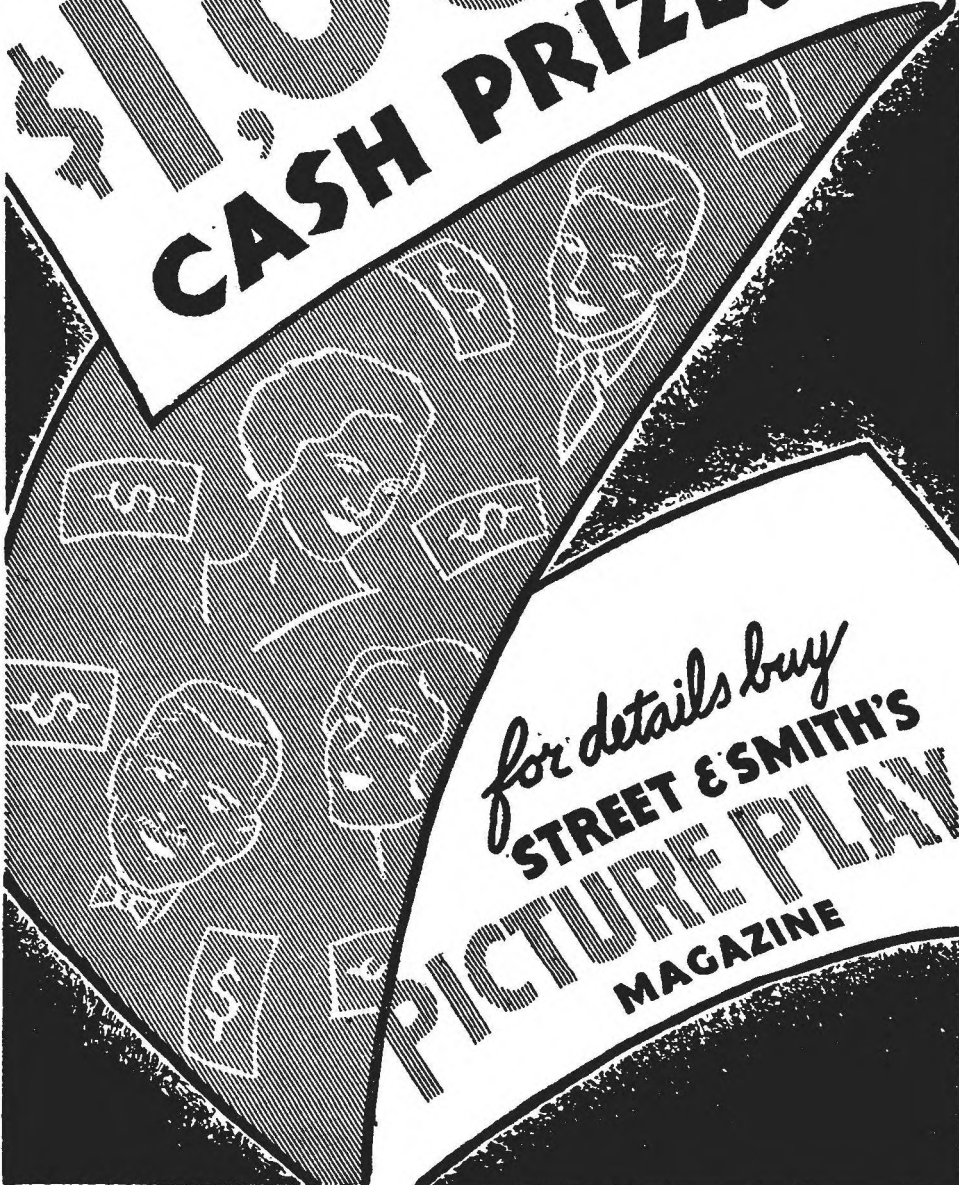
"Thought yuh was dead!" Shorty answered. "Stick around. We'll give yuh a hand in a minute, as soon as we tie these hombres up."

"I ain't in no hurry!" was Malone's reply. "Yuh better go git their hosses and pull yore wagons back to the main road. Yuh shore done a good job, Shorty. It looks to me like there is goin' to be some sheep fer sale in Caliente—if yuh want to buy 'em."

Shorty grinned and shook his head. "Not me!" he said. "Sheep and mules jest wouldn't mix!"

Shorty Masters, M. D., kin allus be depended on not ter stay neutral in any scrap where one side has got all the breaks. Him an' Willie is allus on the side o' justice. An' when them two *do* take sides in a scrap, there's shore goin' ter be some powder burned. Watch fer the next story about the two pards in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

SOMEHOW I allus seem tuh be rushed, these days. I don't know whether it's this particular new year, or whether it's this way every winter an' I'm just forgetful of the past years—or what. But anyway, I'm runnin' around like a chicken thet's had his haid chopped off.

Now, for tuh-day I'm goin' tuh give yuh one of S. Omar Barker's ballads. Mr. Barker's songs ain't old-timers, but they happen tuh be full of the life of cowboys, an' fer thet reason, I believe they'll live a long time. I reckon yuh'll agree with me thet no matter how old they are, they're plumb swell.

THE BALLAD OF COWBOY
CLARENCE *

By S. Omar Barker

Now hark to the ballad of Cowboy
Clarence,
Who come of a line of illustrious parents!
Whatever was noted some of 'em had been
it,

From soldiers an' Presidents down to the
Senate.

His grandpap, a captain that sailed on the
sea,

His pappy, a gen'ral like Robert E. Lee;
One grandma, when settlin' in pioneer lands,
Had strangled a grizzly with jest her bare
hands;

One uncle was sech a brave man with a
gun

He'd often had even Wild Bill on the run!

'Twas natural when Clarence joined up
with our spread,

He wore a big hat fer to fit his big head;
And to match the big talkin' he done with
his lips,

He toted twin cannons swung low at his
hips.

"Now, boss," he says, "call on me jest any
time

Fer expert advice—it won't cost yuh a
dime!

Fer wrongs that needs rightin' an' fightin',
call me,

Instead of these punchers with no pedigree.
Yuh can't expect much from a scrub-
blooded hoss—

The same with me—me, I'm a thorough-
bred, boss!"

The boss kind o' grins an' says "O. K.,
young feller!

I'm glad I got one hand at least that ain't
yeller!"

At workin' a round-up Kid Clarence is
new,

But learns quick enough that the boss says
he'll do.

"This here's kind o' tame," he says, "work-
in' with cattle.

I'd do a heap better in gun smoke an'
battle!"

"Don't tease him," the boss says, "he may
be plumb right

About this here pedigree stuff in a fight!"

An' so us scrub cowboys we don't make
no fuss

About this here fam'ly-tree, thoroughbred
cuss.

They's no time for monkeyshines when
yo're short-handed,

With cows to be gathered an' calves to be
branded.

Then one day some tracks at Lone Tree
water hole

Shows plain as yer nose that somebody has
stole

Three dozen or more of the Double B's
steers—

Jest drove 'em right off! The wust rustlin'
in years!

They've drove 'em up to Macho Creek
into the bresh,

Both hoss tracks an' cow tracks is plumb
plenty fresh.

We rides like a hurricane houndin' their
trail—

Kid Clarence rides with us, determined an'
pale.

The bresh claws our faces, the trees thump
our knees,

An' many a cliff trail's a mighty tight
squeeze.

Way over on Bear Creek we fires the fust
gun.

The rustlers—an' Clarence—shoot onct an'
then run.

I yells back at Clarence to make him come
on,

But fust thing I know, I look round an'
he's gone!

The battle ain't much but one wild runnin'
race,

With six-guns a-poppin' an' bresh in our
face.

But when it's all over there's two rustlers
dead,

An' one of our boys bleedin' some from
hot lead.

We rounds up the cows then an' drives 'em
to camp,

An' there we find Clarence complainin' of
cramp.

"I took sudden sick, or o' course I'd 'a'
stayed,"

He says. "I killed one, boys! I wasn't
afraid!"

The idea! Him claimin' a man fer his
bullet—

He'd only shot onct afore fear made him
pull it!

* Reprinted by kind permission of the author from his book "Buckaroo Ballads," published by the Santa Fe, New Mexico, Publishing Corporation.

"My stummick—" "He means," I bust
in with a beller,
"Is jest like yer gizzard an' both of 'em
yeller!"

I starts fer to grab him, the boss beats me
to it.

"He's only a kid, Jude," he says. "Lemme
do it."

The boss yanks him up by a hand on his
collar

An' slaps into silence his whimperin' holler.
He gives him a kick in the pants seat—
ker-plunk!

"Yo're fired," he says. "Git, now, yuh
thoroughbred skunk!"

Good-by to our ballad an' good-by to
Clarence,

Who come of a line of plumb pedigreed
parents.

In hosses—or men, boys, believe me or
not—

No pedigree counts, if the colt doesn't trot!

Thar's a good moral tuh thet
song, folks, an' one thet held true
many a time out West. Fer all sorts
o' men went out there in the early
days, an' still do. Some of 'em have
pedigrees, an' some don't. But they
all have equal chances tuh prove
themselves, an' the world soon
knows tuh what group they really
belong.

An' now, folks, hyar's for one of
the most popular ol'-time Western
songs thet exists. Some of yuh have
had it before, but it's worth seem'
ag'in. An' I hope yuh know the
tune of "My Bonnie Lies Over the
Ocean," for this song is sung tuh
thet:

THE COWBOY'S DREAM †

Last night as I lay on the prairie,
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would drift to that sweet by-and-by.

† Reprinted by kind permission of Mr. John A. Lomax from his collection "Cowboy Songs," published by MacMillan, New York.

Roll on, roll on;
Roll on, little dogies, roll on, roll on!
Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, little dogies, roll on!

The road to that bright, happy region
Is a dim narrow trail, so they say;
But the broad one that leads to perdition
Is posted and blazed all the way.

They say there will be a great round-up
And cowboys, like dogies, will stand,
To be marked by the Riders of Judgment
Who are posted and know every brand.

I know there's many a stray cowboy
Who'll be lost at the great, final sale,
When he might have gone in the green
pastures
Had he known of the dim, narrow trail.

I wonder if ever a cowboy
Stood ready for that Judgment Day
And could say to the Boss of the Riders,
"I'm ready, come drive me away."

For they, like the cows that are locoed,
Stampede at the sight of a hand,
Are dragged with a rope to the round-up,
Or get marked with some crooked man's
brand.

And I'm scared that I'll be a stray
yearling—
A maverick, unbranded on high—
And get cut in the bunch with the "rusties"
When the Boss of the Riders goes by.

For they tell of another big owner
Who's ne'er overstocked, so they say,
But who always makes room for the sinner
Who drifts from the straight, narrow way.

They say he will never forget you,
That he knows every action and look;
So, for safety, you'd better get branded,
Have your name in the great Tally Book.

Thar yuh are, folks! An' I reckon
thet's about all we got time fer tuh-
day. So long!"



SCISSORS



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

ANOTHER week has passed by, an' hyar I am ag'in, on the job o' providin' new friends fer yuh. Shore I enjoy it, an' the more letters there is tuh be printed, the better I like it.

Howsomever, I want tuh p'int out tuh yuh that as it takes some time

for yore requests tuh appear in the W. W. W., yuh can get Pen Pals quickly, in the meantime, by askin' me fer addresses o' some o' the Pen Pals whose printed requests have interested yuh.

Jest be shore thet yuh take names o' new Pen Pals from the *latest* issue

o' the magazine, send them to me, and I'll give yuh the complete addresses in return. It's best that yuh take names from the latest issue, because they mean new Pen Pals who haven't many friends yet, an' therefore are more apt tuh answer pronto. Now read the letters.

AXES TUH GRIND.

That covers a lot o' subjects: Collectors o' stamps, songs an' sech-like find a mart hyar; an' whatever request contains somethin' out o' the ordinary is printed under this headin'—all worth readin'.

DEAR SAM: I am badly in need of Pen Pals. I wish you would please try to get me some friends who are interested in the same things that are my hobbies, especially collectors of stamps. Would also like letters from Boy Scouts. Will answer all letters. I am a boy, thirteen years old.

PAUL WINTERS, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I would like to correspond with fellows in other countries who are interested in collecting stamps or who will exchange picture cards or what-have-you for stamps. I am a young man of twenty-eight, a watchmaker by trade, but I do not put any age limit on my new Pen Pals. Nor will there be any geographical restrictions. I wish to hear from people anywhere in the world.

BENNETT DAVIDSON, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I hope that I am not asking too much in requesting you to print this plea for Pen Pals. I am a young chap of seventeen, fond of all outdoor sports, especially hunting, hiking, and swimming. I can play the guitar and harmonica and know a lot of cowboy ballads. Will also exchange snaps. Here is hoping that many fellows, no matter where they may live, will write to me.

BUD J., OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen, longing for Pen Pals on Western ranches who can tell me of their experiences, and who would exchange songs with me. I am a farm girl and can ride horseback fairly well. So I have a little in common with the Western cowgirls.

V. J., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: Will you kindly print my plea in an early issue of the W. W. W.? I am a young fellow of twenty, and I desire principally to hear from chaps around my own age in South America and Florida. Will answer all letters.

HARRY LEWIS, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to you to ask that you try to help me find some of my relatives in Kansas or Missouri. If any one who has the same name as mine reads this, will he kindly write me at once? Also, please, Pen Pals, should you know of a fellow with my name, please, let me know.

IRVING FALING, OF IDAHO.

FROM FAR AWAY.

These folks are callin' fer Pen Pals hyar. International correspondence shore is a fine medium for learnin' somethin' about what the other people in the world think an' do.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, eighteen years old. I would like to get some Pen Pals anywhere in the world and promise beforehand to answer every letter I receive. I am interested in farming, ranching, hunting, cycling, and rowing, but even more so in everything that pertains to aircraft. Will gladly swap maps or anything desired, all strictly within the rules you have adopted. Incidentally, I am a butcher by trade.

CYRIL B., OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen with what I could almost call a craze for billiards. I imagine, however, that our game is quite different from that which is played in your country. Nevertheless, I would like to hear from fellows there with the same hobby, if possible. Note, however, that I shall gladly hear from boys, even if billiards does not interest them—especially sons of Irish parents.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL, OF IRELAND.

DEAR SAM: Just a few lines to let you know that I am very anxious to find some Pen Pals in the West, preferably in the State of Montana. I am a lonely soldier of around twenty and fellows out there of about the same age are invited to write to me. I would gladly exchange small souvenirs, such as a few British badges, for any memento of the West.

PVT. CALDWELL, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: Will you please try to interest some of your Pen Pals in writing to this young girl of sixteen? I am very fond of sports, and I am also somewhat of a bookworm. My home is in an apple-growing district, about thirty miles away from the nearest town, hence I have plenty of chance to get lonely and to long for correspondence.

ETHNE ROSS, OF NEW ZEALAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man in my twenties, an amateur photographer. Would very much like to get some Pen Pals through your department and promise to answer all letters as well as to exchange snaps.

HARRY LOVELL, OF NEW ZEALAND.

LONELY FOLKS.

It's sad tuh feel forgotten an' lonely, an' I think the writers o' these hyar letters do the right thing tuh appeal tuh Pen Pals fer help. Don't disappoint 'em, an' answer quickly an' freely.

DEAR SAM: I wonder whether you will be good enough to make room for my letter in your Pen Pals corner. I am a very lonesome boy of twelve, and I long for fellows to write me and cheer me up. Will answer all letters, even if they fill the mail box to the top.

SONNY BOY, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, a lover of nature and sports, but with all very lonesome and blue because I live way out in the woods away from neighbors. Really, my only good companions are my cat and my dog. Please see that some of the girls write to me, especially any one who is interested in costume designing and sewing, although I shall gladly answer any one who writes.

HELEN F., OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen. As I am very lonesome, I am trying to find some Pen Pals who will write to me regularly. I really do not care much where they live, as long as I get many letters.

WYNONA MARLOWE, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome fellow of nineteen. I served six months in the C. C. C. camps and was a member, before

that, of the National Guard. I can tell a little about army life, will exchange snaps, and promise to answer all letters.

BILL H., OF DELAWARE.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome man, and I would like to get letters from some of the Pen Pals, out West. Fellows between twenty-five and forty years old, please answer this plea soon and write often.

D. D. MERCER, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome chap of nineteen, and I crave Pen Pals among cowboys, aviators, sailors, guides, school-teachers, or in fact letters from any one who reads this plea and feels the least bit interested.

JACK M., OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl, sixteen years old, and very lonely. I would like to get some Pen Pals of about my own age to write and cheer me. I will gladly exchange snaps with them and write as interestingly as I can. Anybody may write, no matter where they live and how old they are.

STELLA MAE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of nineteen. Being very lonesome, I thought of writing to you and asking for Pen Pals anywhere in the United States. I would like to exchange snaps and information with other boys of around my age. I hope that there will be many who will answer this plea.

EVERETT KARNES, OF INDIANA.

WESTERNERS WANTED.

As usual, real Western gals an' boys are asked for info about thar country, because interest in the West never will wane. Give 'em satisfaction, Westerners!

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen, and I should like to get lots of information about riding and roping. For that reason, I ask you to kindly get me some Pen Pals who live on ranches in the West. Maybe some of them would like to exchange info for some old magazines of which I have quite a few.

LEO WASSSELL, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, eighteen years old. For the last three years I have been working on a farm in Maine, but I live now in a city and find life very dull. I long for the open spaces and should like boys of my age in Western States to tell me of

their activities. Fellows from Arizona and Texas will be especially welcome correspondents.

FRED CASAVANT, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: My husband and I are greatly interested in the West, and we harbor the hope that sometime we may go out there ourselves, provided a job can be found. We are especially interested in the States of Iowa, Nebraska, and North Dakota, and we should like very much to hear from Pen Pals living there with full information as to the country and job possibilities. Kindly write to us soon.

MR. AND MRS. BERT L.,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young man of twenty-three. I have a great admiration for the West, and I am very anxious to get in touch with some cowboys in Western States who can tell me more about life and customs out there. While I have never belonged to any military organization, I am a good rifle shot and also fond of outdoor life. Please write.

DOMARATIUS, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy fourteen years old, a farm boy. I would like to receive letters from Pen Pals in the West and also from some who live in foreign countries.

FRANK WHITE, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: Could you get some Pen Pals for me in the West? I am a young fellow of seventeen, and I promise to exchange snaps. Will answer all letters received.

CHAS. PLUTO, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to you in the hope that you can secure for me some Pen Pals from the West with whom a chap of twenty-one can correspond. Old-timers out West and cowboys are the ones whom I should prefer as my Pen Pals, because while I love the West, I know comparatively little about it and hope to learn more through correspondence with West-erners.

MARTIN FORNELL,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.

OTHER REQUESTS.

Of a general order—Pen Pals wanted of any kind and anywhere, the easiest sort o' letters to reply tuh.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to see whether you can get me some Pen Pals anywhere in the United States. I am a girl, fifteen years old, and I should like to hear from friends of about the same age. Will answer all letters.

MARGARET KRUEGER, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: Please find some Pen Pals for me. I will be glad to hear from boys anywhere in the world, and I will answer every letter I receive. My hobbies are sports. Will exchange snaps. I am sixteen years old.

LEWIS MASON, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: Can you make room for one more girl, looking for Pen Pals to correspond with? I am seventeen, with a sunny disposition, enjoy sports, and am anxious to hear from any girls of my age, no matter in what part of the world they may live. All letters will be answered.

MARGY, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man, twenty-one years old. I am interested in music and sports, but since I live on a farm, I have not much chance to practice either. For that reason I should like to get some Pen Pals to exchange letters on these or other subjects. Will answer all letters and exchange photos.

SOL N., OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Here is a jolly, slangy, red-headed tomboy asking for Pen Pals. I am in the second year in high school, and since my kid brother does not want me to tag around with him, I am rather lost. That is not so good for a girl of fourteen, and I want Pen Pals to write to me. Anybody is welcome, whether from the wild and woolly West or from the sunny Southland. Just write to me and you may be sure to get a prompt reply.

SLANGY RED JEAN, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of fourteen. My hobbies include letter writing, and I should like to have Pen Pals in any part of the wide world. I am ready to answer all letters I get.

ERMA BAKER, OF TEXAS.

That's the crop fer this week. Plenty o' new frien'ships in the makin', I reckon. Now don't waste time, but sit right down an' answer 'em. So long until next week.



The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

SAY, Boss," asks Shorty Masters, at this week's meetin' o' the 3W outfit, "don't yuh figure the readin' hombres would 'preciate havin' a poets' night, to-night?"

"Why, mebbe they would, Shorty," we answers, grinnin'. "O' course, *you* wouldn't though, would yuh?"

"Shore thet danged mule skinner would like a poets' night," speaks up Buck Foster. "He's jest the kind of a locoed shorthorn thet *does* like thet fool stuff! I'll be a horned toad, if I kin see why anybody with real savvy wants ter listen ter po'try!"

"What d'yuh know 'bout folks with 'real savvy'?" Joe Scott wants ter know. "If yuh don't like ter listen ter po'try, chances are folks with 'real savvy' would plumb enjoy it."

An' there are some more chances thet Joe don't like po'try much better'n Buck does. But the redhead always disagrees with everything Buck says—jest fer the principle o' the thing. So ter-night, he likes po'try.

Likewise, he starts another one o' the long-winded arguments thet him an' Buck is famous fer. We lets 'em go it, whilst we opens the sack marked "Pomes" an' looks around ter see who's on hand fer the meetin'.

Buck's an' Joe's boss, young Billy West, an' the outfit's slant-eyed chink cook, Sing Lo, is both here. Then we sees the Whistlin' Kid, Jimmy Quick, an' Shorty Masters's lanky cowboy pard, Willie Wetherbee. The which ain't a bad turnout, considerin' it's cold enough, ter-

night, ter freeze the hair offn Buck Foster's bearskin vest.

Waal, finally we're ready ter start the meetin'. But Buck an' Joe is still jawin' like a couple of ornery bobcats. So we has ter tip the wink ter Billy West, who joins us pronto in squelchin' the two pards an' git-in' a little quiet in the Corner.

When said result has been arrived at, we're ready ter commence. So here's the first letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just a few lines to let you know that I sure enjoyed the last poets' night in the Wranglers Corner, and that I hope every one else did, too.

I have tried to write another little poem about Buck Foster. It is supposed to be funny, but I don't know what you—or Buck—will think about it. However, you are welcome to use it any time you want to, if you think the reading hombres will like it.

Now, here it is:

THE HORNED-TOAD BLUES

Buck Foster, a top rider,
For the Circle J spread,
Once met a fair young lady,
And he lost his fool old head.

He asked her hand in marriage,
And she did not refuse—
She just went away and left him
With those horned-toad blues.

'Twas on a Sunday morning,
Buck carefully had dressed—
He had bought a brand-new outfit
And was looking at his best.

He'd cleaned his bearskin waistcoat,
Giving it a real shampoo,
And after drying and combing
It looked almost like new.

When he saddled up his cayuse
And went riding away—
There were few bold Western cowboys
Who were looking near as gay.

In the cow town of Twin Rivers,
Where they had planned to meet,
He found his darling waiting
On a corner of the street.

Then when he popped the question,
He thought he'd won the game,
For they'd started for the parson's
When a telegram, it came.

The wire was from her husband
Of whom she had lost track;
He'd just found out where she was at
And wanted her to come back.

So she left Twin Rivers pronto,
When she got this welcome news;
And now Buck is plenty ugly
With those horned-toad blues.

Yours till Billy West gives Buck the air,
H. F. MCKEAN.
Santa Ana, California.

"Help me, Hannah!" explodes Buck, hardly waitin' till we've stopped readin'. "Thet am all a danged lie, Boss! Yores truly, Buck Foster, ain't never asked no ornery gal ter git married. An' if I did, by heifers——"

"If yuh did," jeers Joe Scott, "the pore gal would die o' fright. Jest the thought o' lookin' at that mug o' yores across the chuck table, every day, would be enough ter make any gal cash in her chips an'——"

"Am thet so? Why, yuh danged, flop-eared, carrot-topped hunk o' cussedness, who am you ter be talkin' about bein' homely? Long-side o' yuh, I'm a reg'lar danged dude, by heifers!"

Fer a while after thet, it don't look like there'd be no more meetin'—nor any place ter hold it, fer the roof almost blows off. But finally things calm down a bit, and here's the next one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We have been reading 3W for three years, and we think it is the best magazine on the market. We have our favorites, and here's who they are, and why:

Circle J is first, because they are all real he-men, even Sing Lo. Hungry and Rusty come second, because they can whip any ten men this side of nowhere.

Sonny Tabor is next, and then comes Shorty Masters—and his mules. They ought to get a job in the movies.

We don't like Kid Wolf and the Whistlin' Kid. They are too tender. All the rest, however, will pass, except George Krumm.

Yours till Sing Lo gets poisoned on his own food,
THE TROUBLE TRIPLETS.

Minco, Ohio.

P. S. Here's a poem which we hope you'll like well enough to use in the Corner, some night:

BRANDS

From Canada down to the Rio Grande,
from Kansas to the Coast
Wherever you see a steer's big side,
You'll spot a big brand on his hide—
At least on the hides of most.

There's the Flyin' W and Circle B,
The Big Box X and the old Bar Z,
The Doodle Bug and the Flyin' V,
The IXL an' the Lazy P.

The W Bar and the big Bar T,
The Circle J and the Rafter B,
Circle 6 and the Crooked Bar,
XIT, an' the big Lone Star.

Over the range where the cattle run, the
men are branded, too—
Level eyes and stubborn jaws,
Legs that are bent to hold a hoss,
Skin tanned to a leather hue.

There yuh are, Boss. We hope you like it.

An' we does. So does the rest o'
the gang. We kin tell it by jest
lookin' at 'em. So we thanks the
Trouble Triplets an' hopes that we'll
hear from them ag'in. Here's an-
other one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first let-
ter to you, and I hope you like it and print
it in the Wranglers Corner sometime.

I have no favorites among your riders. I
think they are swell. I just happened to
think of writing a poem about Sing Lo,
because no one else ever does.

Here it is:

SING LO

The little chink cook is plumb full of tricks
To get his pards out of any old fix,
But when the six-guns begin to roar,
You'll see the Chinaboy no more.

As a doctor, Sing Lo can't be beat—
At mending bones he sure is neat.
But he loves his "tanglefoot," so be,
And often drinks till he can't see.

As a cook, the chink is plenty good,
But he teases Buck, which he never should.
When Buck roars out, "I'll be a horned
toad."
Sing Lo lights out down the Twin Rivers
road.

JOHN L. HENDERSON.

Columbus, Kansas.

Now here's another one that the
author sent in ter our ol' pard, Fid-
dlin' Joe. Joe couldn't use it, on
account of it wasn't a real ol'-timer.
So he turned it over ter us—an' here
it is:

OLD BUNKER

By F. Morris

At the old Dodge ranch where I used to
ride,
Old Bunker, the cow hoss, was the family
pride.
To the boys and girls, he was mild as
milk—
His coat was black and as smooth as silk.

Heavy in the shoulders, light on his feet,
He was a plumb smart cow horse, hard to
beat.

Cute, too—learned from his Yankee boss—
He was nobody's fool, that Bunker hoss.

Show him the steers and use your knees,
Bunker's ears went down an' he hit the
breeze.

He'd rear or strike and bite the tail—
He shore enjoyed to hear 'em wail.

He could stand on a dollar, turn on a dime,
It was up to you to be on the job all the
time.

One day on herd I was riding along,
Idly singing a cowboy song.

'Twas about the little gal at the home
corral,

A-ridin' side-saddle, jest fer a spell.
Bunk saw a gopher hole, it made him shy,
He side-jumps a yard, an' I'm ready to fly.

He left me flat—or was it level—
An' hits for home like he's chased by a
devil.

Well, there was I, gopher hole a-straddle,
Bunk hittin' for home, both feet in the
saddle.

Luckily for me, the herd was far away,
In the saddle, you're O. K., but on the
ground *passee*.

Well, I started walkin' home—only three
miles—
An' when I limps in, there is Bunk, all
smiles.

His knowin' look says, "This is on you,
me b'y!"

But I says to myself, "You're not so fly!
I thought for a minute that you had me
sunk,

But you done me a favor, you danged old
bunk!

"At the ranch house, when she knows I'm
nigh,

Is a gal who'll give me a big piece o' pie."
But when we went back on the range again,
Either Bunk or the pie sure gave me a pain.

Waal, the gang shore got a kick
out o' thet—like they allus do when
they hear a plumb salty rhyme
about a bronc. They join us in
thankin' Mr. Morris fer the pome—
an' Fiddlin' Joe fer passin' it on to
us.

An' thet winds things up fer this
week. Meetin's adjourned. Every-
body be shore an' be on hand next
week!
THE RANGE BOSS.

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Novelette

By PHILIP F. DEERE

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way o' lookin' at it, but the real owl-hooters—they figure he's plumb pizen.

Señor Red Mask and the Gold Of Los Gatos

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