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JULY 6

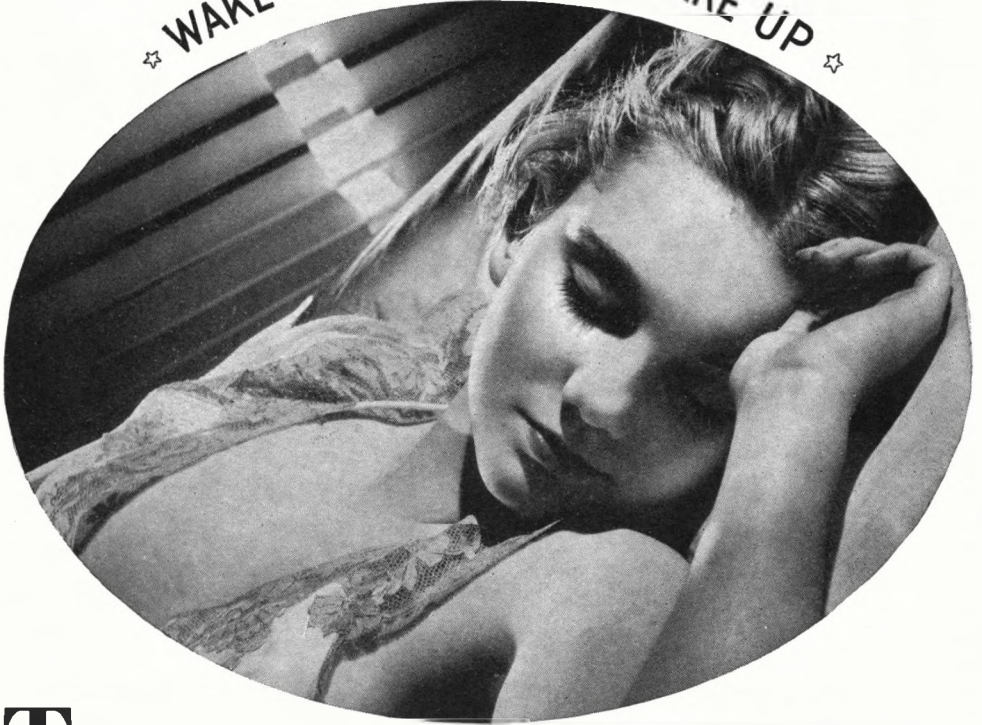
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KID WOLF'S TWO-GUN CODE

By WARD M. STEVENS



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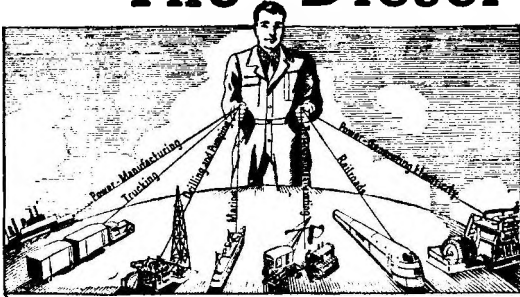
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Vol. 94, No. 5

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"Kid Wolf's Two-gun Code" . . . Painted by H. W. Scott

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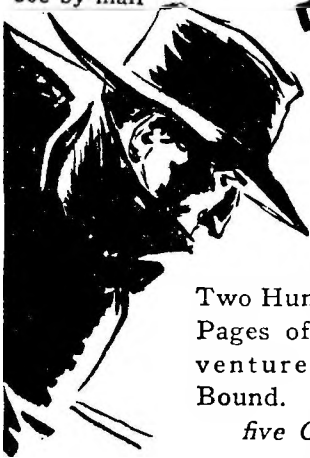
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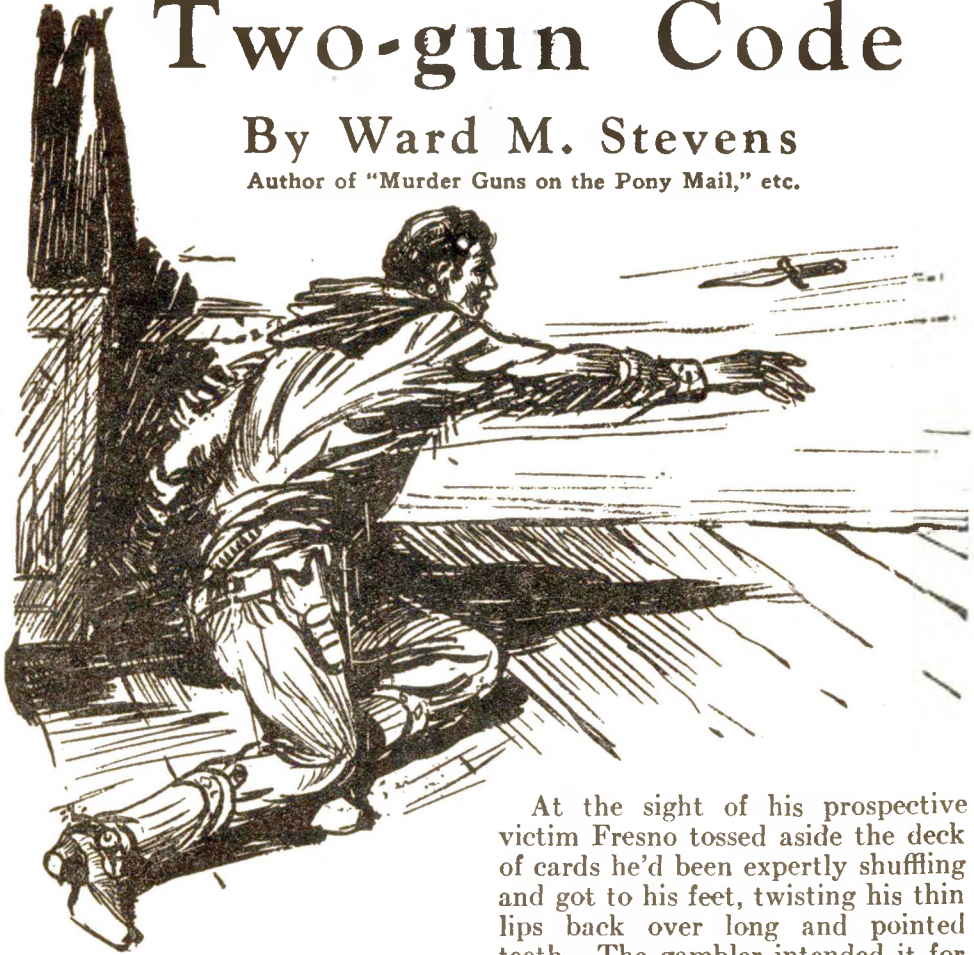
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Kid Wolf's Two-gun Code

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Murder Guns on the Pony Mail," etc.



CHAPTER I.

ACCORDING TO TEXAS RULES.

AS the bronzed young hombre sauntered through the shabby green doors of the Copperhead Saloon, a greedy light sprang into the eyes of Jack Fresno, professional gambler. A poker game had just broken up—with Fresno the big winner—and he was sitting alone at the round, felt-covered table, like a spider waiting for foolish flies to blunder into its web.

At the sight of his prospective victim Fresno tossed aside the deck of cards he'd been expertly shuffling and got to his feet, twisting his thin lips back over long and pointed teeth. The gambler intended it for a friendly smile, but it was more like the hungry grin of a cougar.

Fresno had a method of his own—a system that seldom failed to rope in the unwary—and he proceeded to use it. First of all, he pretended to recognize the newcomer.

"Well, well," he said in a jovial, booming voice, "how's things over in Sandy Gap?"

The saloon was fairly well crowded, and all eyes were turned on the stranger. New faces weren't



uncommon in Little Pine, but this hombre would have attracted attention anywhere.

He was a wide-shouldered, slim-waisted youth, dressed in fringed buckskins, touched off with bright color. The wide brim of a sombrero shaded piercing gray-blue eyes, and his tanned features were clear-cut and regular.

He wore two guns, thonged low to his thighs in worn leather holsters. On his feet were high-heeled boots decorated with the Lone Star of Texas, worked in studs of silver. When he spoke to answer Fresno's question, it was in a soft Southern drawl:

"I'm not acquainted, sah, with affaihs at Sandy Gap."

Fresno seemed somewhat taken aback. He was a good actor, as all

poker experts must be. His gaunt and swarthy face registered astonishment.

"But ain't you Slim Leslie—ol' John Leslie's son?" he demanded.

Fresno didn't have to pretend to be crestfallen this time, for the hombre in the buckskins seemed to look clear through him. A quizzical, half-amused look had come into those steady gray eyes, and Fresno felt uncomfortable.

"Mah name is Kid Wolf, sah, and I'm from Texas, not from Sandy Gap," said the stranger in a courteous but somewhat mocking voice.

"My mistake!" ejaculated the card sharp. "I could've sworn yuh was Slim. Yo're the spittin' image of him. Great friend o' mine, Slim is. Anyway, Kid, we'll have a drink together. The joke's on me, and

so's the liquor." He spun a gold double eagle on the counter and grinned at the bartender. "Trot out a quart o' whisky, Pete."

The barkeeper whirled two thick-bottomed glasses and a tall bottle across the polished surface of the bar, but "Kid" Wolf shook his head.

"Thank yo' kindly, sah, but I don't drink," he said quietly.

Fresno blinked, somewhat perplexed. Then he stroked his narrow black mustache to conceal a smile. The stranger wasn't as experienced, probably, as he looked. There must be a soft streak in him somewhere. A hard drinker himself, Fresno couldn't figure a man who would refuse liquor. He was sure, now, that he was dealing with an easy mark.

"I'll take one myself, Kid," he chuckled, filling his glass. "My name's Fresno—glad to know yuh. Yere, Pete, give my friend the Kid a cigar!"

"No, I'll just roll a cigarette, thanks," the Texan drawled. "And by the way—yo' probably misundahstood—mah name is Wolf, sah. Only mah *real* friends call me 'Kid.'"

Fresno's face darkened a little at this cool thrust. Kid Wolf looked as if he might have money, however, and the gambler swallowed his resentment at the rebuff.

"Goin' to stay in Little Pine long, Wolf?" he questioned.

"I'm just passin' through on mah way to Yellow Pan," was the reply. "I stopped heah to inquiah the best way theah."

"Oh; yuh mean the new minin' camp?" said Fresno. "It's a humdinger, from all I've heard—lots o' gold bein' taken out around thar. Yuh can't miss it. Yaller Pan is right across the range. The goin' will be purty hard, though, and it's

more than a one-day ride. Yuh'd better lay up yere ontill to-morrow mornin'. How about me and you startin' a little poker game, jist to pass the time?"

The card expert was doomed to disappointment. Kid Wolf smiled slightly as if he had been looking forward to the invitation and lifted a shoulder in a shrug.

"I nevah gamble, sah," he said briefly.

Fresno muttered something under his breath and turned away in disgust. Either the Texan was too wise for him, or—well, he didn't know what to think. If Kid Wolf had a soft streak, it wasn't for cards.

The gambler's gloom, however, was short lived, for three or four cattlemen, more or less under the influence of drink, lurched into the Copperhead and ordered whisky. One of them hailed Fresno drunk-enly.

"We've been lookin' fer yuh, Jack!" he cried. "Are yuh goin' to give us a chance tuh git even?"

"Git the cards," yelped another of the bunch. "Yuh cain't *allus* trim us, Fresno! This time we're goin' to take yuh fer a cleanin'!"

Fresno didn't appear to be very eager—he was too clever for that—but after a few protests he took his place at the card table with the others. Calling for more drinks, they began a game of draw poker—a stiff one. Instead of chips they used ten-and-twenty-dollar gold pieces for markers.

Kid Wolf looked on, leaning with his back to the bar, a thin thread of blue smoke uncoiling from his brown cigarette. He didn't seem especially interested; his keen eyes seemed half closed.

Fresno won, almost from the first. Slowly, and then more rapidly, the yellow piles of coin in front of the

ranchers dwindled while Fresno's increased. Time after time, he raked in the pots, while the cattlemen swore at their luck and drank more whisky.

Once, a shining eagle tinkled to the floor, but Fresno didn't bother to pick it up.

He dealt the cards with bewildering rapidity, shuffling them with the long, tapering fingers of an expert. No matter how good the cards of his opponents were, his always seemed to be a shade better.

"I got two pair—tens up," grunted a gray-haired rancher after the gambler had "called."

"Two pair yere," chuckled Fresno. "Jacks up. I've jist got yuh topped."

The next time, Fresno beat three sevens with three queens, after another player had dropped three treys. Soon afterward, he won again, holding a small straight that was just good enough to win. And so it went.

Two of the players went broke, and the other two hombres began to plunge recklessly. They were at the good-humored stage of drunkenness, and Fresno knew that it would be safe to take them for all they were worth.

Suddenly Fresno turned his long, sardonic face and snarled up at Kid Wolf, who was quietly overlooking the play.

"I don't allow nobody to look over my shoulder that a way!" he fumed. "Do yuh want to ruin my luck, Wolf?"

The Kid smiled, his white teeth making a pleasing contrast with the bronze of his face.

"It is very—ah—delicate of yo', sah, to call it 'luck,'" he drawled deliberately.

The gambler's dark eyebrows went together in a frown. The

Texan's cool sarcasm went over his head—it was a bit too subtle for his understanding—and he didn't know whether he'd been insulted or not. There was something he didn't quite grasp about Kid Wolf, and it angered him.

"If yuh want to play, draw up a chair!" he rasped. "If yuh don't—well, I reckon you Texas men is too yaller to risk yore dinero in a poker game!"

The smiling expression of the Texan did not change, but his eyes seemed more gray and less blue than before. He sauntered around the table and pushed a chair into a vacant place.

"With yo' permission, gentlemen," he said to the two cattlemen as he gave a little bow and sat down. "Deal me in, Mistah Fresno."

The gambler stared at him sneeringly, the deck of cards still in his hands.

"I thought yuh said yuh didn't gamble, Wolf."

"Yo' ah right," was the soft reply, "I don't like games of chance. But as this seems to be a game of skill, hombre, I think I'm justified in matchin' mine against yo'ahs."

The gambler scowled, swore under his breath, and began the deal. Kid Wolf had casually drawn a handful of gold pieces from a pocket of his buckskins and had tossed one into the pot for his ante.

Fresno "opened," but Kid Wolf dropped his cards. The two ranchmen, however, stayed with it, drew, and after several big bets the show-down came.

Both rose from the table, muttering disgustedly. The gambler had cleaned them out. A spade flush had beaten them both.

"Well, it looks like it's me and you now, Wolf," said Fresno with a silky laugh. "We'll buck heads."

What do yuh say to a hundred-dollar ante? Or are yuh a piker?"

"A hundred it is, sah," said Kid Wolf.

Every one in the saloon, including the four ranchers who had lost, gathered around the table to watch the play. It promised to be a big one, even for Little Pine, where sizable fortunes changed hands nightly.

Fresno won the first hand, but after that his "luck" seemed to be deserting him. The "jacks-or-better" ruling had been set aside to make for faster play, and either player could "open" whenever he felt like it.

Kid Wolf began to win steadily, much to the astonishment of the bystanders. Slowly but surely the yellow stack in front of him began to climb.

Whenever Fresno laid down the deck to be cut, before the deal, the Texan would separate the cards very carefully and deliberately. Furious now, the gambler's rage was rising by leaps and bounds.

"A nine-high straight—beat it if yuh can!" rasped the gambler after calling a large bet.

Kid Wolf spread out his cards with a cool smile. "Sorry, sah, but my flush beats it. Theah all as pink as a Texas sunrise."

He had five hearts. Fresno gnawed his thin lips as he watched the Kid rake in the biggest pot, thus far, of the session. The gambler was being beaten at his own game, and he was puzzled. White about the mouth with anger, he dealt out another hand. Kid Wolf then won with a pair of tens!

Sweat began dribbling down Jack Fresno's face. Again he lost—and again. The watchers about the table stood with wide eyes and open mouths, scarcely breathing.

The next hand "tapped" Fresno.

The last of the gold coins in front of him passed across to the soft-spoken Texan. Then Fresno took a thick roll of bills from his pocket—and lost that.

"Have yo' got enough, sah?" asked Kid Wolf courteously.

"Keep yore seat!" cried the gambler with a bitter oath. "I'm not done yet, by a long shot!" He drew a folded, legal-appearing paper from the pocket of his black coat and spread it out on the green cloth of the table. "I'll bet this," he exclaimed, "against what dinero yuh've got thar, Wolf!"

"What is it?"

"Mortgage papers on the Lightnin' Rod Ranch, a few miles west o' yere," said Fresno. "The spread's wuth six thousand dollars easy, and yuh've only got about five in front of yuh, Wolf. This paper's the same as money. The mortgage is past due and kin be foreclosed any time. I was figurin' yisterday I'd ride out thar and either collect or take possession, and if yuh win, yuh kin do the same! Will yuh gamble, Wolf—one hand? Or are yuh scairt?"

"Deal the cahds," drawled the Texan.

"All right," rasped Fresno, "but first——"

He pulled a short-barreled Colt .44 from its holster, and placed it on the table within quick reach of his right hand. It was an ivory-handled thing, squat and ugly.

"Them's Little Pine rules, Wolf," he growled, "whenever the pot reaches a certain size. If yuh keer to, yuh can do the same."

The Kid sat back easily in his chair and laced a brown cigarette. He smiled, but there was something icy in it, something frigid in his steady glance as he fixed it on the gambler's twitching face.

"Accordin' to Texas rules, Mistah

Fresno," he replied, "an hombre keeps his gun in its holstah until he's ready to use it. And I reckon I'll play accordin' to Texas rules. Deal the cahds."

Jack Fresno was a professional, a seasoned gambler, but his pale hands were trembling as he shuffled the pasteboards and began the deal. The silence in the long, low-ceilinged room was so tense that the two players could hear the labored breathing of the bystanders.

Kid Wolf picked up his cards, glanced at them carelessly and passed. Fresno declared it open. Both men drew cards.

"Well, sah, I reckon the bettin' is all done," said the Texan. "This is the show-down. What have yo'?"

There was a brief pause, then the gambler's thin face became twisted into a grin of triumph and exultation. With a yell of joy, he threw his hand face up on the table.

"A little filly!" he jubilated. "A full house, Wolf."

The Kid never batted an eyelash. "How big is yo' full?"

"Aces!" chortled the gambler, reaching for the great stack of gold that was heaped in the center of the green cloth. "Three aces, Wolf, and a pair o' kings."

"We'll split the pot," murmured Kid Wolf. "I have the same."

Then slowly, without the shadow of a smile on his tanned face now, he threw down his cards, face up, one by one—a king, an ace, a king, and another ace!

Fresno's face turned the exact color of a rotten Mexican lime—a sickly yellow-green. His repulsive, thin-lipped mouth sagged open and his eyes bulged glassily.

"I admit, sah, that it's a little unusual to find six aces in one pokah game," said the Kid pleasantly, "but

maybe those othah cahds that yo' have up yo' sleeve will explain that."

Those words meant fight, and the crowd scattered like aspen leaves in a high wind! Some of the spectators ducked around the bar, and others flattened themselves behind tables and chairs. Fresno, his long teeth bared, was reaching for the gun at his right hand!

But his fingers never quite closed around the ivory handle of the convenient .44! With a movement so swift that nobody in the saloon saw the motion, Kid Wolf's hand went out of sight below the table top.

Br-r-r-r-rang! There was a sudden red flash, a burst of blue smoke, and the gambler's gun went whirling into the air! Kid Wolf, shooting through the wood of the table, had hit it cleanly. Fresno's groping fingers closed over empty air!

"What the——" he wheezed.

"Stand wheah yo' ah, yo' fo' flushah!" the Texan's voice crackled out while the dove walls of the Copperhead were still quivering from the explosion. In one hand, with a curl of smoke unwinding from the long blue barrel, was one of the Kid's big Colt .45 "Peacemakers."

"Don't—don't shoot!" squawked the gambler, his knees buckling in fright and bewilderment.

"I won't waste anothah bullet unless I have to, yo' cheap cowahd," the Kid's voice bored in. Without taking his cold eyes from Fresno's pasty face, he called to the four astonished cattlemen who had been fleeced by the gambler. "Step up, men, and take the money that yo'-all lost just now," he invited. "He cheated yo'."

The victims hesitated a moment, then came up gingerly and counted out their losses from the bright stack of coins on the table. They were nearly as amazed as Fresno himself.

"*Bueno!*" the Texan drawled. "And now, Mistah Fresno, yo' and me will split the pot. Yo' can take what dinero's left—I'll take this papah."

The Kid thrust the mortgage document into a pocket of his buckskins and continued calmly:

"I knew all the time, hombre, that yo' were ringin' in cold cahds—holdin' out some fo' yo' own use. To beat yo' at yo' own game, I held out a few mahself! And bein' as mah methods were a bit irregulah we'll divide fifty-fifty—and yo'll like it! And now, sah, good aftahnoon—and adios. The next time yo' feel like givin' lessons in pokah, don't call on a Texan!"

The swinging doors thudded shut behind a pair of wide, buckskin-clad shoulders, and Kid Wolf was gone.

CHAPTER II.

LIGHTNING ROD RANCH.

KID WOLF made a few inquiries before leaving town, then swung aboard his horse and left Little Pine, following the trail that led toward the massive mountain range in the west.

The Texan's cayuse had attracted almost as much attention in the town as the Kid himself. Blizzard was much bigger than the average bronc, clean-limbed, deep-chested, and powerful. In color it was as white as drifted snow, without a blemish, and its long mane and tail were like creamy silk.

Blizzard struck a steady, mile-cating pace across the brushy flats, eager again for the trail. Like its master, the huge white horse was a restless wanderer, a rolling stone.

As they loped along, the Kid took the mortgage from his pocket and examined it more attentively, especially the date. As the gambler had

said, the mortgage was several days overdue. If the paper was genuine, Kid Wolf was the owner of a ranch.

After a two hours' ride he reached the Lightning Rod, it being then about four in the afternoon. The headquarters of the spread didn't amount to much. There was just a small, whitewashed dobe house, a windmill, some shacks, and a couple of cactus corrals.

The country surrounding it, however, seemed especially good. The grass was lush, and there was plenty of water. There was no doubt that the ranch was worth the six thousand that Fresno had claimed.

As he approached the house, however, the Texan was somewhat surprised. He'd seen no cattle, and there seemed to be no horses or other live stock about. Except for the well-tended flower garden that bloomed alongside the dobe and the immaculate neatness of everything, the Kid would have thought the place deserted.

Dismounting in the little front yard, the Texan strode to the doorway, his spurs tinkling musically, and knocked.

"Is anybody home?" he sang out.

The door opened, and instantly the Kid's hat was in his hand. Framed in the opening was a little old lady. She wore steel-rimmed spectacles, her white hair was brushed carefully back, and a fringed shawl was draped about her stooped shoulders.

"Pahdon me, ma'am," said the Kid, "but does S. M. Minnroad live heah?" He consulted the paper again to make certain of the name.

The little lady—she wasn't as tall as the Texan's shoulders—nodded assent and eyed her visitor timorously.

"Yes," she quavered. "I'm S. M.

Minnroad—Susan Mary Minnroad.”

Kid Wolf was surprised, but he bowed courteously. The ranch woman was staring at the paper he still held in his hand, and her eyes were frightened and anxious.

“Is that—the mortgage? You’ve come here about it?” she questioned, with a hopeless little gesture of her thin and wrinkled hands. “Won’t you come in, sir?”

“Thank yo’, ma’am,” said the Texan, entering the tiny, primly clean kitchen.

He noted that the lid was off the little stove and near it was a pile of twigs and kindling. Evidently, Mrs. Minnroad had been about to prepare her evening meal.

“Do yo’ live heah all alone?” he asked, declining the chair she offered him.

“Yes, when my two boys are away,” she said, looking up at him uneasily. “They’re away now—in Yellow Pan.”

“Oh, the new gold camp?”

“Yes, sir,” she said with a little tremble in her voice. “If you’ve come about the mortgage——”

“That’s what brings me heah, ma’am,” drawled the Texan.

Mrs. Minnroad seemed to be trying to gather courage. In her nervousness she was twisting and unfolding her apron.

“I know it’s overdue,” she faltered. “I—I can’t even pay the interest. Can’t you extend it? I’ve got thirty-seven dollars—and fifty cents—toward it, and if you’ll extend it a few days more and take that——”

“I wouldn’t think of it, ma’am,” the Kid told her gravely.

The ranchwoman was trying desperately not to weep. “But all I need to save my home is a little time,” she said tremorously. “My

sons have found gold—they really have. In just a little while, we can pay anything you ask! Wait just a moment, and I’ll show you the proof!”

Kid Wolf watched her with a strange look in his eyes while she fumbled and pattered about a shelf over the stove. Finally she drew a newspaper from behind an old-fashioned wooden clock and extended it pleadingly to her caller.

“It’s on the first page,” she said hopefully.

The Texan unfolded the paper. It was a typical, badly printed mining-camp journal consisting of two sheets and bore the quite appropriate name of *The Yellow Pan Weekly Nugget*. His eyes quickly came upon the following item:

ANOTHER GOLD STRIKE

Another good stRike has been made in the Dry Lakes region. Two bRothers named Fred and thomas Minnroad appeared in town wednesday With what was rePorted To be a big stake in coarse gold. Since their aRRival theY have Been spending very freely, according to Rumor and have Purchased thE Lucky Burro Saloon at what is reported to be a good Price.

Kid Wolf glanced through the article, then read it again. He looked up keenly at the little ranch-woman.

“This paper is several weeks old,” he drawled. “If yo’ sons have struck it rich, ma’am, why haven’t they come to yo’ befo’ this? Yellow Pan is only a couple of days’ ride from heah at the most.”

Mrs. Minnroad wrung her hands piteously; she was perilously near, now, to breaking down.

“I—I don’t know,” she quavered. “With all that gold—do you think something could have happened to them?”

“Did they send yo’ this papah?”

the Kid questioned. "Do they write to yo' regulahly?"

"They subscribed for the paper for me, and I've been getting it ever since they went into the Yellow Pan country," she explained. "They used to write every week, but since they discovered gold——"

"They haven't written since then, I reckon," said the Kid grimly. "Ah yo' sons the kind of men—well, the soht who'd let easy money go to theah head?"

"They're good boys," she said earnestly. "You don't know, sir, how good they've been to me. Especially Tom, the younger one. It was to get the money to pay the ranch debt that they went to prospect in Yellow Pan. They wouldn't——"

"How about the saloon that the papah says they bought?" Kid Wolf asked.

It was just a little more than the old lady could bear. She sank into a near-by chair, and rocking her frail body in anguish she began to sob.

"Everything will tuhn out all right, ma'am," said the Texan quickly. "Yo' mustn't think of it. Weren't yo' makin' a fiah when I came in? Let me help yo'. Can I make yo' a cup of tea? I'll have the fiah stahted in a jiffy."

Mrs. Minnroad lifted her reddened eyes in time to see the Kid busying himself about the stove. Putting in some of the kindling, he struck a match. To make it burn faster, he wadded up a legal-appearing document and lighted it. The fire was roaring. Then the Kid filled the kettle from the tin bucket on the washstand.

"But—but you—you——" stammered the old lady, her eyes wide.

"I what, ma'am?" asked the Kid kindly.

"Wasn't that the *mortgage* you burned?" she gasped.

"Yes'm," said the Texan, and then as the little woman gave a queer little cry, he came up and patted her gently on her thin shoulders. "Did you think fo' a minute, mothah, that I would take advantage of yo'? I'll go to Yellow Pan to find those sons of yo'ahs and do mah best to bring 'em back to yo'."

She looked up at him with a dazed, half-joyful, half-incredulous expression.

"You—you will?"

"I'll start this very night," smiled the Texan.

"Who are you? I—I still can hardly believe——"

"Kid Wolf, ma'am, but call me by mah first name," he said. "I've got anohtah one. To some folks I'm known as the 'Soldiah of Misfohtune.' I reckon it's because I like to fight fo' the undah dog, and I'm usually busy at the job. Now, ma'am, may I make yo' a nice cup of tea?"

CHAPTER III.

YELLOW PAN.

IN the middle of the next afternoon, Kid Wolf reached a spot on the eastern slope of the mountains where he could see the mining camp of Yellow Pan huddled below on the banks of a stagnant river.

The first impression he got of the place was a disagreeable one. Yellow Pan was ugly, a hideous jumble of dobe huts, crazily built frame-and-log hovels, tents, and lean-to shacks. They had been erected one on another until it seemed that if one was pulled down all would tumble with it.

The single street was a muddy swamp, deep-rutted and filled with pools of slime. Yellow Pan was a

gold-mad fever spot on the face of the wilderness.

Men were working in the river with cradles and sluice boxes, looking like insects at that distance. Even though two miles away from them, the Kid could feel the excitement that was driving them on. Easy wealth! Sometimes it caused a lot of misery.

"Yo' ah a lucky crittah, Blizzahd," the Texan drawled, as he halted for a moment to watch the teeming scene below. "In lots of ways, hosses ah smahtah than men. Did yo' evah see a hoss fight othah hosses fo' oats that would take ten lifetimes to eat? Ever see a hoss go loco ovah oats, fo' mo' and mo' oats, aftah its stomach was full? Well, men do that about gold, Blizzahd."

The big white cayuse tossed his intelligent head as if he understood the Kid perfectly, but would like to have a few oats, just the same.

"I'm afraid, ol' hoss, that we'll have some unpleasant things to do down theah," said the Kid thoughtfully.

He hadn't told Mrs. Minnroad so, but in his opinion her sons had turned out to be bad eggs. Perhaps gold had crazed them, turned their characters upside down. He had known of such things to happen.

There was a chance, of course, that they had met with foul play, but the newspaper item about "spending freely" and "buying a saloon" seemed to point to another explanation. No doubt Fred and Tom Minnroad weren't the upright young men their mother thought they were. Mothers were like that, luckily for the world.

"I hope I can get 'em to go back to the Lightnin' Rod, befo' they go cleah broke," mused the Soldier of Misfortune. "I can't undahstand

why they don't come home. If I had a mothah, that's wheah I'd be!"

Fifteen minutes later, he was in Yellow Pan, allowing Blizzard to pick the way through the holes and puddles of the evil street. The shacks that lined both sides of it, he observed, were mostly saloons and gambling houses.

The Kid turned his cayuse into a livery stable, and after giving strict orders as to its feeding and care, he left in search of something to eat, himself.

In a sordid little Chinese restaurant he found that, as in most mining camps, prices had sky-rocketed out of all reason. The quality of the food was poor, and after eating nearly four dollars' worth of the grub he still felt hungry.

"Fifty cents fo' three slices of bread?" he drawled as he paid.

"Velly much so," said the Oriental. "I no likee, you no likee. Flou'h one huddled dollas foh barr'l, you chargee all same."

Kid Wolf had no difficulty in finding the "Lucky Burro" as it was one of the largest saloons in the camp, a long, squat building made of crumbling adobe bricks and roofed with thatch. Pushing through the swinging doors, the Kid entered.

There were only a few customers in the dank-smelling place at that hour, and the Texan sauntered on down toward the end of the bar. Behind it a beefy, florid-faced hombre of twenty-five was leaning, smoking a cigar. He surveyed the Kid with insolent, piggish eyes.

"What kin I do fer yuh, stranger?" he grunted, blowing a cloud of smoke ceilingward.

"Is yo' name Minnroad?" the Texan asked, his heart sinking disappointedly.

"Yeah, Tom Minnroad's my name," was the surly reply. "Who

are you, and what's yore business?"

"Mah name is Wolf," said the Texan, for some reason not caring to give his first name. "Have yo' a brothah named Fred?"

"If it's Fred yuh want, I'll call him," Tom Minnroad growled, and raising his voice he yelled out something.

In answer to the summons another hombre—a couple of years older than Tom, but resembling him, came from the saloon's back room.

For the mother's sake, Kid Wolf tried not to feel disgust at the sight of these two wastrels. Both of them reeked of liquor and were more or less drunk.

Fred was taller than his younger brother, and his face was even coarser. Both were dressed in the best clothes the camp afforded, and each wore a pearl-handled, silver-mounted Colt six-gun.

"Yuh want to talk tuh me, feller?" Fred Minnroad demanded, staring at the Texan with unfriendly eyes.

"To both of yo'," replied the Kid grimly. "Yo' don't know me, but I'm acquainted with that mothah of yo's. Why don't yo' go home to her? She needs yo' help."

The two ugly-eyed young men exchanged quick glances, then Tom snarled viciously: "Why don't yuh 'tend to yore own danged business? What we do ain't none of yore concern!"

"Git on out of yere—afore yuh git throwed out!" ordered Fred Minnroad.

Kid Wolf had a fiery Southern temper, and his knuckles were itching for the insolent faces of the two Minnroad men. Two spots of color flamed up into his bronzed cheeks, but he managed to control his feel-

ings and turned abruptly toward the door.

He'd done what he could. Strange that the gentle little old lady at the Lightning Rod should have such worthless sons.

With the jeers and oaths of the two Minnroads still ringing in his ears, the Kid found himself in the street again. He walked slowly along the sidewalk, thinking hard.

He was puzzled. There was something queer about all this. He didn't understand it yet, but he thought he was beginning to get a glimmer of light.

He sought out the office of the newspaper. He had a hard time finding it, for it was only a tent of dirty canvas patched with blankets. In front, however, was the gaudy sign: "The Yellow Pan *Weekly Nugget*."

The printer was a dried-up little man with a sparse gray mustache and wearily drooping shoulders. At the Kid's question, he shook his head gloomily.

"Yep, them Minnroad hombres is no-account—ain't wuth a cuss," he declared. "Goodness knows, this town's bad enough without sech trash as them. Those cusses is allus makin' trouble. Thar's been seven or eight bad fights in the Lucky Burro since they came yere and bought it. Fred has already killed two men, and Tom shot a pore Mexican to death only night afore last."

"I want yo' to think hahd now, sah," said the Kid. "Ah those two hombres the same ones who ordahed yo' papah sent to Little Pine sometime back?"

The publisher scratched his bald head. "Why, mister, I ain't had this paper but three weeks. I bought it offn a man who was wantin' to leave town. I couldn't tell yuh."

The Texan slowly built a brown cigarette while he was considering this. His suspicions were working out.

"Can yo' tell me how to get to Dry Lakes, wheah the Minnroads made theah strike?" he asked.

"Huntin' some gold yoreself, eh?" chuckled the printer slyly. "Well, it's a hard country, Dry Lakes is—a turrible desert, mostly. It begins right beyond the spur o' mountains yuh see over yonder. Better pack plenty o' water, young man. Many an hombre has left his bones thar."

Night was good for desert travel, and just at sundown Kid Wolf drummed out of Yellow Pan, leading a pack horse. He wasn't exactly sure what he would find in the mysterious bad lands of Dry Lakes, but he had a pretty fair idea.

CHAPTER IV.

A DISCOVERY.

THE Texan traveled until dawn across the moonlit wastes, then made camp alongside a frowning sandstone butte and slept until the scorching sunlight roused him. He made a quick breakfast, then saddled Blizzard, caught up the pack animal, and started on again.

It was a weird, amazing country. On every side, great mountain chains split the sky, their naked peaks soaring into the thin air at tremendous heights. The floor of the valley itself, however, was very near sea level. The vegetation had gradually disappeared, all was bare volcanic stone, sand, and alkali.

To cheer himself, the Kid began whistling his favorite tune, and before long he had found words to it. In rhythm with the steady *clip-clop* of Blizzard's hoofs his voice rose in a rich tenor:

WW—2E

"Oh, Texas land's the place fo' me, the Rio!
It's the land wheah bullets zoom,
Wheah the Rangahs ride, and the bandits
hide,
And the air is full of smoke perfume!"

The heat of the sinks became more and more intolerable with each passing hour. By noontime, a stifling haze stretched over the valley like a pall, blotting out the somber mountain summits ahead. Through it the heat waves flickered and danced blindly.

From time to time a dust devil whirled by, making the hot sands hiss. The sun was a fiery hole in a sky of molten iron.

Several times the Kid stopped to drink sparingly from his water supply, most of which would be needed for the horses that night unless he found a spring somewhere. Already his lips were parched and cracking.

The alkali rose up from the hoofs of the brones in gray-white, stifling clouds. He pulled his bandanna over his mouth and nose and went on. Blizzard was tireless, it seemed, but the pack animal was already jaded and weary.

Just before sunset, the Kid was lucky enough to find a tiny water hole between two needle spires of rock. It was unpleasantly warm stuff, with a scum on it, but it gave him a chance to replenish his supply. He'd brought a little grain along for the horses, and after they had fed he went on again by the pale glow of the moon.

The Kid didn't know exactly where he was going, or what he was looking for. He was prospecting—looking for outcroppings of mineral.

Somewhere within the sinks, the Minnroads had made their strike. The Kid was out to find just where. Instead of traveling directly across the basin, he explored the country in all directions as he went.

Dawn of the second day out found the Kid in a more forbidding locality than usual—at the bottom of one of the long-since dried lakes, the floor of which was thick with borax. Straight ahead was a grim barrier of barren mountains, chocolate-colored and seamed with dingy gray.

There was no wind, and nothing alive stirring except a few whiptail lizards. The Texan judged that it would be hotter, before sundown, than the day before had been.

Then, after climbing wearily to the border of the sunken flats, he saw something ahead that made him quicken the pace. It was the green of an oasis. That meant water! The horses, too, scented it, and needed no urging.

"That looks like a shack ahead," the Texan muttered. "It's what it is, too," he said a minute later. "A placah mine, or it's been one! Wondah wheah all that watah comes from."

He soon saw that a spring bubbled up from the rocky ground a few hundred yards from the spot where the rude shack had been built. For a quarter of a mile or so, a stream gushed along the rocks and then it seemed to disappear in the sand, swallowed up as suddenly as it appeared. The clear water was bordered by lush grasses and bushy trees.

Dropping to the ground, the Kid drank deeply. While the horses were refreshing themselves, the Texan strode wonderingly toward the hut. A great deal of digging had been done here within the last few months and he had to climb over big piles of rounded pebbles and stones.

"This is wheah the Minnroad gold came from, that's almost sho'," the Kid thought.

Then, just a few yards from the shack, he came upon something ghastly.

It was a grave, but it had not, unfortunately for the occupant, been dug deeply enough. Either the wind or wild animals had partly uncovered it. The body was not in a coffin, and a red shirt—the Kid could see the white buttons on it—protruded balloonlike from the surface.

He could not see the face, and somehow he was glad of that. One blackened hand had emerged from the sand like a claw.

Kid Wolf stared at the gruesome spectacle for a moment, unable in spite of the heat, to suppress a shiver. Then he hurried on to the shack—a little one-room shelter with a sagging roof.

The only reply, at first, was the sickening drone of hundreds of flies. It was a horrible sound. There was death in it. It staggered the Kid. He stopped stock-still, dreading to go on.

Then his pulses gave a jump. From within the hovel came a faint, agonized cry for help. With an exclamation of pity, the Kid rushed forward.

On the bare floor of the miserable little shack was stretched the body of a man. It stirred a little, or the Texan would not have believed it alive. It was black with flies, and more of the insects were swarming in and out of the single tiny room.

"Water!" sobbed the stricken man in a thick, strangled voice. "Water!"

The Texan hastened out and returned with fresh water in a canteen. Kneeling, he bent over the sufferer, giving him small sips of the life-giving fluid and bathing his face. The Kid had reached him just in time. A few more hours would have finished him.

The man was young, hardly

twenty, though his features were so swollen and distorted from pain that he had at first seemed three times as old. The Kid saw that he had been shot.

In his agony the victim had ripped most of his shirt away, and the Texan noted a wound low in the shoulder. It was nearly healed, though much inflamed, and he judged that it was several weeks old.

"Which one of the Minnroad boys ah yo', amigo?" asked the Kid, as he made the wounded man more comfortable.

"I haven't been able to go out fer water for three days now," babbled the sick youth light-headedly. "Three days! Those flies. Who are *you*? Tryin' to finish me, are yuh?" And he tried to struggle to his feet.

"I'm a friend—just call me 'Kid,'" said the Texan soothingly. "Ah yo' Fred or Tom Minnroad?"

The sufferer's mind seemed to clear a bit. "I'm Tom," he said slowly. "Fred's dead. He's out thar—gone up the flume."

"Did *yo*' bury him, Tom?" asked the Kid, giving Tom Minnroad another sip of water.

"Yes, a few days after it happened I—I scooped some sand over him. Then I tried to git to Yellow Pan, but I was too weak and had to come back yere. No hoss. Not much to eat, either. For a while I was gittin' better, felt stronger, then my shoulder began to hurt again a few days ago. But—how do you know my name?"

"I know yo' mothah," said the Kid quietly. "I promised her I'd do mah best to find yo'."

"Is she—all right? Have they made her leave the Lightnin' Rod? The money we owed——"

"All that's settled now, *compadre*, so don't worry about *that*," said the young Soldier of Misfortune. "Yo' mothah's well. Those two hombres shot yo', did they, and left yo' both fo' dead?"

"Yes. How did yuh know that?"

"I'll explain latah, Tom." The Kid's voice was very grim. "They ah in Yellow Pan, usin' yo' names."

"I reckon thet's why they took all our papers and letters when they searched us," gasped Tom Minnroad. "The gold they took—well, I reckon there was a hundred ounces of it, all coarse stuff and nuggets. Yuh see, me and Fred found float yere, an'——"

"Is theah mo' gold heah?"

Tom, who seemed to be feeling much stronger, shook his head. "It was a pocket and we'd jist cleaned it all out when those two buzzards came yere. They got all there was."

"They've still got something comin', Tom, and it isn't gold," said the Texan coldly. "Theah's no regulah law in Yellow Pan, but we've got a code down on the Rio Grande that's based on two-gun justice, amigo. Those killahs will have to answer fo' theah crime—to me! Now just lay quiet, Tom, while I cook some food fo' yo'. The first thing we've got to do is get back yo' health and strength."

CHAPTER V.

FRESNO MEETS FRIENDS.

JACK FRESNO, mounted on a rangy roan cayuse, came cantering into Yellow Pan's main street a few days after Kid Wolf had left it. The Little Pine gambler was dressed, as usual, in his dandified pantaloons, boiled shirt, and tailed black coat. At the hitch rail of the first saloon he came to he dis-

mounted, tied his roan and swaggered in.

"I'm lookin' fer an hombre named Wolf," he said, as he poured a drink from the bottle that the barkeeper shoved toward him. "Is he around town, do yuh happen to know?"

"Never heard of him," grunted the bartender.

Fresno bit his thin lips in disappointment. "Rides a white cayuse," he explained. "Wears fringed buckskin clothes, like an Injun."

"Oh, I savvy who yuh mean," replied the swamper. "I seen him in town a few days ago, but I think he left. They might tell yuh more about him at the Lucky Burro down the street. The feller in the buckskins went in thar the day he was yere."

The gambler hurriedly paid for his drink and hastened out. The Lucky Burro Saloon was only half a block away, and he lost no time in getting there. Fresno was excited and worried—angry, too. His evil black eyes were narrowed to shining slits.

Stepping into the Lucky Burro, he stared for a moment at the hombre behind the bar, blinked in surprise and sang out a greeting.

"Why, if it ain't my ol' pard Bill Zayker! Ain't seen yuh fer years! How's things over in——"

The man behind the counter stiffened at the words, his hand darting halfway to the pearl-handled Colt at his hip. Then he seemed to recognize the newcomer. He signaled to him with a jerk of his head, and went down to the end of the bar where Fresno joined him. Here they were out of hearing of the three or four customers in the place.

"Shh! Fresno, I don't want yuh to repeat thet name in Yeller Pan," whispered the saloon man.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm goin' by another name yere," growled the man who had been called Zayker. "Call me Fred Minnroad, thet's my moniker now."

"Minnroad," repeated the gambler. "Thet's funny. Thar's Little Pine people by thet name. What does——"

"My brother's yere with me. Yuh remember him don't yuh?" Zayker went on. "Zeke Zayker? He's goin' by the name o' Tom Minnroad now."

"Shore I remember Zeke," Fresno chuckled. "Him and me used to deal faro together in Shasta."

"We had to leave Shasta—wanted fer murder," explained Bill Zayker tersely. "The vigilantes was after us. We happened to take the name o' Minnroad because Zeke and me done fer two fool miners by thet name. We took their gold and jist stepped into their boots, thet's all."

Fresno whistled between his long, pointed teeth. "Why, I knowed them Minnroad boys!" he ejaculated. "So you——"

"Quiet! I'll call my brother." Bill Zayker muttered, and he went into the back room, reappearing with Zeke, his beefy-faced younger brother. The three old cronies shook hands, and after taking a drink began talking in low voices.

"I won't give yuh away, but yuh'd better be keerful," said Fresno. "Them Minnroads live jist acrost the range, and thar's quite a few folks thet knew 'em. Has anybody suspicioned yuh, so fer?"

The brothers exchanged glances. "Well, jist the other day an hombre in buckskins came yere an'——"

Fresno jumped as if a wasp had stung him. "I know him! His

name's Wolf!" he sputtered. "Thet's what's brung me to Yaller Pan! I'm trailin' thet blasted Texas whelp! He cheated me at poker—cheated me out of a ranch!"

"Yeah, Wolf's the name, all right," grunted Zeke. "He left town right after he talked tuh us. We dunno whar he went, but me and Bill has got a good idea. We hired a Mexican tuh foller him and give us the low-down about what he's up to."

"Uh-huh," said Bill. "We set a breed named Knifer Fernando on his trail. We oughta be hearin' from Knifer any time now. We didn't like this Wolf hombre's nosiness. Seems thet he knowed the mother of the Minnroad jaspers, an' he——"

"Listen!" whispered Jack Fresno hoarsely. "Wolf has got to be caught! It means as much to you as it does to me. Yo're riskin' yore necks with him loose, and I'm riskin' a fortune!"

"How's thet?"

"As I told yuh, I lost mortgage papers to a good ranch—the Lightnin' Rod—to Wolf in a game o' poker," began the gambler.

The Zayker brothers laughed. "We didn't know thet anybody could take *you* in at poker, Jack!"

The memory was still bitter, and Fresno bared his teeth in a savage snarl. "Wolf is a wizard! How he done it, I dunno," he rasped. "Well, the very next day after I lost my rights to this ranch, I got an offer fer it from an English syndicate. Forty thousand dollars cold cash! And they'll pay sixty if they have to. Yuh see, they've bought up the range on both sides, and they've got to have the Lightnin' Rod water! By the way, it's a queer thing, but those two hombres yuh sent up the

flume used to live on thet same ranch."

"This Texas jasper has got to be found and put out o' the way," growled Bill Zayker uneasily. "He knows too blasted much!"

Fresno nodded. "And I've got to git back those ranch papers, one way or another!" he ground out. "I'll git——"

He turned his head and fell silent as the swinging doors of the saloon banged. Boot heels clicked and spurs jingled across the floor as a heavily muscled half-breed entered. He was a swarthy, villainous-looking desperado with a serape thrown over one shoulder. He wore a holstered gun at his left thigh, but near his right hand was a knife in a belt ornamented with silver conchas.

"It's Knifer Fernando!" grunted Bill Zayker. "Mebbe he's got news fer us! Come down this way, Knifer!" he called out, as the breed stood peering up and down the bar, his eyes evidently unaccustomed to the gloom after the sun blaze outside.

"This is an old pard of ours—name's Fresno," Zeke said as the breed came up.

He poured "Knifer" Fernando a drink of tequila, and set out the dish of salt and sliced lemon that usually goes with that potent Mexican drink.

Knifer acknowledged the introduction with an evil grin, then began talking in bad English:

"Thees man you send me to follow—you were right, *patrons*. He went to the Dry Lakes. For many miles——"

"So he's snoopin' around at Dry Lakes?" cried Zeke with an ugly oath.

"Wait, and I tell you," said Knifer

in a low voice. "He ees there now, thees man. Weeth him is another—a seek hombre."

"A sick one?" Bill Zayker blinked.

"*Si, señor!*" The breed nodded. "They are in a shack in that desert. The hombre I follow, he ees taking care of the seek one."

It was the first inkling the Zayker brother had had that one of their supposed victims was still alive. It meant danger for them—possible punishment. They looked at each other with faces that had suddenly gone livid.

"We've got to git 'em! We've got to stop both their mouths fer good and all!" Bill Zayker grated.

The breed shrugged his shoulders significantly. "Why you not say you want them keel? It would have been very easy." He tapped the carved handle of his knife. "Weeth thees, I could have keel that Señor Wolf!" he laughed mirthlessly. "A knife! Ah, there ees a pretty weapon! Eet is one the *Americanos* do not onnerstan'."

Fresno gnawed the end of his black mustache. "Well, thar's only one thing to do, and I'm with yuh to the end! I've got to git that paper from Wolf, and if yuh help me, I'll divvy the profits. Let's ride pronto fer Dry Lakes!"

The Lucky Burro was locked up and not long afterward, a hard-faced band of riders galloped out of Yellow Pan. In the lead were the Zayker brothers, who knew their way through the bad lands, and behind them came Knifer Fernando and Jack Fresno, leading a pack horse loaded with grub and water.

Now that they had the low-down, the desperate men weren't letting any grass grow under their feet!

CHAPTER VI.

THE GANG STRIKES.

TOM MINNROAD was rapidly recovering, thanks to the skillful care of his new-found friend, Kid Wolf. The young miner's wound had healed rapidly as the inflammation subsided, and as the Texan had plenty of provisions he soon gained strength.

One of the first things the Kid did was to dig another and deeper grave and give Tom's older brother a decent burial.

"Do yo' feel able to ride that pack hoss of mine, Tom?" asked the Texan one morning.

"I think I could stick on," said Tom, who was hobbling spryly about the little shack.

"Then let's sleep all day to-day," the Texan chuckled. "It's mighty hot in the sun, and if we rest until dahk we'll be in shape to travel all night. We'll have a good breakfast, and then stretch ouhselves out until sundown."

"What're yore plans, anyhow, Kid?" asked Tom.

Kid Wolf, of course, had told him everything that had happened since the Kid had "sat in" at Fresno's poker game. Tom still couldn't understand the Texan's generosity in burning the mortgage.

"First, I think I'll call on yo' brothah's murderahs," said the Kid grimly. "They ah about the lowest specimens of rattlesnakes I've evah run across, Tom. When I think how neah they came to robbin' yo' mothah of *both* her sons——"

"But yuh'd best be keerful, Kid," said Tom gloomily. "Them killers is death with a gun. I don't think yuh'd have much show agin' the two of 'em."

"Time will tell," said the Kid with

a queer smile. "Well, let's get some rest, Tom," he yawned. "We've got a hahd trip ahead of us."

For comfort's sake, the Kid stripped off his gun belts, then stretched himself out on the shack's dirt floor. He had been getting very little sleep lately and soon dozed off. The very heat made for sleepiness, and he fell into a sound slumber.

His awakening came with sickening suddenness. He heard a choked yell from Tom Minnroad, the sound of scuffling, and felt his own breath being knocked from his body as a couple of men leaped upon him.

The Kid, still half asleep, tried to reach his guns, but he was too late. He was being swarmed under! Fighting desperately, the Texan staggered to his feet, but as soon as he shook off one attacker another would seize him.

Hours had passed since he had fallen asleep, evidently, for the hut was lit by the lurid red glare of the sunset.

"Yo' low-down coyotes!" the Kid panted, as he began to recognize the hombres who were milling through the shack.

"Yuh'd better give up, Wolf!" screeched Fresno exultingly. "We got yore guns! And we've got *you!*"

But the Texan still fought. He was like a mountain lion cornered by a bobcat pack! His blows carried terrific power. One sweep of his arm sent Bill Zayker lurching into the opposite wall.

Zeke tried to grab him, but the Kid drove a mighty punch into his midriff. The Kid could see without looking that Tom was down—finished probably. He could expect no mercy from these cutthroats. It was a fight for life!

Smash! A Mexican the Kid

hadn't seen before tackled him about the knees, and the Texan brought his fist slashing up from the level of his boot tops.

The uppercut landed squarely on the breed's mouth, and the Kid felt teeth giving way against his hard knuckles. But it was no use. Others rushed him. Something descended on his head with shattering force. Everything went black.

"Got him!" Fresno grinned mirthlessly and flourished the gun he'd used for a club. "He'll sleep a plenty long time after *thet* one! It was about time, too, or he'd have bested us. Let me search him—I want *thet* mortgage."

He bent over the unconscious Texan and went through his pockets. He found a few gold coins and some silver which he tossed aside contemptuously.

"Find it?" grunted Zeke Zayker, who was still hugging his midriff and gasping for breath.

Fresno's fingers had begun to tremble. Once again he searched the Kid, then he straightened with an oath.

"It ain't on him!" he said in a voice that shook with fury.

"Yo're right it ain't, Fresno!" panted Tom. "The Lightnin' Rod is my mother's now—forever. The Kid burned *thet* paper!"

Tom had put up a struggle, too, but had been overpowered, and now Bill Zayker was holding him down. Tom's face was white, but it wasn't from fear.

Fresno whirled on Tom, read in his eyes that he had told the truth, and began pacing the floor of the shack. The Little Pine gambler was fairly frothing with rage and disappointment. He'd been outwitted, it seemed, after all.

"Looks like yuh've lost, Jack," Zeke Zayker growled.

"No, I haven't!" snarled the gambler. "I've jist thought of a way to git thet ranch, in spite of it. Thar's no writin' materials yere, but thar's some in yore saloon in town."

"What yuh drivin' at?" Bill Zayker demanded.

"Tie young Minnroad up with the lariat yonder," said Fresno. "We'll take him with us to town and make him write to his old lady. She'll come through when she savvies thet he'll die if she don't. Mrs. Minnroad will sign the ranch over to me, right pronto."

"I'll never write such a thing, yuh skunk!" cried Tom, struggling vainly to free himself from the ropes that were being passed around him.

"I'll change yore mind about thet, younker!" leered Fresno. "Yuh'll do jist what I say afore I'm through with yuh!" He walked over to where Kid Wolf lay sprawled and dealt him a vicious kick in the ribs. The Kid was senseless and couldn't feel it, but it seemed to ease Fresno's feelings. "Yuh wasn't so smart, after all, Wolf!" he grinned.

"Do yuh mean we'll start back right now with the Minnroad whelp?" Zeke demanded.

"Yeah. Night is a good time fer travelin', and it's a long way back," said the gambler. He turned to the breed, who was nursing a badly swollen and reddened mouth. "Knifer, you stay yere!"

"For why I stay?" the breed growled.

"I want yuh to stay yere and catch up thet white hoss o' Wolf's," replied Fresno. "I'll pay yuh well. I tried to grab him as we came up, but the blasted cayuse was too quick fer me. The hoss will have

to come to water to drink some time, though, and when he does, I want yuh to catch him and bring him on into town."

"*Bueno*, I weel stay, Señor Fresno!" agreed the Mexican. "I weel get the white *caballo* for you eef it takes me two days to do eet."

The gang made ready for departure. Bill went to the spring and filled the canteens. Fresno stood looking down at the motionless body of the Texan.

Finally, with a gleam of his long, pointed teeth, he drew his Colt. He pointed it at the Kid's temple at close range and rolled back the hammer.

"Watch his head jump!" he chor-tled.

Tom Minnroad gave a cry of horror. The shot, however, didn't come. With an oath in Spanish, Knifer Fernando rushed up and pushed the gun aside.

"Leave heem to me!" he begged fiercely. "I stay here anyway, and *poco tiempo* thees lobo, heem wake up. Then I shall keel him—slow—weeth thees!" The Mexican tapped the handle of his long knife. "Thees Wolf hombre, he did thees to me," he snarled, pointing to his mouth, in which there were several red gaps. "For that I weel keel heem, and he shall know, also, that eet ees Knifer Fernando who does eet!"

The Zayker brother laughed uproariously and slapped the breed across the back. Fresno considered for a moment, then holstered his gun.

"All right, Knifer," he said, "I reckon I won't cheat yuh out of yore revenge. The Wolf is yore meat. Give him an extry slice fer me! Come on, boys! Let's git started—it's almost dark."

A little later, the gang, with Tom Minnroad as their prisoner, trotted across the sinks in the direction of Yellow Pan. Kid Wolf and the breed were left alone.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL OF KNIVES.

WHEN Kid Wolf came to his senses it was night, and a candle was burning, casting flickering shadows over the rough walls of the shack. At first he couldn't realize where he was, or what had happened. But soon everything began to come back to him.

A numb ache at his temples told him that the fight had been no dream. It had really happened.

The Kid was a bit surprised to find himself alive. At first, he thought he was quite alone. Where was every one?

Then he opened his eyes wider. Squatted at the other end of the hut was a swarthy, powerfully built Mexican half-breed. A serape was draped over one shoulder, and he was smoking a corn-husk cigarette.

It came to the Kid suddenly that this hombre was the one he'd smashed in the mouth just before being knocked senseless.

"Good evenin', sah!" said the Texan grimly as he tried to get to his feet.

"Seet down!" ordered the breed, his eyes glittering murderously in the candlelight.

The Texan noted that the Mexican was toying with a big knife, testing its edge and point with his thumb nail. A six-gun was thonged against his left thigh. Kid Wolf contented himself with sitting up, resting his back against the wall of the shack.

"Wheah ah the othahs?" he asked the Mexican.

The breed shrugged. "They go to town—take the othair gringo weeth them," he leered. "You, Lobo, they leave to me, Knifer Fernando, to feenish. Do you see thees?" He pointed to his toothless upper jaw. "For that, Wolf, I weel soon keel you—weeth thees knife! You want to make prayer to the good Heaven, no?"

"No," drawled the Kid, turning all this over rapidly in his mind. "I think not, sah. So yo' intend to kill me?"

"Si," said the breed in a matter-of-fact tone. "And to-morrow I weel catch your *caballo* for the Señor Fresno."

Fernando would have been amazed, just then, had he been able to read what was going on in his prospective victim's mind.

Kid Wolf was far from being unarmed. He'd been searched, but Jack Fresno hadn't discovered his "hole card." The Texan was never without that hidden ace, and he could feel its weight now, between his shoulder blades. It was a big Texas bowie knife, and the Kid was as expert with it as with his Colt Peacemakers!

The handle of that knife was just behind and below his right ear. A quick draw would bring it into play.

The Kid smiled a little and measured Fernando with cool gray eyes.

"Yo' ah good with a knife, ah yo', señor?" he asked mildly.

The Mexican expanded his muscular chest with a proud grin.

"Si! You weel soon find that out, Señor Lobo," he chuckled evilly.

The Texan yawned and stretched his arms carelessly. Apparently he was at ease, yet every nerve was taut.

"Do yo' savvy how to *throw* a knife, hombre?" he asked the cut-throat.

The breed's swollen lip twisted into a sneer. "What you talk about, gringo? What do gringos know of such theengs?" he mocked. "Of course, I can throw the knife."

"Then," said the Texan, his voice crackling, "*throw it now!*" And his hand streaked behind his ear, flashed back into view holding cold steel!

The look that dawned on the breed's ugly face was one of blended amazement, hate, and terror. But he acted almost instantly. With a lightninglike, underhand motion his arm swept down and up!

A split second sooner Kid Wolf had let drive. There was a whirring sound and something streaked like silver in the candlelight.

As he hurled the bowie, the Texan dropped flat. The breed's knife, whirling end over end, passed over his head by two feet and buried itself in the wall behind him where it quivered with a vicious *br-r-rr*.

Fernando, too, had dropped to the dirt floor, but not from choice. He was dying. Five inches of Texas steel was in his throat, and around his twitching body a scarlet puddle was slowly widening. He gave the Texan one last astonished look, and then his eyes glazed over forever.

The duel had lasted only a moment or two, but in those moments, Knifer Fernando had lost—and died.

The moon was rising out of the weird desolation of Dry Lakes when Kid Wolf tightened up the saddle girths on Blizzard and prepared for the long ride into Yellow Pan.

He missed his pack horse. Evidently the gang had caught it, and put their prisoner on it.

How many hours' start the desperadoes had on him, the Kid could only guess. He imagined, however, that they were at least twenty miles ahead. It was a long way to Yellow Pan, however—a journey of a night and a day at the least. He'd recovered his big .45s, and they were cuddled now at his hips.

"I'm lucky to be ridin' yo' tonight, Blizzahd old pahd," murmured the Texan, as he swung into the big California saddle. "I was searched, I reckon—mah pockets were turned inside out—and if they'd found mah bowie I'd be plenty dead by now. But I guess that Lone Stah I was bohn undah was a lucky one."

He could guess just about what the evil trio of schemers had in mind. An extortion plot of some kind was afoot, or they would have killed Tom Minnroad instead of troubling to take him prisoner. Tom was in grave danger, however, and the Kid knew that everything depended on him—and Blizzard.

He hadn't been riding long when the moon became obscured by a curtain of dark clouds. The night became very black, and when the curtain lifted, two hours later, he found that he had missed the desperadoes' trail.

The Kid wasn't very familiar with the landmarks of the Dry Lakes region, and it was another hour or so before he could set himself right again. Some more precious time had been wasted.

Dawn came dully against a bank of rolling, smoke-colored clouds, and he was hardly a third of the way across the wide valley. He halted for a short time, gave his cayuse a chance to blow a while, then pushed on.

"We've got to hurry, old-timah,"

he muttered to his horse. "If we fail, that po' old lady at the Lightnin' Rod— But we *won't* fail, Blizzahd! We've got to get theah in time!"

The day, like all the others in the sunken valley, was frightfully hot, and he dared not push Blizzard too fast, for even Blizzard had his limits. But the Kid held to a steady, relentless pace that slowly but surely devoured the miles.

He came upon the spot where the gang had halted to cook breakfast, but the ashes had burned out hours before. The sight of this urged the Kid on at a swifter clip. Noon came and went, then three o'clock—four. With relief, he felt the fierce heat of the sun lessen a little. He wasn't so very far, now, from the town.

The Kid found another stanza to sing to his favorite tune—"The Rio." His voice rang out, grim and clear:

"We'll use the law of the Rio Grande, the Rio!
And that's the two-gun code!
Win or fail, we're on theah trail,
And theah'll be smoke at the end of the road!"

The sun went down in a crimson blaze of glory behind him. The drifting cloud shadows changed slowly to purple, then darkened into jet. A cool wind sprang up, and from afar off a coyote yipped at the coming of another night.

Then, up ahead of him, he saw the lights of Yellow Pan twinkling in the dusk.

CHAPTER VIII.

GUN PUNISHMENT.

THE Lucky Burro Saloon was tightly closed. Since the desperadoes' arrival at five o'clock, the heavy shutters had been bolted and

the doors—even the small side door on the north—had been carefully locked. It was night, now, and a single oil lamp was burning inside.

Zeke and Bill Zayker were alone with their prisoner. Jack Fresno, on a fresh cayuse, had left about an hour before with a certain letter in his pocket—a letter written and signed by Tom Minnroad.

Tom was sprawled out on the board floor, fully conscious, but still twitching from the effects of the torture. From time to time, he choked back a moan of anguish.

The method of torture had been an idea of the Zaykers, although Fresno had begun things by giving the weakened youth a cruel beating. The saloon men had some alcohol which they kept for making a cheap concoction to be sold to Indians, and they had poured some of this over Tom's left arm and shoulder and had set fire to it!

In his agony, the victim had broken down and written the letter to his mother which Fresno dictated. He was groaning now, not so much from the pain of his burns, but in remorse over having done the gang's bidding.

"Yuh'd have saved yoreself a lot, younker, if yuh'd done what we asked in the fust place," chuckled Bill Zayker, who was behind the bar, sipping whisky and sucking at a lemon rind.

Zeke was sitting atop a card table, dangling his thick legs, and looking down at Tom Minnroad—the man whose name he had taken. He was smoking a long cigar.

"Bill," he demanded of his evil-faced brother, "don't it strike you that Fresno's scheme is purty dangerous? The ol' woman will squawk shore."

"Yeah?" Bill gave a snort of

laughter. "Yuh think so? After she signs away the ranch to save her son, Fresno will quiet her fer good. He told me so. And then who kin ever prove anything?"

Tom Minnroad gave a cry of helpless fury and despair.

"Yuh heartless sidewinders!" he shrilled. "First yuh murdered my brother, and now yuh've planned to——"

He tried to lurch to his feet, but Zeke Zayker flattened him again with a brutal kick.

"I reckon we're through with this little whelp, ain't we, Bill?" Zeke growled.

The other desperado laughed noiselessly. "Yeah," he said slowly. "When he wrote that letter fer Fresno, we got all we wanted. Now is as good time as any, Zeke."

Once again, young Minnroad tried to rise, to struggle against what was coming. Tortured as he was, the urge to live was still strong in him. He didn't want to die.

With his face working pitifully, he supported himself on his right elbow and attempted to crawl. The grinning Zeke whipped out his pearl-handled Colt.

"What are yuh tryin' to do?" he jeered. "Want to kiss my boots, do yuh? Well, even that won't save yuh, Kid. I'm goin' to——"

Suddenly the beefy Zeke jumped like a startled rabbit. There was a splintering crash, accompanied by the shrill squeak of screws being forced from hinges. Then another, louder, smashing impact, and the side door—the one opposite the long bar—came bodily from its fastenings and fell with a bang!

Over the threshold leaped a slim, wide-shouldered young hombre in fringed buckskins! His gray-blue

eyes were shining in the dim lamp-light like frosted stars, and in each hand was a big Colt .45!

"What in blazes? It's Wolf!" Zeke yelled, and with surprising speed for a man of his ponderous size, he put the card table between him and the door. His drawn gun flashed—flashed again!

But the Texan had leaped to one side and was crouched so low that his Colts seemed leveled from his boot tops. He began to shoot, and the explosions came in a tremendous, stuttering thunderclap. Powder smoke, shot through with spitting tongues of flame, churned through the Lucky Burro. The windows rattled and shook, the walls seemed to sway and the floor to vibrate.

The cigar dropped from Zeke's loose lips. Slowly, he buckled at the knees. Three times, in almost the same instant, Kid Wolf had nailed him. His shirt seemed to unfold in little curling rags of red. With a gagging noise, he fell, his head cracking against the table edge as he went.

Bill Zayker had taken one hurried, wild shot at Kid Wolf and then dropped behind the shelter of the bar.

A few moments of quiet came now—a silence that seemed painful after the terrific racket of an instant before. It was as if the hearts of the three men still living in that long, low-ceilinged room could be heard, beat by beat.

"Come out of theah, yo' killah," Kid Wolf's voice stung the stillness. "or I'll sho' come aftah yo'!"

"Try it, Wolf, and I'll blow yuh to pieces!" the surviving Zayker shouted.

Neither of the two fighters could see the other. There was no mirror behind the bar, which was fully four

feet high. The Texan waited a moment, then moved deliberately toward the end of the counter.

Z-z-z-z-z-r-r-rup! A bullet came ripping through the wood, but it whined wild, missing the Texan by yards.

Again Bill Zayker fired, but he was shooting blind, and his guess was bad again. The Texan's spurs were clanking closer and closer to the bar end, where his guns could sweep the full length behind it.

"I want yo', hombre, fo' robbery and murdah!" he said icily.

Unnerved, Zayker suddenly leaped, like a jumping jack, to have it out. With a wild yell, he swung the sights of his gun in line with the Texan's chest.

But he never lived to pull the trigger. Both of the Kid's Peacemakers spat flame and smoke. Glasses and bottles crashed as Zayker's dying body fell among them. There was a bubbling cough or two, then utter silence.

Kid Wolf slid his hot Colts back into their holsters and walked back to where Tom Minnroad still lay sprawled and bewildered. He gently picked up his friend and put him into a chair. Then he stripped away Tom's shirt and examined the burns with an angry eye.

"How do yo' feel, amigo?" he asked anxiously. "It looks like the the sidewindahs neahly finished yo'."

"Those burns hurt, but I'm *bueno* now," gasped Tom, forcing a grin. "Did yuh really smoke up them skunks, or did I dream it?"

"They nevah tohture any one else, *compadre*," said the Texan grimly.

In the little passageway between the saloon and the back room was a small, black-painted iron safe. The Texan tried the door. It had been

closed, but the combination hadn't been turned, and it swung open. Inside were several heavy buckskin sacks and a small canvas bag of gold coins.

"I reckon all these rightfully belong to yo', Tom," said the Kid as he filled his arms with the treasure. "By the way, I expected to find Fresno heah. Did he——"

"He's gone to the Lightnin' Rod," cried Tom Minnroad. "I—I wrote down what he told me to. I couldn't stand what they done to me. I think he's plannin' murder. We've got to——"

Kid Wolf's bronzed face hardened, and his steady eyes sparkled with cold blue lights.

"We'll take a sho't cut right ovah the mountains, Tom, aftah I fix up those buhns of yo's with some oil and bandages," he said. "I think Mistah Fresno is in fo' a mighty unpleasant supprise!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAP TIGHTENS.

IT was about eleven o'clock the next morning when Kid Wolf and Tom Minnroad, after a long and grueling ride, came within sight of the Lightning Rod ranch house.

The Kid was still riding Blizzard. The big white horse was flecked with foam, but was still going strong. Its reserve power seemed endless. Tom was astride a pinto bronc they had hired from the Yellow Pan livery stable.

They were in time! Tom gave a faint cry of relief when they rounded a turn and got a glimpse of the house and its surroundings.

All was peaceful. Mrs. Minnroad was digging in her flower garden, her

pink sun-bonnet making a vivid spot of color against the dull background.

"She wouldn't be doin' that if Fresno had been yere!" Tom exulted. "Gosh, it's good to see ma again—to be home! I thought I'd never——"

At the sound of approaching hoofs, the little old lady dropped her trowel and stood up. Even at that distance the Kid could see her sway in surprise. Then she tried to run toward them, her thin arms extended, her face radiant with happiness.

A few moments more, and Tom had taken her into his arms.

"Ma," he said huskily, "it's our friend the Kid that's with me—not Fred. Fred won't never come home."

She began to cry, and then seemed to steady herself.

"Oh, Tom, we can thank Providence that *you've* come back to me, anyway!" she quavered.

The Kid dismounted and joined them, now that the ranch woman's first outburst of grief was over.

"We'd bettah go into the house, folks," he drawled. "First, I'll put ouh hosses out of sight."

When he had done this, he went into the little kitchen, where he found mother and son comforting each other. It would have been a happy reunion, if there hadn't been a new-made grave in the heart of Dry Lakes. Tom's mother, however, was bearing up wonderfully well. She had the true courage of Western mothers.

"Did—did Fred suffer much before he—went away?" she asked softly.

Tom and the Kid had agreed that it would be best not to tell Mrs. Minnroad everything that had happened. It would only cause her needless suffering.

"No, ma'am," said the Kid. "It was quickly ovah."

She turned to him gratefully, taking his hands in her own thin and wrinkled ones.

"You did as you promised, Kid. You told me to call you that, didn't you? You are very good. I owe you so much."

"Yo're right, ma," said Tom earnestly. "We owe him more than you'll ever know! If it hadn't been fer the Kid——"

Kid Wolf had excellent control over his emotions, except when he was embarrassed by praise. Now his tanned face was warmed by color.

"If I've helped yo', I'm glad, but yo' don't need to thank me," he muttered, and then he changed the subject to hide his confusion. "Theah's been no one heah this mohnin', has theah, ma'am?" he questioned.

"Why, no," said Mrs. Minneroad in surprise.

"Listen, ma," said Tom, steadying his voice with difficulty. "We're expectin' Jack Fresno yere any time now."

"You mean the gambler?" she asked uneasily. "I—I hope you haven't any business with him. Is it about that—that saloon you bought in Yellow Pan? I felt mighty bad, Tom, when I read about that. I never thought yuh'd do——"

Tom and the Kid exchanged smiles. "Yo' sons nevah had a saloon, ma'am," explained the Kid. "It was somebody else who were using theah names. So yo' needn't worry. It's quite anothah matter that's bringin' Mistah Fresno heah." His voice suddenly became chilly. "He will come, ma'am, to ask yo' to sign this ranch ovah to him."

"But—but how can he do that?" she gasped.

"He can't, but he don't know it yet," Tom burst out.

"He thinks Tom is a prisonah in Yellow Pan and that I am dead," the Texan drawled. "In othah words, he believes he can make yo' do anything he wants."

Tom had stationed himself at the window and was carefully watching the main trail. Just then he straightened and turned quickly.

"I see some dust—a lone rider!" he ejaculated.

They waited for a few minutes, watching intently. Then the Texan nodded.

"It's ouh friend, Fresno," he drawled.

"Ma, yuh'd better go into the other room and keep out of sight!" cried Tom quickly.

The Texan had another idea. "Ah yo' afraid, ma'am?" he asked Mrs. Minnroad.

"Not with you here, Kid," she said fearlessly.

"Then yo' stay heah, and Tom and I will keep out of sight in the back room," decided the Texan. "I want to catch that rascal right in the act. Not that I need to fo' proof, but because I want to see him squirm. I'll give him a chance to surrendah when the time comes, but theah may be gun play. If theah is, don't be frightened. You will be in no dangah whatevah, ma'am."

"I—I understand," she gasped. "You want me to talk to him just as if I was alone here."

"Right," said the Texan. "Come on, Tom!"

He and Tom Minnroad ducked back into the room beyond, leaving the door between slightly open.

The drumming of hoofs came

closer, than saddle leather squeaked outside, and they could hear a horse champing at the bit. There was a pause, during which the newcomer was evidently tying his cayuse. Then boots crunched on the gravel walk.

Mrs. Minnroad, outwardly calm, picked up some sewing, and seating herself comfortably in a chair, began plying her needle. Her voice trembled a little, though, when she called out, "Come in," in answer to the rap of knuckles against the door panel.

Jack Fresno entered. He doffed his hat, wiped it on the sleeve of his black coat, and tossed it on the table. Rubbing his hands together briskly, he looked down at Mrs. Minnroad with a smile of satisfaction.

"I'm here on business, madam," he said sharply.

"Is it about the ranch? Won't you take a chair, Mr. Fresno?"

"No, I won't be yere long," said the gambler, with a coyote grin. He rolled a cigarette, and licking it deliberately, thrust it between his razor-thin lips. "Old lady," he demanded with a sudden snarl, "what become of the mortgage thet was on this property?"

"The man who held it, Mr. Fresno, destroyed it," she replied, still busy with her sewing needle.

"Thet paper was stolen from me," rasped Fresno, "but thet's neither yere nor thar, now. I want this ranch, and I aim to git it. I'll speak plain, lady. First of all, I want yuh to read this letter."

The gambler took a folded paper from his pocket and tossed it into Mrs. Minnroad's lap. Opening it with unsteady fingers, she read as follows:

DEAR MA: Do as Fresno tells you, or you will never see me again. They are torturing me, and I will be killed unless you do what Fresno tells you. TOM.

The letter fluttered from her fingers.

"What—what does it mean?" she gasped.

"Jist what it says," growled Fresno. "Thar ain't no law in this country, lady, and yore signature on the right kind of a paper will be enough fer me! In other words, I want yuh to make out a bill o' sale fer the Lightnin' Rod. You write it, and I'll put the witnesses' names on later."

"And if I don't do as you say?"

The gambler's hand fondled the butt of his Colt six-gun. "Suit yore-self, old woman," he sneered. "If yore son's life means nothin' to yuh——"

He paused as hinges squeaked faintly. Turning his head, he made a little gurgling sound as the words died away unspoken in his throat. Into the room had stepped a tall young hombre in buckskins. Just behind him was Tom Minnroad.

"*Buenos dias*, Fresno!" came the drawled greeting. "It's quite a surprise to see yo' heah."

Fresno's mouth opened and shut spasmodically, but no sound came. His unwholesome skin had faded to the color of ashes, his cunning eyes had widened with amazement and terror.

"Seems like yo' have ovaplayed yo' hand, Fresno," said Kid Wolf pleasantly. "The breed that yo' left to kill me had a little hahd luck—he was unfohtunate enough to get killed, himself. Yo' saloon-keepah pahds ah through, too; and now it's yo' tuhn, I think."

Words came faintly to Fresno's

pallid lips. "You Texas skunk! You ain't human! You——"

Kid Wolf's laugh was like the quick beating of a hammer on an anvil.

"Do yo' claim humanity, yo' filthy sidewindah?" he crackled. "Now lift yo' hands or go fo' yo' gun! Take yo' choice!"

The gambler hesitated. Agony was in his eyes, the horrible, frenzied fear of violent death. He waited. Sweat began to stream down his pinched face.

A half a minute passed, during which Fresno made no move. Tom Minnroad edged from behind the Kid, took his mother gently by the arm, and led her into the room beyond. It was the show-down. It was like a poker game with death as the stakes.

"Well?" said the Kid icily.

He had not drawn either of the two guns that nestled against his thighs. Fresno had noted that. He had a fair and square chance.

But had he? Fresno remembered that amazing, lightning-fast draw that had broken up the card game, days before. Feverishly he moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"And if—if I surrender to yuh, Wolf," he croaked, "what—what kin I expect?"

"To be quite frank, sah," the Texan drawled, "the rope! Every one in Little Pine will know what yo've done, and if a pahty of vigilantes don't finish the business, I'm badly mistaken. Yo' can use yo' own judgment, Fresno."

The Kid reached carelessly for the makings of a cigarette. As he did so, there was a yoll of defiance from Fresno. The gambler thought he saw his chance, his clawlike fingers dropped to the butt of his Colt six-gun.

Then Fresno screamed. It seemed that his eardrums had caved in, his head rang with the noise of a shot. He saw the Kid as if in a haze. It was a haze—a wisp of whitish smoke!

The room whirled around him, and around again. All became dim. Fresno tried desperately to jerk his gun the rest of the way out of its holster, but his arm had become strangely weak. He could no longer breathe. Weird voices seemed to be chanting inside his head. A red-hot iron seemed to be boring into his chest.

"Yuh—yuh've killed me, Wolf," he choked, and then the floor came rushing up to meet him.

After supper, when the sun was painting the western sky a thousand tints of crimson, pink, and amber, Kid Wolf made ready to say adios to his friends of the Lightning Rod.

He had courteously refused all their well-meant offers. Tom had become highly indignant when the Texan had declined to accept a portion of the Dry Lakes gold, but the Kid had finally convinced him that he was in no need of it.

It was even harder to turn down Mrs. Minnroad's earnest invitation

to make the ranch his home for as long as he pleased. Kid Wolf, however, was already restless. He was a tumble weed, and the adventure winds were tugging at his moorings.

"Yo' will be able to stock yo' ranch in fine shape now, Tom," he said, as he swung aboard his big white cayuse and reached down to take the hands of Minnroad and his mother in a clasp of farewell. "Yo' and yo' mothah deserve some good fohtune now, and I'm sho' yo'll get it."

"Dog-gone, if I don't hate to see yuh go, Kid," Tom complained. "You and Blizzard ought to lay up a while and rest. Yuh've been goin' day and night."

"We ah used to it," chuckled the Soldier of Misfortune. "*Adios, amigos*, and maybe I'll drop in again sometime!"

He waved his wide-brimmed hat, touched his snowy brone with the spurs, and drummed away toward the blue horizon. His voice was raised in his favorite song, and the words came floating back on the evening wind:

"Oh, the Lone Stah is a-callin' us, the Rio!
Along the trail let's jog,
Theah's not much rest, in the Golden West,
Fo' friends of the undah dog."

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Sheep In Bear Claw Basin

By Hal Davenport

Author of "The Waddy From Thunder River," etc.

THE night wind carried a faint clattering, a drumming of hoofs. Lon Dalhart twisted in the saddle. None but keen ears could have caught the nearing beat of sound, back down the trail, above the roar of the moonlit creek thundering down through spruce and aspen.

Overhead, the night was white; tall peaks stood clear in the distance. Below to the right, Bear Claw Basin lay in a mist of silvery light. But nearer at hand, the rocky route and timbered slope were a puzzle of black shadows.

For a long minute, Lon saw nothing as his gaze went down the shrouded trail—tree-hemmed, steep, and winding.

"Some jigger comin' in a hurry, just the same," the dust-stained ranny muttered.

Well, he'd just ask him the way to the Walking A, if the man wasn't in too great a rush. Tall, lean-hipped, red-freckled, Lon Dalhart, out of New Mexico, was new to the Bear Claw country.

Furthermore, the route he followed had forked so many times in the last few minutes that he

wouldn't have bet even the floppy old J. B. on his sun-burned hair that he was still on the right trail to the little spread he had bought a week ago, sight unseen, due to queer circumstances.

The throb of hoofbeats was nearer now. The rangy ranny thought he caught faint cries, but couldn't be sure. Then unmistakable sounds—the heavy crash of six-guns.

With a quick frown, Lon swung his bay in off the trail. Knowing nothing of this trouble, none but a fool would have entertained thoughts of joining in. He waited in dense shadow.

Suddenly a thundering horse burst into view, just below. For a moment, it seemed riderless as it came on at furious gallop. The next instant, however, a shaft of moonlight struck it full. Lon gave an exclamation.

The cayuse held a figure fighting for life, a man nearly gone from the saddle. Bumping wildly at the animal's side, the fellow hung with one short leg rammed tightly through a stirrup.

A desperate clutch had caught a rawhide saddle string stretched tautly down from the cantle. But the man's jerking head and shoulders cleared the stony trail by less than a foot. Rocks would smash him to death in fifty feet, once that slim grip loosened.

Without a second's hesitation, Lon yanked out a heavy stock knife and flung his bay into the trail, headed up it like the other. He'd need speed to match the runaway's speed, when the terrified horse swept even.

It thundered hardly thirty feet back now, the slender rawhide stretching dangerously. A massed rumble of hoofs had taken the turn

back below. But Lon had no eyes for that fierce pursuit. Slugs wailed in the air like hornets.

"Hang tight just a minute more!" he yelled, bending low for the fellow's collar as man and cayuse surged abreast.

A scream of bullets overhead drowned the words. The clinging figure, with a sudden twist, rammed a .45 muzzle up into Lon's face. A grim snarl accompanied the movement.

"Got one of you skunks, anyhow!" came the hiss through his tight-locked teeth. The six-gun blazed and thundered.

Lon felt the flame scorch past his cheek, its red tongue lighting the shadows for a fleeting instant. A cry of dismay broke from the man:

"You ain't—a Quiet Rider!"

"Never heard of 'em. Just tryin' to help you, darn it!"

Lon had seized the smoking weapon, and twisted it. But he let go now, and slashed with his blade at the other's stirrup leather.

From out of the blare of bullets, a slug found flesh with a sickening sound. The horse of the entangled man leaped wildly, groaned, and stumbled.

It went down in a rolling crash, Lon's bay barely clearing its thresh of legs. Yells of triumph rang from the pursuit. But the violent jerk of the fall had aided Lon's blade. The stout stirrup leather had parted.

"Grab me quick!" the rangy ranny cried, releasing the other's collar. "Now claw up behind me!"

A moment later, he was roaring on with the man now freed of the stricken cayuse. Patches of moonlight stippled the trail. As yet, Lon had barely glimpsed the fellow's face—lean, mustached, grizzled, maybe.

But it certainly hadn't struck him as being either tough or criminal.

Now the waddy threw a glance behind for his first real look at the others. What he saw assured him that he had acted for the right. The dozen riders of the pursuit all wore long and flowing robes, every man a hooded figure.

Honest folk, he reckoned, hid themselves under no such rig. In the dust-blurred haze of moonlight, the hooded band's garb appeared to be gray, or possibly black. Then a sharp twist in the mountain trail blotted out their spurring figures.

Lon's bay was going nobly, yet no horse carrying double weight could long maintain its lead up such a course. A brush-choked gully broke to the right—a long black slash toward the basin.

Lon swerved the bay into it, crashing down through a shield of thicket.

"That's usin' your head," came from the man clamped on behind. "You won't need spurs down this slant." Already the horse was scooting on its tail. "Stranger, I'm shore a heap obliged. My grip was slippin' fast on that saddle string. With fair luck now, we can shake 'em."

"Who are they—or what?" Lon Dalhart growled.

"Good men gone wrong," the other snarled. "At least, that's how I figure. Things are a mess in the basin!"

The pursuit's headlong rush and noise proved a help. For, overshooting the gully, the hooded band lost time discovering the fact and righting themselves. Lon got a lead he never lost.

Taking no chances on moonlight, he pulled in soon on a lesser slant, then angled warily back up the brushy bank. He let the bay pick

its own way, at a quiet walk, along a pine ridge thick with nettles.

He was reined in coolly in the dark when the pursuit poured past at two hundred yards, riders shouting, brush crashing, down the black heart of the gully.

A grim little snort came from the man the New Mexico ranny had rescued.

"'Quiet Riders' they call themselves! And wild cattle couldn't drown that racket! Ride on, brother, kind of easylike, while I work what's left of this stirrup offn my boot. How I got my foot jammed through, I scarcely know, everything happened so sudden."

With an occasional shaft of moonlight filtering the pines as they wound back now toward the trail, Lon got a good look at the other. The fellow proved a rancher, short, bench-legged, with quick little gray eyes in a red face above an iron-gray bristle of mustache.

"Name's Hank Mefford," he announced. "Own the Black M, on back a ways. Tend to my business purty well. And get shot at, looks like, for doin' it! Stranger, I hope you're just passin' through. I wouldn't want you in any trouble."

"Nope, I'm here to stay," Lon returned. "I don't know if we're neighbors yet, but I just bought the Walkin' A, up under these rims somewhere."

"Walkin' A! Glad to hear it!" the rancher exclaimed. "Ol' Rick Aston was gettin' on in years, and we need a good man up there. Dang it, though, I wonder did you know, when you bought from him, just what you were comin' into?"

"Understand it was a good little spread. Why, what's the matter with it?"

"Not a thing—as a ranch. But

it's right under the saddle between the Bear and the Cub. You may be sheeped out, hombre."

"Sheep!" Lon hipped about on the bay, with a frown. "You mean that this ain't cattle range? That woollies have got a foothold?"

"Doin' their darnedest," Mefford declared. "That's what started the trouble. We're holdin' 'em off as best we can, and fightin' those fool Quiet Riders. So ol' Rick Aston unloaded on you!" the little rancher exclaimed. "Why, dang his hide— No, come to think of it, he's been out of Colorado for two-three weeks, on business. The sheep come since he left here."

Part of the frown slipped from Lon's face. "Glad to hear that last, anyhow. Aston struck me as honest. And a dyin' man would hardly have lied. He's dead, you know. Killed accidental."

"Huh? You don't mean it?"

Lon explained. Rick Aston had been passing through a little New Mexico town in the ranny's home range, when a pair of drunken punchers tried to shoot it out in a wild exchange of lead. A stray bullet had pierced Aston's chest. He'd died a day later.

"I helped carry him to a doctor," the ranny said. "He savvyed he didn't have long to live. What seemed to worry him most was he'd been on his way to Santa Fe to close a deal sellin' his ranch, and now he'd never make it. Had a daughter back East, he said, who could never run the spread. And he wanted to leave her somethin'."

"Thet so?"

"Well, the upshot was I bought the place," Lon said. "Cost me all my savin's. Reckon it sounds like a fool stunt. But he had pictures of

it, and all the legal papers. Even insisted I wire the Basin Bank, at Stacyville, to make sure he was O. K. So if I've run into trouble, it ain't his fault, I reckon."

Nevertheless, the sheep angle had Lon plenty worried. He'd seen such wars before—a desperate stand of cattlemen to stem a ruthless invasion. Nothing strips a range so bare, ruins it so utterly, as the short-cropping teeth and choppy hoofs of an inroad of woollies.

"Are they on my place now?" he wanted to know.

"Not yet. But they may be any time, makin' another stab down at the basin. They headed in first through Dead Injun Pass. But we've flung men in there, every hand that we can spare, and sort o' backed up the varmints."

The next most likely point of attack, Mefford said, was the saddle between the Bear and Cub—two mountains bordering the Walking A. If they came that way, Lon was ruined.

Yet if the cattlemen split their ranks to guard two fronts, the main pass itself might be quickly forced. There were at least a dozen sheep outfits, each with its tough set of gunnies.

No lone hand, Mefford declared, could possibly hope to turn them.

"But dang it, man," Lon exclaimed, "ain't there enough cowmen and punchers in this basin to do more'n guard just one pass? That oughtn't to take an army."

"Have to leave men behind to protect our homes," the other said almost fiercely. "It's them Quiet Riders. They've ordered us to make no war on the sheep. Just who they are, we don't know. They bobbed up first two years ago. And did a good job, I'll have to admit, clean-

in' out a tough bunch about to take the county."

"Then what?"

"Then they disbanded, or we thought they did. Now here they're back." Mefford snorted, "claimin' they want no fightin'—in the interest of law and order."

"Some law and order!" the waddy said bitterly. "Seein' the way they tried to dry-gulch you."

"Yep. 'Cause I sort of led the ranchers."

By this time, their winding climb had carried them back to the mountain trail. The wiry little rancher refused Lon's offer to take him home, saying that the Block M wasn't far by way of a handy short cut.

"It's goin' to push you hard, Lon, anyhow, to make the Walkin' A by daylight. Say, before I forget it, there's a cattlemen's meetin' in town to-morrow night. Called by Cass Ventrist, the banker. You'd better come in and see what's done. We're raisin' a defense fund. Ventrist says fight fire with fire. He's backin' us to the limit."

"Sort of unusual for a banker, ain't it?" Lon said.

"Why, no, not for Cass. He's even been out two-three times offerin' advice about postin' our men in the pass. If we're sheeped out, he's hit hard. Holds paper on most of our land, and his security would drop to nothin'. The thing for us to do, Ventrist says, is hire an army of gunmen."

Lon's eyes went down from the rugged heights to the silvery expanse of basin—a rich land, prime and rolling. A shame to turn loose killers there! Yet he savvied the ranchers' position. He was, in fact, one of them.

"I'll be at that meetin'," he de-

clared. "Also, I'm defendin' the Walkin' A with all I've got. But not with any hired gun dogs. I'll use my own gun."

He shook hands and pushed on, sure now of his directions.

II.

The great round moon slid down the sky. But its last soft rays still held the land when Lon topped out, hours later, in a splendid little grassy valley between the snow-capped Bear and the lesser Cub. He'd reached his own holdings.

Night though it was, he could see that he'd got a bargain. A talkative little creek gushed from above, sweeping past a trim log ranch house, barns, and corrals, partly fringed by quaking aspens. Close in the north, a lodgepole ridge reared its shaggy side—excellent storm and winter protection.

Its slope was dense with shadow now, but a final pool of silver caressed the house, the buildings.

Tiny leaves of aspen, shimmering there, seemed to whisper and beckon a welcome.

"Dang!" said Lon. "That's purty!"

He didn't regret spending his savings now. The place looked serene and peaceful.

The tall ranny drew in a breath of air. Sheep get that place! Not while he lived!

Reining in at the ranch-house porch, he stripped off saddlebags and his heavy old stock saddle.

"Chico, there's the barn," he told the horse, with a hearty slap upon the rump. "Soon's I get these things lugged inside, I'll be right down to grain you."

The big-boned bay, however,

elected to enjoy a snorting roll on the rich grass. Lon watched it a moment, grinning. Then he turned back to the porch—and stood in sheer amazement.

The door, a closed black square a moment before, now gaped wide in the dim moonlight. An armed figure stood—hooded—in it.

“No moves,” the toneless order came through a great gray cowl flowing down to join a robe of the same somber hue, belted at the waist by a gray gun belt. “We are here for law and order!”

Gauntlets of gray incased the hands holding two leveled six-guns. The man was big, or at least looked so in the heavy folds of the masking garments.

For a moment, Lon could only stare. The Quiet Rider had appeared with all the silence of a ghost. With no slightest chance to go for his gun, the ranny’s arms lifted slowly at command.

But he tried to feel his way through the situation.

“Ghost,” Lon snapped, “you’re sure sudden! Now speak your piece, whatever it is. I’ve got a horse to feed. Then I’m due to do some sleepin’.”

“Sleep,” declared the muffled tones, “may be yours forever. Tonight you interfered in an affair none of your——”

“How d’you know?” the ranny rasped.

“We know all, about all things. Now we find you on a ranch you don’t own.”

“That’s one thing you sure don’t know,” Lon informed him crisply, carefully measuring the distance to the man. “Happens this place belongs to me, in spite of that know-it-all stuff you’re harpin’ on in such spooky fashion.”

“Ol’ Rick Aston owns this spread.”

“‘Owned,’ you mean. He’s dead now. Killed down in New Mexico. I bought it just before he died. Now, hombre, if that’s all that’s on your chest besides that Mother Hubbard, my advice to you is to ramble.”

Lon spoke coolly. One eye was still on the leveled guns; the other was probing the shadows.

The hooded figure had said “we” two or three times, just as if more of the cowled band lurked right at hand. But Lon could detect no other Quiet Rider. The fellow was demanding:

“Got any proof you bought this place?”

“Legal papers.”

“I suppose you’ve got them on you.”

“I have not! Left them for safe-keeping at the Basin Bank, till I had time to get ‘em recorded,” Lon said.

“And what’s your proof,” the cowled man shot out, “that *you* didn’t kill Rick Aston?”

“Great glory, man!” burst from Lon. “I don’t tote witnesses around with me!”

“Pretty thin,” the Rider sneered. “Either you produce those papers, here and now——”

The hooded figure’s two weapons jerked, rang wildly. For Lon, sinewy muscles gathered, had hurled himself in a hard, low dive across the space between them. The Rider’s words had ended in a gasp. Lon’s shoulders struck his knees and mowed him down in the instant of stark amazement before he could shift his guns to cover the dive.

The impact threw the twin shots off. Lon was battling for the weapons of the rider.

He had both guns by the barrel. The hooded Rider was big and powerful, but the man's muscles seemed somewhat soft, as if from easy living. Lon whammed a knee with all he had against a flesh-larded stomach.

The other groaned and lost one gun and glove to the fierce wrench of the waddy. Lon smashed the Colt at the cowed head, but missed in his eagerness. The man tore free and surged to his feet.

And this time Lon knocked him nearly the full width of the porch with a swipe of the six-gun barrel.

"Now," the ranny snarled, "we'll see your face!" as the hombre landed sprawling.

But a rush of feet had sounded from the barn. Savage shouts rang from somewhere else. More of the Riders were coming.

Some came on horseback from the shadowy slope, but at least three were on foot, shooting now as they charged straight for the porch. The ranny had no chance to reach the man he'd downed. With lead screaming all around him, Lon dived through the door, and rolled to one knee.

He jerked out his own .45s. Guns up, he let them have it.

Slugs, flaming, roaring, broke the rush as if it had hit an unseen cable. A man was down, sprawled in his robe. Another fled with a broken arm. The third jasper, with a hoarse yelp, turned to take it on the run. But now a thunder of hoofs swept around the ranch-house corner.

With a drive of spurs, a horseman lifted his mount to the porch on the dead run. He and Lon traded shots like lightning.

Splinters flew in the ranny's face, marring his sight for an instant. He didn't see the figure reel and clutch

the horn, as the horse flew past the door with a terrific clatter of floor boards.

And only dimly did Lon sense that the leader whom he'd pistol-whipped had staggered up with a frantic leap to swing on behind the saddle. The horse and both of the Riders were gone, crashing through the aspens, when the ranny wiped a trickle of red from a torn cheek and realized just what had happened.

"Mighty anxious, they was," he growled to himself, "that I didn't see that leader's face."

He fed fresh shells to his weapons. There'd be another charge, he felt sure. He quickly shut and barred the door, and stationed himself at a corner window.

All of the foe were out of the moonlight now. Even the one whom a shot had knocked rolling had managed to limp off somehow. Bullets screamed and crashed from the timber, thudding into the ranch-house logs. But the expected rush seemed long in coming.

III.

Lon's eyes ran swiftly over the big front room, wherever moonlight hit it. Two bearskin rugs lay on the floor. Mounted deer, lion, and bobcat heads graced the rough walls. Above the fireplace mantel, a huge spread of antlers held a rifle.

"Aston's, of course," Lon exclaimed.

Well, he'd probably need that carbine, too. In three quick strides he had it, had worked the lever, found the magazine full, and darted back to his window.

Just in time! The charge was coming! The foe swept out of the timber, every hooded figure mounted now, riding hard and riding low.

Yells from behind seemed to hurl them on. Flame flashed like ribbons past their horses' necks.

And a withering gunfire met them!

Lon had never shot faster. The rifle swept the pack in a swinging roar. Then the gun was silent, empty. Window glass had shattered on Lon's head; bullets kicked wood splinters flying.

He grimly whipped his two Colts into play. A horse had gone down. Another rolled. Cowled figures, too, had felt red lead. Everything was a swirling tangle.

Rearing mounts! Snarls and oaths! A back-handed shot from a furious man, as Lon poured it on. Then they had split, pounded away, long robes crackling with their speed. They vanished like great dim-gray bats.

The last of the moonlight was on the land. Dawn was close in the offing. Lon hurriedly reloaded his guns, far from sure that the Riders were gone.

An hour passed. They didn't show.

The east had flushed to a rosy dawn. Then far away he saw them, cutting over a high, bare shoulder of the Bear and going fast, as if to avoid the morning sun now slanting sharp rays at them.

"The dirty sheep-lovin' skunks!" he muttered.

Show them his papers, any time? He reckoned not.

"They just meant to tear 'em up, anyhow, and run me out. Or kill me, if they could," he growled.

Going out in the fresh, crisp air, he hastened down toward the barn to make sure no stray slug might have harmed his bay. The horse wasn't there, but its turf-torn trail showed where it had bolted.

Mind eased by the sign, Lon followed on, and came upon the cayuse well off in the aspen.

"Chico, you ol' lizard, I promised you grain, and here I find your crop-pin' grass," the ranny said, with a grin. "Shucks! Didn't you know you could count on me?"

Back at the house, he emptied oats from one of the saddlebags and fed the bay at the porch edge. Then he took supplies of his own from the other bag, and started in to get breakfast.

As he strode through the door, however, his eyes fell on an object on the floor—the big gray gauntlet the leader of the Quiet Riders had lost when Lon wrenched a six-gun from him. The waddy kicked it on ahead of him, with a grim little smile.

"I'll examine you later. That Colt he had, bein' a .45, didn't give much clew as to who he'd be. I reckon you'll be the same way. All them Riders wore gray gloves——"

Lon stopped.

"Huh, that's funny."

For a little ball of cotton had rolled forth from within the glove at the kick. He picked it up, and the gauntlet, too. The glove itself was leather-lined—the cotton no real part of it.

Inspecting it, he found that the glove, for the left hand, had the little finger and the one next to it rather tightly stuffed with cotton.

"Little one full, the other half," he grunted. "Well, if I ever catch that walloper with gloves off, I reckon I'll kind o' know him."

Thrusting the gauntlet within his shirt, to show to Mefford when they met, Lon ate a hearty breakfast, realized how tired he was as he tidied up, and frowned as he thought of sleeping.

He had to have rest. But it wouldn't do to be slipped up on.

Taking his weapons, he saddled the bay, splashed across the creek, and rode a little way up the slope of the round-topped Cub into heavy timber. There, in a sheltered spot overlooking the house, he picketed Chico and bedded down, with the three guns handy.

Everything still looked peaceful when he awoke. The noonday sun was climbing the sky, as he mounted the bay and headed up the valley into the grassy saddle between the Bear and the Cub. He needed to know the full lay of the land up there, if he was to resist a sheep invasion.

Sharp, rugged folds, thick with lodgepole, fell away from the far side of the saddle's crest, when at length he reached it. He could see for miles in the clear, thin air. Near at hand, nothing moved, save some gray camp robber on silent wings over old "burn," or white down timber.

Far beneath him, however, the ranny's slow, keen gaze, going down and down, suddenly picked out a long and crawling thing—dirty-gray, mingled with dun.

Sheep and dust! On the march, on the roll, winding steadily upward!

Other blurred bands showed, farther back, woollies by thousands and thousands. Here came the dread invasion. For long minutes, he sat studying it.

A thin, grim smile grew on his features.

"Let 'em come," he growled, and turned his horse.

Sheep cover ground slowly, even when pushed. The sharp pitch and sweep of the mighty land would hold them back. Even though they traveled the rest of that day and part of the night, they couldn't reach here before morning.

Gunnies were with them, beyond a doubt. Probably half a hundred. And the mountain saddle was far too wide for a lone man to hold them off. But there was still ample time to shag it on into that ranchers' meeting at Stacyville and let 'em know what was coming.

"Them cowmen'll split their forces quick enough when they realize the real blow is striking here," Lon thought with conviction.

He ate a cold snack in the saddle on the way to Stacyville. It was nearly dusk when he rode in. Hank Mefford hadn't been at the Block M when Lon went by. But he soon found the little rancher in town. At Lon's news, Mefford's eyes lighted with a fighting fire, his wiry mustache bristled.

"Tried to run you out, the scum! That sure shows the Riders are in with the sheep. Come on!" He seized Lon by the arm. "We'll go see Ventrlist, the banker. He's advised against guardin' that saddle," Mefford went on, "till we was sure any move there wasn't a feint. But from the number of bands that you saw, there ain't a doubt now about it."

The bank door was locked when they reached it. But they could make out a dim figure at a rear desk within a railed inclosure.

"You know him, don't you?" Mefford asked, after rattling the latch vigorously as a means of getting attention. He looked surprised when Lon said no. "Why, I thought you checked with the bank, when you bought out ol' Rick Aston."

"Did, by wire. And left my deed here when I went through. But Ventrlist wasn't around then, I guess. Feller name of Stevens answered the wire—same jigger what took my papers."

"The teller. He's a good boy. Well, here comes Cass to let us in. You're shore goin' to see some action when he gets your news. Ventrlist used to ride the range. He's the right kind of banker."

A heavy bolt slid. The door swung in. In the dim light, Cass Ventrlist showed as partly bald, well fed to a hint of paunchiness, yet still plainly amply muscled.

A neat business serge covered his frame. Above broad shoulders sat a square-slashed face, the mouth straight, possibly a bit hard, the ranny thought. The banker's jaw was heavy.

"Why, hello, Mefford," Ventrlist exclaimed. "In for the meeting, I suppose. I hope you brought your check book. That defense fund we're raising to-night——"

He checked himself. Eyes suddenly cold and narrowed seemed to stab at Lon. "But who's this, Hank? A stranger? Perhaps I shouldn't speak before him."

"Oh, he's all right." Introductions were made. "Owns the Walkin' A. And a danged good thing! He's packin' news that means a quick show-down."

Cass Ventrlist frowned. "The Walking A. Never heard of him. But we'll let that slide, till I get the news. Come on back to the office."

Light on his feet for a man of his size, he turned and led the way. Lon, following with Mefford, ran his glance over the place. It seemed to be the ordinary little grilled country bank, save for a spiral staircase, completely inclosed, running upward from near the vault.

In the failing light, he could barely make out a neat sign on the stairway door, announcing "Private Quarters."

"Lives up there, Cass does," Meff-

ford, noting the direction of Lon's glance, explained in a half whisper. "Aims to be on the job all the time. Cass just lives for this bank and the basin."

"Now," said the banker, seating himself at his desk after they'd entered the railed inclosure, "what's this about a quick show-down? It never pays to be hasty, you know."

Hands locked behind his head, he leaned back in his swivel chair, studying Lon intently while the waddy told his story.

The straight lips pursed as if in thought.

"Mefford, how well do you actually *know* this man?" the banker clipped, after Lon had finished.

"Why—uh—just since last night. But criminy, Cass, after what he's seen——"

"Yes, provided he saw it. Now don't get me wrong," Ventrlist cut at Lon. "I have to think of my people."

"Why, what d'you mean?" the waddy demanded.

"That we can't split our forces, weaken the pass, and send men needed elsewhere up to that ranch, on the word of a mere stranger."

"But great snakes, man——" Mefford began, only to have Ventrlist cut him short.

"I know, Hank, you think he saved your life. But I'm looking at this thing coldly. Suppose he's in with the sheepmen. That chase after you could have been a fake—to fool you, and through you, fool us. This man has no proof as to who he is."

"Why, you suspicious lizard!" Lon shot out. "I've got proof right in this bank. Legal papers that show I own that ranch. Left 'em with Stevens, your teller."

"Hm-m-m, strange you should

pick on Stevens," Ventrism said. Again the cold gray eyes had narrowed. "He's with us no longer. Left on the noon train for Denver. Discharged him. Unsatisfactory.

"But if you gave him any deed"—the banker came to his feet—"it'll be in the vault, beyond a doubt. Wait here, while I check your story."

"Say, what's wrong with that bald-headed buzzard?" Lon demanded of Mefford, after Ventrism had rounded the grilled counter, produced a light, and disappeared within the vault, where they could hear him rattling papers. "You'd think he didn't *want* to know those sheep were there. I thought he was a man of action."

The little cattleman, too, looked puzzled. "He does act different, for a fact. But shucks! He'll change, I reckon, the minute he finds them papers."

Ventrism reappeared, locked the vault, and came toward them through the gloom.

"Just as I thought," he clipped at Lon. "The documents you describe are not there. Hank, I'm afraid that he's fooled you. There's no slightest proof he owns the ranch, nor any reason for him to be trusted."

"Why, you danged thickhead!" burst from Lon.

For a moment, he'd been stunned by the news. Now some queer quality in the banker's voice seemed tugging, futilely, at the ranny's brain, even as Lon went on hotly:

"This whole thing shapes up like a stall! I'm goin' to take a look in that vault myself!"

"Here! None of your guff!" Cass Ventrism roared. "I'll have no threats from you!" The man's big left hand whammed the desk; the heavy chin was jutting. "Hank, I think this man ought to be held, while Aston's death is investigated!"

Lon, though, scarcely heard him. The waddy was staring at the hand flat on the desk. He hadn't noticed in the dim light before, but now he saw that the little finger was entirely gone. And the one next to it was half missing.

Stuck in Lon's shirt at that moment, there was a Quiet Rider's gray gauntlet—the corresponding two fingers cotton-stuffed, to hide an unnatural limpness when on the hand of the owner!

IV.

Ventrism, Lon realized in a flash, was almost exactly the same size as that hooded leader. There was that quality in the voice, too, abruptly grown familiar.

He figured he grasped the whole play now—plot, motive, everything—as he faced the man before him.

"Ventrism," he snapped, "who owns those sheep?"

"Why—er—nobody seems to know," the banker got out, taken aback at the sudden question.

"Well, I know!" the ranny clipped. "The same dirty, masking snake who holds paper on almost every cow spread in this basin! Who means to take 'em over when they're sheeped out. Who's soakin' the ranchers, right this night, for a fake fund——"

"Why, you!" Ventrism had paled, then purpled. The words were a howl of fury. The big man had tensed, seemed about to spring. "Cover him, Hank!" he suddenly cried. "He's trying to wriggle out of being held!"

"Hank'll look at this first," the waddy shot out, jerking forth the telltale gauntlet. "The glove that I took from you, you two-fingered scum! Look at those fingers, Hank, cotton-stuffed; and then——"

But in passing the gray gauntlet over, Lon had turned slightly from Ventrism. The big man's right hand dived to his left armpit. A gun streaked forth from a hide-out holster.

The muzzle whipped down to cover the pair.

Crash! Lon Dalhart had swung from the hip.

Ventrism, lifted from his feet, fell in a heap in a corner.

And Lon, with a leap, had the weapon.

"Get up, you skunk!" the waddy snarled. "Now march—into that vault!"

"What—what do you mean to do?" the banker gasped.

"Find my papers, if they're there. And lock you in, anyway. The ranchers are tearin' out to my place to end your sheep. And you're not goin' to warn 'em or your Quiet Riders, either!"

He had the gun between Ventrism's shoulder blades, and was forcing the big man onward.

"But I'll suffocate!" Ventrism almost wailed as, passing the circular-staircase door, they came to a halt before the vault. "It'll be the same as murder!"

"I reckon not," Lon said. "The sheriff'll have orders to let you out, after we're gone. And to hold you, for the ranchers."

Under the hard, steady pressure of Lon's gun, Ventrism, fumbling with the lock, at length threw the combination.

"I—I know when I'm licked," the banker said. "If only you'll just let me leave the country——" He pulled open the great steel door. "Your deed's right here, in this pigeon-hole." He lifted an arm toward a vague, dim row.

Behind Lon, Mefford struck a match. The little rancher cried:

"Son, you shore was right! There's that graspin' skunk's Quiet Rider robe, right on the floor——"

The words chopped off in a horrified gasp. For Ventrism, turning slowly with papers in his hand, had thrust them suddenly at Lon's face. A ripping light, a blinding flare burst from their mass. The walls of the vault rocked and rang to a gun's terrific explosion.

Lon had staggered back. He was going down, carrying the rancher with him.

"He—he sneaked another gun!" Mefford gurgled.

The little man, still entangled, was tugging wildly, vainly, at his own, as Ventrism hissed down at him:

"Yes, and I'm going to use it twice! You'll never spit out what you know!"

Once again, the weapon flamed. Its blare was joined by others—shots that roared and rocketed from the floor.

Lon Dalhart was dazed, half blinded by the murderous slug and scorch of powder that had fanned his cheek there in the vault even as he'd jerked his head aside. He couldn't yet see where he threw his slugs.

But Ventrism was somewhere before him.

The banker, however, amazed by that sudden recovery of a man he'd thought dead, had taken time for only a single shot before hurling himself in a frantic dive behind the heavy grilled counter. At the same moment, many feet pounded in a thunderous rush down the queer circular staircase.

"Kill 'em, men!" Ventrism howled. "Finish 'em both, and then fade! I'll claim it was a holdup."

Hooded figures burst out of the stairway door. Mefford, wounded in the leg by Ventrism's shot, had dragged himself partly behind the vault. Lon, up on one knee, could see now.

Crash-h! Wham-m! Bam!

Slugs ripped and flamed from the ranny's Colts. The first Quiet Rider pitched on his face. A second fell with smoking guns.

Little Hank Mefford was firing now. The stair doorway screamed its smoke and lead. But that stairway was a tangle.

"Rush 'em!" screamed Hank, and tried to get up.

It was plain that the charge was broken.

Lon leaped to his feet. A slug fanned past. One of his guns was empty.

He dropped a man through the powder haze. He peered about for more, but caught none at once. Then he sensed movement to his left and rear, beyond the heavy bank grating.

The ranny whirled, leaped aside, and hurled the empty gun, just as Ventrism's slug whipped past him. The banker ducked, bobbed up again with a vicious snarl six feet away, and threw down on the waddy.

Their weapons flamed together. Hank Mefford whooped:

"He's down, boy! Right between the eyes! Son of a gun! I wouldn't 'a' bet you had another slug. Git here quick! We'll watch the stairway."

There proved no need, however. Excited men were pounding in through the front door—grim basin ranchers, their guns out.

"What is it?" they cried. "A holdup?"

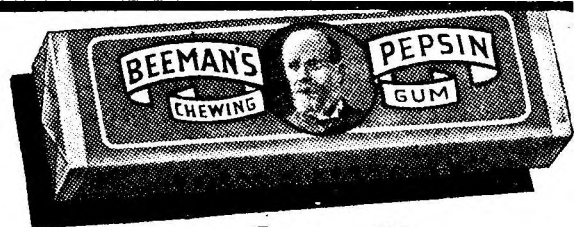
"One that's ended," Mefford growled. "Keep that stairway covered! There's gun hands up there, but they'll surrender, when they find out their boss is dead." He told what had happened. "Now get me a doctor to tie up this leg. We're goin' out to the Bear and Cub to clean up on the rest o' them varmints."

"We'll go out, all right," Lon Dalhart said. "But I think if we take a certain dead banker along, sort o' show 'em their pay checks is ended, there'll be no occasion for fightin'."

The ranny's prediction proved correct. Shortly after daylight, thousands of sheep were moving the other way. Quiet Riders were in jail.

"All except their Big Noise," little Hank said, with a grim smile. "He done got shut off by a straight-thinkin', hard-shootin' waddy."

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Calamity Jails A Sheriff

By Lee Bond

Author of "The Oklahoma Kid Burns Powder," etc.

THE two pards, "Calamity" Boggs and "Shorty" Stevens, were more or less used to trouble. For it seemed that they were eternally into some sort of a scrape. But the adventuresome pair were taken totally by surprise when trouble descended upon them this particular morning.

They had spent the night in Soldad—a mangy-looking little village that squatted on the Arizona Sonora line. Soldad had an evil reputation. It was whispered that its more-or-less floating population belonged to the legion of hunted men who found security of a sort in the far-flung bad lands that stretched along each side of the international boundary line.

Calamity Boggs and Shorty Stevens had spent the night in the ugly little town without having any trou-

ble. They had eaten breakfast at daylight, and were soon on the trail, pointing north by west through the border country, aiming for a larger and more prosperous town, fifty miles or so away.

They had ridden perhaps five miles, when a dull roar of hoofs behind them caused the wandering pair to hip around and study the dim trail behind them. Calamity Boggs made a strangling sound in his corded throat, black eyes fairly popping out. Calamity was a big, powerfully muscled cowboy, and had the sad features of a great bloodhound.

"Hossbackers!" he rumbled now. "Shorty, them fellers is after us, shore. An' I'll bet it's a posse. They'll string me up, pard, an' let me choke to death slow an' horrible."

"Say, yuh big moose, why would

a posse be after us?" Shorty Stevens clipped peevishly. Shorty was a wiry little waddy, with sandy hair and snapping gray eyes.

"They're likely after me instead o' us both," Calamity sighed mournfully. "It's jest my awful luck, pard. I've allus knowed I'd come to some turrible end like this."

Shorty growled like a bobcat, but made no other reply. There were times when he got downright peeved at Calamity, for if the big mournful cuss ever had a cheerful thought, he kept it strictly to himself. But despite Calamity's moaning and groaning, he was a keen-witted hombre and bad medicine in any sort of scrap.

Shorty thought of that now, and decided not to bawl Calamity out too much, since it certainly did look as if there was a batch of trouble descending upon them. Shorty could see unsheathed rifles in the hands of those oncoming riders.

He could see, too, that those rifles were beginning to point at him and Calamity.

"By gosh! You're right!" Shorty cried when a puff of smoke licked from one of those pointing rifles. "Calamity, them blasted fools *are* after us! We'd better—— Good gosh!"

Calamity groaned, swayed sideways, and toppled from his horse. Shorty Stevens was too excited to notice that his big pard lit catlike on hands and feet before letting his body down to the stony earth. Shorty could see only one thing at the moment, and that was a red haze which swam and danced before his blazing eyes.

"Kill my pard, will yuh?" Shorty yipped shrilly, reining his horse around to face the oncoming riders. "Yuh blasted bunch o' bor-

der rats, I'll show yuh a thing or two!"

Shorty's stubby hands slapped down to his thighs, and came up bearing two big Colt .45s. The band of riders split, scattering to right and left as Shorty leaned over the saddle horn and stabbed his guns forward.

"Hold it, feller!" a deep voice boomed from the scattering riders. "Drop them guns, in the name o' the law!"

"Law?" Shorty gasped, clamping short thumbs across the spiked hammers of his guns barely in time to keep those hammers from dropping.

He blinked away the red fog of rage that had blinded him for a moment, staring now at a score or more of mounted men who were swiftly circling him. Shorty saw the big, fat sheriff then, and let his guns sag swiftly. He holstered the weapons slowly, for he certainly had no desire to swap lead with the law.

"Yuh blasted fools, what's the idea?" he yelled angrily as the riders closed in warily. "One o' yuh rattle-headed snakes kilt my pard. Which one o' yuh fired that shot?"

"Better take it easy, runt," a snarling voice called, and Shorty Stevens jerked his head around, to see a lean, hawk-featured hombre closing in on him with leveled rifle.

Shorty was blazing mad again, for being called "runt" set his temper on edge. He glowered at the sallow-faced man with the beak nose and gash mouth who had called him runt, and let his hands inch back toward his holstered guns.

"Say, tinhorn, yuh'd better watch that tongue o' yores!" Shorty snarled. "How come a gamblin' man to be out where he ain't got a chance o' trimmin' some shorthorn?"

The thin-faced man snarled an oath, red to the roots of his stringy yellow hair.

Shorty Stevens remembered seeing that jasper the night before, when he and Calamity had gone into a place called the Eagle Saloon to loaf and listen to range talk that passed among the cowboys who had been gathered there.

Shorty also remembered that a talkative old desert rat had said that the lean, hawk-nosed hombre was "Slick" Welton, owner of the Eagle Saloon and gambling den. It had meant nothing at the time, and Shorty would probably never have remembered the details, if he had not found himself face to face with Slick Welton now.

"Tinhorn, am I?" the gambler rasped coldly. "Yuh pint-sized little coyote, I'll——"

The rife in Slick Welton's thin, pale hands suddenly jumped to his shoulder, and his yellow eyes glowed hotly down the shiny barrel.

"Hold it, Welton!" the huge sheriff bawled hoarsely. "You'd better git a tail hold on that temper o' yores, Slick. That stick-up gent ain't makin' no had play that I can see."

"Stick-up?" Shorty gasped, whirling in the saddle, to stare at the sheriff.

The officer seemed to spill uncomfortably over the saddle he sat. His black eyes peered sullenly from behind thick, fat lids, and his mouth looked grimly determined beneath a huge and flowing black mustache.

"Yeah, stick-up!" the big officer boomed. "Yuh an' that pard o' yores thought yuh was purty cute when yuh robbed the Eagle Saloon this mornin' an' kilt pore ol' Limpin' Sam Dover, the swamper."

"Say, you're loco!" Shorty gasped. "My pard an' me didn't do no such thing, sheriff."

"Shore, now, I didn't expect yuh to admit it right off," the sheriff snarled. "But it'll do yuh no good

to lie. Bull Dugger was sleepin' off a jag under the bar, an' seen yuh two snakes as yuh run out the back door. Where's the loot?"

"I don't know who Bull Dugger is," Shorty growled, trying desperately to hold his temper in check. "But he was either seein' things or else he's a plain liar."

"I'll bet they've hid the loot, sheriff!" Slick Welton jerked out. "Like I said when we first seen 'em, they was ridin' along too easy for gents that was packin' ten thousand dollars in loot. But that big snake on the ground, there, won't rob no more honest people. I don't miss when I line my sights on a feller."

"So it was yuh that kilt my pard, hey?" Shorty Stevens squalled. "Blast yore crooked heart! I'll——"

The big sheriff leaned out of the saddle with surprising speed. His huge hand lifted, thick fingers wrapped about the stock of a Winchester carbine. He brought the barrel down sharply across Shorty Stevens's head.

Shorty was not knocked completely out, and managed to keep his saddle. But he was too dazed to resist when horsemen spurred in about him and yanked the guns from his holsters.

He knew vaguely that he was being handcuffed and that his feet were being tied beneath his roan bronc's belly. But Shorty's head ached terribly, and his whole body felt weak and limp.

"Thar, that will hold him," the big sheriff panted, as he finished tying Shorty's feet beneath the roan's belly. "Slick, leave a man here to watch the feller yore slug on-horsed until we can send a wagon out for the carcass. Rest of us will go on back to town. Looks like we cleaned this case up in a hurry."

Slick Welton glanced sharply

about until he caught the shifty eyes of a skinny hombre who wore the soiled garb of a cowboy and looked as if he might know how to handle those two huge guns he wore in thonged-down holsters. Slick Welton reined over beside the skinny, thin-faced cowboy and jerked his head toward Calamity Boggs.

"Yuh stay here an' guard the carcass o' that stick-up artist, Tex Benton," Slick Welton said loudly. Then, turning slightly, so the others could not see his evil face, Welton spoke harshly from one corner of his gash mouth. "I seen a thick money belt under that feller's shirt last night when he got out dinero to play low-stake poker," the gambler hissed. "I want that money belt, an' it better have plenty in it. Try double-crossin' me, Tex, an' I'll read the sheriff yore pedigree."

Slick Welton was gone then, spurring after the sheriff and the exultant group of men who hemmed Shorty Stevens in as they galloped back toward town.

II.

"Tex" Benton watched until Slick Welton and the others were out of sight, then fished a pint bottle from inside his soiled green shirt, uncorked it, and drank deeply. He took three pulls at the bottle before jamming the cork back into the neck and shoving the bottle into a saddle pocket.

He sat his horse for a full minute after that, staring down at Calamity Boggs, who lay unmoving, face down.

From beneath Calamity's head, a trickle of sluggish crimson had crept out, staining the sun-hardened earth and black lava stones. The sheriff and the others had seen that. They had felt so sure that the big cowboy

was dead that they had not bothered to examine him.

Tex Benton looked at the sluggish crimson now, and a faint grin quirked his crooked mouth. He ran long, grim fingers through a stubble of brown beard that sprouted on his jaw, shifty gray eyes taking on a cunning light.

"Money belt, eh?" he cackled suddenly. "Now ain't that nice! I've been wantin' a stake that'd git me out o' this blasted country. Mebbeso this is my chance."

He slid from his horse, hands going to the butts of those low-slung guns. He stopped beside Calamity Boggs, and prodded the big waddy sharply with one scarred boot toe.

Calamity did not stir. Tex Benton felt sure the big puncher was dead.

"I'm tired o' takin' Slick Welton's orders!" Tex Benton snarled. "Blast him! He's gittin' rich off o' the cattle he makes us fellers rustle fer him. An' what do we git?"

Tex was working himself up, steeling his puny nerve. Many times he had thought of sneaking away, getting into some new country where he could organize a gang of his own and become rich by rustling and robbing, as Slick Welton was doing. But Tex's nerve had always petered out at the last minute, and he had stayed to take orders from Welton.

Welton abused him, threatening constantly to tell the sheriff about some of the murders Tex had done. It never occurred to the evil Tex that Slick Welton was simply a bluff—that Welton would not dare talk.

"Yes, sir, this is mebbe my chance," Tex said loudly, in the hope of convincing himself that he was doing the right thing. "I'll have a look at this dead jasper's dinero. If

there's enough, I'll high-tail it yonderly an' git a gang o' my own."

He stooped, ran a grimy hand down along Calamity's side, and felt the bulge of a thick money belt beneath Calamity's gray shirt.

"Hah!" Tex cried thinly. "So this buzzard *was* packin' dinero. I hope they're a thousand or so. With that much—— Awk!"

Tex had reached down both hands, intending to turn the big puncher over. But those skinny hands were suddenly gripped as if a bear trap had closed over them. Tex Benton squalled an oath, rearing back.

Calamity Boggs sat up, gripping Tex Benton's wrists in mighty hands. Calamity's tapering fingers closed down like steel bands, and Tex Benton's face went white as he realized that he could never break that grip and dig for his holstered guns.

Tex Benton lifted his booted feet and kicked savagely at Calamity's crimson-and-dirt smeared face. There was a shallow bullet groove across Calamity's left cheek bone, and crimson had spilled down along his hard jaw to dry on his big, blunt chin.

Tex Benton aimed both boot heels at that cut cheek and kicked viciously. But Calamity rocked his head sidewise, grinned a little, and came to his feet. Tex Benton screamed, for he was being lifted as if he was a child.

"Don't holler so much," Calamity advised sourly. "My nerves is bad, my eyesight is poorly, an' this here wound on muh face is festerin'. I'll die in a minute more, likely. Or mebbe I'll—— Ow-e-e!"

There was nothing doleful about that last utterance. Tex Benton had succeeded in hooking a spur be-

hind Calamity's neck. And Tex was the sort of gent who filed his spur rowels needle-sharp and laughed when some unfortunate horse squealed and bucked from abuse.

Tex stiffened his long leg, jerked with all his might. The spur left a line across Calamity's neck and up into his curly black hair as his Stetson came off. But Tex Benton was to regret that stunt.

With a snarl of pain and anger, Calamity Boggs lifted the squirming, kicking rascal high above his head, then sent him sailing through the air head-first. Tex Benton screamed in horror, for he was headed straight toward a frosty white bush that would have looked innocent enough to a man who did not know his desert plants.

But Tex Benton knew what he was in for, and horror gripped him even as he sailed toward the shrub. That bush was a white cholla, or jumping cactus, as it is sometimes called.

The huge burs with their many white spines flew in all directions when Tex Benton's bullet-shaped head crashed into the stubby round branches. Tex screamed wildly, for it seemed that a million red-hot needles were buried in the flesh of his head and neck.

He struck the ground, rolled on fallen burs, and let out a still wilder scream. He made the mistake of clawing at the punishing burs, which netted him a dozen or more long spines in each hand.

"Help!" he wailed. "Somebody git these things off! I'm dyin'! Ouch! Help!"

Calamity Boggs stood blinking, feeling the many small holes Tex Benton's filed spur had made up the back of his neck and scalp. Calamity forgot his own suffering, how-

ever, and went forward in quick, lithe strides.

He had been pain-blinded when he flung Tex Benton from the trail. Calamity had not seen the cholla, or he would have aimed Tex in some other direction.

"Lay still, yuh fool!" Calamity commanded sharply. "Quit rollin' on them things, or yuh'll be worse off than ever."

Tex Benton looked up at him out of frightened, pain-dulled eyes. Calamity stepped over to a greasewood bush, broke off two of the thick but brittle branches. He stripped twigs and the tiny green leaves from the branches until he held two sticks that were each a foot or so long.

With these, he hurried back to Tex Benton, and began sliding the ends of the stout sticks under the cholla burs that hung to the whimpering gunman's forehead, cheeks and neck.

With a stick under the knotty green bodies of the burs, Calamity would give them a quick flip. Some of the spines came out of Tex Benton's hide with the burs. Others remained there, poking stiffly out like coarse white hair.

Tex Benton screamed oaths and threats, but Calamity calmly placed a big boot on the skinny jasper's chest and held him fast to the ground while he worked. When he had flipped away all of the burs, Calamity stepped back, a sour grin on his big face.

"Yuh look like a porkypine, feller," he rumbled. "O' course, yuh know thet them thorns is pizen. Don't they hurt awful bad?"

"O' course they hurt, yuh—yuh dirty snake!" Tex wailed. "I'll——"

"Yuh'll be chawin' yore tongue with fits afore much longer," Calamity said mournfully. "It's awful

to die the way yuh'll likely end up. But yuh aimed to rob me, so I reckon I ought to leave yuh hyar."

"D-don't do it!" Tex Benton wailed. "I—I never aimed ter take yore money, honest."

"Don't lie!" Calamity snapped, and there was no gloom about him now. "Benton, I heard everything thet was said when yuh an' the others come foggin' up hyar. Why did Slick Welton frame my pard an' me for robbery an' murder?"

"I—I'm dyin'!" Tex Benton croaked.

Those cholla spines that were hung in Tex Benton's flesh were burning severely. Calamity knew that, for he had been stuck with the things himself. Calamity also knew that Tex Benton was in no danger of dying. Some gent with patience and a good pair of string pincers could work on Tex a while and have him in as good shape as ever.

But Calamity was keeping such things to himself. He realized only too well that he had mighty little time to spend here, and did not hesitate to frighten the murderous Tex plenty. Calamity wanted information, and meant to get it if humanly possible.

"Go ahead an' die!" Calamity said coldly. "Yuh likely helped frame Shorty Stevens an' me, anyhow."

"I didn't have nothin' to do with it!" Tex almost screamed. "Don't leave me here ter die, feller. Honest, it was all Slick Welton's idea that yuh two strangers git framed fer that murder an' robbery."

"Talk, an' mebber I'll give yuh some information about gittin' rid o' them cholla stickers," Calamity grunted. "But if yuh do any lyin', I'll leave yuh right where yuh are."

"There ain't no bank closer than Tucson, which is plumb over in the

next county," Tex Benton blurted. "Folks fer miles around bring their dinero in ter the Eagle Saloon fer Slick ter keep in his big safe."

"So Slick figured to steal that dinero, an' blame somebody else, hey?" Calamity rumbled.

"He—he's been waitin' fer months, hopin' some stranger would come along that he could frame," Tex panted. "He—he decided to do the job the minute he seen yuh two fellers in town last night."

"Mebbe yuh helped him," Calamity grumbled. "Likely yuh thet kilt that swamper I heard 'em say was dead."

"I—I didn't plug ol' Limpin' Sam Dover!" Tex groaned. "The old fool come into Slick's office an' ketched Slick openin' that big safe, jist about daylight. Slick had ter drill the swamper ter keep him from talkin'. I— Ouch!"

Tex rolled over, and evidently jammed some of the spines a little deeper into his tough skin. He sat up with a jerk, whining oaths as he stared down at his thorn-bristled hands.

"Do somethin' fer me!" he croaked. "Yuh said yud'd tell me how ter git these stickers out."

"Pull 'em out!" Calamity rumbled. "Oh' course, yuh'll have to use yore teeth, which means yuh'll likely swaller a few o' the spines. An' a feller with stickers in his stummick is liable to have worse than fits."

"Why, yuh blasted——" Tex Benton began swearing wildly, evidently tumbling to the fact that he had been scared into talking.

Calamity turned away, as if he did not hear. He walked swiftly to his big dun cow horse, mounted, and turned the dun back toward town.

He rode past Tex Benton's bronc,

reined in, and caught up the trailing reins. He slipped the bridle from the bronc's head, then leaned farther over and loosened the latigo strap.

The bronc wheeled as Calamity reined away, kicked up its heels, and sent the saddle flying over its lowered head.

"Hey, what in blazes do yuh think you're doin'?" Tex Benton yelled wildly. "Blast yore hide! I'll git yuh fer this stunt!"

"Yuh'll git them stickers out o' yore hide first," Calamity called back. "Thet is, if yuh don't start festerin' up an' bust plumb open afore yuh hoof it to town."

Calamity rode on then, feeling little sympathy for Tex Benton. Calamity was thinking of Shorty Stevens, and wondering just how he could help his pard.

The best thing to do, he decided, was ride back to town and get hold of the sheriff. Calamity felt pretty sure that he could reason things out with the big officer, if he could only get a chance to talk with him. But could he get into town without hubbubbing trouble?

The town would, Calamity knew, be a hotbed of trouble for him, since he and Shorty were being blamed for the robbery and murder. But the big, gloomy-looking waddy meant to try getting to the sheriff, regardless of how many sore-headed jaspers there were who might try stopping him.

He pulled off the trail when he saw a dust cloud far ahead, knowing that the wagon and the sheriff had mentioned sending was on its way. The wagon would not go back empty, at that, for Tex Benton would be needing a lift.

Calamity thought of that as he cut into a draw, and threw the spurs to his dun. He kept the horse at a

steady gallop until he was within sight of the town, then reined to a walk.

He approached under the best cover he could find, circling toward the north end of the little town where the scabby old adobe courthouse sat on a knoll. The small adobe jail was behind the courthouse, and Calamity worked into a sickly patch of mesquite brush that would take him within fifty yards of the jail walls.

He could see the grim little barred windows even now, and wondered just how Shorty Stevens was making out. Shorty would be plenty proddy, no doubt of that.

"Hope the hot-headed little cuss didn't rile the sheriff too much," Calamity muttered as he dismounted and went the rest of the way on foot.

He came to the edge of the brush, and was about to step out when men came pouring from the front door of the jail building. Calamity Boggs ducked quickly, big right hand dropping swiftly to the butt of the single .45 he wore.

Those men coming from the jail were masked, and as Calamity watched, he saw Shorty Stevens shoved through the door by other masked hombres. The crowd was moving in grim silence, and Calamity saw that one hombre carried a length of new-looking rope, into one end of which a clubby hangman's noose had been tied.

"Lynchers!" Calamity snarled, and ripped his big six-gun from leather.

III.

Gagged, hands bound tightly behind him, Shorty Stevens could not offer much resistance as he was marched from the jail and out to-

ward three scrawny cottonwoods that grew behind the courthouse. Those cottonwoods had strong-looking limbs, however, and no one could see them from the main part of the town.

Shorty Stevens knew what was coming, and lashed out desperately with booted feet in the hope of kicking himself free. But a huge gorillaman who wore a grimy red neckerchief for a mask sashed a ham-sized fist into Shorty's ribs, knocking the breath from him. After that, Shorty was half dragged in beneath the scrawny-looking cottonwoods, and some jasper threw the free end of the hangman's rope up over a limb.

The huge hombre in the red mask was opening the noose to slip over Shorty's head, when a doleful voice came from one corner of the building.

"This here gun is likely fouled with dirt an' sich, an' I'll bet the shells is all too old to fire," that voice drawled. "But in case the thing did go off, Slick Welton, the slug would git yuh square between them yaller eyes!"

Shorty Stevens recognized that mournful voice, and tried to whoop through the gag in his mouth.

"W-who in heck are yuh?" Slick Welton croaked, yellow eyes widening above the edge of his black silk handkerchief which he was using as a mask.

The shiny Colt barrel which had poked around the corner of the courthouse wiggled a little, came out farther. Then Slick Welton and the eight masked men with him were swearing hoarsely. For there stood Calamity Boggs, dried crimson and dirt plastered to his mournful-looking features.

But there was nothing mournful-looking in Calamity's eyes, or in the

way that single Colt he held swung in slow, steady motions from man to man.

The gorilla-man who had clouted Shorty Stevens leaped back, bawling an oath as his huge hair-matted hands slapped down to twin guns that were thonged to his legs. Those long guns came leaping out and up, the man's big, flat thumbs slapping the hammers back.

Calamity Boggs seemed to lean forward slightly, and his gun roared twice in such rapid succession that the twin shots came as one mighty blast.

The apish gent rocked back on run-over boot heels, squealing like a stuck pig. He dropped his guns, to begin clawing at torn, twisted ears that were spurting crimson over his already grimy clothing.

A door slammed in the courthouse then, and Slick Welton snarled a sharp command to his followers. As one man, they whirled, and went legging it around a corner of the building, just as the huge sheriff came stamping out the back door, with a sawed-off scattergun in his fat hands.

Calamity Boggs took one look at that scattergun, and thumb-flicked the hammer of his Colt.

The big sheriff sat down hard, staring at numbed fingers. His shotgun flew three feet through the air, then landed clatteringly on the hard dirt, the stock torn by Calamity's bullet.

"Set tight, sheriff!" Calamity advised coolly. "Yuh'll git me, o' course, an' I'll hang fer what I've did. But yuh'd better set still."

Calamity came forward in those quick, catlike strides, yanked the sheriff's twin guns from their holsters, then jerked the huge officer to his feet.

"Aimed to set in yore office yonder in the courthouse an' let them snakes hang my pard, did yuh?" Calamity Boggs growled. "I ought to hang yuh with thet rope, thet's what!"

The big sheriff stared dazedly at Shorty and the grim noose that dangled above the little waddy's head. Shorty was squirming and glaring, and muttering thickly through the gag. Calamity sidled over to him, drew a stock knife with his left hand, and ripped Shorty's bonds in a few quick strokes.

Shorty jerked his freed hands to his mouth and ripped away the chunk of wool blanket that had gagged him. At the same moment, Calamity Boggs whirled, holstered his gun, and seized the huge sheriff in mighty hands.

He shoved the still dazed officer to the jail and through the narrow door.

"Here, what do yuh think yo're doin'?" the sheriff howled as he was slammed none too gently into a cell.

There was a big key in the cell lock. The cot had been overturned, and the blankets were strewn about the floor.

Calamity guessed shrewdly that this was the cell from which Shorty had been taken. He slammed and locked the door in the sheriff's face, then pocketed the key.

"I—I thought yuh was dead, feller," the sheriff gulped. "But what does this mean? I—say, yuh can't lock me in my own jail!"

"No, I reckon not," Calamity rasped. "But this is some other jail, an' yo're a total stranger to yoreself."

The sheriff blinked, huge face reddening with anger. "Smart, are yuh?" he snarled. "Well, jist as shore as my name is Beefy Carter,

I'll hang yore hide on the fence fer this!"

"Them snakes was fixin' to hang my pard while yuh set in yore office an' pretended not to know it," Calamity rasped. "Feller, yuh can figger yoreself lucky to git off this easy. If I had time, I'd make yuh swaller thet star, then give yuh the beatin' yuh need."

"I—I didn't know nothin' about no lynchin'," the sheriff protested. "Dang it! I don't even know who them fellers was. They was masked, so——"

"I know who they were," Calamity cut in coldly. "An' I'm goin' down to the Eagle Saloon an' have a talk with 'em. How much o' the loot thet Slick Welton took out o' his own safe did yuh git?"

Before the enraged sheriff could think of a reply, Calamity spun on one heel and left the stuffy jail. He stepped out into the yard, and saw Shorty Stevens come bounding out the back door of the little courthouse.

"Went into that blasted sheriff's office to git these," Shorty snarled, patting the big guns in his holsters. "What did yuh do with that startoter?"

"Jailed him," Calamity sighed heavily. "But the pore feller will likely smother in thet hot coop, an' I'll git strung up fer causin' it."

"Jailin' a sheriff is bad business," Shorty snorted, "but it was all yuh could do in this case. Come on!"

"Whar?" Calamity asked innocently, although he knew perfectly well where his hot-tempered pard meant to go.

"Why, after them varmints that snuk into the jail an' drug me out!" Shorty ranted. "I heard Slick Welton laughin' about how he went in

to talk to the sheriff an' stole that key to my cell while the John Law wasn't lookin'. I aim to settle with that Slick Welton jasper."

"I sort o' got the best o' that feller that set to watch me," Calamity rumbled. "Tex Benton was his name. Tex got all full o' cholla stickers, an' got so scared, he talked."

"Gosh, Calamity, I shore thought yuh was done for when them buzzards drug me away from out there!" Shorty spoke more calmly. "Is that scratch on yore face where the bullet gouged yuh?"

"Scratch!" Calamity moaned. "Thet's right, make light of a turrible wound. It's fevered, an' likely gittin' ready to kill me slow. The signs is shore agin' me, pard."

"Aw, quit belly-achin' an' tell me what that Tex Benton snake said," Shorty snorted. "Dang it, Calamity, this here is serious business!"

"Uh-huh, it shore is." Calamity nodded his big head slowly, and drew his gun to replace the three spent shells. He told swiftly what he had learned from Tex Benton, while Shorty Stevens did a jig dance.

"Hot dawgs!" Shorty exulted. "We've got the deadwood on that gang, pard!"

"An' a sheriff in jail," Calamity moaned. "No good will come o' this, pard. Mark my words."

Shorty growled at his big pard's gloom, turned sharply, and went hurrying down the hill toward the main part of the squalid little town. Calamity overtook Shorty at the bottom of the hill, somber eyes searching the street ahead.

Without a word, they paced along the street to the wide doors of the Eagle Saloon, and turned in. The

slapping of those doors sounded loudly down the room. Voices died instantly as Calamity and Shorty strode to one end of the long, highly polished bar.

Men who had been drinking were staring, jaws slack. Slick Welton, back to the bar, and a glass in one thin hand, blinked rapidly, as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

Beyond Slick Welton stood "Bull" Dugger, the huge, savage-faced bouncer. Bull Dugger's ears were covered in crude bandages that showed fresh spots of crimson.

"It—it's them two robbers!" a wizened little hombre gasped, and dived hastily under a card table.

"Hold it!" Calamity Boggs roared, as the crowd began an uneasy shifting. "Would my pard an' me come back here to face yuh men if we were guilty o' robbery an' murder?"

For a long moment, there was silence, while heads nodded slowly.

"Yonder stands the gent who robbed that safe and killed the swamper last night!" Calamity thundered, and pointed a finger at Slick Welton.

"He's crazy!" Slick Welton almost screamed, dropping the glass he had been holding.

"A gunny named Tex Benton is comin' to town in the wagon yuh men sent out after me," Calamity called. "A bunch o' yuh go meet thet wagon an' listen to what Tex has to say. He's banged up, but able to talk."

Slick Welton went pasty-white, and began licking at his thin lips as he raked worried eyes over the room. Men shifted hastily now, muttering as they headed for the far wall. Slick Welton, Bull Dugger, and four others were left there along the bar, faces white and strained.

But Slick Welton was getting over

his fright now. He grinned crookedly, opened his gash mouth. But Bull Dugger beat him to it.

"We're sunk, boss!" the thick-witted bouncer howled. "I told yuh we better not let that Tex Benton fool help us rob that safe this mornin'. He——"

With a scream of rage, Slick Welton drew, his pale hands blurring as they sped down and up.

Calamity Boggs stepped sidewise, massive shoulders hunched. Calamity's hand seemed barely to flick. Then shots were hammering out, and the screamed oaths of Slick Welton became sobbing gasps as he pitched forward.

Calamity stepped out of the fog made by his gun, hard eyes glinting. A slug caught him in the thigh, jerking him half around. He righted himself and chopped a shot at a rat-faced little jasper who was trying to get behind the bar. The rat-faced man folded up, and Shorty Stevens's guns accounted for another.

Bull Dugger was charging, a smoking Colt in each big hand. Calamity hobbled sidewise, and let Bull Dugger lunge past.

Calamity chopped at Dugger's huge sharp-domed head, and felt the barrel of his gun land solidly. As Bull Dugger fell, the shooting died as swiftly as it had commenced.

"They got me!" Calamity moaned. "Shorty, this is trail's end, pard. I'm shot fatal——"

Gasps of dismay came from the hombres who had rushed to the far wall. They ran toward Calamity now, supporting him as he swayed.

"Hey, don't pay no attention to that big moose, men!" Shorty Stevens yipped. "Come take charge o' these two gents I'm keepin' covered! Long as Calamity groans, he's all right."

"No, don't bother with me," Calamity sniffed. "Besides, I've got a chore to do."

"A chore?" some one asked.

"Yeah, I jailed the sheriff." Calamity's voice fairly dripped gloom as he answered. "I'll go let him out

now. But I'll bet he throws me in the cell, an' don't give me food or water fer a straight week. But it don't matter. I kin feel these wounds festerin', an' know the end is close. The signs is agin' me, thet's all."



STIRRUP

TRAPPER'S PONY TEAM

In the far Northwest, where the snow lies thick and solid for at least six months in the year, and sometimes longer, huskies are invariably used to draw the loaded sleds over frozen trails.

There is one trapper, however, who scorns the traditional dog team. Francis Wharton, whose cabin lies over three hundred miles north of Edmonton, has a team of three sturdy Shetland ponies.

He says they are swifter, more sure-footed and easier to manage than the huskies. They don't fight and snarl among themselves as the dogs do. It is not necessary to know a lot of cuss words to urge them on. A few "giddaps" and a flick of the whip are enough to quicken their pace.

Francis doesn't have to carry hay

and oats for his team, for they will eat anything—moose meat, fish, eggs, anything that's going, except peanuts. They love sugar, and know where to find it at the end of a run, for that is always their reward.

Wharton loves his ponies and talks to them just as a cowboy talks to his bronc. There are many long days and nights on the lonely, snow-covered trails when the ponies are his only company.

He declares that they know every word he says to them, and they answer by whinnies and nods and twitchings of their sharp little ears.

"For pulling a heavily loaded sled uphill and down," says Trapper Wharton, with an emphatic thump of his fist on the table, "give me Shetland ponies, ev-er-ee time!"

P A B S T B L U E R I B B O N

It's time for Pabst

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Deputy Desert Phantom

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "The Desert Phantom Rides To Deathville," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SALOON BRAWL.

MURDER was going to be committed at the bar of the Poison Bottle Saloon before another quarter minute could tick away.

"Rawhide" Roder, crouched like a hairy black spider at his table in a far corner of the barroom, had arranged it. He sloshed liquor into his glass and downed the drink, his close-set eyes scanning the two men at the mahogany bar, waiting for the death song of flaming guns.

"Yo'll pay for them drinks, or I'll

tear yuh apart tuh see what makes yuh tick!" roared the lanky hombre in the flaming red shirt and goat-hair chaps. He was a typical gunman, with tied-down holsters and nervous hands that never strayed far from the notched butts of his .45s.

The man he was addressing was well known in Stirrup City, but the red-shirted customer was a stranger in this part of Arizona.

Rawhide Roder knew the latter to be "Lefty" Corson, the fastest professional gun-slinger along the border. In fact, right this minute, Corson had a hundred dollars of Ro-

der's gold coin tucked away in a pocket of those shaggy chaps.

Murder pay—killer's wages. And Roder, when he had given Corson his instructions, had told him to pick out any one he wanted for the slaughter—just so that person was at the bar of Stirrup City's principal saloon, the Poison Bottle.

Rawhide leaned forward with interest, now, his piggish eyes giving Corson's intended victim a once-over.

Corson had invited the fat, inoffensive little man to drink; but the other men in the barroom would not know that. "Chub" Oxman was only a horseshoer, over at Pendrill's Livery Barn. He was not the type to welsh when it came to paying for drinks. But neither would he let a stranger rowel him as Lefty Corson was doing.

"Yo're a liar, stranger!" Oxman stated simply, in a low, firm voice. "It ain't the price o' the rotgut that's botherin' me, it's you playin' me fer a green sucker. You asked me tuh toss down one with yuh, an' I did, jest tuh be sociable. I wa'n't thirsty, but I figured yuh was a stranger in Concha County, an' lonesome."

Corson's face worked with pretended wrath. He was goading Oxman along, wanting the fat blacksmith to reach for the six-gun which swung at his thigh. A hired killer's tactics.

"Them's fightin' words, Fatty!" snarled Corson, backing off.

Rawhide Roder chuckled into a whisky glass as he saw the gunman's deadly left hand twitching in a familiar motion which, Roder happened to know, usually preceded violent death.

Nor was he mistaken. Chub Oxman, with a calm disdain for any man who would try to rib him into a

gun fight over the price of two glasses of booze, reached to a hip pocket for his purse.

Quick as a lizard's dart, Lefty Corson's left hand moved toward his low-swung Colt. The ugly .45 seemed to leap upward to meet his hand.

Brrang! Corson's .45 roared with a jolt that swung the lanterns hanging from the barroom ceiling. A lick of raw flame chased the bullet which tunneled the pudgy blacksmith's heart. Chub Oxman never knew what struck him.

"Self-defense! He was reachin' fer his smoke-pole!"

Chub Oxman was settling toward the sawdust floor as Corson yelled the words to the shocked barroom crowd. The bartender, watching Oxman's startled features slumping below the level of the counter, was too paralyzed to reach for the sawed-off shotgun near the back-bar mirror, as he saw Corson turn to go.

Lefty Corson shot a glance over to where Rawhide Roder was pouring out a drink at a corner table. Roder nodded slightly in a manner that told Corson he had done his job well.

Across the barroom floor flashed the killer, before a single man in that stunned barroom could draw a breath. Chub Oxman's body had not yet settled along the brass rail of the bar when Corson streaked through the slatted batwing doors and was racing across the saloon porch outside.

Rawhide Roder twisted in his chair and peered through a grimy window at his elbow. He saw Lefty Corson take a flying leap from the Poison Bottle porch, land in the saddle of a paint horse out by the hitch rail, and jerk the reins off the post.

Wheeling the horse, Corson jabbed the spurs deep. The rattling hoofbeats of the escaping murderer sifted through the doors which still swayed

from Corson's passage, before the barroom came to life.

"That was cold murder!" yelled the bartender, vaulting over the counter and putting an ear to Chub Oxman's heart.

But the river of crimson which was welling out of the blacksmith's chest told the barkeeper that Corson's bullet had been true.

"Get the sheriff on his trail! Come on, you hombres!" A dozen angry voices took up the cry, as men slogged out of the barroom and ran for their horses.

Every man who had witnessed the deliberate murder of the mild-mannered Stirrup City blacksmith felt sick at the stomach at the sheer, wanton cruelty of the deed. All except Rawhide Roder.

Alone in that barroom, Rawhide Roder knew that the killing of Chub Oxman was no mere saloon brawl. It was a part of a clever scheme of Roder's own invention.

Corson had had nothing against Oxman; indeed, had never heard of the man. The blacksmith was simply unlucky enough to have consented to drink with the red-shirted stranger at the Poison Bottle bar.

Rawhide Roder shoved back his chair and got to his feet. He was a huge man, dressed in a black-checkered shirt and bibless overalls which were tucked into high-heeled, spurred boots.

Twin cartridge belts, bristling with shells, crisscrossed the big man's waist. A pair of basket-woven rawhide holsters, which gave Roder his nickname, were thonged down to his thighs. They held .45s which had more than one notch on their backstraps.

Roder was the last of the men to dash out of the barroom, which was now deserted except for the body of

Chub Oxman, slumped in a growing crimson pool by the bar.

Clapping a battered black sombrero over his tousled hair, Rawhide moved out on the porch and swept his eyes up and down the main street of the little cow town of Stirrup City. Diagonally across the street was the stone building housing the Concha County jail and sheriff's office.

"Sheriff Lew Barry's fallin' into my trap," chuckled Rawhide to himself, leisurely going down the steps. "I reckon everything will be set, once the sheriff follers Corson out o' town."

Sheriff Lew Barry was indeed on Corson's trail. The first sound of a gunshot coming like a dynamite blast in the still afternoon had told the old lawman that trouble was afoot. He had even seen Corson make his get-away. But it had taken a moment to drag a saddle out of his office and rig up his mustang for the chase.

He had the entire town of Stirrup City to help him, it appeared. Every man who could borrow or steal a horse was mounted and clattering off down the street past the courthouse, heading for Catclaw Desert in pursuit of Lefty Corson.

Rawhide Roder did not particularly care what happened to Corson. The man had a fast mount and a head start. Corson had planned his get-away as carefully as he had chosen the man he wanted to kill.

But Rawhide Roder had already forgotten the murder in the saloon. That was only the first of the chain of events he was going to start in motion. The outlaw's evil brain was now working on the next step in his scheme to stage Stirrup City's most spectacular jail break.

As his eyes strayed over through the hot afternoon toward the stone jail, he could visualize the eighteen

bandits whom Sheriff Lew Barry had jailed there, three days before. Those crooks were members of a gang of outlaws who had holed up in the abandoned mining town of Deathville, back in the Kiona Mountains.

Rawhide Roder had happened to be absent from Deathville when Sheriff Barry and his son, the famous "Desert Phantom," made their sensational arrest of eighteen killers.

"But I'm hyar in town now, an' I ain't goin' back tuh the mountains alone," grunted Rawhide Roder to himself, as he rolled a brown paper quiry and strolled across the street toward the jail. "Now that the sheriff's out o' town, I reckon the stage is all set. All I got tuh do is open the jail door——"

With an evil chuckle, Rawhide lighted his cigarette and walked up the steps of the sheriff's office. And then, for the first time, he came face to face with Arizona's most famous justice rider, whose very name made the border's toughest hombres uneasy:

The Desert Phantom!

CHAPTER II.

RODER'S TREACHERY.

THE Desert Phantom, whose real name was "Bearcat" Barry, and who was the son of Concha County's fighting sheriff, looked up from the job of oiling his six-guns. His handsome features were puzzled at the surprise of the man who stood on the threshold.

And, indeed, the presence of the Desert Phantom inside the sheriff's office was something Rawhide Roder had not counted on. The outlaw's eyes almost showed panic as they surveyed the young waddy.

Bearcat Barry's well-muscled form was clad in picturesque fashion—a

green shirt with yellow cuffs and crescent-shaped pockets; a beaded Indian vest, on which was pinned a bright, new deputy sheriff's star; chocolate-color batwing chaps adorned with Mexican-dollar *conchas* and nickel studs; kangaroo-leather boots with spur rowels shaped like stars.

But what attracted Rawhide Roder's gaze, even more than the emblem of the law which flashed on the Phantom's vest, were the peculiar holsters hanging to the cartridge belts that crossed the young hombre's waist.

They were made of transparent steerhorn, steamed into shape to fit the big cedar-butted Colt .45s as the skin fits a frankfurter. They were glass-clear, and their ends were clouded from powder smoke.

Rawhide Roder had heard of those glasslike holsters, and the six-guns that went with them. Every outlaw had heard of them, and of Bearcat Barry's amazing ability to use them.

Along more than one danger trail, his guns had blazed leaden justice against outlaw hordes. The "Desert Phantom" was a title which Bearcat had earned, two years before, while cleaning out a nest of crooks.

"Howdy, stranger!" greeted Bearcat, standing up. "Anything wrong? Yuh look plumb disturbed."

Roder entered, and stuttered something under his breath. His eyes fixed on the deputy sheriff's badge on the Phantom's vest, and the youthful lawman had to work hard to keep from swelling with pride at this attention.

That star had only been on his vest for three days. To be a deputy sheriff had been the lifelong ambition of the Desert Phantom, but only this week, following his thrilling capture of the Deathville outlaw band, had his father given him the badge of

authority which he now wore with such boyish pride.

"I—ah—witnessed that killin' over in the Poison Bottle jest now," grunted Roder in confusion. "It—it sort o' unnerved me."

The Phantom nodded, his face went hard.

"My dad'll run down that dirty skunk!" grated the deputy. "Wish tuh blazes I could 'a' joined that posse. Oxman was a friend o' mine. My hoss is the fastest one in the county, an' I'd 'a' run down the killer afore he got halfway tuh the desert."

Roder glanced at the door leading into the jail cells in the rear. Back there, the members of his old gang were imprisoned. Roder had arrived in Stirrup City that morning with a cavvy of horses, pretending to be a horse trader bound for Phoenix.

In reality, those brones were for the get-away of his fellow bandits. But Sheriff Lew Barry had left a capable guard in charge of the jail.

"I've heard o' yore hoss," replied Roder. "Blue Blazes, yuh call 'im? How come yuh ain't out chasin' that rascally snake?"

Bearcat Barry hitched his gun belts about his lean hips and jerked a thumb toward the jail.

"Got a passell o' crooks in there," returned the deputy. "They're awaitin' trial, most of 'em, an' then the gallows. Can't leave the jail unguarded."

Roder let smoke purl through his nostrils. He studied the tip of his cigarette and shrugged.

"I got a cavvy o' brones in town, myself," he explained. "Otherwise, I'd 'a' skinned out after that blasted killer. But I cain't very well leave my hosses fer any thief tuh stampe while I'm gone possein'."

Rawhide flicked his quirky butt

into a spittoon by the sheriff's desk, and turned to leave. The entire wall of the office was plastered with "reward" and "wanted" posters, and Rawhide was not any too sure that the Wyoming authorities had not sent his picture down to Arizona, in connection with a bank robbery Roder had pulled off up in the Thundergust Mountain country.

The Desert Phantom was eying him keenly, as it was. No use taking any chances.

"I'll be shovin' along, son," Roder commented. "Got tuh bed down my cayuses. Hyar's hopin' the sheriff lassoes that killer."

Rawhide Roder made his way down the street, his face working. However, there was an easy way to dispose of the Desert Phantom.

Arriving at the livery barn where his cavvy of horses were stabled, Roder went inside and spoke swift words to Howling Wolf, a young Apache Indian who was assisting him in effecting the escape of their companions.

The Apache grinned and nodded, as Roder finished his plan. After a few moments, the Indian headed down the street toward the sheriff's office, running as fast as his high-heeled cowboy boots would allow.

The Desert Phantom, seated in the sheriff's office, looked up a second time as he heard footsteps rattling down the board walk and turning in at the jail building.

He did not recognize the copper-brown Apache who leaped up the steps into the office. He judged by the Indian's costume and the stable odors which clung to him that he was a horse wrangler, but he had never seen him in Stirrup City before.

"You're the sheriff?" gasped Howling Wolf breathlessly.

Bearcat shook his head and got to his feet.

"Sheriff's out with a posse, jest now," he replied. "I'm the deputy in charge. What's the bur under yore saddle?"

The wrangler pointed down the street in the direction of the livery barn.

"Me think there's dyin' man in the town stable!" he gasped. "Heap big hombre, have um black-checkered shirt. He just rid intuh town from Hawkeye, me want um feed cayuse fer night, an' me find um. Make um groans, heap sick."

The Phantom's eyes narrowed. A black-checkered shirt—that would be the shifty-eyed stranger who had just visited his office a moment before, then.

"What makes you think he's dyin'?" Barry quizzed. "He smelled like a bar rag a few minutes ago. Mebbe he took another swig, an' the heat made him keel over tuh sleep it off."

The Indian shook his head wildly.

"But—but there's a heap big bowie knife stickin' out of um ribs, an' he all soaked up color of red flag. Me come hyar heap fast—look like heap bad medicine."

The Phantom's pulses quickened. But he checked his impulse to rush out of the office for the livery barn. He did not definitely sense anything wrong. Certainly the Apache's excitement was natural enough. But still—

Perhaps, he told himself, it was because this was his first responsibility as a deputy. But at any rate, he would not leave the jail completely unprotected—not when eighteen desperate characters were inside

"Jest a minute, pilgrim. Be right with yuh, pronto."

The Phantom took down the big ring of keys from the wall, made sure the steel door leading to the jail room was locked, and then put the keys in the sheriff's safe and twirled the dial.

"O. K. Lead me to yore dyin' man," instructed the young deputy, loosening his guns in their holsters. "Rattle yore hocks."

The Phantom was amazed to see how completely deserted were the streets of Stirrup City. Every one and his dog, it appeared, had chased off in pursuit of Chub Oxman's slayer. The fat little blacksmith had been a popular character in the county seat.

That probably explained the absence of "Pecos" Pendrill from his livery barn, too. If it was true that the stranger in the checkered shirt had been knifed, there might be a murder mystery to clear up.

"Here we are at the livery stable," commented Bearcat Barry to the panting Indian at his side. "Where'd yuh see this man with the knife in his ribs? I don't hear him groanin' now."

"Right over there—in second stall," gasped Howling Wolf. "Me goin' tuh bed down my cayuse thar, when me see um."

The Phantom strode toward the stall. As he passed the door leading into the dark room where oat and barley bins were located, the bulky figure of Rawhide Roder slipped out from the black interior, a pitchfork handle in his hands.

Bam! The hickory club whizzed through space and caught the Desert Phantom behind the ear.

Like a pole-axed beef, the young deputy sheriff flopped in his tracks, knocked cold by the treacherous blow.

CHAPTER III.

JAIL BREAK.

"THERE!" panted Rawhide Roder, tossing the pitchfork handle aside and stooping to pick up the Desert Phantom's limp form. "I'll dump this hairpin in one o' the mangers an' cover him with hay. Then we'll git busy, Howlin' Wolf."

The Indian grinned evilly as he saw his chief dump the deputy's body into a manger and then brush the loose straw off his own checkered shirt.

"I seen the jail keys hangin' by the door in the sheriff's office," chuckled Roder. "This'll be easy. Git all our broomtails ready fer the git-away, Howlin' Wolf."

A frown clouded the Apache's face.

"This deputy heap too smart for us, Rawhide," the Indian said. "He no come see about my story o' yore bein' knifed, until he lock the iron door tuh jail, an' put um keys in iron box."

Roder bit out an angry oath.

"He did that, huh? Well, we ain't safe-crackers. The town folks'll be ridin' back afore long—them that cain't keep up with the sheriff. But I got another scheme. You go ahaid, an' git the hosses ready, Howlin' Wolf."

Rawhide Roder crossed the street and headed for a false-fronted, ramshackle frame building from which a weather-beaten sign hung over the street:

MINERS SUPPLIES

Entering, the outlaw found a sad-faced, scrawny woman behind the counter. Her husband was probably out with the sheriff.

"I want six sticks o' dynamite, some caps, an' six bits' worth o' fuse, ma'am," boomed Rawhide Roder,

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with a disarming grin. "Aim tuh do some blastin' up in the Kionas an' make my gold strike."

Five minutes later, the outlaw chief sauntered out of the store with a package under his arm. The streets were still deserted, and Roder doubted if any one saw him as he strolled across the hoof-beaten street and once more entered the sheriff's office.

A second look confirmed Howling Wolf's statement that the Desert Phantom had locked up the jail keys.

"Salty younker, that Phantom!" grunted Roder. "I'm glad he's plumb out o' the way."

Working as calmly as if he was doing an ordinary chore about the office, Roder shut the door to prevent any one seeing him from the street. Going to the steel door, he peered through a grated window into the big jail room.

He was relieved to see that the prisoners were not being confined in individual cells, but were locked in the main room—a room with heavy granite blocks for walls, tiny, heavily barred windows high above the floor level, and a steel-plated floor.

Most of the crooks were playing cards or finishing up the meal which the sheriff had brought them shortly before Corson's flight from town. They were a scummy lot—Apaches, mahogany-faced Mexicans, cruel-mouthed gringos.

"Hisst!" Roder's soft warning made every man in the jail spin about to face the door.

Of one accord, they leaped to their feet as they recognized the face of their leader framed behind the barred grill of the steel door.

"Boss!"

"It's Rawhide!"

Roder stilled the mounting babble of sound, and briefly told what had gone on. Up to now, the outlaws

had had no inkling that plans were afoot for their rescue. Each of them had been brooding over their certain death on the gallows.

Now, Rawhide Roder's words were like a voice from heaven. And to know that their chief had lured the sheriff and half the townspeople away from Stirrup City by a killing, and then had put the Desert Phantom out of the way—it seemed too good to be true.

As he finished speaking, the outlaw's eyes lighted on the sheriff's gun rack. Several shotguns, two .45-70 carbines and a number of Colt .45s were on the rack.

Roder called one of his henchmen to the door, and passed all the weapons through.

"We got tuh work fast, men!" snapped Roder. "Every one of yuh go tuh the far end o' the jail an' turn yore faces tuh the stone wall."

Puzzled, but eager to obey their rescuer's orders, the eighteen outlaws trooped to the far end of the room. Outside in the sheriff's office, Roder set calmly to work.

He put three sticks of dynamite under the steel door, close to the wall to which it was hinged. The partition between the sheriff's office and the jail was of heavy timber; this was the only spot in the entire structure where a blast would be effective.

The charge planted, Roder stepped back to survey his work. Short fuses connected with the caps. He saved three sticks of dynamite for emergencies.

Moving swiftly, Roder touched off the fuses, then fled outside and down the street. He had not gone fifty feet before the afternoon silence was shattered by a thunderous explosion.

The windows of Sheriff Lew Barry's office puffed outward in a cascade of glittering glass slivers. The

door, which he had closed behind him, bounced open with a crash that ripped it off the top hinge and left it sagging at an angle.

Billowing white smoke, thick with dynamite fumes, tumbled out of the windows and doorway, and rolled like a tidal wave clear across the street to bounce against the Poison Bottle Saloon.

Sucking a gasp of air into his lungs, Rawhide Roder ducked into the whirling vapor and made his way into the sheriff's office. The blast had reduced the plank floor to kindling wood. The roll-top desk was tipped over on its side. Reward posters on the wall bulletin board were blazing with red flame.

Fighting through the smoke, the outlaw was relieved to see a gaping hole to the left of the steel door. The door itself, badly twisted out of shape by the blast, was still hanging in its frame. But there was ample room in the destroyed wooden wall for the outlaws to escape.

One by one, the imprisoned crooks dashed from the jail room, avoided the gaping hole in the floor, and slogged their way out through the boiling smoke to the out-doors they had never expected to see again, except on the march to the gallows.

"Down to the livery barn, everybody!" came the booming shout of Rawhide Roder, following the last of his henchmen out of the smoke-filled office. "We got tuh move fast!"

The dozen or so citizens still remaining in Stirrup City ran to the doors of their business establishments at the moment the dynamite blast broke windows and rattled dishes all over the little cow town.

Now they gazed in alarm as they saw the outlaws, running like a pack of wolves, stream down the board sidewalks for the livery barn. Be-

hind them, the jail smoked like a burning haystack. Roder's plans had worked!

The Indian, Howling Wolf, had twenty horses out of Roder's cavvy ready for the get-away. Many of them were saddled with hulls stolen from the livery barn.

Mounting quickly, with the armed outlaws surrounding those who did not have weapons, the gang spurred from the livery barn and headed out of Stirrup City at a gallop, their flight hidden by billowing clouds of yellow dust.

In all the history of the wild frontier, such a daring, wholesale jail break had never been pulled off. It was distinctly a feather in Rawhide Roder's criminal cap.

Ten minutes later, the outlaws had vanished beyond the white sand dunes of Catclaw Desert, bound at a horse-killing pace for the far-flung peaks of the Kiona Mountains. Back there in Deathville Basin, they had a hide-out which could only be approached by a single gorge, known as Coffin Canyon.

Once back there, Roder and his outlaws were positive they could stand off any attack Sheriff Lew Barry might make when he returned and found his birds had flown.

Already, members of the sheriff's posse were straggling back to town. They little dreamed that in a manger of the livery barn lay the unconscious form of the deputy sheriff entrusted to guard the jail—the Desert Phantom.

CHAPTER IV.

UNFIT FOR A BADGE.

PECOS PENDRILL, owner of the Stirrup City livery barn, was among the first of the possemen to return. His horse threw a shoe al-

most before the chase of Lefty Corson had begun, so that he had been reluctantly forced to return, despite the fact that the murdered man, Chub Oxman, had been one of his employees.

Pendrill's first move was to visit the Poison Bottle Saloon and transfer the corpse of Chub Oxman to the coroner's office in the north end of the town. It was when he was returning to the main street that the town was rocked by the jail explosion.

Pendrill, seeing the outlaw band escaping on horses coming from his own establishment, was quick to guess the facts. That morning, a big hombre in a checkered shirt had hazed a sizable herd of saddle horses into his corral, saying he was a trader.

"Instead, he was one o' them Deathville crooks, come tuh Stirrup City tuh rescue his pards!" grunted the stableman, heading at a run for his barn. "Dang it, the sheriff left Bearcat tuh guard the jail. I wonder if they kilt the Desert Phantom."

Pendrill was more interested in seeing whether any of his saddles had been stolen, than he was in investigating the smoking jail to see if he could find the Phantom's body.

Therefore, it came as an overwhelming surprise when, in passing a stall on his way to the saddle pegs, Pecos Pendrill heard a human moan issuing from a manger, and discovered the young deputy lying under a covering of wheat straw.

"Jumpin' juniper!" exploded the stableman. "What's the Phantom doin' hyar? His place was tuh guard the jail—not gad around town. The Phantom ain't fit tuh wear that badge his dad pinned on him tother day."

A half hour later, when the young

deputy recovered his senses in the office of Stirrup City's one and only doctor, he was unprepared for the hostile attitude of his neighbors.

"Somebody told yuh there was a dyin' man in the livery barn, huh? Weak story, Bearcat. Yuh let yore-self git lured away from the jail so's they could blast it open."

"Didn't attend tuh yore duty, son. That star yo're wearin' ain't to be regarded as somethin' sporty. Yo're sworn tuh pfectect the interests o' the citizens."

"Yore dad'll be the laughin'stock o' Arizona, when it gits out that eighteen crooks broke his jail."

His head aching as if it was filled with hot metal, Bearcat climbed off the doctor's table and stared dizzily about. He met the looks of scorn in his neighbors' eyes without flinching, but the heart that beat under the lawman's badge on his vest was heavy and sick at the injustice of it all.

Not worthy of being a deputy? Neglecting his duty?

The young waddy loosened his Colts in their glasslike holsters. If that's the way the town felt, there was only one way to redeem himself and prove that he *was* worthy of wearing a deputy's star. That was to see that the jail got its occupants back again, down to the last man.

The Desert Phantom made his way down the street to the jail building. Most of the posse had returned, all with reports that so far, Lefty Corson had given the sheriff the slip.

"Reckon Oxman's murder was jest tuh draw the sheriff away from town," correctly guessed several citizens. "Seems like the feller had spare hosses planted between hyar an' the mountains an' had fresh mounts ever so often. No wonder

the sheriff couldn't ketch up with 'im. But he's still tryin'."

The Phantom elbowed his way through the crowd and went into his father's office. The fire had gone out by itself after licking the reward posters off the bulletin board. The wall and floor looked like matchwood, but a carpenter could repair the damage by a half day's work.

Derisive grins met the Desert Phantom as he reappeared in the door, his handsome face grim and hard in the gathering twilight.

"Goin' tuh stand guard, now that the birds has flown, eh?"

"Better look out no crooks tries tuh break *in*, Bearcat!"

"Deputy Desert Phantom! Hah! The first week he has his job, he lets eighteen killers slip through his fingers!"

The young lawman raised a hand. His ice-blue eyes were blazing with anger at the taunts of the crowd, but he controlled his temper with an iron will.

"Them crooks headed fer Deathville," spoke out the Phantom evenly. "I brung that gang hyar once, an' I'll do it again. But I needs help. Who'll go with me tuh haze them skunks back?"

Sombroeroed heads shook their refusal. Several old-timers scoffed at the idea of a twenty-two-year-old deputy leading them.

"All right. I'll go alone—me an' Blue Blazes. An' you, Lem Clancy—yo're the county carpenter. By authority vested in me as deputy in charge o' this jail, I authorize yuh tuh repair this damage. I'll have them customers back hyar."

Loud guffaws went up, but the Phantom disdained them and stalked up the street toward his father's home. A few minutes later, he rode back through the lengthening shadows of sunset. He was fork-

ing a fine saddle horse—the powerful blue roan known as Blue Blazes.

Trim of barrel, arched neck erect, hoofs prancing with excess energy, Blue Blazes was eager to be on the trail.

Any good judge of horseflesh would have pawned his soul to own that spirited, well-trained animal. But Bearcat Barry, and he alone, could ride the blue roan.

“When my father gits back, yuh kin tell him where I’ve gone,” announced the Desert Phantom. “I’ll show you hombres whether I’m worthy o’ wearin’ this deputy’s badge or not. If I come back empty-handed, I’ll turn my star in. But I’ll come back with them crooks—or I won’t come back at all!”

The grins died on the faces of the Stirrup City citizens as they saw Bearcat and Blue Blazes gallop off into the dusk, bound for the Kionas. There was no doubt about it—the Desert Phantom had inherited the matchless courage and grit of his go-getting father, Sheriff Lew Barry.

Only three persons knew of the secret entrance to the ghost mining town of Deathville, back in the Kionas. One was the old prospector who had discovered it, “Shawnee” Dixon. The other two were Sheriff Lew Barry and his son, the Desert Phantom.

Through Shawnee Dixon, it became known that an outlaw gang was holing up in Deathville, and that the supposedly worthless mines were once more producing gold. Outlaws were working claims which were the legal property of Stirrup City residents. Thanks to the Desert Phantom, the crooks had been routed from Deathville and brought to Stirrup City and jailed.

Hence, the Phantom’s cup of bitterness was all the more full, be-

cause of the fact that those same outlaws had escaped while he was guarding them—his first job as deputy sheriff.

Although nature had planned that Deathville Basin could be reached only by Coffin Canyon—its other sides being surrounded by unscalable mountain peaks—miners had by accident linked the ghost town with the outside world. The old Horseshoe Mine, on the other side of the mountain from Deathville, had penetrated deep into the earth. Shawnee Dixon the prospector, in grubbing about the abandoned Horseshoe diggings, had accidentally broken through into another mine tunnel—one of those connecting with Deathville Basin.

The location of this hidden entrance to their lair was unknown to Rawhide Roder’s outlaws. And it was by this route that Bearcat Barry intended, that night, to gain entry to the outlaw hide-out.

He rode steadily until midnight, before reining up in the cactus near the entrance of Horseshoe Mine. Knowing he would be gone perhaps all night, and realizing that his hard ride across Catelaw Desert had tired out his mount, the Desert Phantom rode Blue Blazes to the near-by bank of the Rio Torcido.

Letting his roan drink from the mountain stream which wound its way out of the Kiona range, the Phantom left the faithful animal to graze in a small patch of grass near the river bank.

Then the young deputy, making sure his six-guns were ready for action, made his way into the mine.

Aided by mesquite torches, he was not long in threading his way through the old tunnels until he had completely crossed the mountain range.

The moon was up, like a brand-

new sickle blade in the sky when the Phantom found himself inside Deathville Basin. Stretched out before him at the foot of the slope were the abandoned buildings of Arizona's wildest town of other days.

The Phantom's jaw set tight as he heard the sounds of drunken revelry coming from the building which had once been the Bonanza Hotel. Now it was being used as the headquarters of the largest gang of outlaws ever assembled in the Southwest. Armed sentries were posted in Coffin Canyon to make sure the long arm of the law did not disturb them.

"Celebratin' their jail break!" snarled the Phantom, pulling his white sombrero over black hair. "The odds is twenty tuh one, but I reckon I kin figure some way tuh put a stop tuh their joy-makin'."

So saying, the Desert Phantom made his way down the mountain-side toward the single street of the long-abandoned ghost town. His hands were on his gun butts, and he was making straight for the Bonanza Hotel, where Rawhide Roder and his gang were making merry.

An ordinary man would have hesitated at the thought of approaching this den of two-gun killers. But burning in the Desert Phantom's brain was but one resolve—to prove to Stirrup City and Concha County that he was worthy of the deputy sheriff's badge his father had pinned upon him.

CHAPTER V.

INTO THE LAIR.

BEARCAT BARRY was fully aware of the peril which threatened his every forward step toward the ramshackle hotel marking Deathville's bandit lair.

The mountain basin was hemmed

in by steep cliffs, black and silver in the moonlight. There was no possible escape down the V-shaped split of Coffin Canyon; it was guarded, day and night, by riflemen whose keen ears and eyes were primed to detect any intruder.

He had the secret exit of the mine tunnels, but the slightest misstep, the least relaxation of vigilance, might result in discovery and certain death.

"Smells like supper time," grunted the young deputy, as he approached the hotel from the rear. "All the lights is in that built-on annex in the rear, an' that stovepipe is shore smokin'."

Avoiding the patches of yellow light thrown on the ground from the windows of the annex, the Desert Phantom slipped like a ghost to the wall of the building. Lost in shadows, pulses a-tingle with excitement, the young deputy from Stirrup City moved along the eaves gutter until he came to a window.

Removing his Stetson, the cowboy deputy peeped cautiously over the sill, then drew back swiftly after one glimpse. But his eyes had seen all he wanted to know.

The outlaw gang was just entering the big room, once used as a dance hall and gambling room, and were making ready to eat the meal which the cook of the robber band had prepared for them.

Crouched in the darkness outside, the Phantom could recognize the sounds which filtered through the cracked and broken windows—scraping chairs being drawn up to tables, the rattle of tin plates and cups, the coarse voices and hideous laughter of the outlaws.

"Now's my chance tuh give 'em a once-over," grunted the Phantom to himself. "I got the advantage o' havin' the whole gang together."

Reasonably sure that he was alone outside the hotel, the young lawman crouched to avoid being seen passing the windows, and made his way to the porch which flanked the hotel. Removing his spurs so that their chains would not make a betraying jingle, the Desert Phantom cautiously opened the first door he came to.

He found himself in a corridor leading through the main part of the hotel. The place smelled musty. For twenty years, perhaps, not a soul had lived there. Paper was peeling off the ancient walls; there was the odor of spider webs and moldy carpet and musty mattresses.

Moving in utter darkness, the Phantom felt his way along a wall until he came to a cross-corridor. At the left end, he saw cracks of light indicating that it lead to the dining hall.

Making sure his Colts were loose in their holsters, the Phantom crept with catlike silence to the door. He stooped and peered through the keyhole, alert for possible surprise.

Rough, homemade tables were put end to end in a long row down the middle of the room. In the rear, lantern light exposed the kitchen, with a Negro cook, clad in gunnysack apron, busy at a rusted kitchen range.

The table was lined with outlaws, some of them still wearing their Stetsons. All were attacking the food on the table before them with wolflike manners.

The Phantom's eye roved about the room and spotted a railed balcony extending about all four sides of the room. Upstairs on this mezzanine floor, the gambling tables had been placed, so that gamblers would not be disturbed by the drinkers and dancers on the floor below.

"I wish Lefty Corson would

hurry up," boomed a voice which belonged to Rawhide Roder, at the head of the table. "This feed is in his honor as much as mine, gang. That job o' killin' the fat jasper in Stirrup City was the thing that got the law out o' town!"

The Phantom felt his veins boiling. A celebration of their jail break! Every course guffaw, every shout of triumph which reached his ears was a direct insult to him.

Then Bearcat Barry's eyes noted a flight of steps slanting upward in the wall at his right. Figuring that this stairway led to the gambling balcony, the young waddy slipped silently up the steps.

Sure enough, the stairs led to an upper corridor lined with the doors of sleeping rooms—undoubtedly those used by the outlaws themselves. But on the other side of the corridor were doors opening out on the balcony!

"By golly, I'll have a firsthand look-see!" panted Barry to himself. "Mebbe I kin git the lay o' things."

Finding a door more than half open, the Phantom slipped through and found himself on the balcony. Below, eating by the light of kerosene lamps and lanterns, were assembled the Deathville crooks who had escaped jail in Stirrup City. The Phantom felt his heart pounding his ribs like a hammer. He could not risk discovery.

A billiard table, its green baize top moth-eaten and rat-chewed, offered a shelter from which he could look down on the dining outlaws without being seen. Secreting himself in the shadows thrown by the heavy table, the Phantom peered down through the railing, his brain working hard to formulate some plan.

While he was used to matching his brawn and guns against outlaws, the Phantom knew that often he could

be matched, possibly outclassed, when it came to strength or ability to shoot. The difference between victory or defeat, when it came to bucking the lawless, lay in outwitting them.

Rawhide Roder sat at one end of the table, wolfing down the meal with a relish which nauseated Bearcat Barry. The opposite place of honor was empty, and evidently was intended for Lefty Corson, the gunman who had slain Chub Oxman in Stirrup City that afternoon.

"I don't reckon Corson will git here tuh fill that chair ter-night—or ever," muttered the Phantom to himself. "Not with my dad on his trail. He's prob'ly gittin' rounded up an' hazed back tuh Stirrup City, right this minute."

But jumping at that conclusion was the most serious error the Desert Phantom could possibly have made.

Thoughts of Stirrup City, and the dynamited jail, flooded like ice water through Bearcat's head. His hands tensed with impatience. Merely spying on the gang from a hiding place over their heads would get him nowhere.

He had come to Deathville on a rather absurd mission, anyway. How could he make good his bold declaration to the Stirrup City citizens, that he would bring back these killers? Against such odds it was next to impossible.

And then the Phantom's alert eyes, roving over the eaters below, detected something which put an idea in his mind.

Most of the outlaws were not wearing their guns! Safe inside the rimming mountain walls of Deathville Basin, they felt secure. Men, especially when inside their own lair, do not relish the discomfort of having heavy shooting irons and gun

belts dragging at their waists while eating or resting.

As a result, most of the returned crooks had not bothered to carry their six-guns into the dining room with them. Many had even discarded their shirts, and were settling down to make the most of a hearty meal.

"By golly! Only four of 'em got guns!" panted the Phantom, his eyes studying each man closely. "An' they're all at Roder's end o' the table. I believe I kin——"

In a trice, the Phantom had his plan. He would make his way to where a stairway slanted downward from the balcony to the dining room. From that post, he would suddenly announce his presence, throw his guns on the gang, and then force one of their number to disarm the others and tie them up with lariats which lay, along with saddles and other gears, in one corner of the room.

"The plan'll work—it's got to," breathed the young deputy, silently moving back from his billiard-table concealment. "I got twelve slugs in my guns, an' I know how tuh use 'em. If one man goes fer his hog-legs, I'll drill 'im. The others won't dare rush me—each man'll be thinkin' o' his own hide. It'll work."

Silently, swiftly, the Desert Phantom crept along the darkened balcony toward the stairway head where he intended to throw his guns on the crowd below. Those who were armed would have their backs to him. It was a perfect set-up for a daring coup.

But as he neared the stairway, a door suddenly moved open in the wall at his very elbow! Spinning, the Desert Phantom saw a tall figure in red shirt and goat-hair chaps, in the act of entering the balcony to go down to the table. Lefty Corson,

the man who had slain Chub Oxman in the Stirrup City barroom!

With a yell of surprise and rage, the lanky gunman leaped at the paralyzed Phantom, his left hand streaking for his .45. In the space of a clipped heartbeat, the Desert Phantom drew.

Brram! The Phantom's Colt roared, and the exploding cartridge seemed to bring down the very rafters of the dining room with its deafening thunder.

Lefty Corson, his eyes bulging with unbelief that any one could beat him to the draw when he had a head start, checked in his headlong rush, a bullet through his evil heart.

But the outlaw's bulk swept against the Desert Phantom in falling, smashing the young waddy against the balcony railing with a crash.

Brittle wood splintered. The railing bannister sagged, split, then gave way as the Phantom's husky body crashed over the edge and hurtled downward through space.

CHAPTER VI.

FATE OF THE PHANTOM.

THE Desert Phantom struck the dining-room floor on hands and knees. Railing posts rained down in a wooden clatter about his ears, as he tried dazedly to get at his guns.

Up on the edge of the balcony floor, the corpse of Lefty Corson lay with head and arms hanging downward through the torn-away section of rail. Crimson dropped in steady spattering drops, winking like rubies in the light.

Rough hands jerked the young deputy erect. When his spinning senses cleared, Bearcat saw that every man in the room was on his feet, chairs crashed backward to the

floor. In his ribs was gouged the round black bore of Rawhide Roder's .45.

"We don't know how yuh got hyar, busky, but yo're a plumb welcome guest!" snarled Roder in a voice like a saw cutting oak knots. "In fact, we like yuh so danged well yuh ain't ever goin' tuh leave Deathville!"

A burly outlaw unbuckled the Phantom's gun belts and proudly strapped them about his own waist, patting the steer-horn holsters with a cackle of satisfaction.

"Corson's dead!" announced a Mexican, who had bounded up the balcony stairs to turn over the gunman's body. "Señor Corson save our lives, *si!* He come from bedroom, see Deputy Desert Phantom, warn us, an' lose hees life. '*Stamalo.*'"

Roder's face clouded with wrath as he glanced up at the motionless form of Corson. He had heard the killer's thrilling account of how he had managed to throw Sheriff Lew Barry off the trail in Catclaw Desert. Corson would never enjoy the praise of the outlaws he had helped save, now.

"Gang, we got tuh have revenge for Corson's death!" shouted Rawhide Roder, jabbing his six-gun barrel hard against the Phantom's chest. Iron-muscled hands held the deputy's arms at his sides. "An' plain shootin' is too good fer this salty jigger. I suggest we do what Howlin' Wolf suggested we do tuh that prospector, Shawnee Dixon, that time. Good, old-fashioned torture!"

A thunder of approval went up. The Phantom saw a youthful copper-brown Apache outlaw elbowing through the mob. Howling Wolf, he recognized, was the same Indian who had lured him away from the

jail with his story of a dying man in the livery stable.

"An' just what fate has yore Injun friend thought up for me?" rasped Bearcat Barry, his voice revealing no trace of the helplessness that froze his heart. "Bein' a danged 'Pache, it ought tuh be good."

Roder, his evil face reminding the prisoner of a hairy spider under the dancing glare of the oil lamps, nodded.

"Yo're danged tootin' it's good, Deputy Desert Phantom! You've seen them Hosstail waterfalls whar the Rio Torcido drops over the Kiona cliffs? Waal, the gang's been hankerin' tuh put somebody on a raft an' float 'em down the river an' over them falls, fer a long time. You'll do jest as good as anybody, busky. It's a hundred-foot drop tuh the rocks, yuh know!"

The Desert Phantom felt himself go sick. He knew the dizzy heights of the Horsetail Falls. The Rio Torcido, coming down off the jagged heights of the Kiona range, took a sheer drop over the rimming red cliffs. No one could go over such a waterfall and live.

"First thing in the mornin', when it's daylight," boomed Rawhide Roder, "we'll all ride out tuh Hosstail Falls. An' then Deputy Desert Phantom will be no more!"

The young deputy's heart leaped with hope as he heard that his fate was postponed until daybreak. In the intervening hours, he might find a chance for escape.

But his hopes were short-lived. He was tied to a pillar which supported one corner of the balcony, and at no hour of the long night that followed did the young deputy sheriff find himself alone. Always, the jeering, taunting outlaws were there, flinging raw whisky in his face,

swearing at him, reminding him of the awful fate in store for him in a few brief hours.

Breakfast was a nightmare to the Phantom, for though he saw it being prepared two hours before dawn by the Negro cook, he got no portion of it. Meal finished, the outlaws went outside to saddle their horses, and just as the first red banners of a new day were flinging themselves out of the east, the Phantom's death march got under way.

Down the streets of the eerie ghost city, looking just as lonesome and evil in the half light of dawn, filed the cavalcade of armed outlaws. Roder and Howling Wolf rode in the lead, the tied-up prisoner mounted on a buckskin pony between them. The gang was going to extract dire vengeance for the killing of Lefty Corson.

Down the cold, shadow-filled depths of Coffin Canyon the procession filed. Guards challenged them from the rocks above—outlaw guards, with ready rifles.

Daybreak was dispelling the blue shadows of Catclaw Desert as the grim row of horsemen sneaked down out of the canyon and then struck off toward the southwest, following a cactus-clad foothill ridge toward Horsetail Falls.

An hour's ride, and they came in view of the waterfall. Bearcat shuddered in his bonds, as he saw the plunging column of water, sliding like mercury over the lip of the cliff, dropping like a white horse's tail to end in clouding bursts of mist on the rocks far below.

Down in its gorge, the Rio Torcido looked like molten silver glistening over the rocks. The thunder of the falls was a death dirge in his ears.

"All o' you boys assemble yore-selves on that grassy bench down

thar by the waterfall," announced Roder. "I craves the pleasure o' personally tyin' the Phantom to a log or somethin', farther up the river. Yuh'll see him come floatin' down, an' over the falls!"

Protests went up. "We want *you* tuh see him go over too, boss!"

Roder shook his head and spurred along the rubble-carpeted trail, hazing the Phantom's mount ahead.

"Somebody's got tuh shove the deputy intuh the river, an' I'll git more revenge out o' doin' that than seein' his finish," returned Rawhide Roder. "Take yore last close-up look o' the Desert Phantom, gang. Next time yuh see 'im, he'll be floatin' over them falls!"

The gang stayed behind, riding off the trail and down onto a level stretch of grassy mountain meadow, where they could get an unobstructed view of the very brink of the waterfall. Before Roder and Barry had ridden out of sight, the young waddy could see the outlaws dismounting at the very bank of the river, where they could enjoy the cruel spectacle to the fullest.

The Phantom rode in silence, steeling himself for his fate and trying to disregard Rawhide Roder's jeering threats. A half mile beyond, the trail dropped toward the river bank, and visible on the Rio Torcido's shore was a prospector's cabin.

"By golly, the door o' that shack will make a good raft fer you!" grunted the outlaw, eyes lighting with fiendish pleasure. "You see, if I jest dumped yuh intuh the water, yuh'd drown afore yuh went over Hosstail Falls. An' I want yuh tuh suffer plenty afore yuh crash on them rocks, hairpin!"

The grim arrangements did not take long. Riding to the prospector's hut, Roder attached his lariat

to one hinge of the shack's door, and pulled it off by means of his horse.

The door was made of ax-hewn boards, and formed an ideal raft which would force the Phantom to stay afloat until raft and victim were swept over the falls, downstream. Bearcat Barry shuddered at the unthinkable cruelty of the ruffian beside him.

Dragging Barry roughly from his saddle, Roder dealt his helpless victim a stiff punch in the jaw. The blow dazed the young deputy, so that when he revived, he found himself tied to the raft, which was being dragged along the ground toward the river by means of Roder's saddle horse.

Just as the house-door raft was jolting over the pebbly beach by the rivers' bank, the Phantom noted that he had been tied to the raft in such a way that he could sit up. He saw a fresh cruelty in this.

It gave him room to move, to fight desperately to get off the raft and meet a quicker, more merciful death by drowning. But the rope that bound his wrists and then was laced in and out of the heavy puncheon boards of the raft, was made of braided horsehair. It was impossible to chew in two, or untie, even if he had hours at his disposal.

Roder dismounted, stooped, and shoved the raft out into the water. Seconds later, the current caught the floating door and swept it out into midstream.

"Hope yuh enjoy yore boat trip, deputy!" yelled Roder in fiendish glee, from the bank. "I'll collect yore bones under the falls!"

The Desert Phantom groaned as he felt the raft move out into the yellow waters of the river, and start sliding swiftly, relentlessly toward the waterfall and positive doom.

CHAPTER VII.

PLAIN HOSS SENSE.

HORROR clawed at the Desert Phantom's heart. He would have been thankful if Roder had lashed him face downward and spread-eagled to the rough planks of the raft; then he could not see the beauty of the Arizona morning, or the river banks gliding past.

Every yard that the sluggish current bore him along the twisting, snakelike course of the Rio Torcido, was sweeping him closer to a grisly doom.

"An' no chance of hopin' dad an' a posse from town will save me," groaned the prisoner, as he saw his last hope glimmering. "Ridin' out o' Coffin Canyon I could see over the desert fer miles, an' not a speck o' dust. Two hosses out there in Cat-claw would raise a dust."

Never had he seen the Kiona peaks look so majestic as they did now, with the early morning sun gilding their sawtooth peaks. The air was cool, sweet with the scent of salt-cedar and willow and dwarf cottonwood from the banks.

He struggled in madman's fury against the bonds which held him. Bound at knee and ankle, his legs were helpless; and his arms, while not tied behind his back, were lashed from elbow to wrists, and knotted in a dozen places. Then, to seal his fate, that hair rope extending to the raft was—he noted it for the first time—knotted on the under side of the boards.

Even if he had hours to untie the knots which bound him to the raft, he could not get at them, under the water!

"Rawhide Roder shore knows his stuff about preventin' prisoners from escapin'," panted the young deputy. "I reckon they're enjoyin' their

sweet revenge. But anyhow, I avenged Chub Oxman's murder."

He began to sweat, as the raft spun round and round in midstream. He was hopeful that perhaps the current might bob him into a sandbar. But even at that, he could not free himself of the raft without a knife, and he was weaponless. Too much delay, and the outlaws would come up the river to see what was wrong. No, he was hopelessly doomed.

Though the sight caused his soul a harrowing agony, he could not keep his eyes closed against the land slipping by on either side. He could hear the soft rush of the morning breeze through the willows along the muddy banks. A *chacalaca* bird cried out from some thistle poppies on a claybank, as if in farewell.

Sunrise—the beauty of nature—winelike air. How could death stalk the range land on a morning like this?

The raft bobbed around a hairpin turn of the river. Not more than a half mile, now, and the current would slide down toward the cliff brink, and he would be tumbling out into awful space—

"Them dirty skunks! Dad'll make them pay fer this. They'll——"

Suddenly the Phantom's frantic cry broke off. His blue eyes were staring, his face suddenly white under the tan. His gaze was fixed like an insane person's on a certain spot up on the Kionas.

He saw a cavern far up the mountainside, black as ink. A black dot, under a great granite rock formation where the stone had been folded when the earth was cooling, into a peculiar arch which was locally known as the Horseshoe.

"That cave—it's the old Horseshoe Mine!" The cry fell from the Phantom's lips and made startled bullfrogs *plunk* off a mudbar to the

left. "Then—then my Blue Blazes horse must be somewhere close!"

Laughter babbled from the Phantom's mouth as he lifted his trussed-up hands to the level of his lips. Putting his two index fingers between his teeth, the cowboy deputy whistled—three ear-piercing blasts of sound, which went soaring in echoes off up the mountainside.

The whistle made rock rabbits dart to cover behind boulders in a near-by draw. It sent birds darting to their nests in the stunted cottonwoods along the riverside. And it also reached the alert, expectant ears of a saddled blue roan horse which was cropping grass behind a thicket of salt-cedar along the bank.

Crreeee! Again the whistle, and the horse flung its head up, listened, then wheeled from its pasture and galloped with dragging reins out into the open, nostrils flaring, every fiber tense with eagerness.

"Blue Blazes! You ol' walloper, you! Jump in that river an' swim like yuh never swum before, Blue!"

Out on the floating plank door in the middle of the gliding waters, the Desert Phantom was straining at his rope leash as he saw the blue roan saddler pause only an instant on the bank. Then, its slick coat glistening in the morning sun rays, Blue Blazes waded fearlessly into the current, then plunged abruptly into swimming water.

For an instant, the Phantom went sick with a dread that he had not remembered his mount's grazing place in time. Once the raft got the lead, Blue Blazes could never catch up.

But the horse sensed its master's danger. Over twelve hours had elapsed since Blue Blazes had seen the human being he loved and obeyed with the slavish devotion of animal for master. And now, in a

moment of desperate emergency, he was swimming like an otter.

Closer and closer to the spinning raft bearing his master, the horse came. Fighting eddies and cross-currents, splashing through shallow water, Blue Blazes was winning his grim fight.

"Easy, Blue! Swim around tuh this side, now."

Under his master's skillful signaling, Blue Blazes swam until he came alongside the raft. Stretching out his trussed arms as far as the leash rope would permit, Bearcat Barry was just able to get a hand on the horse's tail.

"Now, make fer the bank, Blue! Pull harder'n yuh ever did. Yuh'll save me, yet—you an' yore plain hoss sense."

And Blue Blazes, swimming like a veteran despite his desert training, struck off across stream and fought the yellow, silt-laden water until his hoofs were scrambling up a gravel bank which sloped out from a low, chaparral-clad cutbank.

In the shadow of the slanting cliff, the raft bobbed against the gravel bar with a grating thud. The horse, halting alongside the bar in deep water, reached out a dripping nose to nudge its master's shoulder affectionately.

"Move up a step, Blue—just a step—so's I kin git intuh my saddlebags."

A moment later, the Phantom was straining every muscle to bring his leashed hands to undo the straps of the bags buckled behind his saddle cantle. Only the fact that Blue Blazes was standing in water which left his withers level with the grounded raft's edge, made it possible for Barry to accomplish the feat.

The bag came open, and the Phantom's hand emerged with the bowie knife he always kept there, along

with field glasses and other equipment.

Putting the staghorn handle of the knife in his teeth, the Phantom made short work of the leash rope. Then, by hopping, he got out on the ground bar and sawed at his wrist bonds until his hands were free. Blue Blazes climbed out on the gravel bar, gave Bearcat a shower bath as he shook himself, and then nuzzled the cowboy's neck as the Phantom slashed the bonds which held his legs. Seconds afterward, the young waddy was on his feet, stretching his cramped muscles. Blue Blazes' horse sense was triumphant!

"Blue Blazes, yuh saved my life, that time!" For the first time in years, the waddy felt his voice breaking with the gratitude he held for his faithful animal partner. "How can I pay——"

And then, to Bearcat's ears, came the sharp rattle of hoofbeats along a river-bank trail. Looking upstream, the waddy was appalled to see a rider quirting his way along the bank.

Rawhide Roder, returning!

"We got tuh duck, Blue! He ain't seen us yet——"

The raft was still bobbing at the gravel bar at the base of the sloping cliff. There was no time to kick it out into the stream. He would have to chance Rawhide's seeing it.

Urging Blue Blazes over to the cutbank and bidding him stand still where he could not be seen from the trail above, Bearcat commenced scrambling up the steep clay slope.

Clinging to stones and roots, he made the chaparral on the claybank rim just as Rawhide Roder galloped up, approaching by the little-used trail.

A sudden wild decision came to Bearcat Barry. He had a chance to

remain hidden. But his heart filled with a lawman's hatred for the criminal, as he saw the grin on Roder's face.

Shoving himself through the dense brush beside the trail, the Desert Phantom poised like a tiger about to spring. And as the unsuspecting outlaw galloped past, the young deputy from Stirrup City leaped out like a catamount.

Rawhide Roder was dragged from his saddle before he could bat an eyelash. He crashed to the earth, the Phantom on top of him. Bearcat Barry was forcing a show-down!

CHAPTER VIII.

OVER THE FALLS.

SWEPT to the earth by the speed of the galloping horse, the two men went cartwheeling into the chaparral. Stifling dust clouded up to hide from view the form of the Desert Phantom, as he leaped to his feet.

The somersault had spilled both six-guns from Roder's basket-woven rawhide holsters. Young Barry, seeing the glint of sunlight on the twin Colts lying in the dust, lashed out a kangaroo-boot toe and kicked first one, then both of the guns hurtling over the brink of the cutbank. Flashing in the sun rays, the deadly .45s vanished into the river with creamy splashes.

"Thar, we're facin' each other on equal terms, Roder!" panted the cowboy deputy, as he saw the spiderish outlaw climb to his feet, bellowing in his throat with fury. "I'm goin' tuh thrash the livin' daylight out of yuh, an' then——"

Rawhide Roder's hands flashed to his holsters, found them empty. Then his bullish chest swelled under the black-checked shirt, and he leaped forward like a crazed steer.

The Phantom met Roder's onrush with a rib-jolting punch. The young waddy realized that he must depend upon speedy footwork and cleverness in dodging blows, if he were to beat his enemy.

The Desert Phantom's wiry body weighed nearly one hundred and seventy pounds, but the outlaw tipped the scales at over two hundred, and every ounce of it solid bone and muscle.

Snarling oaths, Roder bored in with pummeling fists. Sparring gracefully, ducking and feinting, the Phantom warded off the blows. Since earliest boyhood, he had had to defend his rights with his fists. The art of self-defense was bred in him, and he did not have to rely on six-guns to win his battles.

The outlaw swung wildly, his ham-like fists often sweeping through empty space as young Barry ducked, or else cushioning themselves on upraised arms. Whenever he caught an opening, the Phantom shot over stinging rights and lefts to the outlaw's hairy face.

But Roder's superior weight and strength were not to be denied entirely. Crashing haymakers broke through the Phantom's defense again and again, blows that crushed flesh and broke skin, blows that were low and foul, blows that jarred the breath from his lungs. But Rawhide Roder's nose was gushing crimson from well-placed punches, and his own ribs ached from a dozen hard-driven blows.

Rawhide Roder suddenly gave ground before the Phantom's desperate onrush. Timing his punches like a trained boxer, fighting with head lowered and jaw set like an iron trap, Bearcat Barry was taking the offensive.

Grunting with pain under hammering knuckles, the big outlaw

braced himself and went into a clinch with his young opponent when his boots had reached the very brink of the claybank.

In the clinch, Roder's forty pounds of extra weight told. His arms were crushing the Phantom's body as might a grizzly. Only by hammering a stunning short-arm jab to the outlaw's heart did young Bearcat succeed in breaking away.

And then the outlaw thought of something. Panting like a leaky bellows, his face slick with sweat, he stared through a tousled screen of hair at his gasping, badly winded, but dogged opponent. Then Roder half stooped, and his hand reached for the sheathed knife which he kept in a boot leg.

The Phantom paled as he saw the sun flash on a razorlike blade. Before he could brace himself for the attack, he saw the outlaw leap forward, his right arm drawn back high above his head for a knife thrust that would slice Barry's throat from ear to ear.

And then a common wrestling stunt came to the Phantom's rescue. Catapulting forward under the whistling blade of Roder's bowie, the young deputy smashed a rock-hard shoulder and head into the outlaw's chest.

Wham! The force of the blow drove an agonized grunt from the outlaw's lungs.

As if he had been hit by a battering-ram, the crook felt himself being lifted off his feet and crashed backward toward the brink of the cutbank.

Wildly Rawhide Roder windmilled his arms to keep balance. The Phantom had fallen to his hands and knees, carried off his feet by his own rush, still unable to believe he had escaped death from that whizzing knife blade in Roder's hand.

An insane cry burst from the outlaw's mouth. Then he was getting his balance, his boots tottering on the very edge of the cliff, his arms swinging the knife back for another slicing cut.

The Phantom leaped to his feet. His shoulder and body swung back, then forward as he drove out a straight-arm right to catch Roder full on the point of the jaw.

The sickening smash carried the bandit out into space. Arms and legs flopping, Roder went down like a plummet to hit the sloping shelf of the claybank. A terrible scream jarred the morning air as he struck the gravel bar at the base of the small cliff with the speed of a toboggan slider.

Swaying on the cliff brink above, the Phantom did not need to be told that the popping sound he had heard was Roder's leg breaking. But he was surprised at what happened next.

Roder's spinning body did not stop as it reached the bottom of the claybank. It rolled like a log out across the gravel bar, and then, to Bearcat Barry's utter amazement, crashed out onto the cabin-door raft which was still bobbing in the water, held against the bar by the current!

But the impact of Roder's tumbling body shoved the raft out into deeper water. Even as Bearcat saw the injured outlaw struggle to get his weight off the leg that was twisted double beneath him, he saw the current seize the raft and sweep him out into the Torcido.

"Roder! Hey! Yuh'll git swept over them falls!"

His sportsman's heart filled with pity at the sight of Roder suffering with a broken leg, unable to move, the Desert Phantom leaped over the claybank, slid down to the gravel bar, and splashed out into the water

until the yellow current was up to the knees of his chocolate-colored chaps, in a desperate try at rescue.

But he was too late. The swift stream was bearing Rawhide Roder away on the same raft he had prepared for the Phantom's doom. He was beyond human aid, now. Unless the raft grounded on some bar farther downstream, he would go over the falls.

Horsetail Falls! Thought of that booming cascade of water brought back the memory of the Deathville outlaw gang who were waiting at the falls. And it made the Phantom slosh back to the gravel bar and yell for Blue Blazes to come to him.

Mounted, the Phantom spurred his horse up a shorter cliff bank farther on, until he had gained the riverside trail. He reined to a halt beside the uneasy saddle horse of Rawhide Roder, still standing beside the chaparral which bore the signs of the desperate combat that had resulted in Roder's defeat.

Stooping over from the saddle, the Phantom jerked Roder's .45-70 Winchester rifle from its boot under the saddle skirts. His own .30-30-caliber carbine was in its scabbard, but having been wet during Blue Blazes's swim, it might jam.

"Git goin', Blue!" gasped the Phantom, bending low over the pommel and jamming his white Stetson hard on his head. "We got tuh git down tuh where them outlaws is waitin' fer me an' the raft tuh go over the falls."

Refreshed by a night of grazing and rest, Blue Blazes headed along the trail as if the wings of the wind were on his twinkling hoofs. Fifteen minutes later, the Phantom was reining up beside a nest of boulders, overlooking the mountain bench at the brink of the Horsetail Falls.

Down on the flat, grassy meadow below, the outlaws from Deathville were assembled. From their excited yelling and gestures, the Phantom knew that he had arrived in time.

Unseen by the crooks below, the Phantom sat his saddle and looked upstream. He was in time to see Rawhide Roder and the fatal raft come floating around a curve of the Rio Torcido. The youth's heart was a frozen block of ice in his chest as he saw the current begin to speed up, as it approached the lip of the falls.

"Pore feller! His leg's broke an' he can't jump off the raft an' drown hisself. He's gittin' the fate he meant fer me."

It was only when the raft with its writhing, screaming passenger had drawn along the bank where they stood in a babbling knot, that the outlaws of Deathville realized that the man sprawled on the plank raft was not the Desert Phantom.

Whiz! Like a sled on a snow field, the raft started the last short skid for the waterfall's brink.

Then Rawhide Roder, his face drawn with agony, struggled to a sitting position and screamed out in terror to his men on the bank, begging for aid.

But they were powerless to help. Riding the swift current to where it tumbled over the Kiona cliff, Rawhide Roder cringed back in horror as the raft hurtled out into space.

The outlaws saw their leader vanish over the brink. Only the Desert Phantom, from high on the ridge above the mountain bench, saw Rawhide Roder's grisly finish.

He saw the falling body and the plummeting raft separate. He saw the raft hit a knob of rock and explode into a dozen boards which flew in all directions. Sickened at the sight, Bearcat Barry still could not

tear his eyes from Roder's dwindling figure, until the evil-hearted outlaw vanished into the leaping spray at the bottom of the thundering, hundred-foot falls.

CHAPTER IX.

LAST STAND.

THEN it was that the dumfounded outlaws on the river bank realized that something had gone wrong—terribly wrong—up the river. If it was Roder on that raft, then it meant that the Desert Phantom had escaped.

Of one accord, the outlaws ran for their waiting horses and mounted. But as they spurred toward the trail leading up the sloping meadow toward the hemming ridge, they drew rein in terror.

Standing on the skyline above them was the magnificent blue roan of Bearcat Barry. And seated in the saddle, peering at them down the sights of a .45-70 rifle, was the Desert Phantom, the morning sun shedding blinding sparks off his deputy's badge!

"I got yuh cornered, skunks!" rang out the clear, steady tones of the cowboy deputy. "The best thing fer yuh tuh do is throw up yore arms an' submit tuh arrest, peaceable!"

Gathering their wits with difficulty, the outlaws glanced wildly about them. But each way they looked seemed to seal their fate. To the west was the sheer drop-off of the Kiona cliffs—no chance of leaping that hundred-foot rock wall to the rocks below. Behind them, to the south, was the mill race of the river, plunging over Horsetail Falls. To the east was a steep slope which rimmed the little mountain meadow on which they were collected. And to the north, on the same ridge, was the only way of escape to the trail.

And the Desert Phantom and his rifle were a deadly obstacle at that point. They were trapped, neatly and securely trapped!

One burly outlaw—the Phantom recognized him as the crook who had stolen his steer-horn holsters and cedar-butted Colts—found his voice and shouted from the middle of the crowd of horsemen: "He's alone, gang! Reach fer yore six-guns, an' one of us'll git 'im. He can't mow us all down."

The outlaw made the mistake of reaching for the stolen guns at his own hip. Up on the ridge, Bearcat Barry's rifle roared out like a dynamite blast. And the outlaw was dumped off his saddle to the ground, elbow broken by a high-calibered slug.

"That's tuh show yuh I mean business!" snarled the Phantom. "I'm honin' tuh take every one of yuh back tuh Stirrup City an' put yuh in jail whar yuh belong."

A wild screech came from out of the outlaw mob. It was the Apache, Howling Wolf, and he was wheeling his horse to spur toward the river. The Phantom followed the escaping Indian through his Winchester sights, but he could not shoot the man in the back, even though Howling Wolf had been the author of the waterfall torture.

Out into the river the Apache galloped. For a minute, it looked as if the horse would make the opposite bank and safety. If so, the entire outlaw gang would probably try the break for liberty, even under the threat of the Phantom's rifle.

But the deadly current was not to be denied. Ten seconds later, Howling Wolf and his frantic pony were tumbling over the waterfall to follow Rawhide Roder to a gruesome death on the rocks below. With his cowboy's love for horses, the Phan-

tom found himself sorry that the treacherous redskin had attempted the break.

"We're licked, gang!" came a choking gasp from the wounded outlaw, who was now on his feet, gripping his bullet-shattered arm with his free hand. "The Desert Phantom's got us cornered!"

The Phantom fanned aside the smoke of his last shot and yelled an order at the wounded man.

"Come up hyar, busky! I'm honin' tuh git my smoke-poles back—an' also tuh give yuh yore instructions. Step pronto, savvy?"

Moving as if he expected a bullet in the brain at every step, the injured man staggered up the steep trail until he got to Blue Blazes's side. Then the Phantom leaned over, unbuckled his own gun belts from the outlaw's waist, and a moment later was patting his Colt .45s into their transparent holsters.

"Now, hombre, listen close tuh what I got tuh say," snapped the Phantom, keeping his eye on the crooks below as he talked. "I want you tuh take them lariats off yore saddles down there, an' put a noose around the necks of every one o' yore pards. Tie 'em together in a long string—neck tuh neck. An' the first jasper that hesitates, I'll sift a .45-70 slug through his briskit!"

Trembling with fear, the outlaw lurched back down to the grassy mountain meadow. With the assistance of one of the Mexicans, he proceeded to carry out the Phantom's instructions.

Only once did rebellion flare up, and that was when a red-headed killer, half hidden by an intervening outlaw, tried to draw a bead on the steely-eyed deputy on the ridgetop above them.

A deafening crack of the alert rifle, and that outlaw slumped from his

saddle to the ground, skull split by a streaking missile. But as it was, a bullet from the outlaw's gun plucked a slot in the flaring wing of Barry's left chap leg.

"That was close," muttered the Phantom, levering a fresh cartridge into the breech of his Winchester. "But things is goin' O. K., now."

The task was finally finished to the Phantom's satisfaction. Each outlaw had a noose about his neck, the rope leading to the neck of the crook behind him. Then the procession began, single file, riding up the slope and out the trail beside the deputy.

As each man passed, the Phantom halted the whole bunch and inspected each noose. He also took the precaution of removing rifles from saddle boots and six-guns from holsters, as well as frisking each outlaw for possible knives or hidden derringers.

At length, the long string of outlaws was standing patiently in the blazing sunlight, and the Desert Phantom, mounted on Blue Blazes, was riding along the string of mounted prisoners like a captain inspecting cavalry troops.

"You can't git away with this!" snarled one black-bearded crook, noting the Phantom's grin. "It's seven miles tuh Stirrup City. If you think one fresh younker like you kin lug sixteen men intuh jail, yo're crazy!"

The Phantom grin widened. "If you don't think so, wait!" chuckled the deputy. He lifted his voice to carry to the wounded outlaw, who was in the lead. "Git goin', up there. Don't trot yore hosses. We'll make fer the ford up the river, an' git started across Catclaw Desert fer Stirrup City. I'm hungry."

The sorry-looking procession got

under way, moving slowly, the young waddy on the alert for false moves.

"We're liable tuh git killed, Barry!" whined one outlaw, his face ashen with dread. "If a single hoss shies or starts buckin', it'll choke ever' one o' the rest of us, with these ropes around our necks!"

But the Phantom was unsympathetic. "Yore hands are on the reins," he shot back. "See to it that yuh don't go faster'n a walk, an' yuh won't break each other's necks."

It was mid-morning when Sheriff Lew Barry and a posse of over forty Stirrup City residents galloped across the desert and met the Desert Phantom homeward bound, riding behind and to the right of a long string of mounted riders, each one with a rope around his neck and laced to the rider ahead.

"I started here the minute I got back from tryin' tuh hunt down Chub Oxman's killer," his father gasped out, after wringing his son's hand. "An' here we meet yuh, comin' back with every crook that busted jail! It seems impossible!"

The Desert Phantom, very tired and hungry, now that the posse was taking over the responsibility of his prisoners, mopped his face with the red bandanna around his throat.

Aside from informing his father that the murderer of Chub Oxman had paid for his killing back in Deathville, he did not comment on his amazing victory of bringing back a small army of outlaws, single-handed.

"I jest promised tuh bring 'em back—it was my fault they escaped," was the young deputy's only comment. "Clancy, did you git the jail patched up? These hombres'll be back there in a hour."

The county carpenter started to

say "Yes," but a big-chested rider spurred up alongside Blue Blazes and held out a hand. It was Pecos Pendrill, proprietor of Stirrup City's livery barn.

"Bearcat," began the liveryman as he shook the Desert Phantom's hand, "it was me that was shootin' off my face yesterday about you not bein' worthy o' yore new deputy's badge. Well, I plumb apologize to yuh, son. An' I'm goin' so far as tuh

say that I've lived in Concha County fer over forty year, man an' boy, so I know what I'm talkin' about when I tell yuh that yo're the gamest lawman that ever wore a badge in this part o' Arizona!"

An' we don't reckon thet ol' Pecos was talkin' through his hat when he said thet, neither. The Desert Phantom is some lawman. In fact, he's a regular Bearcat. Watch fer another story about him in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly next week.

BLOCK



DIAMOND

CAPTURED BY INDIANS

FIFTY years ago, Kitty McLean, a young daughter of the chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Pitt, in western Canada, was taken from the fort, with all the other white residents, by warring Indians.

A large party of half-naked, horribly painted Crees, had descended upon the small settlement of whites who lived in the vicinity of the fort. These Indians had rebelled against the government and had left their reservation, carrying death and destruction wherever they went. A few soldiers guarded the fort, but were surprised and made prisoners by the overwhelming force of redmen.

The Indians agreed to a parley and said they would free the soldiers in exchange for the white civilians, promising to protect them, provided the soldiers would go away.

As this was the only chance the whites had of procuring assistance, the proposal was agreed to. The soldiers departed, and the whites began a long march with their Indian captors.

Near Loon Lake, the Crees ran into a detachment of soldiers, and a furious fight followed, with disas-

trous results to the Indians, who rounded up their prisoners and made a hurried departure.

At Loon Lake, a soldier who had fired at a fleeing figure was startled to see that it was a woman, and that her long fair hair was streaming behind her as she ran, clutching a baby in her arms.

He yelled loudly to his comrades, "Cease fire!" and then ran toward the woman. It was young Kitty McLean, running for her life and trying to save her baby sister.

After this encounter, the Crees realized that their rebellion was a hopeless failure. A few days later, they released their prisoners, giving them one musket among them all, and a guide to take them back to Fort Pitt. When they arrived there they found Kitty McLean and her little sister awaiting them.

That young girl is now a woman nearly seventy years of age. She is Mrs. Yuill, and she remembers all the incidents of her capture by Indians as if it had happened only a few days ago. She is hale and hearty, and loves to talk about the exciting times of her youth when Injuns formed the principal topic of conversation.



The Ragged Ranger

A "Bud Jones Of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "A Ranger Cracks The Whip," etc.

A GREAT fire blazed in the big corral that belonged to the Posada del Borde—the Frontier Inn. About this blaze were gathered many Mexicans, most of them peons, by their appearance—picturesque enough in the shifting light and shade.

The *posada* stood at the end of the one street that made up the fishing village of La Colina. There was only one side to the dusty highway. The scattered houses and hovels were faced by the high, steep limestone cliff that was one wall of the gap in the bluffs lining the eastern side of the rolling Rio Grande.

A brown-skinned lad squatted close to the fire. He wore patched and faded clothing, with worn

zapatos on his bare feet, a ragged straw sombrero on his head, and a tattered serape drawn about him. He tore at his meat and his corn pancake and hot sauce like a hungry wolf.

"Bud" Jones *was* hungry, though his manners were usually better. Now they fitted the part he had chosen to play.

It was a dangerous rôle. He knew well enough that if it were suspected for a moment he was a gringo, he was likely to be killed, instantly and violently.

If they even thought he was a Ranger, he would be stabbed to ribbons, flung into the hot coals of the barbecue trench, to roast out of him what there might be left of life.

There was no doubt about that. Bud Jones, corporal of Company F, Texas Rangers, sat in desperate peril.

He did not think there was another gringo in La Colina to-night besides himself, unless it was some outlaw, allied with the smugglers of the Rio Grande, mixed up in some way with the rough mob that now gathered in the big corral.

The horses that generally used it had been crowded into a smaller one, adjoining. They gazed through the poles at the mob, snorting and shying at the sights and sounds.

A second fire, burned down to hot coals, was in a trench. Two steers and half a dozen sheep were being barbecued over it, now ready to serve. Some men with guitars and fiddles had got together to make up an orchestra.

These people did not all belong to La Colina, or even its neighborhood. They had gathered from far and near, to listen to the proclamation of the poet-patriot of Mexico who was called "El Liberador"—the "Deliverer."

Also, they had come to partake of his bounty—the free food, liquor, and entertainment to be provided by the man who was the Deliverer's right hand and arm, his general, manager, and paymaster—José Tarrago, better known as "El Viento"—the "Wind."

There was plenty of tequila to drink, and some of the motley, rag-tag outfit had already had too much of it. All had put down enough to be noisy and excited. They were waiting to be served with the meat, to listen to music, to sing.

After that, there would be speeches, loud *vivas* for *libertad* and Mexico. For Rodrigo Pelaya, the Deliverer, and Tarrago, the Wind,

had come across the river from Mexico, stirring up insurrection.

They promised to deliver Texas from the clutch of the *maldito Americano*, the gringo, who had taken it by force and vile treachery; to listen to these leaders or revolt. There would be rich rewards for those who joined with them.

The printed verses, the spoken words of El Liberador, who was always a dreamer, fired the crowds that always gathered when he spoke.

El Viento was a business man. He was a good fighter and organizer, and he had sense enough to know that no force they could muster and arm would last long, once the United States got into action.

But before that happened, there would be rare chance for looting, for wiping out ancient grudges, killing the hated gringos, burning their buildings, robbing them of everything worth carrying off, destroying the rest.

El Viento was paymaster. He held the war chest, took charge of the contributions that came in. Anything he paid out was only bait for more.

El Liberador made trips up and down the river, sometimes a little way inland, making promises, gathering followers and funds. Once-wealthy land owners, whose holdings had been divided among the conquering Texans, gave what they had left of money and jewels in the hope of revenge.

That night, both El Liberador and El Viento were in the *posada* with some of their richer converts, eating and drinking the best the inn could serve. Pelaya, the poet-dreamer, was a good platter man. He loved to get drunk on *aguardiente* or champagne. It made his visions seem more real and rosy, and oiled his eloquent tongue.

El Viento was considering La Colina as headquarters. The porch on the river side of the inn was also a wharf. Cargoes were landed there from Mexico that were never intended to pay customs duty to the United States—and did not.

The river was narrow at this spot. A man could make a quick retreat when things got too hot, leaving El Liberador holding an empty bag.

Rumors had drifted in to Ranger headquarters of the threatened invasion and uprising. Not all Mexicans approved of it. A few were level-headed enough to look ahead to the outcome, and they saw to it that the Rangers were tipped off.

It was up to the thirty-odd troopers of Company F to stop the movement before it gained any real strength. Once it broke loose and got under headway, it would spread like a prairie fire with the wind back of it.

Settlers would be murdered, their homes destroyed, women and children massacred or carried off. The raids would spread to the smaller towns, with banks and stores to loot.

Without question, the hundreds of outlaws hiding from justice in the mesquite and chaparral—American fugitives from the law—would take part, though they might not actually ally themselves with the Mexicans.

This was the frontier, and it was a tough border land. Most of the population was Mex. Most of them had citizenship papers of the United States. But their hearts, like their customs and language, remained as Mexican as when that country included the Lone Star State. Their hatred of the gringo had never lessened.

There were a few white settlers, hardy pioneers, farming the rich bottom lands back of the bluffs. There

were some cattle outfits—far-apart and lonely ranches.

And only a handful of Texas Rangers to maintain the law, to keep down smuggling, and hunt out the outlaws from the strip between the Apache Mountains and the Rio Grande, from El Paso, on the north, to Laredo, at the south.

That was a tall contract—to make the land clean and fit for more settlers, for the advance of civilization. A tough and underpaid job that called for men who loved adventure, who were fearless of heart, hard riders and straight shooters.

La Colina, like other river towns, was still almost as Mexican as the day it was built. It was the resort of smugglers and outlaws, who spent their ill-gotten gains over the bar or across the gaming tables of the *posada*.

Nobody paid much attention to Bud as he asked for more *carne* and tortillas. He had little fear of his disguise being uncovered. He spoke Spanish perfectly, including the dialects.

Later on, he meant to get into the *posada*, and there the risks would be greater. All within the inn would have to be able to account completely for themselves.

It was best to wait until the leaders grew mellowed and careless. Meantime, he listened, and sifted all he heard.

The peons were getting full of beef, mutton, and mescal. Some sang drunkenly. There were calls for El Liberador, for El Viento. They wanted speeches, to bolster their courage and their hope.

Suddenly there was a squabble in a corner of the corral. A man was fighting desperately, dragged forward toward the fire. He struggled hard against the odds, but he went

down. They kicked him, yanked him to his feet.

His face was bruised, disfigured, smeared with wet crimson. But Bud caught sight of his gray eyes, and his youthful face grew grim and old. His hand crept toward his six-gun, tucked beneath sash and waistband.

This was a gringo—an American. They meant to do away with him. They surrounded him, all trying to strike him at once. They yelled at him:

"Espia! Espia! Matar! Matar!"
(*"Spy! Spy! Kill! Kill!"*)

"Throw him into the fire!" some one suggested, and the cry was taken up.

Bud could not save the man by shooting. He would uncover himself, and though he might kill some of them before he went down, they would both perish. Bud would never turn in a report to headquarters. That was his mission. Delay might be fatal. Once let them get going, and the red riot would be like a prairie fire on the Staked Plains.

To hold back meant he must watch a fellow countryman die; yet it might well mean a thousand others saved.

II.

A Mex came pushing through the mob. They gave way to him, though he was a little man, with one shoulder higher than the other. His black hair hung down on his shoulders in snakelike locks. The flame of a fanatic burned in his eyes—the fire of hatred, of race prejudice, of an almost insane cruelty.

He had a shrill voice, a way of speaking that carried, and they listened to him.

"Save him! Hold him for El Viento!" he cried. "El Viento has a rare way with spies. I know him, amigos. I have seen him tie them

to wagon wheels and toast them. Steam them and peel off their skins. Tie this one up until El Viento comes to speak to us!"

His idea seemed to gather favor. The mob gazed up at the balcony where presently they expected to see El Viento and also El Liberador appear.

The man had recovered a little from his man-handling. His chin was up, his eyes defiant. Bud felt proud of him as an American. And he began to see a chance of helping him.

They dragged the prisoner to a corner post of the corral and lashed him there with rawhide thongs. They mocked him, spat at him, and struck him. Back of where he stood, defenseless, the horses milled uneasily.

These belonged to the recruits of El Viento's ragtag army. Bud's own mount—a big roan troop horse, Pepper—was not with them.

He was too conspicuous, too fine a beast for a peon lad to own. The Ranger had left him outside the village in a small glen, sure of finding him again when wanted.

The roan's rigging was in a hollow tree, with Bud's carbine and his cartridge belts. A peon youth would not wear a cartridge belt or own a six-gun. Bud had brought along spare cartridges in his pockets.

A deep voice bellowed from the balcony, and the mob turned from their prisoner to listen to El Viento, a burly and commanding figure. He was ripe with strong drink, but he gripped them.

"Patience, my infants!" he cried. "The Deliverer will soon appear and speak to you. There is news. Good news."

They cheered him, flinging up their great hats.

Bud slipped through the skirts of

the mob, through the lower bars of the corral.

The horses sniffed at him, and he talked to them softly and wisely gliding among them, unseen in the shifting shadows, until he got behind the post where the American still kept his head up.

Bud squatted, unsheathed his bowie knife, and got to work.

"Don't make a move until I get you clear," he whispered. "This is a Ranger. I'm cuttin' you loose, and I'll make a chance for you to break away. Who are you? How did they get hold of you?"

The man hesitated for a moment, but he felt his bonds loosen.

"I'm Sam Haskins, with a farm on Deer Creek," he said. "I got tipped off there was goin' to be trouble. I don't aim to lose all I've got, or have my wife an' kids harmed. I can speak Spanish. I tried to listen in; thought I might find out their plans, an' warn the Rangers. Didn't figure one of you'd be on hand. But a hawss got nervous, an' they spotted me."

"You should be one of us, Haskins, if you wasn't married," Bud told him. "Married folks don't belong in the Rangers. But you're sure one he-man."

He cut the final thong.

"You're free now, but keep still," Bud warned him. "I aim to chase this *caballada* plumb into the big corral. Soon's I do, you get goin'. Are you all set?"

"I'm set," said Haskins, "thanks to you. But, if I git away, how about you?"

"Don't let that worry you," said Bud. "That's my job. I have to sabe it. I'm stickin' round. Have you got a hawss?"

"I staked him on the beach," answered Haskins. "There's a trail,

where Deer Creek runs into the river."

"Good!" said Bud. "We're campin' at the head of Wild Turkey Creek. It runs the other side the ridge from Deer Creek. Reckon you know it. When you get away, after you've let your folks know you're safe, ride to headquarters, ask for Cap'n Halstead, an' tell him I'm here. Tell all that you know of what's happened. The cap'll use his own judgment."

"Right," said Haskins. "I'll do just that, if I kin."

Bud liked his voice. The settler was a true pioneer. What he had gone through did not check his courage.

The big fire had died down, and there was no more wood in the corral to build it up. The barbecue trench was only a line of dull-red ash. El Viento had come out on the balcony again, others with him. Doubtless one of these was the Deliverer.

The crowd settled down to listen as El Viento flung up his arm. The man was crude in oratory, compared to the Deliverer. But these humbler followers understood him, even better than the fanciful phrases of the poet, which thrilled them, but which they did not understand.

El Viento talked of matters that appealed to them—of loot, the slaying of gringos, of revenge, swelling their own importance. Mexicano against Americano. An old slight, to be evened. Money, liquor.

Haskins was, for the moment, forgotten, as El Viento's voice boomed out, "Amigos!"

Bud sidled among the horses until he got to the rear of the smaller corral. On his way, he slid back the wooden bolt of the gate between the two inclosures, and softly opened it.

The horses stared at the gap, sniffed, but did not go on through. They were packed and restless, but they did not like the man smell. They needed urging.

Bud gave them that. He let out "yippees" that drowned El Viento's opening phrase. He startled horses and men alike.

Then he fired off his six-gun at the heels of the remuda. He spared one shot, and fired at the flank of a big bay close to the gate.

The bullet seared the bay high on the flank. It was only a flesh wound, as Bud had intended; but it made the bay plunge forward.

It surged through the gate into the big corral, and the other horses stampeded, spurred by the exploding cartridges, by the sound and flame and heat of them.

They raced into the big corral, smitten with panic. Bud leaped for the gate and closed it.

The horse herd went trampling amid the mob of men, who yelled at them and further excited them. Their hoofs stirred the hot ashes of the barbecue trench, and sent them frantic. They plunged and reared, beyond all control, scattering live embers.

The peons plunged for the outer gate in panic, clogging their own efforts. From the balcony, El Viento shouted commands they barely heard and could not obey.

In the confusion, Haskins slipped into the now empty horse corral, looked for his rescuer, and did not see him.

He got out of the horse corral unnoticed. There were some lighted windows in the rear of the *posada*, but there was no movement on the outside. Haskins ran swiftly and silently through the dense shadows and dropped from the porch to the

beach unseen and unheard, blessing the Ranger.

Haskins had attempted a fine thing, but he had failed. It was Bud who had spared him to his wife and children. But Haskins knew that he had been recognized, that his farm would be the first visited when the raiding started.

He could warn them, place them in some spot of safety on his way to the Rangers' headquarters. The Mexicans might destroy house and barns, drive off his stock, and ruin his crops.

He knew the Rangers were scattered on patrol. He could not tell how many or how few he might find at their camp. It seemed a forlorn hope, at best. But the thought of the fearless Ranger, young enough, almost, to be his own son, who had stayed on the job, inspired him.

As Haskins raced along the sand, he heard the confused shouting of the mob. The Rio Grande rolled silently under the stars. He came to where Deer Creek joined the river, leaped to the back of his tethered horse, and sent it tearing up the steep and narrow trail.

III.

In the excitement, Bud got the chance he was looking for—to get into the *posada* during the confusion. He felt sure that the settler would not fail him in getting through to headquarters.

But in any event, it would take hours before Rangers could arrive. In the meantime, much might happen.

There would be a search for Haskins, for the other man who had aided him. Who had given a cowboy yell, stampeded the horses with gunfire, cut Haskins loose. The cut thongs by the post would show that.

That would stir things up. It was not likely that Bud would be suspected. On the other hand, it would not be easy for a ragged peon to get into the *posada* and the presence of El Liberador and El Viento.

That was what Bud meant to do. He had to think up a good excuse. Also, he had to lose no time. The first thing was to get inside while the uproar was on.

Captain Halstead, commander of Company F, had often warned his pet trooper against taking too much initiative, trying to accomplish too much single-handed.

Secretly, he was proud of Bud, the youngest corporal in the Rangers; proud of Bud's ability to pluck the moment, and bring off a stroke that, delayed, might not be possible at all.

For strokes like that, Bud and Pepper, the big roan, wore honorable scars—the only badges of merit handed out to Rangers.

Bud had such a play in mind. There was scant time in which to get it started, no details of a plan. He would have to use his wits, and seize opportunity as it came to him.

He figured that eating was through. Aside from that, the kitchen help would be attracted by the clamor to the side of the *posada*, where they could see what was going on.

Bud had never been in the Posada del Borde, but all riverside inns were built alike, all *posadas* planned on the same general lines. All were erected about a central court or patio, which usually was paved, had a fountain, pergolas where vines grew, an outer stairway to the second floor, doors to the rooms on the ground floor.

The main entrance was through an archway guarded by heavy gates.

It was more than likely these would be closed and barred that night.

The building occupied all four sides, save where, at the back of the patio, there should be a blank stretch of wall, with a postern gate in it, not big enough for horsemen.

Bud reached this gate and looked up at the adobe wall. Its top was tiled in the shape of an inverted "V" against rainfall. The small gate was tightly fastened.

Bud crouched, leaped, and caught the peak of the clay tiles. He hauled himself up, lay along the top like a lizard, listening, looking into the gloom of the patio. He heard nothing, and dropped lightly inside.

The outer stairway would not help him much. It was on the river side of the patio, away from where the Deliverer and the Wind feasted.

The Ranger climbed up a post of the pergola to the cross pieces, trod along them like a roving cat, found a window that would open, crawled in, and again was motionless and silent, watching.

He could hear the muffled racket of the mob, the booming voice of El Viento. He was inside.

He risked a match. This was a bedroom, better furnished than most *posada* chambers. There were clothes on top of a chest that Bud would have liked to put on, but dared not, for fear of recognition. He had to stick to his rags.

A guitar hung on a wall from a ribbon. The Ranger's eyes gleamed. Here was his excuse, if he could make it stick. He lighted another match and inspected the guitar, lightly touched its strings. It was a trifle out of tune, and Bud keyed it up in the darkness, putting the ribbon about his neck.

Then he boldly walked out into a passage. Across it, a door was open. The passage was empty.

Bud looked into the room. Here the Deliverer and El Viento had dined with their chief followers. A table was spread with soiled linen, cluttered with dishes, plates, glasses, and bottles.

A window that opened to the balcony was wide open, and there were five men crowding it, intent upon what was going on below, leaning over the railing. A little more to drink, and some, if not all of them, would have toppled over, Bud thought.

One of these men was shouting orders with the voice of a bull—a bull in a rage. That would be El Viento, directing the search after the spy who had got away, the man who had helped him.

They would not expect to find the latter in the room back of them.

But El Viento was in a bad humor. Bud had to get him out of that. His brain worked swiftly. Men like El Viento were bullies, and they could be flattered, if they gave the flatterer a chance.

Bud did not consider himself a poet, like Pelaya, El Liberador—Pelaya, the Deliverer. But he desperately began to link rhymes together, in Spanish.

Everything depended on the first impression. If El Viento had him thrown out, that would be the end of his chance to win favor, to learn about their plans.

El Viento was the first to come inside. There was no mistaking him, or, thought Bud, the Deliverer. Pelaya did not look like much of a Liberador now. He was dressed in a *charro* costume of velvet, with much silver braid. His sash and neckerchief were gay. His hair was very long, parted in the middle. His face was long, weak-chinned, almost feminine.

And he was very drunk. Unless

he could spout talk in that condition, the peons outside had slight chance of being charmed by his oration that night.

He slumped into a chair. Of the other three, one looked like a trader or storekeeper. One might have been the *jefe* or *alcalde* of the place, and very likely was. The third Bud set down for a *contrabandista*, a smuggler—just the sort to aid El Viento and his schemes.

"The fools let him get away," growled El Viento. "Might have been only the one, at that. They did not bind him properly, and he got at his knife. Well, he could not have learned much of our plans, seeing they are not definite. We'll have to get going now, before that spy stirs up the whole country."

"He'll make for the Rangers' camp," said the man who looked like the *jefe*.

"What of it?" said El Viento. "Blast the Rangers! We send out runners to-night, call in all recruits. We'll be twenty to one against the Rangers. Sooner we trim them down, the better. As for that fool," he added savagely, pointing at the slumped Pelaya, "he can stay drunk all he wants to. We're through talking. It's time for action."

He poured himself out a big drink of *aguardiente*, and downed it.

"I'll go across the river to-night," said the smuggler. "I've got two hundred men waiting for the word. I'll have them here by daylight."

"Good, Armando," said El Viento. "We'll be under way before noon. We'll strike at Castrovilla, to begin with, loot the bank, and stores. There ought to be good picking there. We'll raid the ranchos, and gather remounts and beef. It will be a week before they get the soldiers started, two weeks before they get anywhere near us."

They sat down, and the bottle passed. It was emptied, another started.

Bud was behind a serving screen. He plucked at his guitar, and started his song boldly:

"Who can tell when the Wind will blow?
The Wind blows high, the Wind blows low.
Who can tell where the Wind will go.
Or what the Wind will do?"

"The Wind it comes and goes at will;
The Wind blows high, the Wind blows low,
And all things bow when the Wind blows ill;
And chills your body through.

"Blow high, blow low; blow fast, blow slow;
The Wind is ever master,
And he who would the Wind resist
Will only meet disaster."

"What's this? What's this?" cried El Viento, as Bud came from behind the screen, strumming and strutting jauntily, going on with the next verse, each line more flattering than the other. It was plain that El Viento was not ill-pleased.

Bud stopped with a harmonious chord, and bowed.

"I would be the troubadour for the famous El Viento," he said. "I would sing his praises to the people, tell them how bold and generous he is."

El Viento roared with laughter, helped himself to more aguardiente.

"Pelaya never wrote any poems to me," he said. "I doubt if he could write a proper ballad for the people. What is your name?"

Before Bud could answer, two *mozos* entered to clear the table. Behind them came the *posadero*, the landlord of the inn. He scowled at Bud.

"How did this *piojo* get in?" he demanded of the two *mozos*. Then his face darkened, became convulsed with rage. "The *ladrone* has stolen my guitar! Give it up, *robador!* Take it from him, but do not break

it. Break his head, his back, but not the guitar. It cost me fifty pesos."

The *mozos* advanced warily. The *posadero* stuck his head outside the door, and called for more help.

El Viento did not interfere. Stealing was not a crime with him. This singer had amused him, might amuse him some more.

Bud eluded them. His luck, that had seemed so good, had shifted with a vengeance. He knew he took a long chance when he borrowed the guitar, but it was too good a one to pass up. Even now, he might get by with it.

El Viento had liked his song. And Bud knew Spanish ballads of all sorts, with which he could entertain El Viento while in the mood for music.

He knew that El Viento would not punish any one who could please him.

"I only borrowed it," Bud said. "A guitar that is not used is like a man who is dead."

"You were in my room!" screamed the landlord, as two more *mozos* came running.

One was the cook, with a meat chopper, the other his assistant, with a knife.

The cook swung his hatchet, and Bud brought the guitar down on his head. The instrument smashed, and the cook was blinded, half stunned, bonneted with broken wood and twisted strings.

El Viento laughed until he choked.

"Don't use a knife!" he shouted at the assistant *cocinero*. "Hold him! He is a plucky cockerel, this singer."

Others arrived. Bud backed into them as he fought the rest off. The landlord danced with rage on the edge of the fight. The cook swore

as he struggled to free himself. Bud knocked one clean off his feet, and then they grappled with him.

He tried to fling them off. El Viento hoped he would.

He saw El Viento leaning back in his chair, applauding. Suddenly his face changed. Bud's scrape had been torn from him, and he was glad to get rid of it. It was in his way.

But now his cheap, worn shirt ripped from neck to waist. His neck and arms were tanned, but his skin was as white as milk, where the garment had covered it.

El Viento rose from his chair like a great bear, roaring at them:

"A gringo! A spy! Hold him, you *perros!* Don't kill him! I'll attend to that."

IV.

The Ranger kicked one *mozo* on the knee. He uppercut a second and danced free. He had his gun and his knife, but he did not want to waste shots. He might have no chance to reload. Pelaya, the Deliverer, had gone to sleep, and was snoring.

El Viento's gun belt and hogleg were on a table. The Deliverer was in his way as he reached for them, seeing Bud's Colt come into the open like magic. El Viento gripped the back of Pelaya's chair. With terrific strength, he lifted it, with its occupant, from the floor, and flung both at Bud!

Bud was making for the open window. He had no mind to leap from the balcony down to where the peons still lingered about the fire, looking up to where the noise had attracted them. He had quite another idea. But before he left, he hoped to do a little damage.

The Deliverer was only a figure-head, a drunken rhymester. He

would stay put until morning. The *jefe*, or *alcalde*—whichever he might be—was not a man of valor. The one who might be a storekeeper was much more of a fighter. He produced a long knife.

And the smuggler had another. El Viento was the only one, it seemed, who carried a six-gun.

The two closed in between Bud and the window.

The cook had rid himself of the guitar, and was brandishing his hatchet again. His assistant was dazed, but recovering from the uppercut. They all had knives. More coming from below.

Bud jumped over the chair from which the Deliverer was spilled like a bale. He landed on the balls of his toes. His bowie knife was in his left hand, and he warded off the clashing blade of the smuggler, then struck in and down.

He heard his steel scrape on the other's hip, like a rasp on metal, and then a flung *cuchillo* caught him in the left shoulder. The blade bit deep. It touched bone, and left him faint for a second, as the smuggler was faint. It clung to his flesh and muscles, and a red stream spurted.

There was a roar—a flash of flame that almost blinded him. A slug whined so loud, it seemed to be inside his head instead of out. El Viento had fired.

The smuggler went down. El Viento went back, lead through the fat of his upper arm. Bud was forced to snap shots. They were stabbing at him from behind. His left arm was badly weakened, though he still gripped his bowie.

The *alcalde* came in, bent double, forearm across his head, well in front, the long knife slashing. El Viento fired again.

Bud's back felt as if seared with a hot iron at the shoulders. He

slashed with his bowie knife, halfway through the *alcalde's* wrist. He whirled, and shot a man in the throat, holding them off.

He flung a bullet at El Viento, and missed him by the fraction of an inch. Bud saw the slug star the plaster of the wall.

Then he darted through the window, and pulled it to after him. It was a tall frame, on single hinges.

A howl like that of a wolf pack came from below.

They fired at him, the few of them who had six-guns with them. The bullets pattered on the dobe, smashed the glass of the window as Bud stood on the railing, and then leaped for the end of the rafter that projected through the wall, as in all Mexican buildings.

He curled himself about it like a trapeze performer, a steady crimson stream spouting and spurting from him. He stood on the timber, caught his finger tips on the upper edges of tiles, praying they would hold.

So he wriggled up over the slant of tiling to the flat roof. It ran around the patio, and Bud raced across it, using up almost the last of his strength. He *had* to put a tourniquet on his arm, and he paused for that.

There was a moon rising in the east.

Bud saw it looming above the *posada* roof.

Against it, there showed something like a great spider, curling over the edge, dropping down into the shadow. It was El Viento.

Flame belched out of the darkness. Lead whined past Bud, whose two hands were busy with his tourniquet, his six-gun laid down. He fastened the bandage, snatched at his weapon, firing it where the flash

had shown in the shadow before he stood up.

"Come on, El Viento!" he cried. "This is not a spy! This is a Ranger! Nobody knows, how the wind blows," he taunted. "Stand up and fight like a man! You've got the moon back of you. I'm in its light."

The answer came in two more shots as El Viento still crouched where the moon flung a shadow on the roof, from which the jets of flame leaped.

One bullet nicked Bud's ear. The second went wild as the Ranger fired from his hip.

That slug went to its mark. El Viento cried out. He pitched forward on all fours, then curled over, spinning like a strange sort of top.

Bud pulled the trigger to finish him. But his six-gun was empty. A trapdoor burst open and men came leaping from the opening.

There was no time to reload, no friendly chimney, behind which to dodge.

But El Viento was through, lying now in a motionless huddle where he had squirmed out of the shadow in his death throes. The Wind would blow no more.

There was just one hope for the Ranger, one refuge, at which ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have balked.

That was the Rio Grande, sliding and swirling past the *posada*.

Bud did not know what its depth might be. It was often a shallow river, but it narrowed here, and that should mean a fathom or so—a risky dive, at the best, for a sound man.

He dared the gantlet of their guns as he raced to the western edge of the roof. He poised for a moment, gathering all his reserves, as the slugs hummed and whistled past him.

Then he shot out into the air—

out beyond the porch that was also a wharf. He seemed suspended in the air before he turned in a perfect swan dive, struck the water, and went down with incurving back and legs.

He barely scraped the river bottom, striking out with the current, keeping under water.

Lead pitted the water when his head at last broke through. He ducked once more after a gulp of air, swimming like an otter. The next time he sought to breathe, he was close inshore, where the water was black in the shadow of the cliff.

Presently he came out. He was sore, and soon he would be stiff, but these things did not matter.

He was strong enough to get to Pepper. Once he forked the good roan, he would not have to worry. Pepper would look out for him. Pepper could come close to picking him up and setting him back in the saddle, if he ever fell out of it.

Bud was not going to do that. And when he met the Ranger detail on its way to La Colina, he could tell them that the rebellion was all washed up. The Deliverer was only

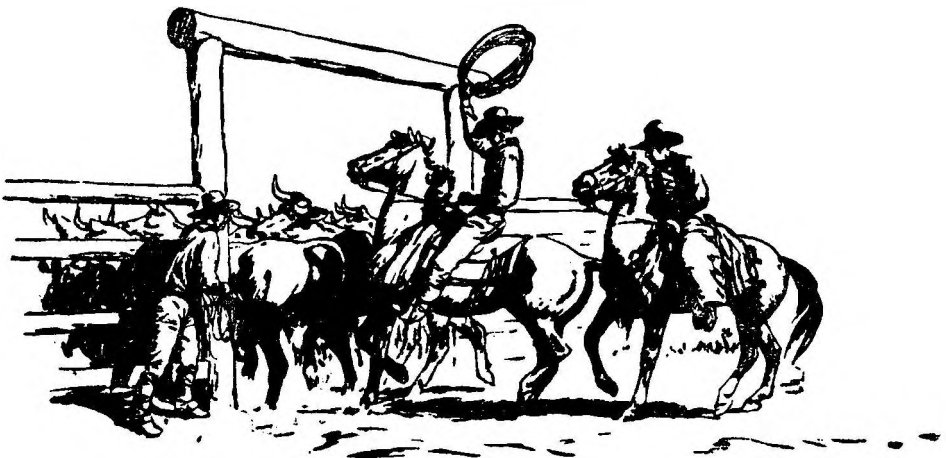
a puppet poet, a drunken dreamer. They would find him there at the inn.

And they would find El Viento, the Wind who was all through blowing. The rest had been taught their lesson. One Ranger had licked the insurrection. From now on, they would be good *perros*.

That helped a lot. So did the nuzzling of Pepper, when Bud reached him, resting for a moment against the roan's stalwart side, before he saddled him. Pepper usually savvied his master's talk, but he did not quite understand what Bud was saying. It was:

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, old-timer. And that was sure one ill wind. But it's plumb blown out."

Bud Jones shore does keep the bad hombres along the border guessin'. Thar's no tellin' whar he'll show up next, or what he'll be disguised as. But whar-ever he lands, an' whatever rig he wears, them six-guns of his are plumb in the open when they're needed, an' doin' business with both eyes peeled. He'll be back afore long in another grippin' story. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





Peaceful Hombre's Pay-off

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Gun Fog on the Rio Grande," etc.

CHAPTER I.

COWPOKES WALK OUT.

TEN grim-lipped cowboys filed from the big Q P bunk house, knotty warbags slung over their shoulders. There before the door of the bunk house stood ten saddled horses, dozing over trailing reins. Each of the ten men stepped to his horse, flung a warbag behind the cantle and lashed it there in swift, angry jerks.

They turned then as one man, to stare somberly toward the huge, rambling Q P ranch house which

sprawled lazily beneath great pepper trees.

A man came down the trail from the big house, a lean-waisted, square-shouldered young man who had a thatch of flaming red hair and gray eyes that were flecked with brown spots. The youth's clean-cut face looked drawn and pinched, and there were dark circles about his eyes.

He stopped before the ten silent cow-punchers, looking slowly from man to man, then at the bulky warbags behind the waiting saddles. For a moment, the brown-flecked

eyes of "Peaceful" Preston wavered, flicked toward a knoll beyond the windmill, where a patch of tamarisk trees made a sharp green splotch against the brassy southwestern sky.

Among those tamarisks were two graves, one of them old but well kept, the other still showing the marks of the shovel that had rounded it. That new grave held the mortal remains of Quin Preston, Peaceful's father. The older grave held the mother Peaceful could remember only vaguely.

Those things went through the youth's tortured mind now as he visualized the graves he could not see at this distance. But Peaceful brought his gaze back to the men, glancing slowly from face to face.

There was a lump in his throat, and the attempt he made at smiling was a total loss. He focused his brown-flecked eyes on stubby old "Poke" Jackson, who had ramrodded the Q P for better than a dozen years.

"Looks like yuh boys are leavin' me, Poke." Peaceful Preston's voice was calm, despite the emotion that was tearing at his heart.

"We are, Peaceful," the old foreman snapped bluntly. "Me an' these boys has got some pride, even if yuh ain't."

"One o' Lafe Turner's Tumblin' 8 stinkaroos killed yore daddy over a poker table less than a week ago," a lean, weathered puncher rapped out. "But what have yuh done about it? Yo're too danged peaceful to do anything but mope an' look sick."

Peaceful's eyes puckered a little, and there was a white line about his wide lips. But when he spoke his voice was as calm as before.

"Like everybody else, yuh boys think I ought to go smokin' Lafe Turner an' his men off the map, eh?"

he asked slowly. "That wouldn't bring dad back, would it?"

There were snorts, explosive oaths from the ten cow-punchers.

"Peaceful!" Poke Jackson shouted. "Folks hung that name on yuh when yuh was still wearin' knee pants. Why? Because yuh was so danged peaceful-minded that the other school kids made life miserable for yuh. An' yuh never bucked onct."

"Peaceful Preston, fastest gun artist in Arizona Territory," a moon-faced young cowboy snickered. "He could spot any tough gunny in the Territory to the full draw, then shoot him loose from his britches before said gunny could pull trigger."

"Yeah, but Peaceful has never aimed them sixes o' his at anything but calf-killin' pumas, rattlesnakes, an' mebbe a few gophers," another waddy snorted. "Heck, he'd git weak in the knees an' start bellerin' if a man was to slap his face good an' hard."

Peaceful stood there, his gaze leveled at the men who were quitting him. There was something wrong inside of him, and he wondered if he was about to get sick—as he had the time he had scarlet fever.

He felt a gnawing, burning thing within him that had been there since his father had been carried home from Painted Rock, riddled by bullets that had come from the gun of a Tumbling 8 cowboy. Peaceful felt that burning something that was within him flare hotter at the words of these men who had ridden his father's range.

But Peaceful did not understand the quickening of his pulse and the raw fire that ran along his nerves. He had never been angry in his life, therefore he did not know that the thing within him was a smoldering

rage, which was something far more dangerous than any quick flare of temper might be. Peaceful knew only that he did not feel well, and that the words of these cowboys made him feel worse.

"So yuh boys are ridin' out on me, eh?" he asked them, and wondered why his voice was jerky and why his throat seemed so stiff.

"We're shore quittin'," old Poke Jackson snarled. "Peaceful, we might 'a' overlooked the fact that yuh don't aim to do a thing about yore dad's killin'. But—but yuh rode up to the north rim o' Q P range yesterday an' told them blasted nesters they could *stay* there."

Peaceful blinked, actually surprised. "Why, what's wrong with that?" he asked mildly. "Those men and their families need land to farm an' places to build homes. Besides, Poke, that's government land. What right would I have to chase those people off?"

The old fellow choked, his leathery face purple with rage. He swore savagely and spread his gnarled hands in a helpless gesture.

"Make out our time, Peaceful," he almost panted. "I'll lose my temper an' take yuh to a cleanin' if I don't git away from here. Make out our time!"

Peaceful glanced again at the grim faces, then turned and stalked back toward the big ranch house. In a spacious office where he and his father had spent many hours going over ranch business, he sank wearily down at a big desk, opened a drawer, and took out a big check book.

Peaceful wrote out ten checks without bothering to look at the account book. Some of the boys had drawn a little money ahead of time. Others owed the ranch for saddles,

chaps, spurs, bridles and such things that cowpokes sometimes buy on credit through the ranch for which they work.

But Peaceful Preston did not bother to look in the account book to see who owed money. And he wrote the checks double, paying each man a month's wages in advance. It was a dry year, Peaceful thought, and the boys might have trouble finding jobs just now. That extra forty dollars apiece might come in handy.

He finished the checks, then dipped into the open drawer again and brought out a stack of white envelopes. He kept ten of them, and wrote a name on each: Shorty, Blue, Fat, Turkey-neck, Poke, Jerry, Bat— Peaceful stopped once, to swipe hastily at his eyes with the back of his pen hand. It would be lonely around the Q P with the hands all gone. But they wanted to go.

Peaceful finished his writing, then placed each check in an envelope that had the right name on the back, sealed them, and got to his feet. He walked back through the big, cool house and out into the hot sun.

The men were gathered at the front gate now, and Peaceful went toward them unhurriedly. He stopped before them, looked them over in his calm way, then began calling off the single name which he had written on each of the envelopes. One by one Peaceful tallied off the names and laid the envelopes in outstretched hands.

He had dealt out the last one when the ranch-house door slammed, and across the yard came "Biscuit" Nelson, the short, sour-tempered old cook.

Biscuit mopped at his hairless dome with a corner of his flour-sack apron and turned baleful brown

eyes on the cowboys he had fed for so long.

"Quittin', hey?" the cook bawled loudly. "Why yuh sway-backed, ring-boned bunch o' spavined coyotes, I should 'a' put pizen in yore grub long ago. Leavin' this boy with thirty miles o' range an' a thousand head o' cattle to look after single-handed is a scurvy trick any way yuh take it."

"Hobble yore tongue, yuh ol' grub spoiler!" Poke Jackson snarled, flushing red to the roots of his grizzled hair. "Who asked fer an opinion, yuh stove-up ol' wart hog?"

"Yuh mangy sons asked fer an opinion when yuh run out on this boy!" the cook stormed. "Git, or by gosh I'll let the breakfast I fed yuh out o' yore paunches."

Biscuit Nelson's water-reddened right hand came flicking from beneath his flimsy apron. That hand clutched a big blued Colt that was cocked and weaving slowly.

Until now Poke Jackson and the others thought that Biscuit was simply letting off steam, cussing them out for the fun of it, as he had done many a time. But they were seeing a different Biscuit Nelson now. The cook's cheeks were white, and tears of rage squeezed through the lids of his slitted eyes.

Peaceful Preston saw, too, that the cook was deadly serious, and deliberately put his own lean body between the gun and the awe-struck crew.

"Adios, boys," Peaceful said quietly as his brown-flecked eyes roved over the men. "Any time yuh're down on yore luck, ride this way. Always a vacant bunk here for any o' yuh boys."

"An' a gob o' rat pizen to chaw on!" the old cook yelled vehemently, as the suddenly confused punchers mounted and turned away.

CHAPTER II.

MORE TROUBLE.

PEACEFUL PRESTON did not go to town for over a week after his punchers quit him, and very likely would not have gone for at least another week if old Biscuit Nelson had not slipped away one night and ridden into town. Biscuit got back home with the first flush of dawn, so soused he could barely keep his stocky legs beneath him.

Biscuit stabled and fed his horse, then reeled toward the ranch house, chuckling and spitting crimson. Biscuit's right eye was ringed with purple and swollen shut. Two teeth were missing, his nose was a shapeless thing, and there were a half dozen egg-sized bumps on his hairless head.

But in spite of all the damage, Biscuit was so happy that he sang in a decidedly off-key voice as he waddled toward the back door, where Peaceful Preston met him. The battered cook stopped to grin up into Peaceful's face.

Peaceful grinned a little, trying to hide his uneasiness. "Dog-gone, Biscuit, I knowed it was about time yuh was gettin your skin full o' booze again," he drawled. "But yuh got somethin' on the outside this time. What happened?"

"Yuh ought ter see three-four them Tumblin' 8 gents," Biscuit cackled tipsily. "If them Palace Royal barkeeps hadn't pulled me off I'd 'a' eaten one o' the skunks raw. Huh! They ain't so tough, son."

"Tumblin' 8 men jump yuh?" Peaceful asked a little sharply.

"Huh?" the soused cook grunted frowzily. "Oh, shore, they started it. That is, they made me start it."

He licked at his battered, swollen lips, a fierce frown slowly creasing his brow.

"It ain't so!" he roared suddenly. "Blast their mangy hides, yuh ain't yaller, boy. Yo're jist a peaceful-minded gent, an' yuh'll have peace if I has to shoot every skunk-scented jasper on the Tumblin' 8. They said yuh was yaller, an' I made 'em take water. Almost done it, anyway. Next time——"

Peaceful's face was a little pale, and there was a squint to his brown-flecked eyes.

The Tumbling 8 crowd had goaded old Biscuit into a temper, then mauled him. Peaceful felt that wild, hot something burning through him, and wondered what it was that made him tremble. But he got Biscuit into the house, poured strong coffee into him, then set the broken nose.

Biscuit cursed and sang by turns while Peaceful worked over him. Then Peaceful undressed the old fellow, rolled him into a clean, cool bed, and left the ranch house. Biscuit would sleep until late afternoon, and Peaceful felt that he need not worry further about him.

"Reckon I'd better go see just what the old scamp stirred up," the youth muttered as he hurried to the horse corral. "Biscuit ain't fussy by nature. The Tumblin' 8 men must 'a' started the ruckus."

Peaceful caught a big stout sorrel, piled gear onto it, and was soon fogging down the trail to town. He felt uneasy about what Biscuit had been into, and wanted to find out just what had happened. And he wondered why he felt so hot inside as he kept thinking how the Tumbling 8 men must have ganged the old cook to give him such a beating.

He made the journey in a little over two hours, and headed straight for the sheriff's office the moment he got to town. But the little building

that was combination sheriff's office and jail was empty, and Peaceful strolled up along Painted Rock's one street.

He passed several men he had known for years, and felt his face grow strangely hot when those men turned their eyes quickly away to keep from speaking. Peaceful was white about the mouth as he pushed past the Palace Royal's wide swing doors and stalked to the bar.

There were a dozen or more men in the place, but the room was so large it seemed actually deserted. Peaceful beckoned a squat, sour-visaged barkeep who had a cut over one eye and a swollen jaw.

"Andrus, were yuh here last night when Biscuit Nelson run wild?" Peaceful asked quietly.

"Was I *here!*" Ben Andrus squalled until his voice echoed through the room. "How do yuh think I got my head laid open an' this jaw knocked out o' joint? I'll fill that bald-headed skunk full o' buckshot if he ever sticks his face in this place again."

"Yuh had trouble with Biscuit?" Peaceful asked mildly.

"Trouble!" the barkeep raged. "That old buzzard got snorty when some o' the boys said that yuh was too yaller to do anything but bawl if yuh got in a fight. I tried to ontangle 'em, an' that blasted Biscuit like to kilt me."

"How did yuh try untanglin' him with whoever he was tangled with?" Peaceful wanted to know.

"By battin' him acrost the head with a bung starter!" the barkeep snarled. "An' if I ever sec him in here again——"

"Who was Biscuit tangled with?" Peaceful cut in, wondering at the edge in his own usually calm voice.

"With me if yuh want ter know, yuh spineless young whelp!"

Peaceful turned slowly, a frown creasing his brown forehead. Just down the bar from him stood Lafe Turner and three more men. Turner was a big hombre, rawboned and as tough as nails. He stood with his booted feet planted widely apart, yellow-thatched head thrust out on a thick red neck, mean little green eyes flaming hotly. He puckered his lips slowly, and spat deliberately toward Peaceful's boots.

A thin, stoop-shouldered man with a sharp-chinned face and beady little black eyes stood beside Lafe Turner, his gashlike mouth curling in a sneering grin as his bony fingers tapped the pearl grips of twin six-guns that were thonged at his thighs. That thin-faced hombre was Blake Ashby, Tumbling 8 ramrod and one of the saltiest gun fighters the border country had ever known.

Beyond Lafe Turner and his ramrod stood two more Tumbling 8 men who grinned faintly and nudged each other as Peaceful Preston looked slowly down at his soiled boot toes.

Peaceful's frown deepened, and there was a puzzled look in his eyes as he locked glances with Lafe Turner. That wild, surging something was hammering at Peaceful's iron nerves, making him breathe rapidly.

He realized suddenly that he wanted to smash the leering grin from Lafe Turner's thick-featured face. Peaceful was a little shocked at his own feelings, for he had never struck a man in his life.

"That was plumb uncalled for, Turner," he said evenly. "Spittin' on my boots, I mean."

"Why, how plumb keerless o' yuh, boss," Blake Ashby jeered. "Yuh should 'a' did it like *this*."

Blake Ashby pursed his thin lips, sent a stream toward Peaceful's boots. But Peaceful Preston was a natural athlete. Every move he made was lithe, swift, effortless. And he moved now, shifting out away from the bar so suddenly that Blake Ashby missed his mark.

The thin-faced killer laughed, munching at the quid of tobacco that bulged one thin cheek.

"Got 'em dancin' now, boys," he chuckled. "I've made fellers dance with bullets, but never——"

"Don't do it any more, Ashby," Peaceful cut in quickly. "There's spittoons handy along the rail at yore feet. Use them if yuh have to spit."

"Say, Blake, that young snipe is sassin' yuh!" Lafe Turner growled hoarsely. "Yuh going to stand thar an' let a yaller kid sass yuh?"

"Sassin' me, are yuh?" the thin-faced ramrod snarled, and came forward in a lithe, slithering lunge. His bony right hand flashed up, popped like the sound of a pistol against Peaceful Preston's left ear.

Peaceful staggered back, a look of blank amazement on his lean face.

"Why, how come yuh to do that?" he asked without heat.

Down toward the back of the room a man swore in disgust. Lafe Turner guffawed, and the two men behind him echoed the sound. But Blake Ashby seemed strangely enraged by Peaceful's mild manner.

"Yuh yaller pup, I'll make yuh crawl!" the Tumbling 8 ramrod almost screamed. "I'll slap yuh plumb out o' yore boots, yuh mangy little coyote! I killed yore daddy, do yuh hear? I ketched the old son sneak-in' an ace from the discard an' filled his gizzard with lead. An' now I'll run his whelp out o' town with my bare hands."

Blake Ashby struck again, and the sound was louder, sharper than it had been before.

CHAPTER III.

PEACEFUL ON THE PROD.

PEACEFUL PRESTON felt the stinging pain of the open-handed blows on his face and ears. He staggered, listening to what Blake Ashby was saying.

Suddenly that hot, choking thing that had been inside Peaceful since the death of his father swelled larger, then seemed to explode as a gun might explode. Peaceful saw red lights swing before him, and knew dimly that he was yelling something, and that his lean hands had suddenly balled into fists.

Peaceful's hands had always been unusually fast at whatever task he set them to. Those hands were fast now, and made sickening, crunching sounds as they crashed time after time into the thin face of Blake Ashby.

Peaceful heard the man's screams, and saw the dark face gradually turn to a red, twisted thing that floated down and sidewise before him. But everything was red, and through Peaceful ran a sort of wild music, such as he had once heard an old desert rat play on a soft-toned violin. Peaceful laughed without knowing it, and in those brown-flecked eyes was a light that men were to learn to dread.

When the battered, red-smearred face of Blake Ashby was gone, Peaceful charged on down the bar, slamming blows into the beefy face of Lafe Turner.

Peaceful saw Turner pulling a gun, but paid little attention. He drove three swift blows to Turner's lips and eyes before the gun exploded.

Peaceful felt the searing rip of a bullet across his side, but still he waded in, laughing, yelling, fighting as few men could have fought. Now his brain was becoming crystal clear and as cold as new ice.

He sent Lafe Turner to the floor, then went after the other two Tumbling 8 toughs who had backed against the bar and were staring at him in loose-jawed amazement. One of them bawled an oath and tried to drag a gun as Peaceful leaped at them, laughing like a drunken man.

Peaceful sent a long right to the fellow's jaw that loosened him from the gun he had drawn. Then the other Tumbling 8 tough stopped a left hook with his nose that left him draped backward across the bar. But Lafe Turner was on his feet now, charging in at Peaceful from behind, six-gun ready to crash down atop Peaceful's hatless head.

What caused him to spin around Peaceful never knew. But spin he did, and let drive a swinging uppercut that lifted Lafe Turner's big body up and backward. Then the sour-visaged barkeep leaned over the mahogany, took careful aim, and walloped Peaceful across the head with his bung starter.

Peaceful should have fallen, according to Ben Andrus's way of thinking. But Peaceful only shook his head, reached out a long arm, and fastened steely fingers in the barkeep's hair. He snaked Andrus, screaming and kicking, across the bar, wrenched the bung auger from his fat fist.

Peaceful was grinning, yet there was no mirth in the grin. He took the bung auger, hefted it, then brought it down sharply across the seat of the squat barkeep's pants. When Peaceful came to himself he was still standing there, making soggy music with the bung auger

while the barkeep screamed a frightened chorus.

Peaceful blinked, looking about dazedly. He hauled the barkeep the rest of the way across the counter, looked at him for a moment, then dumped him unceremoniously into the grimy sawdust before the bar.

Peaceful drew a shaky hand across his eyes, stared about in growing wonder. Lafe Turner and Blake Ashby lay there on the floor, so battered that Peaceful scarcely recognized them. Farther down the bar lay the other two Tumbling 8 men who were less battered and beginning to regain their wits. Peaceful realized slowly that *he* had done this to those men.

He looked down at his hands, saw that they were raw, swollen, and stained crimson. Then he felt the dull throbbing of the wound in his side, and saw that his shirt was crimson and soggy around the bullet hole.

He pulled the shirt open with fingers that were numb and stiff. The cut along his side was shallow, still flowing. He closed his shirt and turned as if to leave the room.

There was a crowd jammed in the front of the place—a wide-eyed, staring bunch of men who looked at him as if he were a ghost. There was a sudden prickle of that hot feeling along Peaceful's nerves, and without thinking he let his hands drop to the butts of his guns.

There was a quick surging of the crowd there in the front of the room; the place filled with sudden wild cries as men fought desperately to get out through the door.

Baffled, Peaceful stood staring until the room cleared.

"I—I must 'a' got mad or somethin'," he gulped, glancing around at the battered men on the floor.

"Gosh, that was an awful thing for me to do! I wonder——"

He remembered suddenly that Blake Ashby had bragged of killing Quin Preston, his father. Those red lights blazed again before Peaceful's eyes, and he was beside the battered Tumbling 8 foreman in three long strides. He called Blake Ashby's name, prodded him sharply with a booted toe. But Blake Ashby only muttered weakly through cut, swollen lips.

The swing doors hammered open suddenly, and into the room charged lean old Sheriff Tim Simpson. The grizzled officer clutched a double-barreled shotgun, and his hard black eyes took in the scene swiftly. The sheriff swore feelingly, lowered the muzzle of his wicked scattergun.

Peaceful Preston turned slowly, his brown-flecked eyes holding a light that made Sheriff Simpson grip his shotgun a little tighter.

"Yuh want me?" The words jerked past Peaceful's pale lips.

The sheriff blinked, mouth opening slowly. Peaceful had not come through the ruckus without showing the scars of battle. There was a blue lump on his cheek, his lips were cut and his nose dribbled crimson. Peaceful had been struck again and again by the men he had fought, yet he had not realized it at the time. But those bruises were beginning to throb now, and his head felt caved in.

He lifted a long-fingered hand to discover that there was a huge knob atop his head where Ben Andrus had hit him with the bung auger. Peaceful growled under his breath, shot a glance to where Andrus was standing spraddle-legged and groggy before the bar.

"Peaceful, what in tarnation has come over yuh?" the sheriff blurted.

"What's the idea in tryin' to beat these fellers to death?"

Peaceful turned, took two long steps toward the sheriff. "Why didn't yuh arrest Blake Ashby for drillin' my dad?" he asked in a voice that was thin and hard. "He bragged about it a while ago, an' figured to run me out o' town besides. How come he ain't been arrested?"

The sheriff backed up, raising the barrels of his scattergun a little.

"Hold on, now," old Tim snapped sharply. "Peaceful, my hands are tied in that case. A dozen or more men seen the shootin', an' they all swore that yore dad went for his iron first."

"They were all Tumblin' 8 men?" Peaceful cut in.

The sheriff flushed, glancing uneasily about the room. "Well, yes," he admitted slowly. "Seems like the Tumblin' 8 boys had sort o' been proddy that night, an' everybody else had left the saloon."

"Exceptin' dad." Peaceful's voice was still thin and hard. "Sheriff, they framed it so's they could murder him an' have nobody but their own crowd for witnesses."

"Now wait a minute," the sheriff protested quickly. "Don't yuh go jumpin' at any fool conclusions, Peaceful."

"I ain't jumpin' at any conclusions!" Peaceful snapped. "I reckon I knew from the first that dad had been murdered foul by Blake Ashby. But I was too danged peaceful to do anything about it."

"Yuh better keep on bein' peaceful-minded too, boy," the sheriff growled. "Go pullin' any more stunts like this, an' yuh'll wind up either in my jail or in Boot Hill."

"I'll mind my own business, if that's what yuh mean, sheriff,"

Peaceful answered grimly. "But when Lafe Turner an' his skunks are through havin' their nap, tell 'em that from now on there's open season on their hides the minute they set foot on my range."

Before the flabbergasted sheriff could reply Peaceful Preston was gone, long legs carrying him swiftly down the room and out through the swing doors.

Through the chill silence that was left in the big barroom came a shrill cackle, and from beneath a poker table against the far wall crawled a frowzy little saloon bum who had grabbed a quart bottle of liquor from the bar before holing up under the table. The little bar-fly cackled again, waving his stolen booze airily.

"That lobo cub has got his fust taste o' red meat, Mr. Sheriff," the tipsy bum cackled shrilly. "From now on he'll be about as peaceful as a sore-toothed bulldog in a bone yard. Glad I'm jist a bum instead o' workin' fer Lafe Turner's outfit."

CHAPTER IV.

A TOUGH BREAK.

PEACEFUL PRESTON got his horse and left town. He looked back just as he quit the main street. He could see the backs of the buildings now, and as he looked the back door of the Palace Royal was pulled open. Two men staggered out and began moving along the littered alleyway at a shambling trot.

Peaceful recognized those jaspers as the two Tumblin' 8 cowboys he had fought with when he jumped Blake Ashby and Lafe Turner. Peaceful had plenty to learn about fights, and attached no particular significance to the fact that those two Tumblin' 8 toughs were legging it straight toward the livery and feed barn that was located several

hundred feet from the main street of the town.

Peaceful was a little sick, and his wounded side pained sharply at every lunge of the sorrel. "Got to tie up that cut," he muttered, and turned his attention to the trail.

Halfway to his spread there was a deep, rock-ribbed water hole that was fed by a deep spring. The water was on Q P range, and Peaceful had fenced it himself, running a pipe down to a metal trough that was kept full by the natural flow. Cattle could not foul the main water hole, yet they would always have plenty of water.

Peaceful thought of the fenced-off water hole now, and reckoned that a plunge into its cold depths would ease the aches in his body. He was baffled, unable to understand just what had happened to him. But despite his mental and physical sufferings there was a wild, joyous something burning through him, and he caught himself grinning once when he remembered the startled and thunderstruck expressions on the faces of the Tumbling 8 men when he had charged them.

Peaceful knew absolutely nothing of fights, for he had never struck a man before in his life. Yet he had sense enough to realize that he had whipped those four men and the barkeep, simply because they had been surprised at his attack. They had expected him to take their abuse, as he had always done.

Peaceful had never actually crawled when folks deviled him. But he had always managed to pass off trouble with a shrug and a grin, or a quick-witted gibe that made his tormentor seem foolish.

He had never been afraid of anything or anybody. But there had been something inside him that had always caused him to overlook the

harsh words of other people, and turn a deaf ear to bluster and threats.

But to-day something had happened inside him. He still remembered that explosive feeling within himself when he had lit into Blake Ashby. And somehow Peaceful could not feel sorry.

He let the sorrel travel at a running walk, mind busy with many perplexing thoughts. He held one hand against his wounded side, and tried not to think about the pain.

When he finally got to the water hole he was white as a ghost, and his head felt strangely light. But he dismounted, watered his horse at the metal tank, then crawled in beneath the three-wire fence and began stripping off his clothes.

His shirt and undershirt were soggy with crimson, and he rinsed them in the cold water, hung them out to dry on the fence. Then he slid into the deep, cold water, breath whistling through his nostrils at the shock. The water drove the pain from his side, and his brain cleared swiftly as he ducked his battered head and face time after time.

Shivering a little, Peaceful then crawled from the water hole, stepped beneath the shade of a gnarled cottonwood, and let the hot desert wind dry his lean body while he pulled on socks and boots. He stalked to the fence, took his undershirt and tore it into wide strips. With those strips he bandaged the deep, painful bullet crease in his side, then put on the rest of his clothing. He felt better now, and reckoned that by the time he got home and fixed himself a snack of grub he would feel as fit as ever.

Peaceful stooped swiftly to crawl under the wire. That swift bending of his lean body saved his life, for a bullet spat viciously through the air

where his chest had been but a moment before. As it was, the slug ripped a hole in the crown of Peaceful's black Stetson. He heard the sharp *whang-g-g* of a rifle, and slithered swiftly under the fence.

Another bullet cut the bottom wire directly over his back, and a third kicked grit into his face as he rolled swiftly down the slope to the metal watering tank. Peaceful heard the *whamp* of a bullet against the metal tank, and saw water spurt in a crystal stream from the punctured trough. Then he was behind the metal tank, listening to the slap of bullets against it and the gurgling splash of spilling water.

Peaceful was trembling a little, and before his eyes swam that red mist that had been there when he fought those Tumbling 8 men. He realized suddenly that he had drawn his guns, and stared at the weapons as if they were total strangers to him.

"Circle to the nawth, Buzz!" a harsh voice called shrilly. "I'll keep the snake holed up behind that tank until yuh git around to where yuh kin see him over yore sights."

"We've got him, Curly!" a second voice exulted. "Directly I git behind him, we'll smoke him out o' there in a hurry. See that he don't git away while I'm circlin'."

Peaceful nodded slowly. That would be "Buzz" Carter and "Curly" Pryor, the two Tumbling 8 cowboys he had fought with in the Palace Royal. Peaceful remembered having seen the pair come out the back door of the Palace Royal and head for the corral as he rode out of town himself.

"They set out to bushwhack me," Peaceful muttered slowly. "Dog-gone it, I don't want to go gettin' mad again."

A slug hammered the tank, mak-

ing it shiver. Peaceful glanced over his shoulder, realizing that he had to do something and do it quickly. If he stayed where he now lay stretched behind the tank, Buzz Carter, who was somewhere on the little hill in front of him, could not put a slug in him. And if he did stay where he was, Curly Pryor would soon be in a position to shoot him from behind.

Peaceful considered those facts as he eyed the fringe of brush which grew within a few rods of the metal tank. Beyond the brush, he remembered, there was a deep, sandy wash.

He turned his back to the tank, keeping as low as possible. He waited until he heard a bullet chunk into the metal, then made a quick dash for the brush. Peaceful expected to hear or feel a slug as he ran, but there was no sound to tell him that his escape had been detected, and he went into the brush carefully.

Peaceful was an expert at stalking game, and his knowledge helped him now as he wormed his way through heavy mesquite without causing it to rattle or tremble too much. He reached the brink of the sandy wash, breathing heavily. He squatted there a moment until he could catch his breath.

He was about to jump down into the sandy watercourse when the unmistakable crunching of feet came sharply to his ears. Peaceful ducked silently back into the thicket, holding his breath as he listened. The sound of steps came clearer now, and his gaze went to a sharp curve in the deep watercourse. He saw a battered hat, then the thick, swollen features of Curly Pryor beneath the hat brim.

Pryor was a husky fellow, with thick, powerful shoulders and un-

usually long arms. He was breathing hoarsely, and Peaceful could see little trickles of sweat running down the gunman's leathery face.

Pryor halted now, head cocked sidewise while he listened. A bullet struck ringingly against the metal tank, and the sharp report of the rifle echoed loudly in the deep wash. Curly Pryor nodded his head, a huge grin suddenly twisting his thick, bruised lips.

"Buzz is holdin' the snake, all right," he muttered loud enough for Peaceful to hear. "An' now I'll buy chips in the game. I'll learn that slick ear ter wallop me."

He trotted on down the wash, looking for a place where he could scramble up into the thick brush. Curly Pryor plowed to a sudden stop, a look of horror on his evil face. He stood there as if frozen, eyes slowly widening.

From directly above him had come the slow, ominous roll of hammer dogs as twin guns were cocked. Curly Pryor twisted his head slowly. A choked oath rattled in his throat, for he was staring squarely into the muzzles of twin .45s that did not waver. Behind those yawning gun muzzles were the brown-flecked eyes of Peaceful Preston.

"Drop that rifle yuh're luggin', Pryor!" Peaceful rasped. "An' don't make a sound if yuh know what's good for yuh."

Curly Pryor dropped the rifle as if it had suddenly become red-hot. His huge arms went upward in a hurry. Peaceful Preston got to his feet and stepped from behind the screening brush.

"I'll hop down there an' hog tie yuh' with yore own britches legs," Peaceful snapped. "Then I'll take rounders on that pard o' yores, Curly, an' discourage him some."

Peaceful took another step—and

the lip of the wash gave way suddenly beneath his feet! Flood waters had undermined the sandy embankment, leaving a two-foot strip of it hanging over. That two-foot strip gave, and Peaceful Preston went hurtling headlong into the wash.

Before Peaceful could right himself Curly Pryor snatched the rifle he had been told to drop, bawled an ugly, exultant oath, and leaped. The butt of the rifle caught Peaceful across the back of the head. He dropped forward limply.

"Hi-yah! Buzz!" Curly Pryor whooped. "Come a-runnin' if yuh want ter help finish this snake. I nailed him, pard."

CHAPTER V.

LOBO KINCAID, OUTLAW.

WHEN Peaceful Preston regained consciousness he was in a room that was filled with tobacco smoke, bright lamplight, and the coarse laughter of men. The room was close, and Peaceful could smell the sweaty bodies of the men and the sour odor of cheap whisky.

He lay still for several minutes, eyes roving over the ceiling above him. There were big, age-whitened logs running across the low ceiling, and Peaceful could see dirt above the logs. He knew of no such place, and was trying to figure out how he happened to be here.

He was, he soon discovered, on a pile of filthy rags that had once been blankets. He discovered, also, that he was bound hand and foot, and that the flooring beyond the filthy rags that made his bed was dirt.

He turned his eyes toward the sound of laughter now, and saw a dozen or more men bunched about a table that stood in the center of the rather small room. Peaceful's head

ached dully, and the back of his neck felt stiff. He remembered falling when he had the drop on Curly Pryor, and reckoned that Pryor and Buzz Carter had lugged him here to this hovel.

The men at the table shifted a little now, and Peaceful saw many bottles and a lot of tin cups. He also saw the battered, evil features of Lafe Turner, and heard the Tumbling 8 owner guffawing as he raised a brimming cup.

"Here's how, boys!" Lafe Turner bawled. "I'm drinkin' this ter Curly an' Buzz, who had sense enough ter fetch that Peaceful Preston snake in alive instead o' killin' him."

"We figured yuh'd want ter work on him, boss," Buzz Carter cackled.

Buzz Carter was a lanky, hook-nosed specimen, with a pair of murderous eyes that were seldom still. Those eyes jerked now to where Peaceful lay watching, and Buzz Carter yelped an oath, pointing.

The gang about the table whirled, and Peaceful saw that they were all Tumbling 8 men except one huge, hair-matted thing that looked more like an animal than a human being. But sight of that massive man wiped the last shock fog from Peaceful's mind.

Peaceful shuddered a little, trying to blink away the vision of that giant thing. But Peaceful could not rid himself of the vision, and his mind was suddenly rocking back to a time twelve years ago when a giant of a man had brought a gang of cutthroats into the Painted Rock country. That giant outlaw had left a crimson trail behind him before he was finally trapped in a blind canyon with his evil gang.

Peaceful remembered hearing his father tell what had happened, for Quin Preston had headed the posse

that trapped "Lobo" Kincaid, the giant leader of those murderous outlaws. Kincaid's killer pack had been shot to ribbons, and the posse left Lobo Kincaid himself lying riddled with a dozen bullets.

But when men rode back to the spot the next day, Lobo Kincaid's huge body was missing—and there had been wild terror among some people lest the outlaw leader return with another outfit and seek vengeance.

Peaceful's old father had always laughed at the idea of Lobo Kincaid ever reappearing, for Quin Preston had thought that some one had hidden the outlaw chieftain's body as a sort of grisly joke. Other people had finally accepted the theory, for no one had ever seen or heard of Lobo Kincaid again.

Those things hammered through Peaceful Preston's throbbing brain as the men left the table and stalked toward him.

There in the lead was Lobo Kincaid, huge body bare from the waist up. Sweat made greasy-looking streaks across Kincaid's shoulders. The moisture ran in little streams from his massive neck, to lose itself in the coarse, kinky hair that matted his great bulging chest.

Lobo Kincaid laughed, and the sound was an ominous rumble in the little room. He stopped and stared down into Peaceful Preston's pale face. Lobo Kincaid's flat, fleshy nose swelled and flared, and his thick, wide lips peeled back from huge yellow teeth that were as strong as an ape's.

Kincaid's skin was mottled, of uncertain color. And his eyes were muddy, bloodshot things that mirrored a brain that was more cunning and more evil than the most vicious wild animal ever possessed.

"So this is Quin Preston's kid,

hey?" Lobo Kincaid snarled, his huge, scarred face suddenly black with rage. "Quin Preston was the cause o' me havin' to hole up hyar in Mexico fer so many years."

"But he's gone now, boss, thanks ter Blake, here," Lafe Turner said suddenly. "An' yuh've got the kid ter work on, ain't yuh?"

Peaceful was staring, forgetful of his own peril. Lafe Turner had called Lobo Kincaid *boss!* Slowly, horribly, the truth dawned on Peaceful.

For twelve years Lobo Kincaid had been hiding here across the border, planning his revenge, waiting for the day when he could swoop down upon the Painted Rock country to murder and plunder as he had done before. Lobo Kincaid's murder-stained money had built the Tumbling 8 into one of the biggest spreads along the border. Lafe Turner, Blake Ashby and the other Tumbling 8 cutthroats were simply part of Kincaid's gang. Peaceful Preston knew those things now, just as surely as if he had been told outright.

He lay staring up at the massive outlaw who scowled and chuckled by turns. There were many scars on the great chest and shoulders of Lobo Kincaid. Bullet scars! Those were the wounds Quin Preston and his fellow possemen had given Lobo Kincaid. But the massive bandit had lived to hide here across the international line and plan a flaming revenge.

Lobo Kincaid lifted a huge, knotty hand, clawed with great, blunt fingers at the wild mop of kinky hair that clung to the crown of his big head. The murderous giant was filthy dirty, and there was an odor about him that made Peaceful want to gag.

"So yuh're Quin Preston's pup?"

Kincaid's voice was a hoarse rumble.

He lifted one filthy boot, swiped it sidewise across Peaceful's face.

"Lick that boot!" the bandit snarled. "O' course, I don't expect yuh to obey right off the bat. But afore I'm through wth yuh, yuh'll do anything I say. Do yuh hear?"

"Yeah, I hear," Peaceful said wearily. "But I reckon yuh've got another guess comin', Kincaid. I'll never lick yore boots. Nor any other man's."

Instead of becoming angry, the huge outlaw laughed, slapped a massive hand loudly against his scarred chest.

"Yore daddy put these scars hyar!" he thundered. "Him an' the rest left me fer dead that time they trapped me an' my men. But I come to myself an' crawled away. An' now I'll git my first revenge. I'll make yuh feel all the pain I felt the time yore daddy an' them others put them bullets into me."

He turned and faced the grinning pack of hirelings who stood waiting.

"Git back acrost the line, Lafe," he ordered. "Yuh boys ain't supposed to all come down hyar nohow. Git back, an' git busy."

"Shore, Lobo, we'll git busy." Lafe Turner laughed nastily and looked at Peaceful as he spoke. "We'll round up a hundred or so fat Q P steers an' have 'em down here by noon to-morrer. An' we'll keep bringin' bunches like that until the Q P range is clean."

With parting grins for Peaceful, the Tumbling 8 gang filed from the dirty little shack that smelled of stale tobacco smoke, sweaty flesh and whisky.

When the sound of galloping hoofs died away in the night Lobo Kincaid turned from the door, closed it, and walked to the table. He seated himself where he could look at

Peaceful, and poured a brimming cup of raw whisky from a squat bottle. There were baleful, horrible lights in his muddy eyes as he stared over the cup at his prisoner.

He drained the cup in a few big gulps, then got to his feet. He stooped over Peaceful, and there was a fiendish chuckle in his corded throat as he ripped the youth's shirt away. He threw the pieces of the garment aside, then yanked the bandage from the wound in Peaceful's side. Lobo Kincaid squatted there for a full minute, studying that open gash attentively.

White to the lips, Peaceful could only lie and watch while Lobo got slowly to his feet, crossed the room, and began rummaging in a grease-spattered box that hung to the adobe wall beside a small cook-stove.

When Lobo Kincaid turned from the box that served as a cupboard he had a sack of salt in one huge hand. He tilted the sack, let a white pyramid of the salt form in the palm of his left hand. Then, shoving the sack back into the cupboard he stalked back to Peaceful's corner, squatted on his heels.

There was an inhuman light in Lobo Kincaid's muddy eyes and a horrible grin on his thick, wet lips as he tilted his huge left hand sharply and let the salt trickle down into that raw wound in Peaceful Preston's side.

CHAPTER VI.

PEACEFUL MAKES A BREAK.

FEW people indeed would have recognized as Peaceful Preston that sun-blackened man who was chained by the neck in the Sonora bad lands.

There was a thick chain about Peaceful's neck, held there by a pad-

lock the size of a man's hand. By day Peaceful was stripped of his clothing and tied there in the yard, while Lobo Kincaid sat just inside the doorway of the shack, rattling a tin dipper in a bucket of water and laughing his fiendish laughter. When blisters formed on Peaceful's back Lobo Kincaid broke them, and ground dirt into the raw places with the heels of his huge hands.

It seemed years since he had been dragged here, yet Peaceful knew that this was his fifth day of torture. He would be left there in the sun throughout the whole day, with neither food nor water. The wound in his side, thanks to the salt that had almost driven him mad that first night, had healed completely. But there were many other wounds on his lean body—wounds where Lobo Kincaid had beaten, gouged and kicked at him in drunken rages. But the patience which had been his from birth saved Peaceful's reason through those days of heat and sun and abuse.

At night, he would be led into the cabin like some animal, slammed brutally into the corner where there were some filthy old blankets. He was fed sparingly, being given just enough food and water to keep him alive, for Lobo Kincaid could not torture a dead man.

"How long do yuh aim to keep this up, Kincaid?" Peaceful asked quietly as Lobo chained him to the stump that was there in the yard and waddled back toward the cabin door.

The big outlaw seated himself just inside the doorway where it was shady and cool. He sloshed water from a bucket, let a crystal spray of the precious liquid spatter out onto the hard-packed doorstep.

"I aim to keep this up until yuh cave in, blast yuh!" the outlaw

bawled. "Yuh're tougher than most, but no man kin stand what yuh've stood without weakenin'. Yuh'll cave in to-day or to-morrow."

Peaceful's sunken eyes studied the brassy sky, dropped to sweep the desolate, cholla-studded hills that hemmed this outlaw's hide-out like silent guards. It would be hot here again to-day—that scorching, searing heat Peaceful had come to dread. But his skin was toughening. Yesterday no blisters had appeared under the merciless rays of the sun. In a few more days—

Peaceful's thoughts jerked to a halt. There was something crawling over his bare feet, starting up his lean shanks. He glanced down, and a cry of horror passed his lips. There were ants about his feet—millions of them! And they were those big, red fellows that will bite chunks from human flesh if given the chance.

Peaceful leaped away instinctively. But the chain stopped him abruptly, almost jerking him down. He circled swiftly, with a growing horror in his sunken eyes. Those ants were all about the stump, squirming and swarming thickly over the earth. Peaceful saw tiny white flakes where the ants were not too thick, and then understanding dawned as a horse bellow of evil mirth roared from the cabin.

"Haw-haw-haw!" Lobo Kincaid howled. "That's oncet yuh got a move on yuh. Why don't yuh run some more?"

"Sugar!" Peaceful gasped hoarsely, staring at the earth at his feet. "Kincaid, yuh stirred sugar into the dust here, so's these ants would come."

One of the dreaded insects bit down sharply between Peaceful's toes, causing him to leap in pain. He had to stoop, spread his toes apart, and tear the ant loose by main

force. Another bit into the flesh of his leg, and he began brushing hastily at the crawling insects. When his feet and legs were cleared he kept moving swiftly around the stump, while Lobo Kincaid laughed uproariously.

"Jist the way I figgered it!" the fiendish outlaw whooped. "Them ants will keep yuh on the move, which will tire yuh out, make yuh want water worse. An' if yuh don't keep movin' them ants will chaw yuh up in little pieces. Thought yuh had me buffaloeed with yore hard nerves, hey?"

Sweat streaked Peaceful's burned skin as he trotted swiftly around and around the stump, churning his feet so hard that the ants could not get onto them.

Never in his life had Peaceful Preston wanted to kill a man. Not until now. His brown-flecked eyes became savagely cold, and there was a whining snarl in his throat as he trotted around and around in the blazing sun. But he was not thinking of the sun, the chain that was bruising his neck, or the ants he must keep off his body. He was thinking only of Lobo Kincaid, and how to go about killing him.

Inside the shack were Peaceful's own guns and belts. He had seen them there, hanging on a peg above Lobo's smelly bunk.

"If I could get those guns, I'd kill him!" Peaceful thought. "I'd put slugs into his head, where they'd reach his brain. He wouldn't get over wounds like that."

The idea grew until Peaceful could almost feel the kick of those big six-guns against his palms. He was a dead shot, and could put slugs any place he wanted them. There was that flat spot between Lobo's muddy eyes. The spot was no larger than a dollar, and looked as if it

might have been caused by a hard blow. But Peaceful felt sure that he could put a slug from each of his guns into that flat place.

First, however, he would have to get those guns. Peaceful thought of that, and some of the rage that was burning through him died.

Here he was, racing madly over ground that was literally covered with ants while a thick chain held him prisoner to a mesquite stump. And yonder in the doorway sat Lobo Kincaid, laughing hideously.

Peaceful jerked his eyes from the huge outlaw, turning his attention to the stump. The chain was slipping easily around it, which meant that it was looped on rather loosely. Perhaps Lobo Kincaid had left it that way on purpose, so that when his prisoner began running from the ants the chain would not wind up and stop the fun too soon. Or perhaps to-day Lobo had been in a hurry, fearing some of those murderous ants would creep up his grimy trouser legs if he stood there beside the stump too long. At any rate the chain seemed loose, and the first hope Peaceful had felt in five awful days sprang up within him.

The mesquite stump was only a couple of feet tall, and was naturally smaller at the top than it was next to the ground. Peaceful saw that he could grasp the chain, bring it up over the stump and be free. His hopes mounted swiftly, for Lobo Kincaid was getting to his feet, turning back into the adobe shack.

"I'll have ter have a drink on this," the huge bandit cried in evil glee. "Gosh, I ain't had this much fun in many a year. I'll treat some o' them other Painted Rock snakes the same way, too, afore long. Think I'm dead, do they?"

Peaceful Preston saw the huge

form grow dim inside the cabin. Peaceful leaped then, lean hands clawing frantically at the chain that was looped about the stump. He grasped the loop, brought it up and over the top.

His pulse raced as he whirled, darting toward the cabin door, a four-foot length of chain with the loop in its end whirling above his head like a lass rope. But Peaceful had no intention of using that chain as a lass rope.

As he burst into the cabin Lobo Kincaid jerked around, strangling on the whisky he had been swallowing. The whirling chain slapped down, crashing solidly across Lobo's mighty head.

The huge outlaw fell, but Peaceful did not notice. He was swarming toward Lobo Kincaid's bunk. He leaped upon it, grabbing at his belts and guns. The chain caught on the bunk, jerked Peaceful to his knees. He snarled in rage, lunged again. He got his belts and guns this time, ripped the weapons from leather as he whirled. He was just in time to see Lobo Kincaid lunge out the back door.

With a scream of rage Peaceful was off the bunk, leaping toward the door. The dragging chain snagged on the leg of the table, held fast when Peaceful lunged against it. The abrupt jerk brought Peaceful back and down. His head struck the hard-packed floor with considerable force. He tried to leap up again, but his muscles were limp, useless things.

He saw a slowly moving shadow in the doorway. He looked up dazedly, to see the bestial face of Lobo Kincaid peering at him around the door facing. Now one of Lobo's huge paws poked into the room, gripping a cocked Colt.

CHAPTER VII.

PEACEFUL CALLS SHOW-DOWN.

SIGHT of that cocked gun slowly coming to target on him drove all the numbness from Peaceful Preston. His eyes held to the Colt, even as his own right-hand gun flicked up.

Peaceful's Colt roared. The sound filled the room. But he had forgotten that flat spot between Lobo Kincaid's eyes.

At the crash of Peaceful's gun, Lobo Kincaid staggered sidewise, screaming in pain and rage as he stared at the mangled thing that had been his right hand. Then his huge left hand dived for the gun that was holstered on that side, and he charged into the cabin, rage and pain-maddened.

Peaceful remembered the flat spot between Lobo's eyes then. He sat up, and his guns boomed in unison. Lobo Kincaid shivered, let the gun fall from his huge left hand, and stood batting his evil, muddy eyes. But Lobo Kincaid was already dead, for squarely in the center of that flat spot between his eyes was a black hole where two .45 slugs had slapped him.

Lobo Kincaid crashed forward, a sighing sound escaping him as the breath left his lungs.

Peaceful Preston shuddered a little, and closed his eyes. He got to his feet after a moment, crawled to Kincaid's side, and took keys from one of the dead bandit's trouser pockets.

Peaceful was over the numbing horror that had gripped him at seeing a man fall before his guns by the time he got the chain from around his neck and donned his clothing. He had only Levis, boots and his Stetson to wear, for Lobo Kincaid had torn his shirt from him that first

night. Peaceful belted his guns about his naked waist, reloaded the spent chambers, and quickly left the cabin.

In a corral out back was his big sorrel and a great strong dun that belonged to Lobo Kincaid. Peaceful saddled both horses, led them back to the shack, and managed to load Lobo's huge body across the dun's saddle. He covered the grisly thing with a grimy blanket, lashing it securely with a lariat rope that hung on Lobo's saddle.

Then Peaceful was astride his sorrel and riding north, keeping away from the broad trail his cattle had made coming down across the border. There had been a bunch of his stuff brought across every day, and he knew that they were penned somewhere back in the hills beyond Lobo's shack. But the cattle could wait. Peaceful had more pressing business now.

There was a savage thumping in his temples; his eyes glowed hotly in their deep sockets. He stopped once to drink from a pool of water he came upon unexpectedly in a nest of lava hills. Then he was riding again, heading north, eyes grimly alert.

The sun swung up, beating at his bare back, reminding him of those five days that had been like centuries. He laughed, and the sound was anything but pleasant in his own ears. He kept the horses at a good pace, and kept peering ahead, trying to find some landmark that was familiar. But the sun with its searing heat was dipping low in the west before Peaceful saw anything that looked familiar.

Far ahead a great stone mountain seemed to poke itself up out of sheer desert. Peaceful nodded, and a grim smile tugged at his cracked, swollen lips. He knew that stone mountain. It was at the southern boundary of

his Q P range. But he was well west of it, and meant to keep his distance.

There were a band of rough hills along the border there by that stone mountain, and Peaceful figured that his cattle that were being stolen by Lafe Turner and the other Tumbling 8 men would be driven through the pass there at the base of Old Stony, as the mountain was called.

Peaceful did not want to run into those Tumbling 8 cutthroats out in the open, where they would have a chance to scatter and get away. He wanted to get them bunched, and see that they stayed bunched until the law took them in charge.

Peaceful swerved his horse a little more west, and was in sight of Painted Rock by dusk. It was dark, however, when he came silently to the outskirts of the town. He headed straight for the sheriff's office and jail, intending to report to the sheriff and have a posse rounded up to handle the Tumbling 8 crowd. But Peaceful saw before he reached it that the jail was dark. So was the front half, which served as sheriff's office.

Peaceful drew the two horses into the dark shadows of an old shed, tied them securely, then moved toward the rear of the buildings on foot.

He headed for the Palace Royal, thinking that the sheriff might be there, but when he neared the back door he heard raucous laughter, and dropped flat to the ground. The voices had come from so close by that Peaceful was alarmed.

He saw a light flare over his head, and realized that it was coming through a window of one of the Palace Royal's private cardrooms. He reckoned a bunch of gents were getting ready to play a little poker, and was about to move on when one

voice coming from within that cardroom arrested his attention.

"It'll be easy, I tell yuh!" the voice was saying. "The boss knows what he's doin', boys. Why, this blasted town will be in our hands afore anybody knows what's comin' off."

"Lafe Turner!" Peaceful snarled, and lifted his lean body from the ground.

He strode quickly to the window, peered in cautiously. There were six men in the room, seating themselves about a green-topped table. There were Lafe Turner, Blake Ashby, Curly Pryor, Buzz Carter and two Tumbling 8 men that Peaceful knew only as "Slicker" and "Juggy."

Slicker was a wizened little jasper, with the sharp nose, beady eyes and teeth as prominent as those of a rat.

Juggy was a booze-soaked old buzzard, with a ropy white mustache, mean greenish-blue eyes and a jagged scar running down the left side of his leathery face.

"But I don't think we ought ter wait any longer, Lafe," Blake Ashby was growling through thin red lips that were twisted in a snarl. "Why don't the boss want ter bust this country wide open afore next week?"

"Because it'll take us that long to finish cleanin' the Q P range o' steers, yuh fool!" Lafe Turner snarled. "The boss wants to sell all them cattle, so's he'll have plenty o' dinero when he gits here."

"He'll need plenty," Blake Ashby growled. "I don't think yuh'll win that race fer sheriff, come election time. Old Tim Simpson will——"

"Will be dead afore mornin'," Lafe Turner cut in savagely. "That's why I wanted yuh fellers back here where we could talk. We've got ter git rid o' that sheriff!"

"Danged right we have!" Curly Pryor grunted. "Him an' ol' Biscuit Nelson come danged nigh ketchin' us red-handed this mornin' when we was roundin' up them Q P critters that the boys will be headin' down the trail with by now."

"I'll say they come close ter us," Buzz Carter growled with an oath. "But Curly an' me sprinkled lead around the old fools, an' drewed 'em into a runnin' fight while the other boys moved them cattle."

"Say, what if the sheriff an' Biscuit Nelson recognized yuh two?" Lafe Turner answered harshly. "I'm afraid them two old buzzards did recognize the boys, so I'm takin' no chances."

"What's the plan?" Juggy asked, tugging at his white mustache.

"We'll all sashay back out that way in a crowd an' separate," Lafe Turner talked swiftly now. "Juggy, yuh an' Slicker head fer the Q P, an' drill Biscuit Nelson when he beds down fer the night. Blake, yuh take Buzz an' Curly an' go hide out close ter the jail."

"An' what'll yuh be doin'," Blake Ashby asked suspiciously.

"Me?" Lafe Turner laughed coldly. "Why, I'll be out thar in the barroom, watchin' fer that blasted star-toter. When he shows up I'll send him down to his office by tellin' him that they's somebody waitin' thar ter see him."

"Which won't be no lie," Blake Ashby grinned evilly. "Three o' us will be waitin' there fer that sheriff."

"All right, let's git goin'," Lafe Turner growled. "We'll all go line up at the bar an' have a few drinks. Then yuh fellers scatter into the crowd naturallike, an' work yore way outside quiet."

The six evil jaspers stood up, kicking back their chairs. Peaceful

Preston leaped away from the window, went racing away from the building.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROUND-UP DAY.

PEACEFUL was panting when he reached the old shed where he had left the two horses. He figured that he had to do something, and do it almighty quick. No time now to gather a posse or get help of any sort. Those cutthroats would scatter, sneak away on their murderous errands.

Peaceful knew that he would have little chance of handling Lafe Turner and those other five jaspers single-handed. And there would be Tumbling 8 sympathizers in the saloon to buy chips in the game when the fireworks started. But Peaceful reckoned that a little surprise might help his case; it might give him a chance to settle accounts with Blake Ashby, at least. Peaceful wanted to shoot it out with Blake Ashby, the man who had killed his father.

Peaceful stepped to the big dun that bore Lobo Kincaid's stiff body. Peaceful's hands flew to the task of ripping the blanket and the ropes from that stiff form. He heaved the huge body upright, forced the stiffened legs to fork the saddle. Then Peaceful was up behind the outlaw's body, holding it there in the saddle with one hand, handling the dun's reins with the other.

He rode from the old shed and out onto the main street. He jabbed at the dun's flanks, felt the big horse lunge mightily. Then Peaceful was neckreining the dun across the hard-packed dirt walk.

The horse breasted the doors of the Palace Royal, went through them with a low snort of uneasiness.

Men yelled, dodged right and left. The double-laden dun snorted in terror, buck-jumped halfway down the room before stopping to sniff un-easily.

A momentary hush settled over the room, while men stared with widening eyes and loose jaws at the huge thing there in the dun's saddle. From that blackened, crimson-caked face stared two evil eyes that looked strangely alive in the lamplight.

"Lobo Kincaid!" some hombre squalled, and the lid popped off.

Feet hammered, chairs and tables crashed over, men cursed and clawed each other in a mad stampede away from that dun. But Lafe Turner, Blake Ashby and the other four cut-throats who had held that confab only a few minutes ago in the back poker room still stood at the bar, staring in swiftly growing horror.

"The boss!" Lafe Turner yelled through a sudden lull in the uproar. "My gosh, boys, it's Lobo. An' he's—he's dead!"

Peaceful Preston slid sidewise and back, landing well to one side of the dun. The horse snorted, jumped away at the thump of Peaceful's boots. The huge body of Lobo Kincaid toppled slowly, struck the floor stiffly.

The terrified dun whirled, snorting in terror. It saw the doors now through which it had come, and charged them. The dun slammed outside, and there was a lot of cussing and yelling from hurt and frightened men. But Peaceful dared not look around.

"Turner, I reckon the men against the wall over yonder heard yuh call Lobo Kincaid 'boss' just now," Peaceful called loudly. "He owned the Tumblin' 8, was getting ready to sack this country for revenge. Yuh an' the rest are killers that Kincaid hand-picked——"

"By gosh, that gent's Peaceful Preston!" a hoarse voice came from the tense crowd against the far wall. "An' Lafe Turner *did* call Lobo Kincaid boss when——"

It happened then—happened with the blinding speed of lightning. Blake Ashby struck down at his guns, screaming an oath as he leaped sidewise from the bar. Lafe Turner and the others were drawing, yelling oaths as they grabbed gun butts. But Peaceful Preston had eyes only for Blake Ashby.

Peaceful's lips peeled back, and his teeth showed white against his sun-blackened features. Peaceful's own hands streaked down past his brown, bare sides, slapped pistol grips.

Then the room was rocking to the boom of guns. The screams of men came eerily through the roar. Peaceful drove two slugs at the thin red mouth of Blake Ashby, laughed hoarsely when he saw that red mouth become a crimson blotch. Blake Ashby fell, and only then did Peaceful whip his eyes to the other men.

Something slapped him across the top of his left shoulder, and crimson splashed his brown skin as if a brush loaded with red paint had hit him. He staggered a little, shot twice with his right-hand gun, and saw Lafe Turner start reeling in blind circles. Then a slug hammered Peaceful's ribs, and another ripped through his right thigh. He wallowed sidewise, struck the floor, and tried to keep shooting, but his hands were weak, and there was a film over his eyes.

He knew that men were rushing past him, and could hear them cursing above the hammering bang of many guns. Then Peaceful's brain cleared, and not until he sat up jerkily did he realize that water had been dumped over his face and bare

chest. He blinked the stuff from his eyes, stared into the seamed, worried faces of Sheriff Tim Simpson and old Biscuit Nelson.

Beyond Biscuit and the sheriff stood Poke Jackson and the other Q P hands who had quit. Peaceful grinned, and let go of the guns those men had been unable to pry from his fists.

"Gosh, son, we thought yuh was a goner!" the sheriff croaked. "We was comin' in to give yuh a hand when a blasted hoss nigh tromped the bunch o' us to death."

"The sheriff an' me played tag with a couple o' snakes this afternoon while Poke Jackson an' the rest o' the boys snagged a mess o' Tumblin' 8 buzzards that was stealin' yore cow critters," Biscuit Nelson growled. "We was all headin' here fer a clean-up, but danged if yuh didn't beat us to it. We only got to shoot a few shots afore them other four skunks give up."

"One o' them snakes yore punchers ketched got boogery an' give up head, Peaceful," the sheriff said grimly. "He told us how Lobo Kincaid was the real owner o' the Tumblin' 8 an' aimed to sack this country. But looks like yuh changed Lobo's plans some."

"Poke an' the others finally run short o' spendin' money an' opened up them envelopes that had held

checks," Biscuit Nelson growled. "When they seen how white yuh'd treated 'em, Peaceful, they come back to the ranch bellerin' like unweaned calves that had lost their mammies."

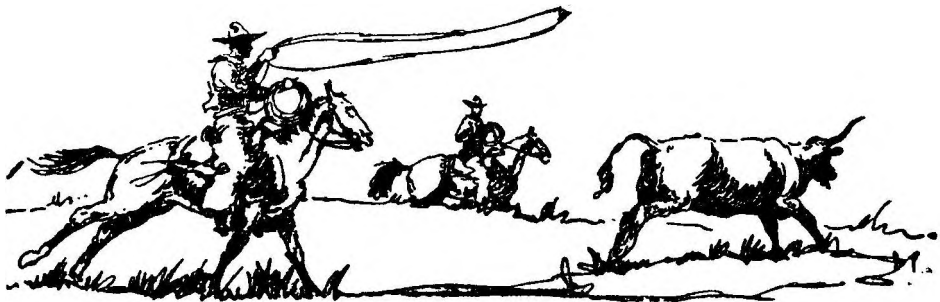
"I'm glad the boys are back." Peaceful smiled wearily. "Somehow it wouldn't seem like the same spread if I had to hire new hands."

"Yeah, I took 'em back to help hunt yuh an' help stop the cattle from disappearin'," the old cook grinned sourly. "But I made it plain that I was to give orders. An' have I worked them blasted quitters!"

"It—it's all over now," Peaceful said. "Mebbe I can go on bein' a peaceful gent again like I always have been."

He got shakily to his feet, head spinning a little. His wounds had been bandaged, however, and Peaceful found that he could walk if he took it easy. He headed for the swing door, the sheriff and old Biscuit ready to help him in case he needed it.

"As I was sayin'," a grizzled cowman addressed the awe-struck crowd that was staring down at Lobo Kincaid's huge body, "they's jist one thing wuss than tryin' to take a she-grizzly's cubs away from her bare-handed. An' that's gittin' a peaceful gent on the prod."



How Abilene Was Tamed

WHEN the bad men of Abilene broke all bounds and became unmanageable, a tall, athletic, soft-voiced man, with fair hair and clear blue eyes, drifted in one morning and applied for the job of marshal. But the mayor was not impressed by his manner.

He looked much too gentle for the job. What Abilene needed just then was a rip-roaring gunman—one who could cow the desperadoes who were keeping the town on the jump, and giving the citizens "a man for breakfast" nearly every day in the week. So Tom Smith was rejected.

Several slap-dashing, would-be marshals were chosen, but they all failed when a show-down came. So, for want of some one better, Tom Smith was finally appointed, although the mayor and the worried citizens had doubts about him.

Within one hour after his appointment, he met "Big Hank," a cowboy with the reputation of being thoroughly bad and mighty fast with a gun.

Big Hank spoke first. Striding up to Smith, he demanded:

"You the new marshal—the galoot that's allowin' to run this town?"

Smith admitted that he was and ordered Hank to hand over his gun.

Hank swore loudly that no star-toter could take his cutter from him.

The arm of the new marshal swung out. He didn't draw a gun, because he didn't have one. His fist landed on Hank's chin, and the bad man doubled up. When he returned to life, he was in the calaboose.

Another wild puncher, "Wyoming Frank," told the boys on the ranch just what he was going to do to that marshal. Big Hank was his pal, and he meant to avenge him. He rode

to town, followed by a crowd of his friends, all anxious to see the fun.

As soon as Frank saw Tom Smith, he swung off his brone and swaggered up to him. His gun was in his hand, and it was aimed at a particular button on the marshal's coat. But he got a little too close and the lightning fist of the officer sent him down with a thud.

He woke up in a cell, where he had time to talk things over with Big Hank and a few others.

Marshal Smith's courage and the accuracy of his punch, won him the admiration of all the decent men of the town. He became the hero of the trail drivers.

For six months he kept order in Abilene. While it was impossible to tame the wild cow town completely, Smith made life and property reasonably safe.

One morning, he rode out to arrest a man named McConnell, who had killed a neighbor. As he approached the dugout in which the murderer had taken refuge, McConnell shot the unsuspecting law officer through the heart from a window.

Tom Smith was succeeded in office by "Wild Bill" Hickok, under whose rule Abilene became wilder than ever. The defiance of law was so great that the best citizens and farmers decided to put an end to the reign of desperadoes by stopping the local cattle trade.

Drovers were notified that the trail herds were not wanted there and they were told in plain language to stop coming to Abilene.

Within a week all business ended. Gambling houses and dance halls vanished. The bad men disappeared on the gallop, and Abilene was tamed.



Massacre Cave

A "Vincente The Yaqui" Story

By Wilson Campbell

Author of "Skull Wash Gold," etc.

THE smallest and youngest of the ZB punchers, "Red" Kesley, sat in the sun-mottled shade of a mesquite and used his eyes. To the south, a thin pencil of smoke lifted against the glassy blue of the Arizona sky. To the east, but heading southward, were three horsemen, each leading a pack animal.

Squinting at them with his green, catlike eyes, Red Kesley screwed up his round lump of a nose. Strangers. He could not make out the faces of the men, but he knew every saddle horse in the Palo Verde country, and these did not belong.

"Headin' straight for that smoke," Red muttered, "an' from

the way they're huntin' out the low spots, they ain't none too anxious tuh be seen. Reckon I'll have tuh trail along an' see what's what."

Yawning, he stood, caught the reins of his sorrel pony, and swung into the saddle. It was a heck of a note, he grumbled, when a feller couldn't grab a little siesta without havin' somethin' turn up that needed investigatin'.

Dropping behind a line of hills, Red rode swiftly southward. When he figured he was one wash away from the place where the smudge fire burned, he dismounted and scrambled up the hillside.

The hill was level but rocky on top. Red flattened himself and

snaked toward the far edge. He heard voices lifted in hot argument; and as he worked nearer, he understood a few words in broken Spanish.

At last, when he could stretch his neck and peer down on the scene below, Red caught his breath and stared. Fully a dozen men were there; but all, except the strangers Red had recently seen, were Indians.

"An' they're Tupans, or I'm a boiled owl," Red muttered. "I'd know them ugly mugs a mile off at midnight."

The three white men, Red decided, were just as hard-looking. Two, dismounting, had started to work on the packs of the led horses. The third—a big man who bulged in his saddle—waved his heavy arms and shouted at the leader of the Indians.

"You pay what we ask or you get no guns," he declared. "What's the answer?"

Hatred flashed in the Tupan leader's dark eyes; but he quickly spread his hands and managed a toothy smile.

"We need guns much," he said. "We pay price."

He signaled several of his braves who came forward with a number of small but heavy leather pouches. These were dropped on a spread-out blanket.

Swinging down from his horse, the big man picked up a pouch and pulled it open. He grunted with satisfaction as he spilled some of the contents into his wide palm.

From his high place, Red Kesley caught the unmistakable gleam of gold. He leaned forward excitedly for a better view. Sellin' guns to the Tupans, huh? Maybe that Yaqui friend of the boss's son wouldn't be interested in knowin' that!

But Red, intent, rested his weight on an insecure rock. Breaking loose, it threw him off balance and went bounding down the slope.

A shot couldn't have startled the men in the wash more. They stared up at the little waddy, and the white men went for their six-guns.

Red scrambled back over the edge. A bullet spattered at his heels. Angry shouts followed him as he ran—and more lead. The carrot-topped puncher streaked across the hilltop as fast as his bowed legs could carry him.

The white men followed, and some of the Indians. Before he reached the other side of the hill, bullets buzzed after him like so many deadly hornets. He flung himself down the slope and leaped into the saddle.

Red was thankful, that afternoon, for his sorrel's sure-footed speed. Standing on the edge of the hill, the men blazed away at him. Red did not pause to return the fire.

"Distance," he muttered, "helps the heart beat longer."

Twelve against one, the way Red Kesley figured, were anyhow eleven too many.

Galloping into the ZB yard a couple of hours later, Red pulled his six-gun and fired twice into the air. Instantly, half a dozen men came running out to see what was wrong. Red sat on his lathered horse and grinned.

"What the consarn goshdang!" Lanky Tom Gibbons, sour-faced foreman of the ZB spread, glared at the little puncher. "Are yuh tryin' tuh be funny, or are yuh just a little crazier'n usual?"

"I'm serious as a broke back," Red declared. "I've been shot at."

"Somebody had a good idea," Gibbons snapped. "Pull this stunt

any more, an' I'll do some shootin', also. But *I* won't miss."

"Old Man" Chase, the barrel-chested, white-haired owner of the ZB, took his scarred, unlighted pipe from his mouth and pointed it at Red.

"Tom is right," he said. "If yuh got some news, we'd rather have it without gettin' scared half out of our skin."

"And it had better be good," Alf Chase added.

"It ain't," Red said, sliding to the ground. "It's bad." He turned to Vincente, the Yaqui, who was standing near Alf. "It's about yore friends, the Tupans," he explained. "From all I could see, they must be aimin' tuh start a war."

The Yaqui's lean, copper-colored face clouded at mention of the Tupans, ancient and bitter enemies of his tribe. As Red told briefly what he had seen and how, at an awkward moment, his presence had been discovered, Vincente's lithe muscles tensed and his dark, hooded eyes narrowed to mere pin points of light.

"How many guns?" he asked.

"Plenty. They had three pack hosses. I slipped before I got a good look-see."

"And the leader of these Tupans?"

"Ugly as sin," Red declared. "I bet he'd scare himself if he ever seen that face of his——"

"Zeukha!"

Suppressed rage showed in every fiber of the Yaqui's powerful body. Clad only in faded blue dungarees, with a belt of braided leather to hold them up, the Indian stood as a splendid specimen of desert-bred manhood. He turned to Old Man Chase, face stern, mouth pressed into a thin line.

"Zeukha is head medicine man of the Tupans," he explained. "He buys guns for but one reason—for use against my people. I must go at once, señor, and warn them!"

Excitement flared in Alf's agate-gray eyes. "Reckon I'll be going along," he said.

"Me, too!" Red Kesley hopped around as if something was biting him, for he knew that things were usually likely to happen when Alf Chase and his Yaqui friend started out together.

"Nothin' doin'!" Tom Gibbons growled. "Yuh've got a job of work tuh do right here."

Red looked glum. "If that ain't gratitude!" he complained. "All right, I quit! I ain't goin' tuh nurse no cows when there's a chance of seein' some lead fly. Not so's yuh could notice——"

"Goshsarn condang it!" Gibbons exploded. "Is this a cow outfit, or a Injun protective association?"

Old Man Chase held up a caloused hand.

"Vincente has helped the ZB more times than I can remember," he said. "Won't hurt none tuh do him a good turn now an' then. Tom, I'd suggest that both yuh an' Red go along."

The scowl faded from the tall foreman's face. Red whooped.

Leaving the ZB almost at once, Vincente and Alf, with Red and Gibbons, headed for the wash where the little puncher had witnessed the beginnings of the barter of guns for gold. Arrived there, they found nothing but ashes of the signal fire and a great confusion of tracks.

"Shucks!" Red grunted, visibly disappointed, "I guess I scared 'em off."

"Sure!" The tall foreman snorted. "They ran when they seen yuh. Only yuh ran faster."

"Proves I'm smart," Red declared.

Though Vincente said nothing, Alf Chase could see that he was worried. Armed with rifles, the Tupan braves might easily wipe out the whole Yaqui village—a thing they had been trying to do for many years. They wanted for their own the fertile mountain-rimmed valley where Vincente's people lived.

"What we goin' tuh do?" Gibbons asked. "Foller them jaspers what brought the guns or take after the Injuns?"

"We'll trail the Tupans," Alf decided. "If those other three hang around, we can deal with them later on."

Vincente nodded, eager to be on the way. It was an all-night ride to the Yaqui village and to the nearby country of the Tupans. So the four turned southward, soon leaving ZB range and crossing into Mexico.

They rode all night, striking deep into an increasingly rugged country. Red was the only one who had much to say, but he contrived to do enough talking for the rest of them.

Vincente halted his saddleless horse and slid to the ground.

"Wait here," he said softly. "We are near the Tupan village. I go to see what they are doing."

"Better take a six-gun," Alf suggested. "If they got as many new guns as Red claims, that dagger of yours won't be much account."

"My dagger is silent," Vincente said, moving toward a clump of manzanita. Even as the young rancher watched, the Yaqui vanished.

Gibbons and Kesley, veterans of the saddle, promptly rolled on the ground and went to sleep, realizing

the advantage of getting rest whenever possible. Both snored. Remembering their recent argument, Alf grinned. They sounded like a couple of bullfrogs in twilight chorus.

There were no other sounds. Usually, at this hour, an early breeze stirred, and birds began to sing.

As Alf watched, gray light spread through an overcast sky. The whole world seemed to be hushed, as if waiting for something dreadful to happen. Alf did not like it. He believed that the Tupans, if they were up to some devilment, should be beating tom-toms and screaming the wild songs of their war dance.

An hour passed. It was quite bright. Alf yawned, closed his eyes and stretched.

"You are weary, my friend," Vincente said.

Alf jumped to his feet. As silently as he had gone away, the Yaqui had returned. A heavy frown rested on his lean face.

"What did you find out?" Alf asked.

"Too much. The Tupan village is deserted."

"Deserted!" Alf echoed. He stared at Red and Tom, who were awake and sitting up. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Vincente said unhappily, "that every second is precious. That the Tupans have already left to attack my people. That even the old men, and the women and children, have gone along, so sure are they of victory!"

"That bein' the case," Red muttered, "we'd better get a wiggle on."

Flinging himself into the saddle, he galloped away. The others clattered after him, with Vincente quickly taking the lead.

II.

Near the summit of a narrow pass, Vincente halted and raised his hand. Alf glanced at the half-clouded sun. It was a couple of hours high. They had made excellent time from the Tupan village.

Asking Gibbons and Red to remain with the sweating horses, Vincente beckoned to the young rancher. Afoot, he and Alf continued up the pass, careful to make no noise.

They might have spared themselves that trouble, for presently great uproar reached their ears. Running on to the divide, where the pass fell away in a wide notch to the valley floor, they beheld a scene of wildest confusion.

Evidently the Tupan attack had just begun. At first glance, people seemed to be rushing everywhere. Some shouted; others screamed. Vincente, standing tense, muttered under his breath.

After a moment, Alf was able to pick out the Tupans, because of the brightly colored war paint which decorated them. They had all the best of it. Surprised by the sudden onslaught, the Yaquis were fleeing in helpless disorder from their homes.

Gradually their flight turned to a battling retreat. Armed with bows and arrows, and with any other hastily grabbed thing which could serve as a weapon, the Yaqui braves were closing in behind their women and children, who fled in terror across the valley.

Alf clenched his brown fists; his gray eyes burned with rage. But he, like his distracted friend, was powerless to do anything, just then, but watch. They were too far away; they had arrived too late.

"A thousand curses on the Tupans!" Vincente exclaimed bitterly. "Must their evil tribe be wiped out before my people know peace?"

"There are four of us," Alf began. "Maybe——"

Vincente spread his hands. "Against two hundred, my friend, we would be powerless. You forget—many of the Tupans have guns."

"But they're not using them!" Alf cried. "What do you figure——"

He stopped short. Dozens of white puffs, like shreds of cotton, suddenly appeared among the Tupans. A few seconds later, the friends heard the sharp, rolling echo of the volley, along with startled shouts of the Yaquis.

Several of the latter dropped in their tracks and were still. Instantly, they spread out, offering a less compact target for the enemy bullets.

"Zeukha is clever," Vincente muttered. "But he will pay for this! First he makes a surprise attack on the village. Then he breaks up the retreat with unexpected gunfire. But——" His voice broke off; he caught Alf's arm. "See!" he exclaimed. "My people have reached the foot of that high cliff!"

"I don't get it," Alf said. "That's as far as they can go!"

Even as he watched, the Yaquis began to toil up the face of the cliff. Evidently a steep, narrow path was there. Disregarding the Tupan guns, a handful of braves remained far out on the valley floor, covering the flight of their own people. And there they stood, at frightful cost to themselves, stemming the Tupan advance with flight after flight of glistening arrows.

Alf's heart swelled with admiration. Now, better than ever before, he could understand Vincente's fine qualities—his courage and self-

sacrifice. These things, seemingly, were the heritage of every Yaqui.

"That patch of shadow you see is really a cave," Vincente explained. "Though not very deep, it is wide. For longer than the oldest brave can remember, that cave has been stored with dried meats and fruit, with water and grain and weapons—plenty of food for a month, arrows enough to hold off the strongest enemy."

Alf nodded somberly. Arrows! What good were they against the death-dealing accuracy of rifles?

Planning his attack with fiendish skill, Zeukha had kept his guns silent until it was too late for the disorganized Yaquis to turn elsewhere. Whether or not they understood the dreadful peril which hung over them, they had to keep on climbing up to that cave.

Arrows could not reach its height. But bullets could. That storage cave would have been an excellent place of refuge from invaders armed only with bows and arrows; from it the warriors could launch counter-attacks while their women and children remained safe.

Alf realized, probably before Vincente, what a ghastly death trap that cave could become under the fire of the Tupan rifles.

It seemed to Alf that he had been watching for an eternity, so helpless did he feel. In reality, only a few minutes had passed since the battle began. Now all Yaquis but the few braves on the valley floor had reached the cave.

Seeing this, the survivors turned and ran for the shelving path. More than half their number remained behind—twisted, inert figures which were mute evidence of the deadliness of Tupan bullets.

Nor did all of those courageous fighters live to reach the cave, which

was not far from the top of the cliff. Advancing again, the Tupans took deliberate aim. It was horrible to see those helpless men picked off of that steep trail, and to be unable to do anything about it.

But the watchers were to behold a sight still more cruelly grim when the last Yaqui brave staggered into the patch of shadow up on the face of the cliff. The firing did not cease. Instead, it became more intense; and soon, through the booming echoes, Alf could hear screams of agony and terror.

Vincente turned to him with haggard eyes. "They are aiming at the roof of the cave!" he shouted. "It slopes downward. The bullets glance—kill! The cave is not deep. My people, they will be slaughtered!"

Alf nodded bleakly. Never had he seen his friend so thoroughly dismayed. The shooting abruptly ceased.

"Zeukha knows that my people are helpless!" Vincente said. "Now he plans to torture them by firing a few bullets at a time."

The Indian's face hardened. Alf knew that rocky, masklike expression. It meant Vincente had decided on a course of action.

But what could Vincente do now? Already, it seemed to Alf, the Yaquis had got themselves into a position from which there was no possibility of escape, not the remotest chance for rescue.

"Come!" Vincente said.

Turning, he sped down the pass, toward the place where Red and Gibbons and the horses were waiting.

III.

Never, in all his saddle days, had Alf experienced such a ride as the one on which Vincente now led him.

The Yaqui smoked down mountain-sides so steep that it seemed impossible to reach bottom in anything but a fatal plunge; and for every sliding drop, there was a lunging ascent.

How Vincente managed without a saddle, the young Arizonan could not guess; he was ever hard put to keep from going on his own neck. Time and again, he breathed thanks that Ink, his all-black horse, was sure-footed and trustworthy.

Red and Gibbons also managed to keep up. After all, with the fate of a whole tribe depending on their haste, there was no time for considering either their mounts or themselves.

Vincente did not explain his plan, but Alf saw that his intention was to circle the valley and approach the cave from above. What he meant to do then, the young Arizonan could not guess.

After one last, heartbreaking climb, the four from ZB reached the level of the valley rim. The horses heaved, but they kept on going, as if they, too, realized the necessity of giving their best efforts.

As they neared the cliff edge, they could hear shooting once more. It came at irregular intervals, and never heavily, though each round was followed by cries of pain and hate and fear. Zeukha, wicked medicine man of the Tupans, was torturing the whole Yaqui tribe—and in his own deadly, slow fashion.

Flinging himself off his horse, Vincente crouched low and ran to the edge of the cliff. The others followed. Because of an overhang, the cave was not visible. But on the floor of the valley, the Tupans who had rifles were spread in a wide half circle, just out of reach of an arrow's flight. Alf judged that there were about thirty so armed.

Others, with spears and bows and arrows, stood farther back, plainly enjoying the relentless slaughter. Unless the Yaquis made a break, which would have been little short of suicide, this group had nothing to do.

Zeukha was among them, clad in the brilliant red robes of his office, strutting about like a rooster. Ugly indeed was Zeukha, with a deep-lined face twisted into a gloatingly cruel expression.

Peering down cautiously, the four friends themselves remained unseen. The whole attention of the Tupans was fixed on the massacre cave. Alf noted an interesting fact. The guns of the enemy were old and clumsy, and not a few seemed more dangerous to the men who used them than to any one else.

Here was another reason for Zeukha's withholding use of the guns until the routed tribe had nearly reached the storage cave, with no other place to turn. In more equal circumstances, arrows would have been nearly as effective. Now, with the Yaquis trapped, the awkward rifles were all too deadly.

"Good thing them Tupans is takin' their time 'bout bumpin' the Yaquis off," Red muttered. "If they was tuh do some serious shootin', Vincente wouldn't have no more people'n a dodo."

"Too many have died already," Vincente said bitterly. "We must make haste."

The four withdrew from the edge of the cliff to a point where they could stand without being seen from below. Vincente pointed down the slope to a gully where tall, slender saplings grew in abundance.

"Bring many of those," he told Red and Tom. "We must make a ladder."

"A ladder!" Alf exclaimed. "Why do we——"

"There is no other way," Vincente said. "We must get my people out of that cave!"

"They won't have a chance!" the young rancher cried. "They'll be picked off——"

"We must give them a chance," the Yaqui interrupted. "Gather rocks, my friend—big rocks—and see that your six-gun is ready!"

Shaking his head doubtfully, Alf started to lug boulders, dropping them near the edge of the cliff. Red and Gibbons returned with armloads of saplings, already stripped of their branches. Slicing into them with his long, double-edged dagger, Vincente fashioned notches, fitted the ends together, and bound them with strands unbraided from Red's rawhide rope.

No one wasted a second. The sun came from behind its curtain of cloud and blazed down on them. Steady but slow firing continued in the valley. Naturally, all the bullets, fired at random against the sloping roof of the cave, could not find a mark. But an occasional stricken cry told that far too many jagged, glancing shots were dealing death to the trapped tribe.

The fact that women and children must certainly be victims of the murderous fire made no difference to the Tupans. Clearly, their intention was to slay every Yaqui before they were through. The cave was not deep, and the slant of the roof exposed every part of it to glancing lead.

Working swiftly, Vincente completed the sides of the ladder. Laid parallel, they were then notched, and rungs lashed to them. When Red's rawhide and the foreman's maguey rope, cut into short lengths, were used, the Yaqui finished the

job with tough fibers of the agave which grew plentifully thereabouts. Alf's lariat was needed for another purpose.

Thus, hurriedly, a strong but light ladder was built. Finished, it measured better than fifty feet. Catching it, the four men lifted it to the cliff rim, laying it along the edge.

From below, a great shout went up as some one discovered them. The Tupans stirred angrily; the bow-and-arrow men came running forward, as if their futile weapons might be of some use in driving the intruders away.

The rifle fire was lifted from the massacre cave. Lead thudded into the cliff walls, whined overhead. Alf and the two white men dropped down, pulling their six-guns. For a moment, the Yaqui stood defiant, shaking his fist.

He was recognized. Who but Vincente could that tall bronzed figure be? His name was taken up and shouted in fury; but in the voices of the Tupans there was a hint of awe, too. Many times the Yaqui had faced his age-old enemies, driving them to defeat. And here he was again!

"Vincente!" they cried, and their tones held the same note of alarm with which they might have announced the approach of a fierce storm or a seething flood. "Vincente!"

The invisible Yaquis took up the cry, but it swelled from their throats with sudden hope. Vincente had come! Never before had he failed them; he could not fail them now!

Zeukha darted forward, red robes fluttering, and wildly waved his arms. Alf could hear his shrill, excited voice, undoubtedly telling his followers that they had nothing to fear.

But even at that moment, bullets

from the ZB six-guns began to hail among them, and they beat hasty retreat—with Zeukha among the first to run!

Vincente made a loop around the lower end of the ladder with Alf's rope. Then, while Red took pot shots at the Tupans, Alf and Gibbons caught the other end of the ladder. It was then shoved over the edge of the cliff, with Vincente lowering his end carefully. Though it was strong enough to support the weight of several men at once, it had not been built to endure sharp strains or rough handling.

The Tupans howled with rage when they beheld the ladder. They charged forward again; nor were Red's well-placed bullets enough to drive them back. They blasted the edge of the cliff with lead, and the echoes of the gunshots boomed like summer thunder across the valley.

But Alf and his companions were careful to expose themselves no more than necessary. Even so, a bullet snipped through the peak of Alf's black Stetson, and the peppery Red swore when another bullet cut a crimson channel across his arm.

When the ladder was upright, Vincente flipped the rope and caused it to come free. Then he quickly lashed the upper end of the ladder to a stunted but strong tree which grew at the very edge of the cliff, its roots deeply anchored in the rock.

An uproar came from the cave. A flight of arrows glanced into the sun, but they fell far short of the Tupan riflemen. An eager Yaqui brave, walking dangerously on a log which was thrust out from the lip of the cave, caught the free end of the ladder and swung it inward.

Anxious hands grabbed the ladder. Then, as he started to return, the brave's body jerked. Clutching

at his spurting neck, he tottered and fell. Alf saw his body smash against the boulders far below—saw it hurtle outward and come to rest, a twisted and broken thing, not far from the Tupans who had killed him.

Vincente shouted to his tribesmen. No one, he commanded, should attempt to scale the ladder until he descended and made certain that it would hold together. Then he turned to his friends.

"Now it is up to you!" he said, his voice low and tense. "My people live, if you can hold the Tupans off!"

"Hold 'em off, nothin'!" Red snorted. "We'll smash 'em down!"

With that, he shoved the first big boulder. Alf and Tom Gibbons quickly followed suit. To the cries of hate and hope, to the thunder of guns, another sound was added—the terrific crash and rattle of falling, bounding stone.

The overhang sheltered the cave, and the rocks were shoved off well away from the ladder. Pausing a moment to test the highest rungs, Vincente let himself down, going so fast that he actually seemed to be falling.

A fusillade of shots greeted his move. Alf saw puffs of powdered rock spurt up, dangerously near his friend. He grabbed his six-gun and began to blaze away at the enemy. Red and Tom continued to push boulders over the edge.

And they turned the trick. Striking far below, after dropping with ever-increasing speed for hundreds of feet, the great rocks appeared to explode like so many bombs. Spinning, jagged fragments went raking across the lower slope, cutting dark trails through the tall grass, leveling whatever brush that happened to be in the way, snuffing the life from

those luckless Tupans who could not escape the widely spreading fan of destruction.

Terror-stricken, they fled. Still Red and Tom pushed large rocks and small over the cliff. The noise made by that hail of stone was terrific; it smothered out all else, save an occasional death cry which pierced through as a flinty splinter found a mark.

And so, for the moment, Vincente was safe. Alf saw him disappear, as if the cliff had swallowed him.

Almost immediately, the Yaquis began to climb out of the deadly cave. The women came first, followed by men with children and the wounded clinging desperately to their shoulders. But every one of them, it seemed to Alf, carried some sort of hurt.

The Tupans were still determined to do all the harm they could. Though many of their riflemen lay still, other braves faced about and rushed back toward the cliff. Circling, they came in from the sides, where there was far less danger from the flying chunks of stone. And they used their rifles.

An old man, white of hair, reached for the top rung of the ladder. A bullet smashed his hand. With a groan, more horrible than any scream of terror, he plummeted downward, sweeping two others off the ladder, and so to their death.

"Get them Tupans!" Alf shouted.

Red and Tom raced in opposite directions along the top of the cliff. Their six-guns barked angrily, spilling lead directly down on the foe. Again the Tupan riflemen beat a hasty retreat, while Alf continued to hurl rocks down the face of the cliff.

One, remaining intact and bounding far, almost wiped the red-robed Zeukha into eternity. The young Arizonan was sorry it hadn't. Tak-

ing no further chances, the medicine man fell far beyond reach of the death-dealing boulders.

Meanwhile, with the Tupan riflemen diminished by half and driven back, the rest of the Yaquis escaped from the cave. Last of all came Vincente, his long face carved deep with sorrow over the horrors he had seen. The dead lay thick on the gory floor of that hideous high place.

"It is frightful, my friend!" Vincente said as he pulled himself over the cliff rim. Sadness laid a heavy hand on him, making him seem weary. "Frightful—and this day's fighting is not done!"

He turned to glare at the huddled Tupans, to scowl at their women who stood in wailing groups near the edge of the village. An expression of intense, bitter hatred darkened his face.

"These Tupans still foul the air of this valley with their presence," he added. "We must drive them out!"

IV.

All the able braves, at Vincente's command, had brought bows and a plentiful supply of war arrows with them from the storage cave. The tall Yaqui spoke briefly to them. They split into two sections and raced down the slope. Vincente turned to Red.

"If you will remain here," he told the little waddy, "and see that no Tupans return for the rifles of their slain, great will be my thanks."

With a fleeting smile, Vincente turned and hurried down the slope. Alf and Gibbons trotted after him, leaving Red with the Yaqui women, children and wounded, and with the four ZB mounts.

Alf wondered what his friend's plan could be. There was no time

to ask. They neared the bottom of the slope and turned into a wash. It cut back to the valley in a series of abrupt steps down which no horse could have gone. That answered Alf's question as to why they didn't ride.

Coming into the valley, Alf saw the main group of Tupan warriors standing uncertainly near the middle. A few attempted to get at the guns of their slain companions, but Red, blasting at them joyously with his six-gun, held them back. When they saw Vincente and his two white friends, they ran to re-join their fellows.

Alf now noticed many small groups of men around the edges of the lower end of the valley. They were Yaquis, he saw, and they were all advancing slowly, relentlessly toward the crowd of worried invaders.

These, finally, began to move away, to walk, to run. Vainly did Zeukha scream after them, commanding them to halt, to fight like men. But the Tupans, abject cowards at heart, were brave only when they had the best of things.

Their careful plans had failed. Vincente had come. The Yaquis had got out of the death cave. Many of their own men had been mowed down by that frightful bombardment of rock. Of their rifles, in which they had placed so much reliance, more than half were silent.

So they fled, those Tupans, with Zeukha racing after them. When the women saw that the battle was not won, but practically lost, they abandoned the Yaqui village which they had so noisily possessed only a short while before. They went toward the pass, with their defeated braves making every effort to catch up.

Alf and Gibbons, following Vincente, sped after the Tupans. So,

too, did each small group of Yaquis, until, in an ever-tightening half circle, Vincente and his followers closed in on the enemy, like riders upon a herd of cattle.

And the Tupans stampeded like a herd of frightened cattle. Those with rifles paused to fire occasionally on the Yaquis, but the bullets went far of their marks.

In return, they had a taste of ZB lead, and always it was a rifleman who dropped. Too, Yaqui arrows flashed in the sun, ever hissing closer to their mark.

Realizing that their only hope lay in getting out of that death-ridden valley as quickly as possible, the Tupans gave up all pretense of covering their retreat. Some even threw away the dearly bought rifles, knowing that they were useless now, and that their weight made running slower.

Last of all the Tupans went Zeukha. Arrows dropped about him and stood quivering in his tracks, and Gibbons paused to aim certainly with his six-gun. Vincente bellowed a command:

"Let no one slay the medicine man!" he cried. "That task remains for me!"

Frantically, as if he heard his doom in that command, Zeukha tried to increase his speed. His effort was vain. Zeukha ran last of all, and not for reasons of courage or through desire to fight to the end for his routed men. He ran last of all because his flowing red robes, mark of his office, caught in his legs, impeded his progress.

Time and again, he shot despairing glances over his shoulder. The tall Yaqui, as fleet as a deer, unhindered by unnecessary clothing, gained rapidly, drawing away from Alf and Tom, from all the others.

And so Zeukha was left alone,

with no one nearer him than his mortal enemy. His people, whom he had led to near victory and sudden, disastrous retreat, pounded through the Yaqui village and toward the safety of the pass without so much as a backward glance for the man who had failed them.

At last, realizing it was useless to run farther, Zeukha halted. He groped in the folds of his robe, whipped out a dagger that glinted in the sun. Then, with defiance and hatred and fear twisting his ugly features, he waited for Vincente, poised like a coiled snake about to strike.

Vincente met him with a rush. Like fighting cocks they lunged at each other, careless of the hurts they might themselves receive, thinking only of dealing a fatal blow to the despised enemy.

Bright steel blades traced dazzling arcs in the sunlight. Alf saw the Tupan's knife slice into Vincente's shoulder, saw the Yaqui's dagger draw a crimson line across Zeukha's evil face. They broke apart. They plunged at each other again.

Metal clashed on metal; the blades locked at the hilts. Each leaped back, closed in again, thrusting with quick, vicious jabs. A dark stain appeared on the medicine man's robe, and fresh crimson streamed from a gash along the Yaqui's side. Once more, they parted.

The Yaqui braves raced past. Evidently they knew that this was a fight to the finish, and plainly they had no doubt as to its outcome.

Alf and Gibbons stopped close by. Zeukha was a powerful man, skilled in the use of the knife. Let Vincente make one false move, and that wicked blade would strike deep at some vital spot.

Another leap, another clang of steel, click of hilts! The two men

battled face to face, bare body to robed body, straining mightily. The muscles of Vincente's back stood high, and they bulged across his powerful shoulders. Alf stared and clenched his fists. Gibbons muttered, fumbling nervously at his gun.

For an eternity, they seemed to stand that way. Then, with lightninglike swiftness, Vincente twisted, wrenched his dagger free, leaped to one side. He moved with the suddenness of a powerful, abruptly released spring.

Zeukha's blade swept down with terrific speed. Alf gasped. It missed Vincente's side by narrowest of margins. Thrown off balance by sheer force of the thrust, Zeukha took a quick step forward.

At the same instant, Vincente retreated one pace, keeping in front of his foe. His right arm struck upward. The dagger shone brilliantly, flashing toward the Tupan's chest. The glitter vanished.

Brought to a sudden stop by the violence of that death blow, Zeukha pitched backward to the ground, arms outspread. His own knife dropped from limp, lifeless fingers. The hilt of the Yaqui's dagger quivered above the medicine man's heart, pinning the robe to his chest. Around the hilt, a fresh stain quickly spread, darker and redder than the crimson of the cloth.

Vincente turned to face his friends. The fury faded from his hooded eyes, to be replaced by an expression of sorrow.

"Once more, my people suffer at the hands of the Tupans," he said, "but here is one who will never bother them again."

From up in the pass, a triumphant, echoing cry floated down to the valley—the victory shout of the Yaquis. Throwing his head far back, Vincente answered in kind.

The echoes caught the sound, amplified it, tossed it from cliff to cliff until the whole valley seemed to rejoice.

When the last note faded, Vincente shrugged.

"And now," he said, "we have unhappy work to do."

Red Kesley came riding across the valley, leading Alf's and Tom's

horses. Each animal was burdened with a wounded man.

"How about it, Red?" Vincente asked. "Did you get enough fighting for one day?"

The little cow-puncher blinked his round green eyes.

"Dangdang sarnsarn—as Tom'd say!" he muttered. "I've had enough for anyhow two weeks!"



THE RANGERS' OUTLAW LIST

WHEN Major John B. Jones was directing the activities of the newly organized force of Texas Rangers, he soon found that it would be necessary to assist civil officers in the enforcement of law on the frontier. He communicated with the authorities in each county of the State and procured from them a list of their "wanted" citizens, many of whom had fled to the frontier to dodge the law.

This list, with a complete description of every outlaw whose name was on it, was printed and bound, and a copy was given to every company of Rangers.

The descriptions of the outlaws were accurate and complete to the smallest detail, and it was the thoroughness of these details that caught the fugitives more often than not.

Their names didn't mean much, as they could change them as often as they changed the scene of their activities. But the color of their eyes, any peculiarity of speech or movement, such as a lisp or a limp—these they could not change.

The Rangers had good memories, and the Outlaw List was their favorite book. It did not take them long to spot a stranger, whose personal defects—and sometimes at-

tractions—were indelibly impressed upon their minds. They might forget a name, but a squint, or a missing finger, or eyes that were odd or unusual in color, or a stutter, were always remembered, and connected with some crime.

All these old-time outlaws were not marked by disfigurements, neither were they all ugly. Quite the contrary. Many of them were fine-looking men, with pleasing manners and a smile that would banish any suspicion that the ordinary person might have.

But the Rangers were not ordinary persons.

That disarming smile, the white teeth, and the eyes with the friendly beam, were on the list, and marked a clever cattle rustler, or horse thief, and sometimes even a murderer. Often, the educated son of a good family who had taken the owl-hoot trail through necessity, or for adventure.

His traits, his speech, his cultured manner, were more convincing and more enduring, and more easily recognized by the Ranger than any cattle brand.

They gave the outlaw away just as surely as a hump on his back or a broken nose would, if he happened to be described on the outlaw list.



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.

YUH know, it's kinda fun tuh speculate now an' then on the number of people who follow this hyar song department, an' what they do. Pity we can't all gather tuhgether in person an' see fer ourselves!

I hope thet whatever yuh spend most of yore time doin', yuh ap-

proach the Corral with a feelin' of pleasure an' relief from whatever ails yuh.

First, I'm gonna give yuh a piece of somebody's mind about Arizona. This song was sent in some time ago by Gus Johnson, of Minnesota, who has sent us several interestin' songs, as yuh may remember. He says it

was recited by Charles Brown, fifty years ago, in Congress Hall, Tucson, Arizona.

ARIZONA

The devil was given permission one day
To select him a land for his own special
sway;

So he hunted around for a month or more,
And fussed and fumed and terribly swore.
But at last was delighted a country to view
Where the prickly pear and the mesquite
grew.

With a survey brief without further excuse,
He stood on the bank of the Santa Cruz.

He saw there were some improvements to
make

For he felt his own reputation at stake.
An idea struck him, and he swore by his
horns

To make a complete vegetation of thorns.
He studded the land with the prickly pear
And scattered the cactus everywhere:
The Spanish dagger, sharp-pointed and tall,
And at last the chollas to outstick them all.

He imported Apaches direct from hell
With a legion of skunks, with a loud, loud
smell

To perfume the country he loved so well.
And then for his life he couldn't see why
The river need any more water supply.
And he swore if he gave it another drop
You might have his head and horns for a
mop.

He filled the river with sand till 'twas al-
most dry

And poisoned the land with alkali;
And promised himself on its slimy brink
To control all who from it should drink.
He saw there was one improvement to
make;

So he imported the scorpion, tarantula, and
snake;

That all that might come to this country
to dwell

Would be sure to think it was almost like
hell.

He fixed the heat at a hundred and 'leven,
And banished forever the moisture from
heaven.

And remarked as he heard his furnaces
roar

That the heat might reach five hundred
more;

And after he fixed things so thorny and
well,

He said: I'll be darned if this don't beat
hell.

Then he flapped his wings and away he
flew
And vanished from earth in a blaze of blue.

Thar's another longer version of
this song, called "Hell in Texas,"
an' sometimes it's sung as "The
Founding of New Mexico." Which
State got the song first, I don't
know, but it looks like the senti-
ments fer all the States is plumb
u-nan-i-mous. Whew! Thet word's
somethin' worth spellin'!

Now hyar's a song thet we sung a
long time ago, but tuh-day I'm
givin' it tuh yuh *with* the music.
It's a song thet was obtained by Mr.
Frank Dobie from a Miss Burton, of
Texas, who learned it from a young
feller who was "callin' on her," years
ago. As the song talks about Injun
fightin', yuh kin be sure thet it's a
mighty old one—an' it's a cowboy
song.

NOT LONG SINCE, A YOUNG GIRL AND I FELL IN LOVE*

Not long since, a young girl
And I fell in love;
I courted her as treasure,
As I would lay above.

She being like all other girls,
I fear she would not do;
Since I have come to study,
My bargain I will rue.

She thought by her flattering tongue
And by her silly voice
That she would try to lead me
To a fool's paradise.

Me being more wiser
Than she had taken me to be,
I'll never prevent her marrying,
Since she's gone back on me.

So now at last we parted.
She said: "My love, good-by;
If I never see you again,
On the dreary plains you'll die.

* Reprinted by kind permission of the Texas Folklore Society from an article entitled "Ballads and Songs of the Frontier Folk," by J. Frank Dobie, published in their Publications VI, entitled "Texas and Southwestern Lore."

"Remember what I've told you,
And keep it in your mind,
For the girl that loves you the dearest
Is the girl you left behind."

Come, all you rambling cowboys,
A warning take from me:
Don't be so easy to fall in love
With every girl you see.



"I'll cross the Rocky Mountains,
Where the savage Indians dwell;
I'll cross the dreary plains,
Where many a cowboy fell."

Your head'll bend in trouble,
Your heart will ache with pain.
The girl you love so dearest,
You'll never see again.

And now I am so lonely
On the wild and dreary plain,
For the girl I love so dearly,
I'll never see again.

So long, folks! I'll be with yuh
next week!



A PIONEER'S DIFFICULTIES

A PIONEER of the Canadian Rockies, Lewis John Swift, had his eighty-first birthday a short time ago. Friends gathered at his original homestead near Jasper, Alberta, to celebrate the event, and Mr. Swift took great delight in comparing the conditions of the old times with those of to-day.

He came to Alberta from Ohio, and after making a trip through the Athabasca Valley, he established a farm in a wild, unnamed section that is now known as Henry House, near the foot of Pyramid Mountain.

With the aid of a homemade irrigation plant, he harnessed a mountain stream, raised wheat and other crops, and milled his own flour. He went to Edmonton over a pack trail

of two hundred and twenty-five miles, and brought pigs in on horseback over the same trail.

Cows came on their own hoofs until the transcontinental railway was built, years later, when both the horned critters and the pigs were able to travel in comfort.

Mr. Swift thinks that people were happier then than they are now, for they had to do everything for themselves and had no one else to blame if they were not so well done as they should be. He says that this made them less fussy and more considerate of the workers.

He is hale and hearty and happy. Although he does not expect ever to carry pigs on horseback again, he is ready for anything.



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.

WAAL, folks, vacation time is on, an' I suppose it means idle hours tuh many among the readers. That's the time when bein' a Pen Pal is of value! That's no need tuh mope, no matter whether the sun is out or it's rainin',

as long as yo're a Pen Pal an' only need tuh sit down an' write a letter tuh have distraction an' pastime.

Yuh don't know who tuh write tuh? Waal, jest buy the *latest* issue o' the W. W. W., look up the Pen Pal Department, an' if yuh don't

find more willin' correspondents than yuh need, I'll— Yes, I'll eat my old sombrero! Now lamp this week's letters:

TRADIN' COUNTER

These are letters from collectors of stamps, songs, an' sech who are willin' tuh trade. They give yuh the finest chance in the world tuh enlarge yore own collection of whatever yuh fancy, but "fair an' square" is the rule.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twenty-two. I love music and play the organ as well as the guitar. That is perhaps the principal reason why I am interested in collecting songs; and with reference to this hobby of mine, I ask that you try and get Pen Pals for me abroad or in this country with whom I can exchange cowboy as well as sacred songs.

GINGER, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get a few Pen Pals in foreign countries who collect stamps because there is the chance that we can trade to mutual advantage. Note, however, that I am primarily interested in getting correspondents—in other words, I am anxious to receive and write letters, hence whether or not your Pen Pals are collectors, I hope they will write to me. I am a young man, twenty-one years old.

FRANK BRYGI, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of thirteen, and I come to you to ask for Pen Pals. Not that I am lonesome, because I am popular and have many friends, but I collect songs and wish to find friends with whom I can trade. Do your best to connect me with some one.

V. FRANKLIN, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: If you have any Pen Pals who are interested in learning more about this country, and who will exchange postal cards and snaps, let them write to me. Foreigners are invited to get in touch with me, as well as Pals in the West. I am a willing learner of what is old and new, so you will have a wide range as far as writing is concerned. I am a boy, eighteen years old.

CECIL THOMAS, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I wonder whether any one among your readers rides the same hobby as I do. I am collecting cigar bands, and

I am a member of the "International Cigar Band Society." If any one cares to exchange or desires something else in trade for cigar bands, have him write, but he should inclose a stamp for the reply. I am a man in the twenties, and while I prefer to correspond with fellows around my own age, I promise to answer any letter I receive.

DICK PATTON, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a young married woman, nineteen years old, very happy but nevertheless lonely at times. I have been collecting songs since my early youth, and while I have several thousands of them now, I am continuing to enlarge the collection and for that reason, would like to get Pen Pals who are also interested in that manner. I have done a lot of traveling through sagebrush and prairie and may be able to interest Pen Pals in more than one way. At any rate, I promise to answer every one who will write to me. I hope there will be many of them.

MRS. PEGGY B., OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: Please help me find some Pen Pals. I am especially interested in making contacts with some Western girls, but I am ready to answer any one who writes to me. My hobbies are sports of all kinds and collecting songs as well as postal cards and snaps. Of course, I will gladly trade with any one who is similarly interested. Girls in the teens, which is my own age, are preferred.

ELLIE HARRIS, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: We are two girls of eleven and thirteen years of age, longing for Pen Pals, about as old as we are, ourselves. We both live on farms and, of course, enjoy outdoor sports, especially horseback riding. However, we are also interested in cowboy songs and offer to trade with any one who will write to us on that subject. All letters will be answered.

DOT AND ELI., OF NORTH DAKOTA.

SPECIALS

A couple o' letters from Pen Pals who offer information on this an' that an' requests thet're jest a bit out o' the ordinary. Worth while readin', all o' them.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen living in the country. I would appreciate it very much if you could find some Pen Pals for

me, especially girls who reside in the West. If a cowgirl would answer my request, I would be pleased beyond measure, because I am interested in their way of life and desire to know more about it. However, every letter I receive will be answered, and I hope I will have a busy time doing it.

ANNIE, OF SCOTLAND.

DEAR SAM: I have been reading 3W for some time now and must say that I enjoy the magazine more and more. Somehow or other, anything that concerns the West gets hold of me and naturally increases my desire to learn more of it. That is also the reason why I desire to join the Pen Pals. I hope to make contacts with some Western fellows who can satisfy my longing for more information. I am a young man of twenty-two; age of my correspondent is, however, of no consequence. Write to me, young or old, and I shall answer.

TOM HOLDER, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I wonder whether you will do something for my friend, Jennie, and I. Our English teacher thought it would be nice for us if we could correspond with girls in other countries, because it would broaden our viewpoint and understanding. She suggested a correspondence club, and as I realized that the W. W. W. maintains a Pen Pal Department, I of course thought of you. Please invite some girls of about sixteen years old in foreign countries to get in touch with us, and we shall certainly thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

DOROTHY AND JENNIE,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen. I would like to get Pen Pals anywhere in the world, and I promise to give interesting information on the State in which I live, as well as about other questions which may be asked. I have traveled quite a bit and will be only too glad to talk of what I have seen and experienced. Snaps will be exchanged. JUNE COOPER, OF COLORADO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, in search of Pen Pals of my own age anywhere in the world. I lived on a ranch for a number of years, so that I can write interestingly on that subject which, I hope, will induce many Pen Pals to write to me. I also collect cowboy songs and will trade them, as well as with snaps of all sorts. The point is, have Pen Pals write to me soon and often.

MARY ANN PALMER, OF COLORADO.

LONESOME HEARTS

Whoever has been lonesome an' felt forgotten knows that a letter received at the right moment did a lot tuh change things fer the better. A few words o' sympathy have dried many tears o' loneliness, an' that bein' so, if yuh've got the real Pen Pal spirit, yuh'll hasten tuh answer these hyar letters.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, thirteen years old, and I come to you for help because I believe that you can do something for me. You see, I am very lonesome, and I think that if you could get some girls to write to me I would get away from the blues. Please do your best and have some girls write to me, and I will do all I can to make the correspondence interesting to any and every one who answers this plea.

MARTHA HAFFER, OF NORTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen and very lonesome. I am hopeful of getting some Pen Pals, because I think writing and receiving letters will cheer me. Please get some girls interested in me. They may know from the start that I will be only too glad to answer all letters received.

LONE ESTHER, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I realize that through your Pen Pal department you have brought relief and happiness to many hearts and since I am now in need of cheer, I write to ask that you hold out a helping hand to me. My husband died only a short while ago, so you may realize that I have to live through many lonely, sad hours, and you will understand how welcome Pen Pal letters would be. I invite any one to write, no matter how old, married or single, and promise to answer every letter I receive. I am thirty-two years old and have a daughter of thirteen.

MRS. DIXON, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen, exceedingly lonely, and therefore very anxious to be one of the Pen Pals. I love all outdoor sports and promise to make my letters interesting, especially to those who desire more detailed information about the State I live in. Please interest Pen Pals in my plea, no matter where they may live or how old they are.

FRANCIS KLINE, OF COLORADO.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely lad of eighteen, and I would love to hear from Pen Pals anywhere, especially across the seas, because I feel that correspondence would do a lot toward making things brighter for me. There must be other "Lonesomes" in the world who would be glad to have an opportunity to write to a fellow sufferer. I am hopefully waiting.

JACK LONDON, OF OKLAHOMA.

WESTERNERS WANTED

Thar's no section o' the U. S. A. of more interest than the West, with all its possibilities an' characteristics. No wonder folks want tuh get first-hand info about it an' thet they're comin' tuh the W. W. W. Pen Pals fer it. Don't disapp'int 'em, gals an' boys who happen tuh be fortunate enough tuh be children o' the West.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve and because I am so much interested in the West, I am asking you to bring me in contact with boys out there. Fellows of my age who live in Northern States are also welcome to write.

JOHNNIE MANN, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve. I am interested in Pen Pals, especially if they are girls living in the West. Please try to put me in touch with girls in the West. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps.

I. McC., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen. I would like to get in touch with cowboys or fellows of around my own age who live on ranches. My object is to find boys who have and are willing to trade Western things, no matter what. Just write to me, fellows, tell me what you got and what you want, and the trade is well near made.

STANLEY MAKSYM, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen. I would like to get Pen Pals out West, no matter how old, as long as they will be faithful correspondents. Will also gladly exchange snaps and, of course, answer all letters received.

WAYNE KING, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl past sixteen. I am a reader of the W. W. W. because all things Western interest me. It is for that reason, also, that I would like to get some Pen Pals in Western States. I prefer girls who live in Wyoming, Texas, or Wisconsin, although I am ready to answer letters no matter where they come from.

ELOISE DEWESE, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of thirteen. Ever since I saw my first Western movie, I have been hankering to make the acquaintance of a cowgirl. Now that I realize what the Pen Pal Department is like, I feel that I am near the fulfillment of my hope. Please get a cowgirl to write to me, and you may assure her that her letters will be promptly answered.

BETTY PAUL, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen, just r'arin' to travel. For this year, my aim is to visit the West, because it is that part of our dear old U. S. A. that seems to hold a special attraction for me. Before I go on my trip, I would like to make friends with some girls there, and I consider your department just the medium I need to do so. Let me hear from you, Western gals.

BERNICE ANTONE, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of eighteen, anxious to get some Pen Pals who live in the West. I would like it especially well if you could induce some rangers in one of the National Parks to write to me. I am almost equally interested in hearing from fellows who live on ranches. I live on a small farm, and that is one reason why info about the wide-open spaces of the West would be welcome as a contrast to the conditions under which I live. Boys from Wyoming and Colorado please answer this plea.

TASKER, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, sixteen years of age. While I am a city boy, all my hobbies concern outdoor sports, and for that reason, I am interested in the West more than in any other part of the country. I surely expect to visit the West in the near future and, with this in mind, I am asking Western Pen Pals to get in touch with me for exchange of information for our mutual satisfaction and benefit.

CHARLES FOX, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow of seventeen. As a reader of the W. W. W., I became greatly interested in the West, and I would now like to get in touch with real Westerners of whom I can ask more detailed information. Please tell the boys to write to me promptly.

OSCAR RAY, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: Here is my request for some Pen Pals from Western States. I am a boy of sixteen, and I invite any Westerner of that age or older to answer this request. As I expect to go West, myself, it is only natural that I try to make friends there, because I will need info about living conditions, work possibilities, et cetera, that only friends can give.

MONTIE P., OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of nineteen. The thing I am most interested in is to get more information about the West, especially the State of Texas. I would like nothing better than to find work on some ranch in Texas, and I am asking you to print this request with the thought that perhaps some Pen Pal will assist me.

JACK SEE, OF KENTUCKY.

OTHER LETTERS

Of a general nature, no favors asked, no ax tuh grind—jest letters askin' fer Pen Pals hyar an' thar,

but letters thet are, nevertheless, interestin' readin'.

DEAR SAM: I have read the W. W. W. for quite some time, and I have finally decided to try and be a Pen Pal—one of the many who are corresponding through you. I am a boy of fifteen, and I would prefer to correspond with boys of my own age, although that is not a definite condition. Boys from all over the world, if this request interests you, please write. You can be sure that you will receive a reply by return mail.

GEORGE FORAN, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, thirteen years old. I would like to have Pen Pals, and I hope you will be good enough to tell girls of my own age, anywhere in the world, to get in touch with me. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

LOIS KNABE, OF KANSAS.

Thar we are, folks; no better collection o' letters was ever published. If yuh don't find the Pen Pal yo're lookin' fer, it shore ain't my fault; mebbe yo're too "selective." That's a word my old friend, "Ironhead Pete" used, referrin' to mosquitoes thet attacked his posse! So long till next week.

YOUR CHANCE TO GET A PORTRAIT OF THE WHISTLIN' KID

Coupon No. 3

By clipping this coupon and putting it with Coupon No. 1, which appeared in the June 22 issue of 3W, and Coupon No. 2, which appeared in the issue of June 29, and sending all three together to

The Whistlin' Kid, care of Street & Smith's WILD WEST WEEKLY 79 Seventh Avenue New York, N. Y.

you can get a beautiful, full-color portrait of that fighting young range detective, Pete Prentiss, better known as the Whistlin' Kid.

Remember it takes a complete set of three coupons to get it—this one and Nos. 1 and 2, from the issues of June 22 and June 29.

Name

Address

(Please print name and address)



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.

KID WOLF, the Soldier o' Misfortune from the Rio Grande country, is on hand fer this week's meetin' o' the 3W spread. So is Bud Jones, thet rip-snortin' Texas Ranger. The other two hombres besides us are Calamity Boggs an' his bow-legged little pard, Shorty Stevens.

Calamity, as usual, is moanin' an' groanin' somethin' turrible. His hand's all wrapped up in a bandanna neckerchief, an' he keeps hold of it all the time like it was plumb painful.

"What's the matter with yuh, Calamity?" asks Bud Jones. "Did some big bad hombre shoot yuh in yore dew-claw?"

"Worse'n thet, Bud," groans the big, curly-haired waddy. "This is turrible. Already I kin feel blood-pizenin' settin' in. Purty soon I'm

agoin' ter contract lockjaw, too. Then, even if I don't cash in o' the pizenin', I'll starve ter death from not bein' able ter open my mouth. But I knowed it all the time. My luck is awful. The signs has been all agin' me since——"

"Aw, fer the love o' Pete, pipe down, yuh big moose!" snaps Shorty. "Quit yore belly-achin', or I'll tell the hull gang what really did happen ter yuh."

Calamity looks plumb scared, at thet. He shuts up, pronto. But the rest o' the outfit pricks up their ears.

"What's yore gloomy pard been inter now, Shorty?" we asks.

Shorty grins, as he looks at Calamity an' sees the big cuss git kind o' white around the gills.

"Sorry, Boss," he answers, "but I done promised the big moose thet if he'd lay off his complainin' durin'

the meetin', I'd keep his secret. I let 'im git by with that one burst o' gloom. The next one, though, an' I spill the beans."

Calamity groans, but don't say nothin'. An' everybody at meetin' kin see that *this time* he's really got somethin'—whatever it may be—ter groan about.

"If I was a gamblah," drawls Kid Wolf, with a chuckle, "I'd lay even money that we find out what the trouble is, afore the meetin' is ovah."

The gang laughs, an' pore Calamity looks sadder'n ever.

"How're the pitchers goin', Boss?" Bud Jones asks then.

"Fine, Bud," we answers. "An' thet reminds us that we got ter announce ter the readin' hombres that this is the last pitcher offer. After the third coupon fer the Whistlin' Kid's pitcher is printed, this week, there won't be no more—at least fer a while."

Calamity Boggs sighs with somethin' thet sounds a lot like relief. Reckon he was worried thet mebbe we'd ask him ter set fer his portrait. Mebbe we will, at thet, some time. But fer a while now, he's safe.

"How come yo' ah stoppin' now?" asks Kid Wolf.

"Waal, Kid, it's like this. The response ter them pitcher offers has been somethin' tremendous. Every Monday mornin' after the third coupon fer any one o' the pitchers appeared on the stands, the office was plumb snowed under with the letters. It kept right up, too. Now, with the storm o' requests fer the Kid's pitcher soon ter break, we're still gittin' requests fer Sonny Tabor's pitcher. So we thought we'd jest lay off fer a while an' let things kind o' calm down. An' we're still ter hear, o' course, from

the readin' hombres who live on tother sides o' the oceans."

"Kin the readin' hombres still git copies o' them pitchers?" asks Shorty Stevens.

"Shore," we replies. "All they got ter do is send in the coupons from the right issues. If they ain't got 'em, they kin order 'em from our Subscription Department, fer fifteen cents apiece. Fer their benefit, we'll soon be printin' a complete list o' the pitcher offers, with the dates an' all."

An' now, we reckon, it's time ter git goin' with the business o' the evenin', which same is lettin' the waddies on hand—an' the readin' hombres—take a squint at a small hunk o' the mail thet's blown in, this week. Here's the first letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We two readin' hombres shore appreciate the fact thet yuh liked our first letter ter yore Corner. So we're writin' ag'in, hopin' yuh'll find room fer it.

We sort o' like the idea o' havin' the Circle J pards with us every week. Like thet Gene Ramon hombre says, them Montana waddies kind o' keep more spirit in the good ol' 3W.

Boss, we realize as how yuh cain't please all us readin' hombres. So we suggests thet when some important question pops up, yuh jest do what yuh think is right. Thet was Davy Crockett's motto, an' he was a real Westerner.

Boss, it would be sort o' nice if yuh would print short sketches on the lives o' Bill Cody, Davy Crockett, General Custer, and other hombres who helped make the West. Think it over.

Well, so long fer this time, Boss. Remember thet we're backin' yore 3W policies. Good luck ter all the gang.

THE VIKING BROTHERS.

Ironton, Ohio.

Glad ter hear from yuh ag'in, Vikings. Drop around ag'in, some evenin', although we cain't guarantee ter print every one o' yore letters. We'll be plumb interested ter see what the other readin' hombres

and *muchachas* think o' yore idea about short sketches on the lives o' famous Westerners.

Now here's another letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner. I've been reading the 3W for four years, and I think it's the "top."

My favorite hombres are as follows: Circle J, Cougar Fang, Sonny Tabor, Hungry an' Rusty, Calamity Boggs, Shorty Masters, and Bullwhip Adams.

Say, how about having a popularity contest in 3W. You could print a small coupon in the magazine and ask every reading hombre to vote for his favorite waddy. Then you could put in the favorite hombres more often.

Yours till Joe Scott shoots Buck Foster,
BILLY WEST, II.

Brooklyn, New York.

Waal, there's another idea fer the readin' hombres ter think over. We hope thet when they've got it all thought over, they sets down an' writes us about it.

It jest occurs ter us, howsomever, thet the most popular waddies soon wouldn't be so popular if they was in a story every week. We kin imagine folks gittin' tired even o' Sonny Tabor if they had ter read about him every week.

Here's another one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, but I've read 3W for about four or five years. I think it is the very best magazine published. I sure like every waddy on your spread.

I think Buck Foster is a real, honest-to-goodness he-man. I hope he knocks Joe Scott's block off. Maybe that'll teach that red-headed nuisance a thing or two.

A lot of readers write in and tell you how bad Bud Jones is. Well, all I've got to say is that they sure don't know what they're talkin' about. Bud Jones is plumb O. K.—a lot better than those two fake Rangers, Hungry and Rusty.

I have a question I want to ask you: Can a reading hombre subscribe ter W. W. W.—so it'll come to him every week in the mail?

Yours till Buck burns his vest,
WALLACE HARTWIG.

Yuh shore kin subscribe ter 3W, Wallace! So kin any other readin' hombre who wants ter. The price is six dollars a year, or three dollars fer six months. Send yore orders, with a money order fer the right amount, ter the Subscription Department, an' yuh'll be took care of pronto.

The next letter we reads is this here one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I don't have any favorites among your waddies. I idolize them all.

Not long ago, a loco hombre said somethin' about Billy West's being a sissy. If he wants a fight about Billy West, I am waiting.

The durned fool also told you to take George Krumm and the Whistlin' Kid—of all people—out of the magazine! Dog-gone him, I'll bet that he hasn't missed a story about Billy West, the Kid, or Johnny Forty-five since he started reading 3W.

Here's hoping that this letter has got steam enough to pass by the wastebasket. Yours till I can read the Wranglers Corner without getting mad at some skunk,

MILDRED LEWINS.

Wewahitchka, Florida.

That one hands the gang a laugh. It gives 'em all a kick ter have one o' the readin' hombres stick up fer 'em so strong. Billy West an' the Whistlin' Kid—ter say nothin' o' George Krumm—will be glad ter see thet letter, too.

Now, here's the last one we got time fer ter-night:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading your magazine for two years, and I think it is the best magazine on the news stands. Three cheers for W. W. W.!

I like all your waddies except one. That one is the Terror of Evildoers, George Krumm. He sure is a coward. Johnny better get rid of him pronto.

The readers who say that Bud Jones is a poor Ranger give me a pain. He's all right. Tell him not to pay any attention to those who say he isn't.

I sure enjoy the Circle J stories. Buck

Foster is great. Print more stories of all your waddies, except George Krumm.

Well, I'm afraid this letter is already too long to be printed in the Corner. Adios, and good luck, **ETHEL MAE HOLT.**

Hardesty, Oklahoma.

Jest as we lays that letter down, Calamity Boggs fergits his deal with Shorty Stevens an' starts moanin' an' groanin' somethin' fierce. He allows as how he's got misery in his stomach an' is about ter cash in his chips.

"I'm a-dyin'," he begins. "I——"

"All right, Shorty!" yips Bud Jones. "Yuh kin spill the beans now. What really is the matter with Calamity's hand?"

Shorty Stevens grins at Calamity.

"Why," he says, "this here big galoot what's the toughest hombre in a scrap yuh ever saw, an' who's the slickest gun-slinger in the South-west—almost—he bought a cap pistol ter give ter a kid on Fourth o' July. Jest as he handed it ter the kid, the hammer fell an' pinched his finger. Yuh should 'a' heard him yelp. He——"

But Shorty don't say no more. He's runnin' out after Calamity who's high-tailin' it fer his bronc. An' the rest o' the gang is right behind Shorty, all whoopin' an' laughin'.

Which same is the end o' the meetin'. There'll be another one next week. **THE RANGE BOSS.**

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

THE OKLAHOMA KID BUILDS A NOOSE

Novelette

By **LEE BOND**

After watchin' so many hombres build one fer him, the Kid is plumb expert at the job. It jest fits the two-legged skunk it's made fer, after the Kid slows him up some with lead.

RAIDERS FROM LONG S

Novelette

By **CLEVE ENDICOTT**

When one o' the good neighbors o' Billy West's Circle J spread gits inter trouble, the saddle pards hit the trail, an' said trouble gits busted quick.

PHANTOM OF THE FLAMES

Novelette

By **WALKER TOMPKINS**

There are still a few snakes lurkin' around the old town o' Deathville. The Phantom, his father, an' a big posse go after 'em, an' the Kiona Mountains echo with six-gun shots.

Also stories of Jimmy Quick, by Frank J. Litchfield; Shorty Masters, M.D., by Allan R. Bosworth—and other characters.

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