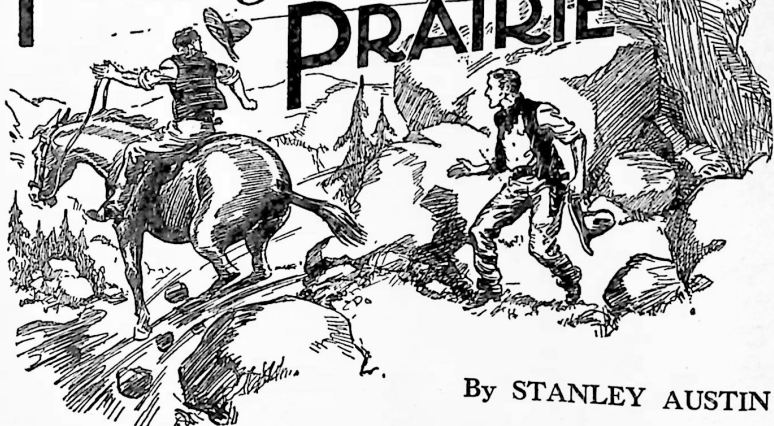


FOES of the PRAIRIE



By STANLEY AUSTIN

THE FIRST CHAPTER THE HIDDEN MARKSMAN!

CRACK!
Something buzzed like an angry wasp past Jim Hardman's lean face, and spanged into the rock-face, sending splinters flying like hail.

There followed the distant bark of a rifle, and hardly had the echoes ceased ringing through the gorge than Jim had jumped clear of his plunging roan and quickly ducked behind a mass of rocks.

Then he whipped out his six-gun, his eyes gleaming angrily as he stared out, searching for a tell-tale puff of smoke that would betray the whereabouts of the unseen rifleman.

Almost at once came another distant crack, and this time Jim's keen, grey eyes glimpsed a puff of white

smoke above a jumbled mass of rock high up the canyon. Yet even as he glimpsed it, Jim whirled round at a sudden crashing of hoofs behind him.

Then he understood. For another horseman had appeared round a bend in the trail, and Jim realised that the newcomer was the target of the unseen marksman.

This time the zipping lead had gone nearer the mark. It had evidently wounded the stranger's horse, which was plunging and kicking furiously, whilst its rider tugged desperately at the reins.

With a startled cry of warning Jim leaped to his feet, heedless of the danger from the deadly unseen rifleman. He ran forward, realising the stranger's danger from another quarter.

But he was too late.

A nerve-tingling yarn of a bitter feud between two ranch-owners that will grip your interest from start to finish.

A last frantic scrambling of flaying hoofs, a warning yell from its rider, and then both horse and rider vanished over the edge of the bluff amid a shower of stones, a shrill, terrified scream coming from the horse.

The rifle was silent now. Jim reached the crumbling edge of the rocky bluff and peered over. In the gorge below swirled the sullen waters of the Lushwara, black and turgid. It was not a great drop, but dangerous enough none the less. At once his anxious eyes sighted the horse, swimming gamely against the stream, and making at a tangent for the opposite bank. Of the rider he could see no sign.

With grim face Jim Hardman ran back to his horse, leaped into the saddle and spurred down the rocky trail at a reckless pace. His horse, more than once, slipped perilously amid showers of rock and shale. But Jim kept his head, and a tight hand on the rein. In a matter of seconds, it seemed, they reached river level.

Jim's eyes scanned the turgid river. Next moment he was spurring his mount into the water. More than once had Jim Hardman forded the Lushwara at this spot in the dry season. But now the river was swollen with the recent heavy rains, and it was a far different proposition.

For a few yards the roan retained its footing. Then, as the water reached its shoulders, the horse struck out boldly, while Jim kicked free of the stirrups and leaned well back in the saddle to help keep his horse's head up high.

For Jim, in that brief glance, had glimpsed a dark spot floating in the water, and he knew there was just a fighting chance of saving a life. In addition to the dark head, he had glimpsed a feebly moving arm that told him the swimmer was either injured or exhausted.

"That guy hasn't a chance in a million on his own in this flood," Jim gritted. "Steady, Laddie!"

Fear seemed to have gripped the roan as he felt the pull of the current. But Jim's encouraging voice steadied his plunging. Already the dark head of the swimmer was on a level with them. Jim turned his horse's head downstream to get ahead, then swung the roan towards the man. The real fight began as the horse swam gamely against the current at an angle that should bring them in the course of the vainly struggling figure in midstream.

Above the roar of the swollen river, Jim's voice shouted encouragement both to his horse and the stranger battling for his life. They were in midstream now, and Jim turned the roan's head to face the current.

Nobly the animal struggled, but despite its utmost efforts he began to drift slowly in the torrent's grip. To Jim this scarcely mattered now, however, for the swimmer was almost upon them. Three yards away he went under, and Jim's heart sank. But the man's head reappeared the next instant, and swiftly Jim snatched his lariat from the side of his saddle and threw.

"Look out, stranger! Grab it!"

Fortunately, the exhausted man saw and understood. The snaking rope slapped over him, his arm jerked up, and he caught it. Jim hauled in, and a minute later the man was hanging on to one of the stirrups.

Jim turned the horse's head downstream again. They were nearing a bend in the river now, and here Jim hoped to win the final struggle.

Rapidly the bend came nearer, and soon the roan was fighting gamely again as he strove to gain the left bank. As Jim expected, the current had already taken them shorewards, and his eyes gleamed with hope as



The moment the drowning man's head reappeared, Jim swiftly snatched his lariat and threw. "Look out, stranger!" he yelled as the noose slapped over the man. "Grab it!"

he suddenly sighted a short tree stump near the water-line.

"Hold on, stranger! Steady, Laddie!"

Jim clipped out the words, and prepared to bring the lariat into use again. He found the free stirrup with his foot, steadied himself in the saddle, and made a swift, desperate cast.

Rarely did Jim Hardman miss a cast, but the distance was great and his position unsteady. Yet eye and skill did not fail him. The rope snaked out, hovered a brief instant over the blackened stump and then settled down snugly over it.

Jim pulled it taut with a grunt of

satisfaction, and took three turns with the end round the saddle-horn.

The rope tightened. The roan suddenly swung in-shore, and his head went under once. He started to plunge violently, but again Jim's voice steadied him. He struck out again, and the rope, holding the horse against the current, did the rest. Swiftly the struggling horse drew his double burden shorewards, and Jim gave a sudden whoop of joy as Laddie's feet suddenly found foothold.

He scrambled ashore, shaking water from him in showers. Jim leaped from the saddle, grabbed the exhausted man by the belt and dragged him out of the shallow water on to dry land.

He lay there, utterly spent for some moments. Then the man dragged him over to his feet and gave his rescuer a feeble grin.

"Danged close call, friend," he said, holding out a brown, firm hand. "I guess you've saved my life. I'm Ben Lewis, and if ever I can return the compliment, I sure will."

"I can see that," laughed Jim, eyeing the metal button of a Forest Ranger that the stranger wore.

"Ranger, aren't you?"

"Yep! Sent down to see the new quarantine orders are enforced," was the grim answer. "Say, d'you happen to own a spread round here? You look——"

"My young brother and I run one—the Bar F—over in High Grass Valley," said Jim. "Jim Hardman's my name."

"I guess I called at the Bar F yesterday with notices about the new orders," was the smiling response. "You weren't at home, but I reckon it was your brother I saw. Nice kid, and a danged nice little spread you've got. Waal, so long as you don't get so plumb foolish as to try runnin' stock in or outer this district while quarantine orders are in force, you and me'll get on fine."

He paused, and then his smoke-grey eyes hardened like steel.

"And now we've got acquainted, what about this bit of shooting jest now?" he went on. "Those shots came from up the canyon, and I'm kinder curious to know who's so anxious to ventilate me. It's the third time lead's been pumped at me from a hidden marksman since I came into the district a week ago. Any bad men round here, Hardman?"

"None—no professional bad men, anyway," said Jim, with a puzzled frown. "Beats me who it could be."

"Huh! I weren't expectin' to be popular round here," said Lewis, his

eyes narrowing. "But—say, d'you happen to be friendly with the folks over at the Lazy L."

"Not any," said Jim briefly. "Old Hank Tanker is a coyote, and his son Del's as bad. The old man wants to buy the Bar F and he's sworn to hound us out if we won't sell."

"I know the breed," said Lewis, nodding. "Hard-fisted old land-grabber who won't be satisfied till he owns everything in sight. Any reason why he objects ter visitors?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Only that old Hank seems shy at meetin' me," grinned the Ranger. "I called yesterday and the day before, but he weren't at home—though I got a sorta glimpse of the old hunks both times. Leastways, I gotter notion I seen him in the house. Hombre with grey beard and hair, ain't he?"

"That's him," said Jim, nodding. "Queer he didn't see you."

"He did see me," said the Ranger drily, "but it weren't his at-home day, I reckon. Waal, I'll be meeting up with you again, mebbe soon."

With a friendly nod the Ranger walked away, squeezing the water from his clothes as he went. His horse had landed safely higher up, and was busy cropping grass now. Jim watched Lewis ride away, and then he mounted his own horse. Forging the river lower down where it was safer, Jim was soon jogging homewards, his mind busy with the strange mystery. Who had shot at the new Ranger? And why? He felt certain that Ben Lewis was not without his own suspicions.

He met his brother Steve on the steps of the veranda of the little ranch-house. Steve was a mere boy, little more than sixteen at most. Jim saw at once from his angry face that something unusual had disturbed him.

"What's wrong, Steve?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing much, Jim—only Del Tanker's been here again throwing his weight about," said Steve grimly. "I say, Jim, we'll have to look out—those coyotes mean business. Del came complaining about our cattle straying on his land again. Says he'll shoot any more he finds."

"Let him dare, and he'll get more shooting than he wants," snapped Jim, his eyes glinting. "Aren't they cuttin' the durned wire of th' fences themselves so our stock will stray through and give 'em chance to cause trouble? That's the game, Steve."

"I know. But it can't go on much longer, Jim," said Steve dispiritedly. "They're stronger than we are. And Del was making threats again—says his father's going to run us off the range and mighty soon."

"Well, we've held our own so far, Steve," said Jim. "We're sticking it out, kid. But we've got to keep our eyes peeled, young 'un. Mind you watch out while I'm over at Rocksville to-night."

THE SECOND CHAPTER

A BLOW FOR THE BROTHERS.

JIM HARDMAN started out for Rocksville after tea that evening on his usual weekly trip for odd provisions, tobacco and other small items required. It was a good thirty-mile ride, and, as darkness fell, he tethered his horse and made preparations to camp for the night, as was his usual custom.

He had selected a bunch of cottonwoods on the prairie for his camping place, and soon he was collecting dry sticks to build a fire. This done, Jim made the unpleasant discovery that he had no matches.

"Jumping snakes, can you beat that?" he grunted, speaking to his hobbled horse as he often did when the

two were alone. "No matches, and that means no coffee and no fire! Ain't I jest a tin-horn tenderfoot to go an' forget them?"

There was no help for it, however. He would have to dispense with a fire and coffee. He took his coffee-pot to the spring hard by and filled it with crystal water. It was when returning to the camp that he halted suddenly as the sound of hoofs and wheels came from the trail twenty yards away.

In the dim starlight he glimpsed the shadowy form of a buckboard drawn by two horses, while behind rode two horsemen.

The sight struck him as a strange one at that hour of the night, but, at the moment, the thought of a chance to get a match came first.

He dropped his pot and ran out on to the trail. The driver of the buckboard must have seen him at once, and could not fail to have heard his friendly greeting. Yet he came on, even lashing the horses to greater speed.

Jim would have been run down, in fact, had he not jumped backwards, his upflung hands grasping the reins and sending the horses back on their haunches.

The driver yelled furiously—and it was only then that Jim recognised him as Del Tanker.

"Yew blamed scum, get outer th' way!" yelled Tanker. "Yew all-fired galoot, let loose them reins!"

"Easy with your words, Del Tanker!" snapped Jim. "I guess if I'd known it was you—"

Jim broke off and leapt back again—but too late to escape the lash of the whip in the infuriated Del's hands. The lash curled round his shoulders, cutting through the flannel shirt. Jim's eyes went hard as steel. A quick grab, and his hand closed over Del Tanker's foot. Next moment,

with a wild yell, the rancher's son was hauled from his seat on the front of the buckboard. He fell on the trail with a mighty crash, the whip flying from his hand.

He scrambled up again instantly, blind rage in his eyes. He sprang at Jim—to meet a punch that lifted him clean off his feet. He crashed down again, and this time Jim dragged him to his feet.

"Get up, you cowardly coyote!" yelled Jim, furiously angry. "I'll teach you to lay a whip on me! I'll give you what you've been asking for for months!"

Del Tanker's fist slammed out, but Jim slid under it. His own fist landed home with a smack like a flat board on water. Del Tanker landed on his back under the hoofs of the horses. They immediately began to plunge dangerously, and Jim grabbed his enemy's leg and hauled him out of danger.

He turned suddenly as a cold circle of steel bored into his neck.

"That's enough from you, hombre!" came a cold voice. "Beat it—and beat it pronto!"

It was one of the cowpokes, who had leaped from his mount and come to Del's rescue. Jim knew better than to argue with a six-gun. Still ramming his gun into Jim's neck, the man—a hard-bitten rascal like all of Tanker's men—turned to Del as that raging youth staggered to his feet.

"Say the word, boss, and I guess I'll ventilate this hombre!" he suggested.

Del Tanker did not answer. He struck Jim clean across the face with his flat palm, picked up his quirt, and leaped into his seat again. Snatching the reins, he lashed at the horses. They plunged into motion, and both Jim and the cowpoke leaped aside just in time.

The horses broke into a mad gallop,

and the buckboard rumbled away in a cloud of dust. Without a word the cowpoke holstered his gun and leaped into the saddle of his horse. Then he and his companion rode on fast after the vanishing buckboard.

Jim Hardman stood alone on the trail, staring after them blankly.

"Well, that beats it!" was Jim's comment as he returned to camp. "Seems like as if Del was mighty feared of me pokin' my nose into his business. Has he bin robbing the Rocksville bank or what?"

As he ate his sandwiches Jim pondered over the mystery, but found no solution.

Supper over, Jim threw his slicker on the ground, rolled up in an oilskin and a saddle blanket, and speedily fell asleep, with his saddle for a pillow.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, and after breakfast and a hasty wash at the spring he resumed his long journey. The sun was high when he rode, dusty and travel-stained, into Rocksville. On the outskirts of the cow-town the trail ran past the Veterinary Service Experimental Station, and Jim drew rein and called there.

Joe Winter, who had once been a cowhand at the Bar F, worked at the station, and Jim generally stopped for a few minutes' friendly chat. Jim found him leaning over the rails of the corral staring moodily at a couple of steers which Jim could see at a glance were dying from foot-and-mouth disease.

Joe was a long, dismal-looking individual, and he did not even smile at Jim's cheery greeting.

"What's the matter now, Joe?" demanded Jim. "Shucks! Somebody been rustling yore invalids?"

Jim was joking, of course, and certainly didn't expect the reply he got.

"Seems like they hev," was the indignant reply. "Jinxed, that's what this hyer outfit is—jinxed! Say, Jim, you ain't seen nothing of a dead steer lying about th' trail when you come?"

"Gee! I ain't. Why, you ain't been and gone and turned any of yore beasts out for an airing, I hope," gasped Jim. "You wouldn't be so plumb foolish——"

"Nope! But one's gone since last night, and there's going ter be a mighty rookus about it when th' boss knows," said Joe darkly. "I tell you, Jim, this outfit's jinxed. Cows can't fly, and one couldn't hev jumped over this hyer fence—specially one as was dying. And nobody'd rustle a diseased beef-critter, would they? I arks you!"

"You'll find the beast all right, Joe," said Jim. "You're seeing things as ain't there, or not seeing things as are there."

With that Jim rode on into town, being unable to offer any suggestions or advice. He supposed Joe was making a mistake—it seemed impossible to think anything else, in fact.

Jim's first task was to get outside a steaming jugful of hot coffee, and for the next two hours he was making calls and buying the things he wanted. Then he rode out of town and made tracks for home.

The journey back was uneventful,

and just after noon he reached the ranch-house. To his surprise he found Ben Lewis the Ranger with his brother, and Jim saw from their grave faces that something unusual had happened. Steve, indeed, was white of face and he hurried to meet Jim in an agitated state that quite frightened the elder brother.

"Steve, what's wrong, lad?" de-



A quick grab, and Jim's hand closed over Del Tanker's foot. Next moment the rancher's son was hauled from his seat, and he fell on the trail with a crash.

manded Jim, catching his arm. "You look——"

"Jim, we're done," said Steve in a low, broken voice. "Something has happened—something mighty serious, old man. Here's the Ranger—he'll tell you."

Ben Lewis came up, his eyes grave, his square chin hard.

"I'm sorry, Hardman," he said quietly, "but I've durned bad news

for you. I've just found one of yore steers dead——"

"Dead!" Sudden fear came to Jim Hardman. "Dead! You don't mean——"

"I do," snapped Lewis. "It died of foot-and-mouth disease, Hardman. There ain't no doubt about it. I've seen it."

Jim was incredulous. Yet he felt as if an icy hand had clutched at his heart.

"You're sure it's one of our beasts, Lewis?"

"Shure! It's got yore brand, Hardman! Better come and see it."

The three got their horses and rode away across the pastureland. A couple of miles Steve led the way, and suddenly he stopped and pointed. In the long, lush grass lay a steer on its side—a steer with scaly hoofs and coat rough and uneven. The signs were unmistakable, and silently Lewis pointed to the brand. It was the Bar F brand. Jim gulped.

"But—how—why—it's impossible, Lewis!"

"Seeing's believing," said Lewis. "I'm sorry, Hardman—durned sorry, especially after what you done yesterday. But duty's duty. I've got my job to do. Orders are that if a diseased beast's found all the herd's gotter be destroyed. My job now is to shoot and burn hide an' hair of all yore stock. You'll get compensation, of course."

Jim gave a bitter, angry growl.

"Compensation or not, it means ruin for us, Lewis," he said hoarsely. "We're heavily mortgaged with Lawyer Beat at Rocksville—and that skunk Tanker's behind him. The State compensation money will come too late to save us from foreclosure. We were depending on the fall sales to see us through. And now—well, even if the money came in time, it'd

be far less than we'd have got for the critters at the sales."

"I reckon yore right. But it can't be helped, Hardman. I'm only here to enforce th' law, lad!"

Jim stared dully at the Ranger. But in the official's smoke-grey eyes he saw no weakening; no hope. They were hard and adamant. Despite the debt he owed Jim—though Jim was the last to have counted upon that—he meant to do his duty.

In silence Jim mounted his horse again. Steve followed suit, his eyes showing his misery. The Ranger mounted and rode away in the opposite direction.

The two brothers rode home without a word. All their years of work, all their slaving and sacrifices, had come to nothing. They would lose their stock, their home—the ranch they loved so much.

It was ruin.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

THE STAMPEDE!

CHIN LO, the Chinese cook, brought in the brothers' dinner, but they sat down with little appetite for food. They had scarcely discussed the situation—they couldn't. Both seemed stunned by the sudden, overwhelming blow—a blow like a bolt from the blue.

Yet Jim's jaw was firm and his eyes glinted as he ate. Strange thoughts were working in his mind, and his young brother eyed him silently. Suddenly Jim pushed aside his plate with a muttered exclamation.

"Steve," he said, his voice trembling with sudden excitement, "we're going to have another look-see at that steer—and right now!"

"Why, Jim——"

"Never mind why—yet!" snapped Jim, his voice now steady. "Get yore horse, Steve."

A few minutes later the brothers were mounted, riding back hard for the meadow in which the dead steer had been found. Jim forced his mount to a mad gallop. Reaching the spot, he flung himself from the saddle. As Steve joined him a few seconds later, Jim pointed to the brand on the animal.

"Look at that, Steve—look at it!"

"I—it's our brand right enough, Jim; I only wish it wasn't!"

"It's our brand. But it durned well isn't our steer!" blazed Jim, and Steve had never seen him so enraged. "It's a dirty frame-up! I knew it. Last night I met Del Tanker driving their buckboard from Rocksville—at near midnight! I thought it mighty queer, then. But—listen, kid!"

And Jim related his adventure the night before on the trail.

"And that ain't all," he finished grimly. "I spoke to Joe Winter this morning, Steve. He was all het-up because one of his invalid cows had vanished mysteriously-like. He said the outfit was jinxed. Now d'you see what I'm aiming at? Joe loses one of his sick cows last night, and I meet Del Tanker driving a covered buckboard comin' from Rocksville at midnight—and afraid of anyone stopping him."

"Jim—you surely can't mean——" gasped Steve.

"I do. Who was it told the Ranger about this beast here, Steve?"

Steve jumped.

"One of Tanker's cowboys told him—said he'd found it when hunting for a stray this morning, Jim!" he said breathlessly.

"I knew it! It's a frame-up, Steve! Tanker stole that sick beast, planted it here, and told the Ranger. Why? 'Cause he knew what the Ranger would have to do. 'Cause he knew it'd be ruin for us—Lawyer

Beat would foreclose, and he'd buy the ranch up."

"But the brand, Jim—you're forgetting the brand!"

"Forgetting nothing, kid. Use yore eyes! That brand's been done quite recently—durned recently. And we haven't branded a single critter since branding season. Look at it!"

Steve breathed hard as he gazed at the brand. It was easy enough to see the point now Jim mentioned it. The brand was new—indeed, it was amazing the Ranger hadn't noticed it. That alone was proof enough that the animal was not theirs—that someone else had got hold of their branding-iron and branded it.

"But the durned skunks won't beat us yet, Steve!" snapped Jim. "Quick—we got to find Lewis before he starts work. I'll race for his cabin in the hills now. Case he ain't there you'd best slip back home, get the men together and send 'em out in search of Lewis. Then you follow me up in case there's trouble. I'm seeing Tanker afterwards!"

Jim leaped on to his horse and galloped away. He was not fated to reach the Ranger's cabin, however. For even as he started his horse up the steep rise leading to the Ranger's cabin beyond Crooked Canyon, four horsemen emerged from a cleft leading into the heart of the canyon itself.

The four were old Hank Tanker, his son Del, and two cowpokes. At sight of them a gust of anger took possession of Jim, and he forgot caution.

"Hi, you, Hank Tanker!" he yelled. "I gotter have a settlement with you. I've rumbled to yore durned trickery, you coyote! It was you who planted that dead steer on me—stole it from the corral at Rocksville! I got proof, and I'm going to prove it!"

Old Hank stood stock-still, his hand on the bridle of the horse he was leading. He did not deny the accusation. His blue eyes, cold and cruel, bored into Jim's.

"So yew found that out, hev you?" he said coldly. "And yew kin prove it, Hardman?"

"Yeah—you bet I can, you sneak-ing skunk!"

"Then," said old Hank softly, "I reckon yore as good as dead, Hardman. Put 'em up!"

The voice was steely. Jim's hand whipped down for his own gun as he sighted Hank's six-gun raised. But he groaned as he found the holster empty. He had left his gun behind!

None the less, Jim acted. Careless of bullets in his fury, he flung himself at his enemy. For his pains he got the butt of a six-gun crashing down on his forehead. His senses left him.

When he came to his head ached madly. He found himself stretched flat on his back with the burning sun in his eyes. A voice spoke near him, and he turned his head. It was all he could do, for his limbs were bound with rope.

Then he got a shock. Lying near him was another man, like himself, bound hand and foot. It was the Ranger, Ben Lewis!

His own horse and the Ranger's were hobbled a few yards away. Otherwise they were alone. Lewis was speaking.

"Listen, young 'un. We're in a tight jam. We're lying on the floor of the canyon. Tanker's going to stampede cattle down it—his little way of wiping us out, the cur! Our horses, too—to make it look as if we'd both been caught in the stampede—an accident. Afterwards, Tanker will come along and remove our bonds from what's left of us after the stampede."

"So—so that's the game!" breathed Jim, a shudder of horror going through him. "You—you know why he's putting me out, Lewis?"

"I reckon I do, lad. Tanker told me what he'd done—gloated over th' way he'd planted that steer on you. He told me 'cause he knew I wasn't goin' to live to take action." The Ranger paused, and then went on rapidly: "It was Tanker who tried to get me with a rifle yesterday. He's been trying to get me since he knew I was here."

"But why——" began Jim.

"Because the skunk knows me and I know him. His name ain't Tanker. His name's Carter, and he killed a man down in Texas years ago. I was a deputy sheriff then, and I roped him in. But he gave me the slip, and I hadn't seen him since—until I saw his face at the window of the Lazy L ranch-house less'n a week ago. That's why he wouldn't see me; that's why he's been trying to out me since. He knowed I'd put th' law on his track agen. And now—well, Hardman, 'less we get outer these ropes mighty quick you'll lose yore life as well as yore ranch. He'd have let me alone until I'd burned yore stock, but I bumped into the skunk jest by accident an hour ago. It had to come then, and he got the drop on me afore I could draw."

Lewis ceased speaking and resumed his frantic tugging at his bonds. Jim, knowing only too well the terrible peril they were in, began to struggle also—struggle until the veins stood out on his forehead and sweat poured from him.

And then the first dread sound reached their ears—the thudding of innumerable hoofs. Following it came the bawling of cattle, and the pounding became thunderous. Jim raised his head. At the far end of the narrow

canyon had appeared a black mass of moving objects. He glimpsed the tossing horns, the flying tails of the maddened beasts. Behind were horsemen, their quirts rising and falling as they flayed the terrified animals into desperate speed. In a huge cloud of dust the steers came pounding nearer, the sounds echoing like thunder in the narrow defile.

"It's the end, Lewis!" muttered Jim. "So-long!"

"Not yet!" gritted the Ranger, and he resumed his efforts with savage fury. Nor was it the end. For just then Jim heard new sounds—a horse's hoofs, the clatter of stones, and a familiar yell.

"Hold on! I'm coming!"

It was Steve Hardman. Jim saw him now. His horse came scrambling down from the rocky trail that led upwards along the right face of the canyon. How any horse could have retained its footing down that steep declivity, Jim couldn't think—but Steve's did. Amid a shower of stones and flying rock, and with the clattering of flaying hoofs, horse and rider came rushing down. Jim's heart was in his mouth, for every instant



Reaching Jim and the Ranger, Steve dragged his horse back on its haunches in a hasty halt and leaped down to release them. But was he in time? The stampeding steers were thundering nearer and nearer!

he expected to see both of them plunge head over heels.

A final shower of stones, a stumble, a recovery, and then a mad gallop as Steve flogged his horse towards them, coming to a quick halt as the lad dragged the horse back on its haunches and leaped down.

Steve's knife was already out. He slashed at Jim's bonds, and then jumped to Lewis. In a matter of seconds they were free. But was Steve in time? Already stray beasts were thundering past them, tails flying, horns tossing.

Immediately Jim's horse was cut free he wheeled, snorting, and galloped away before the alarmed Steve could hold him.

But for swift, frantic action the other two would have done likewise; they were cow-ponies, and knew the terrible danger well.

"Into the saddle, Steve!" roared Lewis. "Up behind me, Hardman—for your life!"

How Jim reached the back of the Ranger's saddle he never knew, for his limbs were numbed and nerveless. But he did reach it. Steve was in the saddle of his horse now, and the three tore away.

"Make for the cleft yonder!" shouted Jim.

The Ranger nodded. Steve had turned his horse towards the cleft; he knew the spot well. Lewis didn't, but he followed instantly. The mad race only lasted a few seconds, but it seemed a lifetime to the three.

At last the cleft opened before them—a narrow, tiny gulch that led steeply upwards from the canyon floor to the trail above. The vanguard of the stampede was upon them now, and the horses escaped disaster by a miracle again and again. Above the thunder of noise sounded furious yells and then the sharp, unmistakable crack of rifles.

But the cleft was reached. The three tumbled from the horses and dived into the jumble of rocks guarding the mouth of the gulch. The horses galloped on—riderless.

"Tanker and his guys spotted us!" yelled Lewis, as they stumbled on while the horde of maddened animals roared past. "Get ready for a scrap! You got a gun, Steve?"

Steve had, and he willingly handed it over to the Ranger. They were safe now from the stampede, but they knew Tanker would never dare let them escape. The stampede began to

thin out; through the swirling dust clouds they caught glimpses of stray beasts.

"Why not climb up to the trail?" said Steve. "They'll get us——"

"Pick us off like flies if we did!" snapped Lewis. "Stay hyer. One man with a gun could hold off an army with luck. Lie low!"

They lay low, taking shelter behind rocks, and awaited the attack they felt certain must come. But none came. Instead, they heard the sound of hoofs gradually dying away until silence fell upon the defile.

Ranger Ben Lewis moved cautiously to the entrance and peered out. He sighted four horsemen disappearing up the canyon in the distance. He came back grinning.

"They've beat it," he chuckled. "I guess old Tanker knows he'd not smoke us out hyer in a hurry, and I guess seein' young Steve turn up like thet hav' put th' wind up him. He knows th' game's up fer him. Now we'll beat it. Then we'll get a few honest-to-goodness cowpokes together and make a kinder official call on Mister Tanker."

Two hours later a posse of cowboys under Ranger Ben Lewis surrounded the Lazy L ranch-house. But once again old Tanker was not at home, nor was his son, Del. But the safe was wide open and empty, and all valuables had gone. And it was very clear that old Hank Tanker—otherwise Carter, the wanted murderer—and his son had gone also.

Nor were either seen again in High Grass Valley.

Old Judge Bentley—a friend of the brothers—bought the Lazy L, so there was no risk of a further feud. Peace and prosperity came to the owners of the Bar F Ranch with the defeat of their foes.

THE END