

THE PACKSADDLE BUNCH!

by FRANK RICHARDS



SCHOOLBOYS' OWN

1737

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TREASURE ISLANDS

TRINIDAD, an uninhabited, volcanic island in the South Atlantic, was a favourite spot for pirates and other sea-robbers, many of whom concealed their ill-gotten gains there. At least two treasures are known to have been hidden on the island by some adventurer of bygone times.

A hoard of £10,000,000 in moldores and pieces of eight is concealed in one cache, while in another, waiting for the finder, is £8,000,000 in gold and silver bars, put there by the famous buccaneer, Jose Santos, about 1825.

Many expeditions have been made to this island, but no traces of treasure have ever been found.

The Hermit's Hidden Hoard.

A strange story is told of the island Tristan da Cunha—on the opposite side of the South Atlantic—of fabulous treasure being buried there.

In 1815 a band of English soldiers were established as a garrison there, and while on the island they discovered an old hermit named Corrie. He told them how he and two ship-mates were marooned on Tristan da Cunha, and how his comrades, with the aid of a home-made boat, had set out in an attempt to reach the mainland, never returning. The soldiers, however, were suspicious, and openly accused Corrie of foul play, saying he was an ex-pirate who had murdered his friends for their share of the loot.

One night Corrie got up and started to walk to one end of the island. Some of the soldiers dogged him, and in the morning reported that they had seen Corrie with vessels and jars filled with glittering rubies and diamonds. When questioned, he sullenly admitted that he had a treasure cache, but no

whipping could wring from him the hiding-place of his hoard. Months later he died, without telling anybody his secret.

The Wall of Wealth.

Balambangbang Island, just off the north coast of Borneo, was, until 1851, the haunt of bloodthirsty Malay and Chinese pirates.

There is said to have been hidden treasure there ever since 1844, when the old East India Company was forced off its shores. A year before, this company received a warning from the government of Manilla to clear off Balambangbang or take the consequences, and when they took no notice of the command, a hoard of pirates, in league with Manilla, raided the island. For some hours a fierce battle raged, and in the end the pirates won. But before they were overcome, the men of the company hid their vast gains in a well. Apparently, in their hurry to escape, they foolishly forgot to mark the position of the well, and the treasure was never found.

Pirate Treasure.

In the Mediterranean is the island Alboran, said to hold £2,000,000 worth of gold and jewels, looted from other vessels in the Caribbean by the pirate ship the Young Constitution, about the year 1835.

Later, the same ship met with a British cruiser, and she was captured, and every pirate swung at the yardarm for his crimes, with the exception of a cabin-boy named Robinson.

Years later Robinson disclosed where the treasure lay, and a certain Colonel Gage led a band of hunters to Alboran. The only thing the spades turned up was a bronze key. There was no sign of the treasure anywhere.

It is suggested that the sailors of the cruiser gave Robinson such a thrashing that he revealed the secret position of the wealth, and that some time or other it was quietly lifted, no one being the wiser.

THE PACKSADDLE BUNCH!



When Dick Carr, fresh from England, first hit the Texas cow town school, the Packsaddle Bunch figured he was the world's prize boob. But there was a surprise in store for the Wild West schoolboys.

CHAPTER 1.

The Packsaddle Bunch!

BANG!
Bill Sampson, schoolmaster of Packsaddle, stood in the doorway of the frame schoolhouse, on the bank of the Rio Frio, and loosed off a long-barrelled Colt.

That was the signal for school.

There was no school-bell at Packsaddle that morning. Some enterprising guy had cut the bell-rope and carried off the bell. That bell had been missing for two or three days, and Bill's gun had to serve its turn.

Bill, long-limbed and loose-jointed, in leather crackers and a red shirt, did not look much like a schoolmaster. He

looked more like a cowpuncher. And he had been a puncher on the Kicking Mule Ranch till about a year ago, when the citizens of Packsaddle had decided that there ought to be a school in that growing section, and had roped in Bill to run the same. Which he did to the satisfaction of the parents, if not wholly to that of their sons.

Under Bill's left arm was a quirt. He never used a cane. He had found a quirt O.K. with refractory steers when he rode with the Kicking Mule bunch. He found it O.K. with the boys of Packsaddle.

Bang!

Bill's big Colt roared again, waking every echo from the Rio Frio to Squaw

Mountain. Nearly every man in Packsaddle packed a gun, and Bill Sampson packed the heaviest Colt in Texas.

There was a scamper of running feet.

Boys who were in the fenced playground came scampering up at the signal shot. Other's arriving on bronchos, spurred on in haste, and hurriedly turned their horses into the corral and ran for the schoolhouse.

There were about thirty of them, and their ages varied from twelve to fifteen or sixteen. Most of them looked hefty and husky. Packsaddle boys were a rather tough bunch, and they needed a tough schoolmaster to handle them. They had one in Bill!

"Mosey in, you 'uns!" barked Bill.

Bill herded them into the big timber school-room as if they had been a bunch of steers.

They took their places at the bare, unpainted pinewood desks. Bill shoved his revolver back into its holster, and slipped the quirt from under his left arm into his right hand.

He stood surveying his class grimly.

He looked like trouble. The Packsaddle bunch could guess what was on his mind. Bill was worried about that missing bell. He had something to say before morning class started.

"You, Poindexter!" he rapped.

"Yep!" answered Slick Poindexter.

"Where's that bell?"

"Search me!" answered Poindexter. Bill grunted.

"You, Kavanagh?" he snapped.

"Where's that pesky bell?"

Mick Kavanagh grinned.

"You can search me, Bill!" he replied.

"I guess," said Bill, "that it was one of you two that cinched that pesky bell. Ain't you the gol-darnedest, all-firedest pair of scallywags in this here school? I'll tell a man! You ain't letting on?"

"Not so's you'd notice it!" answered Slick.

Bill glared over the class.

"Any other guy got anything to un-

cork about that pesky bell?" he demanded.

No reply.

Bill Sampson swished the quirt.

"Stand up!" he barked.

The boys stood up.

"Lean over them desks."

Thirty boys leaned over their desks. They knew what was coming now. They did not like the prospect. But they were not going to argue with Bill.

Bill Sampson walked behind his class, quirt in hand. His face was grim.

Whack!

"Ow!" roared Slick Poindexter, who got the first lick.

Whack!

"Howly saints!" yelled Mick, who got the second.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Breeches in the Packsaddle section were mostly of strong and tough material. But they were a poor protection against Bill's quirt. Bill gave the bunch only one lick each. But he handed it out as once he had handed it out to steers on Kicking Mule Ranch. Every lick brought out a fearful yell.

Only one fellow raised objections. That was Steve Carson, the biggest fellow in Packsaddle School, the son of Two-gun Carson, the "bad man" of the section. He was sixteen, and rumoured to pack a gun himself, which no schoolboy at Packsaddle was allowed to do.

Steve came last, and as Bill reached him, he jumped away from his desk and backed to the wall.

"Cut it out, Bill!" he snapped. "It's not good enough for me."

"Eh! What's that you're spilling?" ejaculated Mr. Sampson.

"I guess I said cut it out!" retorted Steve. "Keep it for the geeks who will stand for it."

"Forget it, Steve!" said Slick Poindexter. "Take your medicine the same as the rest, and don't chew the rag!"

"Can it, you Slick!" snapped Carson.

"I'll tell the world!" gasped Mr.

Sampson. He made a stride at the tall, slim, cool-eyed fellow backing against the wall.

Steve's hand whipped to his hip.

The next moment Bill Sampson jumped as he saw himself looking at a revolver held in a steady hand.

"Drop it!" said Steve.

"Jumping Moses!" ejaculated Slick Poindexter. The whole bunch stared at Steve. Many a time had the gunman's son declared that he would pull on Bill if Bill handled the quirt on him. Now he was doing it.

Bill's rugged face was crimson. He had had heaps of trouble with the Packsaddle bunch in one way or another, but this was the first time that a gun had been pulled on him in his own school-room.

"Put down that gat!" he roared.

"I'll say nope!" retorted Steve.

"Put down that quirt, Bill Sampson, or I'll sure lay you over with a bullet in your laig, and——"

Whiz!

The quirt sang in the air, and the tip of the lash caught the revolver and jerked it away from Steve's hand. It clattered on the floor a dozen yards away.

Steve gave a startled howl. The next moment Bill's left hand was gripping him, and he was forced over a desk. Then the quirt rose and fell—not once but many times.

"I guess," said Bill, as he laid it on, "that you won't have a hunch to pull a gun in this here school-room again, young Steve. I'll tell a man!"

By the time Bill had finished there was no more defiance left in the school-boy gunman. Steve leaned on the desk and groaned and mumbled when the quirt ceased to lick.

Bill tramped back to his high desk, facing his class.

"Now," said Bill, "I got suthin' more to spill! There's a noo kid coming to Packsaddle this afternoon. He's coming along in the hack from Hard Tack. He's a Britisher! Now, I'm telling you 'uns this! You ain't going to let down

this here school afore a son of John Bull! You get me? This here kid has been to school in the Old Country, and I guess he's going to see that the Old Country's got nothing on Packsaddle—not a thing! He ain't going to write to his popper that in Texas schools the guys is called into class by the school-master's gun! Nope!"

Bill paused.

Silence.

"That bell," said Bill, "has got to be perduced! If it ain't perduced by the time young Dick Carr hits Packsaddle, every guy in this bunch is going to have the quirt, a dozen licks each, laid on hard and heavy! Chew on that!"

Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh exchanged a glance. Bill spotted it, and grinned. He calculated that the school bell, whatever had become of it, was going to be produced by the time Dick Carr got to school.

CHAPTER 2.

Roped In!

DICK CARR was the only passenger in the little one-horse hack that made the trip by the trail from Hard Tack to Packsaddle. He sat beside the driver, looking about him with keen, interested eyes at the green grasslands, dotted with clumps of mesquite and post oaks, stretching from the banks of the Rio Prio to the rugged slopes of Squaw Mountain.

It was not six weeks since Dick had landed from the steamer at the port of Galveston on the Gulf of Mexico. But he had seen something of the towns in the eastern part of the great State of Texas. Now he was seeing the cow country in the west. Far in the distance, a blur to the north-west, was the vast tableland of the Staked Plain, where in old days the Spanish conquerors had marched, and the Redskin raiders had ridden. It gave Dick quite a thrill when the stage-driver pointed it out with the butt of his whip, at the

same time ejecting a stream of tobacco juice which Dick just dodged.

Much nearer at hand, clear in the brilliant sunlight of Texas, a straggle of shacks, shanties, frame-houses, and corrugated-iron roofs told where the cow town of Packsaddle lay. Outside the town, on the bluffs by the river, was a long, low wooden building.

"That's the school," said the driver. "You hittin' Packsaddle School, feller?"

"I'm going to board there," answered Dick. "My father's store manager of Hard Tack, and there's no school there. And I— Great pip!"

"Stick 'em up!" came a sudden shout from the trail.

Andy Butt, the driver of the hack, pulled on his ribbons. Beside the trail, at that point, was a stretch of uncleared chaparral. From the thickets two riders on bronchos suddenly emerged and halted directly in the path of the hack.

Who they were, and what they were like, would have got any man guessing. Each of them wore a flour sack over his head, inverted, the open end tied round his waist. Eye-holes were cut in the sacks, and slits for breathing. Both riders held levelled revolvers. And Andy, surprised as he was by a hold-up so close to the town, was not the man to argue with guns. He pulled in his horse so sharply that the animal nearly landed on its haunches. Up went Andy's hands over his Stetson hat—one still holding the reins, the other his whip.

Dick Carr stared blankly—too startled and amazed to obey the order to "stick 'em up!"

He had heard of rustlers and road-agents in the cow country; but seeing them was another matter.

"Say, you geck!" called out one of the riders. "You light down, pronto! That means you, you young jay!"

Dick just sat and stared.

"Say, you want to light down, big boy," said Andy Butt.

Dick nodded, and descended from his seat into the trail.

"Say, you in the flour-sacks!" called out Andy. "I'll say you're missing your guess. This guy is only a kid for Bill Sampson's school at Packsaddle, and I'll tell a man he's got no dollars in his rags."

"Aw, can it, Andy! We don't want his dollars! We sure want the duck himself!" answered the one who had spoken to Dick. "Stand back from that hearse, you young guy! Andy, you can beat it!"

"I swear!" ejaculated Andy. "You ain't kidnapping my passenger!"

"You've said it, Andy!"

The stage-driver stared hard at the speaker, and, to Dick's surprise, a sudden grin overspread his face. Dick figured that Andy Butt had recognised the rustler's voice; but why that should make him grin was beyond the English boy's understanding.

"Say, what's this here game—" began Andy.

"Drive on, you geck, and don't chew the rag!" snapped the flour-sacked rustler; and he flourished his revolver at the stage driver.

And Andy, grinning, drove the hack on towards Packsaddle, leaving Dick Carr standing by the trail.

The two horsemen rode up to him. One of them kept him covered with a revolver. The other looped a lasso over him, and drew it taut, fastening his arms down to his sides.

"Step lively!" he rapped.

"Look here—" began Dick.

"Step it, pronto!"

As the rustler set his horse into motion, and the lariat pulled, Dick Carr had no choice about stepping it. He tramped after the riders, and was led into the depths of the chaparral, out of sight of any man who might have been riding the Packsaddle trail that afternoon.

His heart was beating fast.

He was not afraid. Dick Carr had plenty of pluck, and plenty of nerve.

But he was deeply excited, and he was uneasy. He had heard of the kidnapping gangs of the Wild West. Apparently he had fallen into the hands of lawless kidnappers.

"Look here!" panted Dick, as they halted in the shades of the chaparral. "You're making some silly mistake! I'm a schoolboy! I'm no use to you!"

"I guess you're no use to anybody, bo!" said the fellow with the revolver, with a snigger under his flour-sack.

"You've said it, begob!" remarked the other.

The speaker, Dick guessed, was Irish-American. It struck him that both the voices were boyish. He had heard that Packsaddle was a tough country. No doubt it was if fellows no older than himself took to rustling and kidnapping. They said no more. They dismounted in the chaparral, and one of them drew a big red Mexican scarf from under his flour-sack. He bound it over Dick's face, completely blindfolding him. Only his mouth was left uncovered.

He could not resist, with the lariat gripping his arms to his sides. Neither did he think of resisting under the muzzle of a six-shooter. Dick had not been long in Texas; but he had been there long enough to learn that it was unwise to argue with the man who held the gun.

Leaving their horses they led the prisoner through the chaparral, taking him by either arm.

Where he was led he had not the faintest idea. He could see nothing—hear nothing but the brushing of the thickets.

When that sound ceased he guessed that he was out on the open plain. But where he was going was a blank to him.

Once he was dragged headlong into a bush, and the three of them crouched there in silence, a gun pressing to Dick's neck as a warning to keep quiet. He guessed that they were taking cover to escape observation.

Then at last they moved on again.

Suddenly there was another halt. He heard a clambering sound, and was left alone for a minute or two.

Then there came a drag on the lariat, and he felt himself rising. They had climbed a high fence, and were dragging him up after them against the timber.

He could see nothing, but he knew that they sat astride of the fence as they lowered him on the inner side. He heard them jump down after him.

One of them hurried away, leaving him with the other. Then a voice called in cautious tones:

"O.K.!"

He was led on again. He was now in a building of some kind. Was it the bandits' lair? Or where was he?

"Pronto!" whispered a voice. "We're sure on time, but I guess there ain't ten minutes to go."

"That'll see us through."

Seeing nothing, Dick's ears were keen and alert. He knew that a rope was tossed up to a beam overhead. One end of it came slithering down. The loop of the lasso was adjusted carefully under his arms. Then he felt a drag on the rope, and he was pulled clear of the floor.

He swung in the air.

Something was tied to his feet. He could not begin to guess what it was. Then there was a subdued chuckle, and a sound of retreating footsteps. The kidnappers were gone.

Dick Carr's brain was fairly in a whirl. They had brought him into some unknown building, and left him swinging on the lasso from a beam with something tied on his feet. For some minutes he swung there, and then he began to struggle, in the faint hope of getting loose.

Clang, clang! came from below him.

He gasped with amazement. He knew now what was tied on his feet. It was a bell. It rang and clanged as he struggled and swung.

CHAPTER 3.

Bill Gets the Bell Back!

CLICK!

Bill Sampson snorted.
He was wrathful.

It was the hour of afternoon classes at Packsaddle School. The school bell was still missing. Bill stood in the porch, his Colt in his hand, to give his signal-shot to the Packsaddle bunch. But when he pulled the trigger there was only a click instead of the usual roar of the Colt.

"By the great horned toad!" hooted Bill. "Say, what guy's been monkeying with my gun?"

He glared at the gun. The cartridges had been withdrawn. During dinner it was Bill's custom to hang up his gun-belt on a nail. Nobody had ever ventured to monkey with it before.

Somebody had done so now. It did not occur to Bill that a fellow had wanted that revolver for a time, and wanted it unloaded, and so had borrowed it and extracted the cartridges. Bill concluded that it was a joke on him, and he breathed with wrath. He had not thought of the gun till he had wanted it to shoot the signal for afternoon school.

"Jumping painters!" howled Bill. "I'll sure hand out the quirt to the guy that's been fooling with my gun! I'll tell a man!"

There was a snigger from some of the fellows in the playground. They seemed amused by Bill.

"Here, you Slick—you Mick!" roared Bill. "Where you been since chuck? I ain't seen you cavorting around." He glared suspiciously at Poindexter and Kavanagh. "I guess you been monkeying with my Colt! Say, if that bell ain't to home this afternoon, I'll say—Great gophers!"

Clang, clang, clang!
Bill Sampson stared round him blankly. It was the clang of the old iron school bell—that cracked and unmusical clang that had often awakened the echoes of Rio Frio, but had not

awakened any for the past three days. Now it was waking them again.

Clang, clang, clang!

That bell generally hung over the school roof. The cut bell-rope was still dangling down, but the bell was not in position!

Bill for the moment did not know whence the ringing of the bell came. He stared and glared in amazement.

"Say, Bill, your bell's come agin!" grinned Steve Carson.

"Where's that bell?" roared Bill.

"Sounds like it was in the school-room!" said Slick Poindexter. "Didn't you allow that it had got to be brought back, Bill, along with the Britisher when he hit Packsaddle? Looks like it was."

Clang, clang! Rattle! Clang!

"Jumping Injuns!" gasped Bill.

He rushed across the porch to the doorway of the school-room. Most of the Packsaddle bunch rushed after him, curious to know what it meant.

After Bill's threat that morning to quirt the whole school if the bell did not turn up that day most of the bunch had expected it to turn up. They guessed that the guys who had cinched that bell would not want any more quirt. Now it seemed to have turned up!

Bill Sampson rushed into the school-room. He stopped dead, with a gasp of astonishment, at the strange sight that met his gaze.

"Howling coyotes!" he stuttered.

He stared, and the bunch behind him stared. It was an amazing sight.

From one of the beams across the timber school-room, a boyish figure swung at the end of a lasso. The face was hidden by a red Mexican scarf tied across it. To the feet was tied the bell—ringing and clanging as the swinging figure wriggled and struggled.

Clang, clang, clang!

The school bell was ringing on time! It was Dick Carr who was ringing it, though quite unintentionally!

Wherever Dick Carr fancied that he

might be, he certainly never dreamed that he was in the school-room of the cow town school.

But that was where he was! And the schoolmaster of Packsaddle stared at him with bulging eyes.

"Say, what's this game?" roared Bill. "Who's that geck?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the bunch.

"How'd that gink get here?" roared Bill. "Who's strung him up in this goldarned school-room, I want to know?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bill Sampson rushed at the swinging figure. He could not tell who it was, with the face covered by the Mexican scarf. He figured that it was one of the bunch, larking. And as he reached it, he handed out a lick of the quirt.

"Oh!" roared the swinging one, as he got the lash, and he struggled and kicked frantically.

Bill was not expecting that! A boot crashed on Bill's bearded chin, sending him staggering backwards with a fearful howl.

"Whoooh! Jumping painters!" gasped Bill.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Packsaddle bunch. The cow town schoolboys were enjoying this.

"I'll say this is the bee's knee!" exclaimed Bill, and he grasped at the swinging figure, getting hold of its legs. "Now then, you jay—you pie-faced, pesky gink, what's this game?"

"Let me loose, you silly rotters!" yelled the blindfolded fellow.

"You let that rope go, you Carson!" yapped Bill.

Steve unhooked the end of the lasso, which was fastened to a desk. He let it go suddenly, and the swinging figure came down with a rush.

Bump!

There was a yell as the fellow in the lasso hit the floor. Bill leaned over him, loosened the loop, pulled off the lasso, and jerked the Mexican scarf from the face. With a swing of his powerful arm he landed the fellow on his feet. He stared at him.

He saw a rather handsome, sturdy, fair-haired fellow, a complete stranger to him. It was not one of the bunch, after all.

"Say, who's you?" yapped Bill.

The new boy at Packsaddle panted. He stared round him with starting eyes. He was more surprised than Bill.

"I'm Dick Carr?" he gasped.

"You're Dick Carr? You're the noo kid?" stuttered Bill. "You was coming by the hack from Hard Tack! How'd you get here like this?"

Dick gasped. His brain was in a whirl of amazement. He could see that he was in a school-room! He had been left, as he fancied, in a bandits' lair. It was a big surprise.

Bill grasped him by the shoulder and shook him.

"Spill it!" he hooted. "How'd you get fixed up here in the school-room? Say! Uncork it, pronto!"

"I—I—I was kidnapped off the hack!" gasped Dick. "I—I—I thought that—oh crumbs!—I was kidnapped by rustlers—two rustlers in flour-sacks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a roar from the Packsaddle bunch.

Bill fairly blinked at the new boy.

"Kidnapped by rustlers!" he gurgled. "Kidnapped nothing! Rustlers nunk! Some of this here bunch has played this game on you! You know anything about it, young Poindexter?"

"What'd I know, Bill?" answered Slick.

Dick Carr gave a jump as he recognised the voice of one of the rustlers!

"What about you, Kavanagh?" hooted Bill.

"Nothing about me, begob!" answered Mick.

And Dick jumped again as he realised that the other rustler was speaking!

He stared blankly at the two cow town schoolboys. He understood now.

Bill gave him a vigorous shake.

"Say, big boy! You savvy who cinched you and strung you up here?" he demanded. "I guess it was some of

this bunch, and I'll say I'm going to take their skins off with my quirt! You wise to them guys, say?"

Dick Carr was already "wise" to the guys! But he did not mean to say so.

"I never saw their faces," he began. "I took them for rustlers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the bunch.

"Aw, can it, you young jay!" growled Bill. "I'll tell a man you're the tenderfoot from Tendertown! You're the prize boob! You're the goob from Goobsville! And then some!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can the cackle!" roared Bill. "You're late for class already! Get in your places, or——"

Bill cracked the quirt. There was a rush of the Packsaddle bunch to their desks.

CHAPTER 4.

Tenderfoot's Jump!

TIN TUNG, the Chinese cook and man-of-all-work at the cow town school, took Dick Carr to the chuckhouse, where he ate his dinner, which was late, and which he wanted after his long trip. Then he was taken to the bunkhouse, where he was shown his bunk and a locker, and where he found his suitcase, which had been landed by Andy Butt.

There were a dozen bunks for the boarders; the rest of the bunch were day boys, who came up on foot from the cow town, or rode in on bronchos from the neighbouring ranches.

The cow town school, with its chuckhouse and bunkhouse, struck Dick as being fixed up more like a ranch than a school, and he would never have taken Bill Sampson for a schoolmaster, but for a cowpuncher, and a fairly tough one at that.

But when, later in the afternoon, he presented himself in the school-room, he found that there was another teacher—a little man, in a tail-coat and horn-rimmed spectacles, who was called

Small Brown—Brown being his name—and who, Dick afterwards learned, was a graduate of a college in an eastern State.

Small Brown supplied the knowledge, while Bill supplied the authority. Small Brown's tail-coat was the only one in the valley of the Rio Frio. He had sported a plug hat on his first coming, but it had been riddled with bullets by playful punchers and discarded.

Grinning faces and chuckles greeted Dick as he came in, and Bill pointed him to his place with the butt of the quirt.

His face was red as he sat down.

He could see that all Packsaddle School had heard the story by this time of the "kidnapping" of the new guy from the Hard Tack hack, and chuckled and chortled over it. Even Bill was grinning, and there was a glimmer of amusement behind Small Brown's horn-rimmed spectacles.

Dick's chief desire was to punch the heads of Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh, whom he knew to be the "rustlers" who had kidnapped him from the hack. He was wise to them now.

But they evidently did not guess that he was wise to them, for when school was dismissed they joined him as the bunch tramped out with friendly grins, and Slick gave him a smack on the shoulder.

"Say, that sure was tough, young Carr!" declared Slick. "I'll say that game was real tough on a new guy."

"You're shouting, begob!" agreed Mick.

"There's some of this bunch," went on Poindexter solemnly, "who'll give a new guy the glad hand, and help see him through. Me, Slick Poindexter, I'm one—and this red-headed galoot, Mick Kavanagh, is one more! Ain't that so, you Mick?"

"I should smile!" said Mick.

Dick Carr nodded cheerfully. Knowing what he knew, he guessed that another game was coming. This time,

being on guard, he did not think that the playful pair would get by with it.

"Mosey round and give the shebang the once-over!" said Slick, and they led him across the playground towards the river.

Most of the bunch stared at the new fellow and grinned. Steve Carson came up, with his accustomed swagger, and looked him over, with a jeering grin that brought a gleam to Dick's eyes.

"Some tenderfoot!" said Steve. "Say, you ever been fanned, bo?"

"Fanned!" repeated Dick Carr. He had not been long enough in Texas to have learned what fanning was.

"Ain't he the prize boob?" said Carson. "Say, you guys, you stand clear while I fan him!"

"Aw, can it, Steve!" snapped Slick. "You keep your gun packed, if you ain't honing for some more of Bill's quirt. Besides, we're going to show the new guy the tenderfoot's jump."

Steve burst into a chuckle.

"Carry on!" he said.

And he stepped aside, and Dick Carr walked on with the two fellows who were showing him round. A gate in the school fence gave access to the grassy bluffs that overhung the Rio Frio.

In the rains, the Frio ran high, almost to the summit of the bluffs; but when the river was low, as it now was, a wide stretch of mud lay below the bluffs, and the water was a dozen feet out.

On the edge of a bluff, where it dropped sheer to the yellow, sticky mudbank, the three stopped. Slick and Mick exchanged a wink.

"Say, bo!" drawled Slick. "You look across the Frio—I guess you can see the Kicking Mule Ranch from this here spot."

Dick Carr did not look across the Frio. Being "wise" to the playful pair now, he guessed why they had brought him there, and why the spot was called the tenderfoot's jump. And Dick's idea was that he was not going

to play the tenderfoot and be tipped off the bluff into the mudbank ten feet down.

He made a sudden unexpected grasp at Slick Poindexter, and before that cheery youth knew what was happening he was tipped off the bluff.

Squash!

Slick landed in thick mud ten feet down.

"Howly Moses!" stuttered Mick. "What intirely— Oh, begob!" He tipped over after his comrade under a vigorous shove, and landed beside Slick in the yellow mud.

Dropping on his hands and knees on the edge of the bluff, Dick Carr looked down at them and grinned.

Gasps and gurgles came from below as Slick and Mick struggled up out of the mud. They were sticky and smothered from head to foot, and they stood waist-deep in mire, glaring up at him with muddy faces in wild wrath.

"Say, what game do you call this?" bawled Slick. "You pesky, ornery, pie-faced tenderfoot, I'll sure sock you a few for this."

"Urrrrghh!" gurgled Mick, spitting out a mouthful of mud. "It's choked I am intirely, begob!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Dick Carr. "You look muddy! Don't you reckon that's funny—as funny as sticking up a fellow on the trail and kidnapping him?"

"Aw, begob, he knows it was us, Slick!" gasped Kavanagh.

"I guess I'll sock him, all the same, when I get out of this!" gasped Poindexter. "I'll sure sock him a few, and then some! Urrrrghh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Muddy fists were shaken at the new fellow grinning down from the bluff. But they could not get at him. They had to trample and wallow through the mudbank under the bluffs for a distance before they found a way up. Dick Carr cheerfully left them to it, and walked back to the playground of Packsaddle School.

CHAPTER 5.

Fanned!

CRACK!

Dick Carr jumped clear of the ground.

The revolver shot rang out as he entered the playground and the bullet smashed on the ground an inch from his foot.

Crack!

He jumped again. This time the bullet grazed his boot. An inch nearer and it would have gone through flesh and bone.

He stared blankly as he jumped. He was startled. He expected things to be rough and tough at Packsaddle School, but he did not expect a fellow to be blazing away with revolvers in the playground.

But that was what was happening.

Steve Carson stood a dozen feet from him, two six-shooters in his hands, his own and one of Bill's he had "borrowed." He loosed off rapid shots. A crowd of Packsaddle fellows, keeping back from the line of fire, looked on and roared with laughter.

Crack, crack!

"Jump, you gink, jump!" shouted Carson.

Dick jumped.

He guessed now what "fanning" was. The bully of Packsaddle was fanning him with shots. And he had to jump. Fanning was a dangerous game. Carson had sent the first two shots close. Now he was shooting at his boots. That was the cowpuncher's game of fanning. A fellow who was fanned had to keep jumping or get hot lead in his toes.

"Stop that!" yelled Dick.

"Jump, you gink, jump!" yelled the Packsaddle bunch.

Crack, crack!

Dick Carr jumped swiftly and actively. His eyes gleamed, and his face was red with wrath, but he knew what he had to do, and he did it. Roars of laughter from the bunch greeted the performance.

A dozen shots rang out, and the revolvers were empty. Steve, roaring with laughter, prepared to reload the guns. He was going to keep up this game and frighten the tenderfoot out of his five senses. That was the big idea, at all events.

But Steve did not get away with it. For the moment the six-shooters were emptied, Dick Carr rushed forward. Steve, groping for cartridges, never got them out. A clenched fist, that seemed like a lump of iron, crashed on his jaw, and the biggest fellow at Packsaddle went over backwards and landed with a crash on his back. The revolvers flew from his hands.

"So that's fanning, is it?" panted Dick. "You won't fan me again in a hurry, you booby!"

"By thunder!" Steve Carson struggled to his feet. His jaw had a fearful ache in it.

He hurled himself at the new guy.

Then the Packsaddle bunch registered surprise! They expected to see the English schoolboy go down, knocked out and smashed. They guessed that Bill Sampson would have to carry in what was left of the tenderfoot and put it to bed.

But that was not what happened.

Right and left, a pair of clenched fists met Steve Carson. He was older and bigger and taller. But that did not seem to help him. Crashing knuckles in his eye sent him spinning. He landed on Texas again, bumping.

The Packsaddle bunch yelled with surprise and delight. Nobody in the bunch had ever been able to handle Big Steve. He was handled now.

He staggered up, gasping, panting, purple with fury. He flung himself headlong on the tenderfoot.

For three or four long minutes there was scrapping such as had never been seen in the Packsaddle playground before—though the Packsaddle bunch scrapped often and hard.

Two muddy figures that came squelching from the river stopped and stared, and then ran on to join the

excited crowd. Slick and Mick were looking for the new guy to sock him. But they did not want to sock him now! They grinned with gleeful appreciation as he knocked the bully of Packsaddle right and left.

Dick was getting some tough punishment. But he did not seem to mind. He was handing over more than he got.

Crash went Big Steve again! This time he did not get on his feet! He lay spluttering and gasping, whipped to the wide.

"Whipped!" yelled Slick Poindexter. "Howling hornets! I'll say that tenderfoot is some lad!"

"You're shouting, begob!" chuckled Mick.

Dick Carr stood panting for breath, a little uncertain on his pins as he dashed a stream of red from a damaged nose. He was game to go on. But Steve was finished.

"Say, bo, you want to bathe that nose!" chuckled Slick, and he slipped his arm through Dick's, and led him away towards the bunkhouse. Mick, on the other side, slipped an arm through the other.

Dick Carr blinked at them rather uncertainly. But they grinned at him with friendly grins. The hatchet was buried. Dick, Slick, and Mick were going to be friends.

CHAPTER 6.

Chuck!

"CHUCK!" roared Bill Sampson, headmaster of Packsaddle School.

Dick Carr, the new boy in the cow town school, stared round at him.

Bill, with his quirt under his arm, and his ten-gallon hat on the back of his rough head, was staring in at the open window of the school bunkhouse.

Dick was inside, unpacking a suitcase that lay on his bunk.

He had in his hand a Latin grammar, an old school book that he had

brought with him to Texas from his former home in far-off England.

"You hear me yaup?" demanded Bill.

"Eh? Yes," said Dick. "But——"

"Chuck!" roared Bill.

Dick could only stare. He was new to Texas, new to America, and he was far from having mastered the language.

"Chuck," to him, had one meaning, which might have been defined in a dictionary as to hurl, or to throw. He could only suppose that Bill was referring to the volume in his hand. But why Bill Sampson wanted him to chuck that volume he could not guess.

"But——what——" stammered Dick.

"Carry me home to die!" exclaimed the schoolmaster of Packsaddle. "I'll say you're some tenderfoot, young Carr! Yep! Say, don't you savvy what chuck means?"

"Yes; but——"

"Waal, then, jump to it, pronto. This way! Chuck!"

"Oh, all right!" gasped the new boy at Packsaddle.

Dick Carr might be a tenderfoot in Texas, but he understood plain English. The trouble was that he did not yet understand plain American. He did not yet know that "chuck" was supper; he was unaware that the Packsaddle bunch had already gone into the chuckhouse, and that he was late; that Bill was telling him to step out by the window to save time. Unaware of that, the new boy obeyed his headmaster, and chucked the volume in his hand.

Whiz!

Thud!

It hit Bill on the nose.

Why Bill wanted him to chuck the book at him, the tenderfoot did not know. But when his headmaster said "chuck" and "this way," it was scarcely possible to mistake his meaning; and Dick was there to do as he was told! So he did it.

Bill, who meant something quite different, was not prepared for the sudden arrival of the Latin grammar

through the window. It hit him on the nose quite unexpectedly.

He staggered back in amazement. The toughest bullwhacker in the valley of the Frio could not have knocked Bill Sampson down. But the surprise did it. Bill sat down in the playground with a heavy bump, and a roar that rang almost from the Frio to Squaw Mountain.

"Whooo-hoop!" roared Bill, as he sat. "Say, you gone loco? Jumping painters! You watch out till I get you!"

Bill scrambled up. He grabbed his quirt, which he used instead of a cane in the cow town school. With a face as red as the sunset over the Staked Plain, Bill hurtled in at the bunkhouse window.

"But—but you said——" gasped Dick.

He did not stay to say more! Why Bill was wrathful with him the tenderfoot did not know. But there was no doubt about the fact. The quirt was cracking round his legs, as he bolted along the bunkhouse. He tore past the bunks, heading for the door at the other end of the wooden building.

After him roared Bill.

Dick Carr went out of the doorway like a bullet from a rifle.

Shouts of encouragement came from the bunch at the chuckhouse. Steve Carson, the oldest and biggest fellow at Packsaddle, rushed out to intercept the fugitive. Big Steve's face was in a highly-decorative state, from an encounter he had already had with the tenderfoot, who had proved that he could use his fists with great effect.

"Let up, Steve!" shouted Slick Poindexter.

"Leave him alone!" roared Mick.

Unheeding, Steve rushed into the tenderfoot's way. The next moment he wished that he hadn't! Dick had no time to stop and handle him, with Bill and the lashing quirt so close behind. He lowered his head and butted, catching Big Steve exactly

where he had just been packing away his supper.

There was a horrible gurgle from Steve Carson, as he crumpled up and sat down. Dick Carr bounded on.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a roar from the bunch, drowning the suffocated gurgling of the bully of Packsaddle.

Right round the chuckhouse went the new boy, burning the wind in great style. But faster still the long legs of Bill Sampson covered the ground behind him, and a lick of the quirt told him that he was close at hand. Dick made a jump at the chuckhouse eaves, caught on, and clambered wildly up. In a few seconds, he was seated astride of the ridge, panting for breath.

Bill Sampson brandished his quirt, and roared with wrath. The Packsaddle bunch roared, too, with merriment. The whole crowd had poured out of the chuckhouse now to watch. Only Steve Carson did not join in the merriment. He was still gurgling for wind. Even Tin Tung, the Chinese cook, stared on with a grin on his yellow face.

"Say, you gink!" roared Bill. "You coming down?"

"I'm jolly well not coming down to be whopped for nothing!" retorted Dick.

"Nothing!" hooted the cow town schoolmaster. "Carry me home to die! You call it nothing to heave books at your schoolmaster's nose, you pesky geck! You figure that you'll get by with it? Not in your lifetime, big boy."

"You told me to!" howled Dick.

"Told you nix!" roared Bill.

"You did!" yelled Dick.

"By the great horned toad, I'll say that that young geck is plumb loco!" exclaimed Bill Sampson.

"But what's he done, Bill?" asked Slick Poindexter.

"Done!" roared Bill. "I'm telling you I looked in the window of the bunkhouse to say chuck—him being late, like the goldarned stoopid tender-

foot he are—and he heaves a book at me, like he was heaving a rock at a coyote!"

"Oh, great gophers!" ejaculated Slick. "Say, you, Carr, do you heave books at your schoolmasters in the Old Country?"

"No!" gasped Dick. "But I was told to. I thought he wanted the book when he said chuck, this way! What did he mean by chuck?"

"What did I mean by chuck?" roared Bill. "Jumping he-goats! Ain't you learned to speak yet? Don't you know that chuck means supper?"

"Oh, crikey! Does it?"

"What the all-fired Moses did you think it meant?" shrieked Bill.

"It means throw in England," answered Dick.

Bill Sampson gazed up at him. He had been brought up on chuck, in the sense of provender. He had never heard of chuck in its meaning of to throw. He had to assimilate this.

"Did—did you mean to be telling me that supper was ready?" gasped Dick Carr. He was getting it now. "I thought you meant that I was to throw the book I had in my hand. Of course, I thought you'd catch it, as you told me to chuck it—at least, I thought you did—"

"Great horned toads!" gasped Bill. His wrath faded away, and he burst into a laugh. "Say, if you ain't the world's prize boob, I'm a greaser! I guess you'll learn to speak at Packsaddle, and you'll sure learn that chuck's chuck! Come down, you young geck; I sure ain't going to hide you! Haw, haw, haw!"

Bill roared; he tucked his quirt under his arm and stalked away to the schoolhouse, still laughing. That little misunderstanding on the part of the tenderfoot seemed to strike Bill as funny. He was still sniggering as he disappeared into the schoolhouse, apparently having quite forgotten the bang on his nose.

Dick Carr slid down the slanting roof and landed with a jump among the

Packsaddle bunch. They were all yelling with laughter.

"It's the boob from Boobsville, and so it is!" chuckled Mick Kavanagh, putting his arm through Dick's. "Mosey in to chuck, boob." He led Dick Carr into the chuckhouse, and the bunch followed, laughing.

CHAPTER 7.

The Man Behind the Gun!

"S TICK 'em up, Bill Sampson!" The headmaster of Packsaddle gave a convulsive start. Dick Carr jumped clear of the floor.

It was near bed-time at Packsaddle. Bill had sent for the new boy to his office, as he called it, in the schoolhouse, to chew the rag a piece, as he would have expressed it, with the tenderfoot. The door was shut, but the window was open, and outside the window the glorious starlight of Texas streamed down from a velvety sky.

The cool, clear, but menacing voice came from the window. Bill Sampson's impulse was to reach for the big Colt in his belt as he turned. But he did not. He reached for the air, instead, and his hands were over his head as he stared at the head and shoulders framed in the open window. A man of small stature, strong and wiry, with a red moustache and stubbly red beard, looked in at him over the levelled barrel of a six-gun. The finger was on the trigger, and had Bill reached for his gun, instead of for the upper air, Packsaddle would have wanted a new schoolmaster. But Bill knew the moves in the game.

"Red Ike!" said Bill, between his teeth.

"You've said it!" agreed the man at the window. "Keep 'em up! You young geck, stand against the wall, and don't spill anything!"

Dick gazed at him dumbfounded.

This was a Texas hold-up. He knew that, and it sent a thrill through him

from head to foot. It was strange, startling, almost incredible to the boy fresh from England. But he knew that there was death in the levelled revolver, death in the cold, hard eyes that glinted over it. Bill's action showed him that if he had doubted it. He had seen enough of the Packsaddle schoolmaster to know that he was no lamb. But he was tame and quiet as a lamb at the order to stick them up, though his eyes were burning.

Red Ike stepped in over the low sill. Keeping the schoolmaster covered with the revolver, and the tail of his eye on the boy, he crossed to the door, and with his left hand lifted a bar and dropped it into the sockets. He was safe from interruption now.

Dick made a movement. The gunman's eyes glittered. Bill, hands over head, snapped a word to the boy.

"You young geck, back on that wall, and freeze to it! Don't you know better'n to argue with a gun?"

"Yes!" gasped Dick.

"I'll say you want to snap to it, kid, if you ain't tired of life!" said Red Ike grimly.

Breathless, Dick backed on the wall, standing silent. It was not for him to act when Bill Sampson was taking it like a lamb.

Red Ike stepped to Bill and hooked the Colt from his belt. He dropped it carelessly under Bill's desk. Then he jerked down Bill's lasso that hung on a nail on the wall.

"Hog-tie him, young 'un!" he snapped to Dick.

It was a new word to Dick, but he understood. His eyes turned questioningly on Bill. He had never seen Red Ike before, or heard of him, though evidently Bill Sampson had. But he knew that the red-bearded man was a desperado, ready to shoot if he was crossed. All the same, the boy looked to his schoolmaster for orders.

"You hear me sing?" hissed Red Ike, his eyes gleaming. He was master of the situation in Bill's office, but he was

risking his life every minute that he stayed there.

"Am I to do it, sir?" asked Dick calmly, though his heart was thumping.

Bill stared at him.

"I say yep!" he exclaimed. "You loco? I guess if you wasn't a goldarned tenderfoot, you'd jump to it, without chewing the rag. Get to it, you gink!"

Thus adjured, Dick got to it. He took the lasso, and under the watchful eye and revolver of Red Ike, he bound the schoolmaster's hands behind his back.

Then Red Ike holstered his gun, and taking the lariat, bound Bill's legs also. With the end of the same rope he tied Dick hand and foot.

"I guess that lets you out!" said the gunman.

Bill choked.

"You got me by the short hairs, you Red Ike! But I guess I'll see you strung up for this, you border thief. You figure you'll get away?"

"Sort of!" said Red Ike.

"You never came on a cayuse—I'd have heard you!" muttered Bill, his eyes gleaming. A man on foot had little chance of escape, once pursuit was up, in the cow-country where every man was a horseman.

Red Ike grinned.

"You said it!" he agreed. "I guess I came a-crawling, like an Apache Injun, Bill! But I'll say I'm going to borrow a hoss from your corral to get away on. Your black broncho will suit me fine. You ain't saying nope, I guess."

Bill writhed with rage. Even at the risk of instant death he was tempted to shout and give the alarm. But it was not good enough. Red Ike, the border bandit with a hundred robberies and shootings to his credit, hunted up and down Texas by the Rangers, was getting away with this daring raid, as he had got away with many a one before.

"Where d'you park the dust?" asked Red Ike quietly.

For a moment Bill was silent. Then, as the gunman's eyes gleamed like cold steel, he gave a nod towards the desk.

A few moments more and the schoolmaster and the boy were gagged. Red Ike opened the desk and rooted in it. A roll of greenbacks rewarded him. His eyes glittered as he hastily counted the bills.

"Five hundred dollars!" he grinned. "I guess I called on you about the right time, Bill."

Bill's eyes burned at him, but he could not speak. The bandit thrust the roll of bills into a little leather sack that was fastened to his belt with strap and buckle. The leather sack was already fat, looking as if this was not Red Ike's first successful raid.

The gunman turned out the swinging lamp and stepped from the window. A moment and he was gone, as silently as he had come.

Bill Sampson struggled desperately with the lariat and the gag. Dick Carr followed his example. But they strove in vain. Red Ike had done his work well and securely.

A few minutes later there came a distant sound from the plains; the staccato beat of a horse's hoofs dying away in the distance.

Bill groaned behind the gag with fury. Red Ike was gone on the back of Bill's black broncho, the finest cayuse in the Frio valley, worth almost as much as the dollar-bills the ruffian had taken, worth much more to Bill, who loved that cayuse almost like his own flesh and blood.

But there was no help for it. It was an hour later that Small Brown, looking for Dick to herd him off to bed in the bunkhouse, knocked at the door. Receiving no answer but mumbling and scuffling, Small Brown in amazement came round to the window. Then the schoolmaster and the new boy were released—and in about a minute Bill Sampson was on a horse riding, with a

gun in his hand, and in five minutes a dozen citizens of Packsaddle were riding after him. But the dark prairie had swallowed up Red Ike, and they rode in vain.

CHAPTER 8.

Lost on the Prairie

DICK CARR started violently. He would have cried out in his startled alarm, but a hand was clapped over his mouth, silencing him.

The Packsaddle bunch had long been in bed. Dick heard the sound of deep breathing and a snore or two as he opened the door and peered in. Bill Sampson was gone. Small Brown, in a state of twittering excitement, was barring windows in the schoolhouse, rather like locking a stable-door after the horse was stolen. Dick had gone to the bunkhouse by himself, long after the bed-time of the bunch. In the doorway he had been going to strike a match. And then suddenly, from the darkness, hands reached and seized him.

His arms were gripped, a hand was over his mouth. Three unseen fellows had hold of him, and Dick jumped to it at once who they were—Steve Carson, Poker Parker, and Slim Dixon. They had waited up for him and some rough joke was coming.

Hardly able to stir a limb, let alone struggle, in the grasp of three pairs of muscular hands, Dick was lifted off his feet and carried away from the bunkhouse.

He was dumped down by a high fence, which he knew to be the corral wall. There was a sound of horses within.

"Cinch him!" He knew the whispering voice of Steve Carson. "I guess Bill's helped us in this stunt, by keeping him so late. I'll say it'll be later, a few, before he gets to his bunk."

There was a chuckle.

Dick's hands were tied together. A neckcloth was bound over his mouth to

silence him. One of the slim figures vanished in the starlight. He heard the sound of a horse, the clink of bridle and stirrup.

He knew that he was going to get hard measure from the bully of Packsaddle, but he could not begin to guess what was intended.

He was lifted to his feet and forced away along the corral wall by the two that remained with him. He was led through a gate in the school fence. Outside Parker was holding a horse.

It was pitchy dark in the bunkhouse.

Steve Carson leaped into the saddle and gathered up the reins.

"Stick him on!"

Dick was lifted to the horse's back behind him.

"Hold on, you guy—I'll say you'll get hurt a few if you tumble!" grinned Steve. "Let her go, Poker!"

The horse dashed away. With his wrists tied it was difficult enough for Dick to hold on to Steve with his hands. But he held on, gripping the horse's flanks with his knees. He heard a chuckle from the two fellows who were left behind, but in a moment or two they were out of sound and sight. Steve Carson headed for the open prairie at a gallop.

He did not speak a word as he rode. Dick Carr was still in the dark as to his intentions. All he could be sure of was that this was some rough and savage practical joke.

How many miles the galloping broncho covered Dick did not know. But Big Steve pulled in at last. He halted so suddenly that Dick, losing his hold, rolled from the horse's back and tumbled heavily into the long grass.

There was a chuckle from Steve.

"Say, you guy! How long you figure it'll take you to pick your trail back to Packsaddle?" he jeered.

Dick panted. The neckcloth had slipped from his mouth and he could speak.

"You cur! You're not leaving me here?"

"You get me!" answered Steve coolly. He dismounted, picked off the neckcloth and loosened the cord round Dick's wrists. Then he leaped on the horse's back again.

"So-long, tenderfoot!" he shouted mockingly.

"You rotter!" roared Dick.

The beat of the horse's hoofs answered him, dying away swiftly over the starlit prairie.

Dick stood panting.

In a few minutes he shook the loosened cord from his hands, and was free.

The hoofbeats of Steve's horse had died away. Deep silence was round him.

He stared over the dark prairie. Faintly, looming against the stars in the west, he could make out the massive shape of Squaw Mountain. But he could see nothing else but waving grass glimmering in starlight.

"Good heavens!" breathed Dick.

He could hardly believe that the toughest bunch at Packsaddle meant to leave him there, stranded at night on the trackless prairie.

But it was only too certain.

It was the roughest of rough jests, such as a thoughtless bunch of cow-punchers might have played on a newcomer. It was entertaining to Steve and his friends to think of the tenderfoot wandering at wild random over the dark prairie, unable to find his way till daylight—perhaps not even then! They knew how helpless a stranger to the prairie would be in such circumstances.

For several long minutes Dick Carr stood overwhelmed with dismay. But it was useless to remain where he was, and he started to try to find his way back to Packsaddle.

He knew that he had miles to cover. That would not have mattered so much if he had known the direction to take and had been able to keep to it. But he had no clue to the way.

He tramped and tramped because it was futile to keep still, but with little

hope of seeing Packsaddle again that night.

The prairie was rugged and rough, full of unexpected inequalities and hidden gopher-holes. The grass was thick and wiry. Again and again the hapless tenderfoot stumbled, and several times he fell.

But he scrambled up and tramped on, hour following hour, weary and worn, but determined to keep on as long as he could.

Utter weariness overcame him at last.

A dark mass of shadow loomed before him. It was timber—one of the "prairie islands" that dotted the undulating plain. To tramp his way round it, or to thread a path through jutting trunks and trailing creepers was almost impossible in his fatigued state—and he was not at all sure that he was heading in the right direction.

He made up his mind to it at last. There was no getting back to Packsaddle School that night. He had to wait for dawn—still hours distant. Wearily he crept under the shelter of the trees, sank into a mass of fallen Spanish moss, and closed his eyes—and slept the moment they were closed.

CHAPTER 9.

Tenderfoot's Luck!

"**D**OGGONE the critter! Quiet, you!"

Dick Carr was dreaming as he lay in the heap of Spanish moss in the black darkness under the cottonwood trees. Red Ike, the rustler, mingled in his dreams, and as he started and awoke, it seemed that he was still dreaming, for the hard voice of the border bandit was in his ears.

He lay staring into the darkness. Surely he was dreaming! Or was it the voice he had heard menacing Bill Sampson at Packsaddle School that he could now hear?

"Goldarn the cayuse! Say, you got a noo master now! And, by thunder,

if you don't keep quiet you get the quirt!"

It was no dream! Dick sat up silently in the moss, his heart beating like a hammer.

There was the sound of a horse near him—a tethered horse, that jerked at the trail-rope. All was darkness; the boy could see nothing. But he could hear. There was the sound of a swish, of a hard and heavy blow falling on a horse's flank, the startled whinny and squeal of an animal in pain. The growling voice of the rustler followed:

"Forget it, durn your hide! Quiet, you!"

The horse whinnied faintly, but there was no further sound of straining rope or rustling thicket. That savage blow had quietened the captured animal. Dick heard the sound of a man rolling himself in a blanket again and sinking on the ground.

Red Ike had returned to his slumber, broken by the effort of the stolen broncho to escape. The horse was quiet now, and Dick listened in vain for a sound. He might have been utterly alone in the timber island, as he had supposed when he crept into the trees for shelter.

He breathed hard, his heart fluttering. From the sounds he knew that Red Ike and the horse were hardly a dozen feet from him.

A thrill of excitement, not unmingled with terror, ran through him. How far this timber island might be from the cow town he did not know. But even if he had tramped in the wrong direction after Steve had stranded him he could not be more than ten miles from Packsaddle. Red Ike, it was clear, had covered the distance on the stolen horse before camping for the remainder of the night in cover of the timber. By the sheerest chance the schoolboy lost on the prairie had struck his camp. Had he gone deeper into the timber he might have stumbled on the sleeping rustler.

It Red Ike found him there—
He remained very still, silent. Long

minutes passed, and there came a stirring sound of the horse. Bill Sampson's broncho was not sleeping. Possibly, with the keen instinct of an animal, he knew that someone was at hand. It was clear that the broncho hated the change of masters, and but for the trailing rope would have fled from the rustler. His effort to escape had awakened Red Ike once, and might awaken him again.

Dick, as he sat silent, with beating heart, was thinking first of waiting till he was sure that Red Ike was asleep, and then, creeping on tiptoe out of the timber. But other thoughts followed.

If he could get the horse!

The thought made his heart jump. He knew only too well that if the border ruffian woke he would shoot. But the thought grew and fixed in his mind. On a horse he had a chance of getting away—ten to one the animal would head direct back to Packsaddle if released from the tether. But that was not all. Left on foot, the rustler would almost certainly be run down and recovered. The Packsaddle bunch would open their eyes wide at such an exploit of the "tenderfoot." Dick grinned at that idea.

He could hear, from moment to moment, a faint uneasy stirring of the stolen horse. But the animal was quiet, subdued by the savage lash from the rustler's quirt. Red Ike was sleeping.

Dick rose to his feet at last.

He tried to still the hurried beating of his heart. Softly, groping his way inch by inch, he crept farther into the timber. Through an opening of the heavy branches overhead there came a glimmer of the bright stars of Texas. Faint as it was it was light enough now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness.

Dimly he made out a figure rolled in a blanket bedded in ferns. Close by it the horse was standing; it had not lain down. Dick could see that the broncho was still saddled and bridled—in readiness for the rustler's instant

flight if pursuit awakened him. He saw the horse's head turned towards him; the animal had scented if not heard him.

But there was no movement from the figure rolled in the blanket. Dick prayed that the horse would make no sound. There was a revolver in a hand that showed under the edge of the blanket. Red Ike slept in readiness for enemies.

Dick made soothing gestures as he approached the horse. He caught the glimmer of the broncho's eyes. He understood that it was a friendly hand that was stretched out to him. The black broncho stood quite still watching him.

He reached the horse and with the gentlest touch smoothed the glossy neck. The black muzzle brushed on him. Dick's hand glided to the trail-rope. One end was pegged close to the sleeper. Silently he took out his pocket-knife and opened the largest blade. Almost without a sound he sawed through the strong rope.

Taking the reins from the horse's neck Dick drew the animal away. There was a rustle of a branch, a shaking of pendant Spanish moss, Red Ike stirred, grunted, and sat up in his blanket.

"You doggoned cayuse! I guess——"

The ruffian broke off. His eyes wide open were fixed on the spot where the horse had been. His hand groped at the trail-rope. He leapt to his feet, with a roar of rage.

Dick Carr panted.

Further caution was useless. He ran the horse out of the timber, running by its side. He heard the ruffian plunging through the trees behind him. Clear of the timber, Dick swung himself to the broncho's back. A second more, and he was riding madly.

Gallop! Gallop!

Red Ike at first had doubtless fancied that the broncho had somehow loosened itself from the trail-rope. But, as he plunged furiously after it from the timber, he saw the figure of the rider

in the starlight. A roar of fury came from the ruffian.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

He fired as fast as he could pull the trigger.

But the hot lead flew wide and wild.

Yelling with fury, Red Ike blazed away his last shots as the horseman dashed on over the dim prairie.

Dick shouted aloud in sheer glee as he galloped. When he looked round the timber island had sunk into the dimness of the prairie.

But he slackened speed at last. The faintest, palest glimmer in the east told him that dawn was coming. But it was still dark on the prairie, and he was still as hopelessly lost as ever—but for the horse. He trusted to the animal's instinct. And he was right! As soon as he no longer felt a guiding hand, the broncho changed his direction and trotted away on a course of his own, and Dick did not need telling that he was heading for home.

Mile after mile over the rugged prairie; mile after mile through the tough grass that gradually whitened as dawn came. The rising sun was gleaming on the high summit of Squaw Mountain in the west; eastward, Dick had a glimpse of the glimmer of the Rio Prio. Packsaddle was not in sight. But the broncho loped on; he knew his way.

The glimmering of corrugated-iron roofs in the loop of the Prio caught Dick's eyes at last. Shacks and shanties and the high roof of Larsen's store came in view. Nearer the river was the frame schoolhouse, with its high fence, corral and bunkhouse and chuckhouse clear in the dawn. The gate stood wide open.

Dick gave the reins a shake. He could make out a staring crowd in the school playground. He grinned, and waved his hat. With a jingle of bridle and a thunder of hoofs, the tenderfoot dashed up to Packsaddle School. Bill Sampson stared through the gateway with his eyes almost bulging from his

bronzed bearded face as the rider came thundering up.

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Bill.

"Dick Carr!" yelled Slick.

"The tenderfoot!" gasped Steve Carson. "What's he doing on Bill's broncho? Say, where did he cinch that cayuse?"

Bill stood rooted to the ground. The Packsaddle bunch gathered round him, staring. The quirt was idle now. It was Dick Carr the tenderfoot new kid, who was riding in, and he was riding Bill's stolen horse. The Packsaddle bunch would never have figured that the tenderfoot could ride a Texas cayuse at all. But he was riding the big black broncho, and riding him at a gallop.

"Great gophers!" gasped Mick Kavanagh, dropping from the porch. "I'll tell all Texas! It's the tenderfoot, and so it is, and he's sure got Bill's cayuse."

Dick Carr dashed in, drew rein, and halted almost under Bill's astonished nose. He threw the reins to Bill Sampson.

"Your horse, sir!" he said coolly. Bill could only gasp.

CHAPTER 10.

"B'ar!"

DICK CARR joined the bunch at breakfast in the chuckhouse. He was the centre of all eyes. He ate his breakfast with a good appetite, a smile lurking on his face. He was, in the estimation of the Packsaddle bunch, a tenderfoot from Tendertown, a boob from Boobsville. But he had astonished the cow town school. Lost on the prairie, he had dropped on Red Ike's camp; he had got Bill's horse away, and ridden home on it. The rustler had been left on foot, and already Ezra Lick, the town marshal, and his men were riding out of Packsaddle to rope him in. If they got him

it would be due to the tenderfoot. Dick grinned over his crackers and beans.

When the bunch went out of the chuckhouse Steve Carson lounged up to the new boy. Steve was feeling uneasy. Dick had said nothing about Carson's bunch having taken him out on the prairie during the night, and stranding him there to find his way back as best he could. Steve was not anxious for Bill Sampson to hear that.

"Say, you young guy, you ain't chewed the rag to Bill!" said Steve.

"I'm not going to."

"Stick to that!" said Carson. "Me and my bunch will sure make you sorry you're alive if you spill it to Bill."

Dick's lip curled.

"You and your bunch can go and chop chips!" he answered. "I'm not giving you away, but I'll make you sit up some time for playing that dirty trick on me."

Big Steve laughed and lounged away to join his friends. So long as Bill was not put wise he did not care what the tenderfoot's motives were.

The day boys were coming in now—some on foot from the cow town, some on bronchos from the ranches. One of them, Pie Sanders, from Squaw Mountain, called out to the bunch as he jumped from his mustang and turned it into the school corral.

"Say, you 'uns, where's Bill? I guess I got noos for Bill."

"What's up?" asked Poindexter.

"B'ar!" answered the boy from Squaw Mountain, and he hurried across to the schoolhouse, where he spotted Bill in the porch.

Dick Carr stared after him and joined the crowd of fellows who were following him. The news he had brought seemed to have caused some excitement in the bunch, but what it meant was rather a mystery to the English schoolboy. He caught Slick Poindexter by the sleeve.

"What did he mean?" he asked.

Slick stared at him.

"Jest what he said, I guess," he answered. "B'ar."

"Bar?" repeated Dick, mystified. "What sort of bar? Do you mean a bar in a river, or a bar in a saloon, or a bar at the gate—or what sort of a bar?"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Slick. "Say, you 'uns, listen to the boob! He's never heard of a b'ar!"

"I guess there's no b'ars in the Old Country!" grinned Mick. "But there's b'ars in Squaw Mountain, honey."

"I guess no b'ar will come down from Squaw Mountain as far as Packsaddle," said Steve Carson. "You don't want to be skeered, tenderfoot."

"Who's scared?" snapped Dick. "I don't see—"

"Haw, haw, haw,! Ain't you ever heard tell of a b'ar before?" yelled Poker Parker.

"Of course I have!" said Dick. "But I don't see anything to be scared of in a b'ar! What sort of a bar do you mean?"

"Grizzly!" yelled Slick.

"Oh!" Dick Carr gasped. "You mean bear."

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Pie Sanders was gasping out his story to Bill. Now that he understood that a "b'ar" was a bear—and a grizzly at that—Dick understood the excitement. He had never seen a grizzly bear, but he had heard of that terrible and ferocious animal. In the rocky recesses of Squaw Mountain a few of those savage animals still lurked, and it gave Dick a thrill to hear what Pie had to say. Bill Sampson gave a snort as he listened.

"B'ar!" he repeated. "You telling me that a b'ar will come moseying down as far as Packsaddle! Forget it!"

"Popper told me to warn you, Bill," answered Pie. "They been after him for days, and he's wounded and taken to the prairie. They've lost his tracks, and his last trail was seen heading for the river. I guess if he's making for the Frio, he won't pass far from the burg."

"Aw, guff!" growled Bill. "Forget it, I'm telling you!"

Evidently Bill did not think it likely that the wounded grizzly, driven out of his den on Squaw Mountain by the hunters, would venture anywhere near the cow town or the cow town school, but he rapped out an order to close the school gate before the bunch went in to lessons.

During class with Small Brown that morning, Dick Carr found his thoughts wandering a good many times to the grizzly. He could picture the savage animal—wounded, fierce, desperate—driven from the mountain, creeping through the long grass of the prairie, seeking a hiding-place—perhaps hungry and seeking food.

It did not seem to Dick impossible that the brute might be seen at Pack-saddle, though Bill made light of the idea. He observed that Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh were whispering together a good deal, and wondered if they were discussing danger—from the lost grizzly.

After class Bill Sampson mounted his black broncho to ride down to the cow town and learn if there was any news of Red Ike. Bill was thinking of the five hundred dollars that the gunman had clinched from him. Two or three of the bunch shouted after him as he rode away.

"Watch out for b'ar, Bill!"

"Aw, can it!" snorted Bill, and he dashed away down the trail to the cow town.

As soon as he was gone, Slick and Mick slipped quietly into the school house. Small Brown was in his own cabin; Tin Tung was in the cookhouse, and there was no eye on them.

"Say, Mick, it's a daisy of a stunt!" chuckled Slick. "I'll say the tenderfoot will be scared to a frazzle."

"You said it!" grinned Mick.

They gathered up Bill's bearskin rug from the floor. Mick packed himself inside it, and Slick Poindexter drew the folds round him and fastened them. Mick's red head disappeared inside the huge head of the grizzly, grim and

fierce-looking with its glinting glass eyes.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Poindexter, surveying him. "That gink knows there's a grizzly loose on the prairie, and I guess he won't stop to think when he sees you in that outfit, Mick!"

A chuckle came through the grinning muzzle of the grizzly.

"Say, it's warm inside!" said Mick, his voice coming strangely from the head of the bear.

"I guess that cuts no ice. You stick there till I pass the word round the bunch, or some guy might get hold of a gun and let daylight through Bill's prize bearskin!" chuckled Slick.

Leaving Mick in the porch, Slick walked, grinning, out into the playground. Dick Carr was speaking to Mr. Brown at the door of his cabin next to the bunkhouse, quite unaware that a joke was going on. Quickly Slick passed the word round among the rest of the bunch, amid a chorus of sniggering and snickering. It was necessary for the bunch to be warned; for Bill kept a loaded rifle in the schoolhouse, and at an alarm of "B'ar!" some fellow might have rushed for it.

Dick Carr left Mr. Brown and came across the playground, glancing round him in surprise. He saw no cause for the grin that adorned every face in the bunch. But suddenly from Steve Carson there came a yell.

"B'ar!"

"Watch out!"

"Run for your lives!" yelled Slick.

Dick Carr jumped, and his heart almost missed a beat. Waddling from the direction of the schoolhouse was a ferocious-looking grizzly bear, with fierce eyes that gleamed and glinted in the sunlight. The tenderfoot of Pack-saddle stood rooted, his heart thumping wildly.

Not for an instant did he dream that the dreaded apparition was a Pack-saddle fellow enveloped in Bill Sampson's bearskin. It looked fearfully

lifelike as it crawled. Indeed, had not Slick passed round the word that the joke was on, plenty of other fellows would have been deceived as well as the tenderfoot. As it was they all affected terror for the tenderfoot's benefit.

"Run!" yelled Poker Parker.

"Beat it!" shrieked Slim Dixon.

"Burn the wind, you guys!" roared Slick Poindexter. He grabbed Dick Carr by the arm. "Beat it, you gink! You want to be chewed up? Hit that flagstaff—and hit it quick!"

"Gr-r-r-r!" came a deep, savage growl from the bear's muzzle, as it lurched towards the tenderfoot.

Dick made a rush for the flagstaff. After him lumbered the bear, growling horribly. A great paw lashed at him. He bounded at the tall pole, clutched it, and clambered out of reach. In breathless haste he climbed to the top of the pole and clung there, staring down with startled eyes as the bear reared on its hind legs and glared up after him and gave a hideous growl.

CHAPTER 11.

The Laugh's on Dick!

DICK CARR clung desperately to the summit of the flagstaff. He stared down at the bear below. From that height, in the clear sunlight of Texas, there was a wide view over rolling prairie and rippling river, and over the tin roofs of the cow town to the distant wooded slopes of Squaw Mountain. But Dick's eyes were fixed on the fearful monster at the foot of the tall pole. The Packsaddle bunch were widely scattered on fence-tops and roofs, staring towards him.

Small Brown, alarmed by the disturbance, came out of his cabin, spotted the bear—or, rather, the bearskin—and darted back with a single frantic bound, banging the door after him. The teacher was not in the secret, and he did not like grizzly bears at close quarters.

Tin Tung looked out of the cook-house, where he was cooking dinner, his slanting eyes distended, and he promptly slammed his door and rolled a barrel against it. From the bear came a deep, horrible growl that floated up to Dick's startled ears as he clung to the top of the pole.

Gr-r-r-r!

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Dick Carr.

The "bear" was rearing on his hind legs, the paws feeling at the flagpole, apparently trying to climb after him. From various points in the distance the Packsaddle fellows watched it. Some of them were grinning, though Dick, in the thrilling excitement of the moment, did not notice it. All his attention was fixed on the bear.

He knew that bears could climb—better than a man could. If that bear wanted him, that bear could get him. And it looked as if the bear wanted him. He had started to climb. Dick's eyes were fixed on it in horror; his heart almost died within him. He had plenty of pluck, but he was unarmed; he had no chance. And the fearful beast was beginning to climb.

"Help!" shouted Dick. He gave a desperate glance round at the fellows in the distance. He noticed now that some of them were grinning—Steve Carson was laughing aloud. They were out of danger, so long as the bear concentrated on Dick; but he wondered at their indifference to his peril. The Packsaddlers were a tough bunch, but he had never figured they could be so tough as this.

"Hang on, tenderfoot!" yelled Slick from the top of the fence. "Say, you geck, don't let him get you! He'll sure chew you up!"

"I'll say that tenderfoot's scared stiff!" chortled Steve.

"Help!" yelled Dick. "Poindexter, cut into the School House and get a gun! There's a rifle over Mr. Sampson's desk there."

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Slick. He was tickled to death at the idea of

getting Bill's rifle and letting daylight through Mick in the bearskin. Dick Carr had not observed that Kavanagh was absent from the crowd in the playground, and certainly never dreamed that he was in the bearskin.

The tall pole was thick and strong. But it swayed under Dick's weight at the top, and swayed still more as the "bear" clambered. Dick had plenty to do to keep his hold at the summit, with the wind from the prairie whistling past his ears. He shouted:

"Will you help me? Get a gun—get the rifle! Poindexter——"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

There was no help from the bunch. With a heartless indifference that was simply amazing to the tenderfoot, they laughed at his appeals. Dick stared desperately down at the slowly clambering bear. If he could have leaped past it, as it climbed, he had a chance. But he realised that there was no chance of jumping past the bear. He could only cling to the top of the pole and hope that the savage brute would not be able to climb so high and reach him with its fearful claws.

There was a sound of hoofbeats. He stared round in the direction of the cow town, and his heart leaped at the sight of Bill, in his red shirt and tennagallon hat, riding back to the school on the black broncho. Bill, as he came, stared at the clinging figure at the top of the flagpole, visible to him over the fences and the buildings.

Dick Carr freed one hand and waved to the approaching rider. He gesticulated frantically.

"Help!" he yelled. "Mr. Sampson! Help!"

His voice carried to Bill on the wind and made him stare harder. The fences hid the "bear" from Bill's sight, and he could only wonder why the new schoolboy was hanging to the top of the flagstaff and yelling for help.

"Help!" shrieked Dick.

"Jumping painters!" ejaculated the

cow town schoolmaster. "Is that pesky young guy loco?"

He cracked his quirt, and the black broncho galloped on. Something was amiss at the school, Bill knew that, and a sudden misgiving came into his mind of the wounded grizzly driven down from Squaw Mountain by the hunters. His bronzed face set hard, and he drove the broncho on with quirt and spur.

There was a yell of alarm from Poker Parker.

"Say, you guys! Here comes Bill!"

"Oh, great gophers!" gasped Slick Poindexter. "I'll say Bill will be mad when he sees his bearskin——"

The gate was closed. But Bill did not stop to open it. The black broncho rose to the leap, and Bill came sailing over the gate to land in the playground with a crash of hoofs. He was down from the saddle in a second.

To Dick Carr his sudden arrival brought joy and relief. It had rather a different effect on the bunch, who suspected that Bill would be mad when he discovered the use to which his bearskin had been put.

"Help! Help!" yelled Dick. "Shoot! Oh, shoot!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"Say, don't you burn powder, Bill!" howled Poindexter. "You don't want to burn holes in your bearskin, old-timer."

But Bill was not likely to shoot. From the ground he could see what Dick Carr could not see from above—human legs that showed under the clambering bearskin. Bill Sampson was not thinking of pulling a gun. He grasped his quirt and rushed across towards the flagstaff.

"Beat it, Mick!" yelled Poindexter.

"Howly saints!" gasped Mick Kavanagh. He had ceased to climb, and was staring round in dismay at the alarm that Bill was coming. It was not easy to move quickly in the thick folds of the big bearskin. Mick slid down

the pole and landed on the ground as Bill reached him.

"Jumping buffaloes!" roared Bill. "I guess I'll wallop you a few!"

Dick stared down blankly. He had expected Bill to pull his gun, or else rush for his rifle. He could not imagine why the cow town schoolmaster was tackling a grizzly bear armed only with a 'puncher's whip. But the next moment, as Bill grasped the "bear," he understood.

The bear rolled over in Bill's grasp, and the skin burst open and a red head and a crimson face emerged into view. Dick stared at it with starting eyes, almost losing his hold in his amazement. From the Packsaddle bunch came a howl of merriment. From Mick came a howl of anguish as Bill's sinewy grasp dragged him out of the bearskin and the quirt was laid on.

Whack, whack, whack!

"Aw! Can it!" shrieked Mick. "Howly Moses! Sure it was only a joke on the tinderfoot intirely! Howly saints! Let up, Bill, you piecan!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Instead of letting up, the headmaster of Packsaddle laid it on hard. The quirt rang on Mick like pistol shots.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Dick Carr.

He understood now. With a burning face he slid down the flagstaff. He knew now why the bunch had been indifferent to his peril. There had been no peril. It was only another rough jest on the tenderfoot. But for the fact that Bill Sampson was handling Mick, Dick would have hurled himself on the practical joker. But Mick was getting enough from Bill!

"Thar!" gasped Bill. "I guess that will larn you a few, Mick! I guess you won't play any more tricks with my bearskin and skeer a doggoned green-horn stiff and cold! Nope! I'll say you won't!"

"Whoo-hooop!" roared Mick, as he staggered away. "Ow! Oh, wake snakes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from the

bunch. Bill was grinning, too, as he picked up the bearskin and threw it over his arm.

"Say, you doggoned tenderfoot, you figure that it was a real b'ar!" he exclaimed. "I'll say you're some boob!"

"I—I—I thought—" gasped Dick, his cheeks burning. "I—I knew there was a grizzly about, and I—I thought—"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Bill.

He walked away with the grizzly's skin. Dick Carr looked round at grinning faces, his own red as the blossom of the malva that grew along the Rio Frio.

"You silly asses!" he exclaimed indignantly. "What was a fellow to think—"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"Ain't he the world's prize boob!" gasped Slick. Even Mick was howling with laughter, in spite of the quirting he had received. Dick, crimson with anger and vexation, stamped away to the chuckhouse, followed by shrieks of laughter from the Packsaddle bunch.

CHAPTER 12.

Pluck!

SMALL BROWN was smiling when he took his class in the school-room that afternoon. His eyes glimmered with amusement through his horn-rimmed glasses. Every face in the class wore a grin—except Dick Carr's. Dick was dark and frowning—but his dark looks only added to the merriment of the bunch. Probably Bill Sampson would have been grinning, too, had he been there. But the headmaster of Packsaddle had ridden out on the prairie with Marshal Lick and his men on the trail of Red Ike, leaving the bunch to Mr. Brown. Every now and then there was a chuckle in the class, and two or three times a voice called out "B'ar!" in tones of pretended alarm, raising a howl of laughter. Dick sat with knitted brows.

He had been made a fool of, and the whole bunch was laughing at him. Most of them laughed good-naturedly, but Steve Carson and his friends sneered and jeered. Dick's cheeks burned when he thought of the ridiculous figure he must have cut, clinging to the top of the flagstaff with a practical joker in a bearskin growling after him.

Any fellow at Packsaddle who had taken Mick in the bearskin for a genuine grizzly, would have bolted for cover, he knew that. Unluckily, only he had been taken in. Hunting cover, in such a case, was no sign of funk. But, as it had turned out, it was ridiculous, and he realised it only too keenly.

When Mr. Brown's back was turned at the blackboard, Steve Carson leaned over to Dick and gave a sudden bellow in his ear that made him jump.

"B'ar! Beat it for the flagstaff, tenderfoot!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

It was the last straw! Dick Carr was a good-tempered fellow, but he had a temper. As Steve drew back his grinning face, Dick's arm swung up, and the back of his hand smacked hard on Big Steve's features. It was a hard smack, and Steve lurched under it and fell off his bench. He spluttered as he went down among riding-boots.

Small Brown spun round from the blackboard.

"What—" he squeaked. "Keep order! You Carr—Carson—I tell you—" Small Brown could not handle the bunch like Bill Sampson.

Big Steve did not heed him. He scrambled up, grabbed a book from his desk, and hurled it at Dick Carr's head.

Dick dodged just in time and the school-book flew past him and caught Slick Poindexter on the side of his jaw. There was a howl from Slick.

The next moment Dick had caught the inkpot from his desk and shot the contents at Big Steve in reply to his missile. Steve's missile had missed—

but the ink did not. It splashed full in Carson's face, spreading there, and transforming him suddenly into a coon. There was a gurgling, gasping howl from the bully of Packsaddle, and a chortle from the class. Small Brown shouted at Dick.

"Carr! How dare you! You young rascal! Keep order!"

"Let that rotter keep order, then!" snapped Dick. "I'm fed-up with his cheek."

"B'ar!" shouted Poker Parker.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shut up, you dummy!" shouted Dick, with flashing eyes.

"Silence, you Carr!" squeaked Small Brown. "You must expect to be made fun of, Carr, if you run away from a boy dressed in a bearskin."

"You bolted into your cabin fast enough, anyhow, Mr. Brown!" retorted Dick. He had not forgotten how Small Brown had dashed indoors, and banged the door of his cabin after him.

Small Brown crimsoned. He had not forgotten it, either, but he had hoped that that little incident had passed unnoticed.

"You—you—young rascal!" he stutted. "I shall report you to Mr. Sampson for punishment." He raised his hand and pointed to the door. "Go to Mr. Sampson's office and wait there till he returns, and tell him that you have been sent to him for a beating."

Dick Carr hesitated, breathing hard. He was angry and indignant. He had noticed already that Small Brown had very little authority with the bunch; indeed, his life would hardly have been worth living at Packsaddle School had he not been backed up by Bill and his quirt. When Bill was absent, little Mr. Brown walked warily in dealing with the tough bunch; but he seemed to figure that he could be authoritative with the tenderfoot. It was unfair, and it made Dick angrier than ever, but he choked down his angry resentment, and stamped away to the door.

"The greenhorn's sure got his mad up!" chuckled Mick as he went.

"B'ar!" shouted Slim.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick tramped out with gleaming eyes and flaming cheeks. From the school-room he had to cross the hallway to Bill Sampson's office, which was on the other side. He glanced out of the porch which opened from the hallway into the bright sunshine of Texas, and was tempted to go out into the playground instead of where he was bidden to go. But he restrained that impulse, and crossed into Bill's office. He stumbled over the big bearskin rug as he went in; it was back in its old place, between the doorway and Bill's table. He gave the grinning muzzle a kick in passing, and threw himself into Bill's chair with knitted brow.

The lesson went on in the school-room. He heard the murmur of Small Brown's voice—and the murmur of other voices. The bunch were not giving Mr. Brown a lot of attention—as was their way when Bill was not on hand. From where he sat Dick saw Steve Carson come out of the school-room and go out at the porch, no doubt to wash the ink off his face at the pump. He glanced in at the open doorway of the office as he passed, and gave Dick an inky glare. Then he went out to the pump.

A few minutes later, there was a crash of hurried footsteps coming back to the schoolhouse.

Dick, who was looking at Bill's rifle, slung on the wall over the school-master's desk, stared round. Big Steve came bolting in from the playground, his half-washed face, still inky, streaming wet. The look on it fixed Dick's attention, and he stared hard. Big Steve's face was chalky with terror, where the ink was washed off. His eyes were staring from his head. He bolted into the hallway from the porch, and ran for the school-room.

"What——" exclaimed Dick Carr.

Something in the playground had terrified Big Steve almost out of his

wits. Dick stepped to the office doorway and looked down the hallway to the porch. What he saw made his face as pale as Big Steve's. Framed against the sunlight in the open porch was a gigantic and terrible form. Dick's heart thumped against his ribs.

"The grizzly!"

It was strangely like the pretended grizzly that had fooled him that morning. But it was no trick this time.

It was the grizzly bear that had been driven from Squaw Mountain—with daubs of dried blood on its fur, foam on its fearful jaws, hunger and ferocity burning in its little red eyes. No wonder Steve Carson had come bolting in, at that fearful vision in the playground. Dick Carr stood transfixed, staring at the animal; then, as the bear came shambling in, he slammed the office door.

"B'ar! B'ar!" Steve was panting as he burst into the school-room.

"Aw! Can it!" grinned Slick Poin-dexter. "The tenderfoot ain't here, Steve——"

Steve, unheeding, grabbed at the school-room door to slam it. But his hands were shaking with terror. From the hallway came a fearful growl that startled every ear. Steve had the school-room door half-shut, and all the fellows were on their feet, when a heavy paw struck the door and sent it spinning open again, almost knocking Steve over.

There was a yell of wild alarm.

"B'ar!"

"The grizzly!"

"Oh! Help! Help!" shrieked Small Brown, blinking in terror at the fearful figure as it shambling into the school-room. From the bear came a deep-throated roar. Its little red eyes burned at the scattering crowd of scared schoolboys. It was wounded—hungry—fierce and savage—a more dangerous and deadly beast than the tiger in the jungle. Its foam-flecked jaws were open as it shambling towards the terrified bunch.

It was no false alarm this time. The

hunted, hungry beast from Squaw Mountain had found its way to Packsaddle School. And Bill, the only man who could have tackled it, was away.

The Packsaddlers had laughed loud and long at Dick Carr's scare that morning. They did not feel like laughing now. They scattered from the desks with yells of alarm and terror. Some of them leaped for the windows; others ran and dodged among the desks. Small Brown skipped like a frightened gopher. The fearful beast was famished, and he had come for food! Wildly the bunch scattered and dodged and fled up and down the big school-room, the grizzly shambling and growling in fierce pursuit. Only the fact that his attention turned from one to another saved at least one of the bunch from being dragged down in his terrible claws. But it could not have lasted many minutes.

In Bill's office Dick Carr heard the frantic yelling and shrieking, with beating heart.

He had slammed the door, from instinct, to shut out that fearful visitor. But now he opened it again and looked across the hallway into the open door of the big school-room.

He saw Slick Poindexter, his face like chalk, leap over a desk, barely evading a clutching claw. He saw Mick Kavanagh pitch over the blackboard as the bear leaped at him, and dodge, just escaping a slash from talons as sharp as razors.

Dick's face was white—but he was cool! He remembered Bill's rifle on the wall. He had heard that it was kept ready loaded, and he hoped that it was.

He leaped across the room and grasped the rifle from the wall. With the weapon in his hands, he rushed back across the hallway to the school-room.

Bill's Winchester was a heavy weapon, but Dick did not notice its weight. Inside the school-room he dropped on one knee, clamping the butt of the rifle to his shoulder. He was

cool—cool as ice—and he needed all his coolness.

Bang!

In the wild excitement the school-boys had not even seen him, or known that he was there, till the rifle roared. Steve Carson had clambered into a window, and was dragging himself up when the grizzly reached him. A terrible claw was lifted to drag him back, and in a moment more the bully of Packsaddle would have been in the clutches of the grizzly. It was well for Big Steve at that fearful moment that a steady eye was looking along the barrel of Bill's rifle, that a finger steady as steel was on the trigger.

The bullet struck the grizzly on the jaw and glanced. But the sudden crash of hot lead made the huge animal swing round with a savage growl, and Steve Carson dragged himself up into the window out of reach. The roar of the Winchester was followed by a yell:

"The tenderfoot!" howled Mick.

"Shoot!" shouted Slick. "Oh, shoot!"

Bang, bang! Dick fired twice, with a steady hand, and each bullet crashed into the huge, furry form.

With a growl of rage and pain, the grizzly turned on Dick Carr, shambling across the pine-plank floor at him with a speed that seemed incredible in so huge and heavy an animal.

Shouting voices died away—the Packsaddle bunch gazed spellbound. Small Brown, from the farthest corner of the long room, blinked dizzily over his horn-rimmed glasses, which had slid down his nose. Not a fellow in the bunch could believe that the tenderfoot dared remain where he was, facing the rush of the enraged grizzly. But Dick Carr did not stir.

He was still, still as a figure in bronze, aiming. He knew that he had time for only one more shot before the fearful brute reached him. And he aimed with cool care and fired with the huge brute hardly a dozen feet from him. And one of the blazing red

eyes went out like an extinguished lamp, as the bullet crashed into it, and the great furry form rocked and rolled over.

Dick Carr panted. The sweat was running down his face. The grizzly, growling and roaring horribly, clawed and clutched, tearing great splinters from the floor in mad fury. Bang, bang! roared the Winchester, as Dick emptied the remaining shots into the struggling, writhing form. And with the last shot a shudder ran through the gigantic figure, and it lay still at last.

"Dead!" stuttered Slick Poindexter. He was the first to approach the grizzly, terrifying even in death. "Dead! And the tenderfoot's killed it!"

"Faith, and he's some lad entirely!" gasped Mick.

Dick Carr dropped the rifle. He stood unsteadily, mopping the sweat from his face. The grizzly lay dead before him, but he could hardly believe that it was dead—that he had killed it! He had saved lives that day—at least one life, probably many. Even Big Steve, as he dropped in from the window, looked at him with a new respect.

"Faith, it's a broth av a boy ye are, and it's me that's telling ye so!" yelled Mick Kavanagh, and he rushed up to Dick and fairly hugged him. And the roar of a cheer, that woke all the echoes of Packsaddle School, greeted the ears of Bill Sampson as he rode in from the prairie.

"Say, you ginks, what's this game?" roared Bill, as he strode into the school-room. "You playing tricks agin, as soon as my doggoned eyes are off'n you?"

He glared at the grizzly for a second, taking it for his own bearskin and another practical joke. But that was only for a second. His jaw dropped as he stared at the dead bear, lying in a pool of blood, and he realised the truth.

"Howling coyotes!" gasped the headmaster of Packsaddle. "Who shot that grizzly?"

Dick Carr grinned.

"The tenderfoot!" gasped Slick.

"Aw! What you giving me?" hooted Bill.

"The goods!" gasped Mick. "It sure was the tenderfoot, Bill!"

Bill Sampson gazed at the bear, gazed at the bunch, and gazed at Dick Carr. Then he held out an enormous hand to the new boy at Packsaddle.

"Carry me home to die!" said Bill. "You've got me beat, and you the boob from Boobsville! Put it thar!"

Dick Carr grinned and "put it there." Bill gripped his hand. The next moment the new boy at Packsaddle hopped and yelled. Bill had a grip not unlike that of the grizzly!

CHAPTER 13.

Trouble in Class!

A CLATTER of hoofs rang on the sun-baked prairie trail, and every fellow in the big timber school-room lifted his head and listened. It was a hot afternoon, and there were few, if any, of the Packsaddle bunch who wanted to spend it indoors with Small Brown and school books. But for the presence of Bill Sampson, who sat at his high desk with his quirt before him. Mr. Brown would probably have had trouble with the rather unruly class. Mr. Brown did not have an easy time, anyhow, at the cow town school. But Bill was ready to handle the bunch, as he had been wont to handle a bunch of steers on the Kicking Mule Ranch.

So, though the fellows lifted their heads at the sound of hoof-beats, they did not rise from their places and rush to the windows, as certainly they would have done had not Bill been present.

There was a tramp of heavy boots in the porch, and Ezra Lick, town marshal of Packsaddle, looked into the school-room.

"Say, Bill!" he shouted.

Mr. Sampson stared round at him.

"Aw, you, Ezra!" he hooted. "Don't you know better'n to horn in while school's going on, and you town marshal of this hyer burg! Beat it!"

"Beat nothing!" retorted the marshal. "I'm telling you, Bill, that Red Ike's been seen down the Frio, and we're riding after him. You git on your broncho and mosey along with us."

Mr. Sampson jumped from his desk. That news was enough to make Bill forget that he was a schoolmaster. Red Ike, the rustler, had five hundred dollars that belonged to Bill.

"You got it sure?" he demanded.

"Sure thing!" answered the marshal.

"Red Ike's on foot, and he's hunting for a cayuse to get away on. A Kicking Mule puncher has seen him."

"Why ain't he cinched him, if he seen him?" demanded Bill.

Ezra Lick chuckled.

"I guess he burned the wind when he spotted Ike's red head," he answered. "Ike wanted his horse, and was ready to give him some lead for it—and I'll say that puncher didn't want any."

Bill snorted.

He followed the marshal from the school-room. A few minutes later he was mounted on his black broncho, and riding away with the marshal's outfit. The school-room was left in a buzz of excitement.

Small Brown was giving his class geography, but nobody in the bunch cared a red cent for geography, or Mr. Brown, just then. Every Packsaddle fellow was thinking of the outlaw, the marshal's men riding in quest of him, and Bill Sampson riding with the marshal's men. Some of them went to the windows and started out. Small Brown squeaked at them in vain.

Big Steve even proposed to throw down school, mount, and ride. Likely enough the bunch would have done so, too, but for the fact that they would meet up with Bill on the prairie. And

if Bill caught them riding the plains in school hours, they knew what Bill would do with the quirt.

"Sit down! Take your places! Will you keep order?" yapped Small Brown. "We are here to work!"

"Forget it!" drawled Big Steve.

In the buzz of excited voices, Mr. Brown's shrill yap passed almost unheeded. Half the fellows were at the windows, looking out through the gateway, across the playground, the way the riders had gone.

Unsupported by Bill, little Mr. Brown was nowhere. He was really afraid of fellows like Steve Carson, who could have pitched him across the school-room. He had an irritable temper, which he seldom or never ventured to let rip.

He waved a pointer, squeaked and yapped. Then he came across to a window where Dick Carr was staring out.

Certainly Dick ought to have been in his place. But no other fellow was in his place, and the new boy followed the crowd.

Whack!

Dick gave a yell as he caught the pointer across his pants. He spun round at Mr. Brown with blazing eyes.

"Go and sit down!" yapped Small Brown.

"You cheeky ass!" shouted Dick Carr. He knew that Small Brown was picking on him because he was new and "tender," and because he dared not pick on tougher fellows like Carson or Parker, or Dixon, or Pie Sanders.

Whack, whack! Perhaps Small Brown hoped that punishing one member would have a disciplinary effect on the rest. If that was the idea, it was rather rough luck on a fellow who was, after all, the most orderly fellow in the whole bunch. The sight of Small Brown whacking with the pointer was new, and it interested and entertained the bunch. They gathered round, cheering him on.

"Wade in, ol' man!" chirruped Poker Parker.

"Give him a few on the pants!" yelled Pie Sanders.

"Touch up the tenderfoot!" chuckled Big Steve. "Say, you 'uns, Small Brown surely has got his mad up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whack! rang the pointer again, and Dick Carr, with flashing eyes, jumped at Small Brown and jerked it from his hand.

"Give Brown a few, big boy!" yelled Slim Poindexter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Say, shall I hold him for you, Mr. Brown?" drawled Carson.

"Yes, yes!" gasped Small Brown.

"Leave him be, you Carson!" shouted Mick.

But Big Steve was not losing this chance of getting back on the tenderfoot who had knocked him out in a scrap, his first day at Packsaddle. Generally Big Steve was a leader of trouble in the school-room, and he had had many a walloping from Bill's quirt for that reason. Now it suited him to stand for law and order.

He jumped at Dick Carr and grasped him.

They struggled, and Small Brown, hopping round them like a rabbit, snatched the pointer back.

Whack! Whack!

It came ringing on Dick's back as he struggled with the hefty Steve. He gave a howl of wrath and anguish. With a sudden effort, hooking Big Steve's leg, he whirled him over, and Carson crashed down on the nearest desk.

He rolled to the floor with a hefty bump as Dick turned on Small Brown. That gentleman jumped back in alarm, his eyes almost bulging through his horn-rimmed glasses as Dick made a jump at him.

Dick grabbed the pointer from his hand. He turned on Steve, who was struggling up.

Grasping him by the back of the collar, he forced Big Steve down again, grinding his nose into the pine planks of the floor.

Then the pointer rose and fell.

Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack!

The dust rose from Steve's breeches and fearful yells from Steve. He struggled and wriggled, and roared and howled. Dick Carr, with gleaming eye, laid on the pointer with all the force of his arm.

Poker Parker and Slim Dixon rushed forward to the help of their pal. A slash of the pointer, catching Dixon on the side of the head and Slim on the nose, drove them yelling back. Then the pointer lashed again and again on Big Steve's breeches, to an accompaniment of fearful howls.

The whole bunch were roaring with laughter. This was better fun than geography! Small Brown hopped, and almost danced, with angry excitement. Bill Sampson would have restored order in a moment. Small Brown could do nothing but squeal and yap.

Leaving Carson yelling on the floor, Dick Carr pitched the pointer out of the window and walked to the door.

"Take your place!" squealed Small Brown.

"Go and chop chips!" retorted the new boy at Packsaddle, and he walked out of the school-room and banged the door after him with a bang that rang along the Rio Frio.

CHAPTER 14.

The Rustler's Revenge!

"SEARCH me!" breathed Bill Sampson.

Bill's eyes gleamed under his rugged brows.

He pulled in the black broncho and jumped from the saddle. Far away on the prairie Stetson hats bobbed in the brilliant sunshine of Texas. The marshal's outfit, once clear of the cow town, had separated, to hunt for sign

of the elusive Red Ike. Sign was not easy to find, but Bill Sampson figured that he had picked up some.

Stooping in the tough grass, the cow town schoolmaster examined the hard, sun-baked earth. Bill had forgotten he was a schoolmaster now. He was once more a 'puncher of the Kicking Mule, riding after a rustler!

"I guess I got him!" grinned Bill.

Bill was as good a man on the trail as any Apache or Comanche that wandered in the wastes of the Staked Plain. Red Ike had left little sign where he moved, but what little he had left, Bill's keen eyes picked up.

Standing waist deep in the tough grass, Bill stared round him. Two or three Stetsons bobbed over the high grass in the far distance. But they were far out of hearing of a call. On his left, were the bluffs that hung over the deep channel of the Rio Frio. Wide and deep was that channel, cut by the river in flood. But the Frio ran low now, twenty feet below the level of the prairie.

With his reins hooked over his arm, Bill tramped towards the river. Unless Bill was mistaken—and he did not figure that he was—some guy had tramped down to the Frio on foot, and if that was so he did not need telling who the guy was. A man on foot on the plains was a very rare bird—no man in the cow country went afoot if he had a horse. And Red Ike, the rustler, had lost his horse. Bill's hand was very near the butt of his gun in his belt as he tramped out on the bluffs over the Frio.

The descent from the plain to the bed of the river was steep. Below was a wilderness of glimmering mud. Far across it the Frio flowed, shallow, and glimmering in the sun, with yards of quaking mud between it and the grassy bluff where Bill stood.

Scanning the mudbank, Bill failed to pick up the man he sought. He shook his head at the thought that the outlaw might have got across

the Frio at that spot. Only utter desperation could have driven any man to trust himself to that quaking swamp of mud, where wandering steers from the ranches had sometimes sunk down to choking death.

Bill figured that the red-bearded outlaw was in cover in some hollow of the high bank. Red Ike knew only too well that he was closely hunted, and he was the kind of firebug to watch for a chance of turning on a pursuer and getting possession of a cayuse. Once in the saddle, Red Ike would know how to burn the wind. On foot, he could only skulk and hide like a scared prairie rabbit.

Bill Sampson pegged his broncho, loosened his Colt in the holster, and clambered down the rugged face of the bluff to the mudbank that stretched towards the river below.

It was not easy going. Several times he slipped, and saved himself by catching at the roots in the slope. But he noticed that in three or four places there was sign that the descent had already been made, and not long since. He was not far from Red Ike.

Any instant he might have heard the crack of the gunman's Colt. He was watchful and wary as a panther. But he figured that Red Ike would not be in haste to burn powder. A shot would carry wide on the wind, and bring other enemies upon him.

Suddenly, as a loose root pulled out under Bill's weight, he went plunging and rolling down the steep bank.

"Jumping painters!" gasped Bill, as he rolled.

He grabbed and clutched, but he could get no hold. He pitched helplessly till he brought up in a hollow of the bank that was screened by half-rotten branches, left there by the river when it was higher. Bill crashed through the rotten branches and rolled in the hollow, and at the same moment he felt something there that was not earth or mud—something that stirred, something that panted.

A hand grasped him. Half-buried in rotten branches and leaves, on his back, his gun snatched away, Bill glared up at a savage, fierce, red-bearded face, that glared down on him.

He panted.

He knew now where Red Ike had lain in cover—in that unseen hollow of the river bank, covered with driftwood. And he had rolled fairly down on top of the hidden outlaw. But it was Red Ike who was on top now.

Bill's gun was jammed to his face, Red Ike's finger was on the trigger, and the gunman's eyes blazing over it.

"By thunder!" said the rustler between his teeth. "You got me, Bill—and I got you, by thunder!"

"Doggone my cats!" panted Bill. "I'll say this is the bee's knee! Shoot, you skunk, and be durned. I guess Ezra will hear the gun, and you sure won't make a getaway arter. Shoot, you coyote!"

The outlaw did not pull trigger. He grinned at Bill savagely over the gun. Bill, crumpled on his back, a knee on his chest, was powerless. His eyes gleamed with rage at the ruffian.

"I guess Ezra ain't on hand—not a whole lot," said Red Ike. "I been watching you, Bill, and I sure hunted cover here when I saw you had picked up sign. Your side-kickers ain't on hand, Bill."

"I guess they'll hear that gun, all the same," snorted Bill. "I guess it's you for a limb and a rope, you dog-goned thief and rustler! Shoot, if you want!"

"I guess I'll shoot quick and sudden if you give me trouble," grinned Red Ike. "But I ain't honing to shoot, Bill. Stick your paws together."

With the gun jamming in his bearded face and the gunman's desperate eyes gleaming over it, Bill Sampson made no demur. His strong wrists were dragged together and tied with a cord from Red Ike's pocket. The rustler knotted the cord with cruel care.

"That's let you out, Bill!" he said, with a savage grin. "I guess I'm going to borrow that hoss of yours that you've staked out on the bluff. I guess I borrowed him once and lost him agin, but I sure ain't losing him this time. I figure on burning the wind out of the Frio country and hitting Mexico a piece. You goin' to stop me?"

"Doggone you!" gasped Bill.

"Get on your hind legs!" snapped the rustler.

Bill staggered to his feet.

He gritted his teeth with rage. He was powerless in the rustler's hands, and his horse, on the bluff, was at the gunman's mercy. Red Ike had found, at last, the chance he wanted of cinching a cayuse, and it was Bill's cayuse that he was going to cinch.

"Walk!" snapped the rustler.

He dragged on Bill's arm. The cow town schoolmaster had to walk. The rustler was forcing him in the direction of the water.

Something like pallor came on Bill's rugged, bronzed face. Red Ike was not going to burn powder. But he was not going to spare his enemy, who had fallen into his hands. Hunted, desperate, worn with hunger, and hardship, and fatigue, Red Ike was a wild beast—a savage wild animal that had turned on his hunters. What was he going to do?

Bill soon knew.

As they drew nearer the Frio, their feet sank in the mud deeper, and softer, and more insecure, close to the water. Red Ike was picking a spot—a spot he knew! He gave the schoolmaster a sudden shove, and sent him sprawling.

Bill crashed on quaking mud.

Struggling wildly, frantically, he righted himself, head up. But he was down to his gun-belt in soft mud by the time he was upright. As he tramped to keep his footing, he sank deeper.

"I guess that fixes you. Bill

Sampson!" said Red Ike, between his teeth. "I'll say you won't ride on my trail no more, you doggoned geck! Say, that's where the steers from Kicking Mule was lost, last fall. I guess you'll hit their bones when you go down deep enough. Howl, you dog, howl, and see if your side-kickers will hear you!"

"You goldarned cow-thief!" panted Bill.

Red Ike laughed savagely and tramped away. Bill, struggling wildly in the mud swamp, watched him go. He saw the active rustler disappear over the edge of the bluff.

Bill groaned.

The way of escape was free for the rustler, and that troubled Bill more than his own peril, at the moment. Ezra and his outfit were far afield, and even if they spotted a horseman, at the distance, they would not figure that it was Red Ike. Now that he had a horse, every chance was in favour of the desperado riding clear and getting across the Rio Grande into Mexico.

There was a beat of hoofs on the prairie above.

Red Ike was riding!

Thud, thud, thud! rang the galloping hoofs. Red Ike, in Bill's saddle, was riding the black broncho—for the Mexican border! In a few minutes the sound of galloping hoofs died away to the south.

"Jumping painters!" panted Bill.

He was down to his armpits in yielding, clinging, sticky mud. His struggles only drove him deeper. Even with his hands free, he could not have dragged himself out now. Indeed, even a strong man could not have dragged his bulky body from the deep bed of mud without firm ground to stand on—and there was only yielding mud round him. He knew that this was the end of the trail.

He shouted—and shouted again! But he gave it up—there were no ears to hear. The mud was up to his shoulders, sucking at his neck. Thick

and cold and clammy, it squeezed him and squelched round him as he moved. The rustler was gone—long gone—leaving Bill Sampson to a fearful fate, as terrible a revenge as even that savage heart could have desired. It was the end of the trail, and Bill Sampson, with the sweat thick on his forehead, looked up—looking his last on the blue sky of Texas.

CHAPTER 15.

A Tenderfoot and a Rope!

WHIZ!" It was the whiz of a lariat. "Rotten!" grunted Dick Carr. He had missed.

At Packsaddle School the bunch were still in the school-room, with Small Brown. But Dick Carr was far from the cow town school. He had banged the school-room door behind him and cleared off, and that was that! But he did not want to hang about the playground by himself, and with an angry sense of injustice strong upon him, he did not intend to return to the class. He caught a pony in the corral, saddled him, took his lasso, and rode out of the gate.

Every day since his first instruction in the use of the "rope," Dick had put in some practice with it. He was naturally quick and intelligent, and he was making progress, but it was a thing that had to be learned, and he was more than tired of the bunch's grinning and gibing at the clumsiness of the tenderfoot. He could always borrow one of Bill's horses; and now, every day, he would ride out on the prairie, after class, to practise with the rope. On this occasion he was doing it during class.

Riding down the river, out of sight of school and town, he made cast after cast with the rope, at branches or lonely saplings—anything that gave him a chance. Sometimes the whirling loop settled on the object at which

he aimed—more often it missed. He was getting on, but he was getting on slowly.

Having failed once more, missing a stump in the prairie, he coiled up the riata as he rode on and prepared it for another cast. Looking round for another object at which to aim, he spotted a bunch of tall sunflowers that grew on the grassy bluffs over the low-flowing Frio.

He rode within a dozen feet of the high edge of the bluff, and made his cast. Once more he failed to cinch, the coiled rope striking the sunflowers and crushing them down, instead of noosing them. The riata uncoiled to full length, the loop dropping over the edge of the bluff.

"Bother!" growled Dick.

He sat his pony, coiling in the rope, facing the river. From the saddle, high up on the grassy bluff, he could see far out across the river-bed, to where the Frio flowed between wide banks of mud. He stared, and stared, at the sight of a Stetson hat on the mud.

He stared hard, unable to understand. It was not a hat that had blown away from some rider on the plains, for it was moving and stirring, and it was raised more than a foot above the level of the mudbank. Yet if it was on a man's head, where was the man? Even if he was sitting down, even if he was lying down, the hat would have been higher. Besides, Dick could see nothing of him, only the hat!

Then suddenly he grasped it. He had heard talk among the bunch of the danger of the swamp along the Frio. Bill, in fact, had warned him of that danger; a necessary warning to a tenderfoot. And now he knew that some unwary guy had gone down to the water and sunk up to his neck in the mud! That was the meaning of a ten-gallon hat wagging a foot above the level.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Dick.

He jumped from the pony and hastily pegged it. Then he ran to the edge of the bluff, threw himself on his chest, and peered down. Twenty feet down that Stetson wagged and wobbled as the sunken man under it wriggled in the mud that enveloped him, twenty feet out from the bluff.

"Hi! Hallo! Hi!" shouted Dick Carr.

He saw a sudden movement of the Stetson. It slanted, and a bronzed face stared from under the immense brim. Dick's eyes almost started from his head. It was the face of Bill Sampson that he saw!

"Bill!" panted Dick.

He stared at the schoolmaster of Packsaddle blankly. He waved his hand, and Bill stared back, with hope lighting his rugged face. A hoarse, husky yell came from the cow town schoolmaster.

Dick jumped to his feet. His face was white. How Bill had got there, what it all meant, he did not know, and there was no time to think. But he knew that it was a matter of minutes to save the life of the schoolmaster of Packsaddle. That was enough for him to know.

He gave one glance at the end of the riata, to make sure that it was safely fastened to the pony's saddle. Then he threw the rope, uncoiling, over the bluff. He did not waste time climbing down—he slithered down the rope. The cow pony, used to the strain of a lariat, braced his hoofs to take it. In a few seconds Dick was down on the mudbank.

He raced across to Bill.

Bill shouted hoarsely:

"Watch out, you gink! You want to sink in?"

Dick did not heed. Soft mud squelched over his boots as he ran. But he was taking the lariat with him, over his arm.

With sticky mud to his knees, Dick stopped and pitched the noose at Bill. It tapped on the Stetson and fell beside it.

"Catch!" shouted Dick.

"You doggoned geck, I'm hog-tied!" panted Bill.

He made a wild effort, and forced his arms out of the mire. The effort sank him to his chin; but the hands came up, and Dick saw that they were bound together at the wrists.

He tore out his pocket-knife.

"Watch out!" panted Bill, as the tenderfoot came squelching recklessly out to him. "Go back—go back! You'll sure be sucked in!"

Dick was in to his waist as he reached Bill. He did not heed it. He sawed the keen edge of the knife across the cord that fastened Bill's wrists. It parted, and the schoolmaster of Packsaddle was free.

"Go back!" groaned Bill. "You doggoned geck, go back—afore you go under! You hear me shout!"

"Hang on, Bill!" said the tenderfoot of Packsaddle, unheeding. He shoved the loop of the lasso into Bill's strong fingers. They gripped.

Holding on to the rope, Dick dragged himself back along it. But for the rope stretching down from the saddle of the cow-pony on the bluff he would never have got out of the swamp alive.

But his grip on it was strong, and he dragged himself along, and reached firm ground under the bluff.

Up the bluff he clambered at frantic speed. Bill, holding on with both brawny hands to the lasso, was keeping his head out of the swamp. But it was sucking him down, and the soft mud welled over his bearded chin, and squeezed in the corners of his shut mouth.

Dick scrambled to his feet. He waved a hand to Bill.

"Hold on!" he yelled. "Hold on for your life, Bill!"

Bill did not answer. He could not speak now, with mud welling at his mouth. But he held on with a grip of iron to the rope, as Dick Carr leaped into the saddle, and put the cow-pony in motion.

Away from the river went the cow-pony, dragging on the taut lasso. The pull on Bill's arms was terrible. But he had got them through the loop, and the loop under his elbows, and he held on with fingers of steel. The mud held his bulky figure like a giant's grasp, and it seemed as if his brawny arms would be torn away by the pull of the cow-pony on the rope. Bill gritted his teeth and bore it.

Slowly he was drawn from the swamp.

Head and shoulders were clear, and his bulky body followed. Then the resistance was weaker, and the draw on the rope brought the rest of him whisking out, his long legs flying, caked with mud.

At the end of the lariat he went rolling along the mudbank towards the bluff. A minute more, and he was swinging against the bluff.

The cow-pony pulled on, and Bill came clambering and scrambling over the grassy edge.

As he rolled there, streaming yellow mud in the grass, Dick reined in, and dismounted. He ran back to Bill.

Bill lay exhausted, too exhausted even to free his arms from the lariat. Bill was as strong as a buffalo, but every ounce of his great strength was spent now. He lay and panted. Dick unhooked the rope, coiled it, and slung it on his saddle.

Bill sat up at last.

"What you doing out of school? Brown give you a holiday?"

"I gave myself one."

"Howling coyotes! I'll sure quirt you!"

Dick grinned.

School was over at Packsaddle, and the bunch streaming out, when they had the sight of their lives—Bill, smothered with sticky mud, thick and evil-smelling, riding in on a cow-pony, with Dick Carr trotting by the pony's

side. The bunch stared blankly. And as Bill rolled wearily from the cowpony at the porch of the school-house, Small Brown hopped up to him and squeaked:

"Sir! Mr. Sampson, I have to complain of that boy Carr—a very serious complaint——"

"Forget it!" roared Bill.

And he tramped in.

That serious complaint was never made! And Bill quite forgot to quirt the truant of Packsaddle!

CHAPTER 16.

The Buck-Jumper!

"GUM!" exclaimed Slick Poindexter. "That's a hoss!"

"And so it is, entirety!"

said Mick Kavanagh.

Dick Carr looked round.

Dick was interested in horses. He was a good rider, and could "back" any "critter" in the school corral. But, so far, he did not possess one of his own—the only fellow at the cow town school who didn't.

The Packsaddle bunch were in the playground, after chuck, when Steve Carson came riding in at the gate from the prairie trail. He came in with a gallop and a flourish, a clatter of hoofs and jingling of bridle. Steve liked showing off his horsemanship. And he was riding a new horse! He had gone out on his cow-pony, but he had come back mounted on the handsomest pinto in Texas.

As he drew rein in the playground there was a rush of the Packsaddle fellows to gather round him and admire his horse. Packsaddle guys knew all about horseflesh. Dick Carr, tenderfoot as he was, knew quite as much as the rest, and he looked at Steve's handsome pony with a keenly appreciative eye. It was exactly the cayuse he wanted.

"Say, where'd you cinch him, Steve?" exclaimed Poindexter.

"Been hoss stealing?" asked Mick; and there was a laugh.

"Where's your own critter?" asked Poker Parker.

"Made a trade?" inquired Slim Dixon.

Questions rained on Steve. He grinned down at the Packsaddle fellows as he sat at ease in the saddle. The pinto pony stood quite still, with almost a sleepy look, as quiet a cayuse as had ever been seen in the Frio valley. But Dick Carr, watching the pony's eyes, detected a gleam in them which gave him the impression that the pinto was not so quiet as he looked. Had he been in the saddle he would not have sat him so carelessly as Carson was doing now. But Big Steve was quite at his ease.

"I guess I've made a trade, you 'uns," said Steve. "I met up with Snort Jinkins on the prairie, and he had this cayuse to sell. I traded my cow-pony and ten dollars for him, and I guess I got the goods."

"You sure did!" exclaimed Poindexter. "Say, does he buck?"

"I guess he won't buck me," said Steve. "I'll say I'll ride any cayuse between the Staked Plain and the Rio Grande."

"You'd better keep a tight hand on the rein," said Dick Carr. "I don't like the look in his eyes."

Steve Carson stared at the tenderfoot of Packsaddle and burst into a roar of laughter. It was echoed by the rest of the bunch. They did not want telling about horses by a tenderfoot who had been only a few weeks in Texas.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Steve. "That tenderfoot figures that he knows something about a cayuse. Say, did you ever sit a critter before you hit Texas?"

Dick Carr coloured.

"I've ridden ever since I was old enough to sit a horse," he snapped. "And I tell you that that pony is full of mischief."

"He sure knows a whole lot!" chuckled Poindexter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bill Sampson, the headmaster of Packsaddle, came striding down from the schoolhouse. The bunch opened, to make way for the cow town schoolmaster, in his red shirt and ten-gallon hat.

"Say, that's a cayuse!" said Bill admiringly. "But don't you sit him like you was sitting on a sofa, you Carson! He's sure full of pep!"

"I got him all right, Bill," said Steve, while the bunch stared a little.

Bill knew more about horses than any other man in Texas, and his words rather unexpectedly bore out what the tenderfoot had just said.

"I'll say that critter set you back a hundred dollars," said Bill, scanning the pinto.

"Guess again!" grinned Carson. "I traded him off Snort Jenkins for my old pony and ten bucks, Bill."

"Snort," said Bill, "is the sharpest, durndest horse-dealer in Texas. I guess this is the first time he ever came out of the little end of the horn in selling a horse. I'll say——"

Bill was suddenly interrupted.

From somewhere out on the prairie came a shrill whistle, followed sharply by another.

Evidently, it was a signal of some sort and for a second the Packsaddle bunch wondered what it meant. But the next second they had something else to think about.

The quiet pinto pony woke suddenly to life. The second blast of the distant whistle had hardly sounded when the pinto leaped clear into the air, all four feet off the ground, and arched his back.

"Look out, Steve!"

"Jump for it, you 'uns! Look out!"

"Great gophers!"

Crash! came the hoofs on the ground. Crash! Crash! Clatter! Clatter!

The Packsaddle bunch jumped away in hot haste. Bill Sampson tripped and fell backwards, and narrowly escaped a kick from a flashing hoof. He

scrambled up hastily and leaped to safety.

Steve Carson gripped the reins and dug his knees into the pinto's flanks. Steve was a good horseman, and, taken by surprise as he was by the sudden outbreak of that quiet pony, he clung to his seat. His face was savage, his teeth gritting, and his eyes glittering. Crowding back, the bunch watched from a safe distance, such an exhibition of buck-jumping as had never been seen at Packsaddle before, though there were plenty of buck-jumpers there.

Clatter! Crash! Clatter! Up went the forefoot of the pinto high in the air and Steve seemed like sliding over the tail. Down came the forefoot like thunder, and Steve nearly shot over the pony's head. Still he held on fiercely, determined not to be beaten by his new acquisition.

Crash! Crash! Clatter!

"Jumping painters!" gasped Bill. "I'll say that cayuse is some buck-jumper! Stick to him, Steve!"

The pinto suddenly broke into a gallop across the playground. With a yell the bunch scattered out of his way.

Steve's hat was gone. His hair blew out in the wind from the prairie. His face was white now. He knew now that he could not handle that horse, and he would have given a whole herd of ponies to be safe on solid earth. He dragged fiercely at the reins, in vain. The pinto shot across the playground like a bullet.

"Look out, Brown!" yelled Dick Carr.

Small Brown gave one horrified blink through his horn-rimmed spectacles, and bounded round the bunkhouse like a startled prairie rabbit. Never had Small Brown displayed such activity.

Clatter! Clatter! The pinto was making for the school fence. It seemed that he would crash. Steve could not stop him—he had no more chance of stopping an express train.

But the pinto swerved a yard from the fence and rushed round the play-

ground towards the gateway, at terrific speed.

"Stick on, Steve!" yelled Slick Poindexter.

Close by the gateway the pinto leaped into the air and came down on his hind legs, his forefeet high. Steve Carson shot over the lashing tail and landed like a sack of alfalfa. The pinto shot out of the gateway like a bullet from a rifle and vanished down the prairie trail.

Steve Carson lay gasping on his back with an ache in every bone of his body. Round him the bunch gathered, laughing now that the alarm was over. Steve did not laugh; he gasped and groaned. But the rest of the bunch roared. Bill Sampson roared.

"Haw, haw, haw! You want to watch out, you Carson, when you buy a horse from Snort. I'll say he fooled you a few! Say, you figure that you'll ever see that pinto agin? Haw, haw, haw!"

Poker Parker and Slim Dixon helped Steve to his feet. They helped him away to the bunkhouse, grinning as they did so. He was too sore and aching to walk without assistance. "Swank" did not make the bully of Packsaddle popular in the cow town school.

Dick Carr looked out of the gateway. The pinto had vanished. Steve had lost saddle and outfit, as well as his new cayuse. He had fancied that he had got the best of a bargain with the sharpest and most unscrupulous horse-dealer in Texas. Evidently, he hadn't!

"Won't Carson get that horse back, Poindexter?" asked Dick Carr.

Slick chortled.

"I guess not. Didn't you hear that whistle? I guess that was Snort's signal to the cayuse. That started him buck-jumping." Slick roared, "I'll say that cayuse won't never be seen near Packsaddle agin!"

"You mean that he's robbed Carson of the horse he sold him?" asked Dick.

"I mean jest that!" grinned Slick.

"Why, I guess Snort's sold that cayuse

to a dozen jays, one after another, and he'll sell him to a dozen more! Ha, ha, ha! Steve was sure a boob to be fooled that-a-way! Say, you guy, when you go to buy a hoss, don't you trade with Snort Jenkins!"

Dick laughed.

"Hardly!" he said—not guessing what the near future had in store.

CHAPTER 17.

Tamed!

"B OTHER!" grunted Dick Carr.

For nearly half an hour Dick had been walking to and fro in the main street of Hard Tack waiting for the hack. Dick's father was manager of the store at Hard Tack, and as the day was a holiday at Packsaddle School, Dick had run across to see him.

It was a trip of over twenty miles down the valley of the Rio Frio. As Dick had no horse and the distance was not to be walked, he had been glad of a lift in Ezra Lick's buckboard coming over that morning. But the marshal of Packsaddle was not going back that day, so Dick had to rely on Andy Butt's hack. And the little one-horse hack that made the trip up the Frio was far from reliable.

Dick waited, and groused. He had left his father at the store because the hack was booked to start at five. Now it was half-past five, and the hack was not yet visible on the street. Dick felt sorely the lack of a cayuse. But Mr. Carr was far from wealthy and had indeed been lucky to get his present post at Hard Tack Store; and horses cost money. Ever since he had been at the cow town school, Dick had been looking for a chance to buy a horse—but he had only twenty dollars to devote to that purpose, and he did not want to buy a crock. He had to wait till he could pick up a bargain—and he was still waiting! So he had to take the one horse hack back to the school!

—and Andy Butt was later than even usual.

Loafing about with his hands in his pockets Dick watched cowpunchers riding into town and riding out. Presently his attention was drawn to a man leading a handsome pony with the reins over his arm. The man was a bony, sharp-featured fellow with cunning-looking eyes set close together; but the horse he was leading was a beauty.

It was a pinto—a "painted" horse, as the cowmen called it. Grey, with patches and spots of a deep rich brown, it had a painted look, hence the name. But it was not only the good looks of the horse that drew Dick's attention. He had seen that cayuse before—twenty miles away, at Packsaddle School! It was the pinto that Steve Carson had ridden in the playground a few days ago—and never seen since.

"By Jove!" murmured Dick, with a gleam in his eyes.

It was Steve Carson's horse; there was no doubt about that. Dick could guess that the sly-eyed man with it was Snort Jenkins, the astute horse-dealer.

Snort was taking an interest in the boy who was loafing up and down aimlessly. He came over the street to him, leading the pony.

"Say, big boy! You lost your critter?" asked the horse-dealer. Nobody in the Frio country went on foot.

"I haven't one!" answered Dick.

He was breathing rather hard. He was on the worst of terms with Steve Carson, the bully of Packsaddle, and had earned his undying enmity by knocking him out in a scrap. All the same, he wanted, if he could, to get Steve's horse back for him from the rascal who had cheated him. He wondered whether he would have a chance. Snort was twice Dick's weight, so he was not easy to handle.

"You ain't got a cayuse?" exclaimed the dealer. "I'll tell a man! Say, you looking for a horse to buy—cheap?"

Dick grinned.

Quite unaware that he belonged to

Packsaddle, unaware that he knew anything about Steve's disastrous purchase, the rogue was going to try to sell him the same horse!

Dick knew the programme. When the money was paid over and the buyer rode the horse away the signal whistle would follow—the buck-jumping act, and the vanishing of the pinto—for Snort to sell again to some other unwary boob.

Dick was a tenderfoot in Texas, but he was not tender enough to fall for that!

But it was not his game to give away what he knew! He saw here a chance of getting Steve's horse back for him!

"How much?" he asked.

"I'd take fifty dollars," answered Snort.

"I've only got twenty!" answered Dick innocently.

"Kid," said Snort, laying a hand almost affectionately on his arm, "the cayuse is yours! Snort Jenkins ain't the guy to say nope to a trade. No, sir! Twenty bucks, and the critter's yours."

"Let me try him!" said Dick.

"Try him all you like!" said Snort. The pinto was saddled and bridled; Dick knew to whom that saddle and bridle belonged! But he was not telling Mr. Jenkins all he knew!

He put his foot in the stirrup and mounted easily and quickly. Snort let go the reins.

"Ride him up the street and back again," he said. "I'll say that pinto's as quiet as a lamb! Yes, sir! Quiet as a li'l woolly lamb, sir!"

"Looks it!" agreed Dick, as he gathered up the reins. He was aware that the pinto was a quiet animal until Mr. Jenkins gave the signal whistle he had been trained to obey. Then he was all fireworks! But Dick was ready for the fireworks!

With a shake of the reins he started. But he did not ride up the street. He whirled round the pinto and rode out on the prairie outside Hard Tack.

Snort trotted after him, with the bow-legged trot of a man used to riding.

"Hyer, you guy, don't you burn the wind at that rate!" yelled Snort. "You ain't paid for that critter!"

Snort had no fear of losing the pinto. He had his signal-whistle in reserve. But it was not time to play that card yet.

Dick drew in on the prairie trail and Mr. Jenkins came panting up. Dick Carr looked at him with a smile.

"Like that critter, hey?" asked Snort.

"Yes, rather! I'd buy him off you, and glad, if he was yours to sell, Mr. Jenkins," answered Dick cheerfully. "As you've already sold him to Steve Carson at Packsaddle, I'm taking him back to his owner. Good-bye!"

"What?" gasped Snort.

Dick shook the reins, and dashed away on the Packsaddle trail. He did not need to wait for the hack now that he was mounted on the finest pony he had seen in Texas.

Snort Jenkins stood for some moments transfixed. But his way of life made him quick on the uptake. He swiftly realised how matters stood. He was not going to sell that pinto to the tender-looking guy! That tender guy figured that he was walking off the cayuse to Packsaddle! Snort put his fingers in his mouth and whistled two loud, sharp blasts.

"I guess that'll fix him, some!" growled the horse-dealer.

The pinto pricked up his ears at the well-known signal. Up to that moment he had been all that a rider could wish—as in Steve's case! Now he suddenly turned himself into a bundle of fireworks.

Clatter! Crash! Clatter!

Snort stared on from a distance, with a derisive grin. The pinto was leaping, cavorting, buck-jumping, rearing, and tumbling like a mad thing. The horse-dealer had no doubt whatever that in a few moments the rider would be violently thrown, and the pony would come trotting back, as he had been taught to do.

But Dick Carr could ride.

In his own country Dick had an uncle who was a farmer in Wales, and Dick had been accustomed to spend holidays with him, riding fierce little Welsh ponies that wanted some riding! The tenderfoot of Packsaddle had nothing to learn about backing a horse!

To Snort's amazement, and probably to that of the pinto, Dick did not pitch off, as Steve had done in the Packsaddle playground. He stuck to the horse like a limpet to a rock.

Up went the forefeet of the pinto, and he stood on his hind legs, threatening to fall backwards on his rider. Dick leaned to the glossy neck and held on fast. Down came the forefeet with a thunderous crash, and up went the hind legs till it seemed as if the rider must be hurled over the lowered neck. But he seemed glued to his saddle.

See-saw went the back-jumper for five or six long minutes. Dick was still in the saddle—breathing hard through shut teeth.

Then, suddenly, the pinto rolled over in the tough grass, his heels lashing in the air.

Snort Jenkins grinned savagely. He figured that the boy would be brushed off like a fly, probably with a cracked bone.

But like lightning Dick leaped clear, still grasping the reins. And as the pinto gathered his legs under him and scrambled up, Dick was in the saddle once more with a swift leap. He was sitting the pony when it was on its hoofs again, much to its astonishment—and Snort's.

"Blue blazes!" gasped Mr. Jenkins.

"That kid can ride!"

And he whistled again the signal to the pinto. He was getting anxious.

He had reason to be! For Dick Carr was riding the pony now, up the prairie trail, with a hand of steel on the reins, and the pinto was obeying his hand!

The fireworks were over; the buck-jumper knew that he had felt a master's hand, and he was allowing

himself to be ridden. Many times came Snort's whistles, unheeded now. Dick rode the pinto at a gallop, and the lashing heels sent back a cloud of dust.

Snort rushed in frantic pursuit. But he might as well have pursued a streak of lightning!

He halted, panting for breath, shaking bony fists, and almost turning the atmosphere blue with a stream of profanity. Up the trail went the pony and its rider at a terrific gallop. Snort was left standing in the grass, yelling with rage. From a far distance Dick Carr turned his head and waved his hat. Then he vanished in nodding grass towards Packsaddle.

Snort snorted with fury. That handsome pinto was worth two hundred dollars of any guy's money, and Snort had sold him a dozen times at various prices, in various districts. It looked as if he had sold him now for the last time—unless he could sneak him from the school corral later. Which, as it seemed to be his only resource, Snort resolved to do that very night!

CHAPTER 18.

Dick Makes a Bargain!

STEVE CARSON looked round as Dick Carr came into the chuckhouse. He winked at his friends, Poker Parker and Slim Dixon, who grinned.

Dick did not heed the bully of Packsaddle and his pals. He was tired and hungry, and he dropped on the bench at the supper-table in the place Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh made for him between them.

He had got in rather late from Hard Tack. The sun was sinking behind the Staked Plain, and shadows lengthening along the Rio Frio, when Dick reached the school. All the bunch had gone into the chuckhouse for supper, and there was nobody about when Dick arrived and turned the pinto into

the corral. He intended to tell Steve that he had recovered his new horse for him; but that could come after supper.

"Say, tenderfoot!" called Steve across the table, after another wink to his pals. "I guess I got to chew the rag with you a piece!"

Dick looked at him, with his mouth full of bacon and beans.

"Aw, can it, Steve!" said Slick Poindexter. "You sure don't want to put it over on the tenderfoot."

"And himself the world's prize boob!" said Mick.

"I guess nobody asked you guys to horn in!" snapped Steve, with a scowl at Slick and Mick. "Don't you uncork any more! Look here, young Carr, I guess you want a horse."

Dick nodded. His mouth was too well laden for speech. He had come in from the prairie hungry, and Tin Tung's cooking was appetising.

There was a chuckle along the trestle-table. All the Packsaddle bunch knew that Dick wanted to buy a horse, and that he had the moderate sum of twenty dollars to spend on it. In a few weeks at the cow town school the tenderfoot had been offered plenty; but he had not proved tender enough to buy any of them. He wondered whether Steve was going to try that game again.

But Big Steve had quite other ideas in his mind.

"I'll say you know a cayuse when you see one, young Carr!" he said. "You sure liked the look of that spotted pinto I bought the other day."

Dick nodded again, wondering what on earth was coming.

"Waal, how'd you like that cayuse?" asked Steve.

"Fine!" answered Dick.

"He's yours for twenty dollars," said Carson. "All you got to do is to get him back. I guess a hoss-thief like that pesky Snort Jinkins won't be able to get away with a swindle like that! Nope! He'll sure be run in by the

marshal's men afore he's many days older! I'm telling you!"

Dick masticated beans and bacon, and looked steadily across the table at the bully of Packsaddle.

Ever since the episode of the buck-jumper, Steve had been like a bear with a sore head.

He had traded his own horse and ten dollars for the pinto, and had lost the pinto—cheated like the greenest tenderfoot, and laughed at by all Packsaddle into the bargain. He had been unpleasant all round, and most of all to Dick Carr. Now, all of a sudden, he was as sweet as molasses!

Dick did not need the grins up and down the long table to enlighten him as to the reason. The bully of Packsaddle, as unscrupulous as the rogue who had swindled him, was aiming to swindle the tenderfoot in his turn. He had not the remotest hope of getting that pinto back again, or of ever seeing Snort Jenkins anywhere near Packsaddle. He was offering to sell the tenderfoot the horse because he believed that the horse was gone beyond possible recovery!

Dick was a tenderfoot in Texas, but Steve made the mistake of guessing that he was a boob as well!

"I'll say that's a good offer, Carr!" said Poker Parker, backing up his leader. "I'll tell a man I heard Ezra Lick saying that he figured on roping in that hoss-thief Jenkins by the end of the week."

"They'll get him O.K., and the hoss, too!" said Slim Dixon, with a nod. "You're giving that cayuse away at the price, Steve."

"I guess I mean what I say," said Steve. "Twenty dollars, and that cayuse is yours, Carr, as soon as he's got back from that hoss-thief."

Dick Carr looked thoughtful. What had happened at Hard Tack that afternoon put a complexion on this matter of which Steve was quite unaware!

Slick Poindexter opened his mouth—and closed it again! After all, it was

the tenderfoot's business; a greenhorn had to learn by experience.

"Let's have this clear, Carson!" said Dick at last. "If that pinto's got back from Snort Jenkins he's mine for twenty dollars. Is that it?"

"You said it!" assented Carson. "You fellows are all witnesses," said Dick, looking round.

"They sure are!" said Steve. "And I'll say I ain't the galoot to go back on a trade! Is it a cinch?"

"Yes," said Dick. "Faith, and it's the world's boob ye are, and so ye are entoi'rely!" yelled Mick. "You piecan! That hoss'll never be got back, and Steve knows it, and——"

"Can it, you!" roared Steve, and he hurled a cracker loaf across the table, catching the Irish Texan on the chin.

"Wurrgh!" spluttered Mick, as he went backwards over the bench.

There was a crash as he landed on the earthen floor.

"Look here, Steve," exclaimed Poindexter, "give the tenderfoot a fair deal! You're wise to it that Snort's got that cayuse for keeps!"

"Ain't I telling you to can it?" snarled Steve. "Carr's said yes, and I sure hold him to it!"

"I'm standing by it!" said Dick Carr cheerfully. "Twenty dollars for the pinto, if I get him. There's your dollars!"

From an inner pocket Dick sorted out two ten-dollar bills, and pitched them across the trestle-table to Carson. Big Steve grabbed them up, and shoved them away in a twinkling.

"Waal, if you ain't the boob from Boobsville!" growled Poindexter, in disgust. "I'll say you're the softest guy that ever struck Packsaddle! Say, you big stiff, you figure you'll ever cinch that pinto?"

"I think so!" answered Dick Carr. "He's mine now!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Carson. "You'n if you can catch him! I wish

you luck in getting after Snort, big boy!"

"I guess Bill wouldn't stand for this if he knew!" growled Mick. "It ain't a square deal on the tenderfoot."

"I'm satisfied!" said Dick Carr.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a roar all through the chuckhouse. The Packsaddle bunch were almost doubled up with merriment at the simplicity of the tenderfoot.

Dick laughed, too. As the pinto was, all that while, safe in the school corral, he considered that the laugh was on his side.

His supper finished, he rose. The moon had risen over the Rio Frio, and the playground was almost as light as day. Dick went to the door.

"Going after the cayuse?" roared Steve.

"Just that!" answered Dick, glancing round.

And he walked out of the chuckhouse, leaving the bunch staring blankly.

"Say, is he loco?" asked Mick. "Does he figure that he's got a dog's chance of cinching that cayuse from Snort?"

"Looks like he does!" chuckled Steve Carson. "He's sure welcome to try. I'll say it'll be a long time afore Snort is ever seen near Packsaddle agin!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick Carr walked over to the corral. He took saddle and bridle from the harness hut, and went after the pinto. He had left him with a running rope, so he was easy enough to catch. Snort's buck-jumper was quiet as a lamb again now, and Dick saddled and bridled him, and rode him out into the playground, cracking a quirt as he rode.

At the clatter of hoofs there was a rush of the bunch from the chuckhouse, and Bill Sampson looked out of the porch of the school-house at the rider in the moonlight.

"Say, what's that critter you got,

young Carr?" shouted the Packsaddle schoolmaster.

Dick reined in, with a thunder of hoofs, in front of the porch.

"My new horse, sir!" he answered. "Carson's sold him to me for twenty dollars!"

"I'll tell a man!" gasped Bill, staring at the horse. "Say, that's the buck-jumper Snort sold to young Carson—and cinched again——"

"I got him back at Hard Tack this afternoon and rode him home!" said Dick cheerfully. "Now I've bought him!"

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Bill.

There was a roar from the bunch. They surrounded the tenderfoot, staring blankly at the horse. Steve Carson's face was a picture.

"I—I—I'll say it's the cayuse!" he gasped. "My pinto!"

"Mine!" said Dick Carr, looking at him. "You've sold him to me for twenty dollars!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Slick Pindexter. "There's a boob here, Steve, but I guess the boob ain't that tenderfoot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Steve Carson strode forward with a knitted brow and gleaming eyes. He grabbed at the pinto's bridle.

"That's my hoss!" he said, between his teeth. "The bargain's off, doggone you! I'll give you back your dollars!"

"You won't!" said Dick Carr coolly. "You sold him to me believing that I'd never get him! I've got him! Take your paw off my horse!"

"I'm saying——" yelled Steve. He clutched the bridle.

He broke off with a yell as Dick's quirt came down sharply on his arm. He dropped the bridle and howled.

"Say, what's this game?" demanded Bill Sampson.

A dozen voices told him. The cow town schoolmaster glared at the enraged Steve.

"Say, you pesky piecan!" roared

Bill. "Say, you figured you could put it across the tenderfoot, and you want to go back on it, because you ain't got by with it? Say, you figure that sort of game is good enough for Packsaddle? Forget it! You sold that cayuse, and you gotter stand for it! And I'm the guy that's telling you so, and I guess I got a quirt to back it up."

Bill's quirt was under his arm, its usual place. He slipped it down into his hand and grabbed Steve by the back of his neck.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

With a roar, Steve jerked himself away and bolted across the playground. Bill shook the quirt after him.

"Say you want some more, you jest come and whisper that that cayuse is yours!" he roared.

But Big Steve did not come back. He did not want any more of Bill's quirt. Dick Carr rode to the corral and turned his horse into it—indisputably his horse, and the best cayuse in Packsaddle!

CHAPTER 19.

Alarm in the Night!

DICK CARR lifted his head in his bunk in the school bunkhouse and listened. Outside, the soft, bright moonlight of Texas glimmered. But within the bunkhouse all was dark. The score or so boarders at Packsaddle School were—or should have been—all in their bunks and fast asleep at midnight. But Dick Carr was wide awake—with a strong suspicion that others were, also. He had hardly closed his eyes since he turned in with the bunch.

He did not trust Steve Carson—not an inch! The outcome of that bargain in horseflesh had enraged the bully of Packsaddle to a deadly pitch. He would have gone back on his bargain without scruple; but Bill Sampson's word was law on that subject, and the whole bunch were against him. The pinto was Dick Carr's, bought and

paid for. But Dick did not believe that Steve would let it go at that. It was easy for any malicious fellow to get at the horses in the corral if he wanted to. The pinto was not yet used to his new home, and if he was let out he would run. Dick had resolved to sleep that night with one eye open. He was glad of it, as he heard a sound of movement in the darkness.

A chill draught of air blew, for a moment, through the sleeping bunkhouse. The door had been opened and shut again.

Dick Carr whipped out of his bunk and hurried on his clothes and boots in the dark. He picked up a quirt and stepped silently to the door. Someone had left the bunkhouse, and he hardly needed telling who it was. Outside, in the bright moonlight, he had a glimpse of a figure running, with head bent low, towards the corral. Steve Carson was the biggest fellow at Packsaddle School, and Dick knew him by his size.

He cut across the playground in pursuit. Steve reached the corral bar, lifted it, and disappeared inside. There was a sound of stirring among the horses. Dick Carr, gripping his quirt, waited by the corral gate with a grim expression on his face. He blotted himself against the fence, waiting for Steve to emerge.

The pinto had been left with a running trail-rope, and it was easy for Steve to catch him. In little more than five minutes he appeared at the corral gate, leading the horse. In the moonlight his face showed black and bitter. He jerked savagely at the rope, and the pinto whinnied as it followed.

"Git up, doggone you!" snarled Steve. "I guess you're going back to Snort, you goldarned brute, or you can beat it for Mexico, for all I care! I guess you're beating it, pronto, as soon as I get you out on the prairie. I guess —"

Slash!

The quirt in Dick Carr's hand rose,

and fell fairly across the back of the bully of Packsaddle.

Steve staggered with a yell of surprise and pain, and dropped the trail-rop. The pinto, startled, whirled back into the corral. Steve's hand flew to his back.

For a second he did not know what had struck him. Then his eyes blazed at Dick Carr, standing before him in the moonlight. He glared at the tenderfoot in amazement and rage.

"You!" he panted. He leaped at Dick with clenched fists.

The quirt lashed and lashed again. Dick put all his beef into it. The bully of Packsaddle staggered back, howling. Dick followed him up, still lashing with the quirt, and Steve fairly took to his heels, running for the shelter of the bunkhouse.

After him ran Dick Carr, laying on the whip as he pursued. Had he not remained on the watch that night he would have lost his horse—with his twenty dollars gone! His idea was that Steve Carson wanted a lesson, and that he was going to have one!

Steve was getting one—and getting it hard! Whack, whack, whack, came the quirt over his shoulders, as he dodged and ran and twisted. His frantic yells rang far and wide.

A window slammed open in the timber schoolhouse. A head was put out, and a deep voice roared:

"Say, what's that rookus?"

Bill Sampson had been awakened! Steve, more scared of Bill's wrath than of the lashing quirt behind him, bolted into the bunkhouse.

A door was heard to open in the distance; Bill was coming out to investigate the cause of the disturbance.

Dick Carr breathlessly followed the bully of Packsaddle in. A dozen voices were heard along the row of bunks inquiring what was the matter.

"Shut that door!" hissed Steve. "Bill's up!"

Dick shut the door.

"But what's the row intoirely?" exclaimed Mick Kavanagh.

"I caught that rotter trying to turn my horse loose on the prairie!" answered Dick Carr. "He won't try again in a hurry, I think."

"I guess that's playing it low down, Steve," said Slick Poindexter, in disgust.

"Can it!" hissed Steve. "Bill's coming!"

There was silence in the bunkhouse, as the heavy tread of Bill Sampson was heard outside. The door opened, and a stream of bright moonlight shot in, barred by the brawny figure of the cow town schoolmaster. But Steve and Dick were already back in their bunks, and all was quiet.

"Say, you guys all snoozing?" growled Bill.

Silence!

Puzzled, Bill closed the door. He strode away from the bunkhouse. Somebody—and something—had been up; he did not know who or what! But he meant to know before he went back to bed.

He tramped round with watchful eyes. The corral gateway was open; neither Steve nor Dick had lingered to replace the bar. Bill gave a grunt as he jammed it back into place.

"Some guy after the critters!" breathed Bill.

Somebody had been at the corral, that was clear. Horse-thieves were many in the valley of the Frio. Bill's jaws set grimly.

If horse-thieves were about, Bill was the man to deal with them. He stepped into the corral and looked and listened.

All was quiet there. Somebody had been there, though whether that somebody was connected with the row he had heard, Bill did not know. He moved through the corral, looking at the horses. It was easy to count them in the bright moonlight. None was missing.

Quite perplexed, Bill returned to the corral gateway and leaned on the wall there, blotted in the shadow, puzzling it out. And as he stood he became

aware of a dark head that rose over the corral fence where it bordered the open prairie.

The fence was ten feet high, of solid pine—not easy to climb. Bill, as he spotted that rising head in the clear light of the moon, guessed that its owner was standing on the back of a horse outside, to clamber up.

Quietly, grimly, he loosened the revolver in the holster at his belt.

"Snort!" breathed Bill.

He was in dark shadow himself, but the head over the corral fence, twenty feet away, was clear in the moonlight. He recognised the foxy face and cunning eyes of Snorty Jenkins. His jaw jutted as he pulled his gun.

Snort stared over the wall from the prairie, and his sharp eyes picked out the pinto among the other animals. He rose astride of the pine wall, and put a leg over. He was going to jump into the corral and lead the pony out by the gate. Undoubtedly Snort would have got by with it, had not Bill been there. But Bill was there!

There was a glint of moonlight on a barrel as Bill threw up his gun.

Bang!

Snort gave a fearful yell as half his right ear was torn away by the bullet. He clapped his hand to his head and yelled wildly as he tumbled back over the fence to the prairie outside.

Bang! Bill's Colt roared again, but Snort was gone! A crash and another fearful yell told that he had landed on the hard prairie. There was a squeal from a startled broncho.

Bill rushed across to the corral wall. He bounded up, caught the top, and leaned over. With his brawny chest leaning on the top of the fence, he swung his gun-arm over and glared round for Snort. There was a crash of hoof-beats! Snort was already burning the wind.

Bill threw lead after him till he vanished into the prairie. The cow town schoolmaster dropped back from the fence, grinning.

"I guess that's enough for Snort!" chuckled Bill. "I'll surely say that that hoss-thief won't nosy round this corral any more!"

And Bill went back contentedly to bed. Bill was right, Snort Jenkins was never seen near Packsaddle again.

CHAPTER 20.

Indians!

"NJUNS!" yelled Slick Poindexter. "Beat it!" roared Mick Kavanaugh.

Dick Carr jumped.

The tenderfoot of Packsaddle School had never even seen a Red Indian. He did not, indeed, suppose that there were any left in the valley of the Rio Frio. So that sudden alarm naturally made him jump.

Dick, Slick, and Mick were strolling on the trail between the school and the cow town of Packsaddle, ready to cut in as soon as they heard the bell for class. All of a sudden Slick and Mick yelled the alarm.

Dick stared round. After the first jump of surprise he rather suspected that his companions were pulling his leg. Plenty of rough jokes had been played on the tenderfoot at the cow town school.

But he started at the sight of a coppery face looking out from a clump of pecans beside the trail.

It was a Red Indian!

The dark face, with its aquiline nose, was like copper, the thick black hair was adorned with several draggled feathers, the brawny form draped in a tattered blanket. It was the striped blanket of a Navajo, though Dick, of course, knew nothing of that; he could not have told the difference between Navajo and Comanche and Apache. It was his first Red Indian—and the sight of the coppery face and gleaming black eyes startled him.

Slick grabbed at one of his arms,

Mick at the other. Their faces registered intense alarm and excitement.

"Beat it!" gasped Poindexter. "Warn Bill if you get in first! Run for your life!"

Slick and Mick started running for the school. Dick ran with them. Dick was active and fleet of foot and he forged ahead, but he slackened pace as he saw that his companions were falling behind.

"Hump it, you!" panted Poindexter. "Get in and warn Bill—tell him to get his gun!"

Dick tore on and shot ahead. He fairly raced to the school. Slick and Mick dropped still farther behind. A patch of mesquite hid them from Dick's eyes; had he looked back he could not have seen them. But had he seen them he would have been astonished at their proceedings. Once the tenderfoot was off the scene Slick and Mick stopped running; they threw themselves in the grass, kicked up their feet in a paroxysm of merriment, and yelled with glee. Evidently the peril was not so great as they had led the tenderfoot to believe.

Unaware of that, Dick Carr tore on. The open gateway of the school fence was before him. Three Packsaddle fellows—Steve Carson, Poker Parker, and Slim Dixon—were lounging in the gateway, and they stared blankly at Dick as he came racing up.

"Say, what's biting you, boob?" drawled Carson.

"Get in! Look out—Indians!" panted Dick.

"Injuns!" gasped Poker.

"Yes—yes, down the trail! Get in—quick!"

Dick panted those words in passing; there was no time for delay. He had to warn Bill Sampson, the cow town schoolmaster. He tore into the playground, leaving Steve and his friends blinking.

He raced across to the schoolhouse. A crowd of fellows in the playground

stared at him, wondering what was the cause of his wild haste.

"Indians!" shouted Dick, as he passed.

"Aw, can it!" gasped Pie Sanders. "What guff you giving us?"

Dick rushed on without further words. In the porch of the schoolhouse, he spotted the gigantic figure of Bill Sampson in talk with Small Brown. He burst into the porch like a cyclone, colliding with Small Brown and sending him staggering.

"What—Who—" stuttered Small Brown, as he pitched against the wall, his horn-rimmed glasses slipping down his thin little nose. "What—"

Dick staggered back from the collision, and the strong, sinewy hand of Bill Sampson gripped the back of his neck and steadied him. Bill glared at him.

"Say, what's this game?" roared Bill. "What you mean horning in like you was a runaway steer from a herd? Spill it!"

"Indians!" gasped Dick. "Get your gun!"

"Injuns!" yelled Bill.

"Yes—yes, Indians—quick!"

Dick naturally expected Bill Sampson to jump to the alarm. If a Red Indian raid was on hand it was time for the cow town schoolmaster to act—and to act promptly. Dick expected him to roar an order for the gate to be shut and to rush for his rifle.

Bill did neither; he gripped the tenderfoot harder by the back of his neck and shook him.

"You doggoned, ornery gink," roared Bill, "what you mean? Say, you figure you can put that across me? I should smile!"

Shake, shake, shake!

Bill had a strong hand. The tenderfoot swung to and fro in his grip as he shook; he spluttered and gasped for breath.

"I'll say this is the bee's knee!" hooted Bill. "Injuns! You figure you

can fool a galoot my size with Injuns? I'll sure give you Injuns!"

Bill's quirt happened to be in the school-room—luckily for Dick. But Bill's hands were hard and heavy. He made a knee for the tenderfoot, hooked him across it, and spanked.

Whack, whack, whack!

Bill's heavy hand came down on the seat of Dick's riding-breeches—whack on whack, almost like a flail. Dick roared and struggled.

"I tell you— Oh, my hat! I tell you—Indians!" he shrieked. Evidently Bill did not believe in the Indians, and figured that the tenderfoot was trying to pull his leg. He spanked and spanked.

A crowd of Packsaddle fellows gathered before the porch roaring with laughter. Steve, Poker, and Slim came in from the gate and joined them, yelling; and two fellows weeping with laughter followed in from the trail—Slick and Mick. But there was no sign of Indians.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Carson. "That tenderfoot figures that the Injuns are on the warpath! Injuns! Ha, ha, ha!"

Spank, spank, spank!

"That's for you!" gasped Bill, setting Dick Carr on his feet at last and glaring at him. "Now you got yours, you young gink, and I guess you won't try fooling me no more!"

Dick staggered against the porch, gasping.

"You fathead——" he gurgled.

"What?" roared Bill.

"The Indians are coming! I've seen one of them! Poindexter and Kavanagh saw him, too, and told me to warn you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a shriek from the playground.

"Howly saints! Sure, that tinderfoot will be the death of me, and so he will!" sobbed Mick.

"Ha, ha, ha!" gurgled Slick.

Bill's glare changed slowly to a grin as he stared at Dick Carr. He realised—rather late—that the tenderfoot had not been attempting to pull his leg. It

was the tenderfoot's leg that had been pulled.

"Aw! If you ain't the big boob from Boobsville!" gasped Bill. "Injuns! Haw, haw, haw! You, Poindexter—you been fooling this kid?"

Dick stared round in amazement at seeing Slick and Mick howling with laughter like the rest; his face crimsoned as he realised that it had been a false alarm.

"I guess the guy saw an Injun, Bill," answered Poindexter. "That Navajo hobo, Seven Horses, was on the trail; I guess he'd been sleeping off the hooch in the pecans, and he woke up and looked at us. I'll say the tenderfoot sort of got the wind up."

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Bill.

"You—you silly ass!" gasped Dick Carr. "You said——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Packsaddle bunch yelled and roared. Seven Horses, the Navajo derelict, was a well-known character in the Frio valley. When he came in from the desert it was to touch good-natured 'punchers for tanglefoot; certainly not to carry on the ancient warfare of Red man against white. That was one of the many things that the Packsaddle tenderfoot had yet to learn.

Dick's face was burning as he stared at the yelling bunch. He made a sudden rush at Slick and Mick and grabbed them by their collars.

Bang!

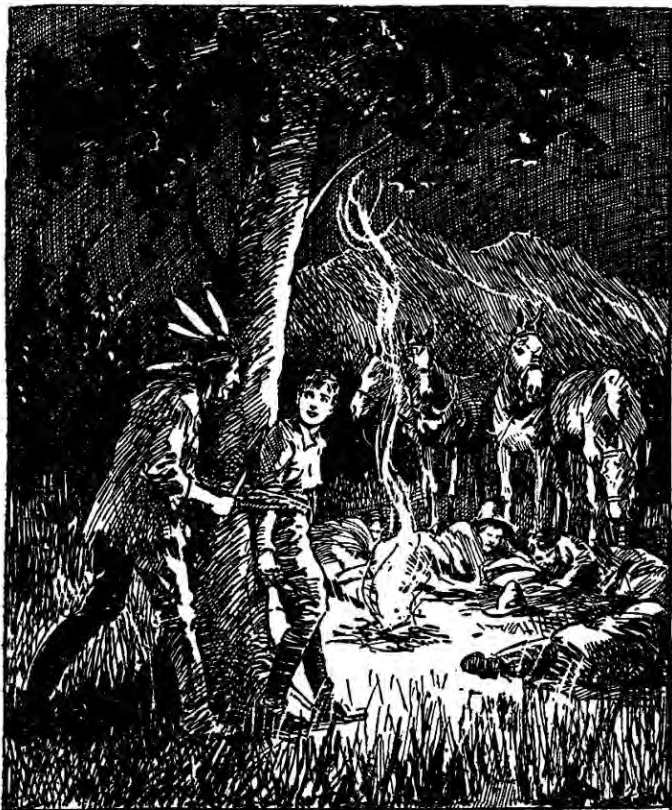
Their heads came together suddenly, unexpectedly, and with a terrific shock. They left off laughing on the spot. A simultaneous yell came from the two practical jokers.

"Yooooooooop!"

"Whooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Clang, clang, clang! Tin Tung was ringing the school bell. The bunch went into school, still laughing. Slick and Mick rubbing their heads, but grinning as they did so, and Dick Carr, breathing hard, his face like in hue to a freshly boiled beetroot!



There was a faint sound behind the sapling, and Dick Carr caught a glimpse of a dark, coppery face with tufted feathers in the hair. Next moment he felt a sudden loosening of his bonds as they were severed by a keen blade!

CHAPTER 21.

A Horse For a Life!

CRACK! Crack! Crack!

Dick Carr drew rein at the sound of the ringing pistol-shots.

It was after class, and Dick was getting a ride on his new pony, the handsome pinto that had been his only for a week.

Slick had suggested a name for him, which was "Pep"—the pony being crammed with that quality. Pep, when he got excited, was the wildest buck-jumper in Santanta County, if not in all Texas. But he was meek as a lamb with his new master, and already he would come at Dick's call, and hardly needed a trail-rope.

It was sheer joy to Dick to vault into the saddle after class, and scamper over the rolling prairie, with Pep's heels flying like lightning under him. And the bunch, when they saw him on the buck-jumper, had to admit that the tender-foot could ride!

Outside the cow town of Packsaddle, at a little distance from the school, a crowd of 'punchers' had gathered. Dick knew some of them by sight; he had seen them riding in from the Kicking Mule Ranch. They were the Kicking Mule outfit—a rough-and-ready crowd liable to "shoot up the town" when they came in from the ranges.

As he spotted them Dick remembered he had heard talk in the playground of the "Judson gang" having been seen in the Frio valley. The Judson gang were a bunch of desperadoes—cow-thieves, hold-up men, road-agents—badly wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas.

The news that they had been seen on the Rio Frio had started Town-Marshall Lick into activity, and men had ridden in from the ranches to help the marshal look for them.

As he heard the banging of Colts, Dick's first impression was that the Kicking Mule 'punchers' had got hold

of some of the Judsons, and that a battle was going on.

But as he pulled in his broncho and looked and listened, he heard roars of laughter, punctuated by the shooting. It was not a pistol-fight that was going on, but some sort of a rough cowboy jest.

Popping six-guns are no respecters of persons, and Dick, though he was curious to see what was on, did not ride up to the crowd of 'punchers'. He pulled his pony to a ridge of high ground near the trail, whence he could look down on the scene over the ten-gallon hats of the crowd.

"Oh crumbs!" he gasped, as he stared.

In the midst of the rough circle of 'punchers' was a figure in a tattered, striped blanket and ragged moccasins, hopping wildly. Barney Bailey, foreman of the Kicking Mule, was shooting at his feet, with a gun in either hand. The rest of the 'punchers' were looking on, roaring with laughter.

Dick recognised the copper face of Chief Seven Horses, the Navajo, at once. It was the Indian outcast whom he had seen a day or two ago on the school trail. The Redskin's face was wildly excited now, his black eyes almost popping from his head, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl of rage and fear, as he hopped wildly to Barney's shooting.

This was the game of "fanning," and Dick had once been through it himself. To the rough and tough 'punchers' it was a lark; but it was no lark to the guy who was fanned by bullets. For a false step, a moment's hesitation, would have caused hot lead to crash through the Indian's ragged moccasins, and perhaps lame him for life. Barney was shooting at his feet, not round them, and the Redskin had to hop swiftly to dodge the rapid, raining shots.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

"Dance, Injun, dance!" roared Barney.

Mr. Barney had been refreshing him-

self at the Red Dog, in Packsaddle, and was a little excited, but his shooting was true as a die. He was having his rough joke with the Redskin, and the Kicking Mule outfit were enjoying the joke; but the coppery face of Seven Horses expressed the fiercest rage, mingled with terror.

Dick's face set darkly. There was a very strong element of brutal bullying in this kind of jest. But it was impossible for him to intervene. Apart from the guns they packed, which they certainly would not have pulled on a boy, the 'punchers were hefty men, and any one of them could have picked up Dick Carr and pitched him through the air.

Crack, crack, crack!

"Jump, Injun, jump!" yelled Barney in great glee.

Chief Seven Horses jumped and jumped. He had to jump, to save his flesh and bone from crashing lead. Barney was burning powder with each six-gun alternately, and evidently he was going on till all his cartridges were expended.

The six-guns were emptied at last, and there was only a click as the Kicking Mule foreman pulled trigger again. Barney dropped his hands, the empty guns in them, to his sides, gasping with merriment. The Redskin ceased to jump and hop, and stood breathless, panting, snarling, an inferno of rage and hate in his glittering black eyes.

Then, suddenly, as he realised that the white man's guns were expended, he whipped a knife out of his ragged leggings. With sudden swiftness he leaped at Barney and slashed.

Dick gave a cry of horror. The 'punchers roared with wrath. For a second Dick dreaded to see the Kicking Mule foreman go down, slashed to death by the sharp, razor-like blade. But Barney, taken by surprise as he was—for he no more expected resistance from a Redskin than from a prairie rabbit—was quick to see his danger. He brought up one of his

empty guns with a jerk, catching the Redskin's arm with the barrel as he struck.

The blow was deflected barely in time. As it was, the tip of the blade gashed along the cowman's cheek, laying it open and bringing a spurt of blood.

Barney leaped back, clapping a hand to the gash.

Chief Seven Horses did not delay for another slash. Already guns were whipping out of holsters. It would not have been "fanning" now; the 'punchers would have riddled with bullets a Redskin who handled a knife on a white man.

The Navajo bounded back, plunged from the crowd, and ran with the fleetness of a deer, his striped, tattered blanket trailing in the wind. He was heading directly for the spot where Dick Carr sat on his pony, where there was a belt of pecans and post-oaks.

Bang, bang, bang! came the roar of Colts behind him, fortunately too hurried for good aim. Then the 'punchers rushed for their horses, which were hitched to a rail at a little distance. Dick heard the angry roar of Barney Bailey.

"Get him! We'll sure string him up for pulling a knife!"

Dick's heart beat fast. The Indian was racing up the rough ground, his moccasined feet seeming scarcely to touch the earth as he raced. On foot no white man had a chance of running him down. But as soon as they got on their bronchos it was a matter of only minutes. And already the outfit were dragging the horses loose from the rail.

In his haste the Redskin had not seen Dick, but he saw him suddenly, and stopped. The schoolboy was directly between him and his intended way of escape. He was swerving off to the right, when Dick shouted:

"Here! Take my horse!"

Chief Seven Horses stopped dead, staring at him blankly. From anyone

with a white face he had not expected kindness or help.

But it was too much for the English schoolboy. The 'punchers, in their present excited mood, would have lynched the Redskin on the nearest tree without a scruple. Life was cheap in the Valley of the Frio—especially a Redskin outcast's life. Barney, as he scrambled on his horse, shook loose his lariat—for what purpose was only too obvious.

Dick did not stop to think. It was a life that was at stake—only the life of a drunken Indian outcast, desert rat, and cattle-thief, perhaps, but a man's life. To part with his pony was a wrench. But he did it.

As he shouted to the Indian he jumped from the saddle and held out the reins, shouting again. There was not a second to lose.

"Quick! Take my horse! Here—quick!"

The Indian, amazed as he was, understood. He bounded on again and reached the schoolboy.

"Take him! Send him back to me at Packsaddle School—my name's Dick Carr! Send him back—I can't lose him! But take him now—ride!"

"Wah!" said Chief Seven Horses.

With that ejaculation, he flung himself on the pinto, and dashed away at a fierce gallop.

Dick stood staring after him as he galloped across the prairie, with a heavy heart!

Surely the Redskin would send back his horse when he had lent Pep to save the man's life! But he knew how doubtful it was; he knew that most likely he was looking his last on the handsome pony's flying heels. And he almost forgot the probable wrath of the outfit he had prevented from lynching the Redskin.

He was reminded, as they came whooping up the rise on their bronchos. They reined in round Dick, glaring at him in fierce anger. But only for a moment. Barney Bailey reached over,

and gave the schoolboy a fierce cut with his quirt that sent Dick staggering to the ground. Then the whole outfit went off across the prairie, at a furious gallop, in pursuit of the fleeing Redskin.

Dick picked himself up, panting. He stared after the thundering outfit. Chief Seven Horses was a speck in the distance. Dick rubbed the place where Barney's savage cut had landed.

He did not fear for the Redskin now. Pep was the fastest pony in Texas, and the best-mounted man on Kicking Mule would never ride him down. But his face was clouded, and his heart heavy, as he walked back to the school. He hoped—but he knew how little chance there was that he would ever set eyes on his pinto again.

CHAPTER 22.

Bill Puts Paid to Barney!

"LOST your cayuse?"

Slick Poindexter asked the question as Dick Carr came into the playground.

"Sure, it's hard luck, and so it is!" said Mick. "But I'll find you me own pony, begob, to go after him."

Dick smiled faintly.

"I haven't lost him—I've lent him!" he said. He told Slick and Mick what had happened on the school trail. "You think that Indian is likely to let me have him back when he gets a chance?" he concluded.

"Not on your life!" grinned Slick. "You boob! What'd it matter to you if the boys lynched a pesky Redskin?"

"He'll sell that cayuse to get fire-water!" said Mick. "You sure are the softest jay from Jaysville."

That opinion was shared by the rest of the Packsaddle bunch when they learned what had happened. There was a ripple of laughter all through the cow town school. Steve Carson declared that this was a better joke than the tenderfoot's alarm of Redskins. And

he warned Dick to watch out for Barney Bailey.

"If they don't get that Red, after he laid open Barney's face, you can bet that Barney will moosey in and talk turkey to you!" grinned Steve, evidently in happy anticipation.

"And he'll sure bring his quirt!" chuckled Poker Parker.

"Say, you hunt cover, quick, when Barney hits Packsaddle!" said Slim Dixon. "I guess you'll be sorry you horned in on the Kicking Mule outfit."

Which was not a happy prospect. But the loss of the pinto worried Dick a good deal more than any fear of the Kicking Mule foreman.

It was a couple of hours later, and in the sunset the bunch were heading for the chuckhouse for supper, when a clatter of hoofs was heard at the gate, and Steve yelled:

"Watch out, tenderfoot! Hyer comes Barney!"

It was the Kicking Mule foreman, with a stained bandage tied over his stubby cheek, a quirt in his hand, and a deep frown on his brow. Dick's heart beat faster as he saw him. He was glad to see the herculean figure of Bill Sampson coming out of the schoolhouse.

Barney stared round the playground, spotted Dick, and started towards him. Dick Carr promptly jumped behind the schoolmaster. And Bill lifted a large and commanding hand.

"What you happen to want, Barney?" he demanded. "You figure you can handle that quirt on any of my bunch? Forget it."

"I'll say I'm going to take the hide off'n that young boob!" roared the Kicking Mule foreman. "I've rid hell-for-leather arter that Injun, and he got clear, and that pesky jay helped him make his getaway! I'm sure going to quirt him a few, and then some."

Bill shook his head. He had already heard of what the tenderfoot had done, and had laughed, like the bunch, over it. But Bill Sampson was the only

man who was going to handle a quirt at Packsaddle School.

"Aw, you forget it, Barney," he advised. "From what I hear, you was fanning the Red when he pulled a knife. You only got a scratch, and it sure can't make you no uglier than you was. That tenderfoot kid is a boob, but he's sure got a whole heap of grit, and you ain't touching him."

"They were going to hang him——" panted Dick.

"Aw, can it, you!" said Bill. "What'll it matter if they string up every Redskin in Texas? You ain't no call to horn in on their fun. I got a good mind to quirt you myself, but I allow you're an all-fired tenderfoot, and don't know a thing."

"I guess I'm going to quirt him!" roared Barney. "I'll ask you to step on one side, Bill Sampson."

"Guess again!" said Bill.

"You letting me quirt that pesky young peecan?" bawled Barney.

"Not so's you'd notice it, old-timer!" answered Bill.

That was enough for Barney Bailey. He reached for his gun.

At the same moment Dick Carr had his first sight of a quick draw. Bill Sampson was so big, and so hefty, that few would have expected him to be lightning-like in his movements. But Bill was as quick on the draw as any man in the Frio valley. So swiftly that the eye could not follow the movement, the big Colt was out of the holster at his belt and looking the Kicking Mule foreman full in the face.

Dick stared in wonder and amazement. There was a gasp of thrilling interest from the Packsaddle bunch.

They forgot chuck. Every eye was tensely on the two brawny men facing one another in the playground—Bill's gun at a level, his cool eyes gleaming over it, Barney still reaching.

"Don't!" said Bill quietly, and there was a world of significance in that quiet word.

Barney's fingers jerked away from his

butt, as if it had become suddenly red-hot. He panted with rage.

"Doggone you, you was always quick on the draw!" he snapped. "Drop that gun, and I'll sure clean up this here school with your carcass, and chew up what's left of you."

Bill grinned. He had been a 'puncher in the Kicking Mule outfit himself, and he was still more of a 'puncher than a schoolmaster. As headmaster of Packsaddle School, Bill had to be an orderly guy, and set an example to the bunch. But he found it irksome sometimes, and he was not going to lose this chance.

"Old-timer, you've said it!" he answered. "Throw away your gun, Barney, and use your hands."

Barney Bailey unhooked his gun-belt, and threw it on a bench. Bill holstered his Colt at once, and did the same. They faced one another with their fists up.

"Wade in, Bill!" roared the bunch, gathering round in huge delight.

Dick Carr looked on breathlessly. He had seen some scrapping, and he had done some scrapping himself, but never had he seen anything like this battle of giants.

Barney, already in a rage, enraged still further by being beaten to the draw, fairly hurled himself at Bill Sampson. He was a big and powerful man, twelve stone of bone and sinew.

But Bill met him like a rock. Bill's big fists came out like mallets. There was not a whole heap of boxing skill in that fight. But there was a heap of strength, determination, and fierce tenacity.

To and fro tramped the two big cowmen, hitting and hammering, without a pause for rounds, going it hammer and tongs all the time.

But strong as Barney was, Bill was stronger. And Bill was cool, while Barney was in a flurry of fury.

Hard knocks landed on Bill unnoticed. He took fierce punishment without seeming to feel it.

Crash! went Barney suddenly, under a terrific drive that landed on his

stubbly jaw and swept him off his feet. Barney hit Texas with a concussion that seemed to shake the earth.

"Say! I'll call that a sockdolager!" gasped Slick.

"Barney's sure got his!" grinned Mick.

Barney Bailey tried to struggle up. Bill dashed a stream of blood from his nose, and blinked out of a blackened eye. He was ready to go on. But the Kicking Mule foreman strove in vain to rise. With spinning head he collapsed on the ground again.

"Whipped to the wide!" grinned Poindexter.

Dick Carr breathed with relief.

"Say, old-timer, I guess we're calling it a day!" said Bill cheerfully, and he leaned over the Kicking Mule foreman and gave him a hand up. "I'll tell a man it was a good scrap. Say, you mosey along and put your head under the pump, and I guess I'll fix you with a square drink."

Barney Bailey grinned faintly as he staggered away, leaning on Bill's arm. He had been knocked out fair and square, and it seemed to have done him good.

Leaving him bathing his damaged face under the pump, the Packsaddle bunch went into the chuckhouse to supper, gleefully discussing the "rookus." Barney had more bandages on his face when he rode away from the school—and he did not look for Dick Carr before he went!

Bill had put paid to Barney, but Dick sagely resolved to give the Kicking Mule foreman a wide berth after that. He would have been sorry to meet up with Barney when Bill was not around.

CHAPTER 22.

The Redekins' Gratitude!

WHIZ! Dick Carr dodged too late. He knew the whiz of a lasso as it flew, but the loop settled over his shoulders in the twinkling of an eye.

It was the following day after class. Dick had ridden a few miles on the homeward way with Pie Sanders, who lived at Squaw Mountain, on a borrowed broncho from the school corral. Three miles from the school he left Pie and turned to ride back, and his way lay by the trail through a belt of timber. As he came under the cotton-wood-trees he noted a bunch of riders in Stetson hats. The sun was setting on the prairie, and under the thick branches it was deeply dusky. Taking the riders for 'punchers' belonging to one of the ranches, Dick rode on without giving them any special heed—and the whiz of the lariat took him completely by surprise.

The rope grabbed him from the saddle like a giant's hand. The broncho, with a startled squeal, dashed on at a furious gallop. Dick Carr plumped in the grass behind with a jar that shook every bone in his body, and rolled over in the grip of the rope.

He sat up dizzily as the horsemen reined round him. There were five of them, and now that he saw them more closely he could see that they were a wild and tough-looking crew. Every one of them packed two guns at his belt and had a rifle in a case at his saddle. Dick blinked up at them, gasping for breath, and staggered to his feet.

"Cinch him, Hank!" rapped one of the riders, a brawny, black-bearded fellow with a scarred face, and the man with the lasso dismounted and grasped Dick by the shoulder.

The broncho, at a wild gallop, vanished from the timber and disappeared across the plains. Dick, shaken and startled, but more angry than anything else, stared at the bunch of riders with gleaming eyes.

"You silly fools!" he gasped. "What's this game? Now I shall have to walk back to Packsaddle!"

The black-bearded, scarred man gave a hoarse chuckle.

"I guess you won't be hitting Packsaddle in a hurry, bo!" he said. "I'll

say your luck's good if you ever hit that burg agin!"

"You said it, Jud!" grinned another of the riders.

Dick started violently at the name of "Jud." He knew now who the black-bearded, scarred man was—Judson, the leader of the notorious Judson gang.

For days past it had been rumoured that that gang of hold-up men and cow thieves were in the Frio Valley. The tenderfoot of Packsaddle had run fairly into them by chance and ill-luck.

"You doggoned little gink!" said Judson staring down at him. "I guess your cayuse won't tell no tales and you won't neither now we got you cinched! You sure ain't shouting out at Packsaddle that the Judson gang are around!"

"I'll say nope!" agreed Hank, taking a turn of the lariat round Dick's arms and knotting the rope.

Dick struggled. The ruffian stared at him and half drew a bowie-knife from his belt. The boy ceased to resist at once.

"Aw, don't spill his juice, Hank!" grunted Judson. "I guess we ain't no baby-killers! Fix him with the rope!" He scowled at Dick. "What you doing here, bo?"

"I was riding back to school" panted Dick. "I never knew you were here—I took you for a bunch of 'punchers' when I saw you or——"

"Or I guess you'd have burned the wind!" grinned Judson. "Yep! Anybody else around along of you?"

"No!"

Judson gave him a suspicious stare and rode to the edge of the timber. He scanned the rolling prairie on all sides. But there was no one in sight, and he rejoined his friends.

"It's O.K.!" he said. "I guess that little gink never knowed who we was, but they'd have knowed at Packsaddle fast enough if he chewed the rag there. Fix him to a tree, you Hank! It's O.K.!"

The gang dismounted and led their

horses from the trail into the trees. Dick Carr was backed up against a sapling and the rope run round it and knotted. He stood leaning on the tree, unable to stir hand or foot, while the rustlers camped.

They hardly heeded him further. They camped in the timber, sorting food and drink out of their saddlebags, having pegged their horses. No fire was lighted; it was evident that they were keeping their presence so near to Packsaddle a secret. The sun sank lower on the prairie, and darkness deepened in the timber. The Judson gang, stretched in the grass, were resting—and waiting!

Snatches of their muttered talk came to Dick's ears. Several times the cow town bank was mentioned, and he gathered that a raid on the bank at Packsaddle was Judson's game. But it was not to take place till late at night, when Packsaddle was sleeping. Until the time came to act the gang were remaining in cover in the timber three miles from the town, unseen and unsuspected.

Dick wrenched at the lasso that held him to the tree. But he had to give it up. If he could only have escaped and given warning at the cow town! A hundred six-guns would have been ready for the Judson gang if the Packsaddle men had known.

The long minutes passed. Dick knew from their talk that they were to ride at midnight, and it was two hours to midnight yet. Sleep was impossible to him if he had thought of it, with the knotted rope cutting into his skin.

Darkness was dense under the cottonwoods. Only a glimmer of the stars came through here and there.

But suddenly it seemed to Dick that he caught a movement in the deep shadows. His heart thumped at the thought of a wild animal—a panther, perhaps, creeping on the sleepers. Or was it a human form that was creeping in the dark?

There was no sound, only the heavy

breathing of the sleeping ruffians and a faint stirring of the tethered horses.

Suddenly through the gloom came the bright glitter of eyes. For a long moment they gleamed and glittered, and Dick caught his breath.

Then they vanished. It seemed to him that even in the darkness he had had a glimpse of a face—a dark, coppery face with tufted feathers in the hair. Was it some savage Indian who had crept on the camp of the rustlers?

He listened.

There was a faint sound, the faintest of sounds, behind the sapling to which he was tied. His heart beat almost to suffocation.

Dick felt a sudden loosening of the ropes that bound him. In sheer amazement he stood against the tree while the cut ropes slithered to the ground.

Was he dreaming?

He stood free! Fragments of the tough rope, severed by a keen blade, lay around him. An unseen hand reached from the darkness and grasped his arm.

He yielded to the pull on his arm. Treading on tiptoe, fearful of awakening the ruffians sleeping only a few yards from him, he groped his way after the hand that was drawing him on. Vaguely, indistinctly, he made out a figure at his side, and glimpsed a striped blanket. In silence he was led on through the trees, his heart thumping, till he emerged with his guide into the trail through the timber.

There the starlight fell more clearly. Dick's staring eyes turned on the man who led him, still grasping his arm, and his heart gave a bound as he recognised Chief Seven Horses, the outcast Navajo.

The Navajo put a finger to his lips and Dick understood. A sound would be followed by the roar of the rustlers' six-gun. The Navajo led the boy along the trail till they reached the edge of the timber towards the distant cow town.

There was faint whinny, and a

glossy muzzle nuzzled under Dick's arm. A pony was tethered in the grass outside the timber. With a beating heart, Dick stroked the smooth neck of his pinto. He began to understand now.

"Oh!" panted Dick in a whisper. "I was sure I could trust you—I was sure of it! You were bringing my horse back to the school—"

"Wah!" grunted Chief Seven Horses. "Little white chief save Chief Seven Horses! Injun steal plenty cayuse, no steal little white chief's cayuse!"

"And—and you saw them—"

Chief Seven Horses grinned.

"Injun see! Bad white man no see Injun!"

Dick Carr breathed deep.

He had hoped that the Indian outcast would bring back the pinto which he had lent him to save his life. He understood why the Indian had come under cover of night—it was not safe for him to be seen near Packsaddle after pulling his knife on the Kicking Mule foreman. And on his way to the school he had spotted the Judson gang.

"Injun watch bad white man!" murmured Chief Seven Horses. He made a gesture towards the cow town. "Little chief ride."

Dick grasped the Indian's brown hand and pressed it hard. Then he leaped into the saddle.

He dashed away through the thick grass in the starlight. When he looked back a few moments later Chief Seven Horses had vanished into the dark timber again.

Bill Sampson was waiting up for Dick at the cow town school with a quirt ready across his knees. But he forgot the quirt when he heard what the tenderfoot had to tell him.

In two minutes Bill was galloping down the trail to the cow town; in a few minutes more he was riding with a bunch of armed men for the timber on the prairie.

They did not find the Judson gang,

but they found the trail of five men who had gone on foot—a silent-footed Redskin having "cinched" their horses while they slept!

Far away on the rolling prairie Chief Seven Horses was riding with a bunch of bronchos to sell to Mexicans on the Rio Grande. The Judson gang, wearily tramping, with horsemen spurring on their trail, repented from the bottom of their hearts that they had ever struck the Rio Frio.

CHAPTER 24.

A Stampede From School!

"SILENCE!" squeaked Small Brown. Brown.

He squeaked in vain.

Not a fellow in the school-room at Packsaddle was silent.

Excitement reigned in the cow town school. If the Packsaddle bunch listened it was not the voice of Small Brown, their teacher. They listened for the sound of hoof-beats on the prairie and ringing rifle-shots!

All the bunch knew that Ezra Lick, town marshal of Packsaddle, was hard on the traces of the Judson gang—hold-up men and rustlers! Bill Sampson, schoolmaster, was riding with the marshal's outfit. It was rumoured that the Judsons had been cornered somewhere on the rugged slopes of Squaw Mountain.

Small Brown cut little ice with the unruly bunch when Bill was away. Now he cut none at all.

Slick Poindexter climbed into a window to stare out over the school fence. Steve Carson lounged to the door. There was a buzz of incessant voices.

Class—such as it was—had been going on for an hour that morning. But one fellow had not yet arrived. That was Pie Sanders, who lived at Squaw Mountain. The bunch wondered whether he would come. They envied Pie, right on the spot if the outlaws really were rounded up at Squaw.

"Silence! Go to your places!" squeaked Small Brown in despair.

"Aw, can it!" said Steve Carson. "Quit chewing the rag, Mr. Brown!"

The beat of horse's hoofs came from the school trail, and Slick, in the window, yelled:

"Here comes Pie!"

There was a rush to the door. Small Brown squeaked and waved his hands. But the whole bunch passed him with a rush. They wanted to hear the news from Pie.

Dick Carr, the new boy at Packsaddle, was in his place. The tenderfoot of Packsaddle was the only fellow who remained at his desk. But he did not remain there many moments. He was as keen as the rest, and he did not see being the only guy in the bunch to keep order. He jumped up and scudded after the others.

Pie Sanders came in at the school gate with a thud of hoofs, and pulled in a foaming broncho in front of the school porch. Twenty voices yelled at him as he halted.

"What's the noos, Pie?"

"You seen the Judsons?"

"Spill it!"

Pie did not dismount. He sat his panting broncho. His face was red from hard riding.

"Say, you guys!" he exclaimed. "They got 'em! The Judson gang—five of 'em—rounded up on a mesa at Squaw Mountain! I tell you they're a-shooting!"

"Is Bill there?" gasped Slick.

"Where you figure Bill would be?" grinned Pie. "He's sure there, along with the marshal's outfit and a bunch of the Kicking-Mule 'punchers and a heap more guys. They got the Judsons at last."

"Go back to your places, boys!" came Small Brown's squeak. Nobody heeded the order.

"They got 'em dead to rights!" went on Pie. "I heard Bill say that some Injun had cinched their critters and left them on foot. They aimed to hunt

cover in Squaw Mountain, but they was run down, and they're making a stand on the mesa. Burning powder, I'll tell a man!"

"Gum!" exclaimed Slick Poindexter. "Say, who's game to ride to Squaw Mountain and take a hand?"

"You've said it!" chuckled Mick Kavanagh.

There was a shout from the whole bunch. Small Brown rushed out of the schoolhouse.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Boys, go back into the school-room at once! Sanders, get off that horse."

"Not in your lifetime, ol' man!" said Pie. "I guess I moseyed along to give the bunch the office; I ain't come to school! Nope!"

And Pie, wheeling his broncho, dashed away to the gate again and galloped out on the prairie trail.

That was more than enough for the bunch. There was a scamper across the playground to the school corral.

"Stop!" yelled Small Brown.

"Can it, you!" grinned Slim Dixon, over his shoulder.

"You coming, tenderfoot?" grinned Slick, as he found Dick Carr running by his side for the corral.

"What-ho!" answered Dick.

"Aw, you forget it!" sneered Steve Carson. "I guess this ain't a game for a tenderfoot! You'll sure be scared stiff when you hear the guns."

"Rats to you!" answered Dick.

Mick jerked away the corral bar, and the bunch ran in for their horses.

"Pep!" shouted Dick, and his pinto came trotting up to him. The tenderfoot saddled and bridled his pony as swiftly as any of the bunch. He was the first to ride out.

Small Brown jumped in his way. Any other of the rough and tough Packsaddle bunch would have ridden on unheeding, and Mr. Brown would have jumped out of the way faster than he jumped into it. But the English schoolboy reined in.

"Get off that horse!" shouted Small

Brown, grabbing Dick by one leg and jerking at him.

"No fear!"

"Follow on!" roared Slick Pindexter, dashing by at a gallop. After him went Mick, Steve, Poker Parker, Slim Dixon, Domingo Duque, the Mexican boy, and the rest of the bunch.

"Let go, Mr. Brown!" snapped Dick.

"Stop! Come back! I order you!" squealed Small Brown. "Carr, dismount at once!"

It was the Packsaddle teacher's duty to keep the bunch in school—if he could! But he couldn't! The whole bunch, with the exception of Dick Carr, was riding out of the gate. Dick was not likely to remain behind. And he was well aware that Small Brown had picked on him because he was the "tenderfoot" of the school and more amenable to discipline than the rest. But discipline was thrown to the winds now.

"Will you let go?" roared Dick Carr.

"Certainly not! Dismount, or I will pull you from your horse! I order you to—" howled Small Brown.

Dick gave the pony a touch of the quirt. Pep needed only the slightest touch to start him buck-jumping. In an instant he was rearing, plunging, and cavorting, and Small Brown, with a squeal of alarm, leaped backwards from the whirling hoofs.

One of the playground benches was behind him. His backward leap landed him on it, the back of his knees catching the edge.

"Oooogh!" spluttered Small Brown as he went over backwards, his feet and coat-tails flying in the air.

He landed on his shoulders and the back of his head on the other side of the bench. He yelled wildly as he smote Texas. Dick chuckled and dashed on to the gate. Small Brown scrambled up, stuttering with rage, rubbing the back of his head with one hand and shaking the other, clenched, after the tenderfoot. Unheeding the wrath of Mr. Brown, Dick galloped out

of the school gate and dashed down the trail after the bunch.

Short as the delay had been, they were well ahead of him, riding hard for Squaw Mountain—the great mass that barred the blue sky to the west, fifteen miles from the bank of the Rio Frio. But Pep, the pinto, was the fastest pony at Packsaddle, and in a couple of minutes Dick had overtaken the bunch and was riding with the foremost. With a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of bridles they swept away across the prairie. The miles raced under the galloping hoofs, and as they drew nearer to Squaw Mountain the ringing of rifles came to the ears of the bunch on the prairie wind.

CHAPTER 25.

The Cornered Rustlers!

BILL SAMPSON, schoolmaster, pushed his ten-gallon hat back on his untidy hair and wiped a stream of perspiration from his bronzed head and a streak of blood from his cheek. A bullet had gone very close, taking a strip of skin and a tuft of beard. The Judsons were putting up a fight—a fight that was likely to be long remembered in the valley of the Rio Frio. Cornered on Squaw Mountain, the desperate gang were standing at bay, and they were gunmen and killers, every one of them. Every man who rode on their trail knew that powder would be burned and blood would be spilled before they were roped in.

Looked at from the distance Squaw Mountain seemed like a solid mass against the sky. Closer at hand it was split by great canyons, gulches, and arroyos.

Medicine Canyon rived the mountain in a great gap, shut in on either side by towering cliffs and clinging pines.

In Medicine Canyon stood the "mesa"—one of the great volcanic masses of rock common in Texas, Arizona, and Mexico—flat-topped,

whence came the Spanish name of mesa, or table.

On the summit of the mesa clustered the Judson gang, burning powder.

There were five of them—desperate border ruffians. Chief Seven Horses, the outcast Navajo, had stolen their cayuses in the night and left them on foot, with the pursuit already up. They had hoped to scatter and escape in the gulches of Squaw Mountain, but the hunt had been too hot on their trail. Horsemen had ridden them down in Medicine Canyon, and they had turned to bay.

On top of the mesa, lying in cover of loose rocks, and firing whenever they saw a Stetson hat, they were surrounded, but not yet taken.

The mesa was twenty feet high. The sides were steep and rugged. It was not an easy position to rush, and the five men on the summit were all good shots, armed to the teeth and desperate.

But more and more enemies were gathering round the cornered Judson gang.

Ezra Lick, the marshal of Packsaddle, was there, with a dozen Packsaddle citizens. Barney Bailey, the foreman of Kicking Mule Ranch, had ridden up with 'punchers' from the outfit. 'Punchers' had come from other ranches. Bill Sampson, of course, was there. Bill was not likely to miss this.

Bill, with a rifle in his grip, and a streak of blood running down his cheek, did not look much like a schoolmaster. Bill had forgotten that he was headmaster of Packsaddle School.

"Doggone my cats!" growled Bill, as he dabbed his cheek. "I guess that one went close. That'll be Jud that pulled trigger. He sure is some shot! But we got 'em, marshal."

Marshal Lick, in cover of a big rock with Bill, nodded.

"We got 'em!" he agreed. "We got 'em dead to rights! I guess the Judsons won't ride no more trails after

this rookus. And there'll be some other guys that won't when we get to grips."

"Sure!" assented Bill.

"I'll say there's enough of us to eat 'em, body and boots!" growled Barney Bailey. "Waiting for you to give the word, marshal."

Marshal Lick peered round the big boulder.

Rifle-shots were ringing from the summit of the mesa. Return fire came from a dozen points in the wide canyon, the hot lead sweeping over the mesa and keeping the Judsons close in cover.

Mr. Lick chewed his under-lip thoughtfully.

He had waited for plenty of force to gather before coming to grips with the outlaws. Now there were more than thirty men in the canyon, surrounding the rugged mesa, loosing off their rifles. Enough, as the Kicking Mule foreman said, to eat them body and boots if they got at them. But it was a tough proposition to rush the rugged slopes of the mesa in face of five rifles.

Bang!

A bullet spun the Stetson on the head of the marshal of Packsaddle as he peered. Mr. Lick gave a howl and jumped back to cover.

Bang! roared Bill's rifle, almost at the same instant. Bill was watching through a crevice of the rock, and he had seen a Judson lift himself on the mesa to fire.

A fearful yell came from the top of the mesa. The man who had fired at the marshal sank back there, the rifle falling from his hands.

A roar of rage from the other rustlers echoed the yell of the fallen man. Fast and furious came a blaze of fire from four rifles.

Bill grinned.

"I guess," he remarked coolly, "that there's one guy in that bunch that won't pull trigger when we come to grips, marshal."

"You said it!" grinned Mr. Lick. He set his Stetson straight on his head again. "You ain't forgotten how to

shoot, Bill, quirting them young guys at the school."

"Not so's you'd notice it!" grinned Bill.

From somewhere along the canyon came a sharp shriek. Bill's grinning face became grave.

"That's one of our outfit got his!" he said.

Barney Bailey snapped an oath.

"I guess that's a Kicking Mule guy, and he's got it where he lives!" he growled. "How long you going to wait, marshal? Say, if you don't get a move on, I guess the Kicking Mule outfit will handle this rookus and leave you out in the cold!"

"Aw, can it, Barney!" grunted the marshal.

He peered round the rock again, giving the position the once-over. Then he rapped out his orders, which were passed along from man to man.

From thirty rifles came a peal of heavy fire, and bullets rained on the mesa, driving the Judsons to close cover on the summit. Following that burst of fire came a rush from all sides, and Packsaddle men and punchers rushed and clambered up the steep sides of the mesa to the attack.

CHAPTER 26.

The Fight at the Mesa!

"I 'LL say they're going it!" panted Slick Poindexter.

"And then some!" grinned Mick Kavanagh.

The leaders of the Packsaddle bunch were riding into Medicine Canyon. Slick and Mick led, Dick Carr keeping up with them. He could have shot ahead on the fleet-footed pinto, but it was new country to the tenderfoot of Packsaddle, and he knew none of the trails. Close behind the three came Big Steve Carson, using whip and spur on his grey broncho. The rest of the bunch were strung out behind, in ones and twos and threes. All were riding hard

for Squaw Mountain, but all were not equally well-mounted.

An incessant roar of rifle-fire greeted the ears of the schoolboys as they dashed into the canyon. The leading riders came suddenly in sight of the rugged mesa, and reined in.

"They're getting to grips!" panted Carson.

"They got the Judsons!" said Slick.

Dick Carr stared at the thrilling scene before him, his face ablaze with excitement. It was a scene to make the tenderfoot's heart thump.

Puffs of smoke, the barking of rifles, came from the summit of the mesa. The Judson gang were defending themselves desperately. But thirty men or more were swarming to the attack, clambering up the rugged rock, some of them loosing off revolvers as they clambered.

At the foot of the mesa three men lay wounded, and as Dick Carr looked he saw another man come rolling down the rugged rock, to crash helplessly on the earth.

"There's Bill!" breathed Slick. He pointed. Bill Sampson's brawny form could be seen clambering up with an activity amazing in so bulky and brawny a guy. "Good old Bill!"

Bang, bang, bang! roared the rifles of the rustlers.

A bullet whizzed towards the bunch of schoolboys. They were hardly a hundred yards from the scene of the desperate fight.

Dick Carr involuntarily ducked as he felt the wind of it. It missed him by a foot or more, however, and whistled away towards the distant canyon wall.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Steve Carson. "I guess that skeered you a few, you Carr. Say, you want to hunt cover."

Dick's face crimsoned.

"I'm not scared!" he snapped. "But—"

"I'll say you looked it!" grinned Carson. "What you doing here, anyhow, tenderfoot? I guess this ain't no place for a soft boob."

Slick and Mick grinned. Pie Sanders reined in beside them and chuckled. Dick Carr set his lips. He would have given anything to recall that involuntary duck of the head; but gunfire at close quarters was rather a new thing to the Packsaddle tenderfoot.

"Beat it, you!" grinned Carson. "I guess you'll find a prairie rabbit's hole to stick your cabeza in!"

Dick's eyes gleamed, but he made no reply. He turned his gaze on the mesa again. Bill Sampson was at the summit, and as he scrambled forward a burly ruffian with a black beard and a scarred face leaped at him with clubbed rifle.

"That's Jud!" panted Slick.

The schoolboys gazed, spellbound. It seemed to them, for one terrible instant, that the Packsaddle schoolmaster would be swept away by the whirling rifle-butt, and hurled from the summit of the mesa to the canyon below—to crashing death.

But Bill Sampson dodged the crash of the rifle-butt, closed in on Jud, and grasped him.

For a moment or two they struggled on the edge of the mesa; then, losing their footing together, they rolled down the rough slope, still grasping one another and struggling fiercely.

"Oh!" panted Dick Carr, his face white. "He will be killed!"

"Aw, can it!" sneered Big Steve. "If you ain't got the nerve of a gopher, why don't you beat it?"

Dick hardly heard him. His eyes were fixed tensely on the Packsaddle schoolmaster. Gripping each other fiercely, like fighting panthers, Bill Sampson and Jud Judson rolled down the jagged rock, bumping, jolting, crashing, but still clutching and fighting.

There was a yelling and trampling on top of the mesa now. Ezra Lick and Barney Bailey and six or seven others had reached the summit, and the Jud-

sons were hard driven. One had already fallen to Bill Sampson's rifle—another had rolled over under Barney's Colt, and the leader was rolling down the rock in Bill's grip. Two remaining ruffians, dodging among the rugged boulders on the mesa, loosed off revolvers and kept up a desperate resistance, while more and more foes clambered up to assail them.

Bump! came Bill Sampson and Jud, rolling from the rugged slope to the rocky floor of the canyon. The crash on the rocks tore them apart, and both of them lay panting for the moment. Bill, striving to rise, sank back.

"Bill's hurt!" panted Dick Carr.

He set his pony in motion, riding towards the mesa. Bullets were still flying wildly, crack after crack ringing out. But the Packsaddle tenderfoot did not heed them. He dashed on to Bill's help, and Slick and Mick followed him, and then Pie Sanders. Steve Carson sat his grey broncho where he was. In spite of his sneers at the tenderfoot, the bully of Packsaddle did not seem keen on getting near Jud Judson.

Bill Sampson needed help. His leg had twisted under him as he fell, and he was unable to get on his feet. Jud had been more lucky, and he was scrambling up, revolver in hand.

But for the schoolboys, Bill was at his mercy. The fight was still going on, and the marshal's men, who were not yet at close quarters with the outlaws, were clambering up to the attack. Not a man there had an eye for lame ducks. Bill Sampson, struggling in vain to rise, lay under the muzzle of the rustler's revolver. Jud, panting, swaying, brought the weapon to bear on the Packsaddle schoolmaster, his fierce eyes blazing over the barrel.

Dick Carr dashed up, and slashed with his quirt, the only weapon he had. In the wild excitement of the fight neither the marshal's men nor the rustlers had seen the schoolboys arrive. Jud did not even know that Dick was there, till he came up with a clatter

of hoofs, and the slashing quirt caught the levelled revolver and tore it from the black-bearded ruffian's hand.

The Colt clattered on the rocks, and Jud was disarmed. He leaped back, spitting out an imprecation. His hand flew to the knife in his belt, and the long, broad blade flashed out into the sunlight.

"Watch out, you Carr!" shrieked Slick.

Dick was watching out—not for himself, but for Bill. The schoolmaster was struggling fiercely to rise, but his injured leg held him down. Dick rode between him and the rustler, his eyes on Judson, his quirt ready for another slash. It was a poor weapon in a boy's hand against a long knife in the grip of a brawny desperado.

But Jud, about to hurl himself at the schoolboy, paused and stared round. Up to that moment the ruffian had only thought of fighting to the bitter end, like a cornered wild beast, killing till he was killed. But now he saw a chance of escape.

Bill lay powerless; his revolver was empty, and he could not rise. All the rest of the marshal's men were on the mesa, attacking the remnant of the outlaw gang. For the moment, Jud had a chance. He glared round with burning eyes under his black brows, leaped back from the spot and rushed towards Steve Carson. Dick, Slick, and Mick were round Bill, ready to defend him the best they could; and they were glad enough to see the brawny ruffian, with the flashing bowie in his hand, bound away from them. But the next moment they saw his intention, and shouted to Steve Carson.

"Look out, Steve!"

Pie Sanders slashed at the ruffian, but Jud passed him unheeding. He reached Steve with swift bounds. The bully of Packsaddle whirled away his pony, too late. The ruffian's hand was on the bridle, his knife flashing in the air.

Steve rolled off the saddle, just in

time to escape the slash, and pitched heavily over on the rocks. Judson dragged the horse round, ran by its side for a second, and then leaped on its back. Steve was left lying dazed on the earth.

The rest of the Packsaddle bunch were riding up. They were right in the path of the fleeing ruffian, who had seized so promptly upon that unlooked-for chance of escape. They reined their ponies out of his way, as he came charging towards them, knife in hand, desperate fury in his bearded, blood-spattered face.

"Stop him!" yelled Slick.

But Jud was past the schoolboys and riding away like a madman on Steve's horse. Bill Sampson gave a roar of rage.

"Jumping painters! That guy's beating it—and he's the king-pin of the crowd. Aw, carry me home to die! This is sure the bee's knee!" Bill roared to the men on the mesa. "Say, you guys, Jud's beating it—get after that guy!"

But the last of the Judsons, on the mesa, were fighting like tigers, and the marshal and his men gave no ear.

Dick Carr waved his hand to Slick and Mick.

"After him!" he shouted.

"I guess—" gasped Slick.

"After him!"

Dick gave his pinto a touch of the quirt, and Pep leaped into a gallop. Bill lifted himself on an elbow and yelled after the tenderfoot.

"Come back! You Carr, you come back! You figure you can handle that firebug! Come back, I'm telling you!"

Dick was already out of hearing, galloping on the track of the fleeing outlaw. Slick and Mick exchanged a glance. Then they put spurs to their horses and dashed after the tenderfoot. Pie Sanders rode after them. Bill staggered up on one leg, holding to a jutting spur of the mesa. He yelled to Steve Carson.

"Say, you geck, what for you want to give that fire-bug a mount!" he roared. "What you doing here, anyhow, instead of at school? By the great horned toad, I'll sure quirt you a few!"

Steve made no answer. He stood staring blankly after the chase, vanishing down Medicine Canyon. On the summit of the mesa the fight sputtered out. The Judson gang were wiped out. The marshal and his men, missing Jud, came scrambling down. They rushed for their horses—but the cayuses were tethered at a distance. Jud Judson was gone; and unless the schoolboys galloping on his track could cinch him, he was gone for good.

CHAPTER 27.

Roping in the Rustler!

"**Y**OU gink!" panted Slick Poin-dexter as he came up beside Dick Carr.

"You geck!" howled Mick, racing up on the other side.

Pie Sanders was already dropping behind. Five or six more of the bunch who had wheeled their horses to join in the chase were strung out behind Pie. In a few minutes they were lost to sight, if the three in the lead had looked back. But they did not look back.

Unheeding, Dick rode on, his eyes on the fleeing outlaw ahead. Jud Judson was riding hard on Steve Carson's horse, getting every ounce of speed out of a good animal. But Dick easily kept pace on Pep. The handsome pinto was more than equal to the race.

"What you figure you're doing, you pesky boob?" yelled Slick. "You backing your quirk agin a Colt?"

Dick gave a breathless laugh.

"He's lost his gun, Slick! If he had a gun, he'd have fired back at us before this! Keep going, and we'll get him."

"He's sure got a 'leven-inch bowie!" gasped Mick.

"We're three to one! Keep going!"

"I'll say you're some tenderfoot, you

Carr!" grinned Slick. "I'll say you're as loco as a hornet; but if you're trailing Jud, I guess we're trailing him, too!"

The three schoolboys galloped on, miles of ground racing under the thundering hoofs. Jud had swerved into a narrow gulch that led into another wide open canyon. Evidently the outlaw knew his way about Squaw Mountain.

Medicine Canyon and the mesa where the gang had been wiped out, were miles behind now. If the marshal's men were riding, they were far out of the race. Dick did not know the country; but Slick and Mick knew it, and they knew that the hunted outlaw was heading for the loneliest stretch of Squaw Mountain in the hope of getting away to the prairie beyond and the recesses of the Staked Plain in the distance where he could hunt safe cover. Unless the three schoolboys could deal with him, Jud was safe for the Staked Plain.

Several times as he rode, the black-bearded outlaw cast a savage glare over his shoulder.

The schoolboys could read at first puzzlement, and then relief, in his fierce face.

Jud had feared to see armed men, in ten-gallon hats, with Colts in their grip, riding on his trail. All he saw was a bunch of three schoolboys, unarmed. His look told what was in his mind. At first he could hardly believe in his own good luck. Now he was riding hard, not because he feared the schoolboys, but because he feared others who might be coming on behind.

Had the ruffian still possessed a firearm, he would have shot down the three as they rode, with no more compunction than if they had been prairie rabbits. But he would not delay to deal with them with the weapon that remained to him—the razor-edged knife with a blade eleven inches long. But Jud reckoned that if they came up with him the bowie-knife would put paid to them fast enough.

Meanwhile, he rode hard, with the Packsaddle trio on his track.

They were out on the open hillside now, and ahead appeared rolling plains of waving grass stretching away to the towering bluffs of the Staked Plain. Like a great wall in the distance, that high tableland barred the horizon.

But it was still far away, and the pursuers were gaining. Dick Carr's pinto could have run the outlaw down long since, but he kept with his comrades. The pursuit was reckless enough, but he was not so reckless as to think of tackling the desperate outlaw single-handed.

Pep kept a little in the lead, Slick and Mick going all out on their ponies to keep the pace. And Steve's horse, under the heavy weight of the bulky outlaw, was getting winded.

"We've got him!" said Dick, between his teeth.

"I'll say he's got us!" grinned Slick. "What'll he do with that 'leven-inch sticker, you gink, when we cinch him?"

"You've got your lasso!"

"Sure!" assented Slick, his eyes gleaming.

"And by the same token, so have I!" said Mick.

"I'll say it's a chance!" said Slick. And his riata was in his hand as he rode now.

Dick Carr had his lasso at his saddle, but he was not yet skilled in the use of the noosed rope. He left it there, keeping his quirt in hand. But Slick and Mick held their lariats ready for a chance.

Closer and closer they drew to the galloping outlaw.

Again and again Jud glared back at them. He had spotted the lassoes, and knew what was intended. Once within reach of the forty-foot rope, even a schoolboy's hand could have plucked him from the saddle, as he well knew. It was very near time for Jud to turn at bay. Neither was he unwilling. His heavy weight had tired Steve's pony, in a desperate gallop of five miles over

hard country, and he had a horse-thief's eye on Dick's pinto.

That he could get the worst of a struggle with the schoolboys hardly occurred to the ruffian. All he wanted was to be clear of other pursuers while he handled them. And he was clear of other pursuers now.

Whiz!

Mick's rope flew, uncoiling as it spun through the air. It dropped hardly a yard behind the outlaw, flicking his horse's tail as it fell. Hurriedly Mick coiled it in.

Judson whirled round his horse. The long knife flashed in his hand as he rode back at the schoolboys.

"Scatter!" yelled Slick.

The three separated at once, dashing out of the outlaw's way.

Judson pulled in his horse, uncertain which to attack. As he paused, Slick's rope flew, and only by a swift and desperate twist did the outlaw escape the dropping noose. It struck the Stetson from his head as it grazed him.

"Aw, shucks!" growled Slick, as he dashed on, coiling in the trailing rope.

Jud whirled his horse again, and dashed at Dick Carr. He had to deal with the three separately, and to pick his man, and he picked the rider of the pinto.

He came swooping at Dick, the knife flashing in his hand. A touch of the quirt, and the pinto leaped into a wild gallop, and Dick rode away, with the outlaw panting behind. It was well for the Packsaddle tenderfoot, then, that he had a good horse, and knew how to ride it. Pep outdistanced the outlaw riding fiercely after the tenderfoot.

And after Jud came Slick and Mick riding in pursuit, ready to dodge him if he turned on them. Judson felt, rather than knew, that a whirling rope was coming, and swerved to avoid it, and again a loop dropped a yard from him. He snarled an oath through his clenched teeth, as he dragged round Steve's horse to ride back at Slick and Mick.

"Beat it, Mick, you guy!" panted Slick.

"You said it!" grinned Mick.

They dashed away in different directions as the outlaw came thundering back at them.

With burning eyes Judson picked on Slick, and rode madly after him. Now it was Slick's turn to flee, and he rode for his very life, with the outlaw plying his spurs behind. After Jud came Dick Carr and Mick, in hot chase.

So desperately did the outlaw drive on Steve's pony that it seemed for some moments that he would ride Poindexter down. One slash of the bowie would have finished all things for Slick had Judson reached him. But Slick plied whip and spur, and kept ahead, and Steve's weary pony, overloaded by the brawny outlaw, stumbled, and Jud was nearly thrown. Poindexter glanced back over his shoulder, grinned, and reined in. He was safe from the outlaw's reach.

"Say, Jud, I guess we got you dead to rights!" yelled Slick. "It's you for the calaboose at Packsaddle, Jud!"

A yell of rage answered him.

Judson turned on the two schoolboys behind. They reined in at once as he turned. Mick's lasso flew, and the outlaw, with a desperate bound, barely avoided it. He made a spring to grasp the rope as it fluttered on the earth, but Mick was not likely to give him a chance of that. Swiftly he jerked the trailing rope away.

It was dawning on the ruffian's mind now that it was not so easy to deal with the schoolboys as he had reckoned.

He sat the almost spent pony, his eyes glittering with rage, his grasp convulsive on the handle of the bowie-knife. There was murder in his eyes, and in his heart, if he could have reached them, but he could not. And while the minutes passed, pursuit was drawing nearer and nearer.

For long, long minutes he watched them, like a cornered panther. And

they watched him. Then, with a sudden crash of spurs on the flanks of Steve's pony, he galloped at Dick Carr. Instantly Dick dashed away, and instantly Slick was riding after the outlaw, lariat in hand, whirling the coiled rope for a cast.

Whiz!

A fearful yell came from Jud. This time he did not escape the whirling rope.

Forty feet of cowhide stretched in the air, and the loop dropped over the outlaw's head and shoulders.

He dragged in his horse and clutched at the rope—too late! Slick whirled his pony and dashed away, putting a sudden strain on the rope, that tightened the loop like an iron band round the outlaw, and plucked him from the saddle like the clutch of a giant's hand.

Crash went Judson on the rocky earth, with a concussion that almost stunned him. The bowie-knife flew from his hand, falling yards away. He was dragged along the rocks a score of feet before Slick pulled in his pony.

"I'll say we got him!" shrieked Mick.

Mick and Dick dashed up, and leaped from the saddle. One of Jud's arms was pinned by the lariat, the other they grasped as he strove to struggle. Slick joined them in a few seconds. The three of them had their hands on the outlaw, and the lasso was wound round and knotted, pinning both his arms.

Jud Judson, leader of the Judson gang, for years the terror of Texas, lay a helpless prisoner in the hands of the Packsaddle schoolboys.

Slick Poindexter fanned his face with his Stetson.

"I'll say this is a cinch!" he chuckled. "I guess Bill will be mad with us for lighting out of school and leaving Small Brown on his lonesome. But Bill will sure be a glad guy when he sees this baby with the rope on."

"And then some!" chuckled Mick.

"Stick him on his horse!" said Dick Carr.

Jud Judson was lifted to the saddle of Steve's pony. There his feet were tied together under the animal. Slick Poindexter held the end of the lasso, and the schoolboys rode back the way they had come, leading their prisoner.

They had to cover several miles before they sighted a bunch of bobbing Stetson hats. They waved their own hats, and yelled and shouted. Marshal Lick and his men came up at a gallop, with amazed faces. Bill Sampson pulled in his horse, gazing at the three schoolboys and the bound outlaw with an expression on his face that made the boys chuckle.

"You—you got him!" gasped Bill. "You got that all-fired rustler! You sure got that goldarned firebug! Jumping painters! Say, boys, pinch me and wake me up!"

The marshal of Packsaddle took the rope from Slick. Still amazed, he stared at the savage, scowling face of the outlaw.

"It's sure Jud, and we got him!" he said. "Mister Sampson, I'll tell a man you're some schoolmaster, to raise a bunch that can handle a firebug of Jud's heft! Yes, sir, I'll tell all Texas."

"Carry me home to die!" said Bill. "I was going to quirt the whole bunch for breaking herd that-a-way. I sure was going to make them sit up on their hind legs and yowl! But——"

"Forget it, Bill!" said the marshal of Packsaddle.

And Bill forgot it!

Dick, Slick, and Mick rode back to Packsaddle with the marshal's men, and saw Jud Judson safely lodged in the calaboose of the cow town. There was no more school at Packsaddle that day. Small Brown had expected to see Bill's quirt handled, hard and heavy, on the unruly bunch. Instead of which, much to Small Brown's disgust, Bill announced that the rest of the day was a holiday.

CHAPTER 28.

Judge Lynch!

"LYNCH him!"

The roar in the streets of the cow town of Packsaddle was clearly heard in the school on the bank of the Rio Frio. Bill Sampson, cow-puncher and schoolmaster, grunted angrily as he heard it. Small Brown started nervously, and blinked uneasily through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Some of the bunch grinned, and whispered to one another. Dick Carr, the tenderfoot in Texas, caught his breath.

"Lynch him!"

It was a roar from two or three hundred throats. Men were parading the streets of the cow town, mostly 'punchers from the surrounding ranches. They roared and shouted, and loosed off their revolvers into the air.

All through the day wild excitement had reigned in the cow town. It grew and intensified towards sundown. In the timber calaboose, Jud Judson, leader of the notorious and dreaded Judson gang, lay a prisoner. In his ears rang the yelling of the lynch mob. But for the fact that the town marshal, Lick, was on guard at the gaol, gun in hand, the outlaw would have been dragged out already and strung up to the branch of a tree. But the deepening, threatening roar of the lynch mob told that Marshal Lick would not find it easy to guard his prisoner during the wild hours of the night that was coming.

"Jumping painters!" growled Bill Sampson.

He strode across to the window of the school-room and stared out across the playground at the gateway opening on the trail down to the cow town.

He knitted his brows at the sight of a bunch of horsemen riding up the school trail. They were 'punchers from the Kicking Mule, with Barney Bailey, the foreman, riding at their head.

With a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of bridles and spurs, the Kicking Mule

'punchers rode in at the gate. Bill tramped to the wide-open doorway. Outside, the sunset glared red on the playground and the waters of the Frio.

"By gum," whispered Slick Poindexter, "I guess there's going to be trouble in town to-night, you 'uns!"

"You said it!" agreed Mick Kavanagh.

Dick Carr breathed hard. Lynchings were nothing new to most of the Packsaddle bunch. It was a different matter to the English schoolboy who had been only a few weeks in Texas.

"Slick," he breathed, "you don't mean that they'll take him out of the gaol and hang him without trial?"

"Sure!" answered Poindexter.

"Aw! You're some tenderfoot, you, Carr!" sneered Steve Carson. "What's the use of trying Jud Judson when every guy in Packsaddle knows his record? Old Lick's sent a messenger to the county town for the Rangers to fetch him there for trial. I reckon he won't be here when the Rangers come for him. They'll sure find him on the end of a rope!"

"Sure thing!" said Poker Parker.

Dick shivered. He had been glad that he had helped in rounding up the desperado; but he was not so sure that he was glad now.

"Silence in the class!" squealed Small Brown.

The bunch heeded Small Brown's squeal about as much as they would have heeded the chirp of a cicada. Half the fellows were on their feet, and most of them were talking excitedly. The 'punchers had ridden up to the school-house, and were visible through the open porch, where Bill Sampson was standing to greet them.

"I guess they want Bill to join up!" said Slick. "But I'll say that Barney misses his guess. Bill ain't the guy to take a hand in lynching a galoot, even an all-fired fire-bug like Jud Judson."

"Bill's soft!" scoffed Steve Carson.

"You want to let him hear you say

so!" grinned Mick. "You sure wouldn't say it twice, and so you wouldn't, bedad!"

"Can it, you Irish Mike!" snarled Steve. "I'll tell a man, when school's out, I'm going down to take a hand in the game."

Barney Bailey reined in his horse outside the school porch. The Kicking Mule foreman's rugged, bearded face was excited and savage.

"Say, Bill Sampson!" he roared, his powerful voice ringing through the cow town school. "I guess we want you down to Packsaddle! That dog-goned Lick is holding us off at the calaboose with his gun, and he allows that he's keeping the fire-bug Judson for the Rangers! We sure want you to come along and tell him where to get off!"

"You doggoned son of a prairie gopher!" roared back the schoolmaster of Packsaddle. "You figure that me, a schoolmaster, is aiming to back up a lynch mob? Forget it, and forget it soon!"

Barney Bailey glared down at him from the prancing broncho.

"Doggone you!" he roared. "I guess we're getting that fire-bug, marshal or no marshal! I'm telling you, the Judson gang shot up three good men afore we wiped them out at Squaw Mountain yesterday! I'm telling you that one of them was a man in this bunch, a Kicking Mule man, and every guy on Kicking Mule has moseyed along to lend a hand in stringing him up! And up he goes!"

There was a howl of approval from the five or six 'punchers riding with the Kicking Mule foreman. Dark looks were cast on the cow town schoolmaster as he stood in the porch facing them, with his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. But dark and threatening looks had no effect on the burly, brawny schoolmaster of Packsaddle.

"Jumping painters!" hooted Bill. "Forget it, I'm telling you! Ain't there any law and order in this here

county of Santanta, you piefaced geeks? There's a Ranger guy coming over for him, and I guess the marshal is going to hand him over safe and sound to that Ranger guy! Chew on that, you ginks, and go back and punch cows!"

"I guess we ain't punching cows none till we seen that fire-bug up on a riata!" snarled Barney. "Ain't there a dozen shootings and hold-ups to his tally? And what's the good of sending him to trial? I guess we're making sure of him while we've got him!"

"Guess agin!" snorted Bill.

"Marshal Lick's a good man, and we ain't honing to hurt him any," said Barney. "You come along and talk turkey to him, Bill. He'll sure listen to you. Get him to slide out and leave us to carry on. We're getting Judson if we have to fill up Mister Lick full of lead! You get me?"

"I get you!" snorted Bill. "And now you get me! I'm sure coming down to Packsaddle, and I'm coming with my guns! And if you want to lay a finger on Jud, you got to walk over them guns to do it! Chew on that!"

"You backing up that gink, Lick?" roared Barney.

"All the way, and then some!" retorted Bill.

Barney's hand dropped on his gun. Instantly Bill's hand shot up from his hip, with his big Colt in it.

Bang!

The roar of the Colt rang like thunder through Packsaddle School. A wild, fierce yell came from Barney Bailey. For a second the breathless bunch reckoned that Bill had shot up the Kicking Mule foreman as he pulled his gun—as by all the laws and customs of the cow country he was fully entitled to do. But the next second it was seen that Barney was still in his saddle, sucking the fingers of his right hand frantically, with howls and gurgles of pain. His revolver lay on the ground. Bill had shot it out of his hand as he pulled it.

There was no man in Texas quicker on the draw and quicker on the trigger than Bill Sampson.

Bill's smoking gun covered the group of horsemen, his eyes glaring fiercely over it. Barney sucked his numbed fingers and howled. From one of the fingers a strip of skin had been torn by the bullet that had struck the Colt from his grasp.

"Say, you guys come here a-shooting?" roared Bill. "Get on with it, doggone your hides! I'll say that they'll be short on the tally at the Kicking Mule Bunkhouse when you're through!"

"Doggone you, Bill!" growled one of the 'punchers. "We ain't hunting trouble with you, you pesky schoolmaster! But I'm telling you that, if you back up Master Lick, they'll want a noo schoolmaster at Packsaddle, and don't you forget it!"

"Ride, you 'uns!" snarled Barney Bailey, and with his uninjured hand he swung round his broncho and dashed away, followed by his men. They galloped through the gateway and roared away down the trail to the cow town, to rejoin the lynch mob yelling and parading there.

Bill Sampson gave a snort. Without a glance into the excited school-room, he strode away, bound for Packsaddle, to back up Marshal Lick in saving his prisoner—if he could—from Judge Lynch. Small Brown was left to carry on in the cow town school, but he soon gave up the attempt, his squeal drowned by the buzz of excited voices.

When school was out Steve Carson mounted and rode away with his friends, Poker Parker and Slim Dixon, to mingle with the mob, and several other fellows followed him. As the sun sank lower behind the bluffs of the Staked Plain and lights gleamed out in the dusk, the roar of the lynch mob from the cow town grew deeper, wilder, more menacing. That starry night there was to be wild work on the banks of the Fric.

CHAPTER 29.

Dick's Daring Scheme!

DICK CARR hardly ate his supper at the trestle table in the chuckhouse. Again and again before the sun went he had climbed the school fence and stared towards the cow town. The school was only a short distance from the town, and through the openings of the buildings he could see the excited mob parading, loosing off revolvers, goading one another to wilder frenzy. The calaboose, a strong timber building with corrugated iron roof, faced the plaza, and from the school only the rear of it could be seen, mostly shut off by a high fence.

There, Dick knew, lay Jud Judson, the man he had helped to capture. But for him Jud would have succeeded in fleeing to the Staked Plain and keeping his liberty. Dick could not wish that that had happened, for the man was a reckless desperado with many a wild shooting and hold-up to his credit. But it sickened him to think of even such a wretch being dragged out by a maddened mob and hurled into eternity, riddled with bullets amid roars of execration. When darkness shut off the view he went into the chuckhouse to supper with the rest of the bunch, but his thoughts were with the man in the calaboose.

Slick Poindexter nudged Mick and grinned as he glanced at the clouded, thoughtful face of the tenderfoot. Half the bunch were away, gone down to Packsaddle to mingle in the riot. When Bill was absent Small Brown had little chance of keeping the bunch in check.

"I guess the tenderfoot's feeling sick," grinned Poindexter.

"Sure, he's new to Texas, and so he is!" answered Mick.

Dick rose from the table.

"You fellows come out!" he said.

"I've got something to say."

Slick and Mick followed him into the

playground, glimmering under the softly gleaming stars of Texas.

"What's the game?" asked Slick. He peered curiously at Dick's face in the glimmer of the stars.

"It's through us that that man's going to be lynched!" said Dick Carr abruptly. "They'd never have got him if we hadn't chipped in."

"Through you, most of all!" grinned Poindexter. "Don't you worry, old-timer! I tell you, Jud's the hardest case in Texas."

"They're not going to get him if I can help it!" said Dick Carr, in a low determined tone.

Slick and Mick stared at him blankly.

"Can it, you gink!" said Slick. "When that mob gets going Marshal Lick and Bill won't be able to stop them. What you figure you can do? You going to face that crowd with a ruler in your grip?"

Mick chuckled.

"I've been thinking it out," answered Dick quietly. "It's up to us, and I want you to help. We put him where he is, and it's up to us to save him, if we can, till the Rangers come for him. Bill's standing up for the law, and what Bill thinks is good enough for us."

"You said it!" agreed Mick. "But what—"

"Nothing doing, you gink!" grunted Poindexter. "I'll say I'd back up Bill all along the line, and then some. But I'm telling you, if we go down to the calaboose and tell him we've come to help, he'll sure give us a lick with his quirt for our trouble."

"Sure thing!" grinned Mick.

"That's not the idea," said Dick Carr. "I've been watching the place ever since we got out of school. There's a mob in the plaza, in front of it—hundreds of them. But there's nothing to stop us from climbing the fence at the back—"

"Oh gum!" said Slick. "I guess we could get in at the back of the cala-

booze if we wanted, but what's the good? I tell you the Texas Rangers, if they was there, couldn't stop that mob when it starts."

"If we get Judson away——"

"Get him away!" howled Slick.

"Let loose the worst fire-bug in Texas! Forget it, you geck!"

"Who's talking about letting him loose?" snapped Dick impatiently.

"We get him away and get him here—to keep till the Rangers come for him."

"Great gophers!" ejaculated Slick. He gave a snort of derision. "Why, you pesky tanderfoot, if the marshal spots a guy breaking into his calaboose he'll burn powder at sight, without waiting to ask whether it's a darn fool schoolboy! And if them lynchers get wise to it, they'll string you up along with Jud as like as not. Forget it!"

Dick set his lips.

"I'm going!" he said. "If you won't back me up, you won't!"

He turned and tramped away, leaving Mick and Slick staring. It might be a wild and hare-brained scheme, but whether it was or not, Dick Carr's mind was made up, and he was going to carry on. He had a few preparations to make, and he went into the bunkhouse, where his locker was.

When he came out most of the bunch were grouped in the light from the door of the chuckhouse, listening to the wild roar from the cow town, and talking together excitedly. Dick slipped quietly away to the gate. As he passed through the gateway two dim figures loomed up in the shadows and joined him.

"You pesky gink!" came Slick Poin-dexter's growl. "You figure that we're letting you carry on this stunt on your lonesome? I'm telling you that you're the world's prize boob, all the same!"

Dick grinned.

"Come on!" he said.

And the three schoolboys tramped down the trail together. As they drew

near the cow town the roar of the lynch mob came deeper and louder. The cracking of revolvers, fired into the air, was incessant. More and more 'punchers' had ridden into Packsaddle after sundown, and the plaza was swarming with horsemen and men on foot.

Like many Texan towns dating from the old Spanish days, Packsaddle was built round a plaza, on which the principal buildings fronted. The plaza was a blaze of light, naphtha lamps flaring on all sides; but the backs of the buildings were deep in shadow. The mob was gathering and thickening in front of the calaboose, but behind the gaol lay waste land, dark and deserted.

The three picked their way in the gloom over a rugged stretch, cumbered with empty tins, disused boots, and other rubbish. They reached the high fence at the back of the calaboose enclosure. The wall was of solid pine-wood, ten feet high, shutting in the yard at the back of the gaol. Mick Kavanagh looked up at it and grinned.

"Sure, ye'll niver get over that, unless your grandfather was a monkey," he remarked.

"Stand close to Slick!" muttered Dick Carr. "You're the heftiest of us three. You get on his shoulders, Mick, and I'll get on yours."

"Faith! And ye didn't lave your brains behind in the ould country when you came to Texas!" commented Mick.

"And how'll we get up after you, you gink?" demanded Slick.

"I've brought my lasso."

"Ain't he a broth of a boy, and doesn't he think of everything?" grinned Mick.

Slick Poin-dexter stood close to the wall, bracing himself to take a weight. Mick climbed on his shoulders with the activity of a monkey, and was just able to hold on to the top of the wall with his finger-tips. Over the two of them Dick Carr climbed. He was the

lightest weight of the three, but there were deep grunts from Slick Poin-dexter as he stood the strain.

But Dick was swiftly up and astride the top of the pinewood fence. He loosed his rope and dropped on the inner side of the wall. There he put his weight on the rope, till Slick and Mick had climbed over.

The three schoolboys trod softly towards the building. From a small barred window in the dark came a deep growling voice to their ears.

"They'll get me, sure! By the great horned toad, if I had a gat in my grip!"

It was the savage voice of Jud Judson. There was no glass in the window—glass was an almost unknown luxury at Packsaddle. Standing at the window, only the wooden bars separated them from the desperate leader of the Judson gang.

CHAPTER 30.

Bill Stands Firm!

"HAVE him out!"
"Lynch him!"
"String him up!"

Bill Sampson gave his gunbelt a hitch. Marshal Lick's face was grim and serious.

Except for the prisoner, the two men were alone in the calaboose. The marshal's deputies, even the gaoler, had disappeared. Probably their feelings and sympathies were on the side of Judge Lynch. Anyhow, they had no hunch for a battle with a lynch mob. In all Packsaddle only Bill Sampson was standing by the marshal. But Bill Sampson was a host in himself. It was Bill's presence that had staved off an attack so far.

Every guy in Packsaddle knew what Bill's shooting was like. And he was there to shoot if the mob attacked the calaboose. His bearded face was grim and unbending as he looked out of the door on to the crowded, lighted plaza.

"I guess they're coming, Bill!" muttered Mr. Lick, as a deeper, louder roar came from the mob.

Bill nodded. He knew that the attack was coming. Barney Bailey, at a little distance, could be seen in the saddle, yelling to the mob, who answered with deep roars. The fury of the lynch crowd was working to a climax.

Sooner or later—more likely sooner than later—the rush would come, scores of infuriated men, with weapons in their hands hurling themselves at the calaboose. And when that deadly rush came, two men, however determined, were not likely to drive it back. But one of the two, at all events, was steady as a rock, though the other was wavering.

Marshal Lick had stood by his duty throughout that day, rather hoping against hope than expecting to be able to hold his prisoner till the Rangers came for him.

One by one his men had slipped away—and, but for Bill Sampson's presence, it was possible that the marshal himself might have found business elsewhere. He was a brave man, and keen on doing his duty, but he felt that the game was up.

"Bill, old-timer, they're coming!" he said.

They were coming! With Barney Bailey and Two-Gun Carson in the lead, the whole mob surged towards the calaboose.

Bill Sampson looked at them coolly and steadily through the doorway for a moment. Then he shut the door and slammed the bars into position. A minute more, and blows were raining on the stout pinewood.

"Have him out!"

"Lynch him!"

"You, Lick!" came Barney Bailey's deep yell. "You open up, you ple-faced clam! I guess nobody's going to hurt you any if you stand clear! You horn in, and you get yours, and you, too, Bill Sampson! Open up!"

"Not in your life-time, Barney!" shouted back the Marshal of Packsaddle.

"Bring an axe here, you guys!" shouted Barney Bailey.

Crash, crash, crash!

The door, stout as it was, shook and groaned under the crashing blows of the axe, wielded by a brawny 'puncher.

Bill Sampson quietly pulled the revolvers from his belt. The marshal had his hands on his guns. But he did not draw them.

"Say, you guys!" roared Bill. "You get through that door, and you'll sure hear my guns talk! I'm warning you!"

Barney's savage yell came back:

"You burn powder on this crowd, Bill Sampson, and we'll string you up alongside Jud!"

"I guess I'm burning powder soon! I see a doggoned guy through that door!" answered Bill grimly.

Crash, crash!

The axe rained blows on the door. Bill, standing a dozen feet back from it, lifted one of his Colts to a level. His face was like iron over it. The Marshal of Packsaddle touched him on the arm.

"The game's up, old-timer!" he breathed. "They'll get Jud—and they'll get us if we burn powder! Forget it, Bill!"

The Packsaddle schoolmaster gave him a glare of scorn.

"And you town marshal of this hyer burg, and letting a lynch mob get your prisoner away!" he snorted. "You forget it! Pull your guns, you geck, and stand up to the racket!"

"They're all our friends, and Jud's a doggoned fire-bug, anyhow!" growled the marshal sulkily. "We done all we can, and the Rangers can't get in till sun-up. I'm telling you that Jud's a goher, and——"

"Aw, can it!" snapped Bill. "I keep on telling you to pull your guns!"

Crash! The edge of the axe came through the pinewood, and as it was

jerked back a gleam of the naphtha lamps from the plaza came through.

Bang!

Bill fired at the slit in the wood. He fired high, and the bullet, whizzing through the split door, whistled over the heads outside. A roar of rage from the lynchers followed the shot, and a crash of revolver-fire. Hitherto, Colts had been loosed off into the air, adding to the wild din. Now they were aimed at the calaboose door, and hot lead splattered on the wood and splintered it right and left.

Marshal Lick breathed hard. Barney's voice was heard yelling to the lynchers to hold their fire, and the rain of lead ceased to give the 'puncher with the axe a chance again. Once more the heavy axe crashed.

"You got to let up, Bill!" hissed the marshal. "That door will be down in a minute more, and they'll be coming a-shooting——"

"Can it!" snorted Bill. "If you got cold feet, there's a back door, ain't there, and a fence you can hop over. Vamose the ranch, and leave me to handle that crowd. I guess I can do it!"

"The Texas Rangers couldn't handle them now their blood's up!" yelled the marshal.

"The Texas Rangers ain't got nothing on me!" retorted Bill. "I'm mentioning that I can handle that crowd! Ain't you swore me in as a deputy, you gink, and ain't it my dooty! Burn the wind while you've got a chance if you ain't standing to it! Quit, you quitter!"

Crash, crash, crash! came the heavy blows of the axe. Bill did not fire at the gaps in the door again. He had fired once in warning. Now he was ready for the door to fall—with levelled guns. Bill figured that he could stand up to the rush and drive it back. Mr. Lick figured nothing of the sort; but he did not take Bill's tip and vamose the ranch. It was easy enough, for the whole crowd swarmed

in front of the calaboose, and escape was open through the yard behind. But he was not the man to run when another man was standing to it.

With a final crash the door went! The fragments hung to the leather hinges, and the doorway was open to the wild mob.

Barney Bailey and Two-Gun Carson surged in, Colt in grip; behind them the pressing crowd, a leading 'puncher' with a riata ready in his hand. With a roar, they pressed in at the doorway, only to halt, suddenly, savagely, in front of Bill's levelled guns.

Steady as a rock stood the Packsaddle schoolmaster, fingers on triggers. But the crowd behind were pressing on, and the halt was likely to be brief.

"Stick 'em up, Bill!" hissed Barney hoarsely. "We're giving you a chance to let up, you pesky gink!"

"Stick up nothing!" growled Bill. "I'm shootin' if you wade in! You ain't lynching no Jud Judson while I'm around!"

"You'll get yours, Bill!" snapped Two-Gun Carson.

"Mebbe!" grunted Bill. "And I guess your young Steve, up at the school, will be a pesky orphan about the same time."

There was a fierce growl, and a surging from the mob, pressing at the doorway.

Marshal Lick gave a shout:

"Hold on, boys! I'll say we're letting you through! Bill, you ornery geck, put up your guns! I order you, as marshal of this here burg!"

"Order your Sunday shirts!" retorted Bill. "I ain't letting up, not so's you'd notice it!"

A fierce roar pealed from the lynch mob. There was a forward surge, and the leaders were pushed on. Guns were raised on all sides. Bill's eyes flashed, and in another second the roar of Colts would have split the air. Marshal Lick made a sudden grasp at Bill's arms and dragged them down.

"Jumping painters!" roared Bill. "You pesky geck——"

He had no time for more. The instant they were no longer threatened by Bill's guns, the lynchers rushed on, and the brawny schoolmaster of Packsaddle went down under the rush.

He roared and struggled fiercely, but five or six hefty 'punchers' had hold of him, and they kept hold.

Swaying to and fro in the grasp of half a dozen pairs of hands, Bill Sampson raged in vain. They grinned at him as they held him.

"Forget it, Bill!" said one of the Kicking Mule 'punchers. "We got you by the short hairs, old-timer, and we ain't hurting you any. But you don't horn in on this deal!"

With Bill struggling in vain in many hands, and the marshal standing with folded arms resigned, the lynchers had it all their own way. With yells and shouts they spread through the calaboose, and from the mob crowded in front came the deep roar:

"Have him out! Lynch him!"

CHAPTER 31.

Saved From the Mob!

"BY gum! Listen to them!" breathed Slick Poindexter. "They're sure mad!" muttered Mick.

Dick Carr did not speak. The fearful din from the front of the calaboose told that the crisis was at hand. There was no moment to be lost. Across the window of the outlaw's cell were two thick, strong wooden bars, and until they were gone, there was no help for the desperate man within. Dick had brought a small saw with him from the school, knowing what would be wanted, and he was sawing hard at the wooden bars, putting all his strength into it.

Within a fierce, savage, bearded face glared at the schoolboys in the star-glimmer. Jud Judson, when he heard them at the window, figured for a moment that some of the lynchers had come round behind the calaboose, to get

him from that quarter. But in the starlight he recognised the schoolboys who had captured him the day before. In sheer amazement he glared at them, and it slowly dawned on his mind that they were there to save him from the lynchers. As he realised that, hope lighted again in the ruffian's desperate face, and he watched Dick Carr's saw at work, panting with eagerness.

His brawny grasp fastened on a half-sawn bar. He wrenched it out, with an exertion of his huge strength. His head came out at the aperture, but his brawny shoulders could not follow. He jerked back into the cell.

"Quick!" he breathed.

Dick did not heed him. He sawed hard at the other bar. Twice the outlaw wrenched at it while he sawed, but failed to break it, and had to wait with snarling impatience. But the saw worked swiftly, and at last a third terrific wrench tore out the bar.

The way was open for Jud Judson.

His head and his brawny shoulders came through. Then Dick Carr spoke, quietly and coolly.

"Stop! Hands first, Jud! Tie his hands with that rope, Mick."

"You bet!"

The ruffian clenched his fists fiercely, his deep-set eyes burning at the Pack-saddle schoolboys.

"Get clear!" he snarled.

He strove to force his way from the window.

"Collar him!" said Dick, and the three grasped the ruffian's arms and held. "We're not letting you loose, Jud Judson; we're keeping you for the Rangers. Keep quiet. One call from us will bring that mob round the gaol, and if they get you—"

Judson panted with rage. But he ceased to struggle. The schoolboys were there to save his life, not to set him free; and his life hung on a thread. One call would have brought the mad mob surging round the building to cut off his escape. Savagely, glaring like a wild beast, the chief of the Judson

gang submitted while Mick bound his brawny wrists together with the end of Dick's lasso.

Then he was allowed to wedge through the window. They helped him to the ground outside. As he landed there, the fearful crashing in front of the building told that the door had fallen in.

"Beat it!" breathed Poindexter.

They hurried away across the yard, the outlaw following on the rope. Dick Carr's heart was beating hard. Only the fact that the marshal's men had deserted him, in fear of the lynch mob, had made the rescue possible. But the three had got away with it. They reached the high fence. A muttered word, and Jud Judson braced his gigantic form against the pinewood, and the schoolboys scrambled over him like cats to the top of the fence. Dick had taken a turn of the rope under the outlaw's arms to drag him up in his turn. Sitting astride of the fence, the three hauled on the rope; but they had to exert every ounce of their strength to drag the heavy ruffian up.

But they got him up and over, and lowered him on the other side. They jumped down after him. From the calaboose came a wild roar, and the sound of banging doors and trampling feet. The mob were in the gaol.

"By gum! I'll say we were only on time!" breathed Slick.

"Doggone you, let me loose!" hissed the outlaw.

"Cut that out!" snapped Dick. "Get on, you fellows—quick!"

They crossed the open space at a rapid run, the outlaw stumbling after them, dragged on the rope. The roar that pealed from the calaboose was terrifying in its wild rage.

"He's gone!"

"Lynch him!"

The schoolboys hurried on. They had barely dragged the ruffian out of the grasp of Judge Lynch. It was certain that there would be immediate and furious pursuit and search; the lynchers

were mad with rage at the escape of their victim. Panting, breathless, the schoolboys tore on to the school, with the outlaw panting behind.

Small Brown was in the gateway, staring out with uneasy eyes through his horn-rimmed spectacles. His startled eyes nearly popped through those horn rims at the sight of Jud Judson.

"What—what——" squealed Small Brown.

Unheeding him, the schoolboys led Jud on into the school yard. There was a shout from the bunch as they came crowding up.

"Stick him in the alfalfa shed!" said Slick Poindexter; and into that building Jud was led. He cursed loudly and fluently as his rescuers bound him fast to a beam. They left him there, and closed and locked the door on him. Jud was safe now till the Rangers came for him—if the lynch mob did not discover where he was hidden. And they were not likely to guess that he was hidden at Packsaddle School.

CHAPTER 32.

A Surprise for Bill Sampson!

"CARRY me home to die!" ejaculated Bill Sampson.

He stared into the empty cell. The marshal of Packsaddle stared over his shoulder.

The gaol yard was crowded with lynchers; the gate was unlocked and open; the whole building was surrounded now. With yells and oaths, the mob searched and hunted for the man who had vanished. Some of them were still rooting through the calaboose; others were raging through the streets of the cow town, gun in hand; and many had mounted their bronchos, to scour the prairie trails and cut off Jud's escape before he got out of reach.

"I should smile!" said Bill.

No more than the lynchers had Bill guessed that the outlaw had made his getaway. He turned from the door of

the cell, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, and tramped away from the calaboose. The prisoner had gone; the lynch mob had broken up into search parties; the "rookus" was over. The Packsaddle schoolmaster headed for the school. He stopped at the sight of Steve Carson, Poker Parker, and Slim, Dixon in the cow town street.

"What you young guys figure you're doing out of school?" he roared.

The three stared round at him.

"Great gophers! It's Bill!" exclaimed Steve. "Beat it!"

And they ran from the school trail.

After them roared Bill. Now that the rookus was over, Bill remembered that he was a schoolmaster. Up the trail to the school scuttled Steve, Poker, and Slim; after them came Bill, his long legs covering the ground like lightning, and he overtook them half-way up the trail. Bill hadn't his quirt with him, but he had on the biggest and heaviest boots in Santanta County. One of those boots landed on Steve Carson from behind like a battering-ram, and the gunman's son yelled, and flew head-long. Poker and Slim bounded on; but Bill was after them like a shot, and his powerful foot shot out twice, and Poker rolled to one side of the trail, Slim to the other.

Bill halted and glared down at the gasping trio.

"You figure Packsaddle boys are let join up with a lynch mob!" he roared. "Say, I guess I'm booting you all the way home! Jump for it!"

Steve, Poker and Slim jumped for it. They fairly raced up the trail to the school, bolted in at the gateway, and did not stop till they had scuttled into the bunkhouse. Bill Sampson tramped in at the gate, with a frowning brow. It was bed-time at Packsaddle, but not a guy was in bed. But at the sight of Bill's tall figure swinging in at the gate there was a general scuttle for the bunkhouse.

But three fellows stopped to greet Bill with grinning faces—Dick Carr, Slick

Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh. Bill glared at them.

"Why ain't you in your bunks?" he roared. "You figure you're staying up all night because there's a rookus in the burg? Mister Brown, you jest get me my quirt from the schoolhouse, and get it quick!"

"Forget it, Bill!" said Slick, with a chuckle. "We've sure got something to surprise you, old-timer! Say, where's Jud Judson?"

"That fire-bug has sure made his getaway!" snorted Bill. "That's what we got to tell the Ranger guys when they hit Packsaddle and want to know! Where's that quirt, Mister Brown?"

"But we got a surprise-package for you, Bill!" grinned Mick. "Look in the alfalfa shed!"

"What guff you giving me?" growled Bill.

Dick Carr unlocked the shed and threw open the door. Slick held up a lantern. Bill stared in, and almost fell down at the sight of Jud Judson roped to a beam.

"Jud!" he gasped.

"All ready for the Rangers, sir!" said Dick Carr, with a chuckle.

Bill fairly gaped.

"These boys, sir!" squealed Small Brown. "They brought that—that dreadful ruffian here, Mr. Sampson! They appear to have got him away from the gaol! They left the school without permission! Here is your quirt, sir!"

"They got him!" said Bill dazedly. "They beat Judge Lynch, and got him here—safe and sound—all ready for the Ranger guys to pick up! Carry me home to die!" He took the quirt from Small Brown and stared at him. "You figure I'm quirting these young geeks for what they've done, Mister Brown?"

"Certainly, sir! I consider——"

"Waal, I ain't quirting them none!" said Bill. "But I'll say that I'll quirt you, Mister Brown, if you ain't out of my reach in two shakes of a beaver's tail!"

Small Brown was out of Bill's reach in less than one shake of a beaver's

tail. Dick Carr and his friends chuckled as they beat it for the bunkhouse.

In the sunrise a bunch of Texas Rangers rode into Packsaddle for Jud Judson. Marshal Lick could only tell them that the fire-bug of Santanta County had made his getaway. But Bill Sampson had another tale to tell; and when the Rangers rode away again they rode with Jud Judson, bound to a horse in their midst. Jud was safe in the grip of justice, and the schoolboys of Packsaddle had defeated Judge Lynch.

CHAPTER 33.

Trouble in School!

"PACK it up!" grunted Steve Carson.

And the Packsaddle bunch repressed their chuckles.

Small Brown was about to enter the school-room. Mr. Brown was rather a suspicious guy. His experience of the rough and tough bunch at the cow town school had made him so. And if he had seen them all grinning and chuckling, Steve figured that he would have been put on his guard—which was not what Big Steve wanted.

The door from the porch was half-open. Small Brown, in the porch, was rubbing his horn-rimmed spectacles before jamming them on and coming in to take his class again. On top of the door Steve had perched a heavy wooden stool.

They were a tough bunch at Packsaddle. When that heavy stool came down on the head of a man entering, somebody was going to be hurt. Dick Carr, the new boy and tenderfoot, knitted his brows. A booby-trap was all very well with a can of water or a sack of soot. But the crack on the head that Small Brown was going to get was too thick in the tenderfoot's opinion, though the rest of the bunch did not seem to think so.

"Look here, Carson——" began Dick.

"Can it, you!" snapped Big Steve.

"Yep! Pack it up, big boy!" said Slick Poindexter. "Don't you spill the beans and put Brown wise, you geck!"

Dick rose from the rough pinewood desk at which he sat. There was a gleam in his eyes as he stepped towards the door. He did not like Small Brown, and Small Brown did not like him. But he was not going to see a guy's nut cracked.

"Let up, you gink!" hissed Steve, leaving from his place.

Needless to say, Bill Sampson, the headmaster of Packsaddle, was nowhere at hand. When Bill was around, the Packsaddle bunch, tough as they were, walked warily. But Bill had saddled up early that morning to ride out to the Kicking Mule Ranch. Brand blotters had been at work on the Kicking Mule ranges, and Bill was riding with Barney Bailey and the 'punchers in quest of them. He had been away all the morning, and while Bill was away, Small Brown did not enjoy life.

"Can it, you Carr!" exclaimed Mick Kavanagh in a shrill whisper, as Dick ran towards the door.

The tenderfoot did not heed either his friends or his enemy. He simply was not going to see Small Brown's head cracked by that stool falling on it. There was an angry murmur from the whole bunch. Steve whipped after the tenderfoot, and grabbed him by the shoulder before he reached the door.

With blazing eyes, Steve dragged him back. Dick Carr's eyes blazed, too, as he turned on Big Steve.

The bully of Packsaddle was older than Dick and half a head taller. They had scrapped once, and the tenderfoot had knocked him out, all the same. He was ready to knock him out again, if it came to that.

"I'm shouting to you to let up, you big stiff!" hissed Steve.

And he wrenched at Dick, dragging him back towards the desks.

Dick wrenched in his turn, and

dragged Steve on after him towards the door. They had nearly reached it when Big Steve rallied and bore him back. All the bunch were on their feet, watching. Panting and struggling, the two reeled and staggered. Small Brown, in the porch, became aware that a rookus was going on in the school-room. He put on his horn-rimmed glasses and blinked through the half-open doorway.

"Be quiet, there!" squealed Small Brown. "Go to your places! Carr, I shall report you to Mr. Sampson for this!"

That was Small Brown all over. He was afraid of Big Steve, and he was not afraid of the tenderfoot.

Mick Kavanagh chuckled.

"Leave him be, Dick, you geck!" he called out. "Ain't the little baste howling for it, and so he is!"

Dick did not heed. He plunged towards the door again, and as Big Steve would not let go, dragged the bully of Packsaddle with him. Close by the door, visible to Small Brown through the half-open space, they struggled fiercely. But Big Steve was grinning now as he struggled with the tenderfoot. For the tussle in the school-room was bringing Small Brown to the spot; he was coming across the porch, and in a few moments more he would be pushing the door open. And then—

Dick knew that as well as Steve. He made a tremendous effort to tear himself loose and get to the door in time. Steve clung to him like a cat, and whirled him back. Another effort Dick made, swinging the gunman's son right at the door. This time they reached it.

Steve crashed on the door from the inside just as Small Brown was putting a hand to it from the outside. Steve's crash shut the door on Mr. Brown.

As the door shut, the stool perched above came crashing down. It landed on Steve's head.

Crash! He gave a fearful yell as the heavy stool crashed. That yell echoed from the bank of the Rio Frio to the cow town of Packsaddle. Big Steve

relaxed his grasp on the tenderfoot, spun over, and crashed on the floor. He sprawled there, half-stunned.

From the bunch came a roar of mirth. Dick Carr stood panting.

The door was pushed open from outside, and Small Brown horned in, blinking angrily through his glasses.

"Carr, how dare you!" squealed Small Brown. "Carson, get up at once! Why, what—"

Small Brown's watery eyes almost popped through the horn rims of his spectacles at the dazed and dizzy Steve and the pinewood stool.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the bunch.

Steve staggered to his feet. He put his hand dizzily to his head. A big bruise was forming there under the thick, untidy hair. He glared savagely at the tenderfoot, panting with rage. Small Brown, grasping how the matter stood, waved excited hands.

"Go to your places! Go to your places at once! I shall report—"

Unheeding him, Big Steve grasped the pinewood stool, swung it into the air in both hands, and leaped at Dick Carr.

There was a gasp of alarm from the bunch, the laughter suddenly dying away. Every guy expected to see Dick stretched on the floor, stunned and senseless. Big Steve, in his rage, was utterly reckless, and did not care a boiled bean if he cracked the tenderfoot's head.

But the tenderfoot was on his guard. A swift leap back, and he escaped the crashing blow, the stool missing him by a bare inch as it swept down. Steve had no time to lift his weapon a second time. Dick Carr was springing forward again, and his clenched fist drove full in the face of the bully of Packsaddle School.

Crash! went the falling stool to the floor. Crash! went Steve backwards, landing hard on the pine planks.

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Slick. "I'll say that was a sockdolager!"

"You said it!" grinned Mick.

Small Brown waved frantic hands.

"Go to your place! Sit down! I order you to sit down!"

Dick Carr, rubbing his knuckles, badly barked on Big Steve's features, went to his place and sat down. Steve staggered to his feet. He dabbed dizzily at a streaming nose. The bunch watched him breathlessly. Small Brown's presence would not have stopped Big Steve from carrying on. But that sockdolager on the nose did. He gave Dick Carr a glare of savage fury and went to his place and sat dabbing his nose.

Small Brown had an unruly bunch to handle that morning, as usual when Bill was not around. But he had no more trouble from Steve Carson. With a bruised head and a swollen nose, Big Steve had enough trouble on hand without hunting for any more.

CHAPTER 34.

Tricked!

"**D**OGGONE it!" growled Big Steve, bending beside his broncho in the gateway of the corral.

Dick Carr had been feeding his Pinto pony, Pep. He glanced round at Steve. It was the day following the row in the school-room, and class was over at Packsaddle. Steve had been leading his broncho out of the school corral, when he stopped and grunted angrily.

Dick would have asked any other guy what the trouble was. But he did not care to speak to Carson. Rather to his surprise, Carson looked round and called to him.

"Say you, Carr! Bill's given me a message to take over to Kicking Mule, and my cayuse has sure gone lame. You go?"

Dick hesitated one brief moment. He was willing enough to oblige Steve, enemy as he was, and still more willing to oblige Bill Sampson. But he was not keen on hitting Kicking Mule Ranch.

Barney Bailey, foreman of the Kick-

ing Mule, had a deep grouch against him. Barney had promised him a quirt if he ever met up with him on the prairie. And Barney was the man to keep a promise of that sort.

"Say, I guess Bill wants Barney to know," said Steve, "and your pinto is sure the fastest critter in the place. You don't want to be feared of Barney, bringing him a message from Bill."

"I'll go!" said Dick. "What's the message?"

"Tell Barney not to wait for Bill; he can't ride with the outfit to-day," answered Carson.

"Right!"

Dick saddled and bridled Pep, led him out of the corral, and rode away on the prairie trail. Carson stood watching him go, with a savage grin on his face. When the tenderfoot was lost to sight, Steve led his broncho back into the corral—with no sign of lameness about the animal now.

Never dreaming that the bully of Packsaddle had been "stringing" him, and that Bill Sampson had sent no message at all, Dick put his pinto to a gallop, and covered the miles rapidly in the direction of Kicking Mule.

A well-worn trail led to the ranch, and Dick was not likely to miss it. But he was still miles from the ranch when he sighted a horseman sitting his broncho on the trail. As he drew nearer he recognised Barney Bailey. The foreman of the Kicking Mule sat in the saddle, looking towards Dick as he came, as if in expectation of someone arriving from the school. The expression on his rugged, bearded face was dark and grim. He set his horse in motion, and came up the trail to meet the schoolboy.

His quirt was in his hand, and Dick noted that he took a hard grip on it, a grim grin spreading over his rugged face. Dick waved a hand to him.

"Message from Bill!" he called out.

"Message, nothin'!" grunted Barney.

"Light down, you young geck!"

"Bill says——"

"Aw! Can it!" snarled Barney. "Ain't you wise to it that you been sent here to take what's coming to you? Light down!" He rode straight at the schoolboy, his quirt cracking in the air.

"Oh!" gasped Dick.

He understood now. There was no message from Bill. It was a trick to bring him within reach of Barney's quirt.

The Kicking Mule foreman grinned at him savagely.

"I guess you're getting yours now, you young gink!" he snapped. "I'll say I'm taking some skin off, and then some more! Yep! Light down!"

Dick dragged his pinto away from the trail. A word, and a shake of the reins, and Pep burst into a gallop again. The whistling quirt of the Kicking Mule foreman swept the air, but Dick swung over the side of his horse and missed the slash.

Dick grinned breathlessly, and rode hard. He had fallen to the trick, but he was not caught in the trap. He galloped hard, heading back to the school, and, well-mounted as Barney was, he dropped behind the pinto's racing heels. From behind him Dick heard the sudden roar of a gun.

Bang!

His heart thumped for a moment. But he knew that Barney was not firing to hit him. Rough and fierce as the Kicking Mule foreman was, he was not the man for that. The bullet flipped the schoolboy's Stetson as it whizzed by.

Bang, bang!

Twice the ranchman fired again, and the bullets whizzed close, Dick feeling the wind of them. But he rode on, harder and harder, and Barney realised that he could not scare him into stopping. Barney swore savagely, thrust the gun back into his holster, and spurred.

Suddenly, from a belt of mesquite and dwarf pines by the trail, a puncher pushed out into view. He was

directly ahead of Dick, and Barney yelled and waved to him frantically.

"Rope that guy in, Mesquite!"

It was a Kicking Mule 'puncher, and as he saw the chase and heard his foreman's shout, he dashed at Dick, swinging his lasso.

Dick set his teeth.

He was between the two of them, and cut off from Packsaddle. He spun Pep round, and galloped off into the open prairie, in the direction of distant Squaw Mountain.

The circling rope whizzed and dropped, but the loop hit the prairie a couple of yards behind Pep's whisking tail. Bending low in the saddle, Dick rode his hardest, heading into the sunset. How and when he was going to get back to the school he did not know, or, at that moment, care; his thoughts were concentrated on getting clear of the Kicking Mule men.

Behind came the crash of pursuing hoofs. Dick glanced breathlessly over his shoulder. Mesquite, the 'puncher, had dropped behind, and was almost lost in the waving grass. But Barney Bailey, fierce and determined, was riding at the utmost speed of his broncho, quirt in hand.

Dick half-turned, and waved a mocking hand at him. Barring accidents, he knew that the speed of his pony would see him safe.

Barney shook a furious, clenched fist. Dick laughed, and waved again, and the Kicking Mule foreman, with an oath, dragged the gun from his holster. Bang!

The bullet cut a rag from Dick's shirt as it flew. In his rage, the Kicking Mule foreman was taking risks of laying him out.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped the tenderfoot of Packsaddle.

And he rode harder and harder.

Thud, thud, thud! came the hoofs behind, and again and again the revolver roared. But the lead, though it went perilously close, did not hit, and Dick was drawing farther and farther away from his pursuers.

When he looked back again, Barney had almost dropped from sight in the high grass, though still spurring his sweating broncho.

Dick dashed on, and the Kicking Mule foreman's Stetson dropped out of view. Dick Carr laughed breathlessly. The sun was deep in the west, sinking behind Squaw Mountain to the Staked Plain; he had a long, long ride back to school. But he had escaped the trap laid for him by Big Steve in cahoots with the Kicking Mule foreman—and he laughed as he eased down his pony and trotted on.

CHAPTER 35.

The Brand Blotters!

THE curl of blue smoke, rising from the depths of the prairie hollow, was invisible from the open prairie. The hollow was deep, like a great saucer sunk in the plain, and the smoke dispersed before it floated up to the level of the llano. Dick Carr spotted it, and wondered what it meant, as he led Pep down the slope.

He had outdistanced his pursued, and he doubted whether Barney Bailey was still hunting him, once lost to sight. But he was cut off from Packsaddle. To ride back to the school, while the daylight lasted, was to risk being caught. It was not long to dark, and Dick resolved to wait till the sun was gone before riding home.

But he did not want to remain a conspicuous object on the landscape, when fierce eyes might be scanning the plain for him. He dismounted, and led his pony down the grassy slope into the prairie hollow. Pep needed a rest after that wild chase, and in the hollow both of them were out of sight of searching eyes.

The curl of smoke rose from the middle of the hollow. Thick and tangled bushes interposed, and Dick could not see the fire from which it rose. But fire spelled the presence of

men. If it was a camp of Kicking Mule 'punchers, the Packsaddle school-boy did not want to hit it.

He stopped as soon as he was below the prairie level, tethered Pep, and left him.

On foot, and treading with caution among the thickets, he descended deeper into the hollow. If men of Barney Bailey's outfit were there, he did not intend to linger near the spot. It was easy enough to ascertain, keeping in cover of scrub oaks and mesquite.

A ruddy glimmer caught his eyes through the thickets. A smell of burning came to him and the squeal of an animal.

He started. He could hear the sound of a struggling cow, and a muttered curse in a hoarse, husky voice.

His heart beat fast.

He had heard of the brand blotters. Only the day before Bill Sampson had been riding with the Kicking Mule outfit in search of them.

Like a flash Dick knew that he had come on the cow-thieves at their work. With beating heart, but with more caution than ever, he crept on to the edge of the open space in the middle of the hollow.

Lying there, hidden in the thickets, he had a clear view of the scene before him.

A small fire burned, from which the curl of smoke rose. A rough-bearded man, in a red shirt, was stooping beside it, thrusting into the embers the branding-iron he had just used on a hog-tied cow, to heat it again for blotting another brand.

A second man, a swarthy Mexican, was leading away the cow that had been branded. At a little distance was a bunch of cows, hobbled to prevent them from stampeding.

The Mexican turned loose the branded cow and roped another, and led it towards the fire. There it was thrown down and hog-tied, to receive the brand. The man in the red shirt

turned from the fire, with the glowing iron in his hand.

Dick watched breathlessly. He knew the man with the iron by sight; he had seen him in the streets of Packsaddle. The Mexican was a stranger to him. He knew now that he was watching the brand blotters—and he knew that Barney Bailey would have given much to be in his place, seeing them at their work.

The Kicking Mule brand was a big "K." The cow-thieves were branding a big "O" beside the "K" on the left of it.

By that simple trick, the brand was changed from K to O.K. Once the brand was on the cow, even a Kicking Mule 'puncher could not have said that it was a Kicking Mule cow. Its brand proclaimed it as belonging to the O.K. Ranch, wherever that was. Dick had never heard of it, but he had no doubt that it was within driving distance of Kicking Mule ranges, and that after nightfall the stolen cows would be driven there to mingle with O.K. herds.

Again a smell of singed hair and burning skin. Again a terrified squeal from the cow.

"That's four, Diego!" said the man with the iron.

"Si, si!" answered the Mexican. "Ten more, amigo Euchre, and the light will soon be gone."

"I guess we got time. Git another cow."

Euchre thrust the iron into the fire again. Diego led the cow back to the bunch and roped another. A twig snapped under Dick's knee, and the sound, slight as it was, startled him and made his heart thump.

Evidently it reached the keen ears of the Mexican. He turned his head, his dark face and glittering black eyes searching in the direction of the thicket that hid the schoolboy, and his dusky hand dropped on a knife in his belt, half-drawing it.

"Say, hump it, Diego!" called out Euchre. "The iron's hot!"

"Did you hear——"

"Only a gopher in the chaparral!"

The Mexican stood listening with bent ear for a long minute before he turned to the cows again and led another one to the fire.

Dick Carr had seen enough.

Slowly, cautiously, with intense care, he crawled away through the thickets. Another sound, and the brand blotters might come searching through the chaparral, and that meant the end of all things for the Packsaddle schoolboy, under the knife of the Mexican or the revolver of his confederate.

The perspiration was thick on Dick's brow as he crawled. It was only minutes, but it seemed hours, before he reached the spot where he had left the pinto tethered.

He soothed the pinto, fearful that some sound from the horse might reach the ears of the brand blotters below in the hollow. Then he led Pep cautiously up the rugged slope to the plain. Barney Bailey did not matter much now—if he chanced on the Kicking Mule foreman. There was death behind him—and once on the upper plain the Packsaddle schoolboy mounted and rode for his life.

CHAPTER 36.

Putting Barney Wise!

"W AAL," ejaculated Barney Bailey. "I swow!"

Barney gripped his quirt, his eyes glinting under his heavy, knitted brows.

What the Packsaddle tenderfoot's game was Barney did not know. But he knew that he was going to quirt him good and hard.

Barney had given up the hunt for the elusive schoolboy, but the ranchman reckoned it likely enough that he might show up on the skyline, heading for Packsaddle, before dark. Barney did not expect too much hoss-sense from a doggoned tenderfoot!

And he looked as if he was right;

for a rapidly riding figure came into his sight in the waving sea of grass, and with fierce satisfaction he recognised the tenderfoot.

It was Dick Carr, riding not for Packsaddle, but for the spot, as near as he could calculate, where he had lost Barney.

Little as Barney guessed it, the schoolboy he wanted to quirt was now anxious to meet up with him.

The Kicking Mule foreman figured at first that Carr did not see him, or did not recognise him if he saw him. But when Dick waved a hand from a distance Barney knew that the schoolboy knew him. Yet, knowing what Barney had in cold storage for him, he came right on, at full gallop.

"Great gophers! Is that young gink loco?" muttered Barney. Sitting his horse, he watched Dick galloping up. "I'll say he's sure howling for it, and I'll tell all Texas that he's going to get what he's howling for, and then some!"

Grimly Barney watched the breathless tenderfoot ride up. Dick was a score of yards away when Barney, fearful that he might change his mind, spurred his broncho and dashed right at him. Barney's lasso was in his hand now—and a leap of his broncho brought him within roping distance.

Dick reined in his pinto, shouting:

"Stop that, Barney Bailey! I've come——"

Whiz!

The riata flew. Dick threw himself out of the saddle barely in time. The loop struck on the saddle a split second after he dropped in the grass.

"Doggorn my cats!" snarled Barney.

He had not expected the tenderfoot to be so spry as all that.

He dashed on, gathering in the slack. Dick, his eyes flashing, shouted to him breathlessly.

"You fool! Chuck it, I tell you! I've come here to tell you——"

Barney leaped from his plunging broncho. He dropped the riata, no longer needed, as the schoolboy was

making no attempt to escape. He rushed down on Carr and grasped him.

"By the great horned toad, I got you!" panted the Kicking Mule foreman. "Doggone my boots, I guess you're getting yours now, you pesky young gink. You ain't got Bill Sampson around now, you geck, to lambaste a guy what's going to quirt you!"

There were still the marks of Bill's knuckles on Barney's rugged face to remind him of the day he had visited the cow town school to quirt Dick Carr. Grasping the schoolboy with his left hand, Barney whirled the thick, heavy quirt in his right.

"You fool!" yelled Dick. He had not reckoned that Barney would give him no time to explain, before he waded in with the quirt. "I tell you—"

But there was no time to talk! Barney was getting going, grinning with fierce satisfaction now that he had the tenderfoot in his grip.

Dick made no attempt to wrench himself away from that brawny grip. It would have been useless; he was like an infant in the hands of the Kicking Mule foreman. But, with desperate speed, he lowered his head, and suddenly butted Barney just over his gun-belt.

Barney was not looking for that! That sudden butt in the stomach almost crumpled him up.

His swipe with the quirt missed as he sagged and crumpled, gurgling for wind. Dick jerked loose from his relaxed grasp.

"Gurrrrrgggh!" gurgled Barney.

Dick sprang away, panting.

"Wurrrrrgh! Doggone my c-c-cats!" stuttered Barney, pressing a hand to his suffering stomach. "Urrgh! Great gophers, I'll sure take all the hide off'n you! Gurrrgh!"

He staggered after Dick Carr. Dick jumped out of reach again. The winded foreman stumbled over a root and swayed. It was too good a chance to be lost. Dick leaped at him, drove

both fists at his brawny chest, and sent him toppling over.

Barney crashed down in the grass.

A split second, and Dick's knee was planted on him, and he had torn the big Colt from Barney's holster and jammed it into the bearded face. That was an action that Barney could understand!

He gurgled and blinked up at the tenderfoot as the muzzle of his own gun ground into his bearded cheek.

"Urrgh! Doggone my cats—"

Dick grinned down at him. He had not the remotest intention, in any circumstances, of pulling trigger. But Barney's experience of guns was long and too exciting for him to dream of handing out trouble with a gun jammed in his face. Barney lay as quiet as a lamb.

"Now listen to me, fathead!" said Dick breathlessly.

"You got the goods on me!" gasped Barney. "I'll tell a man!"

"Do you want to rope in the brand blotters?" roared Dick Carr. "I've spotted them, and that's why I came back. Got that?"

Barney blinked at him.

"Say! What guff you giving me?" he panted.

"I'm telling you the truth!" snapped Dick. "I've seen them at it, in a hollow about three miles from here—a man I've seen in Packsaddle named Euchre, and a Mexican he calls Diego blotting the brands on Kicking Mule cows! Now do you understand?"

Barney gazed at him.

"Carry me home to die!" he ejaculated. "Say, if that's the how of it, you let up on a galoot."

Dick chuckled and rose to his feet. Barney heaved himself out of the grass, still gasping, and Dick handed his gun back to him. With a rather shamefaced look, the Kicking Mule foreman thrust it into his belt. He eyed the tenderfoot very curiously.

"You spotted them brand blotters, and you beat it this-a-way to put me wise?" he asked slowly. "And me

arter you with a quirt! Kid, I'll say you're a genuine white article! I'll say that Bill Sampson has sure got a prize packet in his bunch at Packsaddle, meaning you!"

"Here's your quirt, Mr. Bailey!" said Dick, picking it up and handing it to the Kicking Mule foreman.

Barney grinned sheepishly as he took it. He no longer had the intention, or the wish, to lay it round the tenderfoot of Packsaddle.

The Kicking Mule foreman questioned Dick closely and quickly. In a very few minutes he knew all that the tenderfoot could tell him. He clambered on his broncho.

"Aren't you going to the ranch for help?" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"Help nothin'!" rapped Barney. "I guess I got to cinch them brand blotters afore they burn the wind with Kicking Mule cows. Ain't I got a gun, and you figure I'm skeered of a coupla cow-thieves? Forget it!"

He put spurs to his broncho and dashed away. Dick Carr leaped into the saddle and dashed after him on his pinto.

Barney looked back at the clatter of hoofs.

"Say, bo, you ride clear!" he shouted. "I guess there's going to be shooting when I meet up with them cow-thieves."

"I'm going to help!"

Barney laughed and dashed on at a gallop. Dick Carr rode on with him, and the Kicking Mule foreman said no more.

CHAPTER 37.

Gun Talk!

RED in the west, the sun sank down, Squaw Mountain a black mass against the glowing western sky. In the hollow where the brand blotters worked it was dark, but on the open prairie the light yet lingered. But the work of the cow-thieves was done; every cow in the

bunch of fourteen had been falsely branded, ready for driving away. The fire had been stamped out, the branding-iron packed, and Euchre and Diego stood by their bronchos ready to ride and drive. They waited only till the last of the light should be gone. The new brands on the stolen cows were too fresh to bear inspection, and the cow-thieves did not want to risk being seen during the drive.

Thud, thud, thud!

The beat of horse's hoofs came ringing from the upper plain.

The two cow-thieves started and listened. Euchre loosened the gun in his holster.

"Caramba!" breathed the Mexican. "A rider——"

"I guessed no doggoned 'puncher will spot us here!" muttered Euchre. "They sure ain't wise to us, Diego! Quiet!"

Down into the dusky hollow came the thundering hoofbeats. There was crash on crash as a horseman rode through the thickets.

Euchre's gun was in his hand now. Whoever was coming was "wise" to the brand blotters, that was clear, for he was heading direct for the open space in the middle of the hollow, where they stood beside their bronchos with the bunch of branded cows.

Through the gloom a dim figure on horseback burst into view—a cowman in ten-gallon hat, revolver in hand.

Bang! roared Euchre's revolver. He fired at sight. The dimness, the swift leaping of the horse, saved Barney Bailey. But his answering shot was guided by the flash of Euchre's gun, and it did not miss.

Bang!

A fierce yell rang through the wooded hollow, and Euchre crumpled and sank to the ground, the Colt falling from his hand.

Bang! Bang! roared the foreman's revolver again and again as he came galloping on. But the Mexican was dodging away in the chaparral, and he escaped the whizzing lead.

Barney Bailey reined in his broncho, and leaped to the ground. He peered at the figure in the red shirt, crumpled by the dead embers of the fire.

"I guess you got yours, Euchre!" muttered Barney grimly.

He glared round for the Mexican.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He emptied his revolver into the thickets, in the hope of getting the greaser as he ran.

"Doggone him! He's vamosed!" snarled Barney, lowering the smoking revolver. "But I guess he won't get far without a cayuse, and——"

He broke off as a shadowy figure leaped from the chaparral. The Mexican, as well as Barney, knew that he was not likely to escape on foot. He had counted six shots from the six-gun, and now, like a tiger, he leaped, striking with his knife.

Barney barely warded the slash of the long, razor-edged cuchillo with the barrel of his revolver, and it knocked the Colt from his hand. He leaped back desperately from a savage lunge, stumbled over the body of Euchre, and fell, and before he was fairly on the ground the Mexican was on him, pinning him down, struggling fiercely to drag his knife-hand free.

"Say, you gink Carr!" roared Barney.

Dick Carr was following him down the rugged, tangled side of the hollow, leading his horse by the bridle.

Barney had told him to keep clear, figuring that a tenderfoot schoolboy was no use in a gun-fight. Now, however, as he struggled wildly under the Mexican desperado, barely keeping the murderous knife from his throat, Barney hoped that the tenderfoot schoolboy was at hand. For, unless help came, and came pronto, Kicking Mule Ranch was going to want a new foreman. If that doggoned tenderfoot was not on hand——

But the tenderfoot was. As he heard Barney's desperate roar, Dick Carr dropped the bridle of the pinto and dashed on at a run. In the deep gloom

at the bottom of the hollow he could hardly see a thing, but he heard the panting, the scuffling, of the men who struggled on the earth near the bunch of startled, plunging cows. He caught the gleam of the long, keen cuchillo in a dusky hand. He came leaping up just as Diego tore his wrist free from Barney's clutch, and threw up the knife to strike.

Two hands grasped the Mexican by his neck-scarf and dragged him over as he struck. The knife, missing Barney, grazed Dick's shoulder. The next moment Diego was on his back, spitting like a cat, and Barney was free. He bounded up and hurled himself at the brand blotter. One crash of a brawny, clenched fist, full in the dusky face, and Diego stretched senseless on the earth.

Barney panted.

"I'll say this is our game!" he drawled. "We got 'em—we sure got 'em! And I was aiming to squirt you, kid!" Barney blinked at the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. "Say, you want to forget that, kid! I guess I'm asking you to forget it! You ever get a hench to ride out to the Kicking Mule Ranch, and this here ornery galoot, Barney Bailey, will sure be powerful glad to see you, and I guess that goes for all the outfit—sure!"

The Packsaddle tenderfoot had made an unexpected friend!

.

The Packsaddle bunch were turning in in the school bunkhouse when Dick Carr rode home. They heard Bill Sampson's voice, and were surprised not to hear it raised in wrath. They expected to hear the sound of Bill's quirt on the late-comer. But they heard nothing of the kind; and when Dick came into the bunkhouse his face was cheery and smiling.

"Say, ain't Bill hidid you for staying out that a-way?" exclaimed Slick Poin-dexter.

Dick laughed.

"No!"

"Ain't he mad with you?" asked Mick.

"No; he's pleased," grinned Dick.

"Plazed!" roared Mick.

"Well, he was rather glad to hear that I helped Barney Bailey to put paid to the brand blotters on Kicking Mule," answered Dick carelessly.

The bunch stared at him.

Steve Carson stuttered.

"Didn't that geck Barney quirt you?"

"Sorry, no!" chuckled Dick Carr.

"Barney and I are great friends, and you'll have to find another man to do the quirting—unless you'd like to try it on yourself!" added Dick.

Which Big Steve did not seem disposed to do.

"Now, then, bed!" squealed Small Brown, his horn-rimmed glasses glimmering in at the door.

Dick turned into his bunk, glad to get there after his hard riding. But he was not allowed to sleep till he had told the tale of what had happened on the Kicking Mule range. And when he had finished, Slick Poindexter remarked:

"I guess when you hit Packsaddle I figured you was the world's prize boob! Now I'll tell all Texas you're a whole team, and a cross dog under the wagon!"

"You said it!" grinned Mick.

And Dick chuckled and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 38.

While the Cat's Away—

"**H**OWLIN' coyotes!" ejaculated Bill Sampson.

He stared from the porch into the school-room.

Red wrath was in Bill's rugged, bearded face.

What he saw going on in the school-room was enough to make any school-master wrathful.

Mr. Brown was not enjoying life! The bunch were!

All the bunch knew that Bill had

ridden down to Packsaddle burg that morning to see Lick, the town marshal. But they did not know that Bill had chanced to meet Lick near the school, and got through his business unexpectedly soon, and blown in again. Had they been wise to that, the Packsaddle bunch would have bolted for their desks like prairie rabbits for their holes.

"Go to your places!" Small Brown was squealing wildly. "I shall report this to Mr. Sampson! Carson, release my ear—release my ear immediately! Dixon—Parker—let go my arms! Poindexter, stop pulling my hair! Kavanagh, if you dare to pull my nose, I will—gurrirgggh!"

"Where's that riata?" roared Steve Carson.

"Here you are, Steve!" yelled Poker Parker.

"Lynch him!" shouted Poindexter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Dick Carr. He was sitting on his desk watching the startling scene.

Small Brown wriggled in many hands.

Even Mr. Brown, nervous as he was, did not believe that his pupils really were going to lynch him! Even the rough-and-tough Packsaddle bunch stopped short of that!

It was a game—but a rather rough game! Recently there had been an outbreak of a lynch mob in the cow town. That had put the idea into the head of Steve Carson. With Bill safely off the scene, as he figured, Steve went ahead with his game.

Pie Sanders threw the noose over one of the roof beams. The noose dangled over Small Brown's head.

A crowd of laughing fellows dragged him under it. He wriggled and struggled. But they had hold of him anywhere and everywhere and there was no escape for the hapless Mr. Brown.

The loop of the lasso was passed over his head. For one awful moment Small

Brown almost thought that the excited bunch were going to put it round his neck! But Slick Poindexter slipped it down under his arms.

Mick Kavanagh dragged on the other end.

A dozen fellows scrambled to grasp the rope with Mick, and dragged on it, and Small Brown swung off the floor.

"Up with him!" roared Carson.

"Lynch him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Oooogh! Release me—urrrrgh!" spluttered Small Brown, as he went up on the rope, arms and legs flying wildly in the air.

Except for the hard grip of the rope round his narrow chest, Small Brown was not getting hurt. But he was scared out of his wits. His horn-rimmed spectacles slid down his nose, and he blinked wildly over them, like a frightened owl. He howled and squealed.

Roars of laughter answered him. The lynch game entertained the Packsaddle bunch enormously. It was the wildest rag ever perpetrated, even at Packsaddle, and the bunch fairly let themselves go.

"Urrrgh! Oh dear! Oh!" squealed Small Brown.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Spin him!" shouted Carson.

"Wooooo!" spluttered Small Brown as a dozen hands shoved at him, spinning him round like a top as he swung on the rope.

"For goodness' sake, you fellows—" gasped Dick Carr. He was the only fellow in the school-room not taking part in the uproar. "I say, suppose Bill came in—"

Big Steve looked round at him with a sneer.

"Aw, can it!" he jeered. "You're the only guy here that's got cold feet! You don't dare horn in, you pesky skunk!"

Dick flushed crimson.

It was not the fear of the consequences that kept him out of the rag. But the bully of Packsaddle saw a

chance to score and he did not miss it.

"Stick where you are!" jeered Steve. "When Bill gets mad about this, you can tell him what a good little angel you are!"

"Come and give him a spin, you Carr!" shouted Poindexter.

"He's afraid!" sneered Steve.

That was enough for Dick Carr. He jumped off the desk and joined the shouting crowd. Small Brown was getting enough, if not too much, without his help, but he was not going to have the bunch figuring that he was afraid to do as the others did.

He gave Mr. Brown a spin in his turn. Round and round went Mr. Brown on the rope, amid yells of merriment.

"Swing him up to the roof!" shouted Steve Carson. "Tie that end of the rope, you Sanders! Now swing him up."

Steve was warning to the work! From Small Brown came a squeal of sheer terror. Several voices were raised in protest. Steve was carrying the thing too far even for the rough Packsaddle bunch.

But the bully of Packsaddle was not to be denied. He grasped the swinging teacher by the ankles, to give him a swing up to the roof of the school-room.

Bill Sampson, in the porch, unseen in the excitement, seemed to be petrified by what he saw. He knew that Mr. Brown had trouble when he was absent, and despised him for not being able to handle the bunch. But this wild scene surprised even Bill.

As Carson was starting to swing Mr. Brown, Bill woke to life, as it were, and strode into the school-room.

"Let up!" he roared.

There was a howl of alarm as the bunch stared round.

"Bill!" yelled Poindexter.

"Sure, it's Bill!" gasped Mick Kavanagh.

There was a rush back to the desks, Steve Carson, wildly excited, and anxious to display his nerve before the

bunch, gave Small Brown a powerful swing before he rushed to his desk after the others, and the hapless man on the rope nearly hit the roof as he swung up.

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Bill. "I'll sure——" He broke off with a yell.

Small Brown, swinging back from the height, crashed on him as he came, knocking him over headlong.

The stout pine planks of the floor shook as Bill's weight landed on them.

"Yaroooh!" roared Bill.

"Oh, great gophers!" gasped Slick.

And the Packsaddle bunch stared on blankly as Bill Sampson sprawled on the floor, and Small Brown gyrated over him at the end of the rope.

CHAPTER 39.

Bill Handles the Bunch!

BILL Sampson picked himself up. The bunch watched him breathlessly.

There was deep silence in the Packsaddle school-room, broken only by a breathless squeal from Small Brown.

They were all tough at Packsaddle—Steve Carson the toughest of the bunch! But they all felt cold chills under the eye of Bill Sampson. Big Steve had displayed his nerve by giving Small Brown that last swing right under the eyes of his headmaster. But Steve wished now that he hadn't! It had fixed Bill's eye specially on him. And Bill's eye had a glint in it that was alarming.

Bill had had a hard thump on the ear, but he did not worry about that; he was as hard as hickory. Standing with his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, Bill surveyed the bunch grimly.

"Release me!" came Small Brown's squeal.

Bill gave a scornful snort.

"I guess there ain't no hurry, Mister Brown, seeing as you let yourself be fixed up that-a-way!" he answered.

"Say, ain't you got as much sand as a gopher? Ain't you got as much backbone as a musketeer? Search me!"

"I—I—I——"

"Aw! Pack it up!" Bill turned to the class again. "I guess this here rookus is the limit, and then some and a few over!" he hooted. "You figure you're at this here school to hang up my teacher like he was a horse thief? You figure you're here to paint Packsaddle red, like you was a bunch of cow-punchers let loose after the round-up? Forget it! I'll tell a man I'm the guy to ride herd and keep you from stampeding! Yep! I'll tell all Texas!"

Bill turned to the teacher again.

Grasping Small Brown with one hand, he held him as easily as an infant, to take his weight off the lasso. Then he loosened the noose with his other hand and jerked Small Brown out of it.

The teacher, gasping and spluttering, was set on his feet.

"Now!" roared Bill. "I guess the whole bunch was in this here rookus? That so, Mister Brown?"

"Yes, yes!" gurgled Small Brown. "I——"

"And I'll say that Carson was the big chief! You step out here, you Carson. I sure want you, a few."

Big Steve set his teeth. He had been the originator and ringleader of the wild outbreak. After the feast came the reckoning.

He assumed a swagger, which rather belied his feelings, as he came out of the class. The bunch were not going to see him show the white feather if he could help it.

"I guess I'm here, Bill," he said coolly.

Bill gave him a glare.

"Yep! I'll say you're some bull-dozer!" he roared. "You're a bully boy with a glass eye, you are, and then some! I'll mention that I'm the galoot to give you something to cure it! You hear me whisper."

Bill's "whisper" could be heard across the playground and along the banks of the Rio Frio!

"Now, you put your cabeza into that riata!" roared Bill, holding the loop of the lasso from which he had released Small Brown.

"I guess not!" answered Big Steve. "What the great horned toad——"

He got no further.

Bill's mighty grasp was on him. Head and shoulders were shoved through the loop, and it tightened under Big Steve's arms. Steve was heavier than Small Brown, but Bill lifted him in one hand with ease.

He stepped back, leaving Carson swinging, his feet a yard or more from the floor.

"That's yours!" roared Bill. "You was the king-pin, and you cinch the king-pin's canful. Mister Brown, you hand me my quirt."

Small Brown almost bounded to the schoolmaster's desk. He bounded back with the cowman's whip.

Bill grasped it. It rang round Steve Carson in a series of cracks like pistol shots, as he swung on the rope.

The bunch watched. They knew that their turn was coming! Bill, it was clear, had his mad up!

Crack! Crack! Crack! rang the quirt on Big Steve Carson, and he swung and spun on the rope, yelling.

"Let up, Bill, you gink!" yelled Big Steve. "I'm sure telling you to let up, you pie-can!"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Quit!" screamed Big Steve. "I'll sure get you for this, Bill Sampson, you ornery old geck!"

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Will you let up?" shrieked Steve.

"Not so's you'd notice it!" roared Bill. "Not by a jugful! Nope! I guess I'm the man to ride herd over this bunch! You got a few more coming."

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

"I'll get you!" yelled Big Steve, as the quirt cracked and rang. "I'll see you get yours, Bill Sampson, you pesky skunk! I guess my popper will come a-shooting when I put him wise to this."

"What you giving me?" roared Bill, red with rage.

Steve was the son of Two-Gun Carson, the gambler and gunman of Packsaddle. There were plenty of men in Santanta County who feared the hard-faced, ice-eyed gunman, who packed two guns, and was like lightning in handling them. But Bill Sampson was not on the tally of those who feared him. Steve's threat had only one effect on Bill—he had been about to quit with the quirt—and now he went on with it instead.

Crack! Crack! Crack! rang the quirt and Steve writhed and howled and yelled with anguish.

"Any more from you?" roared Bill. "You want to tell me any more about your doggoned popper coming a-shooting? Say!"

Steve had no more to tell Bill on that subject! Swinging on the rope, helpless as Small Brown had been, Steve groaned and gasped, and said nothing.

Bill Sampson snorted and strode towards the class, the bunch eyeing him and the quirt in his hand with great uneasiness.

"Git on your hind laigs, you 'uns!" roared Bill.

The class stood up.

"Now, I guess you're getting yourn!" said Bill. "I'm sure going to larn you 'uns that my doggoned teacher, Mister Brown, is here to teach this outfit, and sure not to be strung up on a rope in this goldarned school-room! I guess I'm going to have you feeding out of his hand afore I'm through! I'm sure going to quirt you like you was a herd of ornery steers!"

And Bill did!

Passing along the rows of standing schoolboys, Bill laid on the quirt, hard and heavy.

Every fellow in the bunch got it, and roared.

Bill paused when he came to Dick Carr.

"You was in this here rookus, too, you tenderfoot?" he asked. "I sure reckon I spotted you out of your place."

"Yes, rather, I was in it!" answered Dick promptly. He was not keen on getting the quilt by any means, but neither was he keen on faring better than the rest of the bunch. And he had been in it, though unwillingly.

And Bill gave him his full share.

By the time Bill Sampson was through, it was a wriggling, gasping, worried bunch that stood at the desks—repentant of that wild rag on Small Brown.

Even Bill, hefty as he was, was a little breathless when he had finished handling the quilt.

"Now, get to it!" he said. "Mister Brown, I kinder reckon this here class won't give you no more trouble."

Bill was right there! All desire to give trouble had, for the time, at least, been taken out of the Packsaddle bunch.

They wriggled on the benches as Small Brown resumed instruction. From Steve, swinging helplessly on the rope, came a savage howl:

"You, Bill Sampson, you let up on a guy! You sure ain't leaving me strung up this-a-way, you galoot?"

"Guess again!" answered Bill coolly. "You're fixed up like you fixed up Mister Brown, and I guess you stay fixed! Yep!"

"I'm telling you——" yelled Carson.

"Aw! Pack it up! You spill any more, and you sure get some more quilt!" snorted Bill. "You stay there, Steve Carson, and I guess you better do some thinking! You ain't running this here school, not by a whole lot, you ain't! You want to chew on that, doggone your hide!"

"I'll get you for this! I'll——"

Crack! rang the quilt round Steve's legs. He yelled frantically.

"Spilling any more?" roared Bill.

Steve did not spill any more.

Class went on at Packsaddle—Small Brown grinning, the bunch wriggling, and Steve rotating on the end of the

rope slung to the roof-beam. And never had a class at Packsaddle been so orderly. Bill walked out, leaving Small Brown to carry on—but there was not a whisper when he was gone! Bill was the man to handle the bunch, if no other man could!

Not till Tin Tung clanged the bell for the end of class was Steve released from the rope.

He staggered out of the school-room, his face black with fury. In the playground he gave Bill a bitter and furious look. Bill did not heed it; but many of the bunch noticed it, and they were not surprised when Steve led his horse out of the corral, mounted, and rode down the school trail to Packsaddle town, and they wondered whether he would be able to make his words good, and whether Two-Gun Carson, the gunman of Santaunta County, would come a-shooting.

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Early.

CHAPTER 40.

Big Steve on the Warpath!

DICK CARR glanced at Big Steve several times in class that afternoon.

It was a quiet class—amazingly quiet for Packsaddle. The bunch had not forgotten the lesson of the morning.

Small Brown very nearly had them feeding from his hand, as Bill had promised.

Dick and other fellows noted that Steve seemed to be in a state of expectation.

Many times he lifted his head to listen when there was a sound of hoofbeats from a distance.

But as the afternoon wore on Steve's brow grew blacker, and it was clear that he was disappointed.

All the fellows knew what he was expecting—the arrival of Two-Gun Carson to talk to Bill. But Two-Gun Carson did not seem to be in a hurry to hit Packsaddle School.

Slick Poindexter winked at Mick Kavanagh.

"I guess Old Man Carson knows the place that's good for his health," Slick whispered—"and he knows that it ain't named Packsaddle School."

At which some of the bunch chuckled.

Steve caught the words in the unaccustomed silence of the school-room and glared round savagely at Slick.

"You watch out!" he snarled. "I guess I've put my popper wise, and he allows he's coming up to talk to Bill."

"He sure ain't burning the wind, nohow!" said Slick.

"He's sitting in a poker game this afternoon with some rancher guys from White Pine!" snarled Steve. "I guess he ain't got away yet. But you'll sure see him along."

"No more whispering in class!" Small Brown yapped. "Carson, you were talking in class."

"Aw, go and chop chips, you Brown!" snarled Steve.

Rap!

Greatly daring, Small Brown rapped Steve's knuckles with a pointer.

"Wake snakes!" murmured Poker Parker.

Big Steve leaped up in his place. From Bill he had to take his medicine; taking it from Small Brown was another matter.

The class were using geography books. Steve's book was in his hand. He hurled it direct at Small Brown's head.

Bang!

"Wow!" yelled Small Brown, as he went over backwards.

There was a snigger from the bunch. Small Brown had banked on the lesson Bill had handed out that morning. But it was clear that the bully of Packsaddle was not quite tamed yet. Small Brown realised that as he sat down on the pine planks with a heavy bump.

Bill Sampson glared in from the porch.

"Say!" he roared. "You shouting for more, you Carson?"

"You figure I'm letting that little pie-faced gopher crack my knuckles?" yelled Steve.

Bill did not answer that question; he strode in, gripped Steve, and swung him off the bench.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

The quirt got busy round Steve's riding breeches. Small Brown picked himself up, set his horn-rimmed spectacles straight, and blinked.

"Now you sit down, you Carson!" roared Bill.

Steve dropped into his place, panting.

"You, Mr. Brown!"

"Sir!" gasped Small Brown.

"Take that pointer and rap that young guy's knuckles good and hard!" roared Bill.

Steve clenched his hands convulsively. Small Brown picked up the pointer and stepped to him.

"I tell you I ain't standing for it, Bill Sampson!" panted Steve. "I'm telling you—"

"Don't spill any more! Put your paws on that desk!"

Steve put his hands behind him.

Bill's eyes glittered, and he gripped the quirt hard. Steve's hands came

from behind him and were laid on the desk.

Rap, rap, rap, rap!

Small Brown rapped good and hard, as the cowpuncher schoolmaster bade him. Steve sat it out, silent, breathing rage, the bunch looking on breathlessly. Bill's quirt was ready, but it was not needed. The gunman's son took the knuckle-rapping like a lamb.

"Chew on that!" snorted Bill, and he tramped out of the school-room again, his quirt under his arm.

There was no hint of trouble in the school-room after that. Bill was at hand, and nobody in the bunch wanted to bring Bill horning in again. Small Brown wielded unaccustomed authority that afternoon.

Steve sucked his knuckles, breathed fury, and listened hopefully for the sound of a horseman riding up to the school gate.

But no rider came.

Two-Gun Carson who ran the game of poker as a business, was perhaps kept away on that account. If he was getting the dust off a crowd of ranchers from White Pine he was not likely to interrupt that profitable transaction to come up to the school. Anyhow, if he was coming he was leaving it late.

But most of the bunch figured that Steve had been talking hot air, and that his popper would think twice or three times before he came up to Packsaddle School gunning after Bill.

When class was dismissed by Small Brown, perhaps Steve had come round to the same opinion, for his scowl was blacker than ever. Several times he went down to the gate and stared along the trail to the cow town.

But there was no sign of a horseman riding up.

Either the poker game was keeping Two-Gun or else he had thought better of it and was not coming a-gunning.

When Tin Tung served out supper in the chuckhouse, and the sun sank westward behind Squaw Mountain, nobody expected to see Two-Gun Carson arrive at Packsaddle—and there were a

good many grinning faces round the long trestle table, contrasting with Steve's, which was black with bitterness.

After chuck he went out into the playground with his friends Poker Parker and Slim Dixon. They eyed him rather uneasily in the thickening dusk.

"Say, what's the game, Steve?" asked Poker. "Your popper won't be coming now, I reckon."

"I reckon not!" snarled Steve. "But I'm sure getting Bill myself!"

"Aw, forget it!" muttered Slim. "Ain't you cinched enough of Bill's quirt for one day, you geck?"

"I guess Bill's going to cinch the next!" said Steve, between his teeth. "He's in his room now; you can see the light from his window. I'm getting on the roof over the window with my lasso." He lowered his voice. "One of you guys will heave a rock at the winder, and when Bill puts his head out to see what's the matter I get him with my rope."

"You doggoned, locoed glunk!" gasped Slim. "Bill'd take the skin off'n us! I guess we ain't sitting in no such game!"

"Count me out, Steve!" said Poker promptly.

"I'm telling you——" hissed Steve.

"Aw, can it!" said Poker and Slim together, and they cut the matter short by walking back into the lighted chuckhouse.

The bully of Packsaddle ground his teeth. With rage and vengeance running riot in his breast, he had fully made up his mind.

Bill had strung him up in the school-room and quirted him. He had thought out his plan of vengeance. Bill was going to be strung up and quirted in his turn! It was a wild and reckless scheme, but Big Steve was in the mood for it.

It was easy enough if all went well; it was only the consequences that mattered. Steve was reckless of the consequences. After he had lambasted Bill he was going to mount his horse and

ride down to Packsaddle town. Two-Gun Carson would see him through. He banked on that.

Taking his coiled lasso over his arm, Big Steve crept away through the shadows to the side of the schoolhouse, where he clambered up.

The roof slanted, but over the windows was a parapet that ran the length of the building.

Sitting on that parapet, Steve had Bill's window directly below him. He prepared his rope for a cast.

If Bill put his head out of that window Steve had him! And he was going to be made to put his head out.

The window-shutters were wide open. There were no sashes or glass to the window, or to any at Packsaddle.

By leaning over, Steve could have tossed a stone in, and that, he figured, was quite enough to make Bill put his head out to see what was going on.

But as he looked down over the wooden parapet, taking his bearings, the lamplight at the window was darkened by a shadow. A Stetson hat came out into view—and Steve's eyes glittered.

For what reason Bill was looking out he did not know, and did not care. He only knew that that was just what he wanted and he whizzed his riata down and roped in the head and shoulders in the twinkling of an eye.

Throwing himself back on the roof, he dragged at the rope, putting his whole weight and strength on the pull.

CHAPTER 41.

The Wrong Man!

"EVENIN', Mr. Carson!" said Bill Sampson politely.

"Evenin'!" said Two-Gun, with a sarcastic sneer.

Bill was sitting in his big office, as he called it. The lamp stood on the table, and near it lay a big Colt.

It looked as if Bill figured that a Colt might come in useful, and had one handy that evening.

The Packsaddle bunch were at chuck when Two-Gun Carson walked in. He had left his horse at the gate and walked into the schoolhouse porch and into the house as if it belonged to him. Bill's door on the hallway stood wide open, and Two-Gun stepped in—to be greeted with politeness by the cow town schoolmaster.

Two-Gun Carson was a slim, agile man, handsome in a dark and rather sinister way. He packed two guns, whence his name in Packsaddle. His eyes, narrow and keen, looked like slits of ice. His profession was that of a "sport," or gambler—he lived on the game of poker, and lived well.

That peculiar profession was not thought of highly in the cow country—but Two-Gun was treated with a good deal of respect. A man who packed two guns, and was remarkably swift and skilful in the use of them, had to be respected.

He stepped towards Bill's table with the soft, cat-like tread of the gunman. He did not remove his hat—they did not stand on ceremony at Packsaddle. Bill's own big Stetson was on his head as he sat at his table.

Bill nodded cheerfully and good-humouredly. The revolver lying ready on the table looked as if he expected trouble, but his face expressed nothing of the sort. His hands were in the pockets of his leather crackers, and he did not withdraw them.

"I guess I've moseyed in to talk to you about Son Steve, Bill Sampson!" said the gunman, in his quiet voice.

"Spill it, old-timer!" said Bill affably.

"Steve allows that you strung him on a riata in the school-room——"

"Like he did my teacher!" said Bill.

"That cuts no ice with me!" said Two-Gun. "I'm here to tell you, Bill Sampson, that I don't stand for it! You get me?"

"I sure get you!" assented Bill. "And now you get me! I guess I'm running this here school! I don't take no back-chat from any guy in the

bunch! I handle that bunch, without asking advice from any galoot in Texas! You aim to talk turkey, and you can squat down and talk till you get a crick in the neck! You shoot any lip this-a-way, and I'll sure heave you out of the winder so quick it will make your head swim! You got that?"

Two-Gun's right hand made a stealthy movement. Bill stirred in his seat.

"Don't!" said Two-Gun Carson coldly. "Keep your paws in your pockets where they are, Bill! I guess if you reach for that gun I'll fill you full of lead afore you handle it!"

"You reckon?" yawned Bill.

"You figure yourself a big noise in Packsaddle, Bill Sampson!" went on Two-Gun. "I guess I don't give a continental red cent for that! You ain't quirting Son Steve any more! Got that? I allow I don't stand for it! I'm telling you——"

"Pack it up!" said Bill. "I guess no poker sharp is cavorting around this school, bulldozing Bill Sampson! Nunk! You've spilled enough, Mr. Carson! You're going out of that winder on your neck!"

Bill's right hand flashed from his pocket. Carson's hand whipped to his gun.

But he did not pull it.

Bill did not reach for the Colt that lay on the table. There was a gun in the hand that came out of his pocket. He had been grasping it there all the time!

The gun looked the "bad man" of Santanta County full in the face. Bill grinned over it.

"Stick 'em up!" said Bill casually.

Two-Gun Carson panted with rage.

He did not dare to touch his gun. And, casually as Bill spoke, the gleam in his eyes over his levelled revolver was warning enough. Two-Gun's hands went up over his head.

"I guess that's hoss-sense!" said Bill, with a nod of approval. "You figure I'd give you the pull on me!"

The gunman's face worked with fury. "Keep 'em up!" said Bill, heaving his great bulk out of his seat. "I guess if you try any gun-game on me, Two-Gun you get yours so sudden you won't know what landed you on the other side of Jordan! I allowed you was going out of that winder on your neck, and I'll say that's what coming to you."

Keeping the gambler covered, Bill stepped round the table, and with his left hand jerked away the two guns.

He threw them carelessly under the table.

"I'll sure get you for this, Bill Sampson!" muttered the gunman, his voice thick with rage. "I'll sure——"

"I'll say I've had that from Son Steve, and it didn't cut a lot of ice!" drawled Bill. "Pack it up! You'll want your breath to yaup when you go out of that winder!"

Bill holstered his gun now that the gunman was disarmed. His powerful grasp descended on Two-Gun Carson.

The gunman was no weakling. He was strong and active. But he crumpled up in Bill's hefty grasp.

Struggling, he was swung round the table. With a grasp on the back of his collar, and the back of his belt, Bill Sampson heaved him into the window.

Two-Gun sprawled out across the wooden sill.

Bill grasped his ankles, to tilt him headlong out. With a heave, he sent him hurtling.

The next moment Bill gave a roar of surprise.

Two-Gun, hurtling out of the window, should naturally have crashed to the ground below. Instead of which he jerked into the air, as if plucked by an invisible hand above!

"Great gophers!" roared Bill.

He stared blankly, his eyes almost popping from his bearded face. A choked howl came from Two-Gun Carson. No more than Bill did he realise, for the moment, what had happened.

"What the thunder——" yelled Bill.

He put his head out of the window, staring amazedly. Then he saw. From the roof above a rope ran. The loop of the lasso was over Two-Gun's head and arms. It had tightened round him, dragging him up as the rope was dragged from above.

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Bill.

Horrible gasps and gurgles came from Two-Gun Carson. He writhed in the rope.

Bill stared up. Over the wooden parapet above, a face appeared staring down. Steve Carson's eyes were blazing with excitement and revenge.

"I guess I've got you, Bill!" he yelled. "I've cinched you sure, you ornery old bulldozer, and you get the quirt."

Steve had knotted the end of the lasso to the chimney-stack. His prisoner was secure.

He scrambled over the parapet and dropped. There was a quirt in his hand.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Bill Sampson. "Carry me home to die! I guess this beats the whole deck, and then some! Haw, haw, haw!"

Steve spun round and stared at him, framed in the lighted window.

Till that moment he had not begun to doubt that it was Bill whom he had roped in.

His jaw dropped.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Bill. "Say, Two-Gun, you figure that Son Steve don't want some quirting! Haw, haw, haw!"

"What!" gasped Big Steve. "Who—"

"You was laying for me, you young gink!" roared Bill. "I guess you roped in your popper! Say, Two-Gun, if you allow that young Steve don't want any quirting, I'll say that I'll leave it to you."

He reached out with his knife, and cut through the rope. Two-Gun Carson came to the earth with a bump. Bill Steve stared at him, transfixed, as he wrenched himself out of the noose.

Bill Sampson, roaring with laughter, slammed the window shutters.

"Steve——"

"What——"

"Thunder—what——"

Loud and startled exclamations came from the Packsaddle bunch. They were heading for the bunkhouse after chuck, when Steve Carson came speeding across the playground.

After him came Two-Gun Carson, with cracking quirt.

Wild and frantic yells came from Big Steve as he stumbled and fell, and Two Gun stood over him, lashing with the quirt. The bunch stared on, amazed. Bill Sampson came striding from the house, and he grasped the gunman, and jerked him back. Two-Gun panted.

"Can it, you geck!" he yelled. "I'm telling you, you don't quirt him enough—I guess——"

"Quit guessing, old-timer, and beat it," said Bill, and he jerked the gunman away, and walked him to the gate, where his horse was hitched. "Say, it's you for the trail, and pronto!"

He pitched Two-Gun on his horse, and gave the animal a smack. The gunman went clattering down the trail, and Bill, with a grin, slammed the gate. Dick Carr, Slick, and Mick picked up Big Steve, and helped him to his bunk in the bunkhouse.

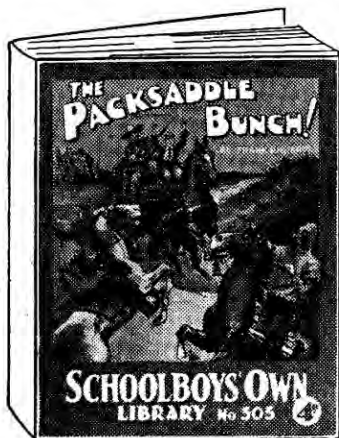
He was gasping and groaning there when Bill looked in.

"Say, you Carson, I reckon I ought to quirt you a few!" said Bill. "But I'll say that your popper has sure given you enough, and then some! He sure did not like being roped in and strung up, not a whole lot! Nunk! You figuring on asking him to call agin, and talk to your schoolmaster?"

Steve's only answer was a groan. Evidently he was not figuring on that. Nobody wanted to see Two-Gun Carson at the school again—and Steve least of all!

THE END.

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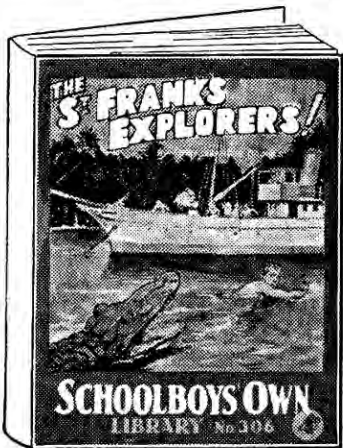


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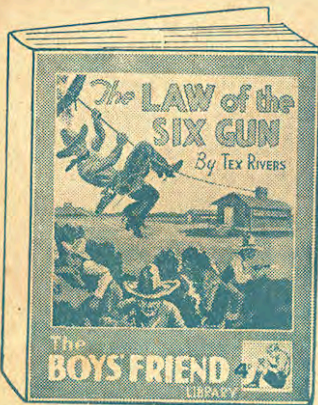
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