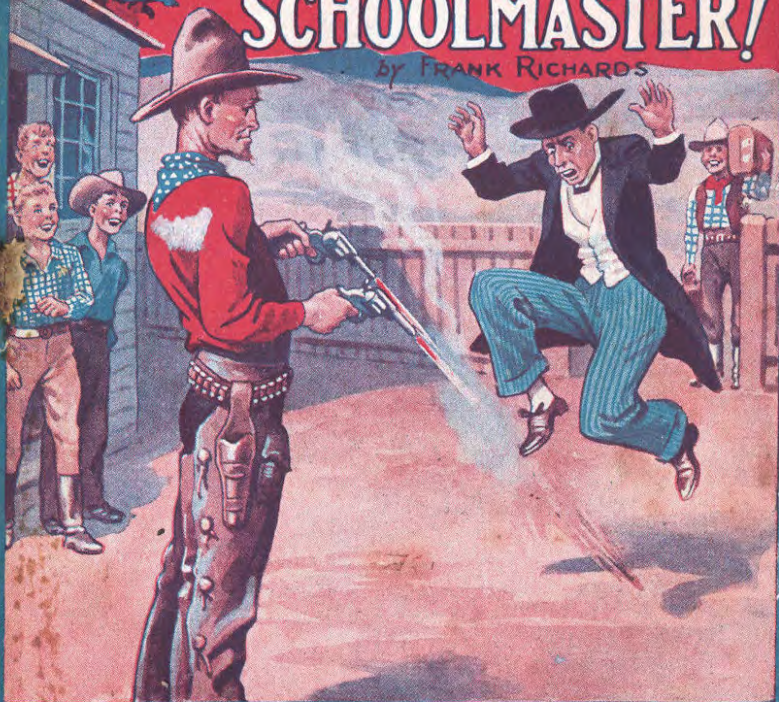


The **SIX-GUN** **SCHOOLMASTER!**

by FRANK RICHARDS



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The SIX-GUN SCHOOLMASTER!

By FRANK RICHARDS



BILL SAMPSON, the Texas schoolmaster, is more used to handling a quirt or a six-gun than a pen. He has a tough bunch under his charge at Packsaddle School!

CHAPTER 1.

The Hold-up!

"O H, look!" shouted Dick Carr. He reined in his pinto, and pointed with his riding-whip. "What the great horned toad—" exclaimed Slick Poindexter. "What the howly Mike—" exclaimed Mick Kavanagh. "Look!"

Classes were over at Packsaddle. Dick, Slick, and Mick were riding on the bluffs over the Rio Frio, a mile from the cow-town school. At the point where Dick pulled in, the trail from Hard Tack ran along the bank of the river, overlooked by the high, grassy bluffs that dropped almost like a wall to the lower level.

"Sure, it's only the hack!" grunted Slick, reining in his bronco almost on the edge of the bluff, and staring down. "Ain't you never seen Andy Butt driving his hearse from Hard Tack before, you gink?"

"He's pulled in," said Mick. "I guess—"

"Look!" repeated Dick Carr.

The next moment his companions saw what he had seen—the reason why the hack driver had halted on the trail by the river.

From a clump of trees under the bluff a horseman had pulled out. The schoolboys above could see little of him but his head—which was not covered by a Stetson hat like almost every other cabeza in Samanta County, but by a

flour-bag, inverted and pulled down over the face. And the horseman's right hand was lifted, the sunshine glinting on the barrel of a levelled revolver in his hand.

That was why Andy Butt had halted. That was why he sat with his hands sticking above his head, reaching for the sky. It was a hold-up!

High above the strange scene the schoolboys of Packsaddle watched breathlessly.

"By gum!" said Poindexter breathlessly. "If a guy only had a gun!"

"Sure, we could get him from here!" said Mick, with a nod. "I'll say it would surprise him a few!"

"But what's he after?" muttered Slick. "There's no passengers in the hack this time—there ain't a galoot for him to go through! I guess he can't be after the baggage! What's his game?"

"He won't get ten cents off Andy!" said Mick.

Bang!

"Oh!" gasped Dick Carr.

The report of the revolver roared up from below. For an instant the tenderfoot of Packsaddle expected to see the hack driver reel over and topple from his seat. But the next moment he saw that the bullet had only spun the hat from Andy's head. It had gone close, however, for the driver's startled yell reached the ears of the schoolboys on the bluff.

Slick chuckled.

"I guess Andy's rattled!" he remarked. "That guy sure has given him a hint to talk turkey!"

"But why—" gasped Dick.

"I guess there's suthin' on that shebang he knows about, and wants, and Andy don't none to put him wise!" grinned Slick. "Andy brings up a packet of greenbacks from the bank at Hard Tack sometimes for the ranchers' pay-day. That'll be it."

It looked as if Slick was right. For Andy Butt, lowering his hands, stooped,

extracted something from under his seat, and handed it over to the rider.

Even at that distance, in the clear air of Texas, the schoolboys could see what it was. It was a buckskin bag; and they did not need telling that it contained money—dollar greenbacks!

The schoolboys saw the man in the flour-sack make a gesture with his revolver, and Andy promptly drove on.

The rumble of wheels floated through the air. The hack disappeared from view up the bank of the Frio, the bluffs hiding it from sight in less than a minute.

The horseman was left alone on the trail, unconscious that three pairs of eyes watched from above. Sitting in his saddle, the road-agent had opened the buckskin bag and was counting its contents. So far as the schoolboys could see, there was quite a large roll of bills. They had a better view of the man now; but there was little to be seen but the flour-sack in which the eyeholes were cut for vision.

Having examined his plunder, the rider dismounted, fastened up the buckskin bag again, and thrust it into his saddlebag.

Then he remounted his bronco—a large and powerful animal, grey with black splashes, and rode down the river.

Slick shook a fist after him. With a gun in his hand, Slick would have tried a pot-shot at the rider, as he was far beyond the reach of a lasso.

"By gum! We got to see him ride clear with it!" growled Slick.

Dick's eyes gleamed.

"Follow me!" he exclaimed, and he wheeled his horse and rode away from the edge of the bluff.

Slick and Mick rode after him.

"Say, what's biting you, tenderfoot?" snapped Slick.

"Don't you see?" Dick was excited and breathless. "The trail follows the river over a mile. Where it leaves the prairie it goes through a dip in the bluffs. He will have to ride out that way, and we—"

"Jumping Jerusalem!" yelled Slick. "Come on! Hell-for-leather, you 'uns!"

Slick did not need to hear any more. He gave his pony the spurs, and dashed on at a gallop. Dick and Mick spurred on.

The three rode at a gallop down from the bluffs to the prairie. A mile to the south they reached the spot where the stage-trail turned from the open plain, and followed a rugged break in the bluffs to the river-bank. By that way only could the man in the flour-sack gain the open country, which was unquestionably his object. When he came up the dip the Packsaddle schoolboys were in his way.

Breathless from the mad gallop, they drew in their panting horses in cover of a thicket of mesquite and post-oaks. Slick gripped his coiled lasso, ready for a cast. If the man in the flour-sack came within the sweep of Slick's rope, there was no escape for him, and his gun would not help him.

Waiting in cover, they listened for a rider coming up from the river. And they were none too soon on the spot, for in less than three or four minutes there was a thudding of horse's hoofs, coming up the trail from the bank of the Rio Frio.

CHAPTER 2.

Roping in the Road-agent!

PAINTER PETE rode up from the Frio, with a cheery grin on his rugged, bearded face. There was no flour-sack over his head now, and there were no black splashes on his grey bronco. The flour-sack had been thrust into a crevice in the bluffs, the black paint washed off the bronco in the waters of the Frio. Once clear of the scene of the hold-up, Painter Pete ceased to be a road-agent, and become a cowpuncher again.

Andy Butt, when he got to Packsaddle, could only describe the trail-thief as a man in a flour-sack, with a grey horse splashed with black. Painter

reckoned that the Packsaddle crowd would be a long time guessing whose face had been covered by that flour-sack, and what horse had carried those black splashes. It was no wonder he grinned as he rode up from the river.

Painter Pete saw before him a glorious prospect of a jamboree, spending money right and left, down at Hard Tack, painting the town red.

It was a rosy dream—suddenly cut short and shattered by the whiz of a riatra from a clump of thicket as he rode by it.

Painter Pete dodged too late. He was taken quite by surprise. The loop dropped neatly over his head and shoulders, tautened round his waist, and plucked him from the saddle like a giant's hand.

Crash went the trail-thief on the hard prairie, and the startled bronco, with a squeal, dashed on at a wild gallop.

Rolling on the ground in the grip of the rope, Painter had the use of his hands. He grabbed the Colt in his belt, and tore it from the holster. Burly man as he was, he was active and swift, hence his nickname of Painter—which was what a panther was called in Santanta County. But he was not given much chance with the gun, swift as he was.

Slick Poindexter spurred, the rope tautened again, and Painter was dragged head-over-heels over the rough ground. Slick was only too well aware what would happen if the ruffian got a chance with his gun.

Crash on crash went Painter, rolling and bumping. Bang, bang! came twice from his gun, but one bullet tore into the earth, and the other soared away skyward, utterly at random.

"Get that bronc!" yelled Poindexter to his companions. He had not forgotten that the trail-thief had packed his plunder in the saddlebag, and the grey bronco was galloping away.

Dick and Mick dashed after the fleeing animal. Keeping the road-agent rolling at the end of the rope, Slick had

him safe, and they were eager to get hold of the buckskin bag.

But neither had a rope with him, and the chase was in vain. Both were well-mounted, but the fleeing grey had no weight of a rider on his back, and he was a strong and swift animal. A half-tamed buck-jumper at the best of times, the grey was startled and scared now, and he was going all out for the open spaces. Swiftly as the schoolboys spurred after him, they did not gain an inch.

"Get back!" panted Dick breathlessly.

"He will keep, anyhow! Slick——"

"You said it!" gasped Mick.

Leaving the grey bronco to career over the prairie, the two schoolboys wheeled and dashed back. Slick had a master's hand with a rope, but they were anxious about him, left alone with the trail-thief. Another ringing shot came to their ears as they rode hurriedly back.

"Let up, you gink!" They heard Slick's voice shouting. "You hear me whisper, you ornery guy! You drop that gun, or I guess you won't have a whole bone left in your carcass, in two shakes of a possum's tail! You get me, you doggoned geck!"

Bang! came another shot in reply.

But it was wasted in the air, as the breathless, bruised, desperate man rolled in the grip of the lasso. Slick's life was at stake, as he knew, if the man got a chance to aim, and he gave him no chance. His horse, in rapid motion, dragged Painter Pete headlong over rough prairie, crashing and bumping him every moment.

"Slick's got him all right!" panted Dick Carr.

"I'll say he has, a few!" grinned Mick.

Mick dashed in, jumped down, and grasped the revolver. There was still a cartridge left in the six-gun. Mick Kavanagh gripped the butt.

"Say, let up, Slick!" he roared. "I sure got him if he kicks!"

Slick reined in.

The trail-thief sprawled on the ground in the gripping rope. Mick ran to him, and as Painter struggled to a sitting position, covered him with his own gun.

The three schoolboys surrounded the captured road-agent. He staggered to his feet, breathless, panting, bruised, crimson with rage. It was their first chance of getting a good look at him. He was unknown to Dick Carr, but from both Slick and Mick came an exclamation:

"Painter Pete!"

"You know him?" said Dick Carr, in surprise.

"I guess we seen that guy!" grinned Poindexter. "I'll say he's in the Kicking Mule outfit, and I sure reckon that's how he knew that Andy Butt had greenbacks on the hack."

Painter stood panting, too breathless and winded to speak. Dick Carr stared at him. He understood that the road-agent would naturally get rid of the flour-sack before hitting the open country. But the discovery that this man belonged to the Kicking Mule outfit was rather startling to Dick.

Painter found his voice at last.

"You doggoned gecks! You all-fired young piecans! What you mean by this game? Say! I'll sure put Bill Sampson wise to this, and I'll say that he will quirt you a few!"

Slick chuckled.

"You ain't getting free, Painter!" he answered. "I'll mention that we saw you hold up Andy Butt's hack from the top of the bluffs, and we sure laid for you here, getting away with the goods. What you got to say now, you gol-darned thief?"

Painter did not reply for the moment. He glanced swiftly in the direction that the grey bronco had taken. The runaway horse was far out of sight now. All three of the boys noted the cunning gleam that came into Painter's eyes, and wondered what it meant.

"I guess we want to hit Packsaddle

pronto!" remarked Slick. "And we'll sure tote this guy in at the end of the rope."

"Guess again!" snarled Painter. "I'll sure lambaste you a few for this, and then some! You've lost me my cayuse, with your fool tricks."

"I guess we'll rope in that cayuse some time, and a bag of greenbacks along with him!" grinned Slick.

"Greenbacks nothing!" snarled the cowman. "I'll sure eat all the greenbacks you raise along to my cayuse, you geck. If Andy Butt's shebang has been held up, what'll I know about it?"

"A whole heap, I reckon, as you did it!" said Mick. "Mean to say you wasn't the galoot in the flour-sack?"

"I sure do!" said Painter coolly. "Ain't touched a flour-sack since I helped cookie with the chuck in the chuckhouse at Kicking Mule, and that's a week ago. If you see a guy in a flour-sack, I sure ain't wise to that guy."

"Where is he, then?" grinned Slick. "We was waiting here for that guy to come up from the river, and there ain't nobody come but you."

"How'd I know?" snapped Painter. "Now I think of it, I reckon I did see a guy fording the Frio, way back, me being down by the river looking for lost cows."

Dick Carr caught his breath.

Was it barely possible that the Packsaddle trio had made an awful mistake and roped in the wrong man?

Unless the plunder was found on him, there was nothing to identify this 'puncher as the man who had held up the hack. And that could not be put to the test, as the grey bronco was gone. It dawned on Dick what that sudden, cunning gleam in the cowman's eyes had meant. He had realized that the proof against him had gone away into unknown spaces at a gallop.

But Slick only laughed.

"You want us to figure we got the wrong guy, Painter? Forget it! What you blaze away with that gun for, say?"

"I'll say that any galoot would loose off his gat if he was roped in that-away!" growled Painter. "You figure you can rope in a Kicking Mule 'puncher like he was a steer? Give me that gat, Mick Kavanagh, you young geck, and you, Poindexter, you git this rope off'n me. I sure got to get arter my critter and ride after them cows."

A chill of doubt was troubling Dick Carr. But it was plain that Slick and Mick had no doubts.

"Hit it for Packsaddle!" said Slick curtly.

"You letting up on a guy?" roared Painter.

"Not so's you'd notice it," answered Slick. And he set his pony in motion, and the cowman, turning the air of the prairie almost blue with his remarks, stumbled along after him at the end of the rope. Dick and Mick followed, the latter still with the gun in his hand. And Painter Pete was still safe at the end of the rope when Dick, Slick, and Mick hit Packsaddle School.

CHAPTER 3.

A Surprise for the School!

BILL SAMPSON, headmaster of Packsaddle School, stood with his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt and stared. Bill looked as if his eyes were going to pop out of his bearded face, so astonished was he. And Small Brown, the teacher, seeing Bill gazing with such amazement out on the school trail, hopped along to blink through his horn-rimmed spectacles, and see what was surprising Bill. It surprised Mr. Brown in his turn, and led him to utter quite a startled squeal. And then all the bunch who were in the playground hit the same spot to "rubber," even Tin Tung the Chinese cook, and Hank, the hired man. Crowded in the gateway, nearly every guy in the cow-town school rubbered. It was quite a reception for the three schoolboys who

rode up the trail, leading a Kicking Mule puncher on the end of a rope.

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Bill Sampson, finding his voice. "This here is the tarantula's side-whiskers, and then some! I'll say them young guys is hoping for the quirt."

"Outrageous!" squealed Small Brown. "Most shocking! A very, very rough practical joke on a—a man employed by Mr. Dunwoody at Kicking Mule."

Small Brown did not belong to Texas. He came from Boston, where they were cultured and refined. He made this clear by wearing store clothes and a Derby hat. But the Packsaddle bunch did not give ten cents for culture from Boston, and they led Mr. Brown a rough life. The more Bill quirted the bunch, the more Mr. Brown approved, and he entertained a hope of seeing Dick, Slick, and Mick quirted on the spot for what looked to him like a rough joke on a puncher. Mr. Brown did not see everything through his horn-rimmed spectacles.

Up the school trail, with a clatter and a jingle, rode the three, under a sea of staring eyes. They rode at a moderate pace, to give the stumbling cowman on the rope a chance. Many times had Painter Pete striven to wrench himself loose, but the drag on the riata prevented him from loosening the loop, and two or three rough falls on the prairie had rewarded him. His face was burning with fury as he was led up to the school gate. Had his gun been in his hand there would have been sudden death in sight of the Packsaddle bunch. But his gun was in Mick's hand, and Mick was ready to drop him with a bullet in the leg if he handed over trouble.

"Say, Bill, we got a prize-package for you to hand over to Marshal Lick at the burg!" shouted Slick, as the three halted. They could not ride in, with the rubbering crowd bunched in the gateway.

Bill strode out at them, glaring.

"Jumping painters!" roared Bill. "You pesky piccans! What you figure you're doing, roping in a Kicking Mule puncher that-a-way? Say, you gone loco? Shoot!"

There was an answering roar from Painter before the boys could speak.

"Say, you Bill Sampson, you git me outen this durned rope! Say, you figure your durned school bunch are going to cinch a cowman and ride him off his range? Say——"

"Hold on, Bill!" shouted Slick, as the cow town schoolmaster put a hand to the rope. "You ain't letting that road-agent loose!"

"That what?" gasped Bill.

"I'm telling you!" hooted Slick. "That guy Painter held up Andy Butt's hack on the river trail, and cinched a bag of dollars. That's why we've roped him in."

"Great jumping painters!" ejaculated Bill, and his hand dropped back from the rope. "You giving me the goods?"

"We all three piped him from the bluffs, Bill!" declared Mick Kavanagh. "And Slick got him in the rope as he came up from the river."

"I'm saying that's a lie!" roared Painter. "I guess I was along the Frio trailing lost cows from my herd, when these young ginks took me for some other galoot."

He grasped the rope and wrenched it to loosen the loop. Poindexter gave it a sharp jerk, and he rolled over with a heavy bump.

"Forget that, Painter!" advised Slick. "You ain't hitting the horizon yet, not by a large piece, you ain't!"

Bill Sampson, more astonished than ever, stood and stared. Painter scrambled up, breathless and furious, and yelled at him.

"You, Bill Sampson, you know me. You was riding in the Kicking Mule outfit afore they cinched you to run this here school."

"You said it!" growled Bill. "And I'll say I never did figure you was O.K.,

Painter. I guess I've seen you lose dollars at faro and poker down to Hard Tack that you never earned punching cows on the ranges! Yep! I guess this here is a matter for Mister Lick to horn into."

"Here comes the hack!" shouted one of the bunch, as Andy Butt's vehicle appeared in sight on the prairie trail at a distance, heading for the cow town.

The hack was passing too far away for shouting. Bill Sampson strode out to meet it on the trail, waving his big Stetson to the driver as a signal to halt. Andy Butt waved back and pulled in.

After the cow-town schoolmaster went the whole bunch, only Small Brown being left in the gateway, blinking owl-like. Painter, still safe in the rope, stumbled after Slick's horse, sputtering oaths.

"Say you, Andy!" roared Bill, as he tramped to the stage trail. "Them young geeks allow you were held up coming up the Frio? Shoot!"

"I'll buy it!" answered Andy.

There was a buzz from the bunch, and Steve Carson scowled. It was certain now that there had been a hold-up.

"A guy in a flour-sack," went on Andy, "and he sure took a piece of skin off my cabeza, doggone him, afore I handed over the bag from the bank for Mr. Dunwoody. I'll say he beat it with a thousand dollars."

"You figure it was Painter?" Bill waved a hand at the cowman staggering in the rope.

Andy shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't put it past him," he answered. "But I sure never saw nothin' but a flour-bag on his front porch."

"You allow he got the dollars?"

"Yep!"

"I guess that's a cinch, then!" said Bill. "If that geek's got a bag of greenbacks on him, I'll call it a clear case."

"Doggone it, Bill Sampson!" yelled

Painter. "I'll tell a man I'll eat them greenbacks if you raise them in my rags, and my Stetson after!"

"We saw him pack the bag into his saddlebag, Bill!" said Dick Carr. "His horse got loose when Slick lassoed him. It's running loose on the prairie now."

"Aw, can it; that's a leetle too thin!" sneered Steve Carson. "I guess I'd take Painter's word agin yourn, and some over!"

"You spillin' more, you Steve?" hooted Bill. He whipped out a lash with his quirt, and Big Steve yelled as he caught it round his legs. "Now pack it up, you big stiff! Get me?"

Andy drove on the hack to the cow town. Bill Sampson, having reduced Steve to savage silence, rubbed his bearded chin in doubt.

"I guess," he said at last, "that Painter's cayuse has got to be roped in, and it's for the marshal to hold him till we get the critter. Painter you're going on a pasco with this baby to see Mister Lick."

"I'll say——" began Painter, with a roar.

"Say nothing!" snapped Bill. "If the greenbacks ain't found on your cayuse I guess that lets you out!"

He threw Slick's lasso off the cowman and gripped him by his loose shirt. Painter eyed him fiercely and savagely, evidently reckoning the chances of a break for freedom. But burly as he was, the gigantic Bill towered over him; he had no chance. With a sullen curse, he tramped after the hack, with Bill's grip still on him. And the whole bunch followed to see Painter to the calaboose.

CHAPTER 4.

Barney Balley Gets Busy!

PACKSADDLE was in a roar.

Andy Butt had pulled in his hack outside Hanson's Hotel and store, and in a couple of minutes after he had got off his box the news of the hold-up was spreading through the

cow town. Long before Bill arrived with the prisoner, followed by the school bunch, all Packsaddle was wise to it. Barney Bailey, foreman of the Kicking Mule Ranch, was in town with half a dozen of his 'punchers.' They were there to take over the bag of greenbacks and convey it to the ranch. And they got the news that there was no longer a bag of greenbacks to go to the ranch.

"Blue blazes!" growled Barney Bailey. "I guess we'll be arter that guy, and we sure won't worry the marshal with him if we get him. A rope and a branch will be good enough for that bulldozer!"

Andy grinned.

"Some young guys up to the school allow they've cinched him," he said. "They got hold of a galoot—young Carr and Poindexter and the Irish Mike——"

"Them three are bright lads!" said Barney. "I guess I'll be powerful glad to see the man they've cinched."

"You've seen him afore!" grinned Andy. "He's one of your crowd, Barney."

"What!" roared the Kicking Mule foreman.

"It's sure Painter Pete." Andy pointed up the street to the trail. "There's Bill Sampson toting him along to the calaboose."

"Search me!" gasped Barney.

His face was red with wrath. Barney wanted to get a cinch on the man who had got away with Rancher Dunwoody's dollars. But he wanted a heap of convincing that it was a Kicking Mule man! Nothing short of finding the dollars on him would have convinced Barney that one of his outfit was a trail-thief and road-agent.

Bill Sampson marched the prisoner up the rugged street, the Packsaddle bunch behind him; Dick, Slick, and Mick riding, the rest on foot. Barney Bailey strode to meet them, his hand on his gun.

After Barney crowded five or six Kicking Mule men, looking grim and

with their hardware ready. Andy Butt dodged into Hanson's Hotel, and several more law-abiding citizens followed him. Bullets were no respecters of persons, and it looked as if gunplay was coming next.

"Say, Barney," shouted Painter, his face lighting at the sight of the Kicking Mule outfit—"say, you ain't standing for this, Barney!"

"I'll say nunk!" roared Barney. "You, Bill Sampson, you spill it, and spill it quick! What you got on Painter?"

"I guess I'm whispering it to Mister Lick!" answered Bill. "Keep your gun at home, Barney; you ain't running this town, old-timer! Some guy tote out that pesky marshal."

Marshal Lick was already coming on the scene. He came striding down from the calaboose, and the crowd opened for him. The Town Marshal of Packsaddle had already heard of the hold-up. A dozen voices addressed him as he arrived, and he waved his hand for silence.

"Pack it up!" roared Mr. Lick. "Shoot, you Bill Sampson! I guess you can chew the rag arter, you Barney Bailey."

"I'm saying——" roared Barney.

"Saying nothing! Pack it up, I'm telling you, and let the schoolmaster shoot!" snapped Mr. Lick.

Barney snorted angrily, but he gave Bill a chance to speak. Bill put it in a few words, to which the whole crowd listened eagerly.

"Let them young ginks shoot next!" announced the marshal, waving back Barney and his men.

Dick, Slick, and Mick told the tale briefly.

"I guess," said the marshal at length, "that there ain't no proof till we get a cinch on Painter's cayuse. I'll say I'm going to hold him till that cayuse is roped in."

"Hold Abraham Lincoln!" roared Barney. "Them young gecks is mis-taken. They seen a guy in a flour-

sack, I allow that much; but they lost sight of him, and they roped in a Kicking Mule 'puncher what was down by the Frio arter lost cows! That's what I'm a-shouting!"

"You said it, Barney!" panted Painter Pete. "I guess the outfit ain't standing for cinching a Kicking Mule man in any old calaboose."

"Not by a jugful!" snorted Barney.

And there was a roar of endorsement from the Kicking Mule 'punchers.

Marshal Lick took hold of Painter Pete's neck-scarf with his left hand, and a Colt appeared in his right.

Suddenly over the excited, roaring, surging mob came the whiz of a lasso. It whizzed from a Kicking Mule 'puncher, mounted on a bronco, on the edge of the crowd.

The loop dropped over Marshal Lick's shoulders, and dragged, and the Marshal of Packsaddle was suddenly flung on his back, his revolver flying.

At the same moment his grasp on Painter's neck-scarf was dragged loose. Painter Pete did not lose the chance.

The instant he was released he darted into the crowd.

With a defiant roar the Kicking Mule 'punchers closed round him to cover his escape.

"Wake snakes!" gasped Mr. Lick, scrambling up, and jerking off the lasso. "Say, where's that guy? I guess I want that guy!"

"Forget it, marshal!" grinned Barney Bailey. "You ain't cinching no Kicking Mule man—not by a canful!"

The crowd swayed, surged, and roared. Marshal Lick pounced on his gun, grabbed it, and rushed after Painter Pete. But Painter, in the midst of three or four comrades, had scuttled away among the cabins and shanties along the irregular street. A beat of horse's hoofs rang back to the ears of the exasperated marshal. One of the 'punchers had handed Painter his bronco, and the suspected man was already burning the wind for Kicking

Mule. Barney Bailey and his friends, grinning, went for their horses, and Barney shouted back as he rode out of town:

"Say, you want a Kicking Mule guy? You hit Kicking Mule, and ask for him. All the boys'll be glad to meet up with you."

And Barney and his men rode off triumphant, little dreaming that in standing by a man in their outfit, they were standing by the man in the flour-sack, who had cinched the rancher's bag of dollars.

Bill Sampson herded his bunch back to the school. He herded them back with his quirt like a bunch of steers. The bunch did the distance from the cow town to the school in record time.

Dick, Slick, and Mick were not feeling pleased when they went to their bunks in the school bunkhouse. They had got the right man—they were sure of that. But the mistaken loyalty of his comrades of Kicking Mule had let him loose again, to trail down his lost bronco, and get his hands on the bag of dollars taken from the hack. When the rest of the bunch were asleep Dick lifted his head from his straw pillow.

"Slick, Mick! You asleep?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," grunted Poindexter. "I guess I'm worrying a whole heap about that guy Painter getting away with it."

"You said it!" murmured Mick.

"He's not going to get away with it, if we can stop him!" said Dick Carr quietly. "You fellows, we're going to trail down that horse, and get him before that thief Painter can get him. What about it?"

"Big boy," said Slick, "you're shoutin'!"

"Shoutin' a mouthful," agreed Mick.

Bill Sampson, sleeping over in the schoolhouse, was not wise to the fact that three fellows in the bunch were

getting out of their bunks. And considering what a heavy hand Bill had with a quirt, it was just as well for them that he was not wise to it.

CHAPTER 5.

Breaking Herd:

"I GUESS we'll work the riffle!" whispered Slick Poindexter. "You said it!" murmured Mick Kavanagh.

Dick Carr stood listening.

It was near midnight, and Packsaddle School was sleeping. Faintly through the silence came the murmur of the waters of the Rio Prio, rolling under the high, grassy bluffs. The moon, round and white, sailed high over the river and the rolling prairie.

The playground at the cow town school was almost as light as by day. Silvery beams crept in at the shuttered windows of the school bunkhouse.

Three of the Packsaddle bunch were out of bed and dressed—Dick, Slick, and Mick. Slick had opened the door, letting in a flood of moonlight.

There were fifteen or sixteen boarders at the cow town school. All were in their bunks, excepting the three.

But Dick Carr was not sure that all of them were asleep. His keen ear had caught a faint sound of stirring from Steve Carson's bunk.

Slick crept back from the door.

"O.K.!" he whispered. "Not a guy awake! I guess Bill's snoozing some over in the schoolhouse. We got to beat it soft. Bill would sure quirt us if he spotted us breaking herd this time of night!"

"Carson's awake!" muttered Dick.

"Aw! Doggone him!" muttered Poindexter, and he stepped towards the bunk occupied by the bully of Packsaddle.

He knitted his brows as he discerned Big Steve, in the deep shadow, sitting up in his bunk. Steve grinned at him.

"Say, what's this game?" he asked. "You guys beating it in the middle of the night? I guess Bill would like to know."

Big Steve did not subdue his voice. But the bunch were sleeping soundly, and nobody woke.

Slick set his lips.

"Pack it up, you goob!" he muttered. "You aiming to wake the bunch and give us away to Bill?"

"I guess I don't care a continental red cent!" answered Steve coolly. "Bill would sure get his mad up if he was wise to it. You geeks breaking herd to go down to Packsaddle and paint the town red?"

"Aw, can it!" snapped Slick. "We ain't guys of your heft, Steve! No poker game at the Red Dog is ours."

"Ssez you!" sneered Steve. "What's the game, then?"

The three comrades of Packsaddle glared at him. They wanted to get out quick and quiet. If Bill Sampson, sleeping over in the schoolhouse, spotted them, the game was up. If Small Brown, in his cabin next to the bunkhouse, woke, his alarmed squeal would soon bring Bill on the scene. And Carson was not to be trusted.

"Look here," whispered Dick Carr, "keep quiet, Carson! If you want to know, we're going after Painter Pete's horse on the prairie."

Steve laughed scoffingly.

"Aw, beat it, if you like!" he jeered. "I guess you won't have got your cayuses out of the corral afore Bill is cavorting around. It's you for Bill's quirt!"

"You keeping your bully-beef trap cinched?" growled Slick savagely.

"I guess I'll shout as loud as I like, and you can chew on that!" answered Steve coolly.

The three exchanged glances. It was a stroke of ill-luck that Big Steve, their enemy, should have awakened and spotted them. All three realised that as soon as they were out of the

bunkhouse Steve was going to open, his mouth wide.

He would not, perhaps, actually call up Bill Sampson or Small Brown. But he was going to wake the bunch, and the buzz of excitement and chin-wag in the bunkhouse at that unaccustomed hour would soon give the alarm.

But Slick was the man for the occasion. Whether Steve gave them away openly or in an underhand way, it came to the same thing. Steve was not going to give them away at all!

With a sudden swift movement, Slick Poindexter pounced on the grinning fellow sitting up in the bunk.

Before Steve Carson knew what was happening, he was squashed down in the bunk, with a blanket over his head.

"Pronto!" panted Slick.

Dick and Mick jumped to his aid at once. Steve, struggling fiercely, was pinned down by three pairs of hands.

Poindexter held the blanket close and hard over his face. His attempted shout was muffled into a faint gurgle. Dick Carr grasped his arms, and Mick Kavanagh secured his legs. Big Steve was helpless in their hands.

"I guess we're cinching this ornery galoot, and keeping him from spilling the beans!" breathed Slick. "We ain't getting Bill on our trail with his doggoned quirt jest to please this big stiff!"

Steve wriggled and gurgled. But the sounds were faint under the muffling blanket, and did not awaken any of the sleeping bunch.

Mick grabbed Steve's belt from the hook beside the bunk, and buckled it round his legs. Dick Carr got his wrists together, and tied them fast with a twisted neck-scarf.

Then Slick groped for his mouth and clapped a hand over it, while the blanket was removed. Bound hand and foot, Steve wriggled wildly, striving to yell.

But the hard grasp over his mouth choked back any sound.

"Plug his yaup-trap!" breathed Mick.

Slick "plugged" it. As the grasping hand was removed, Steve opened his mouth for a yell. A crumpled handkerchief was driven into it at the same moment.

Steve gurgled.

The next moment he could not even gurgle. Slick jammed home the gag, and fastened it securely in place, with a string round the bully of Packsaddle's head.

Then Steve was released. He was powerless either to stir or to call. His eyes, glittering like a snake's, glared fury at the three. But Slick was not taking chances of the Packsaddle bully rolling out of his bunk when he was left. He sorted out Steve's lasso, and tied him to the bunk.

"I guess that's a cinch!" breathed Slick. "I'll say that that ornery stiff ain't throwing us down none. Beat it!"

They trod softly to the door and crept out.

Poindexter drew the door shut quietly after him. The bunch were left to sleep and Steve Carson to wriggle. If there was going to be an alarm before they got clear, it was not coming from Big Steve!

But there was no alarm. In the glimmering moonlight they led their horses from the school corral down to the gate, unfastened the gate, and led them out on the school trail. Slick grinned as he closed the gate.

"O.K.!" he remarked.

Mick Kavanagh chuckled.

"You said it!" he agreed. "But I'll say Bill will be hoppin' mad when he misses us at sun-up! He sure will cavort a few."

"Not if we come back with Rancher Dunwoody's bag of dollars!" said Dick Carr.

"I guess we ain't coming back without it, if we have to trail that grey bronco over Squaw Mountain as far as the Staked Plain!" said Poindexter

determinedly. "Vamoose the ranch, you'uns!"

And they mounted and rode away in the moonlight. The thudding hoofbeats died away over the prairie, and Packsaddle School was left to silence and slumber once more.

CHAPTER 6.

Sign!

"SIGN!" said Slick Poindexter briefly.

The prairie was light, a sea of silvery waving grass under the soaring moon.

Two miles from the cow town and the school, the Packsaddle trio had stopped and dismounted. At that point, the stage trail from Hard Tack, down the Frio, turned from the open plain through a dip in the bluffs, to follow the bank of the river for some distance.

It was at that point, on the previous afternoon, that Dick, Slick, and Mick had trapped the man in the flour-sack coming up from the Frio after robbing the hack of the bag of dollars.

Slick Poindexter was as good a man on a trail as any 'puncher on Kicking Mule, or any Apache or Navajo in Texas. If the grey bronco had left enough sign for a Redskin to follow, Slick figured that he was going to pick it up.

Dick and Mick sat their horses, waiting while Poindexter searched for sign. He was not long in finding it. The trail of the grey bronco, coming up from the river, was clear to Slick, and in two or three places where soft mud had retained a distinct impression, he carefully measured the hoofmarks. And there was a gleeful grin on his face as he announced "sign."

"I guess I know that critter's sign by heart," he remarked, as he climbed into the saddle again. "This way, you'uns."

They rode westward from the river. Slick's eyes were keenly on the

ground, as the waving grass slid under the horses' feet. They were going at a trot. Slick led, the other two riding behind him.

Here and there Dick's eyes picked up sign of the lost horse—a broken tuft of bunch-grass where a hoof had trodden, a trampled cactus plant. But to him the signs were few, and he wondered how Slick kept on at a trot, reading the trail by moonlight.

But Poindexter never faltered and never halted. A mile, two miles, three miles slid under the trotting ponies. The trail was wildly irregular; the unguided bronco had constantly changed direction, as the spirit moved him. But there was always sign for Slick, and the three rode on. The leading rider suddenly raised his quirt, and pointed to a clump of pecans and post-oaks ahead in the moon glimmer.

"I guess we'll pick up more sign there!" he remarked. "That's water!"

They rode up to the clump of small timber.

It was a water-hole in the prairie—a spring cozing up and spreading in a muddy pool.

Round it the mud was trampled by the hoofs of steers of the Kicking Mule herds. But amid those countless footprints, Slick easily picked out the hoofmarks of the grey bronco. And he picked up other sign, too, that made him jump and stare round uneasily over the moonlit prairie.

"I'll buy it!" said Mick, staring at him.

"Say, you'uns, we ain't in the first crush!" said Poindexter with a whistle. "I guess a cowman's boots have been stepping here. Who'd you figure would be ahead of us arter that cayuse?"

"Painter Pete!" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"You're shouting!" agreed Slick.

The three examined the traces of a heavy cowman's boots. It was possible that they had been left by a 'puncher in charge of the herds. But the school-boys did not think so. That track in

the mud hinted that Painter was ahead of them on the trail of a thousand dollars.

"I guess," said Mick Kavanagh slowly, "that guy hit the trail as soon as they was snoozing in the bunkhouse to look for his cayuse."

"I suppose he would," said Dick Carr. "Barney Bailey and his men saved him from the marshal, but they'd string him up like a shot if they found out that it was he that robbed Mr. Dunwoody. He dare not let the horse be found by anybody but himself, with the dollars on it."

"I'll say he's honing to cinch them dollars, too!" grinned Slick. "With a thousand dollars in his rags, Painter won't stay 'punching cows on Kicking Mule—he will sure hit the horizon while he can hit it safe. They sure seen the last of him at Kicking Mule, if he ropes in that bronc."

"Let's get on!"

"Watch out," said Slick as he remounted his horse. "Painter packs a gun, and if he sees us on his trail, we shall sure go over Jordan so fast we shall want to know how we got there."

The three were looking serious as they rode on. The trail of the grey bronco led westward, towards the distant slopes of Squaw Mountain, and here and there Slick picked up the tracks of another horse with it. It looked as if Painter had guessed that his lost bronco would make for the water-hole, and had ridden there direct from the ranch to pick up the trail. Anyhow, it was certain that some rider was ahead of the schoolboys, and they could hardly doubt that it was Painter. They rode warily, watching for an enemy. They were unarmed, and they had not the slightest doubt that Painter Pete would burn powder if he sighted them.

They had not counted on that when they rode out of Packsaddle School on the thousand dollar trail. But it would not have stopped them—and it did not stop them now.

Mile after mile—the trail easier now, with the second horse's hoofprints added to those of the lost bronco. The moon was going, and a faint flush of sunrise came up in the east. The distant summit of Squaw Mountain caught the rays, and glimmered in the rising sun. Suddenly, from the silence of the plains came an echoing report. Bang!

"I guess that's a six-gun!" said Slick.

"But what—" exclaimed Dick Carr,

"Sure, it's Painter!"

Dick rose in his stirrups, and stared across the plain, glimmering between the sinking moon and the sunrise. They were south of Squaw Mountain now, and illimitable prairie stretched before them to the west. It was barred here and there by belts of timber, blotting the view. But the echoing pistol-shot showed that some rider was not far away.

Bang! came the report again.

"It's sure Painter, burning powder," said Slick. "I guess we'll spot him when we hit them cottonwoods. Watch out for the pizen skunk, or Bill Sampson will sure miss three good men from his tally at Packsaddle."

With beating hearts, the three schoolboys rode on towards the belt of cottonwood trees, beyond which, they knew now, was the man who had worn the flour-sack, gun in hand!

CHAPTER 7.

Hunting the Horse!

PAINTER PETE loosed off another shot, and swore savagely. There was bitter rage in his bronzed, hard-featured, bearded face. Sitting his horse he fired again, and missed. The uncertain light and the swift movements of his target beat the man with the six-gun. He cursed as he jammed it back into the holster, and put spurs to his horse's flanks again.

Like a shadow in the uncertain light,

the grey bronco flitted before him. His rope was ready as he rode.

But it was not easy to rope the bronco. The grey was a half-tamed, fierce buck-jumper, and Painter had not been a gentle master! The animal had tasted freedom, and was wise to the rope! He was leading the trail-thief an unexpected dance on the prairie.

And Painter knew that he had no time to cut to waste. He had slipped quietly out of the bunkhouse at Kicking Mule while the outfit were sleeping to take the trail of a thousand dollars. He was not likely to be missed till sun-up. But when Barney Bailey and the punchers missed him, what were they going to think? Barney had given orders for half a dozen of the outfit to ride in search of the lost bronc at sun-up, believing that when the grey was found, Painter would be cleared of suspicion. Painter, knowing only too well what would be found in the bronco's saddlebags, was not likely to wait for that!

He had picked up and followed the trail, and come on the grey bronco, sleeping in the grass, ten miles from the spot where he had been lost. But the sound of his horse had been enough for the wary buck-jumper, and Painter had no chance of getting within the cast of a forty-foot rope.

The grey fled before him, elusive as a shadow in the moonlight. In sheer desperation Painter loosed off his six-gun to bring the animal down. The grey was worth fifty dollars of any guy's dust, but it was worth shooting him down to cinch the thousand dollars packed in the saddlebags, and hit the horizon with it. But successive shots had failed, and the enraged cow-puncher took up the trail again, driving on his horse with whip and spur.

"Doggone him!" snarled Painter, as he galloped. "Aw, doggone the pesky critter! I guess I'll sure make a colander of him, once I got a bead on him, goldarn his pesky hide!"

The sun was coming up over the Frio. By this time he was missed at Kicking Mule. What was Barney Bailey going to think? He was going to guess that the Packsaddle schoolboys had been right—that Painter was the man in the flour-sack who had held up Andy Butt's back on the river-trail. Little cared Painter if he got the buck-skin bag of greenbacks and hit the Mexican border with his prize safe. But he had not got it yet.

The horse he had taken from the Kicking Mule corral was a good animal, but not equal to the grey bronco. In a race he had no chance of running the grey down. All he could do was to keep on the track, watching for a chance to bring the fugitive down with his six-gun. His only comfort was that the chase led him farther and farther to the open west, away from the Kicking Mule Ranch. If Barney Bailey followed him he was well ahead. That three Packsaddle schoolboys were closer behind did not occur to Painter for a moment.

He had forgotten the Packsaddlers, except to give them an occasional curse as the cause of his present trouble.

Bang!

He fired again as he rode, but he might as well have fired at a will-of-the-wisp. The grey, galloping fast, was far ahead, evidently determined not to be recaptured if it could help it. But suddenly, to Painter's surprise and relief, the shadowy bronco slowed down and swerved.

For a moment or two, glad as he was to see it, he did not see the reason. Then he understood. The runaway bronc had run into a herd of cows sleeping on the prairie. The galloping hoofs, and the ringing shots from Painter's revolver, had startled them, and they heaved up from the grass, hairy backs billowing right and left, long horns glimmering.

The bronco swerved from the startled herd, and swung off on a new course, almost at right angles. Painter Pete,

cutting across, saved distance. It was a stroke of sheer luck for him, for it brought him within a lasso-cast.

His coiled rope circled round and flew. Pete was a good hand with a rope. But the grey bronco was wary. He had been roped before, and perhaps he remembered more than one savage quirling he had received from Painter after giving trouble. The rope was touching him when he swerved and eluded it, and dashed on free, Painter sputtering oaths as he rode after him, coiling in the rope. With flashing heels the grey bronco was heading for the belt of cottonwoods, winding back the way he had fled—and the enraged puncher was now chasing him back in the direction of Kicking Mule Ranch—the last direction he would have wished the runaway to take.

Bang! roared the six-gun.

There was a shrill squeal from the grey. The bullet had gone closer this time, clipping a strip of skin from its haunches. For a moment Pete hoped to see the bronco pitch over. But it was only a graze; though the pain of the cut had the effect of startling the grey into still wilder flight.

"Doggone him!" panted Painter, as he drove on his sweating horse with whip and spur.

The grey bronco dashed among the cottonwoods. Desperately, Painter Pete dashed after him, gripping his gun, rage and fury blazing from his eyes.

CHAPTER 8.

For Life or Death!

DICK CARR gave a yell.

"Look out!"

"Gum!" gasped Slick.

The three schoolboys, riding on to the belt of cottonwoods, were not a hundred yards from the nearest trees, where there was a wild thudding of hoofs. From the trees, with tossing head and streaming mane, burst a wildly galloping horse—saddled and

bridled, but with no rider on his back.

"The bronc!" yelled Mick.

It was the grey bronco, mad with excitement and terror, galloping like the wind—almost directly towards the Packsaddle three.

For a second they stared at it in amazement.

From the sound of firing beyond the timber, they had guessed that the man hunting the horse was trying to shoot it down. Evidently he had not succeeded, though a red streak on a grey flank showed that one bullet at least had gone very close. What had turned the runaway back the schoolboys could not guess; they were amazed to see it break suddenly from the cottonwoods, coming back almost on its own trail.

But amazed as they were, they were quick on the uptake. Slick's lasso was swiftly in his hand.

The maddened runaway came swooping on, and then sighting the three riders, swerved to elude them. But as he swerved, Slick dashed at him, and the coiled rope circled.

This time the grey did not dodge the falling loop. The riata caught him as he swerved, and settled over the stretched neck.

"Cinched!" roared Poindexter.

The grey thundered on, striving to break away. But the end of the lasso was fast to Slick's saddle-bow, and there was no escape for the roped bronc.

The drag on the rope tightened the noose round his neck, half-throttling him. Squealing, the grey reared and cavorted, with lashing heels and flaming eyes.

But he was safe on the rope. Slick Poindexter gave a breathless chuckle.

"We got him! I guess Painter ain't handled him yet—the dust is still in them saddlebags, you'uns! We sure got back them thousand dollars."

"Look out!" roared Mick Kavanagh.

A horseman, wildly spurring, burst from the cottonwoods.

That the trail-thief had not yet

cinched and handled the grey was certain, for it was Painter Pete, still in pursuit. He came thundering from the trees, gun in hand, eyes ablaze—a man mad with rage, and the fear of losing his prey. He had jammed fresh cartridges into his six-gun as he rode through the trees, and he was still hoping to riddle the grey with bullets, and capture the buckskin bag of dollars from its dead body.

At the sight of the Packsaddle schoolboys, Painter Pete's jaw dropped in his astonishment.

"Them young geeks!" he gasped.

The next moment he was firing.

"Beat it!" yelled Poin Dexter. "Burn the wind for Packsaddle."

He spurred his pony.

Bang, bang, bang! roared the six-gun, as Dick, Slick, and Mick rode for their lives, the captured grey galloping behind Slick's pony.

The Packsaddle boys had ridden hard many a time on the prairie. But never had they ridden so hard as they rode now.

Thud, thud, thud, rang the galloping hoofs. With whip and spur they rode for their very lives. They were barely out of range of the roaring six-gun, and a moment's loss of time was sudden death. Painter Pete, mad with fury at seeing his prize snatched away under his very eyes, was shooting to kill. He rode like a madman, firing as he rode. Dick Carr felt the wind of a bullet as it sped.

"Attaboy!" yelled Slick. "Burn the wind, you'uns, burn the wind!"

They were burning the wind! But the maddened ruffian behind them was burning the wind, too, and it was a race for life or death.

Dick Carr glanced back. His pinto was forging ahead of his friends, and he checked its speed, to keep pace. The grey, at the end of the forty-foot rope, galloped ahead, and led in the wild race. After it thundered the Packsaddle schoolboys, riding abreast, heads

bent low, the wind rushing past them like a whirlwind.

Either the grey or Dick's pinto could have beaten Painter Pete hands down. But he was as well mounted as either Slick or Mick, and it was the slowest that set the pace for the party. Spurring his horse with savage cruelty, lashing it fiercely with his quirt, the trail thief tore on in pursuit, his eyes gleaming with fierce hope. The schoolboys had had the luck to rope in the run-away, but it looked like luck for Painter, also, for the grey bronco's speed was checked by the rope; his pace had to be that of Slick's pony. And Slick's pony was no faster than Painter's mount. He did not gain, but he did not lose, and he rode desperately, knowing that the slightest accident or delay would bring the schoolboys within range of his gun.

They knew it, too. A slip of a foot, the plunge of a hoof into a gopher hole, meant death. They fled over the rolling prairie, under the streaming rays of the rising sun. Bang! roared behind them again; and if the lead dropped short, it was only by yards.

Gallop, gallop! Dick Carr looked over his shoulder again. In the clear sunlight he could see the savage, scowling, bearded face, the glittering eyes under the Stetson hat, the smoke from the six-gun.

"Attaboy!" panted Slick.

They rode on, wildly, fiercely. Bang! the gun roared again, and Mick gave a yell. The lead had grazed his hat. Was the pursuer gaining? If he was, he was still too far for effective shooting. But when the six-gun roared again the bullet came closer, clipping Dick's stirrup leather. The trail-thief's horse, savagely spurred, madly lashed, was lessening the distance in a wild burst of speed.

"Aw! Look, you'uns!" roared Poin Dexter suddenly.

Dick Carr could have shouted with joy. Ahead, bobbing over the waving grass, were Stetson hats.

"Punchers!" gasped Mick.

"Kicking Mule guys, you bet!" said Slick, with a gasping chuckle. "Say, I guess they won't stand for Painter this time, like they did yesterday in Packsaddle. I'll say nunk!"

The three schoolboys headed for the bobbing Stetsons. They counted six as they drew nearer. It was a bunch of Kicking Mule 'punchers riding towards them. As they came in nearer sight they recognised Barney Bailey, foreman of the Kicking Mule, riding at their head. The 'punchers had evidently sighted them and heard the shooting, for they came on at a gallop.

Bang! Once more Dick Carr looked back, and the wind of a bullet fanned his cheek as he did so.

But it was Painter Pete's last shot. He had spotted the Stetsons, and he knew what to expect from the Kicking Mule outfit when the bag of dollars was found on the grey bronco. And Painter Pete, gritting his teeth with rage, wheeled his sweating, panting horse, and rode for the Mexican border.

CHAPTER 9.

Barney Has to Believe!

BARNEY BAILEY reined in his horse.

Three breathless schoolboys came to a halt. The grey at the end of Slick's rope struggled to escape, but the throttling noose held it fast. The Kicking Mule 'punchers surrounded the schoolboys, eyeing them curiously, and rather grimly.

"I guess you're far enough from your school, you young ginks!" growled Barney. "Say, that looks like Painter's bronc you've got on your rope!"

"I guess it looks a whole heap like it, seeing that it's that very cayuse, Barney," grinned Slick. "And if you give the saddlebags the once over, I'll tell a man you'll raise the bag of dollars that was taken from Andy Butt's back yesterday."

"Aw, forget it!" snapped Barney. Dick Carr laughed.

"You stood by that trail-thief yesterday, Barney," he said. "You got him away from the marshal of Packsaddle. But——"

"Ain't you missed him off'n the ranch yet, Barney, you gink?" grinned Mick Kavanagh.

Barney grunted.

"I guess we missed him, and we saddled up to come after him, looking for that pesky bronc," he growled. "I guess Painter was in a powerful hurry to get arter that bronc, but that ain't no proof——"

The schoolboys chuckled. The Kicking Mule foreman was hard to convince that a Kicking Mule man had clinched the rancher's bag of dollars from the Hard Tack bag. But there was plenty of proof on hand to convince even Barney.

Slick pulled on the rope, and the squealing, cavorting grey was pulled in. Two or three of the 'punchers dismounted to hold him, and soothe him, while Barney Bailey, still with incredulity in his obstinate face, groped in the saddlebags.

He drew forth a buckskin bag.

The expression on Barney's bronzed face, as he revealed it, was so extraordinary that it made the schoolboys burst into a roar of laughter, and all the 'punchers grinned.

Slowly Barney unfastened the bag.

Within was a roll of dollar bills. In silence, and with his grim face growing grimmer, the foreman of Kicking Mule counted the bills. They totalled precisely a thousand dollars. Still silent, Barney shoved the bag into his own saddlebags.

"Got it now, Barney," grinned Slick. "You figure that that's Rancher Dunwoody's thousand bucks, or you reckon that Painter picked up that roll playing poker down to Hard Tack?"

"Aw, can it!" grunted Barney. "I guess it's a clinch. You git your rope off'n that bronc, young Poindexter——"

that's a Kicking Mule cayuse. I guess you want to beat it for school."

He turned to the punchers.

"We got it clear now. Painter was sure fooling us when we got him away from the marshal. We was played for suckers. I guess it was Painter, and no other guy, what held up Andy Butt's hack. And I'll tell all Texas that he's going up on a rope for it, if we get him! Ride, you gecks!"

A Stetson hat had vanished to the south. It was Painter Pete's turn to ride for his life, and he was burning the wind for Mexico. With a clatter of hoofs, and a jingle of spurs and bridles, Barney Bailey and his men galloped off southward, taking the grey bronco with them. And Dick, Slick, and Mick were left sitting their horses, looking at one another.

Slick burst into a laugh.

"I guess Barney ain't best pleased to get wise to it that it was a Kicking Mule guy that robbed Old Man Dunwoody," he said. "I sure reckon he will make Painter pay for it if he gets him. I'll say that galoot, Painter, is riding for his neck!"

They followed the riders with their eyes till the bunch of Stetson hats vanished in the waving grass. Then they hit the trail for Packsaddle.

CHAPTER 10.

Mad!

BILL SAMPSON, headmaster of Packsaddle, rose from his desk as three dusty fellows came into the school-room.

School was going on when Dick and Slick and Mick arrived. Bill had his quirt ready across his knees.

Bill was hopping mad!

The expression on Bill's face that morning was quite agreeable to Steve Carson. It boded trouble for the three truants who had ridden out at night and failed to turn up when the bell rang for school. Grimmer and grim-

mer grew Bill's brow as the morning passed.

Steve Carson had been released when the bunch woke that morning. He had told Bill why the three had tied him up. So Bill knew why they had gone. But that did not abate his wrath. Not for a moment did he figure that they would ride down the runaway, and rope in the bag of dollars. When they came Bill was going to put them wise to what he thought of young ginks who broke herd without leave. And when the three came into the school-room they found Bill ready.

"You ornery, doggoned, piefaced young piecans!" roared Bill, in a voice that woke all the echoes of the cow town school. "What sort of a game do you call this? Say! You figure you can break out of this herd jest when you want, like you was ornery steers? You want to forget it, and you want to forget it quick! You hear me whisper?"

"It's all right——" began Dick Carr.

"I guess——" started Poindexter.

"We're sure telling you!" Mick got going.

But they got no further. They had expected Bill to be mad—hopping mad! But they had hoped to placate him by explaining that they had recaptured the bag of dollars belonging to Mr. Dunwoody at Kicking Mule. No doubt that explanation would have placated Bill—if he had heard it. But he gave them no time to speak. Before they could get it out, Bill waded in with the quirt.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

"Oh crumbs!" yelled Dick Carr, dodging frantically.

"Wake snakes!" yelled Slick.

"Howly Mike!" shrieked Mick Kavanagh.

Three hapless schoolboys jumped and hopped and dodged. Grinning faces watched them from the class. Small Brown blinked approval through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Steve Carson chuckled gleefully. Wild howls

rang from the three as they hopped and skipped and jumped.

Up and down the school-room of Packsaddle they went, twisting and dodging, jumping over benches, scrambling over desks—Bill behind them all the time, with the lashing quirt. Not till Bill was breathless did he quit handing it over.

"Now you squat down, and let Mister Brown teach you jografy!" roared Bill. "I guess that will see you through!"

"You piefaced gink!" yelled Slick. "You ornery old piecan, can't you give a guy a chance to speak? I'm telling you we got after that bronc of Painter's, and——"

"Can it!" hooted Bill.

"We roped in that cayuse, you dog-goned bull-dozer!" roared Mick.

"And we got back the bag of dollars!" growled Dick Carr. "Wasn't that worth going on the trail for? We've not even had any breakfast."

Bill Sampson stared at them.

"You cinched that cayuse, and got back Old Man Dunwoody's dollars!" he ejaculated.

"Yep, you ornery old geck, and handed them to Barney Bailey!" hooted Slick. "We was on a thousand-dollar trail, you doggoned old hoodlum, and we got the goods!"

"Waal, carry me home to die!" exclaimed Bill. "I guess if I'd knowed that, I wouldn't have quirted you! Nope!"

"I guess that don't cut much ice now you've done it!" groaned Mick.

Bill grinned.

"You said it!" he agreed. "It don't. Vamoose the ranch, you young gecks, and ask Tin Tung to fix you up some eats. No school for you this morning."

Which the wriggling three were glad to do. Mister Brown taught geography without them that morning, while they took a well-earned rest after riding on the thousand-dollar trail. But they wriggled a good deal while they rested. Bill had a heavy hand with a quirt.

CHAPTER 11.

Tit for Tat!

DICK CARR grinned. Bill Sampson reached for his quirt.

Certainly, Dick ought not to have grinned. Bill Sampson was his headmaster. Neither was it a safe game to grin at Bill, with his quirt lying so handy on the desk.

Morning school had been dismissed at Packsaddle. Small Brown, the teacher, had gone out, followed by the bunch. Bill called to Dick as he was going out with the rest, and the tender-foot of Packsaddle came up to his desk.

On that desk lay a paper written in Bill's hand.

Bill's fist was more used to handling a quirt, a bronco's reins, or the butt of a six-gun than a pen. And Bill, who knew all about punching cows, did not know a lot about spelling. He was the man to run the cow-town school—only a guy like Bill could have handled that tough bunch. But Small Brown did all the teaching in the school-room. Small as he was, Mr. Brown had much more knowledge packed into his five feet six than Bill had in his six feet five. Dick Carr grinned quite involuntarily at the sight of the paper written by the Texas headmaster:

"LORST!

"Baccy powch, full of terbacker, sunwhar in Packsaddle. Dollar to the guy what totes it to Packsaddle Skool.

"BILL SAMPSON."

"I guess," said Bill, fixing the tender-foot schoolboy with a cold eye, "that I want you to tote this here notice down to the burg and stick it on the door of Hanson's store. I guess I don't want to see you snigger none."

"Sorry!" gasped Dick. "But—— Whooop!"

Crack!

The quirt curled round his legs.

Dick jumped and dodged. One lick from Bill's quirt was enough for any guy at Packsaddle. Bill had a heavy

hand. He had been accustomed to handling steers before the citizens of Packsaddle appointed him headmaster of the school. Sometimes he seemed to figure that he was still handling steers.

"You sniggering some more?" hooted Bill.

"Oh! Ow! No!" gasped Dick.

"Vamoose the ranch, then, and git that there notice stuck on Hanson's door!" growled Bill. "Beat it, pronto!"

Dick picked up the paper from the desk, and beat it.

Outside in the playground Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh were waiting for him by the porch.

"Say, what's biting Bill?" asked Slick.

Dick held up the paper.

"I've got to take this down to Hanson's store. Coming along?"

"You said it," agreed Mick.

The three schoolboys walked out of the gates, to go down the school trail to the cow town. It was only a short distance, and they did not trouble to fetch their horses from the corral.

But half-way to the town there was a clatter of hoofs on the trail behind them.

Steve Carson came down from the school gates at a reckless gallop. Dick, Slick, and Mick had just time to spring out of the way of the galloping bronco. Catching his foot in his haste in a trailing mesquite root, Dick Carr went headlong.

The bully of Packsaddle laughed loudly as he tore by on the galloping bronco. Dick scrambled up, red with anger.

"Say, you pesky gink!" roared Slick Poindexter. "You figure you've bought this here trail?"

"Aw, go and chop chips!" called back Big Steve over his shoulder.

And he galloped on, and disappeared into the rugged street of the cow town.

"I guess that big stiff is asking for it a few," growled Slick.

And the three schoolboys resumed their way and arrived at Hanson's.

Hanson's store was the biggest build-

ing in Main Street, Packsaddle. It stood next to the Red Dog Saloon. A good many people were going in and out of the store. The big door stood wide open, and on the door a good many papers were pinned or stuck.

Packsaddle did not boast a newspaper. Local publicity was secured by a notice stuck on Hanson's door. Everybody in Packsaddle, sooner or later, was sure to see it, or hear about it. If a man had a horse to sell, or wanted to buy a bunch of steers, he would stick up a paper at Hanson's.

There were several other papers already on the pinewood door. Dick found a vacant spot, and proceeded to affix Bill's notice thereto. The writing was wildly scrawling, but the meaning was clear. All Packsaddle was going to know that the schoolmaster had lost his tobacco-pouch, and was prepared to pay one dollar for the recovery and return of the same.

"Pull in!" said Slick Poindexter, as Dick was turning away after finishing his task. "I guess Steve is around. Pipe that bronc!"

A brown bronco, with a white "stocking" on one forefoot, was hitched to the rail outside the Red Dog. It was Steve Carson's bronco, and the three recognised it at once. Steve's father, Two-Gun Carson, the gambler, was generally to be found at the Red Dog, and it was clear that Steve had gone into the saloon to see him.

"That's Steve's cayuse," said Poindexter, with a grin. "I guess I got a stunt."

"I'll buy it," said Dick.

"Big Steve figured that it was funny to ride us down on the trail," said Slick. "I guess he can walk back. He sure does hate hoofin' it."

"Good!" said Dick Carr, laughing.

Slick unhitched the bronco, and led it away up Main Street. Steve was still in the Red Dog Saloon when they hit the trail again and trotted the bronco back to the school.

It was about a quarter of an hour later that Big Steve came out of the

Red Dog, and discovered that his cayuse was missing. He stared round the rugged street in anger and alarm. Broncos cost dollars, even in the cow country, and horse-thieves were plentiful.

A Kicking Mule 'puncher was riding up the street, and Steve shouted to him. But the 'puncher had seen nothing of his horse.

Steve rushed into Hanson's Store to make alarmed inquiries. Hanson, the fat Dane, gave him news that relieved his alarm, but added to his anger.

"Dose poyas from te school, Dig, Slig, and Mig," said Mr. Hanson. "Dey take der hoss, isn't it? Dey gum here to stick a notice on der door, and dey take der hoss. I see dem from der vinder."

Steve grunted angrily, and tramped out again. He paused at the door, to look at the notice placed there by the schoolboys. He grinned at the spelling, as Dick had grinned when he first saw it. Having read the notice Steve passed on; but he paused and stepped back. The notice was scrawled in pencil, and Steve had a pencil in his pocket.

Taking care that no one observed his action, Steve added a figure and a letter to Bill's scrawled notice in similar scrawl. He put "20" before the word "dollar," and added an "s" to that word.

The notice now read as if Bill Sampson was offering twenty dollars reward for the return of his "lorst" tobacco-pouch.

Grinning, Steve walked up the street. The offer of twenty dollars, he figured, would set every idle loafer in the cow town hunting for that baccy-pouch, and it was certain to be found. And when the finder presented himself at Packsaddle School, and claimed twenty dollars, it was certain that Bill, who had offered only one, would refuse to pony up. There would be a rookus, and very likely a fight. And what was Bill going to think when he found that the trouble was caused by an alteration

of his notice? That Dick, Slick, and Mick had done it, of course. Bill's quirt would get busy, and Steve figured that the three would be sorry that they had walked off his horse.

He tramped up the trail to the school, arriving a little late for chuck. Tin Tung was serving the meal when Steve tramped into the chuckhouse, and a laugh greeted him as he entered.

"Say, you lost a cayuse?" chuckled Poindexter. "I guess you'll find him safe in the corral if you give it the once over, Steve."

"You been hunting around for that critter, Steve?" grinned Mick.

"You can think twice before you ride a fellow down again!" said Dick Carr.

"I guess it's one on you, Steve!" chuckled Pie Sanders.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

To the surprise of the bunch Steve laughed, too. It was not his way to take a joke against himself good-temperedly. But Steve, thinking of what was coming to the three when Bill got going with the quirt, roared. And when, after chuck, he told his pals, Slim Dixon and Poker Parker, they were tickled to death.

Bill Sampson, who was greatly attached to his old tobacco-pouch which had cost him four dollars at Tombstone, hoped that he would get news of it that day. Big Steve was sure that he would.

CHAPTER 12.

Measque Gets Mad!

SCHOOL was on at Packsaddle. The bunch were in their places at the pinewood desks. Small Brown was teaching them, and he had a very orderly class—for the excellent reason that Bill was seated at his high desk, with his quirt ready to his hand. When Bill was around the tough bunch were as meek as little lambs, and Mr. Brown found life worth living.

When Bill was not around it was

quite a different matter. At the present moment the bunch were quiet and attentive, only Carson, Dixon, and Parker every now and then exchanging grinning glances. They fully expected something to happen that afternoon.

And something did! The door on the wide porch was open, letting in the bright sunlight of Texas. Across that sunlight fell a shadow, and Bill looked round, and all the bunch looked up.

Mesquite Sam, a 'puncher of the Kicking Mule Ranch, stepped in—a big figure in his heavy cowman's boots and ten-gallon hat, with one cheek bulged by a big "chew" of tobacco.

Bill frowned. Having once ridden the ranges of the Kicking Mule himself as a 'puncher of cows, Bill was always glad to see an old acquaintance of the prairie. But not in school hours.

Bill was no great shakes of a schoolmaster, so far as education went. Of book-knowledge he had little, though he had a great store of knowledge that was perhaps more valuable. But though he could not teach like Mr. Brown, Bill could keep order as Mr. Brown never could, and he was very particular that class should never be interrupted. Even Marshal Lick had been called a pesky piccan, and told to beat it when he horned in while lessons were on.

So Bill waved a large hand at Mesquite, waving him away.

"Vamoose the ranch!" he rapped. "This here is a school, not the Red Dog Saloon, Mesquite! Beat it!"

Mesquite blinked at him.

"Doggone you, Bill!" was his answer. "You put up a notice asking galoots to s'arch around for your baccy-pouch, and you shoot off your mouth that-a-way when a guy horns in to put you wise that he's found it!"

"Aw, you allow you've cinched that pouch, Mesquite?" said Bill. "All the same, you've no call to horn in while classes is on! Ain't you never been to no school, you uneducated cow-puncher? Don't you savvy——"

"Can it, Bill!" said Mesquite. "I guess I got to get back to Kicking Mule,

and ain't got a lot of time for chewing the rag. I'll say that when I seed your notice at Hanson's, I jest went rubbering around arter that baccy-pouch, and I sure cinched it. It took me more'n two hours to raise it where you lost it, you old piccan."

Bill stared at him. He had offered a dollar for the return of the lost pouch, to pay any guy for the trouble of coming up to the school with it. But a dollar was hardly enough to set a man searching, especially for the length of two hours. Bill gave a snort.

"I guess you Kicking Mule guys has got time to burn, if you can waste two hours that-a-way!" he grunted. "But now you're here you hand over that pesky pouch and quit! I'm telling you that you're hornin' in where guys ain't wanted to come chewing the rag."

Mesquite tossed the tobacco-pouch on the desk. Bill picked it up and examined it. It was a big leather pouch, full of tobacco, though not so full as when Bill had lost it. The bulge in Mesquite's cheek hinted that he had helped himself to a "plug" to chew, as he came up to the school—and the size of the bulge hinted that it was a good big plug!

There was little about that big leathern pouch to distinguish it from a score of others. Still, Bill knew his own property and he was satisfied. He groped in the huge pockets of his crackers for a silver dollar.

"I'll say I'm powerful glad to see that pesky old pouch agin!" said Bill, more graciously. "Here's your dollar, Mesquite."

He extended the silver dollar towards the 'puncher.

Mesquite Sam did not take it. He stared at it, and stared at Bill.

Mesquite might or might not have "time to burn," but certainly he would not have rooted up and down Pack-saddle for a couple of hours to earn a single dollar! Mesquite was thinking of twenty dollars.

"Say, Bill, what you call that?" inquired the 'puncher warmly.

"Ain't you never seed a silver dollar before, you piecan?" asked Bill.

"I'll say yep!" agreed Mesquite. "And I'll jest ask you, Bill, where's the other nineteen?"

"Nineteen nothing!" yapped Bill. "Say, you gone loco. There's your dollar, like it was said in my notice down to Hanson's Store."

"Forget it!" roared Mesquite. "You figure that I've bin rubbering all over Packsaddle for a dollar!" Mesquite made a stride nearer to the headmaster of Packsaddle. "I'm asking you to pony up them twenty dollars, like it was said in your notice down to Hanson's."

"Twenty jumping painters!" gasped Bill. "You figure I'm paying a guy twenty dollars for an old baccy-pouch what cost no more'n four at Tombstone, and that was seven years ago?"

"I guess I figured you was loco, or else you wanted that baccy-pouch bad!" agreed Mesquite. "But that ain't no concern of mine! You stick up a notice about twenty dollars——"

"Twenty howlin' coyotes! I put one dollar on that paper——"

"I'll say you put twenty!" roared Mesquite.

"And I'll say you was as drunk as a Mexican, and you saw double!" roared Bill. "I'll say——"

"Say nothing!" howled Mesquite. "I'll tell all Texas I'm here for twenty dollars, Bill Sampson, and don't you forget it!"

"Twenty ring-tailed gophers!" snorted Bill. He turned to the staring class. "Here you—Carr!"

"Yes," gasped Dick Carr. "You gave the notice the once-over, afore you moseyed down to Hanson's. You tell this bone-headed 'puncher what was wrote on it."

"One dollar reward for finding the tobacco-pouch," said Dick Carr, at once.

"I guess that's so!" said Slick Poin-dexter. "I read it, too."

"You said it!" exclaimed Mick. Mesquite stared at them. Mesquite

knew what he had read on that paper on Hanson's door. He knew that he had started to search for the lost pouch like a dozen other guys, simply because the munificent reward of twenty dollars was offered. Mesquite's temper was rising fast.

"You ornery young piecans!" he roared. "There ain't a word of truth in it. Bill, you pesky old lobo-wolf. Packsaddle won't hone to be keeping you on hyer as a schoolmaster, you teaching them young guys to lie like Mexican half-breeds!"

Bill Sampson leaped from his desk, red with rage.

"Pack it up!" he roared. "And beat it afore I spread you over this hyer school-room in little pieces——"

"Pack up nothing!" bawled Mesquite. "I'm hyer for my twenty dollars, and I'll say—— Whooooo!"

Bill hurled the silver dollar at him, catching him fairly on the nose. Mesquite broke off with a wild yell.

"There's your dollar!" bellowed Bill. "Take it or leave it, and quit! You want to beat it while you're in one piece."

Mesquite did not beat it. He clapped his hand to his nose. Then he rushed at Bill. The next moment a terrific scrap was raging in the school-room of Packsaddle, and all the bunch were on their feet, watching it with breathless interest.

CHAPTER 13.

Gun-play at Packsaddle!

TRAMP! Tramp! Tramp! To and fro went the headmaster of Packsaddle School and the 'puncher from Kicking Mule Ranch, grappling and thumping and punching.

It was a terrific combat.

The bunch watched breathlessly. Small Brown watched, his eyes almost popping through his horn-rimmed spectacles in alarm. Steve Carson chuckled. He had figured that trouble

would follow that misunderstanding about the amount of the reward. He had been right.

Mesquite was a powerful man. But he was not a match for the gigantic headmaster of Packsaddle.

For full five minutes they struggled and swayed, panted and gasped. Then Mesquite was off the floor.

Bill had a grip with his right on the slack of Mesquite's trousers, with his left on the back of the cattleman's neck-scarf. Mesquite swung in the air, arms and legs flying.

"Good old Bill!" chuckled Slick.

"I'll say Bill's cinched that ornery guy!" chortled Mick.

"Say, you let up on a galoot!" came Mesquite's frantic roar. "Say, I guess I'll come a-shooting—"

Unheeding, Bill Sampson strode out of the school-room, through the porch, with the big cattleman struggling and wriggling vainly in his grasp.

There was a rush to the door to watch him as he went.

Right across the playground went Bill, to the gate in the fence that guarded the edge of the high bluffs over the Rio Frio.

On the top of the bluffs he came to a halt. Ten feet below was the bed of mud beside the river. It stretched for a good distance from the foot of the bluff to the waters of the Frio.

A fearful yell from Mesquite told that he guessed what was coming next. He swung dizzily in Bill's powerful hands.

"Say, you let up!" raved Mesquite. "I'll sure come back with a gat in my grip, and fill you with holes like you was a colander! I'll tell all Texas —"

Mesquite's yell was lost in the air as he was tossed over the bluff. There was a heavy squash in the mud below.

Bill glared down at the cattleman, almost buried in soft mud, struggling wildly to his feet, spluttering and gurgling.

"I guess that's yours, Mesquite!"

roared Bill. "You horn in at this here school agin, and I'll say I'll fix you up for a front seat in a funeral!"

And, leaving the hapless 'puncher to splutter and crawl out of the mud, Bill tramped back to the schoolhouse.

He found the porch crammed with staring schoolboys. Bill glared at them.

"Say, what's this game?" he roared. "What you young piccans rubbering around this-a-way for, when Mister Brown's a-teaching you lessons! You figure that this here is a doggoned rodeo? Beat it!"

Luckily for the bunch, Bill's quilt still lay on his desk. There was a rush back into the school-room, and Bill followed it, landing out with his heavy boots to speed up. There were loud howls from the members of the bunch who were rearmost.

In record time they were back at their desks. Small Brown, twittering with nervousness, resumed his instruction. Bill sat down, pushed back his Stetson, and mopped his perspiring brow. Even Bill had had to exert himself in handling Mesquite.

However, the "rookus" was now over, Bill comforted himself with a chew from his recovered pouch. But the bunch noticed that he took his big Colt from the holster, examined it, and put it back again.

Mesquite had threatened to come back "a-shooting," and it was quite possible that he might make his words good. Bill reckoned that it was wise to have a gun handy and ready.

It was about an hour later that footsteps were heard coming up to the porch. The bunch exchanged eager glances. They wondered whether it was Mesquite on the warpath.

The same idea evidently occurred to Bill, for he was seen to give his gun-belt a hitch, to bring the butt of his Colt nearer to his grasp.

Again a shadow blotted the sunlight at the door. But it was not Mesquite Sam this time. It was a plump, swarthy Mexican who entered—dark-

skinned, with black and silver buttons on his bell-trousers.

Most of the Packsaddle bunch knew him. He was Jose Gomez, who ran a pulque joint in the cow town, where Mexican vaqueros congregated to soak their national drink.

Why Gomez had come up to Packsaddle School was rather a puzzle. Bill, already not in the best of tempers, glared at him.

"Say, you greasy gink—" he hooted.

Gomez came into the school-room, removed his sombrero, and bowed to Bill with Spanish politeness. But Spanish politeness was a sheer waste on the headmaster of Packsaddle. He had no use for greasers, and least of all for Jose Gomez, whose reputation in the cow town was a juicy one.

"Senor Sampson—" began Gomez.

"Pack it up and quit!" snorted Bill. "No guys ain't allowed in this here school-room! Vamoose!"

"But you lose a pouch!" said the Mexican. "You offer a reward! I find a pouch, senor!"

He held up a leather tobacco-pouch so like Bill's that it might have been its twin!

Bill stared! The bunch stared! Gomez grinned and bowed.

"Jumping painters!" gasped Bill.

His tobacco-pouch, already found and returned by Mesquite Sam, was in his pocket! Evidently the Mexican was not aware of that!

Every guy in Packsaddle had seen Bill's pouch at one time or another. There were plenty more like it to be had at the store!

Evidently the offer—or supposed offer—of twenty dollars reward had tempted Mr. Gomez! Unaware that the lost pouch had been found and returned, the cool rogue had come along with another just like it, packed with tobacco! It was worth the expenditure of three or four dollars to cinch twenty!

Bill gazed at him agape!

But for the fact that he had already recovered his old pouch, it was very

probable that he would have fallen for the trick!

Not that he would have handed over twenty dollars, as the Mexican supposed. Gomez, of course, knew nothing of Steve's trickery, and took the notice at Hanson's at face value.

"Howlin' coyotes!" gasped Bill, almost stupefied. "I'll say this is the bee's knee! Yep!"

"Your pouch, senor!" said Gomez, approaching him with another bow, the bunch watching him spellbound. "Often I see him, senor, when you honour the town with your presence! Si, senor! When I find him in the street I know him at once—he is yours! I hasten to return him to you, Senor Sampson."

"Oh, gum!" breathed Slick Poincxter. "I'll whisper that that greaser is sure asking for trouble!"

"You said it!" grinned Mick.

"Doggone my cats!" gasped Bill. "You figure that baccy-pouch is mine, Mister Gomez! You jest hold it up for a guy to see!"

Mr. Gomez held up the tobacco-pouch.

Bill whipped the Colt from his belt.

Bang!

There was a fearful yell from the Mexican. The bullet from Bill's six-gun tore the tobacco-pouch from his hand, and a strip of skin from one of the fingers at the same time.

"Caramba!" yelled Gomez, in surprise and rage.

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

Bang roared the six-gun again. The bullet chipped leather from one of Gomez's boots! Bill, rising from his desk, strode at him with smoking gun, red with wrath.

"Beat it!" he roared. "Hop, you dog-goned greaser—hop!"

Bang, bang!

With a yell of terror Gomez hopped! Bill was "fanning" him with the six-gun, firing at his feet. Gomez had to hop to save his feet, and he hopped frantically.

The Packsaddle bunch roared with

merriment. Even Small Brown grinned. Hopping wildly, the Mexican gained the doorway of the porch. Bang! roared the gun, and the Mexican darted through the porch and ran for his life.

Bill rushed after him.

Bang! roared the last shot of the six-gun, and a yell floated back as it spun the sombrero on the fleeing man's head.

Then there was a clatter of hoofs on the trail. Jose Gomez was burning the wind for the cow town, fervently wishing that he had never thought of attempting to play that cunning trick on the schoolmaster.

Bill Sampson tramped back into the school-room, grinning.

"I'll say that greasy guy is sorry he called, a few!" he remarked. "Say, you young piecans rubbering agin? You want to 'tend to Mister Brown, or you honing for the quirt?"

Bill picked up the quirt from his desk. The bunch decided immediately to attend to Mister Brown!

CHAPTER 14.

Not Funny for Steve!

"I GUESS I'll buy it!" said Slick Poindexter, rubbing his nose in puzzled amazement.

But nobody had it to sell.

It perplexed all the bunch, excepting Steve, Slim, and Poker. They knew.

School was over and the bunch were in the playground. Steve lounged in the gateway, rather in hope of seeing Mesquite Sam coming back for trouble. The other fellows discussed the strange happening of the afternoon.

Why Mesquite had fancied it was worth twenty dollars to recover that lost baccy-pouch was one mystery. Why the greasy Mexican had horned in with a put-up tale was another. Jose was rogue enough for anything, but he had spent money on that tobacco-pouch he had tried to palm off as Bill's; not much, perhaps, but certainly more than the dollar that was offered as a reward.

So it really looked as if Jose Gomez, as well as Mesquite, fancied that the reward was larger than that stated by Bill.

Dick, Slick, and Mick knew what was on the notice they had posted up at Hanson's. They did not even know that Big Steve had seen it at all, let alone altered it. So they were puzzled and perplexed, and so were the rest of the bunch. Bill was as puzzled as any man! Mesquite's mistake, and the Mexican's trickery, had him equally beat.

When there came a galloping of hoofs on the school trail, the Packsaddle bunch rushed to the gate. Big Steve, grinning, shouted:

"Say, you'uns, here come the Kicking Mule guys, and I guess they're sure going to put it over Bill!"

"Gum!" exclaimed Slick, and he drew a deep breath as he stared at the riders on the trail. "I'll say that looks like trouble."

Mesquite Sam was riding up the trail with four companions—men from Kicking Mule Ranch. All of them packed guns, and all of them looked grim. Grim, bearded faces frowned under the Stetson hats.

There was a deep buzz in the school bunch. Only too clearly the Kicking Mule 'punchers were hitting Packsaddle for trouble.

Dick Carr cut across to the school-house. Bill was in a rocker in the porch, his long legs stretched out, a frown on his rugged brow. He was still puzzling over the afternoon's happenings.

"They're coming, Bill!" panted the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. "Mesquite, with four more—"

Bill shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I guess if they've come a-gunning after this baby they won't all be riding hum to Kicking Mule at sundown!" he remarked. "You beat it, kid, and tell the bunch to keep clear. I guess there may be hot lead spilt around hyer."

Dick rejoined his friends, but the

punch did not keep clear. Nearly all crowded round as the cowmen dismounted at the gate and strode in, clattering in their heavy boots with jingling spurs. Mesquite Sam roared to the schoolboys.

"Say, where's that doggoned schoolmaster of yourn what throwed a guy into the mud of the Frio? Shoot!"

"I guess Bill's along to the schoolhouse, Sam," answered Slick, "and all ready to throw you into the Frio again, and your side-kickers after you."

"Can it, you!" snapped Sam, and he strode over to the schoolhouse porch, followed by his friends. "Say, you doggoned schoolmaster," he roared, as he advanced "you hiding away like a doggoned coyote?"

"Not so's you'd notice it!" drawled Bill, as he stepped into view from the schoolhouse with a gun in either hand. "I guess I'm at home, you'uns, and if you want me I'm your antelope. Sure!"

There was an angry buzz from the 'punchers. Hands were on guns, but none was drawn for the moment. Bill Sampson was lightning on the shoot, and with either hand he was a deadly marksman. And with a big Colt in each hand he faced the angry outfit coolly.

Mesquite Sam had a crumpled paper in one hand. He unfolded it and held it up. Dick, Slick, and Mick recognised the notice they had pinned on the door at Hanson's.

"Look at that, you pesky old piecan!" roared Mesquite. "I guess you know your own doggoned dockment agin."

"I sure do, old-timer!" assented Bill.

"Look at it, you ornery old gink! If that ain't twenty dollars wrote on it I'll sure eat it, and my six-gun arter it!" hooted Mesquite. "And I'm mentioning that I've horned in to collect them twenty dollars, and my pards have come to see that I do it, and if you kick, Bill Sampson, you'll get what's coming to you!"

Bill Sampson made no answer.

He was staring blankly at the notice extended in Mesquite's hand.

Plain to the eye was the statement that twenty dollars would be paid for the return of the "lorst" tobacco-pouch.

Bill's eyes were good, but he could hardly believe them. He knew what he had written on that paper, but what he read now was not what he had written.

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Bill at last.

He shoved his guns back into the holsters, heedless of the fact that every one of the 'punchers had now a gun in his hand.

"You owning up, you piecan?" shouted Mesquite. "You allow that's twenty dollars wrote on that bill, dog-gone your ornery hide?"

"You said it!" agreed Bill.

Dick Carr gave a shout.

"That was not on the paper when I posted it up at Hanson's. Slick and Mick knew that it wasn't. It's been changed."

"Aw, forget it!" yapped Mesquite. "Say, you Bill Sampson, I want to know, and I want to know quick! You spilling them twenty dollars?"

Bill gave the paper another earnest stare. He breathed hard and deep. The mystery was clear to him now.

"You hear me a-shouting?" roared Mesquite.

"You doggoned, ornery, located roughneck!" snorted Bill. "Pack it up and let a galoot shoot! I'm telling you I put one dollar on that paper, like young Carr sang out, and some ornery guy has fixed it up different while it was stuck on Hanson's door! You got that?"

"Aw, what you giving me?" grunted Mesquite, taken aback.

"Ain't you knowed me to be a square man?" roared Bill. "Ain't I rode with you'uns afore I was a schoolmaster on the Kicking Mule ranges? And did you ever know me throw a guy down? If I allowed I'd squeeze out twenty

dollars, ain't I good for twenty bucks and some over, doggone you? I guess this was fixed up for a joke on me!"

"Great gophers!" said Mesquite.

"How'd I know that there was twenty dollars wrote on that paper when you come up with that baccy-pouch?" snorted Bill. "It was done arter I sent it down to Hanson's! And if you ain't taking a white man's word, goldarn you, get going with them shooting-irons—and I'll sure mention that Rancher Dunwoody will miss some boneheads from his outfit!"

But the 'punchers packed their guns. What had occurred was clear to all of them now—even to Mesquite, sore as he was from his dip in the mud of the Frio.

"I guess I'd like to intervoo the guy what played that fool trick!" growled Mesquite surlily. "I allow you're giving us the goods, Bill, but I'd sure like to meet up with that guy!"

"I guess I'm going to cinch that guy!" snapped Bill. "I guess he ain't fur off." He stared round over the crowd of schoolboys. "Say, which of you guys has been down to the burg to-day?"

"I guess Carr took the notice down to Hanson's, Bill!" grinned Steve Carson. "I'll say he could put you wise if he liked."

"That notice hadn't been altered when I left it," said Dick Carr quietly. "And Slick and Mick will say the same."

"You're shouting," agreed Slick.

"You said it!" exclaimed Mick.

Bill's eyes fixed on Steve.

"I reckon you've been down to Pack-saddle, Steve Carson!" he rapped. "You hit Hanson's Store while you was there?"

"Nope," answered Steve coolly. "I guess I seen the popper in the Red Dog; never went near the store. Never knew there was a notice up at all till Mesquite blew in this afternoon."

There was a shout from one of the

'punchers in Mesquite's crowd; he made a stride towards Steve.

"You ornery young piecan!" he roared. "Didn't I see you? Didn't you yaup out to me that you'd missed your cayuse, and ask me if I'd seen it around? And when I allowed I hadn't, didn't you horn into that store to ask Hanson? Didn't I see you go in?"

Steve started.

He remembered the Kicking Mule 'puncher in Main Street, to whom he had called when he had missed his bronc outside the Red Dog. This was the man. Steve had forgotten that incident. He was reminded of it now.

"Carry me home to die!" roared Bill. "You allow you never went near Hanson's Store—and here's a guy what seen you horn into that very sheebang!"

"I—I—I guess I forgot!" stammered Steve. "I jest went in to ask Hanson about my bronc——"

"Pack it up!" snorted Bill. "Why, you young piecan, I suspicioned you first of all, and now you cough up a hatful of lies! I guess I ain't looking no farther for the guy what pulled this stunt on me! Nope! Mr. Brown!"

"Sir!" gasped Small Brown.

"Tote out my quirt!"

Small Brown hopped into the school-house for the quirt. Steve Carson gritted his teeth. It looked as if the quirting he had planned for Dick Carr was coming home to roost.

"Now," roared Bill as he grabbed the quirt from Small Brown, "you're mighty free offering twenty dollars around and making fools of galoots! Here's Mesquite, what has come up for twenty dollars. I never offered no twenty dollars, and I ain't standing for it! But you did, Steve Carson, and you're standing for it, or else you're going to be quirted like you was an ornery steer—and then some! You get me?"

"Not a cent!" hissed Steve. "I guess——"

"If you got twenty dollars in your rags, you want to hand it over to Mes-

quite—like you allowed you'd do, putting it on that notice," said Bill grimly. "I guess you got it and more—and I guess you want to pay up and make your word good, young Carson. You squaring?"

"Nope!" yelled Steve. "I——"

Bill grasped him with his left hand. The quirt sang in his right. There was a fearful yell from Steve as it ran round him.

"Let up! Let up, you old piecan!" howled Steve. "I guess I'll pony up!"

"I guess you will," roared Bill, "or else I guess I shall want a noo quirt arter wearing this one out on your hide!"

"You said it, Bill!" chuckled Mesquite. "You got to stand for what you wrote up on that notice, young Carson. You ain't got no kick coming!"

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

Steve Carson's face was a picture as he sorted out four five-dollar bills. The gambler's son had plenty of money, but he did not like parting with it. He had to part with it, however. With a furious face he handed the bills over to Mesquite Sam, who chuckled as he packed them away in the pocket of his chaps. Then, with grinning faces, the Kicking Mule 'punchers rode away, with clattering hoofs, down the school trail.

"I guess," said Bill, "that I'm powerful obliged to you, young Carson, for offering a reward of twenty dollars for finding that old baccy-pouch, what I reckon I might never have seed agin but for you. One dollar might never have done it, but twenty sure herded it home. I'll say I'm obliged!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The bunch roared. Steve's pals, Poker and Slim, yelled with the rest. Steve was the only guy in the bunch who did not laugh. Steve's trickery had set him back twenty dollars—and the joke, after all, was on him. It was a long time before the Packsaddle bunch ceased to chuckle over that twenty-dollar reward!

CHAPTER 15.

A Word of Warning!

"LISSEN, you'uns!" roared Bill Sampson.

The Packsaddle bunch listened.

Small Brown might have told them a dozen times over to listen and hardly a fellow in the bunch would have taken heed, but when Bill Sampson talked the most reckless and unheeding fellow at the cow-town school sat up and took notice.

Bill's bronco, saddled and bridled, was at the porch. The headmaster of Packsaddle School was going to hit the trail that morning. Quite a number of fellows were waiting eagerly to hear the hoofbeats of his departing horse; for when Bill was away discipline generally dropped off the bunch like a discarded cloak. Small Brown, the teacher, did not enjoy life while Bill was absent.

Instead of mounting his bronc, however, Bill came striding into the school-room, his quirt under his arm, a frown on his rugged brow under the shade of his ten-gallon hat. He fixed a grim glare on the bunch.

"Spill it, Bill!" said Slick Pohn-dexter encouragingly.

"Shoot!" said Mick Kavanagh.

"I'm telling you to lissen!" roared Bill. "I guess I got to hit the trail for Kicking Mule. I allow I'm going to be away most of the day. And I reckon you 'uns are going to keep quiet and 'tend to Mr. Brown while I ain't here to ride herd over you."

Steve Carson winked at his friends, Slim Dixon and Poker Parker. If Bill reckoned that Steve was going to keep quiet while he and his quirt were at a safe distance, Steve figured that Bill was out in his reckoning. Steve was only waiting for Bill to ride clear before he started in to make Small Brown wish he had never been born—or, at least, that he had never travelled as far as Texas looking for a teacher's

job! Slim and Poker grinned back at Steve.

Unluckily for Steve, Bill caught that wink and knew what it meant. He made a stride towards the class, his quirt slipping down from under his arm into his hand.

Whack!

Steve gave a fearful yell as the thong whacked round his shoulders. He jumped up from the pinewood desk, yelling.

Whack, whack, whack!

Slim Dixon and Poker Parker jumped up in their turn, roaring.

"Want some more?" roared Bill.

"Aw, you pie-faced old gopher, what's biting you?" yelled Steve, furiously.

Whack!

"You squat!" roared Bill.

Steve squatted at once; so did Slim and Poker. They glared at Bill—but they did not want any more quirt.

"Now," resumed Bill, "like I allowed, I'm aiming to hit the trail for Kicking Mule, and I guess I want Mr. Brown to keep order hyer while I'm gone. You get me? Any guy kicking up a rookus in this hyer school will get his when I come back. And that's a sample for you to go on with, you Steve."

Steve scowled savagely, but did not answer. The rest of the bunch sat very quiet. With Bill in this mood no fellow in the cow town school was feeling like arguing with him.

"Mr. Brown!" rapped Bill.

"Yes, sir?" squealed Small Brown.

The little man blinked at Bill through his horn-rimmed spectacles. He was not looking forward to handling the bunch while Bill was away.

"I guess," said Bill, "that the bunch will know better than to hand over trouble while I'm gone arter what I've just spilled; but, if they do, you take a quirt to them, Mr. Brown. Got that?"

"Oh, yes!" gasped Small Brown.

"What you grinning at, like you was

a Mexican monkey, you Carr?" roared Bill Sampson.

Dick Carr, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle, jumped. He had grinned involuntarily at the idea of Small Brown taking a quirt to the rough and tough bunch.

"Oh!" he stammered. "I—"

Yaroooh!"

Whack!

Bill seemed to have a free hand with the quirt that morning. Perhaps he wanted to make it clear to the bunch what they had to expect if they handed out the usual trouble while he was away. A few licks of the quirt helped them to remember that he was coming back later.

"Ow!" gasped Dick. "Wow!"

Nobody else in the bunch ventured to grin. Bill glared round over a crowd of serious, not to say solemn, faces.

"Any other guy in this bunch honing for the quirt?" he commanded.

No answer.

"Weal," said Bill, "I guess I've put you wise. Mr. Brown, I'm leaving you to ride herd over this hyer bunch. There's a quirt on my desk, and I'll say you want to handle it if they give trouble. You get me?"

"Yes, sir!" gasped Small Brown.

And Bill Sampson strode out of the school-room, the thick pine planks creaking under his heavy tread, and mounted his waiting bronco.

There was a clatter of hoofs as he rode out at the school gate, and Hank, the hired man, shut it after him.

"Bill's gone!" murmured Slick Poindexter.

"You said it," murmured Mick.

Dick Carr rubbed his shoulder where the lick of the quirt had fallen. He liked and respected his headmaster, much as Bill had astonished him when he first came to Packsaddle. The schoolboy from the Old Country had never seen a schoolmaster like Bill before he hit Packsaddle. But, though he had learned to like Bill, he had not learned to like Bill's quirt. He wriggled painfully as he rubbed his shoulder.

Small Brown eyed the class uneasily as the hoofbeats died away on the prairie. Bill had warned the bunch, but Mr. Brown would not have been surprised by the usual outbreak of uproar.

It did not come, however; for the present Bill's warning had its effect. Steve Carson lounged in his seat and let his school books slip off the desk to the floor, evidently as a hint that he was going to do no work. But if that was the worst that Small Brown had to expect it was a relief to him.

Finding the class so unusually quiet and orderly, Mr. Brown felt his confidence revive. It was his ambition to handle the bunch as Bill did—an ambition never yet realised.

"Carr!" he rapped out.

Dick looked at him.

"Sit still!" rapped Small Brown. "How dare you wriggle about in your seat in that manner! Sit still!"

Dick's lip curled. That was Small Brown all over. He was afraid of Steve, the bully of Packsaddle; he was not afraid of the tenderfoot. So he had picked on the tenderfoot to display his new authority. Steve Carson, leaning on the desk behind him, put his legs across his own desk; Mr. Brown did not heed him.

Dick sat still. But the twinge in his shoulder was rather severe. Bill had a heavy hand. The tenderfoot was soon wriggling again.

Small Brown picked up the quirt which Bill had so thoughtfully left for him on the headmaster's desk. He was not going to put his authority to too severe a strain by laying it round Steve's legs as they rested on his desk; he gave his attention to the tenderfoot.

"I have told you to keep still, Carr!" he said.

Whack!

Dick gave a roar as the quirt lashed.

"Stop that!" he shouted.

"What—what?" squealed Small Brown. It was almost the first time that the tenderfoot had kicked. He

was, in fact, the only member of the bunch on whom Mr. Brown would have ventured to handle the quirt. "How dare you, Carr! I shall punish you severely!"

Whack, whack!

Steve Carson chuckled. Some of the bunch laughed aloud. Small Brown as a cheap imitation of Bill Sampson was rather amusing. But it was not amusing to the fellow who was getting the quirt.

Dick jumped up, grabbed the handle of the quirt, and wrenched it away from Mr. Brown.

He stepped across to the window and flung it out into the playground.

Small Brown fairly shook with wrath.

"Carr," he squealed, "go and fetch that quirt at once!"

"Rats!" answered Dick Carr.

"I order you——"

"Rot!"

"I shall report this to Mr. Sampson!" squealed Small Brown—his last resource in time of trouble.

"Report and be blowed!" answered the tenderfoot of Packsaddle, and he went back to his desk and sat down.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the bunch.

Small Brown glared at the tenderfoot. He glared at the class.

"Silence!" he squealed.

"Aw, pack it up, you, Brown!" grinned Pie Sanders. "You ain't no Bill Sampson, you ain't, and don't you forget it!"

To which Mr. Brown made no reply. It was only too clear that he was no Bill Sampson. The lesson began—with a laughing, talking class paying very little attention to Mr. Brown. There was no outbreak of disorder—Bill's warning lingering in the minds of the bunch. But it was a very free and easy time in the school-room that morning.

Only Dick Carr was grim and worried. He was going to be reported to Bill, when Bill came back—as the

only fellow who had given real trouble while the headmaster was away. He was feeling strongly inclined to fetch in the quirt and lay it round Mr. Brown!

CHAPTER 16.

The Bad Man Blows In!

HANK, the hired man, stood looking over the school gate, meditatively chewing tobacco and squirting the juice right and left, when the stranger came up the trail.

Hank looked at that stranger.

He was a big, powerful man, almost as big and powerful as Bill Sampson himself. He was dressed like a cow-puncher, but his garb was old and worn, and tattered and stained. The goatskin chaps were almost in rags; the Stetson hat on his untidy, frowsy head looked as if it had been picked off a refuse-heap. The butt of a big Colt peeped from the holster on his gunbelt. The hired man of Packsaddle School, as he gave that stranger the once-over, wished that Bill was not away. He knew a "hobo" when he saw one, and this was the roughest, toughest specimen of a hobo that he had ever seen. Hank rather hoped that the tramp would pass the gate and keep on to the cow town farther down the trail.

But the hobo did not pass on. He stopped at the gate, turned his shaggy, stubbly face towards him, and fixed a pair of sunken but very keen eyes on him.

"Say!" he greeted.

"Mornin'!" answered Hank civilly. Hank was not famed for civility. But it was wise to talk turkey to a ruffianly looking tramp who packed a gun.

"This here the school?"

"You said it."

"I guess I've heard of it," said the stranger. "Yep! I'll say so! Me, I'm from the Bar-O."

"Fired?" asked Hank. The pilgrim on the trail looked as if he had been fired a good time ago, and had roughed it a lot since.

"You're shouting!" agreed the man from the Bar-O. "I guess I was fired for gouging my foreman. Yep! I'm mentioning that I'm a bad man."

Hank thought that he looked it, but did not say so.

"Right on to the burg," he said. "You'll hit the Red Dog as soon as you raise it, right on the plaza."

"I guess I ain't hitting no burg," said the bad man from the Bar-O. "I'll say I'm coming in for chuck. You got anything to say agin it?"

Hank had nothing to say against it. Hank was hired to split logs, sweep, and make himself generally useful at the cow town school, not to raise Cain with hobos who packed guns. He shook his head.

"I'll say you'll open that gate!" said the bad man from Bar-O.

Hank hesitated a moment. The hobo's hand slid to the butt of his gun.

"I'll just mention," he remarked casually, "that Yuba Pete—that's me—is pretty sudden on the shoot! You get me?"

"Mr. Sampson will sure be mad!" said Hank.

"Who's Mr. Sampson when he's to home?" asked Yuba Pete derisively.

"He's sure the schoolmaster."

"Trot him out," said the bad man from Bar-O, "and I'll fill him so full of holes you can use him for a colander."

Hank would have liked nothing better than to trot out Bill Sampson had he been there. Unfortunately he was many a long mile away, on the ranges of the Kicking Mule Ranch.

In silence Hank opened the gate.

The dusty wayfarer tramped in. Hank resumed chewing tobacco. It was no concern of his.

Yuba Pete stared round him, under

his tattered Stetson, and tramped on to the schoolhouse.

At the porch he halted and roared: "Say, anybody to home?"

Tin Tung, the Chinese, popped out of the house into the porch, his almond eyes almost popping out of his yellow face at the same time. Tin Tung was cook, and many other things at the cow town school, and at present he was busy tidying up Bill's quarters.

"A doggoned Chink!" growled the bad man from the Bar-O. "Say, where's your boss?"

"Mistee Sampson lide to Kicking Mule," answered Tin Tung. "Mistee Blown in school-loom."

"Git!" snapped the bad man.

He grasped Tin Tung by the neck, whirled him out of the porch, and sent him spinning into the playground. Yelling, the Chinese sprawled there in the bright sunlight.

Having thus disposed of the Chinaman, the bad man from Bar-O tramped through the porch into the open doorway of the school-room.

It was getting near time for chuck—the school dinner—and little in the way of lessons was going on. Steve Carson, Slim, and Poker were sitting on their desks, swinging their legs, and talking. Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh were holding an argument on the subject of the respective merits of their broncos.

Domingo Duque, the Mexican school-boy, was showing an interested group some steps in the fandango of his native country. Dick Carr was almost the only fellow who was sitting quietly at his desk. Still, Small Brown, thankful for small mercies, was glad that the bunch were only careless and inattentive. Bill's warning had borne fruit.

There had been times when the bunch had chased Mr. Brown out of the school-room, pelting him with their books! It was not so bad as that now.

At the heavy tread in the porch, and a Stetson hat against the sunlight,

there was a gasp of alarm from the bunch. For a moment they figured that it was Bill Sampson coming back, and there was a rush to the desks. But the next moment they saw that it was a false alarm.

"Aw, don't you worry, you guys!" drawled Steve Carson. "I guess it's only a doggoned hobo horning in to touch some galoot for the price of a drink at the Red Dog."

Yuba Pete tramped in.

Small Brown goggled at him in alarm through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Dick Carr stared at him in astonishment.

Dick was getting used to Texas and Texan ways. But the tenderfoot had plenty to learn yet. This was the first hobo he had seen. Tramps he had seen in his own country—some of them rough enough. But the armed and desperate tramp of the Wild West was a new specimen to him. He had heard tales of hobos holding up some lonely homestead or ranch-house for chuck, and a lodging for the night. But the reality was very surprising to him.

"Goodness gracious!" gasped Small Brown in alarm. "What—what do you want, my good man?"

The bunch stared at Yuba Pete. He was not so surprising to them as to Dick Carr. He was not the first ruffian who had horned into the cow town school. But on other occasions Bill Sampson had been there to deal with the situation. Small Brown was not the man to deal with it.

"I'll say I'm Yuba Pete from the Bar-O, and I guess I want chuck!" roared the bad man. "You the school-master?"

"Oh dear! The schoolmaster is away. I am the assistant-master!" stammered Small Brown. "I—I—I will give instructions for—for food to be given you—"

"I guess," said Yuba Pete, "that I can give all the orders I want, you guy with the goggles! Say, you ornery young piccan, what did you call me when you see me horn in?"

He stepped towards Steve Carson.

Steve, looking at him, rather wished that he had not let that dangerous-looking customer hear his remark. The man was evidently a "bulldozer" of the toughest description, hunting for trouble. Trouble with a towering ruffian, who packed a gun, was not what Steve was honing for. But he was not going to show the white feather before all the staring bunch.

"I guess I called you a hobo," he answered. "And I'll say——"

Steve got no further.

Yuba Pete made a grasp at him, and Steve jumped back. But the grasp closed on him, and he was dragged out of the desk.

Lifting him in his powerful arms, strong as a gorilla's, the ruffian pitched him headlong across the school-room.

There was a crash and a yell as Steve hit the pinewood wall and rolled on the floor, knocked half-senseless.

Slim Dixon and Poker Parker moved simultaneously forward as Steve was seized. The next second they were moving back—quick! But Yuba Pete had noticed the movement, and his red-lidded eyes gleamed round at them.

Smack, smack! came his big, heavy hands, and the two schoolboys spun. Slim staggered in one direction, Poker in the other, and both fell.

"Wake snakes!" breathed Slick Poindexter. "I'll say that galoot is some bulldozer, and he sure is the bad man from Badtown."

Three fellows were sprawling on the floor, groaning and gasping. The rest of the bunch eyed Yuba Pete grimly.

His hand was near his gun. Would he burn powder if they rushed him? That was what kept them back. There were no cowards in the Packsaddle bunch, but rushing on a loaded revolver, in a reckless hand, was not wise.

The bad man from Bar-O glared at them.

"I guess you 'uns don't want to shoot off your mouths at Yuba Pete," he

roared. "Say, you with the long laigs! You got any more to spill?"

He glared at the sprawling Steve.

"Ow! Nope!" groaned Steve.

All the bunch looked at Small Brown. He was twittering with dread. Bill, had he been present, would have handled Yuba Pete fast enough. Small Brown was there in Bill's place. It was up to him. But Small Brown did not pack a gun—almost the only man in the Frio Valley who did not. He was, indeed, afraid of firearms. And, so far from packing a gun, did not like to touch one at all. But even Small Brown felt bound to horn in when the hobo started throwing his pupils about the school-room.

"Please—please do not be violent, my good' man!" squealed Small Brown. "I—I beg you to go away! Otherwise, I shall call in the Marshal of Packsaddle, and—and you will be arrested."

Bang!

The hobo's gun leaped into his hand, and he fired. Small Brown gave a fearful yell as a strip of cloth was torn from the only tail-coat in Santanta County.

Bang!

A lock of Mr. Brown's scanty hair went away with the bullet. Another terrified squeal came from the teacher of Packsaddle.

He made a bolt for the doorway.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Yuba Pete.

Bang, bang! The gun roared twice as Small Brown dodged through the doorway.

The ruffian was not shooting to hit, but to scare. But he was utterly reckless, and one of the bullets took a strip of skin from Small Brown's skinny leg as he hopped out into the porch. If the hot lead had gone right through him, Small Brown could not have uttered a more piercing shriek.

He vanished across the playground like a frightened gopher, darted into his cabin, slammed the door, and bolted it.

Yuba Pete roared with laughter.

He flourished the smoking revolver as he turned to the staring bunch again.

"Say, you guys want some?" he roared.

"Not so's you'd notice it, old-timer," said Slick Poindexter.

Dick Carr's hand was on a ruler on his desk. His eyes were gleaming. It went sorely against the grain to allow that frowzy ruffian to carry on with a high hand at Packsaddle School. But Mick Kavanagh pushed him back from the desk.

"Forget it, you gink!" he whispered. "Say, you honing to pass in your checks in a hurry?"

It was not good enough. Dick realised it. The man with the gun was master—at least, till Bill Sampson came back.

"I guess," said Yuba Pete, "that I've horned in here for chuck. And I'll say that you guys are going to raise a few dollars to help a guy on his way. Yep! Here, you!" He beckoned to Dick Carr. "You put me wise to where I get chuck—pronto!"

Dick, suppressing his feelings, guided the ruffian across the playground to the chuckhouse. There Tin Tung, shaking in every limb, his slanting eyes dilated with terror, handed out the biggest and best meal that the cow-town school could provide. Which the bad man from Bar-O proceeded to dispose of, with his revolver lying on the table beside his platter.

CHAPTER 17.

Handling the Bad Man!

DICK CARR set his teeth. "Are we standing for this?" he muttered.

Slick Poindexter shrugged his shoulders. Mick grinned.

From the open doorway of the chuckhouse Yuba Pete had a view of the playground, and the bunch had a view

of him as he sat at his meal. He was eating like a hungry coyote, but his red-lidded eyes gleamed sharply under his beetling bushy brows, and his Colt was ready to his hand. That he would shoot to kill if he was attacked, all the bunch knew now. And though it was certain that Marshal Lick would get after him if he did, and very likely run him down and string him up, that was cold comfort to a fellow who stopped a bullet.

"I guess we got to stand for it, old-timer," answered Slick. "I'll mention that I ain't walking up to that gun and asking for what's inside it."

"You said it," grinned Mick.

"Aw, let the tenderfoot cinch him!" sneered Steve Carson. "What's the good of blowing off your mouth, dog-gone you, you pesky gink? You don't dare to go near the guy."

"He wouldn't have chucked me across the school-room as he did you, anyhow!" retorted Dick Carr.

Steve gave him an evil look.

"Waal, let's see you handle him!" he jeered.

"I guess we could get help from the burg," said Slim. "But that guy would sure burn powder if he spotted any galoot breaking herd to beat it down to Packsaddle, and it ain't good enough."

"We're not standing for it!" said Dick Carr.

"Aw" can it!" snapped Poker Parker.

"Forget it, big boy!" advised Slick. "He sure will hit the trail soon. And I guess I'll be glad to see him go. I tell you he's a bad man. We got to smile."

"What about your lasso?"

Slick gave a snort.

"Nothing about my riata, you geck! I guess I ain't roping in a guy with a six-gun in his grip. Nope!"

"Here he comes," muttered Pie Sanders.

There was a crash in the chuckhouse. Yuba Pete, having finished an enormous meal, hurled the wooden

platter at the Chinaman who was submissively waiting on him. Tin Tung's yell rang across the playground as he was bowled over. After that act of wanton brutality the ruffian came tramping out into the sunlight.

The Packsaddle bunch watched him uneasily. Small Brown was still bolted inside his cabin, quaking with dread. Some of the schoolboys had gone into the bunkhouse to keep out of the ruffian's way. But there were a good many in the playground. It was past time for chuck, but nobody was thinking of dinner. They only hoped that the hobo, now that he had had his meal, would go on his way. But Yuba Pete was not prepared to go yet.

"Say, you!" He beckoned to Slick. "You want to show me where your schoolmaster packs his roll, and you want to do it quick!"

Slick breathed hard.

A sign of hesitation was enough for the bad man from Bar-O. He whipped out his revolver and fired at the school-boy's feet.

Slick jumped, just in time. A second later and the bullet would have crashed through flesh and bone.

Bang, bang!

"Jump you!" roared the bad man from Bar-O.

Slick jumped actively. The ruffian was "fanning" him with bullets, and Slick knew better than to disobey. He had to save his feet by jumping, and he jumped quick.

"Now you putting me wise?" roared Yuba Pete.

"I'll say yep!" gasped Slick, only too thankful that the rain of bullets had stopped.

He led the hobo into the schoolhouse and into Bill Sampson's room there. It was evidently the ruffian's intention to help himself to anything there was in the way of cash before he hit the trail again. And there was no one at Packsaddle to stop him, unless—

"That does it!" said Dick Carr, between his teeth. "That brute isn't going to rob Bill!"

"You figure that you're going to stop him?" sneered Big Steve.

Dick did not trouble to answer the bully of Packsaddle. He cut into the bunkhouse, where he kept his lasso.

In the use of the looped rope Dick had made some progress, but he was not nearly so skilled yet as the Texan boys. Still, he could handle the rope, and he was going to try.

Keeping out of sight of the doorway, Dick Carr clambered up the side of the wooden porch. The bunch, in the playground, watched him breathlessly.

They spotted his game at once—a desperate game, yet with a promising chance of success. On top of the porch Dick held the looped rope ready. When the hobo came out again he would have his chance.

He would be able to make the cast, at all events, before Yuba Pete knew what was coming to him.

On that cast of the rope all depended. He would have no chance for a second throw if it failed!

If it failed he would come rolling down to the earth with a bullet through his body, and he knew it.

His face was pale and set, his eyes gleaming with resolution, as he waited for the hobo to emerge.

From within the schoolhouse came a sound of crashing and breaking. Yuba Pete was smashing open Bill's private desk in his office. Bill had left it locked, and there was no doubt that there were dollars in it. Yuba Pete, with a heavy stool in his hand, smashed the desk to pieces, as the easiest way of getting it open.

Slick Poindexter watched him savagely. But he was powerless to interfere.

As the desk fell in pieces the grinning ruffian groped in the wreckage. Bill's various private belongings were scattered over the floor of the office. Yuba's greedy clutch closed on a roll of bills. There were two or three twenties, a fifty, and a hundred, and Yuba's eyes gleamed with satisfaction over his plunder.

"By the great horned toad!" he chuckled. "I'll say it was a lucky day I hit this hyer school! Yep! And then some!"

He thrust the roll of bills into a pocket of his tattered chaps.

"Now I reckon all I want is a cayuse," he remarked. "And I'm mentioning that you're going to pick out the best critter in the corral for me, you young geck!"

Slick gritted his teeth. The hobo had struck Packsaddle School on foot. Had he left on foot there was a very good chance that he would be run down and captured and forced to disgorge his plunder. But if he picked out the best horse in the school corral and burned the wind, there was little likelihood of Santanta County ever seeing him again.

"Beat it, you!" he growled to Slick, and Poindexter went out of the house, through the porch, with the ruffian tramping at his heels.

Slick emerged into the sunlight of the playground, unaware that a pair of eyes from the roof of the porch were watching.

After him came the burly hobo.

There was a deep-drawn breath from the bunch as they watched. Steve Carson sneered. Hardly a fellow there believed that Dick would have the nerve to carry on, Steve least of all.

But he had the nerve—and he did!

As the Stetson, on the frowzy head, emerged from the porch and Yuba Pete passed under the waiting, watching schoolboy, Dick gritted his teeth and flung the rope.

The open noose settled over the Stetson hat and dropped round the bulky shoulders of the bad man from Bar-O.

Instantly Dick was dragging frantically on the rope.

There was a roar of rage from Yuba Pete as the noose tightened round him, pinning his left arm to his side.

But his right arm was free, and his gun was in his hand. But even as he whipped it up a fierce jerk on the

rope tumbled him over and he sprawled on the ground.

He would have been up again in a moment. But in that moment Dick Carr leapt down from the roof of the porch, fairly on him.

The schoolboys' boots crashed on the sprawling ruffian, his whole weight falling on Yuba Pete, knocking the wind out of him.

"Great gophers!" gasped Slick.

"Back up!" yelled Dick Carr.

His clenched fist smashed into the bearded, stubby face as Yuba Pete twisted round at him, snarling like a wolf. He grabbed the ruffian's gun-arm and forced it down.

Had Yuba Pete been free of the rope it would have gone hard with the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. But with the rope gripping him hard, pinning one arm, the ruffian, powerful as he was, was at a disadvantage, and his gun was forced to the ground. It roared, as the hobo pulled the trigger, the bullet skidding along the earth.

Fiercely and savagely, panting with rage, Yuba Pete wrenched at his arm. He would have got it free in a few moments, desperately as Dick's grip on it was. But he was not given those few moments.

Slick leaped on him like a panther. His heavy boot crashed on the ruffian's hand, and the revolver flew from the numbed fingers.

Mick Kavanagh darted in and grabbed it.

Spitting fury, Yuba Pete heaved up. His left arm was still pinned by the rope, but his right gripped Dick Carr in a bear-like hug.

Crash! came the butt of his own revolver on the back of his head. Crash! it came again. Mick Kavanagh dealt the blows with all the strength of a strong arm.

And Yuba Pete, half-stunned, rolled over helplessly. Then came the bunch with a rush and a roar.

Hands grasped the writhing ruffian on all sides. Steve Carson yelled to Mick:

"Burn powder, you gink! Put a bullet through him!"

"Aw, forget it!" said Mick. "I guess we got him."

"We sure got him dead to rights!" grinned Poindexter.

Yuba Pete still wriggled. But his wriggles did not avail him. The bunch wound the lasso round him and knotted it, and he lay on the ground, bound hand and foot!

Slick picked the roll of bills from the pocket of his chaps.

"I guess Bill will be glad to see this agin!" he remarked with a grin, and he carried the roll back into Bill's office.

Yuba Pete was dragged to one of the timber supports of the porch and tied to it with the end of the lasso. Leaving him there to wait for Bill's return, the Packsaddle bunch went grinning off to chuck.

Dick Carr tapped at the door of Small Brown's cabin. A scared squeal came from within.

"Go away! Oh dear! Go away!"

Dick chuckled.

"It's all right, Mr. Brown," he called out. "We've got the hobo fixed, and you can come out."

And he walked away to the chuck-house for dinner with the bunch. But apparently it seemed to Small Brown too good to be true, for he did not come out. It was a holiday for the bunch till Bill Sampson rode in at the gate, when the sun was setting over Squaw Mountain. Then, and not till then, did Small Brown venture out.

CHAPTER 18.

Yuba Pete Hits the Trail!

"CARRY me home to die!" gasped Bill Sampson.

He stared at the wriggling hobo tied to the porch.

The grinning bunch surrounded him. A dozen voices told him what had happened during his absence.

"And who roped him?" demanded Bill.

"The tenderfoot," grinned Slick.

Bill looked at Dick Carr.

"Kid," he said, "I'll say you're the goods! I'll say that you're all wool and a yard wide and then a few! I'll tell a man!"

Then his eyes turned grimly on the hobo.

"Ontle him!" said Bill.

Yuba Pete was untied.

"Hombre!" said Bill in measured tones. "I guess you allow you're a bad man! You allow you're some bulldozer! I'll mention that I'm going to make you feel like a small piece left on the counter! I'm going to put you wise that you ain't worth a cent, and that a Mexican one! You get me?"

And Bill began.

For about three minutes Yuba Pete stood up to the heaviest and hardest fists in Santanta County. Then he was down on the earth, and preferred to stay there.

Bill gave him a genial nod.

"I guess," said Bill, "that I'd let you run with that, but I got to make you plumb tired of hornin' into Packsaddle!"

Taking his quirt in his hand, Bill proceeded to make the hobo plumb tired. The bunch looked on, grinning.

Yuba Pete did not grin! He rolled and roared, and leaped and hopped and howled! The lashes of the heavy quirt came down like rain. The hapless hobo made a wild break for the gate. After him went Bill, still lashing with the quirt, putting every ounce of his beef into it. The gate was shut, but that did not stop Yuba Pete. He was yearning for the open spaces now!

He made a wild and frantic leap over the gate. Crash! came the last lash of the quirt, as he jumped. It rang like a rifle-shot on the hobo's back. Over the gate went Yuba Pete, landing in a yelling leap on the earth outside.

But he did not linger there. He was up in a twinkling and running.

Down the trail went the bad man from Bar-O like a runaway bronco, and he vanished into the grass of the prairie.

Bill grinned.

"I guess," he remarked, "that that guy won't be in no hurry to hit Packsaddle agin!"

And it was probable that Bill was right.

"Mr. Sampson—sir!" squealed Small Brown.

Bill turned to him.

"Uncork it, Mister Brown!" he said.

"I have to report Carr——"

"Hey?"

"Carr, for disorder in the school-room——"

Bill looked at him.

"Carr, what roped in that bulldozer while you was playing possum in your cabin, Mister Brown!" said Bill.

"Carry me home to die!"

Bill took a grip on his quirt.

"Git!" he roared.

Small Brown gave him one startled blink—and "got" it.

CHAPTER 19.

Cinching Slick!

"SAY, big boy! Pull in a piece!"

Dick Carr, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle School, halted.

He was coming up the school trail from the cow town when the man in the buckboard hailed him.

The buckboard stood beside the trail, the horse cropping the grass, the reins loose on its back. Dick glanced with some curiosity at the man in it who had hailed him. He was dressed in "store" clothes, rare attire in the cow country of Packsaddle. But the inevitable Stetson was on his head—and his face under it was hard as iron, his eyes keen and sharp as a hawk's. Those eyes fixed on the Packsaddle schoolboy like gimlets.

"I'll say you b'long to that joint!" said the man in the buckboard, with a jerk of his thumb towards the school.

"Right!" answered Dick Carr.

"You Poindexter?"

Dick smiled, and shook his head.

"No. I'm Carr!" he answered.

"Poindexter around?"

"Slick Poindexter's at the school, if you want to see him," answered Dick.

"You've only to drive up the trail."

"I guess I ain't hornin' into that shebang, bo!" said the man in the buckboard. "Nopel! Not so you'd notice it, big boy. I've had trouble with that schoolmaster of yourn, Bill Sampson, and I'll mention that I ain't honin' to see that guy again! Not by a jugful, I ain't! Mebbe you'll put young Poindexter wise that I'm around?"

"I'll tell him, certainly," said the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. "What name shall I tell him?"

"I guess if you allow that Mustang Dave has moseyed along from the ranch, that'll work the raffle."

"Right!"

Dick Carr walked on up the trail, the man's keen eyes watching him as he went. It was not far from the cow town to the school that was built on the bluffs overlooking the Rio Frio. The gate stood wide open, and Dick walked into the playground, where most of the Packsaddle bunch were to be seen. Steve Carson, mounted on his bronco, was displaying his horsemanship. Steve was a good rider, though not quite so good as he believed himself to be. He was making his bronco rear on its hind legs, till it stood almost upright, and the bunch stood round watching him.

"I guess," remarked Slick Poindexter, "that that guy will hit Texas, and hit it hard, if he don't watch out!"

"You said it!" grinned Mick Kavanagh.

Dick Carr joined the watching crowd. Steve's eyes flashed at him for a second. He swung the rearing horse round, with the intention of bringing down the sawing forefeet with a terrific crash on the earth just in front of the tender-

foot. That, Steve reckoned, would make the guy from the old country jump some!

Unfortunately for Big Steve, that sudden jerk on the rein caused the rearing bronco to lose his balance. The horse pitched over on its side, and Steve was flung from the saddle, landing in the playground with a crash. Steve gave a fearful yell. It was echoed by Mick Kavanagh, who caught a knock from one of the lashing hoofs, and hopped on one leg, clapping the other, and roaring. The rest of the bunch roared, too, with laughter.

"I'll say he's hit Texas!" chortled Slick.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Howly Mike!" roared Mick Kavanagh, dancing with anguish. "Sure me laig's broke intoirely, and so it is!"

"You want to stay clear when Steve's cavorting around on a bronc!" chuckled Pie Sanders.

Steve Carson lay breathless and winded on the earth, while the bronco struggled up. His face was like a demon's face as he scrambled to his feet. He snatched up the quirt he had dropped, sprang to the bronco, and grasped the reins. The quirt rose and fell in savage lashes on the squealing animal.

"Aw, can it, Steve, you geck!" shouted Slick Poindexter. "It sure wasn't the cayuse's fault. You was showing off and took a tumble."

Lash, lash, lash! the rain of blows descended, the bronco squealing and struggling and rearing. Dick Carr's eyes flashed.

"Stop that, Carson!" he shouted.

Steve Carson did not heed. Neither did any of the bunch think of intervening. It was the unbroken law of the cow country never to come between a guy and his cayuse. But Dick Carr was new to the cow country, and if he knew of that universal law he did not care a red cent about it. He was not

going to see a horse cruelly beaten for no fault.

He made a jump at Steve, grabbed him by the shoulders, and fairly wrenched him away from the squealing bronco.

Once more Steve Carson hit Texas, sprawling at full length. The bronco, immediately it was released, tore away, with reins dangling loose. It headed for the open gateway, with tossing head and mane, and thundering hoofs, and went careering out on the prairie.

"I'll say Steve will have to hoof it some to rope in that critter!" grinned Slick.

"Ow, ow!" Mick was still hopping. "Ow! Me laig's broke intoirely! Ow!"

Steve Carson sat up dizzily. Poker Parker and Slim Dixon ran to help him to his feet.

Dick Carr tapped Slick on the arm. He kept a wary eye, however, on the bully of Packsaddle. He had had plenty of trouble with Big Steve, and he was ready for more. But Steve did not approach him. He was bruised and breathless, and he only gave the tender-foot a bitter, evil look as he limped away between his two friends.

"There's a man on the trail wants to see you, Slick!" said Dick Carr.

Poindexter stared at him.

"I guess he can hit the school if he wants to see me!" he answered.

"He says he's had trouble with Bill some time or other. His name's Mustang Dave."

"Gum!" said Poindexter. "I guess I want to meet up with Dave if he's moseyed along from the ranch! I ain't ever heard of him having trouble with Bill, though. Where is he?"

"On the school trail, half-way to the town."

"Ow, ow! Wow!" howled Mick. "Give me a hand to the bunkhouse, cain't you? Can't you see me laig's broke intoirely? You, Slick—"

But Slick was already swinging towards the gate. Dick Carr ran to Kavanagh and gave him a helping

hand to the bunkhouse. There Mick sat on his bunk, and his damaged leg was examined. It was not broken, or anything like it, but there was a bad bruise that needed attention at once. Dick Carr lost no time in giving that black bruise first aid.

Meanwhile, Slick Poindexter hoofed it down the school trail. Passing round a bunch of pecans and post-oaks he came in sight of the buckboard, where the hawk-eyed man sat watching. At the sight of the schoolboy the man slipped from the vehicle. Slick stared at him. He had never seen the man before, and certainly he was not Mustang Dave, from the Poindexter Ranch.

"Say, you young Poindexter?" asked the hawk-eyed man.

"You said it!" answered Slick. "Say, you seen a guy around here—a 'puncher'? I guess—"

"You aim to meet up with Mustang Dave?"

"Sure thing!" answered Slick. "I got a message that he was hanging up on this hyer trail—"

"I guess," said the hawk-eyed man, "that if you want to see Mustang you want to hit your popper's ranch, and that's a long step from hyer, and then some. I'll mention that I borrowed his name to get you out of your school, big boy. You won't see no Mustang Dave—but you sure seen Hawk Walker, that's me! I'll whisper that you're going on a leetle paseo with this baby."

Slick, in blank astonishment, jumped back as the man leaped at him. The next moment he was struggling in a fierce grip.

Slick Poindexter was strong and husky. But he crumpled in the powerful grasp of the kidnapper.

For a full minute he struggled desperately. Then he was down, breathless, overpowered, and a rope was knotted round his wrists and another round his ankles. He lay panting, staring up at the hawk-face.

Hawk Walker cast a swift glance up

and down the school trail. Then he jerked a buffalo robe from the buckboard and rolled the bound schoolboy in it, completely concealing him from sight. Slick was tossed into the buckboard like a sack of alfalfa. Hawk followed him in, gathered up the reins, cracked the whip and drove away rapidly, the buckboard jolting and bumping wildly across the rough prairie. He grinned as he drove.

At Packsaddle, Tin Tung clanged the bell for class. But there was one member of the Packsaddle bunch who did not turn up in the school-room for lessons with Small Brown.

CHAPTER 20.

Missing!

"SIR—Mr. Sampson—" squealed Small Brown.

"Spill it!" said Bill.

"One boy is absent—"

"Who's that geek?"

"Poindexter!"

The headmaster of Packsaddle School frowned. He stared over the class and picked the quirt from his desk.

"I guess," said Bill, "that you'll hear from young Poindexter, pronto! I guess you'll hear him yauping when I round him up with this hyer quirt! Yep!"

And Bill Sampson strode out of the school-room to round up the truant. All the bunch were wondering where Slick was. Mick had been busy with his bruised leg until the school bell rang, and had not missed his chum till the bunch gathered for class in the school-room. Dick Carr remembered that Slick had gone down the trail to see Mustang Dave, but the school bell could be heard as far as the town, and Slick could not have failed to hear it.

Bill, quirt in hand, went round the playground and looked into the corral and into the chuckhouse and the bunkhouse. But he saw no sign of Slick. He questioned Tin Tung, but the Chinese cook had not seen him since

chuck, and Hank, the hired man, had not seen him at all. Bill's rugged brow grew grimmer. Bill ruled the Packsaddle bunch with a heavy hand—and a quirt in it! Any guy who was late for class was apt to be herded in like a stray steer, with a quirt whacking round his legs. But Bill did not sight the truant, and it was soon clear that Poindexter was not within the timber fences of Packsaddle School at all.

"Jumping painters!" growled Bill, when he came to that conclusion. "I'll say that young geck has broken herd; and I'll say I'll sure hide him a few when he horns in agin!"

And Bill returned to the school-room.

Class was over at four. Slick had not come in, and all the bunch were asking themselves what his game was. Packsaddlers often gave a class a miss when Bill was away; never when Bill was around.

"I guess that guy Slick is sure asking for it," said Mick Kavanagh, as he limped out—his leg was still painful. "What the howly Mike is he playing this fool game for? Bill will hide him sure!"

"I suppose nothing can have happened to him?" said Dick Carr.

"What would happen to Slick, you geck? I guess he's given himself a holiday, and I allow he will be sorry for it when he sees Bill agin."

But Slick did not seem to be in a hurry to see Bill again. He had not returned when the sun sank westward behind Squaw Mountain. Day boys sorted their broncos out of the corral to ride homeward. Boarders went into the chuckhouse for supper.

Dick was getting anxious by that time. If Slick had given himself a holiday, he would surely have gone in the saddle. But his bronco was still in the corral. No Packsaddle fellow ever went a mile on foot. In the cow country they took to horses as naturally as they breathed.

Bill was seen to tramp down to the gate several times and stare out over

the school trail. His quirt was under his arms. But when the bunch were at supper Bill came tramping into the chuckhouse.

"Say, you'uns!" growled Bill. "I want to know if any guy here's wise to what young Poindexter is up to? Shoot!"

No answer.

"Anybody seen him quit?" demanded Bill.

"Yes," answered Dick Carr. "He went down the trail to speak to a man from his father's ranch, before school. I don't know why he hasn't come back."

Bill knitted his brows.

"How'd he know that guy was there?" he asked.

"I told him! I passed the man coming up the trail, after posting Mr. Brown's letter to Hanson's store," explained Dick. "The man gave me his name as Mustang Dave from the Poindexter Ranch, and he was in a buckboard."

"And why didn't he hit the school if he aimed to see young Poindexter?" demanded Bill.

Dick grinned.

"He told me he'd had trouble with you, and didn't want to see you again," he answered.

Bill stared at him.

"What guff you giving me?" he grunted. "I ain't never met up with no Mustang Dave from the Poindexter lay-out! Nope!"

"Well, that's what he said!" answered Dick. "And Slick went out to see him on the trail. He knew the name."

"Mebbe his popper sent the buckboard to tote him home for a piece, Bill!" suggested Mick.

Bill snorted.

"I guess Mister Poindexter wouldn't tote no guy in this bunch home without taking leave of his schoolmaster!"

Bill strode out of the chuckhouse again. There was a worried look on his rugged, bearded face.

Dick was worried, too. He followed the Packsaddle headmaster down to the gate. The dusk was deepening over the prairie and the rippling waters of the Rio Frio. Down the trail lights were gleaming from the town of Packsaddle.

Bill leaned on the gate, staring into the thickening dusk. There was a sudden beat of horse's hoofs coming up the trail. Dick heard his headmaster draw a deep breath of relief.

"I guess that'll be the young guy," he heard Bill mutter.

But it was not Slick who rode up in the shadows.

A horseman drew rein at the gate. Under his Stetson hat his face was hidden in the dusk, and his neck scarf was drawn over the lower part of it. He drew up with a jingle and a clatter, and stared at the two faces looking over the gate.

"Say, you 'uns, I reckon I got a message for the schoolmaster!" he called out.

"I'll mention that I'm the schoolmaster," grunted Bill. "Shoot!"

"You Bill Sampson?"

"Sure!"

"I guess you'll have heard of Hawk Walker?"

Bill stared.

"I've heard of that doggoned firebug," he answered, "and if I ever meet up with him in Santanta County I'll sure hide him with my quirt a few!"

"I'll say he's sent you this here billy-doo," said the horseman, with a laugh, and he tossed a letter over the gate, put his spurs to his horse, and dashed away at a gallop. Bill stared after him blankly as the crashing hoofbeats died away in the falling night.

stare at the vanishing rider. Bill took the letter, blinking at it. There was a glitter in his eyes under his knitted brows, and his hand dropped for a moment on the butt of his six-gun. The name of Hawk Walker was strange to Dick, but it was easy for him to see that it was quite familiar to his headmaster. Bill gritted his teeth.

"By the great horned toad!" he muttered. "I guess that guy was Hawk hisself; he allers works alone, so they say. Jumping painters, if I'd knowed it—"

It was too dark to read the letter at the gate. Bill tramped away to the schoolhouse, where kerosene lamps burned. He signed to Dick Carr to follow him.

The tenderfoot trailed after Bill into his office. He was feeling uneasy and alarmed. Somehow he guessed that Bill saw some connection between the missing Slick and the letter from Hawk Walker. What the connection could be was a mystery to the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. The schoolmaster's face was dark and fierce.

He grabbed open the envelope and jerked out the folded sheet of coarse paper within. It was written on in pencil. Bill blinked at it in the light of the kerosene lamp hanging in the room, and then handed it to Dick Carr.

"Spill it!" he grunted. Schoolmaster as he was, Bill found difficulties in reading anything but print. Bill had been raised as a cowpuncher, and education was not his long suit.

Dick's face paled as he read the letter aloud. It was startling and amazing to the schoolboy from the Old Country. Dick had heard that in the United States kidnapping was a regular business carried on by gangsters. But no sample of it had hitherto come his way, and he had never even heard of Hawk Walker, and did not know that that hombre's name was famous all over the West for his kidnapping stunts.

The letter ran:

CHAPTER 21.

Steve Asks for It!

DICK CARR picked up the letter which had fallen to the ground inside the gate. He handed it to Bill, who turned to him after a long

"Run up a rag on your flagpole when you're ready to pony up five hundred dollars for young Poindexter. I guess his popper will stand for it. Put it through pronto. I ain't feeding no boarders."

"HAWK WALKER."

Bill Sampson's face was a picture of anxiety and fury as Dick read out the kidnapper's letter.

The meaning of it was clear enough, though the tenderfoot could hardly believe it. The school flagpole could be seen for miles over the rolling prairie, and a "rag" run up to the summit was to be the signal that the ransom would be paid. The last line gave Dick a thrill of incredulous horror. It meant that the prisoner in the kidnapper's hands would starve to death if the ransom was not paid.

Was it possible?

One look at Bill's face showed that it was not only possible, but certain. Dick shuddered. There was silence for a long minute, and then Bill spoke in a hoarse voice.

"You young geck! What was that guy like what fooled you into sending young Poindexter out to be cinched?"

In a faltering tone Dick gave a description of the hard-faced man in the buckboard. Bill listened attentively and nodded.

"Yep! I guess that was Hawk!" he said. "You were a bone-headed young geck—but sure Poindexter was the same. I guess he picked on Slick because his popper's got a ranch and can stand for the dollars. Carry me home to die! If I'd knowed that Hawk was in Santaunta County, or in Texas at all——" Bill gripped the butt of his six-gun almost convulsively. "By the great horned toad, I'll sure hit that guy's trail and make it last sickness for him! Git!"

Dick laid the letter on the table and left the schoolhouse.

His face was white, his heart heavy

as lead, as he went to the bunkhouse, where the bunch were now going in to bed.

He knew now how he had been tricked. Hawk had been watching the school trail for Poindexter. All unwittingly Dick had sent his friend into the hands of an enemy.

"Say, what's biting you?" asked Mick Kavanagh, as Dick came into the bunkhouse. All the bunch stared at his white, harassed face.

"Slick——" faltered Carr. "A villain called Hawk Walker has got him! You ever heard of Hawk Walker?"

There was a buzz in the bunkhouse. Every fellow in the bunch, it was plain, had heard of the notorious kidnapper.

"Hawk Walker!" yelled Steve Carson. "Great gophers! How'd he get hold of Slick?"

"How'd he work the raffle?" exclaimed Mick.

"That man on the trail," faltered Dick Carr. "He used the name of a man on the Poindexter Ranch to get Slick out, and I—I brought in his message——"

Steve burst into a loud laugh.

"You handed Slick over to Hawk Walker? Say, what did he give you for helping him cinch Slick?"

Dick stared at the bully of Pack-saddle, his face flaming. He blamed himself for having been made use of by the kidnapper; but, after all, the pretended Mustang Dave might have sent in such a message by any other fellow in the bunch who had happened to be passing on the trail. Unless a fellow knew the gangster by sight he would not have been on his guard. It was easy to be wise after the event. But Steve was hinting very plainly that Dick had known what he was sending Poindexter into.

"Aw, can it, you Carson!" snapped Mick. "The tenderfoot never knowed Hawk——"

Steve laughed again maliciously.

"I guess I wouldn't have taken no

such message for a guy I'd never seen afore!" he said derisively. "Mebbe Carr didn't know Hawk—and mebbe he did! His picture's been in the papers a heap of times."

"I'd never even heard of him!" shouted Dick. "How was I to know?"

"Spill that to Bill!" grinned Carson. "Bill may lap it up. He sure is a bonehead. But it ain't no use to me." Steve looked round at the staring, excited bunch. "You 'uns, I'm saying that that guy's handed Slick over to Hawk Walker, and I'm saying that he never did it for nix! I'll say he's got dollars in his rags that Hawk handed him for working the rifle."

With blazing eyes Dick Carr rushed at the bully of Packsaddle. He fairly leaped on him, hitting out right and left.

There was a howl from Steve as he staggered under the fierce blows. He rallied swiftly and gave blow for blow. Fighting furiously, they tramped to and fro in the bunkhouse till a fierce uppercut sent the bully of Packsaddle crashing to the floor.

He lay panting, glaring up at the tenderfoot with deadly rage in his gleaming eyes. Dick stood over him with clenched fists.

"You cur!" he shouted. "You're lying—and you know you're lying. You'll take it back, or I'll thrash you till you can't crawl!"

"You sold Slick to Hawk Walker!" panted Steve. "I'll tell all Texas that you sold Slick to Hawk Walker, you—you—"

"Can it!" roared a bull-voice in the doorway. Bill Sampson strode in. "Why ain't you young geeks in your bunks—hey? You honing for the quirt, you pesky young piccans?"

"That rotter says—" panted Dick Carr.

"And I say it agin!" yelled Steve, staggering to his feet. "I say that pizen coyote sold Slick to the kidnapping guy—he knowed what he was

doing when he sent Slick out to be cinched by Hawk Walker—"

Dick sprang at him, red with rage. But Bill Sampson's iron grip on his shoulder swung him back.

"Forget it, you!" snapped Bill.

Dick struggled furiously in his grasp. "I'll drive his lies back down his throat!" he shouted. "Let me go! Let me go, I tell you—"

Bill's grasp tightened. His bearded face was grim. The bunch looked on breathless. Hardly a fellow believed a word of Steve's wild accusation.

Carson stood wiping the dripping blood from his nose. Dick Carr wrenched at Bill's grasp, but he wrenched in vain. He was an infant in the hands of the herculean schoolmaster of Packsaddle. Steve lifted a hand, crimsoned from his streaming nose, and pointed at the tenderfoot.

"I say he sold Slick—" he roared.

"Can it, you!" hooted Bill. "You shoot off your mouth too much, you Carson! You, Carr, you allow you never knowed it was Hawk Walker—"

"Of course I never knew!" shouted Dick passionately. "Are you fool enough to believe a word of that lying cur's?"

"I guess," said Bill grimly, "that I ain't standing for being called no fancy names, young Carr! I guess you want to turn in, and turn in quick, and put a cinch on your yaup-trap!"

He picked up the tenderfoot from the floor and tossed him bodily on his bunk. Dick bumped there, gasping.

"Now, you 'uns, turn in!" snapped Bill. "Any more trouble in this hyer shebang, and I'm wading in with the quirt. I don't believe nothing agin the tenderfoot, young Carson, except that he's the world's prize boob, what we've always knowed ever since he hit Packsaddle. Pack it up, and turn in."

The bunch, in silence, turned in. Bill was in a grim mood, and nobody wanted the quirt. But it was long before the Packsaddle bunch slept that night.

CHAPTER 22.

Proved Up!

DICK CARR'S face was pale and troubled in the morning.

He was deeply concerned for the missing Slick, in the ruthless hands of a professional kidnapper. He blamed himself for the part he had unconsciously played, and he saw that all the bunch blamed him. But Steve's wild accusation hit him hardest. He could not think that any fellow in the bunch believed it—not even his enemy himself. But it hit him hard. He had lain awake half the night—not till after midnight had he fallen into a deep sleep, from which the clang of the bell awakened him in the dawn.

In the chuckhouse at breakfast, Steve and his friends, Slim and Poker, gave him sneering looks. Other fellows eyed him dubiously, as if they were wondering whether there could be anything in it. Mick Kavanagh made it quite clear that he did not doubt his friend. Some of the others followed his example. But Dick was worried and miserable.

Small Brown, in the playground, blinked at him suspiciously through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Small Brown did not like him, and evidently he had heard of Steve's talk. Dick gave him a fierce glare in return for his suspicious blink, which brought an angry flush to Mr. Brown's face.

That morning Bill Sampson mounted his bronco to ride down to Packsaddle town and take Hawk's letter to Marshal Lick. Whether he entertained the idea of paying the ransom or not, Dick and Mick could not tell. So far, at all events, no signal had been run up to the top of the flagpole to meet watching eyes on the prairie.

"Bill ain't the hombre to stand for it!" said Mick, as the bunch went into the school-room. "He's as mad as a hornet. I'll tell a man he'd shoot Hawk on sight if he spotted him. He ain't weighing out no five hundred bucks."

"But Slick—" said Dick Carr

miserably. "That villain has got him, and he threatens to starve him—"

"I guess he means every word, too!" said Mick. "Hawk's game is pretty well known—he's run the kidnapping stunt for years, and he's always got by with it. A guy's folks always pony up, sooner'n let a guy pass in his checks for want of eats! I'll say he's some bulldozer, is Hawk!"

"But where—" muttered Dick. "If a fellow could find out where he was he—"

"I guess that buckboard hit the high spots quick! He ain't nowhere around Packsaddle, sure! I reckon they'll have to squeeze out them bucks if we're going to see Slick alive agin!"

"Stop talking in class!" snapped Small Brown. "Carr, be quiet at once!"

Dick gave him a black look, and said no more. Steve, Poker, and Slim were talking, but Small Brown took no notice of them. Steve was rather his favourite, chiefly because he was afraid of the reckless bully of Packsaddle.

The bunch did not give Small Brown the usual trouble in Bill's absence. The kidnapping of Slick filled all thoughts.

Steve Carson's voice came to Dick's ears, bringing a flash of rage to his eyes. Steve's idea seemed to be that if he threw enough mud, some of it would stick. He was asking Poker Parker how much he reckoned Hawk had handed the tenderfoot to betray Slick into his hands.

Dick Carr jumped to his feet. In school or out of school, he was not standing for that!

"Sit down, Carr!" squealed Small Brown.

Unheeding the teacher, Dick tramped through the class, his gleaming eyes fixed on Big Steve. Small Brown whisked between them.

"Stand back, Carr! Do you hear me?" he squealed. "How dare you!"

"Do you think I'm going to let him get away with his lies!" roared Dick Carr. "You shut him up, Mr. Brown, or I'll shut him up fast enough!"

"Be silent, Carr——"

"Aw, let him chew the rag!" sneered Steve. "I'll tell a man that he sold Slick, and I guess it'd be proved up on him, too, if you went through his rags. How much did that all-fired bulldozer give you, Carr?"

Dick gave Small Brown a shove, pushing him out of the way. Small Brown staggered against a desk.

"You—you young rascal!" squealed Mr. Brown. He grabbed Dick by the arm. "Go to your place at once! I shall report you to Mr. Sampson! If he were here now, I would ask him to have you searched."

"Searched!" panted Dick. "Do you think I'm afraid to be searched, you fool?"

Small Brown's watery eyes glittered through his spectacles. Gladly he would have picked up a quirt and handled the angry and rebellious tenderfoot after Bill's fashion. But Dick Carr looked ready to knock him spinning across the school-room.

"Search him!" grinned Steve. "He never handed Slick over for nix, I reckon. I'll say that Hawk stood him at least ten bucks."

"Aw, can it, you gink!" growled Mick Kavanagh. "I'll sure eat all the bucks that Carr has got about him. His popper ain't a poker sharp like yours, and he ain't got no bucks in his rags."

"I've a dollar bill and a quarter in my pocket!" snapped Dick Carr. "But nobody's going to search me. I'm not standing for that."

Steve gave a derisive laugh.

"And he allows he ain't afraid to be searched," he grinned. "But nobody's going to search him. I guess that's no use to this bunch."

Small Brown set his lips.

"I shall search you, Carr!" he said viciously. "If you refuse to be searched, I shall have no doubt——"

"You won't!" said Dick savagely. "Lay a finger on me, and I'll knock you across the room!"

"Dick, old-timer," urged Mick, "you better prove it up to the bunch."

"Never!"

"I guess that lets him out," grinned Steve. "Give him till Bill horns in, and I guess he'll hide the durocks."

Dick leaped at him, with blazing eyes. Small Brown gave a yell.

"Seize him! Carson, Parker, Dixon, Sanders—all of you! Seize that boy! I insist on searching him, and if money is found on him——"

Five or six pairs of hands were laid on Dick Carr at once. Mick made a movement to go to his aid, but he stopped. He could understand Dick's passionate resentment of a search of his pockets, but he figured that it was the best thing for the tenderfoot to prove that he had no more money than usual in his possession.

Dick struggled fiercely, but helplessly.

Steve Carson gripped one arm, Poker Parker the other. Slim Dixon and Pie Sanders had a grip on him. In so many strong hands he was powerless.

"Aw, keep cool, you big stiff!" said Pie. "Ain't this going to prove that Steve's jest blowing off his mouth, you geek?"

"Hold him!" gasped Small Brown. "Hold him!"

Not till he was sure that the enraged tenderfoot was safely held did Mr. Brown approach him to make the search. At that moment, in his angry annoyance, Small Brown certainly would not have been displeased to find the tenderfoot of Packsaddle guilty.

Dick stood panting in the grasp of four hefty fellows. Small Brown turned out his pockets.

"What—what—what is this?" he squealed.

He held up a ten-dollar bill, which he had hooked out of a pocket of Dick Carr's shirt.

All eyes were fixed on it.

Dick Carr stared at it blankly, amazed. Hardly more than once since he had been in Texas had he possessed as much as ten dollars at one time. He knew that he did not possess it now. Yet Small Brown had taken a ten-dollar bill from his pocket, and was

holding it up for all the Packsaddle bunch to see. Dick could only gaze at it dizzily. How had he come to overlook that ten-dollar bill?

"Howdy Mike!" gasped Mick Kavanagh. His eyes almost popped from his head. "You goldarned geck, you allowed you had only a dollar'n a quarter! I'll tell a man that's ten bucks!"

Small Brown blinked at the tenderfoot in genuine disgust and scorn. There was a deep murmur from the bunch.

"Carr, where did you get this money?"

Dick stammered.

"I—I don't know; I—I never knew I had it. I—I suppose I—I must have forgotten it." His voice trailed away. Even as he spoke he knew how lame it sounded.

The schoolboys released him. They stepped away from him with dark and contemptuous looks. Only Steve Carson grinned. His accusation, wild as it had seemed, was proved now—proved up to the hilt. Every fellow in the Packsaddle bunch knew that Dick Carr had not had ten dollars of his own. It was as much as his pocket-money for a score of weeks. Where had the tenderfoot cinched that ten-dollar bill?

There was only one answer to the question in the minds of the Packsaddle bunch. Even Mick drew away from him.

"I—I never——" stammered Dick.

Steve's mocking laugh interrupted him.

"I guess I allowed he never sold Slick for nix," he said.

Dick gazed almost wildly at his accuser. He gazed round at the faces of the bunch—all accusing now.

"Mick!" he panted.

"Aw, can it!" muttered Mick. "Where'd you get them ten bucks, if it wasn't from Hawk for helping him cinch Slick, you doggoned coyote?"

"I shall keep this ten-dollar bill till Mr. Sampson returns!" squealed Small Brown. "I shall tell him——"

"I tell you——" panted Dick Carr.

Steve interrupted him again.

"Say, I guess we ain't standing for having that coyote in this bunch!" he shouted. "I guess we're going to ride him on a rail out of Packsaddle."

"Boys!" squealed Small Brown.

But Small Brown was unheeded. Led by Steve, the whole bunch rushed on Dick Carr, and in the midst of an angry, shouting mob the tenderfoot of Packsaddle was whirled out of the school-room.

CHAPTER 23.

The Cave on Squaw Mountain!

"YOU, Poindexter!"

Slick started out of slumber, sat up, and rubbed his eyes.

For the moment he had forgotten what had happened and where he was, and he expected to find himself in the bunkhouse at Packsaddle School, with his pals, Dick Carr and Mick Kavanagh, in the next bunks.

But as he blinked round at the rugged rocky walls of the cavern in which he lay, he remembered.

He was far from the cow-town school now.

He remembered the drive in the buckboard over miles and miles of rugged prairie. Then a long tramp on foot by the loneliest paths in the rocky wilderness of Squaw Mountain. Then the cave, in which he had fallen asleep, rolled in the buffalo robe, with the murmur of running water in his ears.

Bright sunlight gleamed in his eyes as he sat up and rubbed them. It streamed in through the narrow opening of the cave, hardly more than a yard wide.

Farther in, the cave extended wider, deep in the massive mountain. At the extremity flowed the underground stream, issuing from one side of the cave, disappearing again on the other.

Across the sunlit opening fell the shadow of a man in store clothes and a stetson hat. He grinned at the school-boy sitting upon the buffalo robe.



In the midst of the wild crowd was Dick Carr, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. He was sitting on a rail, clinging wildly to it to save a fall, and the bunch were pelting him with sticks and stones. "Jumping painters!" gasped Bill Sampson, the headmaster, arriving suddenly on the scene.

"Say, you sure been snoozing some!" said Hawk Walker.

Slick Poindexter rose slowly to his feet.

"You doggoned lobo-wolf!" he said between his teeth, his eyes gleaming at the kidnapper. "If I had a gat in my grip there'd sure be one less coyote in Texas—meaning you!"

"You said it!" grinned Hawk.

Slick watched him, calculating his chances. The opening of the cave had been closed by a big rock, now rolled aside. Slick had tried his strength on that rock before going to sleep the previous night. But it had been securely wedged outside, and he had not shifted it an inch. Now the way was open—if he had a chance of handling the gangster.

Hawk, watching the thought in his face, chuckled.

"Forget it, big boy!" he said. "You'd sure get hurt! I ain't left you roped up—I'm a kind-hearted guy, I am—but I'll sure rope you up agin if you hand over trouble."

Slick did not answer. He stood breathing hard, watching the kidnapper. At Packsaddle School the bunch would be at breakfast now in the chuckhouse; but there was no sign of "eats" for the prisoner in the cave high up the rugged slopes of Squaw Mountain.

"I guess you're safer here, big boy," went on Hawk. "I hid once in this hyer cave when the Rangers was on my trail. I'll say it's a safe spot. You figure that your schoolmaster, Bill Sampson, will trail you here?"

He chuckled again.

"I've sure put Mister Sampson wise," he went on. "He knows that it will cost five hundred dollars to get you back. I've mentioned to him that I ain't feedin' no boarders. You get me?"

"You doggoned piecan!" said Slick. "If they get you they'll string you up on the nearest tree."

"Sure!" assented Hawk. "But they got a long row to hoe afore they put a

cinch on this baby. Ain't I run this game for years, and ain't I always got by with it?"

Slick knew that only too well. As a professional kidnapper, Hawk Walker was a famous man. That strange trade, peculiar to the United States, had been carried on successfully for years by the hard-faced man now lounging in the cave mouth and grinning at Slick.

In nearly every State of the Union Hawk Walker was a hunted man, but he had never been roped in yet. He had kidnapped in every state from New York to California. It suited Hawk to change his scene of operations constantly. He had last been heard of in Nebraska. Now he was getting busy in Texas.

"I guess I got posted afore I cinched you, bo!" he went on. "Your popper ain't no doggoned millionaire, but I guess he can stand for five hundred bucks. I reckon your schoolmaster will put him wise, and he sure will pony up. I'll say I'm sorry for you if he burns time. You get plenty to drink." He waved a mocking hand towards the underground stream at the back of the cave. "But there ain't no eats in this hyer boarding-house. Nope!"

"If a guy had a gun!" sighed Slick.

"I guess your schoolmaster, Mister Sampson, has taught you to write," asked Hawk.

"Bill Sampson don't teach us nothing, you geck! Mister Brown is the teacher at Packsaddle!" growled Slick.

"O.K. If you can put a fist to paper you want to write a note to your popper telling him to get a move on. I'll sure see that he gets it."

Slick set his teeth.

"Write nothing!" he snapped.

"You don't get no chuck hyer!" said Hawk warningly. "I'll say you'll be ready to chew boots by sundown."

"I'll chew my boots before I let you touch my popper for five hundred bucks!" retorted Slick. "You pesky piecan, you wouldn't have cinched me so easy if I'd knowed you was around."

You gave Carr a message that Mustang Dave, from popper's ranch, was waiting by the trail to see me, you dog-goned, lying, thieving lobo-wolf. If I'd knowed it was you I'd sure have borrowed Bill Sampson's gun when I came out of school. Now, get on with it, you geck! If I write a word to my popper it will be to tell him not to pony up a single buck to a bulldozer of your heft."

"Chew it over!" grinned Hawk. "I reckon you'll sing a different tune next time I see you. You'll sure be wanting chuck! So-long, big boy, and chew it over."

The kidnapper stepped back from the narrow entrance of the cave, and laid his hands on the big rock to roll it into the opening.

Like an arrow from a bow Slick's sprang.

He had little chance, and he knew it; but if he had a chance at all, it was before the heavy rock shut him in again. He came at the kidnapper like a panther.

Wary as he was, Hawk was startled by that sudden spring. He reeled back from the rock, with Slick's desperate grip on him, and sprawled on the rough ground. He gave a savage yelp as he struck the earth.

But at the same moment his fierce grasp closed on the schoolboy. Slick Poindexter wrenched desperately, but in vain.

For a long minute they rolled and struggled on the ground, Slick striving fiercely to break away, the kidnapper to hold him. But the man was stronger than the boy. He staggered to his feet at last, with Slick struggling savagely in his hands.

"Doggone you!" panted Hawk.

He swung the schoolboy in his arms and hurled himself headlong into the cave. Slick Poindexter sprawled along the rugged, rucky floor. As he lay dizzy, half-stunned by the crash, the panting gangster rolled the big rock into place, shutting out the sunlight. With a heavy thud it jammed home, and Slick

heard the wedges of rock jammed under it without.

Slick staggered to his feet., He hurled himself at the rock, but it was immovable. Deep dusk was in the cave now, only a stray gleam or two of sunlight penetrating through crevices at the opening. On the rugged hillside sounded retreating footsteps, then the clatter of a horse's hoofs.

The kidnapper was gone.

"Gum!" gasped Slick Poindexter, "This sure clinches me!"

CHAPTER 24.

Ridden on a Rail!

BILL SAMPSON stared. The Packsaddle schoolmaster, with a black brow, came up the school trail from the cow town, clattering on his bronco.

Bill was in a savage mood that morning.

He had been down to Packsaddle to put Marshal Lick wise that Hawk Walker, the kidnapper, was getting busy in the Frio valley, and had cinched a guy belonging to the Packsaddle bunch.

But he had little hope that the town marshal of Packsaddle would be able to help. Mr. Lick was ready to shoot Hawk Walker at sight, or to string him up on a limb of a cottonwood. But where was he going to look for the kidnapper? Bill knew only too well how little chance there was of Hawk being roped in by the marshal's outfit.

Riding back from the cow town up the school trail, Bill scowled savagely at the sunlit prairie. Every now and then he gripped the butt of his six-gun. Bill would have given a year's salary as schoolmaster of Packsaddle to draw a bead on Hawk Walker.

In that frame of mind Bill was in no mood for trouble from the bunch. But as he approached the school gate he heard a roar of excited voices from the playground.

Bill gave a snort of fury.

It was lesson-time, and the bunch should have been in the school-room with Small Brown, the teacher. Very often they kicked over the traces when Bill was absent. The Packsaddle bunch needed a strong hand. Now they seemed to be making whoopee on an unusual scale. With Slick Poindexter in the hands of a ruthless kidnapper, it was no time for whoopee. Bill's eyes blazed.

"Carry me home to die!" he ejaculated. "If I don't make them young geeks squirm a few, I've sure forgot how to handle a quirt."

There was a roar from the playground, and Bill stared blankly at a mob that came surging out of the gateway. He reined in his bronco.

"Jumping painters!" gasped Bill.

In the midst of the wild crowd was Dick Carr, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. He was sitting on a rail, clinging wildly to it to save a fall, and the bunch were pelting him with sticks and stones.

The long rail was supported on the shoulders of Poker Parker and Steve Carson, the biggest fellow at Packsaddle School.

Bill just blinked.

"Riding on a rail" was no new sight to his eyes. Guys who were not wanted in a town were often ridden on a rail out of town. Bill had more than once lent a hand himself at riding some bullwhacker or desert rat out of Packsaddle on a rail.

But no fellow in the Packsaddle bunch had ever been ridden on a rail—till now! Now Dick Carr was riding the rail!

"Howling coyotes!" stuttered Bill. He sat in the saddle and stared.

Nearly all the bunch were in the mob. Small Brown was not to be seen. He had no more chance of controlling the excited bunch than of herding a bunch of steers in a stampede. Round the tenderfoot of Packsaddle the mob of Texas schoolboys surged and

shouted. Only Mick Kavanagh stood clear—but he was not lending his friend a hand.

Dick Carr's face was white with rage. He was shouting, but his voice was lost in the roar of the angry mob of schoolboys. He clung desperately to the rail, high in the air.

Utterly astounded at the sight, Bill Sampson stared. He was aware that Steve Carson was the tenderfoot's enemy, and Steve was generally backed up by his pals, Poker Parker and Slim Dixon. But the tenderfoot had been liked by most of the bunch—and Slick and Mick had been his firm friends. What had caused the whole bunch to turn on him like this was mystifying to the Packsaddle schoolmaster.

"Ride him out!" yelled Slim.

"Say, there's Bill!" exclaimed Pie Sanders, catching sight of the brawny figure of the headmaster sitting his horse on the trail.

"Bill nothing!" snapped Steve. "Ride that pesky piecan out! He ain't wanted at Packsaddle nohow!"

"I tell you—" shrieked Dick Carr.

"Can it!" roared Poker Parker.

"Ride him out!"

The mob surged on, out on the trail. Bill Sampson was still staring blankly. Now, however, he woke up, as it were, and slid from the saddle, gripping his quirt in his hand.

"Say," roared Bill, "what's this game?"

Without waiting for an answer to the question, Bill waded in with the quirt. Right and left he laid it on the Packsaddlers.

The rail slipped from Steve and his friends as they dodged the lashes of the cow whip. It crashed on the earth, and Dick Carr crashed with it.

Breathless, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle sprawled, panting. Round him the bunch roared and yelled as Bill got busy. There was a wild rush back into the playground.

After the scattering bunch rushed Bill, still laying it on.

"Beat it!" roared Bill. "You hit the school-room, and hit it quick! I'll say I'll herd you home, you pesky young geeks! Yep! You beat it, pronto!"

The bunch were beating it as hard as they could. They headed for the porch of the schoolhouse in a wild rush, Bill behind lashing with the quirt, herding them in like steers.

Small Brown stood in the porch goggling out at the scene through his horn-rimmed spectacles. He jumped away as the bunch came streaming in—but he did not jump quick enough.

Steve Carson crashed into him, and he staggered—Slim Dixon and Poker Parker rushed him over, and he fell! Pie Sanders stepped on his chest, Domingo Duque on his neck, Mick Kavanagh on his legs. They had no time to go round Mr. Brown, with Bill behind.

Fearful howls and squeals came from the hapless Mr. Brown as he was trodden on.

The bunch passed over him and rushed into the school-room. Small Brown sat up, spluttering. He clutched his spectacles with one hand and dabbed a damaged nose with the other. He howled and squealed. Bill, halting in the porch as the bunch bolted into the school-room, roared to him:

"Say, you, Brown! You want to look after that bunch! I'm telling you!"

"Urrrrgh!" gurgled Small Brown. "Urrgh! I—I—oogh—"

"Git on your hind laigs!" roared Bill.

"Urrgh! I—I have been tut-tut-trodden on! Urrrrgh!"

Bill stooped to give Mr. Brown a hand up. He grabbed him by his skinny neck, and set him up like a ninepin. Small Brown stood tottering.

Bill stepped out of the porch again and fixed a glare on Dick Carr. The tenderfoot had come back into the playground from the trail. But he did not seem to be intending to come in to school.

"Say you!" roared Bill. "Hop it lively!"

"I'm not coming in!" panted Dick. "I—I—whooooop!" he roared, and jumped as the quirt rang round his legs.

"Beat it!" roared Bill.

And Dick Carr beat it, dodging into the school-room, with Bill tramping in after him.

CHAPTER 25.

Condemned by the Bunch!

DICK CARR stood by his desk, panting for breath. He had not sat down—neither had any other fellow in the bunch. Small Brown squealed breathlessly to the boys to take their places, but never had Small Brown been so totally disregarded.

Even Bill, as he stood surveying the bunch with grim blows and gleaming eyes, did not inspire the same awe as usual. The Packsaddle bunch were in an excited and wrathful temper, almost ready to turn even on the cowpuncher headmaster. It was easy for Bill to see that something unusual had happened in his absence that morning. The bunch were always rough and tough, but he had never known them in this mood before. Grimmer grew his rugged brow as he glared at the angry and rebellious faces before him.

"Now, I guess I want to know!" barked Bill. "Mr. Brown—"

Small Brown pointed to Dick Carr. "Carr—" he began.

"I guess I found them riding that young guy out of school on a rail. I want to know!" hooted Bill.

"And I'll sure tell you!" shouted Steve Carson. "That pesky coyote Carr put Slick into the hands of that lobo-wolf Hawk Walker yesterday, and we've sure got wise to it!"

"It's a lie!" panted Dick Carr.

"It's the frozen truth, and I guess the whole bunch knows it!" shouted

Poker Parker. "We ain't standing for having that coyote in this bunch, Bill!"

"Not by a jugful!" yelled Pie Sanders. "We was riding him out on a rail when you horned in, Bill, and I'll tell a man we'll ride him out again."

"You said it, Pie!" shouted Slim Dixon.

Bill waved an angry hand for silence.

"Pack it up!" he roared. "Ain't you young geeks letting your schoolmaster spill a pesky word? What you got agin young Carr? I know that he brought in a message from that lobo-wolf Hawk, and young Slick went out thinking it was Mustang Dave from his popper's ranch. But he never knowed that—"

"That's all you savvy, Bill!" jeered Big Steve. "Didn't I say from the first that he knowed, and that Hawk paid him to put Slick into his hands?"

"You did, Steve!" shouted Poker.

"And you was right!" exclaimed Pie.

"Can it!" roared Bill. "It was jest the ornery thing that young Carson would say, and I don't give a continental red cent for it! Young Carr never knowed it was Hawk—"

"I'll say he did, and that Hawk paid him to work the rifle!" shouted Steve. "Mister Brown sure found the dust on him."

Bill jumped.

"What's that you're giving me?" he asked. It was clear to Bill Sampson that something must have transpired to turn the whole bunch against the tenderfoot. But he had never looked for this.

"It is true, Mr. Sampson sir!" squeaked Small Brown. "In view of the suspicion of Carr, I searched him in this school-room, and found a ten-dollar bill on him! Here it is!"

Small Brown held up a ten-dollar bill. The schoolmaster of Packsaddle stared at it stupefied.

He took it from the teacher's hand.

He scanned it in a deep silence. The bunch were quiet now. They wanted Bill to see how matters stood. Slowly the headmaster of Packsaddle turned the ten-dollar bill over in his hands, examining it. He fixed his eyes on Dick Carr at last, and his look was very grim.

"You ain't denying that this here bill was found on you, Carr?" he demanded.

"No!" panted Dick.

"I guess," said Bill, "that your popper, manager of the store at Hard Tack, ain't fixed up to throw ten-dollar bills about. But if you claim that this hyer ten bucks is yours, I guess I'll ride down to Hard Tack and put it to Mister Carr. Shoot!"

"I—I—" Dick stammered. "If it's mine I must have forgotten that I had it!"

"Your popper never handed it out to you?"

"Not that I remember."

"Aw! Talk hoss-sense!" snorted Bill. "You ain't full of dollars, like young Steve there. You'd know if you had ten bucks. Yes or no?"

"No!" gasped Dick. "I—I don't know how it got in my pocket, but it can't be mine."

"You doggoned piecan, Hawk Walker gave it you yesterday for handing over Slick to him!" roared Poker Parker.

"Is that the how of it, young Carr?" demanded Bill.

"No!" panted Dick Carr. "Never! I believed that the man was a 'puncher from the Poindexter ranch, and he gave a name that Slick knew. Slick thought it was Mustang Dave when he went out to meet him. I thought so—"

"Pack it up!" sneered Steve. "You might have got away with it if Mister Brown hadn't found the money on you."

"Ride him out on the rail!" shouted Poker. "We ain't having him in this bunch, Bill Sampson, and you can chew on that."

Bill crumpled the ten-dollar note into

his pocket. He was evidently puzzled and perturbed. On the face of it, it looked as if the guilt of the tenderfoot had been proved up. Hardly a fellow in the bunch had heeded Steve's wild accusation till the money was found in Dick Carr's pocket. He was in possession of ten dollars for which he could not account. Not a fellow doubted that it was Hawk Walker's bribe for betraying Slick into his hands.

Bill Sampson simply did not know what to think. He had figured that the tenderfoot was a prize boob, made use of by the kidnapper. Now it looked black enough.

But Bill could not get it down. He had his own opinion of the tenderfoot of Packsaddle, and he was not in a hurry to change it. The whole bunch had followed Steve's lead, and turned against the tenderfoot—even Mick had turned him down. But Bill was not easily led.

"I guess," said Bill Sampson slowly, "that this has got me beat to a frazzle! I'll say I don't get the how of it! But I ain't believing that young guy Carr sold Slick to the kidnapper nohow! There ain't nary a guy in this bunch that would do it, not for ten bucks, nor for a hundred."

"Where'd he get the ten bucks, then?" demanded Steve.

"Let him put us wise to that!" jeered Poker Parker.

"You ain't got nothing to say about that, young Carr?" asked Bill. "You don't claim that the bucks is yours, and you allow you never cinched them from that pesky polecat Hawk Walker. How'd they get in your rags?"

"I—I don't know!"

A yell of derision came from the bunch. Some of the fellows made a movement towards Dick Carr.

Bill gripped his quirt, and his eyes gleamed.

"Squat!" he roared.

The bunch eyed him mutinously. For once the roar of the Packsaddle schoolmaster failed to enforce obedience.

"We ain't standing for it, Bill!" shouted Steve. "I'll tell all Texas, we ain't standing for keeping that coyote in this bunch."

Bill fixed his eyes grimly on Big Steve. The son of Two-Gun Carson, the gunman, stared back at him defiantly. But the defiance faded out of his face as Bill made a stride towards him.

"Squat!" said Bill grimly.

For a second Steve hesitated. Then he sat down. And the rest of the bunch followed their leader's example. Dick Carr was the last.

"Now," said Bill quietly, "I've allowed I don't get the how of this hyer game. But I'm sure going to get the how of it. If I get it fixed that that young geck Carr sold Slick to the kidnapping guy, he sure will quit Packsaddle, with my quirt helping him to hit the trail. But I ain't got it fixed yet. And I'll tell a man that this hyer business is for your schoolmaster to settle! You get me? Don't you chew the rag no more! Mister Brown, you carry on."

And school was resumed, though even Bill's presence could not keep the bunch quiet that morning.

CHAPTER 26.

The Tenderfoot's Resolve!

"MICK, old man!"

Dick Carr spoke in almost a pleading tone. The bunch were out of school. Only their knowledge that Bill's eyes were on them prevented them from collaring the unpopular tenderfoot and riding him on a rail out of Packsaddle.

For the time Bill held the angry bunch in check; but it was certain that the first time Bill left the school they would break out again. Meanwhile, dark and scornful looks, sneers and jeers were the lot of the outcast of Packsaddle.

He touched Mick on the arm as he

came up to him in the playground. The Irish-Texan jerked his arm away as if a tarantula had touched it.

"Aw, keep clear!" he snapped. "You pizen polecat, leave me be!"

"You can't believe that I'd take a bribe from a villain like Hawk Walker, to send Slick out to be kidnapped by him!" breathed Dick Carr.

But Mick's face was hard.

"I guess I'd never believed a word of it!" he answered. "Didn't I stand for you when Big Steve began to shoot off his mouth? But Mister Brown found the bucks on you, and it's such a cinch. You never got them ten bucks from nobody but Hawk Walker."

"It's a lie!" said Dick fiercely.

"A lie is it?" said Mick, his eyes flashing. "And Slick, that was raised with me, and has been my side-kicker ever since we could walk and talk, he's in that bulldozer's grip, and, as like as not, we'll never see him alive agin. Hawk won't let him slide without the money's paid—and they ain't paying it any. And you sold him——"

"And I say it's a lie, and I'll knock it back down your throat, as soon as down Steve's!" Dick flamed out.

"Sure, I'll give ye a chance, ye pizen polecat!" retorted Mick Kavanagh, and with his open hand he struck the tenderfoot of Packsaddle across the face.

The smack rang like a pistol-shot across the playground. Dick staggered back, a scarlet mark showing on his cheek.

The next moment he was springing at Mick Kavanagh.

Mick met him with right and left.

There was a roar from the bunch, and they came scampering up on all sides as the two former friends closed in fierce and savage conflict.

Steve Carson grinned gleefully. His enemy was down now—as down as even the bitter and rancorous Steve could have wanted him to be. Every man in the bunch condemned him. He was not wanted in the school, and now his

former friend was fighting him with savage animosity. It had been an ill day for the tenderfoot of Packsaddle when he made an enemy of the gambler's son.

The bunch surged round the combatants, and every voice shouted encouragement to Mick Kavanagh.

"Wade in, Mick!"

"Put it across the pesky polecat!"

"Chew him up, big boy!"

Mick was strong and sturdy, and full of pluck, but he had to give ground before Dick Carr. The tenderfoot, who had beaten Big Steve, the oldest and biggest fellow in the cow-town school, in a stand-up fight, was more than a match for Mick.

But as the fellow he liked, the fellow who had been his friend, reeled under his furious blows, Dick suddenly dropped his hands and stepped back, panting. Mick leaned on Pie Sanders, gasping for breath, for a moment.

"Mick!" panted Dick Carr. "Believe me—try to believe me——"

"You pizen coyote!" panted Mick, and he leaped to the attack again, his eyes blazing.

Dick Carr set his teeth. He piled in again with all his strength, and the fight was fast and furious. Kavanagh went down suddenly and heavily, crashing hard on the earth.

Dick stood panting.

Steve and Pie picked up the fallen schoolboy. Mick leaned on them heavily. He was done.

"I guess you put it over, you pizen skunk!" he muttered. "But you wait till Bill's gone. You'll be rid out on a rail, doggone you!"

Dick Carr stood unsteadily, wiping his face with his handkerchief. He looked round at the grim, hostile faces of the bunch. An idea that had been working in his mind ever since he had sat on the rail that morning became fixed and settled now. He had made up his mind.

Steve Carson, with a grin, pointed to Hank, the hired man, who was leading

Bill Sampson's bronco from the corral to the schoolhouse.

"Pipe that, you doggoned geck?" he jeered. "That means that Bill's hitting the trail soon, and when he's gone you watch out!"

Dick gave no heed to the bully of Packsaddle.

"Mick, I've got a last word to say!" he said quietly. "I'm getting out of Packsaddle. You've turned me down. I don't care for the rest, and if you'd stood by me I could have stood it through. Now I'm going! I don't know what that villain Hawk has done with Slick, but I'm going to hunt for him, and I shan't come back to Packsaddle without him. For the last time I tell you all that I don't know how that ten-dollar bill got in the pocket of my shirt, unless"—his eyes gleamed at Steve—"unless it was put in while I was asleep in the bunkhouse last night. Believe me or not, as you choose. I'm going, and I'm not coming back without Slick!"

An outburst of derisive jeers answered him. Taking no heed of them, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle turned away and walked to the bunkhouse. Mick Kavanagh went to the pump to bathe his burning face and streaming nose.

Ten minutes later Dick Carr emerged from the bunkhouse with a bundle packed in a slicker-roll. Curious glances were turned on him as he walked to the corral and called his horse.

Without a glance at the bunch, Dick Carr saddled and bridled his pinto, buckled on the slicker-roll and mounted. Without a backward look he rode out at the school gate.

"By the great horned toad, I guess he means it!" muttered Pie.

Steve Carson shrugged his shoulders. "I guess the pizen skunk knows what is coming to him when Bill's gone!" he sneered. "He's sure hitting the trail while the going's good."

The clatter of the pinto's hoofs died

away down the trail. The tenderfoot of Packsaddle was gone.

When the school-bell summoned the bunch in again there were two vacant places in the school-room. Dick Carr was missing as well as Slick Poin-dexter.

CHAPTER 27.

A Show-down for Steve!

BILL SAMPSON dropped from his bronco outside the Red Dog Saloon on Main Street in Packsaddle. He hitched his horse to a post, and strode towards the saloon doorway. And a good many Packsaddle guys stared at him as he did so. The Red Dog was the wildest joint in Packsaddle, and the cow-town schoolmaster had never been seen to enter it before—not, at least, since he had been a puncher on the Kicking Mule ranges. Bill, heedless of curious stares, strode in, stared round the long, low room where the gaming-tables stood and stepped up to the bar. The bar-keeper spun a glass across—unheeded by Bill. He was not there for tanglefoot.

He bestowed a curt nod on a slim, lithe, carefully dressed man who was in talk with the bar-keeper—Two-Gun Carson, the gunman and gambler. And Two-Gun's cold, icy eyes turned very curiously on the schoolmaster.

"You looking for a poker game?" he asked.

"Forget it!" snapped Bill. "Ain't I a pesky schoolmaster? I guess I moseyed in to chew the rag with you a small piece, Two-Gun."

"Shoot!" said the gambler tersely.

"I'll say that that boy Steve of yours packs more dollars than any other guy in my bunch," said Bill. "You sure ain't close with the dust you raise on poker games, Two-Gun. That young gink Steve packs more dollars than is good for him."

The gambler shrugged his shoulders. "You been handing him ten-dollar

“bills?” demanded the headmaster of Packsaddle.

“Sure!” answered Two-Gun coolly. “And why not, if I choose?”

“I ain’t saying nothin’ agin it, if you darn well choose!” grunted Bill. “But I got a ten-dollar bill here, and I ain’t wise to the owner. Mebbe you’d know whether you gave it to young Steve.”

Bill laid a ten-dollar bill on the pine-wood bar. Two-Gun Carson glanced at it. He nodded.

“That’s Steve’s,” he said. “I ain’t never forgot the number of a bill, ol’-timer. If that young gink has been dropping it around the playground, I’ll sure guess agin before I give him another.”

Bill Sampson’s jaw shut like a vice. A vague suspicion had been working in his mind. He had come to see Steve’s father at the Red Dog to put it to the test. Now he knew.

“You sure figure that that’s the bill you gave young Steve?” he asked.

“Ain’t I shouting it?” said Two-Gun impatiently. “If that bill’s been picked up at the school, I’m telling you it’s Steve’s. Doggone you, I can tell you the guy I got it from in a poker game, if you want. It sure was Marshal Lick, and I guess he’d know it agin. You hand that bill to young Steve, ol’-timer.”

“I’ll sure hand it to him now I know!” answered Bill grimly, and he strode out of the Red Dog and returned to his horse.

Bill’s face was set as he rode up the school trail. A vague suspicion was now a certainty.

He rode at a gallop and dashed in at the school gate. He jumped down at the porch and tramped into the school-room.

The bunch were there with Small Brown. Bill did not notice for the moment that Dick Carr was absent.

“You, Steve!” he barked. “Get up on your hind legs, you young lobo-wolf!”

“Aw, what’s biting you, Bill?”

drawled Steve as he lounged to his feet.

Bill held out the ten-dollar note.

“I’ll sure spill what’s biting me, Steve Carson!” he gritted. “That’s the ten-dollar bill hooked out of young Carr’s pocket this morning. Take it; it’s yours.” He threw the bill in Steve’s face. “You planted that bill in young Carr’s pocket, while he was asleep in the bunkhouse, to be found on him to-day.”

Steve’s face whitened.

There was a buzz from the bunch. Mick Kavanagh leaped to his feet.

“It’s a darned lie!” panted Steve hoarsely. “That bill ain’t mine, and I never seen it afore. If young Carr’s pitched that tale—”

“Young Carr ain’t wise to your doggoned game!” roared Bill. “But I jest seen your popper down to the Red Dog, and he allows that he gave you that bill, and it’s yours! What you got to say now, you doggoned young polecat?”

Steve Carson stood staring at him, his face like chalk.

“It’s Steve’s bill!” gasped Mick. “Say, if it’s Steve’s bill, sure that pizen bulldozer Hawk never gave it to Carr!”

“He sure never did!” snapped Bill. “It’s sure Steve’s. I kinder suspicioned him. He was so keen to make out that Carr sold Slick to that lobo-wolf Hawk. Now I got it dead to rights.”

Steve did not speak.

Not for a moment had it crossed his mind that the bill found on Dick Carr could or would be traced to him. He had not counted on the horse-sense of the Packsaddle schoolmaster. Bill might be no great shakes at schoolmastering, but when it came to solid horse-sense, no guy in Texas had anything on Bill. He had bowled out the plotting bully of Packsaddle as clean as a whistle.

“Spill it!” yapped Bill. “You planted them ten bucks on young Carr to make it look like he sold Slick to Hawk Walker. You sure did hope to

get the bunch down on that tenderfoot guy, and that was the game you played, you ornery young pizen polecat! Spill it!"

Steve opened his dry lips, but no word came. He was utterly confounded by the sudden and unexpected discovery. He stood panting.

There was a yell from Mick Kavanagh.

"You pizen coyote! Dick sure allowed that that bill might have been planted on him, and I never believed him! You got the goods on him, you pie-faced polecat, and he's vamposed the ranch, and sure I'll beat you up a few!"

And Mick rushed on the bully of Packsaddle, hitting out right and left. Steve went over among the desks with a crash.

Mick flung himself on him, still punching wildly.

"Aw, let up, you gink!" roared Bill.

He grabbed Mick by his neck-scarf, dragged him away from the yelling Steve, and tossed him aside. Mick sprawled on the floor, panting with rage.

"Sure, I tell ye I'll beat him up!" he yelled.

"I guess you'll leave that to this baby!" said Bill grimly. He grasped Steve with one hand, his quirt with the other. "Now, you young piecan, the whole bunch knows that you done fixed it on Carr. You sure are pizen, but I'll say I'm the guy to take the pizen out of you! Yep—and then some!"

And Bill started in with the quirt.

The bunch stood looking on with grim faces. They knew the truth now, and even Poker Parker and Slim looked the disgust they felt for the unscrupulous rascal. There was no pity in the looks of the Packsaddle bunch as Bill laid on the quirt. And he laid it on with terrific vim. Often had Bill Sampson handled the quirt at Packsaddle School, and handled it hard; but he had never handled it as he handled it now. The lashes came

down like rain on the squirming, howling Steve.

Not till his sinewy arm was tired did Bill desist. Then the bully of Packsaddle was allowed to crawl away, groaning. Bill glared over the bunch.

"Where's young Carr?" he snapped.

"I guess he's hit the trail to look for Slick," answered Mick, "and me not believing him, like the bonehead I was, I let him hit it on his lonesome."

Bill gave a snort.

"It's the quirt for him when he horns in again!" he growled.

But Dick Carr did not horn into Packsaddle School. When the sun sank behind Squaw Mountain, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle was still missing.

CHAPTER 28.

Mick Hits the Trail!

"BILL—" "Aw, can it, you!" snapped Bill Sampson, headmaster of Packsaddle School.

"But—" persisted Mick Kavanagh.

Bill slipped his quirt from under his arm into his hand. Mick jumped back off of reach just in time, the lick from the cow-whip missing him by an inch.

The Packsaddle headmaster seemed to have a grouch that morning. He was standing in the school gateway, looking out over the trail and the rolling prairie that stretched, mile on mile, from the banks of the Rio Frio to the rugged slopes of Squaw Mountain.

Bill's brow was black.

The school-bell had clanged, and the bunch had gone into the school-room with Small Brown, the teacher. Mick was the only fellow out of class.

Instead of following the bunch in, Mick came down to the gate, where the headmaster was standing and staring out. With his two chums—Dick Carr and Slick Poindexter—missing from the bunch, Mick was not thinking of class that morning.

"Look here, Bill—" he began again,

keeping out of reach of another lick of the quirt.

Bill turned his head and glared at him.

"You doggoned young piecan!" roared the cow town schoolmaster. "Why ain't you in school, learning from Mister Brown? Beat it, you! You figure you've got a goldarned holiday because that pesky young guy Carr has vamoosed the ranch, and gone rubbering after Slick?"

"You said it!" answered Mick coolly, but with a wary eye on the quirt.

"By the great horned toad!" roared Bill Sampson. "Ain't I got enough trouble on hand, with Slick kidnapped and Carr missing, without you horning in and handing over more? Forget it, you geck! You hit the schoolhouse, and hit it quick—and sure that'll help you!"

A heavy cowman's boot landed on Mick's riding-breeches, and he flew.

"Now, if you want some more—" roared Bill.

Mick did not want any more.

It was clear that Bill was not to be argued with. Mick cut off in the direction of the schoolhouse.

Bill turned back into the gateway with a snort, to scan the prairie. The cow-town schoolmaster, generally equal to any emergency, was at a loss now. It went sorely against the grain to pay the ransom demanded by the kidnapper for Slick.

Bill hated the idea. Yet what else he was to do was a puzzle to Bill. He was expecting Slick's father now from the Poindexter Ranch. If the rancher brought the dollars for the ransom, Bill reckoned that he would have to give in, and let Hawk Walker get away with the goods. But the thought of it exasperated him intensely.

He forgot Mick, and was unaware that that member of the Packsaddle bunch had not, after all, gone into the schoolhouse. Mick stopped by the porch and looked back at Bill. Then quietly he cut off to the bunkhouse,

where he packed a slicker roll. Then he went to the corral and saddled and bridled his bronco.

Bill or no Bill, Mick's mind was made up. He was going after Dick Carr. He did not reckon that Dick had much chance of finding the kidnapped Poindexter; but two heads were better than one, anyhow. And he was very anxious to see Dick Carr, and tell him that the bunch now knew the truth, and that Steve Carson's accusation had been disproved. Bill or no Bill, Mick was going.

The trot of his bronco's hoofs caught Bill's ear, and he glared round, staring blankly at the schoolboy in the saddle.

Bill's rugged face was crimson with wrath.

"Doggone you!" he roared. "Ain't I told you to hit the school-room? Get off'n that hoss, you young jay! You hear me whisper?"

Mick grinned.

"Forget it, Bill!" he called back.

And he gave his bronco the spur as Bill rushed towards him.

Like an arrow the bronco shot out at the gateway, and the lash of Bill's quirt, intended for Mick, fell on the horse. The bronco galloped the faster for it.

Bill rushed in pursuit.

"Say!" he roared. "You stop, you young geck! I'll sure hide you a few! I guess I'll quirt you like you was an ornery steer! You, Kavanagh, I'm a-shouting to you to stop!"

Mick looked back.

He took off his Stetson, grinned, and waved it in farewell to the exasperated schoolmaster.

"So-long, Bill!" he yelled.

Bill put on a fierce spurt. But even Bill's long and powerful legs were no use in a race with a bronc. He halted at last, gasping for breath and fanning himself with his ten-gallon hat.

Mick, riding at a gallop, vanished down the trail.

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Bill.

"I'll sure hide him! I'll sure use up this hyer quirt on him!"

Bill shook the quirt after the vanishing rider. Then he tramped back to the school to wait there for Mr. Poin-dexter to arrive, his rugged brow blacker than ever. Mick Kavanagh, safe for the present, at least, from Bill's quirt, galloped away over the grassy prairie towards Squaw Mountain.

CHAPTER 29.

From Friends to Foes!

DICK CARR, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle School, sat by a camp-fire in a rocky canyon that split the rugged side of Squaw Mountain.

His pinto was staked out by the camp. High on either side of the lonely canyon rose great walls of rugged rock.

It was as solitary a spot as any in Santanta County. Dick had picked that spot for his camp because a torrent of water ran down the canyon-side, forming a stream lower in the canyon.

He had slept rolled in blanket and slicker, with his feet to the fire. In the morning he stirred the embers together and added pine chips, and cooked his breakfast. Now he was thinking before he took the trail—or trying to think.

Slick had been driven off in a buck-board after falling into Hawk Walker's hands. Lick, the town marshal of Packsaddle, had picked up the tracks of the buckboard, and followed them for miles, and found the vehicle abandoned on the prairie. At that point all trace was lost, and the marshal of Packsaddle had had to give it up.

One thing seemed to be clear, and that was that the kidnapper had left the open country and taken to the rocky wilderness of Squaw Mountain, where the stony soil carried no trail.

That was why Dick had arrived at Squaw Mountain. But now he was

there he could not fail to see the hopelessness of the task he had set himself.

He had dozens of square miles of rocky, uninhabited wilderness to choose from—and the search for Hawk and his prisoner was remarkably like hunting for a needle in a haystack.

He rose at last and began to stamp out the fire. Thick smoke rose from it, curling up towards the blue sky. From lower down the canyon came a sound to his ears—the distant beat of a horse's hoofs.

Dick Carr started and stood staring at the direction of the sound. It was approaching him, though the rocks, as yet, hid the coming rider from his sight.

His heart beat wildly.

In that lonely wilderness of rock and pine riders were rare. Sometimes—but seldom—a 'puncher' from one of the ranches might follow stray steers into those remote recesses. Who was the rider who was coming up the canyon from the lower plains?

The thought of the kidnapper was in his mind. If it was, by chance, Hawk Walker— He was unarmed, save for his quirt, and it was certain that Hawk packed a gun. If it was the kidnapper— Too late Dick realised that the column of smoke from the camp-fire might have betrayed him to hostile eyes.

With a clatter of hoofs the horseman came in sight, and Dick gave a cry of amazement.

"Tlick!"

It was Mick Kavanagh. Dick stared at him blankly. He had never dreamed of seeing one of the Packsaddle bunch so far from the school.

For the moment his face brightened at the sight of the fellow who had been his friend—his friend and Slick's.

But it darkened again at once. Mick had turned against him, with the rest of the bunch. Mick was no friend of his.

He stood with knitted brows, watching the rider. Mick sighted him and

waved his Stetson and came up at a gallop. He leaped from his horse and ran towards Dick Carr with outstretched hands.

"Sure I've found ye!" exclaimed Mick, with a grin of delight. "I've found ye intirely, though I'll tell a man I might have hunted ye a month of Sundays if ye hadn't lighted a fire to tell all Santanta County where ye was hanging up. You'd sure be Hawk's antelope, Dick, if he wanted such a goob."

"What do you want?"

Dick Carr's voice was cold and hard.

Mick stared at him. In his satisfaction at having found the tenderfoot he had rather forgotten the circumstances in which Dick had pulled out of Packsaddle. But he remembered now.

"Sure it's O.K., Dick!" he exclaimed eagerly. "You don't want to get your mad up, ol' timer! I'm telling you it's O.K.!"

"Is it?" said Dick bitterly. "Yesterday you were lending the bunch a hand, riding me on a rail out of the school, and——"

"Forget it, ol' timer!" said Mick. "I'll say you had reason to get your mad up. But I'm telling you it's O.K. Bill Sampson found out that that ten-dollar bill was Steve Carson's. He'd had it from his popper, Two-Gun. So then we was all wise to it that Steve had planted it in your rags. I'll tell a man Steve had such a quirting from Bill that he's still looking sick. And all the bunch will sure give you the glad hand when you hit the school agin, Dick."

But the tenderfoot's face did not soften.

"Will they?" he jeered. "Until Big Steve plays another rotten trick, I reckon, and then they'll turn me down again, and you along with them. If you've come after me to tell me that, Mick Kavanagh, you've had your ride for nothing. You can tell the Packsaddle bunch that I don't care a boiled

bean what they think—or what you think, either!"

"You pesky boob——"

"That's enough!"

Mick's eyes gleamed again.

"You doggoned piefaced tenderfoot!" he exclaimed. "You got to come back to Packsaddle! What you figure you're going to do, riding round Squaw Mountain looking for Slick? Suppose you was to raise Hawk Walker? I guess you'd be sorry you met up with him the next minute."

"That's my business," answered Dick Carr coolly.

"I tell you that lobo-wolf packs a gun, and he's shot more men than he's got fingers and toes!" roared Mick. "You're O.K. now with the bunch, and you got to come back."

"Not without Slick," answered Dick Carr.

"Aw, you're the world's prize boob, and so ye are!" growled Mick. "But if you're going hunting Slick, sure I'm hunting him with ye."

"You're not," answered Dick Carr coolly. "You're no friend of mine and I don't want your company, Mick Kavanagh."

"You're sure asking me to beat ye up!" said Mick, breathing hard.

"You tried that yesterday at Packsaddle, and never had much luck with it," retorted Dick Carr. "Try it again, if you like."

"Howly Mike! I'll beat ye up till you feel like a piece left on the counter!" roared Mick Kavanagh, and he hurled himself at the tenderfoot.

Dick Carr met him half-way, and in another moment they were fighting fiercely.

CHAPTER 30.

Swept to Death!

S PLASH!
Dick Carr gave a gasping cry as he went backwards into the torrent.

He had been standing only a few feet

from the water's edge, and Mick's fierce attack drove him backwards.

He would have rallied in another moment, but at that moment his foot slipped on the rock, and he went over.

Head and shoulders he went into the water, and his feet kicked in the air for a second before he vanished under the surface.

Mick stopped, panting.

"Howly Mike!" he ejaculated, staring blankly at the swirling water as it closed over the tenderfoot of Packsaddle.

He was taken as much by surprise as the tenderfoot.

He did not realise, however, that Dick Carr was in danger. He knew that he could swim—he had seen him swim in the Rio Frio. And the torrent that poured down the canyon side, though swift, was neither deep nor broad.

As Dick's head came up from the water, his Stetson floating away, and a look of bewilderment on his face, Mick burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Sure, it's a wash for ye, and so it is! This way, Dick, ye goob, and I'll lind ye a hand out."

Hostility had evaporated at once. Mick jumped to the water's edge to stretch a hand out to the tenderfoot struggling in the water. He grinned as he stretched it out.

But the next instant the grin disappeared from his face.

"Dick!" he yelled.

Dick Carr was swimming hard. He almost got within reach of Mick Kavanagh's outstretched hand. But the rush of water dragged him away, and he whirled down the stream.

Mick stared after him in consternation as the torrent bore him away, in spite of his struggles, and he went under again.

"Dick!" he panted.

He rushed along the steep bank.

But the great rocks and boulders along the course of the mountain stream impeded him. As he clambered over a great rock in breathless haste,

he saw Dick a score of yards away from him, fighting wildly against the torrent that swept him onward.

And he saw, too, what chilled his very heart. The wall of rock on the farther side of the narrow canyon rose almost as steep as the wall of a house. And the torrent did not turn there. It flowed into an opening of the rocky wall, and disappeared into the interior of Squaw Mountain.

Mick's heart missed a beat as he saw it.

Dick had seen his danger, and was fighting desperately against it. But it was in vain. With all his strength he struggled, but if he touched the bank his fingers slipped on the wet rock, and the resistless torrent swept him on again.

For a split second Mick was overwhelmed with horror. Once Dick was swept out of the light of day into the underground stream he was lost.

Mick rushed to his horse.

There was one chance of saving the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. He grasped his lasso from the saddle of the bronco, and tore back to the bank of the stream.

Rope in hand, he climbed on a high rock, and fixed his eyes on the struggling schoolboy in the water.

It was a matter of seconds now.

Dick was within a dozen feet of the gap in the canyon side where the torrent flowed underground.

His white, desperate face showed like chalk in the sunshine. With all his strength, he fought against the rush of the water.

Whiz!

The lasso flew.

There was time for only one cast—if there was time! Mick's face was like stone as he threw the rope—but his hand was steady, his aim unerring. The loop dropped towards the tenderfoot's head—it seemed to Mick that it would encircle him and save him. But even as the rope touched Dick Carr, the whirl of the torrent dragged him

out of its reach—the rope barely touched him and slid away into the water.

Mick saw the tenderfoot make a wild clutch at it—and miss!

The lasso hung useless in his hands, and before he could begin to drag in the rope, the desperate swimmer vanished from his horrified eyes—swept out of sight under the arching rock.

"Dick!" groaned Mick Kavanagh.

He stood staring in blank horror at the water that dashed and foamed on the face of the rocky cliff—with no trace of a swimmer there now. The canyon had only one human occupant—the schoolboy standing dumb with horror on the bank of the torrent that had swept his friend away to darkness and death.

For long minutes Mick Kavanagh stood there, rooted to the rock, hardly daring to believe in the terrible thing that had happened under his eyes.

At his feet the torrent foamed and rushed on, gurgling into the arched gap in the canyon side, rippling and splashing, whirling away fragments of driftwood that disappeared one after another. Dick Carr's hat that had been caught in an eddy came floating down. Mick, with stony eyes, watched it as it whirled on the water and ducked out of sight under the low, rocky arch. The Stetson vanished the way its wearer had gone. Mick Kavanagh groaned aloud.

But he pulled himself together.

Was there a chance yet—a remote chance? The torrent that flowed into the apparently solid mass of the mountain must have an outlet—beyond that towering wall of rock was the Squaw River, a tributary of the Frio. Was there a remote possibility that a swimmer might be swept alive through the underground channel out into the waters of the Squaw?

If there was a chance, it was slight enough. But it was all there was, and Mick would not give up hope.

He coiled in his lasso, and went back to his horse. His face was white and strained; but he was keeping cool. Alive or dead, Dick Carr would be swept out into the wide waters of Squaw River—that seemed a certainty. Alive or dead, Mick would find him there.

He mounted his bronco, and taking Dick's pinto by the reins, led him away, riding fast down the canyon. He knew where to strike Squaw River at the nearest point, and by following the bank he would find the outlet of the underground stream. Alive or dead, he would find the tenderfoot of Packsaddle! He clung to the hope that he might yet find him alive—but as he rode, Mick's heart was like lead in his breast.

CHAPTER 31. No Surrender!

"SAY, big boy!"

Slick Poindexter gritted his teeth at the sound of the voice. It was the cool, mocking voice of Hawk Walker, the kidnapper.

It came from beyond the rock that barred the opening of the cave in the lonely gulch in Squaw Mountain.

The rock almost filled the narrow opening, but here and there through slits and crevices the sunlight glimmered. The cave was not wholly dark. Slick's eyes had become accustomed to the dim twilight that reigned round him, and he could see his surroundings.

During the days and nights that he had been a prisoner in the cave, the schoolboy of Packsaddle had explored every foot of it—every inch almost.

Again and again he had followed some rift, some crevice, in the hope that it might lead to some outlet—but always in vain.

There was no outlet, and no escape! At the bottom of his heart he knew that there was no chance; for the kidnapper would have examined the cavern with care before choosing it as

a place of hiding for his prisoner. But any occupation was better than none, and Slick Poindexter searched and searched till he knew the interior of the cavern like a book.

It seemed to him that ages had elapsed since Hawk had landed him there. No food had been given him. As Hawk had told Bill Sampson in his letter, he did not provide his prisoners with "eats." Slick was almost sick with hunger.

Water he had in abundance. The underground stream that flowed at the back of the cave provided him with that. But no food had passed his lips since he had been a prisoner in the hidden cave.

Even the hated voice of the kidnapper was welcome to break the silence and solitude—broken only by the murmur of the water on the rock. Slick Poindexter hurried towards the narrow opening of the cave.

He was weakened by hunger, but he was ready to make the most desperate attempt to break out if the rock was rolled away, as it had been rolled away the last time the kidnapper came. But this time Hawk Walker did not move the rock.

A narrow crevice was blocked by a dark shadow, and Slick saw the hard, mocking face looking in at him. It was two or three feet distant, and the crevice was too narrow for him to make an attempt to reach it. He shook a clenched fist at Hawk Walker, who grinned.

"Say, bo, I guess you'll be honing for some eats!" drawled Hawk.

"I sure could eat the hind leg of a mule, you pesky piecan!" answered Slick Poindexter. "You want me to pass in my checks in this hyer cave, you doggoned lobo-wolf?"

"I guess I want five hundred dollars," answered Hawk. "But your school-master ain't played up yet! Ontil I hear from him, or from your popper, I reckon there won't be any eats in this hyer elegant boarding-house! Nope."

"If a guy could get at you——" sighed Slick.

"You sure was so fresh the last time I shifted this hyer rock, I sure ain't shifting it any more!" answered Hawk. "If you want to write a letter to your popper, you can push it out through this slit."

Slick Poindexter set his teeth.

"I guess I'll pass in my chips in this cave afore I help you touch my popper for five hundred bucks!" he answered. "I reckon he would have to put a mortgage on the ranch, and I sure ain't standing for it."

The mocking grin disappeared from Hawk Walker's face, and it became cold and hard and evil.

"You better guess agin, you young geck!" he snarled. "I've played the kidnapping game in every State in the Union, and I ain't slipped up on it yet. I got business over in New Mexico, and I sure ain't burning much more time in Texas. You get me? I'm giving you one day more. If the dollars ain't paid to-morrow, you don't see me agin. I'm hitting the trail!"

"Hitting the trail, and leaving me here!" breathed Slick.

Cool and courageous as he was, his heart sank.

"You said it!" snapped Hawk viciously. "And I guess you wouldn't be the first guy I've cinched that's passed in his checks because his folks was too slow to pony up, neither! I ain't in this hyer business for my health, young Poindexter! I'll say I'm after dollars, and if I don't cinch the dollars, your folks can comb Squaw Mountain for you till they find your bones in this hyer cave!"

Slick stood silent. He knew that the iron-hearted villain meant every word of it. It was on those lines that Hawk Walker carried on the business of a professional kidnapper. And he had carried it on successfully for so many years that Slick had little hope that he would "slip up" this time. Unless the ransom was paid, he was lost.

Slick's hand closed on a loose fragment of stone. He could not reach the kidnapper through the deep crevice—the mass of rock jammed at the cave-mouth was three feet thick. But if he could not get through, the missile in his hand could.

And as the kidnapper watched him, impatiently waiting for his answer, Slick suddenly jerked his arm forward, and the sharp, jagged stone in his hand shot like a bullet through the crevice.

It struck Hawk Walker full in the face, and Slick saw the blood spurt from a deep cut as the kidnapper staggered back.

He heard a fierce yell of pain and rage as the rascal fell and disappeared from his sight.

A string of fierce oaths followed as the ruffian scrambled to his feet. Next moment the man's face appeared at the crevice, and then his gun was pointing at Slick.

Bang!

It was the roar of the six-gun. In his furious rage, Hawk fired at the schoolboy.

But Slick leapt aside from the narrow opening. The bullet whizzed through the cave, struck the wall of rock at the back, and dropped into the underground stream that flowed there.

Bang! came the roar of the six-gun again. Another bullet spattered after the first.

Slick Poindexter burst into a mocking laugh.

"Keep on burning powder, ol'-timer!" he shouted. "I guess you ain't scoring no bullseyes!"

He groped for another loose stone and gripped it. He hoped that the kidnapper, in his rage, would roll the rock aside to get at him. He was ready to take the most desperate of chances to make a bid for his liberty.

But if Hawk thought of it, he abandoned the idea. In his rage and fury, he had fired into the cave; but he did

not want to shoot the prisoner whom he still counted on exchanging for five hundred dollars. His voice came in a hoarse and savage shout.

"Doggone you! I guess I'll hide you a few with my quirt afore I hand you over when they pony up the dollars! I'll sure skin some of the hide off'n you, you goldarned young firebug!"

"Forget it!" jeered Slick. "I guess you don't dare to horn into this hyer cave, you white-livered piecan!"

A fierce oath answered him, but the kidnapper was not to be taunted into removing the wedged rock. Slick, peering cautiously through the crevice, saw him standing several feet away, dabbling the blood from his cut cheek. A few moments later he was gone, and the clatter of hoofbeats died away in the silence of Squaw Mountain.

"Gum!" said Slick Poindexter. "I guess that guy is hopping mad! I'm sure glad I handed him a sockdolager with that donick, but— Gee-whiz! I'd sure give all the dollars in the bank at San Antone to step into the chuck-house at Packsaddle! I'll tell a man, I'm sure hungry! I guess—"

He broke off. A voice came to his ears—a voice that made him wonder for a dizzy moment whether his brain was turning. It was a voice he knew—a voice calling his name!

CHAPTER 32.

A Startling Meeting!

DICK CARR gave himself up for lost when the torrent swept out of the bright sunlight into the arched gap in the rocky wall of the canyon.

Light was instantly blotted from his eyes. Water was under him, round him, over him. His head struck the rocky arch above him; it was but a few inches from the surface of the water, and he was driven under.

Whirling in the rush of the torrent,

as helpless as any drift-log carried away by the current, the tenderfoot of Packsaddle felt all the horrors of suffocation. Blackness and choking water overwhelmed him. His lungs seemed to be bursting as he was rushed on into the deep, unknown underground recess into which the torrent flowed.

Twice, thrice, in his vain and frantic struggles—the struggles of a drowning man—his head struck hard rock above him—hard rock that shut him down in the merciless waters.

And then suddenly, even as his senses were leaving him, and death's hand was stretched out for him, his head rose clear of the water. Dizzy as he was, he realised that the rocky roof no longer shut him down to death. He drew in a breath of air—air that was new life to his choking lungs. He was still in darkness, but the rock was no longer over him; his head was free of the water.

He was swimming again, in darkness, but breathing air—life-giving air. He had come through the very Valley of the Shadow of Death, but he still lived. He was dashed almost with stunning force against a point of rock, and instinctively he grasped at it and clung to it.

The torrent raced by, tearing at him, dragging at him, seeking to drag him away to death. But with a convulsive grasp he clung to the rock—a sharp spur that jutted into the stream. He clamped himself to it with a desperate grip, and as his senses cleared dragged his chest over it so that only his legs still dangled in the water.

There for long minutes he rested, with the ripple and murmur of the water in his ears, his strength returning. And as the minutes passed he discerned that he was not in complete darkness; a dim twilight reigned round him, and he was able to discern the shape of a cavern.

Then he knew what had happened. The torrent on its underground way to the Squaw River flowed through a

cave, and he had risen to the surface in the cave.

He crawled from the water. Suddenly, loud above the murmur of the imprisoned torrent, came a roar of sound like thunder, filling the cave with booming echoes. It came again, thundering and echoing round him. In utter amazement he realised that it was the roaring of a gun that he heard. Someone was loosing off a six-gun at no great distance.

Dick Carr rubbed his eyes and stared into the gloom before him. Was he dreaming?

Following the booming of the six-gun came the sound of a voice—a voice familiar to his ears. Unless he was dreaming, it was the voice of the kidnapped schoolboy of Packsaddle—Slick Poindexter.

He stood rooted to the rocky floor of the cavern, on the dim bank of the subterranean stream.

It was Poindexter's voice. Was Slick there? In the dimness he could see nothing but the grim walls of the cavern, half lost in gloom. Was he dreaming?

"Slick!"

He called the name of his comrade of Packsaddle.

He heard the gasp of astonishment that came from Poindexter. There was a tramping of feet on the rugged floor of the cavern.

Someone was there. It was—it must be—Slick! And Dick Carr shouted again.

"Slick!"

A figure loomed in the distance. He glimpsed a white face.

"Say, is that Dick Carr tooting, or am I plumb loco?" panted Slick Poindexter. "If it ain't Dick Carr I'm sure loco!"

"It's Dick Carr!" panted the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. "Slick, old man, I've found you!"

Slick came closer; he peered at him with almost unbelieving eyes; he grasped his arm as if to make sure

that he was real. His eyes seemed to be almost popping from his head.

"Dick! It's sure you; it ain't your ghost——"

Dick laughed breathlessly.

"And it's you, Slick; not your ghost!"

"I'll say this hyer is me—all wool and a yard wide! I guess I'm hyer because that doggoned lobo-wolf, Hawk Walker, kinder planted me here. But how in thunder——"

Dick Carr pointed to the underground stream issuing from the wall of rock; and Poindexter, as he saw that he was drenched from head to foot, understood. He caught his breath.

"You hit this hyer cave that-away!" said Slick in a hushed voice. "By the great horned toad! I guess you got more lives'n a cat, Dick, if you got through that alive. Say, you're wet!"

"Just a few!" grinned Dick.

Poindexter gripped his hand.

"I'll say I'm plumb glad to see you, old-timer!" he said. "But you got sure landed in the same fix as this baby. I'll bet a stack of dollars to a Mexican cent that you never knowed I was here!"

"Hardly!" answered Dick Carr.

"You tumbled in and was washed away, I reckon?" asked Slick.

"That's it!" assented Dick. He said nothing of his fight with Mick Kavanagh. "But I've found you, Slick! You've been shut up in this cave ever since that villain Hawk got you?"

"You said it! And I sure do miss the eats!" said Poindexter. "You ain't got a bite in your rags?"

Dick shook his head. All his supplies were in the camp by the canyon torrent.

Poindexter whistled softly.

"Dick, ol'-timer, I'm powerful glad to see you! But you're fixed as bad

as I am now. I guess Hawk Walker will sure be surprised, a few, when he moseys along to-morrow and finds two where he left one. But he won't let you hit the horizon, Dick, any more than this baby."

"We're getting out of this!" said Dick.

"Mebbe there's a chance with two instead of one shoving at that doggoned donick!" said Slick hopefully. "We'll sure try it on, old-timer!"

Dick Carr followed Slick up the cave to the glimmer of sunlight at the mouth. Slick peered from the crevice, but there was no sign of Hawk Walker; the kidnapper was already far away. Again and again Slick had tried his strength on the wedged rock and had found it immovable. Was there a chance with his comrade to help? It was a glimmer of hope, at least.

The two schoolboys braced themselves against the rock and exerted all their strength; they strained at it till the perspiration ran in streams down their faces.

But it was futile. The heavy rock was too firmly wedged outside, and twice their united strength could not have shifted it an inch. They gave in at last and stood panting for breath.

"I guess that lets us out!" said Slick dismally. "That guy Hawk sure does make a guy safe when he cinches him."

Dick did not answer. He leaned on the rock, breathing hard. Had he found his comrade, only to share his fate in that hidden recess in the rocks of Squaw Mountain? Was it only for that that he had escaped the fearful peril of the underground stream? He spoke at last.

"Anyhow, we're together, Slick!" he said.

"You said it, old-timer!" agreed Slick.

And that was all the comfort the comrades of Packsaddle had. But while there was life there was hope.

CHAPTER 33.

The Empty Saddle!

"DOGGONE my cats!" roared Bill Sampson.

The headmaster of Packsaddle School was wrathful.

He was, in fact, hopping mad!

Bill was standing by the flagpole in the playground of the cow town school. He had a neckscarf in one hand—the other hand on the cord that ran to the summit of the pole.

It looked as if Bill was about to hoist a signal. But, if so, he was a long time about it. For he had been standing there for a good hour, and still the signal was not run up.

Bill, generally quick to decide, seemed unable to make up his mind. His rugged, bearded face was worried and troubled under the shadow of his ten-gallon hat. For a long hour he stood there that afternoon, in the hot glare of the Texas sun, still unable to decide what he was going to do.

The Packsaddle bunch were in the school-room with Mr. Brown. Three of the bunch were missing—Dick Carr, Mick Kavanagh, and Slick Poindexter. But the rest were there, and no doubt they figured that Bill had gone out, having seen and heard nothing of him for a good hour. Usually the headmaster of Packsaddle was in the school-room in lesson-time to keep the bunch in order while they received instruction from Small Brown.

It was fairly certain that the bunch supposed that Bill was gone. For, breaking in on the gloomy and worried meditations of the cow-town schoolmaster, came an uproar from the school-house.

Only when Bill was absent did the bunch let themselves go, regardless of Small Brown. Now they were letting themselves go.

And Bill snorted with wrath.

He reckoned that he had trouble enough on hand, with three of the bunch missing from the tally, without

the rest making whoopee in school-time.

"Doggone 'em!" roared Bill. He dropped the cord and the neck-scarf, and gripped his quirt. "That pesky guy Brown sure can't ride herd over that bunch—not worth a red cent, he ain't! But I'll sure put 'em wise that their headmaster is around!"

Bill strode to the schoolhouse, and tramped through the porch.

He glared into the school-room.

Quite an exciting sight met his eyes.

Small Brown, the Packsaddle teacher, was dodging behind Bill's high desk. His startled eyes almost popped through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Steve Carson, Slim Dixon, and Poker Parker were pelting him with school books. The rest of the bunch were on their feet, roaring with laughter.

"Take your places!" Small Brown was squealing. "Sit down at once! I will report this to Mr. Sampson! I will—yooooop!" Small Brown yelled as a volume caught him under the chin.

"Bullseye!" chuckled Steve Carson.

"Wow!" yelled Small Brown. "Ow!"

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

A heavy tramping of feet in big cowhide boots interrupted the merry roar. The Packsaddle bunch stared round at Bill as he strode in.

"Watch out, you guys, it's Bill!" gasped Slim.

There was a rush to the desks.

Bill grabbed Steve Carson by the back of his neck. Big Steve wriggled and roared in his grasp. Small Brown emerged from behind the headmaster's desk, gasping for breath.

"Say, you, Steve!" roared Bill. "You honing for more quirt—eh? I guess you had enough yesterday to satisfy you, if you sure wasn't a hog and never knowed when you had enough!"

"Let up, you ornery old guy!" gasped Steve, struggling in the headmaster's powerful grip.

"Let up nothing!" snapped Bill. "You figure this is a time to make whoopee, with young Slick cinched by

that doggoned kidnapper, Hawk Walker, and young Carr gone after Slick, and Mick gone after young Carr, and all three of them missing?"

Whack! came the quirt round the legs of the struggling Steve.

Steve's yell woke all the echoes of Packsaddle.

"Ain't it you that put up the trouble?" roared Bill. "Didn't you claim that young Carr had been paid by that lobo-wolf Hawk to put Slick into his paws, and didn't you plant a ten-dollar bill in his rags to make it look like it? And didn't young Carr go off on his ear, the pesky young piccan 'cause all the bunch turned on him?"

Whack, whack!

Steve roared.

"And didn't that young jay Mick go after him, riding off under my very nose, and me a-shouting to him to pull in?" hooted Bill.

Whack, whack!

"Let up!" shrieked Steve.

"I ain't letting up yet a piece!" snorted Bill. "You sure put across enough trouble, young Steve, without raising Cain in this here school-room, and fanning Mister Brown with school books!"

Whack, whack, whack!

"And me waiting for Mister Poin-dexter to horn in and a 'puncher coming up from the ranch to allow that he's gone to San Antone!" roared Bill. "Him not getting word from me, and me not knowing what to do!"

Whack, whack!

"And that lobo-wolf Hawk watching for me to put up the signal that the ransom's to be paid for Slick!" went on Bill. "And me figuring that I've got to talk to that doggoned kidnapper!"

Whack, whack!

The bunch looked on, breathless. For every worry and trouble that the headmaster of Packsaddle enumerated, he gave Steve a lick of the quirt. Steve hopped and roared and howled, but he could not break away from the iron grip on the back of his neck.

But Bill pitched him away at last.

Steve sprawled, yelling, among the desks. Bill glared at the bunch.

"Now, I guess you'll keep order here!" he roared. "You 'tend to Mister Brown, like your folks send you here for. You get me? You let me hear you whisper again, and I'll sure hide you like you was a bunch of ornery steers!"

And Bill strode out of the school-room. Mr. Brown had a very quiet class after he was gone. No fellow in the bunch wanted to bring Bill Sampson back again!

Bill strode out into the brilliant sunshine of the playground.

Not a whisper came from the school-house. Bill dismissed the bunch from his mind.

He went back to the flagpole. Still he hesitated to run up the signal for the kidnapper to see from the distant prairie.

He was still thinking out that problem, when there was a beat of horse's hoofs on the school trail, and he spun round, to stare at the horseman riding in at the gate.

"That doggoned young gink Kavanagh!" exclaimed Bill.

He gripped his quirt, and strode to meet Mick as he rode in. Mick Kavanagh was riding his own bronco, and leading Dick Carr's pinto by the rein. Mick had returned to the cow-town school—but not with the tender-foot of whom he had gone in search—only his riderless horse! What had happened to Dick Carr? What did that empty saddle tell?

"Say, you young geck—" roared Bill, grasping Mick's bridle with one hand, and lifting the quirt with the other.

But he lowered it again. Mick slid from the saddle, and stood unsteadily, facing the schoolmaster. His face was white and strained—and the look on it disarmed Bill. The black frown faded from his brow, and he dropped his rough hand gently on the boy's shoulder.

"Spill it, kid!" said Bill softly. "What's come to young Carr?"

A sob choked in Mick's throat.

"I—I guess he's passed in his checks, Bill, and I've come back to tell you it was my fault!" he groaned.

CHAPTER 34.

A Desperate Chance!

"S LICK!"

"Yeah?"

"We've got to get out of this!"

"Sez you!" grunted Slick Poindexter.

Dick Carr set his lips.

Little did Hawk Walker dream that his kidnapped prisoner had been joined by a comrade from Packsaddle School. Little, indeed, would Hawk have cared, for in the hidden cave Dick was as secure a prisoner as Poindexter.

The great rock that barred the cave-mouth was immovable. The united strength of the two schoolboys had failed to shift it an inch.

Through crevices came the glitter of sunrays to remind them of the outer world from which they seemed eternally shut off. The sun was sinking behind Squaw Mountain now, and the deep twilight in the cave was deepening.

"Slick, old man——" Dick began again.

"Aw, can it, ol'-timer!" said Slick wearily. "I guess it won't buy you anything, chewing the rag! We're as good as gone up the ~~hume~~—you as well as me! I'm powerful glad to have you with me, Dick; but I sure wish you'd stayed back at the school! I'm telling you, the jig is up!"

"We're getting out of it, Slick! There's a chance, and we're going to try it!" said Dick Carr, quietly and firmly.

Slick stared at him.

"I guess I don't see no doggoned chance!" he answered. "Give it a

name, ol'-timer, and see me jump at it with both feet!"

Dick pointed to the underground stream, flowing dark and swift across the back of the cavern. From a gap at one side, it came swirling and gurgling, to disappear into a gap on the farther side.

Slick Poindexter started violently.

"Listen to me, Slick!" said the tenderfoot of Packsaddle quietly. "You know how I got here. I took a tumble in the torrent up in the canyon, and it washed me away underground. I got into this cave alive."

"You said it!" agreed Slick. "I guess it was a miracle, and then some; but you sure did land alive and shouting!"

"That torrent must have an outlet," said Dick Carr. "It must flow into the Squaw River!"

"Sure!"

Slick rose from the boulder and joined his comrade on the rocky ledge of the subterranean stream. He knew now of what Dick was thinking, and the bare thought of it made him shiver.

"It's sudden death!" he breathed.

"I came this far alive, Slick," answered the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. "It was a close thing, but I came through. It depends on the distance before that water hits the open."

"And who's going to guess the distance?" muttered Slick. "We ain't fur from the Squaw, but how fur I ain't guessing."

"That's the chance we've got to take."

Slick was silent.

For a long minute he stood staring at the dark, swirling water, vanishing in constant flow under the low, arched rock of the gap in the cavern side.

Between the water and the rock above there was no space for a swimmer's head. A plunge into the gap meant going under—and keeping under!

If the distance was short, they would be swept out headlong into the Squaw

River in the rush of the water. If it was long— That was hopeless death in the darkness—the death of drowned rats!

Poindexter shivered.

But his face set hard and firm. It was casting the dice, with death on the hazard of the die. But he had the pluck for it.

"It's sure death to hang on!" he muttered. "Hawk ain't handling the ransom, Dick, and when he lights out to-morrow, he lights out for keeps! We'll be left here—and never found! He sure is a tough guy! Dick, ol-timer, I guess if we get through alive, we'd have a surprise party ready for that bulldozer when he humps along to-morrow like he allowed he would!"

Dick drew a deep breath.

"I'll chance it, if you will, Slick! It's the only chance, and we've got to take it, or die here in a trap!"

"It's a cinch!" said Slick Poindexter steadily.

No more was said.

Desperate as the chance was, it was all that remained to the prisoner of Hawk Walker and the comrade who had so strangely joined him.

Dick had come down the upper torrent alive. There was an even chance, at least, of going down the lower torrent alive. Such as the chance was, they resolved to take it.

The thought was in Dick's mind that he wished he had parted friends with Mick Kavanagh, but he did not utter it. Steadily, and in silence, he prepared for the desperate plunge.

They fastened themselves together with neckscarfs knotted to their belts. It was to be both or neither. If either won through to life and liberty, both would win through. If either failed, the other would share his fate. On the edge of the swirling water they exchanged, in silence, a last grip of the hand. Then, setting their teeth, they took the plunge.

In an instant the dark water was over them, and they were swept away together under the rock. In black

darkness, tossed and whirled by the gurgling water, they were swept away as if into the deepest, blackest depths of the earth. And as they rolled and whirled helplessly on in the sweep of the torrent, the icy hand of the grim King of Terrors reached for them in the blackness.

CHAPTER 35.

Alive or Dead?

"S PILL it!" muttered Bill Sampson.

He stood with his big, rough hand on Mick Kavanagh's shoulder, steadying the boy. The Packsaddle bunch would hardly have known their burly, brawny, rough-and-ready Bill Sampson could be as gentle as a woman, and he was strangely gentle now. Mick, standing unsteadily, choked a dry sob in his throat.

"He's gone up, Bill!"

"Carr, the tenderfoot?"

"Sure!" groaned Mick.

Bill felt a pang. He had been angry with Dick Carr for riding out of the cow-town school without leave in search of his kidnapped comrade. He had promised him the quirt on his return, hard and heavy. But he liked the cheery schoolboy from the Old Country, and the thought that the tenderfoot of Packsaddle had ridden away to his death gave him a hard blow.

But he answered quietly:

"You got it sure?"

"I—I guess so! I guess there ain't no dog's chance!" muttered Mick.

"How come?" demanded Bill. "He went rubbering arter Slick what's in the grip of that lobo-wolf Hawk! Mean to say he met up with Hawk, and that doggone cuss shot him up?"

Mick shook his head.

"I ain't seen nothing of Hawk, nor nothing of Slick!" he answered. "I'm telling you it's my fault Dick's gone over the range—my fault!"

"How come?" demanded Bill again.

"I got after him along to Squaw Mountain, Bill. He'd lighted a campfire, like the tenderfoot he was, telling all Texas where to look for him. I sure came to him friendly——" Mick broke off, with a groan.

"You ain't telling me you had a rookus with him?" growled Bill, guessing the truth.

"I told him it was all O.K. with the bunch," said Mick. "I put him wise about you finding out that Steve planted that ten-dollar bill in his rags, making it look like he was in cahoots with the kidnapper. I figured that that would square it, and he would ride back with me. But he sure did have his mad up about the bunch turning him down, and me along with them, and—and—we came to hitting——"

Bill was silent.

"He was standing on the edge of the water," muttered Mick. "I guess you know that canyon on Squaw Mountain, Bill, where the stream runs underground——"

"Sure!"

"He went in," said Mick. "I nearly got him with my rope, but—but he was washed under the rock, Bill, and—and I——" Mick's voice broke.

Bill breathed hard.

"I guess that water runs out into the Squaw River," he said. "I guess there's a chance he went through."

"I sure knew that, and I beat it for the Squaw!" said Mick. "I found the place where it comes out of the hill, and—and I've been watching for hours, Bill, but not hide nor hair of him came through. Dead or alive, I reckoned I'd find him on the Squaw, but—but——"

Kavanagh choked.

"Then I figured I'd come back and tell you!" he went on drearily. "He's gone up, Bill! I never meant it—you know I never meant it! We was fighting on the water's edge, and, sure, I might have gone in instead of Dick! I wish I had——"

"Aw, can it!" grunted Bill.

The Packsaddle schoolmaster stood in deep thought, a wrinkle in his rugged brow.

Bill knew all the country between the Rio Frio and the Staked Plain, and there was hardly a gulch or an arroyo on Squaw Mountain that he had not trodden. He knew where the mountain torrent disappeared into the hillside; he knew where it emerged on the bank of the Squaw River and joined that stream to flow down to the Frio. He knew that driftwood often floated through to the Squaw. But—a living man or boy? His heart was heavy as he thought of it. A dead body would be washed through, sooner or later. But a living one——

"I guess," said Bill, at last, "that there ain't much chance that that tenderfoot's still alive and shouting. Nope! But I ain't going to believe that he's passed in his chips till I got it dead to rights!"

Mick looked at him.

"You figure——" he began.

"I figure that I'm going to give that spot the once-over," said Bill, "and I'm sure doing it pronto. Put them cayuses into the corral and go and tell Tin Tung to fix you up some eats."

Bill called to Hank, the hired man, to bring his bronco. Mick led the two ponies to the corral and turned Dick Carr's in. But he did not unsaddle his own horse.

When Bill mounted at the gate to ride to Squaw Mountain, Mick Kavanagh rode after him. Bill stared round at him.

But he did not speak. If there was a remote chance of finding Dick Carr, dead or alive, Mick wanted to be there, and his headmaster was not the man to say him nay. Bill stretched his bronco to a gallop westward over the rolling prairie, and Mick Kavanagh rode with him.

Bill's face was dark and gloomy as he rode. His problem of dealing with the kidnapper was still unsolved, though, in his anxiety for Dick Carr,

he had shelved it for the time. And that problem had to be solved.

The search for the kidnapped schoolboy had been hopeless. Marshal Lick had done his best—and failed. Either the ransom had to be paid, or Slick left to his fate.

And, by ill-luck, Mr. Poindexter was away at San Antone, and Bill had been unable to get word to him. He had to decide for himself, without taking counsel with Slick's father.

It was no easy matter for the cow-town schoolmaster to raise the sum of five hundred dollars. But his friends in the cow town would have helped; he could have found the money.

Handing it over to Hawk Walker, for the release of his victim, was another matter. It got Bill's goat even to think of it. That was why he had hesitated so long with the signal in his hand at the foot of the flagpole.

Hawk, the professional kidnapper, carried on his deadly business on ruthless lines. He did not feed his prisoners. Already days and nights had passed. It was Slick's life that was at stake now. Yet to yield to the unscrupulous rascal, and without the authority of Slick's father, was a tough proposition to Bill. Now, as he galloped for Squaw Mountain, the problem was shelved for the moment, but it had to be settled soon. Bill would have given all he had for a sight of Hawk Walker, and a chance of pulling a six-gun on him.

The rolling prairie fled beneath the galloping hoofs. The grassland was left behind, and the hoofs of the horses rang on the stony trails of Squaw Mountain.

They struck the bank of the Squaw River where it rolled down through a broad canyon, and followed the bank up-stream.

Bill Sampson dropped from his bronco where a swirling torrent gurgled from a gap in the canyon-side, and flowed down to the river. From a great arched gap it came, rippling and

tumbling. Mick dismounted. On that spot, for long, dreary hours that day, he had watched and waited, and only the swirling glimmering water had rewarded his watch, and sometimes a whirling lump of driftwood.

The canyon was red with the sunset. In the crimson glare of the setting sun Bill stood on the rocks beside the torrent, staring at it with grim eyes.

A pine branch from the upper hill came bobbing out of the rocky gap, and rolled down the stream, floating away on the broad waters of the Squaw. It was a trifle, but it showed that the underground passage of the water was clear. If that branch came through, a swimmer, alive or dead, should have come through. Dead, the tenderfoot's body would have rolled out at the gap. Surely—

Mick Kavanagh gave a sudden yell. He grabbed the Packsaddle schoolmaster by the arm.

"Look!" he shrieked.

"Carry me home to die!" roared Bill Sampson.

Something came shooting out of the gap in the wild, rushing water. A dark object that rolled and whirled—a body—two bodies—clinging together!

"Dick!" shrieked Kavanagh.

"Slick!" roared Bill.

His lasso flew. The loop dropped, caught, and tautened; the two figures that clung together were dragged from the water and landed on the rocks at Bill Sampson's feet. Alive or dead?

CHAPTER 36.

Safe and Sound!

"A LIVE!" roared Mick.
"Jumping painters!" gasped Bill.

He unhooked the riata. He jerked loose the neckscarf that tied the two schoolboys together by their belts. Dick and Slick sat up, streaming with water, white as chalk, half-senseless, but alive, in the helping hands of Mick

Kavanagh and the headmaster of Packsaddle.

They gasped, they gurgled for breath. They stared dizzily, helplessly. Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death they had come, choked, suffocated, buffeted, and beaten, tossed and whirled, utterly spent; so near death that they had felt its icy touch. But alive—and in the hands of their friends.

"Hurroo!" roared Mick. "Dick—Slick—howly Mike! Hurroo!"

"Doggone my cats!" gasped Bill Sampson. "Slick! That guy's sure Slick! I figured that we might raise young Carr—but Slick— This here is the elephant's hind legs and then some! It's sure Slick! Slick Poindexter, or his pesky spook; I'll tell a man!"

It was long minutes before either of the rescued comrades of Packsaddle could speak.

Dick Carr was the first to find his voice.

"Bill! Mick!" he panted. "You here— Mick, old man, I'm sorry—"

"Aw, forget it, ol'-timer!" almost sobbed Mick. "Sure it was all me own fault!"

"It wasn't!" said Dick Carr. "It was mine!"

"Ye pesky boob, if ye say it wasn't my fault, I'll sure hand ye a sock-dolager, and so I will! I'm telling ye it was all my fault!" roared Mick.

Dick Carr laughed.

"Anyhow, it was luck, Mick! I found Slick—"

"I'll say this gets my goat!" gasped Bill Sampson. "I'll tell all Texas that it sure gets my goat! It's you, Slick; it's sure you—"

"I'll say it's a galoot about my size, Bill," grinned Slick Poindexter, "and powerful glad to see you, Bill!"

"But how come?" roared the amazed Bill.

He listened with open mouth as they told him.

"By the great horned toad!" said

Bill. "I'll say you had some nerve to try that game! But you got by with it—you sure got by with it! And that's where that guy Hawk had you packed up—in a cave on Squaw Mountain! I'll say he will be surprised, a few, when he learns that you got out by the back door!"

Slick chuckled.

"He sure wanted me to write a letter to my popper, Bill, putting him wise that I was nix on the cats. He allowed he was hitting the cave to-morrow for the last time, and if I hadn't wrote that billy-doo, and if he hadn't got the ransom, he was leaving me to it. He sure will find his hide-out empty to-morrow, Bill!"

Bill smiled grimly.

"I'll say nope!" he answered. "I guess if that guy hits the cave to-morrow, Slick, he will find somebody there, and I kinder reckon it will be a guy about my size, with a gat in his grip! I'm going to mention that Mister Hawk Walker is riding his last kidnapping trail! He sure struck a bad patch when he hit Texas!"

Dick and Slick, as they recovered their strength, wrung the water from their clothes. Mick, grinning, drew a bundle of sandwiches from his pocket and held them up. Slick Poindexter pounced on them and grabbed them. A prairie wolf had nothing on Slick for the next few minutes.

"I'll tell a man," he said, when he had finished, "that I was honing for some eats!"

He turned to Bill.

"Say, Bill, we hitting Packsaddle?" he asked. "I want to mosey into the chuckhouse, and I want to mosey in pronto!"

Bill shook his head.

"We ain't hitting Packsaddle," he answered. "That guy Hawk Walker is sure watching for the signal from the school. We ain't putting that guy wise that you've made your getaway, Slick! I guess he would hit the horizon so sudden nobody would see his heels for

dust! No, sir! That guy Hawk is going on thinking you're safe in his hide-out."

Bill grinned, a rather savage grin.

"I guess I want to see that feller, and want to see him bad!" he went on. "You ain't hitting no Packsaddle to put him wise, young Poindexter! You're hitting Kicking Mule Ranch, and you'll sure stay there, hunting cover, till we've rounded up Hawk! You get me?"

"Bill, old-timer, you've got more hoss-sense in your boots than Small Brown has in his head!" said Slick. "Me for Kicking Mule—and I'll say I'm going to worry them a few in the chuckhouse there!"

Dick and Mick looked at Bill. The Packsaddle schoolmaster nodded.

"You two young guys keep tabs on Slick," he said. "Stick him on your cayuse, Kavanagh, and tote him to Kicking Mule. I'll send hosses over for you to-morrow—after we've cinched Hawk! You've got to lie low at Kicking Mule. You show hide or hair outside that ranch, and I'll sure quirt you a few, and then some!"

The three comrades of Packsaddle started for Kicking Mule—Slick on Mick's horse, Mick and Dick Carr walking on either side of the bronc. And the three faces were bright as they went.

Bill Sampson remounted his bronco, and rode back to Packsaddle with a grin on his bearded face. Bill, just then, was the happiest man in Texas. His problem was solved. There were no dollars to be found for the kidnapper now, there was no need for surrender to Hawk Walker—that signal would never be hoisted in the playground of the cow-town school.

The greedy rascal, watching from some hidden spot for the signal of surrender, would never see it. For the first time in his long career as a kidnapper Hawk Walker was beaten—beaten to a frazzle!

CHAPTER 37.

Hawk Gets His!

"SAY, you Poindexter!"

Hawk Walker snarled at the crevice in the great rock that barred the narrow mouth of the prison-cave.

It was high morning, and bright sunshine streamed down in the lonely gulch on the rugged side of Squaw Mountain.

That lonely gulch, far from the habitations of man, had looked as lonely, as utterly deserted as usual when Hawk rode into it. He rode with a blackly scowling face under his Stetson.

In his long career as a professional kidnapper, Hawk had sometimes, though not often, failed to cinch the dough. And in such a case he was as pitiless as a mountain cougar.

He had watched for the signal on the flagpole at Packsaddle—and watched in vain. And he swore savagely that if he had to hit the trail out of Texas without the dollars, his prisoner should never see the light of day again.

He dismounted and hitched his horse, and tramped to the cave-mouth, and stared into the gloomy interior by the narrow crevice. He shouted to the prisoner within, little dreaming there were no ears to hear. But to his snarling shout there came no answer.

"You doggoned young piecan!" snarled Hawk. "I guess you can hear me! You want to mind your step, young Poindexter! Say, that schoolmaster of yours is sure a tough guy, and he ain't standing for handing over the dust! I guess I want a word from you to your popper down at the ranch! I'll see that he gets it! You hear me toot?"

No reply from the cave.

Blacker grew the scowl on the face of the kidnapper. Slick had defied him before, but he had reckoned that hunger would drive the imprisoned schoolboy to surrender. And he

figured that a written word from Slick to tell his father that he was dying of hunger, would work the rifle! Surely, after days and nights without food, the boy would not still be obstinate!

"You get me?" hissed Hawk. "I'm telling you that if I don't get that billy-doo for your popper, here and now, I'm hitting the trail! I guess your schoolmaster won't find you here, and if he does, I'll say it's only your bones he'll raise. You shouting?"

Deep silence from the cave. Hawk peered in at the crevice. He could see nothing but the dim twilight within. Hunger could not yet have done its work—he knew that. Why did not the boy speak? Hawk figured that he could guess—that Slick had hoped to trick him into shifting the rock, to get at him with a stone in his hand. The kidnapper set his teeth.

"Last time of asking!" he hissed. "You answer up, you doggone young scallawag, or I'm hitting the trail!"

Silence!

For a long minute the kidnapper waited. Then he snarled out an oath and turned away from the cave-mouth. His ruthless mind was made up. He had failed—he had to ride without the dollars!

And as he turned, a shadow fell in the sunlight. Hawk started and gripped the gun in his belt.

"Stick 'em up!"

With his hand on the butt of his Colt Hawk Walker stared, with startled, unbelieving eyes, at the tall, brawny figure of the schoolmaster of Packsaddle—standing only a dozen feet from him, his bearded face grim over his revolver.

The gulch had looked lonely, deserted. There had been no sound of a horse—no sound of a footstep. Yet there stood Bill Sampson, covering him with a levelled Colt! And the desperado, as he stared, realised that Bill must have been there before him, watching for

him, waiting for him—that he had walked blindly into a trap!

"I guess you want to reach for the sky, Hawk Walker!" came Bill's menacing tones. "Put 'em up, you doggoned rustler! I got you, you gold-darned lobo-wolf! I sure got you by the short hairs, you pesky thief, and if you pull that gun, you get yours so sudden you won't be wise to what hit you! You get me, you doggoned, pesky skunk!"

Hawk Walter stood as if turned to stone, his hand on his gun, utter desperation in his glaring eyes.

Bill made a stride nearer.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped. "Hands up, I'm telling you!"

His eyes, under his rugged, knitted brows, gleamed over the levelled gun.

But the kidnapper was desperate. He made a sudden backward spring, at the same moment pulling his Colt.

Bang!

Bill's six-gun roared, and even as Hawk swung up his gun-arm to fire, that arm dropped to his side, smashed by the bullet.

With a yell of agony, the kidnapper reeled and fell. The revolver dropped from his nerveless fingers.

Bill, with smoking gun, strode up to him. He stared down grimly on the groaning kidnapper.

"I guess," said Bill, "that you was honing for it, Hawk, and you sure got yours! I'll say I was some gink not to put it through your think-box, and make it last sickness for you; but I sure don't want to cheat the sheriff."

Hawk Walker answered only with a groan. He had one more trail to ride—to the calaboose at Packsaddle. But he had ridden his last kidnapping trail!

That day was a holiday at Packsaddle School.

Even Bill could hardly keep the bunch in check when the news got around that the Packsaddle school-

master had roped in Hawk Walker, the kidnapper, and when Slick, Dick, and Mick came riding in from Kicking Mule!

But Bill did not want to keep the bunch in check that day! Bill was as merry and bright as the bunch, and all that day Packsaddle made wild whoopee, and Bill forgot he possessed a quirt!

CHAPTER 38.

Caught!

"YOUR deal, Steve!"

"Sure!"

Dick Carr stared into the chuckhouse at Packsaddle. Lessons were over for the day at the cow-town school; but it was not yet time for supper, and, except at meal-times, the chuckhouse was generally deserted. Now there were three fellows there sitting round the end of the long trestle table—Steve Carson, Poker Parker, and Slim Dixon.

Big Steve had a pack of well-worn cards in his hands, and was shuffling them. He glanced across at the doorway, as the shadow of the tenderfoot of Packsaddle fell in, with the bright sunlight behind him. He grinned derisively as he caught Dick's surprised stare.

"Say, what you want horning in?" he demanded. "Looking for a hand in a poker game?"

"I guess the tenderfoot don't play poker any, Steve!" grinned Slim.

"You said it!" chuckled Poker Parker.

Dick's lips curled.

"Right!" he answered. "And if Bill catches you playing poker here, you'll rather wish you hadn't, either."

"Aw, can it!" snapped Steve. He dealt the cards with a practised hand. "We're wise to it that Bill's gone down to Packsaddle, and I guess he won't be back yet a piece! You goin' to put him wise when he hits the school again?" he added with a sneer.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Dick Carr angrily.

More than once Steve had had the quirt, hard and heavy, as a warning to leave the "devil's picture book" alone! And certainly he would not have been playing poker in the chuckhouse now but for the fact that he had seen Bill ride out at the gate.

"Put him wise if you want!" went on Steve. "I guess that's the sort of pizen coyote you are!"

"That's a lie, and you know it!" answered Dick Carr coolly. "I'm not telling Bill anything. But I'll tell you this—Bill's not so far away as you think. He's come back—"

"Oh, great gophers!" ejaculated Slim Dixon, jumping up from the pine-wood bench in alarm.

"Aw, squat down, you goob!" growled Carson, still dealing the cards. "You figure that that piecan would put us wise if Bill was around? He sure can't string me along that-a-way!"

"I tell you—" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"Pack it up!" jeered Carson.

"Yep, pack it up and beat it!" said Slim, sitting down again. "I guess you can't fool us, not so's you'd notice it!"

Dick Carr turned from the doorway. Big Steve was his enemy, and Slim and Poker backed up Big Steve. Friends or foes, Dick had felt bound to give them the tip that Bill was around. But if they did not choose to believe that the tip was given in good faith that was their own funeral.

Steve and his comrades picked up their "hands." Deep in the game of draw-poker, they dismissed the tenderfoot of Packsaddle from their minds.

A shadow fell across the doorway again.

It was a longer shadow this time; the shadow of a herculean figure, over a foot taller than Dick Carr's.

But Steve & Co., deep in the game, did not observe it. Steve tossed a silver dollar into the pool. He had dealt him-

self four of a kind—a hand that made him very keen and eager.

"Guess I'm raising you, Steve!" remarked Slim, and he threw a dollar and a quarter in.

Slim had a "full house."

"I'll see you!" said Poker Parker, and his dollar and a quarter followed Slim's into the beef-can that served as a pool.

"Carry me home to die!" roared a deep voice at the doorway; and the three started and spun round.

"Bill!" gasped Slim.

Steve Carson gritted his teeth. He realised—too late—that the tenderfoot's warning had been given in good faith. Bill was back from Packsaddle town—and here he was, staring into the chuckhouse, his bearded face grim.

Bill's quirt was under his arm. He slipped it down into his hand as he strode into the chuckhouse.

"Poker, hey!" roared Bill. "I guess you ain't had enough quirt, young Carson, and you sure are honing for more!"

Steve did not speak. He was fairly caught, and there was nothing to say. But his look was black and bitter at the cow-town schoolmaster.

"Only a leetle game, Bill," said Poker Parker nervously. "I guess—Whoop! Yoooo! Yow-owwoop!"

The quirt sang and rang round Poker. He bolted for the door, and Bill rushed after him, still lashing. Poker was yelling frantically as he bolted out of the doorway into the playground.

Bill strode back to the other two.

"Now, you, Dixon!" roared Bill.

"I guess— Oh, wake snakes! Let up!" yelled Slim, as Bill gave him his turn with the quirt.

Down the long chuckhouse went Slim, with the quirt raining lashes on his back as he went. He leaped through the doorway, yelling.

Then Bill came back for Steve Carson.

Steve was the chief offender of the

three, as Bill well knew. He was a bad influence in the cow-town school—an influence to which Bill aimed to put "paid." Steve had backed away towards the window while Bill was dealing with the other two. Now he had the window open; and as Bill came back for him he made a hurried scramble through it to escape.

But there was no escape for Big Steve. Bill's grasp was on him when he was half-way through.

Crack came the quirt on his back! Big Steve yelled and kicked out wildly.

"Jumping painters!" roared Bill Sampson, as a heavy boot caught him under his bearded chin.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from the Packsaddle bunch outside. The uproar from the chuckhouse had drawn all the bunch across the playground to "rubber" at the scene.

"Beat it, Steve!" yelled Slick Poindexter.

"Out you come!" exclaimed Mick Kavanagh, and he grabbed hold of Steve's arm to help him from the window.

The next moment he let go, with a fearful yell. Bill, reaching over Steve from the window, landed a lick with the quirt, and Mick jumped back, waking all the echoes of Packsaddle.

Bill's left hand was gripping Steve by the back of his belt.

Crack, crack, crack! The swipes of the quirt rang like pistol-shots. The Packsaddle bunch stared on. Bill had a heavy hand—and he needed one to ride herd over the rough-and-tough bunch at the cow-town school. But they had seldom seen Bill ladle it out to this extent.

"Let up, you pesky old piecan!" shrieked Steve, wriggling frantically as the quirt rose and fell. "Let up, dog-gone you! I'll sure make you howl for this, you goldarned old geck!"

Crack, crack, crack, crack! rang the quirt.

"I guess that's let you out, young Carson!" panted Bill. "I'll say you hit

this hyer school to larn, and I'll mention that I'm the galoot to larn you, jest a few, and then some! Git!"

He dropped Carson from the chuckhouse window, and the bully of Packsaddle sprawled, roaring, on the ground.

Bill tucked his quirt under his arm, stamped out of the chuckhouse, and across to the schoolhouse, still frowning. He was not quite sure that he had given Big Steve enough.

Steve was sure, however. Steve lay and roared and howled. His friends, Poker and Slim, were putting in some yelling on their own account, and did not give him any heed. Dick Carr came towards him to give him a hand up.

The gambler's son, with a savage scowl, struck his helping hand aside. Then he staggered to his feet and limped away to the bunkhouse.

Slick Poindexter whistled.

"I guess Bill sure had his mad up with that guy!" he remarked. "He sure did quirt him like he was an ornery steer! But I'll tell a man, Steve's the galoot to ask for it."

There was no doubt that Big Steve had had the quirting of his life. He was still mumbling and wriggling when the Packsaddle bunch went to bed in the bunkhouse. And when the rest of the bunch were asleep, Big Steve still lay awake, with many twinges, his gleaming eyes staring into the darkness, and fierce thoughts of vengeance running in his mind.

CHAPTER 39.

The Hold-up in the Timber!

"HUNT cover!" grinned Slick. "You said it!" murmured Mick Kavanagh.

Dick Carr glanced round in surprise for the moment. Then the sight of a ten-gallon hat put him wise, and he hunted cover with his comrades.

School bounds at a school like Packsaddle were not very definitely drawn. Every guy in the bunch had a horse,

and after class could ride where he liked on the rolling prairie, from the banks of the Rio Frio to the rugged slopes of Squaw Mountain. But every galoot who boarded at the cow-town school had to be in before sundown.

It was a necessary rule. Steve Carson and some of his friends found bad company at some of the joints in the cow town. Dick, Slick, and Mick were not the fellows to be found in bad company, but they had to toe the line, with the quirt in prospect if they failed so to do. So the sight of Bill's ten-gallon hat, five miles from the school, when the sun was sinking in crimson and gold behind Squaw Mountain, caused them to hunt cover and hunt it quick.

They had ridden home after class with Pie Sanders, whose folk lived at Squaw Mountain. Certainly there was no harm in that, but they had lingered at the Sanders' shebang, and given themselves little time to get back ten miles to Packsaddle.

Their way homeward lay through a timber island, and it was luckily in the timber and not on the open prairie that they sighted Bill.

On the open plain, Bill could have spotted them at once, and there was no doubt that he would have weighed in with the quirt on the spot. But the trail through the timber was narrow, closed in on either side by big cedars, with great masses of Spaniard's beard pendant from the overarching branches. There was ample cover, and the three schoolboys hunted it promptly. On the thick grass of the trail the hoofs of their horses had made no sound. They jumped down and led the broncs by their reins into the trees within a second or two after sighting Bill.

Bill, still at a distance, had not seen them. He was coming up from the direction of the school at a leisurely pace. They knew that Bill was going over to Kicking Mule Ranch that evening, and so it was easy to guess that he was now on his way there. All they had to do was to wait in cover for Bill

to ride by, and then resume their way home.

Keeping carefully in cover, they watched him as he came trotting up the trail.

"Gum!" breathed Poindexter suddenly.

Dick Carr caught his breath, and Mick's eyes opened wide.

Bill was still twice a lasso's length away when three figures on foot leaped suddenly from the trees beside the trail.

"Stick 'em up!"

Loud and sharp came the words.

The hidden schoolboys stared.

It was a hold-up!

The three figures that had suddenly appeared from the timber were clad in long Mexican serapes, belted round them, completely concealing them, and giving them a bulky look.

Mexican sombreros were on their heads, and their faces were hidden by black cloth masks covering them from forehead to chin.

The schoolboys would have taken them, from the sombreros and the serapes, for Mexicans—"greasers" from over the border.

But the voice that bade Bill "stick 'em up" had no Spanish sound, and they guessed that the Mexican outfit was merely adopted as a disguise by bulldozers who belonged much nearer than Mexico.

Three six-guns were levelled at Bill Sampson as he drew in his horse, and stared at the hold-up gang.

Bill's reins dropped over his horse's neck, and he lifted his hands over his Stetson. Bill was quicker on the draw than any other man in Santanta County, but he was too wise to pull a gun with three Colts levelled at him.

His rugged, bearded face was dark with rage as he put his hands up.

"By the great horned toad!" said Bill. "You doggoned piecans, is this hyer a hold-up?"

"Can it!" interrupted the hold-up man. "Keep your paws elevated, Bill

Sampson, or you get yours mighty sudden."

"I guess I ain't arguing with a six-gun, feller!" said Bill. "But I'll sure see you strung up on a cottonwood for this hyer game."

"Forget it!" snapped the hold-up man. "Say, you guys, you want to lift his hardware."

Two of the masked Mexicans—if they were Mexicans—stepped to Bill. One of them drew the big Colt from the holster in his belt, and pitched it away into the thickets.

Bill, tight-lipped, gritted his teeth. His eyes glittered under his knitted brows. His "mad" was up, but he made no movement. No man in the cow country thought of arguing with a six-gun that looked him in the face.

"You doggoned skunks!" breathed Bill. "You goldarned ornery gang of greasers! I'll sure make you hone for the other side of the Rio Grande afore you're much older."

"Pack it up!" snapped the leader of the gang. "Light down off'n that cayuse, and keep your bully-beef trap shut."

"You ain't no greaser, if your side-kickers are!" said Bill, with a fierce glare at him. "I'll say you're some bull-whacker from along to Packsaddle, or you'd never have knowed I was riding this trail. I'll sure root through Packsaddle till I git you."

"Quit chewing the rag and light down!"

Bill slowly clambered down from his bronc.

One of the gang gave the horse a smart cut, and it galloped on up the trail with swinging stirrups. It went galloping by the spot where Dick, Slick and Mick stared breathlessly, and vanished up the trail towards Kicking Mule.

The schoolboys exchanged glances. Had Bill Sampson tried gunning they would have rushed out to his aid, unarmed as they were. But Bill was taking it like a lamb, and to rush on

three desperadoes with six-guns in their hands was not wise. The hold-up gang did not know they were there, that was clear, and it was wiser to leave them in ignorance. Dick Carr gripped his quirt, but Slick caught him by one arm, Mick by the other.

"Forget it, you gink!" breathed Slick. "You want them bulldozers to fill you up with lead?"

"We ain't got a dog's chance," whispered Mick. "They got the guns, you geck! Bill's taking it quiet. I guess we want to play possum."

Dick Carr nodded.

"Mebbe we'll take a chance to horn in later!" muttered Slick Poindexter. "But I guess a front seat in a funeral won't help none."

Dick could only assent. But his eyes gleamed as he watched through the Spanish moss, hanging in thick clusters from the branches.

Bill Sampson stood in the trail, his hands still up. The leader of the gang, his eyes glittering through the eyeholes of his mask, stepped a little nearer to him, his six-gun at a level. The other two were now handling a lasso.

The loop was thrown over Bill's lifted arms and drawn taut. The headmaster of Packsaddle was a prisoner, his arms cinched in the rope.

"I guess you can put your fins down now, Bill Sampson!" jeered the voice from the mask. "Hog-tie him, you galoots."

Neither of the others had spoken a word. In silence they proceeded to knot the lasso round Bill, fastening his sinewy arms down to his sides. The Packsaddle headmaster made a convulsive movement. This was no ordinary hold-up—the loop did not mean to go through his arms and then let him proceed on his way. They were making him a prisoner. What their object could be was a mystery to Bill as well as to the breathless schoolboys watching from the thicket.

"You doggoned skunks!" Bill choked with rage. "What's this hyer

game? I'll tell a man! What for you hog-tying a guy this-a-way? Spill it!"

"I guess you'll soon be put wise!" jeered the hold-up leader. "We got you dead to rights, now, you piefaced old geck! Beat it, you 'uns!"

With hands gripping his bound arms, Bill Sampson was marched into the timber, the leader of the gang, revolver in hand, following behind him. The trail was left deserted.

"Gum!" said Slick Poindexter. "I'll say this has got me beat! What the great horned toad do they want Bill for?"

He stared into the deserted trail. From the timber came back a rustling as the hold-up gang went on their way with their prisoner. The schoolboys stepped out into the trail, leaving their horses hitched under the trees.

"We're going after them!" breathed Dick Carr.

"You said it!" murmured Slick.

"Keep your eyes peeled!" muttered Poindexter. "I guess if they get wise to us we shan't live long enough to tell them about it in Packsaddle. We sure don't want them to get a bead on us with them six-guns."

And, with definite caution, the comrades of Packsaddle crept through the tangled timber, on the track of the hold-up gang.

CHAPTER 40.

Three on the Track!

"LISTEN!" breathed Slick Poindexter.

He halted, bending his ear to listen more intently. His comrades halted with him.

Ahead of them they could still hear the rustling made in the thickets as the hold-up gang led their prisoner farther away from the trail into the depths of the timber.

But there was a sound from the timber closer at hand, and Poindexter's

keen ear picked it up at once—the sound of tethered horses.

"That'll be their cayuses!" whispered Mick.

Dick nodded.

That the hold-up gang had horses at hand was certain; no man could travel on foot on the prairie. It went without saying that they had left their horses tethered in the timber while they ambushed Bill on the trail.

But they were not making for their horses now, that was clear.

By the way they went they were avoiding the spot where the animals were tethered.

Obviously it was not their purpose to make their getaway with Bill a prisoner on their hands, or they would have gone for their horses. Why they were walking the Packsaddle headmaster into the deepest depths of the timber, far from the trail, was a mystery.

But, whatever their purpose was, they would come back for their horses afterwards to make their escape. Slick's eyes gleamed.

"I guess it's got me beat what they want with Bill!" he whispered. "But they'll want their critters arter they're through, to burn the wind! I'll say they ain't going to find them critters when they want them. Foller me!"

Leaving the track of the hold-up gang, Slick Poindexter plunged into the trees in the direction of the sound that had caught his ears.

Dick and Mick followed him, catching on at once to the plan in his mind. Deprived of their horses, the hold-up gang had no chance of escape in the cow country, where every man went on horseback. And the tethered horses were at the mercy of the gang's unsuspected pursuers.

In a few minutes the schoolboys pushed into an open space under the branches of a great ceiba, where three ponies, saddled and bridled, were hitched. Evidently they were the mounts of the hold-up gang, left there

when they ambushed Bill on foot by the trail.

"Gum!" ejaculated Poindexter, as he stared at them.

"Cut them loose!" breathed Dick Carr. "No time to lose! We've got to get after Bill!"

"Hold on a piece! Don't you know them critters?" gasped Poindexter.

"H wly Mike!" breathed Mick. "They're Packsaddle cayuses."

"What?" exclaimed Dick Carr, in amazement.

"Look at that critter's white stockings!" said Slick, pointing to one of the tethered animals. "That's Big Steve's critter!"

"Oh, my hat!"

In amazement they stared at the horses. There was no doubt about it. The animals were familiar to their sight. One of them, with white stockings—patches of white on its forelegs—they would have recognised anywhere as Steve Carson's horse. The other two belonged to Poker Parker and Slim Dixon.

"Say, them guys have lifted Packsaddle critters!" said Mick. "They're sure met with Steve, Slim, and Poker, and cinched their cayuses."

"Horse thieves!" said Slick. "Yep! They're sure Packsaddle critters, and I'll tell a man that gang ain't seeing them any more."

It was an amazing discovery to the comrades of Packsaddle. They could only conclude that the hold-up gang had met Steve, Slim, and Poker on the prairie and robbed them of their horses. Yet Bill's horse, a more valuable animal, had been set galloping off when they cinched the schoolmaster on the trail. It was puzzling enough; but they had no time to work out puzzles.

Slick cast the three ponies loose and started them through the trees towards the trail. There was no doubt that they would trot home to Packsaddle School now that they were released.

"Hump it, you'uns!" said Slick, and

as the horses disappeared towards the trail, the schoolboys turned back to take up the track of the hold-up gang again.

The rustling sound made by the gang as they threaded a way through the timber had died away in the distance. But it was easy enough to pick up the track of the tramping feet—especially those of Bill Sampson's enormous cowman's boots.

Winding through celbas and pecans and hanging moss, the schoolboys followed the track into the very deepest depths of the timber. Each of them carried his quirt—the only weapon he had.

"What on earth can their game be?" muttered Dick Carr. "What are they going to do with Bill?"

"I guess we'll soon be wise to that. Anyhow, they won't get away after," answered Slick. "They ain't got no hosses, 'cept what they lifted from Steve, Poker, and Slim—and I'll say them cayuses is half-way back to Packsaddle by this time. Watch out! They've halted! We've run them roughnecks down!"

On the edge of a little glade, shut in by overhanging trees, the schoolboys halted, and peered through the pendant masses of Spaniard's beard. And the sight they saw made them wonder whether their eyes deceived them.

CHAPTER 41.

The Face Behind the Mask!

"**C**ARRY me home to die!" breathed Bill Sampson.

The fury in his rugged, bearded face might have terrified any hold-up gang in Texas had Bill been loose with a gun in his hand.

But Bill's gun was gone, and his hands were helpless, his arms fastened down to his sides.

Utterly powerless, the headmaster of Packsaddle lay in the thick grass. Kneeling round him, the masked trio

knotted the lasso again and again, till Bill could hardly stir a limb.

Then they left him lying. The leader of the gang—the only one who had spoken—gripped a quirt and swished it in the air.

Bill, lying face down, twisted his head to glare up at him.

"You doggoned polecat!" said Bill, his voice husky with rage. "You don't dare touch me with that quirt!"

"Forget it!" jeered the fellow with the quirt. "I guess you're going to be lambasted a few, Bill Sampson, and then some! I'll tell a man you'll jest be able to crawl home on your hands and knees when I'm through!"

Neither of the others spoke. They looked on through the eyeholes of their masks in silence.

Bill writhed with rage.

"I guess I'll get wise to you, you gold-darned piecan!" he hissed. "You ain't no greasers from over the border—you're bulldozers of this here section. I guess I've heard your toot before, somewhat, though I don't rightly know where, and I reckon your side-kickers ain't talking none, because mebbe I'd be wise to them if they did! You belong to Packsaddle town, and I guess I've trod on your corns some time and put you on the prod!"

"You've sure spilled a bibful!"

"I'm telling you!" roared Bill. "I'll root through every joint in Packsaddle town till I get you!"

There came a mocking laugh from under the mask. Up went the quirt, coming down with a terrific lash across Bill Sampson's back.

It rang like a rifle-shot through the timber, and louder still rang the enraged roar of the headmaster of Packsaddle.

From their cover on the edge of the glade, Dick, Slick, and Mick stared on, in utter wonder. They knew now what the gang wanted with Bill!

It was vengeance they were after.

"Gum!" breathed Poindexter. "That's the game! I guess Bill has

trod on a good many corns down to Packsaddle town. Them bulldozers have cinched him to hand over a quirting!"

Dick set his lips.

There seemed no doubt now that Bill had fallen into the hands of some rough gang who had a grouch against him. Bound and helpless, he was going to be quirted like a steer.

"We're not standing for this!" muttered Dick. "They're not going to quirt our headmaster under our eyes!"

"You said it!" breathed Mick.

Slick Poindexter nodded slowly. The quirt came down again with another terrific lash, and another wild roar from Bill.

"We got a chance!" whispered Slick. "But if they pull guns on us, it's us for the other side of Jordan. But we got a chance if we get them sudden."

"I'm game!" breathed Dick.

The fellow with the quirt was thinking of nothing but handing out fierce lashes to Bill. The other two, looking on, had their backs to the schoolboys. Obviously none of them had the faintest suspicion that they were watched. It was easy, with a sudden rush, to take them utterly by surprise, and knock them spinning with the butt-ends of the quirts. But if they had a chance to pull their guns—

Down came the cow-whip again, crashing on Bill. That settled it for the comrades of Packsaddle. They were not standing for that.

"Get them!" breathed Slick. "Pick your man, and get him! We got to take the chance!"

He led the rush.

Poindexter picked the fellow who was lashing Bill. The cow-whip was in the air again, about to descend as Slick rushed in. The butt of Slick's heavy quirt crashed on the crown of the sombrero before the fellow knew he was coming, and the hold-up man went staggering across Bill, falling heavily on the Packsaddle schoolmaster.

Slick was on him like a panther.

Bill, face down, gave a grunt as the

weight crashed on his back. Slick's weight was added the next second, as his knee was driven into the ribs of the sprawling hold-up man, and his right arm flew up to deliver a stunning blow with the butt of his quirt.

But that blow did not fall!

Instead of smashing the heavy butt down, Poindexter arrested the blow just in time, staring dizzily, in amazement, at the hold-up man. For the first blow had knocked off the sombrero and the mask with it, and the face of the hold-up man was revealed.

And that face was the face of Steve Carson, the bully of the cow-town school!

CHAPTER 42.

Bad Luck for Big Steve!

DICK CARR and Mick Kavanagh, rushing in at the same time as Slick, landed their blows at the same moment. Two masked figures rolled over, felled by the crashing of the heavy metal butts of the quirts. They yelled in surprise and pain and rage as they rolled.

Before the two had a chance of rising or pulling a gun, Dick and Mick were on them, and had torn the six-guns from their belts.

Instantly they covered the sprawling hold-up men with their own guns.

"Hands up, you 'uns!" roared Mick.

"Put 'em up!" panted Dick Carr.

"Aw, wake snakes!" gasped one, sitting up dazedly, with a hand to his aching head, where the sombrero had been crushed in.

"Great gophers!" gurgled the other.

The voices from under the masks sounded familiar to the ears of the schoolboys.

A moment more and the two masked figures had leaped up, and were bounding away, heedless of the order to "Stick 'em up!"

"Hould on, you 'uns, or sure I'll shoot!" roared Mick.

They tore away into the trees. With

the intention of firing over their heads, Mick pulled trigger. But there was only a click from the six-gun!

"Howly Mike!" yelled Mick. "Sure it ain't loaded, and so it ain't!"

The running figures vanished into the timber.

"What the thump——" ejaculated Dick Carr.

The six-guns were not loaded! Hold-up men with unloaded guns were a new thing in the cow country!

But the next moment Dick and Mick understood, as they turned to Slick Poindexter and the man he was pinning down—or, rather, the boy! Two of the gang had fled, but Slick had his man safe.

"Great jumping Mike!" howled Mick, in astonishment, as he stared at the white, furious face of Big Steve Carson.

"Great Scott!" gasped Dick Carr.

"Sure, it bates Banagher!" stuttered Mick Kavanagh. "Sure, they're not hold-up rustlers at all!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Steve Carson did not struggle. He was down on his back, across Bill's broad back, as the Packsaddle schoolmaster sprawled, face down, in the grass.

Slick, amazed as he was, had him pinned. And the bully of the cow-town school, now that his mask was off, had one overwhelming fear—that Bill would see his face!

"You!" panted Poindexter. "You!"

"Then, the others——" gasped Dick Carr.

He knew now who were the other two who had fled—Poker Parker and Slim Dixon.

"That's how we found their hosses there!" stuttered Mick. "We figured that they was hoss-thieves that had lifted Packsaddle critters, but——"

There was a roar from Bill! The weight of Steve and Slick fairly crushed him into the grass, and, bound as he was, he struggled in vain to shift the weight. He could see nothing of what was going on, only he knew that

the masked men had been interrupted in their act of vengeance. His voice came in a muffled roar from a mouth buried in grass roots:

"Say, you gerroff my doggoned back, goldarn you! What the great horned toad——"

He heaved frantically.

Steve Carson did not speak; but the rage and fury in his face gave place to terror, and he fixed his eyes on Slick in dumb appeal for silence.

The comrades of Packsaddle understood.

For a moment or two they hesitated, exchanging quick glances.

They had believed that they were dealing with armed hold-up men—a rough gang of the cow town, who had cinched Bill to pay off some grouch with a quirling. But they were no bulldozers of the cow-town saloons; they were three of the Packsaddle bunch, disguised in sombreros and serapes and masks, and they had held up Bill with unloaded guns. Steve had planned this in revenge for the quirling Bill had given him in the chuckhouse. But for the intervention of Dick, Slick, and Mick, he would have got away with it; Bill would have been quirted like a steer, and the identity of his assailants would have remained a mystery.

But now——

Now Big Steve fairly cringed with terror. He had delivered only three swipes when he was stopped. But what Bill would give him in return when he knew who he was, made Steve dizzy to think about.

Bill, his face buried in grass roots, had not seen him unmasked. He stared at the schoolboys, pleading dumbly for mercy.

Only for a moment or two they hesitated.

Then Slick removed his knee.

He did not speak, but he pointed to the timber. It was enough for Steve Carson.

With a bound he was on his feet and running.

In three seconds the running figure vanished into the trees in the direction Poker and Slim had taken—the direction of the spot where the horses had been tethered under the celba. They did not yet know that the horses were missing.

Slick closed one eye at his comrades. Slick grinned.

"They were going to keep it dark; it was not for them to give Steve away. Neither, probably, would Bill have been pleased had he learned that he had been held up by schoolboys with unloaded guns.

Bill, as the weight was taken off his back, rolled over, panting. He had a glimpse of the running figure that disappeared into the timber, but all he saw was a back view of a belted serape, and Big Steve was gone the next second.

He blinked at Dick, Slick, and Mick. "You 'uns!" he gasped.

"Jest us, Bill, old-timer!" grinned Slick. "Say, them guys have hog-tied you a few! Who was they, Bill?"

"How'd I know, with their front porches kivered up?" roared Bill. "Get me loose, you young geck, 'stead of chewing the rag!"

"You said it!" grinned Slick.

The three schoolboys started unfasting the knotted lasso.

"How come you're here?" demanded Bill.

"I guess we spotted them bulldozers taking you for a leetle pasear in the timber, Bill, coming back from Squaw Mountain," grinned Slick. "We sure followed on and handed them a few with our quirts."

"Jumping painters!" said Bill. "Three bullwhackers what packed guns—and they vamoosed from you young gecks! I guess that's got me beat! I don't get it."

He swung to his feet as the ropes fell from his limbs.

"Beat it for Packsaddle, you!" he snapped. "I guess I'm hitting Kicking

Mule and rousing out the 'punchers to get after them bulldozers!"

Without staying for more, the Packsaddle headmaster tramped away through the timber, taking the shortest cut in the direction of Kicking Mule Ranch.

Dick, Slick, and Mick looked at one another. They could not help grinning.

"Howly Mike!" murmured Kavanagh.

"Bill's going to rouse out the Kicking Mule outfit to get after them bulldozers! What'd he say if he knewed they was Steve, Poker, and Slim?"

"I guess he wouldn't leave much skin on them!" grinned Slick. "But we sure ain't spilling the beans! Beat it!"

The comrades of Packsaddle tramped back to the trail for their ponies. They mounted and rode out of the timber in the sunset on the way to the school. A quarter of a mile out on the plain they came on three weary, tramping figures.

Steve, Poker, and Slim had got rid of their Mexican disguises—and missed their horses. With aching heads—for the butt-ends of the quirts had hit hard—they had started on a five-mile tramp across the rough and rugged prairie to the cow-town school.

They stared round at the clattering hoofs on the trail and gave Dick, Slick, and Mick savage looks.

The three riders grinned at them.

"Doggone you!" snarled Steve.

"Aw, pack it up!" said Slick. "I guess if we put Bill wise, that quirting he gave you yesterday wouldn't be a circumstance to what he'd give you next!"

"You ain't spilling the beans?" gasped Poker.

"Nunk!" snapped Slick. "But you try this game on again, you pesky skunks, and we'll sure put Bill wise—and you can chew on that!"

And the three riders dashed on, leaving Steve, Poker, and Slim to crawl wearily on their homeward way. By the time the wretched trio tottered into Packsaddle School the hour was late, and they were weary to the bone, and

their only comfort was that Bill was not there to meet them.

Bill never discovered the identity of the three roughnecks who had held him up in the timber and started to quirt him.

Bill was very keen to spot them. He did his best, and gave a lot of time to it. But he never thought of looking within the fence of Packsaddle School—and so he was not likely to spot those roughnecks.

But for many days Steve, Poker, and Slim lived in terror of discovery. A careless word from Dick or his chums would have spilled the beans—and the thought of what Bill would do if he got wise to the fact made cold chills run down their backs. It was likely to be the schoolboy bandits' last—as well as their first—hold-up!

CHAPTER 43.

Steve Spills a Mouthful:

"YOU old gink!"

"Say—"

"You doggoned old piecan!"

"What—"

"You call yourself a schoolmaster, you all-fired, uneducated old jay? Get back to punching cows!"

Bill Sampson stood rooted to the playground. He was so astonished that he forgot to be enraged. He just stared at Steve Carson in blank amazement.

The Packsaddle bunch stared, too. Like Bill, they could hardly believe their ears. Dick Carr, staring at Steve, wondered whether he had taken leave of his senses. The whole bunch gasped. Small Brown, standing in the school-house porch, blinked like a startled owl through his horn-rimmed spectacles.

Steve was talking to his headmaster. Tin-Tung had rung the school bell for class. Big Steve mounted on his

bronco, did not dismount and turn the bronc into the corral. Bill Sampson shouted to him, and cracked his quirt as a hint of what would be coming to Steve if he did not follow the bunch in. And that was how Steve answered him.

It got the goat of the whole bunch. Steve Carson had a deep grouch against his headmaster for many a quirting, every one richly deserved. Every guy in the bunch knew what he thought of Bill. But no guy expected to hear him telling Bill. Now he was telling him, and it was amazing.

"Get back to punching cows on Kickin' Mule, if they'll give you a job in the outfit!" resumed Steve, sitting his bronco, and looking at Bill's blankly astonished face with cool impudence. "That's your long suit, Bill Sampson! You a schoolmaster! Forget it! Schoolmaster nothing! I don't give a Continental red cent for a schoolmaster of your heft! Punch cows, you doggoned old pie-faced geck!"

"Say, you gone loco, Steve!" gasped Slick Poindexter.

"Pack it up, you bonehead!" stutered Mick Kavanagh. "You've sure spilled a bibful, Steve! Pack it up!"

Bill, too astounded to stir, stood like a man in a trance. It really seemed that he doubted his sense of hearing. Never since the citizens of Packsaddle had founded the school on the bank of the Rio Frio, and selected Bill to ride herd over the bunch, had Bill been talked to like this. One thing was certain to all the bunch—Steve, who had had many a quirting, was booked for another, compared with which any previous quirting would be a small circumstance.

And he did not seem to care!

That was the amazing part of it. Surely he knew what was coming to him! But he sat his bronco coolly and carelessly, reins in hand, grinning at Bill's dazed face.

"Got that, you old piecan?" asked Steve. "Chew on it! I'm telling you

to quit, and go back to punching cows, you ornery old gink!"

Bill woke up, as it were. He gasped; he drew a deep, deep breath. His grip closed hard on his quirt. Red wrath suffused his bearded face.

"Carry-me home to die!" ejaculated Bill. "You—you're shooting off your mouth that-a-way at your school-master, young Carson! By the great horned toad, I guess I'll make you yaup like you was a dorg with a burnt tail, and then some! I guess——"

Bill jumped at Steve to hook him off the bronco.

Steve gave the bronc a jab of the spur, and the steed leaped away. He rode round the playground, with Bill Sampson chasing in pursuit, brandishing his cow-whip.

The bunch gazed on, spellbound. Unless Big Steve had gone loco, they could not begin to understand this. Careless of Bill's raging wrath, Steve looked back at him as he galloped, and waved his Stetson in mockery. After him charged the enraged headmaster of Packsaddle, but he had no chance of running down the bronco. Right round the playground galloped Steve, waving his hat in mock defiance.

"Loco!" said Slick. "I guess that guy's plumb loco! Say, Bill, will take the skin off him for chewing the rag that-a-way!"

"You said it!" grinned Mick.

"And serve him right, too!" exclaimed Dick Carr indignantly.

"You're talking!" agreed Pie Sanders. "I guess nobody in this bunch stands for giving Bill back-chat in that style! I'll tell a man!"

"Pull in!" Bill was roaring. "I'm telling you to pull in that cayuse, you, Carson! Jumping painters! I'll say you won't be able to crawl when I'm through with you!"

"Forget it, you ornery old geck!" shouted back Carson.

He circled the enraged headmaster on his bronco.

Suddenly spurring the horse, he

dashed past Bill within length of a quirt—so suddenly that Bill was too late in lashing out. But as he swept past, Carson lashed out with his own quirt and lifted the Stetson from Bill's head. He rode on, laughing, out of reach, while Bill's ten-gallon hat flew across the playground.

That was the limit! Bill gave a roar of wrath. The Packsaddle bunch simply gasped. Steve was not only asking for it—he was howling for it!

"You, Poindexter!" roared Bill. "You bring my cayuse!"

But Slick had no time. Carson wheeled his horse and dashed away towards the gateway on the school trail.

Evidently he intended to ride out of school, heedless of the fact that lessons were scheduled to begin. That, indeed, was only wise after the way he had talked to Bill. Yet so far as the bunch could see, there was nothing in it. Steve was a boarder at the cow-town school, and he had to come back sooner or later. And when he came back——

Bill made a wild rush after him. With a jingle of bridle and stirrups, a clatter of lashing hoofs, Steve rode out at the gate.

On the trail outside, he looked back, to wave his hat once more at Bill and yell a parting word:

"Go and chop chips, you ornery old geck!" yelled Steve. "Go back to punching cows, you big stiff!"

And Steve dashed away at a gallop down the trail to Packsaddle.

Bill stared after him. Then he glared round at the staring bunch.

"Say, you young gecks, deaf?" he roared. "Ain't you heard the bell? And ain't Mister Brown waiting for you? Beat it!"

There was a rush for the schoolhouse. Bill was never to be trifled with, and less so now than ever. But the bunch did not give Small Brown much attention in that lesson. They were lost in wonder. Steve was gone—but he had to come back! Bill's look, as he sat at his desk, showed what Steve had to

expect when he came back. Did Steve hope, in some mysterious way, to be able to get away with this? Had he some card up his sleeve of which the other fellows knew nothing? The Packsaddle bunch simply did not know what to think—Steve had got them guessing!

CHAPTER 44.

The Boot for Bill!

EZRA LICK, town marshal of Packsaddle, coughed. Job Wash, storekeeper, echoed his cough. Both of them looked uncomfortable as they stepped through the school-house porch and looked into the school-room. Bill, glancing round from his desk, did not look encouraging. Bill might be more of a cowpuncher than a schoolmaster, he might know more about packing guns than packing knowledge, but Bill did not stand for interrupting class.

"Say, Bill—" began Marshal Lick, having coughed.

"Say nix!" interrupted Bill. He waved a hand towards Small Brown and his class. "Guys ain't allowed to horn into this hyer caboodle while lessons is on! Vamoose the ranch!"

"I guess—" said Mr. Wash.

"Quit guessing, and beat it!" said Bill. "You want to chew the rag with me, you mosey into my office and squat. I guess I'll be along when the school's broke herd."

The town marshal and the storekeeper exchanged glances. The bunch watched them curiously. They could see—and perhaps Bill could—that these two prominent citizens of Packsaddle had arrived upon an errand not wholly agreeable. What it was was a mystery.

Bill was liked all through Packsaddle. The bunch liked him, and respected him, hard as he rode herd over them. In all the rough and tough Packsaddle bunch, Steve was the only guy who had a real grouch against the headmaster. His father, Two-Gun Carson, was the

only man on the school committee who did not pull with Bill. Yet here were the two chief members of that committee, obviously on a disagreeable errand. And none the better pleased, it was plain, by Bill's reception of them.

Having exchanged glances they looked at Bill. Bill gave them his shoulder to look at, his eyes on the class. Marshal Lick drew a deep breath, and spoke again.

"I guess we've come up special in the buckboard, Bill, to talk to you a few."

Bill glanced over the shoulder he had turned to them.

"You guys gone deaf down to the burg?" he asked.

"Meaning?" asked the marshal.

"I guess the school bell can be heard in Packsaddle, allowing you ain't gone deaf. So you're wise to it that school's on."

"Look here, Mr. Sampson!" said Job Wash. "As members of the school committee of the town of Packsaddle, we—"

"You, Poindexter!" roared Bill.

"Yep!"

Slick jumped.

"Shut that door!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Dick Carr; and the bunch grinned.

Slick, grinning, went to the door and shut it, almost on the noses of Marshal Lick and Mr. Wash.

Class went on. Voices—angry voices—could be heard murmuring in the porch. Bill Sampson gave them no heed. Bill had been appointed headmaster of Packsaddle School, and, so long as he was headmaster, he was riding herd; and guys who horned in during class had to take what came to them. The door remained shut.

Small Brown blinked curiously at Bill through his horn-rimmed spectacles. Small Brown wondered how Bill had the nerve to hand over this stuff to the important citizens who had appointed him to his post, and could push him

out of it again, if they liked. Bill seemed to have dismissed those prominent citizens from his mind. If they chose to wait in his office till he had time to chew the rag, well and good; if they didn't, well and good again. That was how Bill looked at it.

But there was some subdued excitement in the bunch, though none apparent in Bill. Something was up—that was certain. Dick Carr wondered whether Steve Carson's amazing defiance of his headmaster had any connection with this. It was a coincidence at least.

School was dismissed at last.

The Packsaddle bunch streamed out of the schoolhouse. Slick Poindexter pointed to a buckboard hitched at the gate.

"That's Wash's caboodle," he remarked. "They're waiting to see Bill."

The two prominent citizens were indeed waiting to see Bill—not in the best of tempers. Bill crossed the porch from the school-room into his "office," where he found the town marshal sprawled in a rocker, and Job Wash standing by the window with set lips. Bill gave them both an affable nod. Now that school was over, Bill was no longer a schoolmaster, but just Bill, ready to be hospitable and friendly.

"Spill it, old-timers!" said Bill.

Marshal Lick glanced at Mr. Wash, who coughed. Bill looked from one to the other.

"Meaning no offence, Bill," said Mr. Lick.

"I guess," said Bill, "that I ain't the galoot to go off on my ear. You got suthin' to spill. Shoot!"

"The regular meeting of the school committee has taken place, Mr. Sampson," said Job Wash. "The committee have come to a unanimous decision."

"Meaning?" asked Bill, who had never learned the word unanimous on the ranges of Kicking Mule.

"To be brief, the committee, while unanimously acknowledging your past services, and expressing their thanks

for the same, consider that the time has come——"

"You've spilled a jugful!" said Bill. "Put your cards on the tale, Mr. Wash."

"The committee," said Mr. Wash, "will be glad to accept your resignation of the present post as headmaster of this school."

"That's the parcel," said Marshal Lick.

Bill looked at them.

"That's what you've moseyed along to spill?" he asked.

"You said it."

"Your resignation——" said Mr. Wash.

"Forget it!" said Bill.

The storekeeper eyed him.

"You do not think of resigning?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," said Bill.

"Hem! In that case——"

"Fired?" asked Bill.

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"I should not express it in that manner, but——"

"I guess not," agreed Bill. "You wouldn't talk plain if you could crawl around blowing off your mouth."

Mr. Wash flushed.

"Meaning no offence, Bill," said Marshal Lick apologetically. "But the guys do think that a galoot with book-larning and such——"

"You figure that book-larning will handle this hyer bunch?" asked Bill. "Why, you pesky piecan——" He paused. "Say, you been spilling this all over Packsaddle afore you put me wise?" Bill breathed hard. "I guess it was Two-Gun started this, and I'll say he's mentioned it to young Steve. Yep; I get it now. I sure wondered where that young guy had picked up all that nerve all of a sudden. Say, you want my answer?"

"Your resignation——" said Mr. Wash.

"Forget it!" said Bill.

"Then I regret to say your dismissal is——"

"Pack it up!" said Bill. "I guess it's my turn to chew the rag. I'll say you're a piecan, Mr. Wash. I'll mention that you're a bonehead, Mr. Lick. I'll tell a man your pesky committee is a caboodle of the world's prize boobies, run by that all-fired, poker-sharp Two-Gun Carson. I'm fired; and you've moseyed in to put me wise. Now I'll put you wise what I think about you."

Bill made a stride forward.

His right hand gripped Marshal Lick's neckscarf, and hooked him out of the rocker. His left hand fastened like a vice on the collar of Mr. Wash. There was a gasp from the storekeeper. Unheeding both, Bill ran them out of the schoolhouse into the playground, with a grip of steel on the backs of their necks, and a roar from the Packsaddle bunch greeted the startling and unexpected sight.

CHAPTER 45.

Bill's Answer!

"LOOK!" yelled Dick Carr. "Howly Mike!" gasped Mick Kavanagh.

"This here is the bee's knee!" exclaimed Slick. "Say, Bill has sure got his mad up with them guys!"

Down the path from the porch to the gateway, heedless of the staring and excited shouting of the bunch, went Bill Sampson—with a wriggling, squirming, spluttering guy in either hand!

He halted by the hitched buckboard.

"Now, you pesky piecans!" roared Bill.

He dropped Mr. Wash in a gasping heap, and gave both hands to the marshal. Swinging Lick into the air, he tossed him bodily into the buckboard.

Then Bill grasped Mr. Wash. Up went the podgy storekeeper, swinging, and he was tossed into the buckboard after Marshal Lick.

Mr. Lick was trying to scramble up when the storekeeper landed on him. A suffocated howl came from the marshal as Mr. Wash's weight squashed him down again.

Those two prominent citizens of Packsaddle were wildly mixed in the vehicle. Bill, with a glare and a snort, cast loose the horse, and gave it a smack on the flank.

Down the trail went the horse, with the buckboard rocking and rattling behind over the rugged ground.

The gateway was packed by the bunch, roaring and jeering. Up from the interior of the buckboard rose two crimson faces, hatless, with wild, tousled hair. Gasping, panting, spluttering, the marshal and Mr. Wash glared back at Bill and the bunch.

"Beat it, you piecans!" roared Bill, in a voice that reached almost as far as Packsaddle. "Beat it, you pesky polecats! You hit this hyer school agin, and allow that a guy's fired, and I'll sure fix you up in a front seat in

a funeral! Beat it, you piefaced gophers!"

A gurgle from Mr. Wash, and a yell from the marshal floated back, and then the rocking, rattling buckboard disappeared down the trail.

Bill tramped back to the school-house, red with wrath. And the bunch gave him a cheer as he went. Whatever might be the outcome of the trouble, one thing at least was certain—the Packsaddle bunch were standing for Bill!

CHAPTER 46.

Gun Talk!

STEVE CARSON rode in at the gate of the cow-town school as the sun dipped behind Squaw Mountain. There was a grin on Big Steve's face, and he cracked his quirt and waved his hat as he rode in. The bunch were all in the playground. They were gathered in excited groups, discussing the startling happening of the afternoon and what might come of it. Every eye turned on Steve as he came. Most of the bunch gave him dark looks—even his own pals, Poker Parker and Slim Dixon, eyed him rather grimly.

All the bunch knew now how and why Steve had blown off his mouth at Bill that morning—he had had early news that Bill was to be fired, and he had reckoned that it was safe play. And the fact that he had returned, and that he came in grinning and gleeful, showed that he did not know that the two prominent citizens who had come there to "fire" Bill, had been "fired" themselves by the indignant headmaster of Packsaddle. Obviously, Steve figured that Bill was gone.

"Say, you'uns!" chuckled Steve, bringing his bronco to a halt, and jumping down. "I guess you're all wise to it now! That piecan Bill—"

"Can it, you skunk!" roared Slick. "You spill a word agin Bill, and we'll sure ride you on a rail outer the school."

Steve sneered.

"Aw, pack it up!" he said. "I guess Bill's a back number. The school committee down to Packsaddle ain't no use for Bill! I'm telling you! I guess my popper put me wise to it."

"You wouldn't have dared to cheek Bill if you hadn't known," said Dick Carr contemptuously.

"I guess I told that geck what I had been honing to tell him for dog's ages," grinned Steve. "And I'll tell you guys we got no use for an oneducated cow-puncher school-mastering here. I'll tell a man, the noo headmaster ain't a guy of Bill's heft! Nope!"

"You've seen him?" exclaimed Mick. "Sure!"

The bunch gathered eagerly round Steve. It had come as a startling surprise to them that the school committee had decided to fire Bill. It was still more surprising to hear that they had his successor all ready to take his place.

"Is he in Packsaddle already?" asked Dick Carr.

"Yep! I seen him at Hanson's Hotel."

"What's his name?" asked Mick.

"Scadder," answered Steve.

"He's coming to take Bill's place?" asked Dick Carr.

"You said it! Bill ain't got no kick coming!" sneered Steve. "Say, was Bill mad when they told him?"

"Just a few!" grinned Slick.

"I figured he would be mad!" chuckled Steve. "I'd have liked to see his face, doggone him. But I reckoned I wouldn't horn in agin until after he'd beat it—after the way I talked to him this morning."

"You reckon that Bill's beat it?" asked Mick.

Carson stared at him.

"Search me!" he answered. He gave a start. "Mean to say that Bill ain't vamoosed the ranch?"

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

The grin faded from Steve's face. Evidently he had taken it for granted that Bill was gone.

"But—but they came—Mr. Wash and the marshal—they came up to put him wise!" he exclaimed. "They was going to pay him three months' salary, for him to get out pronto and leave the stamping ground clear for Scadder—"

"I guess Bill horned in on them afore they got as far as that!" chuckled Slick. "Why, you ornery piecan, Bill ain't fired! He fired the marshal and old Wash—and sent them cavorting away in a buckboard hell for leather down the trail!"

"Great gophers!" gasped Steve.

"And here's Bill!" grinned Dick Carr, as the headmaster of Packsaddle came striding out of the school-house.

Steve stared at the six-gun schoolmaster with dropping jaw. Then he made a bound for his bronco. But Bill's grasp was on him before he could get into the saddle.

"Let up!" yelled Steve. "You ain't schoolmaster here now, Bill Sampson—you're fired, doggone you? I'm telling you to let up!"

Bill did not answer.

He gripped Big Steve by the collar with his left hand; in his right he swung the quirt.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Steve roared and hopped and howled. The Packsaddle bunch looked on with grinning faces.

Generally, when a guy in the bunch got the quirt, he had more or less sympathy from the rest of the bunch. But there was no sympathy now for the bully of Packsaddle. Steve had howled for it, and now he got it.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Steve's frantic yells rang across the playground. Bill laid on the quirt with a heavy hand. Steve had enjoyed his talk to Bill that morning. After the feast came the reckoning.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

As Bill laid on the quirt and Steve yelled and struggled and the bunch looked on, grinning, no one noticed a buggy stop at the gate.

A thin, long-legged man with a square

jaw in a black coat and black hat stepped down. There were several suitcases in the buggy; the newcomer had evidently come to stay. The driver of the buggy stared in at the gateway and grinned at the scene in the playground. The man in the black coat stared in also, but he did not grin.

He walked in.

"I guess that will see you through, Steve!" Bill was saying. "I'll mention that you won't shoot off your mouth again at your schoolmaster that-a-way!"

Steve staggered away, yelling.

Then Bill became aware of the new arrival. He stared round at the man in the black coat.

There was a deep-drawn breath in the Packsaddle bunch. All of them guessed at once who the newcomer was. Mr. Scadder, evidently, had not heard how the marshal and Mr. Wash had left the school a few hours ago. No doubt he expected to find a vacant place ready to step into.

Bill hitched his gun-belt a little to bring the butt of his six-gun a little nearer his hand as he strode towards the newcomer. Under his ten-gallon hat his brows were knitted and his eyes gleaming.

"Say, you!" he barked. Like the bunch, Bill guessed who the stranger was—the suitcases piled in the buggy told their own tale. Mr. Wash and the marshal had not been given time to tell him. But he could guess the rest now.

The man in the black coat stared at Bill.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"I'll mention that I'm Bill Sampson, headmaster of this outfit!" roared Bill.

"You—a headmaster!"

Bill crimsoned with wrath. In leather crackers, gun-belt, and Stetson, he undoubtedly looked more like a cow-puncher than a schoolmaster.

"Ain't I a-shouting it?" demanded

Bill. "And I'm jest asking you who you might happen to be, moseying into this school?"

"Scadder—Elias Scadder—is my name," said the man in the black coat. "I am the newly appointed headmaster of Packsaddle School, and if you are indeed Mr. Sampson, I am surprised to find you still here."

"Mebbe!" said Bill. "I guess I may surprise you a few more before you're through."

"I certainly understood," snapped Mr. Scadder, "that the former headmaster would be gone. I was distinctly told so. I understood that Mr. Wash, the chairman of the school committee, acquainted Mr. Sampson with the arrangements now made—"

"I guess Job Wash spilled a bibful," said Bill. "Mebbe he hadn't got through when I cinched his neck. That guy sure does chew the rag a whole lot. You ain't seen Wash since he was here?"

"No."

"Nor the marshal?"

"No."

"They sure should have put you wise," said Bill. "Seeing that they ain't, I guess I'll spill it. Me, Bill Sampson. I'm headmaster of this caboodle—got that? I ain't vamoosing the ranch for no other guy to horn in—got that? I ain't got no use for Scadders—got that? Your best guess is to skip back into that buggy and absquatulate! Got that?"

Mr. Scadder eyed him.

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" he answered. "I have informed you that I am now headmaster of this school, and I am here to take up my post. You will oblige me by leaving at once."

"Search me!" gasped Bill.

"If you are dissatisfied, Mr. Sampson, you will doubtless lay any complaint before the school committee," said Mr. Scadder. "With that I have nothing to do. But I must insist on your leaving at once."

"Carry me home to die!" said Bill.

Mr. Scadder turned to the driver of the buggy.

"Take in my baggage," he said.

Bill breathed hard.

"You beating it, you Scadder?" he asked.

"Certainly not."

Bang!

Bill was the quickest man on the draw in Santanta County. His six-gun roared before Scadder knew that it was in his hand.

The Derby hat on the new schoolmaster's head spun round as the bullet bored a hole through it.

There was a startled yell from Scadder. He leaped clear of the ground as he yelled. The perforated hat flew from his head.

Bang, bang!

"Beat it!" roared Bill, as the bullets crashed on the ground within inches of Mr. Scadder's feet. "I'm telling you to beat it! Absquatulate! Vamoose! Git!"

Mr. Scadder hopped and yelled. Whatever he had expected at Packsaddle School, he did not seem to have expected this. He spun round and dashed out of the gateway, his long legs going like lightning.

Bang! roared Bill's six-gun after him.

The bullet grazed a long leg, taking a patch out of Mr. Scadder's trousers. A fearful howl floated back from Mr. Scadder, and he fairly bounded down the trail. He passed the buggy and its grinning driver and raced.

Bill rushed out of the gateway, the smoking revolver in his hand. Scadder, hatless, ran like a deer.

Bang! roared the six-gun again. A wild howl answered from Scadder as the bullet knocked up the dust at his feet.

He tore on and vanished.

Bill strode back into the playground. Steve Carson, still yelping from the quirt, eyed him evilly. But the rest of the bunch waved their hats and roared a cheer for the six-gun schoolmaster.

UNDERSEAS TREASURE!

THERE is at least £50,000,000 waiting at the bottom of the sea-bed for someone to pick up. We know where it is—we know whether it is in the form of bars of gold, cases of precious stones, or fabulous pieces of jewellery. Yet, so far, every attempt to recover this wonderful hoard in "Davy Jones' Locker" has failed.

The Iron Man.

That £50,000,000 is the treasure known to have been carried to the seabed in various ships that have sunk in mid-ocean. And now, at last, a diving-suit has been invented which will enable treasure-hunters to descend to depths where they can search for this sunken hoard.

They call this diving-dress the Tritonia, or "Iron Man." Unlike ordinary diving kit, it is made entirely from metal, and not rubber, and the extra strength so gained enables its wearer to descend to a quarter or even half a mile below the surface of the ocean.

But what is most remarkable about this amazing new invention is that the diver inside manipulates metal "hands" with his fingers, and with their aid could even pick up pennies or matchsticks without difficulty. Owing to water-pressure, divers in ordinary rubber suits find the use of their hands is limited.

The "Iron Man" has already been used in some remarkable salvage feats. A few weeks ago, one of the German warships scuttled at Scapa Flow was raised to the surface for the value of its scrap-iron—£153,000.

Then there was the Italian salvage

vessel Artiglio, which recovered no less than four million pounds' worth of gold and silver from various wrecks in the space of two years—another feat made possible by the "Iron Man."

Sunken Millions!

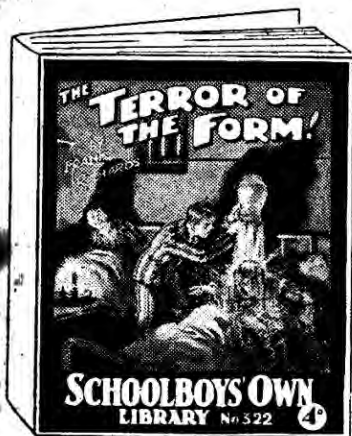
But there is much more wealth awaiting recovery from the sea-bed. Two hundred feet from the shore near St. John's River, Pondoland, lies the Grosvenor, which sank with £2,000,000 in specie on board her. Then there is the Monmouth, a British ship loaded with gold and silver from the mines of Peru, which sank off Vigo with the proceeds of three years' mining—worth £4,000,000!

Many of the treasure ships in Davy Jones' Locker are pay-ships, sunk in times of war. They have been carrying enormous sums of money to pay Britain's soldiers overseas, and three of them alone—the Lutine, the Hussar, and the Birkenhead—would give up millions if their cargoes could be recovered.

Many attempts have already been made to find the Lutine's treasure. She sank off the coast of Holland, in shallow water, but has become so deeply covered with sand in the years that have since elapsed that nobody has been able to find her bullion cargo. Only a few small bars of gold have so far been recovered—and the famous Lutine bell.

This bell, which used to be sounded as a time-signal on the Lutine, now hangs in Lloyd's, the underwriters' headquarters in London, and is rung when a ship is posted as missing, in any part of the world.

TWO MORE TIP-TOP SCHOOL TALES TO READ!

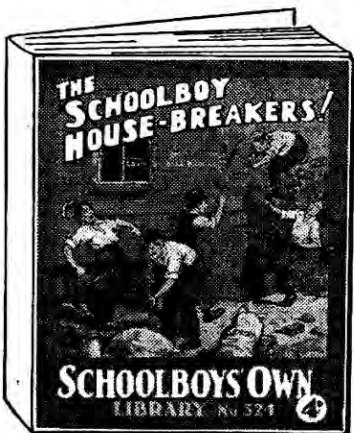


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By **EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.**

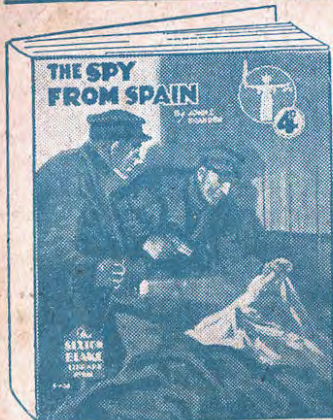
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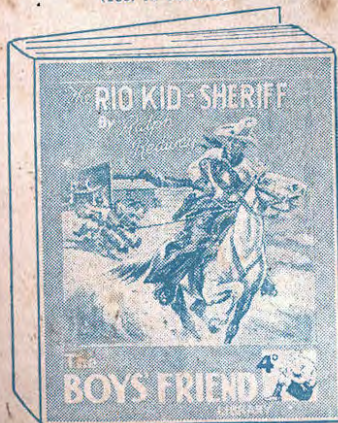
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