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Graham M. Dean**

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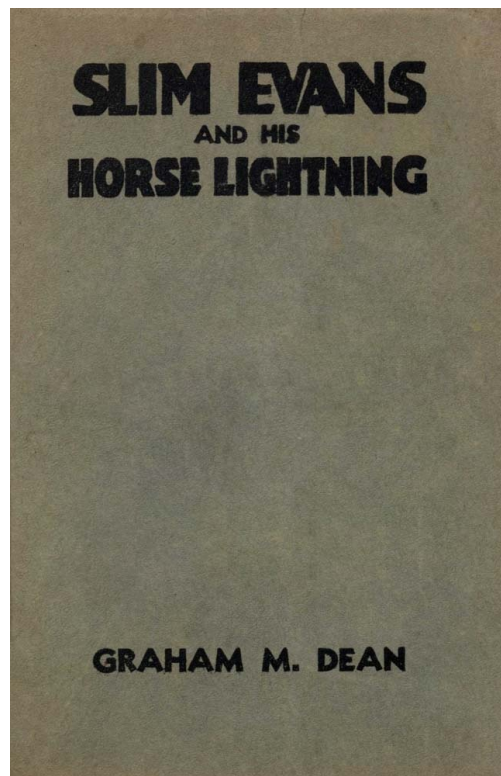
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SLIM EVANS

AND HIS HORSE

LIGHTNING

By

GRAHAM M. DEAN

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Slim Evans and His Horse Lightning

CHAPTER ONE

On the Sky High Trail

The rugged peaks of the Cajons cast deepening shadows down their eastern slopes as the July sun, a ball of fire in a cloudless sky, swung toward the horizon.

Threading his way carefully through one of the passes of the Cajons was a cowboy on a sorrel horse. Dust lay thick on both horse and rider, for they had been long on the trail that day and there had been no rain in the Cajon country for weeks.

Breasting the last steep grade leading to the summit of the pass, a new country was unfolded. The sorrell paused as its rider dismounted more than a little stiff from the hours in the saddle and the intense heat of the day.

The cowboy patted the sorrel affectionately.

"It's been a long grind, Lightning, old girl. We'll rest here a few minutes and then see if we can find a good place to camp tonight."

The narrow trail had broadened at the summit and there was a swale with a little grass that had escaped the burning rays of the midsummer heat.

The sorrel began to graze while the cowboy sat down in the shadows of a boulder.

All day long horse and rider had been toiling up the slope from the east, following the little-used trail. Shading his eyes, the cowboy tried to follow the trail. It turned west and north, into a country that was well timbered and appeared to be rich in grazing land--a country new to both horse and rider.

For the twentieth time in the last three days the cowboy slipped his hand into an inner pocket and drew forth an envelope. He unfolded the letter it contained and scanned it with puzzled eyes. It was addressed to Slim Evans, Flying Arrow Ranch, Sunfield, Wyo.

"Dear Slim," the letter began, "I am in need of your help. Things are going badly in the Creeping Shadows country over beyond the Cajons and I am counting on you to straighten out the trouble. The greatest secrecy is necessary so let no one except your father know of this message. Meet me on the 22nd at the foot of the Sky High trail on the other side of the Cajons. Will explain everything then."

The message was signed by Bill Needham, secretary of the Mountain States Cattlemen's Association.

Slim Evans folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope, which was now badly creased.

It had been a summons he could not disregard and the mysterious tone of the letter had aroused his curiosity. Once or twice in the last two years he had been able to help Bill Needham and the Mountain States Association in running down rustlers. Bill was an old friend of the Evans family and Slim had hastened to roll his duffel and start for the Sky High trail over the Cajons.

It was the best part of another day's ride to the foot of the trail, but he could slacken the fast pace he and Lightning had maintained for he was well within the time limit.

Fine lines puckered Slim's brow as he stared down from the summit of the trail toward the Creeping Shadows country. Although less than a hundred and fifty miles from the Flying Arrow, where he had been reared, it was new country to him, right against the southern boundary of Montana with the Bad Lands touching it on the east.

Slim wondered if Needham was calling him in on a case of cattle rustling. But that seemed hardly possible, for the association had a small staff of men who devoted all of their time and energy to running down cattle thieves. Slim's only work along that line had been several small investigations near the home ranch where he had been able to save the association the expense of sending out one of its staff detectives.

Bill Needham was the only man with the answer and Slim reluctantly left the cool shadow of the rock. Lightning responded to his whistle and the cowboy swung into the saddle.

"Half an hour more, Lightning, and we'll look for a camp," said Slim, running his fingers through the mane of his mount.

Lightning, a beautiful horse, was tall, well built, with legs strong enough to stand a terrific speed even in the roughness of the cow country.

A white star stood out on her forehead and each foot had a collar of white just above the fetlock. It was evident that horse and rider understood each other for, from time to time, Slim spoke to Lightning and the mare seemed to nod in reply.

The Sky High trail had been in little use for half a dozen years, the new trail through the Cajons went nine miles south along an easier pass. Years before the Sky High trail had been one of the

main routes through the mountains, cowboys and herds from the Creeping Shadows country thundering along it. Now the old road was covered with weeds and only a semblance of a trail remained.

For half an hour Slim and Lightning swung down from the summit at a steady pace. The trail rounded a rocky promontory and a small patch of timber ahead hinted of a suitable camping place.

A mountain stream, grown thin from lack of rain, stumbled along over its rocky bed. There was enough grass and plenty of shelter. Slim dismounted, loosened the cinches, and pulled the heavy saddle and blanket from Lightning's back. He slipped the bit out of the sorrel's mouth, tossed the reins over the magnificent head, and Lightning was free to graze for whatever morsels of grass could be found in the little valley.

Slim unfastened the slender duffel roll he carried behind the saddle and brought out the mess kit. He was traveling light.

Before preparing his own evening meal, he slipped off the well-worn leather chaps which protected his legs and went down to the little stream. The water was cool and sweet and he drank deeply from the hurrying creek. Then he washed thoroughly, finally dousing his head in the water.

When he cleared the water from his eyes he saw Lightning standing a little below him and looking at him reproachfully.

Slim laughed. "Better try a little water to wash off the dirt," he chuckled.

But Lightning snorted disdainfully, drank deeply, and returned to graze again.

The cool water refreshed Slim greatly and he set about the task of preparing his evening meal. There was still a half hour of daylight, but he had been in the saddle at sun-up and, toughened though he was to the life of the range, the heat had tired him. He was ready to roll into his blanket as soon as he finished his meal.

There was plenty of dry wood in the patch of timber and Slim soon had a small, smokeless fire going. Plenty of bacon, bread that now was none too fresh, and a small pot of coffee completed food for supper.

Slim had just finished turning the bacon to a crisp, delicious brown, and the coffee was simmering in the coals when a rifle shot echoed from below.

The cowboy paused, bacon halfway between his tin plate and his mouth. There was another shot, followed by a fusillade. Slim heard the sudden scream of pain of a mortally wounded horse and he finished the bacon in one gulp.

"Lightning!" he called.

The sorrel, now a hundred yards away, heard the cry and came at a full gallop.

Slim leaped across the campfire and dove into the small pile of duffel beside his saddle. From a saddlebag he drew a cartridge belt and holster. This he buckled swiftly around his waist, pausing only long enough to make sure that the heavy .38 in the holster was free.

From a boot fastened to the saddle he drew a Winchester 30-30. A glance told him that the magazine was full and he swung an extra belt of ammunition over his shoulder.

The firing down below was coming steadily. There was no time to saddle and Slim leaped upon Lightning and went dashing down the Sky High trail.

Bushwhackers

At a mad gallop, Slim and Lightning raced down the valley. Like the true cow horse, Lightning sensed obstacles almost before they were in sight and on more than one occasion stretched her long legs to leap across badly washed places in the trail. At the pace they were going, a tumble would have been fatal for both.

The valley broadened and the timber thinned out. Slim reined Lightning in sharply. Ahead of them was a great wash strewn with boulders which had been carried down from the peaks of the Cajons by spring torrents. Somewhere in the mass of boulders was the secret of the steady firing.

Slim listened carefully. Three rifles were barking their song of death. As nearly as he could tell from the firing, it was two against one and he voted himself a ringside seat.

"You stay here," he told Lightning. "I can't tell what I'm up against and you're a pretty good sized target."

He slipped off the sorrel and ducked in between the boulders. The sky was a blaze of red as the sun dipped over the horizon. Already the shadows were creeping up from the lowlands. Another fifteen minutes at the most remained of light in which he could hope to do any kind of shooting if he found himself in trouble.

Slim moved from boulder to boulder, drawing rapidly nearer to the scene of the firing. It seemed to be concentrated to his right and he worked steadily in that direction. A minute later he saw the opening of a small draw off the main valley. Then he spotted the horse which had been shot down. The animal was lying just in front of the smaller valley. There was a huge boulder a little to Slim's left and he managed to crawl on top of it. From this point of vantage the entire scene unfolded.

The rider of the dead horse was trapped in the small wash. His cayuse shot down, he had attempted to escape, only to find himself in a box-like canyon with walls too steep to scale. He had taken refuge behind the rocks and now was firing carefully and methodically at the men who had brought him down.

A few seconds later Slim spotted the riflemen who had killed the horse. One on each side, they were gradually closing in on the man who was trapped in the canyon.

Slim took another look at his Winchester. The range was almost too easy, less than two hundred yards. There was no wind, but the light was fading fast.

He didn't like the way the men were closing in on the trapped rider. Their actions were too deadly, they were firing too calmly. It was evident that they did not intend that their victim should get out alive. It wasn't a fair fight and Slim took a substantial interest in the argument as he snuggled the smooth, walnut butt of the Winchester against his cheek.

With keen eye and steady fingers, he drew a bead on the nearest rifleman. But the man's back was toward him. He couldn't shoot without warning. Slim relaxed slightly and sent a ringing call echoing over the valley.

"Hi-yuh! Hi-yuh! What's going on there?"

The firing ceased abruptly and two astonished riflemen swung toward him, their weapons ready for instant action. But Slim, sprawled atop the big boulder, was practically invisible at that distance. There was no sound from the man trapped in the canyon.

"What's going on here?" Slim shouted again.

He must have raised his head slightly, for one of the riflemen made a snap shot and a bullet splattered on the boulder less than three feet away.

That was a declaration of war and Slim accepted the challenge. He could have shot the others down in cold blood, but he had given them a chance--two chances.

The shot fired at Slim was still echoing over the valley when the cowboy from the Flying Arrow fired twice. There was a sharp cry of pain from one of the riflemen and Slim heard a gun clatter to the rocks. He had aimed for an elbow which had appeared for just a second around one side of a boulder. Evidently his aim had been true.

The man trapped in the canyon had joined in the fight again and the riflemen were caught between two fires, with Slim on the one side and the unknown on the other. They had little desire to expose themselves to the deadly marksmanship of Slim and were content to wait until darkness.

Slim held up his own fire. It was a waste of lead to blaze away recklessly and the chances of hitting anyone were extremely remote.

The twilight deepened and the evening star peeped down on the boulder-strewn wash which a few minutes before had hummed with leaden death.

Night came and with it the valley awoke to new sounds--the noise of boots scraping on rocks as their wearers clumsily attempted to move about in silence. Slim took off his own boots and in his stocking feet started quietly toward the place where he had last seen the riflemen. Sharp stones jabbed his feet, but he moved silently, pressing steadily ahead.

In a few more minutes a new moon would shed its feeble rays over the Cajons, but it might not

penetrate this remote valley. Slim almost stumbled over the rifle, which the man had dropped. The stock of the weapon had been shattered by the impact of his bullet and the gun was worthless. Slim laid it back on the ground and worked slowly toward the mouth of the box canyon. He was curious to learn the identity of the man who had been the target for the vicious attack of the gunmen.

The Flying Arrow cowboy was almost at the mouth of the canyon when a thunder of flying hoofs stopped him. There was something familiar in the leaping cadence. The wild tattoo of the hoofs sounded like Lightning. But that couldn't be. He had left Lightning well up the trail.

With a growing fear in his heart, Slim cast caution to the winds and raced back along the trail. The rocks bruised his feet, but with his one thought for Lightning there was no time to stop and hunt for the boulder on which he had left his boots.

The trail smoothed out. Slim felt grass underneath. It was here that he had left the beautiful sorrel; it was here that Lightning should be waiting for him.

Slim cupped his hands and called the name of his horse.

"Lightning!" he cried. Over and over again the shout was hurled from his anxious lips. He whistled again and again. Each time there was only the silence of the night for an answer, while far down the trail the drumming of flying hoofs lessened and finally vanished altogether.

Slim knew what had happened. The riflemen, cut off from their own horses by his appearance, had been forced to seek escape up the trail. They had come upon Lightning, awaiting the return of her master, and had mounted the big sorrel. Picking their way around the rock-strewn wash, they had returned to their own horses and made good their escape but Lightning, the most valuable horse in the Flying Arrow remuda, had been taken with them.

There was a consuming bitterness in Slim's heart as he turned slowly back along the rocky trail to find his boots. Lightning was his own horse. He had trained the mare until she was the envy of every cowboy in the Flying Arrow territory. His hands gripped the stock of the rifle hard. Let him come within range of the men who had stolen Lightning and there would be no warning shouts, no fancy shots aimed only to hit an elbow.

It was in such a mood that Slim stormed back along the trail, too angry to spare his feet as he walked over the cruel rocks.

A quiet voice brought him back from wild rage to a cool realization that he was in a tight spot.

"Put up your hands and don't move!"

The words were softly spoken, hardly above a whisper but there was a ring of earnestness in them that brooked no meddling.

Slim opened his hands and his rifle clattered to the ground.

"Now raise your arms slowly. Don't make a move for the gun in your holster. I'll drop you without mercy if you do."

Carefully Slim's hands went higher until they were above his head. His mind worked rapidly. Could only one of the riflemen have escaped? Had the unwounded man waited for him to walk into a trap? Or was this the man who had been trapped in the canyon?

The questions raced through his mind. The mysterious letter from Bill Needham of the Cattlemen's Association had certainly led him into a peck of trouble and he hadn't reached the Creeping Shadows country.

The soft voice spoke again.

"Turn around now. Move slowly. Remember, I've got you covered."

The Strange Letter

Slim, his hands reaching toward the heavens, turned slowly around in the moonlight. He was careful to make no false move for the bitterness in the voice of his unknown captor almost cut the night air.

The rays of the thin moon shone full on Slim's face. The other man was hidden in the shadows, but Slim knew that a gun was trained on the middle of his body. He waited patiently. There was a snort of disgust from the unseen gunman.

"You can let your hands drop. I've got the wrong one. Just my luck."

Afraid of a trick, Slim was slow in lowering his hands but once they were at waist level he felt safe. His revolver was still in the holster at his side and in a move almost too fast for the eye to follow he could draw the gun and fire with amazing rapidity and accuracy.

Shoes scraped over rocks and a form loomed out of the shadows. Then the moonlight revealed a youth about Slim's own age. A rifle was cradled in one arm.

"Looks like we're a fine pair," chuckled the newcomer. "After you saved my hide from the skunks who tried to ambush me I turn around and show my gratitude by bushwhacking you. Darned wonder someone didn't get killed in here tonight."

"Who are you and what do you want?" snapped Slim, his anger still near the boiling point.

"I don't blame you for being a mite peevish," said the stocky cowboy. "Matter of fact, I don't know altogether what has happened."

"Who shot your horse down?"

"That's another mystery. I was taking it easy down the trail when a rifle cracked and my horse just folded up and pitched me off. The old cayuse never knew what hit him. Then the lead started pouring my way and I scuttled into that blind canyon."

"About that time I came along and voted myself a hand," put in Slim.

"That's about right. You cut in just in time to save my hide. I'm mighty grateful for what you did and doggone sorry that I held you up a few minutes ago. After what had happened I wasn't going to take any chances."

"Oh, I don't blame you for that a whole lot."

"My name's 'Chuck' Meade," the newcomer volunteered. "I'm off the Circle Four. It's a little better than a hundred miles south of here on the Sweetwater."

"I'm Slim Evans. Home brand is the Flying Arrow over near Sunfield."

They coolly looked each other over and an almost instant liking was struck up between them.

Slim was tall, as his name implied. A little better than five feet eleven inches, he packed 163 pounds on a frame that was built of sinewy muscle. His hands were long and slender and there was the grace of a mountain lion in his walk. His blue eyes were frank and inquiring, but at times a deadly light flickered in them, a light that warned an opponent that here indeed was a cow hand who could take care of himself in almost any emergency.

Chuck tipped the beams at 195 pounds and stood only five feet seven with his boots on. His shoulders were massive and his short arms had the power of a grizzly bear. He was champion of all wrestlers in the Sweetwater valley and at catch-as-catch-can scrapping was without a peer. A mop of curly hair was inclined to scatter in almost every direction and his eyebrows were heavy. But under the bushy brows gleamed brown eyes that were warm and friendly and he had a likeable smile.

Chuck looked down at the tattered socks on Slim's feet.

"This is a bad place to go wandering around in your stocking feet," he suggested.

"I left my boots down the valley," Slim explained. "Figured that in my stocking feet I could creep up on the two fellows who were trying to bushwhack you. They got away from me and stole my horse."

"What!" exploded Chuck, quick anger darkening his face.

"While I was playing good Samaritan, those fellows doubled around behind me and made away with my horse."

"That's tough. Means we're both on foot, for my old cayuse will never buck again."

"Standing here won't get us any place. Let's get my boots."

Slim picked up his rifle and led the way over the rocky ground. Every step pained him and there was little left of his socks when he finally reached the huge boulder where he had cached his boots.

He sat down and stripped off his socks, rubbing his aching feet with his hands.

"I've got a change of socks in my blanket roll," said Chuck. "I'll slide over and get my stuff."

Slim massaged the soles of his feet until Chuck returned with his bedroll. The cowboy from the Circle Four unrolled it and brought out a pair of heavy, serviceable socks.

Slim drew them on gratefully, wiggled his toes in comfort, and then slid his feet into his boots.

"Now I'm ready for action," he said, standing up.

"Where you heading?" asked Chuck.

"Down the Sky High trail," replied Slim, who in spite of his liking for his new-found companion was cautious not to give away any essential information.

"That's fine. I'm heading the same way. Since we're both going to hoof it from now on, we might as well throw in together."

"Suits me," agreed Slim. "If those boys who took a little target practice at you should show up again they may be surprised to find they've got two instead of one to fight."

Chuck surveyed the heavy gun and the well worn holster at Slim's side. He whistled softly.

"I've got a hunch that in a pinch you'd be right handy with that six gun."

"I can make it speak a piece," admitted Slim. "What about your saddle?"

"It's just on the other side of the trail. I'll pick it up when we start down."

"Then we'll go up to my camp. I was just sitting down to supper when the firing started."

Chuck slung his blanket roll over his shoulder and followed Slim up the trail.

They reached the patch of timber and found that the small fire had burned itself out. The bacon was cold and greasy and the coffee bitter.

"I'll rustle more wood," said Chuck and Slim set about the simple preparations for the joint meal.

In a short time the fire was glowing again and the savory odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee filled the night air.

"That sure smells good to me," said Chuck, squatting on his heels on the other side of the fire. "I've been traveling a little too light. Grub ran low and I cut out my noon meal figuring that I'd be far enough down the trail tonight to reach some ranch house and get a real supper."

"Guess you don't know much about this country," said Slim as he deftly flipped the bacon.

"Why?"

"There isn't a ranch within miles. We've got a good thirty miles of hoofing it down the trail before we'll be anywhere near a place we can get horses."

"You been through this country before?" Slim thought that Chuck's eyes were peering at him intently from beneath the bushy eyebrows.

"Never been over the crest of the Cajons until this afternoon," replied the cowboy from the Flying Arrow, "but my Dad's ridden through here once or twice and he told me something about the lay of the land before I started out."

"Kind of a lonesome country, then."

"Lonesome and darned inhospitable, especially the Creeping Shadows country over to the northwest."

"Yeh, I've heard that was a good place to stay away from."

Slim, who was serving as cook, used a forked stick to pull the coffee pot out of the coals. Doubling up a glove, he grasped the handle and poured the steaming beverage into the battered tin cups each cowboy carried in his duffel roll.

The night air near the summit of the Cajons is crisp and cool even on a July night and the warmth from the fire was cheering. They ate in silence, draining the last drop from the coffee pot and gleaning the final bit of crisp bacon from the greasy pan.

"I'll turn dish washer," said Chuck, gathering up the simple utensils they had needed for the meal. He went down to the creek where Slim could hear him splashing water on the cups and the frying pan.

Slim piled more fuel on the fire and as the flames leaped higher and the light brightened, his eyes fell on an envelope which Chuck had dropped.

Slim leaned over and picked up the letter. It was face up and the address, "Chuck Meade, Circle Four Ranch," stared at him. But the thing that really caught his attention was the name of the sender of the letter in the upper left hand corner. It was from Bill Needham, secretary of the Mountain States Cattlemen's Association.

There was almost an irresistible temptation to read the letter, but Slim conquered that impulse and tossed the envelope over on Chuck's blanket roll.

It was strange that both should have letters from the secretary of the cattle association and that both should be riding down the Sky High trail at almost the same hour.

Trouble Looms

Chuck returned with the handful of dishes and laid them by the fire where the heat would dry them thoroughly.

"You dropped a letter," said Slim. "I tossed it over on your blanket roll."

Chuck straightened up quickly, almost too quickly, thought Slim, and stepped around the fire. The Circle Four cowboy picked up the letter, glanced at it quickly but thoroughly, and slipped it into an inner pocket.

"Thanks. It's important, I wouldn't want to lose it."

"There are lots of valuable things we don't like to lose," said Slim. "Once in a while they disappear and we can't seem to do much about it." His eyes wandered over to the saddle which he had pulled off Lightning only a little more than two hours before.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning my horse, for instance. If I'd have thought for a minute that I'd have lost Lightning when I went trailing down to help you out, I'm not so sure I'd have gone."

"You're not putting a whole lot of value on my life," smiled Chuck.

"Maybe it's just that I'm placing a lot of value on a good horse."

"You must have thought a deal of that animal. Now you take the cayuse that was shot out from under me--just a plain range horse. Plenty good for cow work, but nothing fancy, and about as ornery as you can make them. Course I hate to lose the horse, but I'm not going to shed a whole lot of tears."

In spite of himself, Slim felt his eyes filling as he looked at the saddle. His voice choked.

"You can say that all right. You had just a plain horse to lose--but I had Lightning."

Chuck looked at his companion sharply and saw that Slim was deeply affected.

"I never had anything but a cayuse," he said. "Maybe if I'd had a really fine horse I would have some idea of how you feel."

"Maybe you would. You see, Lightning was almost human. I could talk to her and she'd understand almost everything I said."

"That's a lot more than a good many humans can do."

"Lightning was smarter than a lot of humans." Slim stretched his long legs on the blanket beside the fire, pillowed his head on the saddle and looked up toward the new moon.

A desperate ache tugged at his heart. Lightning was gone and there was only a great void there. He had to talk, he had to tell Chuck about the wonder of his horse. If he didn't he knew he would burst out in tears, a highly undignified thing for a husky young cowhand to do.

"Lightning was a sorrel with a white star on her forehead and white feet. She was long-legged, fast as the wind, and with plenty of endurance. There wasn't a horse anywhere around that could make her go her limit, and when it came time for the round-up, she could do the work of any other three horses."

"Sounds kinda like a wonder horse," said Chuck as he tossed another handful of wood on the flames.

"She was a wonder horse in every sense of the word," went on Slim. "Lightning was a queer mixture. Her mother just a plain cayuse on the Flying Arrow. We never knew just exactly what kind of a horse her father was, but my Dad swears that it must have been Nige, leader of the band of wild horses over on the Sunfield spur of the Cajons. Nige's never been broken, and only a few people have ever been able to get a rope around him. He's a beauty--coal black and all fire and temper."

Chuck nodded.

Even over on the Circle Four they had heard about Nige and his small band of wild horses which roamed the eastern slope of the Cajons.

"I've heard there was Kentucky blood in Nige," said the Circle Four cowboy.

"That's what my Dad always said," went on Slim. "Anyway one of our cayuses, just a plain little sorrel with a splash of white on her face and legs, was the mother of Lightning. She was a colt in a thousand, you could see that at a glance."

Slim paused and looked up at the moon again for comfort. The ache was still in his heart, but talking to Chuck, telling him about Lightning, was easing a little of the piercing pain.

"I was just coming along to the age when I was going to need a good horse," went on Slim, "and Dad picked out Lightning and turned her over to me. We seemed to get along first-rate right from the start, seemed to understand just what the other wanted to do. Why, I remember one time in spring round-up when Lightning went into a prairie dog's hole and threw me. I busted one leg and sprained the other so bad I couldn't stand. There I was sprawled flat on the range, five miles from

the chuck wagon and a thunderin' big storm whooping down out of the mountains.

"Lightning took one good look at me and set out for the chuck wagon at a full gallop. It wasn't an hour later when she brought Dad and the boys back with her. They got there just before the rain and believe me, I was glad to see them."

"I've heard of horses like that," nodded Chuck, "but I never knew anyone that owned one."

"There's only one Lightning. At first I trained her so she wouldn't let anyone else ride her, but the other boys on the ranch didn't like it very well so I broke her of that habit. If I hadn't done that, she'd never have been ridden away from here this afternoon. It used to be she'd lash out with her feet whenever anyone came near, but that was kinda dangerous on the ranch."

"How do you suppose the fellows that were gunning for me got her?" asked Chuck.

"All they had to do was to walk up and climb on, she was that gentle. Believe me, if I ever get her back, she's going to be a one-man horse from now on."

"I'm afraid there isn't much chance you'll ever get her back," said Chuck, "if this country is as sparsely settled as you say."

"I'll get her back somehow," replied Slim in a tone that brooked no good for the men who had taken Lightning.

They were silent for a time, both thinking of the long walk down the Sky High trail that faced them with the coming of the dawn.

"Funny I didn't see you ahead of me when you went over the summit," said Slim.

"I must have crossed a good hour ahead of you. My horse was pretty badly winded and I didn't try to make much time for the first half hour coming down this side. Fact of the matter is, I stopped a little above here for water and to let the cayuse graze."

The fire was dying and there was no need to put on fresh wood for they were ready to roll into their blankets. Slim kicked his boots off, pulled the blanket up around his shoulders, and said good night to his new-found companion.

He was worn out by the long ride of the day, the adventure in the boulder-strewn wash below and the mental grief of having lost Lightning. But sleep did not come at once.

Why had Chuck been ambushed? His thoughts centered on the letter in his own shirt and the one that Chuck had dropped. Both were from Bill Needham. Could they be on the same mysterious mission, could both be answering a sudden call from the old cattleman?

The Unknown Rider

Slim slept restlessly that night, his mind disturbed by the grief and worry over the loss of his horse. He was awake with the first rosy tint in the sky above the Cajons.

Chuck was still sleeping soundly and Slim, barefooted, walked quietly down to the creek where he washed his face and hands. They had used up the supply of wood gathered the night before and he picked up an armful of dry sticks before returning to the camp.

Chuck was awake and stretching lazily when Slim dropped the wood beside the dead ashes.

"Going to be a great day for walking," said the Circle Four cowboy as he pulled on his boots.

"Not for my feet after the beating I gave them running around over the rocks in my stocking feet," said Slim.

While Chuck was at the creek washing, Slim started the fire and checked over their supplies. There was enough bacon for the morning meal and four slices of bread that were so dry they now resembled hardtack. Not much food for a couple of hungry cowpunchers.

"We're short of grub," he informed Chuck.

"Just enough bacon for breakfast and a snack of bread."

"Might just as well start the day on a full stomach. We'll need it. How's the coffee?"

"Plenty of coffee, but it's going to take us at least a day to reach the bottom of this trail."

"Well, the coffee will help. We can drink that and think we've had a meal."

By the time the sun was up, they had finished breakfast and were about the task of breaking their simple camp.

"What about your saddle?" Chuck asked.

"I'm going to tote it with me as far as I can. If it gets too heavy I'll cache it along the way. Dad gave it to me and I'm not going to take any unnecessary chances of losing it."

Slim made up his duffel roll and fastened it to his saddle. Then he paused to look around the camp and make sure nothing had been overlooked. Chuck, rifle in hand, was waiting for him.

Slim swung the heavy saddle on his back and they started down the Sky High trail. It was covered with a fair growth of grass, for in recent years it was used by only an occasional rider and the walking wouldn't have been half bad in low heeled shoes. But riding boots, with their high heels, were never meant to pound along over a none too smooth trail. Slim knew that he would be in agony before the day was over.

They reached the rock strewn wash where Chuck had been ambushed and stopped while the Circle Four cowboy picked up his saddle. High above them a buzzard was circling. In a few short hours Chuck's cayuse would be another skeleton along the trail, hinting at an unsolved mystery.

Chuck stuck his rifle into the boot fastened to his saddle and the cowboys resumed their march down the trail. It was tough going over the rocks, but they were soon out of the wash, and the footing was a little better.

It was here that they picked up the trail of the men who had bushwhacked Chuck. Slim recognized Lightning's hoofprints at once. A little further along they found where two more horses had been tethered for some time.

"They left their horses here while they went up in the draw and used me for a target," said Chuck bitterly.

"Think you'd be able to recognize them if you saw them again?"

"I doubt it. The distance was too great and the light was poor."

"I'll know one of them," said Slim. "I put my mark on him. Unless I miss my guess he's got a shattered right elbow. If I ever catch up with him he'll have something besides an elbow busted all out of shape."

The sun burned down over the Cajons and the thin air soon warmed. Rivulets of perspiration streamed down Chuck's back and his shirt was soon soaked. Slim, not quite so heavy, felt the heat less.

They pounded along for better than an hour when Chuck called a halt. "Let's stop in the shade of these scrub oaks. This saddle is digging its way right into the middle of my back."

Slim welcomed the suggestion and they flopped down in the shade.

Chuck looked up speculatively at the clear blue of the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight, and the breeze had died down to a whisper.

"How many more miles to the bottom of the trail?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly. I'd say we've covered about four miles since leaving camp. It must be 23 or 24 more."

"I'll never make it."

"I've got to be at the foot of the trail tonight," said Slim.

"I'm supposed to be," admitted Chuck, "but I've serious doubts if my 'dogs' will hold out for better than 20 miles."

"We'd better keep pounding along. Another hour and we'll stop and make a pot of coffee and find a creek where we can soak our feet for awhile."

"Good idea. Mine feel like they're burning up right now."

Shouldering their saddles, they set off down the trail. The grade was easing now. There was more timber but the grass was still scarce.

"Not much grazing land here," commented Chuck.

"No. That's up in the Creeping Shadows country. I've never been there but I've heard there's some of the best grass in Wyoming in that valley."

"Wouldn't have to be very good to be that," said Chuck. "We almost burned out this summer. No rain for weeks."

"There's been little or no rain here, but the Creeping Shadows always seem to get water."

They were silent for a time and Slim wondered why Chuck, too, was anxious to get to the bottom of the trail that night. He couldn't help thinking about the letter which had fallen from his companion's pocket the night before and there was still the unanswered question on why Chuck had been set upon by the two gunmen.

The sun was well toward its zenith when they made their second stop beside a small stream. There was a little grass and a few trees in the valley, enough at least to provide them with shade.

Slim pulled off his boots and socks and looked at his feet. They were red and swollen. Chuck's looked to be in even worse condition.

The Circle Four cowboy crawled to the water's edge on his hands and knees and gratefully thrust his feet into the cool water.

"Oh boy! What a relief. I didn't know water could feel so good. I've half a mind to spend the rest of the day right here."

"Then you'll have to spend it alone. I'm going to push on as soon as my feet feel a little better and we have some coffee."

"Maybe the coffee will pep me up," agreed Chuck. "I'll rustle up the wood in a little bit."

The cool water reduced the swelling of their feet and a few minutes later they donned their socks and boots and picked up enough dry wood for a fire. Slim filled the coffee pot and shortly before noon they had two cups of the steaming beverage apiece.

"Not much of a meal," said Slim, "but it puts a little more stiffening in my back."

Chuck nodded, looking thoughtfully at his saddle.

"Tell you what. I'm going to cache my saddle. I don't think we'll make it to the bottom of the trail tonight if we don't. Once rid of the saddles we'll be able to walk a lot faster and it will ease the strain on our feet."

Slim looked down at his boots. The morning's walk over the uneven ground had done them little good. The soles had been gouged by sharp rocks and the heels were wearing off at a crazy angle. By the end of the day he would have to discard his expensive boots for he doubted if even the most expert cobbler would possess the skill to repair them.

"Guess you're right," he agreed. "I hate to leave my saddle, but I know I can't carry it to the bottom of the trail tonight."

Chuck looked at Slim sharply, each perplexed, perhaps a little alarmed, at the insistence of the other upon reaching the trail's end by sundown.

Slim washed the coffee grounds out of the pot and then placed the battered tin pot and the remaining coffee in his blanket roll.

"There's a little draw off to the left and across the creek that ought to be a good place to leave our saddles," said Chuck.

They tossed the saddles across the creek and then jumped after them. A thicket in the draw which Chuck had pointed out proved ideal for a cache. They returned to the other side of the creek and slung their blanket rolls over their shoulders.

Both cowboys had unfastened their rifle scabbards from their saddles, and they carried these in their right hands, the butts of the guns protruding from the leather case.

With the burden of their saddles gone and their feet rested, they set out down the trail again. The blinding heat of midday was upon them, but they dared not tarry longer beside the creek.

Heads down and shoulders hunched, they plodded along the trail. Hoofprints of three horses were still plainly visible for the men who had stolen Lightning had ridden down the trail at a fast pace.

"Makes me boil inside every time I think of my being set afoot," snorted Chuck. "Maybe I'll take a little time off and hunt around for the boys who did me dirt. With the souvenir you left on that one chap's arm, they shouldn't be so hard to find."

They swung around a bend in the trail and came upon the ashes of a recent campfire. Slim placed

his hand in the ashes. They were cold.

"The horses were staked out and hobbled over here," called out Chuck. "Too bad we didn't slip down the trail last night and take them by surprise."

"It's easy to think of those things now," grinned Slim as he picked up a handkerchief which was covered with brown stains. "I don't imagine one of them passed a very comfortable night."

In midafternoon they paused beside another mountain stream to rest and bathe their weary feet.

"My 'dogs' look like they are going to explode," said Chuck as he wiggled his toes in the cool water.

Slim, stretched on the bank beside him, nodded. He was wondering if they would be able to maintain their pace and make the bottom of the trail that night. He didn't want to disappoint Bill Needham, for the old cattleman had written that he was counting on him.

"My stomach and backbone are so close together I'm afraid they'll form a union and strike on me," grumbled Chuck, "unless I put some food inside me quick."

"There's a little coffee left."

"Then coffee it is," said Chuck. He built a fire and brewed a bitter pot of beverage.

"What did you drop in this? The heel of one of your boots?" asked Slim as he sipped the black stuff.

"Don't complain. It's hot and it's filling, which is the main thing."

In spite of its poor taste, they downed the coffee, drew on their boots, picked up the rifles, and resumed the painful downward trip.

The sun was swinging well along toward the horizon and the country was flattening out. They had reached the foothills, but there was still no sign of human habitation. Coming out of a patch of timber, they looked down a long, broad valley, the grass of which had been burned out by the sun.

"I pity cattle trying to live off this stuff," said Slim.

"Better pity us. If we don't find something real to eat, we may have to take to grass."

Chuck started down the trail again when Slim's call stopped him.

"Wait a minute. There's a horseman riding into the lower end of the valley."

Chuck halted and scanned the far end of the valley.

"Can't see a thing. Maybe you're going daffy."

"I'm not daffy," retorted Slim sharply. "Just stand still a minute. The fellow's coming in from the right and he's leading another horse."

Chuck shaded his eyes and peered intently in the direction Slim had indicated.

"You're right. What now?"

"Let's drop back in the timber along the trail and wait for him to come up where we can get a good look."

They found shelter in a tangle of brush that had grown up around a fallen tree. Slim pulled his rifle from the scabbard and threw open the magazine. The weapon was ready for action.

"Not taking any chances?" Chuck asked.

"Nary a chance. I took one last night and lost Lightning."

The rider advanced rapidly but the sun blazed in the eyes of the cowboys and they found it difficult to see clearly.

The oncoming horseman was less than 400 yards away when Slim recognized the horse.

"He's riding Lightning!" he cried. "Chuck do you hear? That's Lightning coming up the trail!"

"Sure I hear and unless you pipe down that rider will hear you and then Lightning may be forced to go the other way in a hurry."

Slim, who had stood up in his moment of wild elation, crouched down behind the tree trunk and cradled the butt of his rifle against his cheek. The lines of his jaw snapped into straight, tense lines and his finger crooked around the trigger. A little further and the unknown rider of Lightning would be out of the angle of the Sun's protecting rays.

Lightning Returns

Slim waited impatiently as the rider on Lightning pressed on up the valley toward them. At three hundred yards his finger pressed gently on the trigger of his Winchester.

"Better wait a bit longer," counseled Chuck. "You might miss at this range."

Slim snorted. "I've got him lined between my sights right now. That guy is one horse thief that isn't going to get away."

But Slim took Chuck's advice and the tension of his finger on the trigger lessened. The target loomed larger, for the man riding Lightning was heavy and of large stature.

Rider and horse drew nearer, the second horse trailing Lightning by a few feet. It was then that Slim noticed that the rifle of the rider on Lightning was in the scabbard on the saddle of the second horse. If he shot now, it would be at a man armed at the most with only a six shooter and one unable to answer him on even terms. Slim knew that the horse thief didn't deserve such consideration, but in spite of his rage at losing Lightning he couldn't bring himself to shoot a man in cold blood.

He dropped his rifle in disgust. "That fellow hasn't anything within reach but a six gun. I can't take a shot at him at this distance."

"What you going to do?" queried Chuck.

"Wait until he comes up close and then step out and hail him. If he goes for his six gun, we'll be on equal terms."

"I don't know about that. Seems to me you ought to be kind of handy with that six shooter of yours. You've got long arms and long hands and your gun is hung just right for fast action."

"I can make it talk," agreed Slim, his narrowed eyes watching the approach of the rider, now almost within hailing distance. If he continued on the trail, he would pass within three rods of the two cowboys.

Chuck looked down at his aching feet.

"Gosh, but it's going to seem good to swing back into a saddle. I've walked more today than in years."

"You'll be riding again in about five minutes, cowboy," said Slim. "This fellow is coming right into the center of a real unpleasant surprise party."

Slim shifted from his crouching position behind the fallen tree and made sure that his gun was free in the holster. There was a good chance that he would need it in a hurry.

The rider on Lightning was within a hundred yards of them when Slim stood up and waited quietly beside the trail. The horseman came on swiftly, unaware of the incensed cowboys who were awaiting him.

Suddenly Slim shifted his plans. He knew a bloodless but not altogether painless way to capture the rider. Placing two fingers between his lips, he sent a shrill, penetrating whistle ringing down the valley.

Lightning stopped suddenly, poised like a statue. Again the sharp whistle came from Slim's lips while Chuck watched in open-mouthed astonishment.

Lightning whirled into action. The big sorrel left the ground in a wild, twisting buck that caught her rider unawares. Lightning almost swapped ends and came down in a rocking, jarring crash that sent the unknown rider sprawling through the air to land with a thud at one side of the trail.

Then the sorrel raced toward Slim, whinnying in sheer delight at discovering her master again.

Chuck ran down the trail to the side of the fallen rider while Slim swung onto Lightning. The sorrel fairly danced with pleasure over the reunion and Slim reached down and stroked the beautiful mane with gentle hands.

"Gosh, Lightning, old girl, it's good to see you again. Darn me! I thought last night it was all over for us when I heard those bushwhackers riding away. From now on no one rides you but me. Understand?"

Lightning threw up her head in a quick, angry manner that indicated anyone except Slim would have a hard time mounting her.

From down the trail came a sharp cry from Chuck.

"Hey, Slim. Come here and meet your horse thief."

The Flying Arrow cowboy swung Lightning about and trotted down the trail. Chuck was bending over the fallen man, who was now showing some signs of a returning interest in life.

"Think you can recognize him?" asked Chuck as Slim slipped out of the saddle.

"Why it's old Bill Needham!" exclaimed Slim. "What under the sun could he have been doing on Lightning?"

Old Bill, tall and powerful of frame, a typical cattleman of the old school, managed to raise his

bruised body upon one elbow as he squinted angrily at the two cowboys looking down at him.

"What's the idea of pulling a stunt like this on me?" he demanded. Then, recognizing Slim as the mists cleared from his ancient eyes, he added. "My gosh, Slim. I was just riding up trail looking for you when that horse of yours set off a stick of dynamite under my saddle. How did it all happen?"

"That's what we want to know," said Chuck. "There's got to be a lot of explaining about some things that took place last night just this side of the divide."

"Well, well, Chuck. I figured I'd find you somewhere along the trail, but hadn't counted on you and Slim being together. Know each other pretty well?"

"We ought to. We've done better than twenty miles of hoofing it along this trail since sunup. My feet are just about killing me." Chuck sat down and dragged off his boots, massaging the bottoms of his burning feet with his hands.

"Let's hear the story, boys," said Old Bill. "Tell me what happened last night and I'll tell you how I happened to get hold of Lightning."

Slim looked at Chuck.

"Everything happened this side of the divide and you were the first over the summit. Start the ball rolling."

"There's plenty to tell," began Chuck. "I'd been taking it fairly easy, figuring on plenty of time to get to the foot of the trail. A little more than a half hour of easy riding this side of the crest of the trail a couple of hombres cut loose on me with rifles."

"Didn't they give you any warning?" asked the old cattleman.

"Not a peep until the Winchesters started blazing away. The first thing I knew my horse caved in and pitched me off. I managed to get my rifle and ducked into a side canyon, but it was a trap--no way out. The other two had plenty of shelter behind boulders in that dry wash and they blazed away every time I moved. It was getting along toward dark and looking plenty tough for yours truly when someone else voted himself a hand in the party and cut loose on the bushwhackers from behind."

Old Bill chuckled. "It isn't hard to guess who you're talking about."

"Well, that changed everything. Slim hit one of them in the elbow and they decided they'd had enough, but on the way out they circled around and stole Slim's horse."

"So you started hoofing it down the trail."

"You mean we started limping down the trail," said Slim. "These boots of mine were never made for walking and I don't know when I've suffered such agony."

"That goes for me, too," said Chuck.

"How about you, Slim? Let's hear your side of the story," Old Bill urged.

"There isn't a whole lot more to tell. I had made camp this side of the summit and was just sitting down to supper when the firing started. I could tell it was two against one so I got my rifle and did a little scouting. When I got down in the wash, I could see they had Chuck penned up and were shooting to kill. I challenged them and they let me have a little lead, so I cut loose. They got away and stole Lightning and I've been kind of miserable until you showed up."

"And say, you don't know how near death you were a few minutes ago," Chuck said. "Slim had you lined between his sights and was all set to let you have it. Then he decided he couldn't kill a man in cold blood."

"So he just whistled and had Lightning dynamite me right out of the saddle," chuckled Old Bill. "Maybe the shooting wouldn't have been so bad after all." He rubbed his bruised body with exploring fingers. "Danged wonder every bone in my body wasn't broken."

"You take your falls hard," admitted Chuck.

"I want to know where you found Lightning," said Slim.

"The bushwhackers rode past my camp this afternoon and I recognized Lightning in a minute. I knew you would be riding Lightning on a trip like this and I didn't waste time nor lead. They were leading Lightning and when I started shooting, she broke away. After what you did to them last night, those fellows didn't have much stomach for another fight and they took out full gallop for the Creeping Shadows valley. It wasn't much trouble to round up Lightning for she seemed to remember me a bit from my visits to the Flying Arrow. But boy, when you whistled she forgot all about me. I never saw a horse go up so quick or come down so hard. Don't ever do that again to me."

"I never will," promised Slim, "but it's a good trick to keep in the bag. If I'd been real smart last night I think I could have stopped Lightning by whistling to her, but I wasn't thinking very straight. When I heard the bushwhackers galloping off on her I just saw red in about five different shades."

"Don't blame you a bit, son," said Old Bill. "Now let's get down to the business of making camp and getting some grub. No use of our going to the bottom of the trail tonight. We'll make camp here and I'll tell you what I've got up my sleeve."

Slim looked toward Chuck and jerked a thumb.

"What about him?"

"He's in this thing as deep as you are. Just have a little patience. We'll eat, then talk. A man can't

think well on an empty stomach.”

Explanations

They agreed with Old Bill's simple philosophy and all three set about making camp. Slim took care of Lightning and Old Bill's horse while Chuck went about rustling an armful of wood.

Old Bill opened his blanket roll and a goodly supply of provisions was revealed, something more than the bitter coffee on which they had tried to satisfy their hunger that day.

A crackling fire was soon going, the bacon broiling and the potatoes frying. There was plenty of bread and a pot of delicious coffee. Slim and Chuck ate to their fill, and Old Bill watched them with twinkling eyes. These were youngsters after his own heart, clean, manly young chaps--able to ride with the best in the west, afraid of nothing, including mountain wildcats. He knew that he could count on them for the work that was ahead.

When they had finished the meal, Slim and Chuck took the few utensils to the nearby stream where they washed them in the cool water. By the time they were back at camp, Old Bill had the blankets spread out, more fuel on the fire, and his pipe going. He was ready to talk, ready to tell them why he had summoned them to meet him so mysteriously on the Sky High trail.

The cowboy from the Flying Arrow and the one from the Circle Four eased their weary bodies down on the blankets and waited for Old Bill to speak. The cattleman shifted his pipe.

"I'll start in from the first," he said. "It goes quite a ways back into Wyoming cattle history, but it's best that you know fully what you're going into."

He jerked a thumb in the general direction of the Creeping Shadows country.

"That's the best cattle country in this part of the west--plenty of rich grass and lots of water that's good all of the year round. The valley is set down between the Cajons and the Three Soldiers and it's warmer than most parts of Wyoming in the winter. But it's tough country to get into--too expensive for a railroad for the amount of business, so the world has sort of forgotten the valley except when the trail herds come out in the fall on the way to the loading yards at Mopstick. The valley is just as tough, maybe a little tougher, than it was thirty years ago when Adam Marks went in and started the Box B. Adam had a fight on his hands then and he's got one now."

"So we're headed for the Box B?" said Slim softly. He had heard his father speak of Adam Marks and the Box B, of the fine grass and water on the range and of the choice cattle the Box B sent to market each fall.

"You two are headed for the Box B," corrected Old Bill.

"You voting yourself out?" asked Chuck.

"I never voted myself in. Now don't jump at conclusions. Adam went into the Creeping Shadows country when it was a nest of outlaws. He was honest and clean and he bought his land. He took with him a hard-riding, hard-fighting bunch of punchers that were handy with fist or gun. He cleaned up the valley except the town of Dirty Water and that was too tough even for Adam to fumigate.

"To shorten up the story, Adam prospered. He kept buying more land and increasing his range stock. He was figured a millionaire a couple of times over but the bottom went out of the beef market and then rustling started again and it's been growing worse the last few months. Adam has lost hundreds of fine cattle and he hasn't been able to put his finger on the gang responsible."

"Which means you've picked Slim and me to go in and do a little Sherlock Holmes work for you," interjected Chuck. "How about your regular cattle detectives?"

"I was just getting to that," said Old Bill a little wearily. "Adam sent word to me that he was in trouble and I sent a good man into the valley. He never came back. Then Adam sent another call to the association for help and I sent another good riding detective, but after a week in the valley with Adam's boys, he did a disappearing act."

"Someone scare him?" asked Chuck.

"They were the type that didn't scare. I think someone shot them just like they attempted to get you yesterday."

"They'll have to be a lot better shots than that if they figure on getting me," snorted Chuck. "They missed me the first time. Say, I could knock an apple off a man's head at that range ten times out of ten and never touch a hair on his head."

"That's one reason I sent word for you to meet me here," said Old Bill. "Adam Marks is up against a tough proposition. I've lost two of my regular detectives on the job. It isn't that I'm afraid to send them in, but I know it's pure murder for them if I do. They're all known. What I need is two fellows who look and act like a couple of gay young buckaroos that don't have a responsibility in the world and don't care much where they hang their hats just so there's a peg handy.

"I picked you boys for several reasons. Slim has done a couple of little jobs for me over near Sunfield and I know he's got a good head and a cool one. In addition, he's a dead shot with a six gun. Chuck's a fine rider and the best man with a rifle I've seen in many a year. Slim, your temper is likely to flash a bit too hot at times, but I figure that Chuck being a little slower to fly off the handle will kind of keep a check on you. In other words, you're my idea of the right kind of a team

to send into the Creeping Shadows country and ferret out these rustlers."

Slim looked across the fire at Chuck, carefully appraising the cowboy from the Circle Four. He had liked Chuck from the very first.

"What do you think about it?" he asked.

"I don't much like being shot at without warning," said Chuck, "so you can count me in to see this thing through. I've a pretty strong hunch we'll find the fellows that gave me the lead greeting tangled up with this gang of rustlers."

"And I'm still mad about Lightning being stolen," added Slim. "Looks like both of us have a debt to repay those birds in the Creeping Shadows. Count me in."

"Me too," added Chuck heartily.

Old Bill smiled broadly. He had felt sure that these youngsters would come through. He reached over to the nearby woodpile and tossed a couple of large sticks on the flames. The fire brightened, chasing the shadows away from the men stretched on the blankets.

"Don't make a mistake and think this is going to be an easy job," cautioned Old Bill. "You'll have to do plenty of hard work and a lot of tough riding. You're going into this thing alone. Not even Adam Marks will know who you are."

"Why not?" asked Slim.

"He knew that the other men I sent in were detectives. They never came back."

"You're not hinting that Marks is rustling his own cattle?"

"I'm not hinting at a thing," replied Old Bill sharply. "I'm simply telling you the facts. No one must know you have any possible association with me. That's why I asked both of you to meet me on this lonely trail."

"I was 'met' all right," said Chuck.

"That worries me," said Old Bill. "It makes it a lot harder for you boys. The gang operating in the Creeping Shadows must figure I'll be sending in more men and have every incoming trail picketed."

"But they never gave me a chance."

"This gang won't."

"When do you want us to start for the valley?" asked Slim.

Old Bill was silent for a time.

"We've got to get a horse for Chuck and new boots for both of you," he said at last. "Then I'd better get a complete change of clothes for Chuck. That's a pretty loud shirt he's wearing and it might be a give-away when he reaches the valley, especially if those hombres got a good look at it. I think you better have your hair cropped close, too, Chuck. That would change your appearance a lot."

"You mean it would ruin my manly beauty," howled Chuck. "Who's going to do all this barbering, anyway?"

"I'll ride back across the Cajons by another trail I know they won't be watching, get another horse for you, buy boots for both of you, clothes for Chuck and bring back a pair of hair clippers."

"While you're worrying so much about me, what about Slim and Lightning?" Chuck wanted to know.

"They never saw Slim in the daylight and I'll get a little dye while I'm on the other side and we'll make Lightning a solid sorrel. That ought to fool them."

"Better buy me a saddle," suggested Slim. "My own outfit looks too good for a wandering cowboy."

"One thing," grinned Chuck, "we'll have a couple of days to rest here and let the swelling in our feet go down."

"That suits me," agreed Slim. "My main worry was getting Lightning back."

They talked a few more minutes, then rolled into their blankets as the fire died down. The moon, coming up over the Cajons, looked down on the sleeping camp, and swung on toward the west.

The Vanishing Camp

They were out of their blankets at sunup, for Old Bill had a long ride ahead of him.

"Better let one of us make the trip," suggested Slim.

"I'll go," replied the cattleman. "You boys hole up here. I don't want you chasing around much until you're all ready to ride into the Creeping Shadows and look for a job on the Box B."

They all lent a hand in getting breakfast. Then Old Bill got his horse, swung into the saddle, and went off down the trail.

Chuck washed their few dishes while Slim got the camp in shape. When they had completed their tasks, they sat down and contemplated the bright freshness of the morning.

Chuck wiggled his toes gratefully as he looked at his badly worn boots.

"It's going to be great to have at least a day to loaf and let my feet catch up with the rest of me. Hope Old Bill gets a good fit in boots."

"Didn't you give him your size?" asked Slim.

"Gosh, no. I forgot all about that." Chuck's face registered real dismay.

"If he gets the largest boots in the store they won't be any too small," chuckled Slim as he surveyed Chuck's broad feet.

"I'll have no insults cast at my underpinning," roared the cowboy from the Circle Four, hurling a near-by stick at Slim.

Slim ducked with a grin as the stick whistled by.

"If you feel like throwing things, I'll be on my way."

"How come?"

"Don't forget that I've got a horse."

"But you're not pulling out?" Chuck was genuinely startled, afraid that Slim had believed him serious when he had tossed the stick.

"I'm pulling out in about five minutes, but I'm only going to ride back up the trail and bring down the saddles we cached yesterday. It will save time when Old Bill returns."

"You're right. After the reception we got night before last I'm anxious to get into the Creeping Shadows country and see what it's all about."

Slim found Lightning nearby, grazing on a patch of grass that somehow had escaped the searing rays of the July sun. He vaulted onto the beautiful back and ran his fingers through the splendid mane. A queer sob choked his throat as he thought how near he had been to losing forever the horse which had become his companion.

"Let's go, Lightning." The voice was low but Lightning pricked up her ears and trotted briskly toward the camp.

Chuck stood up as they approached, openly admiring the beautiful sorrel.

"Tell you what, Slim. If you ever lose your horse again, come on over to the Circle Four. You'll probably find that I've stolen her. Why, she's the finest horse in the cow country."

"Or any other country," added Slim proudly. "We'll amble. See you this afternoon for I'm going to take my time."

"How about grub this noon?"

"I had enough at breakfast to last until supper."

With a cheery wave to his companion, Slim gave Lightning her head and to the music of swiftly drumming hoofs, disappeared up the valley, heading back along the Sky High trail.

Slim soon brought Lightning down to an easy lope, a tireless pace that was capable of eating up the miles when on a day-long trail. But there was no need for even that much speed, and a few minutes later he pulled her down to a walk.

It was a glorious July morning such as only the Cajon country knows, with the air sweet and clean. As the trail mounted toward the crest, Slim turned to look toward the Creeping Shadows country. The air was clearer than on his first glimpse from the summit, and he could see the broad valley lying below the Three Soldiers.

Even at that distance it was clear that there were many open meadows and from what Slim knew of the country, they would be rich with the grass needed to make fat cattle. It seemed incredible that such a beautiful country was a land of lawlessness and violence where the life and wealth of a man like Adam Marks was in daily danger.

From a distance came the faint drumming of hoofs. Slim had no desire to be seen on the trail and he sent Lightning leaping behind the protection of a dense thicket. His rifle was in camp, but his revolver was in the holster at his side. With deft hands, he made sure that the gun was ready for instant use. Then he slipped off Lightning's back and stepped up to the sorrel's head, placing one

hand gently over the nostrils. He couldn't afford to have Lightning whinny as the other riders passed by.

A few seconds later two horsemen appeared down the trail. They had evidently been riding hard, but the grade steepened just below Slim and they brought their tired horses down to walk. The riders were dressed in conventional cowboy garb, Stetsons, blue shirts with a kerchief caught carelessly around the neck and well worn leather chaps. Each man carried sidearms and a rifle in the boot on his saddle. They were burned to a deep brown by days in the sun, but there was also a hardness about their features that was not reassuring to Slim. They looked like a couple of tough customers.

Slim could hear them talking and he listened intently to catch their words.

"How much further to the summit?" asked the shorter of the two.

"Must be all of ten miles," was the reply. "I'm not sure; never been to the top before."

"Seems kinda foolish to have to watch this trail, but the chief is sure plenty mad about the way Newt and Maxie handled this deal. Means there's a couple of cowboys on the prod somewhere in the valley."

"And probably plenty mad, what with one of them getting his horse shot out from under him and both of them having to hoof it down from the summit."

"Kinda funny we didn't run across them," said the squat, heavy-set puncher.

"It's all right with me that we didn't," growled his companion. "Look at the elbow Maxie's got. He won't be able to use it for a couple of months. If that slug had been a little deeper, Maxie could have kissed his arm goodbye."

"All the same, it seems darned foolish ordering us up here to see that no one comes down the trail. The chief's either getting ready to pull a big raid or he's getting cold feet and is going to leave the valley."

The voices were fainter as the riders went up the trail, but Slim listened eagerly to get the reply of the taller puncher.

"Don't worry about the chief getting cold feet. He's got all of the nerve in the world. In a little while, he's going to be the cattle king of the Creeping Shadows."

Slim smiled grimly. The "chief" would be cattle king only after he had disposed of Adam Marks and if there was anything Slim and Chuck could do to prevent it, that would never be accomplished.

A few rods further Slim came to the stream where they had rested and cached their saddles. He crossed the stream and went into the gulch where the saddles had been hidden. They were intact and after watering Lightning he swung his own onto Lightning's back and cinched it firmly. Then he fastened Chuck's broad saddle on behind his own.

The sun was well toward its zenith when he started leisurely down the trail. Riding astride the easy-gaited Lightning, the trip was in marked contrast to the painful journey of the day before when each step had been agony to their tired and swollen feet. The memory made his feet hurt and Slim shoved thoughts of the trail into the back of his mind.

Slim's trip back down the trail was made at a most leisurely pace. There was no need to hurry, and aside from keeping an alert lookout for some chance rider coming up from the valley, he enjoyed every bit of it. It was mid afternoon when he swung off the trail and turned to the left to their own camp. When he reached the stream bank where they had passed the night every trace of their camp had vanished!

Secret Commissions

Slim looked at the scene in amazement. Blankets, cooking utensils and even Chuck had disappeared. The ashes of their fire had been scattered and made to look as though days had elapsed since the camp had been there.

The cowboy from the Flying Arrow looked around cautiously, afraid that he had stepped into a trap laid by the rustlers from the valley of the Creeping Shadows.

While he raked his mind for some solution to the disappearance of the camp, a low whistle sounded from across the stream. Slim whirled quickly, his right hand poised for a fast grab at his gun if necessary.

Above a fringe of underbrush on the further bank, Chuck was peering at him.

"What happened to the camp?" demanded Slim.

"Didn't you meet any riders along the trail?"

"Two."

"How do you think they got up that far if they didn't come by here? I heard them coming and believe me, I dusted around and made our camp do a vanishing act. You want to remember we're not far off the trail and this looks like a handy watering place on a hot day. I wasn't taking any chances."

"Well, you can come out of hiding now. Those fellows are at the summit by this time and from what I gathered as they went by me, they'll be there quite a while."

Chuck emerged from the undergrowth, carrying his rifle in one hand. He jumped from one rock to another, and finally arrived on Slim's side of the stream.

"Now we'll have to lug all of the duffel and grub over here," said the Flying Arrow cowboy.

"Not on your life. There's a fine bite of grass on the other side and a little hollow to hide our fire. No more camps near the trail for me."

"You're getting worse than an old hen," protested Slim.

"I am, huh! Well listen to me. The boys that rode up the trail swung down to the stream here to water their horses. It was a darned good thing I was on the job and had sense enough to get our stuff out of sight. Why, I sat over there with my rifle trained on them just itching for a chance to bang away. But I'd done my job too well. I hadn't left a thing for them to steal."

"Hear much they said?" asked Slim.

"Everything, but they only talked about the heat and the long ride up to the summit."

"I heard enough when they went by me to warn us that we'd better get over to the Box B as soon as possible. That gang is drawing a tight net around every entrance or exit from this country. Something big is going to happen and unless there's some outside help on the job, Adam Marks may be wiped out."

"Got any idea who's running the rustlers?"

"They mentioned 'the chief' once or twice, but never repeated his name. I've a hunch he'll be a hard one to run down. A man operating a gang as efficient as this one seems to be won't leave many loose strings around."

Slim gave Lightning her head and the sorrel picked her way across the bubbling stream. He unfastened Chuck's saddle and let it drop to the ground. Then he went back across the creek and Chuck managed to mount behind Slim, riding back across the stream in this manner.

Chuck had found an ideal camp spot. The grass was rich, there was plenty of wood, and the swale was deep enough to hide their fire.

Slim turned Lightning out to graze and then both turned a hand to the task of getting their simple camp in shape for the night. That done, they went down to the creek bank, and loafed in the rays of the afternoon sun. Chuck watched the swift-moving waters.

"There's a pool below with plenty of trout. I watched them this morning, but didn't have a thing to catch them with. Gosh, a mess of mountain trout would taste good."

"You're sure there're trout in the pool?"

"Saw them with my own eyes."

Slim hastened back to their camp and dug deep into his saddlebags. He pulled out a small oilskin packet and from that produced a length of sturdy line and two artificial flies, a little the worse for wear, but still usable. Slim fastened the best one to the line and returned to the stream.

"Try your luck with this," he said, dropping the fly and line at Chuck's feet.

"You can start the fire now," grinned Chuck as he picked up the line and started for the pool. "I'll have a couple of one pounders in five minutes."

"Say, who's going to clean the fish?" asked Slim.

"If I catch them, you ought to be willing to do the cleaning," said Chuck.

"But it's my tackle you're using," Slim reminded him.

"You would have to suggest that," retorted Chuck. "That being the case, we'll split the work. I'll catch the fish, you build the fire, and we'll both clean them."

"If any," chuckled Slim.

Chuck strode off downstream and Slim gathered up an armful of wood for the fire. Then he walked down to the pool. Chuck had used his knife to cut a sapling for use as a pole and he was casting energetically with the fly.

"How many?" asked Slim.

"Not a one so far, but just wait a minute."

Five more casts failed to produce a strike and Chuck's confidence started to crumble.

"Let me have a try." Slim took the homemade pole and moved downstream to a point where the rays of the sun streamed warmly on the water. The fly flicked the surface of the water, again and then again. On the fourth cast there was a flash of silver and a trout was hooked hard.

"You've got him, you've got him!" shouted Chuck, dancing along the bank oblivious of his tender feet. "Don't lose him."

"I won't unless your shouting scares him away."

The trout was a beauty, at least a pound and a half if Slim was any judge, and he played the fish carefully, finally drawing it close enough to the bank so Chuck could reach down and get it in his hands.

"What a beauty," said the Circle Four cowboy as he held the trout in his hands. "Some people have all the luck."

"You mean some people have all the skill," grinned Slim, casting the fly back into the now quiet waters of the pool. He was patient and a fair judge of trout water, the result being that a few minutes later he got another strike, but this one finally eluded him. Slim got a third strike and this time landed his fish, which was larger than the first.

Returning to camp, they set about the task of cleaning the fish. Old Bill had left them plenty of food, and at sundown they stretched out beside the fire to enjoy their evening meal. The trout was delicious and there was plenty for both.

Supper over, they lolled on their blankets, watching the last light of day fade and the evening star brighten.

The night was uneventful and in the morning Slim again fished the trout pool. His luck held with him and he managed to land five trout in a little more than an hour.

"We'll have enough for supper, even with Old Bill here," said Chuck as he surveyed the catch of silver beauties.

During the day they kept a close watch on the trail but it was not until late afternoon that Old Bill appeared riding up out of the valley. He was leading a horse and his own saddlebags were bulging with articles he had purchased on the other side of the Cajons.

Chuck looked at the horse with a critical eye.

"That's a skinny nag you brought me," he said, after greetings had been exchanged.

"Maybe it will take a little of the extra weight off you; kinda saw you down in the middle," chuckled Old Bill as he swung out of his saddle.

They gave the cattleman a hand in unloading the saddlebags and unfastening the boots which he had tied to his saddle.

Chuck hobbled the cayuse Old Bill had brought for him and then joined the others in camp.

"Have to move across the creek?" asked Bill.

"A little company rode up the trail yesterday and I figured it was best not to be seen," said Chuck. "Slim saw them higher up the trail, but he gave them the slip, too. They were going up to the crest of the Cajons to make sure that no one else wanders into this country by that route."

Old Bill nodded thoughtfully.

"They're plugging up every trail into the Creeping Shadows country. Lucky thing I know an old one that's been forgotten by everyone except myself and Adam Marks."

"Maybe the rustlers are using that one to get the cattle out," suggested Chuck.

"I'd know if they were sending cattle out that way," replied Old Bill.

Chuck unwrapped a package the cattleman tossed toward him. It contained a change of trousers and a shirt of plain blue material.

"Why this isn't even new," protested Chuck.

"Of course not. Think I want you going into the valley with a brand new outfit when you're supposed to be a cowboy who's nearly broke and willing to work for just about any kind of a wage? I got the shirt and pants from an old clothes dealer. They're clean. Put them on."

Chuck mournfully took off his brightly checked shirt and in its place pulled the blue one over his

head. The trousers were too large even for Chuck, but they would do.

"How about the boots?" asked Slim.

"I got in an awful jam," confessed Old Bill. "I knew your size but I forgot to ask Chuck what size he wore so I just got the biggest in the store."

Slim found that the boots Old Bill had brought fitted comfortably. Like the shirt and trousers for Chuck, the boots were from a second hand store, and as a result were well broken in.

Old Bill's guess had been good, and Chuck failed to grumble when he eased his feet into the boots.

"Now we'll get at the important business," said the cattleman, producing a pair of hair clippers.

"Is that necessary?" asked Chuck hopefully.

"We're going to do this thing right. When I get through with you, neither one of the hombres who jumped you up near the summit will ever recognize you."

Chuck sat down on the grass and Old Bill started snipping away. He wasn't expert as a barber, but he managed a fair job which Slim, grinning at Chuck's protests, watched.

The new haircut certainly made a difference in Chuck, and Slim felt that in Old Bill they had a wise counsellor.

After the hair-cutting operation was completed, Old Bill turned to Slim.

"Bring Lightning up and we'll get at the dyeing of her white spots." He opened up a can of dye and mixed it in one of the tin cups, working until he had the mixture just the shade of Lightning's sleek hair. Then, with a soft cloth, he rubbed on the dye while the big sorrel stood patiently, wondering just what it was all about.

First the star on the forehead was changed from white to sorrel, then the white on the legs was dyed. When the task was finished, Slim stepped a few paces from his mount. The dye had blended beautifully with the natural shade and it would have taken an expert to have detected that dye had been used.

Slim put the new saddle Old Bill had brought on Lightning, drew up the cinches, and mounted. He rocked back and forth in the stirrups, then dismounted and adjusted them. Once more he mounted, this time satisfied, and a smile broke over his lips.

"I'm all set for whatever we run into in the Creeping Shadows country," he said.

"You'll run into plenty of trouble," promised Old Bill. "Let's eat. I'm half starved."

Slim fried the trout and half an hour later, with the sun dropping down behind the Three Soldiers and the twilight coming up out of the Creeping Shadows, they sat down around the campfire. There was little conversation during the meal, for to riders of the range food is too important to mix with idle talk.

The supper over, Slim and Chuck washed up the dishes while Old Bill stretched out on his blanket and puffed contentedly at his pipe.

"Looks like we're all set to start in the morning," said Chuck, returning to the campfire.

"The earlier the better," replied Old Bill. "It's a good day's jog down to Dirty Water. That's the one town in the Creeping Shadows and you'll want to hit there first and make a few inquiries about jobs. Course the only ranch I want you to work on is the Box B, so if some misguided soul offers you another job, you'll have to do some quick thinking and get out of it."

"What will we say if someone in Dirty Water gets curious and wants to know how we rode in?" asked Slim.

"Tell 'em the truth. Say you came down the Sky High trail, but don't say anything more. No one will recognize you, what with Chuck having a new haircut and a shirt that doesn't talk out loud."

"What about the fellows guarding the trail?" Chuck wanted to know.

"Whoever asks will probably know about the guards and if you tell him you came down Sky High, it will cause a little trouble for the guards, which should be all right with you."

"And we're not to tell Adam Marks we're working for you?" asked Slim.

"Not unless it is absolutely necessary. Don't talk any more than you have to. The less you say, the better off you'll be. Just keep your ears and eyes open."

Old Bill sat up and drew a leather folder from an inner pocket. From this he extracted two slips of heavy paper and two small silver emblems.

"When I figured I'd call on you boys to help me solve the mystery of the Creeping Shadows, I went down to see the governor at Laramie. He's made you boys special agents directly under him with authority to act in any part of the state. These slips of paper are your commissions from the governor and the little silver shields are your badges. See that no one gets hold of them or your life won't be worth the paper those commissions are written on."

Slim took the paper and badge Old Bill handed him, and read the commission which made him a special agent of the state. Then he folded it carefully and placed it in the bottom of his right boot. Chuck did likewise and both cowboys fastened the badges on the inside of their Stetsons where the sweat band would hide them from any observer.

"Those badges mean that the entire law enforcement machinery of this state is behind you in your

quest for the rustlers," pointed out Old Bill. "When you learn the truth of what's going on in the valley, send for me. If there isn't time for that, use the power of the law which those badges give you."

Slim's fingers slid inside his hat and he fingered the tiny silver shield. He hoped that he wouldn't have to call on the power which the badge represented.

Shortly after that they rolled into their blankets, for a long ride was ahead of the young cow punchers with the dawn of the next day.

Dirty Water

Breakfast next morning was finished in quick time and they set about breaking camp. Slim cached his own saddle and under it Chuck placed his extra clothing.

They brought their mounts up to the camp and saddled them. Slim patted Lightning affectionately, talking to her as he drew the cinches tight.

"We're going on another adventure, old girl," he said softly, "and I'm counting on you to help me win. If we get in any tight spots, it may be up to you and your speed. How about it?"

If Lightning didn't understand the exact words, she sensed that her master was praising her, and she tossed her head proudly.

Slim looked carefully at the places where Old Bill had applied the dye. There was no trace of the pigment and to all intents and purposes Lightning was simply another sorrel. True, she was a little larger and longer of leg than the average range horse, but not uncommon enough to attract unusual attention.

Chuck's new mount was just a plain calico cayuse, a good sturdy horse with plenty of endurance and a good trail gait.

"Fixed on cash?" asked Old Bill.

"We're supposed to be broke," said Chuck.

"Sure enough, but I thought you might need a bit for emergencies."

"I've got enough for that," said the Circle Four cowboy and Slim added that he had sufficient cash to carry him along.

The sun was just topping the Cajons when they swung into their saddles and splashed across the noisy mountain stream. They reached Sky High trail and took the turn to the left, heading down for the valley. For an hour they rode steadily with Old Bill in the lead. Then they came to a fork in the trail and the cattleman halted.

"Here's where we part. I'm going left and out beyond the Cajons by the old trail. You boys take the way to the right. It's a good day's ride to Dirty Water and unless I miss my guess, that's where you'll find the rustlers. I'm counting on you boys to turn them up for us. When you need me you can send a telegram from the railroad station at Mopstick. That's outside the valley, but it's the nearest telegraph office. Good luck."

Old Bill gave each of them a firm, warm handclasp that conveyed more than words, swung his horse around sharply, and moved briskly down the left fork of the trail.

Chuck and Slim watched him until a clump of aspen hid him from view. Then they spoke to their own horses and turned onto the trail that led to the Creeping Shadows.

The cowboy detectives rode at a steady pace that ate up miles on the long down trail into the valley.

Through midday the sun burned down on them unmercifully, but they paused at noon only long enough to water their horses.

Slim rode in the lead, little spurts of dust leaping up around Lightning's hoofs. The Flying Arrow rider kept his head bowed to shield his face from the burning rays of the sun.

They left the foothills and entered the Creeping Shadows country, a broad, rolling land that was sheltered between the Cajons on the east and south and the mighty Three Soldiers range which reared its peaks in the west.

Streams tumbling down the sides of the ranges converged in the valley and assured the cattlemen there of plenty of water. There was ample timber and the grass was lush and long, though now burned badly by the long drought. It was a cattleman's paradise and Slim, as he appraised the worth of the valley, could realize why rustlers would make a bold bid to steal the possessions of Adam Marks and take the valley for their own.

Lightning seemed to sense her rider's thoughts for she paused at the crest of a knoll as though to give Slim a better chance to view the country which unfolded before him.

Chuck, his clothes heavy with dust, reined in beside Slim.

"Better ease up a little," said the Circle Four rider. "This pace is a little more than my cayuse can stand on a day as hot as this.

"We've been hitting it pretty hard," conceded Slim, "but I wanted to get to Dirty Water before sundown. Unless I miss my guess the village is only a couple of miles further." Slim pointed toward the left, where a cluster of frame buildings could be seen strewn along the banks of a stream.

"It may be the Box B," said Chuck.

"I don't think so. The Box B is closer to the Three Soldiers. Whatever it is, we'll know in a few minutes."

Slim spoke to Lightning and the magnificent sorrel started down the slight grade, apparently as fresh and tireless as when they had taken the trail early in the day.

As they neared the buildings, Slim was convinced that they were approaching Dirty Water and he wondered just what kind of a reception was in store for them. Old Bill Needham had said the village was the headquarters of the rustlers.

Dirty Water was anything but impressive. It was a typical cow town. Most of the buildings were unpainted, their cracked boards burned a dead gray by the heat of summer and the chill blasts of winter.

Slim and Chuck pulled up on their side of the creek and surveyed the town with critical eyes. There was only one street, the buildings fronting along the creek and set back about fifty yards from the edge of the stream. Many of the frame structures had false fronts, giving them the appearance of two story buildings. There were not more than fifteen or sixteen buildings in Dirty Water.

"Wonder where the town got its name?" mused Chuck, looking down at the stream which flowed in front of them. It was clear and blue--the blue of waters from the high peaks of the Three Soldiers. "It couldn't have been from this creek."

"I'll leave that information for you to dig out," grinned Slim. "Come on. I'm hungry, tired and dirty. There's one place over there that claims to be a hotel."

They forded the stream and their horses mounted the sloping bank to the main street. Half way down the row of buildings a two-story structure reared its head. A faded sign proclaimed "Palace Hotel" and to the rear was a rambling stable and large corral.

In spite of their own weariness from the long, hot day in the saddle, their horses came first.

A hostler appeared from the shadows of the stable as they dismounted and Slim turned Lightning over to his care.

"How much for the horses?" asked Chuck.

"Going to stay at the hotel?" asked the stableman.

"Yes," Chuck nodded.

"Half a dollar for each horse then."

The price was fair enough and Slim and Chuck unfastened their saddles and rifle scabbards. They were taking no risks on the honesty of anyone at Dirty Water. The hostler looked at Lightning with open admiration.

"Fine looking horse," he said. "Must be mighty fast."

"Fair," agreed Slim, "but getting a little old to keep up a hard trail gait very long. See that she's given the best of care."

The cowboys picked up their duffel and headed toward the hotel.

"What was the idea telling the hostler Lightning was old and losing her speed?" asked Chuck.

"There's just a chance we may find our lives depending on Lightning's speed and there's no use in tipping off anyone how fast she really can run when I give her a chance."

"In other words, we'll sit tight and let the other fellows do the talking while we're here," grinned Chuck.

"Exactly. I'm hungry. Let's hope the hotel doesn't live up to the name of the town."

They clumped across the narrow stoop in front of the hotel and entered the small room which served as a lobby. A fat, bald-headed man who had been swatting flies looked around from behind the counter.

"Bed and board?" he asked.

"Providing there's no bugs in either one," said Chuck.

The fat man's face turned red and he sputtered furiously.

"Tha--, tha--, that's an insult to the Palace Hotel," he finally managed to say. "I never yet been accused of harboring a bed bug in my place."

"No offense meant," grinned Chuck. "I was just being cautious."

The hotel man shoved a well thumbed ledger across the counter. A rusty pen and half empty bottle of ink followed.

"Sign your monickers here," he said, indicating several blank spaces near the bottom of the page.

Slim picked up the pen and looked at the names which had been signed before him. According to the register, the last guest, Maxie Denkman, had visited the hotel three months before. Slim looked again at the name on the register. "Maxie," the name clicked. It was the one the riders on the Sky High trail had mentioned as the man he had shot in the fight near the summit when Chuck had been ambushed. Here indeed was a clue to the mystery of the rustling in the Creeping Shadows. It might be worth only a little, but Slim carefully cataloged it in his mind for future reference.

"Not much travel through here," he said, pointing to the name which had been placed on the book three months before.

"Not enough," grunted the hotel keeper. "Still, with the riders coming in off the range, I manage to get along."

"Country seems right healthy," said Chuck, glancing through the dust-fogged windows toward the broad expanse of the valley.

"Some inquisitive people have been known to have a touch of lead poisoning," said the hotel man sharply.

Slim signed his name and handed the pen to Chuck. The Flying Arrow rider scratched his name with gusto and felt sure that no one would be able to read the scrawl.

"You fellers didn't put down your addresses," said their host.

Slim looked at him calmly, yet when he spoke his voice was low.

"That," he said, "is none of your business." The hotel keeper decided that as far as he was concerned the newcomers could be only one jump ahead of a sheriff.

He handed a key over the counter. "Your room's No. 3 on the left side as you go down the hall."

Slim and Chuck picked up their saddles and ascended the stairs. The hallway was narrow, hot, and poorly lighted, but they found the door of their own room.

The room was furnished in the usual fashion of a cow country hotel. The bed was of cast iron, the other furnishings being two straight-backed chairs and a wash stand that stood at a crazy angle. The mirror above it, like the windows, had not been cleaned in months and there was a smell of mustiness about the room.

Slim threw open the one window and a light breeze from the east riffled the remnants of what had once been a curtain.

Chuck tested the bed.

"Not bad," he said, "and the sheets are clean."

There was no water in the pitcher on the washstand but the portly keeper of the hostelry appeared with a bucketful.

"Wasn't looking for any business today," he said as he filled the water pitcher. "Here's a towel, too. Supper will be ready in about fifteen minutes."

He paused at the door.

"Anything you need?" he asked.

"Solitude," said Chuck.

The door slammed hard behind the retreating figure.

Slim laughed and then sobered as he turned to Chuck.

"You're deliberately stirring that old chap up," he said. "What's the idea?"

"Nothing special. I just don't like his looks. Maybe I can worry a little of the excess fat off him."

"If you keep up at the rate you started, he'll be a skeleton by tomorrow morning."

They washed the grime of the day's ride off and Slim surveyed the washbowl with distaste.

"It's easy to see where they got the name 'Dirty Water' for this town."

The clang of a bell sounded below and shortly after footsteps thudded heavily on the stoop.

"We'd better get down there ahead of the army," said Chuck, throwing open the door of their own room and starting down the stairs. Slim followed, but at a more leisurely pace. He had heard someone moving about in the next room and he was curious to know what their neighbor looked like. The door opened and a man, dressed in typical cowboy attire, stepped into the hall. His right arm was in a sling. There was scarcely enough light to see his features clearly in the dusk of the hall, but Slim felt certain that the man was Maxie Denkman, who had registered three months before. He was also the Maxie he had wounded on the Sky High trail.

"Pretty hot today," said Slim as the other man approached.

"Yeh, a little warm. I guess I saw you riding in a while ago."

They were at the head of the stairs where the light was better and Slim saw that the other man was watching him keenly. His eyes shifted down to the gun, which swung at Slim's right hip. Then they jerked back again.

"Going to stay in this country long?" Slim thought there was just a tinge too much anxiety in the tone.

"Hard to say. My pardner and I are just drifting, trying to find a good outfit to tie up with."

"Then you won't hang around here long. Cattle business in the valley is in a bad way. I hear lots of talk about rustlers, but I guess it's poor management more than anything."

"We're willing to work cheap if the outfit looks like it will come through," said Slim.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and turned into the dining room. Half a dozen men were already seated at the one table and the food was disappearing at a rapid rate.

Chuck had his own plate heaped high and Slim soon had his filled with food. There was little conversation. That would come later when appetites were satisfied and they sat back and waited for the pie to be brought on.

The man Slim had met in the hall was making slow work of his supper, for he was greatly handicapped with the use of only his left hand. He paused and looked at Slim.

"Don't believe I know your name or did I miss it coming downstairs?"

"I didn't mention it. Name's Evans, Slim Evans. My pardner's Chuck Meade."

"Glad to know you. I'm Maxie Denkman. Meet the rest of the outfit here."

He turned to his left and introduced the group at the table. There was Pike Carberry, who ran the general store, and his clerk, Jim Ferris, who also did the barbering for the whole valley. Next was Leo Kovec, whose star on his vest proclaimed him to be the marshal and beyond him sat Newt Bemis, whom Denkman introduced as an assistant cattle buyer. The man at the end of the table drew Slim's attention. He was well groomed in spite of the heat of the day, immaculately shaved, and his linen was fresh and white. His dark hair was slightly curly and he had a pleasant smile.

"I'll introduce myself," he said. "I'm Hal Titzell, cattle buyer."

"Glad to know you," said Slim, and Chuck echoed the words. Just then the pie was placed on the table and conversation died.

Between mouthfuls of pie, Slim mentally gauged the group at the table.

Pike Carberry, genial, white-haired and sixty, was just what he appeared to be--the town storekeeper. Jim Ferris, slightly bald and about thirty-five, was talkative.

Leo Kovec, the marshal, was about forty, heavy of face and figure and Slim put him down as mentally slow, although he might be the local agent of the rustlers.

Newt Bemis looked plain bad. His features were heavily lined and a livid scar disfigured the right cheek. The brand, "Gunman," was written all over him and for that reason Slim put him down as both interesting and dangerous. He was also the Newt who had tried to bushwhack Chuck on the trail.

Maxie Denkman, in introducing the others, had failed to mention his own business, but Slim knew he was allied with the rustlers.

The last man and the hardest of them all to catalog was Hal Titzell. He might be thirty-five and again he might be almost fifty. His skin was a clear tan, and his hands and fingernails much better kept than the average. He might be a cattle buyer, but Slim also put him down as a gambler, a man of rare courage and ability, which also meant an exceedingly dangerous man.

The pie finished, the group pushed their chairs away from the table and went to the stoop, where a dozen chairs were ranged along the wall of the hotel.

The sun had dropped behind the Three Soldiers and shadows were thickening. Titzell sat down beside Slim and pointed across the valley.

"Watch the shadows and you'll see why this country is known as the Creeping Shadows."

The shadows from the foothills of the Three Soldiers were extending further into the valley in a steady, visible movement. They were alive, creeping out and out until the entire basin was folded in their softness. Hard behind them came the deeper cloak of the night. Down the street a light flared in the window of Pike Carberry's general store and further along raucous voices sounded in the Elite Pool Hall. Several horses splashed across the creek and their riders disappeared inside the portals of the pool hall.

"Quiet night," said Titzell. "Things liven up Saturdays when the boys come in off the range."

"You must get around the country quite a bit. Maybe you know where they're needing help."

"Most of the outfits are cutting down instead of adding men on the payroll," said Titzell smoothly. "The Box B, Adam Marks' outfit, claims to be having trouble with rustlers, so you might get on with him but it would be a chance I wouldn't want to take if what Adam says is true."

Slim wondered if Titzell was giving him a friendly warning or trying to scare him.

"I didn't figure there was much rustling being done these days," said Slim.

"All I know is the talk that's current in the valley. Adam claims he's being stolen blind and of course that makes all of the other ranchers touchy. They think he's accusing them of being cattle thieves because Adam has the biggest outfit."

"It looks like good cattle country."

"There's none better in the world," said Titzell softly. "It would be a prize worth risking your life to get. Adam Marks once had the chance to control the whole valley, but he's getting older and losing his grip. The man who succeeds the Box B can run this little cattle empire about as he desires."

"Unless," thought Slim to himself, "he happens to be an ambitious rustler and runs up against the law."

Chuck, who had been making a tour of the town, returned and dropped into a chair beside Slim. It was quiet and peaceful, a far cry from the bitter cattle war which Old Bill Needham had told them was raging in the valley. They talked for another half hour with Titzell and were about to go up to their room when the sound of wildly drumming hoofs came from across the creek.

"Someone's coming mighty fast," said Titzell, half rising from his chair and shielding his eyes in an attempt to peer into the darkness beyond the creek.

"Two horses," said Chuck, adding quickly, "they're pulling a wagon of some kind."

"Must be from one of the ranches, then," put in Titzell. The cattle buyer stood up and hurried down toward the creek. Slim and Chuck followed.

Out of the night lurched a lather-covered team, a spring wagon careening behind them. The horses fairly leaped the stream and started a mad dash up the bank.

Chuck without waiting to learn who was in the wagon or what was happening, hurled himself at the team, grasping the bit of the horse on the left. The Circle Four cowboy was lifted from his feet by the wild charge of the horses, but he came down with his legs in motion and dragging hard on the bit. It was 195 pounds of bone and muscle against a tired team, and Chuck soon won, the horses slowing down to a walk. They came to a halt in front of the hotel where the feeble light from the lamp in the main room cast its rays over the wagon, where a man was huddled on the seat.

Hal Titzell vaulted into the wagon and lifted the man's face.

"It's Adam Marks," he cried. "He's been shot."

The words drummed into Slim's brain. Adam Marks, owner of the Box B and the man they had come to help, had been shot! The rustlers were striking out boldly, bidding for a quick finish in their fight to ruin the rancher and win control of his rich grazing lands.

Slim Rides Alone

Slim vaulted over the wheel and into the wagon. He picked up the body of the rancher and passed the inert form down to Chuck. The news of the runaway spread rapidly and a crowd was gathering. Hal Titzell shouted for the doctor and the only physician in the entire valley, "Doc" Baldrige, appeared in the doorway of his office, a half block down the street from the Palace Hotel.

"Bring him over here," he called.

Chuck, carrying the unconscious rancher, hurried to the physician's office where he placed Adam Marks on the old cot. The white hair of the cattleman was streaked with dried blood and his breathing was slow and irregular.

"Looks bad," said Hal Titzell, shaking his head.

Slim was watching the doctor, now working over his patient with practiced hands. He called for hot water from the hotel and a bystander hurried away to return shortly with a steaming kettle of water.

There was nothing Slim and Chuck could do in the doctor's office and they stepped outside.

"I'll see that the team's cared for," said Chuck, leading the exhausted animals back toward the stable.

Slim, leaning against the hitching rail in front of the doctor's office, stared into the blackness across Stony creek, wondering what secret it held of the attack which had struck down the cattleman. Chuck returned presently and they conversed in low tones.

"I found his rifle and revolver in the bottom of the wagon," said Chuck. "The six gun must have fallen out of his holster. Neither one had been fired, which means he was ambushed."

"I expected as much. The gang we're up against doesn't give a man a chance."

Slim paused suddenly. Hal Titzell emerged from the doctor's office.

"What's the news?" asked Chuck.

"A little too early to say definitely," replied the cattle buyer. "Adam's been creased pretty deeply by a rifle bullet along the right side of his head. Doc thinks he may pull through but it's going to be tough going."

"Maybe we ought to ride outside and get a better doctor," suggested Chuck, who had little faith in Dirty Water or anyone connected with it.

"No need to do that," assured Titzell. "Doc Baldrige may not look like much, but when it comes to fixing up gunshot wounds he's a marvel."

It was evident that it would be a good many hours before Adam Marks regained consciousness and could tell what had happened, so the small group gradually dispersed leaving Slim and Chuck.

"You'd better roll in," said Slim. "I'm going to hang around until I can find what's happened."

"All night?"

"If necessary. If the fellow that wounded him finds he didn't do a thorough job, he may decide to sneak back and finish him."

Chuck whistled softly. "That's an idea. Tell you what. I'll turn in for a few hours and then come down around two and relieve you."

Chuck went to the hotel and Slim re-entered the doctor's office. Doc Baldrige had drawn a chair up beside a table on which a kerosene lamp burned softly. On the cot across the room was the motionless form of the owner of the Box B.

"One of Adam's riders?" asked the doctor.

"Nope. Just drifting and looking for a job. I'd kind of hoped to get on with the Box B."

Doc Baldrige laid down his book and stared thoughtfully at Slim over his spectacles.

"Don't be a fool," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. It's doggoned near fatal to start riding for the Box B these days. Look what happened to the owner of the outfit." He jerked his thumb toward the rancher.

"If the pay's good, I'm willing to take the chance," grinned Slim. "I'll just stick around and when he comes to he may be crazy enough to hire me and my pardner."

Doc Baldrige resumed his reading and Slim sat down beside the wounded man to begin what might be an all night vigil.

Hal Titzell looked in an hour later.

"You must want a job," he said to Slim.

"I'm going to get one if patience will bring it," grinned the Flying Arrow puncher.

"Maybe I could find something for you to do," suggested Titzell.

"Thanks. If this doesn't pan out, I may be around."

The cattle buyer left and Doc Baldrige, without looking up from his book, spoke softly.

"Keep away from Titzell. He's poison."

Slim smiled and gave no sign that he had heard the warning from the doctor. He had already put the suave Titzell down as a dangerous man.

It was nearly one o'clock when Adam Marks opened his eyes. His fever had dropped and his mind seemed clear. Slim spoke to the doctor, who shut his book and went to the cot.

"How about it, doc?" asked the cattleman.

"You're too tough for one rifle bullet to kill," replied the doctor, "but you're going to be laid up for a few days. What happened?"

"Bushwhacked," was the slow reply. "It was almost dark and just at the mouth of Wolf coulee. The first shot missed me. I started for my gun but the second one got me. How'd I get here?"

"The team brought you in. They must have run all of the way. Good thing they did."

"This will leave the boys at the ranch in a tough spot," said Marks.

"Maybe you could use a couple of extra hands," said Slim hopefully.

"I could if they were good, honest men."

"I'm one of them and I'll vouch for my pardner. I'm off the Flying Arrow and he's from the Circle Four. We want work."

"There's more than work at my ranch. There's apt to be fighting soon. I'm being stolen blind and the day I catch up with the rustlers there's going to be bloodshed."

"I'll work and fight for an honest boss."

The cattleman seemed to be mulling something over in his mind. Then he asked, "You say you're off the Flying Arrow?"

Slim nodded.

"Fellow named Evans used to own that outfit. Maybe you know him."

"My name's Evans. I'm his son."

Marks' eyes twinkled beneath the heavy bandage.

"Then you're hired and so is your friend. I wish I could get a dozen more like you."

"I don't think you'll need a dozen more," said Slim quietly. "I'll start for the ranch now and my pardner will come down and stay with you. When he thinks it's safe to leave you, give him any orders you have and he'll ride out."

"Joe Haines is my riding boss. Tell Joe I sent you. I've only got four men now. Others have either been shot up or scared away, but I guess you won't scare."

"I don't like to run," grinned Slim.

The Flying Arrow rider left the doctor's office and hurried to the hotel. A dim light was burning in the lobby, but there was no one about. He shook Chuck out of a deep sleep and informed him that they were on the payroll of the Box B.

"Have any trouble getting on?" asked Chuck.

"Not a bit. I told him where I was from and he's heard of Dad. I'm starting for the ranch now. You stay here and keep watch on Marks. He'll be safe enough in the day time but don't let him out of your sight at night."

Chuck pulled on his clothes, examined his six gun and rifle, and prepared to take up his vigil at the doctor's office.

The cowboy detectives parted outside the hotel.

"Watch your step," cautioned Chuck. "I don't want to see you brought into Doc Baldrige's office with a hole through you."

"I'll be careful," promised Slim.

The Flying Arrow rider wakened the stableman and inquired the way to the Box B.

"It's a nine mile trip, but the trail's clear. You'll strike it just across the creek."

Slim's low whistle brought Lightning out of the corral and he saddled and bridled the mare with expert hands. He slipped his rifle into the scabbard on the saddle and swung silently into the stirrups.

Dirty Water appeared asleep with only the dim light in the hotel and the glow from the windows of Doc Baldrige's trying to penetrate the blackness of the night. It was the hour just before the dawn when Slim set out for the Box B.

War Declared

Dawn had broken over the crests of the Cajons and smoke was curling above the cookhouse when Slim rode down on the Box B. The ranch buildings were set almost in the shadows of the Three Soldiers, the towering peaks looming above the huddled structures at their feet.

The foothills rose some miles behind the ranch, but the buildings themselves were in a broad, rich valley. A fringe of cottonwoods growing rank along a creek protected the layout from the winter winds which swept down from the north.

The ranch house, a rambling frame structure, had once been painted gray, but wind and rain had worn this to a sickly hue. The other buildings, including the bunkhouse, the cookhouse, and the blacksmith shop, were unpainted, their boards warped and burned by the sun.

A large corral was just below the buildings with a score of horses inside. Beyond was a rich meadow through which the creek wandered, and the grass there was thick and green. Stacks of hay, cut for winter use, were ranged along one side. It was an ideal layout and Slim could understand the pride of Adam Marks in the Box B and its rich, rolling miles of range land. He could understand, with the spirit of a true cowman, how a man would fight to the end to retain his possessions in this last stand of the cattle frontier.

Slim spoke to Lightning and the sorrel quickened her pace. As he rode past the pole corral, men poured out of the bunkhouse to watch his approach.

Slim pulled Lightning up several rods from the bunkhouse and surveyed the Box B riders with a cool eye. It was easy to pick out Joe Haines, the foreman. He was a typical cowboy, head slightly bald as though singed by too much exposure to the sun and face as brown as saddle leather. He could claim any age from forty to fifty, and Slim would have been willing to guess that he was closer to fifty. The others were younger, but he noticed that every one of them carried guns and well-filled cartridge belts.

"I'm looking for Joe Haines," said Slim. "I have news for him."

"You're looking at him," said the foreman, stepping forward.

Slim leaned over in his saddle and looked into the foreman's eyes.

"Your boss was shot last night," he said.

"What's that?" demanded Joe, stunned by the words.

"Adam Marks was shot last night. His team brought him to Dirty Water and Doc Baldrige patched him up."

"How bad was he hurt?" a younger cowboy edged forward with this question.

"A rifle ball creased one side of his forehead. He was unconscious for a while, but Doc thinks he'll pull through."

"Where did it happen?" asked Haines, hitching his gun belt forward.

"Marks said it was at the mouth of Wolf coulee, wherever that is."

Joe Haines nodded.

"That's a bad place. Come on, boys. We're riding for Dirty Water."

Slim spoke quickly.

"Just a minute. I had a talk with your boss before I left town. He wants you to stick at the ranch and watch the cattle. Maybe this is just a ruse to get you all away so the rustlers can clean out the place."

Pausing, the foreman turned back toward Slim. "Who in thunder are you?" he asked.

"Name's Evans--Slim Evans. I've been riding over on the Flying Arrow. Been hired and told to report to you for work. My pardner, Chuck Meade, is staying in Dirty Water and he's camped right beside your boss, so you won't need to worry about anything happening to him there."

"How do I know you're telling a straight story?" countered the range boss.

"You've got my word for it and people don't question my word," said Slim quietly. He straightened up in his saddle and his right hand slipped along his leg.

Joe Haines saw the move and a broad smile covered his homely features.

"No offense meant, cowboy, but we've had so much trouble I'm just naturally suspicious of everyone who comes along. We'll take your word. Better turn your horse loose. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

Slim rode down to the corral, pulled his saddle off Lightning and turned the sorrel loose. There was plenty of water and feed in the corral and, satisfied that his horse was all right, Slim returned to the bunkhouse where the cowboys were finishing their morning toilets under the pump.

"Meet the gang, or what's left of them," said Haines. "Here's Pat Beals, Doug Huston and Walt Kelly."

Slim shook hands with the outfit as the breakfast bell clanged. A Chinese cook, Lee Wu, brought steaming bowls of breakfast food, a pitcher of black coffee, and then stacks of cakes and bacon. There was little conversation as the cowboys stowed away enough food to carry them through the day if need be.

Slim made a survey of his companions while they were eating. Pat Beals and Walt Kelly were only a little older than himself and there was a reckless glint in their eyes. Doug Huston was sandy-haired and Slim put him down as probably thirty. His left eyelid drooped slightly and he seemed to be continually squinting. He was the least likeable of the group and Slim felt that he could not be trusted altogether.

Breakfast over, they gathered outside the cook house and Joe Haines issued orders for the day.

"Pat, you and Doug ride along the west range and see how those cattle along Stony creek are faring. Walt can trail over north and see if everything is all right toward the Double O. I'll take Evans and ride down to Wolf coulee and see what happened there last night."

They started for the corral, Slim and the range boss walking together.

"Your horse fit for a full day?" asked Haines.

"She'll be all right," smiled Slim as he thought of Lightning's wonderful endurance. There was no need to tell anyone of the capabilities of his horse.

While the others had to rope their mounts to separate them from the milling string of horses in the corral, Slim only whistled once and Lightning responded instantly.

"My gosh!" exclaimed Pat Beals enviously. "You must have a circus horse. I can yell my head off and I can't get any of my mounts to come near me."

"Maybe they don't like your voice," suggested Walt Kelly, who had just finished a battle with a calico cayuse and was badly winded.

They swung into their saddles and started out on the day's ride, Pat and Doug heading west to ride along the headwaters of Stony creek, Walt riding north toward the range of the Double O and Slim and the foreman backtracking along the trail to Dirty Water.

Joe Haines was openly admiring Lightning.

"Quite a horse," he said. "Must be fast?"

"She can go places," grinned Slim, but he did not encourage the conversation along that line.

"Have any trouble getting into the Creeping Shadows country?" asked the foreman.

"Why?"

"Rustling's bad here and we'd heard that the gang doing most of the dirty work had plugged up every trail coming in and were getting ready for a final clean-up."

"I haven't been here long enough to find out what's going on," said Slim, which was partly true. "If rustling is bad, why not appeal to the peace officers?"

The foreman snorted. "The sheriff's on the other side of the Three Soldiers and he's either been bought off or is scared to death."

"How about the marshal at Dirty Water?"

Haines laughed bitterly. "Kovec's nothing but a tool for the rustlers. It's a wonder you ever got out here alive."

"I left when the town was asleep," grinned Slim.

"That town never sleeps. It's bad from top to bottom and Hal Titzell is one of the worst of them. He rides all over the country but I never heard of him ever buying any stock to amount to anything and Maxie Denkman and Newt Bemis, who say they're helping him, are nothing but hired gunmen."

"Maxie isn't feeling so well," said Slim.

"How come?"

"Well, from what I gather, Maxie and his friend Newt must have tried to stop a couple of cowboys from riding into the valley. Seems as though they picked the wrong targets and Maxie got a bullet through his arm."

"You wouldn't know who shot at Maxie, would you?" Haines asked, a broad grin wrinkling his face.

"I might," smiled Slim, "and then again I might not. I've got a bad memory."

"I think we're going to get along fine," said the foreman, "and I'm only hoping that pardner of yours is the right kind of a hombre."

"Don't worry about him. He's as steady as they make them and a dead shot with a rifle."

"Then I'm starting to take heart again. For a while it looked like we would be cleaned out, but with a couple of good riders who've got plenty of nerve and aren't afraid of a struggle, we'll fight this gang of rustlers to the end."

Fading Trails

The ride to the mouth of Wolf coulee was uneventful and the sun was swinging high above the Cajons when they reached the scene where the owner of the Box B had been ambushed the night before.

The mouth of Wolf coulee was broad with the trail from the ranch to Dirty Water down the center of the draw. An outcropping of rock thrust its way into the coulee from the right and it was obvious that from the shelter of the rock the gunman had fired at Adam Marks.

The riders slipped from their saddles and picked their way carefully over the broken ground, Slim taking the lead.

"It must have been almost dark when it happened," said Slim, "for it was some time after nightfall when the horses came galloping into Dirty Water."

The foreman nodded. "He left the ranch half an hour before sunset and packing quite a roll of cash with him."

"I didn't see any cash when he was brought into the doctor's office."

"Probably not. The rustlers must have reached him after they had wounded him and taken the money. Adam was afraid to keep the money on the ranch and he was going to go around Dirty Water and drive all night to get to Mopstick where he could catch a train and take the money to the bank at Brighton."

"If the money was in your boss's clothes when he reached the doctor's office, it's safe, for Chuck's on the job," said Slim.

There was a warning whir of rattles and Joe Haines called out sharply.

Slim leaped backward, his gun spouting flame. Two shots echoed across the coulee and the body of the rattler slipped off the rock.

The foreman looked incredulously at Slim.

"Where you carrying your gun, in your hand?" he asked.

"No," replied Slim, feeding fresh shells into the six gun and sliding the weapon back into his holster.

Joe Haines asked no further question but in his own mind he cataloged Slim as the fastest man he had ever seen with a gun. The weapon had been drawn with a skill so fast and smooth that it defied the eye. It was almost like magic, the sweep of that long arm and the accurate spurt of the weapon.

"Here's where our bushwhacker made himself comfortable," said Slim, pointing behind a rock where a half dozen cigarette butts were strewn. He leaned down and picked up an exploded rifle shell. Turning it over slowly in his fingers, he looked at the mark of the firing pin on the base. Then he slipped the copper cartridge into an inner pocket. It might come in handy later.

A few rods further back they found where the gunman's horse had been tethered and there was evidence written in the dust there that the rider had mounted in great haste.

"He must have been afraid someone had overheard the shot and was coming after him. He sure tore out of here," said Joe Haines.

"Maybe he started out to overtake Adam Marks and get the money," said Slim.

"By golly, I'll bet you're right! We'll get our horses and follow this trail."

Slim's hunch was correct, and a short distance further the tracks left by the lone rider merged into the dust of the main trail to Dirty Water. The gunman had been riding hard, but the team, spurred on by an unknown fear, had been too fast for him.

A mile and a half along the road to Dirty Water the trail of the solitary rider swung to the right toward the Three Soldiers.

"Want to follow it?" asked Slim.

"I'm more anxious about the money. That trail won't cool off for a few hours. We're riding to Dirty Water."

It was mid morning when they reached the cow town. They splashed across Stony creek and tied their horses to the rail in front of Doc Baldridge's office. Chuck emerged from the interior and Slim noticed that he was careful to keep his rifle in his hands.

"Anything happen?" he asked anxiously.

"Something tried to happen," said Chuck grimly. "This is no place for a sick man to try to get well. We've got to get Mr. Marks back to the ranch and get him there at once."

"This is my pardner, Chuck Meade," said Slim, introducing his companion and the range boss of the Box B.

"Glad to know you," said Chuck, as he shook Joe Haines' hand with real warmth.

"Hear you've signed on to work with us and I'm glad of it. We need all the good boys we can get."

The foreman hurried on into the office and Slim and Chuck had an opportunity to talk alone.

"What happened?" Slim asked eagerly.

"You mean what didn't quite happen? Well, it was about half an hour after you left and I was still trying to wake up when I heard someone creeping along outside the front of the office. We had all of the curtains pulled down but it was so hot we had to leave the door open. I blew out the lamp and jumped through the doorway. In the darkness I stumbled and when I got up the hombre that had been trying to do the sneak act was running down the street past the hotel. I let him have a few slugs to stir things up, but I missed him."

"You think he was after Marks?"

"I know it. Here's what I found outside this morning. The fellow was in such a hurry he dropped it."

Chuck pulled out a revolver which he had stuck in the belt of his trousers.

"We were afraid something like this might have happened. Joe Haines told me his boss was taking some cash to the bank at Brighton and had planned to ride around Dirty Water in the night and take the train at Mopstick. You see any money on him?"

Just then Joe Haines emerged from the Doctor's office.

"If one of you boys will go around to the stable and get the team ready, we'll start for the ranch. We're taking the boss home. The money is safe."

"Good thing," said Chuck. "I'll get the team."

Fifteen minutes later they carried the owner of the Box B out of the office and placed him on a mattress in the bottom of the wagon. Slim had settled for their room at the hotel and at the same time had made the purchase of the mattress. Joe Haines took the reins of the team while Slim had a lead rope on Joe's horse. They eased across the shallow bed of Stony creek and started the dusty ride to the ranch.

As they moved away from Dirty Water, Slim turned in his saddle. Hal Titzell, immaculately dressed, was standing on the stoop of the Palace Hotel, watching the small cavalcade and Slim thought that the expression on the face of the cattle buyer was anything but pleasant.

They made slow progress, Joe Haines driving carefully to ease the jolts for the injured man on the mattress. Slim rode alongside the wagon and conversed with Joe.

"If it's all right with you, I'm going to swing off the main trail and see if I can follow the fellow who did the shooting last night," he said.

"Go ahead," urged Joe. "If you catch up with him, treat him like you did the rattlesnake this morning."

A few minutes later Slim turned away from the trail to the ranch and headed more directly toward the Three Soldiers. He had little difficulty in following the trail for the rider had been pushing his horse hard.

Slim swung along at an easy lope, a pace that Lightning could hold all day. The trail was leading into the foothills of the Three Soldiers and shortly after midday Slim stopped beside a creek to allow Lightning to drink and graze. He had no food for himself, but breakfast at the Box B had been hearty enough to ward off the pangs of hunger until nightfall.

It was mid afternoon when Slim found the place where the unknown rider had stopped to rest himself and his mount. A handful of ashes were still warm and he pushed on with renewed hope. His quarry could not be more than three hours' ride ahead and on a horse that should be tiring rapidly.

Slim leaped off Lightning and got down to examine the tracks he was following. He wanted the memory of the hoof marks stamped indelibly on his mind. Somewhere in the valley he might come across them again even though the coming night might let his quarry escape this time. The left rear shoe had a V-shaped nick that made it easily recognizable anywhere and after studying the other tracks for some outstanding characteristic, Slim remounted Lightning and pushed steadily ahead. The pace was faster now, and the sturdy sorrel seemed to scent that a chase was on.

They had been climbing for the last two hours and Slim knew that they were well behind and above the Box B layout. It was half an hour before sunset when, from a promontory, he looked down on the ranch buildings, snuggled in the rich valley which was the heart of the Box B.

As the shadows deepened in the Three Soldiers, Slim knew that his quarry was safe for the night. In spite of Lightning's superior speed and the ease with which he had been able to follow the trail, it would be impossible to overtake the rider ahead.

Slim watered Lightning at a mountain stream and pondered what to do next. It would be a hard ride down to the ranch, but he was hungry. On the other hand, if he stayed in the foothills, he could press on the first thing in the morning, perhaps overtaking the man he sought before he struck the trail again.

Slim's innate stubbornness and determination to stick to a job until the end finally decided him and he made a crude camp beside the tiny stream. There was plenty of grass for Lightning, but Slim went hungry for the second meal that day. He hitched his belt a trifle tighter and unrolled his blanket.

With the first streak of dawn over the distant Cajons, he had Lightning saddled and ready for the trail. An hour later he came upon the overnight camp of the unknown rider and his heart leaped.

The trail was getting hot. Another hour and he should be within striking distance.

Slim felt that if he could but overtake the gunman who had shot down the owner of the Box B, he would have captured an important man in the gang of rustlers. It might be the opening wedge to splitting up the gang and freeing the entire valley of the menace which hung over the cow country.

The rosy hue of the dawn faded into a slate grey and misty clouds whirled around the peaks of the Three Soldiers. It looked like rain, the first in weeks.

Slim exclaimed bitterly, for a rain at this time would obliterate the trail and his day of hard riding would be without reward. Talking almost constantly to Lightning, he pushed the sorrel as rapidly as the rough ground would permit. He knew that he was gaining steadily and if the rain would only hold off another hour, he should have his quarry.

The gray clouds swept lower as Slim pressed along through the foothills, praying that the rain would hold back a few minutes longer. But the skies opened and the long-delayed rain descended in torrents. The trail faded before his eyes and Slim turned back and headed out of the foothills. So far the rustlers held the upper hand.

Powder to Burn

Night settled over the Creeping Shadows country on the wings of the storm and Slim still faced a long, wet ride back to the Box B. It was unfamiliar country, but he knew in a general way the shortest route to the ranch and he struck out cross-country.

The rain fell in torrents, and he kept to the higher ground, working his way slowly out of the foothills. The long-needed rain would be worth thousands to the valley, freshening the grass which had been burned brown by the prolonged drought.

In spite of the long hours on the trail and the hard pace of the last few hours, Lightning made good time, and a little after ten o'clock Slim caught sight of the lights of the ranch. The yellow pin points of light dispelled some of the misery of the night and disappointment of having the trail washed out from under him.

The rain was cold, and in spite of the poncho, rivulets of water ran down his neck and he became thoroughly chilled. They struck one of the ranch trails, and Lightning quickened her pace. She was as anxious as Slim to get protection from the weather.

The ride in from the foothills gave Slim a chance to think over the situation in the valley. There were certainly some unusual elements involved.

First, there had been the shooting on the Sky High trail, in which Chuck had been ambushed and then the attempt to kill the owner of the Box B. It was evident that things were moving rapidly toward a climax.

Slim thought of his brief visit at Dirty Water and checked over one by one the men he had met there. The storekeeper and his clerk could be eliminated from important roles in the rustling gang, but Hal Titzell was a puzzling figure. It was obvious that he had plenty of nerve and at least an explanation for his presence in the valley, but Slim questioned whether he actually had been buying any cattle. That was something he determined to find out.

It simply wasn't possible for cattle to disappear without some trace, and Slim wondered why the Box B cowboys had been unable to find the rendezvous of the rustlers. Then there must be a shipping point for the stock. The normal place was Mopstick, outside the valley, but there might be another loading yard nearer along the railroad that was being used.

As Slim mulled over the possibilities, he realized that he and Chuck were going to be in for some busy days before the mystery of the rustling on the Box B could be solved.

Slim rode into the valley which sheltered the headquarters of the Box B and Lightning sloshed toward the corral. Chuck, who had been listening for Slim's approach, came running with a lantern under his slicker. He opened the gate, and horse and rider passed inside the corral. There was a pole lean-to, with a thatched roof, at one side of the corral and the horses were gathered under this protection.

"What luck?" asked Chuck.

"None," replied Slim. "I was within half an hour of my man when the storm broke. The trail just melted out in front of my eyes and I turned and headed for home."

"Had anything to eat?"

"Not a thing since yesterday morning."

"Gosh, you must be starved. Lee Wu's kept some food hot for you. Better get over to the cookhouse and fill up. I'll go up to the house and tell Joe Haines and the boss. They've been mighty anxious about you."

"I'll eat in a little bit," said Slim, as he pulled his saddle off Lightning. "What do you think of the outfit here?"

"Everything rings true to me, except Doug Huston. He hasn't made a move out of the way, but I don't like his eyes."

"Neither do I. Maybe it's unfair to Doug, but I'm going to play a hunch and keep a mighty close watch on him. Think the other boys suspect we're anything but a couple of punchers?"

"No one except Joe Haines, and he knows we're not out here just for the fun of it."

"I'm not worried about Joe, but I don't want the others to get suspicious and I especially want them to keep out of Dirty Water where they might start talking."

"I guess we'll be too busy riding range for anyone to get to town for a couple of weeks."

"This thing will go one way or another by that time. We'll either have the rustlers behind bars or they'll have control of the valley. Let's go."

They splashed through the mud of the corral and made their way to the cookhouse. Lee Wu, who had been reading, welcomed Slim.

"Supper hot," he said.

"I'm going up to the house. See you later." Chuck left the cookhouse and Slim was alone with the Chinese cook.

Lee Wu hurried in with hot food. There was plenty of hash, bread, and coffee and Lee opened a can of sliced peaches.

"I'm just about starved," grinned Slim, as one mouthful of food followed another. "Haven't had a thing since yesterday morning."

"Can fix more hash," grinned Lee Wu.

"No thanks. This will fill me up. Say, Wu, you're a real cook. I never tasted better hash."

"Not bad, not bad," chuckled Wu. "Like that myself." He sat down opposite Slim and took a generous helping of his own hash.

"Catch bushwhacker?" he asked.

Slim looked up gloomily. "No, Wu. I was almost up with him when the rain started and the trail was washed out. Better luck the next time."

"Tough place. Plenty boys come and work here while and then drift on. Afraid of getting bullet in back. No one bother Wu though."

"Why not?"

The cook disappeared in the kitchen to return with a double barreled sawed-off shotgun.

"Fill 'em up with nails," he chuckled. "Hit someone and phooey!"

"Phooey, is right," grinned Slim. "I guess you're safe enough from the rustlers. Got any idea who's causing all of the trouble?"

"Plenty ideas, no proof. Bad business to talk with loose tongue."

"You're right, Wu. A loose tongue can sure get a fellow into a lot of trouble."

Chuck stuck his head in the door.

"They want you at the ranch house as soon as you're through."

"I'll be along in a minute." Slim finished the last of the can of peaches. "Great supper, Wu. Thanks a lot for saving it for me."

"Okay," grinned Wu, who had warmed to Slim's praise of his cooking.

Slim found the owner of the Box B propped up in bed. Joe Haines was in a chair nearby.

"Chuck's told us about the rain," said Adam Marks, his keen eyes glinting beneath the bandage which swathed his head. "Anything else happen?"

Slim recounted briefly his hard ride on the trail of the bushwhacker. "The fellow was circling along the foothills and riding pretty hard. He must have had an idea he would be trailed."

"You're darned right he did," put in the range foreman. "We wouldn't let a shooting like that go without trying to get revenge."

"Get any clues on the fellow's identity?" asked Marks.

"I'll recognize the marks of his horse's shoes wherever I see them," replied Slim.

"Good boy. We've needed a couple of nervy riders like you and your pardner. It gives me new courage. We'll whip these rustlers to a standstill."

"I'd like to know how they ship the stock they rustle," said Slim.

Joe Haines smiled grimly. "I'd like to know the same thing. I've got a hunch, but you can't prove anything on a hunch."

"How do the other cattlemen in the valley stand?"

"They're all suspicious since I started losing cattle. Claim they're being raided, too, but I doubt that. No one will work together. It's every man for himself."

They discussed the situation for a time and then Slim went to the bunkhouse. The other riders were in their bunks, apparently asleep, but Chuck roused up and lifted his bulk on one elbow. He started to speak, but Slim shook his head, undressed, turned out the light, and rolled into the blankets. He was worn out by the hard ride on the trail and he fell into a slumber that was broken only by the strident tones of Lee Wu's breakfast bell the next morning.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Slim found the bunkhouse deserted, but the sound of running water and other noises informed him that his companions were outside at the pump.

He slipped into his clothes and joined them.

"Chuck tells us the rain played you a dirty trick," said Walt Kelly, hitching his pants closer about his rotund waist.

"It didn't help any," admitted Slim.

"Learn anything that really gives you anything on the rustlers?" asked Doug Huston. Slim looked into the watery eyes and thought he detected a trace of uneasiness.

"Not a thing," he replied. While the others headed for the cookhouse, Slim hurried down to the corral. He was afraid the rain had washed the dye off Lightning, but to his intense relief he found that the white spots were still effectively covered.

There was little conversation at breakfast as the punchers downed the stacks of cakes and gulped

the breakfast food and coffee. When they emerged from the cookhouse, Joe Haines was waiting for them.

"We've got two more riders," he said, "and we're going to try to cover all of the main herds everyday." Then he assigned the work and Slim found that he was teamed with Doug Huston while Chuck was paired off with Pat Beals. Joe and Walt would ride together while Lee Wu took his faithful shotgun to the ranch house to stand guard there.

Slim found Doug to be a silent riding partner, but Doug knew the range well and they worked west toward the foothills where he had ridden the day before. The rain had freshened the grass overnight and Slim marveled at the sleek, well fed condition of the Box B cattle. It was little wonder rustlers would take extreme risks to get such stock as grazed on the rolling acres of the Marks' ranch.

They stopped at noon and ate the lunch Lee Wu had prepared, then started the swing back toward the ranch. There had been no sign of any cattle having been stolen and the herds were grazing calmly in the rich valleys of the foothills.

They were near the north boundary of the ranch when Slim sighted a lone rider and turned to Doug.

"That's one of the Double O boys. Nels Anderson, their boss, keeps them all riding our range line. Claims he's lost cattle and doesn't make any bones about saying that he thinks they're on our range. Matter of fact, I guess he did find about forty head he'd lost over here."

"Which doesn't mean the Box B rustled them."

"Well you try to tell that square-head that story. We've all talked ourselves hoarse."

The lone horseman waved as the Box B punchers passed a few hundred yards away and they waved in return.

"That's Al Bass. The Double O riders are all friendly enough, but they have to do what old Nels tells them."

They reached the ranch shortly before sundown and found the other riders there ahead of them. There had been no sign of the rustlers anywhere on the Box B and Joe Haines led his punchers to supper with a lighter heart.

After supper Slim had a chance to talk with the foreman alone.

"How many head have you lost altogether?" he asked.

"I'd say around 500. That's a rough guess, but we won't know for sure until the fall round-up."

Slim whistled. "That's a lot of cattle."

"More than we can stand. Much more of it, and the Box B will be ready for the auction block."

A rider appeared on the trail from Dirty Water and they watched him approach the ranch.

"I'd just as soon see a snake coming," grunted the foreman as he recognized the visitor as Hal Titzell, the cattle buyer.

Titzell dismounted easily and faced the foreman.

"Been around the valley a bit today," he said, "and thought you might have a little choice stuff to sell. I've got a special order from a Chicago commission house. Top price for choice beef. What do you say?"

"Sorry Titzell, but you know we don't do business with you."

"I thought maybe you'd changed your mind. I heard your outfit was a little pressed for cash."

"You heard wrong."

"Maybe I'd better talk with your boss," said the cattle buyer, starting toward the ranch house.

"Adam Marks is too sick to see you," replied Joe, barring the way. "If I were you, I'd start back for Dirty Water."

"Very well," replied Titzell, apparently unperturbed by the gruff treatment accorded him, "but think it over. If you change your mind about that choice stuff on your north range, let me know."

The cattle buyer mounted and rode swiftly down the trail toward Dirty Water.

"I hope his horse stumbles and Titzell breaks his neck," snorted the range boss.

One remark of the cattle buyer's lodged in Slim's memory. He had especially mentioned the choice stock on the north range, which lay next to the boundary of the Double O.

Slim was still feeling the fatigue of his two arduous days on the trail of the bushwhacker and he rolled into his blankets early, followed shortly by the other riders of the Box B.

Doug and Slim rode the same section of the range the next morning and it was well after noon when they reached the boundary of the Double O. On the previous day they had passed a bunch of steers grazing in a coulee a mile below the boundary, but the cattle were nowhere in sight and Slim and Doug spread out to hunt for them.

Slim followed their trail straight across the line into Double O territory and he turned and rode back to join Doug.

"The cattle have gone into Double O range and it looks to me as though they were driven there."

"Then we'd better get back to the ranch and tell Joe."

Slim gave Lightning her head and soon outdistanced Doug in the ride back to the ranch. Fortunately Joe Haines had ridden in early and he told the foreman what had happened on the north range.

“We’re going to have a showdown with Nels Anderson,” said Joe grimly. “We’re going to get those cattle back even if we have to do it with gunpowder!”

Dangerous Hours

"See that you're well heeled," admonished the fiery foreman of the Box B as he hurried into the bunkhouse to strap on an extra revolver.

Slim made sure that his saddle was well cinched for they would be riding fast and hard.

Just before they started, Walt Kelly and Chuck rode in from the south. They were speedily informed that Box B cattle had been driven into Double O territory and that the Box B was determined to have none of that. They joined the raiding party with a whoop and all five riders set out at full speed for the north range, leaving a startled Lee Wu to guard the home place and his wounded boss.

"How many do you think were driven onto the Double O?" asked Joe as they galloped northward.

"I'd say about forty head," replied Slim, "and from what I saw of them yesterday, they were all prime beef."

"That's just the kind of cattle we've been losing right along, prime stuff that knocks the bottom out of our pocketbook. If this keeps on much longer, we won't have anything left to ship this fall. I never figured old man Anderson would stoop to rustling our stuff, but it looks like we have the goods on him."

The little cavalcade whirled northward, a trail of dust mounting in its wake and hanging in the still afternoon air.

They topped a slope and looked down on the Double O range. A little more than a mile away they could see a few cattle grazing.

"Maybe that's our stuff over there," shouted Walt.

Joe shook his head. "They'd have driven them further into their own range."

They swung westward along the range line to the place where Doug and Slim had picked off the tracks of the missing cattle.

Joe swung out of the saddle and scanned the hoofprints of the horses which had driven the cattle into the Double O territory.

"Only three riders made the raid," he grunted. "They had plenty of nerve."

Slim, looking down at the hoof prints could hardly suppress an exclamation of surprise. There was a distinct V-shaped nick in the left rear shoe of one of the horses! There had been a similar nick on the same shoe of the horse which had carried the bushwhacker safely away from the vengeance of the Box B.

Slim leaned down and spoke to Joe, and they moved out of earshot of the others.

"Listen Joe, there was a V-shaped nick in the left rear shoe of the horse I chased all over your west range. There's the same kind of a nick in one of the hoofprints here."

"You mean the fellow who took a shot at the boss was one of the fellows who rustled the cattle last night?"

"It looks that way."

Joe's honest eyes narrowed to steely slits and his lips tightened into a grim line.

"The Double O had always been a tough outfit, but I never figured old man Anderson would stand for murder. If we find one of their riders is riding a horse with a shoe like that, watch out for trouble in great big chunks."

The Box B riders remounted and started north into the Double O territory. From the trail, it was evident that the cattle had been driven hard, but the small herd had been fairly easy to handle.

They penetrated more than a mile into the Double O range when a group of riders galloped into sight over a low hill.

"Here comes trouble," grinned Chuck, loosening his rifle and making sure that it was ready for fast action. The other Box B riders looked at their guns and Slim's heart tightened. Tempers were at a fighting pitch. It would require some real diplomacy to get through the next few minutes without someone being hurt, perhaps seriously.

The two groups of riders swept toward each other at a furious pace, slowing down only when they were less than two hundred yards apart. At a hundred yards they stopped, eyeing each other warily, waiting for the first break.

"Old man Anderson's with his boys and he's wearing two guns," said Joe. "That means he's on the warpath sure."

Slim counted the Double O riders. Five men were ranged behind their boss and he recognized one of them as Al Bass, the range rider they had seen the day before.

"They've got our cattle," said Walt Kelly impatiently. "What are we going to do, talk or shoot?"

"We'll talk first," said Joe, curbing his first impulse to shoot it out, for the Box B was outnumbered.

Joe held up his hand and started forward, calling to Slim, "You ride with me and the rest stay here

and watch for any break.”

Nels Anderson and Al Bass rode forward from the Double O group and they met halfway between.

The owner of the Double O was a gigantic Swede, well over six feet tall and as broad as an ox. His huge hands rested easily on the pommel of his saddle and the butts of his six guns protruded from the holsters on each leg. The light blue eyes peered out from beneath shaggy eyebrows and his whole face was a picture of intense rage. He burst into an immediate accusation.

“You fellows got nerve,” he roared. “Stealing my cattle and then riding over here in the daytime hunting more. By gar, this is going to stop and stop right here!”

“What do you mean, stealing your cattle?” replied Joe angrily. “All we’re doing is trailing a herd of our own stuff that you’ve driven into your range. Fine thing for a man’s neighbor to turn rustler.”

The Swede’s face flushed an angry red and his right hand clawed at his gun, but Al Bass reached out quickly and seized the hand with a firm grip.

“Hold it, Nels,” he said. “There’s something wrong here. I saw Box B cattle on our range better than a mile back. They’re hunting their stuff on our territory and we’re looking for some of our choice beef on their side of the line.”

It was with difficulty that the owner of the Double O controlled his surging temper, and when he spoke his voice was filled with emotion.

“Don’t you call me a rustler again,” he warned Joe. “Next time maybe Al won’t be here to stop me.”

“Sorry, Nels, but my temper got away from me. We’ve been losing cattle right and left and this time we figured we’d trailed some of our prime beef right into your back yard.”

“Yeh,” grunted Al Bass. “There’s a trail a quarter mile west of here where about sixty head of our stuff was driven onto your range last night. Laugh that one off.”

“Looks to me like a clever attempt to get the Box B and the Double O into a lot of gun play and clean both outfits out while they were busy trying to settle grievances,” said Slim.

He turned to Nels Anderson. Briefly he told him of the attempt to kill Adam Marks and how he had trailed the bushwhacker, only to be beaten back by the storm.

“The man who shot Adam Marks was riding a horse that had a V-shaped mark on the left rear shoe,” said Slim. “We found the same mark left by one of the horses used to drive our cattle onto your range last night.”

“So you figured that it was a Double O rider who tried to kill your boss,” said Al Bass.

“That’s about the ticket,” said Joe.

Nels Anderson’s big frame shook with anger.

“Fools, fools,” he cried. “Why, Adam and I came here together. We don’t always agree, but by gar I sure wouldn’t let anyone take a shot at him.”

Al Bass leaned forward.

“I was the fellow who found out our cattle had been rustled and I got a good look at the hoofprints left by the rustlers’ horses. There’s just such a mark as you described on one of the left rear prints.”

Slim smiled a little grimly.

“I’d kind of figured there would be. Seems like these two outfits ought to forget any past troubles and realize that through a clever trick the rustlers almost had them fighting each other to death. We figured one of your boys tried to get our boss, and that your whole outfit was stealing our cattle, while you fellows were dead sure we rustled off your beef last night.”

Nels Anderson leaned over toward the Box B foreman, thrusting out a huge hand.

“Joe, your boy is right. We have been blind. You tell Adam that from now on we ride together. I’ll come see him soon. Now we better throw in together. We’ll round up your stuff and drive it back on your range and then bring our cattle back.”

They united forces and turned back into the Double O range to hunt out the Box B cattle. Slim felt that real progress had been made. The differences between the Double O and the Box B had been smoothed over and the two largest outfits in the Creeping Shadows had united for a stand against the rustlers. He looked over the cowpunchers. They were a hard riding lot, every one of them capable of a good fight and Slim knew that the rustlers were going to be in for some dangerous hours before many more days passed.

Telltale Marks

It was sundown when the Double O and the Box B riders finished the task of getting the cattle back on their own ranges. They stopped at the boundary between the ranches and the Double O cattle plodded northward onto their own range.

"How many cattle you figure you've lost?" Joe asked the owner of the Double O.

"Right around 350," replied Nels. "How many have you?"

"It's more than that. A good 500 head and maybe a few more have been stolen in the last few months. I tell you, it's hit us mighty hard."

Nel's pale eyes hardened and his huge hands moved convulsively for he was a man of deep emotion.

"We shall stop that, and soon," he roared. "Tomorrow we go see Cook and line him up. After that we'll clean out Dirty Water and maybe that will stop the rustling."

Joe looked thoughtful.

"I don't think we'll be able to swing Cook along with us," he said, "and when it comes to cleaning up Dirty Water, we'll have to have some proof."

"I'm tired of waiting," said Nels. "Action I got to have. There's no law in the valley unless we make it ourselves."

"You're right," agreed Slim, "but let's wait until we're sure of the gang responsible for this rustling."

Nels grumblingly agreed that Slim's advice was logical and they parted with the agreement that the Box B foreman would ride over to the Double O in the morning and that Nels would accompany him on a visit to the Cook ranch.

"What sort of a fellow is this Cook?"

"All bad," replied Joe. "He runs the Diamond Dot, a small outfit that lies east of the Double O and the Box B and north of Dirty Water. His range backs right up against the Cajons. We've had lots of trouble with him over our water rights."

"Has he been losing cattle the last year?"

"Claims he's lost a bunch, but I wouldn't take his word for anything. Unless we keep a close watch, he runs his cattle over on our range and they clean up some of our best grazing land."

"Then it won't be much use to see him tomorrow?"

"I don't think so, but it will satisfy Nels, and if Cook has really been losing beef he may throw in with us. He has a lot of riders and they're all tough birds. If the three outfits made a united stand, we'd sweep this valley clean of every undesirable hombre that's come in here the last couple of years."

When they reached the home place, Joe went at once to report the events of the day to the owner of the Box B while the cowboys hurried into the cookhouse, where Lee Wu had supper ready.

"Golly, but I thought there was going to be trouble when Joe called Nels Anderson a rustler," said Walt Kelly, between mouthfuls of bread.

"There would have been if Al Bass hadn't grabbed his hand," put in jovial Pat Beals. "I'm telling you, my hair was standing on end."

"We're finally getting started on the right track," said Walt, "even if it almost took bloodshed to get these outfits together. Believe me, it's going to be tough for the rustlers from now on."

Slim had been watching Doug Huston and he thought he saw the cowboy's face twitch slightly. One thing, Doug had expressed no elation at the peacemaking with the Double O.

There was only the faintest tinge of light over the Three Soldiers as they left the cookhouse. Up at the ranch house, a light glowed in Adam Marks' bedroom and Slim knew that the foreman was recounting in great detail the happenings of the day.

Slim walked down to the corral and whistled softly. Out of the shadows came Lightning, and Slim climbed up to the top rail and ran his hands through the sorrel's thick mane.

"We made a little progress today," he said softly and Lightning tossed her head in agreement. "But we've got a long way to go," added Slim, and again the sorrel nodded.

Chuck came down from the bunkhouse and climbed atop the corral.

"Doing a little heavy thinking?" he asked.

"Trying to, but the results are about zero."

"I'd like to know how the 800 and some head that have been stolen from the Box B and the Double O were taken out of the valley," said Chuck.

"When we discover how that's been done, we'll be just about at the end of this mystery."

"They've been rustled in small lots, but even then cattle can't fly."

"That's one reason I'm anxious to see what kind of a place the Diamond Dot runs. Joe Haines don't like that outfit a bit."

"He didn't like the Double O until he realized that somebody was trying to get the two outfits to fighting," pointed out Chuck.

"There won't be any more trouble along that line and I feel we've made a little progress, but not enough."

Slim's fingers, exploring an inside pocket, came in contact with the cartridge he had found at the scene of Adam Marks' ambush. He had two definite clues, the exploded shell and the V-shaped hoofprint. Somewhere in the valley he must find the rider of that horse.

The cowboy detectives returned to the bunkhouse. The foreman was still at the ranch house and the other Box B riders were engaged in various personal tasks.

Slim and Chuck rolled in early, and a few minutes later the others were in their blankets.

Slim fell into a restless sleep, for even after his body relaxed his mind was working on the rustling mystery. Thus it was that he heard a slight noise down at the corral and awakened almost instantly.

Slim pulled on his trousers, picked up his boots, and left the bunkhouse silently. Someone was in the corral saddling a horse. Slim moved swiftly forward. The moon, which had topped the Cajons, was shrouded with clouds.

The cowboy detective paused beside the main gate of the corral to see what was going on inside and had just stuck his head above the top rail when a rope swished out of the shadows and settled over his head. Before he could utter a sound, it was jerked tight and he fell sprawling to the ground, gasping for breath.

Slim clawed at the rope, but it was too tight. Someone was running toward him, coming out of the corral.

The moonlight brightened for an instant and Slim looked up into a masked face.

"Smart guy," came a hard, chilling voice. "Well, you're not as smart as you think you are."

Slim tried to dodge, but the other man struck him with a short, heavy club, and the cowboy detective lost consciousness. When he finally opened his eyes, the moon was well toward its zenith and his head throbbed dismally.

He tried to move, but found his arms and feet securely bound and a tight gag in his aching mouth. He managed to roll over and lift his head. He had been carried a hundred yards from the corral and deposited beside the creek. Slim tried to wriggle along the ground, but he made little progress and it was an exhausting effort. He rolled over on his back and looked up at the moon. There was nothing to do but wait for morning.

It was well after midnight when Slim heard a horse approaching the Box B. It was coming slowly as though the rider was afraid of discovery. Then the gate of the corral was opened and Slim knew that his assailant had returned. There was no question now but that one of the Box B riders was allied with the rustlers for Slim felt sure that the unknown rider had slipped away to inform the other members of the gang that the Box B and the Double O were standing shoulder to shoulder to resist any further depredations.

The aching hours went by slowly. The moon dropped behind the Three Soldiers and for over an hour the Creeping Shadows country was cloaked in the deepest night. Then the peaks of the Cajons were touched with the first streaks of another day and Slim moved a little to rest his tortured body.

It was an hour later before he was found and then Chuck saw him lying beside the creek and hurried to slash his bonds.

Slim had to be helped to a sitting position, for the circulation had long since stopped in his feet and hands. Chuck worked carefully, rubbing the bruised members. Slim cried out in pain once or twice as the blood again coursed through the arteries and veins. His tongue was badly swollen and Chuck ran for a cup of water. Returning, he took a clean handkerchief and soaked it with water. This Slim placed in his mouth, sucking gratefully at the cool liquid.

Joe Haines heard that something was wrong and came hurrying down, the other Box B riders following him. Slim waved aside their questions for his jaws ached too much to talk and it was not until he had downed a bowl of breakfast food that he told them the full story.

"Have any idea who it was?" asked Joe.

"Not the slightest," replied Slim, deciding not to reveal that he had heard the rider return to the Box B.

Walt Kelly hurried down to the corral to look at the horses.

"Every cayuse is there," he said when he returned.

"Then I can't figure out what anyone was doing in our corral," said Joe.

"Maybe he was going to run off with the horses and Slim came along just in time to give him a scare," suggested Doug.

"Well, maybe," agreed Joe, but it was plain that such an explanation did not satisfy him.

When they left the cookhouse, Joe turned to Slim.

"Feel like riding over to the Double O with me?"

"I'll be all right in a few minutes. Count me in. I want to be along when you talk with the boss of the Diamond Dot."

Slim went to the bunkhouse while the others hastened down to the corral to get their mounts. The cowboy detective was firmly convinced that someone in the bunkhouse had slugged him the night before and left him hog-tied along the creek.

With quick, deft hands he searched one bunk after another. It was not until he reached Doug Huston's duffel bag that he found anything. Wadded in the bottom was a black cloth which might easily be tied around the lower part of the face to form a mask. Slim nodded grimly. His suspicions that Doug was the rustlers' key man on the ranch were rapidly being confirmed.

Slim rammed the black cloth back into the duffel bag and slipped on his chaps, slung his gun belt around his hips, and started for the corral.

An excited group was gathered at the gate, looking at tracks which led into the corral.

"Look here, Slim," cried Chuck. "One of the rustlers, the guy that took a shot at the boss, rode right into our own corral last night. Here's his tracks going in, but there's none coming out."

Slim looked down at the hoofprint to which Chuck pointed. There was the telltale V-shaped mark.

The Night Alarm

There was no mistaking the V-shaped nick. It was clearly outlined in the dust and Slim stooped to look at it closely.

"Kind of looks like the mysterious rider was the guy who roped me around the neck and then left me down by the creek to hear the crickets sing," he said.

"Maybe he was trying to get another shot at the boss," said Walt Kelly.

"If he was, he wouldn't have ridden right into our corral. Anyway, there're no marks like this one coming out," Chuck pointed out.

Slim sat back on his heels, puzzled at the turn of events, while Chuck ambled into the corral. A minute later he shouted for them to join him and they hurried inside.

Chuck was looking at his own horse but as they approached he pointed at the dust.

"My gosh, fellows, my own horse has that V-shaped mark on his left rear shoe!"

"That kind of puts you in a hole," spoke up Doug Huston.

"Nothing of the kind," retorted Slim sharply. "Chuck wasn't on the range when the boss was shot and you fellows know darned well where he was the other night when the rustlers were chasing our cattle onto the Double O range. This is just a trick of the rustlers to cause suspicion in our own outfit. The fellow who slugged me last night rode away on Chuck's horse and while he was away from the ranch he had the V-shaped mark filed in the shoe. It was clever trick, but it didn't work."

Joe Haines, who had been strangely silent, stepped forward.

"You're right, Slim," said the foreman. "Putting that nick on the shoe of that cayuse was aimed to throw us on the wrong track. What's troubling me is how the rustlers learned we were after a horse with a shoe marked like that. As far as I know only our own outfit knew about it and Nels Anderson and Al Bass."

"I didn't think the Double O would shoot straight," said Doug.

"I wouldn't jump at conclusions," said Slim. "When this thing is finally cleared up there's going to be a lot of surprised people in the Creeping Shadows country."

"Oh, you talk like a cattle detective," snapped Doug.

"If I was a cattle detective," replied Slim smoothly, "I'd probably be slipping the iron bracelets on these rustlers and starting them for the state penitentiary."

"Better get a file and smooth out that mark," Joe told Chuck. "There's no use your cluttering up the landscape with V-shaped signs."

Chuck departed for the blacksmith shop and Slim and Joe saddled and mounted their horses.

Joe gave the riding orders for the day to the other punchers. Then with Slim he rode north toward the Double O. After a time he spoke.

"Do you think it was someone on the ranch who waylaid you last night and rode away on Chuck's horse?"

Slim picked his words carefully as he replied for even though he had absolute faith in the integrity of the foreman, he did not intend to reveal that he was in the employ of the Mountain States Cattlemen's Association and working under Old Bill Needham until the showdown.

"I'm inclined to believe someone on the ranch is tipping the rustlers off to every move. That's the only way the gang could have learned the boss was carrying money with him the night they shot him and it's the only way they could have learned about the nick in the horseshoe. Whoever is doing the thinking for this gang is clever and dangerous."

"He's all of that, but he'll never match the power of the cattlemen if we line up Hack Cook."

Nels Anderson and Al Bass were waiting for them and they swung into their saddles as the Box B men approached.

"Anything happen last night?" asked Nels. Slim related what had occurred at the Box B corral.

"That's no good," he said. "It means there's a traitor in your outfit."

"Don't say that until we've got the proof," Joe warned him, for although he was privately convinced that Nels was right, he wasn't going to let any outsider cast any reflections on his riders until he had ample proof.

With Nels and Joe ahead, they rode toward the Diamond Dot. Slim found Al Bass a pleasant companion and they discussed the range war at length.

"Your outfit's pretty well loaded with men," Slim said.

"The Box B would be if they could keep their hands on," grinned Al, "but after those two cattle detectives were killed and a couple of the other boys got winged, a bunch of them blew out of the country."

"The present outfit won't blow," said Slim.

"I don't know about that. I wouldn't count too much on Doug Huston. He looks like a weak sister to me."

It was nearly noon when they reached the Diamond Dot, which lay north and well to the east of the Box B although almost directly east of the Double O.

Water on the Diamond Dot was not as plentiful as on the neighboring ranches and the grass was thinner. The buildings, almost under the Cajons, were in a poor state of repair and the corral was a ramshackled affair. Two cowboys in front of the bunkhouse looked up as the riders approached and four more men appeared to watch the visitors. On the porch of the ranch house a man pulled himself out of an old rocking chair. He was in his stocking feet and had been dozing and smoking his pipe at intervals.

"That's Hack Cook on the porch," said Al. "He's a tough customer and I've got a hunch we won't get any cooperation from him."

Slim looked at the owner of the Diamond Dot. Hack Cook was almost square. His shoulders were tremendously broad and his chest was like a barrel. His face was red and his neck so short that it disappeared into his body.

"Hello, Hack," rumbled Nels as the riders stopped in front of the porch.

"Howdy," replied Hack, but he gave no hint that he intended to ask them to dismount and have dinner at the ranch. "What's on your mind?"

"Plenty," said Nels. "It's about the rustlers. The Double O and the Box B are joining forces."

Hack's face reddened and his voice trembled. "Joining forces? It's about time you big outfits did that. Now you'll try to ruin me altogether. You haven't been able to do it singly so you're doubling up on me. Well, I'm serving notice on you right now that I've got fighting men on my payroll and we're going to fight to the end."

"Why you crazy fool," broke in Joe Haines, "we're not looking for trouble. We're offering you a chance to join us and run the rustlers out of the valley. You claim you've been losing stock. Here's your chance to prove it by throwing in with us. We're going to give this valley the once-over with a fine-toothed comb."

Slim had been making a survey of the Diamond Dot layout. He was surprised at the number of cowboys at the bunkhouse. There were six outside, more than the Box B carried and as many as the Double O, which were much larger ranches than the Diamond Dot.

There was the movement of a faded curtain at a window on the second floor of the ranch house and Slim started involuntarily as he got a glimpse of the face peering out from behind the curtain. It was that of Hal Titzell, the cattle buyer from Dirty Water. It was true that Titzell had visited the Box B two days before, and it was possible that he was trying to buy cattle from the Diamond Dot, but Slim didn't like the looks of the thing as he recalled the early warning Doc Baldrige had given him about Titzell.

Nels and Joe argued for some time with Hack Cook, but the owner of the Diamond Dot was adamant and no amount of cajoling on the part of the visiting cattlemen could make him change his mind.

"Then go it alone," exploded Nels at last, "and I hope to heaven you lose every one of your cattle, that your grass burns up and your water holes go dry."

"They probably will if you can do anything about it," retorted Hack.

The visitors whirled their horses about and departed at a gallop.

"What burns me up is that he didn't ask us to eat," grumbled Al Bass. "Our cook quit last night and one of the boys had to rustle grub this morning. We fed light."

Slim could sympathize with Al, for even though he had enjoyed one of Lee Wu's good breakfasts, he was hungry. When they reached the Double O, the Box B riders paused only long enough to water their horses, before pressing on toward the home ranch.

Nels and Joe had decided on night riding and Slim knew that there would be little rest for him until after the dawn of another day. When they returned to the ranch, Joe explained the new plan of action.

"We're splitting up the range," he said. "Most of the stuff has been stolen along our north and east line and along the south and east line of the Double O. We'll load up a chuck wagon at once and start for our north line where we'll make camp. Get a move on, boys, and help Lee Wu get ready. The Double O's lost their cook and Lee's got to cook for both outfits."

It was just before sunset when a team was hitched to the chuck wagon and Wu, his shotgun over his knees, cracked the whip, yelled a wild Chinese chant, and the team leaped away to the accompaniment of many crashing pots and pans.

Walt Kelly, in spite of his protests, was left at the ranch to guard the boss and to feed and care for him while the others trailed out behind the fast-wheeling Wu.

It was deep twilight when they reached the site which had been selected for the camp. There was a good spring and plenty of timber. The Double O boys were waiting and they greeted Wu with wild shouts of joy for the Chinaman's reputation as a cook was known the length and breadth of the valley.

It was well after dark before supper was ready and they fell to with ravenous appetites. The Double O riders were loud in their praises of Wu's cooking and the grinning Chinaman served them again

and again until he finally spread his hands and said, "All gone, too much hungry."

They grinned and leaned back on the ground, waiting for orders from Nels and Joe. Slim looked them over. In addition to the Double O boss and Al Bass, there were five riders from that ranch. All of them were clean, capable-appearing fellows. In the Box B contingent were Joe, Doug, Pat Beals, Chuck and himself. With Wu to guard the camp, that meant twelve riders were available for riding the range.

Nels, by virtue of his years, took command and assigned each rider to his night's work. Three shots, fired in rapid succession, were to be the signal that trouble was ahead.

"This is a finish fight," Nels warned them. "The word's gone out that we mean business. Shoot first and ask questions afterward."

The riders scattered to their horses and a few minutes later were stringing along the east range of the Double O and the Box B. East of them lay the Diamond Dot. Slim and Chuck rode south together. They were to patrol near the trail which led from the Box B to Dirty Water.

"Think we'll get anything by this night riding?" asked Chuck.

"We may not get anything, but neither will the rustlers," replied Slim. "I've got a hunch that the key to the whole mystery is somewhere around the Diamond Dot. I saw Hal Titzell there this afternoon. He was watching us from a second story window."

"You mean that the Diamond Dot is rustling the stuff from the Double O and the Box B and then Titzell steps in and buys the cattle?" asked Chuck.

"It might be something like that," admitted Slim, "but I'm not going to advance too many theories. We've got to be careful they don't spot us as cattle detectives."

They parted near the trail to Dirty Water, Chuck riding further south along the east line of the Box B.

Midnight passed, and up and down the long line of riders there was nothing reported out of the way. Pat Beals was on one side of Slim and Chuck on the other. He contacted them at intervals and they talked briefly before starting the return ride down their section of the line. It was lonely work, riding the range at night, with the feeling that rustlers might be encountered at any minute. Slim fingered the six gun at his side and made sure that it was free in the holster. Then he slipped his rifle in and out of the scabbard to satisfy himself that it was ready for instant action.

The thin moonlight faded and the night became doubly black. Another hour and the sky over the Cajons would brighten, but in the interval before that Slim had the feeling that many things might happen.

He was riding north when trouble started. Behind him and from Chuck's section of the range came three shots, one after another. Slim wheeled and listened. There was a sharp, terrible fusillade. Then silence.

Whipping his own gun from his holster he fired three times in the air and urged Lightning into a mad gallop. From behind him he could hear the alarm signal echoing up the line as other riders repeated the warning shots and he knew that they were pounding along in his wake. The rustlers were riding somewhere before him and he knew they had already silenced Chuck's guns. With black anger in his heart, he leaned over Lightning and urged the great sorrel to even greater speed.

On A New Trail

Slim and Lightning sped through the darkness at a mad, headlong pace that fairly devoured distance. They passed the end of Slim's patrol and entered Chuck's territory.

Slim pulled the sorrel up short and listened. From far behind him came the pounding of hoofs, the other Box B and Double O riders coming to the alarm but ahead of him there was only a dismal silence. The sound of gun shots had long since died away and Slim progressed more slowly.

There was a chance that he might walk into a trap, but an even greater chance that if he hurried he might pass Chuck in the dark.

It was nerve wracking to hold Lightning down to a walk, but Slim kept up the steady pace as the sound of the riders behind him came nearer.

Pat Beals was the first to catch him.

"What's happened?" he shouted.

"I don't know," replied Slim. "I heard Chuck give the alarm and then there was a volley of shots. I haven't heard a thing since then and haven't been able to find Chuck."

Other riders joined them and they spread out to hunt for the missing cowboy. The sky was graying before they found the first clue. Joe Haines stumbled on the trail. His gun blazed three quick shots into the sky and they rallied to him at a gallop.

Joe pointed to a broad trail before him.

"There goes one of our choice bunches of beef," he said bitterly. "That means Chuck stumbled on the rustlers on our range."

"Comb this section again," roared Nels angrily. "Maybe they left Chuck wounded some place just out of our sight. Get him first, then the cattle."

Again the riders, grimly silent, spread out and through the early hours of the morning they rode in search of the missing Box B puncher. It was mid forenoon before they gathered around the chuck wagon, weary and hungry from the all-night vigil and the search.

Squatting on their heels, with pans of piping hot food before them, they listened as Joe Haines outlined the next step in their campaign against the rustlers.

"It's pretty evident that the rustlers captured Chuck and forced him to go with them," he said. "The thing to do now is to go after the cattle. The trail's fresh and even though they've a few hours start, we'll be able to overtake them."

"That trail's heading for the Diamond Dot," said Nels harshly.

"I know it. Look to your guns, boys. There'll be trouble before the day's over. If any of you want to pull out now, that's all right with us."

No man moved as though to leave and after the hearty breakfast, each one examined his guns.

With Nels and Joe in the lead, they swung into their saddles. It was an earnest, silent group of riders that trotted south along the Box B line to pick up the trail of the missing cattle. They found the trail and turned east into Diamond Dot territory, with the rugged foothills of the Cajons only a few miles ahead of them.

Al Bass leaned over and spoke to Slim.

"Once the rustlers get the cattle to the Cajons, it will be tough finding them. They'll break up the herd and we'll have to comb every valley."

Slim nodded and gave voice to his thoughts.

"Aren't we likely to run into the Diamond Dot, going through their range this way?"

"I'm kind of hoping we will," shot back Al. "My own hunch is that the Diamond Dot is in thick with the rustlers. If they aren't actually doing the rustling, they know who it is. Why, the Box B or the Double O would never let rustlers drive a herd across their range."

It was shortly after noon and they were well into the Diamond Dot country when Slim, who was now in the lead, sighted a cloud of dust coming toward them. A few minutes later a plodding herd of cattle was visible and behind it was ranged a cordon of riders.

The Box B and Double O punchers paused to survey the scene. Then Joe exploded.

"What nerve!" he roared. "Those are Box B cattle and that's a Diamond Dot gang riding behind them."

His hands flashed to his side and his gun leaped up, ready for instant action, but Nels reached out a huge hand and restrained him.

"Wait a minute, Joe. They're driving the cattle toward your range. Hold your temper and we'll see what's up."

A lone rider broke away from the group behind the cattle and galloped toward the visitors. Slim recognized the powerful, squat figure of Hack Cook, owner of the Diamond Dot.

Cook pulled up sharp and his horse reared as he jerked savagely on the bit.

"What's the idea of invading my range?" asked Cook angrily, his heavy face flushing.

"What's the idea of driving our cattle around on your range?" countered Joe.

"We're bringing them home. Found them here a couple of hours ago and started back with them. I don't want those scrubs eating up my grass."

"So you found them?" drawled Nels, his light blue eyes little more than slits under his shaggy brows. "Well, mister, let me tell you, those cattle were rustled last night off the Box B's east line and one of their riders is missing. Someone's going to have a lot of explaining to do."

"I'm not explaining anything," replied Cook. "We found the cattle this morning. Go get 'em and take them home."

"Your horse looks about worn out, Hack," put in Joe. "Must have been doing a lot of night riding."

"We don't ride our range at night," replied the Diamond Dot boss.

"Well, anyway, your horse is about worn out. Better get another or this nag may collapse and you'd have to walk home, which would be just too bad."

Cook growled something under his breath, but wheeled and galloped back to join his own riders. They soon drew away from the Box B cattle, heading back for their ranch house.

The Box B and Double O riders circled the herd and started it again on the journey back to the home range.

Joe scanned the cattle with practiced eye.

"Holy mackerel," he exclaimed. "We've been gyped right. There should be at least 250 head in this bunch and I can't count more than 185 or 188."

Slim and Nels checked the number in the herd. Joe was right. At most there were not more than 190 in the herd.

"Which means the rustlers skimmed the cream of the herd and turned the rest back. It would be too easy to trail a bunch this size. Also, turning them back allays our suspicions," said Joe.

"Darned if I don't think it was the Diamond Dot that rustled the stuff last night, took what they wanted, and started back with the rest when they figured we'd be on the trail," said Al Bass.

"I think you're right," agreed Slim. "I want to know what's happened to Chuck."

Nels looked at the Cajons with a critical eye. "I expect the answer's some place in the mountains, but it would take weeks to comb them and we can't leave our own range unprotected that long. We'll just have to play along and hope that we can get the rustlers and find your friend at the same time."

But Slim was sick at heart for he knew what had happened to the other cattle detectives sent into the Creeping Shadows country. They had disappeared, never to be heard from again and he was afraid that a similar fate had befallen Chuck.

They herded the cattle back to the Box B range and then Slim drew Joe to one side.

"I'm riding alone for a while," he said. "If I get the breaks, I'll turn up some valuable clues on the rustlers and also find Chuck."

"Good luck, boy," said Joe.

Slim turned away from the other riders and headed straight back into the Diamond Dot range. There was at least three hours of daylight left and he soon reached the place where they had met the Diamond Dot riders. Slim pressed on along the trail of the cattle, following it into the first of the Cajon foothills.

There he saw that the cattle, driven at a hard pace after being taken from the Box B range, had been watered and the bulk of the herd turned back toward their home range. It was evident that the rest of the cattle had been driven in small groups into the foothills. This, in itself, did not interest Slim greatly, for he had been convinced of what had happened. He was seeking a clue that would lead him to the hideout where he hoped he would find Chuck.

Half a dozen trails led away from the water hole and Slim finally decided on one which led toward the heart of the Cajons. It was sound reasoning that the hideout of the rustlers would be in some mountain fastness.

Slim followed the trail cautiously, wary lest he ride into a trap. The trail branched in several places, but Slim pressed deeper into the mountain country, climbing higher and higher.

The trail was well worn and he knew that it had been used recently so he kept on. To his surprise, it followed a low pass through the mountains and it was mid evening when he reached the summit.

Behind him spread the Creeping Shadows country while to the east and north the moon was coming over the horizon. Far away he saw the flash of a locomotive headlight and he determined on a new course of action. Undoubtedly this trail, unknown to anyone on the Box B or the Double O as far as he knew, led down to the railroad, perhaps even to Mopstick, the shipping point for cattle from the Creeping Shadows country.

More Clues

Slim rode for another hour and then, with the moonlight bright, found a suitable camping place away from the trail. He tethered Lightning and unrolled his own blanket. In spite of his worry over Chuck's disappearance, he was soon asleep, worn out by the previous night ride and the long day in the saddle.

He was up with the dawn and a few minutes later, astride Lightning, was going down the trail. It was nearly mid morning when he reached the railroad and turned to his left to follow the line to the cattle shipping point.

A locomotive hooted a few minutes later and Slim moved away from the track as a transcontinental limited roared by. Passengers on the rear platform waved to the lone rider and Slim returned the greeting. Far down the rails he could see the cluster of buildings that was Mopstick, but the limited shot by without stopping.

Mopstick consisted of a water tank, a blistered station, three boxcars which had been set on the ground for the families of the section men, and the stockyards. There was no store.

Slim tied Lightning in the shadow of the water tank where a trough overflowed with cool water. Entering the depot, he found the operator busy copying orders for a freight that was wheezing along in the wake of the limited.

Slim had reached the point where he needed information and needed it in a hurry. When the agent turned around he produced the small badge of authority from the governor and found that it opened, as though by magic, the way to obtain the facts he sought.

"I want to see your records on cattle shipments in the last year," said Slim.

Without protest, the agent produced the large book with carbons of the bills of lading. The Diamond Dot, the smallest outfit in the north end of the Creeping Shadows, had shipped as many cattle as the Double O and the Box B combined.

"The Diamond Dot is a pretty good customer of this railroad," said Slim.

"Just about the best we've got around here. They've been shipping a lot more stuff in the last year than ever before."

"Ever hear anything about any rustling going on in the Creeping Shadows country?" asked Slim, watching the agent intently.

"Sure. There's been bad talk for a couple of years, but nothing seems to come of it. Lots of people think the Box B and the Double O are getting ready to grab the Diamond Dot."

"Who says so?"

"Why I've heard Hack Cook of the Diamond Dot tell how the big outfits were trying to run over him."

"Then doesn't it seem kinda queer that Cook's shipping as many cattle as the other two combined?"

"I asked him about that once," replied the railroad man, "and he said he was cleaning out his range so if they chased him out he wouldn't lose so much."

Slim grunted. It was an explanation, but a pretty thin one. He went out to the yards. They had not been used for some weeks, but he recalled that the last bill of lading had been dated only the week before. He turned back to the station.

"Your last bill of lading was dated only a week ago," he told the agent, "but those yards haven't been used for at least a month. Something funny's going on around here. You'd better talk and talk fast."

"I didn't say the cattle had been shipped from here," replied the agent. "You didn't ask me where they were shipped from. Just keep your temper and I'll tell you."

The freight whistled in, stopping only long enough for water and orders, and then clanked out again. When he had reported the passage of the freight, the agent turned to Slim.

"Cook drives his cattle through a low pass in the Cajons and hits the main line about fifteen miles below here. In order to save time we load direct on a way freight, using a portable chute."

"Then Cook lets you know a couple of days in advance so you can have the chute on the way freight?"

"Sure. I have to see that the freight's carrying enough empty cattle cars to take care of his stuff. He's shipping two cars out tomorrow night."

"You're certain about that?"

The agent handed Slim a copy of an order he had sent the dispatcher, asking for two empty cattle cars in the way freight the next night.

Slim tossed the order back.

"Keep your mouth shut about my visit. If a word leaks out that I've been here, I'll know who's to blame and I'll see that you get in plenty of trouble."

He hurried out of the station, his mind buzzing with plans. Cook was shipping cattle the next night fifteen miles down the line. It was time for action. There wasn't a minute to lose. Hours of hard riding faced him, but he felt that within the next two days the mystery of the rustling in the Creeping Shadows country would be solved.

The Cloudburst

It was on the ride back to the line camp of the Double O and the Box B that Lightning showed her magnificent stamina. Mile after mile the big sorrel covered at a trail-eating lope.

Slim didn't dare return to the Creeping Shadows country through the low pass. Instead, he rode miles out of his way and came in further north, cutting across a corner of the Diamond Dot range and then racing along the east line of the Double O.

It was late afternoon when threatening clouds rolled out of the Three Soldiers in the west. The air grew still and moist. Nature seemed to hush as the angry clouds climbed higher. The sun was blotted out. It was one of those quick, terrible storms of midsummer and Slim looked for shelter. There was none. He could only ride, hoping that the rain would not come down too hard.

The first big drops pelted him. Then the skies opened, a gray wall of water rushing down from the heavens. In spite of the poncho, Slim was soon soaked and the water rushed off Lightning's flanks in torrents. Heads down, horse and rider plodded on.

It was impossible to see more than a few hundred feet, but Slim knew he was in a valley. That was bad. The rain was of almost cloudburst proportions and a wall of water might come sweeping along at any moment.

Slim urged Lightning to a faster pace, and the faithful sorrel responded. The cowboy looked for higher ground, but instead they seemed to be going down a gentle slope. Then they looked down on what had been a dry wash. It was running several feet deep with water and rising all the time. On the other side lay higher ground and as Slim debated what to do, the dull rumble of oncoming water could be heard above the noise of the storm.

If he turned back, it might be hours before he could cross the stream. He leaned over and spoke to Lightning. "Let's go," he urged her and the sorrel started down the bank. Slim almost held his breath as the water swirled about them. Lightning walked carefully, for a slip would send them both into the torrent.

The sound of the oncoming water filled the heavens with its terrible roar and Slim looked upstream. Around a bend poured a wall of water, black, raging, death-dealing.

Lightning's hoofs touched the other bank and with a great leap the sorrel left the water. But danger still lurked for horse and rider. The wall of water was spreading out. They were far from safety.

As though sensing that death was riding hard behind them, Lightning shot ahead, mud flying from her hoofs. In great leaps the sorrel kept ahead of the madly rushing waters, angling always toward the higher ground.

Slim looked behind. The water was gaining. He urged Lightning to another burst of speed and the great horse responded. It didn't seem possible that they would escape, but with a last noble effort, Lightning flashed over the muddy ground and they reached safety just as the flood waters swept by.

Slim pulled up his horse and watched the torrent roar down the valley. Gratefully he leaned over and stoked Lightning's head.

"That's another score in your favor, girl," he said. "Maybe I'll be able to repay you some day."

Almost as suddenly as it had descended the storm broke and the sky cleared. The sun went down behind the Three Soldiers in a crimson aura of light and Slim and Lightning pressed on over ground that had hardly been dampened by the rain. They reached the line camp just at dusk and found the Double O and Box B riders getting ready for the night patrol. Slim swung out of the saddle as Joe and Nels hurried toward him.

"What luck?" asked Joe.

"Plenty," replied Slim, "but first I've got to take care of Lightning and then get a little grub for myself. I'm starved."

Half an hour later, with a plate of steaming food before him and the Double O and Box B riders grouped around, he related the events of the last few hours.

"I've suspected Hack Cook for some time," said Joe Haines, hitching his gun belt higher when Slim told them that another shipment of stolen cattle was to be dispatched the next night.

"They've shipped the last of *our* cattle," rumbled Nels, his hands shaking with rage. The other cowboys backed up his remarks with determined expressions.

"What's the plan of action?" Joe asked Slim, for the young rider, by his resourcefulness, had become the acknowledged leader now in planning the campaign against the rustlers.

"I think we'd better hit the trail for Mopstick. Then swing south along the railroad and lay a trap for the rustlers. They'll drive the cattle through the low pass in the Cajons and we'll catch them red-handed. That will give us all of the evidence we'll need."

Nels nodded his approval and Joe looked around at the others.

"You boys all set for a clash with the rustlers?" he asked.

"You know it," replied Al Bass.

Less than an hour later, the Box B and the Double O cowboys left the line camp, Slim taking the lead and Nels and Joe trailing close behind. At the pace they planned to travel, it would be an all night ride to Mopstick, where they would water their horses, rest, and then ride leisurely down the railroad and lay their trap for the rustlers.

They crossed the country where Slim had almost been trapped by the cloudburst and found the stream nearly back to normal. Hour after hour they moved along the trail, cutting through the foothills and then over the Cajons and down the other side.

Slim was thinking of the action that would come the next night, considering first one plan and then another for cornering the rustlers. He didn't want bloodshed if it could be avoided. If things went well, the rustling in the Creeping Shadows country would be broken soon.

It was nearly dawn when they reached Mopstick, where they watered their horses at the trough under the railroad tank. A fast mail thundered through the hamlet, and Al Bass was taken for a ride by his cayuse, which went wild at the sound of the locomotive whistle.

Pat Beals and one of the Double O riders had brought along the grub and they all lent a hand in getting breakfast. After that the horses were turned into the stockyard and fed while their riders slept in the cool shade of the water tank. It was noon before they were ready to start down the railroad.

Slim went into the tiny depot and spoke to the agent.

"What time will the freight be along to pick up the cattle?" he asked.

"About six o'clock. That gives them better than an hour to get the beef loaded."

"Thanks," said Slim. "Mind you now, not a word about this to anyone."

A few minutes later an even dozen grim-faced cowboys started down the railroad, their horses refreshed by the feed and rest and the riders alert and ready for whatever blazing action the next few hours might hold for them.

The agent had given Slim explicit directions on just where the freight would stop and how the cattle were loaded. It was midafternoon when the cowboys reached the place along the right-of-way. Fortunately there was plenty of cover nearby, low undergrowth providing an excellent hiding place for riflemen while an outcropping of rock would shelter the horses from the rustlers.

Slim, Joe and Nels surveyed the scene carefully. There must be no slips. The trap must be carefully laid.

It was finally decided to place riflemen in the underbrush, holding several riders in reserve behind the rock outcrop. The minute the firing started, they would sweep out and cut off the escape. With the train blocking the railroad, the riflemen on each side and a mounted rear guard, there seemed little chance that the cattle thieves would be able to get away.

Nels took charge of the riflemen while Slim and Joe elected to ride with the men who would cut off the escape from the rear. By the time they had taken their places, a cloud of dust could be seen on the trail from the Cajons. The rustlers were coming, driving the stolen cattle leisurely, for there was ample time before the freight arrived.

A small stream ran a half mile back from the right-of-way and it was here that the rustlers paused to water the cattle. Slim, watching from the protection of the rock outcropping, counted six riders.

The sound of an engine whistle came to them faintly and he turned to see a plume of smoke far up the track. The local freight was coming. The rustlers heard the whistle and started the cattle moving toward the tracks. The showdown was near and Slim felt cool and ready for anything that might happen.

Trapped

The freight train clanked to a stop while a quarter of a mile away the cattle churned restlessly. Slim was impatient for the break that would mean action, the break that he hoped would mean the end of the rustlers in the Creeping Shadows country.

While the train crew unloaded the portable chute, the rustlers drove the cattle nearer. Slim looked around at the riders grouped nearby. Impatiently Joe was fingering his six gun and behind him Al Bass sat calmly, his face tense and a little white. Three other horsemen were ready to sweep out and cut off the escape of the rustlers.

Watching the approach of the cattle and the riders, Slim was not surprised to recognize the squat, heavy form of Hack Cook, owner of the Diamond Dot.

"I'm taking Cook," muttered Joe, who recognized the Diamond Dot owner just as Slim did. The cowboy detective nodded. He'd let Joe have the first chance, for after all it was a feud between the ranches of the valley. If Joe failed to get Cook, Slim knew that with Lightning under him he could overtake anything in the country.

The rustlers whirled around the cattle, keeping them in a compact mass as they neared the train. Suddenly there was a burst of gunfire. The riflemen hidden in the bushes had blazed away.

A horse and rider went down. In another blast of lead a second rustler threw up his hand and pitched from the saddle to lie inert upon the ground.

Guns leaped into the hands of the remaining rustlers and they opened a rapid fire on the riflemen. Joe spurred his horse, and the riders swept out from behind the rock. Slim was riding easily, cautiously, ready to take the trail of the first rustler who made a break for liberty.

"Get 'em all," shouted Joe. "It's the Diamond Dot outfit."

The gunfire was savage, ripping the silence and hurling echoes against the boxcars. The astonished train crew scurried for shelter.

The rustlers knew they were up against tremendous odds, for the cattlemen far outnumbered them and were shooting from shelter.

Hack Cook whirled to meet the menace of the riders. He was using two guns, both of them spouting flame and smoke. A Double O rider who had leaped ahead of Slim slumped in his saddle and his fright-crazed horse pitched him to the ground.

Another Diamond Dot rider went down before the hail of lead. There were only three rustlers left, Hack Cook, one of his cowboys and Newt Bemis, whom Slim knew as a henchman of Hal Titzell's.

Slim saw Bemis shooting at Joe. He opened fire with his own six gun and the second shot sent Bemis tumbling out of his saddle.

The remaining Diamond Dot cowboy made a dash for the train while Hack Cook whirled his cayuse and rode straight toward Al Bass. Al didn't flinch, his own gun blazing away steadily at the two-gun desperado. But Al never had a chance. Cook's heavy bullet caught him in the shoulder and he spun to the ground.

Slim had been too far away to get a draw on Cook, and the rustler broke through the cordon of riders and dashed away up the trail leading through the Cajons.

The cowboy detective paused only long enough to make sure that the other rustler would be captured. Then he spoke to Lightning and set out in pursuit of Cook.

The great sorrel could have overtaken the Diamond Dot owner within a mile, but Slim had other plans. There was a fair chance that Cook, ridden by fear, would lead him to the mountain hideout of the rustlers and there Slim felt that he would find Chuck. He didn't dare think that anything had happened to Chuck, that he wouldn't find his companion alive.

Lightning struck an easy pace, keeping within sight of the fleeing Cook, and Slim carefully reloaded his gun. Behind him the sound of firing died out and he knew that the last Diamond Dot cowboy had either been brought down by the blazing guns of the cowboys or had surrendered.

Slim looked down at the trail ahead and something in one of the hoofprints made him pull Lightning to a sudden halt. He slid out of his saddle. The left rear hoofprint of Cook's horse was marked by a V-shaped nick. There was no doubting it now. Cook was the man who had ambushed the owner of the Box B. He was the rider who had directed the raids on the Box B and the Double O in an attempt to get those outfits fighting each other in a finish battle.

When Slim remounted, he rode with new determination. The rustling mystery was near its solution.

In the Cajons

Chuck's mind was vague and his head throbbed dully. The last thing he could remember was firing wildly at guns flashing in the night. Gradually his memory returned and he remembered the night raid by the rustlers on the Box B cattle.

The riders had come silently out of the night, following a little draw driving a small herd ahead of them. He had swept down on them after giving the alarm and they had opened fire instantly. Then something had struck his head, constellations had danced before his glazing eyes, and he had collapsed in the saddle. How much time had elapsed or where he was, were questions he couldn't answer.

Chuck moved cautiously and learned that he was bound hand and foot. His roving eyes took in his prison. He was lying on the floor of a lean-to, one wall of which was formed by a larger cabin. It was daylight, for he could see the sky through cracks in the roof, but there was no sound to indicate that anyone was near.

The cowboy detective attempted to sit up, and after a painful ordeal, managed to twist his body into a partially upright position. His hands and feet were numb, but there was a little give in the ropes which held his hands and he moved them steadily. The circulation returned to his aching arms. For a time Chuck had hopes of freeing his hands, but he had to give up in defeat and he rolled back onto the floor.

Hours passed before he heard the sound of horses and a few minutes later two riders dismounted within a few feet of the lean-to. He could hear their voices plainly. One he recognized as that of Hack Cook and the other, though familiar, he could not identify.

"Where's the kid?" he heard the unknown ask.

"Tied up on the floor of the lean-to. He's got a back nick in his head where one of our bullets grazed him last night."

Well, that was something. Chuck knew that the raid had taken place only the night before and from the waning sunlight, it must be late afternoon.

The door of the lean-to opened and two masked men entered. The first one he knew was the owner of the Diamond Dot, but the second he could not identify.

Hack Cook bent down and looked at Chuck's throbbing head.

"He ain't hurt much. Couple of days and he'll never know he was hit."

"I'll say he won't," put in the other rustler. "In a couple of more days he'll not care what happens. I'm positive this kid and that Slim Evans are cattle dicks."

"We searched Meade but didn't find a thing," replied Cook.

"Makes no difference. These boys are too dangerous to have loose on the range. Why Evans was within a few minutes of you when you were riding in the foothills of the Three Soldiers after you failed to bump off old man Marks. If it hadn't been for that rain, he'd have gotten you sure."

"Another thing, he's looking for a man that rides a horse with a shoe that's got a V-shaped nick."

"I fixed that," growled Cook. "Had Doug Huston file a nick on one of the shoes of Meade's horse and we filed a couple on the horses of the other boys. Say, there's so many V-shaped nicks making tracks around this valley that the fellow who tries to follow all of them will go crazy."

"Then let's hope that Evans tries to follow them all. That fellow's just plain dynamite."

Chuck was hungry and he spoke up.

"How about something to eat?" he asked.

"Not tonight. We haven't got any grub with us. Maybe we'll be back tomorrow."

"Then give me a drink."

Cook laughed harshly. "It'll do you good to get thirsty. Give you an idea of what we're going to do with you when we have time."

They stepped outside and slammed the door. Chuck could hear them conversing outside.

"When are you going to ship the cattle?" asked the unidentified rustler.

"Day after tomorrow. Can't get cars until then," replied Cook.

"Well, keep a close eye on Meade. I'm going back to Dirty Water. After the cattle are safely out I'll come back and we'll decide just how we'll dispose of this fellow."

They mounted their horses and rode rapidly away, leaving Chuck alone, without food or water. The air grew chill, and he spent a miserable night.

It was mid morning when he heard a lone rider coming toward the cabin. The horseman dismounted and opened the door. Like the visitors of the day before he was masked, but he had a jug of water and some food. He untied the ropes that bound Chuck's hands and, gun in hand, squatted on the other side of the lean-to while Chuck wolfed the food. His lips were cracked from lack of water and his stomach ached with a great emptiness, but the coarse food soon gave him new energy. If the

masked rustler would only come close enough for him to lunge. Chuck eyed the distance with a calculating eye.

"Turn around," commanded the gunman. Chuck was forced to obey, and the rope was slipped over his hands again. The lean-to was in semi-darkness and Chuck managed to tense his hands. Perhaps there would be a little slack when the rustler finished tying the knots.

Chuck was hurled over on his back and the rustler slammed the door and rode away. It was not until Chuck was sure that he was quite alone again, that he renewed his attempt to loosen his bonds. The rope around his wrists gave slightly and he worked steadily, straining against the bonds. Night came and in spite of himself he fell asleep.

At dawn he was at the painful task again, straining and tugging, and making a little progress all of the time. At last his left hand slipped free, then his right, and with shaking fingers he untied the knots that had held his legs fast.

His legs were so numb that he was forced to crawl out of the lean-to on his hands and knees. Once outside he rested in the bright sunlight, blinking his eyes against the unaccustomed light. He massaged the muscles of his legs until the circulation was back to normal and then he stood up. It was great to be free again.

At a nearby stream Chuck washed his face and hands and gingerly felt of the wound on his head. Nature had done a good job of healing it and unless he got another severe bump, it should heal all right.

Chuck took time to survey his prison. The cabin and lean-to were in the heart of the Cajons, an old trail leading away to the left. It was along this that the rustlers who had visited the cabin traveled. There appeared to be no other exit from the valley and Chuck set out along the trail, walking carefully.

For better than a mile he followed the winding path. Then it opened suddenly into a wider valley and Chuck looked down on the hiding place of the rustlers of the Creeping Shadows.

There was plenty of water here and lots of rich grass. A large pole corral had been built near the far end of the valley where the mountains closed in again. Down there was also a large cabin. The whole valley appeared deserted except for a calico cayuse which was in a smaller corral. Chuck's heart leaped as he recognized his own horse.

Keeping under shelter as much as possible he made his way down the valley. The entire layout was deserted and he entered the cabin. His saddle and rifle as well as six-gun were piled against one wall and with eager hands Chuck fastened the gun belt around his waist. There was food in the cabin and he soon had a good meal. Rifle in hand and saddle over one shoulder, he started for the corral. Refreshed by the food, he was ready to hit the road.

The dusty trail leading out of the larger corral indicated that a small herd of cattle had been driven out of it a short time before and Chuck picked up the trail and followed it, angling always a little to the left.

A few minutes later the smaller trail joined the one Slim had followed through the mountains, the path the rustlers used in running the cattle out of the Creeping Shadows over to the railroad. Chuck had stumbled on the hiding place where they held the stolen livestock until time to ship them out from the railroad.

Still following the trail of the cattle, Chuck swung toward the railroad. He rode steadily, ever watchful lest he run into another trap of the rustlers. At noon he was well down the east side of the Cajons and he saw the local freight pulling down the main line and stop, but he was still some miles away, too great a distance to see what happened after the freight stopped.

Chuck spurred his cayuse into a full gallop, rocketing down out of the Cajon foothills. The trail straightened out and a lone rider, coming at a furious pace, came into sight.

Chuck swung his cayuse off the trail, slid from the saddle, and found shelter behind a rock. The oncoming rider had been too busy looking behind him to see Chuck.

It was Hack Cook, owner of the Diamond Dot. Then Slim galloped into view and Chuck snuggled his cheek down against the butt of his rifle and voted himself a large-sized share of the chase.

Much as he knew the rustler deserved to be shot down without mercy, Chuck couldn't quite bring himself to that. Lining his sights on the oncoming rider, he pressed the trigger. There was a tiny spurt of smoke from the rifle and Hack Cook catapulted from the saddle, drilled neatly through the right shoulder.

The Confession

Slim rode easily, keeping the fleeing owner of the Diamond Dot within sight. They pushed deeper into the Cajon foothills and Slim knew that Cook's horse would soon commence to slow down under the pace, which was gruelling for the average range horse.

In desperation Cook dismounted and unlimbered his rifle but Slim, sensing the move before the rustler had found cover, dropped out of his saddle and fired rapidly at the Diamond Dot man. Cook was beaten at his own game and he leaped back into the saddle to continue the race against certain capture.

If he could only hold out until nightfall there was just a chance that he could escape, but Slim had no intention of allowing the rustler to do that. He was closing the gap steadily when the trail opened into a long, narrow defile in the mountains.

Cook spurred his tiring horse madly, while Slim gave Lightning her head. It was a good place to end the chase. He slipped his rifle out of the scabbard and lined up the sights. Before he could raise the weapon to his shoulder he saw Cook topple from his saddle to lie motionless along the trail.

Slim pulled Lightning up sharply. Perhaps it was a trick of the rustler's, a ruse to bring him within sure range.

Slim dismounted and moved forward warily, his rifle ready for instant use. Then the echo of hoofs warned him of the approach of another rider and up ahead Chuck burst into view on his calico cayuse. It was then that Slim knew Cook's fall from the saddle was no ruse. He had been shot down by Chuck, who had suddenly voted himself a hand in the play.

The Flying Arrow cowboy was the first to reach the wounded rustler. Cook was still dazed from the shock of the wound and the fall, but he was not seriously injured. Relieving him of his weapons, Slim looked up just as Chuck arrived in a thunder of drumming hoofs and a cloud of dust.

"Where under the sun did you come from?" demanded the astonished Slim.

"I'll tell you all about that later. Did I get that skunk?" Chuck pointed toward the rustler.

"Through the right shoulder," nodded Slim. "If you hadn't cut in on the play when you did, I was figuring on stopping his travels in about another second."

"Yeh, but I owed him a little more than you did. What's happened since I did the disappearing act?"

"We had a little fireworks along the railroad this afternoon," smiled Slim. "Seemed a half dozen hombres were shipping some Box B cattle under another name and we put a stop to it."

"Did you get them all?"

"Counting Cook here, they're all in the bag."

"That must just about clean out the gang," said Chuck.

"There's a few more, but we'll round them up in time."

"I've got a score to settle with one of them," said Chuck, relating briefly how he had been held captive. He was especially incensed at his treatment at the hands of the masked man who had accompanied Hack Cook on the visit of the Diamond Dot owner to the hideout where he had been held captive.

"I'm going to find out who that fellow was," went on Chuck.

"I think I know," put in Slim, "but if you can get Cook to tell you, so much the better."

They bent over the rustler, who was now thoroughly aware of his dangerous situation. Slim tore off a piece of Cook's shirt and bound up the shoulder wound.

"Give me a drink of water," the rustler begged.

"Not on your life," snapped Chuck. "You fellows didn't treat me any too well. I want to know the name of the hombre that was with you."

Cook's face whitened, but his lips tensed and he only shook his head.

"So that's the way it is," said Chuck grimly. "Believe me, you're going to talk."

The Circle Four cowboy took the rope off his saddle and deftly slipped a noose around Cook's shoulders.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Slim, who wasn't sure whether Chuck was in earnest or was merely trying to scare the rustler.

"I'm going to drag the information I want out of this cheap desperado," replied the cowboy detective.

Chuck walked toward his horse, straightened the rope out after him. Cook attempted to free himself, but Chuck had done a neat job.

The Circle Four cowboy mounted his cayuse and turned back to Cook.

"There's one more chance. Who was with you?"

Still the rustler's lips were sealed and with a warning glance at Slim not to interfere, Chuck spoke

to his horse. The cayuse moved ahead and the rope tightened.

A startled cry broke from Cook's lips.

"I'll talk!" he screamed, "I'll talk! Don't drag me over these rocks."

Chuck dismounted.

"I thought it would work," he grinned at Slim. "This fellow's yellow clear through."

The cowboy detectives bent over Cook.

"Talk fast," Chuck warned him. "If you don't I'll take you for a real ride."

Cook moistened his lips. It was plain that he was reluctant to talk and only Chuck's threat of a terrible punishment had loosened his tongue.

"It was Titzell," he muttered. "Titzell got us into this jam. He was too greedy. He wanted everything."

Slim looked at Chuck. He had been right. Titzell was the leader of the rustlers. Disguised as a cattle buyer, he had ridden the length and breadth of the valley, spotting choice stock to be run off by the gang later.

"Who else is in the gang?" insisted the relentless Chuck.

"They'll kill me if they learn I've squealed," begged Cook.

"If you don't talk, they'll never see you again," promised Slim.

"There's Maxie Denkman and Leo Kovec and Newt Bemis, besides the boys on my own place."

"How many have you got there?"

"Ten altogether, but you got four of them and Newt Bemis when you jumped us at the train."

"That leaves six more Diamond Dot riders, plus Maxie Denkman and the marshal at Dirty Water," said Slim. "Maxie's out of the way, because I put a slug in his elbow when he tried that ambush on the Sky High trail."

"Where's the other six?" demanded Chuck.

"Two of the boys are watching the Sky High trail, two of them are over on the trail through the Three Soldiers and the last two are on the trail from the valley south."

"Think he's telling the truth?" Chuck asked.

The tall cowboy nodded and walked over and picked up Cook's rifle. Calmly he fired a bullet into the ground and then picked up the spent shell. He produced another cartridge from an inner pocket and compared the firing pin marks on the base of the shell.

"I guess your days are numbered," he told Cook when he turned back. "The shell from your gun corresponds exactly with one I found at the scene of the ambush of Adam Marks and your horse has the same V-shaped nick on the left rear shoe."

"There's marks like that all over the range. That don't prove anything."

"Oh yes, it does. Remember that I'll testify I heard you and Titzell talking about that in the cabin and you figured you were pretty smart to file marks like that on a number of shoes."

Chuck's words crushed the last resistance in the rustler.

It was twilight when the first of the Box B riders came up the trail. Pat Beals was ahead and the cowboy detectives placed Hack Cook in his hands for safekeeping.

"Where you going?" Pat demanded.

"To finish the job of cleaning up this gang of rustlers," said Slim. "We'll see you tomorrow sometime at the ranch."

Before Pat could protest, Slim and Chuck spurred away up the trail, determined to strike fast and hard at the rest of the rustlers.

Showdown

The sky was clear that night and the trail through the Cajons was easy to follow. They stopped at the rustlers' hideout and cooked a late supper.

"I've got a little errand to do," said Chuck, leaving the campfire. He mounted and disappeared up the sidetrail. A few minutes later Slim saw tongues of flame licking above the tree tops. Chuck had set fire to the cabin where he had been held captive.

Before they left, they got an axe from the main cabin and chopped away the main poles of the corral. Then, fastening ropes on the other poles, they pulled the whole structure down. Again a match was touched to the corral and cabin and flames licked hungrily at the dry wood.

"There'll be no more use of this layout by rustlers," said Chuck grimly.

From then on they rode at an easy pace for it was useless to attempt to reach Dirty Water before morning. Stopping at the line camp, they found Lee Wu keeping guard and the cook rustled them an early breakfast.

They told him briefly of what had happened at the railroad and how they had set fire to the rustlers' hideout.

"Plenty good," the Chinaman grinned, giving them extra portions of bacon. "Plenty good."

Before they left the line camp, Slim wrote a note to Joe Haines. He had slipped badly, having forgotten to tell Pat Beals that rustlers were still stationed on three trails leading out of the valley.

It was this information he left in the note, urging Joe to send riders out at once to capture the other rustlers.

Then Slim and Chuck pressed on. Dawn found them nearing Dirty Water and the village was just beginning to show signs of life when they rode across the creek and tied their horses at the rail in front of the Palace Hotel.

"They eat early here," said Slim. "You stay outside and be ready to take care of any of the boys who decide to get away in a hurry."

"You're not going into the hotel alone," protested Chuck.

"I'm going to do that very thing," said Slim with a definiteness that Chuck knew was final. "I'm counting on you to discourage them if they get outside. Remember, we want Hal Titzell, Leo Kovec and Maxie Denkman."

"I'll remember," promised Chuck.

Slim looked up and down the street. Pike Carberry and Jim Ferris were coming down from Carberry's store for breakfast at the hotel. They greeted Slim cordially.

"Better not go in to breakfast just yet," said Slim.

"Why not?" asked Carberry.

"There may be trouble," replied the cowboy detective. "Just wait a bit."

Jim Ferris looked around at Chuck, who was lounging nearby with his rifle in his hands.

"He's right," he advised the storekeeper. "I'll be satisfied with cheese and crackers. Come on."

They turned and hurried back to the store and Slim stepped into the small lobby of the hotel. Sounds from the dining room indicated that breakfast was in progress.

Slim took off his hat and pinned the small shield that had been hidden there on his vest. Then he walked into the dining room. There were four men at the long table, the hotel owner at the head with Hal Titzell at his right. On the other side were Leo Kovec and Maxie Denkman and Maxie, with his wounded arm, was making a poor job of eating the hot cereal.

Titzell looked up as Slim entered.

"Hello, there. What's the news from the wide open spaces?"

"Plenty," said Slim easily. Then Titzell's eyes caught the gleam of the small shield on Slim's vest and the smile vanished. In its place came an expression of repressed fury and alarm.

"Seems as though some of the Diamond Dot boys were caught trying to ship some Box B cattle yesterday afternoon," said Slim.

Maxie Denkman sneezed into the cereal and Leo Kovec let his fork drop with a clatter.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Titzell, his voice low and tense.

"Plenty of the Diamond Dot boys and it seems as though I recall seeing a friend of yours being shot out of the saddle."

"Who was that?" asked Maxie.

"Newt Bemis." Slim's eyes never left Titzell for he knew that if there were to be fireworks, Titzell would start the trouble.

But Titzell never batted an eye and Slim gave him another shock.

"Hack Cook was taken, too. Hack talked."

That touched off the fuse. Titzell knew then that Slim had come to take him. With a leap he was clear of the table, his right hand sweeping toward the shoulder holster.

But Slim had anticipated the move. As Titzell clawed the gun from his holster, the explosion of Slim's gun echoed through the hotel and Titzell's weapon spun across the room.

The hotel owner made a dive for safety beneath his table while Leo Kovec plunged through the window. Only Maxie Denkman remained seated.

"I know when I've had enough," he said. "You can count me out."

From outside came the report of a rifle and Slim knew that Chuck had gone into action. There was no answering shot and Slim figured that Kovec would cause no more trouble.

Titzell was holding his right hand, numbed by the shock of Slim's bullet.

"Get outside," commanded the cowboy detective and Maxie followed Titzell out.

There they found that Chuck was sitting astride Kovec, the marshal groveling in the sand.

"I just took one shot at him," Chuck grinned, "and he thought he was hit sure. Gosh, to think that I missed at only fifty yards!"

Residents of Dirty Water crowded around them, seeking an explanation, but Slim refused to tell them what had taken place. Chuck stood guard over the prisoners, while Slim went around to the stable and ordered the hostler to saddle three horses. A short time later the three rustlers, with Slim and Chuck riding close behind, started the journey to the Box B.

Titzell and Denkman were silent, but Kovec talked volubly. He was scared to death and Slim took advantage of this fear. From a saddle bag he pulled the gun which Chuck had found outside Doc Baldrige's office the night a second attempt had been made to kill the owner of the Box B.

"Recognize this gun?" he asked.

"It belongs to Titzell. He said he lost it."

"Shut up!" The cattle buyer roared at Kovec, but it was too late. Slim knew all that was necessary. He had all of the evidence needed to put Titzell and the Diamond Dot riders behind the bars for a long, long time.

When they reached the Box B, they found Bill Needham waiting to greet them.

"Great work, boys," he said, as they rode up. "You've certainly cleared out the rustlers in the Creeping Shadows."

"We've got the evidence, but you'll have to prove the case in court against them," said Slim.

"I'll do that all right," said Old Bill. "I've been talking with Hack Cook and he's given me a full account under oath. Titzell's the big gun in this whole thing. He came in when Cook was just about ready to fold up and between the two of them they figured that if they could steal enough cattle and get the Double O and the Box B fighting each other, they'd have a good chance to step in and grab both ranches cheap."

Joe Haines came down from the ranch house. "The boss wants to see you," he said.

"Any of the Box B or Double O boys get hurt much?" asked Slim.

"Al Bass has a flesh wound and so has another one of the Double O riders and Doug Huston's disappeared."

"Yeh, I should think he would," said Chuck. "He was hand in glove with this outfit. He was the guy who roped Slim that night down at the corral and left him tied up by the creek. Doug kept the gang tipped off to everything the Box B was doing."

"You mean almost everything," put in Slim.

They found Adam Marks almost recovered and from him they received heartfelt thanks for their fine work.

Nels Anderson was waiting for them outside. "By gar, boys," he roared. "Anytime you need help, just let Nels know. I'll come a-runnin'."

Box B and Double O riders had gone out to round up the last of the rustlers who had been guarding the main trails into the valley and the end was rapidly being written on the feud which had threatened for a time to disrupt the entire valley. There was nothing more that Slim and Chuck needed to do and after a hearty dinner at the cookhouse, where Lee Wu was once more presiding over the pots and pans, they mounted and rode down the trail toward Dirty Water. Behind them they left the shouted farewells of the Box B and Double O cowboys and a promise from Bill Needham that he would call on them again when a knotty mystery confronted him.

They circled Dirty Water, for they had no desire to give a long explanation of their activities, and continued on toward the Sky High trail. A few miles further on they met Walt Kelly and a Double O rider coming down with the two rustlers who had been stationed to guard the trail. The way in and out of the valley was open once more.

By sundown they were well along the trail. Turning in their saddles they looked back on the Creeping Shadows country. Night was already stealing out of the majestic valleys of the Three Soldiers and peace once more ruled the valley.

They turned their horses up the trail, wondering what new adventures might be in store for them with the coming days.

Transcriber's Note

1. Copyright notice provided as in the original printed text—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
2. Obvious typographical errors were corrected.
3. Dialect and non-standard spellings were not changed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SLIM EVANS AND HIS HORSE LIGHTNING ***

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