

*Rigby jerked out a revolver*

## Wild Oats

*His partner kidnaped, a price on his own head, Johnny Bell released himself from a trap in his own ranch house—to find a deputy sheriff awaiting him*

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LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT.

**Y**OUNG Whizzer Lee had never had a serious thought in his life until his lawyer-guardian in Philadelphia, Kenneth Ross, informed him that his inherited fortune of a million dollars had been sunk in the Copper Prince Mine in Arizona, which had been flooded.

Making the best of a bad situation, Whizzer takes the thousand dollars given him by the unscrupulous Ross, who had pillaged Whizzer's inheritance, and starts west. A train wreck

halts him at Red Feather, Arizona, where he falls in with Johnny Bell, a young rancher.

Unknown to Whizzer, the near-by Z Bar 8 ranch is owned by the lawyer, Ross, who calls himself Harvey in his dealings with his Red Feather representative, Banker Henry Rigby, and his ranch manager, Jim McKee.

Jealousy flares on the part of Dell Carver, Z Bar 8 foreman, and Zell Orme, his assistant, when they see the girls they fancy, Ella Rigby and Rose

This story began in the *Argosy* for December 26.

McKee, becoming friendly with Johnny and Whizzer. Orme and Carver make veiled threats against their rivals.

McKee tells Banker Rigby that cattle are being rustled from the Z Bar 8, and this information, added to the fact that Whizzer Lee is in the vicinity, brings Ross post haste from the East.

When Rigby's bank is robbed, Rigby places the blame on Johnny Bell, whose attentions to his daughter are resented by the banker. Whizzer finds Johnny who has been slugged, and takes him to their JB ranch, where, to their surprise, they discover part of the loot from the bank in the ranch house, and the body of Sheriff Reese, who has been murdered with .41 caliber bullets—the kind Johnny uses.

Johnny becomes a fugitive. "Lonesome" Wolf, the deputy sheriff, is none too active in searching for him, being more or less convinced, by Whizzer's straightforward story, that Johnny is innocent. Johnny visits the JB ranch to get food, sees a group of men coming, and hides himself in the cellar. From that place he hears Whizzer being attacked and kidnaped, but cannot get out in time to help him. When he does free himself from the cellar, he emerges to face Lonesome Wolf.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE PLOT AGAINST WHIZZER.

**J**OHNNY stared at the deputy sheriff. "You had a hell of a time gittin' out, didn't yuh?" said Lonesome.

"Was you here all that time, Lonesome?"

"Shore."

"And yuh didn't offer to help me!"

"Didn't know it was you. I thought

mebbe a woodpecker got down there by mistake. Where's Whizzer?"

"That's what I'm wonderin', Lonesome," said Johnny, and proceeded to tell Lonesome all he knew about the situation.

"Don't make sense," declared Lonesome. "How could anybody make a stake off Whizzer? Why gag him?"

"Don't ask me," said Johnny wearily. "Why did they talk about the Triple X outfit and the town of Shelton?"

"Now, yo're askin' me riddles. Do yuh realize yo're worth a thousand dollars, alive or dead?"

"Whizzer told me. Are yuh aimin' to collect, Lonesome?"

Lonesome yawned and shook his head.

"Yo're a hell of an officer!"

"I ain't."

"Ain't what?"

"Ain't no officer."

"No? Since when?"

"I got m'self conspired against."

"Yea-a-ah?"

"Shore. Yuh see, I antagonized old man Rigby somethin' awful, and I told the prosecutin' attorney he was a damn ol' lady and ort to git him a petticoat. He said I was neglectin' my duty—my sworn duty. I told him I didn't have no sworn duty; I was jist the sheriff's hired hand.

"Well, he said he'd block any attempt to make me sheriff, and I said I'd help him all I could. We got to kinda tellin' each other a lot of true things about each other, and I pasted him on the nose. Then I wrote my resignation, and came out here to associate with somebody that understood me. Yuh see, I've been misunderstood, Johnny."

"Oh, yuh hadn't ought to quit a job like that, Lonesome."

"It palled upon me, feller. I never was very strong for the law."

"But, damn it, Lonesome, you can't associate with me."

"Wasn't aimin' to; I thought Whizzer was here."

"Oh," grunted Johnny. "Well, I wish we knowed somethin' about what happened to Whizzer. How in the devil do they figure to make money out of him, I wonder?"

Johnny took the lamp and stepped into the main room, which was also the bunk-room of the ranch. Some one had opened both his and Whizzer's war-bags and flung their clothes all around the room. The bag of silver was gone.

"What the devil did they do that for?" wondered Johnny. "They never had to throw all our clothes around to find that silver."

"Huntin' for somethin'," said Lonesome. "Look at them pants. They turned the pockets inside out."

"Them's Whizzer's pants."

"I'd know that. You never had pants as good as them."

"I've had some awful good pants in my life, Lonesome."

"Yeah! With rivets instead of sewin'. I've had lots of 'em."

**T**HE coat which matched the pants was hanging on a nail, nearly hidden by an old slicker. It had apparently been overlooked. Lonesome took it off the nail and searched the pockets. Here were several old letters addressed to Whizzer, and one minus the envelope. Lonesome unfolded it and held it near the lamp.

"C'mere, Johnny!" he grunted, after perusing it for a moment.

It was the letter Kenneth Ross had handed Whizzer Lee, and it had been sent to Kenneth Ross, instead of to

"Harvey." The two men read it carefully.

"Copper Prince!" snorted Lonesome. "It says the water came in on the thousand-foot level, and is now within sixty feet of the surface. Why, the damn liar! It's only a hundred and fifty feet deep, and dry as a bone. Hell, they spent all their money driftin'!"

"Look at that name, will yuh?" blurted Johnny. "Henry H. Rigby, President. Look at that date, will yuh? Why, Lonesome, they ain't worked that mine for two years, and he's reportin' it closin' down a month ago!"

"Johnny," replied Lonesome slowly, "there's somethin' wrong. Who is this Kenneth Ross, I wonder? A feller named Harvey owned the Copper Prince; the same feller that owns the Z Bar 8. I hear he's out at the Z Bar 8 right now."

"It seems to me that Henry Rigby, the holier-than-thou, has been lyin' on paper, Lonesome."

"Dog-gone if it don't. But how does this affect Whizzer? He ain't had nothin' at all to do with the Copper Prince."

"He never mentioned it," said Johnny softly, thoughtfully. "Never did mention the Copper Prince. But, Lonesome, he told me a queer story of how his father had a million invested in a mine that flooded. Whizzer's father left everythin' to him—everythin' invested in that mine. On the showdown, Whizzer was busted. That's how he happened to come here—headin' for California."

"Wasn't never no million invested in the Copper Prince, Johnny."

"Well, wasn't old Rigby interested in the Copper Prince, before he came here to run this bank?"

"Yeah, he was."

"And didn't this feller Harvey own the mine?"

"I've heard he did. After that busted, he bought out the bank and the Z Bar 8. Whizzer told me that his lawyer's name was Ross. It was in this lawyer's office that Whizzer found that camera picture of Rose McKee. This letter is to Ross, tellin' him that the levels of the Copper Prince is flooded, and that everythin' is lost. If Lee's father owned the Copper Prince, where the hell does Harvey come in at, I'd like to know?"

"I reckon I'm ridin' to Shelton to-night," said Lonesome.

"So am I," declared Johnny.

"No, you ain't. You dang fool, you better hide in a hole and drag the hole in after yuh."

"I done that once, didn't I, Lonesome? I'm ridin' with yuh. Hell, I'm as safe there as here—mebbe safer. They won't look for me in Shelton. Anyway, that's a different county."

"It's yore neck—not mine," replied Lonesome. "Git yore bronc, cowboy; a couple damn fools are goin' on a wild goose chase."

## CHAPTER XI.

### WHIZZER STARTS SHOOTING.

IT was a long time before Whizzer awoke. That blow from the rifle barrel had nearly fractured his skull. He was in utter darkness, owing to a heavy bandage over his eyes; his mouth was full of cloth, and he seemed to be lying across a boat in a heavy sea.

It required some time for him to realize that he was lying on his belly across a saddle, with the horse traveling at a jog-trot. Ropes, which cut him cruelly, held him tightly to the saddle. Extreme nausea and a blinding head-

ache caused him to lose consciousness again, and his next sensation was of being handled roughly and finally being thrown upon a bed of some sort.

He could hear voices around him, but they meant nothing. They seemed very small and far away. The bandage was still around his eyes, but the gag was gone now. Except for the dull ache in his head he had no feeling. He tried to remember who he was and what had happened, but it was no use.

Suddenly it all came back to him with a rush. He tried to sit up, but his aching muscles refused to respond. His hands were tied, and the rope seemed to have been fastened behind him. His feet were also tied together. He relaxed and drew a deep breath. Men were talking, and it sounded as though they were in an adjoining room. Whizzer could hear disjointed sentences at first. A man was saying:

"... know what would happen if they found it out."

"Who will find out? I tell yuh it's a cinch."

Just a low rumble of conversation for a while, and a voice raised in protest:

"Hell, I never figured on anythin' like that."

"Well, I had to give the sheriff his cut. He knows who signed McKee's name to all them bills of sale."

"He didn't need so much."

"If it wasn't for him, our game wouldn't work; you know that. No way of alterin' yore brands."

"Oh, well, it's all right; we'll need him plenty. As long as he's deaf, dumb and blind—"

"He will be; don'tcha worry about him."

The voices trailed off to silence. Whizzer didn't know what the conversation meant, but it sounded very much

as though they had been having some dealings with a crooked sheriff. It was all right with Whizzer. He wished that some one would come and give him some water. He couldn't think of any earthly reason for them to knock him down and make him a captive. He had never had any trouble with any of them, except Zell Orme.

Finally he went to sleep, and later was awakened by voices near him. A man was saying:

"Naw, he's still out. I tell yuh, we better git a doctor for him; his skull is busted. Ain't nobody goin' to stay out that long with jist a pop on the head. I'm scared he'll die."

"What the hell do we care? I shore ain't goin' to bring no doctor out here for him. Pour some whisky down his neck, if yuh want to. That last keg would shore bring a wooden Injun to life."

"Mebbe some water would be better. Jist what's the idea, anyway? How are we goin' to git money out of Harvey? What's this hombre to him?"

"Stop speakin' names, will yuh?"

"Oh, hell, this jigger can't hear anythin'."

"Yuh never can tell. Pour some water down his neck."

"Yuh ain't goin' to put no guard over *him* to-night, are yuh?"

"I hope to tell yuh I ain't. If he's alive in the mornin' he'll be lucky."

Whizzer heard footsteps; a door closed, and he was alone again. The conversation had disclosed very little. Who was this man Harvey, he wondered? Harvey? Wasn't that the name of the man from Philadelphia, who was at the Z Bar 8? From Philadelphia—owner of the Z Bar 8—and these men, whoever they were, were going to use him to get money out of Harvey.

"Somebody must be crazy," decided

Whizzer. "I guess they got hit on the head, instead of me."

**H**IS head began throbbing again, and he sank into a sort of stupor. He remembered hearing voices again, and when he awoke his blindfold was gone, his legs and arms free.

The light was dim, but he could see that he was in sort of a storeroom; a place about twelve feet square, in which were hung several old saddles, some harness, and on the floor were several boxes, a pack-saddle or two and a number of tarpaulins. Whizzer was lying on some blankets, which had been placed on a folded tarpaulin. Near one corner was a rough door, but there were no windows.

Whizzer got up and stretched his sore muscles. His head was swollen and sore, but it did not ache now. He walked around the room like a man with wooden legs, but after a few moments they worked better. Carefully he tested the door, but found it locked or barred from the other side.

He went back and sat down on the bed, trying to puzzle out what it was all about. He remembered the conversation he had heard, but it did not seem to make sense. Then he heard footsteps in the adjoining room, and some one knocked on the door.

"Lee!" called a voice. "Lee, are yuh awake?"

Whizzer was on the point of replying, but something told him to ignore the question. The bar creaked, as the man lifted it out of its socket, and Whizzer quickly sprawled on the blanket again, his face hidden.

The man came in and stooped down beside him. A hand gripped his shoulder and shook him roughly, but Whizzer showed no sign of life.

"Damn it all!" the man muttered. "I told 'em he'd shuffle off if they didn't git a doctor. I'll pour some more water on him, I guess."

As the man shifted around to get the bucket, Whizzer opened one eye. The man was on his knees beside the bed, half turned away, as he reached for the bucket, and his holstered gun was within two feet of Whizzer's shoulder.

Whizzer's next move even surprised himself. He reached out, jerked the heavy gun from its holster, and jammed the muzzle against the man's side.

"Hell!" snorted the man. "Suckers ain't all dead yet!"

"Not even sick," replied Whizzer.

It was a man Whizzer had never seen before; a buck-tooth cowboy, badly in need of a shave and haircut. His little eyes were set close together, and he had a monkey-like expression as he squinted at the gun muzzle.

Whizzer backed to the door.

"I'm goin' out," he said evenly. "You stay where you are, or I'll punch you full of holes."

"Ke-rect," said the man. "Have a good time, dude."

WHIZZER stepped out and shut the door. He was in a long bunk house, the open door twenty feet ahead of him. There were tumbled blankets in the bunks, a card table and stove. When Whizzer was within a few feet of the doorway, a man stepped in. For an instant they looked at each other. The man grunted, reached for his revolver as Whizzer lifted his gun and fired point-blank.

The heavy bullet seemed to fairly fling the man backward, and he threw up both hands as he fell into the yard. Whizzer's legs did not function very well, as he went running past the fallen

man. To his left was a ranch house, to his right a pole corral; and beyond that was a brushy hillside.

There were men running from the ranch house. Some one yelled a warning, and a bullet hummed off the dirt in front of Whizzer. Another bullet whispered past his head.

Whizzer whirled to a stop, flung up his gun and fired at the group of men, which scattered along the side of the house. Then he started running toward the corral. His one hope was to get through that and into that brush. He fell through the first fence, dodged a couple of loose horses which had been frightened by the shooting, and headed for the opposite side.

As he crawled through the fence he looked back. Three men were running down from the house, trying to get a shot at him, but the two horses blocked their aim. Whizzer sent another shot past the horses, started to run, but tripped and went sprawling, flinging the gun ten feet away.

He staggered to his feet, breathing jerkily. The men were so close now that he couldn't hope to escape. Then came the report of a gun from up in the brush, and one of the men went to his knees. The other two jerked to a stop as a fusillade of bullets churned up the dust at their feet.

They appeared to forget Whizzer as they made a mad dash for the other fence, heading toward the stable. Whizzer staggered ahead, picked up his gun, and scrambled in behind a mesquite thicket. He didn't have any idea what had happened to save him; and he wasn't going to stop and investigate. The brush was so thick he couldn't see the house now, but he was following a cattle trail which wound around under a big rock and came into a little cañon.

Panting heavily, he stopped to catch a breath. Then he blinked, shut his eyes tightly for a moment and opened them again. No, this wasn't a part of his recent nightmare. In the middle of the trail stood Johnny Bell and Lonesome Wolf.

"Howdy, feller," said Lonesome casually.

Whizzer tried to laugh, but it was only a grimace.

"If yuh can still travel, we better be goin'," said Lonesome. "Them Triple X hombres might feel hurt over what we jist done to 'em."

"I—I never expected you here," said Whizzer.

"It was sort of a surprise party," grinned Johnny. "We shore put the brakes on them whippoorwills."

"I—I shot a man!" gasped Whizzer. "I just remembered."

"Don't let that git yuh down," grinned Lonesome. "C'mon."

They went in single file for about a quarter of a mile, where they found the two horses.

"Git in the saddle, Whizzer," said Johnny. "We're movin' fast. Gee, you shore got busted on the head."

"I know I did, and I'll tell you all I—"

"Save it," advised Lonesome. "It will keep, kid."

"But how in the world did you know I was here?" asked Whizzer, as they rode along the brushy trail.

"We didn't know yuh was there," replied Johnny.

**T**HEY traveled along for several miles.

Whizzer was getting weak again, and Johnny advised a stop.

"We're across the county line now, anyway," said Lonesome. "If that Triple X outfit notifies the sheriff, he

can't come beyond Poco Cañon. Up there under them live oaks is a little spring, if the cows ain't tramped it all out."

"I—I need water," said Whizzer.

"You need whisky—and I've got some," said Lonesome.

A big drink of whisky gave Whizzer a new lease on life. Johnny examined the wound on Whizzer's head, and told him he was lucky to be alive. He explained what he had heard from the cellar, and the trouble he had in getting back.

Lonesome sat with his back against a tree, chuckling softly.

"If they hadn't mentioned the Triple X and Shelton, we'd never knowed where to look," explained Johnny. "Me and Lonesome decided that they wouldn't take yuh to Shelton; so we took a chance and watched the Triple X."

"They're a crooked bunch," said Whizzer. "I heard them talking about stolen cattle, in which the sheriff got some of the money."

"No!" exclaimed Lonesome. "Yuh did? Stolen cattle, eh?"

"Something about somebody signing McKee's name to a bill of sale."

"Ah-ha-a-ah!" exploded Lonesome. "Da-a-aw-gone!"

"What's eatin' you?" asked Johnny.

"That's how they done it. McKee told Reese that the Z Bar 8 was losin' cows, and Reese thought McKee was crazy. There wasn't no way of doin' it. But with a bill of sale—don'tcha see, Johnny? Somebody sells the Triple X a bunch of Z Bar 8 cows, and they ship from Shelton. A crooked sheriff—and a forged bill of sale. Daw-gone!"

"But who?" asked Johnny. "I can see how it would work, but who in this county stands in with the Triple X and the sheriff?"

"That's for us to find out."

"I'm not fightin' any battles for the Z Bar 8, Lonesome; and yo're not an officer any more. Don't forget I'm worth a thousand dollars, dead or alive."

"But where do I come in on all this?" asked Whizzer. "What have I done? I don't see where I'm worth anything to anybody."

"I dunno," said Lonesome. "In every pack of cards there's a joker. I never could see any use for the danged thing, except in some places where they are crazy enough to play it as a wild card."

"I suppose I'm the joker in this deck," said Whizzer with a wry smile.

"Anyway, yo're an extra card that don't seem to fit. Do you know this Harvey person?"

"No, I've never met him."

"Uh-huh. Johnny tells me that yuh lost all yore money in a mine."

"That's true, Lonesome."

"Uh-huh; I wonder if it is. Looky here, Whizzer."

**L**ONESOME got to his feet and walked away from the tree. He pointed off to the southeast.

"See that kinda green spot 'way down there? That's Shelton. Now, see if yuh can shift yore eyes a little farther south, where that gray hill fades in ag'inst them two peaks. See where I mean? Fine. Now, see if yuh can see some little black spots about halfway up that hill."

"Yes, I can see them."

"Yo're lookin' at the mine that broke yuh."

"The mine that broke me? You mean—the Copper Prince?"

"That's him."

"You're not joking with me, are you, Lonesome?"

"I'm not—but I reckon somebody else did, kid."

Whizzer stared for a long time.

"Why, I had no idea the mine was around here."

"Do yuh remember the letter from the mine?" asked Johnny. "The one yore lawyer showed you?"

"I still have it, Johnny."

Johnny grinned and handed it to Whizzer, who looked at him blankly.

"Look at the signature on that letter," said Johnny.

Whizzer looked at the signature closely, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Rigby! Henry H. Rigby! Why, that must be the banker!"

"Didn't you know that before?"

"Honestly, I never paid any attention to the signature. The news hit me so hard that I absent-mindedly pocketed the letter. No, I never paid any attention to the signature. Of course, at the time, it would have meant nothing to me."

"Notice the date?" asked Lonesome.

"Yes."

"Well, feller, don't it look funny to you? That mine closed down two years ago, because they lost the vein. I'll bet yuh a new saddle there ain't a quart of water in the whole workin's. It stopped work two years ago—and Rigby reports that it jist closed down—a month ago. I don't believe Rigby has been there since he took over the bank."

"Why, that—that's funny, Lonesome. I don't see—"

"And another thing," added Lonesome. "This feller Harvey, who owns the Z Bar 8 and the Red Feather Bank, also owned the Copper Prince. If you had a million invested in that mine—say, listen: I don't believe one-tenth of that much was ever spent there."

"Well, it is all rather amazing!"

"Is that lawyer of yours an honest man?" asked Johnny.

"Kenneth Ross? Why, he handled everything for dad, and—"

Whizzer sat down and reached for Lonesome's bottle.

"I got rather shaky," he said. "Everything started whirlin'."

"Take a good one," advised Lonesome. "Mebbe that will start things whirlin' the other way, and you'll be even."

"Yuh know," said Johnny, "you found Rose McKee's picture on yore lawyer's desk."

"And other pictures taken around the Z Bar 8," added Whizzer.

"I think you better git a good look at Harvey," said Lonesome.

Whizzer looked keenly at Lonesome for a moment, and his eyes widened with a sudden idea.

"Kenneth Harvey Ross!"

"Check!" grunted Johnny. "The old brain starts workin'."

"My God, it can't be possible, Johnny! Do you think Kenneth Ross—"

"It's worth lookin' into," said Lonesome. "Let's ride back to the JB and see if the posse has torn it down yet. We can circle wide and take it easy."

"Take me over to the Z Bar 8," said Whizzer.

"And bury yuh out on the lone pra-ree," grunted Lonesome. "Yo're goin' to play safe, if yuh ask me."

## CHAPTER XII.

### ROSS UNMASKS.

AT ten o'clock in the morning, Dell Carver, Zell Orme and Gus Linehart, rode in at the Z Bar 8. Carver had told McKee that they were going to Shelton and might not be back

early. Kenneth Ross, the pseudo Harvey, was anxious to get their report, and met them at the corral. Linehart and Orme took care of Carver's horse, leaving Carver and Ross together to discuss things.

"Well?" queried Ross anxiously.

"Well enough," replied Carver.

"Then it's all settled, eh?"

"No, it ain't all settled—yet," replied Carver coldly.

"What do you mean?" queried Ross anxiously.

"I mean that yore man is where he can't do any harm—unless I let him."

Ross thought this over carefully. "I don't quite get you," he said.

"Listen, Harvey," Carver lowered his voice, "I'm no two-bit killer. I've got Lee where he can't do anythin'. But the question is, what is his scalp worth to you?"

"I told you what it was worth, Carver."

"Too cheap. The law ain't got a thing on me, and for a big stake, I'll take one chance. But she's got to be a good one. You know where I stand now."

"Blackmail, eh?"

"Call it what yuh like."

"Why, you dirty little—"

"Whoa!" snapped Carver. "Keep yore tongue workin' sweet, Harvey. I'm no more of a crook than you are. Rigby told me enough to—"

"Damn Rigby!"

"Suits me fine. Damn him all yuh want—but don't call me names. Now, start figurin' what you'll pay. I've got a hunch I can turn Lee loose and make you pay damn well."

"How much do you want?" asked Ross.

"How much?" laughed Carver. "I'll make a trade with yuh—Whizzer Lee's scalp for the Z Bar 8."

"What? The Z Bar 8! Don't be a damn fool, Carver!"

"By to-morrow," said Carver coldly, "I'll want the bank, too."

He turned from Ross and walked back to the stable. Ross looked at the man's back as he gripped the butt of a short-gun in his coat pocket. He came near going berserk and shooting Carver in the back. It seemed the only thing left to do—kill somebody. But he stifled his anger and sauntered down to the fence, where he leaned on the top bar and tried to decide what he would do next.

After all his years of crooked work—balked by an ignorant cow-puncher! All he had left of the more than a million stolen from the Lee estate was the bank and the ranch. Not much, it is true, but enough to give him a good income for life. Not good interest on a million dollars; but you can't eat your cake and still have it. All his big investments had turned out badly. Now he *was* in a bad position.

Tommy French met Gus Linehart between the house and the stable. Tommy looked across the yard at Ross, and said to Linehart:

"The boss is kinda sour, it seems."

"What ails him?" asked Linehart.

"Oh, I dunno. Mebbe it was 'cause him and McKee had a run-in this mornin'. I reckon he was tryin' to make love to Rose. Anyway, he got kinda nasty when she wouldn't let him put his arm around her—and McKee overheard it. Man, he shore told Harvey where to head in. I heard Harvey pointin' out the fact that he owned the ranch, and McKee told him where he could take his damn ranch."

"Where's McKee now, Tommy?"

"Him and Rose went to Red Feather."

Linehart smiled sourly. "Harvey

better go back East, before somebody saws his antlers off."

"That's right. Where you fellers been all night?"

"Down to Shelton."

"Hell of a wonder yuh wouldn't say somethin' to a feller."

"Be glad yuh didn't go; it's shore a dead town. I'm goin' to see if Beans will rustle us some breakfast."

IT was about noon when Jim McKee walked into the bank. Rigby was talking with his bookkeeper, but left him at once and joined McKee near the private office. Rigby looked closely at the silver shield on McKee's shirt, but said nothing until they were in the office.

"What's the meaning of that?" demanded Rigby, pointing at the silver insigne.

"Just what it says," replied McKee evenly. "I've been appointed sheriff of this county."

"Sheriff? But you can't do that, McKee."

"Why can't I?"

"What about your position at the ranch?"

"I've quit."

"You've quit the Z Bar 8? Talk sense, McKee."

"I told Harvey to take his ranch and go to hell, Rigby. Now I want a talk with you. You've known Harvey a long time. What's the matter with him? Why did he come here? Why does he hide out every time anybody comes to the ranch?"

Rigby turned a little pale. This was striking home and the angle looked dangerous.

"I don't know," he said. "You must be imagining things. Was that why you quit?"

"No, that wasn't the reason. Harvey

got fresh with Rose, and I kinda locked horns with him. I want to know what he's doing here, Rigby."

"Your questions come a little late, McKee; you've quit."

"Looks like somethin' crooked to me."

"Don't you dare accuse me of being crooked!" exploded the banker. "If you've been appointed sheriff, why don't you apprehend Johnny Bell, instead of accusing upright citizens of being crooked?"

McKee studied Rigby for several moments. "I've always wondered just how upright you are."

The banker got to his feet and motioned toward the door.

"Get out of here! This is my private office, and I don't allow any man to talk to me that way. Keep away from me. In my opinion, they made a very bad mistake in appointing you sheriff, McKee."

Jim McKee laughed shortly and walked out. As he reached the doorway he came face to face with the man he knew as Harvey, who had decided on a desperate chance. The two men looked at each other, but neither of them spoke, and Harvey passed into the bank. McKee looked back to see him talking with the bookkeeper, and then Harvey went to the door of Rigby's private office.

CARVER, Linehart and Orme were having a siesta in the shade of the stable, when Tex Laird and Bucky Torrance of the Triple X rode in. Carver got quickly to his feet, realizing that something was wrong.

"You and yore damn tenderfoot!" snarled Tex.

"He didn't die, did he, Tex?" asked Carver anxiously.

"Die—hell! He played possum, got

Tony Brownell's gun and shot Whitey Snow."

"No!"

"I tell yuh—yes! Somebody was hid on the side of the hill, and when me and Bucky and Ed Stivers tried to capture or kill him, they downed Ed and damn near leaded up all of us. I never heard so many bullets in my life."

"And he got away, Tex?"

"I'd tell a man he did! The boys hauled Whitey and Ed to Shelton."

"Both alive?"

"Nothin' to brag about. What about Harvey?"

"I've scared him stiff, and he's gone to Red Feather."

"That's all right, but didja ever stop to consider that this Lee person was playin' possum last night, and them walls are thin? Hell, he probably heard every word we said. Carver, we've got to stop that jigger's mouth, or this country will be too hot for us. Anyway, he knows where he was kept a prisoner, and he probably knows by this time who kidnaped him. If he don't, the men who helped him will."

Carver shifted nervously. "How the hell will we find him, Tex?"

"You answer that question; you got me into this deal."

"Let's go to Red Feather."

"Git yore horses."

HENRY RIGBY had been sitting at his desk, holding his head in his hands; but he looked up sharply as Kenneth Ross stepped into the office. Ross closed the door carefully and sat down opposite the banker.

"What are you doing here?" asked Rigby. "Aren't you afraid—"

The muscles of Ross's face twitched as he leaned across the desk, and his voice was husky.

"We're up against a damn black-

mailer," he said. "You raised hell when you selected Dell Carver."

Rigby paled quickly. "What on earth do you mean by that, Ross—Harvey?"

"Never mind the names now. Carver captured Lee, and he's got him hidden somewhere. Now he demands the Z Bar 8 ranch as his price to shut Lee's mouth. You told him too much, Rigby; you've ruined things for both of us."

"Wait a minute," choked the banker. "I—I'm not in it. It was your game; I merely worked for wages."

"Wages? Damn it, Lee has that letter you wrote about the mine. You could go to jail for that. What'll we do? Carver's got us."

"What can we do? Give him the Z Bar 8 and—"

"You're crazy! Give the ranch to that damn blackmailer?"

"And I trusted Carver," wailed Rigby. "My God, I'll never trust anybody again."

"Unless our luck changes, you won't have to trust anybody."

Rigby was shaking, and his face was the color of ashes.

"My family—" he choked. "What'll I do? I can't let them—"

"Listen to me, Rigby," said Ross sharply. "Hang onto your nerve. We're still out of jail. How much money have you in the vault?"

"What do you mean, Ross? You wouldn't—"

"Do you think I'm going out of here flat broke? Lee hasn't seen me. He'd have a sweet chance proving that I'm Ross, even if he did find out that Ross had embezzled all his wealth. The deeds are all made out to Harvey. How much money, I asked you?"

"About twenty-five thousand," said Rigby hoarsely. "It would mean ruin

for me, Ross; the bank wrecked. No, I can't let you—"

"Keep your nerve. I'll give you a deed to the Z Bar 8. You must have enough money of your own to make up the bank loss. I want that twenty-five thousand and I want it now. If you want to, you can say you bought the ranch. Go get a blank deed, you chicken-livered—"

"You intend to leave me to face the music, Ross?"

"I want money—all you've got in the bank."

"Well," Rigby tried to moisten his dry lips with a dry tongue, "I—I'll see if I—" His hand fumbled in the desk drawer, and jerked out, gripping a heavy Colt revolver.

Ross sprang like a panther across the desk and grappled with the half-crazed banker.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### "TROUBLE AHEAD!"

OUT on that old road, where Whizzer had followed the buggy tracks, Whizzer, Johnny and Lonesome were having an argument over their next move.

"I tell yuh, them tracks was made by the Z Bar 8 buckboard," insisted Lonesome. "There was one loose rear tire, and they bound it with balin' wire for about six inches. Why, yuh can even see the marks of that bound spot in the road."

"The night the bank was robbed, Dell Carver went to Shelton with their buckboard. And if he did, what was it doin' up here that same night? Why did it go over to the JB, turn around and go back? I tell yuh, Carver knows somethin'. And I'm bettin' Carver had a hand in kidnapin' Whizzer."

"But we can't prove a damn thing," sighed Johnny.

"I know what I'm goin' to do," said Whizzer. "I'm going over to Red Feather and make old man Rigby tell what he knows."

"Keno," said Lonesome softly. "I'm goin' with yuh, feller."

Johnny looked undecided for several moments, but suddenly made up his mind.

"I'll tell yuh about me," he said. "I can't see a life of dodgin' officers. Dead or alive puts yuh in a bad position. I'm goin' in with yuh."

"You can't do that, Johnny," said Lonesome. "Don't run yore neck into a noose."

"It's a rope, a bullet or a chance to go free; and I'm takin' that one chance. C'mon. If I've got to shoot it out with somebody, I might as well do it in town as out in the brush."

They turned and rode swiftly to Red Feather. Johnny's horse was weary from the double load, but game to keep going. They came into the town past Rigby's house, and near the cottonwoods, where Johnny had been hit, they saw Rose McKee, her father, and Ella Rigby. The three of them stepped out toward the road as they recognized the three men on the two horses.

Johnny saw the glistening shield on McKee's shirt, and he drew a deep breath of astonishment.

"Hello," grinned Whizzer. "How's everybody?"

"What in the world happened to you?" asked Rose. "Your face and head are all dirty, Whizzer."

"It was good, red blood once upon a time," said Johnny. "Whizzer has been havin' a big time. Since when have you been sheriff, McKee?"

"About an hour," replied McKee softly.

"Lookin' for me?" queried Johnny.

"Jist wait a minute," interrupted Lonesome. "There ain't goin' to be no arrests for a while. McKee, do you know where Harvey is?"

"He's at the bank with Rigby; I just came from there."

"*Bueno!* We want to see him."

"What's the idea, Lonesome?"

"McKee, there's been crooked work done."

"Harvey?"

"Check. He's right where we want him. C'mon."

"Tell me somethin' about it," said McKee anxiously.

"No time now, McKee. Say! We've got to guard the rear of the bank."

"I'll cut across and come in the back," offered McKee. "Rose, you and Ella skip back to the house."

"We will not!" exclaimed Rose. "Come on, Ella."

**M**CKEE went running across toward the rear of the bank, while the three men spurred around to the front. Carver, Linehart, Orme, Tex Laird and Bucky Torrance drew up at the Cactus Saloon as the three men dismounted in front of the bank. The street was narrow enough for each outfit to recognize the other.

"Trouble ahead!" grunted Lonesome as they trotted into the bank.

There was no one in there, except the bookkeeper, who was looking anxiously toward the door of Rigby's private office. He turned quickly and stared at the three wild looking men.

"A shot!" he blurted foolishly. "In there—a shot—a minute ago! My God, what's happened?"

The office door jerked open and Kenneth Ross started to step out. His collar had been jerked loose, necktie swung under his left ear. He saw

Whizzer Lee and stopped dead still. Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, he jerked back and slammed the door, which shut on a spring lock.

The four men were still staring at the closed door when they heard the crashing of a glass. Lonesome ran forward, tugging at the door. From outside came a warning shout—a shot—another shot.

Men were running from the Cactus as the three friends raced out of the bank. Carver and his crowd had halted halfway across the street. Rose and Ella were but a short distance from the front of the bank.

Jim McKee came running down the alley and sprang to the sidewalk, his gun still in his hand.

"Harvey threw a chair through the window and jumped out!" he panted. "I yelled for him to stop, and he took a shot at me."

"Did he git away?" asked Lonesome.

"No-o-o, he didn't get away, Lonesome."

The crowd had halted, waiting to hear what had happened. Lonesome stepped to the edge of the sidewalk, his lean face tensed, his right hand gripping his gun. Johnny Bell swung sideways, shoving Whizzer back.

"Carver! Linehart! Orme!" Lonesome's voice snapped the names like a drill sergeant. "Hands up, you murderers!"

The order and accusation were so sudden, so unlooked for that all three men were paralyzed for a moment. Two men behind them dropped flat in the dirt, and the rest of the crowd scattered like a covey of quail.

Carver and Linehart made a move to lift their hands, but not so with Zell Orme. He was a gunman. Spitting a curse, he flashed for his gun, and at the

same time he flung back his left foot as a brace. But he stepped on a man behind him in the dirt, and it threw his first bullet ten feet over Lonesome's head.

The next instant Orme pitched forward on his face, centered by a bullet from McKee's gun. Carver dropped flat in the dirt, and Johnny's first bullet smashed into the dust a foot in front of his face, splattering it with gravel and splintered lead.

Linehart, his right arm broken by a bullet, whirled and fell over a man behind him, who was hugging the dirt. The battle was over. Carver was sitting up, spitting gravel, cursing bitterly. His eyes were so full of gravel that he couldn't see to shoot. McKee quickly handcuffed him. There was no use handcuffing Linehart; and Orme wasn't going any place.

"Quit yore cussin', Carver," ordered Lonesome. "You can only blame yourself. But what we want to know is how yuh happened to kill Reese on the steps of the JB ranch. Yuh didn't pack him out there."

"Go to hell," gritted Carver.

LONESOME walked over to Linehart, who was sitting on the sidewalk, grimacing with pain from a broken arm.

"Gus," said Lonesome, "I don't know you any better than I do Carver, but I think he's a liar."

"What about?" panted Linehart.

"He says you killed the sheriff."

"Why, the dirty liar! Tryin' to pass the buck to me, eh? He shot Reese himself; shot him with the gun he took off Johnny Bell."

"Are you willin' to make a statement?" panted McKee. "Yuh might save yore own skin, yuh know, Linehart."

"I'll talk. Git somebody to write it down."

Johnny looked at Lonesome, and there were tears in his eyes. Men were running down the alley, others going into the bank. Whizzer went stumbling down the alley, with Johnny close behind him.

Kenneth Ross was lying near the rear steps of the bank, his head and one shoulder propped against the wall. Whizzer stopped near him, looking down at the man he had trusted. A man sprang off the rear steps and ran to the crowd around Ross.

"Rigby's been shot!" he panted. "He's out, but he ain't dead."

Kenneth Ross had been hit hard; how hard he did not know.

"Well, Ross," said Whizzer hoarsely, "we both came West, eh?"

Ross nodded weakly. "I came once too often, Whizzer."

"I'm not goin' to curse you, Ross," said Whizzer. "You played crooked with me—but you didn't win. You tried to put me out of the way—and you darn near made it. You stole my money to work that mine, and then you bought the Z Bar 8 and this bank with my money."

"Yes," said Ross weakly. "I played a crooked game with you, Lee. It all belongs to you—the ranch and the bank; the rest of the money is lost."

Whizzer nodded and looked around at the crowd.

"You all hear that, don't you?" he asked.

The men nodded, hardly understanding what it was all about. The doctor shoved his way through the crowd to Ross.

"Gawd, what a clean-up!" snorted Tex Laird. "I'll buy a drink for the crowd, bein' as it's all over."

Whizzer whirled around and jerked

out his gun. Two short steps, and he sank the muzzle into Tex's waist line.

"Over?" snapped Whizzer. "You darn crook, I own the Z Bar 8 now, and those were my cows you stole. Keep 'em up!"

Laird's hands went up, and he turned pale.

"Wh-what cows?" he stuttered.

"The ones that Carver and his gang sold to you on a forged bill of sale."

Tex Laird drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"That lyin' Carver said you was a dumb tenderfoot."

"How much hell does a man have to go through in this country before his feet get tough?" asked Whizzer.

McKee stepped in and relieved Whizzer.

"You can't pin anythin' on me," said Tex. "I'm safe."

"You should have told Bucky Torrence to keep his mouth shut," replied McKee. "Lonesome caught him tryin' to make a sneak, and he caved in."

Whizzer staggered over to where the doctor was trying to work on Ross. The reaction made Whizzer dizzy. He dropped on his knees beside Ross and whispered swiftly in his ear. Ross was very sick, but he understood.

Whizzer got to his feet. Rose and Ella had stopped at the back door of the bank. Ella was crying. Rose left her and came to Whizzer. Another doctor was working on Rigby, and he had ordered every one out of the room.

WHIZZER looked at Rose and shook his head. He didn't know what to say to her.

"What happened to Mr. Rigby?" asked Rose. Johnny looked at Ross for an answer. The lawyer smiled weakly, a painful grimace, as the doctor fumbled with a bandage.

"Any chance, doc?" he asked. The old doctor drew a deep breath.

"If you have anything to say—say it," replied the doctor meaningly.

Kenneth Ross swallowed painfully.

"It's all right," he said. "I robbed Whizzer Lee out of his inheritance; gambled most of it away. The Z Bar 8 belongs to him, as does the bank. That's all there is left of a million. I admit that I offered Carver ten thousand dollars to kill Lee.

"Carver kidnaped Lee, and was holding him as a threat against me. Carver demanded the Z Bar 8 as a price for killing Lee. How Lee escaped, I do not know. I was desperate; so I came here and tried to force Rigby to give me all the money in the bank. I—I knew the game was played out, and I wanted a get-away stake. Rigby drew a gun to protect himself and the bank; but we fought for the gun, and I shot him. That's the whole story."

Rose turned and went hurriedly to Ella. Kenneth Ross had absolved Rigby. Whizzer had asked him to do it for Ella's sake. Whizzer turned and bumped into Mush Edwards, the marshal, who had been going from one group to another, trying to straighten things out to his own satisfaction.

"I'd like to make somebody stand still long enough to tell me what this is all about," complained the marshal. "Four men shot, one man blinded and one other man dyin'—and nobody tellin' me what it's all about. That ain't no way to do. I'm marshal and I—"

"Go shoot somebody," advised Whizzer weakly. "It's great sport."

"Who'd you shoot?" asked Edwards.

"I don't know his name."

Whizzer wandered back to the street. He saw Ella and Rose and Johnny farther up the sidewalk, talking excitedly.

Some men came from the bank, carrying Rigby home on a cot. They were saying that Rigby would live; that he was more shocked than injured.

Whizzer felt dizzy and sick. He could see a large group down at the sheriff's office. It had been a big day in Red Feather. Whizzer rather marveled at the things he had done—and still lived. Most of it was like a nightmare; and he wondered if it was.

His legs were weak, so he sat down on the sidewalk and tried to keep things in focus as much as possible. Some one sat down beside him on the high board sidewalk, but he paid no attention.

"Johnny went home with Ella."

Whizzer turned his head and saw Rose McKee sitting beside him. He blinked slowly, shook his head.

"Oh, hello," he said foolishly.

"Whizzer, you look awfully sick," said Rose.

"Gee, I'm all right."

"No, you are not right. Is it your sore head?"

"I guess it's my tender feet. Do you like scrambled brains?"

"I hate them, Whizzer."

"Sorry—that's what I've got. I—I can't think straight."

"You thought straight enough to ask Harvey to say that Mr. Rigby was innocent of wrong."

"Rose, never mention that. No use making things bad for Ella and her mother. And Johnny loves Ella—almost as much as I—Rose, I do love you. I've loved you ever since the day I found that pic—"

And Whizzer slid down in a faint.

**A**IN'T that a hell of a way to propose to a girl?" grunted Lonesome, as he stepped off the sidewalk and picked Whizzer up. Lonesome had come up unobserved. He

placed Whizzer on the sidewalk and held tightly to his shoulders.

"Lonesome, he's fainted!" gasped Rose.

"Yes'm, it shore looks that-away. Oh-oh! Wakin' up right away."

He sat Whizzer on the sidewalk, where Whizzer blinked foolishly.

"I—I must have passed out," he whispered. Johnny came running up.

"Rigby will live," he panted. "Bullet went high. Gee, what a day! Lonesome, you old high-pockets! Without a darn bit of evidence, you called 'em. Without ace, face or trump, you called 'em—and they laid down. My Gawd! And they was offerin' a thousand cold dollars for me, dead or alive. Linehart's writin' a confession for the prosecutin' attorney."

Lonesome grinned happily. "Johnny, I didn't have a pair in my hand, did I? Why, no jury on earth would ever convict on the evidence we had. I just used Injun psychology on 'em."

"Injun psychology?"

"A war-whoop and a surprise attack. When I yelled their names, I scared the devil out of 'em."

"That's right," admitted Johnny. "It was wonderful. I'm only sorry about one thing; I'm losin' my pardner. Whizzer owns the big Z Bar 8, and he won't have no time for the little JB."

"You took me in, Johnny," said

Whizzer. "It was the big JB to me. We'll put 'em together and make one outfit; fifty-fifty—still pardners. And we'll make Lonesome Wolf foreman of the combined layout."

"What are you goin' to do, Whizzer?" asked Lonesome.

"Me?" Whizzer staggered to his feet and put one arm around Rose.

"What am I going to do? Why, I'm going to get married."

Rose blushed, but did not deny it. Lonesome grinned slowly.

"The joker was plumb wild for a while; but I'll betcha he'll git tamed down pretty soon."

The doctor, who had been working on Kenneth Ross, came hurrying down past them, but stopped and looked sharply at Whizzer's head.

"Young man," he said briskly, "your head needs fixing."

"You're too late, doc," grinned Lonesome. "The young lady has already accepted him."

The doctor looked vacantly at him for a moment, burst out laughing, slapped Whizzer on the shoulder and went hurrying down the street.

Whizzer looked around, drew a deep breath and smiled at Rose.

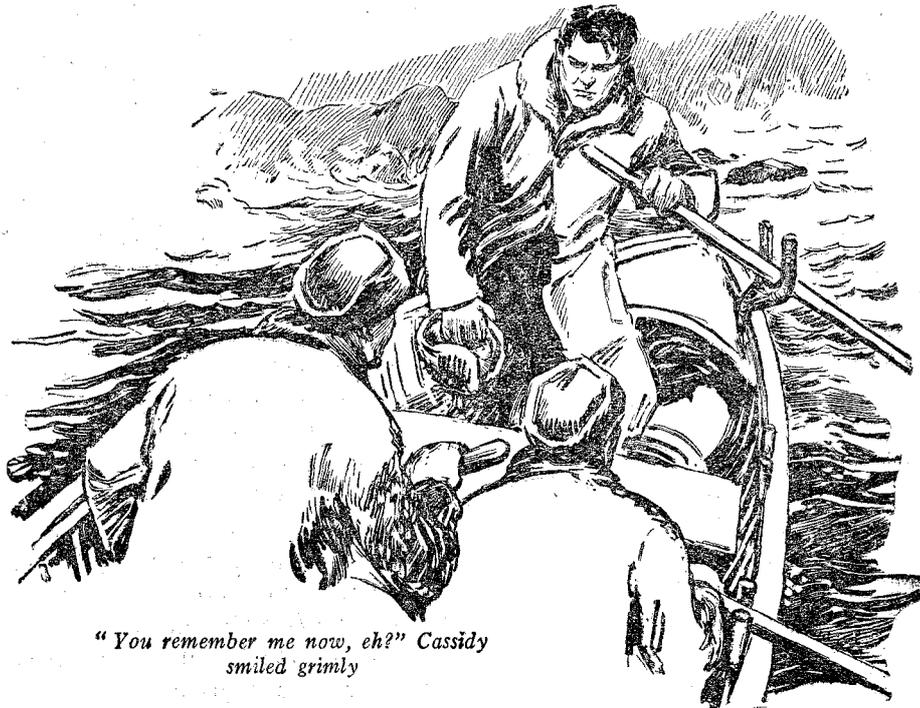
"Well, it—it was rather a mess, all the way around," he said. "But we had a wonderful day for it."

"Wonderful," replied Rose simply.

THE END.

### SPEAKING OF WESTERN STORIES—

There are some fine ones "on the fire" for the next few weeks: "The Whip Hand," one of Erle Stanley Gardner's real and unforgettable "*Whispering Tales*" of the desert; Three Mounted Tramps," a range war novel by J. E. Grinstead; and stories by Robert Ormond Case, W. C. Tuttle, and other favorites.



*"You remember me now, eh?" Cassidy  
smiled grimly*

## Cassidy's Bluff

*"It's too dark to run the rapids in safety," the other Klondike pilots said—but Cassidy had a reason for taking a chance with those two passengers*

**By ROBERT ORMOND CASE**

A CLUSTER of small boats, Klondike-bound, were drawn up on the narrow strip of sand hard by the cleft that marked the entrance to Box Cañon. A few adventurers had gone forward on foot to appraise the first stretch of the rapids that formed the final and sinister threshold to the golden door. These stood close together, insect-like on the face of giant dimensions, looking down into the depths. But the bulk of the gold-seekers, on the strip of sand beneath the wall, formed a milling group in whose center were the three seasoned pilots of Whitehorse.

Though it was early in the great stampede, in deference to the growing row of crosses marking the resting places of those who had lost their hold on the mane of Whitehorse, the Mounties had established the rule that experienced pilots must accompany all craft that put forth into the grim current. Three such had been designated, white-water boatmen who knew each trick of the savage current, each sullen eddy and hidden rock.

A whim of chance and the lure of the greatest gold strike of all time had brought these three adventurers together. There was Geroux, a swash-