

This was no riding contest; there was death in the air

Montana Rides Again

By EVAN EVANS

*Adventurous Kid Montana was never meant for a rancher's life
—not while Mexican bandits were making plans about him*

CHAPTER I.

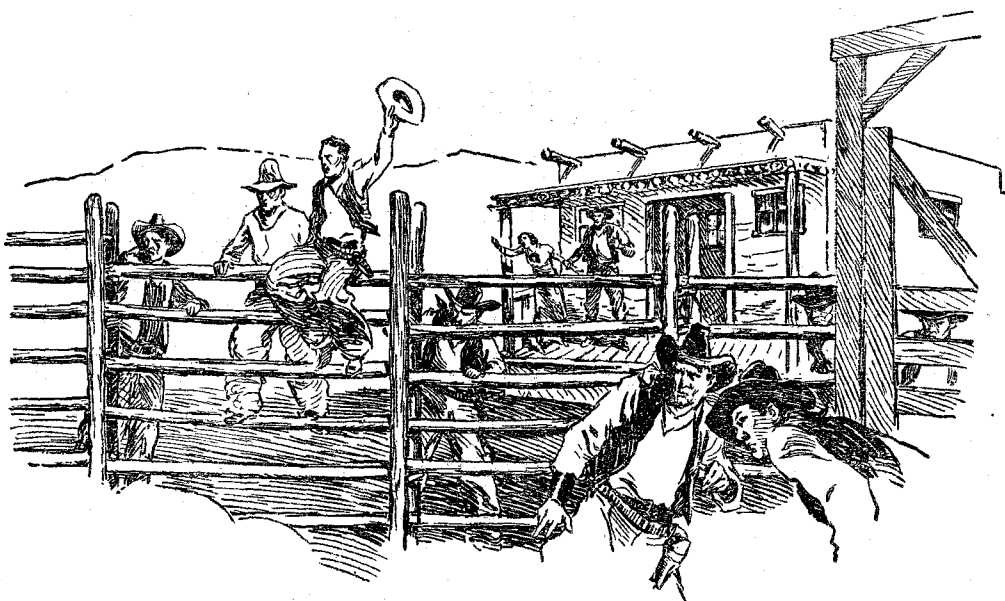
BROTHER PASCUAL.

THE strides of Brother Pascual were long and swift; but the day strode longer and swifter, by far, to its ending. Shadows as blue as water were flowing through the ravines, rising higher and higher, and the naked summits of the San Carlos Range began to burn with rose and gold flame against the Mexican sky.

But the friar, taking a stronger hold on the staff which was his only com-

panion in this wilderness, gave little heed to the beauty around him. He had only one eye for it, after all, for over the other he wore a big shield of black leather. A plaster patch made a big white cross on the opposite cheek, and a bandage circled his head.

To give his stride greater freedom, he had pulled up his long gray robe so that a fold hung over the cord that girdled him. The lower edge of his garment kicked in and out around his knees, leaving his lower legs free and unhampered. In the calf of each brown



Alarm kept the watchers frozen in their places

and hairy leg there was a mighty fist of muscle, needed for the support of this towering bulk of a man. Yet despite his size, the only provision he carried with him on his journey was a pouch of dry corn meal.

He was dark as an Indian, but his broad face was marked with the pain and the doubt of some high endeavor.

The sun bulged its cheeks in the west, and bled radiant color all across the sky; the heavens darkened to green and amber, then yellow-green and blue, with the green fading rapidly into night as Brother Pascual came to the narrow mouth of a gorge over which leaned pillars of lofty rock. A jack-rabbit darted from behind a stone and fled, leaving the whisper of its speed in the air. And in the mouth of the ravine, the friar paused and shouted:

"Oh-ho! Oh-ho! I am Brother Pascual! *Hai!* Do you hear?—I am Brother Pascual!"

After a moment, while the echoes were still dimly flying, a voice almost at his elbow said, "Well, brother, who's

hungry now? Whose bellyache are you to tell us about now?"

"Is it Luis?" asked the friar.

"Luis went spying once too often into the stockyards at Chihuahua. They killed him in the slaughter house. Maybe they made him into sausage.—Damned stringy sausage he must have made, too!"

"What is your name?—Ah, you are Carlos!"

"You've seen me only once—and it's too dark for seeing now, unless you're a cat. How do you remember people, brother?"

"I remember them by their need of mercy," said the friar. "Poor Luis. Is he gone? He had a need of mercy, also!"

"So has every man who rides with Rubriz," answered Carlos.

"So have I.—So have all mortals," declared Brother Pascual, humbly. "I am going on to the house."

"There's plenty of noise in the house," said Carlos. "Yesterday we caught a mule train loaded with—"

"I don't want to hear it!" broke in Pascual, emphatically. "We are all sinners, Carlos. But good may come out of evil—good may come out of evil!—Saint Nicholas, be large in the eye of my mind!"

With that, he stalked on through the thick blackness of the ravine, which rapidly widened. Trees choked the way. With his long staff, he fended his course through them until he came out on a level valley floor with a stippling of lights nearby, giving the vague outline of a house.

He heard singing and shouting and the beat of running feet, while he was still in the distance; and although he was one who had pledged himself to love good and hate evil, he could not help smiling a little. For Brother Pascual was in many respects a true peon, and therefore he had to forgive a true *bandido* like Mateo Rubriz. A thief steals from all alike; but a *bandido* harries the rich only. And in Mexico there is a belief that grows out of the very soil that all rich men are evil.

WHEN he came to the door of the house, Brother Pascual beat on it three times with his staff. Then he threw the door open on the smoky light of the inner hall, and shouted:

"I—Brother Pascual—am coming! It is I—Brother Pascual!"

The thunder of his voice rumbled through the house, and then a door flung open to his right and let a rush of sound flow out about him.

"Bring in Pascual!" shouted the familiar, strident tones of Mateo Rubriz.

Half-a-dozen wild young fellows leaped through the doorway and seized on the burly friar and drew him into the room. It was the combination

kitchen, dining hall and reception chamber of Mateo Rubriz.

A chorus of welcome rose to greet Brother Pascual, and he snuffed up at the fragrance of roasting kid—most delicious of all meat in this world—and the savor of *frijoles* cooked with peppers, the pungency of coffee, and the thin scent of beer and the sour of wine. All these good smells were in that air.

At the long table, some of the men were still eating; others looked on with a careless interest as Mateo Rubriz, equipped with a small balance-scale, measured out lumps of shining white metal and small heaps of heavy yellow dust. Brother Pascual refused to call it silver and gold, because money is the root of all evil—and he loved these men, in spite of himself. So he fastened his gaze solely upon the huge, squat figure of Mateo Rubriz.

Rubriz wore common cotton trousers, furled up to his knees, and cheap *huaraches* on his feet. The sleeves of his shirt were cut off midway, so as to leave unhampered that vast strength which, men said, was unrivalled in all the San Carlos Range—in all Mexico—perhaps and therefore in all the world! So thought Pascual, anyway. And he rejoiced in the might of that fellow peon in his ragged, dirty clothes; he rejoiced in the red silk cap that Rubriz preferred to all the sombreros of cloth or straw. Pascual's heart was touched with sympathy when he marked, diagonally across Mateo's flushed face, the long, white scar which a whiplash had once left on the flesh. Men said that no single whiplash could have left such a broad, deep scar; but that Mateo Rubriz, in the passion of his shame and hate, had rubbed salt into his wound to freshen it and keep it burning on his face as

rage burned in his heart. At any rate, there was the sign, clearly visible on the man's face whenever it reddened. Which was often.

"Come here, little old Pascual!" Rubriz was thundering. "What have you been doing to yourself? I've told you that if you keep taking your shortcuts through the mountains, up the cliffs and down the Devil's Slides, you'd have a fall, one of these days.—Well, if you've had a fall like that, thank God that your head was battered but not broken!—Come here and dip your hands into this sack—all gold—and take out the fill of your big hands.

"You can weight down your pockets and spend it all on your poor! You can buy a new mule for your *arriero*, a new cow for your housewife, and a new gun for the hunter, a new trap for the trapper. You can give sheep to the shepherd and cattle to the poor *charro*. Dip in your hands, as deep as the wrists, and pull out whatever your fingers will hold.—Come, Pascual!—*Hai!* My children! We shall all be a thousand leagues nearer to heaven when Brother Pascual has prayed for us!"

BROTHER PASCUAL stood by the bandit and looked at the buckskin sack which held such treasure. He was aware, too, of the gleam of white metal and yellow, up and down the table.

He took a deep breath and looked up to the smoke-blackened rafters of the room.

"Father, forgive them!" he said from his heart. Then he added, "Not even for my poor, Mateo. Give me something to eat, as soon as I have washed.

"But stolen money poisons even the poor."

Mateo caught him by the wrists and looked him up and down, half-savagely and half-fondly.

"Listen to me!" he cried. "Be silent, every one. Mateo Rubriz is speaking. Do you hear?—One day I shall give up this life and go into a desert with this good man. I shall scratch up roots with my bare hands and feed on them. I shall drink nothing but clear spring water.—Give me a cup of that wine, one of you!—And I shall spend the rest of my days praying and doing penance."

He seized a great, jewelled cup which was handed to him, brimming with sour red wine, and poured half the contents down his throat.

"When I do penance," he roared, "it shall be the greatest penance that ever was done by a Mexican.—And Mexicans are the only men!"

He made a gesture, and some of the wine slopped out of the cup and splashed from the floor onto the bare, hairy calves of his legs.

"Do you hear me, Pascual? By heaven, I shall be such a saint, one day, that they'll have to shift in their chairs and crowd their halos closer together to make room for Mateo Rubriz!

"Give me some more of that wine, some one! I have not tasted a drink for a month of desert days. Pascual, go wash if you please, and then come back and eat.—By San Juan of Capistrano! There is redder blood in me than this wine—and every drop of it sings when I see such a good man."

Brother Pascual went to the well in the little patio outside the room, and there, as he threw off his long robe and washed the sweat and the sand of travel from his body, he could still hear Rubriz's voice, exclaiming:

"The rest of you—all swine at a

trough! There is no other man in the world. There is only Brother Pascual!"

WHEN Pascual came back into the room he found a huge platter of kid, hot from the turning of the spit, and a mass of *frijoles* and thin, limber, damp *tortillas*. He used the *tortillas* as spoon and fork. A knife from his wallet was his carver. As he ate, he sipped moderately from a big glass of the red wine, though *pulque* would have been more to his truly Mexican taste.

The division of the spoils had been completed now, and the treasure was cleared from the table; yet here and there a bright yellow dust appeared on the rough wood. The wages of ten laborers for a month were wasted out of the superfluity of these robbers. Mateo Rubriz himself was now eating again, walking up and down with his jewelled wine cup in one hand, in the other a fat second joint from which he tore long shreds with those powerful teeth of his.

"Now is the time to speak, Lucio," said Rubriz. "You have been sitting there with fire in your eyes, devouring Jose with glances. Tell me what was wrong."

Lucio stood up. He lacked the rounded, blubbery face of a peon; his features were more the type of the aristocrat, and his cheeks were so hollow that they pulled at the corners of his mouth, giving him the semblance of a sneering smile. He said:

"Jose, stand up!"

"Aye—to you or to any man!" said a youth with very wide shoulders and very bowed legs.

He was the true peon type. He swaggered out and stood well forward on the floor.

"When they came chasing after

us," said Lucio, "my horse went down under me. I ran as well as my legs would carry me. I heard hoofbeats. I looked back, and saw that a friend was riding up. It was Jose. I held out my hand to let him help me up.—But by St. Christopher, he galloped right past me! He even tried to look the other way. And the *rurales* and the soldiers would surely have got me, except that I found a crack among the rocks, and ran and fell into it like a lizard.—Mateo Rubriz, give me a judgment! Is that fellowship? A lame dog would be better treated by its fellows!"

A little murmur came out of the throats of the crowd. It was not loud, but it was high-pitched, and therefore the friar knew the strain of anger from which it sprang.

"No, speak, Jose," said Rubriz.

"This!" said Jose, loudly. "I saw Lucio running, of course. I wanted to help him, but I had a whole sack of the gold in the saddlebag. To throw away myself and my horse—that was nothing, though the *rurales* were sure to catch us both if I tried to make the pinto carry double. But there was the gold. And so I rode on.—Speak up with a big voice, Lucio. Are you worth thirty pounds of gold?"

Lucio said nothing. He looked ready to leap at Jose, but he could not bring up words from his throat.

The whole room was hushed. Men leaned from their places, their eyes intent on the leader, who still walked calmly up and down.

But now he paused and pointed the ragged joint of roast meat at Jose.

"SILVER is a good thing, and gold is better; but not even silver and gold and emeralds and diamonds are worth one drop of blood! Blood is better than money.—Jose, you have

not been with me long; you have not learned. Otherwise, by San Juan of Capistrano, I would hang you from that rafter, with my own hands!—Ride past a dismounted comrade? Leave a friend behind for the *rurales*?—However, as I say, you have been with me only a short time. What I tell you now you will remember, no?"

"I remember," said Jose, suddenly abashed and staring at the floor.

"Are you satisfied, Lucio?" asked the master.

"No," said Lucio, curtly.

"Take knives, then. Strip to the waist. Carve each other or kill each other. That is the law.—But we'll have no hatreds inside my band of *charros*."

"Good!" said Jose, and he began to tear off his jacket.

Lucio said nothing, but there was speech in his burning eyes and in his sneering lips.

That was when Brother Pascual stood up and went to Lucio.

"Lucio," he said, "when your brother was sick in the mountains, I searched till I found him and carried him into the camp on my shoulders."

"Therefore," said Lucio, "ask me for my right hand and it is yours."

"Give it to me, then," said the gigantic friar.

He took the right hand of the astonished Lucio and half led, half dragged, him across the floor to confront Jose.

"Give your hand to me, Jose," he commanded.

"My hand is my own!" said Jose, sullenly.

But Pascual's huge grip closed suddenly on the nape of Jose's neck. He shook the young bandit violently, and a knife flashed into Jose's hand. It jerked back, but it was not driven home into the great, fearless breast of

Brother Pascual. And it was awe of the friar, rather than the fierce yell that went up from the others, that caused the knife to drop to the floor.

"Now give me your hand!" shouted Pascual, enraged. "Or I'll carry you out and throw you into the slime of the hog wallow, where I've thrown bigger and stronger men than you!"

"Brother, forgive me!" said Jose, helplessly, and he gave his right hand.

Pascual instantly clapped it into that of Lucio.

He stood over the two men, who glared at one another.

"Jose is a fool. But he is a young fool, and he can learn wisdom," boomed Pascual. "Lucio, grip his hand. I, Brother Pascual, command you.—Jose, tell him that you were wrong. A sulky man is worse than a sulky dog! but a confession washes the heart clean."

THERE was a moment of pause, so tense that the breathing of the men in the room could be heard, and the ripping sounds as Mateo Rubriz tore at his joint of roast meat.

Then Jose said, suddenly, weakly, "I was wrong.—Lucio, I hated you because you got the black mare that I wanted. Will you forget?"

"Is it true?" said Lucio, stunned and gaping. "Do you confess this before them all?—Then you are my brother!"

And suddenly he had flung his arms around Jose.

"I am shamed—but I was wrong," said Jose.

"Shamed?" cried Lucio. "I shall kill the man who smiles!"

But there was no smiling. Only the sound made by Mateo Rubriz as he hurled toward the hearth the big bone which he had picked clean. It clanged

loudly against an iron pot, and spun into the ashes, knocking up a white cloud.

"By the blood of the Lord!" cried Rubriz. "My men have turned into women!—Well, let them go, so long as I have you, Pascual. But have you only come here to make my poor fellows drop their knives on the floor?"

"I have come to speak seriously with you, Mateo," answered the big friar.

"You hear that he wants to speak to me!" called Rubriz to the rest. "Then why do you wait? You have money in your wallets and food in your bellies.—Go! Drink yourselves to sleep and be damned!—Away with you!"

CHAPTER II.

MEXICAN HEART.

THEY faced one another across the long table.

"Tell me about your tumble, first," suggested Rubriz. "Well, even them mountain sheep break their necks, now and again. If something hit you near the eye, then you can at least thank your God that you are not blinded."

"The gun-butt hit the bone over my eye; that was all," said the friar.

"Gun-butt?" said Rubriz, suddenly scowling. Then he pointed. "Gun-butt, eh?—And what hit the other side of your face?"

"The point of a knife," answered Brother Pascual. "But it was nothing."

The bandit began to steal around the table as though he hoped to surprise news in the very mind of his big friend.

"And your head?—The bandage, there?" he demanded, quietly.

"That is not very bad, either. The bullet glanced; I have a hard skull—"

"The butt of a gun—a knife—a

bullet?—Splendor of God! What fools have forgotten that you are the friend of Mateo Rubriz?"

"The Governor of Duraya and his soldiers."

"General Ignacio Estrada? Where did he dare to beat you?"

"In the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe."

"The governor—beats you? In the church? What were you doing?"

"Fighting a little, Mateo, to keep the governor and the rest of the masked men from stealing the emerald crown of Our Lady."

"Why, brother, that crown was stolen long years ago!"

"It was found, by a peon whose son was very sick. He brought the crown back to the church; and his son was healed. And then the governor stole the emeralds and the gold again."

"How was he known, if his face was masked?"

"The holy bishop recognized the voice of the principal robber."

"Bishop Emiliano?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" cried Rubriz. "That little man may be as thin as a knife, but he can cut as deep. He knows me, does he not?"

"You have made many good presents to the church."

"It knows my gold and it knows my silver. Do you hear, brother? When the name of Rubriz is spoken in that church, all the shadows stir and the statues whisper a prayer for me. I tell you this—in that church alone I have bought half the distance from hell to heaven."

The friar smiled a little.

"But this Estrada—what do you tell me about him? No good man ever wore the name of general—except Bonita Juarez, God rest his soul!"

"God rest his soul!" echoed the friar devoutly. "But General Estrada came into the church. The poor monks ran away. Only the bishop guarded the image of Our Lady—"

"I would rather have one blessing from the good bishop than ten thousand *aves* from a whole college of singing priests!"

"**P**EACE, Mateo!" commanded the friar, sternly. He went on,

"The holy bishop recognized the voice of the general, and called out his name; and Estrada desired to leave no witness behind him. He struck Bishop Emiliano to the floor."

"That poor, bald head?—Did it crack like an eggshell?" asked Rubriz.

"No, for Our Lady had softened the blow or made it glance. The bishop still lives, and the governor sits in his fort, with the crown of Our Lady and the ten emeralds in it."

"But you were there yourself?" demanded Rubriz, his face swelling and purpling with emotion.

"It had taken me a little time to get up from my knees, because I had been very deep in prayer. I came shouting at them.—But they struck down the holy bishop. I took a pair of the soldiers and knocked their heads together."

"San Juan of Capistrano! If only I had been there to see and to help!"

"The two soldiers fell down. I knocked over another; but I tripped on him, and he stabbed at me and put the point of his knife in my cheek. As I was getting up, a gun exploded. I felt that blow on my head, as the bullet struck; and another man hit me over the eye with the butt of his gun. I tried to keep my wits, but they flew away into darkness like a flock of crows—and I fell on my face."

"May those robbing swine rot with

a blight! I'll put them on their faces! If I don't cut off their eyelids and stake them out in the sun, my name is not—"

"Mateo, be still!—The bishop called for me the next day—this morning. He said to me, 'If I complain of the stealing, then all the hawks will gather; and the jewels will be scattered through the land. It is better to carry word about this to Mateo Rubriz, because he will not allow this thing to be.'"

"Did he say that?" exclaimed Rubriz, leaping to his feet. "No wonder he's a bishop! If he knows men as well as this, he must know a good bit about saints and angels, also. I shall show him, Pascual, that I am a man to trust.—But what does he want me to do? I shall go to Duraya and cut the throat of the general, the first time he leaves the fort at night!"

"That would leave the emerald crown still safely inside the fort, Mateo."

"*Hai!* That is true! But—Pascual—in the name of heaven, the bishop doesn't think that I can fly like a bird or dig like a mole to get into the fort, and then stand invisible inside it till I've found the emeralds and taken them? Does he think that?"

The friar sighed. He looked down at his own great hands and was silent.

"But that *is* what he wishes!" muttered Rubriz. He turned pale. On the hair of his bare arm he smeared some of the sweat of his face. "No one man in this world could do the thing!" he cried. "Look at me, Pascual, and tell me that I am right!"

BUT Pascual, in a misery, continued to stare silently down at his tightly clasped hands.

"I shall find ten other emeralds and make them into a golden crown twice as big!" exclaimed Rubriz.

"Mateo, beware of blasphemy!" said the friar.

"True!" groaned Rubriz. "That crown is a holy thing. It has come from the brow of Our Lady.—May God pour the fire of hell into the bones of Estrada! But what can I do—alone?"

"You have many men," said Brother Pascual, softly, as though he wished that his words might become part of the other man's thought.

"I have men?—I have hands and feet and guns to help me, too. But for such work numbers are a loss, not an advantage. To be secret as a snake, quick as a cat's paw, without fear under heaven—all of these things I am. But where is there another to be my brother in the danger? Oh, Pascual, two men together may outface the devil; but one man alone—is the fort at Duraya—"

He threw up his arms with a groan.

"Is there no other man?" asked the friar.

"There is one other, but he could not come."

"Could money buy him?"

"No, for he is rich."

"For the sake of Our Lady, then?"

"He is a gringo dog," cried Rubriz, pacing the floor, "and Our Lady means nothing to him. Besides, if he were to try to ride south into Mexico, a whisper of his coming would go before him. The stones would yell out under his feet, 'El Keed!' That is how he is hated and wanted by the *rurales*—by the soldiers!"

"Ah, Mateo, is this gringo the only man?—This man you hate?"

"Aye, this man I hate is the only one.—But also I love him, and he loves me.—*Hai*, Pascual! Think. I once had him under the muzzle of my gun. His life was like this—in my hand to crush.

And there lay Tonio, the traitor—Pascual, keep me from speaking about it. Oh, God! These are not tears of water that run out of my eyes. They are tears of blood, and my heart is weeping.

"But I let them both go free, because Tonio loves me, even while he is wearing another name and speaking another speech. And Montana, I saw, was the second man in the world. There is Rubriz—then Montana, the man known as El Keed. There is no third.—I could not kill El Keed. I left the house. I took his hand. We spoke quietly. We were friends. For a little while, as I went away, my heart was so full of my friend, gringo though he was, that I could forget how I had lost Tonio through him."

BROTHER PASCUAL, listening to this speech, was so intent that sweat ran unheeded on his face, faster than Rubriz's tears. He knew very well that famous tale of how the Montana Kid, by means of a tattooed birthmark, had insinuated himself into the Lavery household in the place of the son whom Rubriz, to repay a whip-stroke, had stolen twenty years before. And then some stroke of conscience had driven the Kid south into Mexico, to find the real heir, whom he had seen there in his wanderings.

Pascual knew how Montana had fought to take young "Tonio" away, and how Rubriz, who had raised the boy to love him and to hate the gringos, had resisted desperately and then pursued the pair north toward the Rio Grande. Now Tonio had been restored to his blood and his family; he had been sent off to Europe, to put some distance between him and his terrible foster father, Rubriz. And the Montana Kid—El Keed, in Mexico—remained on the Lavery ranch about to

marry the daughter of the family. The story was one that men were sure to remember and to talk about. But nothing about it was more strange than that Rubriz respected Montana even more than he hated that reckless young adventurer.

Rubriz blew his nose with a great snorting sound.

"Now I am better," he said.

"This Montana who stole Tonio—" began the friar.

"Be silent!" shouted Rubriz, with the face of a madman.

"If he were with you, might you not steal back the emeralds, even from Fort Duraya and General Estrada? And if you went to El Keed, might he not remember how you once spared him? Might he not ride with you, in spite of the danger?"

"He is to marry Tonio's sister. How can I make him leave her?"

"Mateo, it is not for us to doubt. Let us go north, toward the land of the gringos. Let us cross the river. When we have come to the place, God will surely show us the proper way. He will bring even Montana into our hands."

Rubriz, at this, stopped his pacing. His head began to lift higher and higher.

"Pascual," he said, "who can tell? Perhaps it is true. Perhaps it is the will of God, after all. Perhaps God wishes to see Mateo Rubriz at the side of El Keed. For even God Himself could never guess what two such men might do.—It is true! I feel that the thing shall be. We shall ride together; we shall work together. And what will walls of stone be—what will soldiers be—when we two are side by side?"

He shook his head from side to side.

"But he is a gringo.—Ah, the pity of it!" said the friar.

"Aye," groaned Rubriz. "The pity

of it!—But only his skin is American, for his heart is pure Mexican!"

CHAPTER III.

BROKEN PROMISE.

IN the corral, the blood-bay mare was being drawn to the snubbing post.

And that great rider of outlaw horses, Tombstone Joe, was pulling the ropes.

The cowpunchers sat like crows on the fence posts, eight feet from the ground. The Montana Kid was among these crows. To those on the veranda of the ranchhouse he looked like any of the others, except that his shoulders were a little wider and the big double cord of back muscle could be distinguished, even at that distance, and through the shirt.

Ruth Lavery stood by one of the porch pillars.

"We ought to go down," she said.

"There's no use having too much audience," said Richard Lavery. "That would make Montana want to ride the mare himself."

"But he's promised not to," answered the girl.

Fear changed the blue of her eyes as she spoke, nevertheless.

"Promises—well, promises are still only words, to Montana," said her father.

"Don't say that!" she protested.

"Well, I won't say it, then," answered tall Richard Lavery.

But he kept his thought in the grim lines of his face.

"You've never loved him!" said the girl, nervously, still gripping the pillar against which she leaned.

"Honor and respect him I can," conceded Lavery, curtly. "He's more *man* than anyone I know."

At this, she sighed, quickly, as one sighs when a great emotion is constantly pent up within him. And she broke out, suddenly:

"You think he's only a tramp!"

"I don't think he's *only* a tramp," said Richard Lavery.

"You think he's a tramp—and something more," said the girl, speaking quietly, though mostly to herself. "You sent Dick away to Europe—to get him away from Montana—to get him away from temptation. You've never trusted Montana. I don't know why."

He looked down at a black band around the arm of his coat. His wife had died two months before.

"Now that your mother is gone," said Lavery, very gently, "do you think that he'll be with us long?"

She lifted her head a little. As if to find the answer there, she scanned the long lines of the valley, and the high plateaus, and the green pasture lands for miles and miles. All belonged to the Lavery estate. Dick Lavery, who had once been called Tonio Rubriz, would be heir to half of that estate. Montana had brought him back from Mexican oblivion to share the rich heritage. The other half of the estate would go to Ruth and to Montana.

"We'll be married this Sunday," she said, briefly.

"He's put it off before," said the rancher, and there was no mercy in his hard voice. "He'll put it off again."

"He won't!—This is the last time. He knows it." Then she added in a half - weary, half - sad outburst, "Doesn't he care about me?"

There was puzzled torment in her eyes.

"Aye, he cares about you.—And he cares about other things, too. Horses,

and guns—and his freedom. Marriage won't fit him well."

DOWN in the corral, Tombstone Joe walked backwards and looked over the mare. Now that he had snubbed her against the post, other men were blindfolding her, working on bridle and saddle. Ransome, the gray-headed ranch foreman, was in charge of this business.

"What you think of her, Tombstone?" asked Ransome.

"Half dynamite and half wildcat," said Tombstone. "She's too damn pretty to be good!"

Said the Montana Kid, from the fence, "You don't hitch onto a streak of lightning and ask is it good. You ask how far it'll take you."

Tombstone turned sharply around to rebuke the speaker. Then he saw that it was the Kid, and instead of answering he rubbed his jaw, slowly, as though he had been hit there on a day.

The Kid did not smile. His brown, handsome face remained perfectly calm; but as he stared at the mare, the blue of his eyes burned continually paler and brighter. He pushed his hat back from his forehead and showed the blue-black of sleeked hair. He was so dark that he looked almost like a Mexican. Except that during moments of excitement the blue of his eyes turned bright and pale. He was like the mare—big, but with sinews and proportions that made him look swift and light.

"This here streak," said Tombstone, "it'll take you far all right—it'll take you to hell—but it might leave you there, too."

The Kid tapped the ashes from his cigarette and made no answer. His eyes were on the mare. She was waiting patiently, submitting to the dark-

ness that enveloped her eyes, muffled in her own thoughts. Yet there was danger in her patience. Her head drooping a little, there was nothing about her to suggest a wild-caught mustang.

In the old days, wild-caught hawks made the best hunting falcons. She was wild-caught, and therefore she would be one of the best. The Kid knew it. He kept tasting her strength and her speed, as he had tasted them ever since the day when he had started with many men on her trail. The length of that trail had caused the third postponement of his marriage to Ruth Lavery. Now he sat on the fence to watch this famous horsebreaker try his hand, because Montana had given Ruth his faithful, solemn promise never to mount the mare until she was well broken. That was why little electric thrills kept starting in his heart and flooding out through his forehead and his fingertips.

THE bridle and the saddle were adjusted now, and Tombstone mounted gingerly. Many falls had taught him shameless caution. He acted almost like a man who was afraid.

"Let her go," he said, quietly.

The bandage was taken from her eyes, the rope instantly disengaged from her neck. And the mare shot at the sky.

Nobody spoke. They had all seen an infinity of horsebreaking, but this was not the same thing. They stiffened on the fenceposts. They looked with great eyes, seeing and thinking. Horses have to be broken, but the mare looked like Beauty and the man looked like the Beast.

Nevertheless, he was a frightened Beast. There was no pretense of the

dashing, cavalier ride which a cow-puncher tries to show at a rodeo. Tombstone started that way, sitting straight up and raking the mare fore and aft with his spurs; but after the second jump he was pulling leather like a tenderfoot caught in a horse-storm.

For this was a tornado that he was trying to ride. It rushed as though it would tear down the fence. It turned as though it would bore a hole through the ground. And all at once Tombstone sailed out of the saddle sideways. He struck the corral soil, raised a dust, struck it again, and lay limp and still.

Three nooses settled over the neck of the mare and held her as she tried to get at the fallen rider and savage him. Some one crawled under the fence and dragged Tombstone to safety. Some one else emptied a canteen over Tombstone's upturned face. After a while he breathed. Then he stood up.

"She foxed me that time, but I'll get her the next time," he said.

Ransome, the foreman, said to the Kid, "Well, what you think?"

"She's a sweetheart!" said the Montana Kid, enthusiastically.

He eased himself down from the fence, on the inside. They were snubbing the mare close up to the post again.

Ransome grabbed Montana's arm.

"Look at," he said. "Don't you be a damned fool! Keep away from temptation."

The Kid looked down at Ransome's hand, and Ransome hastily took it away.

"We'll just have a look-see," said the Kid.

"You been and promised Miss Ruth!" said Ransome, huskily.

"Did I?" said the Kid, absently.

He walked around the front of the

mare and looked into her eyes. She was quiet. The only thing she had learned was the burn of ropes, and she did not fight. Not outwardly. The devil was quiet in her now, waiting.

Some one said, from the fence, "He could handle hell fire—but not *that* fire."

Another man said, "What's her name? What you gonna call her, Montana?"

"You better call her before you're dead," said another, dryly.

"Her name's Sally," said the Kid, gently.

He smiled, beatifically, at the men on the fence, including them all in the gentleness of his glance. They feared him so much that they almost hated him; but because they loved him, also, no man smiled back.

"Why call her Sally?" asked Ransome, the foreman.

"I once knew a gal called Sally," said the Kid.

"Did she look like this mare?" asked Ransome.

"She wore black silk stockings all around—like this one," said the Kid, gently.

Tombstone Joe was fitting himself carefully into the saddle.

Montana said, "Watch her, Joe."

"Who the hell is giving me advice?" asked Tombstone.

Montana sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them, the hoofs of the mare were beating the corral like a drum. The dust went up as thick as water before it exploded into spray. Through the upper mist, they had glimpses of the fighting mare, and of Tombstone clinging to her like a shipwrecked man.

Something hit the ground, slithering sidewise and ploughing up the dust. With the last flopping turn it appeared,

the body of a man. The clothes were white with dust. The face was black with it.

UP on the veranda, the girl screamed; but no one turned to look toward her. She had not screamed because Tombstone was on the ground, sprawling. The cry came from her when she saw Montana leave the fence, as a puma leaves a bough for a kill.

To the men who watched, close up, the similarity was even greater. They saw the devouring hunger in Montana's eyes. They saw him crouching, gripping the top rail of the fence with both hands. The next moment, he was plunging through the dust that smoked across the face of the corral. They saw him dodging through it while the wild mare tried to flee from him—as though she feared tooth and claw.

He caught her like that, too. As she swerved out of a corner, he leaped at her with hands and feet. She soared. He appeared, gripping the pommel with one hand, the rest of him streaming upwards. But a moment later he was in the saddle.

The dust billowed like fog struck by a sea-wind. The mare was like the wind. They had glimpses of her red mouth gaping, the sheen of her wild eyes. They saw her high up, fighting thin air. They heard her strike the ground again and again, the shadowy form of the rider shocked and snapped to either side. By a single foot, a single hand, he seemed to be clinging half the time—as if with talons that hooked into tender flesh.

The watchers were frozen in place, because this was not a riding contest; there was death in the air. Tombstone Joe leaned on the fence with his face black and dripping blood, clotted with

dust. The yelling had ended. Every cowpuncher was motionless; one man was on one knee; another on tiptoe, gripping the toe of a post. He seemed to be yelling, though no sound came. Still another held his hat rigidly above his head, but forgot to wave it.

And from the veranda it could be seen that the head of Montana, at every impact, wavered crazily up and down. His chin was beating on his breast. At every lurch of the mare he seemed about to shoot from the saddle, but something made him stick there. Luck, some men might have called it; but it was not luck.

This was not riding a horse; it was killing. Either the man or the mare would fall dead, surely.

Then she staggered and stood still, her legs braced wide apart; and after a time Montana got slowly down from the saddle. He slid down. His face was crimson, and blood from his mouth, his ears and his nose had covered his face with a red mask.

He felt his way to the mare's head.

He put his arm around her neck and began to stroke her face. And she, her eyes half-closed with exhaustion, leaned against him slightly.

He pulled out his bandanna; but instead of drying his own frightful face, he began to wipe the slobber and the froth from Sally's muzzle.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LURE.

IT was only a few days after this that Mateo Rubriz sat in a *cantina* in "Greaser Town," the Mexican adjunct of Bentonville, near the Lavery ranch. Good Brother Pascual had left the table as soon as he had finished his dish of hot *frijoles*. There remained

only Mateo Rubriz and a sallow-faced man with high, squared shoulders, such as one expects to see only in a soldier. He looked like an army officer—and a consumptive. He wore the gay conspicuous garb of a prosperous Mexican *charro*, on which the silver brightened and waned as he turned in his chair or lifted his glass to drink the green-white tequila.

He was Jack Lascar. Every one south of the border knew him, and every one north of the river knew him; but no one knew his nationality. Some people said that he was, in fact, a Lascar. They looked at the yellow whites of his eyes and said that.

He carried himself with an air of amused superiority. He retained this air as he said:

"If I walk into the street and tell people that Mateo Rubriz is in here—if I tell the gringos that—what'll they do to you, Rubriz?"

Mateo Rubriz grinned with good-natured delight. A stiff wave of flesh rose up from his cheeks and almost obscured his eyes as he smiled. He leaned forward.

"Your father—" he began.

After that, his voice was so soft that Jack Lascar had to bend his head to hear the words. A dreamy expression came over Lascar's face.

"That's what I always wanted to know," said Lascar. "I always wanted to know who cut him down.—It was you?"

"Who else would have dared?" asked Rubriz, leaning back, with a two-handed gesture of triumph.

Jack Lascar grunted. "Then what do you want?" he asked.

"I want you to accept a favor," said the Mexican.

"Humph!" grunted Lascar again. "Well?"

"You hate one man a good deal, I know," said Rubriz.

"Do I?"

"The Montana Kid?"

Jack Lascar turned a little in his chair, quickly. He glanced over his shoulder at the door. He looked at the window, also. Then he finished the white fire of his tequila and stared at Rubriz.

"Damn him!" said Jack Lascar.

"Once, in Nevada, in the Imperial Saloon in Carson City," began Rubriz, "on a Tuesday morning—"

"Damn you," said Lascar, suddenly furious.

Rubriz leaned back in his chair. He looked, at that moment, like a fat, rather soft man of middle age—a pulpy creature half rotted by time. But Jack Lascar knew otherwise.

"This Montana Kid," said Rubriz, "is a man who would come to a challenge like a dog to raw meat. Now, if you write out a challenge in English.—Can you write English?"

"I write five languages!" said Lascar, slowly, bitterly. "And I punch cows for a damned—"

"Gringo," supplied Rubriz, still smiling.

Jack Lascar was silent.

Then Rubriz said, "If you were to write out a challenge and nail it on the post office notice board, the town would know. The Kid would know it, too, and he would come. And the sheriff, he is not in town—the law is not in town to-day. It is away—for one whole day!"

JACK LASCAR lighted a cigarette. He held out his glass. The keeper of the *cantina* came running in whispering slippers. He filled the glass until it ran over onto the floor. Lascar slopped the drink into his mouth. A

part of it drizzled down his chin and dropped unheeded onto his gaudy costume. He did not even wipe his face, as he continued to stare at Rubriz.

"The Montana Kid would come!" said Rubriz.

"He would *not* come!" said Jack Lascar. "Everybody knows. Even the little babies know that if Montana ever pulls a gun and shoots at another man—even in self-defense—the sheriff will be on his trail with a posse."

Rubriz closed his eyes to keep the fires in them from being seen. It was his plan—his whole plan—to tear Montana away from the land of the gringos by staging a seeming break with the law. After that, where could he flee, except into Mexico? And with whom would he travel so readily as with Mateo Rubriz? Once on the road, would not the robbing of the fort at Duraya be to El Keed no more than the drinking of a glass of whiskey?—If only this Jack Lascar could be used as the lure!

"No matter what he fears," said Rubriz, "he fears shame more. You know, of course, that I have good reason to curse him?"

"He stole away your son, I know," Jack Lascar sneered. "He took your son—and carried him away and made him into a gringo."

"He did," said Rubriz, with an immense calm which was not an affectation. "That is the reason why he must die."

He meant that. No matter what friendship lay between them, for that deed El Keed must one day die. And Rubriz, staring out the window at the day's red dying as he breathed the sharp, stale scent of cigarette smoke, looked across the little round, iron tables, and continued:

"I cannot challenge him because I

dare not appear. As soon as I show myself in the streets the people would rise up in a wave and wash me away into a jail. But *you* can challenge him.—You can name the hour. You can stand in the middle of the street and wait, while every one wonders that any man could have the courage to wait for El Keed in a fair fight.

“How will they know that Mateo Rubriz lies in hiding beside one of the houses? Or inside a window, with a rifle aimed and ready to end the fight before it begins?—Do you hear, Jack? El Keed will be dead before he has a chance to become an outlaw again! He will be dead before he has a chance to run away from the law.”

CHAPTER V.

RUNAWAY.

SUNDAY morning on the Lavery ranch found the Montana Kid moving about in his room with a slight limp, but he whistled as he encased his long body and his strong shoulders in a white shirt and collar, in socks of black silk, and in a fine blue-black serge suit. One thing he would not do; he refused to change boots for shoes. But unless his trousers were hitched up no one could tell that boots of softest, most highly polished calf were what he wore. For they were not the high-heeled pinch-toes of the usual cowpuncher.

If a horse dropped under Montana, he could not afford to be hobbled by tight boots; he had to land like a running cat, into which animal sundry enemies of his had more than once seen him transformed. Even as he knotted his necktie on this day, his wedding day, he kept on flexing his feet a little in those soft boots, because he could not

tell what guns might look at him before this day was ended. It was what he most disliked—an advertised appearance; and there were plenty of men in the world who might want to take advantage of it.

He would need three pairs of eyes with which to keep on guard this day; but that was what he had needed a great part of his life, and perhaps it was why he was whistling now. His stay on the Lavery ranch had been like being becalmed in a quiet backwater, a pause in the hurry of the current that was headed toward some wild and unknown sea.

Now that he was dressed, he looked quizzically in the mirror at his brown face, and found that the blue-bright eyes were alert for danger, rather than for happiness.

Gray-headed Ransome, the foreman, who had poured himself, tight and helpless, into his Sunday clothes, smoked a cigarette and watched the procedure of his friend.

“It’ll be a great day,” said Ransome.

“A *long* day,” corrected the Kid.

“Any bozo might think,” suggested Ransome, “that you wasn’t gonna step out with a beauty that had a couple millions to float her.”

“Might any bozo think that?” murmured Montana.

“Any bozo might think,” went on Ransome, frowning heavily, “that you didn’t give much of a damn about one of the prettiest, sweetest girls in the world.”

Montana turned. There was combined in his movements a certain speed and a luxurious leisure, like that of a juggler who lets not the flash but the pausing of his hands be seen.

Ransome stood up as though danger threatened him—and perhaps danger did. But though the temper of the Kid

was as quick as the stroke of a startled diamond-back, his friendship was a force as unalterable as the force of gravity. And Ransome was his friend.

So the foreman went on, "Montana, I don't care if you get sore. I'm gonna tell you what I think. You were pretty fond of Mrs. Lavery. She was a good deal like a mother to you. After she died, you begun to find this here ranch sort of cramped. It wasn't no pasture for a mustang like you. It wasn't a box-stall, even. You've got so tired of the Lavery ranch that you're tired of the girl, too—before you marry her!"

The Kid, instead of answering, looked at Ransome with eyes that had become the color of slate; then he picked up that pair of Colts with the extra long barrels, and made them disappear inside his clothes with one of those swift, easy gestures which the eye could not follow very well.

After that, he went to Ransome and laid a light touch on the foreman's shoulder.

"Old Ransome!" he said.

"Yeah—old Ransome be damned!" said the foreman. "What about old Montana, I'm asking?"

MANY other things were going on at the same time, about the big Lavery house. There was Ruth Lavery, in her room, being draped in films of white. She smiled a good deal, until the girl who was the best of her friends said to her, suddenly, whispering:

"Ruth, are you smiling because you're happy—or just to please me?"

"I'm happy, of course!" answered Ruth Lavery. "But I'm frightened, too. Something is going to happen I feel sure . . ."

And in front of the house Richard Lavery, Senior, was walking restlessly

up and down, up and down, scanning the horizon from time to time as though he expected a sign of changing weather to roll darkly up on the edge of the world.

He turned almost expectantly toward a sudden rattle of hoofs that beat on the lower trail and then revealed a rider on a sweating mustang. The young fellow had a look of anxiety, as though wild Indians were behind him.

He threw himself out of the saddle and ran to Lavery.

"D'you know what's happened?" he gasped. "Jack Lascar—that yaller-faced feller called Lascar that showed up in town the other day—he's gone and nailed a notice on the bulletin board in front of the post office. I've copied it down!"

He pulled out a piece of paper and read aloud. Half the words were a gasping whisper, and half were almost shouted:

"Everybody notice that wants to:

"Me that is Jack Lascar is going to stand out in the middle of the street in front of Hi Bailey's blacksmith shop at ten-thirty this same morning and wait for the low yaller hound by name of Montana Kid.

"If he don't show up then and there, you all know what kind of a skunk he is.

"(Signed)

"Jack Lascar."

"Wait a moment!" exclaimed Lavery. "Where's the sheriff?—What does he mean by permitting open challenges in a place like Bentonville?"

"The sheriff's out of town," said the messenger. "Some of the boys have sent for him. He ought to be back by

about ten-thirty. But I thought you might want to know—"

"Get off this ranch!" cried Lavery, in sudden panic. "Don't let Montana see you. If he should find out—"

He saw that the rounded eyes of the messenger were peering straight past him, and, turning, Richard Lavery saw Montana, standing in the open door of the house. Above the white of his stiff collar, his face looked even browner and younger than ever. Montana was rolling a cigarette, letting his fingers feel their own way. Then he spoke.

"You ride back and tell Jack Lascar that it's a little late for me to get his message, but that I'm coming down there as fast as a good horse will take me. Tell him that I'll finish the job I left half done, a while back."

He scratched the match, touched the flame to the crimped end of the wheat-straw paper, and took in a good, deep breath of the smoke. His eyes had an absent look, as though he considered adding something more to his reply to the challenge. But the messenger jerked his head in understanding, and ran back to his pony. It was something worth remembering, during one's life, to be the connecting link between two men like Jack Lascar and Montana.

THE Kid started for the corrals. As for Lavery, he made a few steps in pursuit; then he paused and lifted an arm and parted his lips—but the words did not come. Instead, he turned and made for the house, walking with short steps, like a man stiffened with anger.

The Kid, in the small corral nearest the big barn, went out to the blood-bay mare that he had christened Sally. She fled for a moment, like a bird with a hawk overhead; but presently she stood still and with her bright eyes

laughed at the man and at her own fear. For the two, man and horse, had become new friends, but very deep friends, since the day of their fight to a finish. Montana led her by the mane into the saddle-shed. Already, his serge suit was dusted over with white. But there was no time to change. Even as things stood, he would have to travel fast to get to Bentonville by ten-thirty.

When he got into the saddle and jogged around the corner of the barn, he saw that he would have to face all the music in one great burst. A complete picture of disapproval had been painted for him. For on the veranda stood the assembled family, down to the one-legged cook; a shimmer of white that would be Ruth Lavery, in the center of the group, and her father tall and straight and forbidding beside her.

Montana rode straight up to them and pulled off his hat.

"I've got one of those calls a man has to answer, Ruth," he said.

She only stared at him. Her lips were parted a little. She looked older; she seemed to be squinting at a bright distant light—the future, as like as not. Montana tried to feel sorry, but he couldn't.

Richard Lavery did the speaking. He said, "This will be about all, my lad. My girl has put up with a good bit. She's put off this wedding because of a hunting trip you wanted to go on; and then because you had to chase a wild horse. And now you're going down to face the challenge of a poisonous bit of scum called Jack Lascar. You'll forget about him, here and now, or else you'd better forget about Ruth."

"He's speaking for you, I suppose?" Montana said to her.

But she only kept on staring. One

could not say whether there was more pain or fear in her eyes.

"It appears that I *am* speaking for her," said Lavery. "We know what we owe to you—but there's a future as well as a past to think of."

"Wait a minute!" said Montana. "You can only talk for yourself.—Say something, Ruth!"

"I can't," she answered. "If I try to talk—I'll only be weeping."

"People cry about things that are gone—finished. Am I finished as far as you're concerned?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

"I gave you a promise about the riding of the mare, and then I broke it. Does that make you feel that you can never trust me?"

"Do you trust yourself?" she asked.

This struck him very hard, apparently. He began to reason on her side.

"It's our wedding day—and I ride off. I'll always be riding off, Ruth. Is that what you feel?"

She was silent.

"I know," concluded Montana. "I can see it. What's left in you is mostly fear."

"I want to be braver and bigger," said the girl, "but I can't help it!—Oh, why are you this way?"

"Because the devil got into me between breaths, I suppose," said Montana. "You won't believe how my heart's aching for you, right now. You seem to me everything that's right and beautiful. And if I go away, the best half of the world will be behind me.—But I can't stay and be the happy cat by the fire. Even thinking of that drives me crazy. In the middle of the night, something would catch me by the hair of the head and yank me a thousand miles away into some sort of trouble! If we had children, you'd be counting them orphans, two or three

times a year.—Ruth, I'm going away.—No matter what happens to-day, there's no coming back for me!"

HE took her suddenly in his arms. The tears began to run down her face, but she said gently:

"I'm not pitying myself. It's for you! I think God pities you, too—and loves you."

She lifted her face, and he kissed her.

Then he turned to Lavery and shook hands.

"I was hating you, a minute ago—But you're right," he said.

"There'll be another chance for me to show you that I'll never forget you," said Lavery. "If you'll still listen to me, I'll still beg you—"

But he checked himself. His unspoken words filled a beating moment of silence, and then Montana was walking jauntily down the steps and waving his hand.

"So long, every one!" he called.

Ransome began to make a mumbling sound, but he kept changing his mind about the words he intended to speak, so that none of them were clear.

Only the cook shouted out, as the Kid mounted, "I wish to God I had two legs under me, and I'd ride with you, Montana!"

Afterwards, as he sat the saddle, Montana heard Ruth crying out, "But he'll be killed!—Father, he's going to be—"

He let the sudden beating of the red mare's hoofs drown out that complaint.

As he came to the turn of the road, however, he felt an invisible hand tugging at his shoulder; and therefore he turned in the saddle, and at last he rode out of view with his hat waving over his head.

Well, the girl feared him more than she loved him; and he loved her less than he feared a housed life. To see the spring and the summer and the winter show their faces always at the same spots, that was as forbidding to Montana as the thought of a prison cell might be to other men.

Now the house was out of view behind him. He let the red mare race to get through the pass between the hills, pointing toward far-off Bentonville. After that, he felt that he had brushed the hand of the past from his shoulder.

He began to laugh like a child. He had not realized how he had dreaded double harness until now, when he was started on the empty trail again!

CHAPTER VI.

GUN FESTIVAL.

IT was ten-twenty by his watch when he headed into the main street of Bentonville. That was cutting the time a bit short, perhaps, but he did not want to burn up Sally's strength with too hard a run. For, supposing that he met Lascar and survived the fight with him, he might need all the speed that was in the mare immediately. Gun fights were barred in Bentonville. A message had been sent to the sheriff, who was probably running a horse at a dead gallop right now to get back to the town in time to prevent this duel. And that same sheriff, solemnly, with carefully chosen words, had warned Montana that a single flash of a gun in his hand would be enough to land him in jail.

"This here new reputation of yours," the sheriff had said, "is a lot of pretty light stuff. There's plenty of honest citizens that claim you ought to be doin' time in the pen, right now.

This here reputation of yours—why, it's so much dry powder, and one spark is gonna blow it to hell—and you along with it. No matter where your feet carry you, mind what your hands do after you walk into trouble. Maybe the other fellow will be to blame, but you're the one who'll go to jail."

It was curious, then, in a way, that Jack Lascar should have called for a showdown—a public showdown. Because there was nothing public about either the character or the past of Jack Lascar. He loved twilight and twilight ways, like a cat. A fight at mid-day in the middle of a street, was not Jack's usual procedure. One would expect from him rather a knife in the back or a bullet from behind. The man had plenty of skill and plenty of courage, but he used his talents like a red Indian. There was some mystery behind this challenge—or was it that the memory of that other defeat, that public shaming, had driven Jack Lascar into a frenzy, at last, until death was better than a life in which men smiled behind his back?

A freckle-faced boy ran out from a yard and up to Montana's side.

"Are you gonna do it, Montana?" he shrilled. "Are you gonna kill him? The sheriff'll chase you, if you pull a gun in this town!—Don't get yourself chased away from us, Montana. Everybody knows you licked Lascar once. Everybody knows you ain't afraid!"

"Things will be all right.—Thanks, brother," said Kid Montana.

The boy, panting, drew off to the side, shaking his head; and then he settled down into a steady dogtrot, to get to the appointed place in time for the meeting between the two men.

The street unrolled itself before Montana's eyes. He saw it as the sign of the old life which was now about

to return to him. He smiled at the saloon signs. Back of them, he knew, were long, cool rooms in which the sour smell of beer and the sweet of whiskey were in the air; and farther to the rear were the smaller chambers where card games were generally in progress. In his gambling, the Kid preferred the crooked experts, partly because their pockets were always more full of money and partly because he never enjoyed winning from the weak. Above all, because equal chances made a keener fight that was worth the winning. Those back rooms had offered a hundred adventures in the Odyssey of Kid Montana's life.

The General Merchandise Store could outfit him for the desert or the mountains. In the blacksmith shops there were hands that were cunning in a thousand contrivances. But above all, behind this quiet village life, or stirring through it, were men of the right stuff—the hard fiber.

THEN he saw Hi Bailey's blacksmith shop in the distance, thin blue wisps of smoke leaking out through the big, open doors of the place. No horses were tethered in front of it, waiting their turn to be shod. Instead, the string was hitched on the near side of the place. Well, if bullets were to fly, horse flesh was as penetrable as the bodies of men. But the Kid knew himself and he knew Jack Lascar. There would be no wild shots in this fight!

No wonder the rest of the town had seemed deserted; all its life was concentrated here! The windows, the doorways, were filled, and people stood at the corners of the houses. A dull murmur rose, swelled into a many-throated voice. The rumbling came from men; women and children added a shrill note.

And suddenly the Kid was touched with scorn and anger. "Good" people are a queer lot. These people who were gathered here, such eager spectators for a fight, would also be the first to ride, at the sheriff's call, hotfoot down the trail after the winner.

The Kid smiled, but without mirth.

He looked down and saw that he was white with dust. He had stuffed his trousers into the tops of his boots, and dust was thick in the folds beneath the knees. City clothes, like city people, were foolish things, without the free flow of a range outfit or of range men. He made two deft, imperceptible gestures that assured him of the positions of his two guns.

Then he saw a slender figure walk slowly out from under an awning and step into the street with feet that lifted high, as though this man did not wish to kick the dust up over the polish of his boots. That was Jack Lascar. His bright Mexican jacket flashed dazzlingly in the sun.

"I'll put a red spot on that jacket," said Montana, softly.

He dismounted. The mare followed him, shying a bit from side to side as she kept seeing fresh crowds of humans on either side of the street.

Lascar stood in the exact center of the street, with his hands on his hips. There was no wind to furl back the wide brim of his hat and let Montana see the darkened face beneath. If there was only more light on the face, he would try his shot for the head. Well, he might try for the head anyway. The bright buckle of the hat-belt would be a neat target—neat and small. And Jack Lascar's rather bad chances would be evened a little.

Some one yelled, "Hurry it up! Hurry it up!—The sheriff's comin', hell-bent!"

Out of the distance, Montana could hear the small beating of hoofs.

Jack Lascar had turned sidewise. He was not fool enough to offer the full breadth of his body to an enemy. He forgot that this turn brought the buckle of the hat-belt into fuller view.

They were twenty paces apart.

"How does this suit you, Jack?" asked Montana in a clear voice.

Lascar's whole body jerked with the violence of his words. He barked his curses like a dog. Any distance suited him, he said. Ten paces would be better.

The Kid smiled, and walked straight on.

A woman screeched through the thick silence that covered the town. "It's gotta be stopped! It's murder!—Two of God's creatures out there to murder—"

The voice was suddenly muffled. A man could be heard to say, distinctly, "Now, Mame, don't you go bein' a fool! The boys have gotta have their fun, don't they?"

The hoofbeats from the rear must have rounded a corner. They seemed suddenly nearer. That acted as a signal for Jack Lascar. The man seemed hungry for the battle, as he jerked out a gun.

The Kid made his draw in midstep. He fired as his foot struck the ground. Jack Lascar fired one bullet into the air, as he spun around. He fell neither forward nor back, but in a heap.

CHAPTER VII.

LANDSLIDE.

WITH Jack Lascar's fall there came from the watchers a deep, quick, animal sound. The lips of men and women and children

grinned back suddenly as though there was something in the sight that filled them with the food of satisfaction and horror. After that first grunting noise there came the babel of spoken words, and an uneasy movement forward.

The Kid went up to Lascar's body and put his foot brutally on the man's shoulder, pushing him back so that he sprawled face up. Then Montana could see that a trickle of blood was still running down the side of his head—sure proof that the fellow was not dead as yet. Well, if that bullet had glanced, it meant that there would be more trouble—great trouble—ahead of Montana. For a man like him, with the courage to face his enemy in the open public, made him a man worthy of consideration.

There was something more to be considered, just now. That was the persistent beating of hoofs, down the street, and now rounding the last corner. So the Kid jumped upon Sally, looking back as he jammed his feet into the stirrups.

He saw the sheriff come grandly around the next bend of the street, with his mustang aslant, the dust spilling out sidewise from the slashing hoofs, and the wind of the gallop furling back the brim of the man's hat.—There was patience, kindness, understanding in the face of this man of the law, and long before he had shown all of these qualities in his dealing with Montana. There was also a bulldog persistence and that sort of courage which is found in a man who loves duty more than glory.

And as the sheriff saw the picture before him, the dust still rising above the place where Jack Lascar lay, the man of the law shouted. His cry was like the hoarse bark of a sea lion, as he went for his gun.

Montana did not try to get away down the street. Neither did he open fire on the sheriff, for it was not his habit to shoot at the law-abiding. Instead, he sent the mare winging over a four-foot fence, and then crashing through tall shrubbery, which closed over man and horse like water.

The sheriff's bullets crackled through the brush, and other bullets sang a smaller and a higher note around the ears of Montana. He looked up, and saw a rifleman seated on the very ridge of a roof. The fellow had gone up there to get a perfect view of the meeting between Montana and Lascar. He had carried his gun with him, in case there was a chance for him to put in his hand safely at the end of the fight.

The Kid's lips twitched back from his teeth. There are a lot of people in the world who need killing! But now he had to swerve the mare onto a back lane and send her scooting. There would be plenty of trouble. He could hear its voice growling and howling through Bentonville. Now that the lions had finished fighting, the spectators would take part in a lion-hunt.

Horses began to snort and squeal under the spur as men mounted and drove away in pursuit. Men yelled orders in voices that squeaked with excitement. There was even a sudden discharge of three or four shots that could not have been aimed at anything in particular.

THE Kid smiled a little. His eyes filled with reminiscent pleasure.

He knew all the instruments in this orchestra. He had heard them many times before. And the music assured him that he was now well out of the drowsy noontide of the commonplace and back in the chill wind of the world of adventure.

From his position, the south trail was the best trail. He went straight for it, taking note how the mare carried her head high, moving it in observation, keeping her ears pricked. She was iron-hard. The run from the ranch had not weighted her hoofs with the least weariness. She had found a master, and flown at last to a lure, yet she was still strong from those wild years of running through the wilderness. Montana felt that he had caught from the sky something that would carry him safely away from any earthbound dangers.

The last house, the last barn whirled away behind him. He was heading toward the beginning of the south trail, with the tumult of Bentonville drawing to a single head behind him. Then he saw a man on a black horse, riding furiously down the northern slope to head him off.

There was still time to turn to the left, down a broken ravine; but though he might avoid one enemy in this manner, he would permit himself to be trapped—trapped for that pouring crowd whose horses were beating up a thunder behind him. Besides, he was in no mood to turn for any man.

He drew a gun. The mare flowed beneath him like the current of a river; to shoot from her back would be as easy as shooting from the deck of a ship. And then he saw that the stranger had neither drawn a revolver nor unsheathed the rifle whose holster slanted down under the rider's right leg. It was a brown-faced Mexican, in overalls, with a tattered rag of a hat fluttering on his head. He was dressed like a peon, though he rode a horse fit for a king. Something in that contrast, and in the thick solidity of the fellow's shoulders, put knowledge into the Kid's eyes.

"Rubriz!" he shouted.

For answer, he got a wild yell and the wave of an arm. It was Rubriz himself who pulled onto the trail beside him, checking the great black horse with a cruel Mexican bit.

"Welcome!—Well seen, El Keed!" cried Rubriz. "But take another way than this. The whole town is on horseback. They've seen me, and they're chasing me. Some dog of a spy has warned them that I'm north of the Rio Grande!"

The shouted Mexican speech was music in the ears of Montana. If he added up all the happiness of his life, at least half of it—and the spicier half, too—he had found it in the land of that tongue. He smiled as he answered:

"They hunt *me*, Mateo!"

"They hunt you?—Then they hunt us both!" answered Rubriz.

He turned in his saddle. Montana knew what the Mexican was seeing. The first riders out of Bentonville were lashing or spurring their horses, riding a race, with the wicked joy of the man-hunt maddening their heads.

What Montana looked at were the gross, powerful lines of the Mexican, and the white scar of the whiplash across his face. It would not have surprised him, at this meeting, if the bandit had leaped for his throat. Neither did it surprise him that Rubriz was ready to fight and die with him.

And seeing that, Montana's smile became a laugh.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



Railroad Oddities

WHEN the locomotive was first invented, it did not occur to any one that smooth wheels would run on smooth rails. Most of the experimenters used noisy cogs; but in 1813 an English mechanical engineer produced the "Mechanical Traveler." This had legs and feet like a horse. It wasn't a horse, though, as the inventor realized when it blew up.

The early Louisville-Lexington line was called the crookedest in the world and was intended to be that way. In order to run with as few conductors as possible, the builders provided frequent turns so that a conductor could look back over the cars. The idea was to make sure that passengers behaved themselves. Kentucky also had a two-story train at one time.

The Victoria Bridge over the St. Lawrence River was called the eighth wonder of the world, and consisted of a long tube through which trains ran. The tube was made of sections which contracted when the weather got cold so that two or three feet of the center section were out of sight in below-zero weather. It was a popular sport to walk through the bridge, hoping that no train would show up. One ingenious man of Montreal fixed a pointer to the center tube in such a way that it would show how cold it was—people marveled at the bridge that was its own thermometer.

China's first railway was relished by the coolies, but not by politicians, who pointed out that the noise and smoke disturbed ancient burying grounds. The people said: "That's so," and went on riding back and forth just for fun. In 1876 an official of Shanghai, hearing that the governor of Formosa wanted a railroad, had the local line picked up and shipped there.

J. W. Holden.