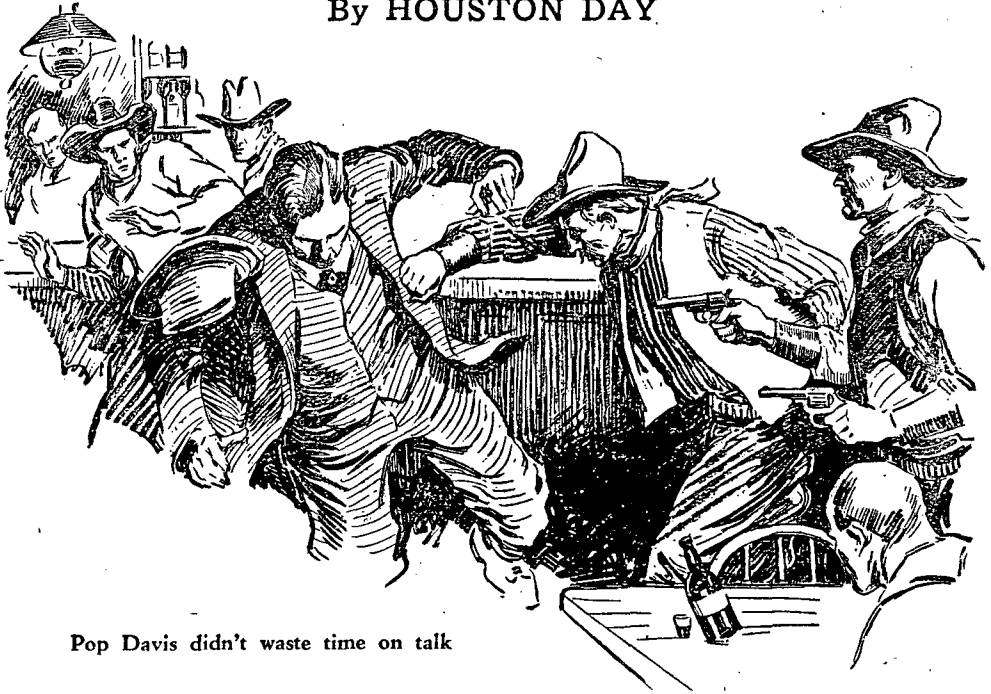


Pardners

By HOUSTON DAY



Pop Davis didn't waste time on talk

"I ain't suspicious," said the Bar C cowman, "but when a crook begins braggin' about his honesty—"

I 'M wearin' a grin as wide as the Rio Grande in flood season when I come out of Peter Whetstone's office.

"Times is hard, Joe, and money's scarce," he's told me. "I don't want to foreclose on that poor farm you miscall a ranch. Nobody is buyin' land these days, and I would just have more taxes to worry about. So if you and Pop Davis pay me a thousand dollars, I'll wipe off that three hundred dollars interest and tear up the mortgage."

Yes, sir, I was smilin' so hard my ears hurt, I was that tickled. For ten years, Pop and I had been tryin' to pay off that mortgage, but something always happened. Once we landed in town and found we had just a hundred

dollars more'n we needed. We was so happy we dropped in at Jake Carstairs' to celebrate just a little, and two weeks later we had to borrow hosses to carry us and our mortgage back to the ranch.—It was some celebration, though!

But this time, there wasn't goin' to be no slip-up. Nary a one. So I heads for the bank to meet Pop and get the cash for Mr. Whetstone. He's not around when I arrives, so I inquires politely at the cage, and they informs me my pardner has got the money and gone out.

I begin then to get a little bit uneasy. Perhaps some one has seen Pop's bankroll and tapped him on the head. My smile fades, because outside of the

Bar C, and Horace, my hoss, I ain't got nobody but Pop, the cantankerous little runt.

The first place I heads for is Jake Carstairs's saloon, but when I get there I see no sign of Pop at the bar. I look around the room, and I see the stud and faro tables are deserted. But down in the corner Carstairs is spinnin' some kind of a wheel, and standin' in front of it is Pop.

I crossed the floor in a hurry, and arrives just in time to see a little white ball click into a slot marked "oo." Carstairs grins and says:

"Tough luck, Mr. Davis. The house wins all bets."

And with that he sweeps the money off the table.

I am waitin' for Pop to place his next bet, when I see he has no more chips or money in front of him. My mouth gets as dry as a lizard's tail. My heart takes a dive, hits the bottom of my stummick, turns a couple of flip-flops, then bounces up and hits my back teeth.

Pop turns around and looks at me kinda sad-like.

"Yes, Joseph," he says. "Go ahead and say it. I'm the biggest jackass in the whole county."

By this time I begin to suspect the worst has happened. Our mortgage money is gone again.

"In the county, only?" I asks, sorta cold-like.

"Texas is a pretty big State," Pop mutters defensively.

"Yeah, it is," I says. "But if it was twice as big, and had twice as many jackasses, you would still be the biggest by five hands."

At that, Pop looked hurt, and I begin to feel sorry for him. He was right. Texas is a big State, and perhaps I'd taken in too much territory. Besides, I

remembered the time I tried to buck Carstairs's faro bank with the mortgage money in my jeans.

"Okay, pardner," I says. "I back yore play, but when old man Whetstone hears what you done he's liable to be a bit provoked."

But even though I slaps Pop on the back and tells him to cheer up, I'm feelin' kinda low as I crosses the street to tell Mr. Whetstone he has to extend our mortgage for another year.

I WALKS into his office and speaks my piece, but I'm very much disappointed in the way he receives my request. He was not half as agreeable as he had been when I told him Pop and I had a thousand dollars in the bank. In fact, he becomes what you might almost call insultin'. He rears up on his hind laigs and shakes a finger in my face.

"You are both a couple of irresponsible scalawags," he shouts. "You are not entitled to any more consideration from me. Either you bring a thousand dollars into this office by the fifteenth or I will foreclose on the Bar C and sell it to the highest bidder, even if I don't get more'n fifteen cents for it!"

"But Pop never seen one of those roulette wheels before," I argues. "He ain't to blame. Any puncher is liable to be thrown by a strange hoss."

"Bah!" snorts Mr. Whetstone. "Bah! You are both a couple of half-wits.—No, I take that back. There ain't a good brain between you. Every one in town knows that wheel is wired."

"I don't savvy," I says. "What do you mean wired?"

"Crooked, you jackass!" he shouts. "Crooked! Do you think Jake Carstairs is takin' any chances on losin' money to a couple of ignorant cow

wrestlers like you two? No, not for a minute. Why, it makes my blood boil! You take my money—money you owe me—and stuff it right in his pocket. Get out of here before I do something violent!”

Mr. Whetstone is actin’ like he was aggravated, so I guessed it was time to mosey along.

“What did he say?” Pop asks me when I come out.

“He says we are both very dumb.”

“Huh, you already told me that.”

“Yeah, but he proved it. You tossed our money into a crooked game.”

Pop’s eyes squinted, and his mustache bristled.

“You mean to tell me that wheel game weren’t on the level?”

“You guessed it.”

Pop hitches up his belt and fingers the butt of his Colt.

“I’m goin’ back there,” he says.

“No you ain’t,” I tells him. “’Cause if you do you’ll be just foolish enough to plug him.”

“Plug him?—Huh, you’ll be able to use his head for a sieve!” says Pop.

And already he’s walkin’ toward Carstairs’s joint.

I grabs him by the arm.

“Nothin’ doin’!” I argues. “You’ll only get yourself strung up, and I ain’t goin’ to work the Bar C alone and pay off that mortgage all by myself.”

“You won’t have to,” says Pop. “Didn’t Whetstone say he was goin’ to foreclose?”

“Yes,” I agrees. “But anyway, that guy Carstairs ain’t worth shootin’. If you want to work him over with yore fists I’ll back yore play. But give me that gun first.”

Pop is an argumentative little cuss when he gets started. There is nothing that will satisfy him but to shoot it out with Carstairs. But I’m very deter-

mined myself; and finally, still grumblin’ and arguin’, Pop hands over his six-gun. And together we ambles down to Carstairs’s place and walks in.

AS we get inside the door we see Carstairs is standin’ by the bar, a toothy grin on his face that outshines the big diamond stickpin in his tie. He is buyin’ drinks for the house. With him I spots Dopey Dan Dorsey, One-Eyed Sullivan and Hoss-Ears Jenkins. They is all laughin’, too, and I suspects that they know about the wheel and are laughin’ at us.

It makes me sore, so I don’t wait to make a speech before I throw down on the room with two guns.

“Just stand where you are, gentlemen,” I says, “an’ keep yore hands on the bar. Mr. Davis desires to have a little confab with the proprietor.”

I’ll say one thing for Pop Davis. He don’t waste no time on talk right then. Carstairs is about six feet and he weighs two hundred and twenty pounds. Pop tips the scales at a hundred and fifteen in his chaps, and he’s about five feet four in his Dodge City boots. But size don’t make any difference to Pop. He raises himself on his toes and smacks Carstairs right in the eye. Then he swings his left at Jake’s other eye.

“Good boy, Pop!” I shouts. “Nice punchin’. Let him have one on the nose for me.”

Pop did, and I’m enjoyin’ the scene very much, especially when Pop butts Carstairs in the stummick and knocks him off’n his feet, and then dives right on top of him. I am right in the middle of a big laugh at hearin’ Carstairs holler quits when somehow or other I find that I’m sprawled out on the floor, and I don’t know how I got there.

The guns have been knocked from my hands, and I feel a very bad pain in the back of my head. Something tells me I've been hit, so I raise myself on my elbow and looking up I see John Tilliman, the sheriff, standin' over me. I'm right. I have been hit.

The sheriff is coverin' Pop, but he doesn't do anything about it when Carstairs and his three cronies jump on my pardner at the same time. Carstairs grabs Pop around the middle, and Dopey Dan, One-Eyed Sullivan and Hoss-Ears Jenkins begin to take turns sockin' him.

That makes me sore. I've seen the time when Pop could handle three or four townies; but he is older now, and so I decides to give him a little help. I jump to my feet and dives into the fight.

The sheriff lets out a bellow, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

I don't stop, and I hear a bullet buzz by my ear. Before he c'n fire again, I've landed right in the middle of the fracas, and I start swingin' with both fists.

But maybe those fellows were a mite tougher than they looked. Or maybe I'm gettin' a bit older myself, for anyway, Hoss-Ears Jenkins turns around.

"So you want some, too?" he says, and with that he swings.

His fist lands on the side of my jaw, and once more I find myself on the floor, without being able to savvy just how I got there. I jump up again, and this time Dopey Dan stops pummelling Pop long enough to take care of me.

"Oh," he says, "so you ain't got enough, eh?"

He clouts me between the eyes, and I find I'm not able to get up so quick; and while I'm tryin' I feel myself being picked off the floor, and a second later I'm flyin' out the door.

I land right on my face in the dust, and sit up spluttering. Before I can find out what became of my laigs, the swingin' doors part again, and out comes Pop. He is flyin' too, and he lands right on top of me.

THE sheriff strolls out and unloads our guns, then tosses them to us.

"You two old rascals ought to be ashamed of yoreselves for creatin' a disturbance in Mr. Carstairs's establishment," he says.

I looks at him, and spits out a mouthful of dust.

"Huh! An' Pop and I voted for you, too."

Tilliman laughs.

"Thanks for that, boys, but get movin' now.—And get movin' fast, 'cause if yore in town by nightfall I'll have to throw you in the calaboose."

Pop Davis and I ain't feelin' so good. In fact we're very much bruised up, so we takes the sheriff's hint and decides maybe we'd better go back to the ranch.

That night, after we painted each other with arnica, Pop and I are sittin' out in front of the ranch house, havin' a smoke before we turn in. We ain't talkin' much, 'cause Pop suspects I'm a little sore at him for losin' the mortgage money. And he's right. We've been sittin' there for about an hour, waitin' for the other to loosen up and say somethin' when Pop begins to cuss.

"What's itchin' you now?" I asks.

"Nothin'," says he. "But there's somethin' stickin' me."

So he stands up and peels off his shirt and starts lookin' through it. Then he cusses again.

"I'll be a cross-eyed horned toad," he exclaims. "Look at this."

I look and see that he is holdin' Carstairs's stick pin.

"How'd you get that?" I asks. "I didn't know you was a pickpocket."

"I didn't pick his pocket. He was wearin' this dinkus in his tie."

"And you lifted it out while you was battlin' him, eh?"

"No, I'm not a lifter, either. It musta come out while we was rollin' on the floor, and then got stuck in my shirt.—Huh! Imagine a full grown man wearin' glass like this in his tie."

"There's no accountin' for tastes," I replies. "Some guys think they c'n beat a crooked roulette wheel, too."

Pop didn't say nothin' to that, but he starts to toss the pin away.

"Hey!" I exclaims. "I want that stick pin. It's worth a thousand dollars."

"One thousand bucks?" says Pop. "An' who'd you say was the biggest jackass in Texas?"

"Yo're just plain dumb," says I. "It's all you got to show for our mortgage money, ain't it?"

Pop has no answer to that, so he hands over the pin and I uses it to close a rip in my shirt that I got when I sailed through the swingin' doors at Carstairs's.

We don't say much more, and pretty soon it's time to go to bed, which I'm glad of on account of my body being as sore as a branded calf's.

THE next day Pop and I don't feel like workin'. What's the use of keepin' the ranch up when it ain't goin' to belong to us any more. But it gets kinda monotonous for me to just sit and smoke and look at Pop's homely face, so soon I'm back in the old rut, doin' the chores. Pop joins in, and the next few days drag by till it's time to go to town and tell Mr. Whetstone it is the fifteenth and he's a ranch owner.

From force of habit we head for Carstairs's, when we get there, and we find there's a celebration goin' on. Dopey Dan, Hoss-Ears and One-Eyed Sullivan are hangin' over the bar with a lot of other loafers, so I knows somebody is buyin' drinks.

Pop and me ain't got any money, so we wastes no time in sidling up to the bar and lookin' thirsty. Sure enough, the bartender slides a bottle down in front of us and tells us to drink up.

Sheriff Tilliman drifts in, and he hands us a smile to show that bygones is bygones.

"Go easy on the red-eye, boys," he says. "I don't want you two cleanin' up this place again."

Everybody laughs exceptin' Pop and me; we're feelin' very downhearted. So we have three fast drinks before we begin to wonder what all the shoutin' is about. We don't have to ask, though, because Carstairs speaks up. He comes over and slaps me on the back.

"No hard feelin', boys?"

"No more'n I have for a rattle-snake," says I.

"An' you c'n lay that double," says Pop.

Carstairs laughs. "Forget it, boys! You gambled and lost. I s'pose you come to town to look for jobs?"

"Yeah," I replies. "Know anybody that c'n use a couple of top hands?"

"No, but I c'n use a couple of men. I'm openin' up a dance hall, next door, in a few days. I'll need a couple of good steady men to keep things tidy."

Pop looked interested.

"You mean you want us to take care of the disorderly element?" he asks, throwin' a nasty look at Dopey Dan.

"No," says Carstairs. "I got three good bouncers. But some one'll have to sweep the floor and keep it waxed, and I thought you boys'd like the job."

I turn quick to grab Pop, 'cause I don't want him to start another row by sockin' Carstairs. But I'm surprised to see him starin' downcast-like at the bar. Then I begin to understand. He hasn't said much about us losin' the Bar C, and I was beginnin' to think he didn't care. But from one look at his face I know different now. It looks as if he's lost his fightin' spirit, as well as the place.

To make conversation, an' because I feel the need of another drink right sudden, I says:

"How come all this prosperity, Carstairs? I kinda thought the free drinks you give those guys that fight yore battles for you would eat up all the profits."

Carstairs grins.

"Yeah, this place isn't the money maker it used to be. But I'm comin' into some big money to-day—five thousand dollars."

I whistles softly. That is big money. "You musta gone into partnership with some bank bandits," says I.

"Nothin' like that," says Carstairs, lookin' insulted. "I always play the game on the level."

I HEAR a derisive snort from Pop, an' kick him on the shin.

"Remember that diamond stick pin I wore?" Carstairs goes on. "Well, I lost it. It was insured for five thousand, although that's only half what it cost me. Well, Peter Whetstone has promised to deliver the check here this mornin'."

I whistle again, and begin to feel sick inside. Especially under my left ribs, where this same stick pin has begin to rub a hole in my skin.

"You mean that was a real diamond?" I stammers, when I c'n get my breath.

Carstairs swells up indignantly. "Certainly," he snaps. "Do you think I'd wear an imitation?"

"I dunno," says I. "Would you?"

Carstairs snorts. "There were some ugly rumors circulated in this town when they heard I was goin' to collect my insurance," he says. "But I sure silenced them in a hurry."

"Who'd you shoot?" asks Pop.

"I didn't shoot anybody. I'm not a dumb cowboy. I just offered a thousand dollars reward, and no questions asked, for the return of the pin. And that sure scotched the ugly rumors."

"One thousand dollars—?" stammers Pop.

"You mean you'll give that to get yore pin back?" I asks, tryin' to keep the excitement out of my voice.

I'm hangin' on to the bar. My head is goin' round and round. I look at Pop, and sees that he is just as excited as I am at the prospects of gettin' our ranch back. He looks as if some one had hit him over the head with a brandin' iron. His eyes are glassy and his jaw is hangin' open. But Carstairs's next words cooled us off in a hurry.

"No," he says. "There ain't no use of offerin' the reward now. I'll be collectin' the insurance in a half-hour."

My heart, which had been gettin' in the way of my tongue, took a dive and hit the bottom of my stummick so hard I thought it was goin' clean through. Disappointed? There ain't no word to tell how I felt.

"If there's anythin' I hate," Carstairs goes on, "it's a four-flusher. There have been lots of times when I've been tempted to pawn that pin. But I always resisted. It had become as much a part of me as my mustache. Once Dopey Dan suggested that I sell the diamond and have an imitation put in its place. No one would know the dif-

ference, he argued.—But not for me. When I wear a stickpin it's the real stuff. That's why they call me Honest Jake."

I'd never heard any one call him honest Jake, but I let that pass, and finished the drink in front of me. I hate to be disappointed. It certainly spoils the taste of everything—even a drink.

Pop nudges me in the side.

"I wanna speak to you alone."

I excuse myself to Carstairs, and follow Pop up in front by the window.

"Ain't it terrible!" he groans. "It's worth ten thousand bucks, and we gotta give it back to him."

I'm half dead with disgust, but I have to grin when I heard Pop say that. Many a better man than him would have thought twice about givin' Carstairs back his pin. We'd been workin' the ranch for ten years, and he'd got pretty near every cent we made, with his crooked dealing. Most guys would have salved their conscience by arguin' they was only gettin' back what belonged to them. But I gotta hand it to Pop. He wasn't like that.

"Yeah," I agrees, "I'd rather drink pizen. But we gotta do it."

THE swingin' doors open then, and in walks Whetstone. He edges up to the bar and orders sarsaparilla, and Carstairs hurries over and throws his arm around him as if he was a long lost brother, or maybe a rancher with a pocketful of money.

While he is sippin' his drink, Whetstone turns and sees us and scowls. We scowl right back. It makes us both sore to see a ranch owner drinkin' sarsaparilla. Ugh!

"Men," says Mr. Whetstone, when he has finished his drink, "I have in

my pocket a check for five thousand dollars. Before I turn it over to Mr. Carstairs I would like to say a few words to you about the value of insurance."

While he is handin' out his line, he reaches into his inside pocket and pulls out the check.

"Mr. Carstairs," he says, "I want to present to you this check, with my compliments. At the same time, I want to congratulate you on yore foresight. No man can foretell the day when adversity will strike."

Carstairs is reachin' for the check, but I can't bring myself to announce that his pin has been found. The idea that he is goin' to get something worth ten thousand, instead of that check for only five thousand, makes me want to die of mortification. But Pop nudges me, and I know I gotta speak my piece.

"Just a minute," I interrupts. "Mr. Carstairs's diamond has been found."

For a minute that bar room looked as if every one had been turned to stone. Carstairs turns toward me, and there is a funny look in his face. The crowd that has been lined up in front of the bar also turns and stares at me.

But I don't savvy that funny look from Carstairs. I'm expectin' him to run over and throw his arm over my shoulder, like he did with Whetstone, and I'm dreadin' it very much.

"Come," says the sheriff testily. "Are you drunk again?"

"No," says I. "I just got some good news for Carstairs."

Then I produces the pin.

For a second or two nobody speaks. I see Carstairs is turnin' a saffron yellow. The rest of his gang are starin' at me with bulgin' eyes.

"Yore pin's been kickin' around in the sawdust for two weeks, Carstairs," I tells him, not wanting any one to

know that Pop and I had it, but was too dumb to know it was worth anything.

If looks could kill, Carstairs's glare would have eaten my heart out, right there. I see his lips workin', and I know he's callin' me a lot of names, but I can't savvy why. He finally reaches for the pin, and when he does I get an idea.

"Just a second, Carstairs," I says. "C'n you identify yore property?"

"Certainly."

"Is this it?" I asks, holdin' up the pin.

"It is."

"Sure?"

"Positive!"

"Good enough," says I.

Then, addressin' the crowd, I adds, "Any of you numbskulls know a diamond will cut glass . . ."

And with that I draw the stickpin across the window. There is a shrill, back-tingling shriek of glass scratching glass, but there ain't nary a sign of a scrape on the window.

"So it's yours, huh?" I says to Carstairs, grinnin' for the first time since Pop lost the mortgage money.

Carstairs looks like a cornered coyote. He glances at Whetstone, then at the sheriff. They are both lookin' at him, too, and there's a cold gleam in their eyes.

I GOTTA hand it to them guys. It didn't take them long to catch onto Carstairs's game. He'd sold his real diamond and substituted a glass stone, but he'd plumb forgotten to tell the insurance company about it.

Then Carstairs makes a break for the door. Everybody is so surprised they are standin' flat-footed. The sheriff shouts, "Halt!"

I'd forgotten about Pop. He was as surprised as any one, but he was the quickest to get over it. I see his body divin' through the air. He hits Carstairs just below the knees with a tackle that an all-star football player would have been proud of.

Pop swings his left. "That's for gyppin' me outa the mortgage money!" He swings his right. "That's for makin' my pardner worry!" He swings his left again. "An' that's for tryin' to swindle Mr. Whetstone!"

But at that time the sheriff butts in.

"Tsk-tsk! That's no way to treat a prisoner," he says.

"But I don't guess there's any need to quarrel about it.—Have a drink?"

I grins. The sheriff isn't a bad guy, after all. As I'm amblin' up to the bar, Whetstone busts through the crowd and grabs my hand.

"Congratulations!" he exclaims.

"Yeah," says I. "Congratulations is all Pop and me ever get. We'd a darn sight rather had that thousand-dollar reward Carstairs offered."

"I don't see why you won't get it," says Mr. Whetstone. "I'm still holdin' the money."

"Sure," says the sheriff. "Give it to him. He's earned it."

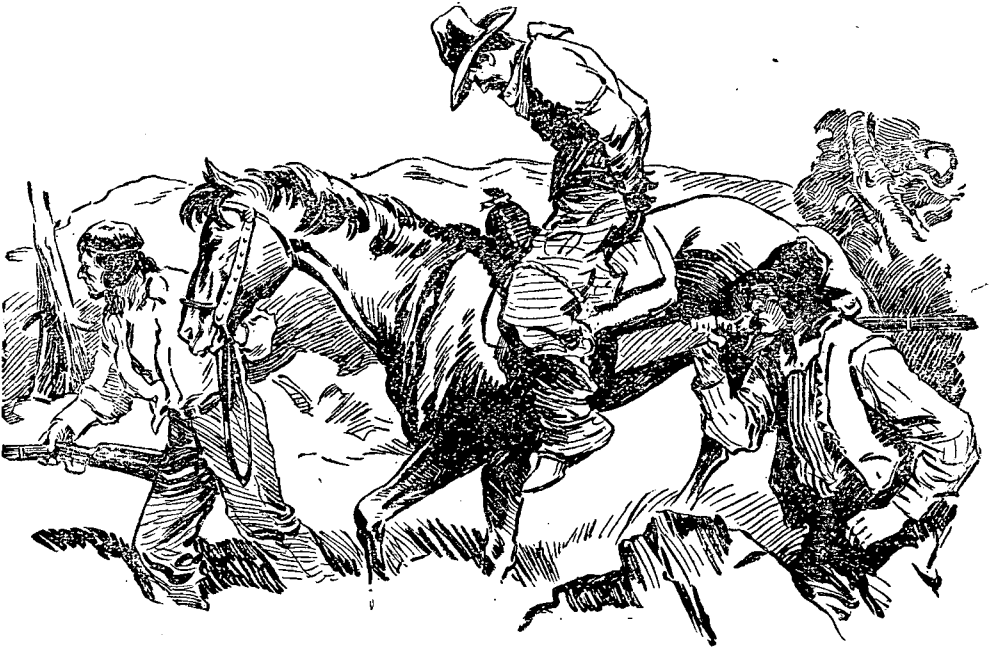
I begin to grin again, real wide.

"Don't bother, Mr. Whetstone," says I. "Just keep it, and tear up that mortgage of ours."

Mr. Whetstone can't understand, either, why I'm so trustful of him, when I was so suspicious of Carstairs.

"That's easy," I replies. "I ain't at all suspicious by nature, but when a crook like Carstairs begins braggin' to me about how honest he is, I'd be a danged fool if I didn't suspect he had something up his sleeve."

THE END



The two half-breeds led Lenister away

Buckshot

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "The Santa Claus Trail," "Hashknife Plays a Hunch," etc.

Irish O'Shea had his rangeland enemies on the run—but they were running toward him

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

A RANGE feud was going full blast in Paint Pot Valley, when Irish O'Shea and Noisy Waters, wandering cowboys, reached the valley looking for work.

Tom Hawks, grizzled veteran, and his two half-breed sons, Mose and Elija, were accused by Dud Palmer, manager of the Box V ranch, of rustling cattle. Ponca Jones, the sheriff, and Windy Grant, his deputy, were not inclined to take sides in the dispute, although Jones insisted that Bill Wing, one of the Box V men, face a coroner's inquest for the killing of Swiftwater Bill Smith when the latter helped the Hawks boys.

A complication was added when Jack Vincent, son of Henry Vincent, owner

of the Box V, was shot from ambush and was carried to the Hawks ranch for treatment. Jack immediately fell in love with Joya, Hawks's adopted daughter, much to the chagrin of Mrs. Vincent, who thought Joya was a half-breed.

Jim Brunk and Tex Born, two gunmen, were imported by Dud Palmer in an effort to get Irish and Noisy out of the way. But, in a gun battle, Born, who called himself Black, was killed, and Brunk, although wounded, got back to the Box V. At least Brunk was believed by the sheriff to be the wounded man, although his face had not been revealed during the fight.

Meanwhile, Irish puzzled over two facts he had discovered: that many calves

This story began in the Argosy for February 17.