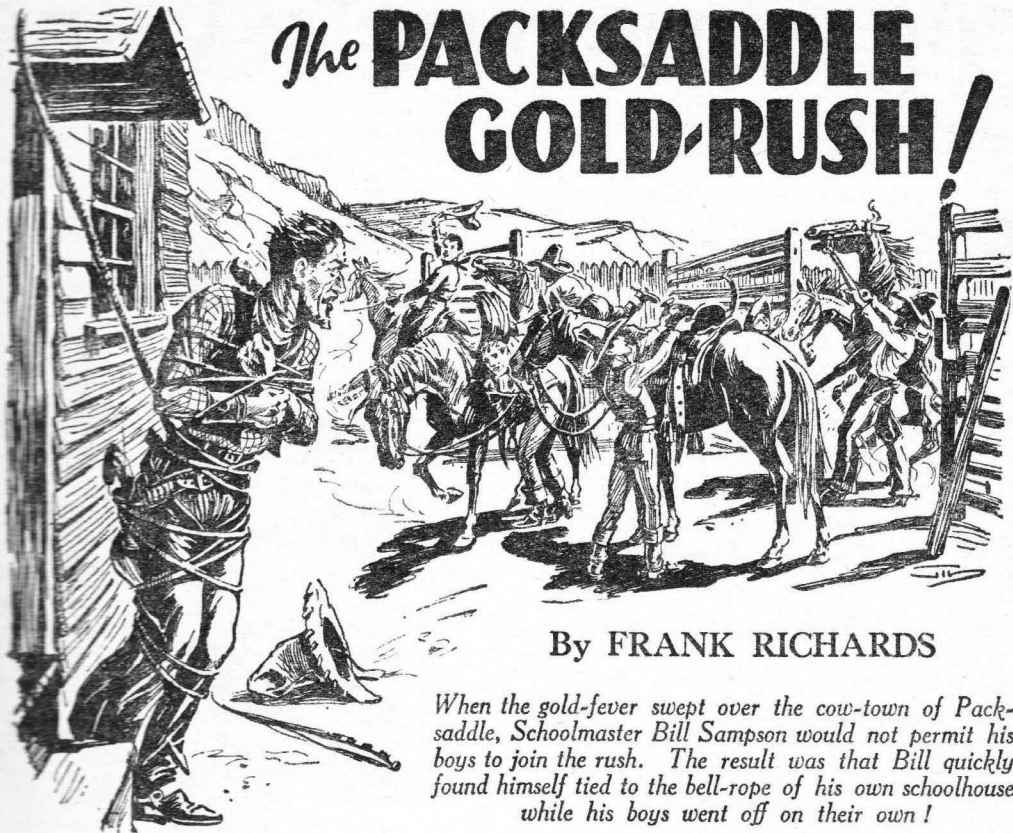


The PACKSADDLE GOLD-RUSH!



By FRANK RICHARDS

When the gold-fever swept over the cow-town of Packsaddle, Schoolmaster Bill Sampson would not permit his boys to join the rush. The result was that Bill quickly found himself tied to the bell-rope of his own schoolhouse while his boys went off on their own!

THE FIRST CHAPTER LOCO ?

BANG !
The sudden report of a shotgun made Dick, Slick and Mick jump.

They pulled in their ponies and stared round in surprise over the sea of grass.

Nobody was in sight.

Classes were over at Packsaddle, and the three comrades of the cow-town school were enjoying a gallop over the prairie, up the bank of the Rio Frio.

Packsaddle School and the cow-town were three miles behind them, out of sight under the waving grass. Far away ahead rose the high table-

land of the Staked Plain, barring the blue sky.

"Say, that's some guy burning powder!" said Slick Poindexter. "But where the great horned toad is he located?"

"Down by the river," said Dick Carr.

"Aw, what'll a guy be doing, loosing off a gat on the Frio?" asked Mick Kavanagh.

The three schoolboys turned their horses in the direction of the river.

The Rio Frio, which foamed and flooded down from the Staked Plain in the fall, flowed thin and shallow in the hot summer of Texas. The main stream shrank to a mere rivulet, with smaller streams trickling into it

sluggishly through beds of mud and sand.

The high, grassy bluffs on the bank were twenty feet above the shrunken stream. Dick, Slick and Mick rode to the edge of the bluffs and looked down into the wide, deep space of the river course.

Far out from the bluffs trickled the stream, gleaming in the blazing sunshine. Here and there sandy bars showed through the water.

Dick Carr pointed with his riding-whip.

"There he is!"

Out on the sandbanks, toylike in the distance, was a figure of a man in a Stetson hat, with a shotgun in his hands.

Nearer the bank, in the shadow of the bluffs, stood a tent, and tethered near it were a couple of pack-mules.

Slick Poindexter chuckled.

"I guess I'm wise to that guy," he remarked. "That's Pedlar Perkins, and I'll say he's plumb loco."

"What the dickens is he camped there for?" asked Dick Carr.

Slick chuckled again.

"Fossicking," he answered.

"Fossicking!" repeated Dick blankly.

The tenderfoot of Packsaddle School knew what fossicking was—gold-seeking. But there was no gold that he had ever heard of in the cow-country. Hopeful guys sometimes went fossicking in the rocky uplands of the Staked Plain, but on the grassy prairies of Santanta County they might as well have looked for platinum or diamonds.

"Is he potty?" asked Dick.

"You said it," chortled Mick, "if you mean loco, old-timer! I'll say he's plumb loco, and then some."

Dick Carr stared down at the man. Distant as he was, Dick had a fairly

clear view of his face—bony, hard-bitten, keen. If he was "loco," he did not look it, but he looked like a guy that needed watching.

"I've sure heard a heap about that hombre," grinned Slick. "He's a pedlar by trade, and he came this way from Arizona and New Mexico. He told the boys in the Red Dog at Packsaddle that he had picked up colour in the Rio Frio."

"Colour?" repeated Dick.

"Signs of gold, you gink! He allowed that there was pay-dirt in the Frio, like he had found in creeks way out in Arizona. I'll say they sniggered a few, and then a few more! But he was sure fixed on it, and he bought a heap of stores at old Wash's store and camped there. He's sure given up peddling for fossicking. I'll tell a man, I'll eat all the gold he washes out of the sand in the Frio."

The man in the river-bed had not observed the three schoolboys sitting in their saddles high up on the bluff. They watched him curiously.

Unless he was "loco," it was difficult to account for his extraordinary actions.

He was re-loading the shotgun, which they had heard him discharge once. What he had fired at was a mystery.

There was no living thing to be seen in the river-bed, except Pedlar Perkins himself. Apparently he was burning powder for his own amusement. If that was his only reason for wasting powder and shot, there could be little doubt that he was "plumb loco."

"There he goes agin!" grinned Mick Kavanagh.

They saw the pedlar lift the shotgun and take aim. He was aiming at a bar of sand that ran out from the muddy bank into the stream.

Bang!

In the silence the report floated up, almost like thunder, echoing far along the Rio Frio.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Dick Carr. "Mad as a hatter, I should say."

"You said it!" agreed Slick.

Pedlar Perkins did not look up. With the shotgun under his arm, he walked across to the sandy bar he had fired at, bent down and inspected it carefully with his keen eyes.

Then he started re-loading the gun again.

Dick, Slick and Mick wheeled their horses and rode away from the bluffs, leaving Pedlar Perkins to his peculiar occupation of blazing away at the sandbanks of the Frio.

As they rode, another report floated up from the sunken river-bed.

Bang!

And as they galloped on, another bang came faintly to their ears. Then they were out of hearing of the mysterious fossicker.

By the time they had finished their gallop and ridden back to Packsaddle School, the three chums had forgotten Pedlar Perkins. But they were destined to be reminded of him.

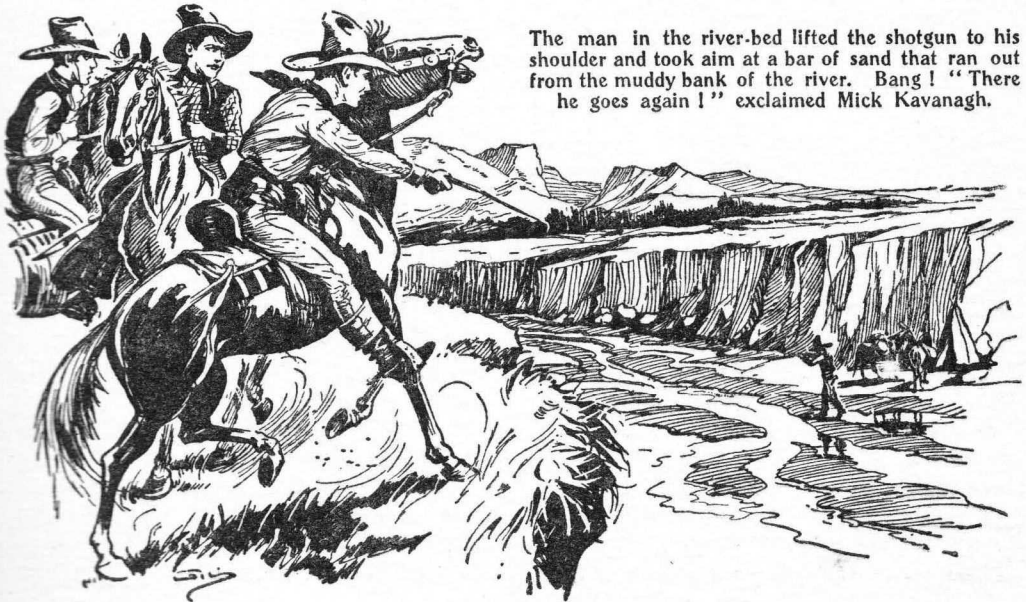
THE SECOND CHAPTER

GOLD!

PIE SANDERS rode up the school trail, in the sunny morning, at a wild burst of speed. He came clattering in at the school gate, his face ablaze with excitement; and the Packsaddle bunch, waiting in the playground for the school bell to ring, gathered round Pie, wondering what was up.

Pie was a day-boy, and lived with his folks at Squaw Mountain. His way to school lay by the cow-town, and he sometimes rode into the town on his way to school to leave an order at Job Wash's store. If there was any news in the cow-town, Pie picked it up and brought it to school with him, and this morning it was clear he had

The man in the river-bed lifted the shotgun to his shoulder and took aim at a bar of sand that ran out from the muddy bank of the river. Bang! "There he goes again!" exclaimed Mick Kavanagh.



picked up some startling news. He was gasping with excitement as he dragged in his foaming bronc.

"Say, what's got you, Pie?" yelled Slick Poindexter.

"Spill it!" said Steve Carson.

Pie gasped.

"Gold!"

"Gold!" repeated every fellow in the bunch blankly.

"Gold!" yelled Pie. "I'll say all the burg's humming with it! I'll tell a man, that guy Perkins has struck pay-dirt on the Frio!"

"Can it!" jeered Carson.

"You want to tell that yarn to a rube from Rubesville!" grinned Poker Parker.

Pie gasped with breathlessness and excitement.

"I'm telling you! It's the goods! I'll say that guy Perkins walked into Packsaddle last night with a bag of dust he had washed out of the Frio. I'll tell all Texas!"

"Great gophers!" exclaimed Slick Poindexter. "Mean to say he's struck gold in the Frio?"

"Yep!" gasped Pie.

The school bell began to ring, but nobody in the bunch heeded it. The startling news had got every guy gasping.

"Gold in the Frio!" said Dick Carr. "That man Perkins isn't potty, after all."

"I'll say every guy in Packsaddle allowed he was loco!" exclaimed Slick. "But he's got the laugh on his side if he's struck pay-dirt."

Clang, clang, clang! rang the school bell. But the iron clang fell on unheeding ears.

Gold!

It was a magic word!

The Packsaddle bunch hummed and buzzed with excitement.

"By gum!" gasped Slim Dixon.

"If there's gold in the Frio, I guess that guy Perkins ain't the only galoot that's going to wash it out."

"You said it!" exclaimed Hunky Tutt.

"I'm telling you," gasped Pie, "half Packsaddle's started already! Old Wash is tearing his hair—what he's got left—because his assistants have moseyed off and left him to carry on the store on his lonesome. There ain't a hombre in the Red Dog—even the bar-keeper's gone! When the noos gets round to the ranches there won't be a puncher left to ride herd! I'm telling you!"

The bell ceased to ring. Small Brown, the teacher, came hurrying across the playground to the buzzing bunch.

"Boys!" squealed Small Brown. "Go into the schoolroom at once! What does this mean? I shall call Mr. Sampson——"

"Aw, pack it up, you Brown!" shouted Steve Carson. "Say, you guys, who's for the Frio?"

"You said it, Steve!" shouted Poker Parker.

"School——" squeaked Small Brown.

"School nothing!" snapped Big Steve. "I guess we ain't fooling around no doggoned school with half the county washing out gold on the Frio!"

"Surest thing you know!" gasped Slick.

Bill Sampson, schoolmaster of Packsaddle School, came striding out of the porch of the schoolhouse. Bill's rugged, bearded face was wrathful under his ten-gallon hat. He cracked the quirt with which he had once ridden herd on the Kicking Mule ranges, and with which he now kept order at the cow-town school.

"Say!" roared Bill. "What's

this game? Say, you young ginks gone deaf? Ain't you heered that doggoned bell none?"

"Gold!" yelled Pie Sanders. "You lissen, Bill! That galoot Perkins has sure struck gold on the Frio."

Bill gave a snort.

"Gold nothing! If that guy Perkins allows he's struck gold on the Frio, he's sure stringing the boys! Forget it!"

"He's showed up pay-dirt in the burg!" yelled Pie. "He's traded a bag of gold dust with old Wash for canned stores! He went back last night with his two mules loaded so they could hardly make the grade. Any guy in Packsaddle will tell you, Bill!"

"What guff you giving me, you Pie?" growled Bill. "I'll tell a man I've fossicked for gold along to Arizona, and I sure know sign when I see it. And there ain't no more gold in Santanta County than there is brains in that bone head of yourn, you young gink!"

"I'm telling you, half Packsaddle's gone already!" yelled Pie. "And I guess the other half is starting."

"Make it a holiday to-day, Bill," said Dick Carr eagerly. "Give us a chance with the rest."

Bill glared at him.

"You young geck!" he roared. "Holiday nothing! Ain't you young guys sent hyer to l'arn from Mister Brown, what is paid a salary by the school committee to teach you reading and writing and jografy and such? And ain't I hyer to see that you do it?"

"Look here, Bill——" exclaimed Slick.

"Can it!" roared Bill. "If that guy Perkins struck gold in a heap as big as Pike's Peak, I reckon this hyer school would go on jest the same. If

there's a gold rush on the Frio, I guess it ain't no place for schoolboys, nohow. Git into school!"

"You pesky old geck!" roared Steve Carson.

"Pack it up, Bill!"

"We're sure hitting the Frio!"

"I'll tell a man——"

"Can it, Bill!"

Bill Sampson surveyed the excited bunch with a grim brow.

"You young guys are sure shooting off your mouths a whole lot!" he roared. "Now, you get me? Mosey into that schoolroom, smart and pronto, or I'll sure herd you in like you was a bunch of ornery steers! Pronto!"

But the amazing news of a gold-rush on the Frio had wildly excited the school. Instead of obeying Bill, they roared protest.

"Pack it up, Bill!"

"Make it a holiday!"

"Nix on school!"

"Who's for the Frio?"

"You said it!"

"Doggone that old piecan Bill!"

Some of the bunch were already starting for the corral to get out their horses. Pie Sanders wheeled his bronco to ride out at the gate.

The six-gun schoolmaster made a stride at him. He gripped Pie, and jerked him out of the saddle.

There was a bump and a roar as Pie landed on the ground. There was another roar as Bill's quirt rang round his sprawling legs.

"School!" roared Bill.

Crack, crack, crack, crack! rang the quirt in his powerful hand. It landed on shoulders and backs and legs impartially, every fellow in the bunch getting it hot and strong.

Towering over the mob of school-boys, the gigantic Bill laid it on, and there was a bite in every whack.

"School!" roared Bill. "You hear me whisper? You want to herd into school, I'm telling you!"

With howls and yells the bunch scattered before the whacking quirt.

Fellows who were heading for the corral changed their minds and headed for the schoolhouse instead. The six-gun schoolmaster drove them in like a bunch of steers and then tramped round the playground for stragglers, and herded them in after the rest.

In five minutes Bill had the bunch in school. Bill was the man to handle that bunch, there was no doubt of that!

With the quirt under his arm, Bill sat at his desk, glaring at the wriggling, excited bunch.

"Now you l'arn from Mister Brown!" roared Bill. "You get a cinch on the lesson, you Brown! And if there's so much as a whisper in this hyer school, I'll sure wade in and quirt you a few, you pesky young piecans!"

And under Bill's grim eye there was not a whisper during morning school at Packsaddle. Small Brown taught a quiet, if not attentive, class!

THE THIRD CHAPTER

THE FIRST TO GO!

THE Packsaddle bunch were quiet. But if they were calm, it was the calm before the storm.

They sat in class—they listened to Small Brown—but their thoughts were elsewhere. That magic word, gold, was in every mind.

It was almost unbelievable that gold had been struck on the Frio. No outcrop of the precious metal was known within a hundred miles and more. But if it had been struck, it was the most exciting news since the old days when the Apaches had come swooping down from the Staked Plain

to raid the ranches. And if it had been struck, every guy in Packsaddle wanted to be in on the strike!

No fellow in the bunch knew from experience what a gold-rush was like. But they had heard about gold-rushes, in Arizona and Colorado and California. Every fellow knew how a town would sometimes empty itself in a day, the inhabitants rushing off to the scene of a new rich strike. And while the bunch sat in class that morning they knew from what Pie had told them, that Packsaddle town was already in the rush.

If Pedlar Perkins really had shown up genuine gold-dust in the cow-town, and it seemed that he had, that was enough—more than enough! There would be a general exodus of every man who could get away.

Ranchers in the vicinity were likely to hit worry when the news got round the ranges. For it was certain that the punchers would saddle up and ride for the Frio as soon as they heard that gold was to be had for the picking up. There would be a crowd from other cow-towns up and down the Frio—from all parts of the country.

First come would be first served! And here sat the school bunch—at lessons, letting the rush get ahead! Strong as was Bill's authority in the cow-town school, it trembled in the balance now.

Even Dick, Slick and Mick, who were all for Bill, were deeply restive now. Steve Carson, Poker and Slim were savagely impatient. The whole bunch thrilled with excitement and seemed to strain like buck-jumpers at a rope.

Fellows who had watches peered at them every now and then. They were wildly anxious to get out. Small Brown certainly could not have kept them in. But for the presence of Bill

Sampson, there would have been a general stampede from school. And is was rather doubtful whether even Bill would be able to hold them for keeps.

A deep murmur rose from the class at twelve o'clock, which was the hour of dismissal. For the bell did not ring.

Bill glared.

"You young ginks beginning bally-hoo agin?" he demanded.

The bunch did not need telling twice! They scampered out of the schoolroom like fresh ponies released from a corral.

Bill strode after them with a frowning brow. It was the duty of Hank, the hired man, to ring the school bell at stated intervals. On this occasion he seemed to have forgotten! Bill was the man to remind him not to forget.

But Hank was not to be seen.



The Six-gun Schoolmaster made a rush at Pie Sanders and jerked him out of the saddle. Pie gave a roar as Bill's quirt sang round his legs. "School!" roared Bill.

"It's twelve!" howled Slick.

"I guess the bell ain't gone!" said Bill.

"It really is twelve o'clock, Mr. Sampson!" squealed Small Brown. Probably he had had enough of such a restive class.

Bill rose from his desk.

"Then why ain't that galoot Hank rung the bell?" he snorted. "I'll say I'll talk to that hombre a few! Beat it, you 'uns!"

Bill strode across to the cookhouse where Tin Tung, the Chinese, was preparing the school dinner.

"Say, Chink!" roared Bill. "Where's that guy Hank?"

"He lun off!" answered Tin Tung.

"He's beat it!" exclaimed Bill in amazement.

"He lun along findee gold along Lio Flio!" explained Tin Tung.

Bill snorted with wrath. The gold craze had caught at least one guy at

the school ; Hank had gone to join in the rush. That was why the school bell had not rung.

" Carry me home to die ! " growled Bill. " I'll sure lambaste that scallywag a few when he hits home agin ! "

He strode across to the school gate, slammed it and barred it. Then he gave the bunch in the playground a glare. Bill did not need telling that some of them, or all of them, would have cleared off if they had had half a chance.

" You lissen, you guys ! " roared Bill. " You ain't going out of that gate none. You keep corralled inside them fences ! You hear me yaup ? I'll say that I'll quirt any guy going out. "

" But, look here, Bill ! " exclaimed Dick Carr warmly. The bunch were, as a rule, allowed to ride out between classes, and this restriction of their liberty was exasperating—in the circumstances.

But Bill was well aware that any fellow who got out of his sight would hit Pedlar Perkins' camp up the Frio. He was keeping the bunch herded in till the excitement was over.

" You argufying, you Carr ? " roared Bill, cracking his quirt. " I guess I'm riding herd here, big boy ! And I'll tell you young ginks this—that galoot Perkins is either a liar or a fool—there ain't no gold in the Frio, nor never was. Chew on that ! "

" He sure traded a bag of gold-dust at Wash's store, Bill ! " exclaimed Pie Sanders.

" Aw, can it ! " snorted Bill. " I'm telling you he never got any gold out of the Frio ; and if you wasn't a bunch of boneheads you'd sure know there wasn't no gold in the cow-country nohow. "

The bunch gave a howl of derision. Generally, they respected Bill's

judgment. Bill's was the last word on the subject of horses or cows, or harness. But though he had fossicked in Arizona in his time, the bunch did not figure that he knew a whole heap about gold-mining. And it was an absolute certainty that Pedlar Perkins had shown up gold-dust in Pack-saddle town, and allowed that he had washed it out of the Frio sand-bars. And it was a sure cinch that old Job Wash would not have traded him stores for anything but the genuine article.

" Aw, talk hoss-sense, Bill ! " exclaimed Slick Poindexter. " It was a cow-country in California afore they struck gold there. Now gold's been struck in Texas—"

" Pack it up ! " yapped Bill. " I'm telling you that guy Perkins is loco. More like he's a doggoned liar—he sure looks it ! Anyhow, nobody ain't breaking herd out of this hyer bunch. "

Bill's word was law ! But it looked as if the law would be broken. The bunch, excited and rebellious and angry, went into the chuckhouse to dinner. Over dinner there was only one topic—the gold strike on the Frio.

To the eager minds of the school-boys, the barren sands of the sunken river were thick with gleaming gold-dust and sparkling nuggets.

True, nobody had ever seen anything of the kind, hitherto. All the bunch knew the Frio, for miles either way. Not a galoot had ever dreamed that there was gold in its muddy, sandy bed.

But, as Slick pointed out, most gold discoveries were made unexpectedly, in unexpected places. California had been a land of cattle-grazing till the great gold rush of '49. The bare idea that a little California lay within an

hour's ride of the cow-town school was dazzling.

Bill Sampson came along while the bunch were at chuck, and glared in at the door. With a quick eye, he counted heads. Then he roared :

" Say, where's that guy Carson ? "

Nobody answered, but some of the bunch grinned. Most of them knew that Steve Carson had crept quietly away to the corral for his horse, hoping to get away unnoticed during dinner.

Bill breathed wrath.

He rushed out of the chuckhouse and tore along to the corral. With a clatter of hoofs, Big Steve came riding out of the corral gate into the playground.

Unheeding Bill's angry roar, he spurred his horse, and dashed across to the school gate on the trail.

" Pull in, you young geck ! " roared Bill, prancing after him in fury.

" I'll say nope ! " snapped Steve, over his shoulder.

" I'll sure quirt you a few ! "

" Aw, go and chop chips ! "

The school gate was closed and barred. With Bill raging on his track, Carson had no time to dismount and open it.

He put his horse to the leap.

The bunch crowding out of the chuckhouse watched him breathlessly.

" Good luck, Steve ! " yelled Poker Parker.

" Put it on, Steve ! " howled Slim Dixon.

Up went Steve on his bronco in a wild leap. The hoofs just cleared the gate, and Carson came thundering down in the trail outside.

" Bravo ! " roared Dick Carr. For the first time since he had been at Packsaddle, Dick was in sympathy with Big Steve.

Bill glared over the gate in wild

wrath, brandishing his quirt. But Steve Carson was out of reach. Plying whip and spur, he went galloping down the trail, and disappeared from sight.

" Carry me home to die ! " gasped Bill.

The first of the bunch to join the gold-rush was gone. And Bill, determined as he was to keep the bunch in hand, perhaps wondered how long he would be able to do it.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

ROPED IN !

PIE SANDERS and the other day-boys, rode away from Packsaddle School, after class that day, with cheery grins on their faces. Bill watched them go, with a frowning brow. Day-boys had to be allowed to go home, but Bill had a strong suspicion that they would not turn up at school the following morning.

It was more than a suspicion with the rest of the bunch ; they knew that Pie and Co. would not turn up on the morrow. And nearly a score of fellows, who boarded at the school and were under Bill's authority at all times, chafed with angry impatience. Of all the bunch, Dick Carr was perhaps the least disposed to kick against Bill's rule. But now he was as keen and eager as the rest.

No doubt Bill was right. In the first place, he did not believe that a gold strike had been made on the Frio, in spite of evidence that convinced everybody else. In the second place, a gold rush was not an affair suitable for schoolboys to take part in.

It was certain that the roughest and toughest guys for twenty miles round would be gathered at Pedlar Perkins' camp—guys who packed guns, and were not slow to pull them. Gold or no gold, Bill figured that

Packsaddle School was the right place for the Packsaddle bunch.

He was right, no doubt, but the bunch did not see it.

Ordered to stay within the school fences after school, when they had always been free to ride where they liked, they raged. They pictured Steve Carson and the lucky day-boys, picking up lumps of the yellow metal from the sands of the Frio.

Already the cradles would be rocking, washing the precious grains out of muddy sands. And even a rich "placer" would not last long with so many hands at work! In a day or two, every precious grain might be washed out, and Packsaddle left out in the cold! The bunch were not standing for that!

"I'll tell all Texas!" said Slick Poindexter. "I like Bill, but I ain't standing for this, and don't you forget it. I'm hitting the Frio, to fossick for gold."

"Same here!" said Dick Carr determinedly.

"You said it!" agreed Mick.

"I guess Bill's keeping tabs on us," remarked Hunky Tutt dubiously. "And he sure has got a heavy hand with a quirt, doggone him."

"I reckon if there ain't any other way, we'll sure cinch that pesky old piecan, and hog-tie him!" declared Slick. "But I guess he can't keep tabs on us all the time."

Bill, it was certain, was on the watch, and very wary. Still, as Slick said, he could not keep tabs on all the bunch all the time. And a little later, Dick, Slick and Mick slipped into the corral, unseen by Bill.

There they saddled and bridled their horses. But the corral gate opened into the playground, and there was no other way out. To get out at the school gate, they had to

get across the playground uncaught. Bridle in hand, just within the corral, they watched for an opportunity.

"Look!" breathed Slick suddenly.

Right across the playground, on the back fence, a clambering figure was seen. It was Bud Dunn, climbing the fence. And Bill, who had spotted him, was rushing after him to grab him before he got over.

His back was to the corral, and his attention was fixed on the clambering Bud. It was a chance for Dick, Slick and Mick.

"Come on!" muttered Dick Carr.

They led their horses out of the corral and ran them across to the school gate. Swiftly they dragged down the bars and swung the gate open.

By that time Bill had reached Bud on the back fence. He had Bud by one ankle and was dragging.

Bump!

Bud Dunn landed on the ground, winded. Bill's quirt sang in the air, but it did not fall on Bud. At that moment Bill spotted Dick, Slick and Mick mounting their horses in the open gateway.

He gave a roar.

"Stop! I'm telling you to stop, you'uns!"

"Beat it!" gasped Mick Kavanagh.

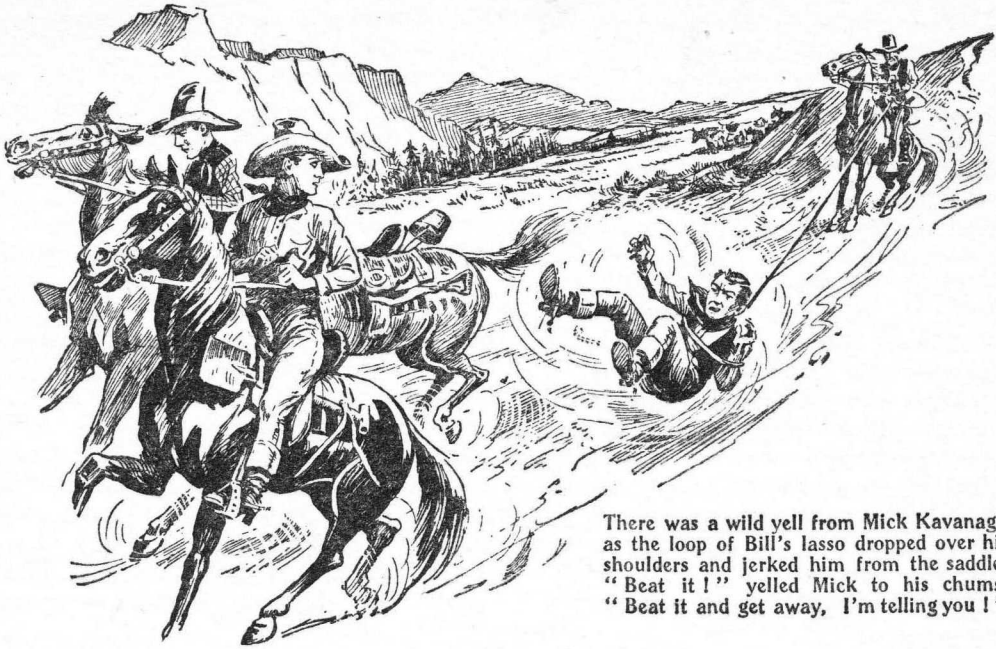
The three rode out of the gate, heedless of Bill's infuriated roar. They dashed down the school trail.

"I guess we done beaten Bill!"

"You said it!" chuckled Mick.

From the school trail they turned into the open prairie, northward towards the upper Frio, where the day before they had seen Pedlar Perkins at his lone camp, loosing off his shotgun.

"Gum!" exclaimed Slick, as a crash of galloping hoofs sounded behind them, and he glanced over his shoulder. "Bill's after us."



There was a wild yell from Mick Kavanagh as the loop of Bill's lasso dropped over his shoulders and jerked him from the saddle. "Beat it!" yelled Mick to his chums. "Beat it and get away, I'm telling you!"

Dick and Mick looked back.

Bill Sampson, his rugged face red with rage, was riding like the wind on their track, swinging his coiled lasso as he galloped.

"Oh, great gophers!" gasped Mick. "Put it on!"

"Attaboy!" panted Slick.

They spurred on hard and fast over the rugged, rolling prairie. Hard and fast on their trail came the six-gun schoolmaster.

It was a wild race! The schoolboys were well mounted, and they could ride! But Bill was well mounted, too, and the old puncher of the Kicking Mule knew how to get every ounce out of a cayuse.

Dick Carr, whose pony was the fastest at Packsaddle, drew ahead, but he checked his mount as he saw that Slick and Mick were dropping behind.

Mick, last of the three, urged on his pony frantically, in terror every

minute of hearing the whir of a tossing rope. But Bill, behind, came on, gaining foot by foot, and suddenly the lasso flew.

There was a wild yell from Mick Kavanagh, as the loop dropped over his shoulders.

He dragged in his pony to lessen the force of the pull that was coming. But it jerked him from the saddle, and he bumped down on the prairie like a sack of alfalfa.

Dick and Slick reined in, panting. Mick, rolling at the end of the forty-foot rope, yelled to them.

"Beat it, you'uns! Beat it, and get away, I'm telling you!"

But Dick and Slick were not going to desert their comrade. Bill dashed up, pulled in his bronc, and leaped down. His powerful grasp was on Mick.

"We're standing by Mick, old man!" panted Dick Carr.

"Surest thing you know!" said Slick.

They rode back to the spot where Mick was wriggling in Bill Sampson's hefty grasp. The six-gun schoolmaster eyed them grimly.

He whipped a knot into the rope to secure his prisoner. Then, as Dick and Slick leaped from the saddle and rushed to the rescue, Bill jumped to meet them.

"Say, you young piecans!" roared Bill. "You figure you can break herd that-a-way, and get by with it! I guess you're going to forget it!"

Dick and Slick were husky fellows. But if they hoped that they had a chance of handling Bill, they quickly found out their mistake. Only to rescue their comrade would they have thought of attempting it. Mick, struggling in the knotted lasso, strove to come to their aid, but he strove in vain. Even the three of them would hardly have downed Bill! Two of them had no chance of downing him.

"Oh, gum!" gasped Slick, as he crumpled up in a sinewy hand.

"Oh, scissors!" panted Dick Carr.

Bill Sampson grasped them in either hand, and swung them off their feet. There was a loud crack as their heads came together. Two fearful yells blended into one floated over the prairie.

"I'll say I got you, sure!" grinned Bill.

He had! It was a cinch!

Struggling and wriggling in Bill's mighty grasp, Dick and Slick were knotted in the lasso. The three trailed at the end of the rope.

"You hitting Packsaddle, along of this baby?" grinned Bill.

They could only gasp.

Bill remounted his bronc. Guiding the bronc with his knees, he led three riderless horses with one hand, and held in the other the lasso, at the end

of which trampled and stumbled three hapless schoolboys.

Dick, Slick and Mick hit Packsaddle! They could not help it. Bill had roped them in and they had to go back. Slipping and stumbling, panting and gasping, they trailed along at the tail of Bill's bronc; and they were glad enough to hit Packsaddle and get it over.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

RIDING HERD!

"FORGET it!" roared Bill Sampson.

The six-gun schoolmaster had got back to Packsaddle only in time. The chase on the prairie had been brief, but it had been long enough to give the rest of the bunch time to make up their minds to break herd, to get their horses out of the corral, and to saddle up.

A crowd of riders were about to come out at the school gate when Bill arrived there with his prisoners in tow.

"Aw, wake snakes!" gasped Bud Dunn. "Here's that piecan Bill agin, and he's sure cinched them galoots!"

Bill Sampson blocked the gateway. He sent the riderless horses scampering in, and grasped his quirt in his right hand. And the bunch backed their horses as the quirt sang in the air. In a few more minutes they would have been clear. But Bill had got back in time—and that was that!

"Forget it, you young gecks!" roared Bill. "Git off'n them cayuses, pronto! You hear me whisper!"

Slick Poindexter, struggling madly in the knotted lasso, gave a yell:

"Say, you boneheads, rush him and cinch him! I'll say there's more'n enough of you to handle that dog-goned old piecan! Get a holt on him."

Slick broke off with a frantic yell as the quirt curled round him.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Any more from you, Poin-dexter?" roared Bill.

"Ow! Oh! Yow! You pesky old scallywag! Wow!" howled Slick.

Whack, whack!

"Any more?" roared Bill.

But there was no more from Slick!

Bill Sampson dismounted, slammed the gate and barred it.

Slowly, unwillingly, with grim looks, the bunch got off their horses and turned the animals back into the corral. Bill cast off the lasso from Dick, Slick and Mick.

He pointed with his quirt to the bunkhouse.

"Git!" he rapped.

"Look here, Bill!" gasped Dick Carr. "I—yaroooooh! Whooooop!" He jumped clear of the ground as the quirt sang round his legs.

"Any more?" asked Bill.

"Yow-ow!"

"I guess I ain't asking you to spill anything!" said Bill. "I guess I'm telling you to hit that bunkhouse, and hit it quick!"

"I guess——" panted Mick.

Whack! Whack!

"Aw, let up!" yelled Mick, hopping frantically. "You pesky old piecan, I'm telling you to let up!"

Whack! Whack!

"Whoo-hoop!"

"Now," said Bill, "you're going to your bunks, and you're sure staying there. Don't you worry about no supper—I guess you ain't having no eats! Not till brekfuss in the morning, nohow! You get me? I guess I'm riding herd at this here school, and I'll tell a man I'm a galoot to do it! You hitting that bunkhouse?"

The quirt cracked, and Dick, Slick and Mick hit the bunkhouse in record

time. They were in their bunks while the rest of the bunch had supper in the chuckhouse.

After supper Bill herded the bunch into the bunkhouse to bed. He stood in the doorway, quirt in hand, his face grim under his Stetson hat. The Packsaddle bunch turned into the bunks—but without any intention of staying there. Packsaddle was not going to be left out of the gold-rush—not if Packsaddle knew it.

"Now, you lissen, you'uns!" said Bill grimly. "I guess I'm wise to what you're figuring, but you sure ain't breaking herd in the dark, no-how! I'll mention that I'm camping in my blankets to-night, outside this hyer door—and if I'm woke up by any guy trying to squeeze out, I'll mention that I'm powerful sorry for that guy! Chew on that, you young ginks!"

Bill slammed the door.

Dick Carr breathed hard.

"We're not standing for this!" he said.

"Surest thing you know!" declared Slick.

Hardly an eye closed in the Packsaddle bunkhouse that night. Bill was still riding herd, but the herd was resolved to break loose. Bill or no Bill, the bunch were going to join in the Packsaddle gold-rush.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

PUTTING IT ACROSS BILL!

CLANG! rang the school bell at Packsaddle School in the bright sunshine of the Texas morning.

Bill Sampson was pulling at the rope.

The Packsaddle bunch were in the playground, but only the fellows who boarded at the cow-town school were there. Though it was time for class, not a single one of the day-boys had arrived; and of the boarders, not one

made a step towards the schoolhouse as Bill clanged the bell.

Instead of heading for the schoolroom, the bunch stood in an excited crowd in the middle of the playground, heedless of the bell.

Small Brown, the teacher, blinked at them through his horn-rimmed glasses, but did not venture to horn in; the bunch were in a mood to stick him under the school pump, and Bill after him.

Bill, as he clanged the bell, eyed them also—grimly. Bill knew that his authority trembled in the balance, but he figured that his quirt was going to enforce obedience, as it had never failed to do.

Clang, clang! With a final jarring clang, the bell ceased to ring, and not a fellow had taken a step towards the schoolroom.

Dick Carr looked round over a crowd of excited faces. Dick, who liked Bill immensely, was up against the six-gun schoolmaster now, and the whole bunch backed him.

"Anybody going in to school?" demanded Dick.

"Not a guy!" declared Mick Kavanagh.

"Nix on school!" said Bud Dunn.

"Surest thing you know!" declared Slick Poindexter.

"Let's tell Bill and have it out," said the tenderfoot of Packsaddle. "If Bill will give the school a day's holiday, all right. If he won't——"

"I guess we'll take it!" roared Slick.

"You said it!"

"Come on!" said Dick Carr.

The whole bunch started towards the porch of the schoolhouse, and Bill, who was coming out with his quirt in hand, was relieved. Bill was ready to herd the bunch into school like a drove of steers, but he was

glad to see them herding in of their own accord. That, for the moment, was what he figured they were doing.

But he soon saw his mistake. The bunch of schoolboys halted at the porch, and evidently had no intention of going in.

"Now, Bill——" began Dick Carr.

Bill pointed to the schoolroom with his quirt.

"Mosey in!" he rapped. "I guess you're late! Mosey in afore I start in with this hyer quirt! You hear me toot?"

"Yes, and now you hear me," said Dick Carr determinedly. "We want to take a hand in the gold-rush, Bill."

"Forget it!" yapped Bill.

"The rush started as soon as the news got out, and everybody's going that can get away," said Dick Carr. "All the day-boys have gone; not one of them has turned up this morning for school, Bill."

"I'll sure quirt 'em a few!" said Bill.

"Hank, your hired man has gone—you had to ring the bell yourself this morning," went on Dick. "Tin Tung, the cook, cleared last night—we had to scrounge for our own breakfast. Now, look here, Bill, you've had some experience of gold-digging in Arizona. Why don't you join up, too, and let us all go? You can't keep the day-boys back, they've gone already! Fair play all round, Bill!"

"I guess the tenderfoot has spilled a hatful!" said Slick. "What you got to say to that, Bill?"

Slick Poindexter was standing with his hand behind him. In that hand, was grasped a lasso—hidden from Bill's sight.

The bunch hated trouble with Bill. But if he stood in the way of their

joining in the gold rush there was going to be trouble.

Bill eyed the bunch, gripping the quirt. They rather expected him to wade in without wasting breath—that was Bill Sampson's way.

But Bill was unusually patient that morning. He had known what a gold-rush was like in his fossicking days in Arizona, and he could understand the feelings of the bunch.

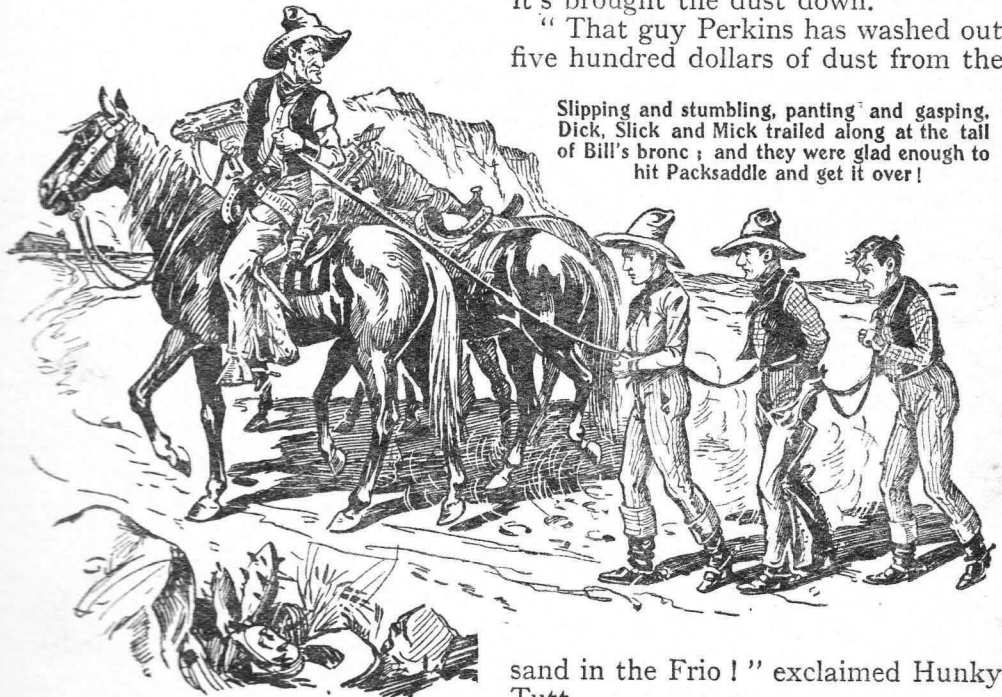
"Now, you lissen, you 'uns," said

stores for anything but real gold-dust?"

Bill paused, Slick had him there! Undoubtedly, it must have been genuine gold that Pedlar Perkins traded at Job Wash's shebang for stores. Old Job Wash was not a guy to be deceived in such a matter.

"And look here, Bill," urged Mick Kavanagh. "There's gold on the Staked Plain, and the Frio sure comes down from the Staked Plain. I guess it's brought the dust down."

"That guy Perkins has washed out five hundred dollars of dust from the



Slipping and stumbling, panting and gasping. Dick, Slick and Mick trailed along at the tail of Bill's bronc; and they were glad enough to hit Packsaddle and get it over!

Bill with unexpected quietness. "I'm telling you! I guess there ain't no gold in the cow-country—there ain't a suspicion of it within a hundred miles of Packsaddle, and that galoot Perkins is jest stringing the boys along."

There was a howl from the bunch.

"Aw, can it!" roared Slick Poindexter. "You figure that Old Wash along to the burg would let Perkins have two mule loads of

sand in the Frio!" exclaimed Hunky Tutt.

Bill shook his head.

"I'm telling you!" he said. "That guy Perkins is a pedlar, and he hit Packsaddle with his two burros loaded with notions and sold them in the burg. Then he allowed that he raised colour in the Frio sand-bars—and I guess all the burg figured that he was loco. But I'm telling you—he ain't loco—he's jest a doggoned liar, and he's stringing the boys. I'll sure eat

all the gold he's washed out of the Frio! I'm telling you, this hyer is cow-country, and there ain't no yeller metal in Santanta County."

"Ain't he a doggoned obstinate old geck!" exclaimed Mick. "A Mexican burro sure has nothing on you, Bill."

"Look here, Bill!" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"Can it!" interrupted Bill. "I've talked to you good and patient, 'cause I know how you feel, figuring that there's gold dust to be picked up and other guys picking it up. But I guess I've spilled enough! Even if there was gold on the Frio, which there ain't, this hyer school ain't going to break herd, nohow! You're here to l'arn from Mister Brown, and I guess I'm going to see you l'arn, if quirting you will do it."

"Can it, Bill!" roared the bunch.

"I'm telling you, there'll be a herd of the toughest guys in Texas along to Pedlar Perkins' camp, and it sure ain't no place for schoolboys!" said Bill. "I'd sure like to make the trip, and give it the once-over myself—but I ain't going—I got to ride herd here! And you young gecks have got to get into school."

"Forget it, Bill!"

Bill's eyes gleamed under his tengallon hat. He had talked to the bunch good and patient. But his patience was exhausted now.

He cracked the quirt.

"Nuff said!" roared Bill. "Don't spill any more! Git into that school-room, pronto!"

"Nix on school!"

"Not by a jugful!"

It was a roar of defiance from the Packsaddle bunch.

That was enough for Bill!

He strode out of the porch with upraised quirt. There was a yell from

Dick Carr as he got the first lick.

But Bill landed only that one lick.

Slick Poindexter was ready with his rope! His hand came out suddenly from behind him and the lasso flew.

Bill was not looking for that!

Before he knew what was happening the loop was tightening round his brawny shoulders, and Slick's drag on the rope toppled him over. Bill Sampson hit Texas hard!

"Aw! Wake snakes!" roared Bill, as he crashed. "Carry me home to die! I'll sure quirt you good and hard——"

"Get him!" yelled Slick.

Five or six pairs of hands grasped the rope and dragged. With that powerful pull on the lasso Bill had no chance of wrenching himself loose.

He went rolling and bumping across the playground at the end of the rope—helpless, enraged and roaring. The quirt fell from his hand. The big Stetson dropped from his head. He rolled and crashed and roared. Never before had Bill Sampson failed in riding herd at Packsaddle School. But this time the bunch had put it across Bill!

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

THE SCHOOLBOY GOLD-HUNTERS!

"Aw—ooogh—I guess—wake snakes —whooop!" roared Bill.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I guess we cinched him!"

"Get him, you ginks!" yelled Slick.

Bill's sinewy arms were pinned by the lasso, tight as a steel band round him. That was fortunate for the bunch. If Bill had had a chance of hitting, even a score of fellows would not have found him easy to handle, and there would have been some damage.

But the headmaster of Packsaddle School was nearly helpless. He struggled as the bunch closed on him and grasped him. But they had him where they wanted him.

Knot after knot was tied in the rope. Then Bill was allowed to scramble to his feet.

He stood swaying and stumbling, spluttering with breathless rage. The grinning bunch surrounded him.

"Sorry, Bill!" gasped Dick Carr.

"You pesky young gink!" panted Bill.

"I guess we hate to handle you like this, old-timer," said Slick Poindexter. "But we sure ain't sticking in school while there's a crowd of guys washing a fortune out of the Frio!"

"Not so's you'd notice it!" chuckled Mick.

"Boys!" Small Brown came up squealing. "Boys! What——"

"You horning in, you Brown!" roared Slick, and Small Brown jumped back like a startled prairie rabbit. "Say, you beat it, pronto!"

"Corral him in his cabin!" said Hunky Tutt.

"You said it!" agreed Slick.

Five or six of the bunch hustled Small Brown away to his cabin.

Mister Brown did not resist. If Bill could not handle the bunch in their present wildly-excited mood, it was a sure thing that Small Brown couldn't, and he had no hunch to try it on.

He skipped away to his cabin in dire alarm, his Derby hat falling off, his coat-tails flying, his horn-rimmed spectacles slipping down his nose.

He darted into the cabin like a gopher into a hole, and slammed the door and bolted it. Hunky and Bud ran for hammer and nails, and nailed door and window to keep him safe

there. Not that they cared a boiled bean about Mister Brown, but they did not want him to let Bill loose too soon after they were gone.

Bill was the man to saddle up and pursue the bunch, quirt in hand. The bunch did not want that.

While Bud and Hunky secured Small Brown in his cabin, Dick, Slick and Mick and a crowd of others marched Bill to the porch of the schoolhouse, over which hung the bell-rope.

Slick tied the end of the bell-rope round him to keep him from wandering!

Bill's rugged, bearded face was crimson with rage.

In all his career as a schoolmaster at Packsaddle, Bill had never known anything like this before. But there had never been a gold-rush before at Packsaddle!

"Say, you young gecks!" gasped Bill. "You figure that you're getting by with this?"

"Just a few!" grinned Mick.

"Surest thing you know!" chuckled Poindexter. "Say, I'll bring you back some gold-dust from the diggings, Bill."

"Aw, won't I quirt you!" gasped Bill.

"Mebbe you will, old-timer, but not jest now!" chuckled Slick. "Say, you guys. I guess it's time we hit the trail."

"Come on!" shouted Dick Carr.

There was a rush across the playground to the corral. Slick flung the corral bar aside, and the bunch led out their horses.

Bill watched them in speechless rage, from the porch of the schoolhouse! Small Brown watched them, in twittering terror, from the window of his cabin.

With a roar of excitement the

bunch led their horses out of the corral, and saddled and bridled them. Some of the more thoughtful fellows rooted out spades and trowels and such implements from Hank's shack. Of gold-mining, even of the simple processes of "placer" mining, the Packsaddle bunch knew nothing—there were no "diggings" in the cow country. But all were wildly eager to get on the spot.

Most of them had heard about "placers" in the gold country. A guy had to select a spot where the gold grains, brought down ages ago in the flowing waters of a river, had been embedded in the sands. The precious grains had to be washed out of the sand and mud.

It was not like quartz mining, which required machinery and the sinking of shafts and cutting of adits.

It was simple enough—if a lucky hombre found the right spot! In the old days of the Californian gold-rush, lucky prospectors had sometimes washed a fortune out of a creek in a few days.

For all the bunch knew, fortunes might already have been washed out of the Frio by the lucky ones who had started first!

They were wild to get there.

And why, after all, should there not be gold in the Frio? It flowed down from the high tableland of the Staked Plain—and it was said, at least, that there were gold deposits in the old "Llano Estacado." Nobody had ever found any, yet—but every discovery had to be made for the first time!

"Say, you young ginks!" came a roar from Bill.

"Good-bye, Bill!"

"S'long, old-timer!"

Some of the bunch were already riding out at the gate. But Dick,

Slick and Mick rode across to the schoolhouse for a last word with the six-gun schoolmaster wriggling wildly on the end of the bell-rope.

"Bill, old-timer, won't you come, too?" urged Slick Poindexter. "We sure will be powerful glad if you'll quit fooling and hump along."

"Say yes, Bill!" urged Dick Carr.

"We sure do want you, Bill!" said Mick.

"Aw, won't I quirt you a few, and then a few more!" gasped Bill. "If I don't take the hide off'n you, you can call me a Digger Injun!"

"If that's the lot we'll beat it!" grinned Slick.

"Say, you lissen!" roared Bill. "I allow there ain't no gold on the Frio, and that pesky scallywag Perkins, is jest stringing the boys. You doggoned young ginks, if that galoot had washed out five hundred dollars from the Frio, you figure he would shout it out to all Santanta County? Wouldn't he jest keep it dark, and wash it all out for his pesky self?"

"But he has!" roared Slick. "I'm telling you, he's showed up a bag of gold-dust at Packsaddle."

"I guess he had it in his rags!" snorted Bill. "I'm telling you, it's all a gum-game. Jest gum!"

"But why?" demanded Dick Carr.

"How'd I know why?" snorted Bill. "I'll say that guy Perkins is a sharp from Sharpsville, and he's got a gum-game on. I ain't wise to it, but that's the how of it. It's all gum. You figure he'd put the whole section wise if he had struck gold? Forget it!"

Dick was silent for a moment.

He could not help being struck by that argument.

"But he couldn't have kept it

dark," said Dick at last. "Anybody might have seen him at work there; it's open country. Anybody who saw him washing out gold would have spread the news. Why, we saw him there only the other day, when we were out on a ride."

"Washing gold?" sneered Bill savagely.

"N-n-no, he wasn't washing gold when we saw him. He was loosing off a shot-gun. Still, we did see him——"

"I guess he'd have kept it dark as long as he could!" snorted Bill. "He had no call to horn into Packsaddle and shout it out. I'm telling you it's all gum!"

"Pack it up!" retorted Slick. "If there ain't no gold on the Frio,

I guess we'll come back, Bill. But we're going to see."

And the three rode after the rest of the bunch, already out of the gate.

Bill gave a roar of wrath. He struggled frantically in the rope.

Clang! clang! clang!

Bill's frantic struggles rang the school bell, loud and long. Clang! clang! clang! rang far and wide over the Packsaddle playground and the banks of the Rio Frio.

Dick, Slick and Mick chuckled as the clanging of the bell followed them across the prairie.

It died away behind them. But at Packsaddle School it was still ringing and clanging as Bill Sampson wriggled and struggled in the rope, and wriggled and struggled in vain!

Slick gave a sudden yell, and jammed his shovel into a sandy bar. "Look!" he roared. A stream of glittering particles flashed in the blazing sun. "Gold!" yelled Dick and Mick together.



THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

STRIKING IT RICH!

"GOLD?"
"Yep!"

"You seen it?"

"Sure thing!"

Pie Sanders reined in his horse.

Dick, Slick and Mick, galloping over the prairie towards Pedlar Perkins' camp up the Frio, sighted Pie and waved to him, and joined him. Pie was riding for Packsaddle town, so they intercepted him.

The three of them shouted the same question, and Pie's answer made their eyes dance.

Pie, a day-boy, had not turned up at school that morning. The chums of Packsaddle knew where he had gone, without being told—to the new discovery up the river. But they were surprised to see him riding back.

"You've really seen the gold?" asked Dick Carr eagerly.

Bill's last words at the school had given him a chill of doubt.

"With my own lookin' eyes I seen it," said Pie. "I'm telling you, the bed of the Frio is thick with it."

"But it's jolly queer it's never been seen before, if that's how it is," said Dick in wonder. "Why, only the other day we were riding up the Frio, and we saw nothing of the kind."

"We wasn't looking for anything of the kind," said Slick.

"Yes, that's true. But——"

"I guess it's the water being so low this summer," explained Pie. "The Frio's always low in the heats, but it's lower than I've ever seen it. Miles of sandbanks and bars uncovered. Pedlar Perkins allowed it looked jest like sandbeds he'd seen in Arizona rivers, and he prospected for colour and found it, sure he did. It's there O.K.!"

"What you riding back for, then?" asked Mick.

Pie grinned ruefully.

"There ain't bite nor chew at the place, 'cept what the pedlar is selling from his pack-mules," he answered. "And I guess Pedlar Perkins' prices is too steep for this baby. I got to hit town for some eats."

And, with a wave of the hand, Pie Sanders rode on to the cow-town. He was eager to make purchases at the store there, and get back to the gold-washing on the Frio.

Greatly encouraged by Pie's news, Dick, Slick and Mick galloped on. They were ahead of most of the bunch, strung out on the prairie trails.

"I guess it's O.K.!" said Mick joyfully. "Pie's seen it, and that's a cinch. That old piecan Bill don't know everything."

"He sure does not," said Slick. "And if we strike it rich, we'll sure buy him suthin' good, to make up for hog-tying him at the school."

"What-ho!" agreed Dick Carr.

They rode on cheerfully at a rapid gallop. Slick had a shovel tied on his bronco; Mick had a tin bucket, all the implements the comrades had been able to get hold of at the school. But it would be easy to buy a new outfit out of their first bag of gold-dust! What they did not know about placer-mining, they would soon learn. Hope reigned supreme. The gold-fever was in their veins. They were sorry that they had had to handle Bill and leave him hog-tied at Packsaddle. But they simply laughed at the idea of Bill, or anyone else, keeping them from joining in the race for a fortune.

As the grass glided fast under the galloping hoofs, they soon had proof that plenty of others were heading for the new field. Men on horses,

men on mules and donkeys, men on foot, were heading in the same direction.

Very few were met returning. And those few, they learned by hailing them, were going back for "eats."

The "placer" was three or four miles from Packsaddle town, fifteen or twenty from any other town. Water was to be found on the spot, but nothing in the way of food.

Pedlar Perkins, they learned, was selling stores, but he was the only man on the spot with supplies. And—as was natural in the circumstances—he was charging high prices.

That was quite in keeping with what they had heard of gold-rushes. In the early days of California and Colorado, food at the diggings was at famine prices.

Eager gold-hunters thought only of unearthing gold treasure, and the few more level-headed who dealt in food and clothes and other necessaries made more money than most of the diggers.

From a dozen or more guys they met and called to, the comrades learned that there was no doubt about the "strike."

Gold gleamed and sparkled from the sandy bed of the Frio, where the sunken waters left the bars uncovered. Scores of eager seekers were already at work, washing out the sand and mud in roughly-made cradles, the material cut with their bowie-knives from the chaparral on the river-banks.

Dick, Slick and Mick drew rein at last on the grassy bluffs over the river, where, a few days ago, they had seen Pedlar Perkins in his camp.

The change in the scene since then was amazing.

Two or three days ago the region had been utterly deserted and solitary.

But now the deep basin of the

Frio, sunk between opposite lines of grassy bluffs, was swarming.

Under the bluffs was a collection of tents and rough shacks, but these were far from sufficient to accommodate the crowd. Most of the fossickers, it was clear, had to sleep in their blankets in the open air. That, however, was little hardship to the rough and tough guys of the cow-country.

There was a good quarter of a mile between the bluffs of the banks. That space was mostly occupied by sand and muddy flats—dry in the sun, or trickling with little rivulets of the sunken river.

All over the sandbanks were scattered eager gold-seekers.

Punchers from the ranches, store assistants from Packsaddle, all sorts and conditions of guys were there, all on the same quest.

Some of them were sluicing sand in rough cradles—some were washing it in tin buckets and pails—some, even less well-provided, were washing sand in Stetson hats!

Others were hunting for likely spots, roaming up and down the river-course with eager searching eyes.

"Gum!" said Slick, with a deep breath. "They're sure going it!"

"I'll say so!" said Mick breathlessly. "That old piecan Bill figured that he was keeping us out of it."

They dismounted on the grassy bluffs. Dozens of horses and mules were staked out there to feed, while their owners hunted gold in the lower levels. The schoolboys staked out their ponies with the rest, and then descended the rugged bluffs to the river-bank.

"Say, there's Hank!" exclaimed Mick.

They spotted Hank, the hired man, who had vamoosed from the school

the day before without stopping to tell Bill that he was going. Hank had marked out a section of a sand-bar and was labouring with spade and pail. They ran across to him, eager for news.

"What luck, Hank?" asked Dick.

The hired man stared round at them, grinned and wiped a stream of perspiration from his face with the back of a horny hand. It was hot down on the sunken river.

"I guess I struck it," said Hank jubilantly. "Look! Give that bank the once-over!"

He struck his spade into a slanting bank of sand, once covered by the waters of the Frio, now high and dry.

Gleams of yellow showed among the grains of sand that scattered under the crash of the spade.

"Gold!" gasped Slick.

"You said it!" grinned Hank.

"How much you got as yet?" asked Mick breathlessly.

Hank's grin faded a little.

"I guess it ain't a heap so far," he admitted. "There's plenty of colour, and I guess I'll get it thick, but so far it's only colour. I ain't washed out five dollars' worth yet, but look at the sign!"

There was plenty of "sign"; it leaped to the eye. Sparkles of gold gleamed and flashed from the sand.

That it was thinly spread was clear, but it was there. And if so much showed on the surface, what might not be hoped for from deeper search? So far, Hank had had his labour for his pains, but every moment he expected to turn up rich gold, in dust or nuggets. He told the boys that Pedlar Perkins had found a nugget weighing four ounces. That was a proof that nuggets were there, as well as dust—if they could be found.

"Gum!" said Slick. "I guess

we might, if we're lucky, hit a fortune that would make Rockefeller look like a piece left on the counter. Get to it, you guys!"

Breathless with eagerness, the comrades of Packsaddle got to it. They forgot all about school, and all about Bill, tied to the bell-rope. Other fellows of the Packsaddle bunch were to be seen scattered about on the same game. They saw Steve Carson at work, and called to him.

"Any luck, Steve?"

"I guess I've struck colour!" called back Steve. "I'll say I've got as good a spot as any on the river. You galoots keep clear."

Numerous as the gold-seekers were, there was plenty of room for newcomers. Dick, Slick and Mick searched with eager eyes for a likely spot.

Slick gave a sudden yell, and jammed his shovel into a sandy bar that jutted into one of the rivulets.

"Look!" he roared.

A stream of glistening particles was turned up, flashing in the blazing sun.

"Gold!" panted Mick.

"Gold!" yelled Dick Carr.

"We've struck it!" chortled Slick. "We've struck it, young 'uns! What'll that pesky old galoot, Bill, say when we ride back with our pockets full of gold? Say, this is our claim!"

Under the broiling sun they set to work. The labour was hard, hot and heavy, but what did that matter? It seemed the easiest thing in the world to pick up a fortune lying at their feet.

THE NINTH CHAPTER

THE CLAIM-JUMPER!

DICK CARR paused in his labour, under the blaze of the noonday sun, and wiped the sweat and dust from his brow. He was hot, tired and

Hair-Trigger staggered to his feet, a six-gun gripped in his brawny fist. "Git!" he roared. "Beat it, pronto, you'uns!"



fearfully hungry—feelings that were fully shared by his comrades. Long hours of heavy labour had resulted in rich promise of good things to come, but as yet only promise. Sand shovelled out of the bar was washed in the tin bucket, and there was a residue of gold—mere flecks, but the real thing.

With a proper washing outfit, they flattered themselves, they would have secured more of the golden grains. What they had secured was worth, perhaps, a dollar—not high pay for a morning's heavy labour for three! But it was proof to their minds that they were on a right spot, and at any moment golden deposits might turn up at their feet. Every stroke of the shovel might unearth dazzling wealth.

"What about dinner?" gasped Dick.

"You said it!" agreed Mick. "I

guess I could chew some. We want to hit Perkins' camp for eats."

And the weary three desisted from their labours unwillingly, but from necessity. They had pegged out and marked the claim; all that could be done to secure it. Later on, it could be registered in the marshal's office at Packsaddle, and would become their legal and undisputed property; but that had to wait. It was plainly pegged and marked, and a paper was pinned on a stake giving the names of the owners of the claim.

They tramped down the muddy flats beside the river towards Pedlar Perkins' camp.

Pedlar Perkins was working as hard as any guy on the Frio, but in a different way. He was selling the stores he had brought on his pack mules and the gold-seekers kept him busy.

In his tent were stacks of canned goods. But large as the supply was, it was not likely to last very long in face of a general and eager demand.

Dick, Slick and Mick had to push their way through a crowd of eager buyers. They had to wait their turn at the pinewood bench Perkins had rigged up in front of his tent for a counter.

On Perkins' side of that bench lay a shotgun—a plain and visible hint to lawless characters that there would be trouble if any guy got too fresh. And it was needed, too, for in the crowd were the roughest and toughest galoots of the section. Among them the schoolboys recognised Hair-Trigger Pete, the red-bearded bull-whacker of Packsaddle. He was slouching away with a can of beef under either arm as they arrived.

Dick watched Pedlar Perkins rather curiously. Bill had said that Mister Perkins was a sharp from Sharpsville, and there was no doubt that he looked it. His lean, bony face was keen and cunning, his eyes were like those of a rat.

So far, he was the only man who was making money at the new "strike." Plenty of "colour" had been turned out by eager seekers for gold; there was promise of rich finds on all sides; but no actual finds had yet been made. Nobody, so far, was any the richer for the gold-rush—except Pedlar Perkins!

But that he was doing remarkably well, the schoolboys could not doubt, when he asked them five dollars for a can of beef that could have been bought for a "quarter" in Job Wash's store at Packsaddle.

"Five dollars!" roared Slick indignantly. "Forget it, you pesky lobo-wolf!"

"Take it or leave it!" snapped

Pedlar Perkins. "I guess I ain't here for my health, big boy!"

And even as the schoolboys hesitated, a puncher came up, grabbed the can of beef, threw down a five-dollar bill and walked off without a word! Evidently Mister Perkins was not going to lack customers, even at prices that might have made a War-time profiteer blush.

"Look here!" exclaimed Dick Carr.

"Beat it, you!" said Pedlar Perkins tersely. "I guess my stock won't last over to-morrow, anyhow! Git!"

There was no help for it! Food was a necessity! After all, what was a few dollars when thousands might be turned up by the stroke of a shovel! That was the way in a gold-rush!

The schoolboys went through their pockets and parted with nearly all they had—twenty dollars—in return for a supply of beef and beans and biscuit that could have been bought for one dollar at Packsaddle! But no fellow who had money in his pockets was going to quit his claim and ride miles over the prairie for food, wasting precious hours.

Twenty dollars for "eats" would look small enough, if they turned up even a four-ounce nugget, as Perkins had done. One ounce of gold was worth more than that sum.

Carrying their supply of food, the comrades of Packsaddle started for their claim again. They were rather uneasy at leaving it so long a time.

When they reached it they found that they had cause for uneasiness. A burly red-headed roughneck was at work there with Slick's shovel! It was Hair-Trigger Pete!

Dick, Slick and Mick stared at him. He paused in his shovelling and gave them a glare.

"You young guys want anything?" he yapped.

"That's our claim!" yelled Slick Poindexter.

"Yourn, is it?" said Hair-Trigger, resting on the spade. "You figure that this hyer claim is yourn? Forget it!"

The schoolboys gazed at him, speechless with rage and indignation. It was "claim-jumping," sheer and unashamed. In the early days of a gold-rush, before law and order could be established, claim-jumping by unscrupulous gold-seekers was as common as profiteering by such guys as Pedlar Perkins. A man had to pack a gun and be ready to pull it to make his claim good.

"You pesky skunk!" yelled Slick. "You figure that we're standing for this! Get off our claim, you polecat!"

"I'll say you want to light out afore you get hurt!" suggested Hair-Trigger.

He laid down the shovel and brandished a set of brawny knuckles at the schoolboys.

"Git!" he said.

Dick, Slick and Mick exchanged a desperate glance. Then, with one accord, they hurled themselves at the claim-jumper.

Hair-Trigger gave a roar of wrath as they grasped him. He grasped in return, and the brawny bullwhacker reeled to and fro, with the three schoolboys clinging to him like cats.

It was a wild and desperate struggle. With a combined effort the three got the ruffian down, with a crash, on the sand of the Frio. Not a dozen yards away, men were delving at another claim, but they did not even glance round. It was every man for himself, in a gold-rush!

Hair-Trigger, bellowing with rage,

rolled in sand and mud, in the grasp of the Packsaddle comrades. He grabbed the six-gun from his belt as he rolled.

Bang!

The bullet sang away to the blue sky of Texas. But as the ruffian pulled trigger a second time, the schoolboys jumped clear. They had no means of dealing with gun-play.

Hair-Trigger staggered to his feet. His revolver was aimed at the dismayed Packsaddlers, as he panted with rage.

"Git!" he roared. "Beat it, pronto, you'uns! I guess I'm fanning you s'long as you rubber around my claim!"

Bang, bang, bang! roared the six-gun, and the bullets knocked up spouts of sand by the schoolboys' feet.

"Beat it!" gasped Slick.

Almost frantic with rage, the comrades of Packsaddle beat it. Hair-Trigger brandished the smoking revolver after them.

"You show up agin, doggone you, and I guess I'm shooting at sight!" he roared, and he threw another bullet after them to hasten their departure, and Mick yelled as the Stetson spun on his head.

At a distance, out of range of the claim-jumper, the comrades of Packsaddle came to a breathless halt. They looked at one another in grim silence.

Bill had told them that a gold-rush was no place for schoolboys! It looked as if Bill was right!

THE TENTH CHAPTER

HUSTLE!

"You, Brown!" roared Bill Sampson.

Bill's roar woke all the echoes of the playground at Packsaddle School.

Bill had been waking the echoes for hours—all through the long, sunny Texas morning.

Every now and then, as he wriggled in his bonds, the school bell gave a loud clang over the porch.

Bill's bearded face was red with rage.

Again and again he roared, but there were no ears to hear, save those of Small Brown, the teacher. And Mister Brown was a prisoner in his cabin across the playground.

The blaze of noon streamed down on the cow-town school. Bill had been growing redder and redder, madder and madder, all the morning.

His only hope of release was in Small Brown.

From the direction of the teacher's cabin there came a sound of knocking and banging.

Mister Brown was trying to get out.

But door and window were fast, secured by long nails driven deep. Mister Brown had no tools to handle—nothing but the leg of a stool with which he was trying to bang a way out.

It was a long and difficult task. It had kept Small Brown busy quite a long time. And he was not out yet.

He could hear Bill's infuriated roar, from time to time, across the playground. That roar, almost as hefty as the bellow of a buffalo bull, could have been heard far up the Rio Frio. Small Brown heard it, and it spurred him on. But he had a lot of hard work to do.

"You pesky Brown!" came Bill's powerful voice. "You piefaced polecat, I'm telling you to hustle! You slab-sided jay, you want to get a move on! You hear me whisper, you piecan Brown!"

"Please be patient, Mister Samp-

son!" squealed Small Brown. "I assure you that I am losing no time! Oh, dear!"

But Small Brown's breathless squeal did not reach Bill. He could hear the knocking and the banging from the teacher's cabin, however. Small Brown was doing his best—a poor best!

In his place, Bill would have burst open the door with one mighty heave of his brawny shoulder. But Mister Brown, though he had great stores of book-knowledge parked behind his bumpy forehead, did not shine in the muscular line. There were husky fellows in the Packsaddle bunch who could have heaved Mister Brown across the schoolroom. A man could only do his best—and Mister Brown was a small thin man with no biceps to mention.

"Jumping painters!" roared Bill. "I guess if you don't hump it a few, and get me ontied, you pesky Brown, I'll sure quirt you a few, like you was one of the bunch! I'll tell a man!"

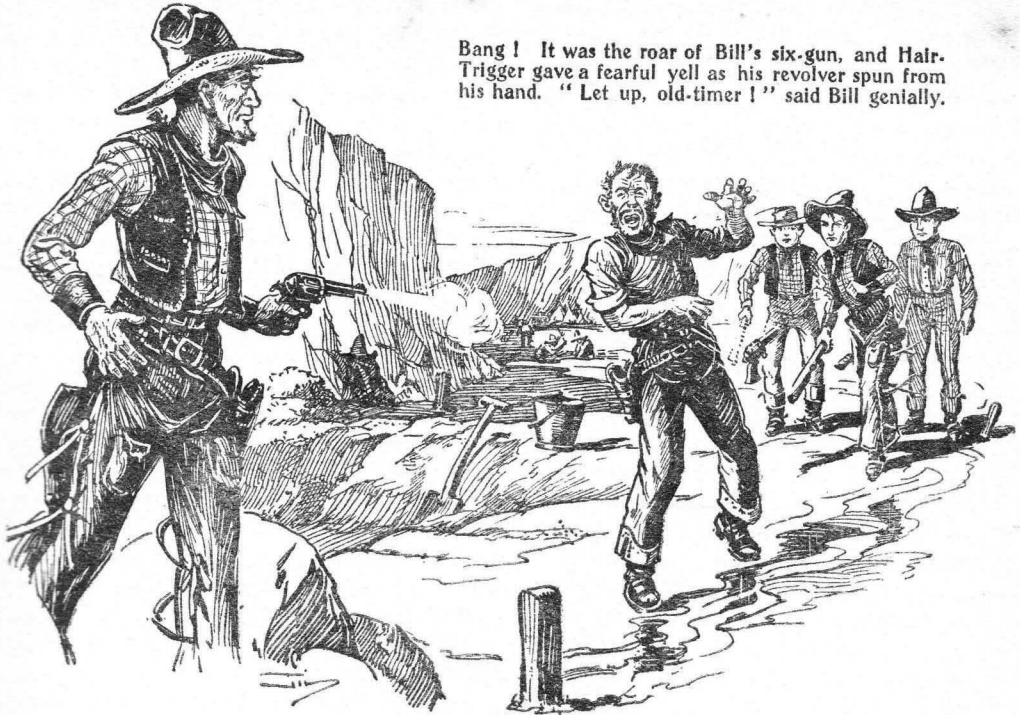
It was past noon. The bunch had been gone a whole morning. Bill thought of the schoolboys mingling with a crowd of the roughest and toughest rough-necks and bull-whackers in Santanta County. He thought of Job Wash, the chairman of the school committee, and what Job would say if he heard of this. And he raged and roared.

With a final bang, the door of Small Brown's cabin flew open.

It had taken him a long time, but he had got out at last. Small Brown, gasping after his exertions, tottered out into the brilliant Texas sunshine, which was flashed back by his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Say, you, Brown!" bellowed Bill, as the Packsaddle teacher blinked round him like an owl in sudden

Bang! It was the roar of Bill's six-gun, and Hair-Trigger gave a fearful yell as his revolver spun from his hand. "Let up, old-timer!" said Bill genially.



daylight. "Say, you getting a move on? You want to stand around, rubbering like a rube at a rodeo? Hump it, you gink! Hustle, you ornery geck! You hear me toot?"

"Certainly, Mister Sampson!" gasped Small Brown. "I——"

"Pack it up! You figure that I want to hear you chewing the rag?" roared Bill. "I'll say I want you to ontie me, you pesky piecan, so that I can beat it after them young ginks."

Small Brown came skipping across the playground. He reached the head-master of Packsaddle in the porch, and began to fumble with the knots on the rope. He fumbled and fumbled while Bill glared at him.

"Carry me home to die!" howled Bill. "You big stiff, can't you ontie a rope! You doggoned bonehead, git a knife! Pronto!"

"Yes, certainly," said Small Brown. "I will look for a knife——"

He went into the porch.

His movements seemed much too leisurely for the impatient Bill.

Bill's legs were free. He used one of them. The biggest cowman's boot in the valley of the Frio shot out and crashed on the tails of Small Brown's coat!

Small Brown shot into the house like a bullet from a rifle!

Crash!

"Yarooop!"

Mister Brown landed on hands and knees with a bump and a howl.

"Now hustle!" roared Bill. "I'm telling you—hustle! You figure that I want to stay roped up this-a-way till the cows come home! By the great horned toad, you pesky piecan, I'll sure lam you a few, if you don't hustle some!"

" Goodness gracious ! " gasped Small Brown.

He picked himself up dizzily.

" Really, Mister Sampson ! " he spluttered.

" Hustle ! " roared Bill. " Get to it ! Jumping painters and howling coyotes will you hustle a few, you gink ? "

Mister Brown hustled. He fetched a bowie-knife from Bill's room, and approaching the infuriated headmaster in rather a gingerly way, began to saw through the rope.

The strands parted quickly under the keen blade.

Bill Sampson was free at last.

He threw aside the fragments of the cut lasso. Without a word to Small Brown, or a look at him, he grabbed up his quirt and strode away towards the corral.

Three minutes more and Bill Sampson was mounted on his bronco and riding out of the school gate, Small Brown blinking after him dizzily through his horn-rimmed spectacles.

Bill, quirt in hand, rode at a gallop across the rolling prairie, heading for Pedlar Perkins' camp up the river, three or four miles from the school. The Packsaddle bunch were there among the crowd of eager seekers for gold, and judging by Bill's expression, they were hooked for a high old time when Bill arrived there with his quirt.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

BILL HORNS IN !

DICK, Slick and Mick sat in the shade of the high grassy bluffs over the Rio Frio and ate canned beef and biscuit. The bluffs rose twenty feet or more above the river-course, deeply sunken in the summer heats, and as the sun was slanting westward, the high bluffs cast a grateful shade on one bank of

the Frio. The other bank was in full glare of the semi-tropical sun of Texas, as well as the river itself, thinned down to a mere streamlet, trickling through far-stretching beds and bars of mud and sand. The three comrades of Packsaddle were tired and hungry after a morning's hard work, and they fully enjoyed the provender they had bought from Pedlar Perkins—none the less because it had cost them nearly all their available cash !

From where they sat in the shade, chewing hard beef, they could see a crowd of fossickers at work.

In spite of the blaze of the sun, few were resting. It was a scene of eager activity, feverish excitement, and—to say the truth—greed !

But as yet, though ample " colour " had been located, the actual out-turn of gold had been woefully disappointing.

Dick Carr knitted his brow as he chewed beef, and Slick Poindexter and Mick Kavanagh had rather grim looks.

While they ate, they discussed ways and means of getting their claim back from the big rough-neck, Hair-Trigger Pete.

" I guess Marshal Lick will mosey along from Packsaddle with some of his deputies to stand for the law here ! " Slick remarked hopefully. " But I reckon that won't help us a lot just now. "

" You said it ! " agreed Mick. " I'll say I wish I'd borrowed Bill's gun afore we lit out from the school. "

" We're going to get our claim back somehow ! " said Dick Carr determinedly. " We've handled Bill to get a chance to join up in the gold-rush, and we've nothing to show for it so far. "

" And I'll say we've got a big quirt-ing in store when we hit Packsaddle

agin!" grinned Mick. "Bill will sure be as mad as a hornet."

"Wake snakes!" breathed Slick. "Sit quiet—there's Bill!"

"Oh, great gophers!"

The gigantic figure of the six-gun schoolmaster came in view. From the upper prairie Bill was tramping and clambering down the rugged bluffs to the level of the river.

The schoolboys had wondered whether Bill would follow on when he got loose. There really was not much doubt about it. Bill was not the man to let the school break herd and get by with it.

And here he was—with a red and wrathful bearded face under his ten-gallon hat! Dick, Slick and Mick sat back, quiet in the shadow. They did not want to meet Bill's eyes just then. Still less did they want to have anything to do with the quirt he carried in his right hand.

Luckily, Bill did not spot them as he tramped past. He stood on the wide stretch of dried sand and mud beside the shrunken river and stared over the busy scene, with a glare of contempt on his rugged, bearded face.

"Jumping painters!" the schoolboys heard him ejaculate. "I'll say them guys are a caboodle of dumb boneheads, and then some!"

The three grinned at one another. They knew that Bill did not believe in the genuineness of Pedlar Perkins' "strike" on the Frio.

And, as he stood staring at the busy fossickers, it was plain that he did not believe it any more than before, and that he regarded the crowd of gold-rushers as boneheads.

There might be gold up in the rocky recesses of the Staked Plain, and it might have been washed down in the waters of the Frio, flowing down from the high table-land. But the possi-

bility was too remote for Bill. He refused to believe a word of it. And Bill had had some experience, in earlier days, in placer-mining out in Arizona. Still, seeing was believing, and most of the gold-seekers had seen unmistakable "colour"—and believed!

Near the spot where Dick, Slick and Mick sat in the shade of the bluff was Pedlar Perkins' camp.

The pedlar, with his Stetson hat on the back of his greasy head, his thin, bony, cunning face beaded with perspiration, was selling all sorts of goods, at all sorts of prices, to innumerable customers.

Bill fixed his eyes on the pedlar's outfit.

He grunted. Whether any other guy was making money out of the "strike" on the Frio or not, Pedlar Perkins certainly was.

As the original discoverer, Mr. Perkins might have been expected to stake out a claim and fossick for more gold. But he seemed to prefer to stick to his own trade.

It was a paying and thriving trade of the "strike," for Mr. Perkins was the only man on the spot with food to sell.

In a few days, no doubt, other enterprising galoots would be joining in such a profitable trade—if the gold-rush lasted! But Mr. Perkins was the first on the spot, and gathering the cream of it. Few of the eager gold-hunters had any supplies with them. They had to buy Perkins' stores, at Perkins' prices, or else leave their claims and ride miles across the prairie to Packsaddle.

Bill strode up to the counter at which Mr. Perkins presided. On Perkins' side of it lay a shotgun, ready for trouble.

At the look on Bill's face, Pedlar

Perkins' rat-eyes glinted, and he dropped a hand carelessly on the shotgun.

"Say, you polecat Perkins!" was Bill's polite greeting.

"Shoot!" said Perkins imperturbably. Apparently he did not mind being called a polecat. Probably harder names had been applied to him in the course of his nefarious career.

"You allow you raised gold-dust from the Frio?" demanded Bill.

"Sure!"

"That's a lie!" announced Bill.

"Buying anything hyer?" asked Perkins.

"Nope!" growled Bill.

"Then git, and make room for customers."

Bill did not "git." He glared at the cunning-eyed pedlar across the pine counter.

"You allow you picked up a nugget in this hyer river?" he demanded.

"Yep!"

"That's another lie!" said Bill.

Dick, Slick and Mick grinned at one another. They hoped that Bill's attention would continue to be concentrated on Mr. Perkins, and that he would not glance round and spot them.

Pedlar Perkins' rat-eyes gleamed. Bill's words were more than enough to cause the pulling of guns in Packsaddle. But Mr. Perkins, though he kept his shotgun ready for trouble with any guy who wanted stores without paying for them, was not honing for a rookus. He was there on business. So he merely shrugged his bony shoulders.

"Pack it up, old-timer," he drawled. "Say, you're in the way of customers. I'm asking you to git!"

"You never washed out no gold-dust, and you never picked up no

nugget," said the Packsaddle schoolmaster. "I don't rightly get on to your game, but I'll tell all Texas it's a gum-game, Mister Perkins, and you're stringing the boys along."

"Search me!" drawled Mr. Perkins, and he turned away to serve an eager puncher who wanted canned beef. Large as Mr. Perkins' stock was, it was dwindling fast, and it looked as if he would be sold out by sundown. It had cost him five hundred dollars a few days ago, and already it had netted him more than four times that sum.

Bill, with a snort of contempt, turned away from him—and as he did so, his eyes fell on three schoolboys in the shade of the bluff.

"Jumping painters!" roared Bill, grasping his quirt and making a stride at Dick, Slick, and Mick.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

They leaped up, yelling, wildly dodging the whacks of the quirt.

"Beat it!" roared Bill. "Hit Packsaddle, and hit it quick! I guess I'm quirting you till you do!"

"Let up, you durned old geck!" yelled Slick, hopping frantically.

"Aw, wake snakes!" gasped Mick Kavanagh.

"Hook it!" panted Dick Carr.

Whack, whack, whack!

Bill laid it on hard and fast. The three schoolboys dodged round Pedlar Perkins' counter and bolted. Bill roared after them.

"You hear me whisper! I'm telling you to hit Packsaddle!"

They vanished—not in the direction of Packsaddle. Bill, snorting, tramped round, looking for more members of the bunch. Bill was there to herd them home like a drove of steers, and Bill was going to do it if his quirt had not lost its persuasive powers.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

BILL GETS WISE!

HAIR-TRIGGER PETE leaned on Slick Poindexter's shovel, kicked over Mick's tin pail, and mopped sweat from his unwashed brow with a red Mexican handkerchief. With a flow of lurid language, Hair-Trigger told space what he thought of the heat of the sun, the buzzing flies, the weary labour of washing sand for gold that was not there, and other things. Hair-Trigger, it was plain, was not in a good temper.

He had jumped the schoolboys' claim, taken possession of such implements as they had, and started in to lift the fortune they had hoped to lift. But he had not lifted it yet. Hair-Trigger did not like work. Hanging about saloons for stray drinks, occasionally "holding" up a guy for his wad on a dark night, was more in Hair-Trigger's line. On this hot

and sultry day he had put in more real work than he had probably packed into the previous twelve months. The lure of gold urged him on. But he had nothing to show for it.

There was "colour"—the colour that had caused Dick, Slick and Mick to stake out the claim in the sand-bar jutting into the Frio. Here and there, among the sand and pebbles turned up by the shovel, glittered precious grains of gold—real gold! But they were merely flecks—promise of good things to come that did not come! And the deeper Hair-Trigger delved, the fewer and farther between were those tempting, enticing flecks of yellow. Hair-Trigger was tired and hot and savage, but he was determined not to give up hope. "Colour" meant the presence of gold, and he was going to wash out the gold and expend the same in

Bill Sampson ran the claim-jumper to the edge of the Frio and planted a terrific kick on his leather crackers. Hair-Trigger, with a wild yell, flew into the river!



countless drinks at the Red Dog in Packsaddle.

Three schoolboys came along to the claim as the burly roughneck rested on the shovel. Dick, Slick and Mick, having dodged Bill, were going to make an attempt to get their claim back from the claim-jumper. It was rather a desperate enterprise, to tackle an armed and reckless ruffian like Hair-Trigger, but they had made up their minds to it.

They had cut cudgels in the chaparral and they hoped to get a chance of rushing the ruffian while he was shovelling, and taking him by surprise. Rather unfortunately, Hair-Trigger was resting from his labours as they appeared, and his glinting eyes, under his shaggy brows, spotted them at once.

He pitched aside the shovel and pulled the six-gun from the holster at his belt.

His eyes glittered over it at the comrades of Packsaddle. Dick, Slick and Mick came to a sudden, dismayed, halt.

"Say, you young gecks honing for more trouble?" roared Hair-Trigger. "I'll say you'll sure cinch it, and then some over! Jump, you galoots, jump!"

Bang, bang, bang!

He fired at their feet, fanning them with bullets, and they jumped! They had to jump! Only by quick jumping could they dodge hot lead.

Hair-Trigger grinned savagely. This was a relief to him in his savage and disappointed temper. He banged and banged away with the six-gun, keeping the schoolboys jumping.

Bang!

It was the roar of another six-gun.

Hair-Trigger gave a fearful yell as his revolver spun from his hand

and a strip of skin from a finger along with it.

He spun round, with a bellow of rage.

Bill Sampson, with a smoking six-gun in his hand, nodded to him.

"Let up, old-timer!" said Bill genially. "I guess them young ginks belong to my bunch, and I sure ain't standing for any galoot fanning them with a Colt! Nope! Not so's you'd notice it, big boy!"

"Bill!" gasped Dick.

"Bill, old-timer!" panted Mick.

Hair-Trigger clutched up his fallen revolver with his left hand, spluttering with fury.

"Look out, Bill!" shrieked Slick.

"Aw forget it!" drawled the six-gun schoolmaster. His six-gun roared as he was speaking. Hair-Trigger, stooping, pitched over like a log.

He lay where he had fallen.

Bill lounged forward, picked up the ruffian's revolver, and threw it out into the middle of the Frio. It disappeared with a splash.

Dick Carr was gazing in horror at the fallen roughneck. But he was relieved as Hair-Trigger sat up, dazed and dizzy, and ran his hand through his thick mop of hair. His fingers came away red.

"Creased him, by the great horned toad!" chuckled Mick.

"Surest thing you know!" grinned Slick.

Bill gave the dazed bullwhacker a cheery nod. Bill could plant a bullet just where he wanted to plant it, and Hair-Trigger had been stunned by the ball grazing his skull. Bill had learned that trick in dealing with refractory steers that eluded the rope on the Kicking Mule ranges. Hair-Trigger was none the worse for it, save for a sore head!

"I guess that lets you out, old-timer!" said Bill genially.

"Bill," exclaimed Dick Carr, "this is our claim, and that brute has jumped it. You'll make him hand it back."

Bill snorted.

"I reckon I'm here to herd you back to school, you pesky young gink! But I sure don't stand for claim jumping, though I figure there ain't no more gold in it than in my Stetson."

"We've struck colour here——" said Slick eagerly.

"Aw, can it!" snapped Bill. "You, Hair-Trigger, you beat it, pronto! I'll sure help you get going, old-timer!"

Holstering his gun, the Packsaddle schoolmaster grasped Hair-Trigger and ran him off the claim. Big and burly as he was, Hair-Trigger resisted vainly in Bill's mighty grasp.

The schoolmaster ran him to the edge of the Frio and planted a terrific kick on his leather crackers.

Hair-Trigger, with a wild yell, flew into the Frio. He splashed up water and sand with a mighty splash as he landed there. He sat up in the shallow stream, with the Frio flowing round his shoulders.

"Urrghh!" gurgled Hair-Trigger. "I guess—urrghh——"

Bill dropped a hand on his gun.

"You hitting the other bank?" he inquired.

Hair-Trigger decided quickly to hit the other bank! He scrambled through water and mud and sand, crawled up the opposite bank and disappeared.

Bill walked back to the claim on the sand-bar. Dick, Slick and Mick, in possession of their claim again, and their shovel and pail, eyed him rather uncertainly. They were not

going back to school till they had washed out gold; that was a cinch. To their relief Bill Sampson did not handle his quart.

"We're after gold, Bill!" said Dick Carr persuasively. "Look here, Bill, you join up with us, and we'll make you a partner in the claim."

"That goes!" exclaimed Slick eagerly. "And I'll tell a man, Bill, it's a good claim! There's a heap of gold here, when we get it out."

"You said it!" declared Mick.

Bill grinned.

"You doggoned young boneheads!" he said. "There ain't no gold here, nor anywhere along the Frio, nor never was."

"Look!" exclaimed Dick Carr.

He caught up a handful of the muddy sand, and held it up before Bill's eyes. Here and there, in the handful, was a yellow sparkle.

Bill eyed it attentively.

"Ain't that gold, you old pie-can?" demanded Slick Poindexter.

Bill nodded.

"Sure thing!" he assented.

"Well, then——" said Dick Carr.

"How much have you washed out, and how much has that galoot Hair-Trigger washed out?" demanded Bill.

"Well, we've found lots of sign," said Slick cautiously. "But we sure ain't washed out much gold so far, Bill. But—it's there——"

"Colour means gold!" said Mick.

"Sure!" assented Bill—"if it ain't planted there by a pesky scallywag jest to string you along."

"Planted!" repeated Dick.

"Ain't you ever heard of salted claims?" snorted Bill.

"Doggone you, Bill!" hooted Slick. "You figure any of these guys would be fooled by a salted claim? I'm telling you it's the real stuff—"

there ain't more'n the colour of it, so far, but it's real gold, the same as Pedlar Perkins took in to Pack-saddle, and traded with Job Wash for stores."

"There's more'n one way of salting a claim, you young goob!" growled Bill. "I'll say that that guy Perkins has salted these sand-bars with real gold-dust. I'll say it set him back a few hundred dollars for the dust. And, by the great horned toad, I guess he's getting it back, and then some, selling stores to the guys at big prices! Yep!"

"Wha-a-t——" gasped Dick Carr.

"Yep!" roared Bill. "I guess I got on to his game now! I'll say he's mebber played the same game in a heap of places, afore he struck Pack-saddle. Sure! He never washed no gold-dust nor nuggets out of the Frio, like I've allowed all along! He had it in his trousers when he came."

"But——" began Slick.

"You young goob! And he traded it for stores—and he's sure selling stores for four or five times what he paid for them to Job Wash in Pack-saddle!" roared Bill. "That's why he started this gold-rush, doggone his hide!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Dick.

"But—but how——"

Bill roared.

"Haw, haw, haw! Didn't you young ginks tell me you saw him here, the day afore the gold-rush started, loosing off his shotgun?"

"We sure did!" exclaimed Slick.

"But——"

"What was he shooting at?" demanded Bill.

"Just loosing off the gun at nothing in particular," said Dick Carr. "But——"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Bill. "And he had it loaded with gold-

dust to salt the sand-bars! Haw, haw, haw!"

"Oh, great gophers!" stammered Mick Kavanagh. "You figure——"

"I guess I'm going to talk to that guy, a few!" said Bill. "You ginks foller me! You got no call to go on washing that sand—there ain't no more gold in it than Pedlar Perkins loosed off from his shotgun—and I'll say that wasn't more'n 'ud buy a long drink! Haw, haw, haw!"

Bill swung round and tramped down the sandy bank towards Pedlar Perkins' camp. Dick, Slick and Mick looked at one another—with sickly looks.

They could not doubt that Bill had got it right. Their own experience of washing out the Frio sand bore it out—and all they had heard of the experiences of others.

"Colour" had been found, here and there—but only "colour." And that "colour" came from the merest whiff of gold-dust, packed into the charge of a shot-gun! And they had actually seen the rascal at his work, "salting" the sand-bars, and had never guessed what he was doing.

"Aw, I guess I want to kick myself!" groaned Slick Poindexter. "We've broke herd from school and hog-tied Bill, all and because a swindling pedlar was stringing us along——"

Dick threw down the shovel.

"Come on," he said dispiritedly, and they followed Bill.

There was one gleam of comfort. The six-gun schoolmaster had spotted the cunning rogue's game, and it was probable that Pedlar Perkins would not, after all, ride clear with the illicit profits he had made. No doubt he had played the same game, with success, in other quarters; but this time he had struck Bill Sampson,

and Bill was the man to make him sorry that he had ever tried it on at Packsaddle.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER THE SHOW-DOWN!

PEDLAR PERKINS was grinning. The red sunset, shining on his bony, cunning face, showed it full of sly satisfaction.

The remnant of the extensive stock of canned goods that he had bought

not only his original outlay for the gold-dust he had bartered for stores, but five times as much in clear profit.

Grinning with satisfaction, Mister Perkins was considering whether to run the game any longer. But he decided not. Already rival traders were coming along, for one thing. That meant lower prices. For another, it was rather a dangerous game that Mister Perkins was playing. If he was spotted he was likely to be shot



"Lynch him!" A dozen hands grasped Pedlar Perkins and dragged him over his counter. "Let up!" roared Bill. "Nix on lynching! Lam him a few and let him run!"

at Job Wash's store in Packsaddle lay on his counter. It was a small remnant—Mister Perkins was nearly sold out! Canned beef and biscuit, and tobacco and cigars, all sorts of foods and drinks, had gone like hot cakes in the two days that the fossicking had lasted on the Rio Frio. And in Mister Perkins' pouch, under his red shirt, was a wad of notes of various denominations, representing

up, or strung on a tree. Mister Perkins decided to resist the temptation to linger for more money-making, and to go while the going was good.

The remnant of his stock was selling fast. Soon the lot would be cleared, and after dark, Mister Perkins was going to disappear quietly from his camp and hit the horizon.

How long it would take the gold-

rushers to realise that there was no gold in the Frio, Mister Perkins neither knew nor cared. They were welcome, so far as Mister Perkins was concerned, to go on hunting for it till the cows came home! All that Mister Perkins was particular about was to be a hundred miles away with his loot before the eager gold-hunters found out that they had been tricked.

In another section, at a safe distance from Packsaddle, Mister Perkins was going to play the same game again, as he had played it a dozen times before, up and down the West.

So, at least, Mister Perkins was reckoning! But he was reckoning without the six-gun schoolmaster of Packsaddle!

Bill Sampson came striding up to the pine counter, followed by Dick, Slick and Mick.

Perkins' rat-eyes gleamed round at the schoolmaster at once. He did not know what was coming, but he read danger in Bill's grim, bearded face.

"Say, Mister Perkins," drawled Bill, "I guess you done good trade here, and you sure must have packed away a good wad."

"I guess I ain't in business for my health!" snapped Perkins. "If you don't like my prices, you can sure ride to Packsaddle and buy from Job Wash! You figure that I'm packing goods on mules for nixes? Say, I guess I ain't got no time for chewing the rag!"

He turned away to serve a puncher.

"Hold on!" said Bill quietly, and he spoke over a levelled six-gun. "I got you covered, Mister Perkins, and you sure don't want to touch that shotgun any, onless you want to hit Jordan so sudden you won't be wise how you got there."

Pedlar Perkins, making a clutch at the shotgun, stopped in time.

He glared savagely at Bill.

"If this hyer is a hold-up, you got another guess coming!" he snarled. "You sure won't get by with it."

"Hold-up nothing!" said Bill. "I'll say all these guys hyer know I'm a schoolmaster, and as white as any guy in Santanta County. Stick 'em up!"

Pedlar Perkins hesitated a moment. But the six-gun was staring him full in his bony face, with Bill's finger on the trigger, and Bill's grim eye gleaming over the levelled barrel. He raised his hands above his Stetson.

There was a buzz from the crowd round the pedlar's counter.

"Say, what's this game, Bill Sampson?" shouted two or three punchers.

"I'm telling you!" answered Bill coolly. "There ain't no gold in Frio sand, any more'n that pesky guy scattered there with his shotgun! I guess some of my bunch saw him at the game and never knowed what it meant, the day afore the gold-rush started! I'll say that that pizen polecat salted the sand-bars with gold-dust, and then let on that he had washed out dust in the Frio—to get you boneheads stampeding for gold! And I'll say that he's sure clinched a big roll, selling you half-dollar cans of beef at five dollars a time, and ten-cent drinks at a dollar! Yep! I'll say he figured he had struck Boobsville when he hit Packsaddle, and I'll mention that he wasn't fur wrong."

There was a roar!

Pedlar Perkins face was white as chalk!

"It's a lie!" he yelled. "I'll tell a man——"

"Tell nothing!" rapped Bill. "I'll

say I've cinched you, you pizen thief, and I'll sure prove it up, too. What was you loosing off your shotgun at the sand-bars for, two days agone?"

"I sure never did! I guess——"

"Some of you cinch that popgun and unload it!" drawled Bill. "I guess a guy can't shoot off charges of gold-dust without leaving sign in his shotgun! I'll say you'll sure raise sign in that shooting-iron."

A buzzing, excited crowd was surging round Pedlar Perkins' camp now. A Kicking Mule puncher grabbed the shotgun and removed the charge. Then a dozen men examined the gun together, and there was a yell. As Bill said, "sign" was sure to be left by a charge of gold-dust fired from a shotgun. Tiny glimmering flecks of yellow remained to prove how the gun had been used.

The roar of rage that went up was deafening.

More and more fossickers crowded up from the sand flats. A howling mob surrounded Pedlar Perkins' camp!

The truth was clear enough now. There was no gold in the Frio, and never had been—till Pedlar Perkins "salted" the sand-bars! The whole thing was a swindle—and the profits of the swindle were packed under Mister Perkins' red shirt!

"Lynch him!"

Pedlar Perkins gibbered with terror as the roar went up. A dozen fierce hands grasped at him, and dragged him over his counter. But for Bill Sampson's presence the detected rascal would have been lynched. But the Packsaddle schoolmaster was not standing for that.

"Let up!" roared Bill. "Nix on lynching! I guess you can lam him all you want, but you sure ain't hanging that guy! Lam him a few and let him run!"

Pedlar Perkins was "lammed" more than a few! Bill saved his bony neck for him, but that was all the rascal saved. His wad was grabbed and scattered—where it went Bill never knew, nor cared. Hustled and thumped and kicked, his shirt streaming in tatters, his hat gone, Pedlar Perkins fled for his life—leaving his tent, his fixings, his pack mules—everything he had—only glad to get away alive from the mob.

Late that night, a tattered and weary rascal was still tottering away on the rugged prairie, wishing from the bottom of his heart that he had never struck Packsaddle—or, at least, the Packsaddle schoolmaster!

BILL herded the bunch back to school without trouble now. At sunset he had herded them in at the school-gate. In the playground he eyed them grimly—quirt in hand! They knew what to expect—and they knew that they deserved it! But they hardly cared—so deep was the disappointment of the gold-rush! Bill eyed them in grim silence.

"Aw, get through with it, Bill!" said Slick. "We sure have played it low down on you, old-timer, and we was sure a bunch of boneheads. We ain't got no kick coming! Wade in, Bill, and get through!"

"I guess," said Bill slowly, "that I sure ought to quirt you a whole lot, and then some, and a few over! I'll tell a man I sure ought to wear out this hyer quirt on you! But I ain't going to! Nope! Beat it for the bunkhouse, you pesky young ginks, afore I change my mind and take the skin off'n you."

And the bunch promptly beat it for the bunkhouse.

THE END