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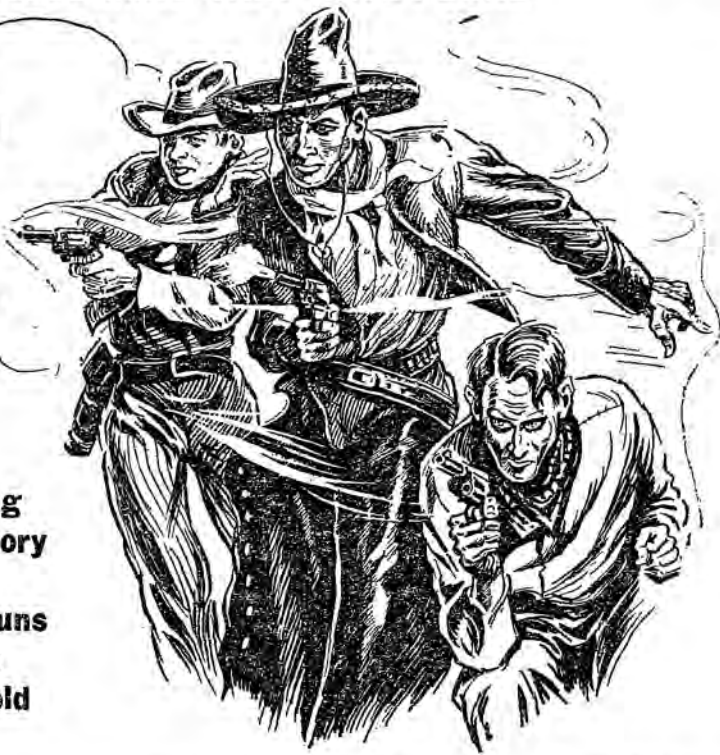
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The Outlawed THREE



A Thrilling Western Story of Smoking Guns and the Lure of Gold

"COVER!" breathed Kid Byrne. He caught Tom Redway by the arm as he spoke, and dragged him back into the thickets. Dan Oak followed immediately after.

In a split second the three Rojo cowboys were in cover amid the thick trees.

Through the wood ran the hoof-marked trail which led from the cow town of Bullwhacker to the Rio Rojo. It was the sound of a distant hoofbeat that had caught Kid Byrne's quick ear and given him the alarm. Neither Dan nor Red had heard it, but they followed the Kid's lead without question.

"If that ain't a rider coming up the trail, I'll eat my stetson!" breathed the Kid.

Dan's eyes glittered.

"Hardfist!" he muttered.

"Mebbe! But if it ain't, I guess we don't want to show up. It ain't healthy for outlaws here!"

The Kid spoke bitterly, for it was a bitter fact that he and his pard were now hunted outlaws, driven against the law by Hardfist Hall, the scheming marshal of Bullwhacker.

The Outlawed Three listened intently as the staccato beat of hoofs drew nearer on the hard, sun-baked trail. A horseman was riding swiftly from the direction of Bullwhacker.

From the open, sunlit plain the rider dashed into the trail under the high, over-arching boughs of great ceiba-trees, walled by tangled thickets. And the three cowboys, peering from cover, watched for him to come abreast of where they stood, and Kid and Dan were grasping their guns.

For if the rider was Hardfist Hall, he was their game. The rascally marshal had made them outlaws, and they would act as such when it came to dealing with their enemy.

With a jingle of bridle and spurs, the horseman reined in his bronco almost opposite the spot where the Rojo cowboys stood in cover. But it was not Hardfist Hall, and Kid and Dan relinquished their guns.

They were not hunting trouble with Jad Jadson, and it was upon the scarred face of the leader of the Jadson gang that they were looking from the foliage.

It was clear that the rustler had no suspicion of their presence. He leaped from the saddle and backed his bronco into the thickets, hardly a couple of yards from the hidden three. The horse was quickly out of sight, tethered to a branch, and then Jad stepped back into the trail with a six-gun in his hand.

He stood looking back the way he had come—his head bent to listen. There was a fierce, savage grin on the scarred face.

"I guess I'm getting him!" muttered the bearded rustler.

Faintly from afar came the echo of a horse's hoofs. Another rider was coming up the trail—not at a ferocious gallop, as Jad had done, but at an easy trot.

Jad's sunken eyes glittered. He backed out of the trail into cover, exactly as the Rojo cowboys had done, and Red barely repressed an exclamation as the lianas swayed over him, stirred by the bulky form of the rustler. But he was silent, and Dan and Kid were silent, though if the rustler had looked round he must have seen them now, for he was hardly six feet from them.

But Jad did not look round. All his attention was concentrated on the trail, his eyes glittering over the gun that was half-raised, his finger on the trigger.

Nearer came the sound of the trotting horse

—of the rider who was coming to certain death, for there was no doubt of Jad's intentions. Who the second rider was the Rojo cowboys could not tell.

Perhaps it was Hardfist Hall, their enemy, the man who had driven them into outlawry. Perhaps one of the Hall punchers riding home to the ranch. Perhaps Doc Baker, on his round, or perhaps some unsuspecting traveller who packed a "roll."

Jad was the most ruthless and merciless ruffian in Arizona. He had killed more men than he had fingers and toes. Shooting down a man from cover was nothing to the scarred outlaw. This victim would not be the first by many a one!

Red's plump face was full of appeal as he looked at Kid Byrne.

But the Kid's handsome face was hard. The Rojo cowboys were outlaws themselves now, and every man's hand in Tontine County was against them. What call had they to horn in?

They were hunted by the law, even as Jad was hunted. Hardfist Hall had framed them, and the law was on the side of the marshal of Bullwhacker. It was not, the Kid thought bitterly, for outlaws to chip in against an outlaw.

Dan's eyes sought his. Dan's impulse, like Red's, was to chip in and put paid to the murderous ruffian watching the trail only a few feet from them. But the Kid shook his head. Let Jad get on with it.

But as the trotting hoofs came closer, the Kid's expression changed.

The coming rider had entered the wood. They could not see him, but they could hear. In a couple of minutes he would be riding unsuspectingly past the spot where Jad crouched, gun in hand, finger on trigger, murderous eyes gleaming over the barrel. And it was borne in on the Kid's mind that he could not stand for anything like that.

Outlaw or not, he was still at heart the cowboy who had worked on the Rojo Ranch with old Sam Oak. And the thought of old Sam came into his mind—old Sam, lying at death's door in Doc Baker's cabin at Parksville. He knew that he could not stand for this.

Dan gave a nod, and Red grinned faintly as Kid Byrne silently drew the gun from the holster at his belt. Silently, without even the rustle of a leaf, the Kid aimed—not at Jad, for shooting a man in the back, even a human

wolf like Jad, was impossible to the Kid, but at the gun in Jad's hand.

Over the head of the crouching rustler the Kid aimed, and as a jingle of stirrups told that the newcomer was close at hand, Kid pulled trigger.

Jad Jadson gave a sudden leap as the gun was smashed from his hand by the bullet, and the roar of the Kid's gun thundered behind him. Utterly startled and unnerved, with the blood spurting from his numbed hand, the rustler rolled out headlong into the trail, yelling wildly.

HARDFIST HALL checked his bronco, his reins in his left hand, his right whipping to his gun.

It was Bill Hall, marshal of Bullwhacker, who was riding the trail. It was the life of the bitter, relentless enemy of the Rojo cowboys that the Kid had saved.

Hardfist's jaw shut hard under his black beard, and his eyes gleamed at the yelling rustler who sprawled on the trail in front of his horse.

What was happening, the marshal of Bullwhacker hardly knew. The shot that roared through the trees had not come from Jad—he knew that much. Who had fired, and why, he did not know. But he knew the scarred outlaw at a glance; he knew that there were others in the trees, and he acted promptly.

Only for a second he checked his bronco, then, gun in hand, he spurred and dashed on. He fired at Jad, the hurried shot cutting a strip of skin from the scarred face, then his bronco was trampling over the sprawling rustler, and he was past. He bent low in the saddle as he rode, nothing doubting that the rest of the Jadson gang were around, and that bullets were coming.

At a mad burst of speed he dashed down the trail, leaving Jad sprawling behind, bruised, battered, half-stunned by the crashing hoofs of the bronco.

So sudden and swift was his flight that the Outlawed Three had only a glimpse of him as he flew past. But that glimpse was enough, and the Kid gave a roar of rage:

"Hardfist!"

He leaped up into the trail, gun in hand. Up went the gun, the Kid's eyes flashing over it. It roared, and roared again. The stetson spun from Hardfist's head as he spurred madly to escape.

Bareheaded, he raced on, and the next moment the trees gave him cover on the winding trail. But Bill Hall did not pause a second—he dashed on at full speed for the open plain. "Hardfist!" repeated the Kid, with savage rage. "By the great horn spoon, he ain't getting clear!"

The Rojo cowboys had no horses. But Jad's horse was at hand. Taking no heed of the rustler groaning in the grass, Kid Byrne rushed for Jad's tethered bronco, and dragged it loose. He leaped into the saddle, and dashed up the trail in fierce pursuit of the marshal of Bullwhacker.

"Kid!" panted Red. The Kid did not even hear him. He disappeared at a mad gallop, and Dan and Red followed on foot at a run.

Jad's bronco was a good horse. Jad, the cunningest horse-thief in Arizona, was always well mounted. And the Kid got every ounce of speed out of the animal. He dashed into the open sunlight of the prairie, and sighted Hardfist Hall on the plain.

Bareheaded in the sun-glare, the marshal of Bullwhacker was riding hard, heading for the Hall Ranch. But the ranch lay ten miles distant across the plain, and the Kid, with gritting teeth, told himself that he would get Hardfist before he reached it.

Jad's horse bounded under him, its flying hoofs seeming scarcely to touch the ground. Closer and closer the Kid drew to the hard-riding marshal. Up went his gun, and a bullet whizzed by a foot from the marshal of Bullwhacker.

Bill Hall's head turned, and as he saw that there was only a single rider in pursuit, and that that rider was Kid Byrne, Hardfist checked his wild flight. He had reckoned that the Jadson gang were gunning after him; but Hardfist was not the man to flee from a single foe.

His eyes glittered fiercely as he wheeled his foaming horse. Man to man, and gun to gun, Hardfist feared no man that ever backed a bronco.

Crack! roared the Kid's gun, as he came galloping on. Hardfist's gun-arm was up; he was pulling trigger when a bullet scored along his arm.

With a yell of agony the marshal of Bullwhacker dropped his arm, the revolver falling from his relaxed fingers into the grass.

The Kid's voice came down the wind in a fierce yell:

"You doggoned lobo-wolf. I sure got you! You're sure getting yours, Bill Hall!"

The marshal of Bullwhacker wheeled his horse again and dashed on for the ranch. Fast behind him rode the Kid, his gun half raised; but he was not firing now.

Only one bullet remained in the weapon, and the Kid was keeping it till he came close enough for a sure shot—the shot that would avenge old Sam Oak and blot out the bitter enemy of the Outlawed Three.

He was gaining—madly as the marshal rode, the Kid was gaining on him.

Over a fold of the prairie suddenly three stetson hats came in sight, ahead of the galloping marshal. A yell burst from Hardfist Hall at the sight of three punchers from his ranch.

The Kid gave a cry of rage.

His enemy was almost in his grasp. But they were riding on Hall's land. From Bullwhacker as far as the Rojo River the pastures of the Hall Ranch extended. Every moment Hardfist had hoped to sight some of his outfit, and his luck was in. He yelled frantically to the startled punchers as he dashed on towards them.

They stared at him blankly for a second, and then came spurring to meet him. Their guns were out as they came.

The Kid checked his horse. Hall's fierce yell came to his ears:

"It's Kid Byrne! Get him! Five hundred dollars if you get him!"

"You said it, boss!" yelled back Mustang Dave, and he dashed on with the other two punchers, riding right at the Kid.

Crack! roared Kid Byrne's gun—his last shot. The bullet fanned Hardfist's cheek as he stared savagely back.

Crack, crack, crack! roared the guns in the

grip of the punchers, as they rode for the Kid.

He wheeled his bronco and dashed away. But he did not head back to the wood. Dan and Red were behind him, though left far out of sight in the wild chase.

The Kid dashed away in another direction, leading the pursuing punchers across the prairie down the Rio Rojo.

It was well for him that Jad's horse was one of the fastest broncos in Arizona, for the pursuers rode him hard, and whizzing bullets narrowly missed the Kid as he galloped.

But he drew farther and farther ahead, and disappeared at last from their sight on the rolling prairie. The punchers, sweating and weary, gave it up at last and rode back to the ranch, to be greeted by a torrent of oaths from the disappointed and enraged marshal of Bullwhacker.

THE great cottonwood-tree, sixty feet high, stood near the bank of the Rio Rojo, in sight of the old rancho where Sam Oak had lived. It stood alone, in a fertile patch by the river, with no other timber at hand.

The weary ruffian, who tramped, and limped, and staggered under the blazing sun of Arizona, gave a groan of relief as he tottered at last into the shade of its wide-spreading branches.

Spent, exhausted, at the end of his tether, Jad Jadson sank down to rest in the ragged bushes that grew round the tall cottonwood.

The leader of the Jadson gang was in hard case. How he had dragged himself thus far from the wood on the Bullwhacker trail he hardly knew. He had lost his horse and his gun, his right hand was gashed and stiff, he was covered with bruises from the trampling hoofs of Hardfist's bronco.

He expected to be hunted after Hardfist's escape, and his one thought was to get to the hills, back to the hidden den of the Jadson gang up in the mesa. But, exhausted now, he could go no farther. Had an enemy sighted him then, Jad Jadson, the most desperate gunman and rustler in Arizona, would have been helpless to resist or to escape.

But the prairie was lonely. He heard no sound save the incessant buzzing of the flies in the hot bushes. Like a log he lay, waiting for his strength to revive. Suddenly, after he had lain long hours, the ruffian lifted his head, like an alert wolf, and listened to a sound from the prairie.

It was the sound of wheels on hard-baked earth, and he knew that some vehicle was coming up the trail that led to the ford of the Rojo—midway between the lone cottonwood and old Sam Oak's rancho. He sank back again, with a groan and a curse.

Few vehicles drove on that hard, rough trail. Most likely it was Doc Baker, of Parksville, on his round-heading, perhaps, for the Hall Ranch. Jad cared little who it was, so long as no eye fell on him in his lair in the bushes.

The clatter of wheels came to a sudden stop. Then Jad lifted his head again. Looking from the bushes, he recognised Doc Baker's buckboard, and the red-shirted six-gun doctor, who had stepped down. Jad shut his teeth hard.

Why had the doc stopped before reaching the ford? Had he seen some sign that warned him that a desperate man lay in cover in the bushes by the tall cottonwood?

Jad saw the doc tether his horse to a stump by the trail. Then Doc Baker turned his back on the buckboard and came across the rugged plain, directly towards where the rustler lay.

Like a hunted wolf hunted to its lair, Jad watched him. Unless the doc knew that he was there, why was he coming? Yet he could read no sign of suspicion, of alertness, in the tanned face under the stetson hat.

There was a rustling in the thorny bush at a little distance from him. The doc was pushing through the massive trunk of the great cottonwood-tree.

He passed, at the distance of a dozen feet, the spot where Jad lay crouched; and it was borne in on the rustler's mind that Doc Baker did not know, or suspect, that he was there. It was for some other reason, unconnected with him, that the doc came.

Sure of that, but more than ever puzzled and

mystified, Jad moved a little so that he could watch the doc through the bushes.

Doc Baker had stopped close by the great trunk. He had taken out a pocket-book, and was scribbling with a pencil on one of the leaves. In deeper amazement, the rustler watched.

Having scribbled a few lines, the doc tore out the written leaf and folded it. He stepped closer to the tree, and thrust the folded paper into a crevice of the massive trunk.

That, it seemed, was all that the six-gun doctor had come for. He turned away, tramped back through the bushes, and strode towards the buckboard tethered on the trail. From his cover, Jad still watched with glittering eyes.

He saw the doc cast the horse loose, jump into the buckboard, and drive on down the trail. A few minutes more and he was splashing through the ford of the Rojo, and disappeared from Jad's eyes on the farther bank.

"Search me!" breathed Jad.

He knew what it meant now. The doc had left a written message in the crevice in the tree-trunk. For whom? Jad had no doubt of the answer to that. Outlaws as they now were, Doc Baker was still a friend of the Rojo cowboys. That hidden message was left for Dan and Kid and Red—the rustler knew it.

With the Outlawed Three, hunted and in hiding, the doc could have no direct communication. But they would be anxious to have news of old Sam, lying wounded almost to death at Parksville, in the doctor's care. Jad reckoned that he could see it all.

He crept through the bushes to the cottonwood.

With a snarling grin, he thrust his hand into the crevice in the tree-trunk, groped for the folded paper, and found it.

He grinned as he read the hurriedly pencilled scrawl. For it was as he had figured; a message left by the doctor to be picked up by the Rojo cowboys.

"Sam still weak, but going on well. He will live.—Doc."

"By the great horned toad!" breathed Jad. He forgot that he was bruised and battered, and could hardly drag one aching limb after another. His eyes blazed over the pencilled note; and he grinned savagely as he put it in his belt.

Sooner or later—that very night perhaps—the Rojo cowboys would come to look for a message. They would not find a message—they would find the Jadson gang—watching and waiting, and they would come to their destruction. They should pay dearly for what had happened that day in the wood on the Bullwhacker trail!

The rustler was still aching and weary; but his rest under the cottonwood had restored his strength a little. After scanning the plain with watchful eyes, he left the spot at last and tramped on towards the mesa.

He came at last into the great canyon of the Rojo, where the river flowed between walls of high rock. A little more, and he would be safe—lost in the rocky wilderness of the mesa. But even as he breathed more freely, with that thought in his mind, there was a clatter of hoofs, and a bunch of horsemen rode out of a gulch into the canyon.

They sighted Jad even as he sighted them. Jake Sanders, the marshal's man, rode at their head—it was the marshal's posse from Bullwhacker. Gun in hand, the riders swooped down on the rustler—and circled round him, as he stood glaring with rage and despair.

"Hands up, you!" barked Sanders.

Slowly, his bearded, scarred face convulsed with rage, the chief of the Jadson gang raised his hands above his head. Armed, he would have fought desperately for his life, even against the odds—for he knew what to expect when he was taken. His life was a dozen times forfeit to the law he had defied for long and desperate years.

But half a dozen guns covered him, and he surrendered without resistance. Jake dropped from the saddle, and grasped his lasso.

"Jad Jadson, by the great horn spoon!" chuckled Sanders. "I guess the marshal will be hoppin' glad to see you, Jad! Keep him

covered, boys, while I fix him—and fill him with lead if he moves a finger."

"Doggone you!" breathed Jad. "If I had a gun—"

"Can it!" grinned the marshal's man. "We got you, Jad—we sure got you by the short hairs! I guess we're totting you to Hardfist at the ranch—and you can bank on it that you're going up on a rope, like Bull Jadson when the marshal cinched him!"

He knotted the rope round the rustler's brawny wrists. Jad was lifted to the bronco's back behind one of the punchers, and Jake kept hold of the end of the rope.

With his chin sunk on his breast, his scarred face haggard with despair, Jad Jadson rode, a prisoner, in the midst of the marshal's posse—his black thoughts of vengeance on the Rojo cowboys driven from his mind by the grim knowledge of what was coming to him.

HARDFIST HALL stood on the veranda of his ranch, his right arm in a sling, his black-bearded face savage as a wolf's.

Hardly a man was left at the ranch—every available puncher in the Hall outfit had been ordered to ride in the hunt for the Rojo cowboys. But long, long hours had passed, and the marshal of Bullwhacker had little hope that they would be successful. By that time the Outlawed Three were probably safe in their hide-out in the mesa; lying low till the hunt died down.

Where that hide-out was, Hardfist had never been able to discover. Again and again he had combed the mesa, without being able to track them down. But failure after failure only made the hard-listed marshal more savagely determined to cinch them, and wrest from them the secret of the lost goldmine of the mesa, which they had located before he had forced them to turn outlaws.

Suddenly he gave a start, and drew a quick, eager breath, as a bunch of horsemen came in sight against the red of the sunset. It was Jake Sanders' bunch, and in their midst one man was riding double—which meant that they were bringing in a prisoner.

A prisoner—Dan or Kid or Red?

Bill Hall breathed hard and deep. But as the bunch came nearer, he discerned that the prisoner was not one of the Outlawed Three—not one of the Rojo cowboys—and the secret of the goldmine in the mesa was as far off as ever.

But there came a grim satisfaction into the marshal's face, as he recognised Jad Jadson. It was the chief of the Jadson gang—the rustler who had waylaid him on the Bullwhacker trail that morning.

Hardfist descended the steps of the veranda to meet the horsemen as they rode clattering up.

Jake Sanders grinned at him.

"We got him, marshal—we got Jad! I reckon he lost his cayuse and his gun, and we got him, hoofing it in the mesa—and rounded him up as easy as a runaway cow! I'll tell a man!"

Hardfist smiled grimly.

"Put that rope over a branch!" he snapped. The riders dismounted, and Jad was dragged down. His sunken eyes glared hate at the marshal of Bullwhacker. A lasso was thrown over the branch of a tree that stood by the ranch-house. Jad Jadson was led under it, and the loop passed round his neck.

Jake Sanders fastened the end of the rope to his saddle. It needed only a touch of the spur on his bronco's flank to drag the burly outlaw up on the rope. He waited for the marshal's order.

Hardfist's face was grim and merciless. He stood for the law, as town-marshal of Bullwhacker—and Jad was the most desperate law-breaker and killer in Arizona. Bill Hall, when it suited him, had little enough regard for the law for which he stood. But he was going to execute it now with pitiless rigour.

Jad licked his dry lips.

The shadow of grim death was on him; but he was cool. He reckoned that he had a chance yet. Hardfist wanted him—but he wanted the Rojo cowboys still more! And Jad remembered the doc's paper in his belt.



At the very moment that the hidden gunman prepared to shoot down the horseman he had ambushed, the roar of Kid's gun thundered behind him, and, with his weapon flying from his hand, the rustler rolled out of his hiding-place into the trail, yelling wildly.

That pencilled scrawl might yet stand between him and the fate he merited.

"Go slow, marshal!" said Jad coolly. "You got me—but I reckon you'd rather see Kid Byrne standing under this branch."

His eyes were keenly on the marshal's face. It was his last chance of life, and he was not sure of it. But he was cool, with a desperate coolness. And his heart beat as Hall, about to raise his hand as a signal to Sanders, lowered it again.

"Kid Byrne!" repeated Hardfist.

"Sure!"

Hall's eyes glinted at him.

"You're lying—lying to save your neck, you doggoned horse-thief. You can't hand over the Kid!"

"Guess again, marshal! I'm telling you, I can put you wise how to lay your hands on the three of them. I reckon you can cinch them this very night, if you want."

"You got a line on their hide-out in the mesa?" Hall's look and tone were grimly doubtful.

Jad shook his head.

"Nope! I guess when they're in the mesa, they hide in a hole, and pull it in after them! But I'm telling you, one of them, at least, will come down from the mesa to-night, and I'll say he would have found me watching for him, if your bunch hadn't roped me in."

Hardfist Hall looked at him searchingly. Then he made a sign to his men to stand back out of hearing.

"Now put it plain, Jad!" he snapped. "If I get Kid Byrne, you save your neck. I guess I'd let all the rustlers in Arizona run loose to get a cinch on the Rojo cowboys. You know that Bill Hall's a man of his word! Put your cards on the table."

"There's a paper in my holster!" said Jad. "I guess you'll know Doc Baker's fist when you see it."

Hall stared at him blankly for a second. Then he dipped into the pistol-holster at the outlaw's belt. He drew out the folded paper, unfolded it, and read it. Hurriedly as the six-gun doctor had scribbled it, Hardfist knew the hand.

"Where'd you get this?" he snapped.

Jad told him.

Hardfist Hall stood silent for a long minute, thinking hard. Jad watched him. He could read the savage, triumphant thoughts in the marshal's mind; and he knew that he had bought his life by betraying the Outlawed Three to their bitter enemy.

The marshal of Bullwhacker spoke at last in a low voice.

"You cinch it, Jad! I guess I got to keep you parked; but I'll sure see that you rustle a cayuse before dawn and make your getaway! You've bought it."

He turned to his men.

"You, Sanders, pack that rustler in a shed and bar the door on him!"

Wondering, the roughnecks led Jad Jadson away. Hardfist Hall went back to his veranda. He stood there, staring into the deepening sunset towards the Rio Rojo. It would be dark in an hour, and then the ambush would be laid.

Under cover of dark, the Rojo cowboys, or one of them, at least, would come to the lone cottonwood for the doctor's message. Once in his grip, they would speak—he would know how to make them speak.

The secret of the lost gold-mine was in his grasp at last!

"**W**AIT here!" said the Kid briefly.

On the rocky bank of the Rojo, where it tumbled down from the mesa, the darkness was thick, broken only by a pale gleam from the stars. It was nearly midnight; and for a long hour the Rojo cowboys had waited there, watching and listening.

In the distance, black against the stars, the mighty mass of the tall cottonwood barred the sky.

Leaving his comrades in the rocks by the river, the Kid stepped softly into the dark and disappeared from their eyes.

The dry bushes rustled round him as he trod by the great tree. The Kid stopped for a moment, his heart beating. It seemed to him, for one anxious second, that the rustle had not been made entirely by his own movements—that something had stirred in the darkness.

It was a rustle that came to him—a rustle made by no movement of his—and the Kid, in a flash, knew that he was not alone. His hand shot to his gun.

Even as he gripped it, outstretched hands touched him in the darkness.

He struggled madly, but now he was down—down on his back, with burly roughnecks piling on him. Once more he fired, then the revolver was wrenched from him, and Kid Byrne lay helpless in grasping hands. Still feebly resisting, he felt a rope passed round him and knotted.

The Kid was dragged away. At a distance on the trail, horses were waiting. The Kid was flung across a bronco. He heard the hard, jeering laugh of Hardfist Hall as he was led away in the midst of a trampling bunch of horsemen.

The Kid in Marshal Hall's power, gone far from the help of his comrades! But Dan and Red, waiting for their comrade's return, have heard the sound of shooting as Kid was captured, and next week they make a desperate bid to rescue him!