

**Grand Christmas Number!** ALSO **FREE GIFT** INSIDE

*The*

# PILOT

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Every Friday.



*"You thought bread and water good enough for me — well, you try it....." said*

**The WORST BOY at BORSTED!**

# The Outlawed THREE



**H**ARDFIST HALL crossed to the door of his office on Main Street in Bullwhacker, slammed it shut, and threw a bar in position. He swung round from the door, to fix his eyes on the little man in black who stood by his desk.

Lawyer Hook eyed him with a vague uneasiness. The cow town lawyer had done plenty of work for the marshal of Bullwhacker, and much of it had been of a questionable kind. He played jackal to the big, brawny, hard-fisted marshal, and all his scruples could have been packed on a pinhead.

"Give that the once-over, hombre!" rapped the marshal, tossing a crumpled sheet of paper on the desk.

In sheer wonder, the cow town lawyer picked it up, smoothed it out, and looked at it. It was a leaf torn from a pocket-book, written on hastily in pencil, and signed "Doc."

"I guess you know that fist?" grunted Hall. "Doc Baker's, of Parksville!"

"You said it!" Lawyer Hook read the scribbled message. "That's written to the Rojo cowboys, marshal!" he said. "It's Doc Baker's fist, and it says Sam is mending, and will live. He's got old Sam Oak up at his cabin in Parksville—he took him away after he was shot-up at the Rojo Ranch. I guess it means he's in touch with those three outlaws, Dan Oak and Kid Byrne and Tom Redway. But—"

"But what?" barked Hardfist. "You can't touch Doc Baker on it!" said Lawyer Hook, shaking his head. "Mebbe he's standing by them young firebugs, and I've sure heard him shouting that he don't believe they shot-up old Sam. But—"

"Who's aiming to get at the doc?" growled Hardfist Hall. "You lissen, Hook! The Rojo cowboys have got a hide-out up in the mesa. I guess I've combed the hills for them, but they got me beat! They don't dare ride the trails, and they sure do hone for news of their uncle. How d'you figure they get news of the old man?"

He pointed to the scribbled paper. "Doc Baker left that in the trunk of the lone cottonwood near the old Rojo Ranch!" he said. "Kid Byrne came looking for the doc's message—and found me and my outfit waiting for him. His side-kickers got him away agin, but—" The marshal's black-bearded face set grimly. "They don't know I got that paper! They don't savvy that I'm wise to it that they use the cottonwood for a post-office! That's why I want you—now!"

Lawyer Hook looked alarmed. "What d'you mean?" he asked hoarsely. "I guess," said Hardfist. "they'll be looking for the doc's message in that cottonwood some time. They won't find what doc left for them. They're going to find a message that old Sam is dying at Parksville! They're going to find it written in the doc's fist. You get me?"

Lawyer Hook did not reply to that. The marshal's meaning, as it dawned on him, drove the colour from his thin, cunning face.

"What you reckon they'll do," said Hardfist. "When they get that message? I'll say they'll saddle up and ride for Parksville to see old Sam before he passes in his checks! I'll say they'll mount and ride, even if all the sheriffs

in Arizona stood in their way handling guns!"

Lawyer Hook did not speak.

"That message," went on Hardfist grimly, "has got to be written, looking as if it came from the doc! I guess I can handle a gun with any guy in Arizona, but I sure ain't no dandy with a pen! You get me, hombre?"

"I—I can't do it, marshal!" stammered the cow town lawyer.

"Forging a man's hand, and me a lawyer—"

"You a lawyer—and I guess there's some things you've done, and been paid for, that the sheriff at Parksville would like to hear about!" growled Hardfist. "Quit chewing the rag, hombre! I guess you're the only man in Bullwhacker able to do what I want!"

"It—it's against the law—"

"I guess the law can stretch a point when it comes to roping in three outlaws that's wanted for shooting-up a rancher!" jeered Hardfist.

"Aw, can it!" snapped Hook, with a show of spirit. "You know you've framed the cowboys on that charge—"

Hardfist Hall's face went dark with rage. His hand flashed to the gun in the holster at his belt. Lawyer Hook, pale with terror as the muzzle of the Colt was thrust against his heart, sank down at the desk. Over the levelled gun Hardfist's eyes glinted at him.

"You coyote!" said Hall, through gritted teeth. "You doggoned sneaking coyote! Get on with writing that message, or you get yours! I'll shoot you up like a stray dog if you go back on me! Get to it, durn you!"

The cow town lawyer took the pencil. His skinny hand shook so much that he could hardly handle it. But he dared not disobey. In silence, white-faced, the cow town lawyer wrote at Hardfist's dictation, and copied what he had written again and again, till the marshal of Bullwhacker was satisfied that he had imitated Doc Baker's hand successfully.

"Sam dying. Hurry if you want to see him alive!" "Doc."

Hardfist took the final copy, compared it with doc's original note, and nodded, satisfied. He jammed the gun back in his belt.

"Skip!" he snarled. Lawyer Hook cringed from the office. Hardfist gave the false message one more look, folded the sheet, and put it in his pocket.

Five minutes later he was riding out of Bullwhacker. The false message was lodged in the crevice in the trunk of the lone cottonwood.

And Hardfist Hall rode back to Bullwhacker, savagely assured that his hour of triumph was near at hand!

**C**LINK, clink! It was the sound of a pick on hard rock. It rang and echoed through the great cave with a hollow sound; but it did not float beyond the cave, for it was drowned by the incessant roar of a waterfall. The scene was a strange one. Several pine-wood toroles were stuck in crevices in the rocky walls of the cave, shedding wavering light. The flare glimmered on walls of rock, and on the sheet of glistening, falling water that screened the mouth of the cave. It was no wonder that the marshal of Bullwhacker had never found the hide-out of the Outlawed Three. A dozen times, at least, had Hardfist tramped up that rocky ravine with his men, but never a suspicion had crossed his mind that a cave lay hidden behind the waterfall.

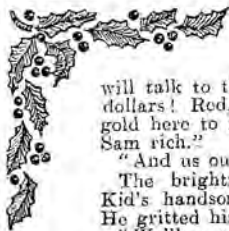
Only by chance had Kid Bryne found it—falling with the cascading water from above. And in that hidden river-cave he had found the gold-mine which had been lost forty years ago with the death of old Sam's father. Sam had hunted for the mine all his life and never found it. Kid had stumbled upon it by accident—but then had come tragedy instead of fortune.

It was Kid Byrne who was handling the pick. Night lay on the Mesa Mountains—starry night. But in the river-cave the pine torches flared, and the camp of the Outlawed Three had a homely look.

A camp-fire burned, with three sticks over it, and a cooking-pot suspended. Red, his chubby face glowing from the fire, was cooking a supper for three, while the Kid clanged the pick and turned up golden nuggets. Dan was absent. He had gone down, under cover of the dark, to cinch the doc's message from the cottonwood "post-office"—if it was there.

Every time Doc Baker rode on the Bullwhacker trail, he left a note in the cottonwood, to give news of old Sam. Only once had he missed—though the Rojo cowboys did not know that, on that occasion, the note had fallen into Hardfist Hall's hands; they never dreamed that the secret was known to their bitter enemy.

Clink, clink! rang the Kid's pick. His eyes gleamed as he dislodged a thick nugget from its bed of rock. He lifted it in his hands, carried it to the fire, and held it up for Red to see.



"Look at that, old-timer!" grinned the Kid. "I'll tell a man that nugget

will talk to the tune of a thousand dollars! Red, there's more'n enough gold here to make us rich, and old Sam rich."

"And us outlaws!" sighed Red.

The brightness died out of the Kid's handsome face at the word. He gritted his teeth.

"We'll sure put paid to Hardfist for framing us!" he muttered. "And I don't care a continental red cent, old-timer, so long as old Sam pulls through and gets the mine! That pizen skunk Hardfist shot him up, and I reckon he meant to make it the last sickness for him—but the doc will pull him through, Red. When old Sam's up agin, he will handle this strike and be the richest old guy in Tontine County—even if we have to ride and hide."

The Kid suddenly moved along towards the mouth of the cave, where the sheet of water fell incessantly, like a fluid wall. On one side was a rocky ledge by which it was possible to pass in and out, covered by a blanket from the drenching water. That was the way Dan would come. A sound had caught the Kid's keen ear, faint, through the thunder of the waters. Dan was coming!

A figure came plunging through the falling water and joined the Kid on the ledge. Kid gave Dan Oak one look—and grasped him by the arm. Dan's tanned, rugged face was white as chalk. He was breathing in great gasps. One look at his face was enough for Kid Byrne—he knew that the news was bad!

"Dan!" he breathed. He drew his drenched comrade towards the fire. Red, about to give the cooking-pot another stir, dropped the spoon, his own plump face paling at the look on Dan's.

"Bad news?" The Kid's grip closed, unconsciously, on Dan's arm like a vice. "Dan—is it bad?"

Dan groaned. His face was streaming with water from the fall, and his eyes were wet not only from the river. His rugged features worked.

"You got a note from the doc—in the tree?" muttered Kid.

"I got it here!"

Dan drew a crumpled sheet of paper from the pocket of his shirt. The Kid caught it and read it in the firelight, Red reading it over his arm. He repeated the brief message in husky tones.

"Sam dying! Hurry, if you want to see him alive!" The Kid's handsome face whitened like chalk. "Sam—old Sam—passing in his chips—and us thirty miles away from him!" Kid's voice choked in his throat. "Old Sam, that's been a father to us three—dying!"

"I got back as fast as I could, to put you 'uns wise!" groaned Dan Oak. "We got to hit Parksville, and hit it quick! There's horses down in the canyon—we got to ride, you 'uns, hell-for-leather! Send that we may be in time to see old Sam afore—afore—" He broke off. "We got to ride!"

Kid Byrne gritted his teeth.

"Hardfist shall pay for this!" he muttered. "His coyote's life shall pay for old Sam's! But we got to beat it, pronto!"

That was the one thought in the minds of the Rojo cowboys. Danger mattered nothing now. They were outlaws—they could not ride into any town in Arizona without danger of arrest. But Hardfist had calculated well. If the streets of Parksville had been packed with sheriffs' deputies, it would not have stopped the Outlawed Three.

The camp in the cavern was left as it was—fire glowing and torches flaring. The three pards plunged through the falling water, out on the rocky path down the ravine. Heedless of the dark, they scrambled down the rocks into the lower canyon, where their horses were staked out in a clump of timber by the river.

It was swift work to saddle up, and the three rode down the canyon to the plain. Thirty miles of dark and rugged prairie lay between them and Parksville—thirty miles of peril, to greater peril when they arrived. And they rode as if for their lives!

"LISSEN!" muttered Jake Sanders. His eyes, under his stetson, gleamed. "I guess—" muttered Mustang Dave.

"Lissen, you goob!" snapped the marshal's man.

Faintly, through the silence of the night, came the beat of horses' hoofs—faintly, from the distance, but growing nearer and clearer. Horsemen were riding in the night—riding fast, drawing nearer to the belt of post-oaks and pecans, through which the trail ran to Parksville.

The town lay a mile away, but riders from the north—from the Rio Rojo and the Mesa Mountains—had to follow the trail through the post-oaks, where Jake stood, with bent head, listening. Mustang stood by his side—and in the shadows, four more roughnecks were rolled in their blankets and slickers. Thud, thud, thud! came the beat of the galloping hoofs.

"That'll be three riders!" muttered Jake. His keen ear could pick up, from the distant sounds, the number of horses that galloped in the dark. "Wake the boys!"

Mustang kicked into wakefulness the four men who slept in the blankets. They turned out yawning and grumbling. There was a gleam of guns.

"Mebbe only a bunch of punchers riding into town!" growled Mustang, rejoining Jake, who still stood listening and watching.



## STILL GOING STRONG!



Father (discovering son in pantry eating Christmas pies): "Now then, Jimmy, what are you up to?"

Jimmy: "Up to the seventh, dad, but they're very small!"



"Mebbe!" said Jake. "But we got the marshal's orders, and no guy ain't riding into Parksville without a show-down."

The hoof-beats rang nearer. Jake Sanders strained his eyes into the gloom of the prairie, where the trail ran into the post-oaks. A crescent of moon gleamed, but such light as it gave was dim and uncertain.

Three riders were coming, and Jake reckoned that they might be the Outlawed Three, who, unless the marshal of Bullwhacker was mistaken, would be riding that trail, soon or late. But, though Hardfist was certain that they would come, he did not know when they would come; and for three days and nights his men had watched, and seen nothing of them.

Jake wanted the Outlawed Three if they came, but he did not want to have a show-down with the wrong bunch. That would be a mistake for which he would have to answer to the sheriff of Parksville.

He stared and stared into the darkness as the galloping hoofs rang nearer and nearer. He had a glimpse of three stetson hats that bobbed to the motion of the galloping horses. Three riders in desperate haste, on sweating steeds—but were they the Outlawed Three?

Six men stood in the trail, gun in hand. Capture or death awaited the Outlawed Three if they came. Jake's finger was on his trigger. He hurried an order:

"Burn powder if they don't pull in when I toot!"

"You said it, Jake!" muttered one of the roughnecks.

The thudding hoofs were close at hand now. Jake Sanders raised his gun and shouted:

"Halt!"

His fierce voice roared above the thunder of the hoofs.

"Halt! In the law's name, halt!"

There was no halt. Three riders spurred savagely at the word; three guns blazed.

Then Jake knew!

"The Rojo cowboys! Fire—fire!" he yelled. Guns roared on all sides. But three riders, in a desperate bunch, swept on madly. A man lay dead in the trail, Kid Byrne's bullet in his heart. Jake Sanders reeled from the heaving shoulder of a bronco; Mustang Dave staggered under the sweeping barrel of a Colt. Guns roared in the gloom; there was the thud of galloping hoofs.

Had the Rojo cowboys pulled rein, even for a moment, they would have been lost. But they spurred fiercely on, heedless of dark figures that surged round them, of flying bullets.

On, on, at mad and desperate speed, fring right and left as they thundered. A hand grasped Dan's rein; the next second the man who grasped was down under the thundering hoofs.

But the desperate riders were through, galloping fiercely on down the trail through the post-oaks, one of them clinging to his saddle, shutting his teeth on a groan, but riding on. Behind them, howls and yells and groans and roaring guns.

Jake Sanders staggered to his feet, and emptied his gun after the vanishing riders. Mustang lay groaning on the ground, his hands to his cracked head. Two men lay still—one with a bullet in his heart, the other smashed by thundering hoofs.

"Doggone 'em!" breathed Jake. "They was the Rojo cowboys, and they beat us to it—they sure beat us to it!"

Galloping hoofs died down the trail towards Parksville. The Outlawed Three had got through that deadly ambush, but not unscathed. Jake was sure of that.

He figured that they had taken lead with them. Neither riders nor horses could have got through the hail of bullets untouched.

While the roughnecks groaned and panted and cursed, Jake got busy. The marshal of Bullwhacker left nothing to chance. If the ambush on the trail failed, yet deadlier peril awaited the Outlawed Three ahead.

From the darkness of the post-oaks a rocket shot up, scattering sparks on the dark sky. It was a signal to Hardfist Hall that the Rojo cowboys were on the trail—that they had passed Jake's bunch, and were riding for Parksville. And in Parksville, Hardfist Hall and his men were on the watch!

"RED!" groaned Kid Byrne.

He pulled in his bronco.

The Kid's luck had held good.

Nothing had touched him in that desperate burst through the ambush in the post-oaks. But he saw that Red was sagging in the saddle.

They were out of the belt of small timber—out on the open prairie again. The post-oaks lay a dim shadow behind them. A short ride now into Parksville—if they could make the grade. But Red was wounded. No word, no groan, came from Red—he would ride till he dropped—but even as Kid ranged closer beside him, the plump figure reeled from the saddle.

Then Red spoke huskily.

"Forget it, Kid! Leave me alone, you big stiff; ride on! Beat it, I'm telling you! You got to get to old Sam!"

"Dan!" called Kid.

Dan did not need to pull in; his horse was sinking under him. There were three bullets in the bronco. Dan leaped clear as it sank into the grass. He was at Red's side in a moment.

The Kid noted that Dan was limping. Dan had been hit as well as Red. Hardfist had failed in that deadly ambush; but he had come near to pulling it off. Luck and pluck had saved them—but had it saved them? The Kid stood unhurt, holding the two horses; but Red lay like a log in the grass, and Dan's leg crumpled as he bent over him.

Even the thought of old Sam—dying, as he believed, in the doc's house at Parksville—faded from the Kid's mind for the moment. He tethered the two horses to a pecan stump by the trail. Dan's horse was dead; the others had only scratches.

Kid Byrne gave one look back along the dark trail towards the post-oaks. If the rough-necks followed on, the cowboys were at a halt now. But there was no sign of pursuit from the ambush.

He dropped on his knees in the thick grass beside Red and tore open the crimson-dripping shirt, his heart heavy with dread. In the moon-glimmer, Red's face was colourless—that face, usually so plump and ruddy and cheery, was drawn now with bitter pain!

The Kid's fingers felt for the wound. The bullet had scored deep in the boy's shoulder and passed out. Silently, with his neck-scarf, the Kid bound up the wound, to stop the flow of blood. Red's eyes met his.

"No!" muttered the Kid. "You got it hard, Red, but you ain't handing in your checks, old-timer!"

Red's colourless lips moved. "You got to beat it, Kid! You got to get to old Sam!"

"Sure thing!" muttered the Kid wretchedly. "But—" He broke off and turned to Dan.

"You stopped one, old-timer?"

"Jest a scratch!" said Dan Oak indifferently. "You don't want to worry none. They took a strip off'n my leg."

He bared his sinewy leg below the knee, and bound his neck-scarf over the deep score of a bullet. The Kid stood erect beside him, holding the horses' reins.

"Beat it, you 'uns!" came from Red. "You got to think of old Sam! I can't ride none—you got to leave me here, and quit."

Kid Byrne clenched his hands in desperation. Old Sam, dying in doc's cabin at Parksville, longing for the sight of his boys before his kind old eyes closed—Red lying wounded!

In the depths of his heart, Kid cursed Hardfist Hall. Greed of gold—the hard-fisted marshal's greed for the lost mine of the mesa had brought them to this.

Dan's voice came quietly: "We can't leave Red—not both of us, Kid! One of us has got to stay and one to quit! There ain't no two ways about that."

The Kid nodded; he knew it. If old Sam yet lived, one of his boys could reach his side before the end came; but one had to stay with Red.

"You for the ride, Kid!" Dan said, in the same quiet tone. "I guess you'll make the grade better'n me, with my hurt leg. If old Sam can't see the three of us, it'll sure please him to see one—get to it, Kid!"

Kid Byrne stared back along the trail. The thought was in his mind that the bunch of bulldozers might, after all, follow on.

"Get Red off'n the trail!" he muttered. "Lay up in the Pecan Creek—you can lie doggo there till I get back to you. Mebbe I'll get doc to come out and see Red, too."

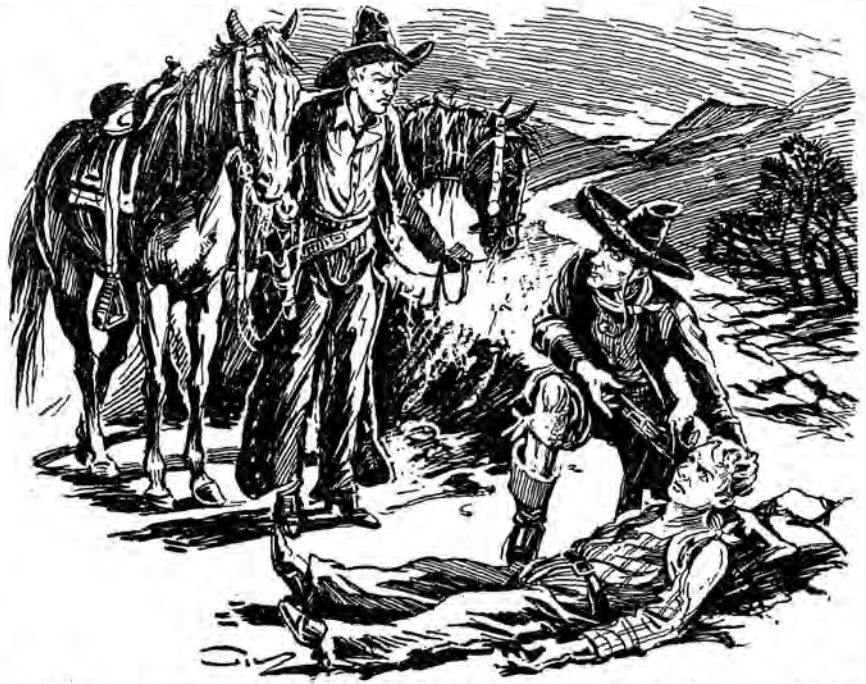
Dan nodded. They lifted Red to the saddle again. Dan, limping, held him there and led the horse off the trail to find cover in the sunken creek.

Kid Byrne went back to his horse. He mounted—but he gave another glance back before he rode. Still there was no sign of pursuit. The Kid prayed that his comrades might be safe, hidden in the hollow of the creek, while he finished that wild ride.

He gave his bronco the spur and dashed away through the dark towards Parksville.

**D**OC BAKER stirred in his bunk and opened his eyes. The doc's cabin stood alone in the straggling street of Parksville, a little distance from other buildings, surrounded by a yard and a split pine fence.

It was long past midnight; and at that hour,



"We can't leave Red—not both of us, Kid," said Dan quietly, looking up from his injured comrade. "One of us has got to stay, while the other rides to get news through to old Sam Oak!"

the latest citizen had usually gone home to bed, though sometimes a belated puncher would ride clattering through the rugged, unpaved street. It was a thud of horse's hoofs that had come to the ears of the six-gun doctor of Arizona; and he grunted and turned over to sleep again.

But the thudding hoofs stopped at the gate, and he heard the creak of rusty hinges. He sat up, with another grunt. Someone was heading for his cabin; the cow town doc was accustomed to being called at all hours.

He lighted a candle and threw on shirt and trousers, while he listened to the newcomer leading his panting horse up from the gate to the door. There was a knock, soft and subdued, in the porch. No doubt the newcomer knew that there was a sick man in the cabin. In an adjoining room, old Sam Oak lay in troubled slumber.

Doc took up the candle, slipped his six-gun into his hip pocket, and stepped into the living-room, which opened on the porch. The knock was not repeated, but he heard the sound of panting breath outside.

He took down the pinewood bar, and threw open the door with his left hand—his right was near his gun. There was no telling who might be horning in at that dead hour of the night, and the doc was ready for a hold-up. But he gave a cry of amazement at the sight of the slim figure in the doorway.

"Kid Byrne!"

The Kid lurched rather than walked in. Weary from the wild ride, covered with dust, splashed with blood, his handsome face haggard, he stood panting before the astonished eyes of Doc Baker. Hardly able to speak, he fixed his eyes in a mute question on the doc. But the doc, pushing past him, shut the door hurriedly and slammed the bar into place. Then he turned savagely to the Kid:

"Kid Byrne! You gone loco?" he rasped. "What'll you be doing here? Hardfist's in town with a bunch of his side-kickers—I've seen them around two or three days! You're loco—plumb loco to come here!"

Kid caught the doc's arm in a fierce grip. "Sam?" he breathed. "Old Sam? Give me a word of him! Is he—gone?" He choked on the word. "Doc! For mercy's sake spill it, and spill it quick! We've rode hell's miles from the mesa after getting your message. Dan and Red have hit trouble on the trail, but I've got through. Doc—tell me I'm in time to see old Sam alive!" His voice broke.

"You're sure loco!" said the doc. "What's put it into your cabeza that old Sam's worse? Ain't you got the note that I left in the cottonwood—"

"I got it here!"

"Then how come?" snarled the doc. "I sure told you in that note that old Sam was mending!"

The Kid reeled. "Mending? Look at it—look at your own fist! What you pulling on me, doc?"

The Kid held out the crumpled paper. Doc Baker stared at it in the candle-light.

"I never wrote that!"

"It's your fist!" panted the Kid. "I'm telling you Dan picked it out of the cottonwood, and it's your fist, and it's brought us hell-for-leather from the mesa! What you giving me, Doc Baker?"

"You've been double-crossed!" breathed the doc. "I left a note for you—but that sure ain't it! I'm telling you, old Sam's on the mend—he's going to live. In two-three weeks he'll be on his feet again! I never wrote that!"

The Kid leaned on the door, panting, almost sobbing. He had been tricked—it was a false message and a trick—but he hardly thought of that for the moment. Old Sam was not dying—old Sam was going to live! If the old rancher lived, Kid cared for little else.

Doc stared at the crumpled note. The pencilled scrawl was so like his own, he himself might have been deceived as the Out-

(Continued overleaf.)



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jawed Three had been. But he knew that he had not written it. He spat a curse through gritting teeth.

"Kid! You figured—"  
"What was a guy to figure when he read that?" muttered the Kid. "If you never wrote it, doc, it's got me beat who did."

"Aw, you bonehead, guess again!" grunted the doc. "Some guy found that we was using the cottonwood for a post-office, Kid, and got my note—and put this in its place! And I'll tell a man that guy's name is Bill Hall! Ain't I telling you he's been around in Parksville the last two days with a bunch of his gun-slingers from Bullwhacker—"

The Kid bit on it. In a flash he knew. He was tricked—and trapped! Trapped—in the doc's house—that was the game!

"I guess I got it, doc!" breathed the Kid. "That's why Sanders' bunch was stacked on

the trail—they knowed we was coming when we got that note! I reckon Hardfist could bank on that, the pizen polecat! It's Hardfist's doing—and he's in town with his outfit for me."

"Mebbe there's a chance for you to beat it yet!" muttered the doc. "Mebbe—"  
He broke off. There were sounds without—sounds of heavy footsteps and a mutter of voices.

The Kid smiled—a bitter smile. He heard—and he knew that the building was surrounded—he had been seen to come. Hardfist and his men were at hand. The Kid's grip fastened on the butt of his gun. He was trapped—but he was not taken yet. Heavy footsteps crunched in the porch.

"Unbar the door, doc, and stand clear!" said the Kid quietly. "This ain't your funeral, doc—and me an outlaw! Nor it won't last long."

"Then listen to me!" grunted Frank, shooting out a muscular hand and gripping the crook until he winced. "Who murdered my brother?" he demanded, through clenched teeth. "Out with it, or I'll choke the liver out of you! Who killed Jim Gwynn, eh? Who put him on the spot? Did you, you rat?"

"No, not—not me!" shrieked the crook, terror in his bulging eyes. "It was Desmond, the Big Shot! He put young Jim on the spot! He ordered Dopey Myers to rub the kid out—him and Porky Dines! Desmond would get a lifer if Dopey squealed; but he knows Dopey won't do that, for fear of his own neck."

"All the same, he's going to get it!" grated Frank, his mouth a thin, straight line. "We're going to see Desmond right now! Understand?"

"Yessir," nodded the crook. "He lives in a swell joint. I been there before."

The "swell joint" proved to be an imposing-looking residence in the best part of Sangster, and no sooner did a trim maid open the door than Frank Gwynn strode past her, pushing the little crook in front of him, and with Dan following.

"Go on!" he hissed. "Take me straight to Desmond's quarters!"

Frank did not knock before he flung open the door of Colin Desmond's study. Neither did he greet his host, unless taking a flying leap across the carpet and delivering a terrific punch that sent Desmond flying over the back of his chair can be called a greeting. In a second leap, Frank cleared the fallen chair, and, landing upon Desmond, yanked him to his feet, afterwards thrusting him back across the table and smiling grimly into the pale, scowling countenance.

"Perhaps you can guess why I'm here, Desmond?" he asked.

His thin lips curling back to bare his sharp, pointed teeth, the gang-boss shot a venomous glance at the flat-faced little gangster.

"So that lily-livered rat has squealed, has he?" he grunted.

"Yes, he's squealed!" nodded Frank Gwynn. "He's ready to swear in a court of law that you put Jim Gwynn, my kid brother, on the spot—and that makes you as much a murderer as Dopey Myers, the man who fired the fatal shots, you hound! I suppose you know that Myers is already dead, but the least sentence they'll pass on you is fifteen years penal servitude; they may even hang you! But, personally, I hope it's fifteen years, you treacherous rat! Fifteen long nightmare years in Penton Gaol! It's a living hell, Desmond—a stone tomb! Chew on that!"

Panting a little, Frank Gwynn leaned back and stared into the greyish-green, fear-stricken face of his crooked team-mate. Desmond's mouth was open, his breathing hoarse, his eyes glazing.

Watching him, Frank felt a pang of pity, even for his brother's murderer.

"What's up?" he snapped. "You ill, or just dying of fright?"

"It's my heart—old trouble—he all right soon!" gasped Desmond. "Give me that—glass—will you?"

"Forget it!" snarled the doc.

He stepped to a back window and peered through a chink in the shutter. Three dim figures in stetsons loomed in the yard. They were watching for the Kid to attempt a get-away at the back. The doc turned from the window again, with clenched hands and gritted teeth. The Kid's gun was out. On the door on the porch came a heavy knock.

A harsh voice shouted:

"Open up, Doc Baker! Open up in the law's name!"

It was the voice of Hardfist Hall!

*Trapped in the cabin—with Hardfist and his roughnecks waiting outside! But Kid Byrne isn't beaten—and how he outwits his enemy is the high-spot in next week's thrilling Western yarn featuring "THE OUTLAWED THREE."*

It was Dan who handed the wine-glass from a beaten copper tray on the sideboard to Frank; and Frank, at a signal from the collapsing crook, poured in a few spoonfuls of water from a cut-glass bottle on the tray.

With an obvious effort, Desmond reached into a waistcoat pocket and withdrew a small bottle filled with white tablets, one of which he painfully dropped into the water, watching it dissolve.

"Sorry I can't ask you fellows to join me!" panted Desmond, lifting the drink to his lips. "Special medicine—not very pleasant to take!"

He drained the glass and replaced it on the floor beside him.

The drink seemed to revive him at once: his cheeks suddenly flooded with colour, and his limbs twitched.

Frank Gwynn's heart stirred within him. Because he could no longer bear to look upon the face of the man he was virtually sentencing to the horrors of gaol, he glanced around the room.

There was holly behind the pictures on the wall, and in the silence that now reigned in the room the sound of Christmas wails, singing carols in the street outside, could be heard.

Frank came to a sudden decision; stared down at Desmond again. The man was huddled in his chair, a pitiable sight.

"Listen, Desmond," said Frank, speaking with an effort, his voice choked with an emotion he fought hard to keep down. "I can't go through with it! Fifteen years in Penton—it's more than any man should have to bear, no matter what his crime! I can't do it—I can't! A sensational trial would stir up a lot of mud, and my brother's name would be clean no longer. There's mother, too."

"I'm letting you off scot-free, Desmond—on one condition. You've got to clear out of the country, d'you hear? That's your Christmas present from me—your freedom!"

A wan smile flitted across the face of the man slumped in the chair.

"You're white, Gwynn!" he whispered. "White as I'd like to have been, if only I hadn't started going the wrong way. You're wrong about going abroad, though."

"I've always dreaded that one day I'd get caught; that I'd have to do a stretch, and—well, I couldn't face it. That's why I've always carried my freedom about with me; it's in that bottle of tablets. My special medicine, it's already shown me the way out!"

A sudden shudder ran through him as he waved his limp hand towards the empty wine-glass beside him, and horror seized Frank and Dan as they realised the meaning of the man's words.

"Poison!" whispered Desmond.

And he fell back in the armchair—dead!

*Fifty thousand spectators saw Sam Mullock, Tinsley Rovers' goalkeeper, murdered—yet an innocent man was accused of the crime! Read: "WHO KILLED THE GOALIE?"—next week's enthralling, long, complete footer story.*

## THE MAN AT THE END OF THE QUEUE.

(Continued from page 316.)

watch, released from his groping fingers, went flying across the room, coming into contact with the fender with a crash that split its back open. But it wasn't the damage to his watch that riveted Frank's eyes to the timepiece—it was the piece of folded paper within! Dropping to his knees, he extracted the paper and opened it with trembling fingers, eagerly reading the few lines that were printed, in tiny letters, on it, in his brother Jim's neat handwriting.

"Here's a stroke of luck, Dan!" he breathed. "This is a confession! Young Jim admits that he did the job in Brunswick Square! He says that Desmond was the brains behind the Grub Alley Mob, and that Desmond threatened to put him on the spot! Jim feared what was coming to him some day, but he didn't mean his murderers to get off scot-free! He gives the names of the mobsters, and all particulars, and— Look out!"

The warning came too late, for Desmond, a poker in his hand, was already upon his feet, a snarling figure of menace.

"I'll brain the first one who tries to stop me!" he grunted, backing towards the door.

"Let him go, Dan!" said Frank, in a quiet voice; and Dan caught the subtle note of meaning in his tone. "Go on, beat it, Desmond!"

The latter gave a wolfish snarl as he slipped out of the room and slammed the door, and no word was said until they heard him rush along the passage and let himself out of the house.

"What next?" asked Dan Sullman, puzzled. "What's the big idea?"

"We're going to find out who bumped off young Jim," announced Frank Gwynn quietly.

It was a good stretch to the Ditches, but within twenty minutes they were knocking upon the door of a disreputable hovel in Lavender Court—one of the addresses Frank had found inside his brother's watch. The door opened an inch or so in response to Frank's insistent hammering, and in that moment the footballer put his foot across the threshold and gave a mighty shove that sent the door crashing back upon its hinges.

"It's you, guv'nor!" whined the flat-faced individual who was picking himself up off the bare boards. "Come inside, then, quick!"

"Pal of yours?" asked Dan grimly.

"In a way," grinned Frank, passing into the grimy passage. "This gentleman called upon me the other day!"

"That's right, sir," said the squat man, leading them into a grubby, sparsely furnished kitchen. "What brings you here, mister? You're not sore with me because I tried to pinch your watch, are you? As I told you at the time, mister, I was only obeying my orders. A dago named Slim Carlous was going to do the job, in the first place, but he turned yeller at the last moment—the rat!"