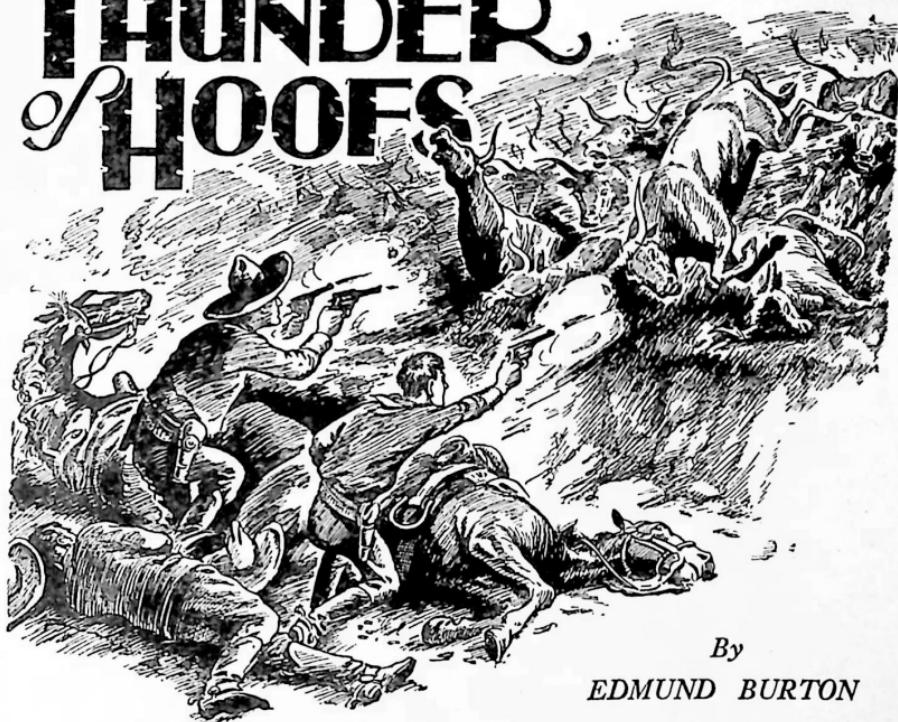


THUNDER HOOFES



By

EDMUND BURTON

THE FIRST CHAPTER

The Great Stampede !

FLASH-flash ! Rumble ! Crash ! The three seemed to blend as one. First came a blinding zigzag blaze of fork lightning that dimmed the glare of the oil lamps hanging from the raftered ceiling of Larrigan's Saloon ; then an ear-splitting peal of thunder which made the bottles—mainly empty now—fairly dance on their shelves ; and, lastly, down crashed a big ornamental stone vase from its niche in the wall, missing the head of a youth sitting almost directly beneath it ere it smashed to pieces on the floor. The youngster started, jumped aside, and made a wild grab at a

piece of paper which he had been pondering over, and which, driven by the wind stirred up by his sudden spring, had fluttered towards the smoky stove in the centre of the saloon.

He caught it just in time, grinned, and went back to his place, where, pencil in hand, he again bent to his task. A big man—a very big man—sitting not far away, looked at the boy and smiled, showing a perfect double row of splendid teeth set in a mahogany countenance.

" Well caught, younker ! " he laughed, and there was something good to hear in that deep rumbling laugh of his. " I guessed it was goin' straight to ashes."

Bob Carrington looked up, returning the smile.

Bob Carrington's first taste of the Wild West is not without incident, and he needs all his courage to win through.

"And I'm jolly glad it didn't!" he replied. "It may only be a poem, but I think it's a good one—"

"Poem?" The big man's eyes took on a new interest. "Eh—you said poem, didn't ye?"

Bob Carrington nodded.

"Why, yes—I did; it's one of my own. I like writing the stuff; it makes a kind of hobby if you've nothing better to do for half an hour or so." He paused. "I had several published in the Old Country—mainly in our school mag. The fellows all said they weren't too bad—"

"Ah! You're English, then? I thought so." The other's gaze rested on the lad's face ponderingly. "I'm Irish meself—or Irish-American, to be exact. Name of Muldoon. An' I'm a bit of a poet, too!"

"You are?"

Bob could not altogether keep the trace of incredulity from his tone, for anyone more unlike a poet than Muldoon he had never seen. The man was a typical Westerner, big-bodied, strong, and "heeled" with a couple of long guns which the great brown hands ever and anon caressed, as though their owner was in the habit of pulling his "artillery" at short notice.

Muldoon laughed again.

"Oh, 'tis gospel truth I'm telling ye, kid!" he said. "I'm a poet like yerself, though I don't get too much time for it. Got other things to do, gener'lly. And—and p'raps I might be able to help ye with that paper; if I may say so, ye seemed a bit puzzled over it just now."

Whilst speaking Muldoon had risen and crossed the floor. He dropped down into a seat beside Bob, who was quite eager to let him try his hand at a rather knotty bit of rhyming and scansion which had been bothering him at odd moments. Bob, somehow, had taken a sudden liking to this big fellow. Indeed, most folk had a liking for Muldoon—except those of a certain fraternity with whom he was continually at war.

He read the pencilled lines through, grunted approvingly, and made a few deft alterations.

"Now, how's this?" he asked, reading out the verses he had changed in a deep, musical

voice which betrayed more than a trace of the born elocutionist. Bob's eyes shone when he had finished.

"Fine—fine!" he exclaimed. "Funny how you settled the whole trouble so quickly, when it was worrying me for hours. You're some poet, Mr. Muldoon!"

"I told you I was!" the latter laughed.

It was the only thing Muldoon ever boasted about. He could have boasted of other more important matters; but he didn't. It was his poetry in which he seemed to take most pride and glory.

"Pity I hadn't a bigger audience!" he grinned, glancing round the saloon which, save for the bar-tender who nodded on his stool, half-asleep, was empty. "We're the only visitors here to-night, though I half expected—someone else. Fact is, I was waitin' for him."

"An appointment?" asked Bob carelessly, and Muldoon gave a kind of ironic one-sided smile.

"Not exac'ly," he said; then changed the subject. "Say, kid, what you doin' out here, if it ain't any harm to ask?"

All this time the thunder had been booming at intervals, making the somewhat ranshackle saloon fairly rattle, but it was gradually dying away as the storm passed to westward. There had been no rain; it was merely one of those sudden spasms common on the great plains, and they never lasted very long.

Bob looked at his interrogator for a moment, then replied:

"My uncle's in a bunk in another room; he's got a touch of fever or something—at least, I believe it's fever, though he seems to be pessimistic. Took bad just after we left Hot Springs, so, the storm coming on, we put up here for the night. I was trying to kill time with this poetry stuff, as uncle seems asleep now—though how he slept through that racket I don't know!"

"Where ye bound for?"

"Buffalo Ranch. Uncle Ben owns that place, and—" Bob paused, shooting another glance over his companion; then, reassured by Muldoon's frank expression, continued: "He got wind of something queer



"SLICK" MULDOON

made the place pay in the past."

"Ah!" the other commented. "Doesn't trust the dago—eh?"

"That's about it, though he seems to have little to go on—only a message from one of the head punchers, hinting that he wanted a talk with Uncle Ben and wouldn't put too much on paper. And now poor old Nunk's ill, and—"

"Let's have a squint at him," Muldoon broke in. "Where is he, did ye say?"

Bob accompanied his new acquaintance to the next room of the saloon. In a bunk against the wall an elderly, big-built man was tossing feverishly. His eyes were open and his face was drawn with pain, but he turned round as the pair entered.

"Ah! That you, Bob? I feel mortal bad," he groaned. "I don't believe this is fever. Who's that with you?"

"Gent named Muldoon," replied Bob. "He says he'd like to have a look at you. Seems to know something about sickness, Uncle Ben. You don't object?"

"Not if he'll do me any good," murmured the man in the bunk; "but I doubt it. Bob, lad, my call's due, and—and you'll soon be the boss of Buffalo Ranch."

"Hush! Don't talk like that, uncle!" Bob interrupted. "It's not so bad as you think: wait till Mr. Muldoon examines you."

He stood aside as the Irishman bent over the bunk. For a few minutes he attended to

going on there—something to do with his manager, a Mexican called Miguel Ferraro. Uncle Ben nicknamed him 'Snaky,' because he always reminded him of a reptile crawling about, he said, though the fellow seems to have

the patient; then stood back with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Well?" asked Bob.

"It may be fever," Muldoon replied. "Cert'ainly he's got a temperature of sorts, but there's other funny symptoms—it's queer."

At that moment Carrington senior turned again. His face was still drawn, but in it there was a look of great resolve.

"Look here," he said, staring at Muldoon. "Who are you? What's your callin'?"

The big Westerner looked round the room, then smiled.

"I'm 'Slick' Muldoon," he said; "known as 'Slick,' I s'pose, because I've got a purty good reputation as a two-gun man—"

"Yes, yes; but what's your job?"

"Anythin', when it comes to lookin' into the affairs of the ungentle community," replied "Slick." "That is to say, siree, that I'm employed occasionally for that purpose by any local sheriff in whose district I happen to be." Then he added:

"I also write poetry, boss."

"Never mind about that," said Carrington. "What are you doin' here now?"

"Nothin'," answered Muldoon briefly. "I was here on business—but the business didn't develop. And that's that!"

Carrington was silent for a few moments before speaking.

"I'm goin' back to Buffalo Ranch. I'm not fit to travel, I know; but I've got to settle matters with 'Snaky' before—before I—However, things have got to be squared



BOB CARRINGTON



"SNAKY" FERRARO

so far as you are concerned, Bob. I've already made a will leaving you the place ; but—but—well, ' Snaky ' is a queer fellow. I want to see him and tell him what's what ! The storm's passin', so we'll move. Goin' our way, Mister Muldoon, by any chance ? "

Slick smiled again.

" I may as well go that way as any other now," he replied. " I'll get my ' meat ' later. I know Buffalo Ranch, sir, so I'll help ye to get there, though—"

" Yes, I guess I'm not fit to move," Carrington broke in, " but I'm movin', all the same ! Chuck us over those togs, Bob, and help me to dress."

In a short time they were going at a slow canter across the prairie, the sick man determinedly sticking in his saddle, despite the pains that racked his frame. An hour later they were well on their way to Buffalo Ranch, Muldoon riding in front, when the latter suddenly pulled up his horse and pointed to the right.

" Gosh ! It's happened ! That's what I most feared !" he said, and there was a tremor in his deep voice which was excusable under the circumstances.

The storm had passed, and the moon was now riding high, making the surroundings as bright almost as by day. But on the horizon another light was visible—a flickering, dancing glow which seemed to be spreading to right and left. The lightning had fired the prairie grass and, above all things, it is a prairie fire which the plainsman dreads most on earth. There is no stopping it ; it sweeps onward until everything in its track has been demolished ; then, like a satiated demon, it burns itself out.

" Down ! " gasped Muldoon. " Throw your hosses in that sandy dip yonder, an' get down behind them ! We can't outpace that blaze. Hark ! "

He dismounted and laid his ear to the ground. He heard a drum-drum of sound through the earth—the clatter of countless hoofs from animals as yet unseen. But they were coming their way !

In the wide, sandy hollow Muldoon's horse lay down obediently, as also did Bob's ; but the ranch owner's broke away and dashed

wildly off, making towards the farthest end of the flickering line of fire. Muldoon muttered something beneath his breath.

The trio crouched down. Slick's guns were out, and Bob, seeing the manoeuvre but not yet understanding it, did likewise with his. The Irishman, ear to ground, listened again.

" Yes, they're comin'—droves of 'em ! "

" Drovers of what ? " asked Bob.

" Steers—cattle ! " rapped the other. " And look ! " he pointed. " There go the prairie-dogs—driven from their underground towns ! That's a sure sign, lad ! "

" But what are you going to do ? "

" The only thing ! " Muldoon's voice was very grim. " We're done if it fails. In a few minutes them steers will come surgin' this way—herds of 'em—an' we've got to split the advance guard. If we don't we'll be smashed to pulp ! "

" I see ! " muttered Bob swiftly understanding now. " Well, say when ! "

Slick shot an admiring glance at the lad. He was scarcely seventeen, yet Bob Carrington was made of splendid material. He guessed the terrible danger, yet he never flinched ; in fact, his whole concern seemed to be for his uncle.

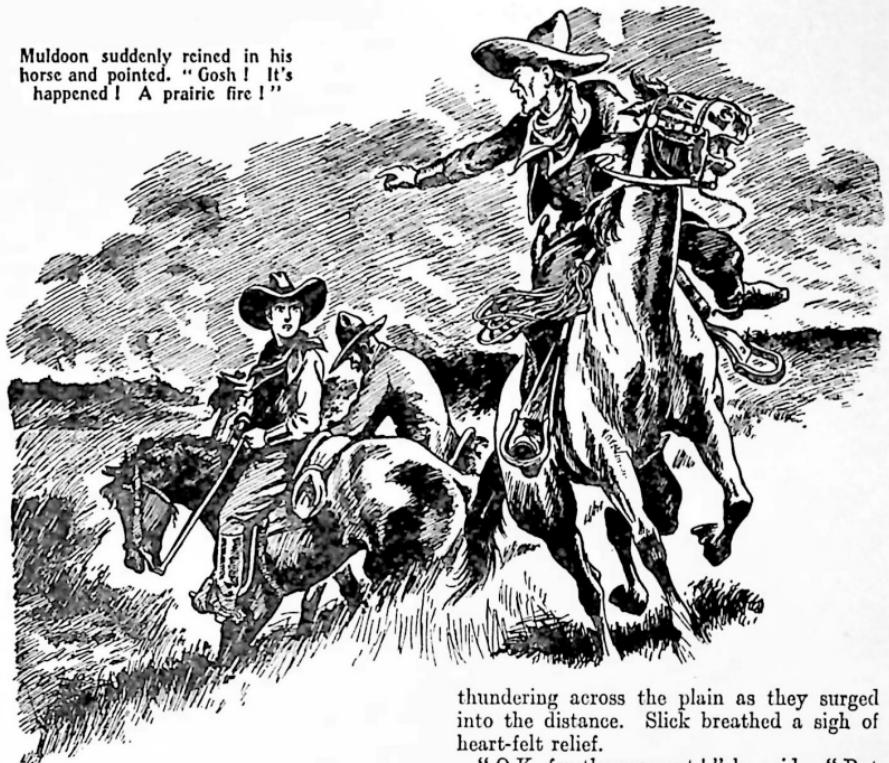
" Lie still, uncle," he whispered, bending over the prostrate form. " We'll get you out of it ! "

" Right, lad ; carry on ! " was all the other murmured, as his face again contorted in a twist of pain.

Drum-drum-drum ! Drum-drum-drummm ! The thunder of those countless hoofs now shook the very ground on which the trio lay. Across the advancing line of flame, and silhouetted against its brilliance, a dark, heaving mass was easily visible—a mass of tossing horns and waving tails, from which clouds of steam from snorting nostrils arose in the air.

Then the unexpected happened. Rancher Carrington's horse, unable to pass the end of the fire, came galloping back again, its mane streaming out and its eye-balls gleaming white with fear. It crossed the lip of the hollow before them, and Muldoon shot it down without a moment's hesitation ; it was impossible to recapture it.

Muldoon suddenly reined in his horse and pointed. "Gosh! It's happened! A prairie fire!"



"First brick in the fortifications!" he grated. "Now for it!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER At Buffalo Ranch.

NEXT moment the herd was within a few yards of their refuge. Muldoon's guns chattered rapidly, and four big steers went down, two more falling to Bob's weapon. It was almost impossible to miss at such short range.

Crack! Another big beast tumbled to earth, and Muldoon stared anxiously. Would the plan succeed?

It did! The advancing mass of cattle suddenly split in twain, divided by the mountain of meat in front of them, and broke away to right and left, their hoofs

thundering across the plain as they surged into the distance. Slick breathed a sigh of heart-felt relief.

"O.K. for the moment!" he said. "But we're not out of the wood yet! We've only two bosses now, and your uncle can't travel fast—even if we could outpace the fire. Let's hope this bare hollow will break it."

Bob did not reply. He was again bending over his stricken relative; then he looked up, his lips quivering.

"Poor uncle has travelled his last journey!" he said quietly. "Look!"

Muldoon bent low, and then removed his sombrero. Rancher Carrington was dead.

The fire came sweeping onwards. As far as eye could see on either side, it stretched for a long, unbroken line—flames leaping and dancing as though in devilish enjoyment. There was no chance of rounding it; no hope of anything, indeed, save that the sandy hollow in which they now rested might prove

their salvation. But the ordeal would be enough to test the stoutest nerves to their utmost.

On came the raging blaze, licking the prairie grass up like tinder and fanning the faces of the surviving pair with its scorching breath. Then—joy of joys!—the fire reached the lip of the hollow, some little distance away, split in two and raced round the edges. The horses whinnied in fear; Muldoon and Bob pressed their faces into the parched sand to protect them.

Muldoon's hair, which he wore rather long, began to smoulder at the nape of his neck and, with a swift movement, he crushed it with his big hand. His clothing and also Bob's caught alight, too, but this they were able to extinguish by rolling about, before it got a firm grip.

The horses proved the most difficult problem; they kicked and plunged wildly, yet that very action saved the body of Rancher Carrington from injury by fire, for one of the mounts rolled almost on top of him, and sheltered him from the direct heat of the advancing conflagration. He lay through it all, a slight smile on his peaceful face—all traces of pain now banished, as if he were just asleep.

At last it was over. Smoke-blackened and grimed with ashes, Bob and Muldoon rose painfully to their knees. The hollow had split the fire in two and it was now racing east and west behind them. The bodies of the cattle they had shot were roasted meat by this time. The smell of burnt flesh and singed hair was almost intolerable.

As far as eye could reach, when the moonlight at length penetrated the thick smoke-pall drifting overhead, was naught save a blackened tract of ground, leagues in extent, which had once been rich grazing-land.

"And now, kid, what's the next move?" Muldoon said, in a low voice, as he looked down at Carrington's body. "I'm sorry for you, younker—main sorry, and—and I dunno quite what to suggest. I s'pose we'd better bring the poor old chap to the ranch?"

"Of course," Bob murmured, with a twitch of the lips. "Uncle always said he wanted to be buried there—where the mustangs

would gallop over his grave," as he put it. We must rope him up on my horse, Muldoon, and I'll have to ride in front of you. Wait! I'd best secure his papers first: he said that all the documents he possessed which were of any value were in his wallet, and he told me to take them if anything should happen to him."

The boy felt in the dead man's inner pocket, drawing forth a well-packed case which he transferred to his own person. Then, with some difficulty, the body of Rancher Ben Carrington was secured to one of the horses, while Slick and the young heir mounted the other, en route for Buffalo Ranch.

Surely the strangest funeral procession that ever crossed the great plains!

Only "Greasy," the half-breed cook, and a solitary cowpuncher were available when Bob and Muldoon reached the ranch house. The remainder of the big complement were absent on the ranges, including Snaky Ferraro himself.

But Jim Graves, the puncher who had sent word to Bob's uncle, had a tale to tell, as soon as his late boss's body had been reverently laid on the bed in the big chamber in which he had usually slept during life.

"It's happened, then," Graves said, frowning. "Ferraro said it would—"

"Said it would?" gasped Bob. "Said what would happen?"

"Why, that!" Graves nodded to the bed-chamber. "At least, he said to me not long back that he feared Boss Carrington was not long for this world; that he wasn't as strong as he looked an' would go out like a candle."

"He said that, did he?" Muldoon put in curiously. "Yet it was a remark anyone might have made, if he thought the boss was really delicate—"

"Ay, that's true," Graves interrupted; "but I've got somethin' else to tell ye." He addressed himself particularly to Bob. "To-day, young boss, Ferraro knew your uncle was dead--knew it long before you brought home his body. Get a chew on that, sir."

Bob fairly staggered back, so great was his surprise.

"He also believed that you had passed in



The prairie fire reached Muldoon and Bob in the hollow, and they were compelled to roll about to extinguish their burning clothing.

yer checks, Mister Bob," Graves continued, thereby increasing the astonishment of his hearers, if that were possible, " and that the ranch would pass into his ownership. Since your uncle went to meet you, sir, and bring you along here, so that you might learn how to work this show against the time when it would be yours, Boss Snaky Ferraro has had some queer callers.

"First there was a lawyer feller, who spent hours writin' on various papers in the livin'-room yonder, under Snaky's direction.

Then, only a couple of days ago, another chap came here—a dirty-lookin' dago, with a limp, whom Ferraro addressed as Velasquez—"

"What?" Slick Muldoon suddenly shouted, seizing Graves by the wrist in a grip that fairly trembled with excitement. "A man with a limp called Velasquez! Great smoke!"

It was now Graves' and Bob's turn to stare at Slick, for the big Irish-American seemed greatly astonished. He rapidly explained matters.

"It was for Velasquez I was waitin' at Larrigan's, kid, when we fell in with each other to-night. I've been after him for weeks, concerning a bit of dirty work up at Seven Pines. I knew he had made off in this direction, and I guessed he would call at Larrigan's Saloon sooner or later. In fact, Larrigan himself was workin' with me; he'd spoken to Velasquez only a few days before I put in an appearance, and expected he might return at any moment. I'd haunted that saloon for three nights in succession, but drew blank. He didn't turn up again."

"Great Scott!" Bob exclaimed. "This is pretty queer." He turned again to Graves. "Well, what did Ferraro say to this other chap? How, indeed, did you come to be present?"

Jim Graves grinned.

"I wasn't present—that is to say, they didn't think I was," he replied. "I suspected that something crooked was afoot. I didn't like Snaky's evident confidence that he would soon own this outfit, nor did I like the look of his visitors. So I listened—on the veranda, there, beneath the open window.

"Ye know, young boss, we were all very fond of your uncle; we'd have done anythin' for him; so when I found my suspicions aroused I went all out to have 'em either verified or squashed—"

"What did you hear?" cut in Bob eagerly.

"Enough to make me wonder—enough to make me understand now," Graves said. "I know why Ferraro is so anxious to get hold of this place: it's not on account of the cattle-stock, good though that is, nor on account of the pastures. He has been drivin' round the whole show, gener'ly at night—him and this lawyer chap, who stayed for a few days. They came back, lookin' pretty well elated over something, and it was then that the lawyer began all that writin'. I listened on that occasion, too, and I discovered exac'ly what they were after—oil!"

"Oil? There's no oil here!"

"There is. They've found it—a promisin' spring, and that's at the bottom of this mystery. What Velasquez was told to do at a price was to see that neither you nor your uncle ever reached here from Hot Springs,

where Snaky knew you'd be sure to put up on your way. Velasquez was to shadow you, and—"

"I've got it!" Bob suddenly cried, passing his hand over his brow. "I see the whole thing plainly now. A man with a limp, you said?"

"Yep."

"Then listen! I'd nearly forgotten the whole thing, it seemed so ordinary at the time, and I never connected it with this business. When we arrived at the hotel in Hot Springs, a dark man with a pronounced limp struck up a sudden friendship with Uncle Ben, and invited us to dine with him, which we did."

Bob paused, stared at the others a moment, then continued:

"We thought nothing of that; it seems the usual thing among travellers; but now I remember that it was shortly after dinner uncle complained first of sickness. He said he thought it might be the pudding, which was a new-fangled thing, and he had remarked upon its strange taste. Velasquez laughed, and said that that was probably because he had never tasted it before. I myself did not have any—"

"Ah! You had none," Muldoon commented.

"Why? Wasn't any offered you?"

"It was served to me, but I didn't eat it," Bob said, "because I'd already had sufficient of other things."

"Lucky for you, kid," Muldoon commented. "And what happened next?"

"Why, Velasquez suddenly left us," Bob said. "He jumped up with a start, looked at his watch, and hastily excused himself—on account of a forgotten appointment owing to 'the influence of congenial company,' as he put it. That was shortly after the pudding arrived on the table."

"Did he know you didn't eat any?" asked Slick.

Bob shook his head.

"He didn't wait long enough to see," he answered. "He saw my portion served out, but that's all. Where's Snaky now?"

"I can't say for certain," Graves said. "The lawyer chap rode in and the pair of 'em set out at once. They took the mule cart."

"Their trail is a bit old now," Muldoon commented, "but the moon's good and I may be able to trace it. I'm used to that kind o' work. What say, younker? Suppose you, an' me, an' Graves here follows 'em? There's no time like the present, and goodness knows when them galoots will return."

"I'm with you!" replied Bob instantly, and Graves, without more ado, brought the necessary fresh horses round from the corral.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

A Trio of Crooks!

LIKE the human bloodhound he was, Muldoon followed that trail across the moonlit prairie. He was seldom at fault, for the signs, though old, were still readable to his trained sight.

Moreover, few cattle had strayed this way to obliterate the tracks of the pair he sought, and he was in high fettle as the pursuers neared Buffalo Crags.

"We're on the right road, chums!" Slick grinned, loosening the heavy gun at his right hip. "They've come this way, and haven't retraced their course."

A few minutes later Muldoon made the startling announcement that a mounted man had joined the pair in the mule cart. Jim Graves and Bob Carrington looked at one another, as though asking a mute question. It was Slick who supplied the answer.

"Velasquez, I reckon. He probably was to join 'em by prearrangement, as soon as he could manage it. They must all be in this oil affair—possibly goin' shares."

Shortly afterwards the rising ground told them that they were climbing the lower slopes of Buffalo Crags, and here the hardness

"Gents below thar!" barked Muldoon. "Sorry to disturb ye, but will ye kindly reach for the sky?"



of the surface made the trail more difficult to follow—indeed, even Muldoon at times lost it altogether. He paused on the crest of a low ridge, frowning as he glanced about him.

"This is a purty extensive place," he observed, "and there's no tellin' exac'ly where them coyotes went. I can see, though, that they dismounted and led the mules along here, and they seemed to be goin' straight on towards that tough bit of a mountain

yonder." He pointed to a towering crag some distance off. "Come on— an' quietly!"

Leading their mounts, the trio toiled up the steep slope, and were almost at the top when Muldoon suddenly stopped dead, his finger on his lips. His keen ears had caught some sound.

"Sh! They're on the far side," he whispered to Bob. "I heard 'em just now. Leave the nags, an' crawl after me!"

From the top of the hill they glanced down into the hollow beyond. A fire was flickering a little way off, and between it and where the watchers lay three men stood round some kind of apparatus which had been fixed in the rocky ground. They were bending intently over this, all unconscious of the fact that three pairs of keen eyes were following their every action.

Bob had just time to take in all this when Muldoon's sharp voice suddenly barked:

"Gents below thar! Sorry to disturb ye, but will ye kindly reach for the sky?"

Bob gasped. In Slick's hands a pair of heavy guns had suddenly gleamed in the bright moonlight. Jim Graves had followed suit, bringing his own "artillery" into line with Muldoon's. Four grim muzzles covered the trio below, and those muzzles never wavered a hair's-breadth.

The three surprised men spun round, stood stock still, and stared upwards. Their faces were clearly revealed in the moonlight. One was obviously Velasquez, from his awkward build, which showed one leg to be distinctly shorter than its fellow. The second was clever-looking in a sly way. The third was stout, dark-haired, and of a very sallow complexion. The jaws of all three had dropped ludicrously in the overwhelming surprise of Slick's challenge.

Their hands went up obediently, nevertheless.

"Now, Velasquez," Muldoon continued, "I've got you. I want you for double murder—a knifin' job at Seven Pines and a poisoning stunt at Hot Springs. You, Mister Ferraro, will answer to the latter charge. And your lawyer seller—it so happens that I know you, too; your name's Tranter. You were mixed up in a nasty swindle I was investigatin'

some months back, an' only escaped jail by yer smartness. But this time I get my inniu's. Keep 'em up, gents"—as the trio showed signs of letting their arms fall—"keep 'em well in the sky. I don't want to waste good ammunition on yer carcasses."

With that he shot a glance at the astounded Bob.

"Take the lariat from my waist, kid," he ordered, "and go down an' rope up them coyotes. They won't bite ye; if they try it they'll bite lead, which would sure be most indigestible. Slick's the word—an' Slick's my name."

Bob hastened down the slope, and soon had the three unresisting prisoners safely tethered. He roped them back to back, using practically all of that long lariat, and made a thorough job of it.

"Now," said Muldoon, as he and Graves joined their companion. "Now we'll see what this is all about."

He examined the apparatus the others had fixed up. There was quite a miscellaneous collection of articles, the largest of which was a steel tripod, and several lengths of piping also played a prominent part in the arrangements. Muldoon fiddled about for a little while, scowlingly watched by the captives, until a thin blue jet of something spouted upwards from a boring already made in the rock. Slick bent lower; then stood erect again.

"Oil, sure enough," he said, with a grin. "Younker, ye're worth robbin'; this is great stuff, or I'm no judge."

Thereupon he made a deft search of the prisoners' persons, drawing from Ferraro's pocket a sheaf of papers which he examined closely in the moonlight. He looked first at Snaky, then at Tranter.

"Durned good forgeries," he remarked to the latter. He turned to Bob. "See here, kid. These are concessions, in your uncle's handwriting—or supposedly so—by which Ferraro takes over both the ranch and this tract of oil-bearin' ground. A sweet plot, 'pon my life. Why, even his signature has been added, which proves that Tranter's a bit of an artist. These documents cancel Boss Carrington's former will, and it was only

necessary to get 'em state-stamped to have the matter in order."

Bob let his blazing eyes rove over the trio, finally fixing them upon Velasquez, whom he had since recognised as their "host" at the Hot Springs hotel.

"You hound!" he said quietly. "Fortunately for myself, I was too fed up to eat any of that pudding, though your rotten game succeeded only too well in—in my poor uncle's case—."

"But he'll pay—he'll pay all right, lad!" Muldoon cut in. "And so will the others: they're all accessories, an' ye can leave it to me to see that things are squared."

Shortly afterwards, with the bound trio lying in the mule cart, which had been standing not far away, the journey back to the ranch was embarked upon. Bob drove the mules, and in some little measure felt that he was doing something towards punishing the miscreants who had robbed him of his unfortunate relative. Graves and Muldoon cantered behind, the latter leading Bob's spare horse.

The local sheriff, summoned to Buffalo Ranch, needed little convincing. The facts were self-evident, and Muldoon saw to it that everything was done to make a pretty plain case. The trio were removed to the calaboose in Hot Springs, where justice came into its own eventually.

"Well, kid," Muldoon said at parting, as he gripped the hand of the new ranch owner, "I'll say so-long, though possibly we'll bob up against each other again. The world ain't so large, y'know."

"Buffalo Ranch is always open to you, Slick," Bob returned; "and if ever I can help you in any way, you've only got to say so. You did me a right good turn over this business."

"And you did me another," Muldoon smiled. "I guess there must be somethin' in poetry, after all."

"How's that?"

"Why, if I hadn't chummed up with you, kid, an' squared up that poem of yours in Larrigan's, it's quite possible that I'd never have roped in Velasquez."



THE SNOW-FIGHT

THE snow lies deep at Gosling's door,
And he is almost weeping;
The more he sweeps it up, the more
The snow itself comes sweeping!
Then Gosling blames the Weather Clerk
For causing all the trouble:
"Although I've swept from dawn till dark
The fall is nearly double!"

But happy schoolboys love the snow;
We fairly revel in it!
And while the wintry winds do blow
We're busy every minute,
Kneading our snowballs into shape,
And rushing into action;
A stirring snow-fight is a jape
Which yields full satisfaction.

The Upper Fourth and the Remove
Are waging war with fervour;
And very sturdy foes we prove,
Delighting each observer.
Volleys of snowballs fill the air,
Crashing upon our foemen;
Till they retreat in wild despair,
Looking as white as snowmen!

Uttering war-cries loud and shrill,
And joining forces neatly,
We hurl our snowballs with a will,
Routing the foe completely!
And Gosling, lingering at his lodge,
With visage melancholy,
Is just one tick too late to dodge
Our last triumphant volley!



Our Incurable Interviewer Calls On HAROLD SKINNER

(The black sheep of the Greyfriars Remove.)

A BRIGHT midsummer sun shone overhead, and the playing-fields of Greyfriars were crowded with the white-clad figures of countless cricketers. I searched them in vain for Harold Skinner.

Almost despairing, I drifted round behind the School Chapel. There, in a shady nook, I spied three pasty-faced juniors playing a game of cards.

"Mr. Skinner here?" I asked.

The three card players started violently, and one of them half rose to his feet.

"Yes, I'm Skinner. Who are you?" he asked. "Thought you were a blessed beak at first!"

"I have called to interview you on behalf of the HOLIDAY ANNUAL, Mr. Skinner."

"Good! Take a hand at banker, and interview me while you are playin'!" grinned Skinner.

"You're very kind, Mr. Skinner. But I came here to interview you, not to gamble," I reminded him. "Have a cigar, Mr. Skinner?"

"Certainly, old bean!" Skinner took a cigar with alacrity. "Quite a treat to meet a man of the world in this old-fashioned hole! This cigar is the goods!"

"It's a Flor de Killemkwik, so it ought to be!" I smiled. "Now for our inter-

view! How do you like Greyfriars, Mr. Skinner?"

"Rotten!" said Skinner, puffing away with an appearance of great relish. "This moth-eaten old show is no place for a go-ahead fellow like myself, I can tell you!"

"How unfortunate that you are here then, Mr. Skinner!"

"I should jolly well think it is! Wretched, I find it!"

"I mean unfortunate for Greyfriars!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Snoop and Stott. Skinner fixed his shifty eyes on me and glared.

"I suppose that means you're one of Wharton's sort, does it?" he sneered. "If so, you can buzz off as soon as you like!"

"But I've come specially to interview you——"

"Well, all right, then!" growled Skinner. "Let's get it over quickly. Just tell your readers that my idea is to have a jolly good time. By that I mean playin' cards, followin' the gee-gees, dodgin' games and strenuous things like that, and enjoyn' the good things that life offers."

"Like cigars?" I suggested.

"Ye-es! Like cigars," assented Skinner, whose pasty face had become suddenly tinged with a greyish hue. "Th-th-this is —aaaaah!"

"My dear Mr. Skinner——"

"M-m-m-m-m!"

"Why, you are throwing away that beautiful cigar!" I exclaimed. "Aren't you going to finish it?"

"I—— Aaaaaah! I—— Mmmmm! Ooooooh!" said Skinner.

And with those words of Skinner's my interview came to an end.

Skinner didn't finish the cigar. The cigar had already finished him!

THE END