



A lone rider had burst out of the pines and halted the stage

# TRAP FOR A BANDIT

By PAUL S. POWERS

*Chuck Spriggs Remains Loyal to a Pard When He Aids an Old Ranny Who Seems to Be Guilty of Stage Robbery!*

**T**HE explosion came a quarter of a minute after the partners, dazzled by the daylight, had stumbled from the portal of their tunnel. It was a weak blast. The ground jarred slightly, and there was a muffled sound, as if a door had been slammed somewhere within the mountain.

That shot wouldn't bring down much rock, but then, what could you expect from a sorry stick and a half of dynamite? It was the last of their powder, and they hadn't the means to buy more.

Old Dan Tigue spat disgustedly as he and "Chuck" Spriggs headed for their cabin across the creek.

"We've just got to find ourselves a grubstake," groaned Old Dan. "Looky here." He shook the little brass lamp that had been attached to his slouch hat, and its flame brightened, then sputtered and died. "We're even out of carbide for our lights, and we ain't got any candles, either. All we've got left to eat is a few frijole beans."

The younger man, still able to see the humor of the situation, laughed as he

jerked his thumb toward the corral beyond the shack. He already knew what Old Dan would reply to his suggestion:

"We might sell the hosses."

Dan's graying mustache bristled like an angry cat's.

"You loco?" he snorted. "An hombre who'd sell his hoss might as well sell his saddle, and the hombre that sells his saddle . . . Huh! I knowed yuh didn't mean it," he broke off, seeing Chuck's grin.

"But no foolin', I got to go to town and see if we can't make a raise. You stay and look after the mine. Mebbe I can get the moneyed folks to stake us for another month's powder and supplies. But dang their ornery hides! When I offer 'em an interest in the claim, all they do is tap their thick skulls and ask why cowhands like us ever figgered we was hardrock minin' men."

"Sometimes I wonder myself," Chuck said, a bit wryly.

"We're goin' to make a big strike of that new-fangled tungsten stuff, that's why," the old-timer stated positively. "We've got only a vein of it knife-blade thin, so far, but it's bound to open out soon."

They had entered the shanty now, and Dan Tigie kicked off his heavy rubber boots and started changing clothes.

"I'm glad I thought to bile out my white shirt yesterday," he wheezed. "It pays to put on a leetle front when yuh're tryin' to raise dinero."

**C**HUCK SPRIGGS shrugged. Dan Tigie was better known in Palo Verde than he was, and could do better at getting financial help, but as far as Chuck himself was concerned he was about ready to get back to punching cows. Gophering into the ground was all right for those who liked it, but he would always be a cattleman at heart.

If they struck a good pocket of valuable tungsten, though, it would mean that he would be able to buy a spread of his own and run it—with Dan Tigie. For the old-timer felt the same way about it.

"If yuh're dressin' up, Dan, yuh shore ain't goin' to wear that confounded old slicker, are yuh?" Chuck demanded.

They had argued over that disreputable fishskin more than once. It was gaudily striped black and yellow. Chuck thought it hideous, but Old Dan always defended it noisily.

"I'm takin' it along in case it rains, and if it don't rain I can use it for a duster," Dan barked.

"And in case yuh want to flag a train, yuh can turn it inside out and wave it," hooted his young partner, for the long, loose coat was lined with a scarlet material. "You know how that red fades off. It'll ruin yore boiled shirt. Why, in the name of the Great Stingin' Lizard don't yuh throw the gosh-awful thing away?"

"You got no more idea of what's beautiful and elegant," Dan said, "than a cigar-store Injun. Help me saddle up, will yuh?"

Carrying bridle and hull, they went out to the corral where their two roan horses—enough alike to be twins—were standing together at an angle of the fence. While they were getting Dan's bronc ready, the old man gloomed over his chances of raising the needed money.

"If I don't get it," he threatened darkly, "I'll hold up the stage on my way home, danged if I won't! Well, don't gawk at me like that. Don't everybody else stick it up?"

That was about right. Chuck thought smilingly. It seemed that everyone did hold up the San Juan-Palo Verde stage, for it had been robbed four times in the last five months, and the bandit had got away with it every time. It was getting to be a

standing joke in the county, knocking over the Verde stage.

"I can picture you robbin' the stage, yuh old coot," Chuck Spriggs said affectionately, as he tightened the saddle-girths for his partner.

He opened and closed the gate, waving a "Good luck" at Old Dan Tigue, who rode away with all the enthusiasm of a man at the tail end of a funeral procession. Chuck watched him until he was out of sight around the curl of the cedar-bordered trail, and then he went to work on the wood-pile.

He wouldn't return to the mine for at least a couple of hours. That would give the dynamite fumes time to clear from the tunnel, and lessen the risk of getting a bad "nitro headache." Meanwhile, he trimmed several pine poles to be used in the underground timbering. . . .

Late in the afternoon Chuck Spriggs threw his saddle on the other roan and cantered out of the gulch to meet Old Dan. Swinging up the steep rise, he soon had a view of mile upon mile of shattered wilderness country, some of it forested, some of it as naked as the day it was born out of its volcanic beginnings.

On the left were the San Juan Mountains, resembling the scattered backbones of a giant, prehistoric animal, and on every side were other peaks, some grouped and others solitary. Here and there could be seen the thin, pale ribbon of the Verde road.

A tiny smudge of dust hung over a hidden section of it. The puff moved as slowly as the minute hand of a clock, and Chuck knew that it marked the passage of the six-horse stage.

**H**E TURNED his roan's head to the west and sent him loping through a little grove of aspen. Then he halted on the broad, flat top of a broken cliff of granite

to watch the coach go past, a half mile away.

There it was—first the horses, pacing beautifully, and then the clumsy-appearing but efficient Concord, came sweeping around the smooth curve. In a minute it would be out of sight again beyond another turn.

"What in blazes!" Chuck muttered, stiffening in his saddle.

A lone rider had burst out of the pines and had halted the stage. Chuck saw a pale orange flash, then a few seconds later heard the distant report of a six-gun. The rider had fired into the air, a warning shot to intimidate the driver and guard.

"Good grief, it's Dan!" gasped Chuck Spriggs, feeling as if he had been slammed in the pit of the stomach.

There was no mistaking that gaudy slicker, even at that distance. Dan had tried to get money honestly in town and, failing, he had gone completely haywire! He hadn't been joking, after all, when he threatened to rob the stage. Dan was doing it, and making an expert job of it, too!

While Chuck stared in flabbergasted horror, the registered pouch was tossed to the bandit, and there were two more emphatic shots as the driver whipped up the team. Both were fired skyward by the road-agent, who now wheeled his roan cayuse and plunged back into the pines.

He had not bothered to rob the passengers. He had made off with the important thing—the pouch that always contained hundreds, sometimes thousands, of cash dollars.

The successful bandit had hardly disappeared when half a dozen horsemen came thundering around the curve in the road. The amazed Chuck Spriggs had no difficulty in recognizing the leader as the long-bodied, stoop-shouldered Sheriff Mahan, of Palo Verde.

He realized what had happened. A trap

had been set to put a stop to the many highway holdups, and a posse had been following the Concord. Poor Old Dan had walked right into it. The sheriff's men were on his trail like a hound pack fogging a rabbit.

Chuck set his teeth as he whirled his roan back into the aspens. He had already traced the course that the bandit and his pursuers would probably take through a pocket in the foot-hills, and he sent his bronc hammering in that direction.

"Dan will shoot, might kill some of 'em, or they might kill him!" he thought, as the iron shoes of his flying cayuse cut the gravel. "I've got to get to him before they do, or help him, somehow. I can talk him into givin' hisself up, givin' the money back. I've got to!"

Dan Tigue had been worrying too much, and had gone temporarily loco, that was it. Chuck had known the old cowhand for a long time, and would put nothing past the impulsive Dan when he was in one of his tantrums. The fire-eating ranny simply hadn't known what he had been doing when he held up the Concord. And now he would get himself killed, or maybe make his crime a hanging matter by shooting a posseman!

"Not if I can help it!" Chuck snarled. "No matter what crazy thing he's done."

**B**Y HARD and expert riding Chuck got in a position to carry out his plan. The sheriff's posse had been farther behind the stage than they had planned to be, probably, and their quarry had a good lead on them and was able to hold it. The chase led across rough, broken country where there was plenty of cover and endless room to dodge in, and Chuck Spriggs managed to work himself in between the lawmen and the man they were after.

By this time the sun had sunk in a burst of sky-fire behind the San Juans, and there wouldn't be much more of daylight. A good break, Chuck thought, as he sent his rugged cayuse thundering upgrade. The less light, the better for his plan.

Old Dan was bearing off to the right, pounding downhill along a side canyon. Chuck could barely see him before he vanished into the trees, and he knew that Mahan's men couldn't. So he deliberately showed himself as he came out into an open patch before galloping furiously to the left.

The posse glimpsed Chuck, and they took the bait. There were hoarse, excited shouts, and he heard Mahan's party change course. They weren't following Dan, now. They were at the heels of Chuck himself, and coming after him "like the devil beating tanbark."

Young Spriggs grinned into the gathering twilight as he bent low over the pommel. That was just the way he wanted it. He would draw off the lawmen, so Dan could make a getaway.

Later—well, he'd see that Old Dan anteed back the dinero, and would straighten things out somehow. If the posse caught him, he might have a tough time explaining himself.

He remembered that Dan had been masked with a bandanna, and he might find it hard to prove his own innocence.

But Chuck didn't intend letting Mahan run him down. They'd have to go some!

Dodging and cutting back and forth through the darkening terrain, he and his wiry-muscled roan proceeded to run the posse threadbare. Sometimes he let them close in to within a couple of hundred yards, and several times he heard the bitter whoosh of bullets splitting the air around him. That posse was playing marbles for keeps!

Deciding that he had played with Mahan's man-hunters about long enough, Chuck started the business of shaking them off. It was not going to be easy. There was a moon now, big and close enough, it seemed, to drag out of the sky with a lass rope, making the night too bright to hide in.

After the far from merry chase Chuck had led them, the sheriff's men were in no mood to call it quits. Officer Mahan himself was as stubborn as a bear-trap, and he had taken so much criticism lately that he wouldn't be apt to give up until his horse dropped under him.

"We've got to ditch 'em, son," Chuck told his laboring cayuse, as they skittered own a cut-bank and zigzagged toward a stand of jackpine. "Mahan's likely to shoot first, and talk to the coroner afterward!"

Their twistings and turnings had taken him into a country unfamiliar to him. It was ranchland, and the network of little canyons had broadened into a valley. Straight ahead was a sky-busting mountain with dark hummocks of foot-hills at its base. There were many thickets and mottes of trees, and by taking advantage of these dark islands in the sea of moonlight he managed to give his pursuers the slip. For the time being, anyhow.

Halting in a tangle of high brush, he heard the horsemen circling the hillside above him. There were more of them than he had first thought; perhaps a dozen. He caught the shrill and angry tones of Sheriff Mahan as he split his party into several groups to comb the valley.

**A**BLE to breathe more normally now, Chuck waited a few minutes, then rode gingerly along a weed-fringed draw, keeping his horse on its sandy bottom. For more than a mile he followed its meanderings, and when he left it he saw distant yellow oblongs of lamplight ahead

of him, a row of windows brightly illuminated.

"Now, what's this?" he grunted.

Shadows—dozens of them—were flitting back and forth and around again in front of those windows. Chuck rubbed one eye, and looked again.

Then he heard the sound of music, and all was explained. To the music of an accordion, a couple of guitars and a fiddle, a ranch-country dance was in progress. The windows were those of a district school-house.

Riding closer, he made out long lines of saddle horses, buggies, buckboards and other rigs drawn up around it. There was a big crowd, and Chuck instantly decided to become a part of it. Alone, he might blunder into a lawman at any moment, but if he mingled with the dancers he might escape notice.

Approaching from the rear on the shades side, he left his steaming cayuse between two other broncs near the end of the fence. Then he sauntered casually around to the open doorway.

A little group of men, some in store clothes and others in their usual range clothing, were standing just outside the entrance. They were passing a whisky flask around, and were too intent on concealing this crime from their womenfolks inside to give Chuck Spriggs more than a sidelong glance. The shindig was a public affair, with no tickets required, and if they saw him at all they took him for one of their own cow crowd.

Before going in, Chuck took a last, quick look into the night. All was serene, but in the distance he could hear the clopping of hoofs and the squeak of leather as somebody came along the road. Probably more waddies coming to the "baile," for it was still only the shank of the evening. Anyway, he hoped so.

"Hold on a minute, feller," someone

said, as he clanked through the doorway. "Yuh're forgettin' somethin'."

"Forgettin' what?" Chuck repeated, half whirling. And then he laughed good humoredly.

He was in the school-house cloak-room, and the cowpoke who had hailed him was on duty there to see that the rules were abided by—especially the important rule that all guns must be stripped off before a man could be admitted to the dance floor.

"Just hang yore shootin' hardware on a hook, if yuh can find one." The man who had spoken, beamed. "It's the custom, yuh know. Not that there's goin' to be anything rough tonight. It's just that there's ladies present. Nice evenin', ain't it?"

The man was small and red-faced. He lacked a hand, and looked as if he might be a ranch cook. Chuck agreed as to the splendor of the night, and unbuckled his gun-belt, wanting to mix in with the crowd as quickly as possible. The rollicking music was loud in his ears now, and he could hear the ringing chant of the caller in a familiar tune:

Swing 'em round an' round an' round,  
Pocketful of rocks to weight 'em down.

"Say, what's the matter with yuh, young feller?" the man in the cloak-room yelped at Chuck Spriggs. "Yuh look as if yuh'd seen a ghost!"

Chuck had seen something more disturbing than any ghost. Not only had scores of gun-belts been draped over the hooks and nails in the hallway, but hats and coats, too, were hanging there. Among these was a luridly striped slicker with a red lining!

**I**T WAS Old Dan Tigue's. Chuck recognized the round, black patch that was gummed to the left elbow, and to make the identification certain there was

the stain on the tail that Dan had got by sitting in some grease just a few days before. There were new stains on it now, dust and grass marks. Old Dan was here at the dance, somewhere in the milling crowd inside!

"Now I know he's loco," Chuck moaned. "Poor Old Dan!"

The cloak-room watcher was still blinking at Chuck.

"Yuh just turned all the colors of the rainbow, and I thought for a minute yuh was about to keel over," he piped up. "If yuh're tight, yuh'd better not go out on the floor. We got a rule ag'in it."

"I'm sober," Chuck growled, wishing he wasn't. While looping up his belt, he noted that there was something wrong about one of the other strips of man-harness hanging there. Its holster, turned closely against the wall, was empty. Its owner had sneaked the gun out of it. This gear was probably Dan's. It looked like it, anyhow, and Chuck's spirits sank another notch.

"I'll yank the old codger out of here by the ear!" he gritted, striding into the schoolroom with all the cheerfulness of a grizzly with a sore nose. "He'll dance when I get ahold of him, and it won't be to music!"

The dance floor was so tightly crowded that he couldn't get a glimpse of Daniel Tigue. All the desks and benches had been carried outside, except for a row of the latter along one wall. There were a great many more men than women, which was usual, and all was a moving bedlam of dancers, spectators, and musicians. A square dance was in full swing, with stompings that shook the little building from floor to ceiling.

Swing 'em east and swing 'em west,  
Swing that gal that you like the best.

A big fellow in a yellow silk shirt was

doing the calls, standing on a box in the center of the room. His round pink face was the picture of mellow good humor as he sent the dancers whirling like cattle in a roundup pen. Nobody paid Chuck the slightest heed as he stood at the edge of the melee, peering vainly into the crowd. He was nearly trampled.

It had just dawned on Chuck Spriggs that Dan Tigue wasn't in the school-house, after all, when there was a sudden commotion in the cloak-room.

"Stop that music!" roared an authoritative voice, and into the festivities stepped tall, bent-shouldered Sheriff Mahan, of Palo Verde. There were men behind him, dusty and scowling, and this time no weapons had been checked at the door!

"Stand right where yuh are, everybody!" the sheriff ordered, sweeping the assembly with a falcon's eye as the din subsided into a shocked hush.

"What's wrong, Sheriff?" the fiddler piped up.

"There's a bandit in here!" the sheriff boomed. "He held up the San Juan stage not long ago! We saw him cross the schoolhouse yard not five minutes ago! Don't anybody try to leave."

As the officer was blocking the only door, this last warning seemed unnecessary, especially as the closed windows were covered with heavy wire netting. Other members of the posse were crowding in behind the others, and the one-armed man of the cloakroom was raising his voice shrilly:

"I can p'int him out! I can show yuh the man that came in just now! He was actin' strange, too."

**C**HUCK didn't wait for any more. He pushed aside those who were in his way, and leaped-like a cougar at the big pink-faced man who had been calling the

dances. He couldn't reach the man's jaw, but a chopping left hand to the midriff knocked the fellow off the box. The crowd fell back to make a circle as the two men rolled over and over, pounding at each other with smashing, fists.

The spectators shouted as if the roof had fallen—and the dance-caller probably thought it had! Chuck caught the man's wrist, just as his hand was darting inside his yellow shirt, and with his own right he gave the pink jewels a punch that sounded like the kick of a wild mule.

"What'd yuh do with the money pouch?" Chuck snarled, on his knees above the prostrate victim. Reaching down, he pulled a stubby six-gun from the man's silk shirt and sent it clattering across the floor. "Where is it? Or do yuh want some more?"

"Don't—don't hit me ag'in!" choked the dance caller. "The money's out in the schoolyard. It's hid under the boards of the well platform."

"All right, Sheriff," Chuck grinned. "Here's yore bandit. Take a look out at the pump and see if he told the truth about the dinero."

Chuck Spriggs wasn't much surprised when one of the possemen brought in the stolen pouch, a few minute later, but he almost collapsed when he got a look at the man who had found it. It was Old Dan Tigue!

"Why, shore, Chuck," the warp-legged veteran blurted, "I was with the posse all durin' the chase. I met up with the sheriff's men when I was on my way home, and I thought I'd ride with 'em and see the fun. But how do you happen to be here?"

"It was me yuh was chasin', for most of the time, anyway." His young partner grinned sardonically. "I thought you had stuck up the Concord, and I was tryin' to lead the posse away from yuh."

"Are yuh loco, Chuck?" Old Dan

stared.

"No, but I thought you was. How come the bandit was wearin' yore slicker?"

"I throwed it away on my way to Palo Verde," Dan said. "I got to thinkin' of what yuh said about it, and I throwed it into the brush on the side of the road. Huh! The bandit must have seen it and figgered it would make a good disguise. Listen, Chuck. I got bad news. I didn't have no luck in raisin' a grubstake."

"Dan, we can buy a dozen grubstakes and laugh at them that turned yuh down," Chuck drawled. "That last stick and a half of powder opened up the widest vein of that heavy tungsten stuff I ever saw. Yuh'll have dinero enough to get yuh a brand new slicker, too—and I hope yuh do it."

Sheriff Mahan wanted to know something. He had just snapped the

handcuffs around the wrists of the prisoner, and had heard enough of the man's confession to be sure that the long list of stage robberies was now solved. The guilty man was a straw-boss at a large ranch in the district and, until that night, had always covered his tracks perfectly.

But something still bothered the sheriff, and he asked Chuck Spriggs about it.

"It's all pretty clear in my mind now," he said when he had heard Chuck's story. "But out of all this crowd, how did yuh know which man had been wearin' the raincoat?"

"It's the slicker's red linin'." Chuck grinned broadly. "Look how it faded off, under the arms of the bandit's yellow shirt. When he put on that old coat of Dan's, he shore put on a hoodoo."