



## BULLET

By  
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**He was just a button but when trouble popped those hard bitten men of Gold Rock had to admit he was man-sized!**

The posse was coming fast . . .

“SOMEbody comin’ up the south trail, Hape. Just one hombre. Too far away to tell anything about him. This place looked like a peach of a owlhoot hideaway, but maybe it’s not. Me, I think we better high-tail it right now for the other side o’ the Catalinas. What you think, Hape?”

Long Jim Romine was very tall and very lean. His face was leathery, his eyes like nothing so much as blue flint. Under each hip he carried in a half-breed holster a big, ivory-handled Colt six-gun. He stood at a south window of the isolated, tumbledown old house, which once had been a cow outfit’s headquarters, staring off toward the Border. Absentmindedly he

fingered the red-stained bandana bandage over a bullet-hole in his left forearm.

“You hear me, Hape?”

Yancey, his partner, rose stiffly from a blanket on the musty floor. Heavily built, and dark, Yancey was as hard-bitten as Romine. He, too, had two big ivory-handled Colts.

“Yeah, Jim, I heard you,” he growled, “and I think your hunch is right, though this bullet-gash in my leg is sore for hawss-back work. That new Gold Rock City sheriff is one keen jigger. Well, what’re we waitin’ for?”

Romine’s keen gaze was still riveted upon the lone rider. Hape Yancey limped over to Long Jim.

“Closer now, Hape, and I can see him fair. Only a kid, ridin’ a stack-o’-bones roan cayuse. Rope bridle, and no saddle at all . . . Hell, pardner, that’s Bullet!”

The rider, little and starved-looking, was ragged and barefoot, his face was freckled and much tanned, and his hair had been burned by the sun to the yellowish hue of sulphur. It stuck out like a tuft of wiregrass through his battered, wholly crownless Mexican straw hat. The lad’s eyes were as blue as Long Jim’s. Not so hard, perhaps, but hard enough . . . Bullet Romine was the image of Long Jim, his father. He’d had no other given name that he could remember. He might have been fifteen years old, he might have been eighteen. To him, his age didn’t matter.

“Hi!” he called joyously, halting the stack-of-bones roan in front of the tumble-down house. “You got comp’ny!”

The two men were on the porch now. They saw that the newcomer had slung over one thin shoulder an ancient cartridge-belt to which was holstered an ancient, very heavy six-gun. The effect was ludicrous, but neither man smiled. Bullet slid to the ground and walked toward his father and Hape Yancey. Long Jim frowned hard.

“What you doin’ here, kid? How’d you know I was here?”

“I been huntin’ you for two weeks, dad,” said Bullet ingratiatingly. “Jest stumbled on you, I reckon. I—I couldn’t stay with Jose and Serafina any longer. They got enough young ‘uns o’ their own to feed—eight! Not that they run me off. Them Mexes is *mucho bueno*. You see, I—I wanted to be with you, dad. I can ride and I can shoot. Jose gimme this gun and hawss, when he seen I was goin’ anyhow. I can stay, cain’t I?”

Quickly Jim Romaine shook his tousled blond head. “You ain’t goin’ to be any owlhooter, Bullet. No, sirree. The

owlhoot is hell. Plain hell, nothin’ else. You had a good mammy. Pity she had to go when you was so little. I want you to remember her and forget me. I got some money now, a heap of it. You’ll take it and give it to Jose and Serafina for keepin’ you. Too late in the day to start back now, but you’ll go first thing tomorrow. Come in, and Hape’ll have supper ready. I’ll stake the roan to grass.”

There wasn’t much to eat. The dog-hungry youth got most of it, Long Jim and Hape lying like a pair of horse-thieves.

Dusk gathered thickly. The three sat on blankets on the floor of the old living room. Hape Yancey was about to suggest that he and the elder Romine head out for safety in the badlands beyond the Santa Catalina range of desert hills, they could trust Bullet to spend the night there and start for the Border home of Jose and Serafina at daybreak, when the hard voice of young Sheriff Tom Braley shattered the evening quiet.

“The place is surrounded, *hombres*, and there’s no use to show fight. Rather not kill you, but we will if it’s necessary. Come out with your paws straight up. Pronto!”

As one man, Jim Romine and Hape Yancey snatched crumpled, banded sheaves of banknotes from their pockets and crammed them inside Bullet’s tattered shirt. “Hide—quick,” whispered Romine to the youngster, “and ride back to Jose tomorrow, remember!”

He and Yancey walked out with their hands in the air. A dozen grim-faced men surrounded them with drawn weapons, disarmed and ironed them, went through their dusty clothing. They noted that tall, gray-faced, efficient Tom Braley had a bandage about his temples.

“Fell down on your gun and it went off, I reckon, Tom,” hooted Hape Yancey. “I guess you’ll blame that on us, too.”

“No, we bumped into Bill Snarr and his mangey gang at Riffey’s Wells last night when we was huntin’ you. Old friends o’ yours, ain’t they, Long Jim?” Braley said dryly.

But he knew better. The enmity between outlaws Jim Romine and Bill Snarr was a part of Gold Rock County tradition. Romine swore loudly. “It’ll be a lot in you two’s favor,” the sheriff went on, “if you’ll tell what you did with the dinero you got in the bank stickup.”

Hape and Long Jim winked at each other in the near darkness.

“What bank stickup?” they said in one voice.

Now it was Tom Braley who swore. “A dozen people recognized you in spite of your masks,” he growled. “But I see you won’t talk—yet.” He turned to his men. “Them of you that’s got matches, see if you can find any bank money in the house there. Not much chance, maybe, but try it.”

Bullet Romine was resourceful beyond his years. He had discovered a loose floorboard in the kitchen, and was now hidden under the old house. The searchers did not find him, and consequently they found no money. The elder Romine had staked the kid’s rawboned cayuse apart from his and Yancey’s horses, so the posse didn’t find the roan, either.

The hard-bitten owlhoot pair was placed in the strongest cell of the Gold Rock City jail. Early on the next morning, angular and grizzled Ad Henson, bank president and big man of town and county, appeared at the barred door and promised the pair the best legal talent in the state if they’d give back the six thousand dollars they’d stolen.

Romine and Yancey merely stared at the banker with rock-hard eyes.

“All right, then you’ll both go up for twenty years!” stormed old Ad. He flung

himself out the white-washed corridor and toward the sheriff’s office at the front of the squat brick jail building. “Just see that they don’t get away!” he said to Tom Braley, and was gone.

“No doubt about the twenty years in the state pen,” whispered Long Jim to Hape. “Unless we can somehow manage to break jail, and she’ll be some job. What do you see out there, *amigo*?”

Yancey stood looking through the cell window, which faced a dusty side street. “There’s Bullet, Jim, as sure as hell!” he breathed.

Young Romine was all eyes. He saw Yancey’s grim face, and then his father’s, at the barred window, and pulled the bony horse over close. He glanced about, noted that nobody was watching him, and lifted off his old gun and belt.

“Here, dad, quick—take this and stick the sheriff up and get out o’ there!”

Neither man moved a finger toward the gun. In a low voice, Jim Romine said, “That’d make you li’ble for jail too, kid. I ain’t goin’ to have that. You light a shuck for the Border and Jose Castellano’s, get me? What’d you do with—Know what I mean, don’t you, button?”

He could see plainly that there was nothing but Bullet inside the tattered shirt. “Hid it little ways out o’ town,” whispered the kid. “Nobody but me can find it. I ain’t leavin’ here while you and Hape is in jail, dad,” and he clucked at the stack of bones, and rode off.

A FEW minutes later, Sheriff Tom Braley looked around from his spur-scarred desk to see a barefoot, freckled ragamuffin standing at his elbow. He didn’t know the lad. Save for Jim Romine and Hape Yancey, nobody in that whole section knew him.

“Hello, kid. Where’d you get the cannon?” Braley laughed and pointed to

the ancient big Colt.

Bullet invited himself into a chair. He had been doing a great deal of hard thinking, and, as has already been noted, he was resourceful.

"Sheriff," he said, "how'd you like to ketch that there lowdown Bill Snarr outfit?"

This gang's reputation for stock rustling and other choice kinds of thievery was known throughout the entire Southwest, and Braley sobered instantly.

"Fine," said the officer. "You don't just happen to be able to tell me where they're holin' up at present, do you?"

Bullet narrowed one of his very blue eyes. He had an inborn contempt for all liars. So he answered, "Mebbe. What'll you gimme?"

Braley, also, narrowed an eye. Through the open front doorway he had seen the poor old roan at the hitch-post. "I'll give you," he said, "a good hawss, bridle, and saddle, and I'll dress you up in good clothes, after, you understand, we've either got 'em in jail here or killed 'em. How does that hit you, button?"

"And somethin' for me and my roan to eat now?"

"Sure." Tom Braley rose. "I'd do that anyway. Now tell me your name, and where to find Snarr, and then we'll take the roan to the livery stable and go to a restaurant."

"I guess my name don't matter much," Bullet said a little lamely. He, too, got to his feet. "Know where Riffey's Wells is, don't you? No water there now. And you know where that dry creek is that lays in between the Catalina hills and Sawtooth. Up toward the head o' the creek is a waterhole and some grass. Well, go there. And take you a big posse."

For half a minute the sheriff looked straight at him. Bullet did not flinch. He had not lied—outright; why should he

flinch?

"I think I know why you don't want to give your name," said Braley. "Bill Snarr would murder you if he found out, in case there's a slip. I'll be right busy now. Here's a couple dollars for grub and hawss feed."

When Long Jim Romine's son came back from livery stable and restaurant, the sheriff's office was a bee hive of activity. Tom Braley had called in all his deputies, and a dozen men besides. He had just finished outlining his plan for capturing Snarr and his lawless gang. Many grim, weather-beaten faces were turned speculatively upon the ragamuffin stranger.

"That's him," Braley said. "He had some motive for it, of course. Probably Snarr did something to him, and he figures to get even. You, kid. If there's anything crooked about this, I might make you wish you'd never been born. Well, men, you understand everything now, don't you?" They nodded, and soon were gone.

"Hang around, if you want to, son," Braley muttered.

Bullet hung around. He worked himself rapidly into the good graces of the jailer, a squat, longhorn-mustached individual named Dave Arnett. At noontime, Arnett sent him to the strongest cell with two plates of food and two tin cups of coffee. These the youth slid under the iron door.

Long Jim Romine and Hape Yancey rose from their narrow bunks and walked to the door. Long Jim peered down the corridor and seeing no one, said in low tones, "When I get out o' here, little rooster, if ever I do, I sure will whale you for not doin' what I told you!"

Bullet smiled crookedly. His blue eyes were very bright, too bright. But only women were weak enough for tears. "You wouldn't hurt me, dad. You never did.

Cain't you see, I got to help you and Hape get out o' here? Everybody but Dave Arnett will soon be gone, and then I'll work it."

When he told how he was sending Tom Braley and his deputies on a wild goose chase in order to have them out of the way, the two prisoners gaped. Then Yancey grinned. But Long Jim Romine didn't. Again he ordered his son to ride for Jose Castellano's with the money. But Bullet refused.

**A**T nightfall, Sheriff Braley and his men gathered at the edge of town and rode for the water-hole far back between the Santa Catalina hills and the Sawtooth. Braley's plan was to surprise the Snarr gang at daybreak.

Bullet now sat with Dave Arnett in the sheriff's office. Supper was over and there was nothing to do. The yellow glow of two bracket lamps on opposite walls had shown the button a ring of large keys lying on the scarred old desk. Suddenly he called the jailer's attention to the hilarity of cowboys and miners in a saloon directly across the semi-dark main street.

"Havin' a big time, ain't they, Dave? Should think you'd enjoy goin' over there for a few minutes. Just to show 'em they's one lawman left in town, y'know. Here's a quawter, if you want a drink. Me, I don't like hootch."

"Yore daddy was a preacher, mebbe," said Arnett, grinning.

"Mebbe," said Bullet.

"Think I will step over there, button," drawled the jailer, presently. "I got a quawter myself. Thanks, anyhow. If anything goes wrong—but nothin' will, for Romine and Yancey never had any pals."

But he took the cell keys with him!

Sunk. Bullet wilted an inch downward in his chair. He felt sure that with the cell

door opened for them, his sire and Yancey would not be able to resist the temptation. Likely Arnett would keep the big keys in his pocket, now that they were there. Suddenly Bullet snapped to his bare feet. That afternoon he had spied, in a desk drawer, a pair of six-guns and belts. Another moment, and he was hurrying down the dimly lighted jail corridor with them. He crammed them between iron bars and into his father's cell.

"Two guns," he breathed as they clumped to the stone floor, "and plenty ca'tridges. Arnett's gone, but he'll soon be back. He's got the keys. When he comes, call him back here, stick him up and make him let you out!"

"Hold on, you little devil!" hoarsely flared Long Jim Romine. "I told you I wasn't goin' to have you makin' yourself li'ble in this, didn't I? I did, and I sure mean it. The only thing on God's green earth I care a single nickel's worth about is you. Now ride to Jose and Serafina's and stay there, plum' forgettin' there ever was any such low down owlhooter as me!" There was pain in Long Jim's voice as his son turned away without replying.

Hape Yancey stooped and picked up both guns and belts. The feel of them was good in his strong, quick hands.

**B**ULLET Romine had come from the jail corridor and was standing gloomily in the street doorway, when a man, a total stranger in Gold Rock City, rode up.

"Sheriff in?" he asked quietly.

"Gone," said Bullet. "Everybody's gone. Out in the hills."

He spoke without thinking. Not that he would have cared very much. The stranger swung up to his saddle, and rode away.

Shortly afterwards, eight horsemen dismounted and dropped rein in front of the noisy saloon across the street from the

sheriff's office. Six of them vanished as though into thin air, while two of them went into the saloon. The foremost of the pair was a big, middle-aged man. He had a ruddy complexion and red hair and a stubbly beard. His narrowed pale blue eyes swept the boisterous crowd, then made a swift survey of the windows and the alleyway door. At that door and at every window there had just appeared a hard-bitten face.

Renegade Bill Snarr and his outlawed gang were at their pet pastime. Catching the lawmen away, they were roughhousing the town in general and this saloon in particular. It went well after many long, dry weeks on the owlhoot trails.

Bullet Romine's ruse, it seemed, had run things squarely into disaster.

At the front end of the bar stood the angular and grizzled Ad Henson. The banker was not drinking but discussing the recent robbery with the saloon owner, formerly a heavy depositor. Near them stood Dave Arnett, the jailer, buying a cigar instead of a drink—he had seen Henson in time.

"Look at that!" gasped the saloon man, turning suddenly pale.

Both Snarr and the man with him had just snatched guns from leather. A whisper ran through the crowd, then the place fell silent. Snarr laughed raucously. It was echoed by men with ready guns at every window and the back door. The outlaw leader's hog-calling voice rumbled out.

"You can see, hombres, that it won't be no use to git gay with us. You there, barkeep, serve us two o' them green-labeled bottles to each man, and git at it before I shoot yore eyelashes off lash by lash!"

He was taking Bullet Romine's word for it that every officer of the law was in the hills. The barkeep picked up an arm-

load of green-labeled bottles and made a round of the windows and back door. Each of the unwelcome visitors took a pull that amounted to at least half a pint of the alcoholic loot, and stowed the rest inside his shirt. Snarr then tapped the cash register with the barrel of his left-hand gun.

"I want what's in there, barkeep, and hustle!"

This order, too, met with instant obedience. The cash register was stuffed, since the saloon owner wasn't using the bank any more. Snarr took every last centavo, did it meticulously, appeared to be enjoying himself greatly. Then he recognized Ad Henson, whose upraised hands were shaking because he was so mad.

"Hi, big feller!" he said. "Say, you gimme a idee, you do. Now you and me will go over to the bank and git the dinero. Rest o' you jiggers, listen! You'll all be under the gun every minute, and you better not make a move o' any kind. Come with me, big feller!"

"You're too late, Snarr," Henson bit out. "Jim Romine and Hape Yancey beat you to it. Cleaned out all the cash. Tom Braley caught them and jailed them, but we didn't get the money back, or any part of it. I can go with you. But it won't do you any good."

Henson was tight-fisted, but he was no liar, and Snarr knew it. The banker had just given him news that had hit him like a gun slug. Long Jim Romine and Hape Yancey, oldest and bitterest of his enemies, were in the Gold Rock City jail, right there almost under his nose! His pale blue eyes narrowed and glittered with ancient hate.

"And not a lawman in town." He was speaking to himself rather than to anyone else. Turning to his companion, he spoke swiftly. "Ben, we won't pass this chance

up. We'll take Jim and Hape out and hang 'em until they tell what they done with that dinero, and then we'll finish hangin' 'em, savin' the law the trouble. You hombres! Get this. We meant to shoot the saloon up but we won't, not as long as nobody tries to leave here. There'll be plenty watchin' from the dark. Now don't you hombres make a mistake!"

He had seen Dave Arnett, but he didn't know Arnett. Snarr and the man with him, guns still menacing, backed into the dim street. The outlaw leader ordered three of his men to watch the saloon windows and doors, and, with the other four, he hurried toward the squat jail building.

A BOYISH voice called from the door of the sheriff's office, "You there, Dave?"

No answer. Bullet had sensed that something was wrong. Now he knew it. Quickly he closed and locked the street door, took off his battered old hat and fanned out the two wall lamps. He dragged the Colt from the worn, cracked leather and thumbed the hammer back. The weapon was so heavy he had to hold it with both hands to fire it.

"Open up!" growled Bill Snarr, kicking the door so hard that a lower panel splintered.

"Dave!" yelled Bullet.

Again Snarr kicked the door. "Open her, or we'll start shootin'!"

Bullet's big Colt started talking. The weighty slug tore through the thin wood and snatched Bill Snarr's hat off his reddish, tousled head. At once the outlaw sent two bullets crashing through the door in the opposite direction. Little Romine had fled into the jail corridor and was fanning out the dim lamp there. He caught his father's clipped words.

"That's Bill Snarr, Bullet! For gosh sakes, do what I say this time, or he'll

murder us all. Get out the back door, and go for help!"

Help? When he and Hape Yancey each had a good gun and plenty of cartridges? That was a real laugh. Long Jim merely wished to get his son as nearly out of the danger zone as was possible.

"Gone right now," whispered Bullet.

The two in the cell heard his bare feet pattering swiftly toward the alleyway. He had barely reached the comparative safety of the darkness when two pairs of heavy boot-heels rang on the corridor floor. There came a voice that both Romine and Yancey recognized as belonging to Ben Ledford, Snarr's right-hand man.

"Ort to be a lamp here somewheres, *compadre*. Strike a match, and we'll light it. Hustle! Bill is plum' rarin' to see how Jim Romine looks with a rope necktie on, and I am too."

The tiny flame of a match flared instantly. Long Jim and Hape, at the barred cell door, loosed gun-hammers, a shattering double blast, a howl of mingled surprise and pain, the thump of a body falling, and Hape Yancey laughed an uproarious, taunting laugh.

"Rope necktie, huh?"

A single set of boot-heels clattered in the corridor darkness. Yancey fired at the sound. "Watch here," breathed Romine. "I'll watch at the window there."

Bill Snarr, oaths bubbling from his lips like water from a spring, was racing for the back of the jail building. A cell window spewed fire and lead toward him. Ben Ledford met his chief at a rear comer.

"Hell, Bill, they got guns! Drilled Toady clean, and winged me. What'll we do now? Better give it up, hadn't we?"

"Give it up?" sneeringly echoed Snarr. He had taken another drink and was boiling with rage. "Damn you, Ben, you know me. I never give anything up. The jailer'd have the cell keys. Where'd he

go?"

"Never seen nothin' of him," Ledford said. "Say, I'm not afraid, but I sure can't sabby this. We—"

Little Romine's big Colt boomed again, from a dark corner across the side street this time. He had shot at the indistinct forms of Bill Snarr and his first lieutenant. The slug smacked into the brick wall just above their heads.

"Damn that jailer!" growled Snarr. "That's him!"

Both he and Ledford cut down at the powder flash. Bullet had dropped under the whizzing lead. Quickly then he rose and fled up the dark alleyway. Bring help, his father had said. He would round the block and go to the saloon. Dave Arnett would be there, and plenty other hombres.

THE place was as silent as a desert graveyard. Cautious by instinct, Bullet went to his hands and knees and crept nearer, the old six-gun dragging in its holster. Soon the side windows of the saloon came within the range of his vision. At three of those windows stood three men, and each held a pair of guns leveled toward the crowd inside. Snarr's men. No wonder the place was so still!

At first, young Romine was for sticking the longriders up. But three were too many, bearing in mind the fact that they had but to duck below the window-ledge in order to be out of his sight. On hands and knees he crept back a little. He was thinking hard. He *had* to get help! All was quiet across the street now, as well as in the saloon, and all this boded no good.

Then Bullet decided that he had it.

Moving without the slightest sound, he made for the eight horses of the outlaws, standing over trailing reins. Out of his pocket came the cheap barlow knife that Serafina Castellano had given him on the occasion of the last *Pascual* celebration.

Always he kept that knife razor-sharp. Swiftly he began to slash off the trailing reins at the bits. A dozen or more horses carrying the brands of outlying cow outfits stood tied to the long saloon hitchrail. He cut these reins, too.

Then he fired his old Colt into the air and yelled. The horses snorted and reared, discovered that they were loose, and began to stampede wildly up and down the street.

"Yip-pee-ee!" yelled Bullet again, and dove for deeper shadows.

He reached those shadows barely in time. The saloon-guard trio had heard the staccato of hoof-beats and had guessed what had happened. Without horses, men of their dark profession were all but lost. They deserted their posts and rushed to the street. Bill Snarr and the others had heard, too, and they ran shouting and swearing after their mounts, but soon found that it was useless.

Jailer Dave Arnett had snapped to life the moment the hard-bitten faces left the windows. So had old Ad Henson. Cowboys and miners went to their feet drawing weapons. Everybody was ready, but nobody seemed to know just what to do. Bullet Romine hastened in.

"They've went to the livery stable to take 'em some hawsses!" cried the ragamuffin. "You ain't goin' to let 'em kill my pappy and Hape, are you, Dave?"

"You bet we ain't," Arnett said promptly. "Come with me, boys! Ad, you git the saloon sawed-off shotgun and come too. Out the back way, mebbe we can surround the stable and capture the whole gang!"

More than twenty guns went with him and Bullet Romine was at his heels. They circled the livery stable and lot in the darkness. In the poor light of a single lantern hanging in the stable they could see Snarr and his men struggling with horses, among them the mounts of Jim



Romine and Hape Yancey. Bullet's old stack-of-bones roan they ignored, except that Bill Snarr almost knocked it down with his fist in an attempt to get it out of his way. Anger flashed like lightning in little Romine's blue eyes.

"Hit my hawss, will you?"

The gun bucked hard in his slim hands, and there was another hole in Bill Snarr's clothing. "Hell, kid," chided Arnett, "we wasn't ready—"

Gun thunder drowned his voice. The night ached with it. Everybody was shooting and Arnett fell sprawling over the slight form of little Romine. Bullet crawled out from under. He was hardly on his feet when a slug took him across the forehead and drove him back, unconscious. He was out scarcely more than a minute, and when he came to, he was staring into the dim, inert face of the jailer. There was still shooting, but it sounded far away.

**T**HEN he remembered. Arnett had the keys to the jail. He felt for them, found them, got weakly to his feet, went staggering off toward the jail building. The firing now was scattered, desultory, which meant that the Snarr gang had escaped. Just as Bullet set a bare foot on the threshold of the dark office, there came a blast from within, and another, and two more.

A few seconds, and somebody was running over him in the blackness, knocking him down. He recognized a tall figure against the doorway dimness.

"Dad!"

Long Jim and Hape turned as though they'd been stung. Long Jim knelt and bent low. "Hape, it's my kid, and he's hurt—damn Bill Snarr's rotten soul, he'll pay for this!" Romine took his son into his arms. "No *Mejico* for us yet Rape. Snarr first, and then, after—"

"How'd you get out?" interrupted Bullet.

"At last we had sense enough to shoot the cell door lock and bust it," answered Romine. "Meet us at Jose's, button!"

He set Bullet on his feet, and was gone with Yancey. They ran to the livery stable. Nobody was there. The Snarr gang had left only the bony old roan, a lank stage horse, and Long Jim's mean, touchy piebald. In almost no time, Romine and Hape threw on bridles and saddles and were gone in the night. Somebody shot at them but they bent low in their saddles and went galloping on.

Young Romine heard the hoof-beats and he understood. Soon he was following on his stack-of-bones. A cowboy tried to stop him and couldn't. Arnett had come to. Bullet heard him calling, but the button didn't answer.

**H**E rode for the hills, haven of the Howlhooters. Though he couldn't make much time on his wreck of a horse, daybreak found him with the south end of the Santa Catalinas not far off. He cut a little to the right, and an hour after sunrise was on higher ground.

From this point, across the rubble of hot stone and desert sand, he could see cacti and scrub that stretched out toward grim and forbidding Sawtooth Peak. His eyes searched everywhere, found no one. Off to the westward lay the water-hole that had figured in his deception of Sheriff Tom Braley. Officer and posse should be somewhere in that vicinity now.

The distant thunder of six-guns drifted to his ears. Far over near the dry creek he saw, or imagined he saw, a faint wisp of blue smoke. He kicked the old roan in that direction. Half a mile, and he heard four more shots. Straight ahead. No mistake about it now. Riding in the cover of boulders and chaparral, he reached the

crest of a lone low ridge within a hundred yards of the creek bed. He got off his horse, climbed a boulder and gasped at what he saw below.

There near the center of a bare sand flat were two dead horses, and behind them, using them for a barricade, lay Jim Romine and Hape Yancey, both hatless and bleeding from many superficial bullet-wounds. Along the edges of the flat four of Bill Snarr's henchmen lay staring at the brassy sky out of eyes that did not see and would not see again. Snarr and Ledford and another man, their faces and clothing blood-streaked, hunkered down behind stones and watched for a head to show above the dead-horse barricade. In addition to a pair of six-guns, Snarr had a big-bore carbine that one of his men had taken from the owner of the Gold Rock City livery stable.

Bullet had drawn his old gun and thumbed the hammer back. He saw Bill Snarr toss a stone far out to his left. As it clattered on another stone, Jim Romine, dizzy with pain, jerked his head up and around. Ben Ledford rose a few inches and leveled a Colt. Bullet took quick aim and pulled trigger. Ledford wilted and the next instant his mouth closed on sand and blood. Romine and Yancey didn't understand. Just the same, they yelled a taunt. Then Bill Snarr's last man called across, as though he had just seen a bright light.

"That rifle'll shoot *through* a hawss, Bill!"

Jim Romine and his partner swore. "I been wonderin' why they didn't think o' that," moaned Long Jim. "Hape, we're gone."

Snarr grinned a devilish, bloody grin. But he was too eager. When he brought the big-bore to his stubbly cheek, he showed too much of himself.

"Got him," said Long Jim weakly,

blowing smoke from his gun-barrel.

"It was me got him," weakly said Hape, punching out a hot empty. I—Say, Jim, look! Yore kid, and he's blowin' smoke out o' his gun too!"

Romine gasped. "Now what the merry hell—" Bullet was running. The last Snarr man, the sap out of him, threw his guns away and jerked his hands skyward. Bullet drove him toward the barricade.

"Listen, Dad, Tom Braley and his posse's comin' fast—saddled Snarr hawsses hid there in the creek bed—you and Hape get away quick, and I'll try to hold Braley here until you got a good start—*hurry!*"

**S**HERIFF BRALEY and his men rode into the flat soon afterward. Sitting on a hot stone and whittling idly, they found a ragged, barefoot, freckled youth whose sulphur-yellow hair grew through a hole in his battered straw hat like a tuft of wire-grass.

"Hi, Tom. How you like the looks o' things?" drawled Bullet.

"Fine," said Braley, "though it ain't a bit purty. You didn't do all this, button. Two dead hawsses, one of 'em Jim Romine's. Him and Yancey is the only two hombres I know who could rub out the Snarr bunch this way. How'd they get out o' jail, and where are they now?"

Bullet's heart sank. The trail that his sire and Yancey had left was plain enough. If he failed to hold the attention of Braley and his men until Long Jim and Hape had a start—

In sudden desperation he blurted, "I know where the Gold Rock bank money is hid, Tom. You and the posse come with me and I'll take you to it. Right now, I mean. Wait even one minute, and I never will—and I'm no man's liar! You can take the live hombre with you, and send a wagon back for the rest. You—you comin' "

*right now?"*

Nobody ever knew what went on in the mind of Sheriff Tom Braley. Perhaps he reasoned that six thousand dollars was of more value to his community than two outlaws in prison for twenty years. Besides, the two had rendered a signal service in wiping out Snarr and his gang.

"Comin'," said Braley.

On the next day a lone little rider, in brand new clothing, in a good saddle on a fine horse, appeared at the simple Border

home of the Castellanos. Long Jim and Hape hurried out to meet him, and Bullet told them about the money. To his surprise, neither man stopped grinning.

"Owlhoot or no owlhoot, dad," said Bullet, "I stays with you."

"*Bueno*," replied Long Jim. "The law won't bother us in Mexico. You and me and Hape will go somewhere down in Sonora and start us a little cow outfit, and you can be the range boss. No more lone ridin' for you . . ."