

TEXAS GUNS

By L. P. Holmes

TENTH INSTALMENT

"Plenty," answered Johnny succinctly. "Had a run in with Montana Wade an' a jasper called Spikes, back at Jake Butterfield's. They come bustin' in loud-mouthed an' bossy like an' told Jake that Spelle wanted all the 30-30 ca'tridges he had in the ionjt. Addin' that crack to the one Pink heard them dry-gulchers made last night about rushin' the randh here an' cleanin' up the whole shebang, I figgered mebbe it'd be a purty good idee to loral that ammunition ourselves. So I sorta argued 'em outa it an' brought it along."

"Oh—yuh did, huh?" rumbled Delevan peering intently at Johnny. "Yuh musta done some damn talkin'."

"Tollable — tollable," nodded Johnny, "I don't allus stutther when I got somethin' real important to say."

"Hi-rumph!" Delevan cleared his throat again. "Yuh never out-argued Montana Wade without killin' him. I know that jasper too well."

"Did I say I didn't kill him?" asked Johnny innocently.

At this statement a squeak of joy broke from Pink Crosby and he leaped upon Johnny to belabor him joyfully on the back.

"Oh dang yore miserable hide," chortled Pink. "Johnny, if yuh clicked off that danged snake-in-the-grass I love yuh like a brother."

"Couldn't help it," remarked Johnny soberly. "He went fer his hawg-lag first. An' then this Spike hombre was backin' his play. He got out o' it lucky. I jest smashed his shoulder. I reckon that evens the count fer yu and Pod, Pink."

"I'll tell a man it does," declared Pink fervently. "Wait 'till olePod hears o' this. He'll get well over night."

"Hope so. By the way—mebbe we better bring Pod up to the house here. I got a hunch we're due fer a visit from Spelle an' his crowd. An' say, Jim, accordin' to Jake Butterfield ole Spelle offered him five hundred dollars if he'd refuse to sell yuh any more supplies."

"Damn him!" rasped Delevan. "An' what did Jake tell him?"

"Told him to go jump in the lake."

"Good fer Jake. I won't fergit that. Dunno but what yuh're right about bringin' Pod up to the house. Can he be moved, Doc?"

"Aye," nodded McMurdo. "If it is necessary."

"Looks like it's damn necessary. Johnny, yuh an' Pink go down with Doc an' fix up a stretcher outa blankets. I'll have Chang git a bed in shape. An' bring all the shootin' irons around the bunkhouse with yuh. If Spelle wants a argument he's shore due to git it."

Twenty minutes later Pod Fortune, still unconscious, was safely reposing in the ranchhouse. Johnny had prevailed on Jim Delevan to abandon his beloved porch corner and have his chair wheeled inside. Now that grim old warrior was sitting at the edge of a ofrnt window, a loaded Winchester across his knees and an open box of ammunition at his elbow. Pink Crosby, similarly armed, patrolled the rear windows, which looked out on the slope of the plateau, while Doc McMurdo, who had gruffly announced his intention of seeing it through with his friends, sat in the same room with Delevan, glaring dourly at the gulf of the desert. For himself Johnny was in the kitchen devouring the meal Ronny had prepared for him.

He was doing his best to keep Ronny from suspecting the true state of affairs but she, with her cleverness and intuition, would not be thwarted.

"Johnny," she said, standing at his elbow. "Something terrible is about to happen. Tell me now, what is it?"

Johnny tried unsuccessfully to avoid both her searching eyes and equally searching words. He had to capitulate in the end.

"Well Ronny," he mumbled finally. "It's like this. Spelle's crazy—must be. We've licked him at every turn o' the trail. He's get-

tin' desperate. On the fact o' things it looks like he's goin' to bust wide open by tryin' to clean up on all of us. I figger he's goin' to attack this ranch. So does yore dad. We're jest gettin' ready fer him, that's all."

"Bu-but the law," argued Ronny. "What will the law say?"

"I dunno. Me—I ain't figgerin' on the law to help us out o' the mud. An' Spelle don't give a cuss fer the law. It's pretty generally understood right now that he was in back o' that hank hold-up. To everybody what ain't prejudiced it shows looks that way. An' the law ain't boo to him about it."

"But—but, somebody will be killed," wailed Ronny.

"I reckon," said Johnny slowly. "Le's hope it won't be anybody in this house. An' when it does start—an' if it does—I want you to get out o' the way o' lead. They's a cellar to the house ain't they?"

Ronny stiffened and her little chin went out. "Johnny Clehoe, if you think I'm going to skulk in the cellar while the rest of you fight, you're mistaken. I can't shoot very well but I know how to load the extra guns. Indeed I won't hide out."

"Aw golly, argued Johnny desperately. "Please Ronny—please. If yuh don't I amble right out in the open with the first shot."

"If you do—I amble with you," said Ronny defiantly. "So there."

In the end she had her way, and because of his worry for her Johnny prowled morosely about the house for the rest of an afternoon that seemed interminable. Just as the last rays of the sun were filtering through the window Doc McMurdo stood up with a snort.

"I na believe that mon Spelle will come," he rumbled. "I'm off fer yon town."

By this time even Johnny began to doubt the soundness of his the-

and plucked at his clothes. His hat was whisked from his head. Something seared across his left thigh. Once he lurched and went head-long, but with Ronny's despairing scream echoing in his ears he was up and on again. The porch was close now, beckoning him on. He tried to fire again but the hammer of his Colt snicked futilely. The gun was empty.

And now a cursing figure leaped clear of the underbrush and sank to one knee, sighting steadily along the barrel of a Winchester at Johnny's bobbing shoulders. Inside the big living room a virulent oath fell from old Jim Delevan's lips and the rifle which had rested across his knees leaped to his shoulder and spat fire. The crouching figure at the edge of the brush stiffened and rolled over, while the bullet that had been meant for Johnny ripped harmlessly into the ranchhouse roof.

Johnny took the porch steps in two long leaps and burst through to the sanctuary of the house. Ronny had her arms about him immediately.

"Johnny—Johnny," she whispered brokenly. "I thought they had killed you."

Johnny patted her head. "Thought so m'self for a minute," he panted. "The dang bush-whackers shot the heel plumb off'n my left boot. Wow! That was shore some hot sprint. Now brace up, honey. We got work to do."

Johnny limped into the big room, punching empty shells from his .45. He caught up a handful of fat, yellow shells from a heap on the table and rapped them through the loading gate, clicking the cylinder around with his thumb.

"If you ain't a fool for luck," rumbled Jim Delevan. "What yuh limpin' about?"

"Lost a heel o' my boot," grinned Johnny. "Got a flat wheel on the left side. I reckon I owe yuh one, Jim."

"Huh. Fergit it. I may be glued to this dang chair, but I ain't fergot how to look down a Winchester. Hell, there goes another pane of glass. An' that stuff costs like

through the devastated windows to thud harmlessly on the inner walls. Once the whang of Pink Crosby's rifle sounded, to be followed a moment later by a shrill yell of triumph by the excited Pink.

"Pink musta made a bullseye that clatter," grinned Johnny to Delevan. "Shore, I'm—wow! That was a close one. Holy hen-hawks—what they got out there—a cannon?"

Johnny's exclamation was caused by a deep toned bellowing report from down in back of the bunkhouse and by a big bullet which tore through the log wall, to cut a neat nick out of one wheel of Jim Delevan's chair, from there to pass on and splinter one leg of the table.

"Sharps," growled Delevan. "Ole buffalo gun. That jasper's dangerous. We g t to get him, Johnny. But he's dsin' black powder. See it hangin' down yonder at the corner o' the bunkhouse."

Johnny nodded and pulled back the hammer on his Winchester. Then he crouched at one corner of a window and watched the bunkhouse with unblinking eyes. A slow minute ticked past before the big gun thundered again. This time the slug tore through not a foot from Delevan's head to carry on and hopelessly wreck a framed Remington picture on the inner wall. And the billow of smoke seemed to spring from the ridge pole of the bunkhouse.

CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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Johnny grinned. "I reckon I owe you one, Jim."

ory and he offered no argument to the contrary with the old Scotchman.

"Sorry to have kept yuh this long, Doc, he drawled. "Come on, I'll go down an' throw yore hull on yore brons for yuh."

The doughty Doctor lingered for a moment to give Ronny some last instructions about the care of Pod Fortune so Johnny strolled corralwards by himself. He led out the doctor's horse and tossed the saddle blanket in place. He smoothed it deftly with one hand and reached for the saddle with the other. At that moment a single rifle shot crashed out, coming from the fringe of underbrush at the edge of the clearing to the north. Came the spat of speeding lead meeting flesh and the luckless bronco went down in a heap at Johnny's feet. The slight leaning twist Johnny had given as he reached for saddle had saved his life, and the bullet, which otherwise would have torn through the center of his chest, struck the horse at the angle of one jaw and ranged upward through the animal's brain.

Like a flash Johnny whirled and went racing for the ranchhouse. It was far closer to the bunkhouse but even if he did reach it in safety he would swiftly be cut off from the rest of the ranch defenders to be eventually wiped out ignominiously. All this went through his mind as he ran, and though he knew his chances of ever reaching the ranchhouse alive were slim indeed, he did not falter. Instead he drew his gun as he ran and threw shot after shot at the treacherous undergrowth.

The answering fire was murderous. Bullets whispered at his ears

blazes in this neck o' the woods.

"Let 'em have their fun. Good thing yuh built this ole house outa logs instead o' sawed lumber. The soft-point slugs they're usin' ain't gettin' through worth a cent. The shootin' will slow up pretty quick I reckon. They can't have any hell of a lot o' shells, seein' as I beat 'em to Jake Butterfield's stock."

True to Johnny's prediction the burst of fire which had followed him to the house and had grown to a veritable fusilade when Delevan had picked off the reckless marksman who had been determined to get Johnny, gradually faded to a few desultory shots. To Jim Delevan's profane disgust there was hardly a sound pane of glass left in the windows. After the first abortive attack on Johnny, Spelle's men had pretty near circled the house.

At intervals bullets whistled

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