

Youth Rides West

by Will Irwin

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WNU Service

(Continued.)

Some seventy five yards away stood a stagecoach, in build and color twin to the one which we had seen yesterday. Three of its horses were struggling and milling, with the driver throwing all power

onto the reins. The fourth, a little white leader, lay on his side, feebly kicking; as I looked I saw a pool of blood by his head. I was aware of a man posed like a statue before the horses, his feet wide apart, a repeating rifle held at ready; I was aware that a black mask dropped from the lower edge of his sombrero.

Another man, he very tall, stood just by the edge of the road. His back was toward me, but I could see the band of mask cutting his black hair. He was holding close in by his chest two heavy revolvers, trained upon an outside passenger who stood with his hands in air balanced dizzily on a seat. Other details swam in upon me—the passengers coming out through the door, their hands up—two women among them—the bandit with the rifle exchanging that weapon for a revolver and stepping forward—finally, two other men, masked also, lying sprawled on a shelf of rock, their repeating rifles trained on a group about the stage. I remember now with some pride that in my whirl of emotions—

astonishment, righteous rage, pure fear—the manlier for a moment prevailed. We at least could fight! My hand went to my hip. Buck had apparently seen the motion; for he whispered:

"No chance, kid. An' somethin' might hit the ladies."

The bandit whom I had noticed first, he who had just exchanged his rifle for a revolver, was saying something now to the man who stood balanced on the top of the stage—the express messenger, I learned afterward. The messenger leaped from the seat to the ground and landed in a heap; as he scrambled to his feet he showed a comic eagerness to get his hands up again. I could hear Buck chuckling lightly in his beard. Then he spoke in a whisper which scarcely carried to me:

"We're all right if they don't come out this way."

"Why aren't we all right even then?" I asked, in my innocence.

"They don't want witnesses," replied Buck. "Shoot a witness quicker'n they would a passenger."

He paused a moment. "Guess I'd

better get them long guns," he whispered. "You stay an' watch—signal if they stare this way." We had two long guns—that pride of our lives, a new-fangled Winchester repeating rifle and a shotgun for small game. Providing against trouble, Buck had slipped in among our shotgun ammunition fifty shells loaded with buckshot.

Buck tiptoed away, his heavy boots making only a gentle rustling. I was free to fix my attention on the drama below. The two inactive bandits still lay like great, evil lizards across the rock, their rifles gently swinging over the field of action. I, from above, could see their figures as a whole. To the passengers they must have appeared simply as hats, black masks and polished steel barrels. He of the two pistols stood covering the line of passengers. He also was swinging his muzzles suggestively over the group. I looked for the fourth robber, the tall one who had stood at the edge of the road, and who appeared to be the leader. During my conference with Buck he must have mounted the

stage; for there he stood in the express messenger's seat. At that moment he was heaving over the rail a heavy box which half buried itself in the mud. With a lightness singular in one so big, he went over the rail in a leap, landed catlike, rose and said something, it appeared, to the nearest passenger, a slouching little fellow, dressed roughly, like a miner.

The leader, thrusting his pistol into its holster, began what seemed to me a rather superficial search. He patted the pockets of the little man, pulled out a wallet, opened it, took something from its contents; then, reaching under the coat of his victim, he pulled his pistol from its holster and tossed it into the bushes. The same process with the next man—then there was a rustling behind me which made me jump and realize how tightly my nerves were strung. It was only Buck, creeping up silently with his hands full of long guns. When I looked back again the turn of the two women had come. The foremost was plump and moved jerkily,

(Continued on page 4.)

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