

# THE LAST BLUFF

BY WILLIAM WESTRUP



NOT always had he been known as English. His father had borne a name not without honour in the Old Country, and the fact that his mother was a nobody should not have mattered. The father was strong, proud, and with a marked vein of chivalry in his composition. Perhaps that was why he married a woman who was a nobody. But that woman possessed the vices of her upbringing—she was of gipsy blood, but brought up in London—and when she died in giving birth to her only child, the father's sorrow was by no means un-mixed with relief.

So the son, motherless, and with that mixture of blood as a handicap, began his chequered existence. He was not really wicked, but certainly he lacked what, for the want of a better term, we may call a sense of honour and decency.

Then his father died, and within three months he married. He was quite young—only twenty-three—and he chose a pretty but colourless girl, whose very lack of character made her as clay in his hands. That was bad. A strong, broad-minded woman might yet have shaped him into something. But he married, and in less than a month was heartily tired of his wife. So he resumed his wild habits.

Of course, the end was inevitable. For four years his wife made no move. Then she divorced him. Thereupon he displayed a quite unexpected anxiety not to be altogether parted from his little daughter. The girl was three years old, and undoubtedly fond of her father. But what does a child know? And yet the father actually implored his wronged wife to allow him to share the custody of the child. Of course, she refused, and at last he realised the futility of his desire. That was the end. He vanished. In England he was entirely forgotten, and nobody ever thought of connecting him with the man known as English.

In the Far West English was a character. He was so well known that very many people doubted if he had any real existence. The most they would grant was that perhaps there were several men who, for their own ends, took the name from time to time. He was a card-sharper, who visited mining camps and skinned the hardened poker players without effort. He was a horse-stealer, who escaped miraculously when a whole state was hot on his trail. He was a cattle-lifter, a hold-up man, a shark. In short, he was the very last word in bad men, and there was a price on his head in several states.

But withal he was not entirely unpopular. Tales were told of his sudden generosity, his nerve, his resourcefulness. Indeed, he might have been distinctly popular had it not been for the fact that he was a horse-

stealer, which is unforgivable. And he stole only the very best horses. Sometimes these horses would be recovered later, ridden to a standstill, and utterly useless. But they had served his purpose, and he had no further use for them. Everything he did he managed entirely by himself—he always worked single-handed.

From Texas to Montana the name of English was well known, though he usually worked further west than Texas, and there was nothing against him in that state. He was merely a name to bring into the talk at night, and was not credited with any concrete existence.



The Mexican swung the child around to form a shield and began to play with a rifle

Consequently, there was not the faintest breath of suspicion attaching to one Long Jake, who ambled up to the ranch-house of Seth Butt and guessed that he wanted a cow-puncher. Seth Butt ran beef over a few square miles of country, and his mark—Circle S—was one of the best known in Texas. Also the new arrival had guessed correctly—he was short of men. So Long Jake was made free of the bunk-house, where he spoke without any trace of an English accent, and in the saddle he soon showed that what he didn't know about cow-punching wasn't worth knowing. Seth Butt congratulated himself, because good cattlemen were not so plenti-

ful that year.

The small—very small—township of Little Sands was happy hunting-ground of the men of the Circle S Outfit. It had a saloon where the usual brands of poison could be procured, and where poker was the staple industry. Long Jake discovered the saloon after his first round-up and from that time was as constant a visitor as his work would permit. He played poker, and he always won, but he did it so discreetly that the other players rather admired him for his luck, particularly as he was very free with his winnings, and never tired of shouting drinks for the bunch. Indeed, he was threatened with popularity.

It was in the saloon that long Jake became acquainted with "Quartz" McKennon. Quartz was sheriff of the district, and his reputation was so emphatic that he had given up all hope of being officially requisitioned. It was his boast that not once had a man got away from him. Evil-doers gave the place such a wide berth that they were never even heard of, and Quartz grieved exceedingly. He was a man of iron will and considerable shrewdness, and he pinned his faith to long-barrelled .45's and the best horses that could be got in the whole of Texas.

Moreover, his boast was no more than the truth. Not once had a "wanted" man got away from him, provided he had been definitely laid on to the trail—and some of the trails he had followed had been long indeed, and crowded with difficulty and danger. But those exciting episodes belonged to the past, and the present afforded him very little active work. So little that he had been able to bring a girl from New Orleans, and had settled down to married life.

Long Jake played poker with the sheriff, and the latter won. Not much, but sufficient to preclude the possibility of his suspecting Jake's play. If he had won a lot, he would have been just naturally suspicious, and if he had lost much he would have been too keenly watchful. Jake—who's other name was English—would not have lasted a dozen years had he not had ability of an unusual kind.

Mrs. "Quartz" McKennon was the only woman in Little Sands, and as such was appreciated at her right value. She was doubly important because she was the mother of a daughter, a golden-haired mite of two, who had the unique honour of being not merely the only girl, but the only child ever born in Little Sands. Consequently,

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