



## “Buzz” Adams Hunts Trouble

By Clarence E. Mulford

Someone had a grudge against Hoppy—one of seven long years standing, but the payoff ran an altogether different finale.

**N**OT more than a few weeks after the Bar-20 drive outfit returned to the ranch, a solitary horseman pushed on towards the trail they had followed, bound for Buckskin and the Bar-20 range. His name was Buzz Adams and he cordially hated all of the Bar-20 outfit and Hopalong in particular. He had nursed a grudge for several years and now, as he rode south to rid himself of it and to pay a longstanding debt, it grew constantly stronger until he thrilled with anticipation and the sauce of danger. This grudge had been acquired when he and Slim Travennes had enjoyed a duel with Hopalong Cassidy up in Santa Fé, and had been worsted; it had increased when he learned of Slim's death at Cactus Springs at the hands of Hopalong; and, some time later, hearing that two friends of his, “Slippery” Trendley and “Deacon” Rankin, with their gang, had “gone out” in the Panhandle with the same man and his friends responsible for it, Buzz hastened to Muddy Wells to even the score and clean his slate. Even now his face burned when he remembered

his experiences on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion. He had been played with, ridiculed, and shamed, until he fled from the town as a place accursed, hating everything and everybody. And now Buzz was returning, not to Muddy Wells, but to the range where the Bar-20 outfit held sway.

Several years of clean living had improved Buzz, morally and physically. The liquor he had once been in the habit of consuming had been reduced to a negligible quantity; he spent the money on cartridges instead, and his pistol work showed the results of careful and dogged practice, particularly in the quickness of the draw. Punching cows on a remote northern range had repaid him in health far more than his old game of living on his wits and other people's lack of them, as proved by his clear eye and the pink showing through the tan above his beard; while his somber, steady gaze, due to long-held fixity of purpose, indicated the resourcefulness of a perfectly reliable set of nerves. His low-hung holster tied securely to his trouser leg to assure smoothness in

drawing, the restrained swing of his right hand, never far from the well-worn scabbard which sheathed a triggerless Colt's "Frontier"—these showed the confident and ready gunman, the man who seldom missed.

Buzz was riding with the set purpose of picking a fair fight with the best six-shooter expert it had ever been his misfortune to meet, and he needed that split second. He knew that he needed it and the knowledge thrilled him with a peculiar elation; he had changed greatly in the past year and now he wanted an "even break" where once he would have called all his wits into play to avoid it. He had found himself and now he acknowledged no superior in anything.

On his way south he met and talked with men who had known him, the old Buzz, in the days when he had made his living precariously. They did not recognize him behind his beard, and he was content to let the oversight pass. But from these few he learned what he wished to know, and he was glad that Hopalong Cassidy was where he had always been, and that his gun-work had improved rather than depreciated with the passing of time. He wished to prove himself master of The Master, and to be hailed as such by those who had jeered and laughed at his ignominy several years before. So he rode on day after day, smiling and content, neither underrating nor overrating his enemy's ability with one weapon, but trying to think of him as he really was. He knew that if there was any difference between Hopalong Cassidy and himself that it must be very slight—perhaps so slight as to result fatally to both; but if that were so then it would have to work out as it saw fit—he at least would have accomplished what many, many others had failed in.

**I**N the little town of Buckskin, known hardly more than locally, and never thought of by outsiders except as the place where the Bar-20 spent their spare time and money, and neutral ground for the surrounding ranches, was Cowan's saloon, in the dozen years of its existence the scene of good stories, boisterous fun, and quick deaths. Put together roughly, of crude materials, sticking up in inartistic prominence on the dusty edge of a dustier street; warped, bleached by the sun, and patched with boards ripped from packing cases and with the flattened sides of tin cans; low of ceiling, the floor one huge brown discoloration of springy, creaking boards, knotted and split and worn into hollows, the unpretentious building offered its hospitality to all who might be tempted by the scrawled, sprawled lettering of its sign. The walls were smoke-blackened, pitted with numerous small and clean-cut holes, and decorated with initials carelessly cut by men who had come and gone.

Such was Cowan's, the best patronized place in many hot and dusty miles and the Mecca of the cowboys from the surrounding ranches. Often at night these riders

of the range gathered in the humble building and told tales of exceeding interest; and on these occasions one might see a row of ponies standing before the building, heads down and quiet. It is strange how alike cow-ponies look in the dim light of the stars. On the south side of the saloon, weak, yellow lamplight filtered through the dirt on the window panes and fell in distorted patches on the plain, blotched in places by the shadows of the wooden substitutes for glass.

It was a moonlight night late in the fall, after the last beef round-up was over and the last drive outfit home again, that two cow-ponies stood in front of Cowan's while their owners lolled against the bar and talked over the latest sensation—the fencing in of the West Valley range, and the way Hopalong Cassidy and his trail outfit had opened up the old drive trail across it. The news was a month old, but it was the last event of any importance and was still good to laugh over.

"Boys," remarked the proprietor, "I want you to meet Mr. Carson. He came down that trail last week, an' he didn't see no fences across it." The man at the table arose slowly. "Mr. Carson, this is Sandy Lucas, an' Wood Wright, of th' C-80. Mr. Carson here has been a-lookin' over th' country, sizin' up what th' beef prospects will be for next year; an' he knows all about wire fences. Here's how," he smiled, treating on the house.

Mr. Carson touched the glass to his bearded lips and set it down untasted while he joked over the sharp rebuff so lately administered to wire fences in that part of the country. While he was an ex-cowpuncher he believed that he was above allowing prejudice to sway his judgment, and it was his opinion, after careful thought, that barbwire was harmful to the best interests of the range. He had ridden over a great part of the cattle country in the last few years, and after reviewing the existing conditions as he understood them, his verdict must go as stated, and emphatically. He launched gracefully into a slowly delivered and lengthy discourse upon the subject, which proved to be so entertaining that his companions were content to listen and nod with comprehension. They had never met anyone who was quite so well qualified to discuss the pros and cons of the barbwire fence question, and they learned many things which they had never heard before. This was very gratifying to Mr. Carson, who drew largely upon hearsay, his own vivid imagination, and a healthy logic. He was very glad to talk to men who had the welfare of the range at heart, and he hoped soon to meet the man who had taken the initiative in giving barbwire its first serious setback on that rich and magnificent southern range.

"You shore ought to meet Cassidy—he's a fine man," remarked Lucas with enthusiasm. "You'll not find any better, no matter where you look. But you ain't touched yore liquor," he finished with surprise.

“You’ll have to excuse me, gentlemen,” replied Mr. Carson, smiling deprecatingly. “When a man likes it as much as I do, it ain’t very easy to foller instructions an’ let it alone. Sometimes I almost break loose an’ indulge, regardless of whether it kills me or not. I reckon it’ll get me yet.” He struck the bar a resounding blow with his clenched hand. “But I ain’t going to cave in till I has to!”

“That’s purty tough,” sympathized Wood Wright, reflectively. “I ain’t so very much taken with it, but I know I would be if I knowed I couldn’t have any.”

“Yes; that’s human nature, all right,” laughed Lucas. “That reminds me of a little thing that happened to me once—”

“**L**ISTEN!” exclaimed Cowan, holding up his hand for silence. “I reckon that’s th’ Bar-20 now, or some of it—sounds like them when they’re feelin’ frisky. There’s allus something happening when them fellers are around.

The proprietor was right, as proved a moment later when Lanky Smith, continuing his argument, pushed open the door and entered the room. “I didn’t neither; an’ you know it!” he flung over his shoulder.

“Then who did?” demanded Hopalong, chuckling. “Why, hullo, boys,” he said, nodding to his friends at the bar. “Nobody else would do a fool thing like that; nobody but you, Lanky,” he added, turning to Smith.

“I don’t care a hang what you think; I say I didn’t an’—”

“He shore did, all right; I seen him just afterward,” laughed Bill Williams, pressing close upon Hopalong’s heels. “Howdy, Lucas; an’ there’s that ol’ coyote, Wood Wright. How’s everybody feeling?”

“Where’s th’ rest of you fellers?” inquired Cowan.

“Stayed home tonight,” replied Hopalong.

“Got any loose money, you two?” asked Billy, grinning at Lucas and Wright.

“I reckon we have—an’ our credit’s good if we ain’t. We’re good for a dollar or two, ain’t we, Cowan?” replied Lucas.

“Two dollars an’ four bits,” corrected Cowan. “I’ll raise it to three dollars even when you pay me that ‘leven cents you owe me.”

“‘Leven cents? What ‘leven cents?”

“Postage stamps an’ envelope for that love letter your writ.”

“Go to blazes; that wasn’t no love letter!” snorted Lucas, indignantly. “That was my quarterly report. I never did write no love letters, nohow.”

“We’ll trim you fellers tonight, if you’ve got th’ nerve to play us,” declared Lanky, expectantly.

“Yes; an’ we’ve got that, too. Give us th’ cards, Cowan,” requested Wood Wright, turning. “They won’t give us no peace till we take all their money away from ‘em.”

“Open game,” prompted Cowan, glancing meaningly at Carson, who stood by idly looking on, and without showing much interest in the scene.

“Shore! Everybody can come in that wants to,” replied Lucas heartily, leading the others to the table. “I allus did like a six-handed game best—all th’ cards out an’ there’s some excitement in it.”

When the deal began Carson was seated across the table from Hopalong, facing him for the first time since that day over in Muddy Wells, and studying him closely. He found no change, for the few years had left no trace of their passing on the Bar-20 puncher. The sensation of facing the man he had come south expressly to kill did not interfere with Carson’s card playing ability, for he played a good game; and as if the Fates were with him, it was Hopalong’s night off as far as poker was concerned, for his customary good luck was not in evidence. That instinctive feeling which singles out two duellists in a card game was soon experienced by the others, who were careful, as became good plays, to avoid being caught between them; in consequence, when the game broke up, Carson had most of Hopalong’s money. At one period of his life Carson had lived on poker for five years, and lived well. But he gained more than money in this game, for he had made friends with the players and placed the first wire of his trap. Of those in the room Hopalong alone treated him with reserve, and this was cleverly swung so that it appeared to be caused by a temporary grouch due to the sting of defeat. As the Bar-20 man was known to be given to moods at times, this was accepted as the true explanation and gave promise of hotly contested games for revenge later on. The banter which the defeated puncher had to endure stirred him and strengthened the reserve, although he was careful not to show it.

When the last man rode off, Carson and the proprietor sought their bunks without delay, the former to lie awake a long time, thinking deeply. He was vexed at himself for failing to work out an acceptable plan of action, one that would show him to be in the right. He would gain nothing more than glory, and pay too dearly for it, if he killed Hopalong and was in turn killed by the dead man’s friends—and he believed that he had become acquainted with the quality of the friendship which bound the units of the Bar-20 outfit into a smooth, firm whole. They were like brothers, like one man. Cassidy must do the forcing as far as appearances went, and be clearly in the wrong before the matter could be settled.

**T**HE next week was a busy one for Carson, every day finding him in the saddle and riding over some one of the surrounding ranches with one or more of its punchers for company. In this way he became acquainted with the men who might be called on to act as his jury when the showdown came, and he proceeded

to make friends of them in a manner that promised success. And some of his suggestions for the improvement of certain conditions on the range, while they might not work out right in the long run, compelled thought and showed his interest. His remarks on the condition and numbers of cattle were the same in substance in all cases and showed that he knew what he was talking about, for the punchers were all very optimistic about the next year's showing in cattle.

“If you fellers don't break all records for drive herds of quality next year I don't know nothing about cows; an' I shore don't know nothing else,” he told the foreman of the Bar-20, as they rode homeward after an inspection of that ranch. “There'll be more dust hangin' over th' drive trails leading from this section next year when spring drops th' barriers than ever before. You needn't fear for th' market, neither—prices will stand. Th' north an' central ranges ain't doing what they ought to this year—it'll be up to you fellers down south, here, to make that up; an' you can do it.” This was not a guess, but the result of thought and study based on the observations he had made on his ride south, and from what he had learned from others along the way.

Needless to say Carson was a welcome visitor at the ranch houses and was regarded as a good fellow. At the Bar-20 he found only two men who would not thaw to him, and he was possessed of too much tact to try any persuasive measures. One was Hopalong, whose original cold reserve seemed to be growing steadily, the Bar-20 puncher finding in Carson a personality that charged the atmosphere with hostility and quietly rubbed him the wrong way. Whenever he was in the presence of the newcomer he felt the tugging of an irritating and insistent antagonism and he did not always fully conceal it. John Bartlett, Lucas, and one or two of the more observing had noticed it, and they began to prophesy future trouble between the two. The other man who disliked Carson was Red Connors; but what was more natural? Red, being Hopalong's closest companion, would be very apt to share his friend's antipathy. On the other hand, as if to prove Hopalong's dislike to be unwarranted, Lanky Smith swung far to the other extreme and was frankly enthusiastic in his liking for the cattle scout. And Lanky did not pour oil on the waters when he laughingly twitted Hopalong for allowing “a lickin' at cards to make him sore.” This was the idea that Carson was quietly striving to have generally accepted.

The affair thus hung fire, Carson chafing at the delay and cautiously working for an opening, which at last presented itself, to be promptly seized. By a sort of mutual unspoken agreement, the men in Cowan's that night passed up the cards and sat swapping stories. Cowan, swearing at a smoking lamp, looked up with a grin and burned his fingers as a roar of laughter marked the point of a droll reminiscence told by Bartlett.

“That's a good story, Bartlett,” Carson remarked, slowly refilling his pipe. “Reminds me of th' lame Greaser, Hippy Joe, an' th' canned oysters. They was both bad, an' neither of 'em knew it till they came together. It was like this . . .” The malicious side glance went unseen by all but Hopalong, who stiffened with the raging suspicion of being twitted on his own deformity. The humor of the tale failed to appeal to him, and when his full senses returned Lucas was in the midst of the story of the deadly game of tag played in a ten-acre lot of dense underbrush by two of his old-time friends. It was a tale of gripping interest and his auditors were leaning forward in their eagerness not to miss a word. “An' Pierce won,” finished Lucas; “some shot up, but able to get about. He was all right in a couple of weeks. But he was bound to win: he could shoot all around Sam Hopkins.”

“But th' best shot won't allus win in that game,” commented Carson. “That's one of th' minor factors.”

“Yes, sir. It's *luck* that counts there,” endorsed Bartlett, quickly. “Luck, nine times out of ten.”

**B**EST shot ought to win,” declared Skinny Thompson. “It ain't all luck, nohow. Where'd I be against Hoppy there?”

“Won't neither!” added Lanky. “Th' man who sees th' other first wins out. That's woodcraft, an' brains.”

“Aw! What do you know about it, anyhow?” demanded Lucas. “If he can't shoot so good, what chance has he got—if he misses th' first try, what then?”

“What chance has he got! First chance, miss or no miss. If he can't see th' other first, where th' devil does his good shootin' come in?”

“Huh!” snorted Wood Wright, belligerently. “Any fool can *see*, but he can't *shoot*! An' it's as much luck as woodcraft, too, an' don't you forget it!”

“Th' first shot don't win, Lanky; not in a game like that, with all th' dodgin' an' duckin',” remarked Red. “You can't put one where you want it when a feller's slippin' around in th' brush. It's th' most that counts, an' th' best shot gets in th' most. I wouldn't want to have to stand up against Hoppy an' a short gun, not in that game; no, sir!” and Red shook his head with decision.

The argument waxed hot. With the exception of Hopalong, who sat silently watchful, every one spoke his opinion and repeated it without regard to the others. It appeared that in this game, the man with the strongest lungs would eventually win out, and each man tried to show his superiority in that line. Finally, above the uproar, Cowan's bellow was heard, and he kept it up until some notice was taken of it. “Shut up! *Shut up!* For God's sake, *quit!* What does it all matter? Who gives a hang? Never saw such a bunch of tinder—let somebody drop a cold, burned-out match in this gang, an' hell's to pay. Here, *all* of you, play cards an' forget about cross-

tag in th’ scrub. You’ll be arguyin’ about playin’ marbles in th’ dark purty soon!”

“All right,” muttered Lanky, “but just th’ same, th’ man who—”

“Never mind about the man who! Did you hear *me*?” yelled Cowan, swiftly reaching for a bucket of water. “*This* is a game where *I* gets th’ most in, an’ don’t forget it!”

“Come on; play cards,” growled Lucas, who did not relish having his decision questioned on his own story. Undoubtedly somewhere in the wide, wide world there was such a thing as common courtesy, but none of it had ever strayed onto that range.

The chairs scraped on the rough floor as the men pulled up to a table. “I don’t care a hang,” came Carson’s final comment as he shuffled the cards with careful attention. “I’m not any fancy Colt expert, but I’m damned if I won’t take a chance in that game with any man as totes a gun. Leastawise, of *course*, I wouldn’t take no such advantage of a lame man.”

The effect would have been ludicrous but for its deadly significance. Cowan, stooping to go under the bar, remained in that hunched-up attitude, his every faculty concentrated in his ears; the match on its way to the cigarette between Red’s lips was held until it burned his fingers, when it was dropped from mere reflex action, the hand still stiffly aloft; Lucas, half in and half out of his chair, seemed to have got just where he intended, making no effort to seat himself.

**S**KINNY THOMPSON, his hand on his gun, seemed paralyzed; his mouth was open to frame a reply that never was uttered and he stared through narrowed eyelids at the blunderer. The sole movement in the room was the slow rising of Hopalong and the markedly innocent shuffling of the cards by Carson, who appeared to be entirely ignorant of the weight and effect of his words. He dropped the pack for the cut and then looked up and around as if surprised by the silence and the expressions he saw.

Hopalong stood facing him, leaning over with both hands on the table. His voice, when he spoke, rumbled up from his chest in a low growl. “You won’t *have* no advantage, Carson. Take it from me, you’ve had yore last fling. I’m glad you made it plain, this time, so it’s something I can take hold of.” He straightened slowly and walked to the door, and an audible sigh sounded through the room as it was realized that trouble was not immediately imminent. At the door he paused and turned half around, looking back over his shoulder. “At noon tomorrow I’m going to hoof it north through th’ brush between th’ river an’ th’ river trail, startin’ at th’ old ford a mile down th’ river.” He waited expectantly.

“Me too—only th’ other way,” was the instant rejoinder. “Have it yore own way.”

Hopalong nodded and the closing door shut him out into the night. Without a word the Bar-20 men arose and followed him, the only hesitant being Lanky, who was torn between loyalty and newfound friendship; but with a sorrowful shake of the head, he turned away and passed out, not far behind the others.

“Clannish, ain’t they?” remarked Carson gravely.

Those remaining were regarding him sternly, questioningly, Cowan with a deep frown darkening his face. “You hadn’t ought to ‘a’ said that, Carson. The reproof was almost an accusation.

Carson looked steadily at the speaker. “You hadn’t ought to ‘a’ let me say it,” he replied. “How did I know he was so touchy?” His gaze left Cowan and lingered in turn on each of the others. “Some of you ought to ‘a’ told me, an’ I wouldn’t ‘a’ said it only for what I said just before, an’ I didn’t want him to think I was challenging him to no duel in th’ brush. So I says so, an’ then he goes an’ takes it up that I *am* challenging him. I ain’t got no call to fight with nobody. Ain’t I tried to keep out of trouble with him ever since I’ve been here? Ain’t I kept out of th’ poker games on his account? Ain’t I?” The grave, even tones were dispassionate, without a trace of animus and serenely sure of justice.

The faces around him cleared gradually and heads began to nod in comprehending consent.

“Yes, I reckon you have,” agreed Cowan, slowly, but the frown was not entirely gone. “Yes, I reckon—mebby—you have.”

**I**T was noon by the sun when Hopalong and Red shook hands south of the old ford and the former turned to enter the brush. Hopalong was cool and ominously calm while his companion was the opposite. Red was frankly suspicious of the whole affair and nursed the private opinion that Mr. Carson would lay in ambush and shoot his enemy down like a dog. And Red had promised himself a dozen times that he would study the signs around the scene of action if Hopalong should not come back, and take a keen delight, if warranted, in shooting Mr. Carson full of holes with no regard for an even break. He was thinking the matter over as his friend breasted the first line of brush and could not refrain from giving slight warning. “Get him, Hoppy,” he called, earnestly; “get him good. Let *him* do some of th’ moving about. I’ll be here waiting for you.”

Hopalong smiled in reply and sprang forward, the leaves and branches quickly shutting him from Red’s sight. He had worked out his plan of action the night before when he was alone and the world was still, and as soon as he had it to his satisfaction he had dropped off to sleep as easily as a child—it took more than gunplay to disturb his nerves. He glanced about him to make sure of his bearings and then struck on a curving line for the river. The first hundred yards were covered with speed and then he began to move more slowly and with greater

regard for caution, keeping close to the earth and showing a marked preference for low ground. Skylines were all right in times of peace, but under the present conditions they promised to become unhealthy. His eyes and ears told him nothing for a quarter of an hour, and then he suddenly stopped short and crouched as he saw the plain trail of a man crossing his own direction at a right angle. From the bottom of one of the heel prints a crushed leaf was slowly rising back towards its original position, telling him how new the trail was; and as if this were not enough for his trained mind he heard a twig snap sharply as he glanced along the line of prints. It sounded very close, and he dropped instantly to one knee and thought quickly. Why had the other left so plain a trail, why had he reached up and broken twigs that projected above his head as he passed? Why had he kicked aside a small stone, leaving a patch of moist, bleached grass to tell where it had lain? Carson had stumbled here, but there were no toe marks to tell of it. Hopalong would not track, for he was no assassin; but he knew what he would do if he were, and careless. The answer leaped to his suspicious mind like a flash, and he did not care to waste any time in trying to determine whether or not Carson was capable of such a trick. He acted on the presumption that the trail had been made plain for a good reason, and that not far ahead at some suitable place—and there were any number of such within a hundred yards—the maker of the plain trail lay in wait. Smiling savagely he worked backward and turning, struck off in a circle. He had no compunctions whatever now about shooting the other player of the game. It was not long before he came upon the same trail again and he started another circle. A bullet *zipped* past his ear and cut a twig not two inches from his head. He fired at the smoke as he dropped, and then wriggled rapidly backward, keeping as flat to the earth as he could. Carson had taken up his position in a thicket which stood in the center of a level patch of sand in the old bed of the river—the bed it had used five years before and forsaken at the time of the big flood when it cut itself a new channel and made the U-bend which now surrounded this piece of land on three sides. Even now, during the rainy season, the thicket which sheltered Mr. Carson was frequently an island in a sluggish, shallow overflow.

“Hole up, blast you?” jeered Hopalong, hugging the ground. The second bullet from Mr. Carson’s gun cut another twig, this one just over his head, and he laughed insolently. “I ain’t ascared to do th’ movin’, even if you are. Judging from th’ way you keep out o’ sight th’ canned oysters are in th’ can again. *I* never did no ambushin’, you coyote.”

“You can’t make remarks like that an’ get away with ‘em—I’ve knowed you too long,” retorted Carson, shifting quickly, and none too soon. “You went an’ got Slim afore he was wide awake. I know *you*, all right.”

Hopalong’s surprise was but momentary, and his mind raced back over the years. Who was this man Carson, that he knew Slim Travennes? “Yo’re a liar, Carson; an’ so was th’ man who told you that!”

“Call me Adams,” jeered the other, nastily. “Nobody’ll hear it, an’ you’ll not live to tell it. Adams, Buzz Adams; call me that.”

“So you’ve come back after all this time to make me get you, have you? Well, I ain’t a-goin’ to shoot no buttons off you *this* time. I allus reckoned you learned something at Muddy Wells—but you’ll learn it here,” Hopalong rejoined, sliding into a depression, and working with great caution towards the dry river bed, where fallen trees and hillocks of sand provided good cover in plenty. Everything was clear now and despite the seriousness of the situation he could not repress a smile as he remembered vividly that day at the carnival when Buzz Adams came to town with the determination to kill him and show him up as an imitation. His grievance against Carson was petty when compared to that against Adams, and he began to force the issue. As he peered over a stranded log he caught sight of his enemy disappearing into another part of the thicket, and two of his three shots went home. Carson groaned with pain and fear as he realized that his right kneecap was broken and would make him slow in his movements. He was lamed for life, even if he did come out of the duel alive; lamed in the same way that Hopalong was—the affliction he had made cruel sport of had come to him. But he had plenty of courage and he returned the fire with remarkable quickness, his two shots sounding almost as one.

Hopalong wiped the blood from his cheek and wormed his way to a new place; when halfway there he called out again. “How’s yore health—Buzz?” in mock sympathy.

Carson lied manfully and when he looked to get in another shot his enemy was on the farther bank, moving up to get behind him. He did not know Hopalong’s new position until he raised his head to glance down the dried river bed, and was informed by a bullet that nicked his ear. As he ducked, another grazed his head, the third going wild. He hazarded a return shot, and heard Hopalong’s laugh ring out again.

“Like th’ story Lucas told, the best shot is going to win out this time, too,” the Bar-20 man remarked, grimly. “You thought a game like this would give you some chance against a better shot, didn’t you? You are a fool.”

“It ain’t over yet, not by a damned sight!” came the retort.

“An’ you thought you had a little th’ best of it if you stayed still an’ let me do th’ movin’, didn’t you? You’ll learn something before I get through with you; but it’ll be too late to do you any good,” Hopalong called, crouched below a hillock of sand so the other could not

take advantage of the words and single him out for a shot.

“You can’t learn me nothin’, you assassin; I’ve got my eyes open, this time.” He knew that he had had them open before; and that Hopalong was in no way an assassin; but if he could enrage his enemy and sting him into some reflex carelessness he might have the last laugh.

Carson’s retort was wasted, for a sudden and unusual, although a familiar sound, had caught Hopalong’s ear and he was giving all his attention to it. While he weighed it, his incredulity holding back the decision his common sense was striving to give him, the noise grew louder rapidly and common sense won out in a cry of warning an instant before a five-foot wall of brown water burst upon his sight, sweeping swiftly down the old, dry river bed; and behind it towered another and greater wall. Tree trunks were dancing end over end in it as if they were straws.

“Cloudburst!” he yelled. “Run, Buzz! Run for yore life! Cloudburst up th’ valley! Run, you fool; *Run!*”

Buzz’s sarcastic retort was cut short as he instinctively glanced north, and his agonized curse lashed Hopalong forward. “Can’t run—kneecap’s busted! Can’t swim, can’t do—ah, hell—!”

Hopalong saw him torn from his shelter and whisked down the raging torrent like an arrow from a bow. The Bar-20 puncher leaped from the bank, shot under the yellow flood and arose, gasping and choking, many yards downstream, fighting madly to get the muddy water out of his throat and eyes. As he struck out with all his strength down the current, he caught sight of Buzz being torn from a jutting tree limb, and he shouted encouragement and swam all the harder, if such a thing were possible. Buzz’s course was checked for a moment by a boiling back-current and as he again felt the pull of the rushing stream, Hopalong’s hand gripped his collar and the fight for safety began. Whirled against logs and stumps, drawn down by the weight of his clothes and the frantic efforts of Buzz to grasp him—fighting the water and the man he was trying to save at the same time, his head under water as often as it was out of it, and Buzz’s vice-like fingers threatening him—he headed for the west shore against powerful crosscurrents that made his efforts seem useless. He seemed to get the worst of every break. Once, when caught by a friendly current, they were swung under an overhanging branch, but as Hopalong’s hand shot up to grasp it a submerged bush caught his feet and pulled him under, and Buzz’s steel-like arms around his throat almost suffocated him before he managed to beat the other into insensibility and break the hold.

“I’ll let you go!” he threatened; but his hand grasped the other’s collar all the tighter and his fighting jaw was set with greater determination than ever.

They shot out into the main stream, where the U-bend channel joined the shortcut, and it looked miles wide to the exhausted puncher. He was fighting only on his will now. He would not give up, though he scarce could lift an arm and his lungs seemed on fire. He did not know whether Buzz was dead or alive, but he would get the body ashore with him, or go down trying. He bumped into a log and instinctively grasped it. It turned, and when he came up again it was bobbing five feet ahead of him. Ages seemed to pass before he flung his numb arm over it and floated with it. He was not alone in the flood; a coyote was pushing steadily across his path towards the nearer bank, and on a gliding tree trunk crouched a frightened cougar, its ears flattened and its sharp claws dug solidly through the bark. Here and there were cattle, and a snake wriggled smoothly past him, apparently as much at home in the water as out of it. The log turned again and he just managed to catch hold of it as he came up for the second time.

Things were growing black before his eyes and strange, weird ideas and images floated through his brain. When he regained some part of his senses he saw ahead of him a long, curling crest of yellow water and foam, and he knew, vaguely, that it was pouring over a bar. The next instant his feet struck bottom and he fought his way blindly and slowly, with the stubborn determination of his kind, towards the brush-covered point twenty feet away.

When he opened his eyes and looked around he became conscious of excruciating pains and he closed them again to rest. His outflung hand struck something that made him look around again, and he saw Buzz Adams, face down at his side. He released his grasp on the other’s collar and slowly the whole thing came to him, and then the necessity for action, unless he wished to lose what he had fought so hard to save.

Anything short of the iron man Buzz had become would have been dead before this or have been finished by the mauling he now got from Hopalong. But Buzz groaned, gurgled a curse, and finally opened his eyes upon his rescuer, who sank back with a grunt of satisfaction. Slowly his intelligence returned as he looked steadily into Hopalong’s eyes, and with it came the realization of a strange truth; he did not hate this man at all. Months of right living, days and nights of honest labor shoulder to shoulder with men who respected him for his ability and accepted him as one of themselves, had made a new man of him, although the legacy of hatred from the old Buzz had disguised him from himself until now; but the new Buzz, battered, shot-up, nearly drowned, looked at his old enemy and saw him for the man he really was. He smiled and reached out his hand.

“Cassidy, you’re th’ boss,” he said. “Shake.”

They shook.