



CURLY WOLF

By Bruce Douglas

Guilty or innocent, a man charged with almost every crime in the law books is apt to find his own range unhealthy. The Curly Wolf found it so, and decided to enjoy the scenery in Mexico—as soon as he finished a little performance for the sole benefit of Sheriff Steele.

H EAT, deadly strength-sapping heat, blazed down on the granite-flaked pass. It shimmered from gray boulders, and gleamed dazzlingly from alkali patches in the serpentine trail. Down where the trail entered the pass, even the lacy leaves of a thicket of mesquite and palo verde drooped hopelessly. Only the fluted saguaro, the towering giant cactus, and the spiny branching cholla maintained their stiff uprightness in the blistering sun. To the south, the twisted branches of a lone Joshua tree stood stark against a brazen sky, as though writhing in agony.

A short distance from the summit of the pass, some five hundred yards from that clump of mesquite and palo verde below, a man crouched behind a boulder at the side of the narrow trail. In tense, menacing silence he sat, a rifle between his knees. His fawn-colored Stetson, gray shirt, and bullhide chaps blended so well with his background that a family of lizards disported themselves within three feet of his browned hands, and a warty gila monster squatted in the shade of the man's

body, tonguing for insects.

An air of deadly menace emanated from the silent, crouching man. Sweat ran down the bronzed forehead and dripped from the finely chiseled nose and chin, but the waiting man remained as motionless as the age-old boulders around him. Only his eyes moved. Keen, crow-footed with desert tracery, they kept incessant watch on the pass where it left the scrub cedars and mesquite dotting the lower mountain and serpented up over the bald summit to where the man crouched.

Of a sudden, the man turned his head sharply, looking up that short distance to the summit of the pass. At the motion, the lizards scurried out of sight beneath a boulder; the gila monster clicked his jaws shut, and rolled a beady eye toward the source of his shade. Immobile once more, the man stared up the pass. From the other side, the clop-clop of a walking horse reached his trained ears.

The hoofbeats grew louder, and presently a rider hove into view at the summit. A tall man, this rider, tall and gaunt, with graying hair and heavy

mustaches. His costume was that common to the southwestern desert and range country; and as he rode, the sun glanced and gleamed from a nicked star at his breast.

A whispered oath escaped the watching man. His fingers clenched tighter on the hot rifle barrel. But still he sat motionless, not twenty yards separating him from the rider.

For a full minute the rider surveyed the five hundred yards of bare, narrow trail. Then he nudged his horse with his knees, and began a slow descent. Silent, the crouching man waited until only ten yards separated them. Then he rose suddenly, his rifle trained on that glittering badge.

"Got yuh, Sheriff!" So strongly had the necessity for silence rested upon the waiting man that his voice now rose scarcely above a whisper. "Raise 'em high. An' pronto!"

From beneath bushy gray eyebrows the sheriff bent a keen glance on this man who had remained so still that he had almost ridden him down. His hands rose slowly, and at the same time an expression of vast surprise flickered over his leathery face.

"Dave Mason!" the sheriff exclaimed.

The clean-cut features of his captor twisted into a snarl.

"Yeah!" he grated. "Dave Mason. Th' Curly Wolf yuh've got so many rewards posted for! Th' hombre yuh wouldn't let come back an' settle down in his home range, but had tuh hang every crime in yore county on him an' hound him intuh outlawry! Git down off that horse!"

The gray-haired sheriff opened his mouth as though to speak, but Dave Mason's rifle came up threateningly.

"Not a word out o' yuh, yuh lousy coyote! Git down!"

At the epithet, the sheriff's clear blue eyes clouded for a moment, and a slight tension showed about his jaw. He

dismounted.

Stepping forward, Dave relieved the sheriff of his two forty-fives and motioned for him to sit down behind the boulder. He gave the sheriff's horse a slap on the rump that sent him trotting back over the summit and out of sight.

"Dave," the sheriff began, "I got somethin'—"

Fires of hell flared in Dave's eyes. "I said silence!" he rasped. With a gesture of anger, he seized the sheriff's neckerchief. "An' I mean silence!"

Defly he formed the neckerchief into a gag, tying it securely behind the captive's head.

"I ought tuh kill yuh!" he snarled. "Yuh lousy coyote! You had tuh have somebody tuh blame fer th' hold-ups an' bank robberies. You an' yore lousy deppities couldn't catch th' robbers, so yuh hang 'em all on me! On me, that come back from my wanderin's intent on settlin' down an' bein' a good citizen! Jest because I've been in some shootin', jest because I'm known tuh be fast with my guns, yuh let on that I've been on th' shady side o' th' law. Somebody holds up a stage or a mine messenger. He's pretty fast with his guns—too fast fer you an' yore wuthless deppities—an' yuh say it was Dave Mason!"

Shaking with rage, he leaned over his prisoner.

"Sheriff," he declared solemnly, "I tell you I've never done a crooked deed in my life! I never killed a hombre that didn't draw first. I never held up a stage or bank or mine messenger. Everyone o' these charges yuh've got against me is framed, an' it's only my doubt as tuh whether yuh did th' framin' that keeps yuh alive right now! But whoever did frame those charges has succeeded. I'm driven intuh outlawry. I'm on th' run. An' now—"

He looked down the trail. "Yuh know

why I'm here," he gritted. "I'm headed fer Mexico. Driven out o' my own country. On the outlaw trail! But afore I go, Sheriff, I'm a-goin' tuh give yuh a treat. Yuh ben accusin' me o' crimes I didn't commit. Hangin' up rewards fer my capture, houndin' me out o' th' country! *Now I'm goin' tuh give yuh th' real treat o' watchin' me perform a hold-up!*"

FORCED down behind the boulder with his captor, his arms tied behind him and his feet lashed together, Sheriff Steele strained cautiously at his bonds. Dave had apparently forgotten his very existence: tense, motionless, he clutched his rifle and stared down the trail.

The sheriff wriggled his shoulders, striving to work some play into the bonds that held his wrists together. But a few minutes of careful straining told him it was useless. He relaxed. Settling back to a more comfortable position, he bent a hawklike gaze on the young man who had captured him.

Suddenly Dave stiffened. Following the line of Dave's gaze, Sheriff Steele saw a man ride out from the rim of trees five hundred yards down trail and proceed on up the slope of barren rock. Convulsively, the sheriff strained once more at his bonds, then set his jaws rapidly working on the mouthful of neckerchief which served as a gag.

The lone rider was armed with twin six-guns, tied down at either leg. He looked sharply about as he rode, his free hand hanging close to his gun butt. Heavy saddle bags, crammed to the bursting point, indicated the cause of his concern.

Dave glowered at the sheriff. "There he is, Sheriff," he taunted in a sibilant whisper. "There's yore mine messenger yuh rode up tuh pertect. Saddle bags bustin' with bars o' refined gold! Looks like I ain't a-goin' tuh strike Mexico

empty-handed!"

The sheriff emitted a series of unintelligible sounds, as though he were making a Herculean effort to speak through the gag. Dave laughed shortly.

"Tryin' tuh warn 'im, Sheriff?" he sneered. "D'yuh wish yuh c'd let 'im know th' Curly Wolf is up here waitin' tuh relieve him o' his burden o' wealth? Huh! Wait till he gits this far, an' I'll stop him jest as easy as I stopped you!"

The crack of a rifle broke off Dave's speech. The mine messenger was about twenty yards up the trail from the last fringe of trees. From a clump of dwarf cedar Dave noted a puff of smoke.

Crack! Crack! Two other rifles broke the stillness. Then a fourth. The mine messenger had leaped from his horse, taken scant shelter in a little gully beside the trail. The rifles were on all sides of him, two on either slope.

"Good gosh!" Dave exclaimed. "Dry-gulchers!"

Striving gamely against odds, the mine messenger had whipped out his forty-fives and was blazing away at the distant puffs of smoke. The bullets fell far short. A taunting laugh drifted up the trail to the watching Dave and the sheriff.

Sheriff Steele fixed his eyes on Dave's face. It was writhing with excitement.

"Th' yalluh-bellied coyotes!" Dave muttered. "They aim tuh shoot him down in cold blood. They're stayin' out o' range an' snipin' at 'im!"

Bullets were pouring in from all sides at the helpless mine messenger. Dave saw him wince as a bullet seared his flesh, and squeeze down closer to the ground in his inadequate shelter. There could be no doubt as to the outcome: the dry-gulchers had the man at their mercy; they would simply keep up the shooting until a lucky bullet snuffed out the life of the messenger, then come out of hiding and

gather in the gold at their leisure.

A look of hope came into Sheriff Steele's face as he watched his captor. Dave was suffering the agonies of the damned. Tensely the sheriff watched. Horror, sympathy, aversion—in quick succession the expressions appeared on Dave's clean-cut countenance. His hands were clenching and unclenching on his rifle. Then, with a gesture of decision, he turned.

With a quick motion Dave jerked loose the gag. He was almost sobbing.

"Th' lousy coyotes!" he panted. "They're—they're murderin' him!"

Sheriff Steele nodded solemnly, still gazing sharply at Dave.

"That's the way outlaws act, Dave Mason," he stated calmly. "It ain't surprisin'."

Dave drew a sheath knife. Suddenly he slashed the bonds at the sheriff's arms and feet. He thrust the sheriff's forty-fives into his hands.

"Yuh take th' left side, Sheriff," he commanded. "I'll circle around behind 'em on th' right. Tuhgether, you an' me'll round up these stinkin' buzzards!"

Without waiting for a reply, Dave was off, scrambling over the rocks to the ridge and working down the slope to outflank the dry-gulchers.

There was a strange look in the grizzled sheriff's eyes as he holstered his guns and started making his way along the opposite slope.

KEEPING the crest of the ridge between himself and the dry-gulchers, Dave quickly made his way along the slope to a spot opposite the shooting.

As he went, a plan was forming in his mind. He must be careful, he realized. Except for the advantage of surprise, the sheriff, armed only with belt guns, was no

better prepared to fight against rifles than was the mine messenger. A single slip, any accident that might reveal his presence before he got within six-gun range, and Sheriff Steele would be out of the fight. It was up to Dave. One rifle against four!

At the top of the ridge, Dave dropped to the ground and cautiously peered over. The mine messenger was still fighting desperately. He had got out of the gully and into a nest of boulders. On three sides the shelter was better there, but it was only a question of time before one or more of the dry-gulchers would work around to where he could rake the shelter with winged death.

The dry-gulchers were firing less rapidly now. Waiting for a sure shot, Dave decided. Saving ammunition. Lying motionless on top of the ridge, Dave waited to spot the location of the four dry-gulchers.

A puff of smoke from a clump of cedars across the gulf to the left. A bullet spanged into granite close to the mine messenger's head, ricocheted, and whined evilly up the slope toward Dave. Then a shot from the near side, fifty yards farther down. At length came the shot Dave was waiting for. Almost directly down the slope from where he lay, a rifle cracked from the shelter of a wind-fallen cedar.

Dave surveyed the ground carefully. It was only thirty yards down, but the space between was smooth and bare of cover. And if Dave's plan was to go through, he must take that first man completely by surprise. Inching his rifle slowly ahead of him, Dave strained over the ridge and bellied slowly down the slope.

Again the color of his clothes against the granite favored him. Once, when a bullet zoomed close to his head he froze suddenly, fearing that he had been discovered by the enemy on the opposite slope. No other bullets came, however,

and he decided the one had merely glanced his way. He muscled on.

In five minutes, which seemed an eternity, he had reached the edge of the thicket. A low outcropping lay before him. He drew in behind it and peered over.

A few yards ahead, lying on his belly with his rifle steadied across a fallen limb, a man in rough range garb was carefully sighting down his rifle barrel. Instinctively, Dave followed the line of that aim. He started. The mine messenger had squirmed around to avoid a withering fire from the opposite slope and was now completely open to that deadly, slow aim!

Dave dropped his rifle, drew one belt gun, and leaped. With crushing weight he landed squarely on the back of the dry-gulcher. The rifle exploded with the impact, but Dave noted even in the flurry of motion that the aim had been shifted. A single whooshing gasp escaped the dry-gulcher. Then Dave's gun barrel rose and fell with precision, and the man lay silent.

Pausing a moment to tie up the unconscious man, Dave fell into position behind the log, with both his and the dry-gulcher's rifles beside him. He peered searchingly at that clump of cedars across the gulch.

Another shot from the cedars. Dave aimed carefully at the puff of smoke, but withheld his fire. His first shot, he warned himself, must put the man out. Otherwise the remaining dry-gulchers would be warned of the rear attack—and there were still three rifles against him!

Dave's keen eyes picked up the glint of a rifle barrel being carefully pushed through the boughs of a cedar. He lined up the moving barrel, drew a long bead.

Cra-a-ack! The two rifles exploded as one. Across the gulch there was a tumultuous threshing about in that clump of cedars. Then silence.

Dave hoped that the scene had not been observed by the other man on his side of the gulch. But immediately he learned that it had.

"Butch! Hey, Butch! What's th' matter over there?"

The shout came from Dave's left, about fifty yards away, a shout of tremulous excitement, with fear in it.

Again the man called.

"Hey, Ragan! Something's happened to Butch! Go see what's up!"

On the opposite slope, the other dry-gulcher left his position behind an outcropping and scurried across an open space. Dave aimed quickly and fired. The bullet screamed across the gulch and plunked into a tree trunk a few inches ahead of the man. With a yell, the dry-gulcher dived for cover.

"Look out!" the man on Dave's side yelled uselessly.

"Look out yoreself!" Ragan shouted from his shelter. "Th' shootin's from yore side. There's a sidewinder holed up over thar somewhere. Go smoke him out! That shot come from where Kruger was! Somebody's got Kruger, I tell yuh!"

The sentence ended in a yell, followed by one rifle crack and a flurry of deeper boomings from forty-fives. Dave chuckled. The sheriff had finally got into action!

"One more!" Dave grated. "He's my meat!"

He leaped to his feet at the sound of crackling in the brush about twenty yards away. The remaining dry-gulcher, realizing that he was alone, was charging down the slope in an attempt to reach the spot where the group had hidden their horses.

Dave's six-guns leaped to his fists, spouting flame and lead. One shot flicked the man in the leg; he stumbled but kept

his feet, straining to reach that clump of bushes.

As he looked, Dave saw the mine messenger painfully drag himself half erect. One arm hung useless at his side, but with the other he leveled a forty-five! A shot boomed out, and the fleeing dry-gulcher spread-eagled into the air, flung forward, and crashed heavily to the ground.

Dave came running down the slope.

"Take it easy, *compadre!*" he exclaimed.

The mine messenger, weak from loss of blood, had sunk back to the ground. Dave leaned over him. A rapid examination revealed an ugly wound at the shoulder and a deep furrow gashed in a hip. Tearing strips from the messenger's shirt, Dave wadded cloth in the wounds to stop the flow of blood.

"Prisoner hogtied in th' holler up yonder, Sheriff," he nodded, as Sheriff Steele came hobbling down the slope. "This hombre's fainted."

Without a word, the sheriff clambered on. He came back with the prisoner just as Dave had completed the bandaging.

Dave rose slowly from his stooping position. He sighed.

"That's that," he murmured. "Guess I'll be driftin', Sheriff."

"Yuh're not goin'!"

Startled, Dave turned around. He found himself gazing straight into the black muzzles of Sheriff Steele's twin forty-fives!

RED rage surged in Dave Mason. "Why, yuh lousy coyote!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Yuh stinkin' buzzard! Yuh low-down sidewinder! Of all th' ungrateful—here I help yuh save this mine messenger, killin' one dry-gulcher an' takin' one alive, an' then—" he looked unbelievably at the sheriff "—

yuh mean tuh say yuh ain't a-goin' tuh let me drift peaceable tuh Mexico?"

"I mean jest that," Sheriff Steele stated calmly. "I mean yuh ain't goin'!"

Dave choked with anger.

"Now yuh shut up an' listen tuh me, Dave Mason!" the sheriff snapped. "I've heard enough about lousy coyotes tuh last me quite a spell. Keep yore mouth shut, er I'll gag yuh th' way yuh did me!"

Dave kept his smoldering eyes fixed on the sheriff but said nothing.

"I said yuh wa'n't gain' tuh Mexico," the sheriff went on, "an' I mean it! I got somethin' tuh say tuh yuh, an' I got th' drop on yuh so's yuh couldn't ride off without listenin' tuh my powwow. Ef yuh hadn't kept me masticatin' a bandanna cud back yonder, I'd 'a' told yuh long ago! Dave Mason," his voice took on added seriousness, "th' law ain't got a single charge agin yuh!"

"What!" Dave gasped.

"Nary a one! Leastways, I can git 'em all dismissed when I git back tuh town. No, it ain't because yuh helped out here, though that was plumb white o' yuh, Dave. Ef yuh'd done them other hold-ups, th' law would still be wantin' yuh regardless. But as soon's I seen yuh here, I knowed yuh was innocent. Some buzzard's been playin' on yore name an' reputation an' pullin' these hold-ups."

He holstered his guns and stared hard at Dave. His face had lost some of its expression of strained seriousness.

"How do I know?" he demanded. "Well, just afore I left th' office, about an hour afore yuh held me up here at th' pass, I got a telephone call that you'd just robbed a bank in Ajo, forty mile away! Th' identification was complete, th' report said. Th' hold-up even called himself th' Curly Wolf. Now, no hombre kin do a holdup in Ajo an' ride forty mile in one hour, so I know damn well that it wa'n't

you!”

He chuckled. “Funny,” he rumbled, “th’ way yuh cleared yoreself! Ef yuh hadn’t come here tuh commit a hold-up, yuh’d never ‘a’ cleared yorese’f o’ the charges of hold-ups that yuh didn’t commit!”

Dave choked. “Sheriff,” he began brokenly, “Sheriff, I’ve said a lot about a lousy coyote. I aim tuh eat those words.

Yuh’re a curly wolf from Wolfville, an’ there ain’t a louse on yore hide!”

Their hands met in firm grasp. Then Sheriff Steele drew a shiny badge from his vest pocket.

“A curly wolf, huh?” he chuckled. “How’d yuh like tuh add yorese’f tuh my litter o’ wolf pups an’ go ketch this lousy coyote that’s been usin’ yore name?”