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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off the Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

BUSHFIGHTERS

THIS "BUSHFIGHTERS," by Hugh Pendexter: A tale of the French and Indian War in New York, and of the dark year 1755, when Ticonderoga was lost and folk trembled lest the scalp-yell rise in the streets of Albany. Israel Putnam—"Wolf" Putnam—does the work of many men in killing Montcalm's "praying Indians." A full book-length novel complete in the next issue, by a man who knows.

Other stories in the next issue are mentioned on the last page of this one.



THE DEATH ANTHEM AT BLACK MOUNTAIN

by
Robert J. Horton

Author of "Checkers at Hungry Horse," "Trails of Silence," etc.

HEN the news flashed through the Little Belts that the lid had been taken off at Kingsville every man in the high hills knew there would be trouble. Wide-open gambling had been taboo in the little mountain town since the days when silver had dropped out of sight and the wild life of the near-by camps had died. But now and again the old order of things had been revived and each occasion marking the lifting of the lid had seen its finish in a tragedy.

Consequently no great excitement was evinced when, within three weeks of the time the word was passed along the lone trails that "she's wide open" and going strong, the intelligence was received that Rand Baltry had been murdered.

Shot down from behind while sitting in his cabin on the east slope of Black Mountain above Kingsville, the old man hadn't had the ghost of a chance. The bullet evidently had been sent on its foul errand through an open window. And a quantity of gold dust which the old man was known to have had in his cabin had disappeared—dust that he had sweated blood to pan from the shallow bed of Weasel Creek, which trickled down from a shoulder of the mountain where it joined the Tenderfoot divide.

This was early Tuesday morning.

The stud-poker tables had been crowded the night before. Baltry had played for a time, paying for his chips with little pinches of dust. He had lost a little, quit the game and gone home. He played more for amusement than anything else.

There were others, however, who didn't play for amusement; cold, silent men who gambled to win, one way or another. Some of these lost also. One of them at least lost all he had. He had left the tables, secured his horse and van-

ished. He hadn't been seen since before day-light Tuesday morning. This man was "Wild" Ralph Warner.

And soon after dawn, Charley Yeag, coming down from his lead claims high up on Black Mountain, had found the lifeless body of old Rand Baltry with a bullet in its back just under the left shoulder-blade.

Shootings, even killings, were not unusual in that country. But to shoot a man in the back; to kill him without giving him a hint of a chance—and for a mere thousand or so in dust! Indignation ran high in this instance.

"We oughta make up a posse an' light out after this Warner person," said Pete Burcher when facts concerning the murder became known in Kingsville. "A man what would turn a dirty trick like that oughta be strung up."

But Pete was the only one openly to accuse Warner; and it was decided to wait for the authorities from the sheriff's office in Great Falls.

When authority came late that night it arrived in the person of Boyer—man-hunter of the silent trails—who always was assigned to a case like this—which led away from the prairie towns into the vast hidden reaches of the high hills.

 BOYER found Kingsville quiet, literally resting on its elbows after the tragedy. The lid once more was tightly clamped down; no rustle of cards, no rattle of chips. And over the little mountain hamlet hung a pall of thick, yellow smoke—like a shroud—obscuring the stars and the moon. It was August; the forest was dry as tinder; and somewhere across the Tenderfoot Divide a fire was eating its way into the timber.

The mountain officer quickly ascertained the nature of Baltry's death. The cabin had not

been touched since the body had been discovered. The old man had been sitting by a table with his back to an open window.

Upon the table were a lamp and an old box-type phonograph, of which there were hundreds in the lonely, widely separated cabins of the mountains. They form means by which music can be packed into almost any section of the hills, and are for that reason greatly favored.

The machine had run down on the cylinder record, which was adjusted—proof that the old man had been listening to its music when death leaped out of the night.

The floor planking beneath the single bunk in the cabin had been ripped up, disclosing the empty hiding-place of the old man's gold.

Charley Yeag explained how he had happened to find the body. He always stopped there on his way down from his place higher on the mountain. He was coming down just before dawn and had seen the light burning. He had received no answer to his hail so he had gone over and found his friend dead.

Yeag had never been known even to have a gun—but suspicion would not have attached to him in any event. Yeag's eyes were right.

Boyer knew men. He wasted no time here. Having completed his inspection by lantern-light, he ordered the body held at Kingsville until the coroner should arrive in the morning, and directed that the cabin windows be boarded up and the door locked with a padlock which he provided. He put the key in his pocket.

Then he went back down the mountain to Kingsville.

"Harrigan," he said to the man who ran the place in which Balty had played, and where the gambling had been the heaviest, "I'm not going to make any bones about the card-playing. That isn't my line. If the sheriff wants to make trouble for you for running a gambling-place up here he can do it himself. But I want a list of the heaviest losers in these last games and I want you to be sort of careful in making it out. Don't overlook anybody—understand?"

Harrigan understood. More than that, he knew Boyer. He wrote out a list which contained possibly a dozen names. Boyer scanned it closely.

"You say this man Ralph Warner lost his whole chunk last night?"

"Everything he had," said Harrigan.

"And these three others went broke too?"

"They sure did."

"But Warner lit out," mused Boyer. "He's the same Wild Ralph that raised that rumpus over on Smith River last Winter, ain't he?"

"Same guy," confirmed Harrigan. "He follows the card-games."

"And got several notches on his gun handle maybe."

"I've heard he has. From what I seen of him

around here I wouldn't want to get into any trouble with him."

"Have a man get my horse, Harrigan, if you've got a man working here you can spare. I sent him down to the stables before I went up on the hill. He's had about six hours' rest; that's all he needs."

Boyer joined the little group of men who had remained up all night while he was making his investigations.

"Any of you boys see Ralph Warner leave last night?"

Several spoke up in the affirmative.

"Don't suppose any of you happened to be outside when he left town so as to notice which way he went?"

"He took the Weasel Creek trail up Black Mountain," said Pete Burcher. "I tried to get up a posse to follow him but they crawfishied."

Boyer went outside and waited until a man brought his horse. He swung quickly into the saddle. Then he called to Harrigan—

"Get the sheriff on the forest phone after day-break and tell him I've gone after Warner."

 GREAT clouds of swirling smoke were hurdling the divide on a freshening wind as Boyer urged his horse up the steep trail toward the summit in the early morning.

He flung himself from the saddle and led his mount, plunging and snorting in the smoke-fumes, up the final slope, and then swung north on the rocky ridge of the divide.

Choking and gasping, he fought the smoke for two miles along the ridge until he reached a point north of where the fire seemed to be raging in the far-flung timber below, and where the atmosphere was more clear and the sun shone dimly through the soaring smoke-pall.

Below him, eastward and southward, the darting tongues of flame were eating through the slender green timber, which here seemed mostly jack-pines with an occasional patch of what appeared to be lodge-pole.

The fire was burning westward and northward; and the timber threatened was in the shape of a huge triangle with the rocky ridge of the divide on the east and a long series of high, limestone cliffs on the west leading to the apex in the north.

Razor Creek, on the south, flowing west to merge with the distant Smith River, formed the base. The fire had started somewhere along the north side of Razor Creek.

The Forest Service men evidently were not worrying much about this particular strip of timber, for its value was negligible even as a watershed. The fire would burn itself out as it reached the barrier formed by the limestone cliffs in the west and the high, bare, rocky ridge in the east, and would creep northward, gradually narrowing.

Boyer unslung his binoculars, and in rifts in the smoke he saw the forest men on the divide far south of him. They were watching—prepared; and if the fire started to leap the divide and get into the big, valuable timber on the east slope a warning would be dispatched to Kingsville and every available man requisitioned to fight it.

But the trailer's interest was not centered in the forest fire.

Somewhere out there below him was a man he was after; a man he wanted for murder.

Boyer searched the timbered area north of the fire with his high-powered glasses in a futile effort to get some trace of the fugitive. He returned his glasses to their case and did something which at once stamped him a past master at tracking men in the wilderness. He mentally put himself in the shoes of the desperate fugitive.

All his life Boyer had lived in the high hills and in the lone prairie country that stretched eastward to the purple buttes and beyond. He had tracked men and trapped them from the Musselshell to the Peace River country far north of the Sweetgrass Hills. He knew the Montana mountains, the Badlands, the prairie country from the Missouri to Milk River, and had followed the lone trails with the North West Mounted far into northern Canada.

He knew the ways of the men of the silences.

Wild Ralph Warner had twenty-four hours' start.

"He wouldn't go south because he'd be sure to meet up with the forest men," said Boyer to himself; "and he didn't want to be impressed into fire-fighting maybe; and he wouldn't want to answer any questions. To go south would be taking chances."

He scanned the country to the north.

"If he went north he'd have to go down and cross Band Creek when he reached the end of the limestone and hit the trail toward the Falls. He didn't want to do that; too many people on that trail."

Then Boyer's gaze again traveled westward.

"Warner's figured he could cut through the triangle of timber and dodge around the south end of the limestone into the Smith River country ahead of the fire," he reasoned aloud.

In a moment the man-hunter measured the distance across to the limestone and noted the advance of the flames from the south. The wind was blowing from the northwest, partly against the fire's advance, and a storm-signal in itself.

"If I can make it across and far enough south I can get up those limestone cliffs and have a clean trail to Smith River."

Without another moment's hesitation Boyer swung into the saddle and turned his horse down into the triangle of timber ahead of the fire.



ASHES and flying embers dropped about him as he cut through the open spaces in the timber and made for the limestone some five miles away. He was on a line much farther north than that which probably had been followed by Warner, because the fire had advanced rapidly during the night. He paid scant attention to the flying sparks and embers and the heavy gusts of smoke until they began to increase in number. Soon he found himself turning to a northwestward course to get farther ahead of the fire.

It was noon when Boyer reached a low ridge in the center of the triangle of timber-land and paused for a breath of clear air. Even as he looked about him a shower of sparks and a blanket of smoke enveloped him. He held his horse with some difficulty.

And then he became aware of the disconcerting fact that the wind was changing. It was veering slowly to the southwest, sending the flames racing almost directly toward him. For the first time since he had swung down from the top of the divide he began to have a concern for his own safety.

He unslung his glasses and again swept the timber-land in the west as yet untouched by the fire. Had Warner, then, got through?

Whether Warner had managed to slip around the southern end of the limestone cliffs or not, it now was vividly apparent to Boyer that he couldn't expect to perform that feat. Already the flames had licked past the point where he had thought he would be able to climb the limestone barrier and make for Smith River.

Suddenly he gave vent to a startled exclamation and kept his glasses trained on a point at the base of the limestone cliffs almost directly west of where he was standing.

On a steep, short slope leading from the timber and directly under the cliffs he saw the figure of a man stumbling along the corrugated side of the slope.

"Afoot!" Boyer ejaculated.

And immediately he was in the saddle, urging his mount toward a point somewhat north of where he had seen the figure.

Warner, if it should prove to be he, had lost his horse and been cut off from rounding the southern end of the limestone. Now he was fleeing northward, searching for a favorable place to scale the limestone wall that reared straight above him.

The clouds of smoke that rode on the wind, now blowing almost a gale from directly south, blinded the man-hunter as he charged through the timber; but the roar of the flames drowned the sound of crashing branches and snapping twigs and the dull echo of his horse's hoofs. The fire was gaining headway fast.

It seemed hours to Boyer, although it was in reality but a comparatively short time, before he came to the west edge of the timber and

brought up before the towering cliffs of limestone. He whirled his horse to the south and started down the broken land under the cliffs.

At the first turn he came upon the man he sought.

Wild Ralph Warner looked up in startled fashion to find himself staring into the menacing black aperture of a gun held by a steady hand. Slowly his gaze traveled to the dark, stern features and steady, gleaming black eyes above it.

"Boyer!" he exclaimed.

"Glad you know me, Ralph," said Boyer, slipping out of the saddle without failing for an instant to keep the other covered. "Does away with explanations. I'll take your gun—that's it."

Boyer snapped the cartridges out of the other's weapon and thrust it into a side pocket of the ordinary coat which he wore.

"Too bad you ever learned to pull a trigger, Ralph," he said quietly. "I'll have to arrest you for the murder of Rand Balty yesterday morning."

Warner remained silent, staring sullenly.

Boyer felt rapidly about his prisoner's person.

"Haven't got the loot on you, eh? Where's your horse?"

"He bolted in the timber when I dismounted to climb a tree and get my bearings," replied Warner.

"I see. Carrying the plunder, too. Well, he'll turn up, maybe. That was a dirty trick, Ralph—shooting the old man in the back.

"No—never mind; no remarks. We've got to get out of here. The fire's whipping up in mighty fast shape. I'm not going to take any chances with you in a time like this; turn around and clasp your hands behind you—that's it."

Boyer snapped on the handcuffs.

"Get up there in the front of the saddle," Boyer commanded. "Colonel can carry the two of us out of this, I guess."

But when they had mounted and Boyer turned the horse toward the east he saw to his dismay that the fire had already crept along the western slope of the divide and they were cut off in that direction.

"Jupiter! We've got to head north!" he exclaimed as he drove home his spurs.

 WITH the fire now raging to the south and east of them, and escape in the west cut off by the high limestone cliffs, it became a question of racing northward to the apex of the triangle, where they could hope to gain the divide where it joined with the cliffs and go down the other side to Band Creek and safety.

"They back-fired on this side of the divide," said Ralph as he leaned forward in the front of the saddle to hold his place.

"I guess they did," agreed Boyer. "Wanted

her to burn off before the top-fire came along and blew over into the big timber 't'other side. My——! She's coming like an express train."

Burning branches and huge fagots hurling sparks in all directions swirled by them in the wind, and the air was so thick with resinous smoke that they nearly smothered in the intervals between the puffs of clearer atmosphere.

Through pure accident they came suddenly upon a spring at the edge of the timber and Boyer, dismounting, threw off his coat, and, cramming Warner's gun into a trouser pocket, dipped the coat in the water and threw it, wringing wet, to his prisoner.

"Tie it around your face," he shouted, catching the reins just in time to prevent the horse from bolting.

He ripped off his woolen shirt, soaked it in the water and tied it about his face under his eyes, which were red and smarting.

Once more they plunged forward in the lee of the cliffs. Not once did a favorable place for an ascent of the limestone show along the sheer face of the rock wall. The flames to their right came nearer and leaped ahead of them. Sparks and burning embers multiplied, while overhead marched the never-ending columns of thick smoke.

The flight had become a race with the fire to gain the apex of the triangle, the northern end of the limestone, first.

They swung into the timber at a point where it ranged across their path flat up against the cliffs. When they emerged and plunged across an open space and on to higher ground under the limestone wall Boyer saw the flames racing ahead of them toward the base of the limestone where it met the divide. There was much timber massed in below the apex.

He reined in the horse. The animal had long since begun to show the effects of the smoke and of the double load he carried.

"We're trapped!" shouted Boyer above the roar of the flames.

Then he dismounted. From a pocket he brought forth a key-ring, selected a small key and unlocked the handcuffs that held Warner's hands and arms behind his back.

"A jury has the right to pass judgment on your life," said Boyer in his ear; "but I haven't. It's each man for himself."

With that Boyer grasped the reins of his horse's bridle and started north, leading the animal. There was just a chance—a slight shadow of a chance—that he could get through to the top of the limestone on this side of the dense pine growth below the apex before the fire reached there. But for once the animal objected to being led.

"All right," cried Boyer, looking at the beast with reddened, smarting eyes. "No time to argue now. I'll take time to take the saddle off and then you can go it alone."

He started to loosen the cinches when Warner came running up.

"Come on! Ride him—I'll show you the way out."

He started back toward the place where they had passed the pine growth which ranged up against the limestone.

"In there," he shouted, pointing. "You missed it. I knew that place was there and was heading for it. Come on!"

Boyer shot one hasty glance backward where the flames were licking at the timber under the point where the limestone and divide came together—where he had hoped to escape—and, leaping into the saddle, urged the horse along behind Warner.

Warner led the way into the pine growth, and Boyer noticed something he hadn't seen before—a trickle of running water. Even as he saw it Warner turned west and they entered a narrow cañon which seemed virtually a gash in the limestone wall.

Boyer had to dismount. The horse, with reins wrapped loosely about the saddle-horn, followed Warner as he climbed up the steep bed of the narrow creek, hardly a yard wide. Boyer brought up the rear.

In half an hour they emerged upon the flat tableland that reached westward from the flat top of the limestone cliffs; where the air was clear and pure, and the afternoon sun was only partly obscured by the smoke veil drifting upward from the fire below.



FOR a long moment they sat and rested. "Ralph," said Boyer finally, "how does it come you didn't tell me about that way out when we passed it?"

"Because I was wearing the bracelets," said Warner simply.

"And if I hadn't taken them off you'd have let us get caught in the fire?" asked Boyer, surprised.

"Oh, — I knew you'd take 'em off when you saw it looked like we couldn't get out," said Warner, rolling a cigaret.

"How'd you know that?"

"Because you're a man, even if you are the law," said Ralph, putting a light to his smoke.

Boyer considered this. He was in a difficult position. Wild Ralph still was his prisoner, though he was not now adorned with handcuffs. But Warner had just saved his life.

Warner had had ample opportunity to sneak back to the pine growth and escape by way of the narrow cañon hidden by the timber without Boyer's knowing where he had gone. Just as easy as not he could have left Boyer to his fate. But he hadn't chosen to do this. And he was under arrest charged tentatively with murder!

"Look here, Boyer," said Warner, slowly exhaling thin streams of smoke from his nostrils. "Don't think I'm tryin' to pull the innocent;

but what time and where was Baltry killed?"

"I don't know your game, Ralph, but I'll answer your questions. He was killed early yesterday morning—before daylight—in his cabin on Black Mountain. Shot in the back."

"Why? Any reason?"

"A sack of gold dust that I suspect is tied to the saddle of that horse of yours that bolted."

Warner laughed.

"I only hope you find him, Boyer, because the only thing you'll find on my saddle is an old yellow slicker tied on behind."

Boyer remained silent considering his problem.

"I know why you think I did it," continued Warner. "Because I lost my pile at the stud tables and lit out before daylight."

Boyer nodded.

"It looks bad, Ralph."

Warner pointed over the edge of the limestone where the smoke rolled upward from the triangle, now a seething mass of flames.

"I could have left you down there in that," Boyer.

"I might have got out some way," Boyer evaded.

"Never! You couldn't have made it if you'd got to the upper end before the fire did. It's as bad up there as it is south of here on this side. I know this place in here like a book. Crossed here many a time. You couldn't have got out."

"Well, then, if that's the case, why didn't you leave me down there and sneak away?"

"Because now you'll listen to reason," said Warner earnestly. "If I'd pointed the way out when I had those bracelets on I'd have gone to the Falls to stand trial. I didn't know what it was about—that's the truth; but I wasn't taking any chances just the same."

"I knew you'd cut me loose when you thought we didn't have much of a chance. An' I got you out of there because I knew you'd listen to reason and because I wouldn't deliberately kill a man without giving him a chance."

Boyer shot a quick glance at him.

"Well, Ralph, what was your idea in hitting out of Kingsville the way you did?"

"I was making straight for Smith River the quickest way I could get there. It's my old hangout. I've got an uncle with a ranch over there who stakes me now and then when I go broke. Sometimes I get lucky again and pay it back the way I get it, and sometimes I have to work it out. It all depends."

"And you was beating it over there to get a fresh stake?"

"Exactly. And listen here, Boyer; you probably never saw me before; just knew me by description and the reputation they give me down there in Kingsville. But I knew you, like everybody in these hills knows you; and you've got a reputation for being square and knowing men. All right. You don't think I'd pull you

out of that fire or look you square in the eyes if I'd shoot a man in the back, do you?

"Boyer, that makes me sore. I don't mind being arrested; I've been arrested before. And I don't mind being accused of a legitimate murder—I've killed a man in my time. But I gave him a chance to draw, by _____. Boyer, I wouldn't shoot a man in the back."

Boyer gazed steadily into the man's eyes.

"You was in a mix-up over on Smith River last Winter, wasn't you, Ralph?" he asked quietly.

"A shooting scrap in a card game. A man accused me of mixing the deal on purpose, called me a name and went for his gun. I might have mixed the deal; but I wasn't what he called me and I don't intend to let no man beat me to his gun if I can help it. I shot him in the shoulder—in front."

Warner's eyes did not waver as Boyer looked at him.

"If you didn't kill old man Baltry have you got any idea who did?" asked Boyer.

"None at all."

"That makes it harder, Ralph," said Boyer at length. "Here's your gun. I've got to be traveling."

 BOYER stayed that night with a sheep-herder on the flats below the triangle six miles north of where he and Warner had escaped from the burning timber. By the light of the camp-fire he studied the list of the men who had lost heavily in the poker game the day preceding the death of Rand Baltry.

He was satisfied that Warner had not turned the trick. He knew too that he could get Warner again if he wanted him.

Then he began to reason; to put himself in the other fellow's place. If Warner had so chosen he could have held the old man up, taken his gold and fled without killing his victim.

But dead men do not disclose the identity of those who rob them. Thus Rand Baltry's lifeless body could not point out the man who had taken the gold dust—even though that man had remained in Kingsville.

Early in the dawn Boyer was on his way. He went east, followed down to Band Creek, crossed the creek and headed back up the trail to Kingsville.

The fire had burned itself out in the triangle. Most of the smoke pall had lifted. The sun shone brightly over the timbered ridges in the east and slanted across the rocky ridge of Ten-derfoot Divide. A turquoise sky arched above the glistening peaks.

It was late afternoon when he reached Kingsville. He put up his horse and went immediately to Harrigan's place. There was a crowd of men before the bar.

"Did you find Warner?" asked a chorus of voices.

"I did," said Boyer.

The men looked at each other significantly as Boyer went to speak with Harrigan at the end of the bar.

"Took him down to Milford probably," said one.

"And now he's gone to tell Harrigan that the lid's got to be kept down tight," said another.

"No need for him to do that," sneered Pete Burcher; "the sheriff's already done that. This town's a dead one now. I'm off for Canady where they's something doing, tomorrow."

Harrigan walked around from behind the bar as Boyer left the place.

"Let's have some music, boys," he suggested, and started the old-fashioned box phonograph that occupied a place on a table before the bar. It was of the type similar to hundreds which are used in the high hills to while away lonely hours.

The men became jovial and tune after tune was played, mostly rag-time, while the men drank and joked and quietly discussed the supposed capture of Wild Ralph Warner.

After a time Boyer reentered the place and joined the men at the bar. His keen glance quickly roved over those present.

"It's a long chance," he whispered to Harrigan as he ordered refreshment for all present.

As the men were being served Boyer stepped back to the phonograph and changed the record. He started the machine, dropped the sound piece midway of the record and stepped back to the bar. The men were raising their glasses.

In an instant the room was filled with music; not rag-time this, but an anthem—a glorious, old-time anthem that swelled and vibrated with full notes.

The men before the bar paused in startled wonder. Then a glass crashed to the floor.

Pete Burcher turned toward the machine to find himself looking into Boyer's gun.

"Nervous, eh, Pete?" said Boyer quietly. "I thought maybe somebody would recognize that tune. It's the tune old Baltry died by—None of that!"

Boyer's gun cracked and Burcher's right wrist dangled, dripping blood.

"I'll take your gun—that's better. Let's feel you over. Ah! Got it in a money-belt, eh Pete? You should have lit out yesterday when you had a chance. Farewells are costly sometimes. We'll be starting for the Falls now."

On the way out Boyer dropped a crumpled piece of paper upon which were written a number of names. A man picked it up.

"Look here," he said, surprised; "here's a bunch of our names with Warner's and Pete Burcher's at the top. I wonder now if some of us hadn't ought to feel lucky!"