



THRILLING ADVENTURES

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TUMBLE BUG



He seized the paper and plopped it squarely onto the bate-twisted face

You'll Roar at the Mirth-Provoking Antics of Calamity and the Dictionary Kid, Jobless Buckaroos

By SAM BRANT

Author of "Death Rides the Badlands," etc.

CALAMITY and the Dictionary Kid reined up under the palo verde tree. They scrutinized the faded sign nailed to the trunk. Two arrows were painted on it, pointing in opposite directions. Under the arrows was crudely lettered:

JUMP CREEK, 5 MILES.
LOS COCHES, 7 MILES.

Calamity pried the black Stetson

from his baldish head and whacked it dustily against his chaps.

"Me, I'd choose Jump Creek," he said.

"Why?"

"On account of it's cow country. And we need jobs."

"Jobs?"

The Dictionary Kid halted in mopping his shiny, round face with a corner of his red neckerchief: "We just

resigned two good positions at cow employment, didn't we? With that Scotchman back at the Horned-O?"

Calamity shook his head dolefully.

"Quit? Heck, old MacDuffy fired us! On account of when he told you his sorrel colt needing shoeing, you thought he said shooting."

"I NEVER could understand old MacDuffy's talk. He oughta engaged me as a tutor instead of a plain cow-hand. Anyhow, let's enjoy ourselves and forget about jobs for a spell. I crave some simple restorative to rinse the Horned-O dust outa my system. Mebbe some saloon at Los Coches will cash our checks—"

"Check," corrected Calamity. "Just one. Old Mac hung onto yores to pay for the colt. That's something else you forgot."

"I still think that tight-fisted old Scotchman said shoot," declared the Dictionary Kid. "He would never of got thirty dollars for that colt any other way."

"Well, this ain't no good place to linger in," declared Calamity with an uneasy look at the sky. "It's going to cut loose and rain, *my pronto*. This here gully will be bank high."

The Kid swung off his horse, dropped the reins, and stretched out on the cool sand.

"Then wake me up when the flood comes along. If we gotta plunge into toil right off again, I aim to restore my tissues first."

The Kid pillowed his head on a boulder, closed his eyes, and was soon gently snoring. But his midday siesta was rudely interrupted. He sat up suddenly with a wakening snort and fanned something off his face.

He stared at the big, black beetle he had knocked to the sand. Then he cast a suspicious eye at Calamity, who was leaning against the *palo*

verde, contemplating the unlovely scenery with a sad eye.

"Mebbeso you parked this critter on my proboscis," the Kid said suspiciously. "Just to rouse me up."

Calamity shrugged one shoulder in denial.

"I wouldn't have nothing to do with a tumble bug," he declared. "They're plenty unlucky."

"Tumble bug?" The Dictionary Kid picked up a twig and prodded the sprawling insect. "Calamity, I'm plumb astonished at your ignorance of inverted bugology. This ain't a tumble bug. His proper name is *pinacate* beetle."

"I reckon you learnt that when we guided that bug-hunting perffessor down in Mexico that time."

"I learned something else. This here pertickler bug is a valuable direction-finder. Just flip him up in the air and whichever way he heads when he comes down is the way you oughta travel, too. It's an old Mex custom."

"Well, give him a flip then. Time we was movin' along."

The Dictionary Kid gave the clumsy insect a toss with the twig. It performed a neat double somersault and lit in the sand, head-first. It remained there, ostrich-style, its hind legs kicking feebly.

Calamity was rewarding it with solemn attention.

"Gosh, now!" he said finally, just what d'ye make outa that?"

The Kid grinned cheerfully. "Reckon it means we oughta stay right here a spell," he declared. He reclined again, head on the boulder. A few moments and he was snoring peacefully again.

CR-RACK! A pistol shot echoed flatly from the boulders up on the ridge. A bullet thudded into the sand, inches from the Dictionary Kid's head, in the exact spot where the tumble bug had been do-

ing his balancing act. The bug had vanished now. All that remained was a slug furrow in the sand.

Calamity promptly jack-knifed behind the tree. The Dictionary Kid flipped over on his belly with lizard agility, his Colt leveled across the boulder which a split second before had been his pillow.

"Gosh a-mighty!" Calamity's voice was a hoarse whisper. "It sure's lucky that bug wasn't on yore nose then!"

Cr-rack! A second shot clipped leaves from the palo verde. They sifted down on the flattened Kid.

"Somebody must of mistook us for two other fellers," said Calamity. "Look, there he is now! Up among them rocks!"

As he spoke, a rider burst into view, spurring hard, and hitting for the canyon trail that Calamity and the Dictionary Kid had just descended. He was waving a six-shooter in one hand. The other gripped a canvas bag that dangled from his saddle horn. He wore a black Stetson like Calamity's. He was of similar build, tall and slim, with bottle-neck shoulders.

The distance was nearly two hundred yards. The Kid coarse-sighted across the boulder and squeezed. The rider stiffened. His left hand left the saddle horn. He gripped the injured member under his gun-arm as he vanished over a rise. The canvas bag fell.

THE Dictionary Kid sprang to his feet, captured the reins, and vaulted to leather. He ascended the ridge at a run.

He came back with the canvas bag. He dropped it to the sand at Calamity's feet. It gave forth a pleasant, metallic clink. The Kid's eyes bulged excitedly.

"There's been a holdup!" he gasped. "Look at the name on that bag!"

The canvas bag was lettered with the name: "Los Coches Bank."

"Mebbeso we'll never have to work no more!" babbled the Kid. "Mebbeso we're millionaires and don't know it!"

Calamity clawed open the drawstrings of the money bag and peered inside. Then he looked up at the Kid, his long face longer than usual.

"There was a holdup, alright enough. But not at no bank."

"What you driving at?"

CALAMITY dipped a hand into the bag and let a handful of the contents filter sadly through his fingers.

"Just iron washers, savvy? That murderous citizen must of held up a hardware store."

Spang! A third shot came from the ridge, farther down. In the same instant a hole ripped through the crown of Calamity's black Stetson. The hat jumped, then tilted down over his left eye. A voice roared down from the ridge:

"Poke 'em up, *hombres!*"

In unison Calamity and the Dictionary Kid stretched their arms above their heads. Then the voice came again, triumphantly:

"C'mon, boys! I got 'em cold! Divvyin' up the loot!"

The Kid twisted in his saddle and saw a rider pause on the ridge, brandishing a saddle carbine. A half dozen others, on sweat-lathered horses, topped the rise and started down toward the *palo verde*.

Calamity's tilted hat shut off his view. "Who-all is it?" he asked.

"A large gent with pop eyes and a longhorn mustache," said the Kid. "He has a star pinned on his vest and he looks plumb irritated about something."

"At a rough guess," groaned Calamity, "I'd say it was the sheriff. I always knowed tumble bugs was unlucky!"

The big man reached them. He

knocked Calamity's hat off with his gun barrel.

"It's our man, boys. Black hat and all. Must of had this other jigger waitin' fer him here!"

One of the grim-faced posse dismounted.

"Good leather, Sheriff! Let's load up the money and head back."

"Head back for where?" asked the Dictionary Kid. "If I ain't inquisitive?"

"Fer Los Coches!" rumbled the sheriff. "An' jail!"

"Jail? Say, this is plumb foolish!" protested Calamity.

"It surer'n blazes is!" The new speaker was a crooked-nosed man with a strangely high-pitched voice. The Kid pricked up his ears. He had heard that voice somewhere before. "The hyena is right!" the crooked-nosed man went on. "They ain't no need to jail neither one o' them! How about it, gents?"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"That *palo verde* looks big enough," decided the man with the crooked nose. "Now, who's got a good, strong rope?"

"Hold on a minute," spoke up the Kid. "We're just a coupla buckaroos outa jobs. Don't tell me you string up men around here for bein' outa jobs!"

THE sheriff growled at the crooked-nosed man.

"Don't go off half-cocked, Badger! I aim to question these *hombres*!"

Badger was evidently anxious that no questions be asked or answered. He flung a borrowed loop over Calamity's shoulders. As he did so, the Kid kicked out with a booted toe. With a shrill yowl of pain, Badger grabbed his newly-damaged nose and tumbled back against his horse. The other man on the ground swore and went for his gun.

Calamity hit him on the jaw, knocking him sprawling.

The sheriff spurred between them.

"Keep yore shirts on, everybody!" he shouted. He swung the saddle gun commandingly. "If there's any shootin' around here, I'll be doin' it!"

The posse subsided sullenly. The sheriff turned to the Kid.

"Now start talkin', you! Talk fast, like you ride!"

"We never rode fast, nowhere," said the Kid. "Take a look-see at our means o' locomotion if you're skeptical."

"**H**E means our hosses," explained Calamity. "You notice they ain't sweated none, like yores. The *hombre* yo're after fogged past here. We swapped lead with him. He dropped that bag and sort of hurried along."

The rider Calamity had knocked down scrambled to his feet and thrust a hand in the canvas bag. He scooped out a clinking heap of the iron washers.

"Well, I'll be a—!" he began.

"Somebody search this tallish gent," interrupted the sheriff. "Mebbe it's a trick. Mebbe he's got the cash on him."

The man rose from the bag and went through Calamity's pockets. From the vest he produced a folded slip of yellow paper. He handed it up to the sheriff. The sheriff unfolded it and a puzzled frown came to his face.

"A Horned-O pay check," he said, "signed by old MacDuffy."

"Dated when?" Badger snapped.

"Yestiddy!"

The Dictionary Kid grinned.

"Sheriff, it looks like a old-fashioned necktie party has been plumb ruined. Spoiling all Mister Badger's notions of a good time." As he spoke, the Kid's eyes studied the gentleman with the buckled nose. The face, as well as the treble voice, was hauntingly familiar.

The posse was silent for a long

moment. One of the men finally spoke.

"Came almighty near bein' too hasty, looks like," he said in a sheepish manner.

"Whereat did that other jigger head for?" the sheriff asked.

"Up canyon," the Kid told him.

The sheriff turned his horse, then hesitated. A dark screen of rain was veiling the hills now. There was an oppressiveness about the heat that portended a drenching shower over the mesa land.

"Ain't no use," opined the sheriff. "His trail will be gully-washed in five minutes more. Hope you and yore pardner don't bear no harsh notions about our citizens. On account o' what almost took place just now."

"Los Coches must be a mighty moral community," said the Dictionary Kid, "when they crave to string up folks for stealing buggy washers."

"It ain't that," said the sheriff. "Whoever stuck up the bank this morning took real money. Something all-fired funny here."

The Dictionary Kid shot another look at Badger.

"Mebbeso we better dangle along back to Los Coches with you anyhow, Sheriff," he suggested.

"All-fired glad if you would. Better we make tracks outa here before the storm rips down."

"My sentiments, exactly," declared Calamity, getting to his horse and swinging aboard.

NINE men took the back trail for Los Coches where seven had started in pursuit of the black-hatted outlaw. Cutting sheets of rain slashed them, gutting the trail to yellow rivulets of mud. Calamity and the Dictionary Kid rode stirrup to stirrup.

The Kid spoke his vague thoughts concerning the now silent and sullen Badger.

"I shore met up with that jasper

with the sprung ol' factory organ somewheres before."

"Me, I was thinkin' the same," nodded Calamity.

The two of them furtively studied Badger. Finally the Kid uttered a pleased ejaculation.

"I got it, Calamity! Lessen I'm mighty bad mistook, Badger is the jasper who held us up when we was comin' outa Mexico that time. With the bug-chasin' perfessor!"

Calamity whacked his thigh.

"By jingo, yuh're right! It's him! Funny I fergot. Bet he felt sort o' put out when he opened them specimen cases he stole, and found they contained nothin' but pickled grasshopper and such. Including tumble—I mean *pinacate* bugs."

THE Kid spurred up alongside the sheriff.

"This here handsome an' amiable Mister Badger a reg'lar member o' your community, Sheriff?" he inquired genially.

"Been in town about a year," the sheriff said. "Funny thing, too. He runs the hardware store."

The Kid whistled.

"Reckon he'll reward us for returnin' these here buggy washers?"

Badger overheard. He rode up, snarling.

"What's all this hocus-pocus about a reward?" he asked nastily.

"Nothin' much," answered the Kid. "Only I'm beginnin' to think about bugs again. You int'rested in bugs, Mister Badger?"

The expression on Badger's face, as he muttered wordlessly and fell back in the column of horsemen, puzzled the sheriff.

By the time the posse reached Los Coches, the sky had cleared and the sun beat down with its usual dazzling brilliance. Los Coches had little to boast of in the way of civic beauty.

But there was a false-fronted build-

ing on a dusty corner that gladdened the eye of the Kid.

"Unless my vision is plumb impaired," he remarked, "that edifice beyond the hitch-rack is a—bar!"

"An' we all shore need a drink," agreed the sheriff. "It makes a feller's clothes dry faster."

Calamity failed to be cheered by the prospect.

"Me, I'm sure hopin' you don't put on no performance like last time we was up to Flagstaff," he told the Kid.

"Fear not," spoke the Dictionary Kid. "Though a good man tarry in a vile place, his heart is immune to the depravities of environment."

"What's that?" asked the sheriff.

"It's a bad sign," Calamity predicted.

"Well, let's light." The sheriff swung off at the hitch-rail. "It's a vile place, just like you say. Badger owns it, along with the hardware store. If there was another o-asis in town, I'd see this one get fly-blowed to hell and back before I went in it."

"Mister Badger ain't one o' your favorites, then?" ventured the Kid.

"He ain't nobody's favorite," the sheriff said.

HE entered the saloon, the posse following.

At the bar, the Kid bellied up to Badger.

"Mister, if I say I'm sorry about prodding your nose, mebbeso you can cash a Horned-O paycheck," he said.

"I can!" Badger spat venomously. "But I won't!"

The sheriff slapped a ten-spot on the bar.

"Forgit yore check, gents. This here town owes you a few drinks."

The Kid's thirst had strangely vanished. He stepped back from the bar.

"On second thoughts," he said quietly, "mebbeso I better abstain right now."

He started for the street. The sheriff elbowed Calamity.

"Yore pardner don't hit me as no owl-hoot troublemaker, like you let on."

"Just wait," Calamity said sadly. "An' make mine rye."

IN something like fifteen minutes, the Dictionary Kid returned. There was a light of elation in his eye. He carried two thin, black metal cases with leather handles.

Badger's eyes went dark at the sight of him. He backed clear of the crowd as the Kid swung the two cases on the bar.

"What's comin' off?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"You ever see these anywheres before?" asked the Kid.

"Nope. What—?"

"I found 'em on a back shelf in Mister Badger's hardware store." Badger was backing toward the door as the Kid spoke. "Yessir, Sheriff, these here specimen cases int'rested me plenty."

Calamity whacked the bar.

"On account of they bein' the bug luggage what was stole from the professor down in Mexico!" he exclaimed.

"Exac'ly," said the Kid. "But I reckon they ain't filled with bugs no more. They're too blame heavy."

Badger was at the door now. He ripped out an oath and a hand flashed toward his holster. But out of the corner of his eye, the Dictionary Kid had been watching him. The Kid's hand had strayed, with apparent aimlessness, to a sheet of sticky fly paper at the end of the bar by the window.

He now seized the well-populated, glue-like mess, whirled, leaped, and plopped it squarely onto Badger's hate-twisted face. His other hand knocked Badger's six-gun to the floor just as it roared and thudded a leaden slug into the bar.

Badger spluttered and clawed desperately at his face.

"Thunderation!" roared the sheriff. "What-fer'd you do that?"

"To cover up Mister Badger's physiognomy," grinned the Kid, "before somebody else up and reckernized it. Less I'm plumb wrong, it's good for a thousand dollars reward down on the Border!"

An amazed shout from the men at the bar caused the stunned sheriff to whirl around. Calamity had pried open one of the specimen cases. It no longer contained rare pickled insects. It was stuffed, instead, with a bulging assortment of cash.

"Migosh!" the sheriff blurted. "There she is, the missin' bank money!"

He plunged savagely at Badger then, and ripped the sticky fly paper from the long-suffering Badger countenance.

"I savvy the whole play now!" the lawman victoriously declared. "Yuh was in cahoots with that jigger in the black hat, wasn't yuh, Badger? Then after he pulled the bank job, yuh up an' doublecrossed yore own side-kick. I always had yuh figured thataway, Badger! Yuh gave him the washers and hung onto the real *dinero* yore ownself."

The sheriff then backed Badger, wincing under the threat of the bigger man's fists, into a corner.

"I allus figgered yuh had a owl-hoot record somewheres," he continued. "But this yere young trail-ridin' jasper was too plumb smart fer yuh." He turned to the Dictionary Kid. "Feller, I knowed you and yore

pardner was smart soon as I saw that Horned-O paycheck. Old MacDuffy, he don't let many fellers collect a entire month's wages from him, the old buzzard!"

The Dictionary Kid's complacent grin vanished.

"I don't quite foller you, Sheriff," he admitted.

"Yuh don't? Why, that Scotchman ribs his help outa everything that's comin' to 'em, most always. Lucky to git away with their pants! Huh, MacDuffy mighty near horn-swoggled me in a hoss trade awhile back. He had a colt he tried to swap me—a spavinned, windbroke, stifled, locoed young hoss with fire in his eye and none in his tail!"

THE Dictionary Kid swallowed hard and grabbed at the bar.

"Didn't happen to be a little sorrel with silver mane and tail, did it?" he asked feebly.

"It shore was! That was the hoss!"

Catching Calamity's eye, the Dictionary Kid made a weak attempt at a grin.

"I plumb told you old MacDuffy said shoot!" he said.

Calamity took a hitch at his gun belt and started out of the saloon. The Dictionary Kid followed.

"Hey!" yipped the sheriff. "Where-at yuh gents a-headin' now? This yere town owes yuh a whoppin' big debt o' gratitude!"

The Dictionary Kid paused in the doorway.

"Yeah, and old MacDuffy owes me thirty bucks!" he said. "I'm goin' to collect that first!"