



Stearn's guns were blazing and Danker crashed to earth

MERRY CHRISTMAS, RANGER!

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

Jim Stearn's holiday gift was to be trapped by a pair of outlaws—but he brought his enemies to a showdown!

THREE days before Christmas, Ranger Jim Stearn rode into the little Border village of Rioville in the middle of the afternoon.

The relentless sun was blazing down from a saffron sky, and black heat waves were dancing across the parched land and drifting toward the sea of chaparral along the muddy river. A hot breeze swirled clouds of dust and litter around the squatty adobe buildings, dogs sweltered as they

slept in spots of shade, and only a few human beings were in sight.

Even Jim Stearn, who had been born and reared in this country, felt wilted. His shirt was soaked with perspiration, and beads of sweat trickled down his face and along his throat beneath his sodden neckcloth, which he had pulled up to his eyes to keep the fine dust out of his nostrils and mouth.

"Merry Christmas!" he muttered, as he

blinked the sweat out of his eyes and looked up at the burning sky. “ ‘Cordin’ to story books, it means snow and sleighs, jingle bells and earmuffs and mittens. Rosy-cheeked kids scootin’ around on sleds. But it’s Christmas every place, I reckon. It’s the spirit that counts.”

Jim Stearn was hoping his stop in Rioville this time would be a short one so he could hurry on to Smoky Mesa, fifteen miles west. He had journeyed to Rioville on orders to contact there his superior officer, Captain Bedlow, for a conference concerning “Lobo” Anson and Ed Danker, notorious outlaws.

Captain Bedlow was finishing an inspection tour along the Border and would be in a hurry to get to Austin in time for Christmas. Jim Stearn was in fully as much of a hurry to get to Smoky Mesa and spend Christmas there.

This should be the best Christmas yet for him, he thought as his lathered pony loped along easily in a steady, mile-covering pace. He felt in his waistband pocket to make sure the little box was safe. The box held a modest engagement ring obtained from a mail order house. He expected to put the ring on the proper finger of Inez Chester, whose father owned the general merchandise store in Smoky Mesa.

Stearn had known Inez for years, and there never had been another girl for him or another man for her. A recent small legacy left him by an uncle made it possible now for Stearn to marry. He had decided to quit the rangers and buy an interest in Chester’s store.

As he rode nearer the plaza in Rioville, Stearn gave a quick glance at the hitch rails. He did not see Captain Bedlow’s big sorrel tethered there. He hoped the captain would arrive soon, so he could make his report and get instructions, then ride on to Smoky Mesa in the cool of the evening.

SEVERAL horses were tied to the long hitch rail on the shady side of the adobe cantina building, but Stearn recognized none of them. He stopped his pony at the watering trough beside the blacksmith shop and let him drink. He could hear the blacksmith snoring inside as he took his siesta. When the pony had refreshed himself, Stearn rode on.

He was recalling what he had learned about Lobo Anson and Ed Danker. Captain Bedlow would be in a hurry to get a complete report. The two outlaws were brush poppers who committed depredations on both sides of the Mexican line. The rangers were eager to catch them and make them stretch rope, and the Mexican rurales were just as eager.

Anson and Danker were wanton killers as well as thieves. Dead-or-alive notices concerning them had been posted for some time. But they had managed so far to elude capture. That they had some secret hideout with an abundance of provisions and water seemed certain. At intervals they rode into some Border village, bought or simply took what supplies they wanted, and rode away.

Stearn decided to tie his pony to the hitch rail in front of the store, where there was a patch of shade. A child yelled shrilly, another answered, and Stearn grinned. He had been spotted already. It would be his job to buy stick candy for all the kids in the village. But he didn’t mind that. He could make the youngsters happy with a few cents, and he liked kids.

Running and screeching welcomes, they converged upon him from all directions until about a dozen were on the walk in front of the store. Stearn dropped his neckcloth and dismounted to tie his pony.

“Chrismus gif’! Chrismus gif’!” one of them chirped.

“So you want Christmas gifts, huh?”

Stearn asked.

“Been dood dirl,” a barefooted tot of five told him.

“Trouble is,” Stearn said, “you’ve got me mixed up with Santa Claus. I’m only a ranger who rides a pony. Santa Claus drives reindeer to a big sled, I’ve heard tell, and the sled is heaped with presents. He’s a fat hombre with white whiskers, and I’m tall and skinny and ain’t got any whiskers at all. I reckon you’re makin’ a mistake.”

Smiles fled from the young faces before him to be replaced by looks of disappointment. Stearn couldn’t endure that.

“But I forgot to tell you somethin’ important,” he hurried on. “Santa Claus made me his deputy. He swore me in all reg’lar, and he told me, ‘Jim Stearn, you’re my deputy to ride to Rioville and buy stick candy for the kids there. They’re good little buttons, and they’ve got to be sweetened up some. Do the job right, or you’ll be hearin’ from me about it!’ So here I am, and I reckon we’d better go right into the store and get it done.”

They surrounded him, some jumping up and down and clapping their hands, others clinging to him. Stearn started with them across the walk and toward the door of the store. One of the small boys pulled the screen door open and held it back. In the midst of the jabbering, tugging children, he strode into the store out of the blazing sunshine.

And he stepped into trouble.

Coming in out of the blinding sun glare, Stearn had his vision distorted for a moment. He started blinking. In that instant, a man stepped in close on either side of him, and he felt two gun muzzles jabbing against his body.

“Step right in, ranger!” a gruff voice said.

“Hands in the air—high! Make a bad move, and it’ll be yore last. We saw yuh ridin’ in and decided we’d better handle yuh.”

On one side of him was Lobo Anson and on the other side Ed Danker. Anson had been doing the talking.

Stearn’s breath seemed to catch and stand still. His heart suddenly hammered at his ribs. The children around him were letting go and scurrying along the aisle of the store, frightened, seeking cover. Stearn could not have made a move without getting blasted, and possibly without some of the children being hurt.

Stearn put up his hands slowly, blinked to get the sun glare out of his eyes. He saw the old storekeeper standing behind the counter with his hands above his head, his eyes bulging. Two grain sacks stuffed with supplies and tied in the middle to be slung across saddles, were on the counter. Stearn guessed the two outlaws had come to Rioville during the siesta hour to replenish their supplies without payment.

“Well?” Stearn asked.

“Stand back against the wall!” Lobo Anson ordered, gruffly.

As Stearn backed the few feet necessary, Ed Danker got the ranger’s guns out of their holsters. Unarmed, Stearn was helpless to make a try at changing the situation.

While Ed Danker held a gun jammed against Stearn’s side, Lobo Anson searched him. He took what little money Stearn had, laughed as he took off his badge of office and pocketed it. And finally he found the little box in the waistband pocket, opened it and whistled.

“A ring!” Lobo Anson said. “Goin’ to give it to yore girl, huh? I know a little Mex girl below the Border who’ll be happy to get this.” He pocketed it.

STEARN'S face was white with rage, but he said nothing. Lobo Anson stood in front of him, looking him up and down.

"We don't like any kind of law officers," Anson said. "We feel like blastin' 'em all. It's right easy to kill a law man. But that sorta makes heroes of 'em. Now, in your case, I've been doin' some thinkin'—"

Anson scratched his thick beard and glanced at Danker, and the latter laughed.

"I reckon," Anson said, "it'd hurt a lawman more to belittle him than to kill him. Law men think they're right important, and it hurts 'em right bad to make fun of 'em. These here handcuffs I took out of yore pocket, Stearn—wonder how yuh'd like to wear 'em yoreself?"

The children were whimpering as the outlaws prodded Stearn outside with their gun muzzles. They made the old storekeeper come along. The handcuffs were snapped on one of Stearn's wrists. They made him put his arms on either side of one of the posts supporting the wooden awning, and snapped on the other cuff.

"It'll take yuh some time to get loose, I reckon," Lobo Anson said. "This here'll give everybody a good laugh."

While Danker remained on guard, Anson strode back into the store and got the two sacks of supplies. The outlaws' horses were at the hitch rail, and they fastened the sacks to their saddles and mounted.

"W've got guns enough and don't need yores," Anson said. He broke Stearn's guns and scattered the cartridges, then tossed the weapons aside into the dirt. "Yuh can load up, when yuh get loose, and come after us if yuh feel like it. Mebby yuh'd better not, though."

They laughed as they used their spurs and rode away, going toward the distant chaparral where undoubtedly they knew all the outlaw trails.

Men began emerging from the buildings when they heard the children screeching. Stearn's eyes were blazing in a white face.

"They took the handcuff key," he told the old storekeeper. "Have somebody get the blacksmith so he can get me loose."

The blacksmith came hurrying. The men and women of the town gathered to watch him work. The children, still frightened, hung around and wondered whether they would get candy now. Their hero had been overthrown, and they didn't know quite how to accept the fact.

Stearn knew the story of this would travel along the Border. A few range riders were in town, and they would spread word. Stearn could expect nothing else. He had allowed two badly-wanted outlaws to take him without a struggle, to relieve him of his badge and guns, his money and the engagement ring he had bought, and make him prisoner with his own handcuffs.

He was silent and white-faced as the blacksmith cut the chain between the handcuffs and then began working to get them off, using hammer and chisel while Stearn put his wrist on a rock to let him work.

And as this was going on, Captain Bedlow rode into the plaza on his big sorrel and stopped in front of the group at the store.

Stearn told the captain the story as the blacksmith worked. When he was freed, he walked aside with Bedlow.

"I'm right sorry this happened, Jim," the captain said. "I can understand exactly how it was. Know how you was afraid the kids would get hurt, too. But it was careless of you to walk in like that and not be ready for anything that might happen, especially in this part of the country."

"I suppose I was a mite careless," Stearn confessed.

"This is somethin' bigger than either

of us, Jim. Ranger prestige must be upheld. We can't have folks laughin' at us. I'm goin' to suspend you, Jim, and we'll hold a hearin' at Headquarters after New Year's. I'd ask you to hand over your badge — but Lobo Anson has that, huh?"

Stearn's face crimsoned. "What am I goin' to do?" he asked.

"Well, now, I'm goin' to speak to you as a friend. Been talkin' like your superior officer up to now. You've already given out that you're aimin' to resign and get married. If yore resignation was handed in to take effect the first of the year, there wouldn't be any hearin'."

"But I can't resign now," Stearn protested. "Not with this cloud hangin' over me. Men'd say I was a coward and got kicked out."

"What are yuh aimin' to do, Jim?"

"I'm goin' after Lobo Anson and Ed Danker," Stearn declared. "I'm suspended as a ranger, but them dead-or-alive notices are for the public. I can go after 'em as a private citizen."

"That's right. They made for the Border, huh?"

"That's the way they headed when they left here, but they could have traveled any direction after gettin' into the chaparral."

"It's a safe bet they always get across the river," Captain Bedlow said. "They've got a hideout on the Mexican side, and some people over there probably help 'em. I'll send word out to some of the ranches for riders and form a posse. We may get on their trail. We can send word to the rurales on the Mex side to keep their eyes open."

"I think their hideout is on this side," Stearn declared. "I've had some ideas about it. Mind if I follow my own trail?"

"You're a private citizen now, Jim. Trail in any direction you like."

"If I meet up with 'em, I'll get my

badge and my girl's ring, and bring both of them outlaws in, dead or alive—or I won't be back."

"They took yore money, didn't they?" Bedlow asked. "I'll advance you pocket cash."

"If I bring 'em in—" Stearn hinted.

"It'd wipe this thing that happened here today, Jim, if you brought 'em in. I'd restore you, and then you could resign proper whenever you felt like it. How about your girl—this affair, I mean?"

"She'll stick by me."

"How about her father? Sam Chester is a stiff-necked old coot. Be just like him to say you're a disgrace."

"I'll have to find out about that," Stearn said.

THE storekeeper cooked an evening meal for Stearn and the captain, and they fed and watered their ponies. Stearn loaded his guns the outlaws had tossed aside and put them into their holsters. He gave the storekeeper a dollar and told him to treat the kids to stick candy until the dollar was gone.

Bedlow had sent word to a couple of ranches nearby, and riders would be gathering for the posse. Stearn wanted to get away before they came to town. It was night, with a moon peeping up over the hills when he got into his saddle."

"Care to tell me in which direction you're goin'?" Bedlow asked.

"To Smoky Mesa, first," Stearn replied. "Then I'm goin' to take a look around the cliff dwellers' ruins eight miles north of there."

"What makes you think the outlaws may hide out there?"

"A few hints I've picked up here and there. Either them or maybe some other wanted men."

"Might be the latter."

"Good water in that canyon, and

grazin' for their horses. They could see the country for miles, see anybody approachin'. Anyhow, I'll soon find out."

Stearn rode away through the night, with a cool breeze blowing against his face. A fine Christmas he'd have this year! Why did this thing have to happen to him now?

He lived over every second of that scene in the store, and told himself he could not have acted differently. He certainly didn't think he could have put up a battle, with two gun muzzles jamming against him and a dozen kids in the danger zone.

But he could not deny that he had allowed himself to be caught off guard. No ranger should do that. He could be blamed in that connection, he told himself. And this disgrace of being suspended— But there had been nothing else for Captain Bedlow to do.

He let the pony walk most of the time, only breaking into a lope at intervals. Once he stopped and rested for a couple of hours, and dozed a little. It wasn't such a long distance to Smoky Mesa, and Stearn didn't want to get there before daylight.

It was after dawn when he finally rode down a rocky slope and approached the little town, almost a replica of Rioville. It was a trading post for some ranches back in the canyons, and for a few small mines in the hills, and Chester made a good thing out of his store.

Stearn walked his pony into the town and stopped at the well to let the pony drink. He dismounted and bathed his face and drank deeply himself. Smoke was coming from the adobe huts, and odors of cooking food were in the air.

He heard somebody running over the gravel, and stood up quickly to see Inez Chester.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried, rushing into his arms. "We heard late last night. It's all up

and down the land. What happened?"

"I'm suspended," he told her, flatly.

"They're saying that Lobo Anson and Ed Danker caught you, took your badge and my ring, handcuffed you with your own irons—"

"They caught me off guard," he admitted, looking down and scratching the dirt with the toe of one boot, like a boy ashamed.

"It makes no difference with me, Jim—you know that. But I don't know about Dad. And you—I know how you feel, Jim. You want to wipe this out, and there's only one way to do that."

"I aim to go after Anson and Danker," Stearn told her. "I'll clear myself, or I won't come back."

"Don't talk like that, Jim!"

"Nothin' else to be done," he declared. "I wouldn't let you marry me unless my name was cleared. 'Twouldn't be fair to you. When I get that ranger badge pinned back on me, then we'll get married, and I'll resign the next day, like we intended."

"Inez!" her father bellowed from the front doorway of the store. "You and Jim come here!"

They walked side by side, Stearn leading his pony. Inez went into the store, and Stearn tied his pony to the hitch rail and followed.

Sam Chester was standing behind the counter, his face grim.

"I heard all about it," he told Stearn. "One of the boys from a ranch was kind enough to wake me up late at night to tell me. Rubbin' it in, he thought. I—I don't know exactly how to say it—"

"Suppose you don't say anything," Stearn suggested. "Wait till I come back again—if I do. Now, I want to buy a few cans of grub and some gun shells."

"Where are you headin'?" Chester asked, as he filled the order and put the goods into a sack.

“For the cliff dwellers’ ruins first. But don’t tell anybody. I don’t want others messin’ in this. It’s my right to fight it out alone. Let’s see! Today and tomorrow—and then Christmas. If I’m not back by Christmas night, it’ll mean I’ve guessed wrong—or come to the trail’s end.”

HE TURNED his pony into the brush corral behind the store, went to an empty hut and made himself comfortable, and had a long sleep. It was only eight miles to the ruins, and he didn’t want to travel in the daytime. If the outlaws were holed in at the ruins, they could see him coming, and he would lose the value of surprise.

Inez called him for dinner, and again for supper. It was dusk when Stearn saddled.

“Tomorrow night’s Christmas Eve,” he said. “Thought we’d spend it together, you with my ring on your finger.”

“Never mind, Jim! Things will straighten out,” she replied.

He held her tightly a moment, kissed her, got into the saddle and rode away. He circled west until he was out of sight from the town, in case somebody might be interested in which direction he took.

He kept off the trail which ran to the ruins and clung to the deeper shadows as much as possible after the moon came up, riding slowly and cautiously and listening to even the slightest sound.

The ruins were in a large box canyon, high up under a cliff. They were not so large or spectacular as other similar ruins in the country, and being off the beaten trail were seldom visited by strangers.

Stearn came to the mouth of the canyon about midnight, with the moon high overhead. He loosened his guns in their holsters, sat erect in the saddle and became keenly alert. Even if the outlaws did have their hideout somewhere in the

canyon, Stearn did not expect them to be awake and on guard at night.

There were a hundred places where outlaws might have constructed a hideaway. The canyon had several springs and a little creek with a few trout in it, and good water could be obtained in scores of places. There were small caves, and in the ruins themselves were nooks that could be defended easily.

Stearn had made certain plans. He did not intend to ride up the canyon and be an easy target when daylight came. He went through a sea of brush near the canyon’s mouth, came to a small clearing beside the canyon wall, and there dismounted and unsaddled. He picketed his pony where he could get water and also graze on sparse green growth. He knew the pony could not be seen there by anybody in the ruins, which were around a curve in the canyon.

Taking the sack off his saddle, he opened it and got out a can of beans, one of peaches, and a box of crackers, as well as some cheese. He opened the cans with his knife and made a meal, and washed it down with water from his canteen.

Going to the creek, he filled the canteen again, then went back to hide his saddle and gear. He wasn’t sleepy, after having slept so much during the day, but he rested for an hour before starting on afoot.

It was not difficult keeping in the shadows, for there were ridges of rock and clumps of brush to cut off the light of the moon. In a cleared place where the ground was soft, he saw something that made his heart jump. There was unmistakable evidence that horses had passed that way recently.

Stearn went on until he was directly below the ruins, and there stopped and looked up. The moonlight drifted under the cliff and exposed the habitations of the mysterious people who had lived there

centuries before, and about whose fate nothing authentic had been learned.

He heard no unusual sound. He sniffed the air, as he had been doing since entering the canyon, but caught no scent of smoke or dead embers. On he went, walking slowly, eyes and ears strained, every sense alert.

The canyon was about a mile and a half long, and Stearn went to its end. Now, if the outlaws were holed in here, they were between Stearn and the canyon's mouth. They might watch beyond the mouth of the canyon to see if anybody approached, but would not be expecting trouble from the rear.

This would be a slow game, he knew. If he discovered his quarry, he would have to stalk them carefully, wait for an advantageous moment before jumping them. He would have two wanton killers with whom to deal.

Dawn came to the canyon and found Stearn high on one of the canyon walls in hiding behind some brush. The wind was blowing away from him, and he would not have been able to smell smoke if anybody down the canyon built a fire. But he might see it.

He strained his eyes. A brisk wind was blowing dust, in which smoke might mingle without being seen. Changing position, he continued to watch the upper end of the canyon, surveyed it until he was sure nobody was this side of a certain point. Then he moved forward and started it over again.

Working higher on the canyon wall to get around a ledge of rock, he saw something else that made his heart jump. Two horses were wandering around and grazing near a spring at the side of a large clearing surrounded by dense brush which made it a natural corral. And one of the horses had a white blaze on his bay forehead—the horse Lobo Anson had been

riding when Stearn had seen him in Rioville!

So they were here! Now he had to locate them before they located him. If they caught sight of him now, they perhaps would shoot to kill. Stearn remembered his disgrace, his badge, Inez' ring, and his eyes narrowed. He did not want to kill unless it was necessary—he wanted to take one or both of them in to swing.

HE WENT ahead cautiously, careful to make no sound the wind could carry down the canyon to warn them. The hours began passing. He had not caught sight of either of the men. He had seen no smoke. Perhaps, he thought, they were sleeping off a spell of drunkenness.

Once he thought he heard a shout, but could not be sure. The sun came into the canyon and turned it blistering hot. In a safe place, Stearn rested to relieve his strained eyes. He wanted a smoke, but did not dare make a cigarette. Tobacco smoke on the air would warn the enemy that somebody was near.

Midday came and passed, and Stearn worked his way carefully down the canyon. And then, in front of a little cave half way up the canyon wall, he saw a man step out on a ledge of rock. He was Ed Danker.

The layout was not so good. The ledge was only a few feet wide, and the cave could be defended easily. As far as Stearn knew, it might even have a back entrance, and one could get out and strike at him while the other held his attention.

Crouching behind a rock, Stearn watched the cave's mouth until his muscles ached and he had to change position. Danker had gone back inside. Stearn inched forward and made for the end of the ledge of rock, where he could take up a commanding position.

He saw smoke in another hour or so, and smelled food cooking. The wind shifted and carried the sounds of voices to him. The sun left the canyon, and Stearn knew the dusk would be coming soon. He was hungry, and his food was away down the canyon where he had left his pony. But he had his canteen with him, and drank deeply of the warm water it contained.

Either he had to act now or wait until morning. He decided to act at once. He knew the wind would not carry the scent of smoke on the air to the cave, for it was blowing now across the canyon. He got behind another rock, took one of his guns out of its holster, and fired a single shot into the air.

The sound of the shot roared and echoed among the rocks and made it seem as if a score of shots had been fired. Stearn watched carefully. Guns held ready, both Lobo Anson and Ed Danker emerged from the cave.

Stearn could tell they were alert, tense. They looked up and down the canyon and across it, crouched and held a conversation. They seemed to be deciding what to do about it.

Presently, Ed Danker got up and started along the ledge directly toward Stearn. The ranger got back behind some brush to let him pass. Things were working out well. If he could get the two separated and deal with them one at a time, it might be easier.

Danker, half bent over, passed within a dozen feet of Stearn and went on. Stearn saw him start to descend the wall of the canyon. He was going down to make an investigation.

Lobo Anson was still in front of the cave, watching and listening. Stearn took out after Danker. It was a slow business, for Danker was going ahead cautiously, guns held ready, and Stearn dared not get closer to him.

They were in a spot, finally, where they could not be seen by Anson up at the cave's mouth. Danker was compelled to cross a cleared space to get to the little creek. Stearn rapidly closed the distance between them.

"Danker!" he snapped, suddenly. "Hands high!"

Ed Danker crouched and whirled, his head jerking quickly from side to side as he tried to locate the man who had spoken. Stearn stepped out from behind some brush.

"Danker, you're under arrest!"

Danker's right hand gun blazed and roared, and the slug from it brushed Stearn's left sleeve. Then his own guns were blazing, and as Danker fired his second shot he whirled and crashed to earth and twitched and was still.

The echoes of the firing died away.

"Ed! Ed! Where are yuh? What's happened?" Lobo Anson was shouting from the ledge.

Stearn did not answer him. Guns held ready in case of a 'possum play, he inched toward Danker. The latter did not move. Stearn saw he had dropped his guns. He turned the man over. Ed Danker had died from a bullet through his heart.

Up on the ledge, Anson was shouting again. Stearn knew he would commence to worry soon, when he got no reply. He pulled Danker's body to one side where it would be hidden behind some brush, and went back toward the bottom of the canyon wall.

Dusk had come, and the shadows were dense. The moon, when it did come up, would not strike into this part of the canyon, Stearn knew. He watched and listened for a few minutes, then approached the canyon wall warily.

No sound alarmed him. Evidently, Lobo Anson was not coming down to see what had happened. Stearn wondered if he

was still in the cave or on the ledge, or whether he had escaped through the cave's back door, if it had one.

Stearn managed to regain the level of the ledge. A flickering reflection of a dying fire came from the cave. He did not see Anson.

He reached the ledge and started along it, guns held ready, carefully going forward a step at a time and cautious against striking a boot against a rock. Anson did not appear. Stearn began feeling the strain. If the brush rustled, he fancied the killer behind him.

A SHORT distance from the mouth of the cave, he stopped. He crouched, held his right hand gun ready, raised the other and fired a shot down into the canyon.

Through the swirl of smoke, he saw Anson come charging from the cave.

"Anson—" Stearn began.

Anson began firing wildly at the sound of the voice. He had a dim picture of a man standing there in the dusk, an uncertain target. The firelight from the cave played over Anson.

Stearn shot carefully, deliberately, but quickly for all of that. He put a slug into Anson's right forearm, and the gun dropped. Then Stearn was launching himself forward, guns held ready for a pistol-whipping. He was upon Lobo Anson before the latter realized what was happening. His heavy guns smashed, tore, ripped.

When Lobo Anson regained consciousness, he found his wrists handcuffed and tied together with a piece of rope in place of the chain the Rioville blacksmith had had to ruin. A piece of his shirt had been wrapped around his wounded forearm.

"Well, Anson, I've got you," Stearn said.

"Ed?"

"He's dead. We fought it out."

"You ain't taken me in yet," Anson said.

"I'll do that in the mornin'. Mind if I help myself to some of your coffee and beans? Haven't had anything to eat since mornin'," Stearn said.

Anson growled curses and insults and watched while Stearn made a quick meal and then sat down with his back against the rock wall of the cave.

"Anson, this is Christmas Eve," Stearn said "Since it is, I'm forgivin' you for the trouble you caused me. Made a fool out of me, and took my badge and my girl's ring. I found 'em in your pocket while you were knocked out, and I've got 'em now. Cap'n Bedlow even suspended me for bein' careless, which was all right and proper."

"What are yuh goin' to do now?" Anson asked.

"As soon as it's light enough, we'll go down and 'tend to Danker."

Anson slept at times during the night, but Stearn did not. He would not be careless again. When dawn came, he made coffee and warmed a can of beans, ate and unfastened Anson's wrists so he could eat, too. Then, with his gun muzzle jammed against the back of Anson's head, he made the outlaw put his wrists together again to be bound with the rope.

They went along the ledge and down into the canyon. They went to the clearing, and Stearn saddled the two horses and made Anson lead one of them. Waving Anson aside, Stearn managed to get Ed Danker's body across the saddle and lash it there with the man's own lariat.

"On your pony!" he ordered Anson.

Anson obeyed without argument. Perhaps, Stearn thought, he had some idea of making an attempt to escape later. Stearn led Danker's pony and made Anson ride beside him.

When they reached the clearing near the mouth of the canyon, Stearn put bridle and saddle on his own pony and got into his saddle. He tied the end of the lariat to his saddlehorn and led the pony carrying Danker's body. So they set out to travel the eight miles to Smoky Mesa.

The sun was up high now, and there was little wind.

"It's goin' to be a right good Christmas after all," Stearn said.

"Yuh ain't got me in the countyseat jail yet," Lobo Anson growled. "I've got some friends in this country."

"I don't doubt that. The rangers would like to know their names, if you care to tell."

They went around the end of a huge mass of rocks and saw the adobe buildings of Smoky Mesa a short distance ahead. Stearn observed more than the usual amount of activity. Horses crowded the hitch rails, and men were grouped in front of the store.

Somebody shouted, and a couple of riders came tearing toward Stearn and his prisoner. They got the news and tore back again, leaving the knowledge that Captain Bedlow and his posse were in the village. Bedlow had gathered some information which had led him to Smoky Mesa.

They were all waiting in front of the store when Jim Stearn rode up, tired but happy.

"Here's your outlaws," he said. "One's dead, but the other'll live to swing."

Possemen took charge, and Stearn got out of his saddle wearily. Inez rushed toward him, and he opened his arms, held her, kissed her, and glanced at her stern father to find his look of approval.

Stearn reached into a pocket and took out a little box.

"Here's your ring, honey," he said, "Stick out your finger."

"Oh, Jim!" she cried, happily.

He reached into his pocket again and took out something else, and went forward to where Captain Bedlow was standing.

"Here's my badge, sir," he said, handing it over. He turned back to Inez.

"One moment, Stearn!" Bedlow barked.

Stearn turned back, and the captain strode forward with determination in his manner and pinned the badge on Stearn's vest. Then he smiled.

"Merry Christmas, ranger!" the captain said. "Sorry I couldn't get home for mine, but it's all right. I'll help celebrate here."