

Ready and Waiting

By SAM BRANT

*When bank bandits stalk the range,
Sheriff Ben Boyd believes in
preparedness!*

SHERIFF BEN BOYD sat in a chair on the porch of the Longhorn Hotel and cursed the fates that had given him a broken leg. It wasn't so much the leg that bothered Boyd—for the doctor had done a good job in setting it—as the inactivity. He was used to being constantly on the go.

Boyd heaved a deep sigh of relief, therefore, when he saw his deputy, Joe Mead, come out of the sheriff's office down the street and amble along the plank walk toward the hotel. From sunrise to late night Boyd had insisted upon remaining there on the hotel porch.

"There's only one street in our thrivin' city," the sheriff said. "And from where I'm sittin' now I can see just about every part of Longhorn. That way, if there is any trouble, the Law is ready and waitin'."

He was forty-three now and he had been a lawman for nearly twenty years. First a deputy, and then for ten years the sheriff of Mesquite County. There was a sprinkling of gray in his thick dark hair, the wiry leanness of his youth was still with him, as was the restlessness.

There had been no glamour in the way he had been hurt. His horse had stumbled and thrown him right on the main street of the town on a rainy day. The fall had broken his leg. Men who saw what happened had carried the sheriff into the doctor's office across the street. Old Doctor Ramsey had



SHERIFF BEN BOYD

set the leg and eventually put it in a plaster cast. That had been three days ago.

Since then Sheriff Boyd had remained on the hotel porch, only leaving to hobble inside for meals, and to go to bed at night. He had a pair of crutches that the doctor had lent him, but his six-gun was in his holster and his rifle stood against the wall near his chair. The sheriff was ready for trouble, you bet!

Joe Mead reached the hotel and came up on the porch. Sandy haired, and easygoing, the deputy was what might be termed a casual man. Having worked with the sheriff for five years he was not inclined to treat his boss with any great degree of awe.

"See any sign of them, Ben?" Mead asked as he dropped into a chair near the sheriff. "Smoke signals, or anything?"

"What are you talkin' about, Joe?" the sheriff demanded impatiently.

"Them Indians you must be expectin' to raid the town," said the deputy with a smile. "You shore have been expectin' something gosh awful to happen."

BUT the sheriff remained quite undisturbed by Mead's skepticism.

"Like I've often told you, it is always

good to be ready for trouble,” he answered serenely. “I’ve been readin’ the papers and right now crime is shore rampant in the state of Arizona.”

“It is?” exclaimed Mead in surprise.

“Shore.” The sheriff nodded solemnly. “A drummer on the Prescott stage lost a wallet containin’ four dollars and sixty-eight cents. Claims the driver or the stage guard picked his pocket—probably by remote control. In Tombstone somebody got Mrs. Brady’s goat.”

“What was she mad about?” the deputy asked.

“Who?”

“Mrs. Brady. You said somebody got her goat.”

“Oh.” The sheriff looked relieved. “It was a real goat. Somebody stole it.”

“So far I ain’t impressed,” said Mead. “What we need is bigger and better crimes, Sheriff.”

“Accordin’ to the papers we’ve got them,” said Boyd. “There was a bank robbery in Tucson day or so ago, the Overland Stage was held up south of here last week—”

“And Mrs. Brady lost her goat,” finished Mead.

The sheriff made no comment. He was watching four men who had ridden in from the south and halted their horses at the hitching-rail in front of the Palace Saloon across and down the street to Boyd’s left.

“Yes, sir,” said the sheriff picking up his Winchester. “I’m the best shot with a long gun in this state. See that shingle stickin’ up at the comer of the feed store down at the end of the street.”

“Seen it for years,” said Mead. “You just notice it, Ben?”

Boyd placed the rifle to his shoulder and took careful aim. Mead thought the sheriff was just sighting the gun. The deputy jumped when the rifle roared. Down the street a bullet tore away the hanging shingle

on the side of the feed store.

The sheriff noticed that the four men across the street were now shielded by their horses, so that if any bullets came their way they had some protection. They obviously had been around. Boyd found the fact quite interesting.

“When you broke yore leg did you hit your head?” Mead looked anxiously at the sheriff. “What day is it?”

“You tell me,” said Boyd calmly, as he ejected the shell from the rifle, and worked another cartridge into the chamber. “What day is it?”

“Tuesday, I mean Thursday,” said Mead.

“It’s Monday,” the sheriff said, placing the rifle back against the wall.

The four strangers had discovered there would be no more shooting. A big man stepped out through the swinging doors of the saloon. He said a few words to the strangers, and then they all went into the saloon.

“Monday,” muttered Joe Mead dazedly. “Today is Monday.”

“Never mind that, Joe,” snapped the sheriff in sudden impatience. “I just saw Lem Carlson talkin’ to four strangers. They all went into the Palace. You better head over there and take a good squint at them four hombres.”

“Pals of Lem Carlson,” said the deputy as he got to his feet. “I don’t think I’m goin’ to like them hombres.”

“I didn’t ask you to kiss ‘em,” said the sheriff. “I told you to find out about them. Get goin’, Joe.”

The deputy walked slowly across the street, kicking up the dust with his boot toes like a boy on his way to school who didn’t want to go. The sheriff drew out his pipe and filled and lighted it.

“There’s a man so busy clingin’ to his first childhood that he never will reach his second,” decided Boyd as he watched Mead

finally pass through the swinging doors of the saloon. "Joe just naturally won't grow up."

The sheriff found his thoughts drifting to Lem Carlson. Carlson owned the Palace Saloon, and had been suspected in being behind some crooked deals in which a couple of neighboring ranchers had lost their spreads. But when it came to a showdown nothing could be proven against Carlson.

ACCORDING to rumors the Longhorn Bank had held mortgages on the two ranches. Carlson had bought the mortgages from Ed Jarrett, the president of the bank, and had foreclosed on the ranchers. Though Carlson had never admitted having anything to do with the deal, Ed Jarrett had told the sheriff about it in confidence. The two ranchers had cleared out of that part of the country without saying anything.

Ed Jarrett usually ate in the hotel dining room in the middle of the day. Today the sheriff had finished his meal early and hobbled back out onto the porch. He had seen the banker go into the hotel half an hour ago. Now Jarrett came out on the porch as Boyd knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put it away. Jarrett was a stout, bald headed man, whose smile always reminded Boyd of a fish gasping.

"Heard you shooting out here a little while ago, Sheriff," Jarrett said, dropping down in the chair near Boyd. "Was a bit worried until someone told me that you apparently were just trying out your rifle. Thought there was trouble."

"Not yet." The sheriff took off his hat and placed it in his lap. "But there could be."

Jarrett reached over and picked up Boyd's rifle. Then he sank back in his chair, holding the gun across his knees as he examined it. Across the street the four strangers came out of the saloon. Neither

Carlson nor the deputy was with them. The men stared at the hotel porch, saw the sheriff and the banker sitting there and were apparently satisfied.

"I forget the name of the boss of that bunch," the sheriff said casually.

"Carl Springer." Jarrett spoke before he thought. He scowled, and swung the rifle so that the barrel was pointed at the sheriff's chest. "I feel right bad about your accident. Here I was examining your rifle and all of a sudden it went off. Bullet went right into your heart, Sheriff."

"No," said Boyd firmly. "It won't work, Jarrett. You forget about my hat."

"What?" Jarrett stared at the Stetson in the sheriff's lap. "What's your hat got to do with it?"

Out on the street three of the strangers strolled toward the Longhorn Bank. The fourth man remained with the horses. On the hotel porch the sheriff's eyes were hard as he gazed at Ed Jarrett.

"I'm holdin' a hide-out gun under the hat," Boyd said. "It is aimed at you—and if it goes off it won't be an accident. Just try to touch the trigger of that rifle and see what happens!"

It was not a particularly warm day, but Jarrett was suddenly sweating as he gazed at the hat. With trembling hands he placed the rifle back against the wall at the rear of the porch.

"It was all a joke," he said. "I just wanted to see if I could scare you, Sheriff." He uttered a burst of laughter that was like the braying of a frightened mule. "Just a joke!"

"When I get around to it, I'll laugh." The sheriff's voice was hard. "Pick up that rifle and walk over to the porch steps." With his right hand he drew his six-gun out of the holster and covered the banker. His left hand was still hidden beneath the hat. "Do like I say!"

Jarrett grabbed up the rifle and moved to

the head of the steps. He stood there nervously, his back to the sheriff.

"Aim the rifle at that hombre guardin' the horses," commanded the sheriff. "Fast!"

"I won't," Jarrett glanced back over his shoulder, his fat face contorted with fear. "Soon as I do, Springer will kill me. He will think the whole thing is a frame-up. I won't do it!"

The three strangers had disappeared inside the bank. The fourth man still guarded the horses.

"All right," snapped Boyd. "Then give me the rifle. I just wanted to make sure that you and Springer's bunch were workin' together. Evidently you have been usin' the bank money for your gambling; I've seen you in the Palace at the card tables night after night. This is about the time the state examiner usually comes to check up on the bank. A robbery would cover any money you had taken from bein' discovered, Jarrett."

JARRETT suddenly handed the sheriff the rifle, and he did not notice that the hand Boyd drew out from beneath his hat to grab the gun was empty. Then Jarrett turned and dashed wildly into the hotel. The sheriff made no attempt to stop him.

The three men came out of the bank, carrying money bags in one hand and six-guns in the other. His gun back in the holster and his hat on his head the sheriff raised the Winchester to his shoulder, aimed carefully and fired. One of the bank robbers went down as a bullet got him in the left leg. A second man dropped as Boyd shot him in the right leg.

At the sound of the shooting Joe Mead came running out of the saloon. Lem Carlson was close behind him. The man with the horses fired at the deputy, as he saw the badge on Mead's shirt. The bullet missed, and before the man could fire again

a slug from the sheriff's rifle got him in the arm and he dropped his gun.

The fourth man was running around in circles in the center of the street, holding his arms extended above his head and squawking like a chicken. He looked so silly that the sheriff started to laugh, and he couldn't stop.

The deputy dashed across the street and up on the porch.

"You all right, Ben?" Mead asked anxiously. "Them four fellers convinced me that they didn't hardly know Lem Carlson, and that they were part of a trail herd crew headin' home. Didn't think they were anythin' to worry about."

"They shore ain't now," said the sheriff, looking at the three wounded men, who were not trying to go any place in particular. "Trail herd crew, eh." He stopped laughing, "Aw, what's the use, you don't even know it's Monday!"

"Say, I been talkin' to Carlson," said the deputy. "You know them stories around town about him buyin' up the mortgages and puttin' those ranchers out of business? Well, it ain't so. He never bought a mortgage in his life."

From the side of the hotel a horse galloped out into the street and Ed Jarrett was in the saddle. Carl Springer was sprawled on the plank walk, unable to rise because of his wounded leg. The outlaw saw Jarrett coming and raised his gun.

One shot knocked the banker out of the saddle and he was dead when he hit the street.

"He don't even care what day it is," Mead said as he saw what happened out in the street. "There's a banker who loved money too much."

"Right," said the sheriff. "And he'll never know I didn't even have a hideout gun under my hat. Round up the prisoners, Joe. The trouble I've been expectin' has come and gone."