

CROWBAIT FOR KILLERS

Ranger Jack Rand Rides Into a Case
of Triple Slaughter That Calls for Gun
Vengeance!

BY

TOM GUNN

Author of "Painted Post Gunplay," etc.

JACK RAND slid wearily out of the saddle in front of the Four Aces Saloon. The lean Ranger's keen gaze swept the deserted street of the little cowtown of Buckshot as he fastened his tired roan beside the other two horses at the hitch-rail. Even for a sweltering hot August day the town seemed unusually still and deserted.

"Kinda like one of them ghost towns," Rand mused, gazing about him. "It don't seem natural. Hmm—nothin' around but them two hosses and they're nothin' but crowbait."

Brushing the trail dust from his shirt and worn Levis, the Ranger loosened the heavy Colt in the holster on his right hip. For a moment he studied the two horses that stood beside his own roan at the hitch-rail.

Their heads drooped and they were caked with dust and dried sweat. They looked as if they had been ridden far and hard. And both the pinto and the bay were so thin and old that Rand decided he had hit the nail on the head in calling them crow-bait. Still, the saddles and bridles were expensive, though the leather was worn.



Jack Rand whirled his horse and fired

Shrugging carelessly he stepped in through the batwing doors of the saloon. He halted abruptly, for a stout man was leaning across the bar, staring at him with blank, sightless eyes, a black hole in the center of his forehead. And that barkeep was as dead a man as Jack Rand had ever seen.

"What the—" he muttered grimly.

He shot a sharp glance about the big room. Two men in range clothes were seated at a card table, but from the unnatural way they were slumped back in their chairs, Rand knew instantly they were as dead as the stout man behind the bar.

The Ranger's eyes were hard as he strode over and examined the three still forms. Both of the men at the card table were elderly and gray-haired. One still clutched in his stiffened, lifeless fingers a torn bit of paper.

Gently Rand loosened the paper and read what was scrawled on it.

Received the sum of \$5,000 from Matt Blakely in full payment.

The paper was signed "Tom Willis."

"Looks like these two old-timers was

makin' a deal of some sort," the Ranger muttered as he stuck the paper into his shirt pocket. "Mebbe somebody seen 'em with all that money, killed 'em and lit a shuck with the *dinero*."

He scowled. There was nothing he could do for the three dead men save to try and learn who had killed them. And at that moment the puzzle of the deserted appearance of the little town was explained as his eyes caught sight of a bright poster hanging on one of the walls of the saloon.

ALL-STAR RODEO
TO BE HELD AT CATTLE CITY
Plenty Prizes
Week of August 8th

"Reckon that's where everybody's gone," he mused. "Cattle City ain't more than ten miles east of here—and a rodeo shore draws a cattle country crowd."

SUDDENLY the Ranger swung around, hand streaking for his gun as he heard a slight noise behind him. Too late—for he was covered by a long-barreled Colt in the hand of a thin, gray-haired man. A sheriff's star glistened on his open vest.

"Git yore hand away from that gun!" The sheriff's voice was sharp as he glared at the lean, red-headed Ranger. "Yuh kill these three hombres?"

"No," Rand said. "Just rode into town a few minutes ago. Walked in here and found these men like this." He displayed his badge. "I'm a Ranger."

"I'm Sheriff Luden," the old lawman said, his tone grown milder. "And I'm gonna surprise yuh. I'm believin' it happened jest the way yuh tell it. What's yore name?"

"Jack Rand." The Ranger smiled as the sheriff thrust his gun back into leather. "You know these three men?"

The sheriff looked at the two dead men at the card table, nodded slowly.

"This feller is Tom Willis. He owns—I mean he did own the Flying W spread." He jerked his head at the other seated dead man. "Matt Blakely was a cattle buyer. Heard tell him and Tom had a deal on. I jest got back to town from Cattle City and it shore looks like—"

The roar of a gun from the swinging doors of the saloon drowned his words. Rand's hand streaked to his holster as he saw the old sheriff totter, then fall face downward on the floor, a bullet in his back. From the street came the clatter of a horse's hoofs.

Gun in hand the Ranger dashed through the batwing doors. He caught a glimpse of a rider galloping away, and cursed when he recognized the horse. It was his own roan! He cursed again at the instinctive knowledge that the escaping killer was the same fugitive outlaw, Jake Gruff, whom he had been following for the past three days!

He glanced at the two old crow-baits at the hitch-rail in front of the saloon. And he realized that even though his own roan was weary there was little chance of catching him while riding one of those old horses.

For an instant Jack Rand stood thinking swiftly. It was not hard to figure out what had happened. Only that morning he had succeeded in getting close enough to have a running gun battle with the man he had been pursuing. He must have wounded Gruff's horse and the outlaw had been forced to seek a new mount in Buckshot.

"Looks like he tried to down me, but shot hasty-like and got the sheriff instead," Rand said tightly. "Wonder what become of Sheriff Luden's horse?"

He went back into the saloon to assure himself that the old lawman was dead

before he explored the main street of the town. All of the stores and buildings were locked and on some of them were signs reading:

GONE TO THE RODEO—BACK
THIS EVENING.

The Ranger found Sheriff Luden had unsaddled his horse and put him in the stable behind the sheriff's office. So that was why Gruff had not taken the old lawman's horse. He could not waste the time to resaddle. The bandit had plenty of reason for haste, Rand thought grimly, wanted as he was for the holdup of the Overland stage and the killing of the driver, the guard and one passenger.

Again Rand returned to the saloon and examined the bodies of Tom Willis and Matt Blakely as a new thought came to him. Willis, he found, had been a small man with rather short legs, and Blakely a man of medium height.

"That jest might work," the Ranger murmured thoughtfully as he gazed out at the two horses at the hitch-rail. "Reckon I'll have to try it anyway."

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"TWENTY-FIVE hundred for me and the same for you." Gil Harper smiled at his partner as they sat in the shack of their little ranch fifteen miles to the southeast of the little cowtown. "We're a couple of smart hombres, Ike."

"We figgered it out right slick," Ike Mason agreed. "Killin' all three of them jaspers in the saloon didn't leave no way for anybody to figger out we done it. Good thing we don't hang around Buckshot much." He leered at the other man as he pocketed his share of the money. "Jest a couple of nesters workin' hard for a livin'."

The light from the kerosene lamp gleamed on the faces of the two men as

they sat at the table. Mason's long legs were stretched out in front of him as he sprawled back in his chair, and he looked even taller than his partner.

"Five thousand," he drawled languidly. "And it wasn't so hard to git at that, Gil. We'll be headin' out of this part of the country in the mornin'."

"Reach!" The snapped command came from a hard-faced man who had suddenly appeared in the open doorway. "Good thing I started nosin' 'round this spread lookin' for a fresh hoss. I shore kin use that *dinero*."

"Who are yuh?" snarled Mason, starting for his gun. He changed his mind as he saw the expression in the eyes of the man in the doorway.

"Never mind who I am," growled Jake Gruff. "Jest hand over the money I seen yuh stick in yore pockets—and do it easy like. I ain't takin' no chances with a couple of killin' jaspers like you two." The outlaw laughed mockingly.

Gil Harper got slowly to his feet. "Look's like you win."

His hand started for his pocket, then suddenly grabbed for his gun. Gruff's Colt boomed as he saw the move. Harper staggered back against the table, a bullet in his chest. But the weight of his body sent the lamp crashing to the floor and plunged the room in black darkness.

For a moment Gruff was outlined against the night as he stood in the doorway. There was a flash of flame and a roar as Ike Mason triggered his weapon. Gruff cursed and ducked as a bullet caught him in the arm.

Outside, Ranger Jack Rand had arrived just in time to whirl his horse and fire as he saw the outlaw killer reel out into the starlight. Gruff staggered and dropped to the ground—dead before he fell.

"Come out, you inside there!" shouted the Ranger as he sent a bullet crashing

through the cabin's open door. "And make it fast!"

"Comin'!" called Mason, stepping through the doorway, his hands held high above his head. "I ain't havin' any more of this."

Rand slid out of the saddle, his gun steadily covering the other man. Ten minutes later Mason sat sullenly in the shack, his hands tied behind his back. He shivered as he gazed down at his dead partner sprawled out on the floor in the flickering light. For the Ranger had discovered the lamp would still burn though the glass chimney had been broken.

"Guess you fellers figured yuh was smart," said Rand. "Riding them two old crow-baits into town and leavin' 'em there

while yuh got away on Willis and Blakely's hosses. Figgered them old nags wouldn't give yuh away, since yuh'd never rode 'em before. Musta kept them in the cavy corral for a long time."

"That's right," said Mason sullenly. "But how did yuh figure that out?"

"Knew that Willis and Blakely hadn't been ridin' them hosses when I looked over the rigs. The stirrups was adjusted for a couple of long-legged hombres and looked like they'd been fixed that way a long time." The Ranger smiled grimly. "Yes, sir, yuh shore made a mistake about them hosses. I rode one of 'em and give 'em both their heads, so they headed for home jest as nice as pie. Reckon them crowbaits didn't even know they was leading me into a nest of killers!"