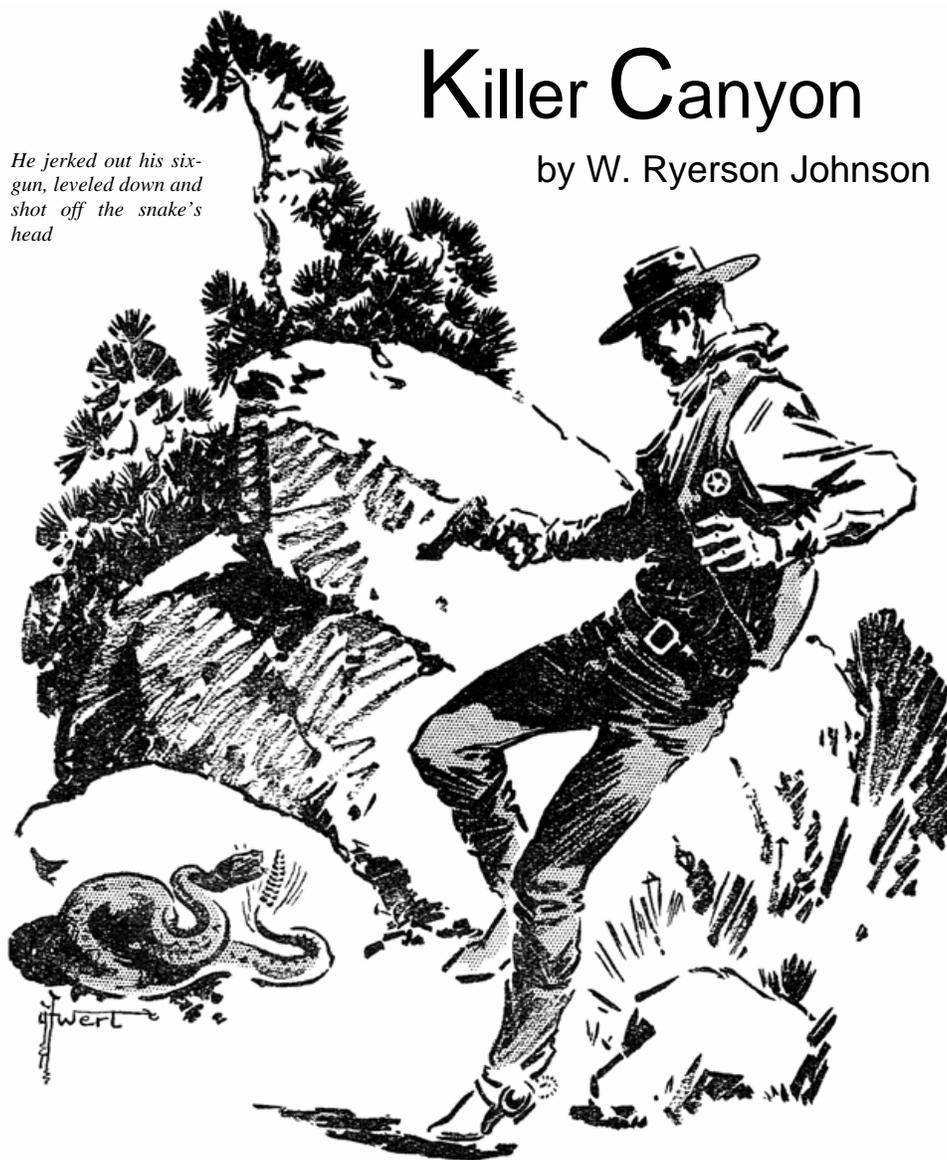


Killer Canyon

by W. Ryerson Johnson

He jerked out his six-gun, leveled down and shot off the snake's head



JOE SAGE, first-term sheriff of Ajo County, swept aside pencil and official report blanks, and grunted with relief as a big man shoved open the screen door and shouldered inside the office.

Joe could face bullets and grin, but after a round with the unfamiliar report blanks he always felt as proddy as a bull that has made the mistake of wrapping his tongue around a wad of cholla cactus.

"I'm Bonehead Gutch," the hulking stranger announced as he let the screen door slam shut behind him.

The door creaked open again, and a slightly built man eased in, timidly, and closed the door carefully without making a sound.

"I'm Howard Cassell," he said, and his voice

was as mouse-like as the rest of him.

"Howdy gents," Joe Sage greeted. "Any interruption from this here now bookkeeping is a wide relief. What can I do for you?"

"Bonehead" Gutch did the talking. He said: "We want to report a accidental death."

The new sheriff reached for a yellow-stringed sack of smoking tobacco. "Whose death?"

"Nobody that's knowed around here. Al Dickerson. He was our partner. We been out on a color chase in the San Marcial. Al got himself killed. We thought we better report it."

"Uh-huh. When was it?"

"Three days ago. We got in as quick as we could."

"How'd it happen?"

“Easiest thing you ever seen. Al must have just tripped and fell. We found him soon after. He’d hit his head on a sharp rock and it killed him. We thought we better report it.”

“Uh-huh.” Joe Sage poured dry tobacco into a crimped, brown paper. “Nobody saw the accident happen?”

“No. Wasn’t nobody in them mountains but us. Howard and me, we was together when we found the body.” Bonehead Gutch looked toward his partner, the little man with the pinched face, pale watery eyes, thin, light hair. “Ain’t that right, Howard?”

Howard Cassell looked like he had been born scared and never recovered from it. He held his hat with his two hands. Bony fingers nervously tapped dust from the brim. He started slightly at the sudden question directed at him. “Sure, Bonehead,” he affirmed weakly, “everything just like you said.”

In the shadowed office there was a flash of white teeth as Joe Sage bit against the yellow strings and jerked his head to close the tobacco sack. He tossed the sack back down on the desk.

“How do I know you hombres didn’t kill him?”

The little man’s pale eyes blinked rapidly. He gulped, seemed to be trying to shrink inside of himself. His blustery partner didn’t show any fear, however. His eyes didn’t blink helplessly. They glared.

“What do you think we hunted you up for if everything wasn’t all right?” he blazed. “We could have gone along and left the body for the buzzards. But we wanted to do everything regular—”

“I ain’t accusing you. Just pointing out how it might look to the dead man’s friends.”

“We can’t help how it looks. It happened like I said.”

Joe Sage’s tongue raked along the edge of the cigarette paper; thumb and finger twisted one end of the brown cylinder. “You’re heading right back into the San Marcials, I reckon?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Thought I might haze along with you.”

Bonehead Gutch bristled. “You’ve still got it in your craw we’re trying to put something over! Lemme tell you, sheriff—”

“Just a routine investigation,” Joe soothed.

“Well, we ain’t going back, see?”

Joe hung the cigarette on his lip and reached for a match. “I thought you were working a gold claim back in there?”

“Were, is right. We’re washed up, finished. We never took out enough gold to crown a tooth.”

“No gold, huh?” Joe said thoughtfully. “Then that does away with a possible robbery motive.”

Bonehead Gutch’s face turned a purplish-red. Beetling brows drew down. He took a step toward the sheriff, his thick fingers clenching. “Listen, are you accusing us of murder or ain’t you?”

FLAME snapped from the match head under Joe’s thumbnail. He sucked the yellow flame into the twisted end of the cigarette. “Accusing nobody of nothing. If you ain’t going back, detail me some directions. I’ll take a sashay up there by myself.”

“All right,” Bonehead growled, “if you’re fool enough to want all that work for nothing. It’s three days out there and three days back.”

Joe nodded. “It’ll be a nice change from all these county reports I have to make out. Nobody told me about them when they got me to run for sheriff. You boys’ll hang around here in Gila City till I get back, huh?”

“The hell we will. We’re moving on, pronto.”

“Course, if you’d rather I’d put you up at the jail—”

Bonehead cursed angrily. “A new hand at the sheriffing game is always trying to scare up crime where crime ain’t! You got nothing on us. We was just trying to do the right thing, but if we’d known a kid sheriff was gonna cause us all this trouble we’d never reported it.”

Joe flicked the dead match at the screen door. “Gila City’s a right sociable little town. You’ll find everybody uncommon friendly—as long as you don’t try to leave before I get back.”

“What’s it gonna get you to fan into the mountains where we was?” Bonehead blared. “You’ll find a stiff with a wound in the temple where he struck against a rock. Just like we said. That’s all you’ll find—”

Bonehead’s slight partner interrupted with a gentle apologetic clearing of his throat. It was such a mild intrusion that the sheriff, watching, was surprised that Bonehead heard.

The little man said: “Let’s don’t rile the sheriff, Bonehead. Leave him go if he wants. It’ll clear us once for all. And this ain’t a bad town for us to heave duffel for a week. They got six saloons. I counted ‘em.”

The little man paused, apprehensively, waiting to see how his blustery partner would react to the

suggestion. Bonehead Gutch glared. Howard Cassell shrank back a bit. The action seemed instinctive, as though, at other times, Bonehead's glaring glance had been followed by a brutally swung fist.

But the big man only shrugged and rumbled: "All right, Howard. I reckon it's all we can do."

Joe Sage puffed smoke from the corner of his mouth and spoke without removing the cigarette. "How do I get there?"

"You go out the Lava Springs trail," Bonehead growled. "Take the left fork around Stove-lid Mountain. Leave the trail and go up Creosote Canyon—"

Again that apologetic cough and a timidly voiced interruption: "Why don't you give the sheriff our map, Bonehead?"

"Yeah. He'd never find the place without it."

Bonehead pawed a piece of thick paper from his pocket, unfolded it, shook dirt out of the creases, pushed it in front of the sheriff's face, and explained in detail the pencil scratches indicating the way.

When the two men went out they left the map with the sheriff. Snatches of their conversation drifted back through the screen door as they stood outside for a moment on the board walk.

"I'm going down to the Buckhorn," Bonehead Gutch's harsh voice chopped, "and throw in about six shots of liquor."

There was a faintly heard murmur, the sound of Howard Cassell's answering voice.

Then Bonehead said, clearly enough: "Yeah, maybe you're right, Howard. But tomorrow, believe me brother, I'm gonna get stewed to the gills."

Inside his office Sheriff Joe Sage blew smoke rings at the ceiling, then picked up official form number 28A which he had been laboriously filling in at the time the strangers entered. The routine report was almost finished. He gazed at it proudly, as at a bad job well done.

All at once he started, swore softly. Lean fingers turned back the top sheet of the report pad. Clear, youthful eyes stared in exasperation at the thick, blue marks on the underside of the paper.

"By blazes, I done the same thing again! Put that mangy sheet of carbon paper in hindside before! Now I got it all to do over!"

But he didn't do it over. Not then. There was a rasp as he ripped the sheet from the pad, a crinkling

as he wadded white sheet and carbon paper into a small ball and shoved them disgustedly into his pocket. He clamped lips tighter on the cigarette, reached for his hat and went out.

FOLLOWING the map the two strangers had left with him, Joe Sage rode into a little side canyon deep in the sun-baked San Marcial Mountains. He located a mound of rocks readily enough, and set about the disagreeable work of exhuming a buried body. He found precisely what he had been told he would find.

The man, Al Dickerson, beyond any reasonable doubt, had been killed by a concussion against the temple. Blue-bottle flies buzzed around. A lone buzzard wheeled out of the sky, hung poised, then lifted in wide banking spirals to signal his black brothers. Joe rebuilt the rock-mound grave as quickly as he could.

Then he turned his attention to the tunnel in the cliffside which the men had been working. The tunnel angled into the rock for thirty feet and tapped a short shaft. A six-inch quartz seam petered out entirely at the face of the tunnel.

Joe examined the seam. It wasn't a pay seam. Just ordinary quartz. He poked over the tailings dump. There wasn't a sign of color. Bonehead Gutch had quite obviously spoken the truth when he said they hadn't taken out enough gold to crown a tooth. It was easy to see why they had abandoned the diggings.

An older man than Joe Sage—one not possessed of so much restless youthful vigor—would have ridden back and made out a death report naming natural causes, and called the whole thing closed. For that matter, an older man in this raw, wide country of blistering desert and crumbling mountains where death had a habit of striking suddenly and often and in devious ways, might never have felt obligated to make the investigation in the first place, particularly since there was nothing pointing toward foul play.

But Joe, with the overzealousness of a young man serving his first term in public office, was eager to make a good showing. He even took the county reports seriously, though his whiskered predecessor had assured him they were intended solely for papering the walls of his office.

So Joe didn't turn back immediately. He prowled around a little in this canyon and in the draws on either side. He shot a rabbit with his six-

gun, built a blazing fire out of a dried clump of bear grass, and fried the rabbit along with corn pones over the long-burning greasy flames.

After he had eaten and settled back in the cliff shade for a short rest, he went through his pockets, looking for the map. He pulled the wadded carbon paper out first, threw it disgustedly at the low, smoky flames of the burning bear grass. The wind veered it away from the flames. It lodged nearby in a rock crevice.

He studied the map for a long while, and pondered upon a fact which he had noted from the first, that an eraser had been carefully rubbed over a portion of the drawing.

"Looks like they drew it wrong, rubbed some out and started over," Joe muttered. "On the other hand, not to overlook no bets whichever, it could have shown locations in adjoining canyons that for some reason somebody wanted to take off the record."

His lean desert-browed face brightened. "By blazes, I got an idea for sure-enough utilizing that mangy carbon paper!"

His lanky frame snapped up. He moved quickly to where the wind had lodged the crumpled carbon. His long arm dipped down. Standing there in the boil of the border sun, he smoothed out the crumpled carbon sheet and commenced rubbing it over the surface of the map, making a blue carbon smear on the paper. He worked carefully and when he had finished, the hard-pressed pencil marks which somebody had erased were revealed in the soft paper as white lines against the blued background.

He examined the map intently and a tight-lipped grin grew slowly on his smooth face.

"By blazes, I'm right! The part that was rubbed out shows new territory. Three—four of these offshoot canyons to the left, and a checkmark indicating something that—"

Joe moved right now, four canyons to one side, and went on a bulldog hunt for what the checkmark indicated. He didn't find anything at first. But after a while he did. That same wind which flooded over the low, crumbling peaks of the San Marcials, gutting through the ancient canyons, came to his aid now as it had earlier in the day when it swept the piece of carbon paper clear from the flames.

The wind spoke in the language of the animals stalking the lonely land. It flung down upon the bare rocks with a coyote's long wail. Or it squalled

like a raging puma. Just now it blew in fitful gusts, scurrying the sand, stirring the drooped green fingers of Mexican tea weed, and sucking through catclaw and greasewood with an ominous snake hiss.

THE WIND actually began to give Joe a creepy feeling up and down his spine. He thought it was the wind, anyway. And when he suddenly stepped around a squat rock shoulder and found a coon-tail rattler coiled almost underfoot, an involuntary shiver went over him.

"I've run across ten hundred rattlers," he muttered uneasily to himself, "and none of 'em ever made me feel this way before."

He jerked out his six-gun, leveled down, and shot off the snake's head. He thought the familiar noise of gunfire would drive away the feeling of unnamed dread which was seeping with the sun glare into his moist pores. But the gunfire echoes, crashing flatly in the canyon, only accentuated the unnatural menace in the air.

Resolutely, he stepped over the writhing body of the headless snake and went on. He came to a sloping bank grown over with prickly-pear cactus, half buried in a drift of white sand sifted down by the wind from the flat above. And there he found what the erased checkmark on the map had indicated.

At several places on the high bank the erratic wind had whipped away the sand. At a point halfway up it had cleared away a narrow ledge some ten or a dozen feet in length. Ordinary, drab country rock protruded. But some quartzite, too. The quartzite was in fragments tightly packed along one three-foot level. Almost at the top of the bank a whole reef of it was thinly exposed.

"The quartzite below could have been shoveled down from above to plug up a small tunnel opening," Joe reasoned.

He made a quick investigation and found he was right.

That wasn't all he found. He burrowed into the loose rock with a prospector's pick. The tunnel didn't reach far back. A few feet only. And then Joe ran onto something which made him stare in stunned disbelief.

Suddenly, almost effortlessly, he uncovered the richest pay seam he had ever looked at in his life! Quartz so loaded with gold that it didn't seem like rock with metal in it; it seemed like gold infiltrated

with a very little quartz.

His fingers tightened on the ore. A wintry look clamped over his face. "Now, by blazes, we're getting somewhere!" he muttered. "They lied about the gold! That means they lied about the killing! The dead man must have known about this quartz seam. Maybe he was the one who found it. His partners—one of 'em, anyway—killed him and covered up the diggings, figuring to come back later after he'd cleared himself permanently of any hand in the death."

The wind beat down with an animal whimper, swirling the sand in sudden blinding spindrifts. The sun shone brightly. Rocks were burning-hot to the touch. Yet the air seemed freighted with a shuddering chill.

Joe covered up the treasure he had revealed. He worked fast. "I'll be uncommon glad to get out of this here now killer canyon," he told himself.

JOE didn't get out of "killer canyon." Not in the uneventful way he had expected to. While he was working he heard a sound behind him. It wasn't a sound the wind made. And it wasn't the warning rattle of a snake. He crouched and whirled as his hand streaked for his six-gun.

He didn't draw the gun, but his hand remained hovering above his holster. He clumped down the sandy bank to meet the man who was riding close, walking his horse.

Joe recognized the man on the horse. He was a little man, the mouse-like Howard Cassell, partner of the hulking Bonehead Gutch.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Joe greeted.

The little man seemed to be trying to shrink inside of himself again.

He pulled up his horse, cleared his throat in that apologetic way, and said in his timid voice: "I don't mean you no harm, sheriff. I had to come here. Bonehead made me. He went on a drunken bat soon as you got out of town and took a wild notion to come plugging back out here to our diggings."

"Yeah? Where the hell were my deputies, that you got out of town so easy?"

"You don't want to blame them," the little man said gently. "We couldn't have got out of town in any other direction. But naturally they wasn't expecting us to hit the trail back this way where you went."

"Where's your partner?"

"He's making camp down where our mine was.

He told me to follow up your tracks and see if you was close by."

"Why'd he want to find me?"

"I don't know no reason. He's still some drunk—that's all there is to it, I reckon."

"Drunk or sober, he cracks the whip and you always jump through the hoop, huh?"

The little man actually cringed. "You don't understand how it is," he whimpered. "Bonehead, he—I think he'd kill me if I didn't do what he said."

"I'm liable to myself if you lie to me again," Joe said harshly.

Cassell's teeth were chattering now.

Joe revealed a piece of the gold-threaded ore in the palm of his left hand. "Know where this came from?"

The little man's glance flitted up the bank where Joe had been digging. "I know," he said hoarsely.

"That bonehead partner of yours, does he know, too?"

"Y-yes. But the thing is—he thinks he's the only one who knows."

Joe digested this. "Holding out on you and thinks you don't know it, huh?"

"That's it."

"Your partner that's dead, Al Dickerson—he knew about the gold, too. Right?"

"That's right. Al's the one who found it."

Joe slashed the next question "Which one of you killed Dickerson?"

Howard Cassell squirmed. His watery eyes blinked. "I didn't do it," he whined.

Joe lifted his gun half out of its holster. "Who did?"

The little man's scrawny throat jerked spasmodically as though he were trying to talk and couldn't. His tongue licked over pasty lips. He got out a single rasped word: "Bonehead."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Joe said. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

Howard Cassell looked behind him and all around, furtively. "Bonehead would have killed me! He'll kill me now—"

"How do you know he was the murderer?"

"I seen him do it."

"Does he know you saw him?"

"My heavens, no! He'd kill me if he knew. He wants all the gold for hisself."

"And you were going to let him have it?" Joe questioned dryly.

“What else could I do? He’d kill me quick as he did Al!”

“You got any proof that Bonehead’s the one?”

“No. No proof.”

“What about the gold ore taken out of here?”

“Well, the ore—yeah. Some of that high-grade he buried. Some of it he’s got on him now. In his saddlebag.”

“You know a lot for a rabbit man, don’t you?”

“I have to know a lot. It’s the only way I remain alive, staying around Bonehead.”

“All right. Now unbuckle your gun belt. Let it drop.”

After appropriating Cassell’s six-gun, Joe searched the man thoroughly and looked through the saddlebag, but found nothing of significance.

“Are you arresting me for the murder?” the little man quavered hoarsely.

“Nope. Just taking precautions. Now we’re going visiting your nice-tempered partner.”

“He’ll kill us both!” Cassell protested in a stricken voice.

“I reckon we’ll take that chance,” Joe clipped.

RIDING BACK to the first canyon, they sighted Bonehead Gutch standing there, looking at the cairn of rocks Joe had built up that morning to protect Al Dickerson’s grave from marauding coyotes.

Joe didn’t waste time sparring. He swung off his horse and started in with the tactics he had pursued when the big man had stamped into the office in Gila City. Then, Joe had deliberately tried to anger the man, reasoning that Bonehead’s violent temper might trick him into making an admission which otherwise couldn’t be pulled out of him with a patented fence stretcher.

In the office Joe hadn’t learned anything by angering Bonehead. But now he had something to back up his bluff. He held up a piece of the rich yellow-glowing quartz, then tossed it over. Bonehead caught it in his thick hand.

“Sweet sample,” he said. “Where’d you get it?”

“Don’t you recognize it?” Joe asked laconically, and watched the big man’s reactions.

“Naw.”

“You ought to. It’s a match for the stuff in your saddlebag.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me.”

“I’m thinking I didn’t hear you right, sheriff,”

Bonehead said with harsh menace.

“You heard me right. That’s a piece of the same high-grade your pardner was murdered for.”

Veinous blood clogged the capillaries in Bonehead’s massive face, dying his florid features a purplish hue. His black-stubbed chin thrust out. Beetling brows drew down. Eyes glared. Thick fingers clenched.

He turned to his effacing partner who stood close. “You hear that, Howard?” he roared. “He’s accusing me of murder!”

Joe looked at Howard Cassell, also. “Go lug Bonehead’s saddlebag over here,” he ordered.

“Don’t you dare touch that saddlebag, Howard!” Bonehead blaringly countermanded the order.

The little man looked fearfully from one to the other, lids blinking over his watery eyes, long bony fingers twitching.

Joe Sage pulled his six-gun from leather. “All right, rabbit; you’re protected, see? Get the saddlebag.”

The little man edged timorously away, keeping his eyes on Bonehead Gutch. “I wouldn’t do it, Bonehead,” he whimpered. “Only he’s making me. You can see he’s making me.”

“You double-crossing yellow-hided mutt!” Bonehead boomed, and took a lunging step after his partner.

Joe Sage’s gun roared. The bullet dusted Bonehead’s sombrero brim. Bonehead stopped in his tracks, trembling in near apoplectic rage. Howard Cassell lugged the saddlebag close, opened it under Joe’s directions. In the bottom of the bag, stuffed in the toe of a rock-scuffed work shoe, were more specimens of the gold-threaded quartz.

“What you got to say now, big boy?” Joe questioned harshly.

Bonehead Gutch was staring stupidly with his wet lips slack. “I dunno,” he said thickly. “I dunno what—”

Joe Sage’s hand tightened on the six-gun butt. Finger tensed on trigger. The long gun barrel leveled out, as steady as a fence post sunk in *caliche*.

“I’m arresting you for the murder of Al Dickerson,” he said.

Joe’s narrowed eyes looked where his gun was pointing—not at Bonehead Gutch, but at Bonehead’s partner!

The timidly shrinking Howard Cassell stared into that gun barrel with a look of growing terror.

“There—there’s some mistake,” he babbled.

“The mistake was made when you murdered Dickerson,” Joe said bleakly, “and planted things so’s in case of a slip-up anywhere, the circumstantial evidence would point to your partner. You should have let well enough alone. The very thing you aimed to clear yourself on is what tripped you up. Bonehead here, he ain’t such a good actor like you. He registers straight emotions. When he’s mad he shows it. And when he’s surprised he shows it. I could tell by his face he never knowed that ore was in his saddlebag till you pulled it out.”

“That—that ain’t enough to pin no murder on me,” the little man sputtered.

“There’s more,” Joe said tersely. “I been suspecting you ever since I figured out it was an act you was putting on, pretending to be so uncommon scared of your partner. It was a pretty good act, but I couldn’t help noticing you called him ‘Bonehead’ all the time, right familiar; while he was always plumb polite to you, calling you ‘Howard.’ And after you left my office your voices come in through my screen door some. Hell, you was actually dictating then. It was your idea of no drinking till the sheriff got out of town. And you made it stick. He wasn’t telling you. You were telling him.”

“All that there,” Howard Cassell gasped weakly, “ain’t courtroom proof.”

“There’s plenty more,” Joe said grimly. “I’m saving the courtroom proof for the courtroom.”

A MOAN wheezed from the little man’s lips. He swayed and his frail shadow sawed back and forth in the sand behind him. His knees buckled and he swayed in against the massive form of Bonehead Gutch, standing close beside him. His bony hands clamped on Bonehead’s shoulder as though for support to his sagging body.

Within the next split wink one of those hands had moved, like a rattler striking, to Bonehead’s holstered six-gun. Snagging onto the gun, the little man swerved behind the shielding bulk of his partner, out of range from Joe’s weapon.

The whole maneuver had taken place in a flashing second. Joe couldn’t shoot without endangering Bonehead. But Howard Cassell’s trigger finger wasn’t hampered. He blared vicious shots at Joe.

The sheriff was already diving for the protection

of that cairn of rocks set up over Al Dickerson’s grave. The first bullet which reached out for him was a foot too high. A second shot blazed from the gun barrel before Joe’s lanky form could reach the safety of the rock cairn. Howard Cassell’s aim was better on this one. The lead slammed past so hot across Joe’s face that it jerked a quick breath from his lips.

That was all the shooting for a while. As soon as Joe had fortified himself behind the cairn, Howard Cassell started backing away, holding onto Bonehead Gutch’s cartridge belt with one hand and forcing Bonehead to move back. Cassell kept the gun barrel leveled out from between Bonehead’s side ribs and his helplessly swinging arm.

There wasn’t a thing Joe could do. He couldn’t get Cassell without shooting through Bonehead Gutch. And every second was widening the distance as the venomous little man backed away. His play, of course, would be to kill all the horses except the one he needed to escape on.

Joe surprised even himself with his next move. Acting almost instinctively, he holstered his six-gun and lunged out clear of the cairn, holding two rounded rocks as big as his fists. Howard Cassell’s revolver sent more bullets horneting past, but Joe, ducking around like a streak of lightning gone crazy, slammed both of his rocks without collecting any gun lead.

He didn’t throw the rocks; he bowled them along the ground. The first bounded past the two men so close that they had to crow-hop to avoid getting their ankles cracked. They crow-hopped for the second rock, too, but it didn’t do any good.

The missile left the ground on a low skip. Bonehead let out a bellow as the rock connected with his shin bone. He tripped, fell backward, and in falling, clamped his milling right arm to his side, imprisoning Howard Cassell’s gun hand in a vise between ribs and steel-muscle arm.

Joe rammed forward, gun leaping from holster. His idea in bowling the rocks had been to upset the two, and in the confusion, with their bodies a little separated, try to get in a shot at Cassell. But the backward fall of the partners didn’t separate them enough that Joe dared risk firing. Not right at first it didn’t. And a moment later Joe’s shot wasn’t needed.

Bonehead raised his ponderous bulk from the ground. But Howard Cassell stayed flattened out where he was. The big man’s crushing weight had

knocked all the wind out of him. Joe picked up the gun from where it had fallen from Cassell's fingers.

Bonehead Gutch was bending over, rubbing his shin. "This here was all a plenty powerful surprise to me," he growled. "I always knowed Howard had a dirt-mean streak in him, but I didn't figure it'd lead him to murder. One thing I'd admire to know. What is this here now courtroom proof you got

against Howard—or was you running a wide bluff?"

Joe Sage grinned. "If I was, I ain't now. His pulling your gun and shooting at me and making you a living shield against my return bullets, is plenty admission of guilt, by blazes, in any man's courtroom."