

The Murder Brand

By Howard Nile

A doomed killer burns himself with"The Murder Brand"

SIMON SAUNDERS rose from the table in the hunting lodge, stretched lazily, and ambled to the fireplace, leaving his partner in crime to clean up their late supper dishes. "Ace" Darby, since this was to be his last evening on earth, could afford to get a little work done, decided Saunders, smiling thinly at the big man's back.

Presently Darby joined him, took a seat before the fire. His long, pale face sparkled with a grin. "The job we pulled this afternoon was a wow, eh, old son?" Then his smile faded. "If only you hadn't chilled that teller. A dumb piece of work, Sim. You're always too willin' to shed blood."

Simon's lips twisted sardonically. "Aw, the guy had it comin'. Shut up about it, will you? None of your bother if I plug somebody who gets in my way."

Darby shrugged away his show of annoyance. "Too good to be true, this job. Twenty grand apiece. And this is just like a vacation—so the folks in the valley will think, seein' us up here. They'll suppose we're on another of our 'hunting' trips." He chuckled, winked slyly. "Not knowing we're the boys who robbed a hick-town bank and made a slick get-away with forty thousand."

Darby leaned forward from his chair to build-up the fire. Saunders' mouth drooped wolfishly, and his eyes glittered blacker than the devil in his heart. His hand slid snake-like under his coat, emerged gripping a .38 calibre automatic. Twenty grand was enough for Darby, perhaps—but not for Saunders, whose greedy vision had painted him a splendid picture of what he could do with forty

thousand dollars.

Darby glanced around suddenly uttered an animal-like cry of alarm. Instinctively he flung himself sideways, whipped something from his right hand which hurtled straight at Saunders.

A stick of fire-wood. It whacked Saunders' gun, ripped it from his grasp. He howled with rage and pain.

"You yellow rat!" shrieked Darby. "Double-cross me, will you?" Shoulder down, he charged the frustrated killer like a crazed bull.

Fear blazed from the smaller man's eyes. Panic gripped him. If it would have saved him, he would have groveled in the dust, begged for mercy. But the wild look in Darby's eyes triggered his mind. He eluded the larger man's rush, crashed into the wall. Clutching to prevent a fall, he gripped an ash-stand atop a heavy iron shaft.

"You slimy, sneaking yellow-belly," bellowed Darby, whirling back at Saunders. But he didn't charge again. His hand shot under his coat. And Saunders felt terror paralyze his mind—but not his thin, wiry body.

He sprang forward, his new weapon clubbed. Darby, caught in the act of ducking and pulling his gun at the same time, was helpless for a fatal instant. The ash-stand whacked against the side of his head, tumbling him in a heap.

Saunders swore between gulps for air. He plastered his greasy hair back into place, knelt. "Better grab his roll before I finish him." Like lightning his hands flew through

Darby's pockets. Suddenly his face went white. He ran through Darby's clothing once more, but no use. The twenty grand was missing.

Darby was beginning to stir. Saunders dumped his dazed victim into a straight-back chair, bound him with lengths of rope found about the lodge. Then he soused Darby's head with icy mountain water.

"You yellow, double-crossing rat," mumbled Darby thickly. "I was lookin' for somethin' like this."

"Where's that money?" Saunders demanded savagely.

"Don'tcha wish you knew?" taunted Darby.

"You'll talk!" Saunders half-screamed. "You'll talk, damn you, or you'll wake up in hell." He stabbed the poker into the hearth fire, then removed his victim's shoes. He worked with frenzied determination.

Within ten minutes Saunders gave up. Darby's feet seemed detached from his body, so far as his vocal cords were affected. Into Simon's heart wormed an agonizing hatred for the man, fed by a fierce jealousy of this show of sheer guts. It maddened him that he could be defeated by one bound and helpless and defiant as Darby was.

He knew for certain that Darby had had the money upon entering the lodge earlier in the evening. He stuck the poker back in the coals, began searching the place. But failure ended his hunt. Shivering with rage, he again confronted Ace.

"Are you going to tell me—" he began loudly. Then he broke off with a curse. His fist knotted, smashed savagely into Darby's jaw. The bound crook tumbled backwards. His chair splintered to bits, and he lay inert among its wreckage.

With a new idea Saunders grabbed up a flashlight and the guns from the floor, hurried outside. Maybe Darby had dropped the money through a window, or had hidden it on

the way to the spring earlier in the evening.

He locked the door behind him. He was taking no chances.

INSIDE the cabin presently, Darby began to move. He moaned in agony. His eyes opened, and he struggled weakly to free himself of his bindings, which had been loosened by the ruined chair. He crawled to the door, but found it impassable. More dead than alive, feeling nothing but the hell his charred feet were giving him, he tried a window, but found his strength unequal to the task of opening it. He sank to the floor with a sob of defeat choking him.

He heard sounds outside the lodge. Saunders. His hands clenched weakly, and he dragged himself toward a coat rack near the door. He pulled himself up, reached a hand in the pocket of an overcoat—Saunders' overcoat—and withdrew it clutching a sheaf of banknotes. It was in Saunders' overcoat he had hidden his cut of the loot. Then he stuffed the money in a back pocket of his own trousers.

He somehow got to the fireplace, managed to pull off his coat, to tear open the front of his shirt. A moment ago another man had turned his feet into charred crisps. A little more burning shouldn't matter. For Ace Darby knew that Saunders was going to kill him. Nothing could prevent his death. A shaking hand grasped the cold end of the poker. Working as fast as his weakness permitted, he streaked the white skin of his chest with the scarlet tip of the iron.

Feet thudded outside. Frantically Darby poked the iron back into the fire, clutched together the flaps of his shirt-front. That rat Saunders mustn't see. He *mustn't*.

Saunders, his gun in his fist, burst in. His lips curled as he spied Darby.

"What you doin'?" He was forward instantly, his hand ripping open Darby's unbuttoned shirt. "Why, you blasted idiot! Of

all the fool things—” He actually roared with laughter.

Darby relaxed in a faint, the stigma of failure twitching the corners of his mouth. Saunders looked at his chest again. “X-X—WIS. Now what the devil? Well, punk, I promised you’d wake up in hell.” His pistol blazed.

It was with misgivings that Saunders left the lodge without Darby’s twenty thousand dollars. But he smeared away the fingerprints from the furniture and everything he had touched that night, and doused the lights. The cabin belonged to Darby, who often went there without Saunders. The little killer could alibi out of any circumstantial evidence charge. He had friends. Besides, it had been dark when they entered the mountains, and no one could say he had been in the car.

He left the coupe, which belonged to Darby, outside a small, foothill town and walked into the village from the opposite direction like a hitchhiker who had been unable to obtain a lift. An hour later he was aboard a bus for Rapadan, a large city near the town where he and Darby had held up the bank, and the present center of their operations. He could easily explain Darby’s absence, for the two had left town separately.

IT was almost noon the next day when the bell of Saunders’ flat burred. He admitted three men in plain clothes. But he wasn’t fooled. “Cop” was written all over each of them. In fact, he knew the identity of the big-middled man who spoke first.

“I’m Lawton, of local homicide. This is Bill Roper, sheriff of Blanton County. We got bad news for you. Your friend, Ace Darby, was found murdered this morning in his lodge in the Blanton Mountains.”

Saunders expressed surprised concern. “Darby—dead! Why—I can’t believe it. Who

would have killed him?”

The men found seats on three sides of Saunders, who, failing to notice the maneuver, sat on the arm of a large easy-chair.

“Saunders,” began Roper at once, “your friend was guilty of bank robbery.”

“Bank robbery! How do you know? Who told you?” This time Saunders’ surprise was extremely genuine. A note of alarm rang in his tone.

“We know because half the loot was on him when he was found.”

“Half the loot!” Saunders’ mind whirled madly. He guessed the truth, and a screaming rage fought to grip him.

“Darby’s death seems a great mystery,” went on Roper, a rangy man with an inscrutable face. “His partner may have killed him. But he wouldn’t have left the twenty grand in his victim’s pocket.”

Saunders stared in silence. His first alarm went over. Such senseless assertions as this small-time sheriff was making were a swell show of ignorance.

“And looky here. We found this burned on Darby’s chest—evidently by himself.” The sheriff unfolded a paper, and Simon reread the inscription he had seen on Darby’s chest.

“What the hell does it mean?” he asked, feigning interest.

“Means simply that Mr. Lawton here is arrestin,’ you for the killing of Darby, for bank robbery, and for the murder of that teller. You’re the smaller of the pair, the one who fired the shot in the bank.”

Saunders stared, shocked by surprise. He tried to laugh, but the sound was a croak. He swept his gaze around the room, felt cold, merciless eyes boring into him. Panic gripped him, crazed him. For the second time in twenty-four hours he went berserk. Like a bullet he charged the seated sheriff.

Trapped in the fatly upholstered piece

of furniture, the officer seemed helpless. Then his hands grasped the chair-arms. His feet lifted on stiff knees, met Saunders' mad rush. The knees buckled—then straightened. The sheriff's chair tumbled backwards. The force of the kick flung Saunders clear across the room. Instantly he was smothered. Strong hands twisted the cold, steel of handcuffs about his wrists.

"Stand up, you lousy killer!"

Saunders shook his head, a raging bug gradually settling to quiet in the back of his brain.

"Tough luck, buddy." That was Roper, a triumphant smile on his face. "Tough luck—and a fool thing to do, jump me. But we had you cold. Yeh, Darby got the last laugh on you."

"Wh—what do you mean? What you

talking about?"

"Look at this." The paper bearing the letters came to light again. "To you, looking from Darby's feet, this reads X-X—WIS. Switch it around and it says— You can see for yourself."

Saunders blinked to clear his vision, glanced at the paper Roper was shoving under his nose. Suddenly a chill froze him. A shriek struggled to leave his throat, threatened to rip out his lungs. He shook his head as his captors shook him. He looked down again. Thickly his lips worded the fatal message: "SIM—X-X. Simon—double-cross!"

"Exactly! He must not have had time to finish your name—or, by damn, it hurt like hell. And since that's where you two will soon meet up again, you might ask him."