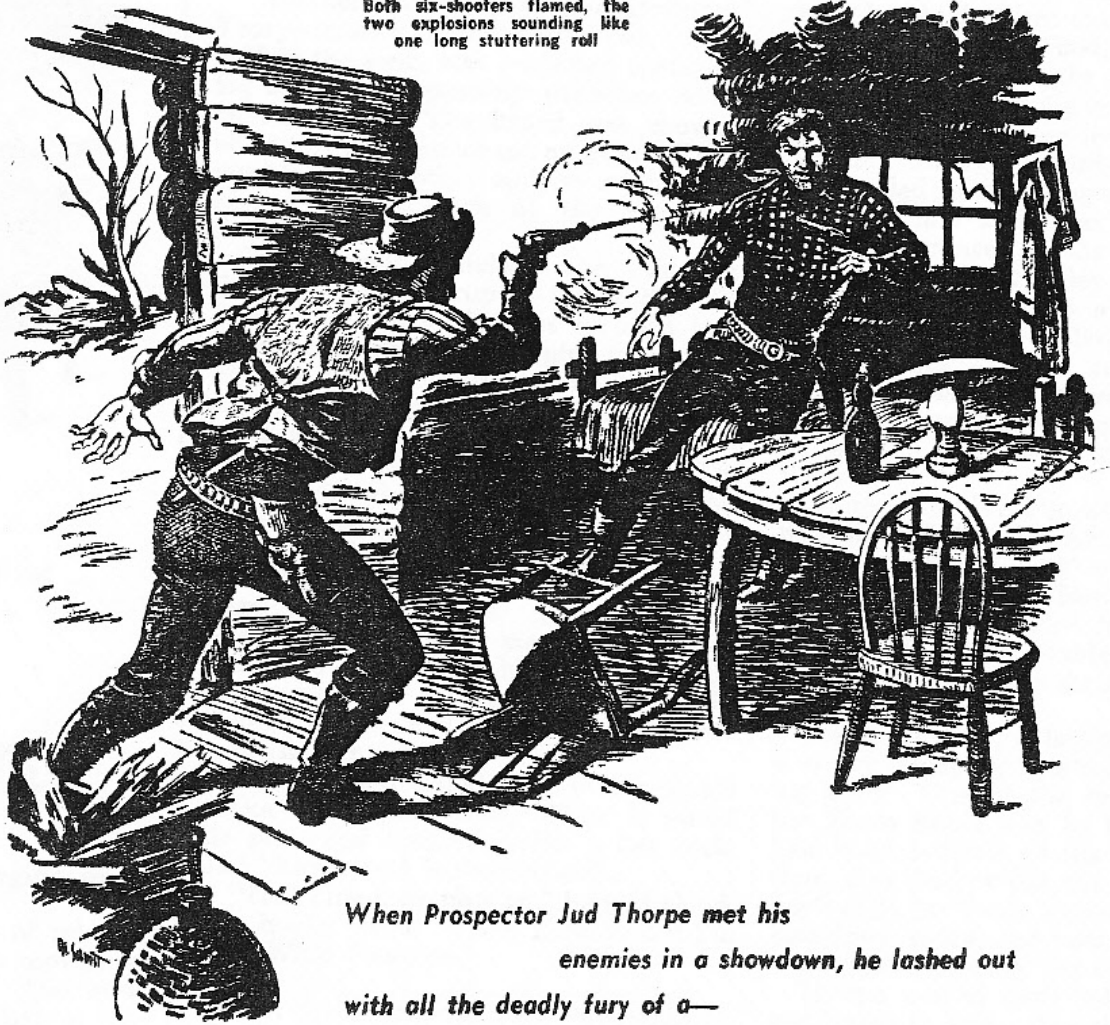


Both six-shooters flamed, the two explosions sounding like one long stuttering roll



When Prospector Jud Thorpe met his enemies in a showdown, he lashed out with all the deadly fury of a—

# Whip Scorpion

By Chuck Martin

**L**YING in the shade of a giant sahuaro cactus, a little man watched one of the never-ending battles of the desert. A *vinegarone*, the deadly whip-scorpion, was facing a crouching lizard. Desert folk called the lizard a "swift," because of its incredible speed. Between the two was stretched a small sand-snake, sluggish from gorging on a fat mouse.

Jud Thorpe had the faculty of relaxed immobility; not even his eyes moved as he watched the silent duel. The sun-drenched sand radiated heat like a furnace, but Thorpe was a desert rat and he thrived on heat. He made a silent bet as he watched the duel which he knew would be to the death, with the spoils of food going to the victor. Jud Thorpe was betting on the whip-scorpion.

The swift straightened its bent forelegs and leaped at the waiting *vinegarone*. The swift snapped its jaws and leaped aside just as the scorpion lashed out with the curved deadly weapon on its scaly tail. The barb missed the swift by a scant inch, and if the scorpion was wounded from those small razor-like teeth, it gave no sign. Neither did it bleed.

"Another blue chip on the scorpion!" Thorpe made a second mental bet.

Now the swift was crouched again, doing a series of push-up exercises on its bent fore-legs. The lizard was showing off to throw his opponent off guard. There would come another sudden rush, and a second deadly slash at the scorpion's throat.

The scorpion watched with dull apathetic eyes, then erupted into action like a miniature fury. It shot forward in a blur, the barbed tail whipping up over its back as it caught the swift in the middle of the setting-up exercises. The poisoned hook struck the swift just behind the head in the soft part of the neck. The *vinegarone* wheeled to the side, trundled around, and crouched down to watch its wounded rival.

Slowly the lizard pushed up in its interrupted calisthenics. Its movements were reduced to slow motion as the poison raced through its blood-stream. The pushing motion stopped suddenly as the lizard's head rested on the sand between sprawling fore-legs.

The scorpion sidled over to the torpid snake and struck once. Then it seized its prey and backed under a flat rock. Jud Thorpe took a deep breath.

"That's me from now on," he said aloud, in a husky voice. "From here on out I'm the—Whip Scorpion."

**I**N A cave, far back in the Superstitions, Jud Thorpe was hunched over a small

fire, brewing an evil-smelling mixture he had learned from the Yaqui Indians.

Thorpe slowly stripped off his rough clothing, wincing now and again as the cloth seemed to cling to his skin. His hands and face were the color of seasoned mahogany, but the skin of his lean muscled body was like gleaming marble. It was striped with ugly red welts, and the old prospector muttered as he began to apply poultices to the angry wounds.

The Apaches used the thorny ocotillo cactus to build corrals for their goats and sheep. Jumper Todd and Tonto Waverly had used the spiny ocotillo as whips, in an effort to make Jud Thorpe tell the location of his gold strike.

All day he stayed in the cave, applying the potion from time to time. His seamed and bearded face was that of a man past sixty, but aside from the ragged wounds, Jud Thorpe's tough body was a thing of beauty. Corded sheaths of muscle leaped and writhed at his slightest move, and he had a seasoned endurance which had carried him through an ordeal which would have killed most strong men.

It was late afternoon when he crept to the entrance of the low cave and scanned the desert valley. Two men were riding toward a *cienaga*, a deep water-hole which nature had hollowed out in the volcanic rock. Thorpe cupped a pair of old field glasses to his eyes, and low savage growls welled up from his throat as he studied the two riders—Todd and Waverly.

Jumper Todd, a big man of thirty-odd, was wanted by the Arizona Rangers—fifteen hundred dollars' worth. He was a claim-jumper and a Border-hopper, and was wanted in Mexico for robbery and murder. He was double fast with the twin .45 six-shooters thonged low on his powerful legs.

Tonto Waverly, a lanky cowhand with a tawny drooping mustache, was crowding

forty. One of the few survivors of the Tonto Basin war, he boasted that he had lived because of his ability to read sign. Jud Thorpe did not doubt the cowboy's skill, for Tonto Waverly had tracked him down twice, and now the two killers were again too close for comfort.

Thorpe moved back into the shadows and began to dress. The sting had left his lacerated back which he daubed with a thick tallow salve. His eyes gleamed as he strapped on his old cartridge belt and fastened the tie-backs low. His gnarled fingers caressed the grips of his old frontier Colt .44.

Thorpe shook his tousled head as he watched the two men circle and work up toward the cave. He smiled without mirth when Tonto Waverly pointed to the ground where the dim trail forked. He had made sign on both trails, and he saw Jumper Todd take the trail that led to Dutchman's Peak. The lost Dutchman Mine was said to be somewhere on the mesa, but men had searched in vain for more than twenty years.

Tonto Waverly came toward the cave on a rangy grulla horse. The cowhand, a thirty-gun in his strong brown hands, stopped his horse two hundred yards from the cave and began to study the rocky cliffs.

Jud Thorpe watched through his glasses, grinding his blackened teeth as he noted the changing expressions on Waverly's cruel face. The cowboy rode into the bracken, dismounted and tied the grulla in a 'squite thicket, where the beans hung plentiful, and disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him.

Thorpe knew that his hiding place had been discovered. As he moved back into the cave, he drew a long-bladed skinning knife from a sheathe on the back of his belt. He tested the honed blade with the ball of his thumb in the murky darkness,

and settled down to wait.

The minutes dragged by as the twilight shadows deepened. A small rock bounced from the floor of the cave, then another. Jud Thorpe stretched to his feet but he made no move toward the six-shooter in his open holster.

A SHADOW darkened the entrance, and a lean man flitted inside with scarcely a sound. There was a long silence. Thorpe watched with eyes that could see in the dark.

Tonto Waverly stood just inside the cave, flattened against the front wall. A six-shooter was cradled in his right hand, and Thorpe knew that Waverly was waiting until his eyes were accustomed to the gloom. After a time he crept forward toward a heap of old bedding huddled against a side wall, with Thorpe's battered old Stetson on top of it.

"The old creep is dead!" Thorpe heard Waverly mutter. "I'll just search his carcass for a map before I call Jumper!"

Thorpe saw Tonto Waverly holster his six-shooter and move closer to the roll of bedding. As the cowhand reached out a hand, the old prospector spoke softly.

"I'm over here, Tonto, what's left of me. Don't reach for yore gun!"

Tonto Waverly whirled toward the back of the cave. His hands went up to a level with his shoulders, and now he could see Thorpe facing him, his right hand hooked into the back of his belt. Waverly gave a short laugh of embarrassed relief.

"So yuh didn't die?" he sneered. "Yuh should have throwed down on me when yuh had the chance!"

"I found the mine," Thorpe taunted his hunter. "But I didn't make a map. You and Jumper flogged me with ocotillo and left me for dead. . . . You ever hear of a whip scorpion?"

Tonto Waverly stared and lowered his

hands. "I've seen many a *vinegarone*," he said harshly. "They hide under rocks."

"And in caves," Thorpe added. "Yuh're looking at one now."

"I've scotched many's the one in my time," Waverly boasted. "Where-at did yuh find the Lost Dutchman Mine?"

"Up here in the Superstitions," Thorpe answered carelessly. "But you and Jumper won't ever get an ounce of that dust."

"So yuh're a whip scorpion," Waverly sneered. "I've got yuh faded with a handgun, and we both know it. I'm coming to get yuh, and yuh better rattle and give up head this time, yuh old *vinegarone*!"

"Stop!" Thorpe said harshly. "You take another step, and I'll let yuh have the pizen."

Something in the old prospector's tone warned Waverly. He stopped, his long legs spread for balance, his right hand hovering above the gun in its buscadero holster.

"Make yore pass," he dared the bearded miner. "I don't aim to kill yuh yet. I'll put a slug through both yore arms, and yuh'll be mighty glad to talk with yore mouth wide open."

"You ever get bit by a whip scorpion?" Thorpe asked curiously. "That old tail just whips up over the scorpion's back. Yuh don't hardly feel the sting of the barb, but when the pizen starts racing, through yore blood, yuh'll think you're in hell with yore blood on fire."

Tonto Waverly leaned forward a trifle, searching the seamed and bearded face of his victim. He was beginning to read sign, and his eyes narrowed to slits as he saw the old miner's right arm move slightly behind his back.

Tonto Waverly struck down for his six-shooter with the speed of long practice. Jud Thorpe's right hand came out with a looping overhand throw just as Waverly's

fingers wrapped around the handles of his six-shooter.

A streak of blurred silver sped across the cave, and the knife buried itself in Waverly's left breast just as his gun cleared leather.

Waverly gasped and went back a step. The gun dropped from his hand, his legs broke at the knees, and then he was down with his long legs twitching and scraping on the rocky floor.

Jud Thorpe waited and watched for a long moment. As he watched Tonto Waverly's face through the murky gloom, he saw the outlaw's eyes become wide and staring. He saw the man's thin lips pucker and blow out a gusty sigh, a sigh which ended in a low rattle of finality. . . .

Another few minutes would bring on the darkness of night. Jumper Todd rode cautiously up on the little mesa where Jud Thorpe had built his log and rock cabin. While he dismounted and tied his bay horse in a buckthorn thicket, he wondered if the old desert rat had died of his wounds. Then, like Jumper, shrugged back his wide shoulders and like a stalking Indian made his way along a brushy path toward the one-room cabin.

"The old desert rat must have a stash of gold squirreled away somewheres around here," Todd muttered to himself. "He'd leave some kind of a sign—or he'll talk if I can find him alive!"

He shook his head as he remembered the condition of Jud Thorpe the last time he had seen the old prospector. Lying in the sand down on the desert floor, his tough body covered with bleeding lacerations from the ocotillo clubs. Jud Thorpe had been beaten into insensibility without divulging the location of the mine, or the hiding place where he had cached his dust.

**J**UMPER TODD figured on using the old rock cabin to get a good night's sleep, cook a big breakfast in the morning, and spend the day making a thorough search. Tonto Waverly had bragged about his ability to read sign, but perhaps there were others who could do it better. Todd approached the rock cabin carefully, circled the little building twice, and peered through the one dirty window. The lower sash was raised, and Todd stared into the room for a long time.

Satisfied at last, he retraced his steps and untied his horse. Then he rode up the sloping trail and watered the thirsty animal at a small spring which Jud Thorpe had walled in with rocks. After staking out the horse on his catch-rope, Todd carried his saddle and gear to the cabin and threw them behind the door. Not daring to light the coal-oil lantern, Todd sat down on the deep bunk under the window to eat the cold meat sandwiches he had taken from his saddle-bags.

He wondered if Tonto Waverly would come back to the cabin. His lip curled as he recalled Tonto's boast that he could follow a bird by reading the sign that same bird's shadow made. It was true that Tonto had tracked down the old prospector the first time, but Todd told himself they could have caught Thorpe any time just by waiting at this very cabin.

Todd pulled off his scarred boots and shifted the heavy six-shooters on his straight legs, yawned and stretched his arms over his head. Then he leaped almost to the door when an angry whirr warned him of a rattle-snake.

Todd's right-hand gun jumped to his hand like magic. He blasted two shots at the sound near the open window, heard something drop lightly to the floor. Then there were rolling echoes until the gunshots died away into nothingness.

Todd plucked a match from the band

of his Stetson, thumbed it to flame, and searched the floor by the window. He grinned sheepishly when he saw a rawhide thong which had been cut in two by one of his slugs. The thong had been tied to the rattles of a diamondback, a big snake killed by Jud Thorpe years ago. Todd's hand had struck it when he had stretched out his long arms. After punching the spent shells from his six-shooter, Todd thumbed fresh cartridges through the loading gate and seated the gun in his holster. . . .

Jud Thorpe had stopped instantly when he heard the muffled roar of two pistol shots. Then he nodded sagely and continued through the darkness. He had come to know all the trails in the dark, every rock and protruding root during his ten-year search for the Lost Dutchman Mine. Those shots had come from the direction of his cabin.

The old prospector made no sound as he continued up a deer trail. Presently he saw the familiar outlines of his old rock cabin. Thorpe also saw the bay horse picketed near the spring, and he bellied down and made his way slowly through the shadows.

Some time later he crouched down by the woodpile and listened with his head cocked toward the cabin. Then he reached down and picked up a discarded air-tight. The tin can now contained a dead scorpion he had killed a few days before. Holding the can gingerly, he crept through the Stygian darkness toward his cabin.

There was the danger that he might stumble into a sidewinder, or even another *vinegarone*. But most of the night creatures would move aside if warned. The real killer was in the cabin, like as not sleeping.

Jud Thorpe skinned back his lips as he made his silent, ghostly way through the black of a moonless night. Now he was

crouching under the window, listening to the deep regular breathing of a tired sleeper. He knew that no one but Jumper Todd could ride that wild bay horse staked out on the picket-rope. Thorpe straightened slowly and raised the tin can above the window.

Would the dead scorpion rattle when it slid from the can? Jud Thorpe wrinkled his brow into a thoughtful frown. If he made a little scooping raise with the can, turned it over quickly. . . ?

He could have riddled the sleeper with bullets, but Jud Thorpe was not that kind of a killer. He remembered the torturing punishment he had received, and his lips moved soundlessly as he told himself that he was the—Whip Scorpion!

He upended the can over the sleeper, the scorpion slid out with only a slight sound, then Thorpe was fading back into the shadows.

**N**OW his knife was in his hand as he crawled toward the tethered horse. He heard the big bay snort and strain at the end of the rope. Thorpe severed the rope and ran behind a brush thicket as the horse galloped down the steep trail, its shod hoofs ringing on the volcanic rocks in the darkness.

Jud Thorpe knew what would happen in the cabin. Men who sleep on the ground awaken at the slightest noise. In a country where a man's horse is often the difference between life and death, that horse is a man's first thought.

Jumper Todd would awaken from a sound sleep; his first jump would take him almost to the door. Thorpe heard the thud of stockinged feet, then Todd's hoarse voice.

"Is that you, Tonto?"

Jud Thorpe crouched down in the darkness and waited. After a while Jumper Todd would go back and sit down on the

bunk to think things over. Todd was double-fast with his cutters and he boasted that he could shoot as straight with one hand as the other.

The bunk creaked softly, and then the stillness was broken by a scream of terror. Two six-shooters roared savagely inside the cabin, and Jud Thorpe knew that Jumper Todd had found the scorpion.

He moved closer with a grim smile wreathing his bearded face. Thorpe saw the flicker of flame when Jumper Todd struck a match, and then came an oath of disgust.

"Just an old dead varmint," he heard Todd mutter. "I'm getting as jumpy as a drunken sheepherder with the snakes!"

Jud Thorpe smiled and moved silently down the trail to a dead-fall where he had left his bed roll. He crawled under an old blanket, shrugged a time or two to fit hips and shoulders to the ground, and closed his eyes. He told himself that it wouldn't take long to spend the night on the mesa and drifted into dreamless sleep.

Gray dawn filtered through the darkness from the east, tugged at the eyelids of the sleeping prospector. Jud Thorpe sat up, alert and fully awake. Reaching under the trunk of the dead tree, Thorpe brought out a square tin can and opened it carefully. Tortillas wouldn't make much of a meal, but they would give a man strength.

His simple breakfast finished, Thorpe looked to his old Frontier Colt six-shooter. He placed the hammer on half-cock, spun the cylinder to make sure that all the moving parts were in working order, and returned the old .44 to his worn holster.

Thorpe's eyes glittered and his thin lips tightened as he drew the long-bladed skinning knife from the sheath at the back of his belt. He honed the blade lovingly on the inside of his left boot, tested it against the ball of his thumb, and placed it in the

scabbard. Then he stretched to his feet and tugged his old Stetson low over his deep-set eyes.

Daybreak was coming to the Superstitions, but the sun had not yet slanted over the highest peaks. There was cover of a sort between the deadfall and the rock cabin, and Thorpe used it like an Indian as he made his stealthy approach across the mesa.

Jud Thorpe knew the wild creatures, and he knew the men who rode the lonely trails. The war of nerves he had opened against his enemy, would have caused Jumper Todd many sleepless hours. Then he would fall into a deep sleep but with the twin six-shooters ready to his trained hands.

It was so when Thorpe reached the door of the cabin. The hinges were well-oiled; Thorpe had seen to that. He pushed the stout door back slowly, his right hand behind his back. Then he stood for a moment looking at the sleeper on his bunk.

Jumper Todd was sprawled on his back. His hat was over his eyes, and his right hand touched the grips of his .45 Colt. He'd weigh all of a hundred and eighty, Thorpe estimated. Fifty pounds more than the man he had flogged so unmercifully.

Jud Thorpe made no sound as he stood in the doorway and watched the snoring sleeper. He knew that no sound was necessary. Given time, Jumper Todd would *feel* those staring eyes.

The light grew stronger, and so did the intensity of Jud Thorpe's gaze. He watched the face of Jumper Todd with eyes that did not wink as they sent a telepathic message to the subconscious brain of the sleeping outlaw.

Jud Thorpe had seen it done many a time. He had saved his scalp a time or two by feeling the eyes of hostile Indians on

the back of his neck. He had seen drygulchers betray their intentions by staring at their intended victims. It seldom failed.

Jumper Todd stirred restlessly and closed his lips on a snore. Then his eyes snapped open and the fingers of his right hand closed spasmodically around the handles of his six-shooter. His boots thudded to the worn planking, and he leaped to the right, clawing his meat-gun from the holster. Todd saw the old prospector in the open doorway as his boots hit the floor. His six-shooter jerked up, but Thorpe had anticipated the move. His right arm lashed out and over in a looping throw, and the long-bladed knife lanced across the cabin like a shaft of silvered light.

As the blade tore through the muscles of Todd's forearm, Todd screamed and the half-cocked six-shooter spilled to the floor and slid under the bunk. He swung to face the man in the doorway. Jud Thorpe was smiling, the cruel mirthless smile of a man for whom death held no terrors. Thorpe did not talk; everything had been said before those spiny ocotillos had bitten into his flesh. Jumper Todd wasn't the talking kind either, especially in a game where flaming guns would speak for him.

Jud Thorpe watched with unwinking eyes. His gnarled right hand rested on his old .44 Colt with thumb on the gnurled hammer. He wasn't a trained gun-fighter, but his right hand should be a match for the outlaw's left.

**B**OTH men jerked their weapons as though motivated by a common impulse. Todd's arm went high, and he cocked the hammer under his thumb as he was throwing down to catch the sights.

Jud Thorpe had figured it different for himself. His thumb notched the hammer back as he was making his draw. His

slitted eyes caught the sights on the up-pull, and his trigger-finger responded with perfect co-ordination.

The two explosions sounded like one long stuttering roll as both six-shooters flamed at the muzzles. But that echoing stutter meant the difference between life and death. It meant that one of the two had shot—*second!*

Jumper Todd's reaction was involuntary. He jumped backward, his leap given force by the impact of the .44 slug which had caught him just over the heart. The bullet from his flaming gun whammed into the door-frame above Jud Thorpe's shapeless Stetson, and the little prospector stood immovable.

Jumper Todd brought up against the far wall of the cabin with a thud. The fingers of his left hand opened to drop the smoking gun at his feet, and his knees buckled to pitch him face-down on the clattering six-shooter. His body twitched slightly and was still.

Jud Thorpe reached up with his left hand and removed his battered black Stetson. His bearded lips moved silently. Then he replaced his hat and holstered his smoke-fouled gun. He walked to an earthen water jar and was dipping up cool water with a gourd when boots crunched

outside the cabin. The old prospector turned slowly to face a Ranger who came forward behind a six-shooter.

"Howdy, Burt Rake," Thorpe greeted the Ranger. "You caught up Jumper Todd's hoss, and you read the sign."

"That's right, Jud," the officer agreed. "I likewise found Tonto Waverly's horse, and then I found Tonto. What were those two killers after, and don't tell me you found the Lost Dutchman Mine."

"I never, but I'm gettin' close," Jud Thorpe answered confidently. "Jumper and Tonto thought I'd discovered it when they took my poke with five or six ounces of dust in it."

"There's fifteen hundred reward on Todd, dead or alive," Ranger Rake said quietly. "Another thousand on Tonto Waverly, and I'll see that you get it. That money will grub-stake you for a long time, and I hope you do find that old goldmine." He stepped forward and touched something with the toe of his boot. "Funny," he muttered. "Looks like an old dried-up *vinegarone!*"

"Yeah, that's what it is," Jud Thorpe agreed and added soberly, "There, but for the grace of God, lies Jud Thorpe—the Whip Scorpion!"