



THE TRAIL TRAP

★ By T.W. FORD ★

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Little Joe Bodie had to catch the murderer of Solitaire Tice alone, for Marshal Ellard was out of town. And no one figured Little Joe was worth cooperating with!

TWO shots rattled out on the sharp frosty night so fast it sounded as if a man were fanning the hammer. After a brief pause, there was another, a single one, and a man's paint-torn curse floating after it. The sounds came from down beyond the bridge at the bottom of the hill from Lusker. The boot heels of a staggering man thudded on the bridge itself. Then there were two more gun reports, the second muffled as if by distance. The quiet of the night flowed back over the wounds the explosions had made in it.

The last echo died out, and the wind chased a piece of brown paper down the hill.

The door of the jailhouse slammed behind Little Joe Bodie. He was tucking his nightshirt inside his batwing chaps as he ran, toting a gunbelt with two filled holsters in his free hand. The moon that had been playing hide-and-go-seek with the drifting cloud racks all night poked through and showed his coal-black hair and slim bony body. He called something back to the jailer as he turned into the

alkali-coated road. Then, sombrero bouncing on his shoulders as it hung by the chin strap, he legged it down the hill toward the bridge.

Doors were jerked open and voices called along the road. A couple of figures, shadowy as the moon was blanketed again, swung in behind Little Joe. He pulled up short as he got to the near end of the bridge over Burnt Wagon Creek, listening. From down the trail came the faint beat of horsehoofs, blurred by the wind. They were moving southward. Little Joe saw the figure sprawled at the other end of the plank bridge, upper part of the body hidden in the undergrowth on the creek bank.

Little Joe Bodie, deputy marshal of Lusker, called out to the fallen man once, then advanced when he got no answer. He got to the gleaming black boots and saw the bloodstains on the road. They started about ten feet beyond the end of the bridge and ran back toward it after wavering boot tracks. Little Joe read the signs: a badly wounded man stumbling backward. Then he turned and

parted the bushes over the rest of the body. The icy-hued moon slid into view again and showed the white ruffled shirt of the body on its back in the bushes.

Even before he bent to see the face over which the black flat-topped sombrero had slid, Little Joe knew then. It was Solitaire Tice, boss of the gambling hell, The Lucky Deuce. Solitaire lay very still, eyes staring straight up blankly. A wisp of smoke still curled up from the .45 gripped in his hand. Even as the deputy looked, the wind poked open his black frock coat and revealed the wet blood on his white shirt. It looked like a slow mushrooming ruby.

Going to a knee, Little Joe bent over the shot man. He was just in time to catch his final gasp. Froth bubbled around his torn-back mouth, and the crimson spread no further on his shirt front; he was dead.

The story was plain. Solitaire had closed up his gambling joint and had been en route home to the little place he had across the creek. Somebody had waylaid and gunned him. Acting on a hunch, Little Joe pulled gently at the body and rolled it onto its side a moment. He was right. There was a bullet hole, red-ringed, in the back of the coat over the left shoulder. Solitaire had been nailed from behind before he died.

The pair who had followed him down the hill from town came up. One was a gray-bearded man pulling his coat over big bare shoulders as he stopped. He was Ab Murdock who ran the General Store.

"Somebody got Solitaire," Joe Bodie said.

Murdock swore softly and bent over the body. A deeply religious man who always read a passage from the Bible when some poor devil was put to rest on Lusker's Boot Hill, he pulled off his hat when he stood up. "Solitaire was a good man. Gawd have mercy on his soul. . . . And the dirty sidewinder who gave it to him pumped in the finishing shot pointblank. They's powder burns on his shirt front."

LITTLE JOE nodded; he had seen them. He was already moving carefully up the edge of the road, looking for tracks. There were some boot prints from behind a big dead pine trunk that stood at the trail side. But in the soft wet dirt they were squashy and shapeless, telling little.

"Did he say anything afore he died, Bodie?" the

man with Murdock called.

Little Joe gave no answer as he moved around a bend in the trail leading away from the town. When he returned some minutes later, a small bunch of sleepy-eyed half-dressed folks had gathered. From a house up on the top of the hill a baby squalled. All the talking stopped abruptly and the eyes shifted to Joe. The same question was in every one. Hank Ellard, big, wire-tough law marshal of the town, was away on the trail of a horse thief. He, Little Joe Bodie, was the law itself here now.

"Well, what're you aiming to do, Joe?" one man called harshly. Joe Bodie didn't need to be told he was one of those who had voted against him at the last election. The Haig brothers who ran the ramshackle hotel stepped forward. One said, "We all knew Solitaire Tice and respected him. We demand something be done. If the law cain't handle it itself—"

Another man thrust a bony finger at Little Joe who nervously toed the wet earth. It had rained earlier that night. "Well, Bodie, do you wear that purty badge for anything?" It was plain they had little confidence in him. He himself wished like blazes Ellard was on hand.

"Found some fresh hoof marks up around the bend where a pony was left waiting outta sight," Little Joe said quietly. They pushed around him, jabbering and wanting to know if he was waiting for the killer to walk smack into his jail and give himself up. Joe Bodie gestured mildly up the hill. "Waiting for my pony that's coming now," he said. The jailer was leading the bay mare down the road as Little Joe had called to him to do when he ran out of the jailhouse.

Murdock came running out the alley from beside the General Store with a saddled-up horse. He yelled he was coming along. An old man in the party at the bridge grabbed Little Joe's bridle reins as the latter swung into the hull.

"Better wait till a few more of the boys join you, Bodie," the man said. "This might turn out to be a man's job. . . ."

They pushed harder through the night as the moon got clear of the dissipating clouds to remain out, Little Joe Bodie and the five-man posse at his back. Joe Bodie knew he himself was on trial. There had been a heap of opposition to his candidacy as deputy marshal, and plenty of angry astonishment when he was elected. More than one citizen of Lusker had been waiting for the first test

of the retiring dry-voiced undersized deputy. That test had come.

They came to the fork where the smaller division of the trail branched westward toward the flat-topped line of hills. The fresh hoof prints were even clearer in the mud of the little-used fork. Little Joe loosened his Colts in the scabbards nervously. One of the men said if they gave the killer a catching there was no need to take him any further than the handiest cottonwood limb. The words sent a cold shock down the deputy's spine.

The track wound through the dome-like hills with their sparse fringe of second-growth pine. They began to climb as the newly bared stars waned overhead. A rifle bullet droned past Little Joe's sombrero up in the front of the column. And the *spang-g* of a Winchester's bark followed it. There was another crash on the graying night and bullet lead went screeching off a boulder inches from Ab Murdock's stirrup. The six hastily scrambled from saddles and sought cover.

"It come from that little rock ledge up there by the lightning-split pine," one of the men called.

DOWN behind a clump of brush, Little Joe Bodie steadied the rifle he had pulled from the saddle boot as he jumped clear. Then he propped his hat on a piece of dried stick and pushed it out into sight. He wasn't kept waiting. There was the zing of a slug and a hole gaped into the crown of his Stetson. Little Joe's rifle answered the shot, blasting twice at where he had caught the muzzle froth up above. One of his bullets sent powdered stone spraying in a cloud from the outcropping ledge.

Murdock lunged out into the open to make a try for the rifle in his saddle. The Winchester up above spoke its piece and Murdock came diving back, a clean-drilled hole in his sombrero, too. Little Joe crept back and they had a war council in the brush.

"Let's drive right plumb in and smoke him outta there," one of them suggested.

But Little Joe shook his head determinedly. He wasn't afraid for himself though it would take more than one man to do it. He was thinking of them. Murdock with three motherless children to raise, and the sharp-chinned Burns with a sick wife. And Charley Chassen who was so short-sighted he could see clearly only ten feet. This was no regular experienced posse.

"We'll flank him on both sides," Little Joe

decided. "We'll work around the ends of that ledge and corner him." Leaving one man to keep a front fire on the fugitive, the deputy took Murdock with him and sent the other three to work around from the north side.

It took them about half an hour to wriggle through brush and over the rough ground to get to either end of the ledge. The moon was nothing but a pale globe in the sky when the two parties met coming in at either end of the ledge. The other bunch almost opened fire on Little Joe and Murdock by mistake in the mist that was beginning to seep from the ground. The hunted hombre had pulled stakes. There were just a few Winchester shells at the spot where he had been crouched.

Murdock swore hoarsely as Little Joe called down to Burns to bring up their ponies. Once again Little Joe wished the marshal himself, Hank Ellard, was along. If Ellard had decided against a frontal rush as he had, there would have been no questioning it. But now that he had and the wanted hombre had gotten away—Joe Bodie had thought of Ellard when the riflemen behind the ledge had centered first his hat and then Murdock's with bullets. Hank Ellard was a deadly marksman like that, too.

They picked up the trail again and came to level ground. It was a nasty piece of badlands, mostly rock and long tongues of lava outcroppings with little twisting cuts and canyons. The rest of the posse were plainly discouraged as they followed the hoof scratches on the rocks into one of the canyons. Around a bend in it they came upon a shot horse. Aside from the bullets through its head to put it out of its misery, the animal had a wounded leg.

The scratch tracks led on down the canyon. Apparently the fugitive had had a second cayuse hidden here in case of trouble. Little Joe straightened, grim-faced, after having checked the brand mark on the dead animal. Beside him Ab Murdock whistled softly; it was a Loop-Y pony. The Loop-Y belonged to the proud King Riner up east of Lusker.

They followed the trail sign on, until they came to the western boundary of the badlands whence the yellow desert stretched away. Daylight had come, the sun poking over the horizon. The sand was almost dry and the rising wind blurred the hoof prints leading out across it. Within a couple of hours more, they had to admit they were whipped

and turn back. The sultry wind combined with the torch of a sun in the coppery sky had obliterated all sign.

"We'd uh got the varmind almost sure had we rushed him when he holed up behind that ledge," Murdock said dourly.

IT WAS afternoon before they rode back into Lusker, weary and trail-stained and empty-handed. The jailer told little Joe that Blackie Sebore had come to the jail early that day to see him. Sebore owned the big Umbrella spread to the south of the town. Even as the deputy walked up the jail steps, Sebore came out of a barroom down the line and came along the walk, two of his tough outfit flanking him. Sebore was a stocky arrogant hombre, always slightly beard-stubbed. He was a big figure in that piece of a country.

"Howdy, marshal! Well—you're acting marshal anyways," he said as he came up to the steps. "Fella came up past my place about dawn and brought word how Solitaire Tice was shot. So I come in pronto, Bodie."

Little Joe nodded, fearing what was to come next.

It didn't; Sebore looked pontifical. "No sense of mincing matters. Folks know that me and Solitaire had a row not long back. We carried a grudge, so I had a motive, maybe. Under suspicion. All right, I'm putting my cards on the table. These two boys of my spread can swear I was at the ranch all night." The two slab-bodied hairpins with him nodded like puppets.

"You'll always know where to find me, Bodie. What I say is—let justice be done. Act like you're under no obligations to me!" He strode off with his men.

Inside the jail, Little Joe Bodie drank three cups of hot java and toyed with the grub the jailer had brought in. He admitted to himself he was scared. Sebore had a motive all right. He had lost considerable dinero in the late Solitaire's place at stud and ended up with a near-shooting row in which he claimed he had been cheated.

And King Riner, one of whose ponies had been found dead up there in the badlands, had a motive, too. Some years back his younger sister had run off with Solitaire Tice and married him. When they returned to town, the haughty Riner refused to speak to her. Less than six months ago she had died in childbirth. The rumor was that Solitaire was

drunk in a card game and didn't send for a doctor until too late. Riner had a reason to hate the dead man all right.

Little Joe's thoughts returned to Blackie Sebore. In that last election, it was the sudden swing of Sebore and his outfit to him that had put him in office over Luke Shore, the former deputy. Since back in the early days of Lusker when it came out that a marshal and his appointed deputy had worked in cahoots in a series of stage-line holdups, the rule in the town had been to elect the deputy as well. Shore had been an experienced veteran at the job. The one charge against him was wounding the wrong man so he was crippled for life by mistake once. Little Joe on the other hand, though a dead shot, had a rep for thinking twice before he slung hoglegs. On the other hand there were some who hinted he was a little lily-livered and apt to sidestep trouble. But Sebore's surprise support had gotten him the job.

He heard mumblings of the old short-on-nerve charges as he moved through the town that afternoon. He caught cold-eyed looks from all sides. Murdock stomped into the air at the Lucky Deuce and bluntly demanded to know why he was not hunting down King Riner.

"Something's going to be done damn pronto or some of us will be taking the law into our own hands," a saloon tough snorted.

"I'm wearing the badge," Little Joe told them dryly. "Don't forget that. And my guns are ready to back its authority." On the way back from the futile chase he had cut off from the rest to a hoeman's place and ordered the latter to go to the Loop-Y and tell Riner he wanted to see him. Little Joe understood the proud Riner well. If he went out and tried to arrest him, Riner would have made a fight. On the other hand, Riner was no back-shooter. His honor and pride would compel him to ride in at the request to prove he feared nothing.

IT WAS sundown when King Riner did appear at the jail. He was a slim, tall man with prematurely white hair that capped his eagle-like profile. With him he had Doc Banes from the Junction. Riner had already heard of the killing. He offered the Doc as his alibi. Banes swore he had been called to the Loop-Y late yesterday and had spent the night with Riner. Riner, he asserted, had suffered a severe heart attack.

"All right. Don't leave the country in case I

want you,” Little Joe said. But when they marched out, they had to pass through an angry throng in front of the jail. Riner stared them down without putting a hand on his gun butt, and the bunch stayed for some time to hurl jeers and insults at the deputy marshal. Inside he was still walking furiously, weighing every angle of the case in his brain.

It was about midnight when the shot splattered on the drone of the still angrily buzzing town. Little Joe hustled out of the jail and got down near the Lucky Deuce. He was just in time to see Yager, foreman of Riner’s Loop-Y, come backing out with drawn smoking gun. “Nobody’s going to call my boss a dry-gulching killer,” he was shouting.

Pot-bellied Dab Tice, the late Solitaire’s cousin, was in the doorway, swinging his gun up slowly. Little Joe, hands already filled, sprang forward and blasted two shots into the gilt-lettered sign just over the doorway.

“Pen them smokepoles, you gents!” he snapped as he plunged into the light from the gambling hell. “Pen ‘em—or I’ll take you in dead if I have to!”

Yager was a law-abiding sort and nodded as he raised his arms halfway. Dab Tice was a tinhorn braggart. He took one look at the deputy marshal’s bleak white face and backed water, holstering with some sullen muttering.

Little Joe strode into the place and ordered a drink at the bar. It was a follow-up gesture to assert his authority. Sebore was there and tried to buy him a drink. The deputy plunked his coin loudly on the bar.

“Say, did Solitaire say anything afore he cashed his chips?” somebody asked. “Murdock says you got to him fust—just as he expired.”

Little Joe let his eyes sweep the place, looking at Blackie Sebore a long moment. Something jumped in the deputy’s mind. He tossed down his drink, said quietly, “Next time somebody gets the idee they’re the law here, I’m shooting first and parleying afterwards,” and walked out. He had his clue. . . .

It was the next forenoon when he dropped into the Lucky Deuce again. Feeling against him was running high in the town. Men were saying that if Ellard were there the killer would already be captured, and as good as strung up. Solitaire Tice had been well liked because of his generosity. He was always good for a sawbuck for a poor devil who was in hard luck. And when times had been

hard in a family, a big basket of food supplies would be left at the door. Everybody knew Solitaire was the one responsible for that, too.

“If that lily-livered Bodie hadn’t been afeared to rush that ledge they’d have got the killer,” men said.

At the gambling hall bar, Little Joe looked around, and then dropped his announcement casually. Sebore was present. He said he was staying in town till he saw justice done. Joe Bodie spoke almost directly to him.

“Got a note this morning from a gent who was passing through here the night of the killing,” Little Joe said. “He saw the killer and can identify him. Seems like his conscience is botherin’ him and this gent is coming back. He’ll be coming in on the Saturday stage—two days from now. I’m waiting for him.”

Later he left and rode out of town. It was the next afternoon when Sebore dropped into the jail at his summons. “Sebore,” Little Joe said, tossing a shell in his hand, “if they’s trouble here when the killer is pointed out, I’m depending on your help with the marshal away. And I got a hunch you don’t believe this hombre coming in can pick the killer.”

“Now, Bodie, I’m plumb behind the law. Of course—”

“I want you to see something, anyway,” Little Joe said as he led the way out. Mounted, they took the trail eastward on the stage run toward Pully’s Gulch. At the head of it, they got down at the deputy’s order and he started up the wooded side of it. Sebore was panting when they got halfway up. And then Little Joe pulled aside some foliage to reveal a small cave. Just around the end of the gulch so a man could come and leave it unobserved by anybody in the gulch, yet it commanded a view of it.

“Say, Bodie, if you’ve dragged me all the way up here to show me some old Injun relics or—”

“Look in here,” Little Joe bade, having stepped inside. He fussed in the dirt then held up two ends of wire that came out of the earth. Sebore blinked. “Well?”

“Don’t you savvy? Put these two ends of wire together and you complete the circuit. There’s a battery somewheres and a load of dynamite with a percussion cap. The dynamite’s probably planted up in that big chunk of overhanging rock ‘cross the gulch there.” He pointed to the face of seamed bare

rock across the way. "The stage comes down the line. The gent hidden up here puts the wires together, completes the circuit and—boom! the dynamite goes off and the stage is crushed under a landslide of rock. Tons of it. And in the stage will be that gent who saw the killing of Solitaire Tice. See? You just put the wire ends together like this and—"

SEBORE leaped forward and caught at Little Joe. "Hey, don't! You—you'll—" He was pale.

Little Joe put down the wires. "Well, it proves my point. Somebody's afraid. I reckon I'll let drop that this gent spent a considerable time up at Deer Lodge and can point out a few other wanted men in this town."

They walked out of the little cave. "Well, what're you going to do?" Sebore asked hoarsely. "You better locate the dynamite and—"

Little Joe smiled wisely. "No need to. I said the gent was coming in on the Saturday night stage. That was a trick. Actually he's coming through on the coach tonight."

When they remounted, Sebore gave Little Joe a big clap on the back. "Say, you're one danged smart hairpin, Joe! I backed the right man all right."

A couple of hours later, back in town, Sebore announced that he was sending his whole outfit up to his north range. Said some cattle had been rustled off up there . . .

It was a little after midnight. And a cramp was twisting in Little Joe's thigh as he waited, hunkered down motionless on the gulch side about twenty yards off from the cave. A night bird called somewhere and he wondered when the stage was coming through. It was almost an hour behind schedule. It was at midnight he had instructed the jailer to come out from town with Ab Murdock and a few other trusted gents if he himself hadn't returned.

The wind soughed in the gulch. Yet sweat dribbled down the young deputy's taut jaws. He had gambled everything on this. If he were wrong . . . Then he heard the rattle of the stage and the grind of an ungreased axle through the wind. The Concord coach hove into view around a curve in the gulch, the mule-skinner cracking the blacksnake over his jaded double team. Unmindful of any danger, it came on, jounced roughly in a mudhole as it drew abreast of the overhanging mass

of rock.

Half a minute passed and the stage was beyond it and swinging out of the gulch. A sombreroed head bobbed from the cave entrance. A curse bit on the night. "It's a trick!" Sebore's heavy voice cried from the confines of the cave. "We gotta get out and—"

"Hoist 'em! We got you surrounded!" Little Joe roared as he leaped out of the undergrowth. He knew there were two men, had figured that way. But they weren't surrendering. There was a reason.

The first one flung sideward as he flung up an already drawn smokepole. Little Joe's right weapon coughed. He missed and was stunned as a low bough ripped the hat from the other's head. For it revealed the curly red hair of big Hank Ellard, marshal. And then the desperate Sebore barged into sight.

From the darkness of the cave, he had picked out Little Joe and he flung two snap shots. Little Joe came running along the canyon side, oblivious to the slug that whistled past his ear. He triggered and Sebore spun, drilled in the shoulder. Bellowing surrender, he went to his knees.

A stab of flame lanced toward Little Joe. He zigzagged and doubled, shooting at the second muzzle light once. Then the wind parted the tops of trees and let through the moon glow to spotlight him. Ellard darted from behind a tree and fired twice more. Steadying himself with deadly coolness, Little Joe drew bead with one outstretched gun and rode the trigger. Ellard went down, rolling yards, gun banged from his grip, his shooting arm broken and his scalp creased.

ASLUG furrowed Little Joe's cheek and he swayed dizzily. Then he saw the treacherous Sebore firing from his knees. Joe ran right at him and fired from ten feet. The bullet smashed right through Sebore's nose and blasted his brain. Little Joe grabbed a sapling to steady himself as Murdock galloped into the gulch, heading the bunch from town.

"It was right simple," he admitted modestly back at the jail, "once I got the drift of things. Ellard, back in the cell, has confessed so you know about everything. He and Sebore were working together to get revenge on Solitaire. That was why I was put into office. Ellard's being outta town when the shooting was done was no accident. They figured I'd never run it down."

“But you didn’t have the deadwood to hang on Sebore till he showed his hand,” Murdock said. “I cain’t see how—”

“I remembered that more ‘n ten years ago Sebore and King Riner had a fenceline fight and that Riner won in court. Sebore was out to get him for that as well as get Solitaire. So he simply slapped Riner’s brand on a horse he’d bought, then killed it up there in the badlands to point suspicion on him. Sebore did the killing, lit out, and was met by Ellard up there. Ellard held us off from the ledge so Sebore could swing south down to his own place. Then Ellard took out over the desert. That had me fooled for a while. I couldn’t figure how Sebore could hit out into the desert and get back to town early that same day and report at the jail.

So—”

“But how did you know he had done it—”

Little Joe finished his drink and smiled slowly.

“When somebody asked me at the Lucky Deuce if Solitaire said anything afore he died, I didn’t answer. But Blackie Sebore didn’t look worried none at all. He pumped the finishing shot into Solitaire with the gun against his body so he knew he couldn’t have said anything. That was my tip-off. So I stuck them two wires in the ground and showed ‘em to him after pulling the windy about a witness to the murder coming in on the stage, Sebore showed his hand. ‘S all.”

He rolled a quirkly calmly. Outside the door a couple of men were saying how Little Joe would do a good job as new marshal all right. . . .