

# POWDERSMOKE SHOWDOWN

by  
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More than trigger magic  
Johnny Straight needed eyes  
in the back of his head.

**J**OHNNY STRAIGHT sat riffling a deck of cards in his cabin high up in the Little Bighorn mountains. Brown slender fingers winking swiftly to make the pasteboards seem alive under his dexterous manipulations. While the tall cowboy's slate-colored eyes watched a giant ram silhouetted against the sky on a high peak across the steep canyon.

Old Gabriel was one of the last of his kind, and the huge Bighorn could always be depended upon to give warning when strangers came too close to the little mountain cattle spread. Now the great curved horns stood boldly against the skyline when Old Gabriel threw back his head and bellowed a challenge, and the tall cowboy rippled to his feet with a sudden surge of springy muscles.

A rifle shot reverberated across the canyon faintly, and the cowboy leaned forward with eyes narrowed when the big ram twitched spasmodically under the burn of speeding lead. A moment later the cowboy was in the saddle, racing down the mountain trail toward a plume of powdersmoke far away across the canyon.

"That shot came from J B range," he muttered. "Must be some Pilgrim Jim Blaze has visiting him from the East."

Under his breath he cursed the winding mountain trail that circled the deep canyon separating his J S connected ranch from the J B. The canyon was less than half a mile wide, but the trail that circled it covered more than five miles. With a killer skulking in the high timber just below Sentinel Peak.

Johnny Straight lost some of his cold anger when he reached the deep valley and saw Old Gabriel skylined high above. Evidently the killer

had missed the big ram, but he might not miss a second time. Straight Johnny set his lips grimly and muttered to himself.

"There ain't going to be a second time!"

He nudged his horse with a spur and rattled through the brush leading to the upper trail. Paying no heed to the grazing cattle in the creek-bed until a protesting bellow focused his attention on a pair of old cows branded with his J S iron.

The rangy cowboy took one long look and sent his roan closer for a checkup. His right hand reached for his rope and built a finicky loop when he saw two calves on the ground struggling against the pigging strings that held them prisoners.

**T**HE tall cowboy was deceptively calm when he hunkered down beside the weaners. A recent branding fire had been kicked out and scattered carefully. Johnny Straight sat on his heels and nodded his head slowly, and he rose to his feet when a pebble rolled down the bank to announce the coming of a rider.

"Howdy, Johnny," a deep voice called from above. "I heard the shot and rode over to see how come."

"That goes for me, too," Johnny Straight answered coldly. "Mebbe you can explain this here after you tell me why you cut down on Old Gabriel!"

Jim Blaze of the J B connected took one long look at the hog-tied calves and swung down from the saddle with a frown of anger on his tanned face. His right hand slapped down to his holster and clawed air when his fingers failed to find the familiar gun-handle. While Johnny Straight watched him closely and made no move toward his

scabbard.

"You can't fool an old cow, Lightning," he said slowly, and the broad-shouldered cattleman jerked when his nickname was sneered. "Both them weaners are Dollar Sign critters, and mebbe you better talk fast and tell me how come them to be wearing a new J B connected brand!"

Big Jim Blaze turned his back and lowered his head in thought. His neighbors called him Lightning because of his speed with a sixgun. Just as they turned Johnny Straight's name around and called him Straight Johnny because of his unerring accuracy with the forty-five Colt thonged low on his long right leg.

He had no fear of being shot in the back while he tried to find the answer to the problem. Straight Johnny was as honest as his name. A straight shooter anyway you looked at it. Cool-headed, too, and then there was Jenny Blaze, Jim's twenty-year old sister.

The two men had always been good friends. Worked round-up together because their little one-man spreads joined each other. Slept under the same blankets and shared each other's food when they were working the tangles back in the timbered hills. Big Jim sighed and turned slowly to face his younger neighbor. Five years difference in their ages, and Jim was thirty.

"Like you said, Johnny," he began slowly. "You can't fool an old cow. Both them calves was branded Dollar Sign, and they have been vented with a saddle-ring to make a J B connected. Sorry I left my gun at home."

He stared levelly at the tall cowboy with an expression of regret in his wide gray eyes. Johnny Straight stared back and slowly nodded his head one time. Then he raised his head and indicated the big ram high above.

"Old Gabriel," he said softly. "It ain't like you to cut down on him, Lightning!"

Sudden anger flashed across the face of Jim Blaze when he took a quick step forward. "Damn you, Johnny," he growled. "I think as much of that Bighorn as you do. Asking you to take back what you said!"

Johnny Straight smiled coldly and turned his head to stare at a saddle-gun under the left fender on the older man's horse. Powder-grimed along the breech, and Jim Blaze followed those slate-colored eyes and growled in his throat.

"Shot me a wolf early this morning. I can't

figger what's come over you, Johnny!"

"It was bound to come sooner or later," the tall cowboy answered slowly. "Take those brands of ours now. Too much alike for one thing, and not only that . . ."

He broke off and shrugged his shoulders carelessly. Right hand rubbing the worn grip of his gun while he stared at Jim Blaze and turned his eyes down to the empty holster.

Jim Blaze nodded his head. "I get it, Johnny," he said quietly. "Up to now we treated the whole thing as a joke. How you want to pitch 'em?"

"Was me branded you rustler," the tall cowboy pointed out. "You call the turn."

Jim Blaze turned for a final look at the big ram up on Sentinel Peak and set his lips sternly. "Five years we've been neighbors, Johnny Straight," he began slowly. "All that time the folks in the Little Bighorns have been waiting. Me being fast with a cutter, and you being just naturally born straight."

No humor in his quiet voice when he tallied off their respective merits. With that sighing note of regret in his deep voice for a friendship that was gone. Johnny Straight had called him out of his name; had asked for a settlement.

"Looks like she's a Powdersmoke Showdown, Johnny," he continued slowly. "You mind that little mesa up there right at the foot of Sentinel Peak?"

Johnny Straight inclined his curly head without speaking. He had first met Jenny Blaze up on the little mesa; had figured that some day when he had money enough to build a bigger house . . .

"Sundown," the deep voice of Jim Blaze cut into his reverie. "Old Gabriel always takes a last look around before he chouses off to his hideout. When he makes his jump . . .?"

Johnny Straight nodded. "Fair enough," he agreed. "That ought to give you just about time enough to go home and get yoreself dressed," and he glanced again at the empty holster.

**T**HE tall cowboy waited until Jim Blaze had disappeared up the trail on J B range. His fingers toyed absently with the handle of his gun, but the old familiar thrill was absent. Lightning, they called Jim, and the cowboy smiled without amusement. One time he had been too fast to be accurate, and the memory of years of practice twisted the smile on his lips.

He shrugged lightly and dropped to his knees beside one of his calves. Rope-burned fingers

pulled the tie and liberated the three legs, and he watched the little animal scramble to its feet and run to the blaze-faced cow closest to the creek bank. His hand was reaching out to jerk the second piggin' string when a shower of pebbles jerked his eyes to the sloping bank on the J B side of the creek.

"Jenny," he murmured softly, and came to his feet to face a deep-chested girl with curly brown hair and wide gray eyes. "I didn't hear you coming!"

"I didn't come, Johnny," the girl answered sorrowfully. "I was right up above there all the time. While you and Jim were making war-talk," she added, and closed her full lips tight when a husky note betrayed her agitation.

The cowboy looked away and dropped his eyes to study the vented brand. "Always liked Jim," he muttered. "But looks like it had to come."

"It didn't have to come the way you forced it on Lightning," the girl blazed angrily. "Both of you trying to build up little outfits by yourselves, when both outfits throwed together would make a fair-sized spread. And it takes the both of you to run each other's outfits the way it is now!"

Johnny Straight sucked in a deep breath and straightened slowly. Jenny was right, and for the first time he realized how much he had depended on Jim Blaze, and how much Jim depended on his help. But again his eyes fell to the vented brand, and he hunkered down on his boot-heels when the girl slid from the saddle and came down into the creek-bed.

"Now you take my brand," and his voice was pitched to a whisper. "I run my J through the S like you know, and folks got to calling it the Dollar Sign. Jim runs a J B connected iron on his critters, and all he had to do was make a little curl on the upper part of my S. Like he done on those two dogies yonder," and he traced the new burn with a long forefinger.

Jenny Blaze came close to him until her rounded shoulder touched his arm. When he turned to look at her, she was pointing at the Bighorn up on Sentinel Peak. The big sheep was keeping guard as usual, and now he was turned away from them while he studied some object hidden from their eyes.

"I was right up above the creek in that thicket," the girl said slowly. "Jim was treating a calf for screw-worm down there in the hollow when

somebody took a shot at Old Gabriel!"

"You mean it wasn't Jim?" the cowboy asked, and his voice vibrated happily.

"Listen, Johnny," the girl answered, and her throaty voice pounded home each word that she spoke. "I rode over here when I saw smoke in the valley. Got here in time to see a hoss-backer high-tailing through the tangles yonder, and it wasn't Lightning!"

"You recognize the feller?" he asked eagerly.

The girl shook her head while her eyes watched his face. "You ain't never been anything but a cowhand, Johnny," she said quietly. "Folks here in the Little Bighorns count you one of the best trackers in Wyoming. Looks to me like they made a mistake."

The cowboy stared at her and tried to read her meaning. He had called her brother a fighting name, and Jim Blaze took the only course open to him. The fastest man with a sixgun in the valley, with sundown only a matter of two hours away.

"Maybe you noticed that Jim's sorrel is barefooted all around," the girl suggested suddenly, and climbed the bank while the cowboy stared after her with a puzzled frown clouding his tanned face.

When the rattle of hooves died away, he turned slowly and began to study the ground around the scattered fire. Then he leaned forward and followed the marks of a shod horse up through a little wash, and his slate-colored eyes were stunned and miserable when he growled like a wounded grizzly.

"Broken shoe on the left fore, and the rustler slid down the trail right here. Same jigger who cut down on Old Gabriel, and I never would have read the sign if Jenny hadn't showed me the way."

He stooped swiftly and picked up a silver concha torn from a pair of heavy chaps. When he rose to his feet, his face was twisted with an anger he had never felt in all his life.

"The sneakin' rustlin' son," he rasped hoarsely. "Nobody but Dave Carew wears fancy rigging like that, and he swore to get even with Jim after that set-to they had early this spring."

**H**UNKERING down on his boot-heels in the deep wash, the tall cowboy carefully pieced out the devilish plan that would have worked except for the sharp eyes of the person most concerned. Dave Carew owned the big Triangle C at the lower end of the valley. A year older than big Jim Blaze, with money enough to satisfy every

desire. That is, all except one.

Johnny Straight stared ahead with unseeing eyes while he made a mental picture. Dave Carew was short and broad-shouldered, and had graduated from an Eastern college. Rated a Pilgrim in the high hills and heavy timber of Wyoming, but the money he had inherited from his father had made the Triangle C the finest ranch in the valley.

The tall cowboy twisted uneasily when he remembered how Carew had tried to rush Jenny Blaze off her feet. Until the night when he had taken too much to drink and had insisted on forcing his attentions upon the girl. Jim Blaze had showed where he derived his name, and Dave Carew had taken a terrific beating when the Lightning had struck.

"No time to reach the Triangle C before sundown," he murmured slowly, and then he shrugged his broad shoulders, and mounted his roan.

He followed the trail of the broken shoe through the little wash. When he came to the upper trail leading toward Sentinel Peak and the J B connected, he stopped with a puzzled frown to stare at the faint tracks. Dave Carew should have headed back the other way, but his trail led upward toward the heavy timber.

"It was him took that shot at Old Gabriel to bring me down here," he told himself softly. "If I can find him before the sun slants down behind the rimrock . . ."

Like a hound on the scent, he leaned low over his scarred saddle and sent his horse slowly up the trail. Once he glanced up at Sentinel Peak and smiled grimly when he saw the giant Bighorn watching him. The big ram knew his friends, and he was accustomed to seeing the tall cowboy riding the steep mountain trails.

Johnny Straight was so absorbed in his tracking that he forgot the passing of time and distance. He stopped the roan suddenly when something bright winked up from the trail. Slid down and picked up a thirty-thirty shell, and he was turning the brass case over in his hand when a sharp voice called from a shoulder of rocks.

"Just about sundown, Straight Johnny. This time I got myself dressed!"

The tall cowboy turned slowly and set his lips when he saw big Jim Blaze straddling the goat trail leading up to Sentinel Peak. His eyes wandered down and checked the heavy gun on his neighbor's

right leg. Counted off the distance and nodded with approval. Ten paces, and he had called Jim Blaze rustler.

"I see you have, Lightning," he answered quietly, and the hum of his voice matched the still of evening. "Got time to talk some?"

Jim Blaze shrugged his big shoulders. "Reckon you said all there was to be said," he murmured. "Neither one of us got the sun in our eyes now," and he glanced up at the tall peak. "Looks like Old Gabriel is about to give us the high-sign," he continued swiftly, and spaced his boots for balance.

Johnny Straight tightened his lips and drew a deep breath. Swung his narrowed eyes up to watch the giant ram skylined against the cloudless blue. The Bighorn was turning slowly for a last look in all directions, and the tall cowboy stiffened when the big sheep hung poised with all four feet bunched for the jump that would take him down the trail to timber.

The ram was leaning out with head stretched down. Staring intently at a shelf halfway between himself and the two men on the mesa. And then the voice of Jim Blaze broke the heavy stillness of hushed suspense.

"Fast and straight," he whispered ironically, and Johnny Straight knew that he meant the difference between them.

The big ram leaped suddenly into space to set off black powder. Jim Blaze rapped down for his gun with a speed that made his right hand a blurring shadow. Johnny Straight was also in motion, with his fingers curled to fit the handle of his gun. He came up with his gun and pressed trigger when his slitted right eye caught the sights, and he was conscious that Jim Blaze had beat him to the shot by an eye-wink of time.

His left breast muscled up when he leaned forward to meet the shock of battering lead. He leaned so far forward that he was forced to shuffle his boots to keep from falling. And then he expelled his breath with a grunt and turned slowly to stare at Jim Blaze.

The big man was watching him while the muzzle of his smoking gun sagged toward the rocky trail. So fast had they moved that the feet of the jumping ram hit the trail and rattled into the timber before the double echoes had struck back from the towering cliff.

A falling stone scraped down the jutting rocks halfway up the peak. Followed instantly by a heavy

body that hurtled out into space and plummeted down like a great goose stricken in full flight. Neither gunfighter moved when the body thudded between them and flattened out. Only their eyes stared briefly and then raised to lock glances.

"I thought you shot at Old Gabriel," Jim Blaze croaked hoarsely. "I knew you was going to throw off yore shot!"

"Lightning," and Johnny Straight swallowed a lump in his throat. "You wouldn't talk, and then old Gabe pointed to the hiding place of that skunk yonder. He meant to kill you, Jim. I caught the flash of the last sun on his 30-30!"

"You shot at Carew?" and Jim Blaze spoke in an awed whisper. "You meant to get him too?"

"Yo're faster than me with a handgun, Jim," the tall cowboy answered in the same muted tone. "But when I shoot, I'm straight!"

**B**IG JIM holstered his gun and came forward with hand stretched out. "Found his sign up here, Johnny," he growled. "And yo're straight all the time. Mebbe it's best to leave it that away. We don't know who tallied for him."

Johnny Straight met the big man's fingers with a punishing grip that robbed Jim Blaze of gun-

tingle. "Been athinking, Johnny," he said slowly in his deep rumbling voice. "Our brands are too much alike, and they ain't a bit of sense in running two spreads the way you and me work together. What you say?"

Johnny Straight raised his head when he heard a horse coming down the trail behind Big Jim. "They can vent yore iron, Lightning," he answered soberly. "And all three of us will have twice as much money if we just turn that J B connected of yores into a Dollar Sign. Suit you?"

"Three of us?" the big man repeated, and then he saw Jenny coming up fast. "Suits all three of us," he chuckled. "Now I figger you better take a little ride with Jenny while I do what has to be done for him," and he jerked his head toward the body on the trail.

"Just one thing, Lightning," and the tall cowboy allowed a fleeting expression of affection to show in his slate-colored eyes. "I don't ever want to face you again for Powdersmoke Showdown. Yo're just too fast!"

"Same here, Johnny," and Big Jim smiled happily. "And I wish I was as straight as you," and he stood in front of the sightless double-target until the two riders rounded a bend in the mesa trail.