

SECRET GUNS

*Crittenden fired,
reeled back
against the stage.*



***Out-Smarting and Out-shooting the Foxiest Gunman
Around Sombrero Mountain Was a Big Order --
and Sheriff Crittenden Had to Fill It!***

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SHERIFF CRITTENDEN crouched grim-
lipped over his six-shooter, bracing himself
on the capacious back seat against the

perilous lurching of the stage coach for Big Shot.
The heavy wheels crunched, horses' hoofs
clattered as they went at a pounding trot up the

rocky, twisting lane over Sombrero Mountain.

To the left, Crittenden's sun-narrowed blue eyes scanned a muddy, boulder-studded precipice. To the right, they looked into space where the earth dropped three hundred feet to the rocks of Sidewinder River. Death on either side if the taut-shouldered driver faltered an instant.

"Cain't yuh drive no faster?" Crittenden bellowed at the man.

The driver cursed, but his long whip cracked. The stage lurched more wildly. The bounce of its high springs tossed him about though he clung to the riding strap by his seat. Crittenden shut his straight-lipped mouth tightly beneath its square cut mustache. Dangerous? Sure, dangerous as hell, but safer than the creeping pace that fitted the road.

For the hundredth time, Crittenden flicked a glance at the huddled brown canvas bags about his feet. Fifteen thousand cash, payroll for the mines. And ahead somewhere, sure as death, lurked Monteith.

THE driver's shoulders heaved, throwing the horses around a jutting cliff shoulder on two wheels. Crittenden, swaying to the two-wheeled lurch of the stage, flicked alert gaze ahead. No Monteith yet.

Twice now, the crashing thunder of Crittenden's gun had driven the bandit to cover, and he was waiting for the third battle, for the glint of the gun barrel across the road that would bring him up for the third time with .45 belching lead. A bullet furrow across his leathery cheek, souvenir of their last meeting, glowed blood-red. He spun the full chamber of his six-gun.

There didn't seem to be any hitting this Monteith. He rode a horse that dodged like a jackrabbit and he would not make a standing fight. He either sprang out from cover with blazing pistol, or he braced his man and flashed his shoulder-gun with the dazzling speed that had earned him his name—"Shoulder-gun" Monteith. Crittenden's blue eyes had hate in them. It should be "Murderer" Monteith.

Monteith was not the usual Western outlaw. His holdups were tricky, not a duel of singing lead on the road. He rode the stage as a passenger or he strolled into a bank as a customer before he swept that deadly gun from his armpit with a speed that plucked his slug into the other man's body before a hip-swing Six-shooter had fairly cleared the leather.

The heavy stage was laboring uphill now, a

steep twisting grade; The four horses were straining against their collars, still lashed to a trot by the fear-urged driver. The left bank, still steep, was gouged by narrow ravines.

Suddenly, a six-gun blasted. Its crashing roar banged against the cliff, whipped along the canyon and through its thunder came the shrill scream of a wounded horse. Crittenden heard the driver curse, heard his whip lash out, felt the sickening lurch of the stage. His lips pulled back from his teeth.

Murderer Monteith had struck!

Crittenden's six-gun was in his right hand. He threw open the stage door and it banged against the body. He swung out onto the step of the wildly lurching coach.

Monteith was not in sight, but the off-lead pinto was up on his hind legs, screaming again, its front hoofs pawing the air. As Crittenden thrust his gun into his belt and shoved his foot in the window to mount the box, the pinto flung forward and lunged into a gallop. The other three horses caught the panic, stampeded with it.

The driver sawed on the reins, foot braced against the long lever brake that locked the rear wheels. It only made the coach rock more wildly—and straight ahead was the crumbling edge of the cliff. Three hundred feet straight down; jagged fangs of rock.

The hind wheels struck a rock, the coach swayed toward the edge and Crittenden's feet flew outward wildly. He was hanging by his hands alone, his fingers clenched about the rail that circled the stage's top. His breath whistled between his clenched teeth. His body banged back against the coach and somehow he jammed his foot again into the window. He hauled himself upward and, behind, heard once more the echoing crash of a gun. He did not hear the lead.

But Crittenden was prone now on the top of the coach. His eyes widened as he saw how close was the death that yawned ahead for them. The horses were racing like mad, heads down against the savage hopeless sawing of the reins.

"Jump, Sheriff," the driver gasped back over his shoulder. "I can't—"

Crittenden dragged his six-gun from his belt, braced his body and sent a bullet plowing into the spine of the nigh lead horse. The pony went down on its nose, dragging the other lead horse to his knees. The coach reeled like a drunken cowboy. Its rear wheel struck the close-crowding cliff above, sent the stage staggering back toward the precipice, and the wounded leader was up on its hind legs

again, squealing, fighting the harness.

Crittenden fired again, missed; snapped another quick shot.

The locked wheels of the stage took hold, sent it slewing toward the cliff edge, steel tires grating futilely on the rocky gravel of the trail. It struck a gully, heeled over on two legs, Crittenden, bracing for another shot, was caught off balance and tumbled head over heels downward. As if his weight had been the one thing the stage needed to be rid of, it teetered a moment, then flopped jouncing back on all fours, perilously close to the edge.

Crittenden struck heavily on his shoulder at the very verge of the cliff. For a fleeting second he seemed to stand on his head. His hat had been tossed off and it soared, tumbling slowly, downward toward the black rocks below. Crittenden's legs kicked wildly. Abruptly he flopped—back toward safety. He reeled to his feet, staggered toward the canted rear of the stage coach, gun still in his fist.

Galloping full tilt toward him, a man crouched on the neck of a dodging horse. A dove-grey hat was rakishly a-tilt, brim flat up with the pressure of the wind. Crittenden's thin lips twisted in a curse. Monteith was unmistakable, just as that cowardly attack had been typical of his strategy. Trying to hurl two men to their death by wounding a horse, so he himself wouldn't have to face gun lead.

Sheriff Crittenden, knees bent, body tense, stepped clear of the body of the coach, and the bandit's gun flashed down. Crittenden flung aside, six-gun belching lead from his hip. The outlaw's slug crunched into the wood of the coach not two inches wide of its mark. A second bullet fanned the sheriff's scarred cheek, but he held his ground. A man shooting from horseback had a tricky job at best.

And Crittenden had leaped to the bandit's left so that Monteith was forced to throw his bullets across his own body. His gun roared again. Damn that jackrabbit horse, weaving in like a boxer. He drew a careful bead, resting his long-barreled Colt across his left forearm.

MONTEITH flopped behind his horse. His spur hooked the cinch. His left hand gripped the bronc's mane. He was using the pony's body as a shield. Under its neck he blazed another shot at Crittenden. A gun banged behind the sheriff. The driver was entering the battle.

One bullet left in Crittenden's gun. Grimly he waited, held it for the instant Monteith would throw a final shot as he dashed by. He trained his gun on the spot where the bandit's head must appear, beneath the pony's neck. His pistol swung with the stride of the racing horse. The bronc's hoofs drummed thunder from the road, streaking nearer. Another two strides, twenty-five feet. The sheriff's trigger finger grew rigid. Monteith was almost upon him.

Under the pony's neck Monteith's gun showed. His masked face gleamed momentarily. Two shots roared out. The horse faltered an instant in its pace, then flashed by.

Crittenden reeled back against the stage, head swinging. He felt the slow, warm pain of blood, raised a quick hand. The bandit's slug had torn through his ear. Cursing, thin-mouthed, he thrust himself erect, stuffed fresh fodder into his gun with fumbling fingers. He stumbled down toward the shoulder of the road Monteith had rounded, glanced down at the road. Hope gleamed in his eyes. There was blood, great dusty spots of it. Crittenden broke into a heavy run...

He rounded the hill shoulder. The trail stretched its ragged irregular way across the cliff's sere side, empty of life. Crittenden's swift eyes swept the ravines that gouged the precipice. Nothing stirred. He followed the thick-spattered blood trail, but it was no good. Despite the wound, apparently to his horse, Monteith had spurred up one of the defiles that broke the steep grade, and made good his escape. The coach horses were too fagged for pursuit.

Crittenden turned slowly back. The driver, Shorty Cork, a bandy-legged cowpoke turned stage-pilot, was examining the damage to his harness, cutting loose the head horses. As Crittenden came up, he spat expressively.

"That there's twice me an' Monteith had swapped lead," he said. "Next time one of us'll get his'n."

ATENSE crowd waited in front of the post office when the stage rolled two hours late into Big Shot. The fagged ribs of Monteith's lead raised shouts and a low mutter of anger, even before Shorty had hauled the two weary horses to a halt.

Crittenden stepped solidly to the ground, his tall, rawhide body still tense with anger. His eyes, blue and chill as iced lakes, invited no questions. He hesitated a moment before the lanky banker,

Jim Shanks, starting to tell him of the holdup that nearly succeeded, then he strode on. The crowd opened silently. Shorty climbed out more slowly. In his left hand swung the money bags, in his right, his six-gun. He looked at the men, spat and walked toward the post office.

"When I get back, I'll tell yuh plenty," he said. "That there Crittenden is one fightin' fool."

The sheriff's shoulders hunched impatiently as he walked toward old Doc Sawyer's to have his ear patched up. In his own opinion, Crittenden was "plumb no-'count." Three times he had shot it out with Monteith and the bandit hadn't yet tasted his lead. He didn't even know what the man looked like behind his mask and that made him suspicious of everyone.

The outlaw was one of the most notorious the stage had known in years. There were rewards of close to fifteen thousand dollars on his scheming head. But the man eluded capture. He defied Crittenden who had kept Pueblo County so clear of bad men that for the three years now it had been called Peaceful Pueblo. And he had kept it clean by the simple expedient of an alert eye and a lightning draw. But Monteith had beaten him by trickery, had refused to let Crittenden corner him, force him to stand and draw.

But he would do it, and when he did—Crittenden's long jaw became a knotty muscled ridge of determination—Monteith would pay for all his killings. The sheriff had the cattleman's contempt for the killer's shoulder-gun, a shepherd's weapon.

It was too slow for a draw on which life itself hung by a split second of advantage over the other man's lead slinging. His own low-slung gun was a blur of speed when he went into action. He had no doubt his slug would beat the other's tricky draw.

But the men Monteith had killed had not doubted their speed, either. The bank guard in Big Shot, where the bandit had made his last successful raid, hadn't doubted his. Yet Monteith's bullet had drilled his breast before the guard's pistol had cleared leather. For all that, this shoulder-gun business seemed sneaky to Crittenden, like shooting in the back.

Suddenly Crittenden spun about facing the shadows of the building that faced the street. A blurred figure showed in the dark. The sheriff's hand flashed to his six-shooter.

"Come out!" he barked. "An' keep yore hands high."

A shadow detached itself from the buildings

and moved forward. "What the heck's the idea, Sheriff?"

Crittenden broke into hoarse laughter, stuck his gun back into its holster. "I'm a-beggin' yore pardon, Mayor," he said, "but I figgered yuh was this Monteith. That guy's been turnin' up so many places that I'm gettin' jumpy. Got where ever'body I see I figger's him."

Mayor Burden joined the sheriff's laughter. "Don't shoot before yuh look," he said. Then he added, "I hear yuh had a run-in with him today."

"Yeah." Crittenden outlined his meeting with the bandit.

The mayor's voice was serious when he answered. "That outlaw is making Peaceful Pueblo into a regular hell-an'-leather bandit section. If something's not done soon we may have to—" His voice trailed off, but Crittenden caught the threat in the mayor's tone.

"There ain't goin' to be need for anythin' special." Crittenden said, flattening each word. "I'll get 'im."

For a long moment Burden stood peering through the darkness at the grim-lipped sheriff. Then he laughed, a short off-key laugh. "This Monteith is getting to be a famous man in these parts. And there's folks besides yuh out lookin' fer that reward—even if most of 'em don't want to see Monteith in person. Somebody said they heard a tramp say he was lookin' fer the reward money, goin' to catch the bandit."

Crittenden laughed, nodded good night to Burden, and went on. It just showed how the man's notoriety had spread. The tramp was not the first stranger to try his hand at getting the reward. But the sheriff intended to collect it himself. It would buy him into a ranch he'd had his eye on this last year. But it was more than merely the money. The bandit's raids were a challenge to his authority in Pueblo. And he intended to accept that challenge, alone. His only hope would be to corner Monteith and force him to draw on equal terms. Crittenden's flashy upswing with his old six-gun, the bandit's sideward flip of his shoulder-iron.

BUT a month later the sheriff still hadn't struck on a plan for forcing Monteith into such a corner. He rode the stage uneventfully into town, then swung down impatiently. He left the driver and two bank guards to remove the money.

Crittenden turned abruptly into a side street toward his own cabin and supper. He had not gone fifty feet when a fury of gun fire split the air wide

open. He spun about and raced back with gun drawn. Beside the stage lay a man. The two guards were slumped against it. Everyone else had vanished. Crittenden saw that the man on the ground was Shorty. He bent over him, groped for a wound.

"I knowed one of us would get it next time," Shorty whispered faintly. "Monteith—pulled down on me from behind."

Crittenden straightened slowly. His jaw knotted. The scar across his cheek flamed. He whirled on the men who now had emerged from their hiding places.

"Yuh yellin' bellied skunks," he roared thickly. "Yuh couldn't throw a gun fer Shorty, but yuh'll git him to a doc *pronto*, or I'll shower down on yuh myself. Now git!"

Bent almost double then, Crittenden moved swiftly along the trail of the bandit's boots in the dust of the road. He had slewed away from the stage with money-bags dragging, then had lifted them, probably swung to his shoulder. Intently Crittenden followed through a narrow alley, saw boots and suddenly jerked his eyes up, gun sweeping with them. He checked his trigger finger just in time.

Lanky Jim Shanks stood before him, hands jerked up swiftly, the white tightness of fear on his face.

Crittenden stared at him narrow-eyed.

"Where yuh been, Shanks?" he demanded sharply.

The whiteness of his face was succeeded by a flush.

"Yuh ain't hintin' nothin', Sheriff, be yuh?" he asked thinly, his hands down now, nearer his gun.

Crittenden thrust his own six-gun away, strode up to the lanky banker and his steely fingers bit into his shoulder, slammed him up against the side of the cabin.

"Answer me!" he bit out. "Shorty Cork's shot, an' I find yuh backtracking the trail of that mangy kiyote Monteith. Talk, and talk fast!"

"Whyn't yuh say so," Shanks mumbled, "without all this here gun-throwing? I was over to the stables, heard the shootin' and come to see what 'twas all about."

Crittenden turned the man loose slowly, staring fixedly into his face. He was a fool to suspect every man he met this way. After all, this alleyway was a familiar shortcut. There was no reason why any man in a hurry shouldn't use it.

But this Monteith had him so worked up he suspected everybody.

"Come on with me," he snapped at Shanks and picked up the trail again. It ended in a board walk. Beside it was a muddle of hoofmarks and he could find no one who had seen Monteith's pinto bronc jack-rabbiting away.

Grimly Crittenden swore in a posse, savagely he rode the Pueblo hills in vain. It was hours later when he wearily stabled his horse and stumped off to his office. Evening again, twenty-four hours since Shorty had been shot, twenty-four hours without rest. No results.

His deputy, Rusty Benson, was sitting at the desk, spurs tucked carefully into a drawer on which he had propped his feet. The reddish hair that gave him his nickname bristled from under his thrust-back Stetson. He took a match-stick from between his teeth.

"Well, Chief," he asked, "did yuh get him?"

The sheriff snarled an oath. The startled deputy, his face puzzled, tumbled out of the chair under his chill eyes. Crittenden kept his slit gaze on Rusty.

"Somebody told Monteith what I was figgerin' to do," he said thinly.

Rusty took in the sheriff's tautness, the fixed glare. His mouth closed in a harsh line. Slowly his own eyes thinned.

"Yuh ain't accusin' me?" he demanded.

"Yuh knew my plans," said the sheriff deliberately. "Nobody else but the Shanks' bank did."

His hands hung, the right slightly away from his holster. Rusty tensed. The two officers glared at each other. Fury burned in their eyes. Slowly then the anger went out of Crittenden's and weariness crept in. Fatigue had dug lines in his face.

"**H**ECK!" he said. "I must be goin' loco. Shore I don't think yuh did it, Rusty. This sidewinder Monteith has got me runnin' in circles."

He slumped into a chair. Rusty, mollified, dropped into a chair also.

"What makes yuh think yuh was sold out?" he asked.

"I ain't thinkin' it," Crittenden snapped. "I know. Monteith savvied that the money was comin' in. An' this shipment was so danged secret that nobody but me, you, the banker and the mayor knew it was comin'. Besides he was waitin' at the post office, which shows he knowed it was goin' "

there instead of to the bank at the other end of town as per usual."

"I'm a cousin to a purple steer," swore Rusty.

Crittenden grunted.

"Run on home, son," he said shortly. "I'll figure this thing out here ef'n it takes all night."

"Better sleep," said Rusty. "Yuh look plumb tuckered out."

Crittenden grunted again. He dug out his old pipe and lighted up. Several hours passed before he got up stiffly, knocked the ashes out of his long cold pipe and went to Rusty's.

"Meet me at the grub shack in a half hour," he told the deputy when he answered his knock. He went directly to the lunchroom itself. As he entered an abrupt silence fell over the several men there. Crittenden glanced at them from under lowering brows. He nodded shortly to Shanks, wolfing his dinner, and Mayor Burden who sat across the table from him. The sheriff turned to the counter.

As he sat down he glanced into the dirty mirror back of the counter. Shanks and Burden had turned almost sideward in their chairs and were staring at his back.

"Pig strip and hen fruit," Crittenden ordered. "*Pronto.*"

A few minutes later Rusty strolled in and sat down beside the sheriff. They nodded to each other briefly. Crittenden finished eating first.

"Step on it, Rusty," he said brusquely. "I want yuh to go to the office with me. Important."

They left without speaking again. At the office Crittenden peered suspiciously out of the window and pulled down the shade. He slowly filled his pipe. Rusty moved restlessly.

"Why all the danged mystery?" he asked impatiently.

Crittenden lighted his pipe deliberately before he answered.

"The bank," he said puffing, "phoned me awhile ago that it's goin' to get in close on fifty thousand gold tomorrow from the mine. I'm bettin' my saddle against a shirt that Monteith tries to corral him some."

SHERIFF CRITTENDEN crouched behind a wooden partition that separated the lobby of the bank from the president's office. Through a crack he watched for Shoulder-gun Monteith. The teller's window, where the bandit would have to get the money, was diagonally across from him. A strange rancher stood there now. His glance about the bank spotted the crack through which

Crittenden spied.

The stranger's eyes narrowed slightly. He cashed a small check and walked out. Crittenden abruptly realized he would have to change his hideout. It was too obvious and Monteith would be sure to keep it covered. Crittenden moved across and squatted behind a low solid railing that encircled the cashier's desk.

It was a weary wait. His muscles cramped. His nerves were taut. The craving to smoke became a torture. Yet he must keep hidden and subject every man who entered to a sharp but furtive scrutiny. The only thing he could be sure of was that Monteith would not carry a hip gun. And nowadays many men went without any guns at all, carried their six-shooters only on the range.

Two men entered. At the hip of each swung a pistol. Crittenden shook his head in disappointment. It was nearly closing time and he was beginning to fear Monteith would not come. One of the men left. The other delayed.

Crittenden became restless. His cramped legs demanded relief from the continued strain of squatting on the floor. He cautiously raised his head above the railing. The man still stood in front of the teller's window.

Sun wrinkles about Crittenden's eyes tightened suspiciously.

But there was nothing in his appearance to stir Crittenden's doubts. Apparently he was only arguing with the teller—and he wore a gun on his thigh with a well worn wooden grip. He stood easily, his left arm leaning on the little shelf outside the teller's window.

Then Crittenden's sharp eyes caught an inconspicuous tensing on the man's right shoulder, followed by a lightning-quick jerk. The sheriff yanked out his six-shooter, then checked, puzzled. He had recognized that twitch as would any man of the range whose life often depended on the speed of his draw. It was the first movement of a gunman going for his weapon.

But the stranger's hand had not dropped to his hip. Crittenden glanced toward the teller. His expression had frozen. His startled gaze centered on the stranger at a point just above the shelf. Suddenly Crittenden understood. A shoulder-gun! The hip holster had been a blind. The man was Shoulder-gun Monteith!

A hard grin distorted Crittenden's face. The bandit's voice rasped across the narrow lobby.

"Jest paw out the money, Mr. Banker," he said. His words were slow and emphatic. "An'

don't try no foolishness. I'm Shoulder-gun Monteith and I mean business."

Crittenden went suddenly cold with rage. This was the man who had shot Shorty in the back, a snakey killer. He laid his gun across the railing, centered on the bandit. His eyes a blue flame of anger, he tightened his finger on the trigger. The hammer reared slowly. The chamber clicked around. In another instant the hammer would snap forward, send a bullet plowing into Monteith's spine.

Crittenden shook his head sharply. He eased the hammer safely down again. He couldn't do it, couldn't shoot even a loco lobo like Monteith in the back.

"Eyes front, Monteith," he grated between his teeth. "An' keep—"

Cra-ack!

A bullet smashed through the door of the president's office. Monteith, without turning, had snapped a shot over his left shoulder toward where he thought his challenger was hidden.

"Freeze!" Crittenden barked. "One more like that an' I'll blow yore brains out."

HIS gun centered on Monteith. His words were hedged brittlely. This time, the bandit heeded. There was no mistaking that voice. Crittenden would do as he said. Monteith stiffened, his eyes straight forward.

"All right, Crittenden," he said softly, "but I've got this jasper with a gun in his belly. Make a move an' I'll plug him. Yuh could blow my gizzard out from the back, all right, but yuh ain't that kind of kiyote, Mr. Crittenden."

It was a deadlock, but the sheriff held the key.

"Yuh're dead right about that, Monteith," he said slowly. "But here's the deal. Yuh think yuh're tarnation fast with that there shoulder-gun of yore'n. I'm goin' to give yuh a chance to throw it. Holster, yore smoke iron. I'll do the same and we'll shoot it out even, hip-gun against shoulder-gun. That'll give us both an even break same as we got now. I pass yuh my word on that."

Crittenden thought of Shorty, who had narrowly escaped death. The scar on his cheek was like a burning arrow. His voice grew thick.

"It's a damned sight better'n yuh deserve, yuh yeller bellied skunk," he ripped out.

Monteith laughed shortly.

"If it was any other *hombre*," he said curtly, "I wouldn't risk gettin' shot with my gun stashed." His voice grew brittle. "Hand over yore smoke-

iron, Mr. Banker, butt first. And don't try no tricks."

The teller surrendered his weapon. Monteith tossed it into a corner. Crittenden saw the bandit's clothing bulge as he holstered his pistol, saw Monteith turn stiffly.

The sheriff thrust his own gun loosely into its sheath and stepped over the railing. He and the bandit faced each other across the scant width of the lobby. Not twenty-five feet apart, there was small chance that either would miss. It was strictly a matter of who plugged his man first, the faster draw, shoulder-gun against hip-gun.

Monteith, as Crittenden saw him closely for the first time, was a lanky man, a trifle over middle height. He had jerked his bandanna up over his nose; and his face, presented to Crittenden over his down-sloped shoulder, showed only eyes like arrow slits. The pupils had a metallic glint.

Monteith's left hand grasped his coat at the front edge near the bottom. He would snap it out of the way for his tricky draw. His right hand centered over his breast. His thumb rubbed slowly against his first two fingers. The man was strung as tightly as piano wire.

Crittenden had squared off as if for a fist fight. His feet were braced apart. His left hand with spread fingers was stretched before him for balance. His right hovered like a claw at his hip, ready for the sweeping twisting jerk that would throw his lead in a single incredibly swift movement, his eyes narrowed.

"Whenever yuh're ready, Mr. Shoulder-gun Monteith," he said thickly.

The bandit glared into his eyes for an instant. Then his coat snapped back. There was a sharp double explosion, clapping thunderously against the walls. A gun clattered to the floor. Monteith's hand groped to the .45 at his hip. But he couldn't seem to draw it. Crittenden had spun half about, his shoulder numb under the sledge-hammer blow of lead.

He leaned heavily against the railing. With painful slowness he raised his pistol again, his arm rigid. Monteith suddenly abandoned his struggle to draw the hip-gun and fled in a stumbling run.

Poo-ow!

A crash of breaking glass. Crittenden's second bullet, a fraction late, had smashed the door. The sheriff's feet dragged over the smooth floor. Blood dripped from his dangling left arm. The pain throbbled through his entire body, sickening him.

The teller dashed from his cage, caught the

bandit's pistol from the floor. He cursed.

"This gun's jammed," he said.

Crittenden turned his head. The chamber of the pistol was gripped against the dented frame, spattered with lead.

"Blazes!" said Crittenden bitterly. "Jest shot the gun out of his hand. Numbed his arm so he couldn't flash his hip-gun."

Crittenden caged his six-shooter. He bent over a moment, fumbling with the holster. Then his shoulder pushed open the door and he staggered into the street. A dozen men were grouped there. Rusty ran up. A rain of red drops from the sheriff's wound spattered on the steps, but he thrust aside his deputy's proffered help.

"Which way did Monteith get to?" he demanded.

No one seemed to be certain. Two pointed up the street. A third was equally certain he fled in the opposite direction. Crittenden's eyes scanned the street. Jim Shanks was coming at a headlong run, overalls covering his clothing. Crittenden, swaying on his feet, stared at him. He shook his head heavily. Mayor Burden rounded a corner thirty yards away, at a run, saw the crowd.

"Halt!" Crittenden yelled. "Everybody stay put."

Shanks stopped uncertainly, eyes narrow. Mayor Burden halted abruptly at his elbow. Crittenden half fell down the steps, broke into a stumbling run. The crowd looked after him in bewilderment. Had he challenged the mayor or the banker? The same thought occurred to them all. Either way the sheriff's wound had befuddled his mind. They went after him.

CRITTENDEN was close to the two men now; stopped. His foot caught in a hole and he nearly fell. He recovered and wavered forward. Thirty feet from them Crittenden stopped and stood swaying. His left arm hung limply red. The blood-wet sleeve stuck to it. Crittenden braced himself. He was on the verge of collapse, but his shooting hand was steady. "Throw yore gun, yuh range rat," he grated.

Shanks started. Then he saw that the sheriff's gaze was fixed on Burden, whirled toward him.

"I haven't got a gun, Sheriff," the mayor said slowly. His face went slowly white. "I haven't got a gun, damn yuh!"

Crittenden's lips skinned back from his teeth. "Draw," he said, "or I'll drill yuh as yuh stand!"

Mayor Burden raised his hand in a restraining

gesture, palm up. "Don't," he said again hoarsely, then his hand darted with dazzling swiftness beneath his coat. His and Crittenden's six-shooters belched lead in a single oddly muffled roar. A single hole showed' in the mayor's coat where his hand had disappeared. Crittenden still rocked unsteadily on his feet.

Burden seemed to shrink, and to grow perceptibly smaller. His gun dropped, fell from his hand like an incredibly heavy weight. He slumped to the ground, rolled over on his back and lay still. Crittenden moved slowly toward him. The others closed in warily. "Are yuh plumb loco?" Rusty demanded. "What the blazes yuh shootin' the mayor for?"

The sheriff stooped painfully over the fallen man and pulled aside the left lapel of his coat. There, binding his shoulder, was the strap for a gun. But there was no holster. Instead there were two horizontal leather slings.

"That there," said the sheriff, "is how he beat a hip-gun to the draw. He didn't pull his smoke-iron, jest shot her through his coat as she rode. Gents, here's Shoulder-gun Monteith's secret."

"Shoulder-gun Monteith!" cried Rusty.

Crittenden bent slowly again, reached into Burden's coat pocket. From it he pulled a wig and false mustache.

"YUH see," Crittenden explained to Rusty when the doctor had made him comfortable. "I figgered the only persons that could have known about that shipment. There weren't but four of us had the low-down on it And Burden was the only one of the four ain't never been seen around here without a coat.

"Then last night at the grub shack we got the mayor right suspicious with our actions and then give him a chance to listen in at the office. I knowed it had to be Burden or Shanks. And when Monteith tries the holdup today I knows it's Burden. You see, there warn't much money in the bank and Shanks would 'a' knowed that."

"But how," Rusty wanted to know, "did yuh beat that cheatin' draw?"

Crittenden's mouth tightened.

"I ain't so proud of it," he said shortly. "But I had to git him and I knew he was cheatin'. He plugged me in the bank an' I didn't even see the flash of his lead blazer. When we shot it out on the street I was ready for him."

He gestured toward his holster. Rusty squatted and inspected it curiously. The thong that usually

bound the end tightly against his thigh swung loose. The leather at the scabbard's end was charred and bullet-torn.

"I didn't flash the old smoke-iron the second time," Crittenden explained. "I untied that there thong before I left the bank. Then, when I braced Mr. Burden Monteith, I jest twisted up and blazed away through leather."