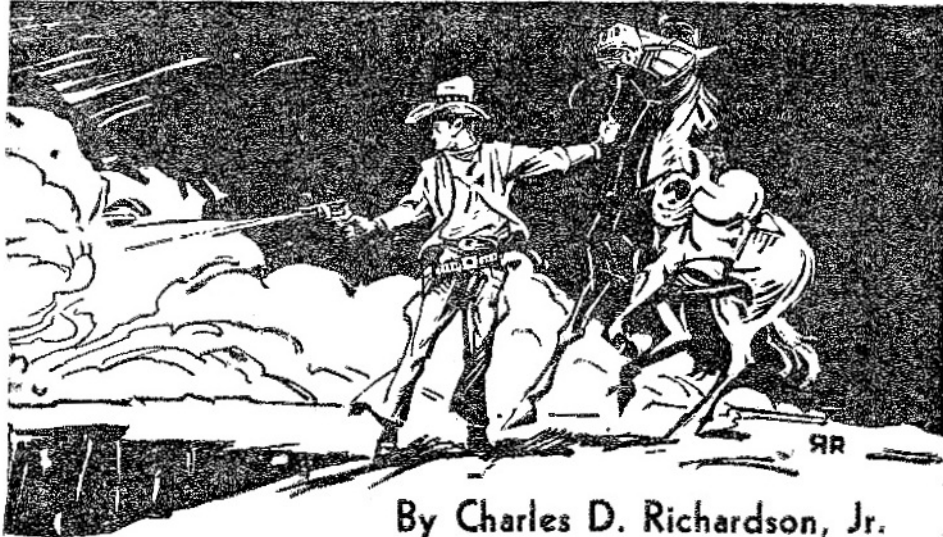


# Pay Dirt Boomerang



By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

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*Joe Cranston would stop at nothing to get the dinero to restore his youngster's eyesight. But when his plan to stick up the stagecoach blew up in his face, Cranston's own eyes showed him that he couldn't blind the law to a holdup haul.*

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JOE CRANSTON stared out the window at his small son Buddy and Old Hen Wetherall, etched against the golden bars of early morning sunlight. Old Hen gave the youngster an affectionate pat, then forked his near-by stallion and galloped out over the dewy range.

Buddy walked slowly over to the bench just outside the bunkhouse and sat down.

On the bed where he lay wounded, Joe Cranston squirmed between the sheets. He cursed. It was hell to stay here helpless as a blind bat, unable to ride the range with old Hen. Blind—the word slashed through Joe's thoughts like a hot brand iron—that's what Buddy Cranston would be, unless a delicate operation were performed within the next few days. An operation which would mean nearly two thousand dollars.

Cranston's highly veined hands clawed the covers into a ball. He turned his head to one side so that he couldn't see his boy out there on the bench. Buddy, Joe knew, even now was having a hard time making out things a few feet in front of him.

The brilliant sunrises, the golden sunsets spilling their hues of silver and red and gold over the rim at the cup which was Ghost Valley, were but an indistinct blur to the child. Buddy Cranston couldn't see the scattered dots of the Leaning T herd. Nor could he make out the bent figure of Old Hen topping the green knoll this side of the twisting stream.

Joe Cranston looked again across the room at his gunbelt hanging on the wall. Within that worn and scored holster lay the means of saving young Buddy's sight. An old .44 single action it was, but with it Joe knew he could stick up the Overman

stage which would be hauling over ten thousand in gold somewhere around noon today.

"I've got to do it," Joe told himself for the tenth time since sunup. And for the tenth time that morning, he tried to get out of bed.

Somehow, Joe finally managed it to the edge of the bed. He sat there several moments, panting. No use kidding himself, he was weak as the devil from that rustler bullet. In spite of the dizzy nausea which gripped him, Cranston's lips pressed in a thin line and the cowman slowly began to slide into his clothing.

What he was about to do was against every principle of square shooting Joe had ever held. Against, too, the ideals and principles of Old Hen Wetherall, his partner. Old Hen hadn't pulled a shady trick in his life. It would cut him deep to think that the man who had married his daughter would stoop to robbing a stage.

Joe Cranston went a little white and he had to stop to get his breath. Joe was thinking of his wife, June, who had died when their son, Buddy, was only two years old. June Wetherall Cranston, Old Hen's raven-haired girl. Joe gulped and drew on his trousers with a shaky hand. He still could hear June's dying words, see the fading light in her eyes as she made Joe promise to bring Buddy up as they had planned, and to look after Old Hen.

She had even smiled at Joe, as her last breath was leaving her.

"Somehow," she'd said ever so faintly, "it doesn't seem hard now—my going out. I know you'll carry on—for the rest of us. Good-by, dear."

**W**ITH cold sweat bathing his forehead, Joe buckled on his gunbelt and saw that the gun was fully loaded and working smoothly. He was sick of lying on his back, letting Old Hen sweat

and strain along that way. Things on the Leaning T had gone from bad to worse. A dry summer, raging forest fires in which Old Hen almost had lost his life, and which had wiped out most of the Leaning T herd and several of Old Hen's valuable horses—all paved the way for the financial ruin toward which the two cowmen were headed.

Then had come the rustler raid to top that. It laid Joe Cranston out and left the aged Hen to carry on alone. Alone, Old Hen must raise that two thousand necessary to save his little grandson's eyesight.

Joe jammed on his hat and staggered out the door.

In order that Buddy wouldn't spot him, the wounded rancher sneaked about the side of the ranch house. Joe's lips twitched at the irony of that. Buddy couldn't see anything until it was almost on top of him. Joe had a hunch that the kid couldn't see as far as he let on. Buddy concealed his thoughts to keep his dad and Old Hen from worrying.

Joe had to steady himself before he pulled up into the saddle. Alternate waves of red and black jumped before him. That wound was worse than he'd figured. Grimly, Cranston took another hold on the saddle horn and swung slowly astride the roan. The sun's rays were searing the spruce tops when he began his long hot ride to the granite cliffs between which the Overman stage would rumble.

As he waited in the pines by the road, Joe Cranston had plenty of time to brood over the thing he was about to undertake. Joe never had robbed a stage in his life. He never had held up anyone, nor gunned a man except in self-defense. Dully, Joe wondered what Old Hen would think of him. He knew Old Hen thought a lot of little Buddy, but Old Hen certainly would be against robbing the stage. He would do

all in his power to save Buddy's eyesight the square and honest way.

Joe Cranston lit a quirley to give his trembling lips something to hang on to. There wasn't time to be honest. His boy's sight meant more to Joe than any principle on earth. To hell with the law. He'd gun a dozen men that Buddy might be spared a life of darkness.

Joe stared at the stern cliffs and the winding road. There had been numerous holdups in Brayson County lately and the coach probably would be well guarded. Sheriff "Puma" Stacey—an old pal of Hen's, but a stern stickler for justice—might be around with his posse. Grimly, Joe wondered how many gents he'd have to slug down before he could get the bullion. He wondered how it would feel to see innocent men dropping before him. Men who never had done a thing to him and had all the right in the world to live.

Cranston passed a quivering hand over his eyes. If only his strength held out. Joe had a horror of the dizziness which still plucked at his brain, making him reel. He gave a quick feel at the bandage on his side and found it still dry. If that wound were to open, the blood begin to flow. . .

The faint sound of hoofbeats made Joe start. The stage! Joe pulled his .44 and eased his horse nearer the edge of trees. The thought .of killing and robbing made him sick inside, sick almost as the rustler wound. But always before him was the pathetic face .of little Buddy. Buddy who believed implicitly in his father's ability to check the dark horror slowly creeping over him.

Joe tugged his bandanna up over his nose and mouth. He guided his horse out from the trees and galloped rapidly for the approaching stage.

He had covered half the distance when a dark blur streaked out from a chaparral

clump, not more than a few yards in front of him. Joe reined in, cursing.

Someone had beat him to it. A squat jasper with mask and cloak of black. He began sticking up the stage before Joe's very eyes. Already, the lanky stage driver had yanked on the brake, the men behind him clawing sky vigorously. The hooded figure, holding two gleaming .45's, sided his horse over and was gesturing for the bullion box.

**F**INGERS tight about his own gun, Joe Cranston backed his horse into the bushes. What right had this hombre to the loot, anyhow? Probably some gunslick who made a living killing for money. He didn't need that bullion like Joe did. A cunning light jumped into Joe Cranston's eyes. Let the skunk make his steal. He wouldn't get far with it. Joe would follow him to his hideout, get the gold away, if it was the last thing he ever did.

The wound in Joe's side gave another sickening twinge. Again, that black cloud of nausea clawed at Joe's insides. Desperately, the rancher gripped his reins and pounded swiftly through the pines after the retreating bandit. The angry shouts of the men behind became a mere echo in the canyon.

The bandit trail led up a steep path of slippery shale. Joe Cranston, urging his horse along a narrow strip that made his right leg jut into space, stared down at the black pit from which they'd just come and shuddered. That jasper ahead sure must have wanted the shipment badly to come such a way with it. One false step and horse and rider would be a red smear at the bottom.

Sudden lead screaming in his ear brought Joe into a tense crouch over his roan's neck. The hombre had spotted him! Joe mouthed a tight oath and fired instantly. He spurred recklessly on up over

the sliding shale. Deep within him was the fear that the gunman might plug him before he could get the gold. Joe thought again of little Buddy sitting patiently at home and wondering what the sunset would look like tonight. Joe roweled deeper.

The rider above Joe topped the rimrock. He slung hasty lead at his pursuer, whisked from sight. Two minutes later, Joe gained the top and streaked across the bare mesa. His bandanna slipped down off his face.

Joe Cranston gave a shout as he made out the speeding form of the bandit over by the towering butte. The fellow was making for the steep side, where the pine and spruce trees thinned. If he kept out in the open like that, Joe might catch him. Joe gave an extra jab to his horse's flank and raised his gun.

It was a long shot and the target moving swiftly, but as Cranston's gun bellowed, the bandit's horse neighed shrilly and ploughed nose-foremost into the pine needles. The rider thudded heavily into some bushes.

The masked gunman swayed to his feet. He had lost one of his .45's in the tumble, but the six-shooter in his right hand moved up in a death arc for Joe Cranston.

"Damn your hide!" the fellow screamed. "You ain't gettin' none of this gold!" Then, as he saw Joe's gaunt face come out of shadow, he shouted, "Joe! Don't shoot! I—"

But Cranston's six-gun already had bucked in thundering detonation. A patch of white appeared on the bandit's black robe, just below the right shoulder. He gave a gurgling cry and folded to the moss. Joe rushed forward, .44 smoking.

The young rancher's face was like chalk. He didn't seem to notice the box of bullion nearby, the gold that now was his

and with which he would be able to save Buddy Cranston's eyesight. Joe went straight to the hooded figure and dropped to its side.

He ripped off the mask.

Cranston didn't say a word as he knelt there, staring at the white features of Old Hen Wetherall. The second time Old Hen had shrieked at him, Joe had recognized the voice, had tried desperately to swing aside his gun. But that damnably quick aim of his had done the trick. Joe had plugged the man he thought more of than any other on earth. The father of the girl who had been his wife for three short, joyous years.

THE agony in Joe's heart dulled the grinding pain in his side. Old Hen, he now realized, had been as worried as he over the hopelessness of ever raising the money for Buddy's operation. Even as Joe, Old Hen must have been planning this stickup for days. He knew that with Joe in bed sick he would have a free hand with the job. Then he'd tell Joe he had "borrowed" the amount. Joe never would suspect Old Hen of robbing the Overman stage.

Joe's trembling hand fluttered to Old Hen's heart. The young cowman gave an involuntary shout. Old Hen still lived! Maybe it wasn't too late after all. Despite returning nausea and excruciating pain beneath his bandage, Cranston pulled off Old Hen's cloak and dragged him over to his horse. Now if he could just get the aged rancher and the gold hack to the Leaning T— Joe smiled through his pain and pictured how Buddy would laugh and play again and watch the sunsets. What if Joe himself did die afterwards? Buddy's sight and Old Hen's life were worth it.

Joe had the limp Wetherall on his shoulder now, struggling to hoist the dead weight into the saddle, when snapping

twigs and quick shouts brought him to a cold crouch. Joe's .44 jumped into his right hand.

"Hell!" the cowman cursed, lowering Old Hen quickly.

Before him, three gaunt riders were thundering up. Joe couldn't make out their faces in the pine shadows, but he sensed that here was a part of the sheriff's posse out to get him. Like Joe, they had decided to let the hombre take the loot, then trail him to his hideout which might contain other plunder. They must have been hot on the scent, even as Joe was chasing Old Hen.

The trio began to fire on Joe Cranston. Joe's gun coughed. One of the riders lost his Stetson. Another, screaming, clutched at his hip.

"You'll never take Old Hen to jail!" Joe barked hoarsely, firing with inspired aim.

The three riders now crouched behind scant sagebrush. Yellow flame lanced out at Joe; he felt the burn of lead on his shoulder and against his thigh. Warm sweat trickled down his cheek. But he kept up his deadly fire. He must get Old Hen and the bullion to safety, even if it meant shooting up the entire posse. With a sickening wrench at his heart, Joe figured his chances of doing that. If the rest of the posse reached him before he had wiped out these three, he was sunk. He and Old Hen and Buddy's sight.

Joe felt the warm stickiness of fresh blood oozing beneath the bandage on his side. The rustler wound had reopened. Again the nausea, the rending pain. Joe staggered by his horse, gun dropping to the moss. He couldn't hear the exultant shout that went up from the sage clump. He was flat on his face in a pool of his own blood.

Joe battled for what seemed hours in a sea of choking ink. When he finally fought

his way to consciousness and some of the throbbing left his head, he opened his eyes to the astounding sight of Old Hen and Sheriff Puma Stacey bending over him. Several of Stacey's possemen were working over three silent forms beneath the jackpines.

Old Hen's bandit mask and cloak lay where Joe had left them.

Joe's first thoughts were of despair. Old Hen and he were caught with the goods. Now Buddy Cranston's chances of regaining his vision were lost forever. Joe and Old Hen would swing for what they had done.

But Sheriff Stacey's rumbling voice soon set Joe clear about that. "Nerviest thing I ever saw," the lawman was saying, "There was Joe pluggin' down them gunnies as cool as you please, and him just out of a sick bed. By gosh, Hen, it must have surprised you to find Joe had the same idea as you about roundin' up them bandits. Bet you'd have hogtied 'em if you'd of knowed in time."

Beside the sheriff, Old Hen nodded. There was a queer, puzzled look in the rancher's eyes. "Yeah," he said.

Joe Cranston stared, gulped. What the devil did old Puma mean by "bandits" he and Old Hen had rounded up? The men Joe had fought were Stacey's own posse. They—

Joe found himself hanging on to the rest of the sheriff's speech.

"I figured them three hombres," Stacey continued, "wouldn't pass up the chance to stick up the Overman stage, even though they had pulled a bank holdup, killed the cashier just a week ago. They must of had one of their men rob the stage so that we wouldn't be wise they worked both jobs. Anyhow, it shore was a break for you and Joe here. With that four thousand reward for the trio's capture, Joe can save his

kid's eyesight and have plenty left over to boot."

For a moment, Joe Cranston lay there on the pine needle bed, breathing hard and trying to digest it all. Those three men he'd just burned down were not a part of the sheriff's posse, but killers who rode the owlhoot and made their living off other gents' pay. Puma Stacey had been trailing them when they had crossed Joe's path. Puma thought Joe and Old Hen had been after *them*.

Old Hen gave Joe an affectionate pat. He saw that the wounded rancher's eyes were open. "Everything's okay now, son," Old Hen said softly.

The old fellow went on to explain things, but Joe Cranston's gaze was on the sheriff. Puma Stacey was toying idly with

the toe of his boot at the black robe and mask on the ground. Stacey looked at Joe and his right eye moved in a wink, and he grinned a little. Joe grinned back. This foxy old law-dog knew more than he was telling. If he suspected that Joe and Old Hen were connected with the robbery, he didn't let on. Those three killers were headed for the noose anyway. Joe had saved Puma a lot of trouble.

Joe Cranston closed his eyes with a sigh. Somehow, before him, he could see the beautiful face of his wife, June, and she was smiling. She, too, would be happy that her little boy would see the sunsets again. Somehow, Joe felt that June would be near when they operated. She and Joe and Old Hen would watch over Buddy as the gray film was being lifted.