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ACTION STORIES

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"YORE NAME'S ON A HUNDRED BULLETS!" . Thomas Thompson 4
Full-length Novel of the great Southwest

A blood-crazed mob moved into the California hills. Eyes blazing, knives honed, guns lead-heavy, they swore screaming agony and slow-death—for a weaponless girl who cowered wild-eyed in the brush.

THE DUDE HANGS HIGH Joe Chadwick 32

He wuz a hongry-lookin' critter from the East a-ways—plumb anxious tuh ride into every kinda trouble like a real cowpoke. The great and glorious West didn't disappoint him none!

THE COLONEL'S COLTS M. Howard Lane 50

Gleaming like polished jewels in their case, one's fingers ached to curl lovingly about their triggers. Yet the dead Colonel's bookish weakling son swore they would never be fired.

LAST STAND OF A LAW DOG Walter A. Tompkins 62

Old Giff Cragg didn't mind age crippling his magic gun, but he sure aimed to turn in a clean badge—bright enough for any killer to see himself by gunflame.

THIRSTY TRIGGERS Lee Floren 77

Barr Stackpool had the cattle. Jim Smith had the water. Big Dan Reynolds had only memories. But they all had guns.

THE HOUSE OF MAPUHI Jack London 84

America's master story-teller creates a screaming super-hurricane and then plunges into its black maw a helpless, naked human with only one resource—a grim, fanatical will to live. Can either side win such a titanic struggle?

BADMAN'S BRITCHES Allan K. Echols 97

Any ornery, owl-hootin' son could shoot up a bank and gun-whip helpless folks, the way El Toro did. But only one hombre was fit to wear his pants.

GUN-WITCH OF HOODOO RANGE Emmett McDowell 102

A Senorita Scorpion Novel

Burly Jess Morgan stared numbly at his grass swept clean of cattle, the smoking ruins of his ranch, the stiffening bodies of his crew. Was this the work of the famous Senorita Scorpion—the girl Robin Hood of the West?



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The one man who went for his gun had it shot out of his hand.

BADMAN'S BRITCHES

By Allan K. Echols

Any ornery, owl-hootin' son could shoot up a bank and gun-whip helpless folks, the way El Toro did. But only one hombre was fit to wear his pants.

7—Action Stories—Winter

SIESTA WAS JUST A WIDE place in the trail to Mexico, a general store dominated by its bar and gaming tables, a livery stable, a scattering of adobe and false-front shacks—and a thoroughly bad reputation. You could say

"Law!" and every man in town would grow tense and reach for his gun.

This man who looked like a giant with Spanish blood in his veins rode into Siesta about sundown, left his horse at the livery stable and hurried to Firenze's store and saloon to wash the trail dust out of his tonsils. Which was what visitors generally did first in Siesta. They also generally came pretty well heeled with money. And so did this man.

When Firenze poured him a drink and asked, "Come far?" the man looked him in the face blankly and answered, "Oh, been here and there."

That was about as definite an answer as any of the visitors ever gave about their business, and that satisfied Firenze. But after a couple more drinks, the stranger remarked:

"I was kinda hoping to bump into a hombre they call El Toro. A friend of his kinda wanted me to look him up if I ever ran into him."

And that was the way the right kind of a hombre would have asked the question as to whether Firenze knew a hombre called El Toro, The Bull.

"Never heard of him," Firenze answered, in strict accordance with his code. "Some friend of his, you say?"

"Yeah. Feller named Squatty Vamoose, back up in Mesquite Valley. Squatty wanted me to get in touch with Toro—"

"Never heard of him," Firenze repeated. "Have another one on me."

The stranger dropped the subject, drank a few more, went across the street to eat, came back later and bucked a faro game for a while, losing without a squawk, and finally went off to bed—satisfied with his beginning.

It was not at all surprising that nobody in Siesta would tell a stranger that he knew El Toro, because even in a town which existed solely for the purpose of being a hideout for outlaws, El Toro was considered bad medicine. Few had claimed to have ever seen him, but many knew about him.

His reputation was known all up and down the Border. He was a lone wolf, a man who had been making life not only unprofitable, but unbearable, for half a dozen mining companies which were digging ore out of Wildhorse mountains. He

always worked alone, a big man on a black horse, who wore a suit of black broadcloth cut Mexican style, and decorated with silver braid from the seams down the sides of his bell-bottomed breeches to the crown of his sombrero. He was a flashing spectacle when he pounced down on a load of bullion, and the tricks he could do with his six-gun made gun experts stick up their ears.

The tales told how El Toro had picked up a fortune off those bullion wagons in the past few years. But now the story was getting a new chapter. El Toro had suddenly changed his tactics. He had come down to the town of Mesquite Crossing and robbed a bank, and for the first time, he had not worked alone, but had brought a gang with him. The bank had lost a hundred thousand, and three employees, including the young daughter of the Cashier had been killed dead.

El Toro was growing. And so was the number of people who would like to get their hands on him.

THE second evening, after the sun had dipped down behind the Wildhorse peaks and cooled things off a bit, the stranger dropped into Firenze's again and drank a bottle of *cerveza*, the luke warm Mexican beer Firenze served. There was a scattering of men in the place, hard eyed hombres who glanced at the stranger, sized him up with interest, and returned their attention to their drinks.

The stranger sat down at a table and drank his beer slowly. Nobody paid much more attention to him until a big man in khaki breeches and khaki shirt opened at the neck to expose a thick growth of black hair on his chest bought a bottle of beer and brought it over to the stranger's table to drink it.

The man had a good look at the stranger as he approached, and the stranger had a good look at him. They were both more than average in size, both had dark hair and dark eyes and broad shoulders. But there the resemblance ceased.

"Hot, ain't it?" the intruder asked, sitting down. "I ain't seen you around before."

The stranger drained his bottle and held up two fingers to the bartender who came with two more bottles.

"Plenty hot," the stranger answered. "First time I been down here, though I've heard a lot about it. Friend o' mine used to drop in here once in a while. This friend, they called him Squatty—"

"Wouldn't be Squatty LeFlore, would it?"

"No. They call him Squatty Vamoose. As I was sayin' he told me—"

"Where'd you happen to know this hombre?" the intruder asked.

"Oh, just around," the stranger answered. Then eyeing the other sharply, he asked, "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just heard of him. Heard he was a friend of this here now El Toro—"

"Yeah," the stranger said, appeased, "Matter of fact, he is. He was tellin' me that if I ever bumped into this El Toro, he had a message for him."

"Wonder if I know this Squatty Vamoose hombre. Seems like I might have met him once. What kinda lookin' hombre is he?"

"Just like the name Squatty says he looks. Got one eye missin'—"

The bartender brought two beers and the intruder paid for them. He drank half his bottle in silence, spent some time in thought, then said:

"Tell you what. I know a man down on the creek that claims he knows this El Toro pretty well. Now if you wanted to come down, I'd be proud to make you known to this feller, and he can take the message—"

"Good," the stranger answered. "I'd be plumb happy to deliver it."

They got their horses and rode down to the creek bottoms, passing through post-oak and cottonwood until they came to a pole cabin concealed beside a shallows. It was dusk now, but a dim light was burning in the cabin.

"I didn't get your name?" the man asked the stranger.

"Oh, they call me Caliente, sometimes," the stranger answered vaguely.

They went inside, where there were four men playing cards. The men dropped their cards and drifted to positions with their backs to the wall. All wore their guns. Caliente did not seem to notice this. They all eyed him suspiciously.

His guide introduced Caliente. "He says

that Squatty Vamoose has a message for El Toro," he explained.

Nobody said anything. The silence was complete—tense. The rippling of the creek over the shallows came in through the door.

Caliente backed up against a wall himself, then asked: "Well, where's this hombre that knows El Toro?"

Before anybody could answer, one of the men countered with another, speaking to Caliente's guide. "Know who this feller is, Jake?"

"I figgered he was all right," the big man answered. "He knows Squatty Vamoose, who is a friend of El Toro's."

Jake then looked at Caliente, "Well, what is this message?" he asked.

"It's for El Toro," Caliente said. "I reckon I'd better deliver it to him in person."

The eyes of the other men turned to Jake, who was obviously the leader of the group. Big Jake scratched his chin, then turned to Caliente.

"I'm the hombre that knows El Toro," he said. "I'll take the message to him."

CALIENTE rolled a cigarette while he thought this over. The other men waited silently, tensely, for his answer. Then Caliente spoke.

"El Toro lost a man on that bank job. Squatty Vamoose is recommending me to take his place. I want to join up with El Toro."

He let this sink in while he watched the men from behind the match he held to his cigarette. The men all looked at big Jake.

Jake eyed him sharply, "Ever had any experience? So I could tell El Toro, of course. He might ask me."

"I think the Rangers would tell you I've had plenty—if they knew who I was." Caliente grinned. "The details don't matter."

The hawk-faced one of the group said, "That's what he says."

Caliente eyed him coldly. "Keep your jaw shut, little stuff, or I'll show you. I wasn't talking to you."

The man decided not to go on with the subject.

Big Jake said, "You're talkin' to a man that's right handy with a gun, mister."

"This handy?" Caliente asked. His

weapon was a blur as it came out and covered the hawk-faced man.

A tight smile hovered on the corner of his mouth as he dropped his weapon back in his pouch. He had seen surprise on the faces of every man in the room, particularly the face of Hawk Face.

He turned back to Big Jake. "Well, what about it?" he asked. "Do I join up with you?"

Big Jake's eyes opened, then narrowed. "With me?" he asked.

"Yeah. That's what I come for, ain't it? Why keep on chasin' around the corral about it?"

A red-faced man laughed. "Kinda got you betwixt a rock and a hard place, Jake."

Then Jake came to a sudden decision. "Well, we got to have another man to take Red's place." He turned to Caliente, "All right, hombre. You get a trial—and to-night. But you better be good."

"You won't be disappointed in me," Caliente said evenly. "Just tell me what to do."

"We got a little job—"

Hawk face butted in again. "Lissen here, Jake, you don't know this hombre from Adam's off ox. What's eatin' on you?"

Big Jake scowled at the pinched little man. "Shut yore jaw. I'm runnin' this shebang. I'm takin' a chance on him because we gotta have him. An' he ain't gonna pull nothin' on me and live over it. There's five of us to one, ain't they?"

Hawk Face shrugged and kept his mouth shut. Jake turned back to Caliente:

"I'm taking a chance on you because you look like you ain't afraid, and you can handle a gun. But the rest of us can handle a gun, too, and if you got any tricks up yore sleeve, it would do me a world of good to salivate you right pronto. If you've heard much about El Toro, then you know I ain't wastin' words."

"That's suits me," Caliente said. "Now reckon you could tell me where I fit into this play?"

"You'll know soon enough," Jake answered. "But here's the general idea. The Jackfork Mine is haulin' a load o' bullion out tonight. I been hittin' 'em pretty hard, so they're cooking up a little fandango for me an' the boys. They got a fake haul comin' down with a couple o' guards

around it. They figger I'll hit 'em where they cross the creek at Stony Ford, so they've got a posse that'll hide in the woods around the crossin'.

"Then," Jake grinned, "here's the trick. We're supposed to get caught in that trap, while the real haul comes along half an hour later, it bein' a spring wagon with only a couple o' guards along. We're gonna cut in back of the fake haul and hit the real stuff while this army is waitin' for us at the ford."

Caliente seemed impressed. "You sure got it figgered out," he said admiringly. "You must have inside stuff."

Jake laughed. "I have," he said. "That mine can't outsmart El Toro."

"No," Caliente observed thoughtfully. "They tell me El Toro don't like to be outsmarted."

"He don't," Jake observed sagely. "It don't pay."

SOME TIME after dusk, Jake and his five men, including Caliente, pulled their horses up along a ravine in the foot of the hills and dismounted. Jake pulled a warbag off his saddle and proceeded to get out of his clothes. Caliente watched him interestedly.

Clad in only his long underwear, big Jake opened up the gunny sack and brought out packages wrapped in newspapers. He opened these as Caliente watched.

Lying on the ground in the opened packages, Caliente saw an outfit of black broadcloth breeches decorated with silver braid. In a separate paper was an ornate black Mexican sombrero.

"A man would sure know that outfit anywhere," Caliente observed.

Big Jake grinned as he lifted up the black pants and looked at them. "Yes, sir, them's my trademark. When a man sees that outfit, he just gets scared and naturally don't offer much resistance."

"Those people in the bank put up a fight, didn't they?" Caliente asked.

"Sure, them fools. But they got what was comin' to 'em. It'll be a lesson to anybody else."

"Did the little girl put up much of a fight before you killed her?" Caliente asked evenly.

Jake gave him a quick suspicious look, stopping in the middle of putting on the

black pants. "What's that to you?" he snapped.

"She wasn't any kin of mine," Caliente answered. "But I'd always heard that El Toro only hit those mine companies. Something about them having stolen those claims that belonged to him through an old Spanish land grant. I hadn't heard about him hittin' banks, and shootin' down little girls."

Big Jake's face turned red. He finished putting on the pants and a black sateen shirt, over which he slipped the black, silver-trimmed Spanish vest. Then he buckled on his pistol carefully. He turned to Caliente:

"Now what was that crack about killin' little girls?"

"My crack was that I don't believe El Toro would have done that," Caliente answered.

Jake's voice was soft and cold. "Listen, mister, get this straight before we go any further. What El Toro does is none of your business."

"I think different," Caliente said. "It's plenty of my business."

Caliente had taken a step backward, and his gun was out and covering the five men. Hawk Face started for his gun. Caliente shot it out of his hand. Then Hawk Face's hands went up with those of the rest of them.

"Listen, boys," Caliente said. "I'm not looking for you at all. I'm not the law. And when I leave here you won't be hearing from me again. But I've got one little job to do, which is to deliver Big Stuff here to the law for killing that little girl."

A look of puzzlement came over the faces of the group. Without lowering their hands, they looked at one another.

"It's like this: when a man wants to disguise himself, it's a simple matter to rig up his clothes so that they're the thing that catches the eye, instead of his face. That's how come El Toro wore that gaudy outfit. People just remember that he was big, and wore them fancy clothes.

"All right. El Toro used that idea, and worked on those bullion hauls, just like I was telling you, because those mining



claims were stole from him. He got what he considered was a fair price for what he lost, and when he did, he quit. He rolled up his Spanish suit and left it in a cave where he sometimes hid out. Then he lit a shuck for Mexico.

"But along comes this jigger named Jake and finds the suit. It fits him, so he decides to play El Toro. He does some fancy robbing in them clothes, and El Toro naturally gets the blame. He shoots down a little girl in the bank, and El Toro wouldn't have done that, even if he had robbed the bank.

"Just like Jake planned it, folks thought they recognized him by that suit. Well, I'm taking him in and let the witnesses look him over. I think they'll swear that he is El Toro, all right, particularly with them clothes on. So, as far as tonight's job is concerned, it's all off for him and me. What you boys do is none of my business, as I said before."

Hawk Face looked at big Jake. "You mean he ain't El Toro? You sure of that?"

"That's one thing I'm sure of," Caliente said.

"How come?"

"Because those are my breeches he stole. I am El Toro."