

# Bluebook

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# THE PRICE OF A TIN STAR

By RICHARD WORMSER

*All John Torrey wanted was to be friends  
with his town and to have a little time to hunt.*

*But while he was away somebody shot his boss, the Sheriff.*

**U**P WHERE John Torrey had been all week, the trees had been pines and spruces and mountain mahogany, and these did not shed their leaves. As he rode down the mountain, he came into thickets of dead-oak, flaming red from the angry frosts of early fall; and then the trail descended until, as he topped rises, he could see the smoke of the town.

In here the aspens had been barely touched by frost, so that they had gone golden instead of red. John Torrey began to whistle as he rode along, riding easy and slow because of the huge weight behind his saddle. Sometimes he slid out of the saddle, and led his pony up the steeper rises, the horse blowing at the back of his neck.

He was very happy. And as aspen gave way to the chaparral that ringed the town proper, his whistling burst out into full, unmelodious song.

John Torrey was, at the moment, perhaps the most heavily-armed man in the territory. Under his left leg on the saddle was his 30-06, with which he had shot the deer that stretched across the cantle--biggest deer ever shot in these mountains.

Under his right leg was a fine twelve-gauge shotgun, and this had accounted for the bag of quail on his pommel, for the four cottontails, and for the pair--first ever seen around here--of grouse.

At his belt was his .41 and the only reason it was there was because he was deputy sheriff and people expected the gun to be there; it hadn't been out of its holster since he'd left town at the beginning of the week.

Now he was passing Wetwash Hill, and that was the beginning of town. He straightened in the saddle, and wiped the grin off his face. That deer would just sort of grow on people; looked like any other deer till you glanced twice and saw its size. Why, it would scale out at over 225 pounds. . . .

First person he passed was old Bill Lowe, who bought hides from the shirttail ranchers down the valley, and had a place almost up Wetwash Hill. Bill was driving his old spring wagon, hunched up in the seat, the way he did when he was out buying, looking like a poor, sick old man. Old Bill had the strength to load bales of skins all day, and the money to buy them, but it was his way to look measly.

But not with John Torrey, to whom he'd given rides on his wagon 10 years ago, when John was just pushing twelve. Always had a smile for John. Usually. Today he didn't.

John called: "Hi, there, Bill," and moved in the saddle so the cantle-load could be seen. Bill said: "Well, John, got a deer, I see," and drove on, hunched over, clucking to his team.

John stared after him, and then shrugged. Old Bill seemed to be coming down with something.

But then he passed Annie and Mike Dahl. Last month, when some kids had stolen Annie's wash off the line, John had deputized the case right out, and recovered the laundry before the sun set.

They didn't even look at him as they passed, and that really startled him. Usually they were a nuisance, fawning on him and his badge, and the free meat he handed around when he'd been hunting.

**I**T was that way all into town. People he'd known since he was knee-high to the town pump suddenly couldn't remember him. People he'd done favors for suddenly had dropped their gratitude into the canyon. He was just plain nothing to nobody in his own home town.

He pulled up on the street between the hotel and the Combes General Store. Mr. Combes was tacking

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## The Price of a Tin Star

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up a sign about prunes being especially cheap this week. John Torrey said: "Hi, Mr. Combes."

Mr. Combes said: "Hi."

John said: "I've been hunting."

Mr. Combes said: "So I see."

Great fire on the prairie, he'd been named after Mr. John Combes. He said "Thought I could hang my take in your ice house."

"It isn't locked," Mr. Combes said, and drove a final nail into the sign and went into the store.

So John Torrey went around to the opened ice house and lugged that big deer carcass in by himself; he'd expected to have a half a dozen volunteers. He hung the bag with the birds and the rabbits, too, and came out and kicked the sawdust off his boots. Viciously, until he grinned and remembered he wasn't mad at the boots. All they'd done was keep his feet warm.

He had a shack on the edge of town, with a corral and snow-shed for his horse and a porch to sit on when the weather was warm. He'd kind of planned on a hot bath before he went home, though, and doggone if this hostile town was going to cheat him out of it. So he took the horse down to the livery stable, and Jake Pine, the hostler was busy in back, so he put the animal in a stall and gave him a good feed of hay and a scoopful of grain. Then he went on over to the hotel, going in through the barber-shop entrance. Ken Winslow was shaving a face he couldn't make out under the lather. "Bathtub busy, Ken?"

Ken scraped the razor down the face; the bristles made a pleasant, grating noise as they came away. "No hot water."

"I'll start some." He waited, but Ken just grunted. So he went back and put kindling in the water heater, got it started, and chucked it with fat pine. Now—he'd done this for nickels when he was a kid—it would be 20 minutes till the Ajax Patented Rapid Water Heater gave out a bath. The way things had been planned, he ought to go loaf in front of the ice house and buttonhole people and take them in to see his bag. Way things had turned out, he didn't care to.

He went through the hall to the hotel proper. Desk clerk was napping in his chair behind the desk, but there wasn't anybody else in the lobby. Good deal of clinking and chinking was coming from the dining room, though. He could go in there, though he hadn't planned to until he was bathed and spruced up.

He went anyway. Cathy Richards was bustling around, seeing that the waitresses set up the tables just right. She was a thorough kind of gal, Cathy. He said: "Well, I'm back."

She said: "We're busy in here, John."

At least she remembered his name; better than anybody else in town had done so far. He said: "Got me a 200-pound deer. Dressed-out weight."

"That's fine." But she sounded plumb mad, where the rest of the town had only sounded indifferent, like they'd thought him over while he was away, and decided he'd never amount to much.

He looked at her. She had mighty pretty eyes, and just about the best figure in town, but for some reason the thing he had always liked best about her was the way her neck rose, white and proud, from the pretty collars she sewed on her dresses. He said: "Well, at least, I didn't break a leg and freeze to death."

She'd been showing a new waitress—red-headed gal, pert-looking number—how the forks and knives and butter and so on went. She stopped doing it and came over to him. "I don't see how you dare come in here."

He said: "Well, golly, Cathy, you've seen me dirty before. I'm just waiting for the water to heat in Ken's old boiler. . . . Say, I had an idea comin' down the mountain. Everybody always barbecues a steer for an election party. Let's give a deer roast instead. With that big old carcass I got out there, people'd just flock. It'll just about carry your dad into office, next month's election."

She caught her breath. All of a sudden, before she said anything, John Torrey knew what was wrong. Knew it, with a dull thud against his ribs. There was only one thing that could make the town turn against him, and he hoped he was wrong. But he wasn't. Cathy shoved her little chin up at him, and said: "Father was killed Wednesday. Shot to death, and the killer got away—while you were out deer hunting on the mountain."

Then she turned on her heel and almost in the same breath told one of the girls to start cracking ice for the water pitchers.

LATER he found himself in the tub, without hardly knowing how he got there. And, lying facing Ken Winslow's ceiling, he thought of a lot of answers. In the first place, Sheriff Richards had told him he could have a week off. In the second place, he hadn't wanted to be deputy in the first place; only taken the job because the sheriff was Cathy's father. In the third place—

It didn't matter. The county wasn't going to listen. It made too good a story. The only deputy the sheriff has was out hunting the first time he'd really been needed for anything more than locking up a drunk or running down some pilfering kids. . . .

He tried hard to see the town's point of view. Nothing made people feel worse than being scared. And they were scared; he could see that. Sheriff shot,

and no law left to protect them from Indian raids—there'd been one fifty years ago—bank robbers, ghosts and stampeding buffalos. It struck right at the people's security, and they had to strike back at something.

But it wasn't going to be him. There wasn't that much money, or a star shiny enough, to make him stay and be their scapegoat.

He'd go to California. Always wanted to see the ocean anyway. Plenty of girls in California, prettier than Cathy Richards maybe, and around a place called Santa Barbara, there were supposed to be dudes a good guide could round up shots for.

Or maybe go up to Idaho. Lot of homestead land up there.

Or Texas. Another place that he'd heard was worth seeing, and they were building a railroad down there. He could be a meat-hunter feeding railroad workers.

Or he'd go up on the mountain and live off his gun; deer, rabbits, quail. There were Indians up there, still wandering around, who knew how to dig roots and which berries were safe to eat. He'd be an Indian.

He pulled the plug on the bath and let the water gurgle away. He took a towel off the wall, and dried himself.

There wasn't any use in running away. Sheriff Richards had been a good man. Old Steve Peterson, who would have run against him in the next election wasn't a good man at all, in Sheriff Richards' opinion, and Richards had known. He had said that Peterson just wanted the sheriff's office so he could use the badge to foreclose on people's places when they didn't pay their bills at Peterson's lumberyard or his hay-and-seed store.

Even a dumb fool like John Torrey knew that wasn't what the sheriff's office was for. So he would have to beat Peterson, have to run in Sheriff Richards' place.

Only way he could do that was to catch the man or the men, or whatever, who had killed the sheriff. And he wasn't going to do that in Ken Winslow's bathroom.

He finished dressing, and threw Ken a four-bit piece and went out on the hostile street.

First place to go was the jail. Sheriff's office was the front room of it; he wondered who'd be at Sheriff Richards' desk, who, for that matter, would be at his own little table in the back.

Wasn't anybody there. Door was unlocked, open to the street. The rack of rifles was in place, padlock all right, the safe was closed. Guess nobody in town but him knew the combination. . . . He went on back to the jail. The cells were all empty, sandy dust gritted under his feet on the cement floor. Nobody. Not even a drunk. . . . Hey!

The lock on the big cell was all smashed up. He bent over, looked at it. Looked as if somebody had taken a crowbar to it. The keyhole was so big, you

could get the tip of a fairly big wrecking bar in there; and it looked as if that was what somebody had done; just ripped the cover off the lock and flipped the tumblers back.

Apparently the sheriff had been killed in a jail break.

He squatted on his heels, staring at the lock, whistling between his teeth. Now, where would a prisoner get a wrecking bar?

Sheriff Richards had been proud of his office, had run it right. In the middle drawer of the sheriff's desk, John Torrey found the day-book that the sheriff had always kept posted so well. Yeah.

There had been three men in the jail. John Smith, Bob Brown and Will Jones, they gave their names. Didn't mean a thing. Charge: trespassing on railroad property. Complainant: Railroad Detective Harold Lacey. Disposition: five days apiece.

Hoboes they were. Plain, free-riding bums taken off the cars. Didn't seem likely that men like that would kill the sheriff, could kill him. . . .

John Torrey went over the jail house once more. In the backyard he found old Mel Gordon, the swamper, sleeping behind a pile of old lumber. He woke him up. Mel said at once: "Hello, Sheriff. I was just about to shake a leg an' git that jail house spotless."

John Torrey couldn't help laughing. It was the first thing Mel Gordon always said when you woke him up. He'd been mopping out the jail, carrying meals to the prisoners, since before John Torrey was born. John said: "Can you tell anything about what happened to Sheriff Richards?"

But poor old Mel couldn't. Of course. He stood in the sun, blinking under his mop of gray hair, wrinkling up his stubbled cheeks, trying to be helpful. "Sheriff Richards? Now, I remember him. Sure enough. He was sheriff right after Mr. Webster. or

was it right before? Around that time, sure enough—”

John Torrey patted him on the back and went away.

Down at the railroad station, he got his first kind word out of the town, and maybe things were changing over. Dennis Pincher, the ticket agent, came out of his little booth, and said: “Glad to see you back an’ on the job, John. Gonna catch them three scoundrels?”

John Torrey said: “Aim to start out, Dennis. Tell me about them.”

Pincher shrugged and took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose. Inside his office, the telegraph instrument clicked away against the old tobacco tin he’d shoved into it to make it louder. He said: “Not an awful lot to tell. Railroad’s been having a mite of trouble, not much more than usual. Y’know, cars broken into in transit, stuff stolen, so Detective Lacey, he rode 812. Found these three bums ridin’ a gondola, not bothering nothing, but you know how them railroad police is; he dropped off here an’ turned ‘em over to Richards.”

JOHN TORREY nodded. It was about what he’d expected—nothing. “Anything else about them?”

“Nothing that stood out.” Pincher chuckled. “You should have heard Conductor Barbour squawk, when Detective Lacey held up the 812 all that time! My, my, my, Sheriff Torrey, he was angry!” The railroad man chuckled, got back to business. “My call,” he said, flipping a thumb at the telegraph instrument. “Well, I reckon you’ll go about catching those varmints a lot slicker than Mister Peterson ever will! He just didn’t seem much interested.” He started for the office, calling: “I’m comin’, I’m comin’,” at the telegraph key.

John Torrey called after him: “Tell Lacey to see me next time he’s through,” and got back on his horse and rode up to the sheriff’s office. He was beginning to get thoughtful.

Town didn’t properly have a hardware store. Bill Cartright tinkered up broken things, and the lumberyard sold new ones out of a little store next to Peterson’s office. John Torrey went out into the street, and rapped on Bill Cartright’s window. “Want you to come fix a broken lock, Bill.”

Old Bill came out, carrying his tool kit. “If I can, John, if I can.” His voice wasn’t over-favorable. When he saw where they were heading, he said: “Who’ll pay me for the job? I don’t rightly know that you got the right to spend county money.”

“Who else?” John Torrey asked. “I was deputy. Sheriff Richards is dead, that makes me sheriff.”

“Steve Peterson’s been saying around that since he declared for the office, and his only opponent ain’t gonna run, he ought to be sheriff right now.”

John Torrey fought down a rising wave of anger. But Bill Cartright was too old and too stupid to hit. So he just said: “I’ll pay you and take my chances on getting it back from the county.”

“Good enough for me,” Bill Cartright said, and went into the jail with his tools. John Torrey stood there on the street, stroking the nose of his tied-up horse. Mighty peculiar. He could go up to the lumberyard right now, and face Steve Peterson down. . . . Or he could bide his time.

THE hotel served supper early for all those who wanted to make it back to the ranches before dark. He headed that way, and then stopped. Town thought he was ashamed of being hunting when he was needed; town wasn’t going to catch him admitting it.

So he went around to the ice house and got his two grouse. He sat on the ice-house steps and plucked them, carefully, singing the last little feathers off with a couple of matches. Trimmed them up nicely, and went across the hotel lobby, swinging them from his hand.

The lobby wasn’t deserted now. He saw a dozen people he knew, a couple he didn’t. But one and all, they stared, first at him and then down at the birds. He saw a certain light come in some of the men’s eyes—the hunters. And he knew them. He knew everybody in this town; the couple in the lobby that were strangers were just salesmen passing through. He’d never lived any place else, didn’t want to live any place else, in spite of his angry dreams in the bathtub before.

But even old Chill Mellen, who hunted or fished just about every day in the year, didn’t speak to him, didn’t ask where he’d gotten the grouse. John Torrey shrugged and went into the dining room.

There was that snappy little red-head he’d noticed before. New girl in town. No ring on her left hand, so she was probably the daughter of somebody who’d taken up a foreclosed ranch from Peterson. There wasn’t any homestead land left around here. Well, it wouldn’t do any harm to get Cathy a mite jealous, though it seemed kind of trifling in face of all the other trouble.

So he took the red-head’s table. She was all over him at once, strain-phenin’ his water glass, lining up the knife and forks that didn’t need it. “What’ll it be, Sheriff?”

He brought the blocks up from under the table and she squealed a little, maybe at the blood. “Get Cathy Richards. I want the cook to fix these.”

Blue eyes were doubtful under the red hair: “Miss Richards—”

“I’m a customer. She’s head-waitress. Get her over here.”

So Cathy came over after a while, standing stiff and formal. The red-head went away a few feet. John Torrey said: “That’s a real attractive gal you’ve hired, Cathy.”

A girl doesn’t have to have red hair to have temper. Cathy’s eyes flared. She said: “You wanted some special service, Mr. Torrey.”

“I want these birds cooked for me. Just broiled nicely. Stay mad-looking, Cathy! Listen to me.



Somebody in town brought those three men in. To kill you—the sheriff. I aim to get whoever it was. Now, Cathy, did he say anything to you about anyone who'd want to—you know?"

She said: "If he'd expected anything like that, he wouldn't have let you go off playing cowboy and Indian on the mountain. Your birds'll take some time, Mr. Torrey. The soup's very good. Ask Margaret to get you some."

He nodded. She didn't believe him. Or if she did, it wasn't going to do him any good revenging her father. She was through with him. It was right unfair, but— Red-headed Margaret was standing there, waiting for the order. "Soup, Margaret. Celery an' olives. Man who's been out in the pines needs things fancy. Got a last name, Margaret?"

"It's Driscoll," she said. "But you don't have to use it, Sheriff."

"Just John," he said. "Just plain John."

"I'll get your soup, John."

Well, he didn't have to be all alone any more. A little company like the red-head's would make up a lot for the town's treating him like he was a town fool. She was a lot of girl, and a lot of nice girl, too. When she came back with the soup, he said: "Do you live in town?"

"They have rooms at the hotel for us girls. Upstairs. . . . My folks bought a farm out aways."

She'd come from the East to use that word farm. . . . John Torrey laughed at himself. He was being a real sheriff, only not about the case he was supposed to sheriff out. Just about a girl. He ate his soup slowly, thinking.

**H**e looked up, and Steve Peterson was coming towards him. Just the way the tall old man walked spelled trouble. John Torrey said: "Set another place for Peterson, Margaret. Maybe we could walk out later?"

"Not if you're a friend of Steve Peterson. He cheated my father something awful on the farm."

"Sheriff's business. Set a place for him."

By that time Steve Peterson was standing over the table. Past fifty, and tall and straight and hard as a burnt-out pine. With just about that much juice in him, too. "So you got back, Torrey."

John Torrey looked up. He grinned. Usually when he grinned, people grinned back; it was a thing he'd learned a long time ago. But not Steve Peterson. He hadn't figured out how much to charge for a smile, so he never smiled.

John Torrey said: "Sit down, Mr. Peterson. Got them cooking some grouse out in the kitchen. Eat one with me."

Peterson said: "Well." But it was his weakness; he could no more pass up a free meal than John Torrey could see a stag buck and not reach for his rifle. He sat down. "Hear you've already been up to the jail."

John Torrey said: "Well, had to report in. It's where I get paid."

"As deputy."

John Torrey said: "Well, sure." The red-head came back, and he said: "Mr. Peterson's eatin' with me. Better bring us each a steak after those birds, Margaret. They're mighty small."

The girl nodded, put down another plate of soup and went off sniffing, as though Steve Peterson smelled bad.

"Didn't know you ever ate beef," Steve Peterson said. It could have been a friendly remark, but not the way he said it; it was put like John Torrey was some sort of wild man who oughtn't to be allowed in where people wore shoes.

"Seems a shame to do so when a man has over 200 pounds of venison in the ice house," John Torrey said. "So you'll be the next sheriff, huh?"

**P**ETERSON was taken aback. His thin throat twitched once, and John Torrey could hear his breath change. Finally he said: "Why, Torrey, heard you had other ideas."

John Torrey said: "Eat your soup." Down on the tracks a train hooted. Number 812, the manifest. Prob'ly Detective Lacey'd still be riding it . . . he kinda hoped so. He said: "Way I see it, Mr. Peterson, I'm sheriff till the election; then you take over."

"There'd be time to run for it yourself."

"Why, Mr. Peterson, it'd cut into my hunting time too much, being full sheriff." Cathy Richards was standing near the door, greeting the eaters as they came in. But he could see how she turned to look at him every so often. . . . Too bad. "Deputy's all right for me."

More noise and steam whistling down on the tracks. Manifest 812 had come and gone. Lord, there wasn't a noise in this town he didn't know the meaning of.

Steve Peterson was relaxed, as much as he could ever get. Which wasn't much. He said: "Don't see why I shouldn't keep you on as deputy."

"I kindly thank you. It's a job that suits me to a fare thee well."

Peterson nodded. Sniffy Margaret came and took their soup away and brought them the grouse. The cook had done them fine as silk. Peterson said: "You're about the best shot anybody's ever seen around here."

"Reckon. Eat your bird. . . . Y'know, it's funny a rich man like you'd want to be sheriff. Don't pay much."

Steve Peterson was tasting the grouse like he expected it to fly away. He seemed to like the first taste, and went on, chewing each bite to get the most out of it. "Last year I paid the sheriff two, three hundred dollars in fees, serving papers for me. Seems I could keep the money."

John Torrey nodded. Anybody would believe that. Yeah. Except John Torrey. And only because he could remember what Sheriff Richards had said when Peterson declared against him. Had said the judge had denied Peterson as many foreclosures as



It wouldn't do any harm to get Cathy a mite jealous, so he took the redhead's table.

he'd allowed him; but with a badge on, Peterson could foreclose and the people would be out of the territory before the circuit rode around again and the judge heard about it. Yeah. . . .

There came Detective Lacey. He looked at John Torrey, but John made a little shake of his head, and that railroad man was smart; he went and sat by himself.

And so they finished their meal, not saying anything more; John Torrey because he didn't have

anything to say, and Peterson because he didn't like to waste words.

Didn't waste time, either. Went away while John Torrey was having his second cup of coffee. Never said thank you for the meal. John Torrey got the check from Margaret, and she said: "I'm through at eight."

John Torrey had been bracing himself, getting ready to carry his check to Cathy Richards, to pay it under her cold eyes. What he said next surprised



him. "Lord, gal, I've been on the hunt a week. I'll be asleep before eight."

Now, why had he said that? It was purely the remark of a fool. Man who passed up a chance to get to know that red-head better had no more brains than a cottontail in the springtime. He said, quickly: "But some other night, Margaret."

She said: "Oh, sure," and he was aware she watched him while he walked away.

CATHY took his money, gave him his change. She did all this just looking at his hands, and then she dropped her eyes down to his boots and said: "You didn't waste any time getting together with the new sheriff."

He said: "Cathy—" But his mad was coming up. "Known each other a long time. You don't have to think everything dirty about me there is."

"You'll have a lot more time off with Sheriff Peterson." The way she said the name was like a word a nice girl wouldn't have known. "He'll want to be left alone in the sheriff's office as much as possible. The deer on the mountain better watch out; John Torrey's coming."

"I'll bring you a haunch now and then," he said. "So's you don't get tired of hotel cooking," and walked out.

Full dark was coming down on the street. A fair crowd of ranch folks had chosen the night ride back home in order to live the wild life—stand on the street and see each other pass up and down. It was time for the piano player in the saloon to start playing, and pretty soon he did, one of the six or seven songs he knew, all of them sounding pretty much alike.

Old Man Ware's daughter, Flo, who wasn't any better than she should be, passed by slowly, walking arm in arm with a girl named Bella who'd been in town about six months.

Things were just the way they always were, always had been. His home town.

After a while Lacey came out of the hotel, a toothpick in one corner of his mouth, and started walking down towards the railroad, shortlegged as a wild hog, built solid as a bull.

John Torrey uninked his long legs and started after the railroad detective. When he passed his own horse, tied to the rack, he gave him a pat on the nose. The horse opened his eyes and blew, and then went back to sleeping on three legs.

He caught up with Lacey down past the livery stable. Lacey was leaning against the shed of Bob Lane's house, chewing his toothpick. "You want to see me, Torrey?"

John Torrey said: "Yeah. . . . I want to know about those three hoboes."

Lacey looked angry. "Fine thing," he said. "I had them dead to rights. Riding a gondola, leaning back smoking cigars, like they owned the railroad."

John Torrey let out his breath. He'd been right! But the detective had some more to say. "And

what does your J.P. here do? Give them five days! And then the sheriff lets them go before the day is out."

John Torrey said: "Well, now, the sheriff hardly meant to. They killed him."

"What kind of a sheriff is it that lets three hoboes jump him in his own jail? Word'll get around, so's nothing the railroad owns is safe!"

That man surely liked his little old railroad. John Torrey said: "They weren't hoboes, Lacey."

"Huh?" That had brought the detective up short. His toothpick dropped.

John Torrey said, slowly: "A man's following coyote tracks and they suddenly climb a tree, he knows it's no coyote he's following; it's some kind of cat with crippled feet. It's easier to have the wrong kind of feet than it is for a dog-critter to act like a cat-critter."

Lacey sounded tough. "Listen, Torrey—"

"Hoboes don't smoke cigars. Hoboes don't lie in a gondola, an open car, when the word's out that

there's railroad police riding the trains. They get inside, where they got a chance not to be found."

Lacey said: "By golly."

"Men don't break the outside cover off a cell-lock when they're inside the cell." John Torrey said. "That's what your three hoboes did."

Lacey said: "It was an awful easy arrest."

John Torrey said: "Let's break a door and a couple of laws. Steve Peterson sells hardware. Steve Peterson don't ever throw anything away that's got good value in it. Like the crowbar he ripped the jail door open with. Let's go see."

Lacey stood there. He tipped his hard hat back and rubbed his thinning hair. A man near old enough to be John Torrey's father. He said: "Well, now, John. Don't know. About two-thirds of all the freight comes into this town goes up the Peterson spur. A right good customer."

John Torrey made his voice hard. It was a trick he'd heard Sheriff Richards do, and it had worked for the old man. . . . "Railroad is the only

railroad around here. Peterson can do business with it, or go out of business. What are you scared of?"

Lacey stood there in the bad light, gulping. He said: "Well, now," a couple of times. Then he brightened and said: "I ain't got no call to work except on railroad property."

John Torrey said: "I'm deputizin' you."

Lacey said: "Well, now," and was silent.

John Torrey took a hitch in his gunbelt. He said: "Railroad'll fire you if the sheriff of this county says you refused to cooperate. They'll get a man who will. They can't fire you any worse if Peterson complains."

Lacey said: "If you put it that way." And he looked at John Torrey and John Torrey knew he'd made an enemy. He said: "Come on."

**S**TEVE PETERSON was cheap. Like Lacey had said, most of the money in the town lay on the Peterson spur, in the Peterson Lumberyard, in the Peterson Hay-and-Feed, the Peterson Cattle Commission Co. But all the night watchman Steve Peterson would pay was an old man that couldn't have scared a fly.

He came out of the night, now, walking the ties of the spur, and crying: "Hold on, now, hold up, who's there?" in a cracked old-man's voice.

John Torrey said: "The sheriff," and the old man came on, carrying his rifle up and ready.

"You can't come in here, sheriff. . . . You ain't the sheriff. You're young John Torrey!"

John Torrey said: "I'm searching the lumberyard."

The old man said: "Now, John, you ain't agonna. Why, you want I should shoot at you? I'm a good shot, remember I used to take you huntin' when your pants weren't no longer than a bobcat's tail."

It was true. John Torrey had forgotten. This piddlin' old man had once been Jake Megargan, and a good hunting man. He said: "Jake, I'm sorry."

Old Jake said: "Look, John. There's a U.S. Marshal at the capital. Whatever's gotta be done, let him do it. He gets big money for it."

"Yeah," John Torrey said. It was a way out.

But why the marshal got that money, John Torrey saw now, was not for being smart. It was also for being lonesome. Lonesome and out ahead, all his life. There was no doubt; if he went and proved Steve Peterson guilty, he'd be a big hero. . . . And condemned to a life of wearing a star, and all he'd ever wanted was plenty of time for hunting.

John Torrey said: "Go on and shoot, Jake," and went forward. The old rifle came up in the old hands. Jake yelped something about it being his job.

As he came towards that gun, a lot was going on in John Torrey's head. A lot of things to remember. Quail scurrying across the pine barrens and taking the air with a roar; a four-point buck picking his way down the stones of a chaparral hill, the sun shining on his hide.

He made a sudden lunge, and his hands closed on the rifle, and he threw it away. It went off in

the air. His own rifle had made that self-same noise, knocking over a mountain lion once, and the air had smelled of old-man sage and yerba buena, and there had been a little mountain spring nearby and the water had tasted better than any bottle on a bar.

John Torrey said: "I'm going in. Come along, Lacey, Jake. I need witnesses."

From back in the shadows, Steve Peterson said: "Take another step, and you won't need anything but a coffin."

"The lumberyard sells 'em," John Torrey said. "Send the bill to the county."

Peterson came out of the dark, and he was wearing a gun. He said: "You're making a mighty poor start of being my deputy, Torrey."

"Maybe I'm running for sheriff."

Steve Peterson said: "You're drunk. Take that badge off! It's not used for breaking into taxpayers' property."

John Torrey said: "If I go in there and don't find what I'm looking for, I'm through. I know it. But I'm going in."

He took four steps towards the lumberyard. They were as hard steps as he'd ever made.

And on the fourth step, Steve Peterson fired, and John Torrey got his own gun, and he was the best shot in that country; his bullet hit Steve Peterson's right shoulder and the rich man went whirling around, and John was on him and had his gun and was yelling to Lacey to go look in the tool store.

And Lacey went, as a man would go from now on when John Torrey yelled. Lacey went and then called back that he had what they'd wanted, and it was all right. Lacey didn't hate John Torrey any more; it could be heard in his voice. Didn't love him, either; just respected him.

The last thing John Torrey had wanted. But Sheriff Richards was dead, and he had counted on John Torrey to take his place. So here he was.

But the price was awful high.

—BY RICHARD WORMSER