SHOWDOWN, 1883

July in southeastern Arizona Territory is hard living. It’s hot, dry, windy, and dusty. Only the rattlesnakes, scorpions, and Gila monsters are smart enough to hide in rock piles during the day from the blistering sun. The nights are cold and lonely. You were lucky if you heard a coyote or two, or had a full moon. It’s the kind of place you only stop at from necessity, then move quickly on from. Desolate, dangerous, deadly...

Cochise -- named after the famous Chiricahua Apache chief who died nearby in 1875 -- was a dreary town of about seventy inhabitants. It was hastily built for the Southern Pacific Railroad for some of its work crew a year ago. It was also a precious water stop for its thirsty locomotives transiting west and back East.

The town had a train depot, a few scattered homes, a small general store, a blacksmith (who acted as a dentist of sorts when a tooth needed pulling), a sheriff, a six-room hotel, a livery, and a two-bed whorehouse. No churches or schools or doctors yet. Cochise also had one saloon, The Canary, so named because it had one of those (rare here) yellow birds in a cage which provided some welcomed silence-breaking trilling, for the saloon had no piano. If you craved more excitement, you could ride two days to either Tombstone or Bisbee, or take the stagecoach to Tucson, or take the train and go even further away.

The town sheriff was Rank Lawson, a worn-out man in his early fifties who would gladly quit his job tomorrow if only the Territory could find a fresh replacement. Fortunately, not much happened in Cochise other than the usual drunken saloon brawls, accusations of petty theft, or assorted cases of domestic violence. Certainly nothing dramatic like the O.K. Corral shootout two years ago in Tombstone.

But all of that routine humdrum was about to change.

It all started with a telegram from Tucson. A killer named Cobb Benson had killed a guard and stolen a horse after busting out of Yuma Territorial Prison. Clarence Benson picked up his nickname a few years earlier on a foray south of the border. Seems that a local Mexican unknowingly offended Benson in a cantina when a drunken Clarence was moodily eating his carne and frijoles and gnawing on an ear of corn. Benson became enraged, and – pinning the hapless Mexican to the floor – had rammed a half-eaten corn cob down the man’s throat until he choked to death. The others in the cantina were frozen in horror and disbelief, so they said and did nothing.

Before storming out the cantina door, Benson growled, “I don’t take no insults from any goddamn greasers, niggers, or Injuns…” And from the day of that shocking incident, Clarence became infamously known as Cobb.

The telegram went on to add that it was believed Benson was searching the southern Territory for his only known kin, a son. Of course, the escaped killer was armed and dangerous. A reward of $850 was offered for his capture, dead or alive. A wanted poster with his likeness would be arriving on the next stagecoach, the telegram concluded.

Now what the hell, Sheriff Lawson mused, as he walked from his office into the furnace-like heat of the late afternoon. He needed a drink, so he headed for The Canary.

Some of the usuals were there, scattered around the dingy saloon: three SP trackmen, two white-bearded silver prospectors, a Confederate veteran with a crutch and a missing leg from the Battle of Shiloh, Crazy Louie, and The Mute. Gus, the bartender, was wiping dirty shot glasses with a dirtier rag. The Mute was sweeping the floor and straightening the tables and chairs. Crazy Louie was talking to himself at the end of the long bar, muttering something about ‘too many flies in here’. (He had been kicked in the head by a horse in his younger days as a cow-puncher, and was never quite right afterwards.) It was still too early for the town whores, Eunice and Sally, to be working their trade. Lawson ordered a beer. The canary cheerily chirped a tune. A stranger to town was resting in a dark corner.

The Mute continued his work silently. It was rumored that his family was massacred by the Apaches and that he had been captured as a boy and kept prisoner by them -- later tortured by having his tongue cut out, then abandoned in the desert. Naturally, he never spoke, nor would he ever open his mouth to display his missing flapper. He stumbled into town alone eight months ago and was given room and board in various places around town for doing odd jobs. He was maybe 18 or 19 years old. He carried scraps of paper and a pencil nub with which to write down requests or answers he could not pantomime.

Lawson sipped his warm, very sour beer.

“Just got a telegram from the depot from Tucson,” he announced to the assembly. “Seems that Cobb Benson busted out of Yuma. Keep an eye out, everyone, and let me know if’n you spy him. There’s good reward money too.”

The stranger in the corner, who looked at first to be asleep, suddenly tilted his hat backward off his eyes and gave the sheriff his full attention.

“How much reward we talkin’ about here?” the stranger asked. He was in his late 30’s and had a face as dark as a walnut shell from the sun. He looked fit and no nonsense.

“Legal script you can cash in in Tucson for 850 silver dollars,” Lawson replied. “Your name, friend?”

“Travis Tell, from Wichita, Sheriff,” the stranger answered. “Tried my luck farming there, but it didn’t take. Left my wife ‘cause I couldn’t take married life anymore. The only thing I like about cattle is eatin’ ‘em, so I ain’t cut out to be no cowboy. Drifted to Bisbee and worked at the Queen Mine digging out copper. Miserable, back-breaking work. You got to be a young man for that toil. Quit that and wandered next down to Nogales. Got sick on the Mex food and water too many times and left. Shoveled shit out of the horse stables for the U.S. Cavalry at Fort Bowie for a while. So maybe I’ll try bounty hunting now if you don’t object.” Travis Tell took out his tobacco makings and skillfully rolled himself a smoke and lit it. His dark eyes then bore into Lawson’s.

“Suits me, seeing as the warrant says dead or alive,” the sheriff replied. “Wanted poster with Cobb’s likeness is due to come on the stage tomorrow at noon. Stop by my office then.”

The next day dawned just like the one before. Another hot one was in the making. The little town of Cochise drowsily went about its business. At just past noon, the stage rumbled in, and Rank was waiting. He riffled through the mail pouch until he found the wanted poster on Benson. The sheriff promptly returned to his office to post it. Travis was already there, waiting.

“So that’s what he looks like,” Tell noted, after Lawson posted the flyer. “One mean and ugly son of a bitch. Think he’ll show up here?”

“That’s hard to say, Mr. Tell,” Rank replied. “All we can say for sure is that this man is a born killer, so be careful if you run up against him.” Cobb Benson’s mug on the wanted poster showed a face now that even his own mother might hesitate to love -- beat up, grizzled, hard, with a willful expression promising to deliver nothing but death on a sheer whim.

Two more days went by. In a place like Cochise, there wasn’t much for Travis to do, so he sat in the saloon to stay out of the heat and chewed the fat with Gus, or he checked on his horse at the livery, or talked with the blacksmith, or visited first Sally then Eunice (he had no preference -- both were rather haggard and gone to fat), or had his meals at the town’s lone hotel where he also bunked. He also bought a plug of licorice at the general store to satisfy his sweet tooth, checked in with the sheriff for any updates on Benson’s whereabouts (none), and carefully cleaned his Colt revolver. Travis figured he would hang around for another day or two before moving on to another town if Benson didn’t show up.

A breakthrough of sorts arrived the next day in the form of a telegram for Sheriff Lawson. Benson had been spotted in Elfrida, about 40 miles away, moving north. He might pass through Cochise tomorrow, Lawson figured, if he had a mind to. Rank was not dumb enough not to be nervous. I’ll shoot the bastard in the back if I have to, he concluded.

The following day – a Thursday – came and went without incident. It was another hot day, with some dark clouds and even some dry lightning strikes in the distant mountains.

But Friday saw a strange man on horseback calmly ride into Cochise. It was just past mid-day, the stagecoach had come and gone, and the broiling sun had forced all the shadows into hiding. The stranger hitched his horse in front of the Canary, then stretched his arms and arched his back and then stood tall and surveyed the surrounding town buildings carefully. His left hand rested near the handle of his pistol. Rank Lawson watched from the smudged window of his sheriff’s office.

Instead of entering the Canary for a drink, however, the man unexpectedly spun around and called out in a loud voice to the whole town: “Reed! Reed Benson! You here?”

His call was answered in silence as the wind blew the endless dust to and fro. Rank waited until the stranger faced away from him, then moved quickly but with stealth out his office door, until he was about sixty feet away from the shouting man.

“Don’t move, stranger,” Lawson commanded. “I reckon you’re Cobb Benson, and I’ve got a warrant for your arrest, dead or alive. Now slowly use your right hand to unbuckle your gun belt and drop it on the ground, nice and easy.”

“Whoa, Sheriff, now hold on there. My name’s Todd Corbett. Who the hell is Cobb Benson? the stranger asked.

“Drop the gun belt and turn around careful like,” Lawson growled. “Do you think I’m a goddamn fool? You just called out for Reed Benson, not no Reed Corbett. And there ain’t no one here by either name anyways,” the sheriff added.

Just then the swinging saloon doors of the Canary parted and Crazy Louie stepped out. “Too many flies, too many flies,” he muttered.

Lawson yelled for Gus to get Louie out of the way, but Cobb saw his chance in the distraction and went for his big iron with his left hand. Swiftly, he spun around and fired. Rank Lawson knew he was done before he cleared leather. He fell face down, motionless, bleeding silently out in the parched soil.

Travis Tell heard the commotion from the back of the livery stable, where he was currying his horse. He went out the rear gate and slipped around the side of the barn. He saw that the sheriff was dead on the ground, but that Cobb hadn’t spied him yet. Tell pulled his Colt and rested his gun hand firmly against the side of the building. He braced it with his free hand. The shot had to be lucky, for his mark was about twenty-five yards away.

Travis steadied himself and aimed, took a long breath, let it out slowly, and then squeezed the trigger. The lead slug hit Cobb almost instantly after the blast, spun him half around in awkward surprise, and dropped him down on his back in the dirt. Travis carefully emerged from his spot and approached Cobb, with his Colt cocked and at the ready if necessary.

Cobb was hit in the left lung, the blood bubbling with froth through his dark grey drover’s shirt as he breathed in and out. He might still live if he got to a doctor, but the town of Cochise had none. Tell kicked Cobb’s gun out of reach with his boot toe, just in case. The eyes of the two men met for the first time. Cobb looked bewildered. The sun blazed relentlessly, as it always does in July. Somewhere, a dog barked.

It was a brief mutual stare, however, because another shot suddenly rang out from behind and to the side of Travis, from the direction of the Canary saloon. Tell felt a searing pain slice into his side near his stomach. His Colt dropped from his hand in a spasm of pain. He went down to join his former prey on his back on the ground, just a few feet away. The sky above was cloudless and pale blue, he oddly noted, as he bled out near Cobb. He heard the crunch of boots on the ground, slowly walking toward him, but he couldn’t see who it was. He was vaguely aware of other townsfolk milling about and murmuring in the distance, trying to see what was happening in their usually sleepy town. What a hellhole to get gut shot and die in, Tell thought glumly. I should have stayed in Wichita. Shit. He looked helplessly at his dirty, trusty Stetson, lying just out of reach. He then heard a voice he hadn’t heard before.

“Sorry, Travis. My real name is Reed Benson. Cobb was my Pa. I just had to shoot you. Don’t you see?”

Tell peered upward and saw that it was The Mute --who really wasn’t, he realized in surprise. Reed had played his role these past months to perfection, fooling the whole town. Reed picked up Travis’ hat and gently placed it on his chest, then went to embrace his dying father.

The End

by Jack Karolewski -- July 10, 2016