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Getting the Sheriff's Number

by

William H. Greene

MY friend from the West and I were dining in a cafe with a Parisian name on Thirty-something Street, just east of Broadway. His stylishly cut hair and evening clothes, smooth-shaven face, and quiet manners were far from suggesting the cowboy. A dark coat of tan was the only thing to distinguish him from the typical man-about-New York.

He did not lay a big six-shooter on the table in front of him, nor shout at the waiter in a voice which startled the other diners. Neither did he ask for ham and eggs and a quart of coffee.

If we had been dining with a couple of fascinating, fastidious and hungry chorus ladies, his order need not have been changed. It was perfect—from cocktails to cordials. The faithful Albert, biggest, quietest, and most efficient of head-waiters, saw to it that we were well served, for my cowboy friend was very particular.

A little incident, which probably could occur in no other American city, and which would have scandalized the peaceful citizens of Deadwood, South Dakota, or Butte, Montana, had just created a little excitement.

"Kid" Swift, the leader of a West Side gang, having a grudge against the manager of the cafe, had dropped in with a few of his friends to "clean up." There was what is known as a "muss," and one revolver-shot was fired. Ladies screamed, and our friend the manager "got his," in the form of several unbecoming bruises.

Albert, the big head-waiter, played a conspicuous part, rushing in and leading several effective blows on the redoubtable Kid Swift himself. When it was all over, and the police had arrived, it was discovered that my wild Western friend was almost the only man in the place who did not carry a "gun."

This episode turned the conversation on to the subject of fights and personal prowess in general.

"Courage," my friend remarked, "is simply comparative. No man is so brave that he isn't afraid of some one. This Kid Swift, for instance, is the head of his gang. But some day

he will meet some one whose nerve is greater than his, and his reputation will be gone. After that the gang will get a new leader."

"Then you don't think any one was ever absolutely fearless?" I asked.

"You read about such people," he answered, "but I never saw one. I have known the worst men in the West, and they all had their acknowledged masters, whom they were afraid to bully. About the nerviest man I ever knew was Al Harland, sheriff of Guadalupe, Texas. For a while I didn't think he knew what fear was—and perhaps he didn't. But he found out."

"You don't tell a story like a Westerner," I complained. "You should address me as 'Pardner,' and start every sentence with the word 'which.' For instance, 'which I wish to remark,' or 'which I desire to propound.' You should bring in such words as 'maverick' and 'locoed,' whatever they mean, and you shouldn't say, 'Have another drink, old man,' as you did just now, but pound on the table and say, 'Name your pizen!'"

"It's too much trouble," said my friend languidly. "You want to see Pawnee Bill's great, realistic tent show. Those fellows get paid for that sort of thing."

"All right," I rejoined hastily, fearing that I might lose the story. "Tell me about the sheriff of Guadalupe, and I'll imagine the dialect as you go along."

"Oh, yes, the sheriff! Al Harland had been a bad man in the old days, and they elected him sheriff to make his habits and actions legal. He had more notches on his gun than any man in Texas. But he was a good enough fellow, and most of the boys liked him. That was the reason they made him sheriff, instead of hanging him. It was put to vote in Guadalupe, and he won by a majority of two.

"There wasn't any bluff about Harland, either. He went up in the hills all alone once, and brought in a whole gang of holdup men. He was the quickest man with a gun I ever knew, and so cool under fire that he could feel the bullets fanning his ears, and never duck his head. He was a good sheriff, too, though he got to be a little cranky on the subject of peace. He would shoot up the whole town rather than allow any riotous or disorderly conduct.

"Well, one day a lot of us fellows of the Broken Arrow outfit were playing poker in the Yellow Dog booze emporium—"

"Now, that's the real Western stuff," I interposed admiringly.

"Well, the place wasn't really called the Yellow Dog at all," admitted my friend, "but I thought the name might appeal to you."

"Men have been shot for less," I reminded him; "but go on."

He laughed.

"Well, as I was saying, we were having a quiet little game of dollar limit, when in walked the sheriff.

"He watched the game a few minutes, then strolled over to the bar, ordered drinks for the crowd, and stood talking to Fred, the bartender.

"I could hear their conversation easily enough. The sheriff was telling Fred about a greaser horse-thief he had shot up the day before. I had heard about the affair. It seems the fellow had really only meant to borrow the horse to ride to the doctor's for his mother. But we didn't find that out until afterward; and as it was only a greaser, nothing was said about it. In those days etiquette was very strict in regard to horses.

"The sheriff seemed to be considerably proud of the shot he had made, and was explaining to Fred, the bartender, how the poor greaser had turned his head and got it right between the eyes.

"'That was the best shot I've made this year,' I heard him say.

"There had been a little slim, dark-skinned chap sitting right opposite me in the game, with a cute little black mustache turned

up at the corners, and keen, snappy black eyes. I had noticed him because he had been losing so steadily.

"He knew as much about poker as I do about bull-fighting, and he had no business in a game with a crowd like us. But none of us wanted to say anything to hurt his feelings, so we kept on taking his money, and I must say he was one of the best little losers I ever saw. He had a gentle sort of smile, like he was apologizing for not handing us the money faster.

"I noticed him sort of prick up his ears when the sheriff started to talk about that shooting, and he began playing even worse poker than before. Also his eyes began to squint up narrow, and sort of burn, like black opals, if there is such a thing, though the rest of his face kept on smiling, showing his even, white teeth as good-natured as ever.

"While the sheriff was still bragging about that shot we finished a hand, and the little dark fellow gets up and says:

"'Gentlemen, pardon. I am sorree, but I think I have enough of those cards. You excuse me?'

"He cashed the few chips he had, walked over to the bar, and ordered drinks for the crowd, the same as the sheriff had.

"What followed could hardly have happened back in the old days, before the peaceful and enervating influences of an effete civilization crept in and moralized us. I don't think one of us in the crowd, except Sheriff Harland himself, carried a gun, and even Fred had misplaced the one he usually kept behind the bar, and didn't know exactly where it was.

"The little fellow turned toward the sheriff, glass in hand.

"'Pardon,' he said politely. 'Your name is Harland, yes?'

"'Right the first time, stranger!' shouted Harland, with a sort of overdone, nervous geniality.

"'You are the sheriff of this place, yes?'

"'Right again, friend.' Still a little uneasily.

"'That was the veree fine shooting which you make, Senor Sheriff.'

"'Not bad, not bad,' Harland admitted modestly.

"'A veree fine shooting,' the fellow repeated slowly, and his voice sent little shivers down my back as I listened. 'Eet was wonderful—yes. Eet was my brother which you keel!'

"His sudden movement was too swift for the eye to follow. He had been holding a glass of whisky in his hand. Now it was a glittering knife, with the point just at the pit of the sheriff's stomach—and the whisky dripped from the latter's face and down his shirt-front.

"'Throw up your hands,' snapped the Mexican, and the sheriff's hands went up promptly.

"The little fellow returned the knife to his belt, his eyes always fixed on Harland's face.

"'If you try to lower your hands, I will have that knife in you before they are halfway down,' he said.

"Then he dragged the big forty-five out of Harland's holster, broke it, emptied out the cartridges, and threw it scornfully on the floor. Taking out tobacco and papers, he rolled a cigarette.

"'Hand me a match—with your left hand,' he said.

"Harland obeyed, raising his hand above his head again when he had done so. The little fellow lit his cigarette, threw the burned match in Harland's face, and blew smoke in his eyes.

"'You did something veree fine, to keel my poor brother—yes?' he went on. 'You are proud of that shooting. But I will make you not quite so proud.'

"'If you are going to kill me with that knife, do it—and have it over;' said Harland, his voice hoarse and shaking.

"'Ah, but I am not going to keel you, senor,' replied the Mexican. ' o, no, My revenge is better. Gentlemen,' making a gesture to attract our attention, which was not necessary, 'You see? This is your sheriff, which you have elect. Your fighter. Your bad man. But he is afraid now. He is a coward. Admit that you are a coward, Senor Sheriff.'

"'Yes,' said Harland through dry, quivering lips.

"'Repeat it!'

"'I am a coward,' he whispered hoarsely.

"'And you have done a cowardly act when you shoot my poor, helpless brother.'

"'Yes.'

"'*Buenos*. I have show your friends what you are. They will laugh at you, as I do. *Adios*, Senor Sheriff—Senor Coward.'

"And he said, 'Hah!' like the villain in a play, threw his lighted cigarette in Harland's face, and then struck him smartly across the mouth with a big pair of riding gauntlets which he drew from his pocket. After that, he strode out through the door.

"We all sat still a few seconds after he had gone, as if hypnotized, and I remember that Fred, the bartender, stood with his mouth wide open in astonishment, and Harland still held his hands above his head. The clatter of his horse's hoofs, as the Mexican galloped away, broke the spell. Harland dropped his hands, fell over against the bar, and cried like a baby.

"'Boys,' he sobbed, 'I don't know what was the matter with me. I never was a coward, was I, boys? But he—he had my number. He hung the "Indian sign" on me. I couldn't even give him an argument. It was his eyes, I think. Did you notice his eyes?'

"We didn't know what to say, so none of us said anything; but the sheriff went on raving, and crying, and begging us to believe that he wasn't a coward.

"'I don't know what it was,' he kept saying. 'He had my number. He's the first one, but he had it all right. You know I never was a coward, boys. It was the way he looked at me. Did you notice his eyes?' Every time he said that he would sort of shiver, like something went through him.

"One of the boys picked up his gun and handed it to him. He looked at it for a minute, as if he didn't know what it was. All of a sudden his expression changed, and he stopped crying, and turned very pale. He took some cartridges out of his pocket, loaded the gun, stuck it in his belt, and then ordered another drink. He poured out a big one, too, and his hand shook so he spilled it. But, instead of drinking it, he threw it down, glass and all, walked out of the place without a word, and a moment later we heard hoof-beats again, as he galloped off in the same direction the little Mexican had taken."

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MY friend paused so long that I asked: "What became of the sheriff? Did he resign?"

"I never saw him from that day to this," said my friend.

"Didn't he come back at all?"

"They never do. When he had not returned next morning we became anxious about him, and several of us followed the double trail—the sheriff's and the Mexican's. I never felt like calling that fellow a greaser.

"The tracks led us southward all the way to the Rio Grande. There, as near as we could read the signs, Harland must have overtaken his man. But there were no signs of any struggle. They had apparently spoken with each other, and the trails parted, Harland's leading southeast along the bank of the river. We did not follow it far, but rode back to Guadalupe, and, as I said, I have not seen or heard of him from that day to this."

"What do you suppose took place at their second meeting?" I asked.

"It would be interesting to know." My friend placed an expensive cigar between his lips, and leaned back comfortably while the ever-attentive Albert struck a match and held the light for him.

"Begging your pardon—it was the same as "before, sir," said Albert. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation, sir, and you seemed interested to know the end."

"Thank you, Al," said my friend, holdout out his hand. "I pretended not to know you because I thought you might prefer it so. Glad to see you, old man."

"It was the same as before," Albert continued, his face red with shame even after so many years. "I tried to shoot him in the back, but my hand shook, and I missed He took my gun away, and laughed at me. Then he struck me across the face again with his gloves, and rode away. He had my number, sir."

"But you are not a coward," I protested. "I just saw you strike this Kid Swift, and he is a dangerous man."

"I don't know, sir," said Albert doubtfully. "Anyway, I couldn't stay in the West after that—so here I am."

"It shows how an incident like that will take the heart out of a man," said my friend, as we left the place. "From sheriff to waiter. I suppose he is humilating himself as a sort of penance."

"H-m. Penance. Humiliation," I repeated thoughtfully. "What would his salary be as sheriff of Guadalupe?"

"Sixty dollars a month."

"He makes twice that in a week now," I said. "He has received so many humiliations that he owns half the real estate in Flatbush, and is going to buy a home on Riverside Drive. Only Bradstreet's can 'get his number' now."