



Healy's gun roared and Jackson fell to his knees

Tough Town for Lawmen

By TEX HOLT

The Sheriff's demise puts Deputy Healy on the spot!

JOHN HEALY stood just inside the open doorway, his eyes hard as he stared at the gray-haired man slumped limply in the chair behind the battered desk. The faint acrid smell of gunsmoke still lingered in the hot, dry air of the sheriff's office, and Dan Cooper, the old lawman who had ruled Black Rock County with an iron hand, was dead, a bullet in his heart.

"Welcome home, Johnny," Healy said ironically, and his voice sounded strangely loud in that death tenanted room.

He moved a little to one side so that his broad back was no longer an easy target for anyone out in the street. Behind him was the town, quiet and dangerous in

the heat of the August morning. Whoever had named the place Rattlesnake had known what they were doing.

Healy halted beside the sheriff's desk, and turned so that he stood facing the door. There were voices and the sound of footsteps coming along the plank walk.

"Yep, I sure did hear a shot in the sheriff's office a few minutes ago," a man was saying, his voice louder than necessary, yet with no trace of excitement. "No mistake about it. We better see what happened, Bull."

A few moments more and two men appeared in the doorway, tall, shadowy as their bodies blocked off the sunlight behind them. Healy waited, silent and

wary, right hand close to the butt of the gun in his holster. He recognized both men, and got ready for trouble.

"So you've come back, Healy," Cliff Lanning said, touching his neat black mustache with a slender finger. "And it looks like you brought hate and death with you."

There was arrogance in Lanning's tone—the assurance of a man who knew he ruled the town and the surrounding country more firmly than he ever had before now that Sheriff Dan Cooper was dead.

"Meanin' you think I killed the sheriff?" Healy asked.

Lanning and his gunman bodyguard stepped into the office, moving apart so that they flanked Healy on either side. There was something about that big gunman which reminded Healy of a mean tempered longhorn, a similarity which had won the bodyguard his nickname of "Bull" Jackson.

"Dan Cooper has been shot," Lanning said slowly, as though he had been debating Healy's question in his own mind before answering. "Two months ago you were the sheriff's only deputy—"

"And the old man's nephew," Jackson suddenly interrupted, and then again lapsed into silence.

"That's right — and the sheriff's nephew." Lanning nodded, dark and tall in his expensive range clothes. "You and Cooper quarreled and he ordered you out of this part of the country."

BLEAKNESS threaded John Healy's tone as he saw the evidence rising black against him. "That's true. Uncle Dan and I did have an argument and I left."

He knew it would be futile to try and tell anyone now that the quarrel had been carefully planned and staged. Rustlers had been working out on the range and Sheriff

Cooper had been sure the outlaws had a hideout back in the hills.

It had been Healy who had suggested the fake quarrel. As a disgruntled former sheriff's deputy heading for the owlhoot trail Healy had hoped to join the rustlers and thus trap the band.

The whole town had heard the quarrel between Dan Cooper and his nephew. It had been staged in the Staghorn Saloon. The sheriff had accused his deputy of being crooked. Cooper had claimed he had seen Healy taking money from a mysterious stranger. There had been angry words between the two men, and finally Cooper had ordered his nephew to leave that part of the country and not come back.

For two months Healy had tried to locate the hideout of the rustlers and failed. The plan of his joining the gang had not worked out at all. This morning he had ridden back into town to report the failure. When he had entered the sheriff's office, he had found Dan Cooper dead.

"Then you're admitting that you killed your uncle?" Lanning asked. .

Healy had been thinking back, remembering all that had happened. The voice of the owner of the Staghorn Saloon and the boss of Rattlesnake brought him back to the present with a sudden shock.

"No, I didn't kill him," Healy said. "That quarrel we had two months ago—it was just a joke."

"Of course." There was mockery in Lanning's voice. "The whole town is still laughing."

A boot scraped on the plank walk outside and then a tall man dressed in range clothes stood in the doorway, a man that John Healy had never seen before. Lanning glanced over his shoulder at the stranger and then frowned.

"Who are you?" Lanning snapped. "What do you want?"

"Sam Craig is the name," said the

stranger. "I figgered on visitin' my old pard Sheriff Dan Cooper." He glanced at the still figure sprawled behind the desk. "But it's shore that I got here too late."

"Much too late," Lanning said. "The sheriff is dead." He nodded toward Healy. "His nephew here shot and killed him."

"I was afraid yuh'd say that," Craig said sadly, looking at Lanning. "When I first seen you I said to myself, 'Now there's a feller who's allers jumpin' at conclusions.' Why, I've known Johnny Healy ever since he was knee high to a horned toad and I just don't believe he killed Dan Cooper."

"I don't like this hombre, boss," Bull Jackson said, glaring at Craig. "Mebbe I better take care of him."

"Don't try it!" A gun suddenly appeared in Craig's hand and he was covering Jackson with the Colt. "Soon as I saw yuh I figgered yuh out as pig-headed and impulsive."

Craig's back was turned to Lanning. The saloon owner reached for his gun, but Healy's voice stopped him.

"I wouldn't, Lanning," Healy said jerking out his gun and pointing it at the town boss. "Wouldn't be right to shoot Uncle Dan's old friend in the back."

"It shore wouldn't," Craig echoed, keeping his gaze riveted on Jackson. "Thanks, Johnny."

"Yuh're welcome," Healy said dryly. "There are a couple of things you overlooked in chargin' me with killin' the sheriff, Lanning."

"What?" demanded the saloon owner sullenly. There was something about the gun in Healy's hand that made Lanning very unhappy.

"My gun hasn't been fired for mebbe a week," Healy said. "So I couldn't have shot Uncle Dan."

"That's my boy Johnny talkin'," said Craig delightedly, as he dropped his gun

back into the holster. "Keep on tellin' it to them, Johnny."

"As yuh'll notice I'm still wearin' my deputy badge," Healy said. "And since Uncle Dan never did dismiss me, I reckon I'm the Law around here, now that Sheriff Jim is dead."

"So yuh are, my boy," said Craig quickly, before Lanning or Jackson could speak. He grinned at the two men. "Sorry you must be leaving, gents. Naturally, as close friend and nephew of the deceased, me and Johnny want to be alone with the late Sheriff."

"Come on, Bull," Lanning said. "Let's be going."

JACKSON looked like he didn't know what it was all about, but he wasn't going to argue any. He meekly followed Lanning out of the office, leaving Healy and Craig alone.

"You're a right good liar," Healy said, staring at the stranger. "I've never seen you before in my life."

"I did know Dan Cooper," Craig said. "Heard he had a nephew named Johnny Healy and figgered you must be said hombre." He grinned. He looked lean, wiry and dangerous. "Reckon it is just as well I dropped in here when I did."

"No doubt about that." Healy found he was still holding his gun. Feeling a little foolish, he thrust it back into the holster. "We better take care of things for Uncle Dan."

Within half an hour the sheriff's body had been left at the local undertaker down the street and the funeral arrangements made. The whole town knew Dan Cooper was dead now, and that John Healy was back. His action of stepping into his uncle's boots as local lawman surprised the citizens of Rattlesnake, but they were willing to wait and see what would happen next.

Healy and Craig returned to the sheriff's office, and Healy seated himself at his uncle's desk. He motioned Craig to a chair nearby. He found that he had taken a liking to the stranger. Sam Craig appeared to be a man to cross the desert with.

"Yore uncle sent for me," Craig said suddenly. "Been so much rustlin' going on around here that Dan was right worried."

"So that's it," Healy said, relief in his tone. "Yuh're a detective from the Cattlemen's Association."

"Reckon that's correct," said Craig with a smile. "What about this fight you had with yore uncle two months ago, Johnny?"

Healy told him the whole story of the fake quarrel and the reason for it. Craig listened silently until the deputy had finished, then frowned.

"And yuh never found the hideout of the rustlers," he said. "I been nosin' around for a couple of weeks before I finally decidin' to come into town. I couldn't find the hideout either. I wonder if Cliff Lanning and Bull Jackson might know more than they're tellin' about the rustlin'?"

"I'm wonderin' about that, too," Healy said. "We're near the Mexican border here. All of the cattle stolen appears to have been taken at night. The stock could have been driven to the border, turned over to men waitin' there, and run over the Line. That'd be about all there was to it at this end."

"Right." Craig nodded. "Five or six men could handle a rustlin' deal like that."

Casually Healy opened the center drawer of the old desk and peered in.

His eyes widened as he saw a letter addressed to him in the old sheriff's handwriting. He quickly opened and read it.

"Listen to this," he said:

"Dear John—I'm sure you will be coming back this way soon, and I've got a feeling I may not be around when you return. I think Cliff Lanning and his men are back of the rustling, and they suspect I know something. If anything happens to me before I see you, I want you to show the folks in Rattlesnake this letter. I swear that we faked that quarrel we had two months ago for reasons of our own, and I am leaving you all my worldly goods, and naming you as the Law in this county until a new sheriff is elected—your uncle, Dan Cooper."

"That shore clears yuh of killin' the sheriff," Craig said as Healy finished reading the letter. "And it proves that we are right in suspectin' Lanning and Jackson." He rose to his feet. "Reckon I'll drift around town. See you a little later, Johnny."

AFTER Craig left, Healy got busy preparing to take over the duties of acting sheriff. He went through all the papers and records.

By evening he felt that he had a fairly comprehensive knowledge of just how Dan Cooper had handled his job.

It grew dark outside as night cast its mantle over the town. Healy suddenly realized he was hungry and decided to go and get something to eat. He put all the papers away in the desk and stepped outside the office. The single street of the town was quiet, there was a hint of a cool breeze in the air.

Dust grated on the worn boards of the plank walk beneath Healy's feet. When he reached the alley between the feed store and the harness maker's shop, he stopped to roll another cigarette. The match gleamed in his hand. A figure suddenly loomed out of the shadow and the muzzles of two six-guns were thrust close to Healy's face.

“I was listenin’ at a window of yore office this afternoon,” Jackson said, his voice harsh with hidden fury. “It’s too bad that you and Craig are so dang shore about the rustlers.”

Abruptly Healy moved. He swept the other man’s guns aside with a blow of his right arm. His bootheel came down on Jackson’s toe, and the killer howled.

The match dropped unheeded, a tiny falling comet. A hard left smacked against Jackson’s chin, and he went down, thudding heavily on the ground, the guns in his hands unfired. Then Healy stood there, his own gun drawn and ready.

“Drop those guns, and get up!” he snapped.

Jackson lumbered to his feet, hands empty, fear rising within him. In Healy’s situation he would shoot to kill and he judged all others by himself. Suddenly he turned and ran, racing back through the alley toward a wooded section behind the buildings of the town.

Healy chased after him. He wanted Bull Jackson now while the fear was strong in the mind of the big killer, for a frightened man generally is willing to talk. They reached some rocks and trees, silvery in the light of the moon.

Jackson swung around, metal gleaming in his hand. Hideout gun, Healy thought. I might have known!

A bullet tore a jagged hole in the left sleeve of his flannel shirt, plowed through the flesh of his arm. His own gun roared and Jackson fell to his knees, gun still smoking and eyes staring in death.

Another shot rang out as, from behind a big boulder a figure suddenly loomed, gun in hand. It was Cliff Lanning, hate gleaming in his eyes. Before the surprised Healy could move, he spoke.

“So you learned who was back of the rustling,” Lanning snarled. “It ain’t going to do you much good. I’ve been sittin’ here smoking, trying to figure out a way to get you, when you and Jackson came running up. Reckon this is a good chance to kill you.”

He fired and Healy felt the bullet nick his ear. Then Healy’s Colt roared a second time and Lanning fell back, his gun clattering as it rolled down the rock.

“Selfish, ain’t yuh,” said Craig, from behind Healy. “Cleanin’ out the rustlers all by yoreself. I got here soon as I could.” He glanced at the deputy who stood swaying a little. “What’s the matter, you hurt bad, Johnny?”

“No,” Healy said. “Just hungry—I ain’t had supper yet.”