

INTO THE SUNSET

BY JACKSON GREGORY



TWELFTH INSTALLMENT

Sarboe had brought in a small pack of food. Lucy wouldn't eat; Barry merely shook his head at it. So Sarboe ate a few bites alone and lay down in a corner beyond the fireplace and went to sleep. Lucy, on her elbows, looked at Barry brooding by the chimney.

"There was something you were going to tell me," she reminded him.

He looked at her blankly. Then: "It's late and you're done in. Better go to sleep, hadn't you?"

"Sleep! Without knowing what it was that you said you could explain! You said I wasn't Lucy Blue at all—"

"I know how you feel." His own mind had been groping; there were questions he wanted answered before he could think of sleep.

His somber eyes trailed back to the man on the bunk; for a time he forgot Lucy and his promise to tell her what he could of the amazing news concerning herself.

"If there was a single word of truth in what you told me—"

said Lucy.

He looked at her absently, then nodded and went out. Returning he brought the flat steel box with him. She was all eagerness at his elbow as he opened the box.

"Why!" she gasped, seeing the

hundreds of pictures. "They are all of me! I know them; Papa—the Judge—used to take one of me every Sunday almost!"

"Ever strike you as a funny thing to do?" he asked.

"No. Well, it does seem sort of queer, but you see I've always been used to it."

"They're all dated on the backs," said Barry. The last picture doesn't look much like the first, does it? But when you take them straight through, you can see it's the same you, can't you?"

"Of course," said Lucy, and looked at him with a puzzled frown. "But I don't understand—"

"Here's something else. It was in the box when I got it; I guess it's been there always, for a dozen years. It's an old newspaper. The Laredo Blade."

He opened it for her carefully; from years of being folded it split along the creases. It was a small, two-sheet affair; banner headlines across the first page had to do with a crime the enormity of which had horrified the community not unused to violence.

Briefly, this was the gist of the newspaper article:

Colonel Dave Hamilton, his wife and three other members of his household had been shot to death. The Colonel, a newcomer to Laredo, but already immensely popular, had arrived with his

family from Virginia, intending to buy vast holding hereabouts and make his home. He had brought with him a large sum of money in cash. There was not the slightest clue to the identity of the murderer, he had made a clean sweep, with none left alive to accuse him.

"But—" began Lucy, more puzzled than ever.

Her eyes, busied with the streaming headlines and big bold type at the top of the page had missed what Barry now pointed out. There were pictures of Colonel and Mrs. Hamilton, as of other members of his household, the Colonel's aunt and two servants.

There was another picture. It was of a little girl five or six years old, the Colonel's daughter. At first it was thought that she too had been murdered. But her tiny body was never found.

"Yes," said Barry. "Doesn't look much like you now, does it? But it's the same little girl that you were in these first pictures the Judge took. Going straight through the pack—well, you've got pretty good proof, proof enough for any jury on earth, that if you're Lucy Anybody, you're Lucy Hamilton and not Lucy Blue!"

"The little girl—you, of course—must have been carried off by the man or men who killed her parents."

"But why?" demanded Lucy.

"She was the Colonel's heiress; it was supposed that she would inherit when she was eighteen. It would seem that she was a very valuable piece of property!"

"You mean that my—that Judge Blue—"

"You're surely the girl in that paper. And you told me that night at Tylersville what you overheard at the stable, the Judge and Laredo talking—"

"And Laredo said he would marry me, but that he'd wait a few years, until I was eighteen or nineteen, I forget which—"

"And the Judge had this box, paper and pictures together. Then he lost it. That's where Laredo cut in on the deal, somehow stealing it from him. And the Judge was afraid of Laredo because of what he knew and could prove."

"It's horrible!" She put her face in her hands, shuddering.

"Then," Barry went on, puzzled in his turn, "with Laredo fading

out, while I'm hunting him from here to California and back again, Tom Haveril rides into the play! Next thing, Tom Haveril has this little box—and Tom Haveril marries you!"

"I am afraid!"

"Yes," said Barry sternly. "Just now I was ready to take you back to Tom Haveril, knowing that I'd made a mistake about him being Laredo. But how did it come that he had this box and the things in it? And just how are he and the Judge so thick? Am I going to take you back into that sort of mess?"

She looked at him strangely, afraid of him too, yet probing wistfully, hoping a little—no, not really afraid.

"Barry! Oh, are you the same Barry of that time at Tylersville? You were so true and honest then; I know it!"

"You should know that I'm honest, and square with you, Lucy. Why, girl, you can tell! When a man is lying to you or telling you the truth—can't you feel it?"

"Can you, Barry?" A faint, infinitely sad smile that might have been nothing but a play of shadow touched her lips. "Tonight, when I came to where you were tied up, as I thought—I have told you I meant to help you. Was I lying then?"

Barry stood looking at her a long while. "I've been thinking about that. You did come wearing my gun; outside of that I don't know how we could ever have got away, Sarboe and I. And I thought of something else. You knew, when I told you we were going where Sarboe was, that Tom Haveril's men would be there before us—"

"But—"

"Yes, I know. You couldn't tell me that, but you did do all that you could to keep me from going there. I remember, Lucy."

"And now you do know that I was telling you the truth?"

"Yes. You gave me every chance you could, Lucy." For an instant his eyes flashed up, then they darkened again as he muttered heavily: "I'm grateful to you, Lucy, but I'm almost sorry. You see, it just makes me love you all the more, and I guess it would be better for me if I could hate you instead. You're Tom Haveril's now—and Tom Haveril isn't Laredo—and I've no longer any excuse to go out and kill him—"

Lucy said: "Are you crazy, Barry Haveril? You know I'm married to Tom; no matter who he was, could you think I'd—I'd marry a man who killed him?"

"Of course I couldn't. I didn't ever think of it that way; I didn't get that far." He made a weary gesture of a hand across his eyes.

"What are you going to do with me now, Barry?"

"I don't know what to do. We can't do anything tonight; it's too

late and you're worn out. Get some sleep if you can. Maybe by morning things will be clearer."

Barry looked up and their eyes met.

"It's hell, that's all," he said heavily. "I love you so, Lucy—and I haven't any right."

She plunged into her newspaper again, reading every line. Later she dozed, dreaming fantastic dreams, and started wide awake to find the fire still blazing. Barry still brooding at the table.

She was dozing again and it was almost dawn; Barry was just going to the door, meaning to saddle the horses, when they heard the cautious steps outside of someone coming guardedly to the cabin door.

At the door Barry stood to one side, and asked curtly:

"Well? Who's out there?"

"That you, Sundown?" came an excited, high-pitched voice.

"It's good old Timberline!" Barry said to Lucy, and opened the door.

"What's happened, Timber?" demanded Barry, getting the door shut.

"A plenty," said Timberline. "We're on the run, to save us our skulls, that's what."

"Who's 'Us' and who's 'They'?" demanded Barry. "You say, 'We're on the run.' Who? And what's after you?"

"Yuh ask who's on the run; well, it's me an' your sister Lucy and Ken March. Them two's down in the pines, waitin' for me to look in here an' see if mebbe yuh did come this way. Ken March has got a bullet through one laig an' an ear mostly shot off. He's sorer'n a saddle boil. Who done it? Shucks, who would? It was Tom Haveril an' the ol' Judge an' a pack o' their varmints."

Timberline asked a second time of Sarboe and the form on the bunk. "Who's them fellers, Sundown?"

Barry said: "This is Sarboe. He's a friend of mine now, Timber—a friend, do you get me? And the other man—go take a good look at him."

"It ain't—it ain't Laredo, is it, Sundown?"

"Yes," said Barry. "That's good. You go to her. We'll be along."

When Barry and Timber joined them they bore the unconscious Jesse Conroy—Laredo—in their arms, wrapped in a blanket. Barry said:

"Hello, Lucy; hello, Ken. You folks ride along, and take Lucy with you. She'll be better off with you than anywhere else for a few days; until anyhow she knows which way to turn. It's about sixty miles on to Pa's place. I guess the house is still standing. Timber and I'll join you later. One or the other of us will ride in on you tomorrow."

The three rode off through the pines.

"Now, which a-way?" asked Timber irritably.

"You think that they'll be able to find my hide-out here," said Barry. "I don't. Just the same, we'll move off onto the mountainside a bit to a sheltered place where we can hole up. We can keep an eye on the cabin all day. If they don't show up before dark, we'll move back into it."

So the three of them carried the half dead Laredo Kid the half mile to the place Barry had in mind.

Sarboe was forever going to stand and look at Jesse Conroy and coming back to Barry to look at him dumbly and pleading as a dog looks at its master.

"This boy's crazy to tell yuh somethin', Sundown," said Timber.

Half way through the next day Timberline admitted: "Well, I reckon yuh was right for once, Sundown; that skulduggery bunch

o' hell-hounds lost our track." He ruminated, then added, grown suddenly waspish. "Yuh're takin' it layin' down, are yuh?"

Barry cocked up his eyebrows. "Taking what?"

"They've chased us out, kilt Juan, stole our gold mine, an' yuh ain't said a word. How about it?"

"We'll straighten that out," returned Barry coolly.

They decided there was no need of three men sticking on here to feed a sick man soup and take care of his bandage. And they did want to know whether all was well with Ken March and the two Lucys.

"You ride along after them, Timber," said Barry.

(Continued Next Week)

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