

Leathered Guns

by Perry Westbrook

FINAL INSTALLMENT

The concussion of that roaring discharge brought a shower of broken glass from the raised window sash, and the recoil upset old Joe as though a horse had kicked him. The buckskin screamed wildly, spun around twice then raced away. But it went with an empty saddle. Following horses leaped high as they hurdled the still figure in the street.

Five seconds later it was all over. Joe Rooney crawled to his feet, rubbing his shoulder ruefully. "What a cannon!" he muttered. "What a cannon! Shore I felt my shoulder blades touch when that damn thing went off that time. I shore musta hit something."

"I'll say you did, Joe," grinned Slim. Then he leaned out of the window and yelled, Hi, Roy! Stoney! Yuh all right? This is Slim."

"Shore, and we're coming along, Slim, my lad. Be with you in a minute."

Roy and Stoney Sheard were soon in the wild horse both uninjured. They looked anxiously at Dakota, who was sitting in a chair while Spud Dillon carefully cut away the bloody pants leg. Dakota grinned dryly.

"Key yore shirts on, yuh two ole ground haws. It ain't nothing to worry about. I could stand a little jolt of liquor, tho."

"Git a bottle, Joe," puffed Spud. "Yuh other boys help yore selves. My treat."

The liquor steadied them. Stoney Sheard turned to Slim. "What say we sashay up the street a bit, Slim? I kinda think I got Brockwell when they was riding for a getaway. I know I hit him, and he was beginning to wobble just as they went outa sight past the livery stable."

Slim nodded and they went up the street, picking their way past groups of excited, jabbering townspeople. Sure enough, not twenty yards beyond the northern end of the street, they found Sarg Brockwell. He was sprawled flat on his back, his face to the sky. A single look satisfied them that there was nothing they could do.

As they turned back, Slim remembered George Arthur. "We got to find that crooked lawyer. Stoney Brockwell can't talk, but Arthur can and will, before I get thru with him. Yuh didn't see him with that crowd anywhere?"

The cowboy chuckled sardonically. Him? Why he ain't got nerve enough to get within three miles of a gun muzzle! Yuh'll find him holin' up somewhere, scared into fits."

They slipped past the Wild Horse, where Roy O'Brien and Spud Dillon were taking turns at explaining to a clamoring crowd, just what it was all about. It was Stoney who spied the crack of light at the bottom of the door leading into Arthur's office.

"Looks like somebody might be in there, Slim," he drawled. "e can investigate anyhow."

Slim tried the door, but found it locked. Pressing his ear to the portal he listened intently. From inside sounded thick measured snores. "Sounds like somebody was sleeping off a drunk," he muttered. "Well, we're going in. Give me a heave with this door."

Before the combined weight of them, the door sagged, creaked, then broke open with a crash. George Arthur was sprawled across his desk, his head pillowed on his arms. The air was foul with stale whiskey fumes.

Slim nodded with satisfaction. "Close the door and shove that chair against it, Stoney," he directed.

He crossed to the sleeping man and shook him roughly. Arthur sighed, coughed and tried to push him away. Slim jerked him erect in the chair and slapped his face. Arthur's eyes opened.

pierced thru the liquor haze which had deadened his brain.

"Loyale," he murmured. "Yuh—what do you want?"

"Plenty," snapped Slim. "Get yore wits together. Yuh've got a lot of explaining to do. Stoney pour him another drink. It will straighten him up for a time."

Arthur gulped the liquor greedily and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. A drunken truculence took hold of him. "Get out!" he growled. "Got no use for you Loyale. I hate the sight of you. Get out of this office."

Slim shook him again half lifting him from his seat only to fling him back again with a crash. "I'm telling yuh something yuh drunken rat. Listen close. Starbuck and both Brockwells are daid. Get that? Daid!"

Arthur's head came up. "Huh? he gasped. "Dead? You're lying."

"Don't kid yoreself. Starbuck and Leo Brockwell were killed trying to raid my ranch tonight. Sarg Brockwell was killed trying to hold up the Standard Bank not fifteen minutes ago. But before he died, Jigger Starbuck talked. He put the tag on you, Arthur. Yeah, yuh got a lot of explaining to do."

Arthur sat quietly, evidently trying to arrange his hazy thoughts. Presently he looked up. "You haven't got a thing on me—not a thing. I won't say a word."

Slim dragged up a chair and sat down, so he could stare straight into the lawyer's bloodshot eyes. "I think you will," he said, a deadly chill in his voice. "Con-

my words good, and you know it. Are you ready to do your stuff? Arthur gulped and nodded. "Give me a pen and some paper."

In the glowing dawn of a new day, a little cavalcade jogged its way from Pinnacle out to the Circle L Ranch. In the lead rode Slim Loyale and Stoney Sheard. Following them was a buckboard with Roy O'Brien driving. Sitting beside Roy, with his wounded leg cushioned and propped up by wads of blankets, was Dakota Blue.

"I suppose Slim'll be after seeing the governor right away?" suggested Roy.

Dakota nodded and grinned. "He's as feverish as a hound pup after its first rabbit. Don't know as I blame him, though. The kid has been eating his heart out all along about Mona Hall. He's plumb loco about her."

"And though he's never hinted of it to me, I know he's had some dang-fool idee about honor that kept him from springing the question to her. Reckon he's sorta felt that with that prison record on his haid, he had no right to ask her to marry him."

Roy snorted. "As if that'd be after making one bit of difference to Miss Mona. She's knowed, bless her heart, that Slim is innocent, same as the rest of us. Shore, and she's a fine girl. She'd stick to the man she loved regardless. But you have to honor the boy for his pride, just the same."

At the home ranch Slim wasted no time. He shaved and cleaned up, donning his only suit of store clothes.

Out at the north end of Jericho Valley, in company with Sam Tisdale and Abe Fornachon, Mona Hall sat her saddle and watched the leaders of long tides of cattle flow out across her range, headed north toward those promised lands in the Kicappoo range. As soon as Tisdale had made the arrangement as to price with

confession, and, while she had expected that Slim would ride to her when the fight was over, yet she could not help the queer feeling that came over her now at the sight of him.

Slim cantered up, giving a cheery greeting. He shook hands with Tisdale and Abe, then turned to Mona. "I got something to explain to you, Mona," he drawled. "How about a little ride? These boys can watch the cattle."

Mona nodded. "I think so, too. You'll excuse us?"

"Go 'long, young 'uns," laughed Tisdale, who guessed how things stood between these two. Slim rode for two miles before he reined in. Then he turned to Mona, his eyes glowing. "I've got Arthur's signed and witnessed confession that I was framed," he stated. "And that makes it fair that I should say what I'm going to say, Mona."

He reached in one pocket and brought out a tiny, plush bubble of a case.

"Back in Jarilli there were times when I thought I'd go crazy. At those times there was just one thing that kept my feet on the ground, and that thing was thinking of you. Looking back I can see where you have been my guiding star all my life."

"Unconsciously I built my scheme of living around you. It wasn't whether I wanted to do this or that merely because I wanted to; it was because I always did what I thought you would approve of. Even when you were a little, long-laiged kid with pigtailed down yore back there was no greater reward for duty done, than yore smile."

"I—I've gotten so used to that standard or reward now, I can't face the rest of life without it. Before I got this confession, I had no right to ask you. Now I can. I've loved you forever, it seems like, Mona. Will you marry me?"

She looked at him, her lips parted, her eyes glistening. "If there was anything that would keep me from saying yes, Slim Loyale, it is because you were so silly in feeling that you could not ask me until your name had been cleared. A woman who would hesitate over such a foolish thing would not be worth thinking about. Your name has always been clear with me Slim. I'll marry you tomorrow, if you wish. I've always loved you."

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