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*The Octopus
of Pilgrim
Valley*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338086013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. — THE LONE BUCKAROO

II. — THE OCTOPUS

III. — SHOW-DOWN

IV. — LAW

V. — TRONO VERSUS STUBBINS

VI. — IN POWDER'S BASTILLE

THE END

I. — THE LONE BUCKAROO

Table of Contents

"Politeness is shorely a shield that stops many a bullet. Still an' all, if a feller has got to insinuate hissself into another party's quarrel, it's plumb best to omit apologies until the shootin' is over...I nev' yit did see a red-headed gent that wa'n't burnin' to right the wrongs of this yere unjust world."—Parting advice of Joe Breedlove to Tom Lilly.

THE blazing, blood-red sun dropped over the western rim and left the valley to a twilight peace. Tom Lilly riding his weary buckskin toward the distant huddle of buildings that formed the isolated town of Powder, felt the first of the evening's breeze. It had all the effect of a cold shower on man and beast; Lilly wiped the crusted sweat from his face and washed his parched throat with a drink.

"Another day, another dollar. Buck, you got a restless, homeless no-account for a rider."

The pony raised its ears and quickened the pace. Dust rose behind in swirling eddies. Night threw successive darkening cobalt shadows across the land, through which twinkled here and there the light of a homesteader's shack; eastward the high mesa became nothing but a stark outline against the sky.

It was new country to Tom Lilly. For that reason and no other was he here. The lure of the unknown, the unseen drew him like a magnet. Beyond the hill was always the promise of fairer fields, the hint of great adventure. And as tired as he was, a small excitement burned in his blue eyes and compressed the muscles of his lean, sun-blackened face

as he drew upon Powder and beheld the lights shining out of the windows into the ruddy, dusty street. This was the whole story of Tom Lilly and explained the wistfulness of his features, the temper that slumbered fitfully beneath the sorrel-red thatch of hair. He was a wanderer, a seeker of something that could never come to pass; Joe Breedlove, his partner back on the H-H, had said this in plain blunt language—though rather sorrowfully—when Tom was on the point of moving.

"Yuh ain't foolin' me, old-trapper, with that poker face o' yours. I reads you mos' clearly. Yore a red-haired gent with misbegotten idears o' romance. All red-heads is the same, which is a fact. Yuh have traveled a hell of a lot o' trails before yuh camped here, without findin' anything to please yuh. Better stick to these diggin's, amigo. Yuh won't locate any better. All you'll do is grow gray an' mis'ble. Ain't I seen how these roamers end up? Usually over a bar'l o' spuds in some town restaurant. Yeah, a broken-down old codger washin' dishes fer a livin'. Ain't that a fine end fer an A-I top hand?"

But Tom Lilly tightened his cinches and tied down his blanket roll, smiling in a faint sheepish way. "Lots of country I ain't seen, Joe. If I don't like it I'll mosey back."

Joe Breedlove shook his head. "Yore kind don't back track." Then the man's big paw gripped his friend's arm. "Well, yuh know best. If yuh ever git in a jam, drop a line or send up a smoke signal. I'll come-a-runnin'."

"Sho'," muttered Tom, losing his grin. He had ridden off with a very brief farewell. Now, as he entered this straggling town street, he was recalling those words. "The hardest part

about movin'," he said to himself "is leavin' a good Joe like that behind." He had said goodbye often, yet never with quite the same depression of spirit. "He was shore a square gent. Well, here we are, and where are we?"

Powder was just another desert town. Tom Lilly had seen a hundred built in the same loose-jointed shackling fashion, with a dozen or more false-fronted frame buildings abutting a dirt street. There would be two or three saloons with their kerosene lights beckoning through the swinging doors, a general store, a restaurant, a jail and, somewhere near the edge of town, a livery stable. Lilly rode slowly, looking for this latter establishment. Men moved in the shadows, their cigarette tips gleaming. Dishes rattled in the restaurant and from the nearest saloon came the flat, unmelodious notes of a piano. Powder was tuning up for the night, given a new lease on life by the evening breeze. Lilly, turning his horse into the stable, felt depressed. It was the same old story over again; Joe Breedlove was right—he would travel the long trail until he could no longer sit in the saddle, looking for something not to be found. How could he find it when he didn't know what he looked for? Just another stray critter never thrown and branded. He slipped off the buckskin, seeing the stable roustabout amble through the door.

"This pony," said he, "gets oats. Where's yore brush and currycomb?"

He led the animal to a stall, slipped off the gear and set to work with the implements the roustabout produced. The latter, displaying the indirect curiosity of his kind, spoke casually.

"Hope it ain't this hot where you come from."

"We had rain there in 1903," opined Tom gravely. "Where's a good place to eat?"

"They's only one place, which is the Star. You won't mind it too much if yore hungry, I might add they's usually a gentleman's game o' poker in progress at Jake Miner's place. Mos' stranger like to know, so I'm a-tellin' you. Mama Ringo runs the hotel if it's your desire to sleep on a real four-bit bed. The sher'ff an' marshal are both tol'rant to'rds ord'nary misdemeanors o' the peace. I might add the likker hereabouts is thirty proof an' the cards entirely without marks. Which constitutes the whole story o' this hole in the ground. It's a nice leetle place—if you don't stay long."

"You shore are a compendium of useful knowledge," averred Lilly, strolling out. "Civic pride is a jewel of great renown."

The roustabout's retort was a short and emphatic word that exploded in the darkness. Tom Lilly, smiling slightly, crossed to the Star and had his supper in solitary state. Powder had unanimously eaten and departed to its pleasures, leaving the latest arrival to finish his steak and onions among a debris of dishes. It was a meal, nothing more than that and Tom paid his bill and walked out, hungry; not for food, but for the palaver of his own kind, for the rough joke and the twang of a familiar voice. It was always thus when restlessness drove him onward and away from friends. He was forever an alien in a strange land, left to his own sober, wistful thoughts. Under the impulse of this loneliness, he built himself a cigarette and headed for Jake Miner's.

But before he reached the door the jingling of the piano, the rattling of chips and the hum of voices suddenly ceased. A silence, uneasy and expectant, pervaded the place and when he pushed through the swinging portals he became a witness to a scene that jerked at his nerves and sent a warning down his right arm. There was something going on here out of the ordinary, something that made him brush the butt of his gun with careful fingers and move quickly to a rear wall. It was such a little drama as he had often seen before and within thirty seconds his quick-acting, partisan temper was thoroughly engaged on the side of a man who appeared to be the under dog. And of a man not of his own kind or profession.

He was a nester, this fellow. That was obvious from a glance at the shabby overalls and the sallow, bewhiskered face. He had a gaunt, weather-beaten frame and a pair of hands warped out of shape by hard labor. A very homely man, who leaned uneasily against the mahogany bar and gripped a glass of whisky that had not been touched. He was perhaps forty, but he looked older, and from beneath bushy sun-bleached brows a pair of faded blue eyes stared out in mixed defiance and fear. Lilly leaned against the wall, hearing a faint whisper float across a near table. "Trono'll shore kill 'im. He shore will." And Lilly, growing angry on the instant, turned his attention to the second party at the bar.

Trono was smiling in the tight malevolent way of a man enjoying himself over a victim. He was a short and burly creature with immense shoulders and arms; a thick, columnar neck supported a face that was as swart as any Indian's; but here the resemblance stopped, for his chin was

of the outthrust, cleft kind and he had bulging green eyes. Somewhere he had been engaged in desperate fighting, one mark of which ran across the high bridge of his nose and up in to the half-bald bullet head. Undeniably he was of the cattle range, and he was taking a cowman's attitude toward the nester. He lifted his own whisky glass, speaking in a rumbling, husky voice.

"We'll drink to the sudden death o' all nesters. Down she goes."

"Well, I dunno's that's perlite," protested the other. "I'm a peaceable feller, a-mindin' my own business."

"Mean to say yuh won't drink with a man?" roared Trono. "That's the sorta insult that don't go down in this country! Why, you—"

"Oh, I'll drink if it'll soothe yer feelin's any," said the nester, raising his glass.

Trono was grinning. And when the nester was about to drink, one massive arm swept across the intervening space and slapped the glass to the floor. The nester spewed the liquor from his mouth and wiped his eyes. His flat chest rose and fell with an excess of outraged feeling, but in the end he spoke quite mildly. "Seems to me you be tryin' to pick trouble. I want these fellers to know I ain't startin' no trouble. It's a free country."

"Free fer anything but bugs," broke in Trono, working himself to a rage. "Y' know what we do with bugs, mister? We bash 'em! Better take warnin' an' clear out."

"No, I don't guess I'll give up," said the nester. Tom Lilly inwardly applauded the man's courage. It took nerve to stand in the midst of a crowd of cowpunchers and declare

himself. Even more nerve to say what he went on to say. "Pilgrim Valley wa'n't created jes' purposely fer the Octopus an' his JIB ranch, though you seem to think so. I'm holdin' my land by gov'ment consent. Mean to prove it an' farm it."

"Oh, you *do*?" muttered Trono, bearing down on the final word.

The nester hastened to take the sting from his pronouncement. "Ain't no reason fer you folks to git sore. They's aplenty land left to run cows on. Shucks, I'm only holdin' a half section outen three-four hundred thousand acres."

"Bugs breed," replied Trono. "Leave one alone an' he hatches a hundred more. No, that ain't no argument. Hey, where you goin'?"

The nester had started to back off. Trono's right hand dropped half way to his gun and the nester's whole body stiffened; he, too, made a gesture toward his coat pocket, only to throw both arms free of his body as if to show he meant no trouble. It was a cruel ordeal and the mark of it appeared on his lean face in deep furrows and fine beads of sweat. Tom Lilly sighed to relieve the pressure of his accumulating anger. First and foremost he was a cowman, with most of the prejudices of that class. But he fought fair, always, and now his sympathies were entirely with the nester who was being badgered. It bore hard on him to stand back and watch this quarrel being trumped up by Trono; for there could be only one end to it. It was obvious that Trono meant there should be but one end.

"I'm goin' about my business," muttered the nester, rubbing his lips with a trembling hand. "I know you, Mister

Trono. You figger to cause trouble. You've allus tried to haze me off my claim. Well, if I was a younger feller I might stand up to you. All I ask is to be let alone. It's a free country and they's plenty o' room fer all o' us in it. I'm gettin' along in years an' there's nobody to take care o' me when I break down, so I want to make a little stake afore I die. Now you leave me be."

Lilly checked an impulse to step forward between the men. His sharp eyes caught the stiffening muscles beneath Trono's coat and the sudden flare of fire in Trono's eyes. The killer instinct was there; he had seen such a light before. But, on the verge of acting, he took hold of himself. It was not his quarrel and nobody had asked him to interfere. The strictest kind of unwritten rules guarded such an affair and held him in his place. Even so, as he watched Trono gather himself, he had come to a decision. Trono's voice droned throughout the room.

"Callin' me a trouble maker, you damn fool? Come back here an' drink!"

What passed in the succeeding moments was something that only swift eyes might see. Trono's arm dropped and seemed to waver. It was only a gesture, yet it might have been the first move to draw his gun. The nester, badgered until his nerves were torturing him, saw that gesture and copied it. But where Trono had been clever, he was only clumsy. He could not feint. One paw started downward and could not stop. After that it was murder. Trono's gun gleamed in the light; the room rocked and roared and someone cried out a warning. That was Tom Lilly's voice, though he never knew it. His eyes, passing from side to