Max Brand

Valley Thieves

Max Brand

Valley Thieves

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338052100

Table of Contents

THE END

"

I. — THE WHIRLWIND

Table of Contents

People who know what I've been through generally look at me twice, because, after they hear the name of Bill Avon, they have to squint at me to make sure that they are seeing right, and that I can possibly be the man who once stood in front of the evil white face of Barry Christian and lived to talk about it afterwards. All that my friends know is that I'm big enough to be awkward, big enough to make an easy target, and by no means adroit with any tool except an ax or a pitchfork. They know that I have a bit of a ranch up in the Blue Waters, where my wife and I are making a home out of acres which are green for one month of the year, brown for five, and all the rest of the time are half wind and half snow; and when they see our shack that leans against a big boulder for shelter from the north storms, they can't believe that out of that shanty came the man who knows more about Jim Silver than any other person in the world. Well, I've been misquoted a good deal, and a lot that has been said about Jim Silver, a lot of crazy exaggeration, has been traced to me. I deny it all. I never said that Jim Silver could knock a silver dollar out of the air as far away as he could see it spin. I never said that he was never thrown by any horse. I never said that he was as good with the left hand as with the right. I never said that his horse, Parade, understood every word and sign that the master uttered. I never said that Frosty, his wolf, could read the mind of any man. What I have said is—

But I am going to put down everything as I actually know it, parting the foolish lies from the honest facts. When you get through with the account, you'll find the facts strange enough and you won't wonder that the knowing of them has plastered ten more years of gray in my hair. I look fifty now, but I'm only a little over forty, and Christian and Silver and "Taxi" and the rest of them did that to me. Just knowing them did it to me.

First of all, it's important to explain how I happened to be caught up by the whirlwind, and how that storm carried me into the dangerous society of Jim Silver, and that soft-footed, swift-handed devil of a Taxi, and Barry Christian. Still, when I think of them, it's as though I were a child reading a book of wonders, stepping short behind seven-league boots. But as for the whirlwind itself, that picked me up and swept me along, the name of it was Harry Clonmel.

The first time I saw him was in Belling Lake. I'd gone down to the town to do the shopping for the month. My wife usually came with me; sometimes my boy was along; but Charlotte had a cold and a headache, this day, and Al stayed home to look after things. That was how I happened to be alone in Belling Lake.

I had some flour and a side of bacon, a good auger for boring post holes, two hundred pounds of barbed wire, some brads, and a big new roasting pan, with odds and ends for Charlotte, all piled into the back of the buckboard. I had gone to untie the team from the hitch rack, and I was just saying a few words to "Doc" Mitchell—I remember he was pulling at one side of his long mustache and laughing at something I had just said—when I first saw Harry Clonmel.

He had the right sort of an entrance. A fanfare of horns was in order, in the old days, when the king and hero entered, and the trumpet call that was sounded for Harry Clonmel was a sudden burst of whooping and yelling down in Jack Parker's saloon.

The noise went right up to a crescendo, then guns boomed, and someone screeched. It was like the beat of a great bell just over my head, that climax to the uproar. It exploded in my brain and sent a shudder through my breastbone.

The double doors of Jack Parker's place split open like a shingle under a hatchet stroke. Instead of the blade of a hatchet, the body of a man appeared, that big, tough fellow, "Bud" Lawson. He shot out, head first, with a gun still exploding in one hand and the other arm making swimming movements in the thin of the air. He landed on his face, in the street. The deep dust spilled out from the impact, like water into spray; a cloud of white burst up; out of the cloud appeared big Bud Lawson, running.

He was not charging back toward the saloon, either.

No, sir, he was sprinting the other way, and he legged it so fast that the dust was sucked a little distance after him; the wind of his speed jerked the hat off his head and blew up his long hair on end. The weight of the gun impeded him. He shied that gun away, and lifted his knees higher and higher. He was going so lickety-split that, when he reached the first corner, he had to slant himself forty-five degrees to get around the angle, out of sight.

I wondered what group of men had been enough angered by some of Lawson's tricks to grab him and throw him out of

the saloon door that way. I wondered how they could be so rash, knowing that Lawson would surely hunt them down, one by one, afterwards. Out of the saloon boiled a dozen men, shouting, laughing. I knew a good many of them. They must have been drunk, to pick on Lawson, I thought.

Then I saw what had actually chucked Lawson into the air like a sawdust doll. It was a dark-haired fellow who came half-way out the saloon entrance and paused there, resting his hand on top of the door.

Resting his hand on top of the door, I said, and meant it. Why, he was a regular whale, that fellow. I never knew his feet and inches. Six four, six five—I don't know what he was. Nobody ever wanted to put a measuring rod on him or ask a scales how many pounds he weighed. All the mind said when it looked at him was: "He's big enough!" He overflowed the imagination. The idea of him ran out onto the margin of the page, so to speak. Because, no matter how big his body was, the spirit in him was bigger still. I could see the gloss and sheen of his dark hair; I could see the dark gloss and the fire of his eyes even at that distance, and the laughter that was bursting from his lips rang in my head as though some huge, bell-mouthed trumpet had been placed at my ear, and blown.

When he stopped laughing, there was still a tremor in me, as though a quiver had come out of the ground and remained in the weak of my knees.

He stepped back inside the door, and the rest of the crowd—like silly little children dressed up in long pants—followed after that real man.

Doc Mitchell was a hardy fellow, with the sort of a vocabulary that is picked up while freighting with mule teams across the mountain desert, but even he could find nothing to say now, though he seemed to be trying.

I looked at Doc and wanted to laugh, but there wasn't any laughter in me. I had been emptied of everything, including speech.

After a while, Doc said: "Big wind, don't you blow my way!" He began to laugh helplessly, his eyes going in a foolish way from side to side. I began to laugh, too, and knew the same idiocy was in my face.

"There's a whole lot of business in that hombre," I said.

"There's a whole month of Sunday meetings in him," said Doc Mitchell.

"Lawson is no fool," I said.

"He's a real bright boy," said Doc Mitchell. "He knows when to pick his feet up fast and put them down far apart."

Sheriff Walt Milton slanted around the next corner on a cayuse and came along ding-bust-it for the two of us. He pulled up his nag. The spade of his Spanish bit pried the mouth of his bronchi wide open; I saw the bloody froth drooling, and the fear and agony like blood in the eyes of the horse, too.

Walt was the sort of a fellow who was always in a hurry, and he always seemed to have his teeth set just right for a fight. He was a sandy man, both ways you take the word. There was no yellow in him, and, also, his complexion and hair were so faded that there appeared to be dust in his eyebrows, and dust seemed to be always in the wrinkles of his face. Even his eyes were a sort of straw color. The

brighter they got, the paler they grew. He was a man-killer, was Walt Milton. We all knew that; we all were sure that he liked his job, not for the salary, but for the shooting chances that went with it. But we kept on voting for him because a mild sheriff would have been no good with the wild fellows in our neck of the woods.

I talk about Walt Milton because he had a big hand in what was to come. He sang out, as he pulled up his horse:

"What's this I hear about a shooting scrape in Parker's place?"

"A big hombre in there just threw Bud Lawson out on his head," I told Milton. "Lawson seemed to be doing the shooting, and the stranger was using his hands."

"Just his hands?" said Milton, with half of a smile.

He rode on to Parker's place, got off, and went inside. Whatever he saw and heard in there seemed to satisfy him. He came out, got on his horse, and jogged slowly past us down the street, with a thoughtful look on his face.

Doc Mitchell muttered: "Walt is tasting a big fight with that big stranger. It oughta be something worth while."

I started to untie my team again, but out of Parker's saloon appeared the big young man once more, with the crowd following, stretching their legs to keep up with him. The nearer he came striding toward us, the bigger he loomed, but he carried his weight like a racer. He was put together with springs.

I could see why Bud Lawson had picked on him. It was because there was such bright good nature in his face. There was a spring of it in his heart, and it kept overflowing at his eyes.

He went on up the street and turned in at Denny McRae's place. I retied the lead rope I had unknotted and looked at Doc Mitchell, and Doc looked at me. Then, without a word, we tagged along to see the fun.

II. — THE WHEEL

Table of Contents

Harry Clonmel—we all learned his name shortly after we got into McRae's place—was flush and treating the crowd. He laid down his money as though it were dirt, while my worried mind kept translating those dollars into bacon, blankets, and beef on the hoof. You could see that money was not what Clonmel wanted to take from the world. He set up a couple of rounds and then drifted back into the long, narrow game room at the back of the saloon. In five minutes he had the games going, and McRae appeared from nowhere, going about in his usual down-headed way, looking up with his suspicious and sullen glances.

"Somebody ought to tell Clonmel that McRae's the brother-in-law of the sheriff," said Doc Mitchell to me.

"What good would that do?" I asked Doc. "You wouldn't show cake to a baby, so why now show trouble to Clonmel?"

Mitchell chuckled at that. But I've regretted since that day that one of us didn't give Harry Clonmel some good advice before the crash came. However, there was not a word said, and in a little while, Clonmel was bucking roulette and making a big play. He sluiced out the money with both hands, won a thousand, lost a thousand, kept right on losing.

"I wonder if that's honest money?" I said to Mitchell. "It doesn't seem to have any weight with Clonmel!"

He'd struck a bad losing streak, as a matter of fact. McRae had sent his regular dealer and croupier off the job and was spinning the wheel himself, seeming to despise the

coin he was taking in. But I saw his nostrils begin to flare. As a matter of fact, I think that Clonmel pushed five or six thousand dollars into that machine before he stopped, all at once, rubbed his knuckles across his chin, and laid a sudden hold on the machine.

It was bolted into the floor, of course, but that didn't hold it now. The pedestal tilted. The bolts came ripping and groaning out of the wood.

I looked at McRae and saw him snap out a gun. Well, I had been expecting that, and I just grabbed his gun wrist and said:

"He'll pay for the damage, Denny."

"Blast you!" said McRae to me, but he didn't try to free himself.

The roulette outfit went over with a crash; the cowpunchers cracked the roof open with their yells. And then I heard Harry Clonmel lift his voice. The boom and the ring of it lodged somewhere in my mind so deeply that I can still hear the roar.

"Crooked as hell!" he shouted. "There's the brake McRae's been using!"

We could all see it, fitted under the floor boards, with the pin for his foot's pressure sticking up a trifle through a crack. A light touch on that lever would put the necessary drag on the wheel at the right instant, as the whirling died away to slowness. The weight of a breath could control the roulette wheel at that stage.

I couldn't believe what I saw. I had never liked McRae. Nobody ever had. But it wasn't possible, you'd say, for a fellow to be raised in a town from his boyhood and then

install crooked machinery to make sure of stealing the money of his friends. Stealing? Why, a thief is an honest man, a hero, and a gentleman, compared with a dirty snake who cheats at a game of chance.

The impossibility of what I was seeing there under the broken flooring turned me numb and dumb. It froze up the rest of the men, and that gave McRae a chance to be a murderer as well as a sneak. He got his hand away from my grip, pulled up the nose of his Colt, and fired pointblank.

He could not miss, you'd say. Not a target as high and as wide as Harry Clonmel. Besides, McRae was known as a fighting man. It was said that the only reason the sheriff let McRae marry his sister was that he was afraid of having trouble with Denny. And we all knew that McRae spent a couple of hours every day practicing to keep his hand in.

Yet Denny missed on this occasion, because as he pulled his hand free and moved his Colt, Harry Clonmel got in motion, too. He took a step forward and hit McRae with the full sweep of his left arm. McRae's bullet drove under the shoulder of Clonmel, knocked a pipe out of the teeth of Pete Meany, and went slam into a big joist at the end of the room. McRae himself was lifted off his feet at the same instant by Clonmel's punch. There must have been lift as well as drive in that wallop, because McRae trailed in the air, turned in it, and landed with a whang, on his face.

Clonmel turned aside and emptied the cash drawer of the roulette outfit into his pockets. He was entirely calm. Excitement makes a man puff more than mountain climbing, but Clonmel was not breathing hard. He counted out the sum of money that he had lost, and since there was plenty

more than that left, he pushed it over, and the crowd helped itself.

No one went near McRae, who began to lift himself from the floor. His face was a red blur. The punch had smashed his nose flat. His eyes were beginning to swell already, and the blood ran out of him in an amazing way. He looked as though he'd been slammed in the face by a fourteen-pound sledge, or the steel knuckle of a great walking beam. A trickle of red was even running out of his ears. It was a miracle that he could recover consciousness so soon.

However, he soon was on his knees, then on his feet, swaying, when his reserves opened a back door and came on the charge into the room. The bartender was one of them; two more were bouncers; they were all good fighting men, when it came to gun work, and I expected to see Clonmel go down full of lead.

Everyone else expected gunfire, too, and the boys dived for doors and threw themselves under tables.

But not a single weapon exploded. Harry Clonmel was the reason. He had picked up McRae by the neck and the belt, and now he heaved the gambler right at the three fighting men. They went down with a crash.

When they got up, they were headed in the opposite direction. They made tracks out of that room pronto.

I wanted to laugh, but I knew that it was no laughing matter. McRae was out of the picture, but not for long. He'd try to kill Clonmel. He had to kill Clonmel. If he were hanged for the murder, later on, that couldn't mean much more than what had already happened to him. He was a ruined man. The only thing he knew how to do was to run a saloon,

and now the fame of his crookedness would travel all over the West. McRae might as well go out and howl with the wolves, and before he did that he would certainly try to get even with the giant.

Then there was the sheriff.

Well, the rest of the boys seemed to figure things the same way. They eased out of McRae's place as fast as they could go. Only Clonmel was in no hurry. He sat down, made a cigarette, and lighted it. I was amazed at him.

"Clonmel," I said, "do you have to stay here like this?"

He looked over at me and nodded.

"They may want to come back and talk," he said, "and I ought to be here to listen."

"Do you as much as carry a gun?" I asked him.

"No," said he.

It was the answer I expected, but it staggered me just the same.

"You've showed a lot of nerve and a strong hand, but you've had some luck, too," I said to him. "Now you go saddle your horse and get out of this town, because when McRae comes back, he'll have the sheriff with him!"

"The sheriff?" asked Clonmel. "Does he herd with crooked gamblers in this town?"

"The sheriff's the brother-in-law of McRae," I answered him, "and he doesn't know how to miss with a gun. And he's coming here to collect your scalp. Do you understand?"

He nodded. After what he had done, you would expect to see a bit of the savage in his face, but, on the contrary, there was no sign of that. Instead, he was simply shining with good nature and high color, like a small boy who has

just finished a good round of tag. There was a blur of red on the knuckles of his left hand; that was the only mark that appeared on him. I could not help wondering what would have happened to the face of the gambler if Clonmel had hit him with his right. Now he sat back in his chair and continued to smile at me, though the sheen of his eyes had diminished a little.

"I understand that the sheriff is coming for me," he said. "I've never run away from a sheriff before and I don't want to begin doing it now. I'll stay here and wait."

I got so excited that I went up and grabbed him by the arm. It was like laying hold on the leg of a horse. I shook the heavy, loose weight of the arm and shouted:

"Clonmel, you don't know the sheriff. He's a killer. He'll kill you! Clonmel, do you hear me? Can you use a gun?"

"I can hit things with a rifle, now and then," said Clonmel. "I never used a revolver in my life."

"You'll be murdered!" I cried at him. "You fool, I know what I'm saying."

Clonmel took hold of my hands gently and moved me a little away from him.

"You want to help me," he admitted, "but it's not any use, and I don't want you to get into trouble. If the sheriff wants to see me—well, I'll have to stay here till he arrives."

It was like arguing with a woman, adding up two and two and two, and finding that they make zero. Then, before I could say a word more, a door opened, and the sheriff stood there. He wasn't raging. He was all cold, and there was a stony smile chiseled out around his mouth.

"Clonmel," he said, "you're a bully and a big-mouthed cur. I've come to get you—in the name of the law!"

When he mentioned the law, his grin turned from stone to iron and froze wider on his face. Law? Well, it was gun law that he meant.

Clonmel swayed forward to rise. Then I shouted:

"Sit still! If you get on your feet, he'll murder you. Sheriff, this is an unarmed man!"

"You lie," said the sheriff. "The yellow dog is going to get up and fill his hand."

I got so angry that I forgot to be afraid. I jumped in between them and shook my finger at the sheriff.

Behind me I could feel Clonmel rising like a mighty shadow.

"If you pull a gun on him,". I yelled at the sheriff, "I'll have a lynching posse after you. I'll bring this up to the law courts. I'll tell 'em what I know—that Clonmel hasn't a gun! Milton, keep your hand away from that Colt!"

The sheriff managed to center some attention on me, when he heard this. He had worked himself right up to the killing point. Now he saw that raw meat was being snatched away from his teeth and he shuddered like a crazy bull terrier.

But the truth of what I had said struck him harder than bullets. I wasn't a drinking man; I wasn't a fighting man; I was, in fact, just a dull, ordinary drone of a worker, trying to make a home and paying my debts as they came up. For that reason, in a law court my testimony would be about ten times as heavy as all the thugs and crooks and hangers-on of the gambling dump put together. Besides, in a society of

cowpunchers and young miners and prospectors, I was a fairly old man. All of these things began to add up in the mind of the sheriff. I could see them clicking in his eyes as big Clonmel pushed me gently to the side. The sweep of his arm was like the drive of a downstream current.

"I don't need anyone between you and me," said Clonmel to the sheriff. "You've used some language that—"

"Oh, hell," said Walt Milton, and turned on his heel and walked away.

Clonmel started after him. I ran in front of him and held out my hands. He walked into them. My arms buckled under the weight of him.

"Are you going to be fool enough to play his game?" I asked.

His lips worked a couple of times before he managed to unlock his jaws and answer:

"You're right. I've got to—I've got to learn how to shoot if I stay in this part of the country. If—"

He shut his teeth on the rest of it. Learn to shoot? Why, those hands of his were too big to be very fast, and what could he learn compared with the gun knowledge of men who were born with the smell of gunpowder in the air? He could only learn enough to make one first gesture, which would be his last. I could see the bullets smashing into his body, into his handsome face. It turned me sick.

"Clonmel," I said, "come up to my ranch and go to work for me. I'll teach you to shoot on the side."

It was the vaguest sort of a gesture on my part. I thought at first that he didn't hear me, because he was still staring