

Ernest Haycox



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1. — SMILING FUGITIVE

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JIM RENO, riding along the bottom of a considerable arroyo, heard the shot smash out of the right forward distance with that thinning flatness made only by a rifle. For a moment he thought he was the target—the natural reaction of a man with something of a price on his head—and his instant response was to crowd his pony against the more abrupt side of the arroyo and sweep it both ways. But nothing showed and no bullet's dust-dimple lifted its telltale shape; and lifting his eyes immediately thereafter to the bald bench he had been paralleling all this afternoon, he found neither marksman nor ravel of gunsmoke. Thus alertly poised he heard the speaking through the sultry silence again.

That moved him. Leaving the saddle he crawled to the rim of the arroyo, and there he saw the whole story in one long survey. A rider fled up the undulating pitches of the bench with every evidence of a mad haste, leaving a banner of dust behind him—the length of that banner showing exactly which creased depression he had started from. Out in the open prairie, about a thousand yards behind him, a horse stood on dropped reins, and slightly aside from the horse a man's body turned over and over on the ground. "Hit bad," mused Reno. Then, because his experience with grief in its multifold forms had taught him never to forget himself, he added: "And if he dies, here I am right on the premises to be accused of doing it." Looking back to the

bench, he watched the ambusher at last curl about a dun knob and vanish.

"I'm a sucker if I go out there," he grumbled. "Nothing but grief comes to the good Samaritan." Then he turned about and his eyes, sharp blue against the swept smoothness of a bronze skin, quested the back trail. As far as he could see, which was about three miles, there was only emptiness—good enough indication that his recent maneuvering in the pocketed country had thrown the posse temporarily off his scent. He had, he supposed, a three-hour lead; and with that decided, he slid back to his pony and rose out of the arroyo. Aiming for the fallen one, he shook his head with a mild feeling of contempt for his own weakness.

"Probably get shot for my pains," he observed. "Posse behind, fellow with a rifle up on the bench, and this poor devil dyin' out there—him no doubt thinkin' I'm the one that got him."

He did, then, a characteristic thing. He grinned, and the grin lightened the assured and rather hard cast of his features. The pressed severity of his mouth was released, small weather- wrinkles deepened about the eyes, and at once a touch of ironic, uncaring recklessness lay revealed. Three hundred feet from the prone hand, he checked in, straightening his tall flat torso. The fellow showed some sign of life. One hand reached outward. A dark and pointed face became distinct.

"Easy," called Reno. "I didn't dry-gulch you."

A surprisingly strong voice came out of the man. "I know that. Come on up."

Reno crossed the interval and slipped to the ground, immediately feeling a profound pity. Here was a young magnificently set-up body, long and leanly powerful. But it was shattered now beyond repair. There wasn't any hope; the man was going out. A telltale sweat streaked the dark skin and a grayish pallor mottled it. Now and then one long leg lifted from a reflex of pain. All that remained strongly alive were the eyes. The light that came out of them was vital, almost fiercely intense.

"Take care of yourself," said the man. "Look and see if—if he's still in sight."

"No. He pulled out after the second shot. Now, old trapper, we've got to do something in a hurry. I'll lift you—"

But the man shook his head, a slow, grim gesture of defeat. "Leave me alone. I'd fall to pieces."

"You're sure of that?" asked Reno, profoundly stirred. He had seen men die before—often enough in fact to have developed that deep and quiet sense of fatalism that colored all his thoughts and sometimes made him seem callous to suffering. But here was a man dying as a man ought to die—without fear and without crying. The bright black glance was actually defiant. It was hard to see such fine courage wasted.

"You're a stranger," grunted the man.

"Yes. Anything I can do?"

"If you're no fool, you'll never stop till this cursed country is behind you," said the man with heavy bitterness.

"You know who got you?" asked Reno.

"Not sure," the other said with effort. He pressed his lips together and Reno understood he would make no guesses.

On impulse he rose and got his canteen and tipped it to the man's lips. Afterwards he took off his hat and shaded the upstaring face.

"Bound anywhere in particular?" asked the fellow.

"If you want a message delivered," said Reno, "I'll carry it."

The fellow's eyes closed. He said rapidly: "Go to Morgantown and find Big Lafe McMurtree. Tell him. Tell him Two-Bits is dead. Tell him—it was a rifle shot."

"That's all?" asked Reno.

"Take my gun with you. Give it to him."

"Nothing else?" pressed Reno. "No information as to who it might have been?"

A great change appeared to shake the prone fellow. All muscular movement became faint. His voice dropped to a faint, rumbling pitch. And with his eyes still closed he said: "No, nothing. That's all."

Reno's deep sympathy moved him to reach out and grip the other's arm. And he said something then he never would have said to another person. "When you cross the Jordan ferry, my friend, the valley beyond will be green with grass and freshly watered. It'll be a pleasant place to camp. Is there no woman you'll want to send a word to?"

"Me?" muttered the other. "A McMurtree? What woman cares for that black tribe? There's only one in all the hills to grieve. She shouldn't, for we've hurt her ever since she was a kid. But she'll think kindly of me long after the rest have forgotten."

"Open your mouth," said Reno, tipping the canteen.

But there was no obeying gesture and Reno, looking down with a close curiosity, saw the other's lids slowly relax and creep partially open. He knew then, even before he laid his hand across that broad chest, what the answer was—the fellow had drifted on.

Rising slowly, Reno replaced the canteen and reached for his cigarette tobacco. Along the lean jaws appeared a sudden tightness, and the rest of his features took sharper and harder form—the unconscious reaction of a man who hated injustice; for at twenty-seven, with rather bitter and rough-and-tumble experience to draw from, he still possessed the instinctive fighter's sense of sureness and he still glowed with hot anger when cruelty and oppression and treachery came within his view.

"Another good hand ridin' into the sunset too soon," he muttered.

Lifting his eyes then, he saw that sunset was not far away, and it reminded him of the fact that he was losing the good minutes. He could do nothing more here. His position was dangerous, his promise to the dead man laid him wide open to further uncertainty. Nor could he undertake to move the fellow to the nearest town. That chore, he realized, would be done by the posse now undoubtedly closing up. What he had to do in short order was to put the miles behind him and to watch with an increasing vigilance. For it became plainer each moment that he stood a strong chance of being accused of this killing.

Reaching down, he got the other man's gun—a .45 with a worn grip that had a star and crescent inlay of mother-of-pearl—and stowed it in a saddlebag. Then he swung up and

lined out to the eastward at a strong canter. Another rear glance showed a clear trail.

"But," he reflected soberly, "this whole business is unfortunate for me. I'm a stranger and I'm mixed up in something that probably has a lot of strings tied to it. This range is no different than any other. Whoever wanted that fellow dead will move a lot of dirt to put the job on me. I expect to be challenged any time."

When the sun fell beneath the earth he was a good eight miles off in the depths of a land that ran west and south without visible break—a free and open range good to the rider's eye. To the north the tawny bench still paralleled him, increasing in ruggedness and backed up by a considerable range of hills that swung forward from the distance. Just as dusk fell he looked behind again and thought he made out the posse far off. Then darkness came with a rush and he laid the sandy miles beneath him, one by one. By degrees the bench began to curve away, and he followed along that bend with the general belief that the town he sought, which was Blackrock, stood somewhere ahead with one face showing to the prairie and the other confronting the hills. Around the bend he saw it in the shape of crystal-pointed lights all aglitter across the flats; and about eight o'clock he entered the narrow central street of a range town. A double row of locusts ran the length of the street, increasing the shadows of the buildings. A saloon blazed brilliantly nearby, men walked indolently beneath the second-story porch roofs, there was the sound of guitar and fiddle somewhere. Coming upon a water trough, Jim Reno let his pony drink

sparingly, then rode into the adjacent stable's runway. When he dismounted a hostler advanced from the darkness within.

"Grain him," said Reno, "but keep the saddle on him."

The hostler's face came closer and was thin and inquisitive. "Keep the saddle on?" he said.

"Yes," replied Reno shortly, and turned away. He knew that so simple an order exposed his hand, and he knew too that the news would spread. All these towns were alike, alert and suspicious, weighing strangers in the light of local politics. But he could hope for nothing better, nor could any other man on the run. Such deliberate plans as he had laid were worthless now, made so by the death of that rider on the prairie, and he could only guide himself from one uncertain situation to another. Understanding this, he strolled into a restaurant and ordered a meal.

"Only thing I'm sure of," he reflected over his eggs and bacon, "is that nobody will recognize me. Nobody."

Afterwards he went back to the street, fashioning a cigarette in the shadows. Half a dozen townsmen sat on the porch steps to his immediate right and talked in drawling syllables; the casual strollers drifted in and out of the saloon across the way. But as he paused in his tracks, debating with himself, he noticed one man walk from that saloon with an air of purpose and come across. He passed Reno at arm's distance, not seeing him; and he went straight to the stable, there turning in. It meant nothing, it meant anything; Reno held his place, on guard. A little later the man emerged from the stable and strode back to the saloon.

"Thought so," said Reno to himself, and dragged a deep draught of smoke through his mouth. He had wondered

about making his appearance in the saloon, but he realized now that it was a necessary step. Somebody was showing a curiosity he had to satisfy. "I've got," he reflected, "about an hour. Posse will be here then." So considering, he went over and shouldered through the swinging doors. At the bar he ordered his whisky and, dawdling against the bar, he studied the place through the plate glass mirror behind it.

It was comfortably filled, this room. Smoke hung thickly from the ceiling like ropes of moss and riders tramped around with the leisurely restlessness that rises from a full stomach and a free night. A half-dozen poker tables were in full blast. Two floormen moved swiftly through the crowd and somebody called rather sharply: "Three sevens will take this pot." Reno drank and laid his glass down.

"Stranger?" asked the barkeep, looking closely at Reno.

"Never saw me before?" countered Reno.

"No-o."

"Must be a stranger then," said Reno, eyes going back to the mirror. He saw something reflected from a far corner of the room. Over there three men stood against a wall and looked at him with more than casual attention. One of them—tall and broad and beyond the middle of life—bent his head and spoke briefly to the fellow at his left hand. That was all. The trio split and the addressed party strolled from the place. Reno paid his bill thoughtfully and turned out. Past the doors he sidestepped to get away from the light and went on down the walk.

"If I'm going to get clear of Blackrock," he thought, "it had better be now. Those men showed something more than idle curiosity. Might have expected it."

He drew up with a swift, defensive motion. A slim figure drifted away from a dark wall, wheeled across his path, and spoke with a softness and a casualness infinitely deceptive. "No offense, but there's somebody as wants to talk to you."

"I don't know anybody here," parried Reno.

"Would that make any difference?" asked the other.

"If he wanted to talk to me bad enough—I guess not," admitted Reno.

"That's it," said the other gently.

But Reno was exploring his chances and so he went on. "I'm not on anybody's payroll. Why should I take orders?"

"This man," answered the other, "is accustomed to having his way." And then a touch of cold insistence came into the words. "Anyhow, your horse probably won't be ready for you short of another ten-fifteen minutes."

"I wondered about that," remarked Reno. "All right. Lead the way."

The man turned, cut into an alley beside the saloon. Trailing down this utter gloom, Reno swung around a corner and stumbled through the clutter of boxes and trash. The man halted, tapped lightly on a door, and opened it. "Go ahead," he said, and Reno stepped into a room that was, he immediately recognized, directly behind the bar. All the sounds of the crowd came through in muted proportions. The messenger closed the door.

There were three men—that messenger, the tall and heavy fellow Reno had noticed before, and another whose square and bold and inordinately hard face had a look of brusque cruelty. Reno knew the types of men who rode the prairie, and his weighing glance told him all he wished to

know about this particular hand. Straight or crooked, the fellow was a driver and a killer. He weighed around two hundred pounds, his hips and legs were powerful after the fashion of a bronc buster. His torso was thin at the flanks and broadened again at the shoulders. He had long arms, the hands of which were oddly tapered and supple—good hands for a gun, Reno instantly thought. But it was the face that dominated Reno's attention—that harsh, blackened face with the pressed mouth, the flattened cheekbones, and the drilling, blinkless eyes as bleak as the jet black hair showing beneath, the man's hat.

All this he gathered at a glance. But he had been long enough at it to draw a dry comment from the older man in the room, who said shortly: "You're lookin' at my foreman, Hale Wolfert."

Reno swung his glance over to this one—quite a big man with a small, nut-shaped head on which were a series of sly and sharp Yankee features. His hair was white and he was perhaps better than sixty. Reno asked a sudden question. "Then who are you?"

"Peter Vilas," said the man, and seemed to watch for something definite to show on Reno's cheeks. Catching no reaction, he added another dry observation: "I own some of the prairie."

"What of it?" challenged Reno.

Vilas chuckled and looked at his foreman. "Comes to the point, don't he, Hale?"

But Wolfert neither answered nor moved. His eyes clung steadily to Reno and a scowling disfavor appeared to collect in them.

Vilas spoke abruptly to the third man, the one who had brought Reno to this room. "That's all, George." And George slipped quietly through the door. Vilas went on. "You were probably on your way straight through Blackrock, wasn't you?"

"What makes you think so?" asked Reno.

"Left your horse saddled in the stable."

"I wondered who was interested enough to go look," observed Reno.

Vilas expelled that humorless fragment of a chuckle again. "You're a sharp boy. Any name?"

"Reno—Jim Reno."

"It will do as good as any," said Vilas shrewdly. "Now, Reno, I need a favor done. I was thinking you'd do it."

"Why?"

"Because," said Vilas pointedly, "I can do you one."

"Maybe—maybe not," was Reno's noncommittal answer.

"Oh yes. I can keep you from falling into the hands of the sheriff. Is that a good guess or ain't it?"

"What's the favor you need?" parried Reno.

"I want a message delivered. Nothing more."

Hale Wolfert suddenly came out of his long silence. "I don't think you better use him, Pete."

"Why not?" demanded Vilas.

"I don't believe you better."

"Know anything about him?"

"No," said Wolfert.

"Then what's your objection?"

Hale Wolfert said emotionlessly: "I don't like the looks of him."

Quiet came to the room, and Reno stood there with the full force of both men's prying inspections beating on him. Vilas' little head came forward and his sly face became deeply thoughtful. But he said finally: "I can judge a man as well as you, Hale. He'll do. It's no odds anyway."

Wolfert shrugged his shoulders, and Vilas turned to Reno again. "How about it?"

"I see the point," drawled Reno. "All right. What message and where to?"

"Do you know anything about this country?" asked Vilas.

Reno remained thoughtfully still a moment, then said, "No," with a certain touch of reserve. It brought from Wolfert a more relentless, saturnine attention, and Vilas seemed to check his ready talk. But after a while he nodded and spoke again.

"Well, it's no country for invalids, Reno. I wouldn't send you out and not tell you that. Up in those black hills is a crowd of men that hate the sight of the prairie and everything that walks on the prairie. There's a little joint up there called Morgantown. Seventeen miles away. In the last forty years I do not recall a Morgantown man ever coming to Blackrock. As for the other way around, a Blackrock man couldn't get to Morgantown if he wanted. That's where I want you to take the message."

A long silence fell across the room. Reno studied the other two with an impassiveness that concealed a mask for one thought after another flashing through his brain. The lamp on the table cut long angles beneath his eyes, slanted across the swept bronze of Iris cheeks. "So," he said at last, "I'm the sucker."