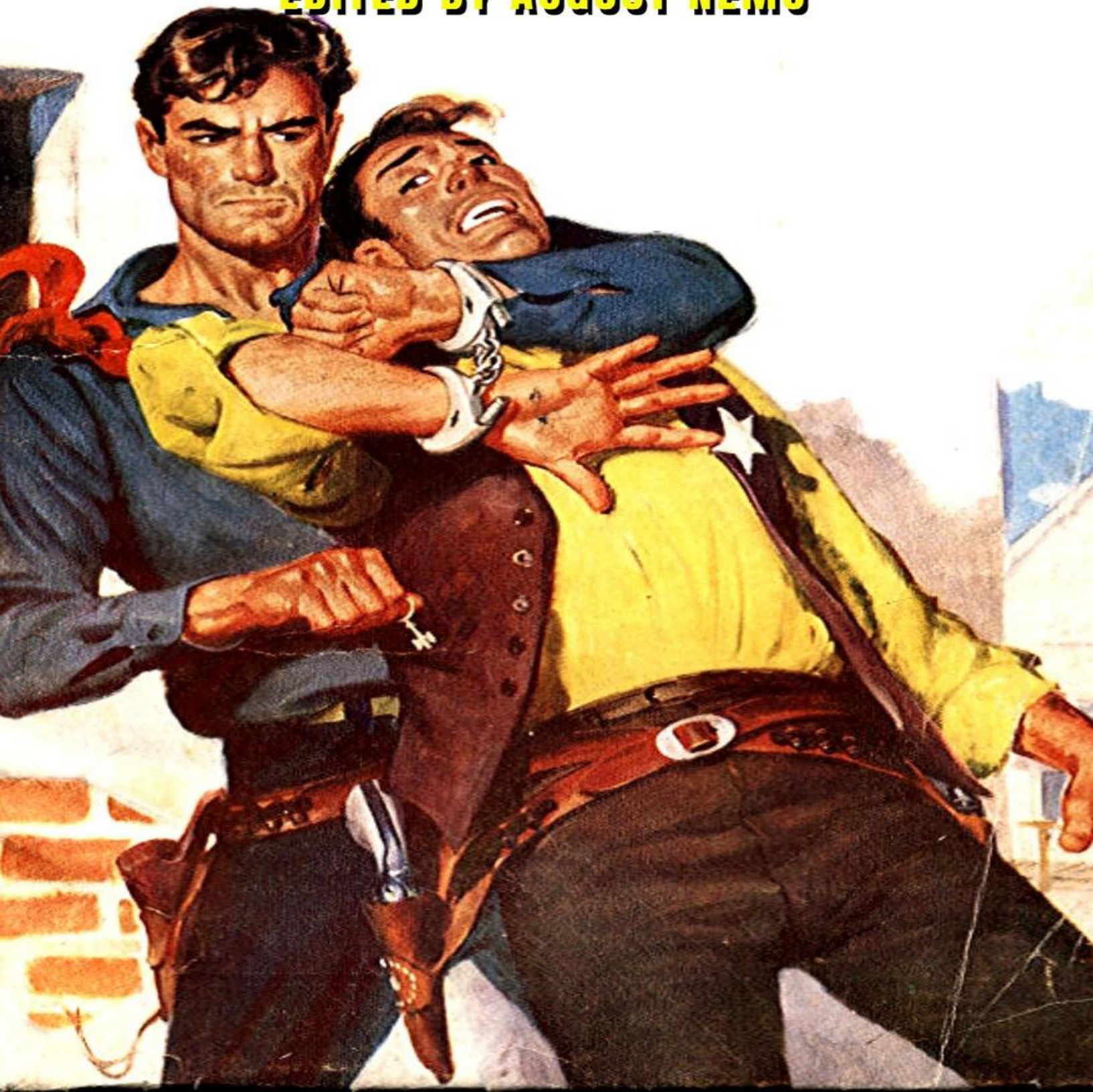
7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY ERNEST HAYCOX

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 BEST SHORT STORIES

Ernest Haycox

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August Nemo

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The Author

Ernest James Haycox (October 1, 1899 – October 13, 1950) was an American author of Western fiction.

Haycox was born in Portland, Oregon, to William James Haycox and the former Martha Burghardt on October 1, 1899. After receiving an education in the local schools of both Washington state and Oregon, he enlisted in the United States Army in 1915 and was stationed along the Mexican border in 1916. During World War I he was in Europe, and after the war he spent one year at Reed College in Portland. In 1923, Haycox graduated from the University of Oregon with a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism, where he also started writing under professor W. F. G. Thatcher. In 1925, Haycox married Jill M. Chord, and they would have two children.

He published two dozen novels and about 300 short stories, many of which appeared first in pulp magazines in the early 1920s. During the 1930s and '40s, he was a regular contributor to Collier's Weekly from 1931 and The Saturday Evening Post from 1943. Fans of his work included Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, and the latter once wrote, "I read The Saturday Evening Post whenever it has a serial by Ernest Haycox."

His story "Stage to Lordsburg" (1937) was made into the movie Stagecoach (1939), directed by John Ford and featuring John Wayne in the role that made him a star. The novel Trouble Shooter (1936), originally serialized in Collier's, was the basis for the movie Union Pacific (1939), directed by Cecil B. DeMille, starring Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea. Haycox wrote the screenplay for Montana

(1950), directed by Ray Enright, which stars Alexis Smith and Errol Flynn.

Haycox died after unsuccessful cancer surgery in 1950, at the age of 51, in Portland. In 2005 the Western Writers of America voted Haycox one of the 24 best Western authors of the Twentieth Century.

At Wolf Creek Tavern

PAUSING on the long gallery of the tavern porch, Eden Ballou looked vainly at the familiar scene for some indication of that change she so definitely felt. It was another high noon and in half an hour the stage would come straining out of the sultry southern prairie into the half-light of this wooded pass, tarry briefly, and roll on to the northern flats. Great red-bodied pines shut out a brass-colored sky; the underbrush of those gentle ridges girting the tavern back and front was a dull, dusty emerald. Wolf Creek's crystal surface moved through shadow and brightness, and at either end of the tunneling road tawny flares of brilliance announced the open country beating against the timbered belt. It was the same; yet in the shade and in the silence was a faint quality that touched Eden. When trouble came, this was its forewarning—a greater stillness in which the air seemed brittle. Juba Bill, who tended the stage company's relief horses, lay asleep on the cooler side of the barn. A faint streak of dust down the road announced the passage of some recently unobserved rider.

"Trenkard and Jim Rawle again," thought the girl.

After that she was not surprised. A file of six men cut out of the farther trees and halted at Wolf Creek's margin, one of the party leading a riderless mount. Jim Rawle came on and forded the shallow water. He looked at Eden, a sudden reserve covering what had been in his eyes. Eden thought: There's always that fence between us.

"Nobody here?" he asked.

"No," said Eden. One firm white arm rested against a porch post. Her body, slimly tall, leaned gently against this support. A little shaft of sun splashed down on her yellow

hair and illumined the cool composure of her cheeks. "No," she repeated, "not yet."

He was again watching those quiet vistas of the ridge opposed to him. Presently he said, "How's things with you, Eden?"

She wanted to ask: Why are you afraid of me, and what's kept you away from here so long? But she didn't, for if Jim Rawle's pride was stiff and intractable, so was her own. They were, she thought, both alike. Both fools. The trouble was they had known each other since childhood and there was nothing new about her so far as Jim Rawle was concerned. "Good enough," she said aloud.

He turned with an unhurried yet definite motion, lean flanks and flatly square shoulders drawn into line. A compact body fell out of the eastern ridge at a gallop, whirled along the road, and made a violent halt beside the porch. On the foremost horse sat a bulky, heavy man whose face was bold, rather dark, and very arrogant; his eyes were pale green and pointed with a restless, discontented light. Jim Rawle was instantly formidable, instantly alert.

"You wanted to see me, Trenkard?"

Trenkard dropped from his saddle, came within a yard of Rawle. His attention went momentarily to Eden. She only nodded to him.

Jim Rawle's voice bore down insistently. "You wanted to meet me?"

Trenkard said: "You've closed Stone Gap against my cattle."

"Yes."

"Do you figure I'm goin' to drive beef thirty miles roundabout, when that short cut's there?"

"For you it is no longer there."

"No?" intoned Trenkard. "I think different."

"That's too bad. You'll drive no more stock through the gap, across Rawle range."

Watching them, Eden felt the repressed violence behind each word, the long-burning animosity holding them apart. It was something they had inherited from another generation and could not escape. Trenkard, more at the mercy of his temper, made no attempt to conceal the stormy run of his thinking.

"Blood's been let at Stone Gap before, Rawle. You won't close it. Trenkards have put stock through the gap for thirty-one years. It's common-user."

"It has been," corrected Jim Rawle. "But not now."

"You're breaking the old agreement?"

"Yes."

Trenkard said heavily: "Then you're quite willing to start the old fight again?"

"Let me clear your mind," stated Rawle. "The agreement was made between our families to end a bad mess. The gap is ours. We opened it to you for the sake of peace on the clear condition that there was to be no more fighting between your side and mine. A week ago I found the remains of a fire over in Red Rock coulee. There was plain evidence of cattle having been driven off my range to that fire. What for? To change brands, of course."

Trenkard's body shifted slightly. "This country is full of stray rustlers. Don't jump at conclusions."

Rawle's left hand went to a vest pocket, found something, held it out on a flat palm. Eden saw only a bit of twisted wire. But Nick Trenkard's lips became a white line, his gaze clung to the wire. Then he glanced toward the Rawle men stationed across the creek.

Rawle flung the wire at Trenkard's feet. "I found that near the fire. Maybe there's a lot of stray rustlers around, as you say. But you'll find that wire twisted into one of your brands, mister. Stone Gap's closed to you from now on."

Trenkard let his own temper have its way. "All right—two can work at that! If you're drawin' the lines tight, so will I. Wolf Creek is the boundary between ranches. Get across that water and stay there!"

"This ground here doesn't belong to you," Rawle reminded him.

"It's on my side of the creek," said Trenkard, full of insolence. "It's in my general territory. I'll tie you up like you're tryin' to tie me. Don't come across that water any more. Not even to reach this tavern."

"Stick to your proper rights," grunted Rawle. "You've got no lick of authority short of that ridge there. Or is it just an excuse for trouble you want?"

"I don't want to meet you here after today," insisted Trenkard.

"You probably will," returned Jim Rawle quietly.

What Eden feared then was the one violent motion or the one careless word that would burst this fragile semblance of neutrality. Nick Trenkard, full of cruelty and guile, never wanted a fight till he had first destroyed the confidence of the other man. It was his invariable manner; and he had

deliberately built up a reputation as a fast, tricky antagonist. All Trenkard's men were rigid. Across the creek Rawle's five hands never had stirred during the talk. Juba Bill, who had seen this ancient introduction to violence before, sidestepped the whole length of the barn and now stood safely at a far corner.

Then relief went through Eden like a cold current; down at the southern end of the road the flaring prairie light turned cloudy and the clack and rumble of the stage swelled forward. It destroyed the tension, shifted Trenkard's lowering glance. He looked around, made a deliberate pivot, and got to his horse. Saying nothing more, he led his crew rapidly through the trees and up the ridge.

Eden said: "Isn't there any better way, Jim?"

Rawle looked at her. "Tell me this, Eden. You think a lot of him?"

The way he said it, half in wonder and half in accusation, both angered and hurt her. "Why?" she demanded. "What could make you—"

But he turned away, and she saw the anger go deliberately from his face. The stage came on through the ruts, four lathered horses at a steady trot. Lee Olwell, high on the driver's seat, halted the stage exactly at the porch and called out: "McKinley died yesterday, and Teddy's on his way to be sworn in."

Juba Bill ducked behind the horses, unsnapped the tugs, dropped the tongue, and went rapidly off with the team. Jim Rawle stood at the coach door, smiling one of his infrequent smiles and handing out a small and vivid and graceful girl. She was Paula Jacklyn. Afterward Henry Jacklyn, Circle Dot owner, crawled from the coach and twisted his cramped legs.

"Olwell," he complained, "you drive like a crazy man."

"Hand down Paula's grips, Lee," said Rawle.

Paula turned. "No. I'm going through to the ranch with Dad."

Eden Ballou marked Jim's surprise. "I thought you and he were going to put up at my place for a couple of days?"

"I only said 'maybe' in my letter," contradicted Paula. "But Dad wants to get to Circle Dot for a quick visit. We'll be back on the morning stage. Let's have our talk while we eat."

"Don't blame this change of plan on me," grunted Henry Jacklyn. "I'm agreeable to put up with Jim and you blamed well know it, Paula. Trouble is, Paula she's ate so much dust gettin' here she don't want to ride the ten miles to your tepee on horseback."

Paula Jacklyn raked her father with one masked glance of irritation. Then her mobile face managed a bright smile for Jim Rawle. Her hands were very graceful in explaining away the moment's embarrassment. "I'm a mess. These clothes are ruined, Jim. I'd feel terrible in them. Another time, maybe."

"Didn't you bring along something easy to ride in?" asked Rawle.

Henry Jacklyn's grin was ironic. "My boy, you're lookin' at a lady. Ride? No, no. She did all her ridin' and ranchin' when she was a kid. Not any more."

"We'd better eat then," said Rawle, visibly disappointed. "Lee won't want to waste time."

Paula turned on Eden as though seeing her for the first time. Her "Hello, Eden," was something on the border of indifference and recognition. Returning that suave greeting,

Eden Ballou wondered how this Paula, who once had been only another child knocking about an isolated ranch, had so contrived that ordered perfection. She was apparently aloof from heat and dust, untouched by it. She was neatness and bigness from head to foot, lovely to look at—an effect, Eden realized, that had the appearance of being accidental but that took labor to create. Paula's eyes were dark and touched with a glint of speculation.

Eden went through the dining room to the kitchen, dished up, and carried dinner to the table. She noticed that Paula had taken the head of the table. Rawle sat soberly on one side, Henry Jacklyn amusedly on the other. Eden poured the coffee, sat down nearby.

"Eden, honey," said Henry Jacklyn, "why ain't you moved to town, into the giddy whirl of the alleged civilized folks?"

Eden smiled, feeling rather than seeing Jim's odd side glance. "Somebody," she said, "has to work."

Lee Olwell came in and made no bones about his hunger. "I can drop you at Circle Dot in one hour exact, Henry," he said. "And I'll pick you up in the morning for the return trip at seven-thirty."

"I was bankin' on that visit," mused Jim Rawle. "When are you going to make it, Paula?"

"Come to town," she countered.

"I'm supposed to own a ranch," Rawle reminded her. "You ought to remember something about the work done on one."

"Don't expect her to remember anything as pertains to ranchin'," warned Henry Jacklyn. "She's a lady, like I told you. She wants to forget her poor beginnin's."

Paula Jacklyn brushed the interruption lightly aside. "We dance every Saturday. We have balls. I am studying French, Jim. You ought to be able to quit riding for a few days. I can offer you more entertainment in Buffalo than you can offer me on Y Cross."

There was, Eden knew then, an understanding between them; Paula's air had that touch of possessiveness not to be mistaken. Olwell finished his meal and got up. He said, "Five minutes," warningly, and tramped out.

"You don't like it on the range then, Paula?" said Jim Rawle, after a moment. The direct question got no ready answer from Paula. But Henry Jacklyn spoke his mind. "Jim, listen. It ain't in my womenfolk to like it. My wife stood it ten years and then I had to build a stone mansion in Buffalo. The idea was, so I was told, to give Paula a better education and better friends. You're lookin' at a girl that's got her mother's slant totally. Not mine. No livin' in the wilderness. No, sir. I have ridden back and forth from town to Circle Dot these eleven years. I've got two homes and ain't I the lucky man to afford such luxury? Socially the Jacklyns are right in the middle of the puddle, up amongst white folks. The idea seems to be, Jim, that you've got to grow away from where you started or you ain't makin' any progress at all."

Paula Jacklyn's cheeks turned a deeper rose.

"You're making us out pretty small, Dad. What's wrong with having a house in town? All the big ranchers' families have —the Tremaines, the Whatts, the Remingtons. Jim, you're the only first-class cattleman in this country who doesn't live in Buffalo."

"You can't run an outfit from a distance," countered Rawle briefly. Then he apologized to Jacklyn. "Nothing personal,

Henry. For me it wouldn't work. Maybe when I'm fifty it might."

"I'm fifty," said Jacklyn, "and it still don't work."

Paula broke in. "That block Mr. Madden owns is for sale, Jim. It is next to our place and in exactly the right location. It would be wonderful for a house."

"As big as a hay barn," added Jacklyn, "for Jim to eat his heart out in when he knows he better be in the hills. Jim, never think of it."

"You can't see living out here, then?" insisted Jim Rawle.

Paula's glance was pointed. "What about the woman? What's in it for her?"

"I must have been wrong," mused Rawle. "I thought there was as much in it for her as for the man."

Paula watched Jim Rawle closely. "Supposing you stay in these hills. What will you be like at Dad's age? I know. You'll be one more of those leather-colored old men with the sand ground into you. Never happy off a horse, never at ease in any company except the roundup. A loud-talking sage-brush tyrant like Captain Hall of Bench U, who is worth a half million and has the manners of a bull in a parlor."

She stopped with a quickness that was to Eden like the confession of a mistake: she had said too much. Now she covered it with that frank, vivid smile and got up, extending her hand to Rawle. "Let's go out and talk a minute."

"Hold on," said Jacklyn. He rose and gathered his dishes. "This is camp style, or have you forgotten that custom?"

Paula glanced at Eden. "I thought this was a tavern where you paid and went on."

"It is," was Eden's answer. "I make my living by waiting on people."

Jim Rawle's expression displayed irritation. "Go on," Eden told him. Paula drew him out of the dining room. Henry Jacklyn took his dishes to the kitchen and came back.

"Eden, was that Trenkard's pony I saw when the stage rolled up?"

"They're quarreling again, Henry."

"There's no end to that but a sorry one," said Henry Jacklyn. "Nick was treacherous as a kid, which you'll remember. He still is. If he didn't think he could beat Jim Rawle to the draw, you wouldn't see him darin' to argue with Jim. Look here, Eden, what's wrong between you and Jim?"

"Nothing."

"You and him were thick as thieves all through your younger days. You're foolish, honey. He's a fine boy and he'll ride high through this country. My girl won't make him a good wife. Her kind is some fellow like Madden's son. She'd do Pete Madden a lot of good. But Jim needs a ridin' partner."

"What've I to do with that?" demanded Eden.

Henry Jacklyn laid a dollar on the table. "I'd give a great deal to see you cut the ground from under that strong-minded gal of mine. You've got everything to do with it. Jim's a fool not to see what she's tryin' to twist him into. So long."

Eden followed him to the porch. Jim Rawle handed Paula into the coach and she bent gently and kissed him and said, "Think about it, Jim. Meet me here in the morning."

Henry Jacklyn swung up on the driver's seat beside Olwell and the coach lumbered away. Jim came up to Eden and