

A black and white photograph of a cowboy herding a large group of horses across a dusty field under a cloudy sky. The cowboy is in the center, seen from behind, wearing a hat and riding a dark horse. A large herd of horses is moving away from him, kicking up a cloud of dust. The background shows rolling hills under a sky with scattered clouds.

Ernest Haycox

BURNT CREEK STORIES

COMPLETE COLLECTION

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Burnt Creek Stories - Complete Collection

**Western Classics: A Burnt Creek Yuletide, Budd
Dabbles in Homesteads, When Money Went to
His Head, Stubborn People**

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A BURNT CREEK YULETIDE

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By day the scooped-out clearing that formed Burnt Creek seemed rather bleak. The surrounding jack pines were drooped under a niggardly coat of snow, and the ground was a streaked white across which the Bend-Klamath Road straggled, taking brief respite from the forest. In truth, the first inch of snow in the desert country makes the land resemble nothing so much as a molting hen minus all but tail feathers.

As darkness closed down and Christmas Eve came, the snow drifted heavier and the kitchen lamp of the solitary crossroads store cast a mellow gleam through the window and upon the ground. Old man Budd, having attended to his night meal, stood on the front porch and watched the air grow dizzy with flakes—quite strange and quite beautiful to this lonesome storekeeper. He struck a match to his pipe and wrapped the Mackinaw tighter about him. The lamplight managed to push its rays through the white flurry and faintly illumine the snow-encrusted branches of the dwarf pines. They looked ever so much like Christmas trees, and Budd, drawing sharply on the pipe, was aware of an old, old memory that would not be brushed aside. It was the sweet and mellow thought of his far-away boyhood home in a Pennsylvania village. On just such an eve as this they would be sleigh riding, and the windows of the neighboring houses would be warm with light and silhouetted with tinsel and glittering trees—pleasant, cheery houses. And he would fall asleep with the utter relaxation of youth in his own feather bed, to wake on Christmas morn with the church bells sounding across the frosty air. He had never cared much for

those bells as a boy. Middle age, somehow, made their chimes infinitely peaceful, infinitely poignant.

He drew at the pipe with harsher strength. All day he had been plagued with depression, and now the night with its weird shadows and white silence caused him to move aimlessly up and down the porch. Emotion did not easily break through his strong, inscrutable face, so he stared at the drifting snow, at the dark outline of the pines, while the church bells of far-off Pennsylvania haunted his brain.

"Christmas evenin'," he murmured. "Just like another night, only there's a difference. Somethin' wrong with you, old-timer. Too much of your own company, I guess."

A flurry of snow obscured the pines entirely. Budd had the impression that someone was coming toward him from the Bend-Klamath Road. The impression was verified when horse and rider bulked through the white storm and approached the edge of the porch. Budd moved back. The rider slid from his saddle and under the roofs protection, beating the flakes from his coat and stamping heavy boots against the floor boards. It was entirely too dark to make out features, but the storekeeper, who knew every homesteader and cow hand for fifty miles around, welcomed this unknown visitor gladly. Here was companionship for Christmas Eve.

"Bad time to be out," he said. "Lead your horse in back to the barn an' I'll throw up a little snack meanwhile. Who is it? My eyes ain't so good as they was once." He stared through the velvet shadows.

The newcomer leaned against one of the two-by-fours which supported the porch roof. For a moment he said nothing at all. Then a grunt of amusement, which was half a whine and half an essay at contempt, issued from him. "Never could see very well. Dunno your own son, I reckon. Bad egg rolled back to smell up the place for a bit."

Budd's head jerked up. "Dan?" he challenged.

"The same. An' I'm in a powerful hurry. Got somethin' to eat?"

The answer came as an explosion of temper. "Nothin' fer you, my lad! You wore out your welcome long ago! I told you to git away an' stay! You're no son of mine. Git off this porch!" He finished the declaration with a bellow, striding forward with a forbidding arm. The younger man was but a dwarf in front of the storekeeper's massive bulk and seemed even smaller when he huddled back against the two-by-four.

"Aw, cut it out," he growled, and again a whine tinged his words. "I didn't come because I wanted. They're after me, an' I ain't had a bite of grub since mornin'. Gimme that an' I'll leave right off."

"In trouble again, huh? Like a yellow dog you run for cover with your tail atween your legs. Well, I've given you my last boost. Ain't goin' to fish you out of any more scrapes. You made your bed. Now you sleep in it!"

"It wasn't my fault this time," protested his son. "The gang did it an' framed me! Honest...I'm clean. They framed me, I tell you. Sheriffs on the way here, too! Lemme have a bite of something and a cup of hot coffee! Fer heaven's sake, don't let a man freeze out here!"

Budd dropped his arm. Here was his wayward son come back to bring him sorrow on Christmas Eve. The boy had left five years before, choosing wilder company in spite of all that Budd might do to dissuade him. And so, after many bitter quarrels and much forgiveness, he had disowned him, had closed the last sober, belated chapter of what had once been—twenty-five years back—bright romance. No one ever mentioned Budd's son in his presence.

The younger man shifted, whimpering. "Aw, lemme in. It wasn't my fault. And I ain't askin' for protection. Just gimme something to eat, and I'll beat it." The apparent hopelessness of his request turned him to childish rage. "Who wants your protection, anyhow!" he shouted. "I don't! Don't want a thing you can give me! It's your fault. Maybe if you'd handled me like a white man when I was a kid, I'd been decent!"

All of a sudden those church bells began to ring again in the storekeeper's ear. Maybe the kid was right. Maybe it was partly his fault. It takes a mother to bring up children, and the kid had never had a mother but had grown piecemeal in the pines and on the desert while he, Budd, strove to make a living from the harsh land. This was Christmas. What was Christmas for but the giving of gifts? Not just packages wrapped in white tissue paper but other things. So the storekeeper, who knew his son to be worthless yet wished to believe there was in him a redeeming spark, moved aside.

"All right, Danny," he said in a gentler tone. "Go in."

The younger man brushed by, teeth chattering, and ran to the stove. "Shut the door!" he ordered sharply. "Don't be a fool! Sheriff might be lookin' from the road right now!"

Budd did as requested and walked into the kitchen. When his son turned around and faced the lamplight, the storekeeper was startled by the change he saw. Once there had been a certain youthfulness on Danny's face, a certain handsomeness to hide the petulant mouth and the greedy eyes. It was no longer present. An unwholesome wisdom was imprinted on the face now, broken by lines of reckless living. The mouth which formerly had curved in a too-frequent pout was set in a perpetual sneer. If he knew anything, the storekeeper told himself, he knew that his son was wholly bad. It took but a glance at the prematurely hardened face—Dan was twenty-five and looked ten years older—to reveal that.

And yet this was Christmas! Here was his prodigal son. For good or bad, he had come back. Budd's lonesome heart was eased at the thought. He went to the cupboard and took from there bits of food he had recently put away.

"What's wrong now?" he asked.

"Aw, it wouldn't be any use to tell," replied Danny. He saw that his trick had worked and, like some mongrel cur, grew bold and sullen. "Don't worry about it. Just pass out the grub."

A dish slammed on the table, followed by Budd's angry fist. "You snippet! Don't give me any of your tongue! I'm askin' you once more! What happened?"

Dan slid into a chair and attacked the victuals. Either from fear or hunger he would not raise his head, but between wolfish gulps he told his story. "Was playin' pool in Bend with Mike Reilly an' Toots' Billmire..."

"Eghh! Herdin' with cow thieves now, huh?"

"Who can prove they're cow thieves?" cried Dan passionately. It seemed to touch a very raw spot, and he dared face his father. But the crafty eyes were not accustomed to so direct a meeting, and slid quickly away. "Anyhow we was playin' when Mike got in a fight with the house man, kicked the lights out, and pulled his gun. Mike was some drunk, I guess. There was a great ruckus. Then somebody donged me on the head and down I went. When the lights come on, there was the house man on the floor...dead. Mike did it, I swear. But the double crosser had clipped me in the dark and transferred guns. I saw it in a minute. The sheriff come on the run. Mike an' Toots starts for the rear. What was I to do, hold the sack? Not on your life! I couldn't explain those two empty shells. I dusted. Sheriff saw which way we went an' he knows where we'll be headin' for, I reckon."

Budd's eyes never left the furtive, pinched face. Every word he seemed to weigh, listening for that ring of truth which, though often very faint, accompanies the sincere at heart. He could not hear it and, after a dismal silence, shook his head.

"Dan, you're lyin' to me."

"I ain't!" yelled the son, white with rage. He kicked back the chair and stood up. "I tell you they framed me! Oh, I know I ain't no saint! It don't make no difference what I say, I guess. You never believed me, and nobody else ever has. I'll clear out now. You can go jump in the creek for all I care. Sweet father you've been!"

Budd was shaken mightily. This was a greater bitterness than he had ever heard in a man. Almost unreasoning. Perhaps he had misjudged. Perhaps he had been harsh. If there had only been a mother to care for his boy. Anyhow, this was Christmas, and those sweet, far-off bells mellowed his thoughts. He wanted to believe that Danny spoke the truth for once. He wanted to believe it more whole-heartedly than he had ever wanted to believe anything. A tenderness, strange and unfamiliar emotion, clutched his heart.

"All right, Dan, I ain't goin' to argue. I'll believe it. Now where you aim to go? This is a powerful bad night."

A greedy flash illumined the furtive eyes. "Across the line, I reckon. 'Tain't so far. But I'll need some money. Flat busted."

Budd was slouched over, his double chin rolling against the folds of the Mackinaw.

"If you only had a mother," he murmured, "things might have been different."

"Aw, cut that out!" rasped out Dan. "No more slush. I've heard it too many times."

"All right, Dan. Don't aim to quarrel. This is Christmas night."

"Christmas? Well, what about it? Just like any other night, 'cept it's a rotten cold desert to cross."

"Why, no," answered Budd, "that ain't all. It's a night they give things. Sort of a time to wipe out debts and mend the holes in the roof, you might say. Time to undo bad things, an'..."

It was more than the younger man could endure, and his rat-like temper broke into a shrill squall. "Will you cut that crap? I ain't gonna stand it!" But he checked the rest of his turbulent objection; in his father's sober, lonesome face was the opportunity for which he had been waiting. "Gimme some money now, an'..."

The snow, seen through the window, came down in a solid mass, a wind rattled the panes, and the sun-warped

boards slatted boisterously. Beyond and above these sounds was another that swung Dan around like a cornered animal, arm raised instinctively to the front door. There was a voice, then another, subdued, followed by the scrape of feet on the porch.

"Sheriff," whispered Dan in a gust of fear. "I'll slide out the back. Put 'em off while I get clear."

A moment later he had disappeared while a heavy fist pounded at the front door. Budd passed a hand across his face as if waking from a stupor. For a few moments this fateful evening the load of care had left him, or at least he had forgotten it. Now it was back, bringing greater weight, greater depression. He fumbled with his pipe and walked toward the door. He hadn't reached it when Cal Emmons and a deputy broke through, strode past the littered counter, and shook the snow from their garments. The sheriff stopped on the kitchen threshold and shot a glance about the room. Budd waited gravely.

"It's a hard night," offered the sheriff, seeming embarrassed.

"That's right, Cal."

The sheriff thrust his finger toward the table where the empty dishes stood as witness to a recent diner. "You eat late, Dave."

Budd crossed his hands behind him and stared at the flaring stove grate. It seemed to him those mellow church bells chimed louder, more persistently. The sheriff turned to his deputy and muttered something in a low voice then began anew, obviously struggling after the appropriate words. He had been old man Budd's friend through twenty years, and the present mission held as much sorrow for him as for the storekeeper.

"That horse out in front...it ought to be stabled, Dave," he essayed. "Oh, by golly, there ain't no use in beatin' about the bush! Reckon you know what I'm after. It's an awful thing he did, Dave, an' I can't overlook it. You understand

that, don't you?" Receiving no answer, he stumbled on. "But mebbe he's scooted already. Now, Dave, you speak up an' tell me. Is your son hidin' here, or ain't he? If he's gone, we'll not waste any more time. If he's here, why...why I reckon we'll have to ask you to give him up, old-timer."

Budd drew at the cold pipe, tamping down the ashes with a finger that trembled slightly. "You ain't expectin' me to lie, Cal, so I guess mebbe I can't. Dan was here a mite ago. He went out the back way."

Emmons and his deputy strode toward the rear door while Budd watched, the pipe dipping between his clenched teeth, and a blaze of unexpected light shining from beneath his heavy brows. The sheriff reached the door first and put a hand to the knob. Simultaneously a draft of air struck them in the back and Dan's petulant voice issued warning. "Stay right there, gents. Claw air, *pronto*. Don't aim to fool with you people at all."

The officers swung around. Dan came through the front door, plucked their guns from the holsters, and tossed them behind a far counter.

"You two boobs sailed in here like you thought I was easy to take. Like I wouldn't make a fight. Don't you think it! When you take me, you'll know it." He appeared to be lashing himself into a rage. "Stand over in that corner. Now, Paw, I got to have some grub. That's why I come back. An' some money."

"Take what grub you want from the shelves," answered Budd. "There's a gunny sack on the counter. You'll find a little change in that tin box below the tobacco case." The storekeeper hardly moved a muscle of his face.

Dan worked swiftly.

"You're makin' a big mistake," warned the sheriff. "Better give in peaceable, Dan. I know your dad...else I wouldn't have walked in here so free an' easy. Better give up an' take what's comin'. We'll hunt you down if you don't."