
JACKSON GREGORY
THE MAN FROM PAINTED ROCK

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WHEN “Hard” Ross was mad he wasn’t a pretty thing to look upon. His rage surged upward through his sunburned cheeks and flared like fire into his gray-blue eyes that were usually cool. The men who went to him for orders and pay, and in whose strong hands the destinies of the Up and Down Cattle Range had resided for a matter of years, were not afraid of him, since they were not the sort of men to be afraid of anything that walked or had a name in the dictionary. But they had a way, at times like this, of going very quietly about their business.

“Do about it!” bellowed Hard Ross at the half-dozen quiet men in the bunkhouse. “What am I going to do about it, huh? Go to the law, you say, Harper? Yes, I’ll go to the law, by God! The law that men have gone to ever since Adam, a long time before the time of crooked sheriffs and rotten judges! The old law, the law there ain’t no bribing an’ no buying up, the law of a man’s right hand!”

It was a long speech for Hard Ross to make before breakfast, a rare bit of eloquence from him at any time, and the men looked at him curiously. Even Sunny Harper, whose yellow, tousled hair and eternal grin gave him his name, condescended to be serious.

“What’s happened recent?” he asked. “Everything was all right when we hit the hay last night.”

“All right?” cried Hard Ross angrily. “You mean we thought it was. Is it all right if a man goes to sleep with a

rattler in his blankets or a skunk under his pillow, just because he don’t know he’s got that kind of company? It wasn’t all right any more’n it’s been off an’ on for a year now. Only this time I got something I can put my hands on!”

There was something interesting, almost tangible in the storm of the foreman’s anger. The men, to the last man of them, looked at him with sharp and expectant eyes.

“It’s Silver Slippers this time!” Hard Ross flung the statement at them as he might have hurled a missile at the head of a man he hated. “She’s gone!”

“Silver Slippers?” queried Little John Sperry, his voice a weak, incredulous gasp. “Why, I tied her in her stall last night, Ross. I watered her an’ fed her the last thing.”

“An’ she’s clean gone this morning,” snapped Hard Ross.

“Maybe she broke away an’—” began Little John a bit uncertainly.

“Maybe I’m a fool, huh?” Ross cut him short. “Maybe she shut the barn door after she went out, after I dropped the bolt in the staple, huh? There’s no maybe about it; she’s been stole the same as one hell of a lot of other things has been stole during less’n a year. An’ this time I got both eyes open, an’ I’m getting the dead-wood on the man I want! You boys just set still an’ watch an’ you’ll see something.”

They sat still, all but Hard Ross, who stood at the open door, and the cook, who remained by his stove, a black stream of steaming liquid escaping from the coffeepot in his hands and spattering upon the rough boards of the floor. And then another man came in, a big fellow with round, muscular shoulders and smoldering eyes.

He came to the door from the well, where he had been washing, glanced carelessly about the long, low room, saw Hard Ross and the bright, hard anger in Hard Ross’s eyes, and started back. Every movement this man made was quick, but his leap now, sideways and back, was not quick enough. Hard Ross’s big hands had flashed outward, they had settled upon the other man’s shoulders, they had jerked him off of his feet and into the room and slammed him back, all in a second, so that his shoulders struck heavily against the wall.

“Hawley,” said the foreman, his voice quiet now, his eyes alight with a perfect joy of rage, “I’m goin’ to give you the beating of your life!”

“What’s the matter?” cried Hawley, his big hands wrenching at the other man’s wrists. “What’s eating you, Ross? Just because you happen to be boss here, you ain’t going—”

For answer Hard Ross jerked his right hand free, and with his hard muscles cording to the effort, drove it straight from the shoulder into Hawley’s face.

Hawley’s head snapped back, striking the wall, and he swayed a moment, all but stunned from the one blow; then with a powerful effort he wrenched away from the one hand holding him and sprang to one side. As he leaped the blood was running across a cut cheek and cut lips; his face was distorted with a wrath no less than Ross’s; his hand flew to his hip pocket.

“You damn fool!” he gasped chokingly. “I’ll kill you for that!”

But Hard Ross was not a fool, and he had no wish for pistol play this morning. He, too, leaped forward. He struck again before Hawley's hand could make the short journey to bulging hip pocket, and there was no man there in the bunkhouse who could have taken that second blow square in the face and stood up under it.

Hawley did not reel now; he fell heavily, not partially stunned but stunned entirely; and where he fell he lay very still.

Suddenly it was very quiet in the bunkhouse. The cook remembered his dribbling coffeepot and placed it back upon the stove. The men who had pushed back their chairs from the breakfast table came forward, looking at the man on the floor.

"You mean he done it?" queried Sunny Harper gently.

"I've just explained what I mean in words a young baby might understand," grunted Ross. He stooped, jerked the revolver from Hawley's pocket, and flung it under one of the bunks. "Give him some water, cookie. Out'n the bucket."

But it was Sunny Harper who brought a bucketful of cold water from the well and splashed it over the unconscious man's face and wrists. In a little while Hawley opened his eyes, wiped the blood from his face, and sat up. And as he moved his body, he moved his right hand. It went swiftly to his hip, found an empty pocket, and dropped again to the floor.

"What's the next play?" he asked coolly. His eyes, hard, sharp, malevolent, were upon the foreman's. "I'm down an' out, I guess, seeing as how you took me when I wasn't looking."

“I just naturally took you as soon as I could get you,” grunted Ross. “I couldn’t wait, that’s all.”

“An’ now maybe you’re going to tell me what you done it for?” he said with a keen questioning look in his smoldering eyes.

“No, I ain’t. Seeing as you know as well as I do! But I’m going to tell the other boys, an’ there ain’t no objection to you listening. You boys know how I put this Hawley on the pay list more’n a month ago. You know we didn’t need an extra man real bad, an’ you wondered why I done it, I reckon? I put him on because I had the hunch he was a crook, that’s why!

“There’s another man we’ve all got our eyes on quite a spell now, an’ that’s Bull Plummer of the Bar Diamond outfit. Well, I’d seen this man Hawley with Plummer, chummy as two of a kind, last time there was races in town, an’ I made the bet when he showed up for a job that Plummer was back of it, an’ that means something crooked. So I put him on an’ watched him.

“During the last two months there ain’t been any cattle lost, but I figgered he was just getting solid with us first. An’ then, last night, he couldn’t stand it any longer. I heard him come back into the bunkhouse about two o’clock, an’ I hadn’t heard him go out. But now it’s plain as print to me that he’s the gent who stole the finest blooded little mare as ever was foaled this side the Rockies. An’ any man as lays a hand on Silver Slippers gets what Hawley just got.”

Hawley, sneering, drew himself up and stood against the wall.

“What do you think I done with her?” he demanded. “I went outside to get a drink, an’ was gone about ten minutes. Think I et her?”

Ross shook his head.

“I don’t know what’s gone with her,” he replied bluntly. “She’s gone, and you know what went with her. I reckon you put up the job with Plummer, an’ he rode over or sent one of his yellow crowd to take her off your hands.”

The smile which came and lingered upon Hawley’s cut lips was not pretty.

“You’re sure great at guessing things,” he said slowly. “Only you’re quite some ways off in your guesswork, Mr. Ross. An’ as for proof—”

“Proof!” snorted Ross, flaring up again. “Do you take me for the sort of man that’s going to wait for proof? I know you’re a damn crook, an’ I know you had a hand in the taking of Silver Slippers, just as you’ve had a hand in a whole lot of Bull Plummer’s rotten play right along. That’s enough for me, Hawley. Now, listen to this: Do you want to know why I just beat you up a little instead of killing you outright as you deserve?”

“I ain’t curious,” muttered Hawley.

“All right. But then maybe the rest of the boys has got a right to know why I’m being so gentle with you after you’ve laid your dirty paws on the finest little mare as ever slapped her feet down on a cow range. An’ I’m telling ’em so’s you can hear if you want to! Boys,” and his deep voice went husky with the new emotion in it, “you know I’m putting it straight when I say that there never was a mare that could make Silver Slippers eat her dust. An’ what I’m going to say

maybe sounds mushy, but I don’t care a single damn what it sounds like. It’s so, an’ I ain’t the man to shy at the truth.”

And yet he did shy a little and hesitated and cleared his throat before he went on.

“It sounds funny, coming from a man like me,” the foreman continued, shifting a bit uneasily under many watchful eyes. “But I reckon there is just one thing in the world as counts. An’ it’s love! Now wait a minute,” he exploded with sudden fierceness, “until I can finish what I’ve begun, or I’ll have to beat somebody else up this morning. It’s love I’m saying, an’ that’s about what I’m meaning. There’s different kinds of love. I ain’t ever loved a woman an’ I ain’t going to. I ain’t ever been mad in love with whisky nor with poker. I don’t know as a man can say I’ve been crazy mad in love with life, even. But Silver Slippers—my God! I raised her from a sucking filly, an’ I broke her, an’ no man but me has ever slapped a leg across her back. Now you know what I mean?”

For a brief, uncertain moment the man’s hard eyes were unbelievably soft, and more than one man there, wondering, saw that they were wet. And then, suddenly swinging about upon Hawley so that he shrank back from what he saw in eyes no longer soft or wet, Hard Ross cried harshly:

“Why didn’t I pound the last spark of life out’n you? Why? Just because I want that little mare back! Just because you’re the one man I know who can go get her for me. An’ I’m passing it to you straight, Hawley, if you waste any time putting Silver Slippers back there in the barn, without a scratch on the silk of her hide, why then, so help me, I’m goin’ to kill you!”

Hard Ross’s jaws shut with a little click of the large, strong teeth. He turned abruptly and went to the breakfast table. The other men, silent for a little while, went to their chairs. Hawley, his face dead-white save for the scarlet threads of blood across it, turned and went down to the corral for his horse.

And then a stranger came into camp and everything was forgotten in the shock of his coming.

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It is a saying in the West that the law and barb-wire fences travel together; that one is as treacherous as the other; and that when they both come, the cattle country has got to move on.

The law and barb-wire fences had not yet invaded the mountain valleys in the Up and Down country. Sheriffs were not unheard of, but the district was big and wild and eminently self-dependent, and men had not forgotten the world-old way of settling their own arguments with their hands.

The Up and Down had been having its troubles for upward of a year now. Trouble upon the range is likely to mean just one thing: the loss of cattle for one reason or another. And, where fences and law have not come, the loss is very likely explained by the one word, “rustlers.” For, wherever there are men there are strong men and weak, good men and bad, and wherever there are cattle and the opportunity, there are men to seek the short cut to gold or the gallows.

When the Creation piled the high masses of the mountains and carved the deep-sided valleys, the opportunity was made. The Up and Down range had its natural boundaries, defined since Time was young. There was the valley, twenty miles of it in length, so narrow here and there that a cowboy riding upon one edge under the cliffs might pick off with his Winchester a deer browsing

upon the far side, bulging in places to a width of half a dozen miles. It was the Valley of the Twin Lakes.

At the “Upper End,” the creek which carried away the surplus of the two little lakes’ clear water to wander westward through the valley, had its beginning under tall sheer cliffs in a white froth over echoing waterfalls. For a man to climb the cliffs there on foot was a day’s work; for him to climb them on horseback was an impossibility. There was one of the range’s Nature-made fences.

Upon the two sides of the valley, north and south, the mountains stood steep in roughly parallel lines extending almost to the “Lower End,” twenty miles away. There were places here and there, narrow, rocky defiles rather than true passes, through which it was possible for cattle to work their way out and up, across the uplands, and so over into a neighboring range. But out of the score of men taking their pay from Hard Ross, foreman, there were always men whose allotted duty it was to visit these gorges daily, to see that there were no restless steers seeking to leave the home range, to examine the ground for the tracks which would tell if even a calf had gone that way.

And still, with all precautions the foreman took, again and again during the year cattle had been lost. They were gone from the range, and no close night-herding had been able to lessen the losses. A dozen big steers had gone in one herd, and that when big steers were worth seventy dollars a head. They hadn’t gone away of their own will, they hadn’t gone through the rocky passes, that much Hard Ross knew. But that was all that he did know about it. They were gone, eight hundred dollars gone in a night. And

picked cattle they were, too. The man who had engineered their theft had gone about his business coolly. He had picked and chosen; he had defied vigilance; he had laughed at precautions.

And that was not all. Again and again a single steer, or three or four beef cattle, “turned up missing.”

It was Bull Plummer’s work. That was the one thing of which Hard Ross was growing more and more positive. For, certainly, of all men none had a better opportunity than Bull Plummer to do this sort of thing, and no man had a harder reputation.

Plummer was owner and his own foreman of the Bar Diamond outfit, and the Bar Diamond lay parallel to the Up and Down just across the ridge to the west. If once Plummer and the hard crowd taking their wages from him could get the cattle across the ridge and into Bar Diamond territory, the rest would be simple enough. From there it was only a night’s drive to the railroad; and, to the cattlemen, railroad and crooked business were synonymous.

Such were conditions upon the morning when Hard Ross lost a mare five hundred dollars could not have bought, lost his temper, and bruised his fist upon the face of Hawley, the new man.

“Anyway,” muttered Ross as he watched the men going down to the corrals for their horses, “one good thing, I don’t have to report this to the Old Man down in the city. It’s my loss, an’ it ain’t his. An’ I’m sick and tired making reports how more stock is lost.”

He didn’t know yet what he was going to know in five minutes: he had made his last report to the owner in the

city. He went back into the bunkhouse, took up his hat and tobacco, and turned again to the door. Then it was that he saw the stranger coming into camp.

He was a strange sort of stranger, his way of coming stranger still; and big Ross grunted his disgust. The road into the valley from the nearest town, White Rock, thirty miles away, was as poor a road as a man ever strove manfully to engineer a Studebaker wagon along. And yet, coming up over a knoll in the floor of the valley was a big red touring car.

The automobile's engine was resting; the propelling power was a team of mules; the car rocked and jolted along behind a heavy log chain; a man riding on horseback at the side of the mules handled the reins and the necessary flow of language; and another man, the stranger, sat smiling upon the seat of his car and gazing with mild eyes upon the landscape through a pair of nose spectacles.

"A city guy coming camping," grunted Hard Ross jamming his hat hard down over his brows. "He'll be shooting at deer an' killing my cattle for me."

Then the mules came down the knoll at a swinging trot, the driver jerked them to a standstill in front of the bunkhouse, and the man in the car smiled pleasantly upon Hard Ross and wished him an amiable good morning. The boys at the corrals saw, saddled swiftly, and rode back to the bunkhouse to gaze upon the newcomer.

The newcomer smiled upon them all and got down. He had all the earmarks of a city guy, all right. In the first place, he wore a stiff hat, a derby. Then, he wore nose-glasses.

Then, he was dressed in patent ties, in neatly tailored and pressed gray suit, in new tan gloves. A fishing rod, newly bought in White Rock, thrust its way upward like a mast; a rifle in a brand-new case stood in the corner of the tonneau; there were suitcases and traveling bags innumerable. These things the cowboys saw before they saw the man himself.

Then the man under the clothes. He looked insignificant as he sat in his automobile; but on the ground, standing upon legs from which he strove to drive the cramp and stiffness, it appeared that he was a tall, rangy, not ungraceful young fellow of perhaps twenty-five or thirty, who might have posed nicely for the pictures of Kuttenheimer Swell Suits which decorated the signboards just outside of White Rock.

One hand came out of its tan glove and showed soft and white. There was a smudge of ink upon the thumb and forefinger which Ross was quick to see and which caused another disgusted grunt.

He was close-shaven, had shaved last night. He wore a gaily colored vest, a high white collar of the latest fashion, just like the collar the dudes in the Kuttenheimer Swell Suit pictures wore, a tie of bluebird blue, a diamond stick-pin. His eyes were a soft brown, filled with much mild curiosity as they ranged from Hard Ross to the rest of the boys.

“Which one of you men is Mr. Ross?” he asked when nothing but stares and still tongues greeted his arrival.

“I am,” answered Ross shortly. “What do you want?”

The young man offered his hand and his name together.

“I’m Mr. Sherrod.” He added a smile to the two other offerings. “I’ve come to stay with you a while.”

There was no glad hospitality in Hard Ross's sniff. He had troubles enough already. But the young man ran on quickly, drawing back his hand from the clutch Ross had been pleased to give him and wiping it upon a white linen handkerchief.

"I've brought you a letter from Mr. Hodges." He felt in his pockets, seemed alarmed, muttered, "Mercy! I'm afraid I've lost it—No," he concluded, with his beaming smile coming back, "here it is." He handed it to the foreman.

Ross took it swiftly, a little angrily, his sole thought that this young whipper snapper was some friend of Mr. Hodges, the owner of the Up and Down, and that the letter was asking Ross to make his stay a pleasant one, to have one of the boys show him where the best trout-fishing was to be found, to point out the likely places for deer, to watch over him so that he didn't fall off a cliff somewhere or take a drop into one of the little lakes and drown. But what Hard Ross read was this:

> DEAR ROSS:
>
> This will inform you that I have sold the Up and Down, brand and all, to Mr. Sherrod, to whom this will introduce you.
>
> D. M. HODGES

Hard Ross's comment was brief, characteristic, and perhaps all that could be expected. He looked from the letter in his hand to the touring car, to the man who had handed it to him, and said softly, "Well, I'll be damned!"

One would have said that young Mr. Sherrod's smile was of the brand warranted not to come off. He lifted his

eyebrows, adjusted his glasses, and beamed.

“Something of a surprise, eh?” he chuckled. “Well, well, so it is to me, too, my good fellow. But I had a pile of money, you know, and I was deuced well tired of the usual thing, you know, so I thought I’d have a try at it. Say, it’s great out here, isn’t it? And all this is mine now? This whole valley, those cows over yonder, the cliffs, the view and all? I’m going to have the time of my life! I say, Ross, give this other fellow a hand with my traps, there’s a good fellow. I dare say the cook’s got some coffee and biscuits and eggs? I’ll run in and have a mouthful. I rode all night.” He beamed over his shoulder, as he turned to the bunkhouse door. “I wanted to get here before the men went to work. You men wait until I come out. You take your orders from me now, you know.”

For a moment there was silence as Mr. Sherrod disappeared in search of breakfast. Then, simultaneously, there came a stifled curse from Hard Ross and a burst of laughter from the men upon their horses, a peal of merriment in which Sunny Harper’s musical baritone led in a paroxysm of pure glee.

A cowpunch isn’t afraid of work, and does many things during the day which soil his hands. He doesn’t mind that. But if there is a thing he abhors more than he does a sheep-herder, it is the type of human, called man for want of a proper name, who dances around at the behest of the idle rich, doing petty, servile things which the idle rich should do for himself. The other men laughed, Hard Ross swore again and with deeper, fuller meaning, and Mr. Sherrod’s things stayed in the automobile.

“As if it wasn’t bad enough already!” bellowed the foreman. “An’ now a man like him comes an’ is going to give his own orders, an’ the Up an’ Down is going to eternal hell in a handbasket!”

“Look out, Ross,” grinned Little John. “He’ll hear you, an’ you’ll get yourself fired. He don’t need a foreman, anyhow. Shucks, he can run a little outfit like this single-handed!”

“An’ I don’t want the job of keeper for a crazy man or mama for a mollycoddle,” snorted Ross. “Let him fire and be damned.”

But the coming of the man, fashionable clothes, inconsequential air, city manner and all, had had their sobering effect. The men, about to begin the day’s work, were suddenly stopped and must await the word he chose to give them. For he was the owner; and after all, though they had lived on the range long before he had heard of it, though it was home to them, they were hired men who had to obey his orders—or quit.

Evidently Mr. Sherrod was hungry and had little thought for the idle men waiting for him. It was close to half an hour before he came out to them, carefully lighting a huge black cigar.

He was evidently in a contented frame of mind. The line of his chest showed prominently under the gay-colored vest, his eyes were filled with smiling satisfaction as once more they swept the faces about him and went on to the steep walls of the valley. Then he seemed to remember the first and only order he had been pleased to give, saw his baggage still where he had left it, and turned, frowning, to Ross.

“I say,” he called sharply. “I said you were to take those things into the house for me. Didn’t you hear me?”

“I sure enough heard you,” was Ross’s surly answer. “I been holding down my job quite some time as puncher first an’ foreman next, but I’m double-damned if I ever agreed to take on the sort of jobs made for a boot-licking valet. If you want that stuff moved, I reckon the best way is to get in an’ move it yourself.”

There was a note of finality in Hard Ross’s tone. The day had begun badly for him, the spirit within him was still sore and chafed, the early morning anger was not yet entirely cooled. Else it is possible that he might have grinned and taken the new owner’s orders. But the spirit of revolt was high in him now, and there was no man who walked from whom Hard Ross was in the mood to take such orders as these.

Mr. Sherrod’s eyes showed a vast amazement. He pushed his derby far back upon his head, adjusted his glasses, and stared. His expression was that of a tourist in a far land being showed one of the wonders of the world.

“You mean,” he said slowly, as if he groped in the dark of a stupefied brain for each word, “that you refuse to do what I tell you to do?”

Any answer was so very unnecessary that Hard Ross made none. He stared back, his contempt leaping high in his eyes. Sunny Harper giggled like a girl in her teens, and then grew suddenly and gravely interested in the loose leather about his saddle horn.

“I’d have you understand,” said Mr. Sherrod with dignity, “that this range is mine. It’s been mine for a month. You’ve

been drawing pay from me. And if my servants won't do what I tell them—"

"Servants!" boomed Hard Ross, his face red, his big hands twitching. "Servants, you little hop-o'-my-thumb! Why, you say that to me again and I'll slap your face for you!"

A little thing, perhaps, this slip of the tongue of Mr. Sherrod's. But then, to a man like Hard Ross and upon a day like today, it was like a goad.

"Mercy!" gasped the new owner of the Up and Down. "You—you impudent boor! I—I—if you so much as laid a hand on me, I'd have you arrested and sent to prison for six months! I—I've a notion to have you arrested, anyway. Mr. Hodges has told me how his cattle, my cattle now, have been stolen! I thought it looked funny."

"Hold on!" shouted Hard Ross angrily. "You go easy, little cock-o'-the-walk. You just hint I ain't straight—"

"I believe you're what you look like," fumed Mr. Sherrod. He drew a step backward and spat out: "You act like a cattle thief, you look like a cat—"

Whether his meaning ended there, whether he sought to affirm that he had discovered something feline in the glare in Hard Ross's eyes, or whether he was going to explain that the man looked like a rustler, was not made plain.

Hard Ross's nerves were tingling. Hard Ross's hand was twitching again. He struck—Mr. Sherrod had not stepped far enough back—his open palm smote heavily upon the freshly shaven cheek; and the new owner of the Up and Down measured the length of his immaculate suit upon the dust by the bunkhouse door.