

Ranger Style

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by J. Allan Dunn

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I.

“GRAB the ceiling! The man who looks down is dead!”

There was no one in the bank who doubted the statement. The second bandit advanced to the paying teller’s window. With a heavy-calibered, single-action, cocked and probably hair-triggered pistol, he motioned the teller to admit him back of the long counter that ran the length of the room. Back of it were the cages of the employees, with an open space toward the front.

The bandit who had first spoken leaped forward. Both had entered through the rear door, and now stood with a gun in either hand. A minute before, the bank had been functioning quietly on a drowsy spring afternoon in Wichita Falls, Texas, unsuspecting trouble. Now it was under the control of two desperadoes. There were no clients before the counter, few people on the streets. Most of these latter loungers were lolling or seated in the shade.

The two bandits had gone about their illicit business with the utmost simplicity from its conception. They wanted money. Money was kept in banks. There was a bank in Wichita Falls, which was convenient and of which they knew the layout.

It was a weakness for such an institution to have a back door; folly, perhaps, to keep it unlocked. But Wichita Falls was a peaceful and neighborly place. Robberies were not thought of, and the back door was convenient.

The two had ridden into town, well-mounted, but not conspicuously so. True, they both wore two guns in their holsters, and their belts were well filled with cartridges. But there were plenty of cowboys who toted the same equipment. One of them was young, barely twenty—so young in years and appearance that his own name of Elmer Lewis had been merged in that of the “Kid.”

The other, who had covered the teller with his single-action pistol, was Foster Crawford. He had more or less of a hard reputation, but he was not definitely

“wanted.” None would have suspected them of being bound for the bank, intent upon looting it. Few noticed them at all as they jogged down the street, turned off, ahead of the bank, into another one that was shaded with trees planted along the edge of the sidewalks.

They swung right once more. Next door to the bank, they left their horses in a vacant lot and tied them to the top of a rail. Ordinarily they would have left them ground anchored, but they wanted to be sure of finding them, of their not being startled away.

Crawford was twice the age of the Kid. Both were fair-haired, as are ninety-five percent of bad men who are killers. Crawford was close-mouthed, the Kid more vivacious.

But nothing was said as they went through the back door with their guns ready for action. The simple plan had been rehearsed—the Kid to the front, Crawford to the teller’s window, and so round the counter.

They were in possession. Everything worked as they had intended it to do. There hadn’t been a slip-up.

Behind the counter were two bank officials, not generally there—Doctor Kendall, physician and surgeon, carrying in his pocket a case of medical instruments; and John Nichols, city treasurer.

Kendall’s instruments, designed to cut and, in so doing, save human life and bodies, played their part that afternoon in unexpected fashion. Crawford’s single-action weapon, ready cocked for intimidation, came into play in a manner the holdup pair had never anticipated.

The bookkeeper’s name was P.P. Langford. He was the first to see the robbers come in through the back door, and the first to see their guns, and guess their purpose. As the Kid sprang toward the front and whirled, lithe as a panther, his eyes blazing with excitement, himself primed for action, Langford dropped back of the counter before either of the looters saw him.

Langford had nerve. His courage may be called foolhardy, but he was not the sort who tamely submits. As he went to hands and knees, he started to crawl to the end of the counter.

The Kid's ears, meanwhile, were alert for the slightest sound. The whole thing was to be one of lightning action. As soon as Crawford scooped up all the money in sight and called to the Kid, the latter was ready to race back, cover his partner while he went through the rear door, and then bolt after him.

Langford figured he could make the end of the counter, crawl beneath a flap that closed off the open end of the operating department, and, back of the Kid, make a break and get through the door to the street and raise the alarm. Men do not have time to consider their thoughts at such a crisis. Faced by danger, the reaction comes in one of fear or daring.

Langford was a man grown. He saw that the bandit up front was only a youngster. He thought he could get away with it. He was going to try. If he had been a man of the open, he might have hesitated. A cowboy, seeing the Kid with his guns drawn and that flame in his pale-blue eyes, would have read more wisely the record of range experience than his tanned face showed. A cowboy would have sized up the Kid for a dangerous customer to cross.

Langford was halfway on his scrambling journey when he glanced up and found Crawford standing over him. He rose to run.

Crawford was not anxious to fire. A shot would arouse the drowsing town, and he knew that the Texans who lived there were, many of them, men of resource and action. Most of them knew how to handle firearms. This robbery of theirs was to be one of rattlesnake fashion, a brief warning and a silent strike.

He brought down the heavy weapon on Langford's head. It was a glancing blow, but it appeared efficient. Then things began to happen so swiftly that it was not repeated. Crawford did not have time to see whether or not he had knocked his man out.

His gun, set for quick firing, discharged from the sheer impact of the blow.

The Kid could not see what was happening from his position. But something had gone wrong back of the counter. Someone had got a gun or had resisted Crawford.

II.

The Kid was a rollicking buckaroo with a criminal streak. He was a natural

bravo of the range, craving excitement; brave enough in certain lights, reacting to a certain code. Adventure acted upon him like a breeze upon smoldering fire, always ready to break into a blaze.

He rolled his guns and sent two streams of lead into the cages. Frank Dorsey, who sat on his stool with his hands in the air, was hit by the first bullet in the neck, and rolled off his seat, crashing to the floor, dead as stone.

The city treasurer, Nichols, ducked in time. The third shot struck Doctor Kendall in the chest and sent him staggering back against the wall, shocked by the slam of the bullet, backed by its heavy charge.

Crawford thought the Kid had been attacked in that drum-roll volley of firing. Someone might have come in on him from behind. As the Kid had gone into action for the rescue of his partner, so Crawford responded.

Langford, half-stunned, was recovering. Crawford had made for the passageway, and the plucky bookkeeper made another dash for the door. He made a little noise passing the flap gate, still functioning in a haze, half automatically. A leap took him to the door. He landed in silence, crouching, but the Kid heard the click of the latch as Langford strove to open it.

He wheeled and sent a bullet at the bookkeeper that took him on the hip. If it had struck bone, it would have stopped him. But he was in luck that day, and he rushed into the street, red soaking his trouser leg, but able to run, yelling his alarm, though he left a trail of scattering crimson.

Half-sleepy citizens broke off their talk. According to their degrees of manhood and experience, they went for their weapons or in search of a hiding place.

The Kid did not lose his head in the sudden turn of events. He watched for others.

“Keep yore skulls down!” he yelled at those still back of the counter. “Keep ‘em out of sight, or stick ‘em up an’ git ‘em bored. Come on, Crawford! We got to git goin’.”

He helped Crawford gather up all the cash in sight, and they bolted through the door by which they had entered.

Quick as they were, they almost lost out as they set foot in stirrup. Frank Keller held down a barber's job, but a razor was not the only weapon he knew how to use. He worked in a building close by, and his shotgun was in his shop. Keller liked to hunt.

He shoved shells into the breech, plucking them from a box where he kept those loaded with buckshot, and ran into the street. Keller was a sport, as barbers often are, even in the effete East and big cities. But Keller believed in taking his sport at first hand, not in placing bets on horses and prize fighters in events he never witnessed.

Keller was a good shot, even for Texas. When he went after deer, ducks, or prairie chickens, he came back with them. It was the first time he had ever attempted a human "bag," but he did not hesitate. He knew just what had happened. He had seen the two men dart out of the bank's rear door, handicapped in their mounting with the loot they carried and had not yet stowed away in saddlebags.

It is more than probable that he would have got one of them, perhaps two. Buckshot is calculated to inflict frightful wounds, if not to kill. Its effects are demoralizing as well as weakening. One barrel of his gun was choked more than the other, but he was almost within easy range. Crawford and the Kid, busy with mounting their startled horses, none too tame at any time, had not yet noticed him, coming on tiptoe, his shotgun ready, held like that of a trapshooter.

Crawford's weapon had exploded prematurely when he hit Langford and started the shooting. Doctor Kendall would have been dead but for his instrument case. The lead from the Kid's gun had been halted by the steel of the blades. It had driven them in and they had gashed the doctor's chest. He was only nastily but not mortally wounded. Here were two events that could not have been foreseen, yet they played important parts in the game— tragic, both of them. Now comedy entered.

Out of the White Elephant Saloon, wanting to see what it was all about, wandered a man who was sober enough to navigate, but too drunk to consider and take in what had happened or was happening.

He wandered right into the line of fire. Frank Keller, with an oath at the sot, barely restrained his squeeze on his triggers.

“Git out!” he yelled. “Wha’ fer?”

It was too late. Crawford and the Kid were up and off, reloading, driving steel into their horses’ flanks, enveloped with dust as they raced out of town, spurts of flame coming from the cloud that screened them. Bullets struck trees, behind which citizens dodged; they lodged in fence posts and smashed windows. The bandits were gone, making for the prairie first and then the river bottoms, where they might hide out till dark and steal away.

Frank Hardesty, deputy sheriff, was coming into town, foxtrotting on his bay mare. He had heard no shots and knew nothing of the robbery. He saw the fast-advancing sky sign of dust. Later in the day, going toward town, or much later, coming from it, he would not have thought much about it, imagining it the hilarious progress of punchers bent for or from amusement in town. As it was, he had a hunch, and he reached to unfasten his holster and draw his gun.

Then they were on him, opening fire. A bullet entered his side, badly wounding him, as he got his own weapon into action. But handicapped by pain and a plunging horse, he missed. But he recognized Crawford, even as the latter knew who and what he was and tried to kill him.

The two bandits rode on hard, the manes and tails of their mounts flying, side sweating, foam flaking back from their bitten mouths, dust streaking them and their riders, who set their knees hard into the horses’ withers and went with their hands free, guns poised, determined not to be stopped or reported.

Hardesty was, they thought, done for. Their faces were grim, and they said nothing. The simple plan had become complicated. It had compounded like interest on the undrawn deposits at the bank they had tried to rob.

Another rider came along, Odie Thomas. He saw them plainly as they struck a harder stretch where there was little dust to hide their appearance. Odie was a rider who was neither to be fooled nor intimidated. He opened fire, and the Kid’s horse came smashing down to its knees.

The Kid was free of the stirrups, out of the saddle, clear and safe, running to Crawford, who reined in his jumpy mount while the Kid vaulted up back of him. He had left part of the loot behind, but they were not thinking now of booty, but of bullets.

It was tricky work, shooting on the run. No one was hurt, but Odie's horse was nicked in one shoulder. It swerved and shied, catching Odie off balance as he was reloading. It crossed its forelegs, as a racing horse may, in a hollow, treacherously masked with dust, and went down.

Odie went over its head, sprawling, losing his gun as he landed. He picked it up, the barrel choked with dust, and ran after his horse which, scared, refused to be caught, running out over the prairie with dangling reins while the two robbers pounded down the road.

The bandits could not go far or fast, two on one horse. By now, they knew, a posse would be gathering.

Fate dealt them another ace in their gamble. A farmer came along, driving a wagon. The team was light and spirited. The two stuck the farmer up as, unarmed, he gaped at them. The Kid stripped the off horse, a likely buckskin, of its harness, retaining the bridle, improvising reins.

He rode it bareback, and they swung off into the mesquite, following cattle trails that sometimes broke their direction in a maze of paths and high, thick growth.

They stopped to reload, to enable the Kid to make a better job of his bridle. Crawford looked at him with a grin. The Kid responded with a genuine smile. He was enjoying himself.

This was adventure. It sent the blood racing through his veins. He had neither the experience nor the grimness of Crawford. He might have had as much imagination, or more, but he did not see in his mind's eye what Crawford did, looming up, throwing a sinister shadow—the gallows.

“We've sure raised Cain, Kid,” he said. “Aw, let it raise!”

“We've killed more'n one of 'em, I reckon.

They'll be after us, fer keeps.”

“What do we care fer their posse? A bunch of waddies! We're ahead. We'll keep that a way. We got our guns, ain't we—plenty ca'tridges? We'll dodge 'em until dark, sneak to the bottoms, light out through the brush.”

“Mebbe. Sheriff McClure knows his business. He ain’t goin’ to feel none too good over that depitty of his, Hardesty. I hope he’s dead before they reach him. He recognized me.”

“What of it? It ain’t twenty miles to the line. We kin ride up the Wichita an’ cross the Big Red by sunup, inter Oklahoma. To blazes with McClure an’ his posse! They’ll quit at the line.”

“I warn’t worryin’ so much erbout them,” Crawford answered soberly. “It was the Rangers I was figgerin’ on. The line ain’t goin’ to stop them.”

“There ain’t no sense in worryin’. Won’t git us a thing. Let’s git movin’.”

Crawford nodded with another grin that lacked mirth. They started and found that McClure had been busy. He was flinging out his posse in the shape of a fan, individual riders keeping within gunshot of each other, the fan gradually lengthening and widening systematically.

Twice, the fugitives came to the verge of the mesquite and saw sign that sent them back again to cover. Once, they were seen, but dodged, cutting back and forth across the country, riding hard, sometimes on the prairie, in mesquite or tangled brush, sometimes on the highways. At nightfall, their mounts were played out.

III.

The alarm had been carried to the Rangers’ camp. Captain Halstead summoned “Bud” Jones.

“Corporal,” he said, as Bud saluted, “there’s been robbery with murder at Wichita Falls—City National Bank looted. They’ve got clean away. Crawford is one of them. You know him by sight. The other is a youngster called the Kid. They may split.

“Take another man with you. I want them alive. You’ll have to deliver them over to the authorities in Wichita Falls, but you had better stay there a day or so in case of a lynching.”

He added what else he knew of the affair and dismissed Bud with the warning he never neglected, although his lips twitched back of his long mustache. It was

good advice, but Bud seemed to forget it!

“Not too much of that initiative of yours, corporal. They may perhaps be rounded up somewhere. They’ll fight against the posse to the last bullet. Those cowboys would drag them through the brush at their horses’ tails.”

Bud saluted again and went to choose his companion and saddle his roan, Pepper. Both men grabbed some jerked beef, knowing they were likely to go supperless. They chewed it as they rode. Both their mounts were far better than anything else in the country, grained and groomed, selected from the pick of herds and private stock, trained and, like their masters, in tiptop condition.

Bud wore his Stetson and high-heeled boots of fine leather, decorated with fancy sewing, spurred. On the right hip was his Colt, on the left a bowie knife. Double belts held shells for his six-gun and the rifle in its boot beneath his left thigh. Beyond this equipment every trooper dressed according to individual taste.

Bud considered the country.

“They’ll go north,” he said, “make fer the Big Red an’ figger on gittin’ inter Oklahomy.”

“Do we hev authority there?” asked the trooper. “We’ll git it,” said Bud Jones.

He was not worrying about that end of it. The Rangers got their men. Even if the posse had them and had not lynched them, he was going to obey orders, posse or no posse. There might be fifty in the posse, but he was going to take over the bandits, see them lodged in jail at Wichita Falls, and stay there until hot tempers cooled. Judge Edgar Scurry was there, strict advocate of the written law.

“Here’s where we ride, Bill,” he said. “Our hawsses’ll be fresher than theirs, time we git there, at thet.”

They started off at the foxtrot that covers country and does not tire horse or rider, without change of pace, so much as the shift from lope to walk. As they neared the Wichita River, they saw punchers riding back and forth across the ends of a thick growth of brush that grew on the high bank above the sandy bed of the stream.

Others, dismounted, taking cover behind clumps of grass and bushes, were firing

into the brush. Puffs of smoke rose, and the flashes began to show plainer and plainer in the thick growth. The sound of firing filled the air persistently in ragged volleys, as the posse fired at will, raking the brush with lead from rifles, until it seemed as if no living thing could stay in the zone and remain alive. Leaves and twigs had been stripped away in places by the horizontal hail.

Out of the brush came answering shots, so close that now and then a cowboy darted for a better cover than the one that had just been raked.

“They’re in there,” said the trooper to Corporal Bud Jones, who nodded, taking in the situation.

“Never mind yore rifle,” he said to the other.

“They’ve got enough artillery unlimbered as it is. If we don’t git those hombres soon, they’ll sneak off in the dark. No moon an’ a cloudy sky. Made to order fer ‘em.”

A man loped out to meet them on a gray horse. It was Sheriff McClure.

“We’ve got ‘em, Ranger,” he said to Bud, recognizing him.

Bud hid a smile. The bandits might be surrounded, but as long as the posse stayed outside the thicket, it had not got them.

“I’ve got men ercross the river,” said the sheriff.

“We’ve got their hawsses. Run ‘em off their laigs.”

“What do you aim doin’ next?” asked Bud.

“Bound to wing ‘em sooner or later. We’ve sure percolated thet bresh, an’ we’ve got plenty of ammunition. Theirs can’t hold out much longer. They got to come out sooner or later. They’ve done enough damage. No sense in rushin’ ‘em.”

“Jest the same, it’s gittin’ dark,” said Bud. “I’m goin’ in—the two of us.”

The sheriff gasped. He knew the bravery of the Rangers. He was not a coward, but he considered he would be throwing his life away if he went into the brush. He said so.

“Jest the same, we’re goin’ in,” said Bud quietly. “I’ve got my orders to git ‘em. Come on, Bill! Wait till I hail ‘em.”

The sheriff mentally threw up his hands. The posse stared.

Bud Jones took over the attack. He rode toward the brush, conscious that he was watched, conscious, also, that he was known. He was not Bud Jones, but a Ranger, representative of that force.

He had ordered the firing to cease. No shots came from the thicket, but there were men there who faced violent and horrible death, with their fingers on gun triggers.

“Come out, Crawford!” Bud cried. “This is Corporal Jones of the Rangers!”

His voice ran clear and authoritative on the still air while the posse waited, expecting to see him fall, recognizing the daring of the man, some of them murmuring against his recklessness.

There was no answer from mouth of flesh or metal.

“I’m givin’ you exactly ten minutes to come out of there with yore hands in the air,” Bud called. “If you ain’t in sight by then, I’m comin’ in to git you!”

A reply came at last. Crawford was speaking. He seemed to have advanced to the edge of the thicket. The trooper had moved up to Bud. The posse whispered together, those who were close:

“He’ll plug him, sure. If he does, we’ll ride plumb through thet brush. Thet Ranger is a plumb fool! Both of ‘em are.”

“Don’t you fool yorese’f,” growled an old-timer. “They ain’t fools, an’ no more is Crawford. I’ve seen Rangers work before. It ain’t jest them; it’s a hull lot more back of ‘em thet’s built the same way. Thet corp’ril ain’t any older than the Kid, but he’s got them buffaloed.”

“What’ll happen if we do come out?” Crawford shouted.

“I’ll take keer of you. You’ll be taken keer of as long as you’re in my custody. You know thet, Crawford. So do you, Kid, or you ought to. If you don’t come

out, I'll come in shootin'! I'm timin' you."

IV.

There was silence again. The pair were whispering in the brush.

"You ain't got no nerve," said the Kid to his partner fiercely. "It'll be pitch dark in ten minutes."

"No, it won't," said Crawford. "It won't be dark fer half an hour, an' thet foxy Ranger knows it.

They've got us, Kid. They'll protect us. It's them or lynchin'. There's allus a chance to break jail."

"Like blazes there is! Let him come."

"Know his rep'? I do. You're a pretty good shot, Kid. So am I. But he's better. The hull of Company F is dead shots, an' he's their best. We ain't got many shots left."

"I'm stayin'," said the Kid, stubbornly, and Crawford kept still when Bud called out again.

"Two minutes left, Crawford." There was no tremor in Bud's voice, but there was one in the soul of Crawford.

He and the Kid had retreated to the middle of the brush. The Kid squatted, handling his hot gun. For the first time in his life, he was wavering, thinking. The cool courage of the Ranger was matching his, and he was not sure of the result.

He frowned and cursed beneath his breath. It was almost too dark now for them to see each other's faces. But they could hear. He would hear the Ranger coming with those keen ears of his that had caught the click of the latch on the door of the bank. Even then, he had only wounded his man and had let him get away to raise the alarm.

What if he missed the Ranger, did not kill him? There would come an answering shot at his flash. What if they killed both Rangers? There were still the men of

the posse on the two sides of the stream. The bandits had only a few shells, no horses, no food. The Kid was physically tired, and they were tortured with thirst. His hand trembled a little.

Bud lighted a match and held it unwaveringly while the second hand of the watch completed its final circuit. Then, unconcernedly as if he was going for his supper, he dismounted, unholstered, and turned to the trooper.

“Come on, Bill,” he said in an ordinary tone. “You take the left end an’ I’ll take the right.”

By the fading light, the fifty men who had tried for hours to dislodge the two bandits listened for the sound of a shot.

They heard the rustling of the thorny growth, and then silence. Long minutes passed that seemed an hour. Dusk deepened.

Crawford was ready to quit. The Kid was not sure, yet. It was the silence that bothered him most. These Rangers were advancing with the stealth of Indians. Then he heard a low, calm voice:

“All right, Crawford. You’re actin’ plumb sensible. This way, Bill. Take care of him.”

In the darkness of the brush, the sound was deceiving. The Kid whirled, as he squatted and fingered his gun. A shot would betray him. There were two of them. A twig cracked, and he crawled off, expecting bullets.

Utter silence again. He could hear his heart beating, and that was all.

Then the voice again. A figure seemed to have materialized out of the dense shadows.

“All right, Kid. Stand up! Hoist yore hands!” The tables were turned. His hands reached for the sky. He felt the prod of a gun muzzle directing him forward.

Their stars had faded and set before the stars of silver that the Rangers wore. The utter coolness of Bud cowed the Kid as he walked on. He had quit. His nerve did not match that of this man.

They came out before the silent posse. The guns of the Rangers were holstered; their prisoners walked in front of them, hands above their ears.

“They’re our prisoners.” Bud’s voice was stern and commanding. “We’re taking them to Wichita Falls, without interference. We’re not looking for trouble.”

Neither was the posse. Its members were quiet in the presence of the man who had shown them courage superior to their own.

They set the captives on their own jaded mounts, handcuffed with the irons of the sheriff. A few went back with them to town; the rest rode back to their jobs on the ranches. “Ranger style” was the topic of the bunkhouses that night.

Lights shone in the town as they returned, riding down the main street with Bud guarding the Kid, Bill, the trooper, on the other side, both watchful for any sign of outbreak.

They saw Crawford and the Kid in their cells and went to the hotel, taking care to announce that they were staying there a day or so.

There was talk of lynching, but it died down to mutterings and saloon bragging by the end of the first day. It was not only the presence of Bud and his trooper, calm, friendly but determined in their midst, but the story of how they had brought out their men. That dominated all. A ranch foreman expressed the general opinion—the same old-timer who had spoken when Bud challenged Crawford:

“Them Rangers aire plain pizen on hawssback, likewise afoot.”

Bud was not quite satisfied. He believed in hunches, and he sensed trouble.

“The cap’n said two days,” he said. “We’ll make it three.”

The third morning came with news of a disturbance in a neighboring town and a call for Ranger service.

“We’ll be back as soon as we kin,” Bud told the sheriff. “Hold ‘em.”

V.

The news of their leaving spread rapidly. By sunset, the temper of the lawless element had seasoned the general feeling toward a lynching.

Hardesty was wrongly and willfully reported to be dying. Frank Dorsey was buried in the afternoon, and the funeral was followed by a general gathering of small groups that gradually joined. Doctor Kendall was said to be doomed from blood poisoning. It was not true, but the rumor served the purpose of those who were bent upon mob law.

So with the disturbance in the neighboring town, Bud had been rather inclined to suspect a ruse, but the trouble was genuine enough and needed Rangers to curb it. Still his hunch suggested that he return to Wichita Falls as soon as possible.

There was a lot of drinking going on all day, increasing after dark—a lot of talk and threats. The mob lacked a leader to give the word of command, but it was plain to sober folk that a crisis was near.

Just before midnight, the leader materialized, and in fifteen minutes, a crowd was hurrying to the jail. Reason was lost to the majority because of the liquor that had aroused the brutes in them. They were like wolves who scent a kill. Relatives of the wounded men were made much of, the tale of the murder and robbery and chase rehearsed. Dorsey's widow was held up as an incentive for speedy reprisal.

The keys were in the hands of the mob. The sheriff surrendered before the show of irresistible force. It seemed as if the whole town had risen against him. His secret sympathies might have been aroused because of the shooting of Hardesty, his deputy.

Judge Scurry gathered other conservative citizens and vainly made a plea for the observance of the written law. Wichita Falls would be given a bad name. It had a reputation that it would lose. To lynch was to kill illegally.

They hooted him down, howling at his oratory with the cry of a pack. They took Crawford and the Kid from their cells to the scene of the robbery. The preparations were swift. Hundreds of hands were ready to assist in them.

A wagon was brought, a rope, a man found who could tie the right sort of knot. There was a tree handy, a great oak with a horizontal limb, over which the rope was tossed. The bight of it was dallied about a saddle horn. A waddy, pal of Odie

Thomas, who had pleaded for the job but drank too much liquor to be of any use, was in the saddle.

All about the jail was a cordon of citizens and cowboys beyond control. Someone suggested they had better hurry, or the Rangers would be back.

Yesterday or that afternoon, the thought might have deterred them. But now they were doubly drunk, with alcohol and the ancient lust for life, revenge, and cruelty. They were all armed. A company of Rangers could not have rescued the prisoners without killing many.

The prisoners saw this, as they stood in the rough grasp of men who no longer regarded them as such. They were as good as dead.

The Kid had got back all his nerve. The sight and sound of the yelling mob made him mad. He was bound about the arms, his wrists pinioned, and he was thrust up into the bed of the wagon, threatened with guns if he made an attempt to run. But his bravado never left him.

Escape was impossible. He stood with his feet apart and told them what he thought of them. His language was lurid, pointed with a string of oaths and epithets that got under the skins of his executioners.

“You got anything to say?” a man demanded. “Sure!” said the Kid. “Tell dad I died game— and died with my boots on.”

He glanced at the cowboy on the horse with the rope.

“All right, fella,” he called. “Pull ahead!” Someone struck the horse with a sombrero and it jumped forward, jerking the Kid into the air. He died without a struggle.

Crawford, coming second, weakened, cringed. He lacked the bravado of the boy half his age. He was lifted to the wagon like a sack of flour, where he begged for whisky. Somebody handed up a pint flask, and Crawford gulped it down in two swallows. It helped a little, but as the noose went round his neck and he felt the rasp of the knot back of his ear, he broke down, screaming and pleading as he was swung off his feet.

There was one rough, rasping yell as the figure of Crawford dangled beside that

of the Kid. Then a sudden silence settled over the mob. They had taken life in red, shouting anger, and now death mutely sobered them. The saloons were still open, but they had few customers.

Men went back to their homes quietly. By two o'clock in the morning, the streets were deserted. The two bodies swung limply from the bough of the tree, obscure in the shadows.

VI.

Dawn was just breaking, gray in the east, as Bud Jones and his trooper came galloping back to Wichita Falls.

"It's right quiet," said Bill. Bud did not answer. That mysterious sixth sense of his—the combination, perhaps, of all his senses, keen as they were—was warning him. The inner voice of his hunch whispered persistently that something had gone wrong in Wichita Falls.

He had carried out orders. He had delivered his men to the right authorities. There was no responsibility with him as to what might have happened later. He had played the game as the cards fell. But his spirit was heavy.

Something seemed brooding in the air as he touched the roan ever so slightly with his spurs; and Pepper, thirty miles of hard travel behind him, leaped forward as if at the beginning of a sprint. The trooper's mount followed with less speed.

A little wind had sprung up with the mounting of the sun. It rustled in the top of the tree where the two dead men swung—rustled like whispering ghosts. The first red rays tinged leaves and branches with crimson that gradually extended.

Bud drew the roan to its haunches as he came to a sudden halt. The town was still asleep. There was not even a stray animal about. All was intensely silent, save for the breathing of the horses, the sound of the wind in the treetop, as Bud gazed at the ghastly fruit that hung from the lower bough.

"We come too late," said Bill in a low voice. "You was right. You said you had a hunch they'd start somethin'."

Bud nodded.

“I had a hunch,” he said. “I’ve got another one. Wichita Falls ain’t goin’ to git erway with this. Might hev been all right in the early days, when there was no law an’ less order, but thet’s passed. My hunch ses thet Cap’n Halstead’ll post a Ranger in Wichita until it gits so it kin handle itself. We represent the law. It’s got to be respected, an’ what they’ve done here is plumb agin’ the law.”

“It may be agin’ the law,” said Bill, “but it come mighty close to justice.”

Bud said nothing. He could not endorse the words of his subordinate, however he might sympathize with them. His face was stern as they rode slowly down the street toward the hotel. First and last, he was a Ranger. The rule of the mob could not be tolerated. Once permitted, the lawless took advantage of it for their own purposes—the settling of their own grudges.

An example had been forcefully set that must tend to discourage others who, like Crawford and the Kid, wanted easy money and held life lightly that stood in their way. But the lynchers also needed discouraging.

“In the eyes of the law, they’ve assisted at murder,” Bud said. “Bill, you ride to camp and report to Cap’n Halstead. I’m stayin’ on till I hear from him. I’ve got a few words to say to some of these hombres who engineered this swingin’ bee last night. A town thet can’t govern itself ain’t likely to prosper. It’s no place fer women an’ children. I reckon it’ll hev to be shown—Ranger style.”

A keen eye, a quick trigger finger, and a good hawss—shore, that’s Ranger style. But thet ain’t all. It takes a hombre with more than an ordinary man’s share of courage ter last long in the service, and it’s thet kind of courage thet’s mostly responsible fer the sayin’ thet a Ranger allus gits his man, like Bud Jones does his. There’ll be another story about Bud and the Rangers in WILD WEST WEEKLY soon.