

Cheat the Hangman

The thundering hooves of horses awaken the slumbering town of Twin Bellow in the Tahoma Territory. As the new day unfolded, the air began to sweat, creating a clammy atmosphere. A posse of five men astraddle wide-eyed horses enter the town. Gordon pauses from his woodworking, watching through weary gray eyes. The creases in the corners aged him, but not nearly as much as the salt-and-pepper beard that covered his square face. Gordon quietly finds his way over to the wooden sidewalk to get a better view of the visitors.

Altogether, the riders slow to a purposeful trot. Leading them is a Black man in ash-colored trousers and a candy-striped top. His hirsute chin is parallel to the sky as he and his posse parade straight to the Sheriff's office. Gordon knew they were a bunch of typical overweening bounty hunters but couldn't help but wonder who the poor son-of-a-bitch was tied to the back of the packing horse that trailed the group. A burlap sack covered the prisoner's head.

Deputy Manning positioned himself in front of the building. Gordon noticed the tenderfoot's legs trembling under the dark jeans that threatened to swallow the lawman whole. Manning was often ridiculed by the town on account of his gutless disposition. Still, in the Sheriff's absence, the town had no choice but to rely on the pitiful deputy.

"That's far enough," Deputy Manning's shrill voice was met with an annoyed bray from an ass in a nearby pen. A Sharps rifle trembled in Manning's hands, making Gordon wonder how such a powerful weapon could look so useless.

The leader of the group scoffed at the little deputy. "You ain't the Sheriff. Bring him on out here, will ya? We got a bounty to cash."

The bounty hunter dismounts his mare and makes his way over to the packing horse, kicking the burlap sack with such force the prisoner is violently thrown to the ground. A billowing veil of dust surrounds his helpless body.

"Sheriff O'Connor ain't here," Deputy Manning says through a beet-red face. More and more townsfolk appear, eager to witness the ruckus. A daunting stiffness pervades the atmosphere of the small desert town.

Gordon tenses as he feels a presence approach him from behind but quickly simmers down when he sees his apprentice's familiar sandy blonde curls. Freckles compliment his soft brown eyes wide with curiosity as he stares down the men gathered boldly in the center of town.

"What's happening?"

"Be quiet, Jimmy." Gordon cants his head to try to make out the rest of the conversation. The vulnerable captive began to writhe on the ground like a snake with its head cut off. Jimmy winces as the bounty hunter violently hurls his boot into the prisoner again with full force, this time in the abdomen. The inspiring vigilantism of the bounty hunters reminded Jimmy of his dime novel collection recounting outlaws and their heinous crimes. Jimmy attempts to inch closer to the bounty hunters, but Gordon grips his shoulder and yanks him back like a dog on a lead. Jimmy opens his mouth to protest but decides against it. Longingly, Jimmy watches with a downward gaze, his adolescent body drawing in on itself.

Deputy Manning's blue eyes are blinking a half-dozen times a second. "He ain't here, fellas," the timid deputy declares again. "Who is this here?"

Pearl-like teeth adorned the Black man's smile. "Why don't you take a look?" He backs away slowly, leaving Deputy Manning face to face with the still silent kneeling man. The sack hung ominously over the prisoner's head as the deputy took a few steps forward, leaving inches between himself and the unknown bounty. In anticipation of the reveal, Gordon holds his breath along with the rest of the town.

The deputy rips off the burlap sack. Cuts and bruises almost made the mystery man unrecognizable, but Gordon could never mistake his menacing gaze.

"Jessie Copeland," Jimmy exclaims next to Gordon. "They caught *Jessie Copeland*."

The town erupts into similar anxious chatter. Jessie Copeland was a name he never wanted to hear again for as long as he lived. A sneer plays on Jessie's lips even through the pain. Gordon swore he could see the Devil himself prancing in the emerald embers of Jessie's eyes.

Gordon's hands shudder at his sides and his heart thunders in his chest as he contemplated the last time he'd come across Jessie and his wild men on the trail. How they ransacked his belongings on the schooner wagon with guns fixed on Gordon and his wife. The way they beat him unconscious and left him beside her dead, ravaged body miles away from any town or civilization. Gordon relived the horror of that day in Jessie's sneer. It'd taken everything he'd had to recover from the hopelessness and despair of being unable to protect her. He had lost everything to the insolent Jessie Copeland, and now here he was, above snakes. His capture should have been alleviating, but Gordon was far from winsome. Gordon had been robbed of his dignity that day. The rage pulsed down his arm, and Gordon fingered his pistol in its holster. He could send Jessie Copeland straight to Hell in front of everyone but rebuked the thought. He couldn't do it. Not here and not yet. He watches absentmindedly as Deputy Manning strips the

duster from the outlaw's shoulders and guides him inside the Sheriff's office. The crowd begins to disperse.

Gordon sent Jimmy home early, impatiently waiting for the sun to go down. In Sheriff O'Connor's absence, Gordon decided that he would storm the jailhouse to exact his revenge on Jessie Copeland. Manning would be too weak to stop him, and Gordon didn't care what would become of him afterward. Drilling a bullet in Jessie Copeland's face became his one and only obligation.

As the night settled, Gordon sidled through the alleyways to not be detected by the night owls that stalked the town in the dark. A rumbling pain surfaced in his throat, for Gordon knew that cheating the hangman was dishonorable. It was clear that the outlaw had wronged everyone but taking his life before he was offered a fair trial was still a grave act. Yet, Gordon's anger overclouded his judgment. His entire life had been nothing but a blur since losing his wife. Killing Copeland wouldn't bring her back. Gordon knew that. But maybe he'd reclaim a sliver of his dignity.

As Gordon encroaches on the jailhouse, he draws his ivory-dipped pistol and circles around the back entrance, preparing to run in and get it over with, but he pauses when he hears scrambling on the other side of the building.

"What the *hell*?" Gordon mutters to himself as he shuffles over to investigate, fearing someone else had beat him to the punch. To his dismay, he sees Jessie Copeland standing right next to the window he just climbed out of. The silhouette of the outlaw's duster is portentous in the shadowy

outskirts of the buildings. His broad shoulders make a sharp turn towards the bungalows, but instead of dashing for his escape, he casually begins to walk into the night.

Gordon couldn't believe his eyes. Jessie's back is turned to Gordon as he continues to walk away. Gordon ponders calling out to the criminal in the dark but decides against it. What warning did he have when they ambushed him and his wife? Gordon raises his pistol with a steady hand. He then takes a deep breath and fires a single shot at the duster in the dark.

He falls without a sound.

Gordon stands there confusedly for a moment. He didn't feel half as good as he thought he would. His wife was still gone, and now he had just taken the life of another without probable cause. An ass brays in the distance as Gordon approaches the unresponsive mass on the ground. His curiosity is piqued by how the duster swallowed the outlaw face down. An eerie silence then engulfs the night around him. With his boot, he kicks over Jessie Copeland to take in his menacing face one last time.

The lifeless brown eyes of a freckled face stare back at him.

Jimmy's throat was sliced open by the bullet, and blood cascaded from the gaping wound. The apprentice never knew what hit him. Gordon flings his pistol on the ground, screaming in anguish. Because he didn't have the courage to make the better choice, he took an innocent life. Gordon suddenly retrieves the pistol and places the barrel to his temple but groans. The cowardice thought is once again rebuked, and the weapon is tossed aside. This is the fate that lies ahead when justice is taken into the hands of the sufferer.

The hangman still collects.