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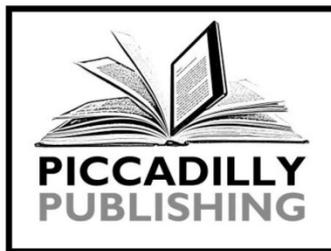
In order to give her testimony at the trial of outlaw Curt Sharkey, Lucille Furness knew she would have to run a gauntlet of death, travelling many a violent mile to reach the courthouse in one piece. Only Sharkey had been captured. The rest of his gang was still at large ... and gunning for her! But even the feisty schoolmarm had no idea just how dangerous the journey was going to be.

Luckily, she had an escort in the shape of two amiable Texans, Larry Valentine and Stretch Emerson. For them, this was a test of nerve and strength they just couldn't ignore. Even when the danger was at its greatest, the drifters battled on, out-shooting the lawless ... and thumbing their noses at law and order!

MARSHALL GROVER

LARRY AND STRETCH 1:

DRIFT!



2016

One – Texans and Pinkertons

“Someone’s just killed Dora Berry!”

The messenger from Larkin’s Grand Hotel gulped for breath, then repeated his news. Sheriff Dean Borden wriggled his tubby frame out of his swivel chair and lurched to his feet.

“Heard you the first time, Rick,” he panted, reaching for his hat. “Where’d it happen?”

“At the hotel. I heard shootin’ from near the kitchen. When I run in there, Dora was lyin’ by the doorway with two bullets in ...”

“I’ll get the rest later!” growled Borden. He raised his voice, yelling for one of his deputies. The man poked his head through the doorway from the street. “Keep an eye on them two hell-raisers in the cells!” ordered the lawman.

The deputy stepped aside. Borden charged out into the street, with the lackey from the Grand at his heels. He moved fast for a man of his weight, and perspiration ran down his flabby cheeks. He headed downtown. The Grand was Millsburg’s biggest hotel, a three-story building two blocks from the sheriff’s office.

An excited crowd was already milling about the main entrance. Borden, sweating and cursing, shouldered his way through them and went into the lobby. He was confronted by a tall, heavily built man in town clothes. He blinked at the tall man, lowered his voice.

“Is she okay, Shannon?” he said.

The tall man, Shannon, gave the sheriff a brief nod and jerked a thumb towards the stairs.

“She’s safe,” he grunted. “Wilkes is with her. You can guess what happened. Somebody caught a glimpse of that cook, saw she had red hair, and cut loose with a gun. Figured this Berry woman was our party. Too bad.”

“Yeah,” sweated the sheriff. “Real bad for Dora!”

He hurried to the rear, to the kitchen. His second deputy arrived and tagged along. Pop-eyed guests were grouping about the huddled form on the floor. Borden pointed at them and mumbled an order to the deputy.

“Pete. Get rid of them ... fast.”

The deputy moved among the onlookers, brusquely advising them to stand aside.

“All right, Rick,” sighed Borden. He sank to his knees beside the body. “You can tell me your part of it, while I’m makin’ my examination.”

The lackey told his story, his nervous glance flickering from the sheriff to the deputy. The story

was short and simple. Later, Borden was to observe that, “the whole damn business was simple!”

Rick Dinsmore, the jack-of-all-trades at the Grand, had been polishing the glass doors at the main entrance. He had heard a shot, then a scream, then a further shot. When he reached the kitchen Dora Berry’s body was lying near the doorway. He heard no other sound, and saw no sign of a fleeing figure. The murderer had killed swiftly, then made good his escape. Rick had hurried to the open outer doorway, that opened into the back alley. He had looked out, but had seen no one.

As Borden listened in gloomy silence, a familiar figure hurried in. Borden nodded to him and said, “Nuthin you can do for her, Doc. Whoever did it made awful sure of her. You might get her moved out of here.”

“Sure,” grunted the medico. “You want the slugs?”

“Uh huh.” The lawman eyed the two ugly bullet wounds again. “He got her with a forty-five is my guess,” he growled. “Shot at her from the alley, then lit out. Pete.” The deputy moved at mention of his name. “Look around some.”

“Okay.”

“And I want a check on all strangers.”

“Sure, Sheriff.”

Borden struggled upright, then waddled out.

In a suite on the top floor, two people stared expectantly at the man called Shannon. One of the two was a man. Like Shannon, he wore town clothes. He was of equal height and had the same alert expression on his stern features. The other, and chief, occupant of the suite was a woman. Like the murdered cook, Lucille Furness had red hair. She was a trim-figured woman in a severely cut gown. She was an attractive woman, but her habitually prim demeanor discounted what beauty she possessed. Miss Furness was a schoolteacher and was not given to displays of emotion. At the moment, she was the most composed member of the trio. Her companion nodded at Shannon and mouthed a blunt query.

“Clean getaway, huh?”

“Yeah,” growled Shannon. He closed the door behind him and locked it. Crossing to the window, he raised the blind and looked down into Millsburg’s main street. Then he lowered the blind, frowned at the woman, and said, “Don’t forget what I told you, Miss Furness. You’re to stay clear of that window. Understand?”

The woman’s voice was low and musical.

“Mr. Shannon,” she said. “I admire your diligence; but your constant repetition of grim warnings is becoming tiresome.”

“You have to be patient with us, ma’am,” the other man answered. “Mr. Shannon and I have a full

time job protecting you.” He looked at the grim-faced Shannon and raised his eyebrows. “What happened?” he asked.

“Somebody just killed the hotel cook,” explained Shannon. He stared hard at the schoolteacher and added, “She was about your age and height, Miss Furness ... and she had red hair.”

The woman bit her lip and the color left her face.

“Get her some brandy, Wilkes,” grunted Shannon.

“No!” She raised her hand to restrain them. “I don’t need brandy. I’ve already assured you that I’m not the fainting type.”

Wilkes threw her an admiring grin.

“Mr. Shannon and I know that,” he told her.

Shannon lit a cigar and beckoned Wilkes into a corner of the room. While they held a whispered discussion on the killing, the woman sat quiet, outwardly in full possession of herself, inwardly seething with the violent thoughts usually alien to a respectable lady schoolteacher.

“How did I get involved in such terrible things? That poor woman; murdered in mistake. The murderer thought he was killing me! Should I call the whole thing off? Go back to my safe, quiet existence at Coyote Creek? No, I can’t do that. I shall never be safe until it’s all over. I have to go through with it. It is my duty. But I hope and pray ... dear God ... don’t let anybody else die on my account!”

The aroma of Shannon’s black cigar began to fill the air. She sniffed, disdainfully, and wondered if all detectives of the Pinkerton Agency smoked foul-smelling cigars. With characteristic doggedness, she resolved to bear with it, thinking, “When one has been given an armed bodyguard, one must make allowances.”

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The tubby sheriff returned to his office and gave the waiting deputy a troubled frown.

“They got Dora,” he grunted. “Mistook her for you-know-who.”

“Bad,” acknowledged the deputy. He added, philosophically, “She has no kinfolks. That’s a mercy.”

“Yeah,” growled Borden, sinking into his chair. “That’s somethin.”

With nervous, pudgy fingers, he began rolling a cigarette. Presently, he glared toward the cellblock and asked a fretful question.

“They givin’ any trouble yet?”

“Them two Texans?”

“Who the hell else? They’re our only prisoners right now!”

Deputy Dowling grinned. The sheriff was having one of his bad days.

“They’re real quiet,” he assured Borden. “Nary a peep outa them.”

“They better stay quiet!” fumed the tubby lawman. “Who do these galoots think they are anyway? You see the list of damage done at Sorrowful Roscoe’s place?”

“Uh huh,” nodded the deputy. “They sure had a busy night. It’ll cost him near four hundred dollars for repairs. His bar mirror got smashed and half his stock, too. Seven chairs and five tables ...”

“Don’t forget the damaged citizens,” said Borden. “Six men beaten unconscious, three with busted jaws. Somebody got a broken arm. A bartender got a fractured skull. Hell! I just don’t understand rannies like Valentine and Emerson. Why do they have to behave that way?”

Dowling coughed behind his hand.

“Uh ...” he grunted. “From what I heard, it seems somebody insulted their home state ...”

“Them and their home state!” raged the sheriff. He mopped perspiration from his face, blinked at Dowling, and said, “You know what that Valentine galoot called me once?”

“No, Sheriff. What’d he call you?”

“Called me a blamed foreigner! Me! That was born and raised right here in Arizona! Blast his no-good hide! You’d think Texas is the only state in the Union!”

The objects of the sheriff’s wrath were, for the time being, occupying adjoining cells. They had been there for the past ten days and expected to remain for an extended period of residence. They felt no rancor. They were reasonable men. Borden, in arresting them, had only been doing his duty. The whole business was the result of an unfortunate error.

Ten nights ago that error had been made, in the glittering bar of Syd “Sorrowful” Roscoe’s saloon. A belligerent drinker had made a disparaging remark about the state of Texas, thus sparking off the flame of resentment in the two tough cowhands from the Lone Star State. In the brawl that followed, an unaccountable number of eyes were blackened, including those of the Texans, Roscoe’s beloved wall mirror was shattered, and a great deal of furniture was rendered useless. Old Judge Slattery, who was not a Texan, imposed a heavy penalty ... a three-hundred-dollar fine, to recompense Sorrowful Roscoe, or fifty days in jail.

“It would’ve been only forty days,” mused Larry Valentine now, “if you hadn’t offered to play one hand of draw poker with that judge. You shoulda guessed he was no sportin’ man.”

“I made him a fair offer,” protested Emerson. “A thousand dollars or a hundred days against three dollars or two days ... high card wins. That’s a right square offer, Larry. Good odds.” He added, significantly, “After all, three dollars an’ thirty cents is all you had in your pockets, Larry.”

“You were gonna let me keep the thirty cents?”

“Why, sure!”

“I’m obliged.”

“Welcome.”

Emerson swung his long legs off his bunk and sat up, patting at his shirt pocket. His full name was Woodville Eustace Emerson. Men with respect for their own welfare never called him by either of his Christian names. They called him “Stretch”. It was an apt nickname. Even seated, his formidable height was very apparent: six feet five and one half inches. He was lean and wiry, a sandy-haired Texan with deceptively innocent, wide blue eyes. His worn flannel shirt was threadbare and torn, a legacy of the fracas at Sorrowful Roscoe’s. Having no success with his search of his pockets, he leaned toward the adjoining cell and called, “Hey, runt.”

“Uh?” enquired Valentine.

“You got any tobacco?”

“Nope,” Valentine shook his head. “I’m plumb outa Durham.”

The term “runt”, used by his saddle-pard, was an indication of Larry Valentine’s height. On Emerson’s standards, he was a sawn-off, standing a mere six feet two inches. He was handsome, in a weather-beaten sort of way, as dark as Stretch was fair. He was good-humored, intelligent, and aggressively loyal to his home state. His present address had done nothing to cloud his sky. Larry and Stretch had been in jail before ... and their crimes remained in a fixed category. Drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace, resisting arrest, destroying property. These men were itinerant cowpunchers, hardworking when the work was there, hard swearing, hard drinking and, above all, hard fighting.

They remained quiet for a while. They had been together for many years now, and each understood the others moods. They had the rare ability of being able to dispense with conversation, when conversation was unnecessary. Both of them yearned for the comfort of tobacco; but neither of them felt the need to discuss that yearning.

An hour passed, then they heard footsteps coming toward them down the corridor. At sight of the disgruntled sheriff, they exchanged grins and made mutual expressions of disrespect “It’s ‘lard-face’,” Larry told Stretch.

“Yep,” agreed Stretch. “That’s ol’ ‘Butter-belly’ all right.”

“By Henry!” raged the sheriff. “If you saddle-bums don’t learn respect for the law ...”

“We got no time to waste, Dean,” growled a new voice. “Let’s get on with it!”

Two newcomers had followed Borden to the cells. Valentine eyed them speculatively, wondering at their presence there. He knew them well by sight. The impatient one was Bob Quigley, manager of the local stage line. His companion was Jesse Knox, Millsburg’s leading attorney.

“You know these gents,” Borden told the Texans. “They got a proposition to make you. You better

listen to what they got to say.”

“We couldn’t do that,” said Valentine.

“Huh?”

“We couldn’t listen to anybody right now ...”

“Were plumb outa tobacco,” explained Stretch. “When we can’t smoke, we don’t hear so good.”

Borden grunted and turned to the visitors.

“See what I mean?” he said, warningly. “Loco! Both of ’em!”

“For Pete’s sake, Dean!” fretted the stage-line man, “give them a smoke!”

“We haven’t got all day, Sheriff,” complained the lawyer.

Muttering curses, the sheriff produced tobacco and papers and passed them through the bars ... knowing full well that the Texans would neglect to return them. He watched them roll smokes and scratch matches on their boot-soles. When the blue smoke wafted out of their cells, Quigley moved close to the bars and said his piece.

“You two have only got a couple of minutes to decide about this,” he announced. “I need two men to do a little job. Sheriff Borden’s willing to parole you fellers to me, if I pay your fine. Jesse here has drawn up a paper, so’s everything’ll be legal. All you have to do is sign.”

Valentine’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re skippin’ things, Quigley,” he accused. “What’s the job?”

“Yeah,” growled Stretch. “You’re willin’ to pay a three hundred dollar fine to git us outa here.”

“What’s wrong with that?” came Knox’s bland challenge.

“We ain’t worth it!” declared Stretch, triumphantly.

“Shut up,” howled Borden.

Quigley exchanged a significant glance with the lawyer, then stared straight at Valentine and said, “It’s a simple chore, Valentine. I have to send a stage to the county seat, tomorrow morning. I need a driver and a shotgun guard—”

“Drivers and guards are a dime a dozen,” grinned Valentine.

“When they’re available,” contradicted Quigley. “Trouble is, all my men are tied up with other runs. I need two men in a hurry and ...”

“How many million dollars’ worth o’ gold,” enquired Stretch, “are you loadin’ on this dad-blamed stage?”

“No gold. I give you my word on that.”

“Who’s the passenger then ... President Polk?”

Quigley shook his head.

“Just three folks that have to be in Nash City in a hurry,” he told them.

Jesse Knox produced a small scroll and unrolled it. "This contract states," he said, clearing his throat, "that the undersigned agree to work for Robert Quigley for one week, in return for his paying the sum of three hundred dollars to the county funds, said amount being ..."

"Forget it," grunted Valentine.

"We don't savvy that there foreign lingo," growled Stretch. "Just give us the paper an' we'll sign."

"You're willing, then?" asked the lawyer.

"Sure," nodded Valentine. "Anything to git outa Borden's lousy jail."

"Don't ever git arrested in this town, gents," advised Stretch. "Borden'll feed you barbequed coyote an' tell you it's beef stew!"

Borden's face purpled. He made a shuddering sound and wrung his hands.

"Please!" he begged Quigley and Knox. "Get this over with fast!"

Knox, from the pockets of his frock coat, produced a bottle of ink and a quill. Quigley watched the Texans sign their names. Had the cowhands noted the tense expression on his face, they might have hesitated. This was a big moment for the Millsburg representative of the Maekstead Stage Line.

Knox examined the two signatures and nodded at Quigley. "Okay, Bob," he grunted. "They're yours."

Borden detached his key ring and unlocked their cells. They stepped out into the corridor and exchanged winks. Borden led the way back to his office and, opening a cabinet, handed them their gunbelts. They strapped them on, enjoying the familiar weight of their firearms. Larry Valentine's weapon was a Colt .45 with a worn walnut butt. He put his right foot on Borden's own chair and tied the holster around his thigh with a rawhide thong. Stretch had two thongs to tie. Since he had been fully grown, he had never ventured abroad without his twin, bone-handled six-guns.

"Now all I ask," sweated the sheriff, "is get 'em outa here!"

"Don't get that barrel-belly in an uproar," grinned Valentine. "We're goin'."

Outside the office, Knox shook hands with Quigley and bade him goodbye. As the lawyer walked away, Quigley nodded at the Texans and said, "Follow me."

They followed him, past the Gifford hardware store and the telegraph office and along the verandah of Sorrowful Roscoe's saloon. Loungers on the verandah gaped at Quigley, then at the Texans.

"Now what d'you suppose they're starin' at?" complained the mystified Stretch.

Valentine shrugged. One of the loungers threw Quigley a knowing look and called, "Finally got somebody, huh, Bob? What's the matter with 'em? They tired o' livin'?"

"What'd he say?" frowned Valentine.

"He said, 'How's my liver'," muttered Quigley, nervously. "Pay no heed to them."

They continued on to the next block and approached the Grand Hotel. Stretch eyed the inquisitive throng gathered outside the building, and nudged his friend. Valentine nodded, but remained silent.

“Rubbernecks,” explained Quigley. “There was a murder here, a couple hours ago.”

“It wasn’t us!” came Stretch’s flat assertion. “We was in jail, an’, what’s more ...”

“Nobody’s accusing you two of anything,” growled the stage-line man.

They passed through the entrance, crossed the lobby and started up the stairs. They climbed the three flights to the top floor. Quigley preceded them along the corridor and paused at a door that bore the number 6. He knocked, gently. A voice growled at him from inside.

“It’s me, Quigley,” he announced. “I’ve brought the driver and guard.”

They heard the rattle of a key in the lock. The door swung open. Quigley motioned for the Texans to enter.

Larry Valentine looked at Stretch. Stretch shrugged. They stepped into the room, with Quigley following. The door was shut and locked by a square-faced man in store clothes. Shannon slipped the key into his pocket, put his hands on his hips, and subjected the newcomers to a searching scrutiny.

The Texans ignored him, letting their gaze wander to the room’s other occupants. A second man was sitting by the window. On a divan, along the opposite wall, Lucille Furness laid her sewing aside and looked at them. They looked back ... with some interest. Despite her prim expression, the schoolteacher was a pretty woman. Valentine removed his hat and Stretch followed his example. It occurred to Lucille that somebody ought to speak. The tense silence seemed, to her, somewhat unnecessary. She inclined her head, with placid dignity, and said, “Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Howdy, ma’am,” chorused the Texans.

Quigley threw Shannon and Wilkes an anxious look and asked, “Think they’ll do? They’re all I could get. Nobody else’ll buy it.”

“I have to check them first,” frowned Shannon. He opened the door of an adjoining room and beckoned to them. “In here,” he growled.

Quigley nodded to the newcomers and entered the room. Larry and Stretch followed. This was a small bedroom. Shannon shut the door. Quigley stood in a corner, bit the end off a cigar, and lit it.

“You two,” grunted the detective.

“Us?” frowned Valentine.

“Yeah, you. Take off your clothes.”

The Texans stared at each other incredulously.

“All of ’em?” gasped Valentine.

“Everything!”

“I couldn’t do that,” protested Stretch.

“Why not?” barked the detective.

Stretch studied his boots and said, softly, “I’m modest, suh.”

“Valentine, Emerson,” called Quigley. “This is Mr. Shannon. He’s an important representative of the Pinkerton people.”

“You mean,” blinked Larry Valentine, “he’s one o’ them city lawmen?”

Quigley nodded.

“Strip,” ordered Shannon.

Reluctantly, they obeyed. As they stood, in unprepossessing nudity, with their clothes strewn on the floor, Valentine voiced a sober thought.

“I wish I’d never signed that blamed paper,” he complained.

Stretch looked down dolefully at his own naked torso, shivered, and said, “I wish I was back in Texas.”

“Stand away from the wall,” growled Shannon.

Then it began. The Pinkerton man examined them carefully, checking anatomical details against a closely written list in his hand. He checked their scars of battle, then questioned them. For thirty minutes, he bombarded them with questions ... their full names, names of their parents, their movements over the past ten years, the names of the ranchers they had worked for, the number of times they had been in jail. When, at last, his questions ceased, Valentine exchanged an indignant frown with Emerson, then asked, “You finished, mister?”

Shannon nodded, folded the list and put it in a pocket.

“You done forgot to count our teeth,” Stretch told him.

“Don’t get funny with me, cowboy!” growled the detective. “And don’t get the fool notion that only Texans are tough!”

“We could give you some arguments,” warned Valentine, “about that.”

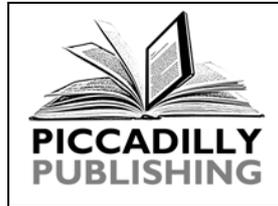
“Get your clothes on,” ordered Shannon. He turned to Quigley and added, “They’re not Sharkey riders. That’s for sure.”

“I could’ve told you that,” Quigley pointed out.

“In my business, Mr. Quigley,” muttered the Pinkerton man, “we check everything.”

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