

# Thief in the Cupboard

*By Ray Fulbright*

*That rural sheriff knew how to sink his teeth into the roots of the crime.*



“YESSIR, sheriff, after that dratted thievin’ scoundrel stole the money, he set hisself down and et purt nigh a whole pint o’ Ma’s blackberry jam.” Pap Jenkins’ chin whiskers were bouncing, his teeth clacking, and his iron-rimmed specs about to bounce from his nose.

Mrs. Jenkins wrung her hands on a gingham apron. “Purt nigh a pint of jam and a loaf of my Sunday baking, too.”

Sheriff Bradbury looked around the well-stocked ante-bellum kitchen. Iron utensils hanging around the huge fireplace. Handmade wooden furniture. And the cupboard laden with homemade foods—blackberry jams and jellies, peach preserves, apple butter, breads and cookies. In fact, everything seemed well-stocked except the little iron box. The little box that had been the Jenkins bank since the days of the bank failures.

Sheriff Bradbury reconstructed the crime. The thief had entered the house when Pap and Mrs. Jenkins had wagoned down to Possum Hollow earlier in the day for Saturday provisions. He had ransacked the house and had finally found the money box hidden at the bottom of the coffee can beneath several pounds of unground coffee. Then, after cracking the box with a hatchet, he had selected a jar of blackberry jam and a loaf of bread from the cupboard and had had lunch before departing. But not a single fingerprint had he left, having worn gloves, no doubt.

They returned to the front room, Mrs. Jenkins wobbling fatly ahead, still wringing her hands on the gingham apron. Pap collapsed into a cane-bottomed rocker, a shaking hand tearing at his gray whiskers.

“Yup,” he moaned dejectedly, “thar wuz thurteen cotton crops in thet little ol’ box.”

Ma echoed, “Thurteen cotton crops.”

“What about your tenant in that shanty out back, your handy man?” asked Sheriff Bradbury, who kept on his feet, pacing.

“Uncle Abe? Why—” Pap Jenkins didn’t finish, but shrugged helplessly.

Out on the road at the front gate a heavy man in overalls, slouch hat, and a rough black beard dismounted from a shaggy mule. He hitched the animal to the bumper of the sheriff’s Ford department car and clumped up the walk.

“Hob Gulden, our neighbor,” Pap Jenkins volunteered.

Gulden entered, removing his dirty green-black hat, scratching his head with the same gesture. Hob Gulden was a thick man. Thick was the word. He was plain thick—thick of fingers, of neck, of personality.

“Howdy, folks,” he rumbled. “Seen yo’r car out front, Shur’f, and figgered somethin’ wuz wrong. Be right proud to be of help if I kin.”

“Perhaps you can, Gulden. Pap and Mrs. Jenkins were robbed today when they were down to Possum Hollow trading. If you could throw any light on the subject, we’d sure be mighty obliged.”

HOB bit off a chew of twist with snagged yellow teeth, chewed vigorously. "By Gad!" he said as if to himself, and pulled up a cane-bottom before the fireplace so he could spit. "By Gad, I knowed somethin' wuz wrong. I knowed it as well as I'm a-settin' heah. But I jes' couldn't put mah finger on hit."

"What do you mean?"

"Well sir," he said and tossed his thick head back, chewing reflectively, "I rode by on my animal this ev'nin' a-comin' from the Hollow with a sack o' flour. As I rode over the hill with the sack o' flour acrosst mah lap I looked up and seen old Uncle Abe sneakin' into the kitchen from the back porch.

"To tell the truth, Shur'f, I didn't think much about it right off. Uncle Abe bein' right at home around heah. Been that way for forty year, I reckon. But then after I got on up the road a quarter mile er so, I got to thinking. Hell, I says to myself—scuse me, Miz Jenkins—I seed the Jenkinses down at the Hollow tradin'. So I hitched mah animal to a fence post, hid mah flour behind a log and ankled back.

"When I got heah, I peered in the kitchen winder. And bless mah hide, if thar warn't old Uncle Abe, his black face a-shinin' lak mah Sunday britches, a-settin' thar at the table like the president, eatin' bread and blackberry jam, with his gloves on!"

Hob Gulden slapped his legs and shook his head as he recalled the astonishing spectacle.

"Well suh, Shur'f"—he spat and stirred up a cloud of gray ashes—"I figgered the po'r old soul wuz jist plain hongry, him not havin' a woman to cook fer him. And I figgered he wuz wearin' the gloves 'cause he wuz old and his blood wuz thin. So I tuk leave, never figgering, mind you, that he'd stole Pap Jenkins' life savin's."

Sheriff Bradbury rose, spinning his Stetson over a long finger. "Come on, Gulden. Let's me and you go out to Uncle Abe's shanty. Pap, y'all stay here if you like."

UNCLE ABE'S unpainted shanty was a one-room affair, many of whose window panes had been replaced by cardboard. The iron cot over to the side looked as if it hadn't been made up in months. Iron cooking utensils hung around the clay fireplace. On the table near the bed was a kerosene lamp with a cracked and smoke-blackened chimney and some dishes bearing scraps of food. In a glass of water lay a set of false teeth.

"You can see old Uncle Abe likes his drinking. Shur'f," said Hob Gulden, and pointed to a shelf on which stood rows of vinegar jugs in which appeared to be blackberry wine.

"Blackberry, too," Sheriff Bradbury added.

"Lookie heah, shur'f," Hob Gulden cried excitedly. "Lookee heah in the fireplace."

In the fireplace were burnt scraps of legal papers.

"Yeah," Bradbury said, "looks like the thief burned up everything except what he would be able to spend."

There came shuffling footsteps from outside. The door opened. A skinny, ancient old Negro stood before them, puzzled, a rabbit in one hand and a muzzle-loading shotgun in the other. He dropped the rabbit and took off his battered hat.

"Gennimun"—he gulped toothlessly—"is—is somethin' wrong?"

"Yeah," Gulden answered for the sheriff. "Whur you been all ev'nin'?"

"Ah been rabbit huntin', gennimun. If anythin's wrong, Ah swear to gosh Ah been rabbit huntin' purt nigh all day. Ah

swear if any dirt's been done, Ah didn't do it, Ah ain't nevah done nobody dirt—”

Bradbury turned to Gulden. “Tell me, Gulden, just exactly what you saw in the kitchen.”

“Well thar he wuz, like I said, with the can and the hatchet on the table, eatin' blackberry jam and big hunks of Mizz Jenkins' bread—man, kin that woman cook! Shur'f, you shore orta lay yo'r

choppers to one of her blackberry pies. You ain't never et nuthin' till—”

“No, Gulden, I wouldn't like to eat one of Mrs. Jenkins' blackberry pies. Nor anyone else's blackberry pies. I've got false teeth. And so has Uncle Abe. People with false teeth don't eat blackberry pie and blackberry jam—on account of the seeds. I'm arrestin' you, Gulden, for the theft.”