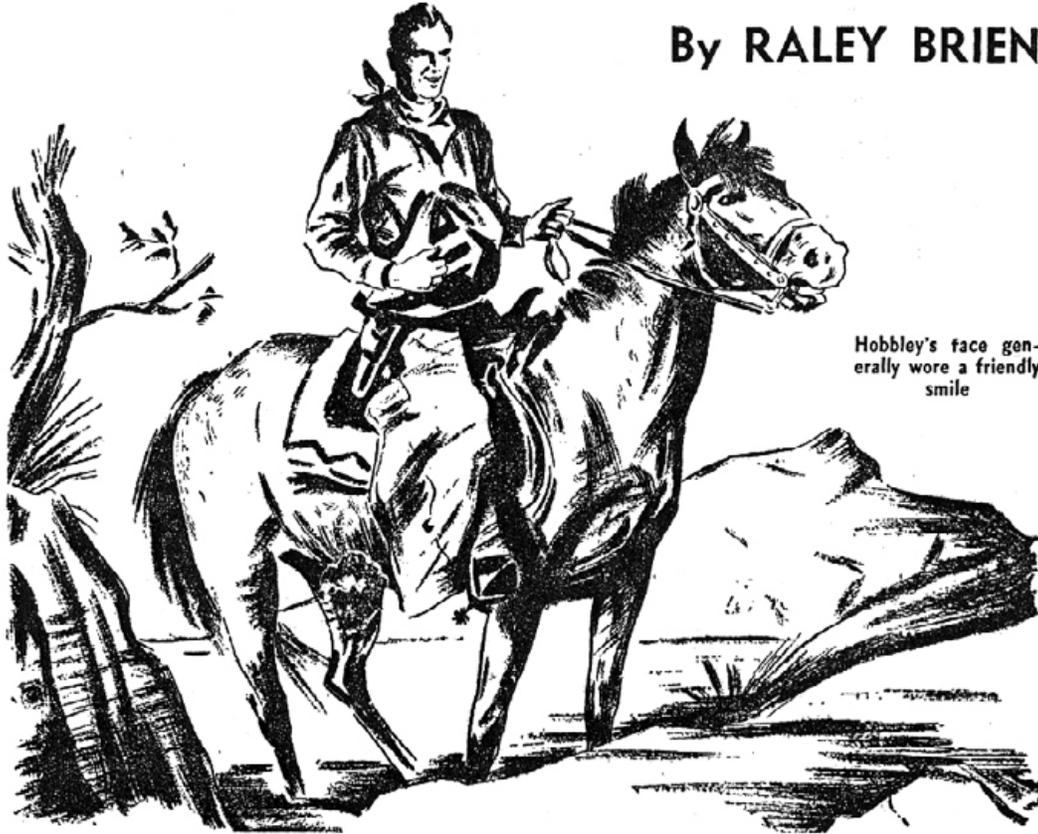


By RALEY BRIEN



Hobbley's face generally wore a friendly smile

## Hobbley Wasn't Smiling

*An ex-Ranger's six-gun skill comes in handy when the little affair of a burned chicken house pops up!*

**E**ARLY that morning, Jim Hobbley loped his horse into the little town of Green Valley and headed for the hitch rail in front of Bert Ellis' general store. The few loafers noticed an unusual thing—Jim Hobbley wasn't smiling.

Generally his even white teeth flashed in a smile that had warmed his neighbors' hearts ever since the day, about three years before, he had bought some land down the valley, built a small house and the usual out-buildings and a corral, and had started a small spread.

He had been a lawman somewhere, it was rumored, and had got shot up and had

received some rich rewards for taking into custody some badly wanted men despite the bullets in him at the time. But you'd never have guessed it from his manner. True, he generally wore a gun, but so did the other men in the district. But he hadn't used it since arriving in Green Valley, except for the extermination of a rattler now and then and an occasional shot at a coyote.

His smile was disarming; it seemed to say he was a man who loved everybody and wanted to be at peace with his neighbors. Since his first social appearance at a barn dance, every

unmarried woman on the range and in the town had been sighing, and match-making mothers and aunts had been busy, but without the desired result.

This morning, he waved a careless hand at the loafers and dismounted to tie his pony to the hitch rail. The watchers eyed one another and glanced back at Hobbley. He wasn't smiling! In fact his face had a rather grim expression. His thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. The watchers wondered if some of his stock had died or, some other disaster had struck his small new spread.

He removed his riding gauntlets, slapped dust from his shoulders, and stepped up on the walk. He jerked his head from side to side in a swift scrutiny of the street. Only a few persons were in sight. Jim Hobbley was making an early call. It was only nine in the morning, and he seldom came to town before noon.

"Howdy," a couple of the loafers greeted.

"Mornin', gents!" Hobbley replied. But he didn't smile when he said it. He shoved open the door of the store and strode inside.

**M**IDDLE-AGED, stoop-shouldered Bert Ellis was behind his counter putting merchandise on the shelves. Hobbley stalked up to the counter, nodded in response to Ellis' squeaky greeting, glanced around to see nobody else was in the store, and leaned on the counter.

"Ellis, I want a couple of loads of buildin' material," Hobbley said.

"Sure, Jim. Hope I've got what you want. Goin' to put up somethin' new out at your place?"

Hobbley didn't answer that directly. "I want the stuff loaded and freighted as quick as you can make it, Bert," he continued. "Hire men to load, and I'll pay the bill. Here's a list of stuff, with the

footage I want. A lot of two-by-fours, some one-by-twelves, all the rolls of meshed wire you've got, about twenty bags of cement; paint and stuff." He tossed down the list.

"Godfrey!" Ellis ejaculated. "You'll about clean me out, Jim. Homer Buell was expectin' to pick up a lot of that—"

"Buell can wait!" Hobbley snapped, and his eyes snapped also as he spoke. "I'll speak to him. I'll see that you're paid."

"Shucks, Jim, I'm not worryin' about that. You can have the stuff, but I hope Buell won't be too mad. I reckon I can prod a couple of the town loafers into loadin' the wagons and drivin' the mules out to your place.

"The stuff isn't to go to my place," Hobbley said. "What the heck would I do with all that wire and cement and the two-by-fours without a lot of sidin' to go with 'em?"

"Well, I—I was wonderin' about that," Ellis admitted.

"The stuffs' to be trucked to Sam Donner's place."

Bert Ellis' eyes bulged. "Donner startin' to spread out with his chicken farm? You buyin' in with him? Not that it's any of my business."

Jim Hobbley bent across the counter again. "Donner's pens and broodin' sheds and his whole plant—all except the house and barn—was burned last night."

"What?" Ellis' eyes bulged more. "Good heavens! And him in such a poor fix, with a sick wife, and just gettin' a start, and with a crazy business like a chicken farm. Jim, it's noble of you to help him."

"Don't make a mistake. I ain't goin' to pay for this stuff, or for the labor of rebuildin' quick. I told you I'd see you are paid. It'll be good money, so you don't care where it comes from, do you?"

"Well, I don't 'spose I do. But all this—you've got my head buzzin' so I don't rightly understand anything."

"Hire a couple of the men out in front and start loadin'," Hobbley directed. "Get the mule teams ready, but don't hitch till I give the word. I'll be waitin' for—somebody I want to see."

Then it was that Ellis realized Hobbley hadn't smiled since he had come into the store. And it made the storekeeper slightly nervous to see that Hobbley was continually dropping his right hand to his holster as if he wanted to make sure his gun was still there.

"The fire—how'd it start?" Ellis asked. "And just how bad was it?"

"Everything went except the house and the small barn," Hobbley answered. "Sam Donner and his daughter got some of the pens open and chased a lot of the chickens out, and they're scattered all over the range. They'll take some catchin'. Happened about midnight. I was up tendin' to a sick colt and saw the red sky and rode over—I'm only five miles from their place, as you know. Donner and his girl, Sarah, were tryin' to stop it with a couple of pails and water from the well. And Mrs. Donner bed-ridden—all the excitement won't help her."

"But how—Did a kerosene lamp blow up in one of them broodin' machines? I've always said the only way to raise chickens is to let an old cluckin' hen tend to the job."

Jim Hobbley eyed him for a moment. "The fire didn't start from a lamp, Bert. It was deliberately set. Understand? Case of arson. Donner was deliberately burned out!"

"Godfrey! You're makin' mighty strong talk, Jim."

"I'll back it up," Hobbley replied. "I'll lay proof on the line, if necessary."

HOBBLEY had been rolling a cigarette, and now he struck a match and lit the smoke. Hoofbeats sounded in the street. He glanced through the dirt-streaked store window and saw Homer Buell and his ranch foreman, Al Norman, dismounting at the hitch rail.

Buell was the big man of the district. He was a middle-aged widower who had built up a big spread by working his wife and his men to death, it was whispered. Now he thought he was the big boss of the Green Valley range, above and beyond the law, and a man whose slightest wish should be taken as an order and receive attention instantly.

Jim Hobbley's face was inscrutable as he looked through the window at Buell. Al Norman, tall and stringy and reputed to be unscrupulous when Buell wished him to be, tied his pony and got up beside Buell on the walk.

"In early," Ellis commented. "Hittin' for Mike Doyle's saloon, I reckon."

"Get busy loadin'," Hobbley said.

Ellis called a couple of the loafers from in front of the store, made a deal with them, and led them out the rear door. Hobbley wandered to the front window and looked out. One of Buell's cowpunchers had just ridden in and was tethering his pony, and another had stopped at the blacksmith shop.

The town was coming alive. A few old men were wandering down the street and a couple of rigs were driving in. A town woman entered the store, and Hobbley went to the back door to call Ellis so he could attend to trade.

"I'll check the loadin'," he told Ellis.

"I didn't tell the men nothin'," Ellis whispered.

Hobbley went out to check the loading, and he urged the men to haste. They thought the stuff was for him, and exerted themselves more than usual. One wagon

was loaded and the lumber secured. They began loading the second.

One of Buell's cowpunchers drifted past on his way to Mike Doyle's saloon and watched the work for a moment. After he had gone on, Hobbley went back into the store.

"Loadin' about done," he told Ellis. "Get the mules ready and the drivers. I'll tell you when to hitch."

Out back was a sudden bellow: "Ellis! Get out here!"

"That's Homer Buell yellin'," Ellis said.

"Go see what he wants. I'll be right behind you," Hobbley told him.

Hobbley followed the storekeeper out the back door. Homer Buell was raging.

"What's all this, Ellis?" he demanded. "I want most of that stuff. I told you so last week."

"But you—Well, you didn't send in for it, Mr. Buell, and I got a chance to sell it."

"I ordered the stuff, Buell, for immediate delivery," Hobbley admitted.

"You? What in tarnation you want with all this stuff? Anyhow, I came in this mornin' to order it delivered. You can wait, Hobbley. I need most of this stuff right now—that is, all the lumber and some of the cement. That cussed wire—I don't want that. Don't see why you do, but that's your own business. I'll have the wagons reloaded, Ellis, with what I want. You can order more stuff for Hobbley."

"I've contracted for this and I'll take it," Hobbley said.

"Gettin' big for your pants, ain't you?" Buell snarled.

"Yeah, who in blazes do you think you are, makin' such big talk?" asked Al Norman, stepping up beside Buell.

"Step aside, gents, and I'll do a little explainin'," Hobbley said. "We'll leave the wagons as they are till we get done talkin'."

"I'm not used to takin' orders," Buell stormed.

"Maybe you'll take a few from me," Hobbley suggested.

"You drunk, or plain crazy?" Al Norman put in. "Mr. Buell, you want I should cuff back his ears?"

"Wait, Al," Buell ordered. "Let's hear what Hobbley has to say. Maybe it'll be interestin'."

They walked aside with Hobbley to where the others could not hear.

"Buell," Hobbley said, "Sam Donner's chicken sheds and pens were burned last night, and some of his chickens killed and the others scattered."

"What?" Buell pretended astonishment. Al Norman's face was a mask.

"You ain't very good as an actor, Buell. That wasn't news to you," Hobbley said.

"What you mean by that?"

"Could tell by the way you acted that you knew it before."

"Matter of fact, one of the men did say he'd heard it," Buell said.

"That's strange. I was at the fire last night, and nobody else showed up. We're ten miles on the other side of town. And I was the first man to ride in today from that direction."

"Well—" Buell said. "Not much loss, I guess. Donner's crazy, anyhow. Comin' here on cattle range and startin' a chicken farm! How's he expect to make a livin'?"

"Oh, I thought you knew!" Hobbley said.

"Knew what?"

"Donner used to breed fancy chickens back in Missouri. He came here for his wife's health. Just had money enough, after payin' for doctors and operations, to buy that little place and make a fresh start. He gets fancy prices for them chickens. Sells all he can raise. Now—well, he's

burned out, far as his chicken plant is concerned.”

“Tough luck, but this is cattle country,” Buell said. “Chickens—huh! We let the women raise ‘em for fryers and eggs and to get pin money from any they sell. The idea of a grown man makin’ a business of chickens! Anyhow, how’d you think I might know about him raisin’ fancy stock to sell?”

“Oh, I thought you might have learned it, Buell, when you were pesterin’ around his place makin’ eyes at Sarah Donner.”

“I—what?” Buell raged.

“It’s no secret. You saw her at a barn dance and decided it might be time for you to get married again. I understand she gave you a mighty quick no. Her father was tellin’ me that your attitude was it’d be a godsend to her and a comedown for you, but you’d marry her.”

“I’ve had enough of this!” Buell shouted. “So that buildin’ material is goin’ out to Donner’s?”

“That’s right.”

“I need it worse than he does, and I reckon I’ll take it. It won’t hurt this range much if he never rebuilds his chicken pens. How’d the fire break out?”

“It was set,” Hobbley said.

Buell, and Al Norman beside him, were suddenly tense. Then Buell relaxed slightly. “How’d you know that?” Buell asked. “It’s not likely.”

“Donner says he heard a horse whinny just before the fire broke out. He looked out a window and saw a rider just leavin’ back of the pens.”

“Yeah? Recognize the rider?”

“Nope,” Hobbley admitted. “Starlight, but no moon. But the rider was the man who’d started the fire. Donner went back to bed, and in a few minutes Sarah began yelling to him that the chicken sheds were afire. They couldn’t do much. I saw the light—was up with a sick colt—and rode

over there, but it was too late to save anything. No wind—that’s what saved the house and barn.”

“Well, it’s tough, of course,” Buell said. “But that’s the way things go.”

“Sometimes things are helped to go.”

“That all you got to say, Hobbley?”

“Nope,” Hobbley said. “I notice a couple of your men in town, Buell. I think it’d be nice if you’d send one to your ranch with word for about half a dozen of your punchers to hit for the Donner place—men who can build chicken sheds and pens and fence. I’ll have these materials trucked out. We’ll start rebuildin’ this afternoon.”

“My men are all busy,” Buell snapped.

“Your men can bed down in my bunkhouse and eat at my place,” Hobbley continued. “Maybe the whole thing could be done by tomorrow night or next day. We’ll build the plant twice as big as it was before.”

“I said my men were busy, Hobbley.”

“It’d be a right neighborly act,” Hobbley said. “I think it’d be the right thing to do, and I’d appreciate it, and I know the folks of the range would. Especially if they didn’t understand everything.”

Homer Buell had been regarding Hobbley closely for some time. He noted the change in him. He didn’t like the new feeling Hobbley was giving him. And now it came to him—Hobbley’s usual smile was missing.

“Aw, let’s go to Doyle’s and get a drink,” Al Norman said. “On your way, Hobbley. Mr. Buell don’t want to listen to any more of your nonsense. I’ll have the men reload the wagons, Mr. Buell—”

“One moment, Norman!” Hobbley’s voice snapped. His eyes narrowed and glinted, and his body tensed. “I haven’t been talkin’ nonsense, have I, Buell?”

“You seem to be all mixed up about somethin’,” Buell said. “Askin’ me to do all this—”

“There’s more,” Hobbley interrupted, his voice low. “All this material that’s goin’ out to the Donner place for rebuildin’—you’re payin’ for that. Nobody’ll know but Ellis and us, and Ellis won’t tell.”

“Yeah, you’re crazy!” Buell said. “Why should I do all that?”

“All that and more. There’ll be brooders and some fancy chicken breedin’ stock to buy. Everything’s goin’ to be replaced double what it was before, and you’re payin’ the bill.”

“Why should I?”

“Before I tell you, I’d better tell you somethin’ else, Buell, so you won’t be makin’ any mistake about me. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“What now?”

“My name’s Jim Hobbley, but that may mean nothin’ to you. Not to be braggin’, but just to go on record, I spent quite a time down on the Border. I was the Ranger who ran into the Jose Garcia gang. Remember hearin’ of that? They almost got me. But I killed Garcia and three of his men, and after bein’ shot up’ some I held three others till help came. So I ain’t the kind of man who’d be much alarmed at any gun-slingin’ you and Al Norman might try.”

“Why, you—” Buell began.

Hobbley’s stare stopped him. “I’ll do some more explainin’—I mean about this Donner business. Donner couldn’t identify the rider he saw or his pony. But plenty of marks were left behind.”

Buell tried to laugh. “I suppose you mean there were hoofprints that could be identified.”

“Plenty of hoof prints, but they look like any a shod pony might leave. No broken shoe, or anything like that, Buell.

The man who set fire to the sheds tied his pony to a stunted tree a short distance away. Tracks look like the pony was there for some time. I reckon that pony must have some skin trouble on his neck. Plain to see where he rubbed his neck against the trunk of the little tree. Lot of hairs caught in the bark.

“I noticed when you rode into town that your pony has a sore neck and has rubbed off a mess of hair. Your pony’s that little roan you ride so much. And the hairs in the bark of the tree—well, Buell, they check with your pony.”

Buell drew in his breath sharply. Then his right hand streaked for his holster. But before he could clear leather with his gun he felt the muzzle of Jim Hobbley’s gun jammed against his stomach. The draw had been so swift that Buell had not seen it. He lifted his hands.

“Ranger service, remember, Buell?” Hobbley asked. “I could have killed you just now. Take it easy. If you’d got me, the Law’d have got you, because the evidence I mentioned is known elsewhere. I don’t like to compound a felony, Buell, but let’s just say in this case that it’d be better to get Donner straightened out and helped at yore expense. You caused the damage, you know. My word’d go a long way in court, Buell, with my official record behind it.”

“Why should I have done such a thing?”

“Because somebody refused to jump when you snapped your fingers, Buell. Because Sarah Donner wouldn’t marry you. A little cheap revenge. Burn ‘em out. Break ‘em. Bring anguish to Donner and his sick wife and his daughter. You’re pretty low, Buell. I should have shot you.”

It became plain that Al Norman was in Buell’s confidence about the affair. For Norman, thinking Hobbley’s attention was centered on Buell, went for his gun. A

quick shot, Hobbley with his own gun drawn, a tale afterward of self-defense—it was a perfect setup.

There came the quick bark of a gun and Al Norman's weapon dropped to the ground. He reeled backward.

"Bad try, Norman," Hobbley said. "Well, Buell?"

"I—I'll do all you said," Buell replied. "Some men are runnin' this way."

"We were cuttin' up, and I shot Norman by accident," Jim Hobbley said quickly. "Don't make any bad moves now, Buell. It'll be a prison term for arson if you do. Send for your men to Donner's with tools, like I said."

"Why are you so interested in this business, anyhow?" Buell asked.

"Oh, I want to see Donner get along, and his wife get well. Donner's sister is comin' out to keep house for him and help him with his chickens, like she did back in Missouri. Because Sarah won't be livin'

there after a few months. We're goin' to be married, Sarah and me."

An expression of genuine astonishment spread over Buell's face.

"It's no more'n right," Hobbley continued, "that you pay for rightin' the damage you caused. Hittin' you in the pocketbook hurts you almost as bad as five years in prison, I reckon. I could take care of the Donners, but I'll need all my money for my own spread. And it's right you should pay."

"You win, Hobbley," Buell whispered.

"And be careful of gettin' any ideas about handlin' me later," Hobbley said. "Handle your man Norman, too, or I'll take on the job myself."

"There'll be no trouble."

"You're sensible, Buell. Oh—uh—Sarah and me had quite a laugh about your high-handed courtin'."

Hobbley looked straight at him again—and smiled.