

# *Slugs Along the Mohawk*



*By*  
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Pruning the orchard was an important item on Jeb's list for the day. But first he had a bullet-planting chore mapped out—a chore which was not intended to reap a crimson harvest.

**T**HE MAN sprawled on the red clay between the peach trees in Lias Mullen's orchard inched forward until he lay surrounded by the rich, lustrous leaves of a double row of blackberry vines. Then he rested.

The sun burned the thick neck above his faded shirt collar. Rivulets of perspiration coursed down his dusty face and stained the blue shirt with darker splotches of moisture. His parched mouth ached for relief and he glanced at the thickly tangled briars. Purplish fruit hung suspended in clusters.

Jeb's eyes glistened. He knew all about these juicy berries. They were a hybrid strain, and the talk of Bedminster Township, because they

ripened earlier than any other variety in the valley. The thirsty man picked a berry as large as his thumb, moistened his tongue. The juices were sourish sweet, thirst quenching. Avidly he took another. When he had consumed several handfuls, a door latch clicked.

Instantly alert, Jeb watched the low single-story house. A burly man in patched overalls rounded the corner. He carried a tin bucket, headed for a stone well curb. Jeb's brain hardened. Lias Mullen, the local bloodsucker . . .

From the soft clay where it had rested, Jeb lifted and leveled the rifle. The sun glanced off the barrel and dazzled his eyes. Since the rifle was a single shot and he dared not miss, Jeb waited

patiently until Lias finished drawing water. The thickset man straightened, his beefy face squarely across the sights. Jeb squeezed the trigger.

The rifle jumped. A puff of smoke obscured the target, but Jeb waited with the sure confidence of a hunter who could hit a squirrel at fifty yards. Burned powder stung his nostrils, tickled his throat, yet he did not mind. When the well came into view again, Jeb saw what he had expected. Lias was slumped against the spout, hands upflung along the rough stones. Slowly the body slipped, fell with a thud. Lias lay very still.

Jeb relaxed and stood up. Coming from his concealment, Jeb approached the prostrate Lias. The man was dead, drilled neatly behind the left ear. Blood still trickled into the coarse, black neck hairs. Water from the spilled bucket lisped and chuckled as it ran over the edge of the wooden platform.

"Lias," Jeb said in a low monotone, "reckon your bloodsucking days is over. Can't say as you'll collect any mortgage money from me. My sweat won't drop on this stubborn clay so's I can scrape out twelve percent interest to pay you. From now on, Lias, I aim to farm debt free. And in peace."

The speech completed, Jeb entered the deserted house. The mortgage and the interest which Jeb had paid last week would be stowed in one of three places, none of which would be the Bedminster Bank. At the fireplace Jeb tested each stone. None was loose. He surveyed the spool bed with its gaudy patchwork quilt—the handiwork of the late Mrs. Mullen—but drew a blank when he searched the ticking.

That left the third place, the only one where Jeb had ever heard of a local man hiding money. A ten-minute search through the crockery in the pantry drew a third blank. Stumped momentarily, Jeb eyed a stubby jug alongside the clock on the mantel. In the bottom of the jug Jeb found the thirty-six dollars and the mortgage.

"Trusted us," Jeb mused aloud, "more'n we trusted him."

His big-knuckled fingers closed around the money, his again and by rights. "Who but me," he said grimly, "has a right to demand and collect the interest Lias claimed? Once over I paid this mortgage in interest and now it's mine."

Stowing the bills and mortgage in a back

pocket, Jeb picked up his rifle and went outdoors. Four miles away, a hazy ridge of hills provided a backdrop toward which rolled the scattered farms of the upper Raritan River valley. The nearest farm, that of Ray Tucket, was a good mile distant. The lazy countryside lay in deep sleep, except for desultory cackle music from Lias' hens and the faint bay of a lonesome hound.

Suddenly Jeb started, listened. He heard the chug-chug of a car on the long farm drive to Lias' house. "Job's done," Jeb muttered. "Best to get back. Only I didn't figure nobody finding the body quite so soon."

**B**ENDING low, he skirted the well and kept behind the cover of a row of unkempt spirea bushes until he reached the barn. Peering from behind a screen of locust, Jeb watched Harry Vanarsdale's topless touring car raise dust along the road. Then, swiftly and noiselessly, Jeb turned and made his way through a woodlot downhill to Primrose Creek. He followed a faint path upstream. Into the deepest part of the shaded hole where he'd caught the four-pound bass last summer, Jeb tossed the rifle.

Fifteen minutes later he unhitched his horse from a snake fence bordering his orchard. "Giddap," he shouted at Daisy, the bay mare. "Giddap," he repeated. Disregarding the horse's gender, he added: "You lazy old good-for-nothing son-o'-Satan!"

The mare ambled off between the rows of young peach trees, while the spike-toothed harrow followed and currycombed the soil. A half hour later a car rattled into the yard and wheezed to a stop. Two men whom Jeb identified as the sheriff and Abe Norton, a deputy, got out. "Quick work," Jeb murmured thoughtfully. "Vanarsdale musta skedaddled when he found Lias!" Unhurriedly Jeb followed Daisy to the row's end, then walked over to the car.

"Afternoon," Jeb said. "Figuring to set awhile?"

Abe Norton looked meaningly at the sheriff. Thus prodded, the sheriff spoke. "Cultivatin' some, Jeb?"

"You got eyes," Jeb answered. He stood quietly, eyeing the two uneasy men, and rubbing a calloused palm over the three-day growth of grayish white stubble on his chin.

"How's she gonna crop up?" the sheriff continued.

"Moderate."

"Bugs bad this way, Jeb?"

"Ain't eyed many."

Abe shifted restlessly. "Now you listen here, sheriff," he complained, "I ain't aiming to rot here till Christmas while you and Jeb work your jaws. Speak your piece and—"

"Abe," the sheriff interrupted, "shut up. Am a-hurryin', ain't I?"

The sheriff, a long sliver of man with leathery cheeks and sorrowful brown eyes, studied Jeb, then asked: "Fall-plantin' that ten-acre field of your'n?"

"Maybe," Jeb said. "What's a-riling Abe?"

The sheriff took a long breath. "There's been a killin'."

"You don't say!" Jeb squinted. "What's it this time, another stranger?"

"Lias Mullen," Abe broke in. "Shot behind the left ear, he was."

"Ain't murder then," Jeb said easily. "Just common sense. Know a dozen men hereabouts 'ud like to gun Lias."

"Know it as well as you," the sheriff said softly. "But the law's been broke and I gotta act. Been workin' here all day, Jeb?"

"Not yet. It's three hours to sundown."

"Evading won't help, Jeb. I been to Ray Tucket's soon as I got Harry Vanarsdale's call. I'm questioning every man in the valley. You work here all day?"

"Harrers don't run theirselves, sheriff. And that Daisy—sure is a good mare, only she don't work none by her lonesome."

"Anybody to witness that?"

Jeb stiffened. "Lived here twelve years," he said, spacing the words evenly. "Ain't nobody ever doubted my word."

Still unruffled and unhurried, the sheriff repeated his question: "You been workin' here since morning?"

Jeb snorted. "You got eyes!" Then he stepped closer, a thin-hipped lanky man with outthrust jaw. "A man 'ud think you're a-charging me with Lias' murder, if you call it that."

"Maybe." The sheriff turned to Abe. "Fetch Jeb's gun."

JEB watched Abe enter the weather-beaten shack. Then he set himself to thinking. The sheriff had got here quick. Still, there was no danger. Carefully he rechecked his plans. Nobody had seen him enter the blackberry patch, nor watched him drill Lias. And the rifle shot could belong to anybody—a kid in the woods, or somebody gunning a woodchuck or squirrel. People didn't trouble themselves in these parts about a rifle shot.

Abe fetching the hunting rifle wouldn't matter, either. The rifle which had killed Lias had been bought secondhand over to Pottersville three years ago and nobody had ever seen it in Jeb's house. What about his tracks between his own house and Lias'? Maybe the sheriff would go for hounds, expecting to follow the trail Jeb smiled inwardly. Let the hounds try. It was behind the barn that Jeb had rubbed garlic on his boot soles!

No, Jeb decided, there was no danger of discovery. There were a dozen men in the upper valley who would like to get Lias between rifle sights—provided no questions would be asked afterward!

The door opened and Abe walked out, carrying a rifle.

Jeb eyed the deputy sourly. "Carry that gun right," he advised Abe. "It ain't used to being handled by strangers."

Abe handed the rifle to the sheriff who asked: "When you fire this last, Jeb?"

"Sunday, over by Hogback Ridge."

The sheriff examined the rifle, handed it back to Abe. Then he said sadly: "Well, Jeb, let's get goin' to town."

A tense silence settled over the three men. Nobody moved, not even when Daisy whinnied loudly. A shiver gathered in the small of Jeb's back and worked along his spine. Suddenly his fingers tingled.

"Now, sheriff," he protested, "you can't pack me off like this. I got that orchard to harrer."

The sheriff said nothing, just stood eyeing Jeb carefully. The silence upset Jeb. "You can't arrest me, sheriff," he snapped angrily. "Judge Somerville won't hold me ten minutes 'less you got proof or witnesses."

Under the impact of the sheriff's steady stare, Jeb quieted down. Fear pulsed up his backbone with the rapidity and force of an electric current.

Numbness crept around inside his body. He waited. There was nothing else to do.

“Nobody liked Lias Mullen,” the sheriff said finally. “But nobody gunned him till you did, Jeb.”

“Don’t talk nonsense—” Jeb began.

“You’re guilty,” the sheriff interrupted. “When you was waitin’ to shoot Lias you made one mistake. You know how blackberries stain. That beard a-your’n, Jeb—it ain’t white, it’s purple!”