

A Quiet Election

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**Deputy Bentley Wanted
a Plumb Peaceful Vote
—So He Had to Blast a
Crook to Hell-an-gone!**

TEARS misted Jim Bentley's eyes as he gazed down at the old man beneath the threadbare quilt. Sheriff Horton had been stove up for nearly two weeks now.

"That was the dangest luck, you gettin' thrown from yore hoss and bustin' them ribs," sympathized Bentley. "But we're gonna win the election tomorrow, hands down jest the same."

"No, son," Horton said sadly. "I reckon the Sloan outfit is bound to elect that Grady dude. There's been lots of talk



Without warning Wilburn and Sloan fired at the deputy

about me gettin' too old for the office. I'm sorry, but it shore looks like yuh're gonna be huntin' another job."

"Yuh're talkin' through yore hat, old-timer," burst out his stalwart, black-haired young deputy fiercely. "Shucks, we're gonna reelect you. What yuh think I been doin' the last two weeks? Rollin' quirlies and twiddlin' my thumbs? I been stumpin' the county like hell. The honest folks are gonna keep you in office. You jest lay here and mend them ribs. Leave the rest to me."

He strode quickly out of the house. Horton had called the turn, all right, and Bentley knew it. But everybody in the county knew that Jack Grady was nothing but the crooked tool of Henry Sloan, gambler, saloon owner, and big stockholder in the Cattlemen's Bank, Sloan who ran things in the town of Aberdeen.

Grady was a thin, sallow-faced jasper with a thin black mustache and snaky black eyes. He was a barman for Sloan, and Bentley had thrown him in jail more than once for brawling. It should have been a laugh when Sloan and his new faro dealer from El Paso, Ted Wilburn, cooked up a scheme to make Grady sheriff, but it wasn't because Sloan controlled half the votes in town, and if he succeeded in swinging any of the honest citizens over to his camp, there weren't enough cattlemen out on the range to reelect Clem Horton who had been sheriff for so many years that folks had lost track of them.

Bentley had canvassed the county. Now he had to see what was brewing in town. He went into Sloan's Lucky Chance saloon and ordered a small whisky at the bar, surveying the huge room.

AT a green, felt-covered table in one corner Wilburn, the new dealer, sat

dealing faro for several players. His hands were long and slender and supple. He had gun-slick written all over him.

Henry Sloan halted near the thoughtful deputy.

"Hello, Jim," he greeted affably. "Ain't seen yuh lately. Yuh been outa town?"

Bentley studied the heavy features of the saloon owner. "Yeah," he said soberly. "Yeah, I been ridin' around some."

"Stumpin' for Clem Horton, I reckon?" said Sloan. "Yuh're jest wastin' yore time and gettin' saddle galled for nothin', hombre. That old galoot's done wore out three leather bottoms to that chair in his office. He's ready for a rockin' chair now."

"We'll see tomorrow," answered Bentley in a level voice. "There's still lots of honest folks hereabouts who are satisfied with Clem Horton."

"Listen to me, young squirt," Sloan said harshly. "We're electin' a new sheriff tomorrow. And if the honest folks is so particular, they should of kicked Clem Horton out a long time ago."

Sock! Jim Bentley's fist crashed into Sloan's lips. Blood spurting, he staggered back, tripped over a spittoon, and measured his length on the floor.

Bentley heard a sharp exclamation, and glanced around. Ted Wilburn rising from his chair, a six-shooter in his slim right hand. Bentley went into a crouch as his own hands streaked for his twin guns. The draw was so fast it pinned the faro dealer helpless, his six-shooter half-raised.

"Freeze!" snapped Bentley. "One move, Wilburn, and I'll put a slug smack between yore eyes."

Silence fell like a blanket. Sloan struggled to his feet.

"Let be, Wilburn," he said between thickening lips. "This fool will get his

after tomorrow when the old crook Horton gets beat at the polls.”

Such reaction was, to Bentley, grimly significant. What sort of dirty game was Sloan up to? What had the man been doing while Bentley was out making a circuit of the ranches? Slowly the deputy backed to the swinging doors and stepped out into the street.

Night was falling as Jim Bentley made his way back to Sheriff Horton’s house, boiling from what he had just heard.

“Listen, Sheriff,” he said abruptly as he walked into the old man’s bedroom. “Henry Sloan is stewin’ up something about you. What’s he mean by openly callin’ you a crook?”

The old man’s face whitened. His keen old eyes wavered, then he brought his gaze back to the indignant face of his deputy.

“Sit down, son,” he muttered. “I mighta known I couldn’t keep it quiet. I shoulda told you about it, instead of tryin’ to duck things.”

“What d’yuh mean?” demanded Bentley, going a bit weak at the pit of his stomach.

“Son,” began Norton slowly, “a long time ago—before you was even born—I was doin’ other things besides sheriffin’. Down El Paso way. They—they wasn’t always on the right side of the law. They was two of us—pard. One day we held up a bank and—and I killed the cashier. My pard and I got away and never rode the owlhoot trail again, but killin’ a man’s one crime which ain’t ever outlawed.”

“I see.” Bentley’s face was taut. “So that’s really what this Ted Wilburn is doin’ here.”

“Yes,” Horton nodded. “Sloan brought him here to force me outa office—I don’t know how Sloan got wind of that old business. My pard didn’t have anything to do with it, anyhow. Wilburn was a teller in that bank.”

JIM BENTLEY spoke in a queer voice. “There ain’t any use tryin’ to hide things from me, Clem Horton. Why d’yuh pick me up when I was a ten-year-old button and bring me up to be a lawman? I’ve always known who yore saddle pard was. It was my father. And I know something else. Dad’s dead now, so it don’t matter. It wasn’t you shot that bank cashier. It was my father. He—he told me.”

The old sheriff’s face was a mask of incredulity.

“Jim!” he cried huskily. “Yuh knowed about yore dad and me all these years—and never told me!”

“Yuh wanted to keep it secret, sir,” said young Bentley with a shrug. “What good would it have done to talk? And yuh didn’t kill that cashier. I’ll bring yuh positive proof jest as quick as I can get to the telegraph office.”

Brushing his eyes, Bentley hurried from the house. “Forgive me, Dad,” he whispered. “But a white lie like that won’t hurt yuh none, and it’ll save yore old pardner.”

The telegraph office at the railroad shack was darkened and deserted. Bentley used his key to enter the office. The sheriff had permission to use the wire whenever necessary, and Jim Bentley was a passable operator.

He rapped out a call to El Paso, and when he got it, tapped out rapid instructions which soon had that city’s police department boiling over in excitement. It was, in effect, a posthumous confession that Tom Bentley and not Clem Horton had killed the cashier of the Merchants’ Bank twenty-five years previous, and an urgent request for El Paso to wire that news back to Sheriff Horton as quickly as possible.

As he finished, Bentley heard a noise at the window of the telegraph shack. He whirled, and in the yellow light of the lamp a knife gleamed as it sped to nick his cheek. He fired, hand still on the key. There was a howl of pain and rage as the glass shattered.

By the time Bentley reached the outside, however, the would-be drygulcher was gone. . . .

Voting at the county courthouse on election day was slow during the morning, and Bentley spent his time going from the jail office to the depot, but there was no word from El Paso.

When the ranchers began to ride in to cast their votes business picked up. Bentley saw Sloan and Wilburn with a couple of ugly-looking housemen enter the polling place where the gambler took charge of the voting. Uttering an angry exclamation, Bentley had started to interfere, to prevent any crookedness when he saw the station agent running along the street, carrying a fluttering paper.

Bentley rushed to meet him.

"Message from El Paso," yelped the agent, his eyes popping. "I'll swear, Jim, I never got such a shock—"

"Give it here," snapped Bentley, grabbing the sheet and reading.

His own eyes bulged and his jaw dropped. With a shout, he headed for the courthouse where Sloan was haranguing the voters.

Before he could get out a word, though, Sloan and Wilburn appeared in the doorway, guns in hand. Without warning both of them fired. Struck in the thigh, Bentley crumpled to the dusty street.

But both his guns were out as he fell. Sloan, crowding behind Wilburn, shot the

left-hand gun out of Bentley's hand. Grimly, knowing this was showdown, the deputy let Wilburn have a slug—low.

The fellow grunted, jerked, and sagged down across the threshold. Bentley's gun leaped to cover Sloan, and both men fired at once. A streak of fire shot across the deputy's head just as he saw the ugly sallow face of Jack Grady peering at him out of the window, a knife in one hand, the other bandaged. So Grady had been the drygulcher at the telegraph office! Bentley tried to raise his gun once more, but failed. He heard a gun roar, then pitched forward on his face.

SHERIFF HORTON came limping along the dusty street, hastily stuffing his nightshirt into his trousers, and holding a still smoking rifle.

"That settles that polecat Grady!" he grunted. "Damn sneak! Jim, son, are yuh bad hurt?"

Sloan was dead, and Ted Wilburn was writhing his life away. Others had corraled and disarmed Sloan's henchmen.

"My past has done caught up with me," shouted the sheriff, "but, by grabs, I ain't leavin' any dirty buzzards to take over my job—thanks to Jim!"

Bentley sat up. He grinned weakly.

"I told yuh I was gonna see yuh reelected, and I don't aim to have been shot up for nothin'." he said. "Sheriff, neither you nor my dad killed that bank cashier. I just got a telegram that says Ted Wilburn shot the cashier in the back after you two old coyotes ran off. They've been huntin' for Wilburn ever since. Now let's have our usual quiet election."