



Enraged, Simmons bashed Lewton on the nose

Blood and Tomatoes

By TED COUGHLAN

*When a corpse plunges down the cull chute
Sheriff Coulter is called to "ketchup" the killer!*

MIKE JONES, owner of Tropical Dairy, carefully backed his dump truck through the lane of twisted coconut palms leading to Princeton Tomato Packing House, and stopped it under the cull chute. He picked up a pitchfork and yelled at the unseen Negro attendant.

"Okay, Rastus, let 'em go!"

The chute opened, and a pulpy mass of ripe, red tomatoes spilled into the truck. After a few bushels, the chute stuck. Mike jumped up to the rickety platform to investigate.

He thrust his pitchfork into the opening, to loosen the sodden mass. The fork stuck, and he yanked hard. He almost fell backward as he finally dislocated the obstruction. It was a human body, covered with the red juice.

The rotund corpse fell into the body of the truck with a thud, and was instantly covered by the onrush of the now freed tomatoes. Mike let out a yell.

"Hold everything!"

The chute closed with a bang, but not before the truck body was three-quarters

filled. The Negro inquiringly poked his bushy head through the packing-house door.

"You-all done got enough?" he asked, grinning.

"Too much!" Mike answered soberly. "I don't think the cows'll like this load. Where's the boss?"

"I guess Mr. Simmons is in his office."

Mike hurried toward the cubbyhole office. He threw open its swinging door without knocking, and blurted out:

"I got a dead man in the truck. He fell out of the cull bin."

"What?" Simmons jumped up from his battered roll-top desk. He had a fattish, round face which made him look much younger than his semi-bald head indicated. He brushed back the fringe of light-brown hair with his plump hands. "Whose body?"

"I'm tellin' you—a corpse."

"You're screwy, Mike. Why don't you lay off that rattlesnake poison."

"I wish that was the answer." Mike heaved his square shoulders. "I tell you there's a corpse in the truck. It came out when I was loading the culls."

THEY left the office and hurried to the truck. Simmons put one foot on the hub of the rear wheel, pulled himself up and looked into the deep dump body.

"I see nothing but tomatoes."

"It's buried under the load. Get one of the workers to dig it out."

"Maybe we'd better call the sheriff," Simmons said somberly. "That's a funny place to find a corpse."

Frowning, the manager went into the building. After a while, he strode back. He hooked his fingers into his belt and stood, staring at the truck.

"The sheriff says leave everything alone. He'll be here in a few minutes. I caught him up at the post-office."

Mike shaded his wide-set, greenish-blue eyes with his stubby hands and impatiently looked up the chalk white road.

"I gotta get back to the dairy. Them cows ain't been fed yet today."

"Don't you give them anything but tomatoes?" Simmons asked sarcastically.

"Sure, but they like them culls best," Mike explained.

A car raced down the highway. It drew up beside the packing shed with a squeal of protesting tires and brakes. A tall, youngish man in knee breeches, open-neck shirt and slouch hat got out. His movements were as lithe as a cat's.

"Howdy, Mr. Simmons! Mike!" he greeted. "What's the trouble?"

"Mike claims there's a body in his truck," Simmons pointed from the truck driver to his load.

"How did it get there, Mike?"

"I started to load up and the chute stuck. When I tried to loosen it up, a body rolled down. Before Rastus could close the gate, it was buried under the tomatoes." Mike pointed his short finger at the pile of culls.

Sheriff Coulter reached for the high side of the truck, chinned himself and peered inside. He gave a sharp whistle, dropped easily to the ground, and looked around for a clean spot to dump the load.

"Get a few empty crates, Simmons. We don't want this mess spilled all over the road."

Simmons had Rastus line up some empty field crates under the back of the truck. Mike got into the cab and started the motor. The dump body slowly tilted toward the empties. He opened the tailgate a crack, allowing only the tomatoes to spill out. When the corpse was disclosed, he asked:

"Where do you want him?"

"Pull over to the platform," Coulter ordered.

They laid the body out on the rickety platform of weathered pine. Coulter bent over it, searching for a wound. The clothing was too soiled to locate it. Wiping the tomato juice off his hands, the sheriff asked:

“Do you know who he is?”

SIMMONS examined the bloody, juice-spattered face and clothing, then answered:

“Why, it’s Sam Lawton. He bought a carload of mixed vegetables from me only this morning!”

“How long has he been down here? I don’t seem to remember him,” Coulter asked.

“He made the regular circuit. From here to the lake and back. He stayed down in Homestead, at the Royal Hotel.”

Coulter bent over the body again, then straightened up.

“I’ll call the ambulance and get him down to the medical officer. Can’t do anything until they wash him off and see what killed him.” He walked toward the office. Hearing Mike’s truck motor roar to life, he turned back.

“You hang around a while, Mike. I want to know what the doc says before you leave.”

“But my cows?” Mike wailed.

“They won’t die without you for a few hours,” Coulter drawled. “We won’t keep you long. Go have a beer, you’ll feel better. Or, maybe you’d better make it tomato juice,” he added slyly as Mike wiped his perspiring forehead with the sleeve of his worn workshirt.

“Tomato juice!” Mike scowled and made a bee-line for the corner barbecue stand.

The ambulance arrived and took the body. Sheriff Coulter looked over the packing house. Everything was as usual. The machinery was humming at full speed.

The graders were deftly handling the fruit, separating the green tomatoes from those showing any sign of color, and tossing them into the bins, according to size. Packers’ hands moved swiftly, scooping up the green balls, twisting paper wrappers around them, and putting them into lugs, all in one deft movement. They seemed to work effortlessly, chatting with one another, without interrupting their work. Apparently, they were unaware of the tragedy.

In Simmons’ office, Coulter sprawled in a swivel chair, his long legs sticking halfway across the tiny room. He rolled a cigarette, and blew a mouthful of smoke toward the beaverboard ceiling.

“Was Lawton a buyer for the Northern commission houses only, or did he buy for the local market, too?” he asked Simmons.

“Both. His firm kept a stall on the wholesale curb market the year around. He didn’t run it, only bought the stuff they used,” Simmons answered, shuffling some papers on his desk.

“Who runs the stall on the market?”

“Jake Shelly. He just comes down here with their truck and picks up whatever fruit or vegetables Lawton buys. I don’t know what kind of a business arrangement they had. Shelly was going steady with Lawton’s sister, Laura.”

“Was Shelly down this way today?” Coulter flipped the cigarette butt through the open window. He squirmed into a more comfortable position, near the telephone.

“Yes. He loaded this morning.” Simmons took a bill from his desk. “Two hundred lugs of tomatoes, fifty bushels of potatoes, some cabbage, squash and celery. They had an argument. Lawton didn’t like the idea of Shelly marrying Laura. He threatened to fire him if he didn’t break it off.”

Coulter pondered over this a moment, then asked:

"Who pays for the loads? Shelly or Lawton?"

"I send a bill to the commission house in New York. They credit my account with it, and send it along to Lawton with their monthly sales report. He gives me his check."

"How much are tomatoes bringing right now? About three dollars?" Coulter looked sleepy, his slow, drawling voice seeming to come from another room.

"Three to three-fifty in the field. Why all the questions, Coulter? You know most of the answers as well as I do." Simmons sounded irritated.

"Just in case . . ." Coulter's hand anticipated the telephone's ring. He spoke into the receiver:

"Hello . . . Yes, this is Coulter . . ." he listened intently. His emotionless face did not change when he told Simmons what he had heard.

"Lawton was shot in the back of the head. There were three wounds. Two from Mike's pitchfork. But the doc says he was dead long before he got stuck. The bullet killed him. Where can I get hold of Shelly?" Coulter's voice had a rough edge to it. "It's murder! Get Shelly down here right away. Send somebody after Mike, too. I want to talk to him. I'm going to look around the packinghouse some more." He slid out of the chair and hurried out of the office.

The interior of the packing-house shed was bright with unshaded light bulbs. The hum of machinery, and sound of nailers' hammers blended with the clank of train wheels and jarring of freight cars being "spotted" at the side platform. Coulter made his way through rows of packed lugs of tomatoes. Near the opening, through which the culls were dumped into the outside bin, he leaned against a stack of empty crates and looked around searchingly.

There was no room to push a body through the opening above the continuous conveyor belt which emptied into the cull bin. But, when he walked to the door and raised his eyes, he saw a sliding door above the box. It was in the second story, where the crates were assembled.

He ran up the creaking steps to the loft. It was stifling hot underneath the tin roof, and sweat poured down the faces of the men who were making crates. A huge blow fan did not afford much relief. Coulter waved at the nailers, in casual greeting.

"Hey, Andy, got a minute?" he called.

"Sure," the angular, sandy-haired nailer stopped working. He wiped his face on his canvas apron, and lit a cigarette.

"They let you smoke up here?" Coulter frowned. "Hold the match. I'll have one, too."

Andy grinned, exhaled a lungful of smoke, and asked:

"What's on your mind?"

"How long you guys been up here today?" asked Coulter.

"We started about an hour ago. Had lots of crates made up ahead, and didn't have to start early. Why?"

"You still doing piece work then, eh?" Coulter ignored the query.

"Sure, half a cent a crate. What brings you here? You didn't come up from Homestead to ask me how much money I make."

"That door," Coulter pointed to the sliding panel over the cull bin. "Was it open when you came to work?"

"Sure. That's the last thing the watchman does before he goes home in the morning. Opens that one, and one on the other side, to cool this joint off."

"All right, thanks, Andy. I won't keep you any longer."

THE sheriff stamped on his cigarette and walked over to the door. He stood

in the opening and looked down thoughtfully, then backed away, and examined the door sill.

He took out his jack-knife, and dug into the hard eight-by-eight beam. He was sweating when he finally dislodged a leaden slug. He slipped it into his pocket, then looked down at the cull bin again; it was three-quarters full of ripes.

As he raised his hand to wipe the sweat off his steep forehead, he heard a grunt, and something hit him in the small of the back.

Waving both arms in a frantic effort to balance himself, he turned his head, lost his balance and pitched head first into the bin. He landed with a squelching sound. Tomatoes flew over the rim of the bin, and buried him under their bulk.

Unhurt, he dug himself out, and climbed to the ground, looking as if someone had spilled gallons of catsup over him. He shook himself, wiped the goeey red juice from his eyes, and picked up a gunny sack, to wipe some of the mess from his clothes.

Furious, he strode into the office.

Simmons, Mike, and Jake Shelly stared at him. Anticipating a wisecrack, Coulter admitted: "Yes, I look like a barbecued pig on toast with plenty of dressing. Which one of you wise guys was upstairs the last few minutes.

They all denied it.

"There's a pair of overalls in my locker," Simmons offered solicitously. "Do you want to change before you leave?"

"I'm not leaving—yet!" Coulter yanked open the locker door and took out a pair of worn blue denims. "I'm going upstairs to wash up. You fellows stay here."

After he had washed and changed his clothes in the men's room, Coulter walked over to Andy's workbench. For a brief interval, he watched the unerring strokes of the nailer's hatchet, then asked:

"Who came up here just after I left

you?"

"I didn't see anybody, I was busy. Say, why the overalls? You got a job here?"

"Yes, but not the kind of work you think," Coulter said wryly.

He told Andy what had happened. The nailer shook his head unbelievably, reiterating:

"I didn't see a body, but that don't mean nothing. They come and go all day. I heard several people walking around, but didn't pay no attention."

"Where were you before you started working this morning?" Coulter asked.

"Home in bed. My landlady can tell you that. I didn't mean to come over at all today. I had enough crates on hand, until Simmons decided to run another car of potatoes this afternoon. He sent after me."

"What time was that?"

"Around ten."

"Thanks, Andy. See you later." Coulter walked down the steep pine stairway.

BACK in the office, he ordered the three men:

"Wait outside. I have to make several phone calls."

Alone, he called the medical examiner again.

"Lawton was killed with a thirty-two," the medical examiner confirmed.

Coulter examined the bullet he had extracted from the door frame. It was obviously a thirty-two. Had the murderer missed his first shot?

He sat at Simmons' desk and looked over the papers on it—reports of New York sales, receipts to growers, and statements from commission houses. He opened the drawers. A copy of the New York *Fruit Reporter* caught his eye. He took it out, read an underscored record of sales.

The paragraph gave the routine information: car numbers, shipper's name, and selling prices. It referred to a shipment

from Simmons Packing House. The tomatoes had sold for an average of two dollars and twenty-five cents a lug. He calculated the net profit to the packing house, then called the men back to the office.

He waved them to a bench near the wall. Rolling a fresh cigarette, he asked:

"Any of you fellows own a gun?"

"Sure," all three answered.

Mike elaborated. "I always carry one in the truck. I drive so much at night."

"What kind is it?" Coulter demanded.

"Thirty-two Colt. Want me to get it?"

Coulter shook his head. "Stay where you are. What kind is yours, Shelly?"

"Same thing. It's down in the car."

"Where's yours, Simmons?"

"Right here." Simmons pulled a revolver from his coat pocket and handed it to Coulter.

The sheriff deftly broke the gun and snapped the cartridges into his palm. His face was taut as he asked:

"When did you fire this last? There's one discharged shell in it."

Simmons looked startled.

"There can't be. I haven't used it in months. I took it along today because I was going to get the payroll. Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Where do you usually keep it?"

"Locked in the dash compartment of my car."

Coulter phoned his office to send a road patrol car to the packing house at once. Waiting for it, he re-examined the documents on Simmons' desk, ignoring the questioning glances of the three suspects.

A siren sounded in the distance. Its wail grew louder. As the roar of an approaching car sounded close, Shelly got up and started toward the window.

"Sit down!" Coulter snapped.

The car stopped in front of the packing house. A moment later, a slender, sun-

burned officer in khaki breeches, brown shirt and black bow tie, walked into the office.

"What is it, Sheriff?" he asked Coulter.

"Keep your eye on those men for a minute. I'll be right back."

He slithered out of his seat and walked out.

WHEN he returned, there was a deep crease on his forehead. He held a broken revolver in each hand, swinging them around his fingers thrust through the trigger guards. He laid both guns on the desk.

"Get a ballistics test on those three guns," he ordered the patrolman.

"I'll take them to the Homestead office at once."

"Here." Coulter put a tag on each gun and handed them to the patrolman. "All three are thirty-two caliber. All three have been fired once, and Lawton was killed with a thirty-two."

"So what?" Mike demanded belligerently. "There are plenty of thirty-twos around here. I fired mine on the way down—shot a rattler. I can show you the carcass."

After the patrolman walked out with the guns, Coulter asked Shelly:

"What was your arrangement with Lawton?"

"Straight salary and commission."

"Who kept the records?"

"I did. We checked up once a week. He did all the buying, and I drove down to the packing houses, picked up the stuff and took it to the market." Shelly answered without hesitation.

"How did you two get along? You weren't gypping him by any chance?" Coulter drawled.

"We got along fine. He was a right guy to work for. Never squawked when I had to cut prices. I was always square with him. I

had to be. I—” Shelly hesitated, looking concerned.

“You what?” Coulter demanded.

“I was engaged to his sister. She’s a swell kid. Has anyone told her yet?”

“No. Where does she work?”

“In Miami, at the Bay Hotel. Maybe I’d better break it to her?”

“Time enough for that later on.” Coulter fingered the bullet in his pocket, and went on. “When did you fire that gun last?”

“Darned if I know.” Shelly frowned reminiscently. “It was in the truck all the time. Most everybody knew I kept it there. I used to lend it to other drivers. Someone must have used it and never told me.”

Coulter looked thoughtful. “What was Lawton doing upstairs? He had no business up there, did he?”

“Not generally.” Simmons scratched his bald spot. “Oh, I remember now. I was wondering if we had enough crates to pack him a carload of potatoes. Lawton went up to see how many were finished.”

“Well, did he find enough crates?”

“That’s funny. Now that you mention it, I just remember he didn’t come back to let me know. I was busy making up the payroll and forgot all about him. I sent for Andy, to make sure.”

“Who sold the culls to Mike. You or Lawton?”

SIMMONS frowned reflectively. “Sometimes I did, other times Lawton. When he bought the entire output of the house, Lawton sold them.”

“Who’d you buy this load from, Mike?” Coulter asked the fidgety dairy man.

“Simmons,” Mike said, and wiped his eyes. “Say, I gotta go and feed me cows.” He started toward the door.

“Sit down. They won’t starve. What time did you leave Miami this morning?”

“About nine o’clock, why? I gotta get back,” Mike protested as he resumed his seat and scratched his thumb.

“I thought you farmers always fed your cattle first thing in the morning.” Suddenly Coulter grabbed Mike by the wrist and examined his hand. With the fingernails of his thumb and first finger he drew a powder-blackened splinter from the dairyman’s thumb.

“So it was you?” he snapped, thinking of the mess he had been when he extricated himself from the cull bin.

“Honest, Sheriff, I didn’t do it deliberately. I slipped on a rotten tomato and fell against you,” Mike confessed.

“Then, why didn’t you admit being upstairs when I asked you?”

“I was scared you’d think I pushed you out through the door on purpose. But I didn’t mean to, honest, I didn’t!” Mike was contrite.

“All right. Forget it for a while.” Coulter turned to Simmons again. “Any truth in that rumor that you were trying to get rid of this packing house, Simmons?”

“Well, last summer, I considered it, but I changed my mind. Glad I did, too. This looks like the best year for fruit and vegetables we’ve had for a long time.”

“War boom,” Coulter grunted and picked up the phone. He paused to ask: “What’s your bank? Coconut Grove or Coral Gables?”

“Gables.” Simmons stared at the sheriff as the officer dialed.

Coulter spoke into the mouthpiece in such a low voice that none of the three men could hear what he was saying. He was frowning deeply when he put down the instrument. Veins stood out at his temples. He sat tensely in his chair. He was about to ask another question, when the phone rang.

He snatched up the receiver, and listened intently, giving only noncommittal grunts for answers. When he was through,

he turned to Shelly.

"Well, why did you do it, Shelly? The bullet was fired from your gun."

"That's impossible." Shelly jumped to his feet, startled. "I never fired that shot. I had no reason to kill him."

"That so? Are you sure he didn't object to you marrying his sister?" Coulter asked.

"He didn't even know. We've only been engaged a few days, and she hasn't seen him since. He was up at the lake." Shelly paced the room, nervously puffing at his cigar stub, and chewing the end of it to a pulpy mess.

"Yeah? Then why was he threatening to fire you this morning if you didn't stop seeing the kid?" Coulter demanded.

JAKE SHELLY stopped pacing momentarily.

"That's a lie!" he shouted. "I didn't even see Lawton today. Whoever told you that—"

"Stop pacing," Coulter ordered him, and got up himself. He walked back and forth in front of the three men. Passing the desk, he bent over and picked up the auction report.

"What does it cost you to pick, pack and ship tomatoes?" he asked Simmons.

"About fifty-five cents a lug."

"Then they'd net you nearly a dollar-seventy if they sold for two and a quarter in New York?" He picked up a pencil and scribbled some figures on the margin of the paper.

"Not quite that. Commissions have to come out. They'd bring one-fifty at most. But we haven't sold many for that price this season yet. I've been hitting a low market all along." Simmons walked over to the desk and opened a ledger. "Here, look at this. See, most of them netted us only about eighty cents."

Coulter examined the ledger. Obviously he did not know much about bookkeeping.

"How many carloads have you shipped to date?" he asked.

"Only twenty-two. We're just getting started now."

"What would an average of eighty cents a lug bring you by the carload?"

"Four hundred dollars. We actually got around five thousand so far. Haven't heard from all shipments yet."

"Looks to me like you should have made out better than that." Coulter was stalling for time. He frowned at Shelly.

"I'll have to lock you up, Jake. Sorry about your girl. I'll have one of my men get in touch with her."

"You can't prove anything, Sheriff. Even if it was my gun that killed him, that doesn't prove I fired it, does it?"

"Not necessarily, but you'll have a tough time convincing a jury. Remember, you were down here when he was killed. Simmons claims you had an argument with Lawton and he was going to fire you. You're in a tough spot, son."

Shelly was frightened. He started to say something, but the door opened and the patrolman came in. He laid the three tagged guns on the desk in front of the sheriff.

"This is the one that killed him," he said, pointing to the middle gun. "You got it tagged."

"Yes. I know. Well, we might as well get going. Come on."

The patrolman took Shelly by the arm and started to lead him away, but Coulter interrupted, smiling bitterly.

"No, not him, Frank. I deliberately tagged those guns wrong. I wanted the murderer to think he was getting away with it for a while, so he'd tell me more."

Hearing this, Mike Jones made a break for the door. The patrolman started after him, but Coulter stopped him.

"Let him go. His cows must be getting hungry. He's just afraid I'll arrest him for tumbling me into that cull bin."

The patrolman looked from the sheriff to Simmons and Shelly. He was plainly bewildered. His eyebrows raised in dual question marks.

SIMMONS suddenly grabbed up the nearest tagged gun and pointed it at Coulter.

“All right,” he snarled. “So you know. You might as well have the rest of it. Lawton was taking me for a ride. When I wasn’t around he would make deals with buyers locally, selling at a fat price right off the platform here. He thought I’d go by the auction reports from New York.

“Well, I caught on to his tricks and followed him to Miami one day last year where he went to contact a new buyer. Of course, Lawton denied everything, but we had a row right in the street, and I bashed his fat nose in for him. You never heard about that around here, for Lawton didn’t talk when he came back. That was when I was on the verge of selling out. That was why!

“But we sort of patched things up. Until last week. He couldn’t stay honest. He sold a carload of tomatoes right here on the platform for three dollars a lug. The bottom fell out of the market before the stuff reached New York. So Lawton cleaned up while I got almost nothing. And I had no legal redress. He just crooked me once too often—and we had it out early this morning.”

“I know,” Coulter answered sympathetically. “I used to be in this racket myself. Lawton gave you a check based on what you would have made at the auction

price and pocketed the difference. But that’s no excuse for murder, Simmons.”

He was slowly advancing, ignoring the threat of the gun. “What if the tomatoes had sold at a higher price in New York?”

“Then Lawton would have had to admit selling them here, paying me my share. He didn’t stand to lose either way. If the market went up above the price he got here, he just would make his regular commission. This time, when it went down, he cleaned up about a dollar a lug—at my expense. I caught on to him, that’s all.”

“So you followed him upstairs and shot him? But how about that second slug? The one I found in the door sill?” Coulter took the bullet from his pocket.

“I borrowed Shelly’s gun and fired that,” Simmons admitted readily. “I wanted you to find it and suspect him. But you’re not taking me, Coulter. Stand back!” He waved the gun menacingly. “I’m going out of here alone!”

Coulter laughed at him. He walked toward the confessed murderer without faltering. Simmons’ finger tightened on the trigger, as he warned once more: “Stand back. I’ll shoot if you take another step!”

Coulter kept coming toward him. Simmons’ finger twitched nervously. The hammer rose, then fell with a click. He stared at the gun uncomprehendingly, then dropped it to his feet. His shoulders sagged as Coulter explained slowly.

“Do you think I’d leave three loaded guns lying around for you to take your choice? They were all unloaded before they left here.”