



*This Time the Old Sheriff
Had a Hunch, to Play 'Em
Hard and Sour,*

RULE ONE FOR SHERIFFS

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"The Gent from Australia,"
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SHERIFF HUNCH McELROY and his two young deputies reined up in the grateful shade of ancient apple trees, dismounted, dropped bridle reins and had started toward the long, low adobe house when the voice of *Señor* Luciano Tafoya, raspy with irritation, hailed them from a much-pillowed rawhide rocker on the vine covered *portal*. The old *paisano's* right arm lay bandage-strapped across his lower brisket, but the other he waved, after the fashion of his race, to punctuate his shout.

"What for you put the horses onder my trees to stap on the apples?"

"Don't swaller your cud, Lucy," Sheriff McElroy called back good humoredly, "the boys'll move 'em."

"Where to?" grumbled the deputy called Bug-Eye. "That sun's hotter'n hell on a housetop an' I don't see no other shade."

"Might find some behind the house." Old Hunch's twang was mildly sarcastic.

" 'Dobe walls is thick enough to stop sunshine, ain't they?"

"But what fer?" This sweaty ride across sun-baked flats on a day he had planned to go fishing in the cooler hills had roused Bug-Eye's dander almost unto rebellion. "Supposin' the ponies do squish a few wormy, bird-pecked windfalls? "They ain't worth—"

"Maybe they ain't," Hunch agreed dryly, "but they belong to ol' Luciano, an' wearin' the star don't give us no leave to tromple 'em. - Rule 6 fer deputies: 'In doin' your duty take care you don't damage, destroy, dilapidate, damnify nor otherwise monkey-doodle no citizen's private property.' Quit arguin' an' move them hosses."

In the course of his lecture on ethics for deputy sheriffs, the banty sheriff himself stooped to pick up one of the small, scattered windfalls, started to bite into it, saw it was wormy, tossed it down and picked up another, redder one. Seeing its' bird-eaten side swarming with ants he

tossed it down too, and reached for another.

“What about Rule 6, Uncle Hunch?” Deputy Rusty Paulsen’s lean face grinned widely. “Or ain’t eatin’ classed as damage?”

“Ain’t et none yet,” grunted Hunch. “You git on with them hosses.”

Glancing back as they led the three sweat-lathered horses around the corner of the house, Bug-Eye saw the banty sheriff still bowlegging around under the apple trees, pausing every now and then to pick up an apple.

Finally he seemed to find one that suited him, judging by the way he examined it, then carefully wrapped it in a blue bandanna and stowed it away in his pocket. Immediately he picked up another one, bit into it, spit out the bite and slipped the other piece inside his shirt.

“I hope he swallows a worm!” grunted Bug-Eye. “Lookit him, stuffin’ ‘em inside his shirt! Fer you, me an’ the ponies it’s Rule 6. Fer the sheriff it’s he’p yourself!”

From the *portal* Senor Luciano Tafoya called out impatiently in Spanish:

“By the life of your illegitimate grandmother, Senor Sheriff, if you want an apple to eat, why you do not pick a good one from the tree and come on? Already I wait you half a day!”

“Thanks, Lucy.” The banty sheriff grasshoppered up to seize an apple from the tree. He found it hard, sour and not very ripe, but chomped on it, nevertheless, with much apparent gusto as he approached the choleric, gray mustached man in the rawhide rocker.

“Howdy, Lucy.” He gave Don Luciano’s plump left hand the brief friendly touch that passes for a handshake among New Mexico natives. “What happened to your arm? Git to talkin’ too fast an’ throw it outa joint?”

“By the life of a spotted she-dog!” Don

Luciano swore in limpid Spanish, then continued in English. “I am robbed an’ murdered in my own house, an’ the shereef of the law, she makes jokeeng! *Por vida de los angeles—*”

“All right, Lucy,” said Hunch amiably, as the two deputies rejoined them, “no use to swaller your cud. I got your message. Who you figger done it?”

“Ha! You ask, eh? Me, I don’t feeger from notheeng! The *chivo* that esteal me the moneys an’ tried to shoot me for dead—it ees joost one man who will do me that, *Señor Honch!* Who you theenk?”

“Well, I got a hunch who you mean, all right.” The sheriff shrugged. “You an’ Don Tito been spittin’ in each others tracks goin’ on six years, ain’t it? But I never figgered—”

“Feeger from notheeng!” stormed the venerable Mexican, pounding the chair arm with his fist. “Tito Roybal ees the *chivo* that do me thees!”

“Then let’s go git him,” broke in Bug-Eye impatiently. “Thank God for once somebody knows who shot him an’ we don’t have to go ‘round detectivin’. Come on, Rusty, let’s—”

“Wup, here!” Hunch’s frail looking, bird-claw hand restrained him. “Jest hold your ‘tater, Bug-Eye. I’d hate to think ol’ Tito Roybal was guilty of such as this.” He turned again to Don Luciano. “This fracas taken place by night?”

“*Si, Señor!* Las’ night thees Tito come when I am asleep an’ from the pockets of my pants take more than seexty dollars, also my golden watch!”

“Then shot you when you tried to stop him, eh? Inside or out?”

“No, *Señor*, he don’t eshoot me inside out, joost through the arm. But for why you ask questions? Don’t I’m told you—”

“I mean inside or outside the house,” explained Hunch patiently.

FOR answer Don Luciano pointed to the tiny rosette of a bullet hole in the blue-painted door casing about midway through the two-foot adobe wall.

“Las’ night it was a *baile* in Las Piedritas for celebrate the open of the mines. My niece an’ hees hosband that live here weeth me was went. Thass leave me here alone. Sometime on the night I hear some noise. I call to ask if it wass Pedro and Nacita come back from the *baile*. Don’t gotting no responses, I sizz my *pistola*, come queeck to the door, an’ *zas!* He shoot me! Then he ron away. After thees I was find the moneys meesing, also the watch, then I know for sure—” He broke off suddenly to scowl at Bug-Eye, who was digging at the bullet hole in the door casing with the pig-sticker blade of a big pocket-knife. “*Sooch, hombre!* Whassamatta you gonna speet me the door?”

“*Sooch* yourownself, bristle-basket,” grunted Bug-Eye. “That bullet couldn’t of gone in very deep after borin’ through meat as spongy as yours. I’m diggin’ it out so we kin prove what gun it was shot out of. Maybe you better rustle me a axe, Rusty, this here wood’s—”

“No-no-no!” snorted Don Luciano. “The bullet was eshoot from my own *pistola* wheech he grab me from the hand when I ron to the door. *Mira!* Here it ees, the vair’ same leetle *pistola!*”

The “little *pistola*” he hauled from under the blanket was big enough it ought to have been mounted on wheels.

Reluctantly Bug-Eye quit whittling on the door casing.

“What’d he do,” he grunted, “shoot you with it, then hand it back to you?”

“No-no-no! When he ron, she drop eet. Thees morning Pedro find eet out there.” He pointed toward a scraggly wild plum bush a few yards from the *portal*.

“You mean you seen him drop it?” Old Hunch’s faded blue eyes measured the distance. “Moonlight, wasn’t it?”

“Listen, Hunch,” Bug-Eye growled impatiently. “What’re we wastin’ time here for? We know who—”

“Rule 14 fer deputies,” drawled Hunch. “Speak only when spoke at. You say you seen him drop it, Lucy?”

“No-no-no, *Señor!* It wass moonlight, but too much shadow from those apple tree, I don’t see notheeng! Joost Tito Roybal ronning away.”

“Lemme see.” Old Hunch tugged at his upper-lip hoss-tails. “Dark, enough you never noticed him drop a pistol the size of a cannon. Still you recognized him. You willin’ to swear to that in court?”

The old Mexican shrugged his one good shoulder.

“What matter thees?” he said. “Ever since we have troubles on the deetch seex years ago, thees son of a goat Tito Roybal gonna make even weeth me. Now he come like a thief on the night to keel me an’ esteat my money. Thees I report to you, *Señor* Shereef, that it ees your duty to put heem to the jail! What for you seet here makin’ teedlewick so he got time to ron away?”

“That’s what I say, Hunch,” urged Bug-Eye.

“Go git the hosses,” broke in Hunch briskly. “I got a hunch we all jest as well be ridin’!”

AS THEY rode away the rusty twang of his voice broke out in a chuckle. His deputies looked at him inquiringly.

“What’s eatin’ you, Uncle Hunch?”

“Why, nothin’—much, Rusty. Only I was jest thinkin’ if I’d been ol’ Tito Roybal payin’ Don Luciano a git-even visit with intent to rob an’ kill, damn if I wouldn’t of gone fixed so I wouldn’t of

had to borrow Lucy's own gun to do it with!"

"You never can tell about these Mexkins," shrugged Rusty.

The home of *Señor* Tito Roybal was adobe also, but much less pretentious than Don Luciano's, and there were no apple trees.

Since Don Luciano had won out over him in their disagreement over ditch rights six years before, water had been too scarce for fruit—or much else. Fortunately for the old *paisano*, his son had a job in Albuquerque. He not only sent the old folks enough to live on, but in accordance with an old native custom, had "given" them his oldest boy to live with and take care of them.

It was this youngster who answered their hail. No, his little grandfather was not at home. But he would call his *abuelita*. Her husband, the wrinkled *Señora* Roybal explained, had left only a few hours ago to walk to the railroad at La Concha, on his way to visit his son in Albuquerque.

"Come on then, Rusty," urged Bug-Eye. "If he's afoot we can ketch him before—"

"Jest hold your 'tater, son," old Hunch broke in.

When, he inquired in Spanish, would Don Tito be back?

The woman shrugged, looked uncertain. "*Quien sabe?*" she said. "Last time he went they pulled him all the teeth. Now Jose says to come and they will make him some new ones. How long it will take, only God knows."

"Y'see?" Bug-Eye said triumphantly. "The ol' goat needs some new teeth—so he steals the money from ol' Luciano to pay for 'em with. Thataway he not only gits even with his enemy, but at the same time a gits hisslef a good excuse to clear out so he won't be arrested! Come on, Rusty, let's go git him!"

"New teeth, huh?" Hunch sighed and looked at his watch. "All right, Bug-Eye," he gave in, "if you crave the exercise, but I got a hunch you're wastin' hoss-sweat. See to it you handle the old man easy if you do ketch him. I got a hunch I better swing on up by Las Piedritas. There's right smart of riff-raft been driftin' in there since the mines re-opened." He jiggled the apples inside his shirt. "Maybe I can peddle 'em a few apples."

On his way to Las Piedritas, Sheriff McElroy bent his course to ride by the home of *Señor* Luciano Tafoya again.

"Who's been around here the last day or two besides Pedro an' Nacita?" he asked.

"Nobodies," growled Don Luciano. "Except las' night when thees damn Tito come to rob me. For why you ask thees?"

"Jest curiosity, I reckon. Where's Pedro an' Nacita?"

At Don Luciano's call the couple came out.

"Hallo, *Señor* Hunch!" They were both good looking young Mexicans, with white, even teeth that shone like ivory.

"The shereef want to ask you some question, *hijos*," said Don Luciano.

"Oh, no," smiled Hunch. "Jest wanted to—er—say howdy. You mind if I pick me up a few more of them windfalls, Lucy?"

Don Luciano motioned him to help himself, which he did, strolling about under the big apple trees, taking his time about stuffing a few more apples inside his shirt.

Presently he swung spryly to the saddle.

"*Hasta luego*, Lucy," he waved back as he rode away. "I got a hunch we'll be back this way—tonight—or tomorrow—with your watch an' money. But don't throw no fit if we ain't."

AROUND dusk the two young deputies loped sweaty horses into Las Piedritas and inquired for the sheriff. The little town, boomed by fresh mining activities, was full of strangers. The first man they asked for Hunch McElroy's whereabouts was one of them.

"Sheriff?" he said. "What's he look like?"

"Like a dried apple helt up by a couple o' warped toothpicks," said Bug-Eye. "Banty little ol' feller with a droop-eared gray mustache, kinder faded lookin' Levi's, ol' slouch hat a size too big for him, tan boots with the pull straps hangin', ridin' a stockin' footed bay. You seen him?"

"I don't know what kind of a hoss he rode in on," grinned the stranger, "but if you mean that locoed little ol' coot that's driftin' around drunker'n a bob-tailed monkey, tellin' flea-bit jokes an' offerin' people a bite of his apple—yeah I've seen him—an' if that's the kind of a jasper this county's got for a sheriff, all I got to say is—"

"Never mind your opinions, Mister," broke in Rusty Paulsen sharply. "Where'll we find him?"

"Ask somebody that knows," shrugged the stranger, and turned in at a new plank shack labeled "Quik-Action Saloon and Card Rooms."

Bug-Eye licked a taste of alkali dust from his lips.

"I'm dryer'n a gunny-sack pie, Rusty. Let's start lookin' fer him in here—an' git us a drink while we're at it."

Rusty nodded and they followed the stranger inside. Hunch was not there. But he had been, the bartender told them—"drunk as a monkey on a merry-go-round."

The two deputies promptly hurried out without even ordering drinks.

"I never knowed Uncle Hunch to git

drunk before in my life," Rusty Paulsen sounded worried. "We better git holt of him before he makes hisself the laughin' stock of the county."

They found him finally, in the last saloon at the far end of the street. He was up on a table in the middle of a hilarious crowd. The gold star of office was missing from his vest and he was trying grotesquely to kiss his elbow. As the two deputies shoved their way toward him, he paused, pulled one of Don Luciano's hard green apples from inside his shirt and balanced it on the muzzle end of his six-gun.

"What am I bid for this here fine piece of fruit, gents?" he intoned in the nasal twang of the old-time auctioneer.

"Hey, Hunch!" Bug-Eye's long arm reached out and tugged at his ankle.

"Sold!" said Hunch, tottering so that Bug-Eye had to catch him to keep him from falling off the table. "To that famous—" he knocked off Bug-Eye's hat and pretended to polish the deputy's bald head—"that famous, han'some gent with the bewtchuss golden hair, Wild Bill Hiccup!"

"He ain't drunk," said Rusty Paulsen in Bug-Eye's ear as Hunch gazed triumphantly around at the laughing crowd. "He's crazy. Let's git him outa here!"

With the banty sheriff astraddle of his middle, Bug-Eye headed for the door.

"Listen, Hunch!" he growled urgently. "Ol' Tito had done caught that train, so we didn't git him. What you got to do—you got to telegraph the sheriff at Albuquerque to hold him till me or Rusty can git there after him. Try an' git holt of yourself, Hunch!"

HUNCH leaned close so that his mustaches tickled the deputy's ear.

"Come on, li'l Bo-Peep—put me

down!" he whispered. "Lookit them fellers over there playin' poker—they ain't laughed yet! Lemme down while I go tell 'em the one about the skunk an' the—"

"Gawdamighty, Hunch! You got to git holt of yourself! You cain't—yeeh—zoo-sis!"

"Kinder ticklish, huh?" Hunch picked himself up from where Bug-Eye had dropped him at the sudden prod of fingers in his ribs, and dodged spryly away.

When Bug-Eye started after him, Rusty Paulsen's grip on his shirt tail stopped him.

"Leave him be," he growled. "I gotta hunch he's got somethin' up his sleeve!"

"Now you're gittin' hunches, too, huh!" grumbled Bug-Eye as old Hunch ferreted his way through the crowd toward five men at a poker table in a far corner of the room. "To hell with him, I'm goin' to have me a drink!"

In the bar mirror he saw Hunch approach the table. The crowd's hilarity subsided expectantly. The old sheriff's twang sounded clearly across the room:

"Evenin', gents! You ever hear the one about the skunk in the cow camp? Well, this cowboy woke up one night an'—"

"Never mind it, runt!" one of the poker players cut in with a scowl. "We're bettin' a pot here. Either clear out or keep quiet!"

Hunch shrugged.

"Why, shore," he said agreeably.

He climbed up on a nearby table, squatted like a hound dog and began to scratch. One of the poker players grinned, as he raked in the pot.

"This cowboy," Hunch resumed, "he was dreamin' about his gal one night, an' when he reached out to throw a hug around her, damn if he didn't knock over an ol' she-skunk. Well, he woke up, seen all them other boys snorin' in their bedrolls, an' it shore made him mad. 'Godamighty!' he says. 'Ever'body asleep

an' I got all this to smell by myself!"

Three of the poker players laughed obligingly. The other two grinned enough to show their teeth.

Something about the way old Hunch came spryly to the side of the poker table, then, made Bug-Eye set down his drink and start over there.

From inside his shirt the banty sheriff pulled an apple.

"Here, *amigo*," he proffered the hard green fruit to the younger man who had only grinned, "take you a bite of apple—fer luck!"

The man did not even look up.

"You go to hell!" he snarled.

"Prob'ly will when the time comes," drawled the banty sheriff. "But first—" he held the apple firmly in front of the man's face—"take you a—"

The man's right hand eased down his cards. Slowly, threateningly it started toward his gun.

"Feller," said the voice of Rusty from among the crowd, "when the little man offers you a bite of apple, I got a hunch you better take it!"

"I don't know what the hell all this is about," the man growled. "But if you put it that way—why not?"

With a shrug he leaned his head forward and bit into the apple Hunch held for him.

From his pocket Hunch deliberately brought out something wrapped in a blue bandanna, unwrapped it and held the two pieces of tooth-marked apple up beside each other. Plainly the toothmarks matched both showing the same imprint of a broken front tooth.

"This 'un," said Hunch, all the foolery gone from his voice now, "is the one you bit into while sneakin' around, waitin' your chance to slip in an' steal ol' Luciano Tafoya's money. Bein' kinder nervous— an' the apple kinder hard an' sour anyhow,

you threw it down. Mister, I'm arrestin' you on suspicion of—"

The speed of the man's hand snaking for his gun was like lightning. So was the wallop of Bug-Eye's pistol barrel back of his ear as the gun's muzzle showed over the table edge.

"Rule 3," grunted Bug-Eye as the poker player slumped in his chair. "Never waste the county's catridges when you kin' sneak up behind 'em with an axe. Doggonit, Hunch, whyn't you tell me an' Rusty what you was up to?"

"Rule 1 fer sheriffs," grinned Hunch. "Don't never tell your hunches to a deputy, for if they turn out wrong, look what a fool he'll figger you for. I hope you didn't hit him too hard, Bug-Eye. All these here fang marks proves is that he was a visitor to the scene of the crime. It don't prove—"

"Maybe this will!" triumphantly Bug-Eye's probing fingers drew a big, ornately

carved gold watch from the knocked-out hombre's inside vest pocket. "Dammit, Hunch, looks like ever when you git you a hunch—"

"I foller it," broke in the sheriff dryly. He grinned around at the crowd and then scratched his head sheepishly with one hand while he fished a few more small hard apples out of his shirt front with the other. "Even if it requires makin' a monkey outa myself to git people to laugh so I can git me a good, unsuspected view of their front teeth."

"I hate to think how Don Luciano's goin' to snort when you tell him it wasn't ol' Tito," observed Rusty Paulsen. "It'll shore bust his heart."

"I got a hunch he'll survive it," grinned the sheriff, repinning the star on his vest. "With ol' Tito in jail who would he have to feud with? Any you fellers have an apple?"