

# Graveyard Shift

By  
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*A hotel clerk finds that a roll of greenbacks can purchase a de luxe trip to the electric chair.*

**A**CROSS the empty lobby, the hands of the Western Union clock pointed to 12:20. My eyes shifted from it just as the midnight rainbow edged through the street doorway.

His legs were a pair of perambulating parentheses; the cream colored Stetson was a yard across the brim and provided startling contrast to the vivid green of his flannel shirt. His pants legs were tucked in the top of a fancy-stitched yellow cowboy boots, and a pearl, gray scarf was knotted loosely around his neck.

He approached the desk with short stiff steps, making you think of a bantam rooster in a high wind.

Putting down the battered brown bag, he shoved the Stetson to the back of his head, uncovering a tangled mass of corn-colored hair.

"Like t' get a room, stranger," he drawled.

Pushing the register at him, I muttered: "Certainly sir. With bath?"

He wrote something in a bold hand. Reading it from my side of the counter, it looked like *Joe Burke, Red River, Texas*.

He straightened up. "Naw, no bath—it ain't Saturday yet."

You take a lot of ribs in my business and I thought this was one of them. But it wasn't. He was as sober as a hoot owl.



"That'll be two dollars," I told him, and after a glance at the worn bag, added: "In advance."

He undid the button on his left-hand shirt pocket, took out a thin roll and unwound the rubber band from it. After a bit I got a greasy deuce.

For no reason at all, I said: "They tell me these things are bad luck."

He nodded solemnly. "Yep. . . . That's the reason I give it to you."

Getting the key to Eight-eleven from the rack, I went around the counter and started to pick up his bag. But he grabbed it.

"Never mind, stranger," he said evenly, "I'll handle this personal."

His milky blue eyes were narrowed. The skin of his long face had a leathery, wind-burned appearance. Only his hands seemed out of character; they showed no signs of toil.

I took him up, explaining as I did the operation of the help-yourself elevator.

He didn't want a thing, except to be left strictly alone. You could tell as much from his brisk, almost surly manner.

That part of it was all right. Some of them want Gloria-Biltmore service for their two bucks, and that means more work for me.

Back at the desk, I started through the late edition of the *Clarion*. Miss Mixit took the Fifth at the Fair Grounds, but the mental bet I'd made wouldn't pay me anything.

**I**T COULDN'T have been more than five minutes before the street door banged open and the quick-moving gent came in. He strode across the lobby with brisk steps, took off his snap-brim as he approached the desk.

His face was sharp, his eyes sharper and as black as a despot's heart. He was a bit overdressed. The blue pin-stripe suit fit him like he'd been poured into it; the folded handkerchief in the breast pocket was too prominent, too ostentatious.

Those sharp eyes swept the register, then rose.

"Man in a cowboy outfit check in a few minutes ago?"

I said: "Yeah. . . . he did."

"I'm a friend of Burke's," he told me from the corner of his mouth. "Give me his room number, and I'll go up."

He seemed to be rushing it just a little.

"Mr. Burke didn't appear anxious to be disturbed. However, if you'll give me your name, I'll ask—"

Those sharp eyes narrowed, grew sharper. He put the snap-brim back on his head.

"You ain't askin' nobody nothin'," he declared, "and here's the reason why!"

It was a good reason. An automatic of .38 calibre, unless I was mistaken. He had it in his right hand in a way that told you he was no novice.

I shrugged. "Have it your way, fellow. You're going up."

He grinned wolfishly. "So are you, pal . . . so are you. Step around to the lift."

I stepped. We went up.

Burke didn't have to open the door. He hadn't locked it. Those narrowed, milky blue eyes popped open wide when Sharp Face showed him the authority for the intrusion.

Then he acted. With his getup, you'd have expected him to be greased lightning with a gun. He wasn't. He was slow; much too slow. Before he had it more than halfway out of the spring-clip holster the fellow's automatic coughed twice. Sort of a thin, high nervous cough.

Burke took a couple of steps, stumbling forward, his face mirroring utter surprise. He was still trying for the gun when he doubled at the waist and pitched forward on his flat stomach. The side of his head hit the floor solidly. When they fall like that, you don't need a doctor to tell you the answer. There's only one. Death. . . .

Sharp Face snapped: "Open that bag!"

My fingers shook, but I got it open. It was full of crisp green paper in neat bundles. More money than I've ever seen before in my life.

Sharp Face laughed, and the coldness of it didn't make me feel any better. "Come on, we're goin' out. Take the bag with you."

There are times when you don't want to do things, but you do them just the same. That's the way it was with the threat of that ready weapon jabbed in my back.

We were in the elevator, passing the seventh floor when the buzzer sounded and the indicator showed "3."

"We ain't stoppin' for anything or anybody. We go all the way down, out to my heap at the curb, and then for a little ride. You know. . . . just like the Frankie and Johnny thing: 'Thirteen went to the

graveyard, but only twelve came back. . . .’  
”

He couldn't have made it any plainer.

Sweat popped out on my forehead. The palms of my hands were wet and my heart pounded like a horse's hoofs in a stretch drive on a dry track.

Sixth floor . . . . Fifth. . . .

Whoever was waiting on Three pushed the button again.

If I went out with Sharp Face, I'd be found along some lonely road. Dead. If I had to die, I didn't want it to be that way; I never did care much for the country.

An idea blossomed. It was a gamble, and the odds were enough to turn my stomach into a mass of crawling caterpillars.

**WE PASSED** Four and were in between floors. This was it. I sucked in my breath and suddenly kicked backwards, catching the rat-eyed killer in the knee. Then I jabbed the emergency button which cut off the current and locked the cables.

Sharp Face fired a shot that *zinged* off the metal grill work, inches from my head. I swung around, jabbed him with a stiff left that tilted his head back while he slashed at me with the rod. I got my head out of the way, but the force of the blow numbed my shoulder.

He was snarling like an animal in a trap, his thin lips drawn back from stained teeth. I got in a solid right. It should have turned the trick, but it didn't. He could take it.

He swung the gun again and it seemed to tear off my right ear. For an almost fatal instant, I was dazed.

Then Sharp Face made a mistake. He thought he had me and pulled the weapon back for either a finishing blow or a shot; whichever it was to have been didn't matter. I slashed hard across his Adam's

apple with the edge of my hand. His breath exploded, caught short. He lost interest in things, gasping for breath, his face turning a pale purplish-green.

He backed into a corner, and that suited me fine. I slammed in with both fists flying—and landing. He slumped, the gun slithered to one side. But he was still trying. He snaked a hand toward the weapon and I tramped on his fingers. Tramped hard, and picked up the gun myself.

I was thinking about a lot of things when I smacked him on the head with it. He groaned.

The guy upstairs wasn't groaning. He was dead. And besides, I didn't like this rat personally. So I hit him again. From the sound, it might have meant a fracture. It could mean a compound fracture and still be okay with me.

He was out as cold as a halibut on ice.

Doors were opening and banging shut again. Excited voices babbled, but it seemed to take a long time before I heard heavy feet pounding up the stairs. Then someone got the idea, and went to the basement to replace the master-switch that would let me move the lift.

Thorne and Berkey, two city dicks, were waiting when I pushed open the gate at the lobby.

“All right,” Thorne said in a bored air, “what's it all about?”

I said: “The cowboy came in—”

He wrinkled his smoothly shaven red face and shook his head. “Wrong the first time. He wasn't no cowboy. ‘Mex’ Merkle just used the outfit to promote a swindle.”

He could have been right, but no swindle I'd ever read anything about would get a guy a bag full of money. I got the battered grip, lugged it to the desk.

Snapping it open, I said: “Take a look!”

The dicks just grinned. They weren't interested, and I couldn't figure why. Then

I noted the money was Mexican; peso notes in large denominations. But that wouldn't change the fact there was a fortune there, even with the rate of exchange being what it is.

Berkey said: "Lookit, who's president of Mexico?"

I told him I didn't know.

"That's just it—the hinge the whole deal swings on. In this country, money is good whether it's printed by the Republicans or Democrats. It ain't like that every place."

I said: "So-o-o?"

"So Merkle gets chumps like you to look up the exchange rate for Mex money in the paper, after he gives you a song and dance about being caught short, just coming up from that country. And you give him good American money—at the generous discount he suggests to arouse your greed—for this stuff. . . ."

I picked up one of the bills. A bird with a handlebar mustache was looking up at me. Herrera was the name under the picture.

**T**HORNE grinned. "Unless they've had a revolution since supper, Cardenas is the big guy down there now. That stuff's real pretty, but it ain't worth nothing, not

even in the country that originally put it out."

"How come it's still getting around then?" I wanted to know.

Berkey bit off the end of a cigar, spit it out and explained: "It *was* good, when the Herrera government was in power. The next outfit withdrew it, put out their own. You can buy bales of it in K. C. Some of the smart boys use it for neat swindles."

In the act of nodding understanding, I thought of something that wouldn't let it add up that way.

"If it ain't worth anything, why didn't Merkle—as you call him—just let the rat have the grip, instead of going for a gun and getting himself killed? Tell me that?"

Thorne's grin grew wider. He unbuckled a money belt from under his coat.

"Here's the reason. At least five grand worth. He thought the guy was going to shake him for the *real* dough!"

That made sense.

I said: "So it ain't worth nothing. A guy couldn't buy a damn thing with it. . . ."

Thorne went over, dragged the still unconscious Sharp Face out of the elevator.

Berkey jerked a thumb, pulled his lips down at the corners. "Couldn't you?" he said softly. "That guy"—pointing—"he bought himself a reserved seat, didn't he?"