



The sheriff got him in the right arm before the super could raise his weapon

KILLER TRAIL

By TEX MUMFORD

Sheriff Rod Barton pits himself against daring stage bandits!

THE winding river surged like some giant foam-flecked reptile of the paleozoic age as it slithered through the black, engulfing shadows blotting out the badlands. Down from hills that were gaunt fingers clawing at the sky rushed the night wind, screaming a canzonetta at the bass rumble of distant thunder.

Rain lashed against the face of Sheriff Rod Barton, tall, slicker-clad, who lurked beside the sodden trail. Water dripped from the brim of his battered Stetson, but he brushed it away, eyes intent upon the spot to the south where the road burrowed back in among the swaying trees.

"About time they was comin'," he muttered, crouching closer to the wet surface of the towering boulder that offered but slight haven from the unleashed fury of the driving storm. "I

shore can't wait here all night."

Finally there came a lull in which the wind died away to a whispering breath and the thunder grew mute. The rain was but a tiny patter. Rising above the pianissimo in the symphony of the elements came a new sound—the sound for which Rod Barton waited. It was the clopping of horses' hoofs, the creak of leather and the rumble of wheels.

From the south it came, back along the road that was little more than a trail, the noise that grew steadily louder. Out from the trees rattled the Overland stage, the horses of the six-horse team vari-colored shadows moving slowly forward. Behind them loomed the Concord, like a spectral coach out of a phantasmagorical dream.

"Takin' it slow," Barton said as he watched and waited. "It don't matter none now."

The sheriff drew out the carbine that the slicker had protected from the rain, as the short-barreled rifle stood close to his right leg. Gun ready in his hands, he cast a swift glance to left and right of the road. Seeking eyes searched for some sign of movement in the shadow-shrouded terrain all about him but found nothing.

The storm was passing, drifting on to the north. High above, the dark clouds were thinning as they scuttled across the sky. The stage drew closer, horses and vehicle seeming to grow larger as they approached. Like gnomes, the driver and express guard were hunched down on the seat on top of the coach, the man who handled the reins not even bothering to crack his long whip.

Then came a sound that was stark in the silence—the roar of a rifle. A second shot seemed an echo of the first. The guard slumped forward as though an invisible hand had slapped him on the back, then the driver rose as a sudden surge of the horses tugged reins that dead hands held.

“Got ‘em in the back—both of ‘em!” Barton murmured. “Never expected the lobos would do it that way!”

THE stage had stopped. The six horses were weary of plowing through mud, and there was no feel of the reins or cracking whip to urge them on. The rain had stopped, clouds were scudding across the night sky, and the wind seemed to be sobbing for the dead.

Rod Barton waited, a feeling of futility sweeping over him. He had stationed himself along the road here in the hope of preventing just what had happened, but he had failed. He moved restlessly and the sheriff’s star pinned to his shirt beneath the slicker pressed hard against his chest as though in accusation.

This made the third time in the past month that an Overland stage apparently

had been held up and the driver and guard killed. Always it had occurred when there were no passengers—only the driver and the guard on the coach, and no witnesses left to tell exactly what had happened until now. It was Sheriff Barton’s job to get the mystery killers and so far he had not succeeded.

A hunch had brought him out into the stormy night to wait beside the road. The wild stretch of rocky country near the river looked like the best place for outlaws to hold up the stage, so the sheriff had lingered there—but only to meet with failure. He had seen men killed, but no sign of their killers.

Patiently he remained where he was, waiting for the drygulcher to appear and loot the stage, but nothing happened. The wind died down, and the lack of action and the stillness of the night got on Barton’s nerves.

“Just killin’ the driver and guard and not goin’ near the stage don’t make sense,” he thought irritably. “Still it could be that hombre is waitin’ to see if anybody heard the rifle shots.”

It dawned on the sheriff that he was not actually sure that the stage driver and guard were dead. They might just be badly wounded. He stared at the huddled figures sprawled on top of the coach. Neither man had moved since the rifle bullets hit them.

He had put a foot forward to go to the stage when he heard the pounding of a horse’s hoofs. A rider was coming along the road from the north. The sheriff frowned. He was sure the killer would not appear from that direction unless he had done considerable circling around. The rifle shots had come from the south.

The stars were out now, the clouds mostly gone when the horseman loomed into view. Hidden in the shadow of the big boulder, the sheriff warily watched the approaching rider. The man appeared in no

hurry, until he rounded a curve and saw the motionless stage.

"Blazes!" he yelled, and rode past Barton without seeing the lawman. "A hold-up!"

While the sheriff watched, the horseman dismounted when he reached the stage. And the lawman's eyes narrowed as another rider appeared, coming from the south along the trail.

"That jasper may be the drygulcher, and he may not," thought the sheriff. "Anyway, it's time I showed up around here."

He edged silently back in among the boulders at the side of the trail, moving as stealthily and easily as a black panther. His horse loomed in the shadows ahead. Barton picked up damp reins and swung into saddle, glad that his slicker protected him from the rain-soaked leather of the kak. And also glad that his horse had not nickered and revealed his presence.

Sheriff Barton headed northward until he was beyond the bend, his horse traveling over soft ground as much as possible. When he swung into the road, and started back there was no longer need for silence.

The two men had dismounted. Their horses stood ground-hitched at the side of the road. One man was on top of the coach examining the driver and guard. Both turned in Barton's direction and waited motionless, their faces vague white blurs in the starlight. There was something familiar about them both though Barton had not recognized either as yet.

"I'm Sheriff Barton!" he called out as he rode closer. "What's happened here?"

"The stage has been held up," the man on top of the coach called back. "The driver and guard are both dead—shot in the back."

"You Ed Turner?" demanded Barton, as he thought he recognized the man who

spoke, a thin, sandy-haired rancher whose spread was not far from Martinville to the north.

"That's right, Sheriff." Turner nodded and climbed down. "Nothin' I can do up there for old Tom Lansing and Matt Buckly now."

"Did the hold-up men get the express box?" The third man spoke for the first time since the lawman arrived. "I had twenty-four thousand dollars in gold in that box that I shipped out from the Last Chance Mine this afternoon."

Barton recognized this man now—the superintendent of the mine, a man named Wake Fallon.

"I better see about that, Fallon," Barton said. "Yuh ship the gold in a hundred-pound box as usual?"

"That's right," said Fallon. "And had the gold checked and insured by the express company before the stage left Martinville."

The sheriff swung out of saddle and climbed up on top of the coach. There was no sign of the express box. Barton frowned again. Why had the driver and guard been killed after the stage apparently had been robbed somewhere back along the road? That was what the lawman wanted to know.

"No box up here," Barton called down. "Looks like they got it all right."

"The gold doesn't matter so much," Fallon said sadly, when the sheriff had climbed down again. "It's Lansing and Buckly bein' killed that gets me. They were good friends of mine."

"They were at that." Barton nodded. "We'd better be gettin' back to town. Think you could drive the stage back, Fallon? Turner and I will ride along with yuh and lead your hoss."

"Shore," said the big heavy-set Fallon. "I can handle the team all right. Glad to do it."

They put the bodies of the driver and guard inside the coach, then Fallon climbed up and took the reins of the six-horse team. There was a flat rocky surface at the side of the road and Fallon managed to get the stage turned around by driving out onto this, then swinging back to head south.

Barton and Turner mounted after tying the reins of Fallon's horse to the back of the coach. The stage started off, heading back to town. Turner and the sheriff rode along a short distance behind it.

"This makes the third time a stage has been held up and the driver and guard killed around here lately," Turner remarked. "Heard that Lansing and Buckly were lucky them first two times."

"How so?" Barton glanced at Turner, thinking that it was natural enough for the rider to have been riding south along the road tonight if he was heading for town.

"Heard that Lansing and Buckly were s'posed to take the stage out both times," said Turner. "But a relief guard and driver took over for 'em just at the last moment."

"I didn't know about that," Barton said thoughtfully. "Anyway, they shore wasn't lucky tonight."

Fallon was driving at a faster clip now, for the mine super suddenly seemed in a hurry. Barton and Turner had to ride swiftly to keep up with the coach, and there was no time for further talk.

An hour later the stage rumbled into town and Fallon brought it to a halt in front of the stage station. A crowd quickly gathered as something wrong was sensed.

Rod Barton was irritated by the babbling voices and milling people all around him. He was tired and disgusted and wanted to get away from the questions and the noise. Then one of his deputies, "Buck" Nash, appeared and the sheriff ordered him to take charge.

Barton felt like a swimmer coming out

of a rough surf as he rode away from the crowd, heading for his office at the far end of Martinville's main street. As the noise grew dim behind him he was glad no curious question had followed him. He needed rest.

He unsaddled his horse, gave the mount a rubdown and stabled it behind the jail. Then he went into the office, removed his slicker, hung it on a wall peg, and sat down at his desk.

The oil lamp the deputy had left burning gleamed on the sheriff's strong, square face. He tossed his hat aside and ran his fingers through his thick dark hair. Six men had been killed, and he had to get their killers. He was the Law, and it was his job.

It was a quiet night in town, after the excitement over the stage hold-up died down. Barton was still at his desk when the deputy came in. There was mutual admiration between the two lawmen. Nash, in particular, middle-aged and range-bred, considered the sheriff quite a man.

"What happened, Rod?" Nash asked, dropping into a chair.

Barton told him of waiting beside the road in the storm, how the stage had appeared, and how the drygulcher had killed the driver and guard with a rifle, but had not appeared to rob the coach.

"While I waited," Barton said, "Ed Turner showed up comin' from the north. Few moments later Fallon showed up ridin' in from the south."

"Either one of them might have done it," Nash said thoughtfully. "But why?"

"For twenty-four thousand dollars in gold," said Barton. He was not looking at his deputy, but at the open window at the side of the office. Beyond the window was the blank side wall of the feed-store across a narrow alley. "I know who did it, Buck."

EVEN as he spoke the sheriff's arm swept out and knocked the lamp off the table, for he had seen a shadow move on the wall beyond the window. From outside a gun roared, and a bullet thudded into the wall of the darkened office just where the sheriff's head had been a moment ago.

"What in blue blazes!" exclaimed Nash.

He felt something brush by him, then Barton was at the window, gun in hand. He fired once at the shadowy figure that ducked back into the alley, but the man was out of sight before the sheriff could aim a second shot.

"He's gone!" Barton grimly thrust his gun back into the holster. "Must have been listenin' outside and tried to down me before I named him. Light another lamp, Buck. There's one in the closet."

Nash got another lamp and lighted it. For a moment the two men stood looking at each other, then the sheriff smiled. He actually seemed pleased.

"So the killer is also a fool," he said. "That might be a big help to us, Buck."

"Could be." The deputy yawned. "Gettin' late, Rod, and I'm sleepy. Yuh reckon there is anything at all that we can do before mornin'?"

"Don't seem so." Barton shook his head wearily. "I could do with a little shut-eye myself. Let's turn in."

They closed the windows and locked up the office. Neither had the slightest thought of searching the town in the vague hope of finding the man who had fired from outside the window.

They had sleeping quarters in the rear of the building—each man a room of his own—and they turned in and slept soundly until morning. After the sheriff had breakfast he saddled his horse and rode out along the road toward the scene of last night's drygulching. He rode slowly, his

keen gaze constantly seeking something at the side of the road. Finally he found the spot he had been searching for and halted his mount.

He sat studying the spot where a heavy box had evidently been dropped in the mud. And there was no doubt in the sheriff's mind that it had been dropped there during the storm the previous night.

"Just as I thought," he muttered, as he dismounted and ground-hitched his horse.

Wandering around on foot, he read sign. He discovered footprints leading away from the spot and followed them. They led back into brush and rocks, and here he found the express box that contained a hundred pounds of gold!

"Better than I hoped," he thought, elated. "Now all I've got to do is wait till the hombre who tossed this box off the stage comes after the gold."

The hot sun had dried out the ground so the sheriff knew he had left no footprints himself. He returned to his horse, mounted, and was riding slowly back toward town when a buckboard appeared. Wake Fallon, the mine superintendent, was driving. He drew up when he saw the sheriff.

"Mornin', Sheriff," he greeted. "I'm not takin' any more chance with the stage or the express company either. I'm takin' some gold through myself today." He motioned to a box in the back of the buckboard. "And nobody will shoot me in the back with a Winchester."

"Hope yuh're right." The sheriff looked worried. "But it seems to me that yuh're takin' a mighty big risk, Fallon."

"I'm not worried," Fallon said, with a shrug. "I'll get through all right."

"If yuh're not worryin' I shore ain't goin' to do it for yuh," said the sheriff, grinning, and rode on toward town.

When he reached a turn in the road where he was out of sight, Barton circled

back. As he neared the spot where he had found the express box he dismounted and silently advanced on foot. Peering through some brush he saw Wake Fallon carrying a big box back into the rocks. Apparently the box was empty for it seemed light.

"All right, Fallon!" The sheriff stepped out, his gun covering the mine super. "I get the whole set-up now. Yuh planned the stage robbery so's yuh would get the gold and also collect the insurance from the express company."

"Prove it!" snarled Fallon.

"I will all right," promised Barton. "Yuh killed six men to get that gold, Fallon. Lansing and Buckly, the men on the stage last night were yore friends and workin' with yuh. Twice before yuh thought they were takin' the stage out and yuh must have held up the Overland each time. Since yuh expected Lansing and Buckly to be on the coach yuh probably didn't even bother to wear a mask, but when yuh found the driver and guard were strangers who would identify yuh then yuh killed them."

"Go on," Fallon said. Plainly he was waiting for a chance to grab for his gun.

"Last night," the sheriff said, "Lansing and Buckly tossed the gold off the coach where yuh'd told 'em to. Then they drove on and you drygulched 'em—shot 'em

both in the back. I knew they were killed by a rifle, but I didn't know yuh'd used a Winchester till yuh told me so yore self a little while ago out on the road. Yuh planned to come out here this mornin' with that empty box and drive on with the box containin' the gold."

"Too bad I didn't get yuh through the window last night!" snapped Fallon. "But all yuh've got is yore word against mine."

"No, the sheriff has a witness," said a voice from the brush, then Ed Turner, the rancher, appeared, and he was smiling.

Fallon thought he saw his chance then and grabbed for his gun. But the sheriff got him through the right arm before the super could raise the weapon.

"Never do to let yuh kill seven men," Barton drawled grimly. "Why, that might have been lucky for yuh!"

Wake Fallon didn't say anything. He was moaning and holding his wounded arm. Ed Turner stood admiringly gazing at Barton.

"Figgered I might find somethin' interesting when I saw Fallon stop his buckboard and carry that box in here," the rancher finally said. "And I shore did. Always thought yuh was a smart lawman, but I'm plumb certain of it now, Sheriff."

Barton smiled and felt a little silly, for he was a modest man.