

The Blazing Horizon

CHAPTER XLVI

When he dropped into his favorite haunt that evening for a quiet game of poker, Tony Harrison found the scar-faced Forbes standing beside the bar. More than he was usually, the feeling that somewhere he had encountered that face before, but to save the life of him he could not resurrect the image of a man with slick black hair and a short mustache and goatee. Most men, if they affected mustaches, favored the long flowing ones with drooping or up-turned ends. "And," he told himself, "it can't be the scar. I'd remember that anywhere."

He lingered nearby, that he might study the other's face unobserved; and presently Forbes, as if he felt unseen eyes upon him, turned around.

He smiled. "Have a drink?" he asked.

For a moment Harrison experienced the uncomfortable feeling of having been caught in an act of rudeness. "I don't drink," he answered as pleasantly as he could.

"Some time ago I decided to get along without it."

"Most of us would be better off if we felt the same way about it," the man agreed pleasantly. "How about something soft—ginger ale?"

Tony hesitated. The man was courteous enough, and yet "Generally," he said, "I don't permit a stranger to stand next to me; but I'll break the rule if you let me buy the next one."

Forbes lifted an arm to signal the bartender. After he had given his order he said, "I won't be a stranger much longer. I'm figuring on locating here."

"Going in business?"

"Drug store. I've been looking over the ground to see if it would pay."

"You know we've got one, of course?"

Forbes nodded. "Room for another one—a good one. Thought I'd see how things were going in Oklahoma City, though, before I made up my mind."

"You know," Harrison said boldly, "I've been thinking of the notion that I've seen you before some place. Is that possible?"

"Been to Chicago?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, that's where I'm from," Forbes laughed a little drily. "Folks are not likely to forget this face," and he indicated the scar.

"Bullet wound," he explained. "Plowed up my cheek considerably, didn't it?"

He shifted impatiently and glanced about him. "Got a poker game on," he explained apologetically and withdrew.

Harrison watched him as he sat down at a nearby table, and frowned. He heard his own name called a moment later and a bit reluctantly walked across the room and dropped into the seat that was reserved for him by his friends.

He played mechanically, with only a half-hearted interest in the cards; and from time to time he found himself staring absently toward the table where sat Forbes.

The man's back was to him, though, and Forbes presented nothing more than a sleek black head and a pair of broad shoulders.

"There's something on your mind, Tony," Fred Perkins laughed as he gathered in a sizeable "pot."

"I raised the ante, drew two cards, and you called me with two little pairs. That ain't natural for you."

Harrison shrugged and smiled. "Too much business, Fred." To Jenkins, the restaurant owner, he said, "That partner of mine thinks up more things for me to do than I can attend to in working hours and criticizes me when I carry them in my mind at night. All right; deal me a hand—and look out for me. I'm out for blood."

He picked up his cards, saw two kings and announced: "She's off!" and threw in a chip. Others clicked beside it.

"Everybody stays," said Jenkins, who was dealing. "How many cards, Harrison?"

"Three." When they fell in front of him he slipped them, unlooked at, between his pair of kings and shuffled the five cards, face down.

"Now let me peel down, Fred."

He began—and stopped short.

There were four kings in his hand and an illuminating flash of memory darting through his brain. He turned quickly in quest of Forbes but the man had left—at least he was not at the table where Tony had last seen him. His eyes roved the crowded room. Not there. Very well—the hotel.

Leaving a winning hand and an unashed stack of chips on the table, he pushed back his chair and darted for the door, his companions too overcome with astonishment for speech.

When he had vanished through the door, Fred Perkins leaned over the table and picked up Tony's cards. "Four kings!" he announced in feeble amazement, and slid back his chair. "Now, what the hell—" he broke off, to stare weakly at the five cards.

In the street, Tony Harrison was saying to himself, "I knew it—I knew I wasn't wrong. Now, if he's only at the hotel—if he didn't get scared at what I said and light out."

The way to the hotel led past his own store, which stood just two doors away from the bank. He proceeded at a run, stumbling now and then over a rut, for there were no street lights in Guthrie yet and the sky was overcast and black. The far-off rumble of thunder accompanied him down the street and once he tripped and sprawled his length on the ground, to pick himself up, cursing, and hasten on.

Far off a light shone through the blackness. From the bank, he told himself. It would be Morrison, the cashier, who religiously devoted one night a week to "checking things up." Morrison—what was it Morrison had said about the scar-faced man—that he hadn't inspired him with confidence?

"Morrison's own words," he whispered, and ran on.

His eyes, accustomed better to the darkness now, could discern fairly clearly the gaunt outlines of the hardware store and the framework of the addition under construction. Perkins and Harrison, a "going" business—and nine years ago.

A jagged flash of lightning rent the sky, lighting the makeshift building in all their nakedness and giving him a brief glimpse of something else. He stopped with such abruptness that his hands sought the ground for balance. It could not have been his imagination, he told himself. Under that brief lightning flash he had seen horses moving outside the little bank, and Morrison, he knew perfectly well, had not ridden any of them.

His amazement gave way to rapid calculation and he stepped quickly toward the dark shadow of the store. It was all very clear now—the scar-faced stranger striding into the bank from time to time and asking numerous questions under the pretense of an interest in Guthrie's business outlook.

He slipped swiftly and silently from the hardware store to the building next door. Hugging it closely he cut around to the rear and then tiptoed toward the side facing the bank. He could make out three bulky shapes in the darkness and could hear the stamping of horses' feet. Beside them was the faint glow of a cigar or cigarette.

His mind revolved on various plans of action. Should he lie in wait until the bank robbers emerged and then open fire on them from his place of concealment? A safe course but not to be considered because of the uncertainty of hitting a man in the darkness. No—he would have to get to the bank and surprise them.

He fingered the holster at his hip, drew out the slender-barreled revolver and, dropping to his hands and knees, began a slow and silent progress toward the shapes in the darkness beside the bank.

A horse whinnied nervously and Harrison flattened himself against the ground like a snake. But he was reassured by the sound of a man's voice: "Quiet, you fool! and presently began to inch forward again.

From where he now lay he could see the horses quite clearly. There would be no danger of running into them. And the faint glow of the cigarette told him which way his man was facing. Just a few feet more now and—

Then he was on his feet, writhing like a snake in the darkness. Before the man who held the reins could turn or utter a sound, Harrison had swung the butt of his gun against his skull and grabbed him to ease his fall.

He spoke softly to the horses, then grabbed off the man's hat, peered at his face, felt with his fingers a swelling lump behind the other's ear, and let him lie. There would be, Harrison was satisfied, no signs of life from him for some time to come.

He felt a fierce exultation within him. Part of his task was accomplished; that for which he had waited and prayed many a day lay just ahead. He spoke once more in a reassuring whisper to the three horses and then turned toward the front of the bank. Two men inside with Morrison, and one of them.

A sudden blaze of passion swept him as he crept toward the lighted window—a savage longing to get that other alone somewhere, to twist his fingers in his throat and hear him plead for his life like a beggar.

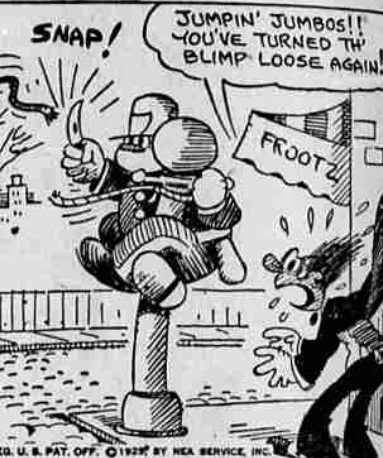
The door beside the lighted window, he noted, was closed. Removing his hat, he cautiously raised himself erect and looked for the man inside. Morrison sat in a chair beside the safe, and in front of him, with leveled guns, stood two men. From the hands of one a half-filled sack dangled. The other, his eyes lifted with anger, was talking in low tones, and Tony Harrison wondered then how he possibly could have failed to recognize him at first glimpse.

(To Be Continued)

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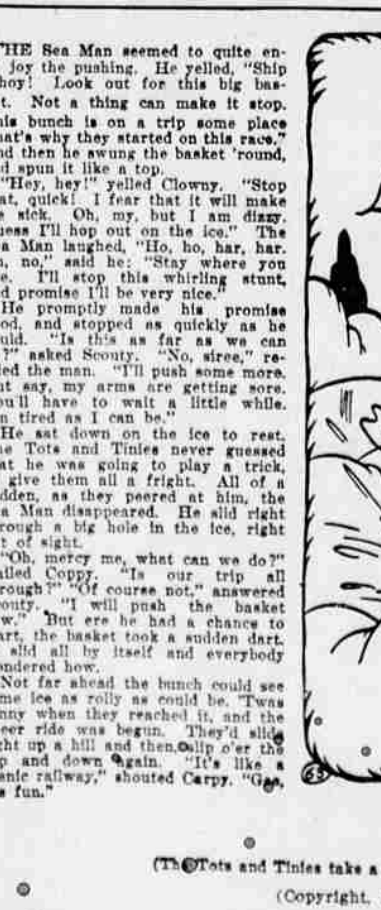
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