

Blood Money

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THE YUMA SAVINGS and Loan, Asuncion Branch, was held up on a Monday morning, early. By eight o'clock the doctor had dug the bullet out of Elton Goss's middle and said if he lived, then you didn't need doctors anymore—the age of miracles was back. By nine Freehouser, the Asuncion marshal, had all the facts—even the identity of the five holdup men—thanks to the Centralia Hotel night clerk's having been awake to see four of them come down from their rooms just after sunup. Then, he had tried to make the faces register in his mind, but even squinting and wrinkling his forehead did no good. The fifth man had been in the hotel lobby most of the night and the clerk knew for sure who he was, but didn't at the time associate him with the others.

Later, when Freehouser showed him the wanted dodgers, then he was dead sure about all of them.

Four were desperadoes. Well known, though with beard bristles and range clothes they looked like anybody else. First, the Harlan brothers, Ford and Eugene. Ford was boss: Eugene was too lazy to work. Then Deke, an old hand whose real name was something Deacon, though no one knew what for sure. And the fourth, Sonny Navarez, wanted in Sonora by the rurales; in Arizona, by the marshal's office. He, like the others, had served time in the territorial prison at Yuma.

As far as Freehouser was concerned, they weren't going back to Yuma if he caught them. Not with Elton Goss dying and his dad yelling for blood.

The fifth outlaw was identified as Rich Miller, a rider from down by Four Tanks. Those who knew of him said he was weathered good for his age, though not as tough as he thought he was. A boy going on eighteen and getting funny ideas in his brain because of the changing chemistry in his body. The bartender at the Centralia said Rich had been in and out all day, looking like he was mad at somebody. So they judged Rich had gotten drunk and was talked into something that was way over his head. A hand from F-T Connected, which was out of Four Tanks, said Rich Miller'd been let go the day before, when the old man caught him drunk up at a line shack and not tending his fences. So what the Centralia bartender said was probably true. Freehouser said it was just too damn bad for him, that's all.

Monday afternoon the marshal's posse was in Four Tanks, then heading east toward the jagged andesite peaks of the Kofas. McKelway, the law at Four Tanks, had joined the posse, bringing five men with him, and offering a neighborly hand. But he became hard-to-hold eager when he found out who they were after. The Fords, Deke, and Navarez had dead-or-alive money on them. McKelway knew Rich Miller and said he just ought to have his nose wiped and run off home. But Freehouser looked at it differently.

This was armed robbery. Goss, the bank manager, and his son Elton, who clerked for him, were hauled out of bed by two men—they turned out to be Eugene Harlan and Deke. Ford Harlan and Sonny Navarez were waiting at the rear door of the bank. The robbery would have come off without incident if Elton hadn't gone for a gun in a desk drawer. The elder Goss wasn't sure which one shot him. Then they were gone, with twelve thousand dollars.

They rode around front and Rich Miller came out of the Centralia to join them. He'd been sitting at the window, asleep, the clerk thought, wearing off a drunk. He was used to having riders do that. When the rooms were filled up he didn't care. But Rich Miller suddenly came alive and swung onto a mount the Mexican was leading. So all that time he must have been watching the front to see no one sneaked up on them.

McKelway said a boy ought to be allowed one big mistake before he was called hard on something he'd done. Besides, Rich Miller's name didn't bring any reward money.

Tuesday morning, the twenty-man posse was deep in the Kofas. Gray rock towering on all sides, wild country, and now, no trail. Freehouser decided they would split up, climb to higher ground, and wait. Just look around. He sent a man back to Four Tanks to wire Yuma and Aztec in case the outlaws got through the Kofas. But Freehouser was sure they were still in the mountains, somewhere.

Wednesday morning his hunch paid off. One of McKelway's men spotted a rider, and the posse closed in by means of a mirror-flash system they'd planned beforehand. The rider turned out to be Ford Harlan.

Wednesday afternoon Ford Harlan was dead.

He had led them a chase most of the morning, slipping through the man net, but near noon he turned into a dead-end canyon, a deserted mine site that once had been Sweet Mary No. 1. Ford Harlan had been urging his mount up a slope above the mine works, toward an adobe hut perched on a ledge about three hundred yards up, when Freehouser cupped his hands and called for him to halt. He kept on. A moment later Jim Mission, McKelway's deputy, knocked him out of the saddle with a single shot from his Remington.

Then McKelway and Mission volunteered to bring Ford Harlan down. McKelway tied a white neckerchief to the end of his Sharps for a truce flag and they went up. Freehouser had said if you want to get Ford, you might as well go a few more steps and ask the rest if they want to give up. They were almost to the body when the pistol fire broke from above. They scrambled down fast and when they reached the posse, Freehouser was smiling.

They were all up there, Eugene and Deke and the Mexican and Rich Miller. One of them had lost his nerve and opened up. You could see it on Freehouser's face. The self-satisfaction. They were trapped in an old assay shack with a sheer sandstone wall towering behind it—thin shadow lines of crevices reaching to slender pinnacles—and only one way to come down. The original mine opening was on the same shelf; probably they'd hid their horses there.

Freehouser was a contented man; he had all the time in the world to figure how to pry them out of the 'dobe. He even listened to McKelway and admitted that maybe the kid, Rich Miller, shouldn't be hung with the others—if he didn't get shot first.

Some of the posse went back home, because they had jobs to hold down, but the next day, others came out from Asuncion and Four Tanks to see the fun.

IT SEEMED NATURAL that Deke should take over as boss. There was no discussing it; no one gave it a thought. Ford was dead. Eugene was indifferent. Sonny Navarez was Mexican, and Rich Miller was a kid.

The boy had wondered why Deke wasn't the boss even before.

Maybe Deke didn't have Ford's nerve, but he had it over him in age and learning. Still, a man gets old and he thinks of too many what-ifs. And sometimes Deke was scary the way he talked about fate and God pulling little strings to steer men around where they didn't want to go.

He was at the window on the right side of the doorway, which was open because there was no door. Eugene and Deke were at the left front window. He could hear Sonny Navarez behind him moving gear around, but the boy did not take his eyes from the slope.

Deke lounged against the wall, his face close to the window frame, his carbine balanced on the sill. Eugene was a step behind him. He was a heavy-boned man, shoulders stretching his shirt tight, and tall, though Deke was taller when he wasn't lounging. Eugene pulled at his shirt, sticking to his body with perspiration. The sun was straight overhead and the heat pushed into the canyon without first being deflected by the rimrock.

The Mexican drew his carbine from his bedroll and moved up next to Rich Miller, and now the four of them were looking down the slope, all thinking pretty much the same thing, though in different ways.

Eugene Harlan broke the silence. „I shouldn't of fired at them.“

It could have gone unsaid. Deke shrugged. „That's under the bridge.“

„I wasn't thinking.“

Deke did not bother to look at him. „Well, you better start.“

„It wasn't my fault. Ford led 'em here!“

„Nobody's blaming you for anything. They'd a got us anyway, sooner or later. It was on the wall.“

Eugene was silent, and then he said, „What happens if we give ourselves up?“

Deke glanced at him now. „What do you think?“

Sonny Navarez grinned. „I think they would invite us to the rope dance.“

„Ford's the one shot that boy in the bank,“ Eugene protested. „They already got him.“

„How would they know he's the one?“ Deke said.

„We'll tell them.“

Deke shook his head. „Get a drink and you'll be doing your nerves a favor.“

Sonny Navarez and Rich Miller looked at Deke and both of them grinned, but they said nothing and after a moment they looked away again, down the slope, which fell smooth and steep. Slightly to the left, beyond an ore tailing, rose the weathered gray scaffolding over the main shaft; below it, the rickety structure of the crushing mill and, past that, six rusted tanks cradled in a framework of decaying timber. These were roughly three hundred yards down the slope. There was another hundred to the clapboard company buildings straggled along the base of the far slope.

A sign hanging from the veranda of the largest building said *sweet mary no. 1—el tesorero mining co.—four tanks, arizona terr.*

Most of the possemen now sat in the shade of this building.

Deke raised his hat again and passed a hand over his bald head, then down over his face, weathered and beard stubbled, contrasting with the delicate whiteness of his skull. Rich Miller's eyes came back up the slope, hesitating on Ford Harlan's facedown body. Then he removed his hat, passed a sleeve across his forehead, and replaced the curled brim low over his eyes.

He heard Eugene say, „You can't tell what they'll do.“

„They won't send us back to Yuma,“ Deke said. „That's one thing you can count on. And it costs money to rig a gallows. They'd just as lief do it here, with a gun—appeals to the sporting blood.“

Sonny Navarez said, „I once shot a mountain sheep in this same canyon that weighed as much as a man.“

„Right from the start there were signs,“ Deke said. „I was a fool not to heed them. Now it's too late. Something's brought us to die here all together, and we can't escape it. You can't escape your doom.“ Sonny Navarez said, „I think it was twelve thousand dollars that brought us.“

„Sure it was the money, in a way,“ Deke said. „But we're so busy listening to Ford tell how easy money's restin' in the bank, waitin' to be sent to Yuma, we're not seein' the signs. Things that've never happened before. Like Ford insisting we got to have five—so he picks up this kid—“

Rich Miller said, „Wait a minute!“ because it didn't sound right.

Deke held up his hand. „I’m talking about the signs—and Ford all of a sudden gettin’ the urge to go on scout when he never done anything like that before. It was all working toward this—and now there’s nothing we can do about it.“

„I ain’t going to get shot up just because you got a crazy notion,“ Eugene said.

Deke shook his head, wearily. „It’s sealed up now. After fate shows how it’s going, then it’s too late.“

„I didn’t shoot that man in the bank!“

„You think they’ll bother to ask you?“

„Damn it, I’ll tell ‘em—and they’ll have to prove I did it!“

„If you can get close enough to ‘em without gettin’ shot,“ Deke said quietly. He brought out field glasses from his saddlebags, which were below the window, and put the glasses to his face, edging them along the men far below in front of the company buildings.

Rich Miller said to him, „What do you see down there?“

„Same thing you do, only bigger.“

„I think,“ Sonny Navarez said to Deke, „that you are right in what you have said, that they will try hard to kill us—but this boy is not one of us. I think if he would surrender, they would not kill him. Prison, perhaps, but prison is better than dying.“

„You worry about yourself,“ Rich Miller said.

„The time to be brave,“ the Mexican said, „is when they are handing out medals.“

„You heard him,“ Deke said. „Worry about your own hide. The more people we got, the longer we last. There’s nothing that says if you’re going to get killed, you got to hurry it up.“

Rich Miller watched Eugene move back to the table along the rear wall and pick up the whiskey bottle that was there. The boy passed his tongue over dry lips, watching Eugene drink. It would be good to have a drink, he thought. No, it wouldn’t. It would be bad. You drank too much and that’s why you’re here. That’s why you’re going to get shot or hung.

But he could not sincerely believe what Deke had said. That one way of the other, this was the end. Down the slope the posse was very far away—dots of men that seemed too small to be a threat. He did not feel sorry about joining the holdup, because he did not let himself think about it. He did feel something resembling sorry for the man in the bank. But he shouldn’t have reached for the gun. I wonder if I would have, he thought.

It wasn’t so bad up here in the ‘dobe. Plenty of water and grub.

Maybe we’ll have some fun. Look at that crazy Mexican, talking about hunting mountain sheep.

If you were in jail you could say, all right, you made a mistake; but how do you know if you’ve made a mistake when you’re still alive and got two thousand dollars in your pants? My God, a man can do just about anything with two thousand dollars!

FREEHOUSER SAT in the shade, not saying anything. McKelway came to him, biting on his pipe idly, and after a while pointed to the mine-shaft scaffolding and said how a man with a good rifle might be able to draw a bead

and throw something in that open doorway if he was sitting way up there on top.

Freehouser studied the ore tailings, furrowed and steep, that extended out from the slope on both sides of the hut. If a man was going up to that 'dobe, he'd have to go straight up, right into their guns.

Maybe McKelway had something. Soften them up a bit.

STANDING BY the windows, watching the possemen not moving, became tiresome. So one by one they would go back to the table and take a drink.

Rich Miller took his turn and it tasted good. But he did not drink much.

Still, the time dragged on—until Eugene thought of something. He went to his gear and drew a deck of cards. Sonny Navarez said, „I have not played often.“

„Stand by the window awhile,“ Deke told him. „Then somebody'll spell you. You got enough cash to learn with.“

Eugene shook his head, thinking of his brother, who had taken twice as much as the others because the holdup had been his idea.

„Damn Ford had four thousand in his bags...“

They started playing, using matches for chips, each one worth a dollar. Rich Miller said the stakes were big... he'd never played higher than nickel-dime before; but he began winning right off and he changed his tune. Most of the time they played five-card stud. Deke said it separated the men from the boys and he looked at Rich Miller when he said it. Deke played with a dumb face, but would smile after the last card was dealt—as if the last card always twinned the one he had in the hole. And he lost every hand. Eugene and Rich Miller took turns winning the pots, and after a while Deke stopped smiling.

„We're raising the stakes,“ he said finally. „Each stick's worth ten dollars.“ Deke's cut was down to a few hundred dollars.

Eugene took a drink and wiped his mouth and grinned. „Ain't you losing it fast enough?“

Rich Miller grinned with him.

Deke said, „Just deal the cards.“

MCKELWAY REACHED the platform on top of the shaft scaffolding and dropped the line to haul up the rifles—his own Sharps and Jim Mission's roll-block Remington. He was glad Jim Mission was coming up with him. Jim was company and could shoot probably better than he could.

When Jim reached the platform the two men nodded and smiled, then loaded their rifles and practice-sighted on the doorway. McKelway said, Try not to hit the boy, though knocking off any of the others would be doing mankind a good turn, and Jim Mission said it was all right with him.

EUGENE GOT UP from the table unsteadily, tipping back his chair; he was grinning and stuffing currency into his pants pockets. In two hours he had won every cent of Deke's and Rich Miller's money. They remained seated, watching him sullenly, thinking it was a damn fool thing to try and win back all your losings in a couple of hands. Eugene took another pull at the bottle and wiped his mouth and looked at them, but he only grinned.

„Sonny!“ He called to the Mexican lounging beside the window.

„Your turn to get skinned.“

The Mexican shook his head. „I could not oppose such luck.“

„Come on!“

Sonny Navarez shook his head again and smiled.

Harlan looked at him steadily, frowning. „Are you going to play?“

„Why should I give you my money?“

„You don't come over here, I'll come get you.“

The Mexican did not smile now and the room was silent. Rich Miller started to rise, but Deke was up first. „Gene, you want to fight somebody—there's plenty outside.“

Eugene ignored him and kept on toward Sonny. The Mexican's hand edged toward his holstered pistol.

„Gene, you sit down now,“ Deke said tensely.

Eugene stepped into the rectangle of sunlight carpeting in from the doorway. He was stepping out of it when the rifle cracked and sang in the open stillness. Eugene's hands clawed at his face and he dropped without uttering a sound.

MCKELWAY RELOADED quickly. He had got one of them, he was sure of that. And it hadn't looked like the boy, else he wouldn't have fired. Jim Mission told him it was good shooting. After that McKelway did some figuring.

From the crest of the ore tailing in front of them, they'd be only about fifty yards from the hut. The only trouble was, they'd be out in the open. He told Jim Mission about it and he said why not go up after dark; then if they didn't see anything they'd still be close enough to shoot at sounds. McKelway said he was just waiting for Jim to say it.

THERE WAS NO poker the rest of the afternoon. Deke had dragged Eugene by his boots out of the doorway and placed him against a side wall with his hands on his chest, not crossed, but pushed inside his coat. He took the money out of Eugene's pockets—six thousand dollars—and laid it on the table. Then he sat down and looked at it.

Rich Miller pressed close to the wall by the window, studying the slope, wondering where the man with the rifle was. His eyes hung on the weathered shaft scaffolding, and now he wasn't so sure if there'd be any fun.

Once Deke said, „Now it's starting to show itself,“ but they didn't bother to ask him what.

Sonny Navarez stayed by a window. He would look at Eugene's body, but most of the time he was watching the dying sun. Rich Miller noticed this, but he figured the Mexican was thinking about God—or heaven or hell—because there was a dead man in the room. Sonny had crossed himself when Eugene was cut down, even though he would have killed him himself a minute before.

The sun was below the canyon rim, though the sky still reflected it red and orange, when Sonny Navarez pulled his pistol.

Deke was raising the bottle. He glanced at the Mexican, but only momentarily. He took a long swallow then and extended the bottle to Rich Miller. But the boy was staring at Sonny Navarez. Deke's head turned abruptly. Sonny's long-barreled .44 was pointing toward them.

Deke took his time putting down the bottle. He looked up again.

„What's the idea?“

The Mexican said, „When it is dark I'm leaving.“

Deke nodded to the pistol. „You think we're going to try and stop you?“

„You might. I am taking the money.“

„You’re wasting your time.“

Sonny Navarez shrugged. „Que va—it’s worth a try. From no matter where you die, it’s the same distance to hell.“

„You wouldn’t have a chance,“ Rich Miller said. „There’s somebody out there close with a rifle dead on this place.“

„For this money a man will brave many things,“ the Mexican said.

„And—I am not leaving until dark.“ Then he told them to face the wall, and when they did, he picked up the bundles of oversize bills and stuffed them inside his jacket.

Rich Miller said, „Do you think you’ll get through?“

„Probably no.“

Deke said, „You’re a damn fool.“

„If I get out,“ Sonny Navarez said, „I will visit a priest and give his church part of the money, and not rob again.“

„It’s too late for that,“ Deke said. „It’s too late for anything.“

„No,“ the Mexican insisted. „I will be very sorry for this crime. With the money that is left after the church I will buy my mother a house in Hermosillo and after that I will recite the rosary every day.“

Deke shook his head. „Things are going the way they are for a reason we don’t know. But nothing you can do will change it.“

The Mexican shrugged and said, „Que va—“

It was almost full dark when Sonny Navarez moved to the doorway.

He stood next to the opening and holstered his pistol and lifted his carbine, which was there against the wall. He levered a shell into the breech and stepped into the opening, crouching slightly. He hesitated, as if listening, then turned to the two men at the table and nodded. As he was turning back, the rifle shot rang in the dim stillness and echoed upcanyon. Sonny Navarez doubled, sinking to his knees, and hung there momentarily, as if in prayer, before falling half through the doorway.

LATER, MCKELWAY and Mission climbed down from the ore tailing and reported to Freehouser. The marshal said three out of five men wasn’t bad for one day’s work. They were sitting on the porch, cigarettes glowing in the darkness, when the rider came in from Asuncion. He told them that Elton Goss was going to pull through.

Freehouser laughed and said, well, he guessed the age of miracles was back. A good one on the doctor, eh? The news made everybody feel pretty good, because Elton was a nice boy. McKelway mentioned that it would also make it a whole lot easier on Rich Miller.

LOOKING OUT into the night, the boy could just barely make out the shapes of the mine structures and the cyanide vats, which Deke had told him held 250 tons of ore and had to be hauled all the way across the desert from Yuma. How did he say it? The ore’d pour into the crusher—jaws and rollers that’d beat it almost to powder—then pass into the vats and get leached in cyanide for nine days. Five pounds of cyanide to the ton of water, that was it. He thought, What’s the sense in remembering that?

It's a strange thing, Rich Miller thought now, how in two days a man can change from a thirty-a-month rider to an outlaw and not even feel it. Almost like the man has nothing to do with it. Just a rope pulling you into things.

He remembered earlier in the day, being eager, looking forward to doing some long-range shooting, but seeing the situation apart from himself. He wondered how he could have thought this. Now there were two dead men in the room—that was the difference.

Later on, he got to thinking about Eugene breaking the poker game and about the Mexican. It occurred to him that both of them, for a short space of time, had all of the money, and now they were dead.

Ford had taken the biggest cut, and he was dead. Toward morning he dozed and when he awoke, Deke was sitting, leaning against the wall below the other window.

Deke was silent and Rich Miller said, for something to say, „When they going to try for us?“

„When they get good and damn ready.“

Rich Miller was silent and after a while he said, „We could take a chance and give up—you know, not like surrenderin'—with the idea of gettin' away later on when they ain't a hundred of 'em around.“

„You know what I told you.“

„But you ain't dead sure about that.“

„I'd say I'm a little older than you are.“

Rich Miller did not answer. Damn, he hated for someone to tell him that. As if old men naturally knew more than young ones. Taking credit for being older when they didn't have anything to do with it.

„What're you thinking about?“ Deke said.

„Giving up.“

Deke exhaled slowly. „You saw what happens if you go through that door.“

„There's other ways.“

„Like what?“

„Wavin' a flag.“

„You wave anything out that door,“ Deke said quietly, „I'll kill you.“

HE'S CRAZY, RICH thought. He's honest-to-God crazy and doesn't know it.

Deke had butted the table against the wall under the window and now they sat opposite each other, Deke on one side of the window, the boy on the other. Deke had divided the eight thousand dollars between them and said they were going to play poker to keep their minds from blowing away. He placed his pistol on the edge of the table.

They stayed fairly close at first, each winning about the same number of pots, but after a while the boy began to win more often. In the quietness he thought of many things—like not being able to give himself up—and then he remembered something which had occurred to him earlier.

„Deke,“ the boy said, „you know why Sonny and Eugene got killed?“

„I've been telling you why. 'Cause they were destined to.“

„But why?“

„No one knows that.“

„I do.“ The boy watched the older man closely. „Because they had the money.“ He paused. „Ford had most of it, and he was the first. Eugene had all

but Sonny's when he got hit. Then Sonny took all of it and he lasted less than an hour."

Deke said nothing, but his sunken expression seemed more drawn.

They played on in silence and slowly Rich Miller was taking more and more of the money. Deke seemed uncomfortable and he said quietly that he guessed it just wasn't his day. In less than an hour he was down to two hundred and fifty dollars. "You might clean me out," Deke said.

Rich Miller said nothing and dealt the cards. The first ones down, then a queen to Deke and a jack to himself. He looked at his hole card.

A ten of diamonds. Deke bet fifty dollars on the queen.

"You must have twin girls," the boy said.

"You know how to find out."

Rich Miller's next card was a king. Deke's an ace. He bet fifty dollars again. Their fourth cards were low and no help, but Deke pushed in all the money he had.

"That's on a hunch," he said.

Rich Miller dealt the last cards—a queen to Deke, making it an ace, a five, and two queens. He gave himself a second king.

"What you show beats me," Deke said, grinning. He pushed away from the table and stood up. "You got it all, boy. You know what that means."

"It means I'm giving up."

"It's too late. You explained it yourself a while ago—the man who gets the money gets killed!" Deke was grinning deeply. "Now I don't have anything."

"You're dead sure you'll be last."

"As sure as a man can be. It's the handwriting."

"What good'll it do you?"

"Who knows?"

"You're so dead sure, go stand in that doorway."

Deke was silent.

"What about your handwritin'? The pattern says you'll be the last, and even then, who knows? That all the bunk?"

Deke hesitated momentarily, then walked slowly toward the doorway. He stopped next to it, stiffly. Then he moved out.

Rich Miller's eyes stayed on Deke as his hand moved across the table. He lifted Deke's pistol from the table edge and swung it out the window and fired in the direction of the scaffolding.

A high-pitched, whining report answered the shot and hung longer in the air. Deke staggered, turning back into the room, and had time to look at the boy in wide-eyed amazement. Then he was dead.

The boy returned to the window after getting his carbine and, with his bandanna tied to the end of the barrel, waved it in a slow arc back and forth. Once they started up the slope he sat back in the chair and idly turned over his hole card, the ten.

The possemen were drawing closer, up to Ford Harlan's body now.

He flipped Deke's hole card. It landed on top of the two queens. Three ladies.

He rose and moved to the doorway as he saw the men nearing the shelf, then glanced down at Deke and shook his head. I sure am crazy, he thought. I never heard before of a man cheating to lose.

He walked through the doorway with his hands above his head.

