

Booty for a Badman

Sackett series

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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When my roan topped out on the ridge, the first thing I saw was that girl. She was far off, but a man riding lonesome country gets so he can pick out anything strange to it, and this girl was standing up straight beside the trail like she was waiting for a stage. Trouble was, nothing but riders or freight wagons used that trail, and seldom.

With fifty pounds of gold riding with me and three days ahead of me, I was skittish of folks. Most times wild country is less trouble than people, no matter how rough the country. And no woman had a right to be standing out there in that empty desert-mountain country.

We Sacketts began carrying rifles as soon as we stood tall enough to keep both ends off the ground.

When I was fourteen I traveled from Cumberland Gap in Tennessee down to the Pine Log Mountains in Georgia, living on cougar meat and branch water, and I killed my own cougars.

Man-grown at fifteen, I hoofed it north and joined up with the Union and fought at Shiloh, and after our outfit was surrendered by a no-account colonel, I was among those exchanged to go north and fight the Sioux in Dakota.

At nineteen I saddled our roan and fetched it for the west to try my hand at gold-panning, but I wasn't making out. Seems like everybody in camp was showing color but me, and I was swallowing my belt notch by notch for lack of eating when those four men came to my fire.

Worst of it was, I couldn't offer them. There I was, booting up for a fresh day with my coffeepot on the fire so's people wouldn't know I hadn't even coffee, but all there was in the pot was water. I dearly wanted to offer them, but I was shamed to admit I was fresh out of coffee—three days out, actually. And so hungry that my stomach thought my throat had been cut.

„Tell,“ Squires suggested, „you've had no luck with mining, so nobody would suspect you of carrying gold. If you rode out of camp today, folks would take it for granted you had called it deep enough and quit. That way you could carry our gold to Hardyville and nobody the wiser.“

The four men facing me had taken out the most dust and, knowing about the Coopers, they were worried men. Three of them were family men and that gold meant schooling for their youngsters and homes for their wives and capital for themselves. They were poor, hard-working men, deserving what they had dug up.

Thing was, how to get it past the Coopers?

„We'll give you one hundred dollars,“ Hodge said, „if you make it through.“

With the best of luck it was a five-day ride, which figured out to twenty dollars a day. With such a grubstake I could take out for California or come back with a grubstake.

My belly was as empty as my prospect hole, and it didn't seem like I had much choice. Coopers or no Coopers, it sized up like the fastest hundred dollars I would ever make. It was Bill Squires done it for me, as we'd talked friendly ever since I staked claim on the creek.

Jim Hodge, Willy Mander and Tom Padgett stood there waiting for me to speak up, and finally I said, „I'll do it, of course, and glad of the chance. Only, I am a stranger, and—“

„Squires swears by you,“ Padgett interrupted, „and even if we don't know you very well, he's known you and your family. If he says you are honest, that's all there is to it.“

„And this is a chance to get you a stake,“ Squires interrupted. „What can you lose?“

Well, the last two men who rode out of camp with gold were found dead alongside the trail, shot down like you'd shoot a steer; and one of them was Jack Walker, a man I'd known. Neither of them was carrying as much as I'd have.

„Take a pack horse,“ Squires suggested, „load your gear.“ He glanced around and lowered his voice. „It seems like somebody here in camp informs the Coopers, but nobody will know about this but us, and all of us have a stake in it.“

Later, when the others had gone, Squires said, „Hope you didn’t mind my saying I’d known your family. They were willing to trust you if I did, but I wanted them to feel better.“

So I packed up and rode off, and in my saddlebags there was fifty pounds of gold, worth around a thousand dollars a pound at the time, and in my pocket I’d a note signed by all four men that I was to have a hundred dollars when the gold was delivered. Never had I seen that much cash money, and since the war I’d not had even ten dollars at one time.

Now, that woman standing down there sized up like trouble aplenty. Pa, he always warned us boys to fight shy of women. „They’ll trouble you,“ Pa said. „Love ‘em and leave ‘em, that’s the way. Don’t you get tangled up with no female woman. They got more tricks they can do than a monkey on sixty feet of grapevine.“

„Don’t believe that, Tell,“ Ma would say. „You treat women right. You treat a woman like she was your sister, you hear?“

Pa, he would say, „There’s two kinds of women, Tell, good and bad, and believe me, a good woman can cause a man more trouble than a bad one. You fight shy of them.“

So I fought shy. Of mountain cats and bears, of muskrat and deer, even of horses and cows I knew a sight, but I wasn’t up on womenfolk. Orrin now—he was my brother—he was a fiddler and a singer, and fiddlers and singers have a way with women. At home when strange womenfolk showed up, I’d taken to the hills.

Looked to me like I was fair trapped this time, but I wasn’t about to turn and run. Any woman waiting in lonesome country was a woman in trouble. Only I begun to sweat. I’d never been close to no lone woman before.

Worst of it was, there was somebody on my trail. A man like me, riding somewhere, he doesn’t only watch the trail ahead, he looks back. Folks get lost because when they start back over a trail they find it looks a sight different facing the other way. When a man travels he should keep sizing up the country, stopping time to time to study his back trail so he recognizes the landmarks.

Looking back, I’d seen dust hanging in the air. And that dust stayed there. It had to be somebody tracking me down, and it could mean it was the Coopers.

Right then I’d much rather have tangled with the Coopers than faced up to that woman down there, but that no-account roan was taking me right to her.

Worst of it was, she was almighty pretty. There was a mite of sunburn on her cheekbones and nose, but despite that, she was a fine-looking girl.

„How do you do?“ You’d of thought we were meeting on the streets of Nashville. „I wonder if you could give me a lift to Hardyville?“

My hatbrim was down over my eyes, and I sized up the country around, but there was no sign of a horse she might have ridden to this point, nor any sign of a cabin or camp.

„Why, I reckon so, ma’am.“ I got down from the saddle, thinking if trouble came I might have to fetch that big Colt in a hurry. „My pack horse is packing light so I can rig that pack saddle so’s you can ride it sidesaddle.“

„I would be grateful,“ she said.

First off, it shaped like a trap. Somebody knowing I had gold might have this woman working with them, for it troubled me to guess how she came here. There were a sight of tracks on the ground, but all seemed to be hers. And then I noticed a thin trail of smoke from behind a rock.

„You have a fire?“

„It was quite cold last night.“

When she caught my look, she smiled. „Yes, I was here all night.“ She looked directly at me from those big blue eyes. „And the night before.“

„It ain't a likely spot.“

She carried herself prim, but she was a bright, quick-to-see girl, and I cottoned to her. The clothes she wore were of fine, store-bought goods like some I'd seen folks wear in some of those northern cities I'd seen as a soldier. Where I came from it was homespun, or buckskin.

„I suppose you wonder what I am doing here?“

„Well, now.“ I couldn't help grinning. „It did come to my mind. Like I said, it ain't a likely spot.“

„You shouldn't say *ain't*. The word is *isn't*.“

„Thank you, ma'am. I had no schooling, except what ma could give me, and I never learned to talk proper.“

„Surely you can read and write?“

„No, ma'am, I surely can't.“

„Why, that's awful! Everybody should be able to read. I don't know what I would have done these past months if I could not read. I believe I should have gone insane.“

When the saddle was rigged, I helped her up. „Ma'am, I better warn you. There's trouble acoming, so's you'd better have it in mind. It may not be a good thing, me helping you this way. You may get into worse trouble.“

We started off, and I looked over my shoulder at her. „Somebody is following after me. I figure it's them Cooper outlaws.“

Worst of it was, I had lost time, and here it was coming up to night, and me with a strange girl on my hands. Pa told me women had devious ways of getting to a man, but I never figured one would set out alongside a lonely trail thataway. Especially one as pretty as she was.

Moreover, she was a lady. A body could see she was quality, and she rode there beside me, chin lifted and proud like she was riding the finest thoroughbred at a county fair, or whatever.

„You running from something, ma'am? Not to be disrespectful, ma'am, but out in the desert thisaway it ain't—*isn't*—just the place a body would expect to find a lady as pretty as you.“

„Thank you.“ Her chin lifted a mite higher. „Yes, I am running away. I am leaving my husband. He is a thoughtless, inconsiderate brute, and he is an Army officer at Fort Whipple.“

„He will be mighty sorry to lose you, ma'am. This here is a lonesome country. I don't carry envy for those soldier boys out here, I surely don't.“

„Well! It certainly is not a place to bring an officer's bride. I'll declare! How could he think I could live in such a place? With a dirt floor, and all?“

„What did he say when you left?“

„He doesn't know it yet. I had been to Ehrenberg, and when we started back, I just couldn't stand the thought, so when no one was looking, I got out of the Army ambulance I was riding in. I am going to catch the steamer at Hardyville and go home.!

When I looked to our back trail, no dust hung in the air, and I knew we were in trouble. If it had been soldiers looking for this girl, they would not have stopped so sudden-like, and it looked to me like they had headed us and laid a trap, so I swung up a draw, heading north instead of west, and slow to raise no dust.

It was a sandy wash, but a thin trail skirted the edge, made by deer or such-like and we held to it. When we had been riding for an hour, I saw dust in the air, hanging up there in a fair cloud about where I had come up to this lady. Again I turned at right angles, heading back the way I had come. Off to the north and west there was a square-topped mesa that was only a part of a long, comb-like range.

„We are followed, ma'am,“ I said, „and those Coopers are mighty thoughtless folks. I got to keep you out of their hands. First off, we'll run. If that doesn't work, we'll talk or we'll fight, leaving it up to them. You hold with me, ma'am.“

„They wouldn't bother me,“ she said. „I am the wife of an Army officer.“

„Most Western men are careful of womenfolk,“ I agreed, „but don't set no truck by being an officer's wife. The Coopers murdered two Army officers not a week ago. Murdered them, ma'am. They just don't care a mite who you may be. And a woman like you—they don't often see a woman pretty as you.“

She rode up closer to me. „I am afraid I didn't realize.“

„No, ma'am, most folks don't,“ I said.

It was still the best part of two days to Hardyville, and nothing much there when we arrived. It was head of navigation on the Colorado, and last I'd seen there were only three or four buildings there, and about that many folks.

Nobody seemed to know how many Coopers there were, but the guesses ran all the way from five to nine. They were said to be renegades from down in the Cherokee nation and mighty mean.

We held to low ground, keeping off skylines, finding a saddle here and there where we could cross over ridges without topping out where we could be seen. It was darkening by then, with long shadows reaching out, and when we came up the eastern flank of that mesa I'd headed for, we rode in deep shadow.

When we found a way around the butte, we took it, and the western slope was all red from the setting sun, and mighty pretty. The wind blew cool there, but I'd found what I was hunting—a place to hole up for the night.

A man hunting a night camp with somebody trailing him has to have things in mind. He wants a place he can get into and out of without skylining himself or showing up plain, and he also wants a place where he can build a fire that cannot be seen, and something to spread out the smoke. And here it was, and by the look of it many an Indian had seen the worth of it before this time.

The falloff from the mesa rim made a steep slope that fell away for maybe five hundred feet. A man could ride a horse down that slope, but it would be sliding half the time on its rump. The wall of the mesa raised up sheer for some three hundred feet, but there at the foot of that cliff and atop the slope was a hollow behind some rocks and brush.

Maybe it was a half-acre of ground with grass in the bottom and some scraggly cedars at one end. We rode down into that hollow, and I reached up and handed down the lady.

„Ma'am, we'll spend the night here. Talk low and don't let any metal strike metal or start any rock sliding.“

„Are they that close?“

„I don't rightly know, ma'am, but we should hope for the best and expect the worst. Pa said that was the way to figure.“

When the saddles were off, I climbed out on one of those big rock slabs to study the country. You've got to see country in more than one light to get the lay of it. Shadows tell a lot, and the clear air of early morning or late evening will show up things that are sun-blurred by day. A man scouting country had best size it up on an evening, for shadows will tell him where low ground is, and he can spot the likely passes if only to avoid them.

Pa, who trapped with Bridger and Carson, never lost a chance of teaching us boys how to judge terrain, and the best time was at sundown or sunup with the shadows falling toward you.

When I finished my study, I came down off the rock and cleared a spot of needles and leaves under one of those cedars that sort of arched out toward us. My fire was about the size you could hold in your two hands, for the smaller the fire, the less smoke, and such a fire will heat up just as well if a man wants to cook. And rising up through the branches thataway the smoke would be thinned out so much it could not be seen.

„I'm from Tennessee,“ I said to her, „and my name is Tell Sackett.“

„Oh—I am Christine Mallory, and I was born in Delaware.“

„Howdy, Mrs. Mallory. Mostly, the Delawares a man meets out here are Indians. Good trackers and good fighting men.“

When I dug out what grub I had, I was ashamed it was so little. It was a mite Squires staked me to before I taken out. The coffee was mostly ground bean and chicory, and all else I had was jerked venison and cold flour.

When the coffee was ready I filled my cup and passed it to her. „Mrs. Mallory, this isn't what you have been used to, but it's all we've got.“

She tasted it, and if she hadn't been a lady I think she would have spit, but she swallowed it, and then drank some more. „It's hot,“ she said, and smiled at me, and I grinned back at her. Truth to tell, that was about all a body could say for it.

„You'd better try some of this jerked venison,“ I said. „If you hold it in your mouth awhile before you begin to chew, it tastes mighty wholesome. All else I've got is cold flour.“

„What?“

„Cold flour—it's a borrowed thing, from the Indians. Only what I have here is white-man style. It's parched corn ground up and mixed with a mite of sugar and cinnamon. You can mix it with water and drink it, and a man can go for miles on it. Mighty nourishing too. Pa was in Montana one time and traveled two weeks on a couple of dry quarts of it.“

Last time I got up to scout the country around I caught the gleam of a far-off campfire.

Standing there looking across country and watching the stars come out, I thought of that girl and wondered if I would ever have me a woman like that one, and it wasn't likely. We Sacketts are Welsh, and a proud people, but we never had much in the way of goods. Somehow the Lord's wealth never seemed to gather to us; all we ever had was ourselves and our strength and a will to walk the earth with honesty and pride.

But this girl was running away, and it didn't seem right. She was huddled to the fire, wrapped in one of my blankets when I came down to the fire. Gathering cedar boughs and grass, I made her a bed to one side, but close to the fire.

„The fire smells good,“ she said.

„That's cedar,“ I said, „and some creosote brush. Some folks don't like the smell of creosote. Those Spanish men call it hediondilla, which means little stinker. Some of the Indians use it for rheumatism.“

Nobody said anything for a while, and then I said, „Creosote-brush fires flavor beans—the best ever. You try them sometime, and no beans ever taste the same after.“

The fire crackled, and I added a few small, dry sticks and then said, „It ain't right, leaving him thisaway. He's likely worried to death.“

She looked across the fire at me, all stiff and perky. „That is none of your business!“

„Mrs. Mallory, when you saddled yourself on me, you made it my business. Girl who marries a soldier ought to think to live a soldier's life. Strikes me you've no nerve, ma'am, you cut and run because of dirt floors. I'd figure if a girl loved a man it wouldn't make her no mind. You're spoiled, ma'am. You surely are.“

She got up, standing real stiff, coming the high and mighty on me. „If you do not want me here, I will go.“

„No, you won't. First off, you haven't an idea where you are or which way to go to get there. You'd die of thirst, if that lion didn't get you.“

„Lion?“

„Yes, ma'am.“ I wasn't exactly lying, because somewhere in Arizona there was sure to be a lion prowling. „There's snakes, too, and at night you can't see them until they get stepped on.“

She stood there looking unsure of herself, and I kept on with what I had to say. „Woman needs a man out here—needs him bad. But a man needs a woman too. How do you think that man of yours feels now? His wife has shamed him before others, taking on like a girl-baby, running off.“

She sat down by the fire, but she looked at me with a chilly expression. „I will thank you to take me to Hardyville. I did not mean to *saddle* myself on you, as you put it. I will gladly pay you for your trouble.“

„Ain't that much money.“

„Don't say *ain't*!“ She snapped her eyes at me.

„Thank you, ma'am,“ I said, „but you better get you some shut-eye. We got to ride fifty miles tomorrow, and I can't be bothered with any tired female. You sit up on that horse tomorrow or I'll dump you in the desert.“

„You wouldn't dare!“

„Yes, ma'am, I surely would. And leave you right there, and all your caterwauling wouldn't do you a mite of good. You get some sleep. Come daylight we're taking out of here faster than a scared owl.“

Taking up my rifle I went out to scout the country, and setting up there on that rock slab I done my looking and listening. That fire was still aburning, away off yonder, like a star fallen out of the sky.

When I came back, she was lying on the bed I'd made, wrapped in a blanket, already asleep. Seen like that with the firelight on her face she looked like a little girl.

It was way shy of first light when I opened my eyes, and it'd taken me only a minute or two to throw the saddles on those broncs. Then I fixed that pack saddle for her to ride. My outfit was skimpy, so it wasn't much extra weight, carrying her.

When I had coffee going, I stirred her awake with a touch on the shoulder, and her eyes flared open and she was like to scream when she saw me, not that I'd blame her. In my sock feet I stand six-three, and I run to shoulders and hands, with high cheekbones and a wedge face that sun had made dark as any Indian. With no shave and little sleep I must have looked a frightening thing.

„You better eat a little,“ I said. „You got five minutes.“

We rode out of there with the stars still in the sky, and I was pleasant over seeing no fire over yonder where it had been the night before.

It was just shy of noon, with the sun hot in the sky, when we crossed a low saddle and started out across a plain dotted with Joshua trees—named by the Mormons who thought they looked like Joshua lifting his arms to Heaven.

We came down across that country, and there had been no dust in the sky all morning, but of a sudden four men rode up out of a draw, and it was the Coopers. Their description had been talked around enough.

„Howdy, Coopers! You hunting something?“

They looked at Christine Mallory and then at me. „We're looking for you,“ one said, „and that gold, but we'll take the lady, too, sort of a bonus-like.“

Like I said, when you've quit running, you can talk or you can fight, and times like this I run long on talk.

„You'll take nothing,“ I said. „You are talking to Tell Sackett—William Tell Sackett, to be exact, as my pa favored William Tell in his thinking. We Sacketts hail from the Cumberland Gap in Tennessee, and Pa always taught us never to give up nothing without a fight. Specially money or a woman.“

„Now,“ I continued on before they could interrupt, „back to home, folks used to say I wasn't much for fiddling or singing, and my feet was too big for dancing, but along come fighting time, I'd be around.“

„Couple of you boys are wearing brass buttons. I figure a forty-four slug would drive one of those buttons so deep into your belly a doc would have to get him a search warrant to find it.“

My horse was stepping around kind of uneasy-like, and I was making a show of holding him in.

„Anyway,“ I said, „this here is General James Whitfield Mallory's wife, and if you so much as lay a hand to her, this territory wouldn't be big enough to hold you. He's the kind to turn out the whole frontier Army just to hunt you.“

My horse gave a quick sidestep about then, and when he swung his left side to them, I used the moment to fetch out my gun, and when the roan stopped sidestepping, I had that big Colt looking at them.

Pa, he set me to practicing getting a gun out as soon as the end of my holster quit cutting a furrow in the ground when I walked. Pa said to me, „Son, you ever need that gun, you’ll need it in your fist, not in no holster.“

They were surprised when they saw that gun staring them down, and this George Cooper was mad clean through. „That ain’t going to cut no ice,“ he said. „We want you, we’ll take you.“

„One thing about this country,“ I said, „a man’s got a right to his opinion. Case like this here, if you’re wrong, you don’t get a chance to try it over. Any time you want to give it a try,“ I said, „you just unlimber and have at it.“

Nobody had anything to say, none of those Coopers looking anything but mad right about then, so I kept on, figuring when we were talking we weren’t fighting.

„I got me a bet, Coopers; I got me a bet says I can kill three of you before you clear leather—and that last man better make it a quick shot or I’ll make it four.“

„You talk a good fight,“ George Cooper said.

„You can call my hand. You got the right. One thing I promise, if I don’t kill you dead with my first shots, I’ll leave you lay for the buzzards and the sun.“

Those Coopers didn’t like it much, but my roan was standing rock still now that I’d quit nudging him with my spur, and at that range a man wasn’t likely to miss very often. And it’s a fact that nobody wants to die very much.

„If she’s Mallory’s wife, what’s she doing with you?“

„She was headed for Whipple,“ I said, „and she turned sick, and the doc said she should go back to Ehrenberg. They asked me to take her there. Served with the general during the war,“ I added. „He knows me well.“

„I never heard of no General Mallory,“ George Cooper said.

„You never heard of *General James Whitfield Mallory*?“ By now I believed in him my own self. „He was aide to General Grant! Same class at the Point with Phil Sheridan and Jeb Stuart. Fact is, they are talking of making him governor of the territory just to wipe out outlaws and such.“

„Begging the lady’s pardon, but he’s noted for being a mighty mean man—strict. And smart? He’s slicker than a black snake on a wet-clay sidehill. Last thing you want to do is get him riled.“

„Lady here was telling me if he is made territorial governor he plans to recruit a special police force from among the Apache. He figures if those Apaches hate white men they might as well turn it to use tracking down outlaws—and he doesn’t say anything about them bringing anybody back.“

„That’s not human!“ George Cooper protested.

„That’s the general for you. He’s that kind.“ Now that trusty Colt had stayed right there in my fist, and so I said, „Now, we’ll ride on.“

Motioning her on ahead, I rode after her, but believe me, I sat sidewise in my saddle with that Colt ready for a quick shot. The last I could see they were still a-setting there, arguing.

Most talking I’d done since leaving Tennessee, and the most lying I’d done since who flung the chunk.

We fetched up to Hardyville about sundown on the second day, and the first person I saw when we rode up to the store was Bill Squires.

„Bill,“ I said, „the Coopers were a-hunting me. Only way they could have known I had that gold was if you told them. Somebody had to ride out to tell them, and somebody would want to be on hand to divvy up.

„Now,“ I said, „if you want to call me a liar, I’ll take this lady inside and I’ll come right back. But you hear this: They didn’t get one speck of this gold, and neither are you.“

„I panned my share of that gold!“ He was looking mighty bleak.

„So you did, but yours wasn’t enough; you had to try for all of it. A month or so back Jack Walker left camp and was dry-gulched. I plan to send your gold to his widow and family, and you can save your objections to that until I come out.“

So I went inside with Christine Mallory, and there were two or three fresh Army officers right off the boat waiting to go to Fort Whipple.

„My husband is not a general,“ she said then, „and his name is Robert Mallory.“

„I know that, Mrs. Mallory. Your husband is Second Lieutenant Robert Mallory, and he’s greener than meadow grass. Month or so back he came out and ordered me to get my horse off the parade ground at Whipple. Mighty stiff-necked he was too.

„Ma’am, you haven’t got you a man there, you’ve got a boy, but a boy sound in wind and limb; and two or three years on the frontier will give you a man you can be proud of. But if you run off now the chances are he will resign his commission and run after you, and you’ll have a boy for a husband as long as you live.

„You stay with him, you hear? You ain’t much account, either, but give you seasoning and you will be. Fact is, if you’d been a woman back there on that trail I might have been less of the gentleman, but you haven’t grown up to a man yet.“

She had the prettiest blue eyes you ever saw, and she looked straight at me. She was mad, but she was honest, and behind those blue eyes she had a grain of sense.

„You may be right,“ she admitted, „although I’d rather slap your face than agree. After what I have been through these past few days, that dirt floor would look very good indeed.“

„Ma’am, when my time comes to marry, I hope I find a woman as pretty as you—and with as much backbone.“

Leaving her talking to those officers, I went to the counter with my gold and checked it in with Hardy in the names of those to whom it was credited, to Jim Hodge, Willy Mander, Tom Padgett—and to Mrs. Jack Walker, whose address I supplied.

„And I’ve got a hundred dollars coming,“ I said.

Hardy paid it to me, and I put it in my pocket. More money than I’d seen since the coon went up the tree.

Then I went outside like I’d promised, and Bill Squires surprised me. He was sure enough waiting.

He shot at me and missed. I shot at him and didn’t.

