

End of the Drive

The Sacketts

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

Published: 1997



We came up the trail from Texas in the spring of '74, and bedded our herd on the short grass beyond the railroad. We cleaned our guns and washed our necks and dusted our hats for town; we rode fifteen strong to the hitching rail, and fifteen strong to the bar.

We were the Rocking K from the rough country back of the Nueces, up the trail with three thousand head of longhorn steers, the first that spring, although the rivers ran bank full and Comanches rode the war trail.

We buried two hands south of the Red, and two on the plains of the Nation, and a fifth died on Kansas grass, his flesh churned under a thousand hoofs. Four men

gone before Indian rifles, but the death-songs of the Comanches were sung in the light of a hollow moon, and the Kiowa mourned in their lodges for warriors lost to the men of the Rocking K.

We were the riders who drove the beef, fighting dust, hail, and lightning, meeting stampedes and Kiowa. And we who drove the herd and fought our nameless, unrecorded battles often rode to our deaths without glory, nor with any memory to leave behind us.

The town was ten buildings long on the north side of the street, and seven long on the south, with stock corrals to the east of town and Boot Hill on the west, and an edging of Hell between.

Back of the street on the south of town were the shacks of the girls who waited for the trail herds, and north of the street were the homes of the businessmen and merchants, where no trail driver was permitted to go.

We were lean and hard young riders, only a few of us nearing thirty, most of us nearer to twenty. We were money to the girls of the line, and whiskey to the tenders of bars, but to the merchants we were lean, brown young savages whose brief assaults on their towns were tolerated for the money we brought.

That was the year I was twenty-four, and only the cook was an older man, yet it was my fifth trip up the trail and I'd seen this town once before, and others before that. And there were a couple I'd seen die, leaving their brief scars on the prairie that new grass would soon erase.

I'd left no love in Texas, but a man at twenty-four is as much a man as he will be, and a girl was what I wanted. A girl to rear strong sons on the high plains of Texas, a girl to ride beside me in the summer twilight, to share the moon with me, and the high stars over the caprock country.

For I had found a ranch, filed my claims, and put my brand on steers, and this drive was my last for another man, the last at a foreman's wages. When I rode my horse up to the rail that day, I saw the girl I dreamed about... the girl I wanted.

She stood on the walk outside the store and she lifted a hand to shade her eyes, her hair blowing light in the wind, and her figure was long and slim and the sun caught red lights in her hair. Her eyes caught mine as I rode tall in the leather, the first man to come up the street.

She looked grave and straight and honestly at me, and it seemed no other girl had ever looked so far into my heart. At twenty-four the smile of a woman is a glory to the blood and a spark to the spirit, and carries a richer wine than any sold over a bar in any frontier saloon.

I'd had no shave for days, and the dust of the trail lay on my clothes, and sour I was with the need of bathing and washing. When I swung from my saddle, a tall, lonely man in a dusty black hat with spurs to my heels, she stood where I had seen her and turned slowly away and walked into the store.

We went to the bar and I had a drink, but the thing was turning over within me and thinking of the girl left no rest for me. She was all I could think about and all I could talk about that afternoon.

So when I turned from the bar Red Mike put a hand to my sleeve. „It's trouble you're headed for, Tom Gavagan," he said. „It's been months since you've seen a

girl. She's a bonny lass, but you know the rule here. No trail hand can walk north of the street, nor bother any of the citizens."

"I'm not one to be breakin' the law, Mike, but it is a poor man who will stop shy of his destiny."

"This is John Blake's town," he said.

The name had a sound of its own, for John Blake was known wherever the trails ran; wherever they came from and where they ended. He was a hard man accustomed to dealing with hard men, and when he spoke his voice was law. He was a square, powerful man, with a name for fair dealing, but a man who backed his words with a gun.

"It is a time for courting," I said, "although I want trouble with no man. And least of all John Blake."

When I turned to the door I heard Red Mike behind me. "No more drinking this day," he said. "We've a man to stand behind."

When the door creaked on its spring a man looked around from his buying, and the keeper of the store looked up, but the girl stood straight and tall where she was, and did not turn. For she knew the sound of my heels on the board floor, and the jingle of my Spanish spurs.

"I am selling the herd this night," I said, when I came to stand beside her, "and I shall be riding south with the morning sun. I hope not to ride alone."

She looked at me with straight, measuring eyes. "You are a forward man, Tom Gavagan. You do not know me."

"I know you," I said, "and know what my heart tells me, and I know that if you do not ride with me when I return to Texas, I shall ride with sorrow."

"I saw you when you rode into town last year," she said, "but you did not see me."

"Had I seen you I could not have ridden away. I am a poor hand for courting, knowing little but horses, cattle, and grass, and I have learned nothing that I can say to a girl. I only know that when I saw you there upon the walk it seemed my life would begin and end with you, and there would be no happiness until you rode beside me."

"You are doing well enough with your talk, Tom Gavagan, and it is a fine thing that you do it no better or you'd be turning some poor girl's head."

She put her money on the counter and met the glance of the storekeeper without embarrassment, and then she turned and looked at me in that straight way she had and said, "My uncle is Aaron McDonald, and he looks with no favor upon Texas men."

"It is my wish to call on you this night," I said, "and the choice of whether I come or not belongs to you and no one else."

"The house stands among the cottonwoods at the street's far end." Then she added, "Come if you will... but it is north of the street."

"You can expect me," I replied.

And turning upon my heel I walked from the store and heard the storekeeper say, "He is a Texas man, Miss June, and you know about the ordinance as well as anyone!"

Once more in the sunshine I felt a strength within me that was beyond any I had ever known, and an exhilaration. Lined along the street were fourteen riders. They loitered at the street corners and relaxed on the benches on the walk in front of the barber shop. A group of them waited for me before the saloon. They were my army, battle tested and true. With them I could take on this town or any other.

Then I saw John Blake.

He wore a black frock coat and a wide-brimmed black planter's hat. His guns were out of sight, but they were there, I had no doubt.

„Your men aren't drinking?“ he commented.

„No.“

„Red Mike,“ Blake said. „I remember him well from Abilene, and Tod Mulloy, Rule Carson, and Delgado. You came ready for trouble, Gavagan.“

„The Comanches were riding, and the Kiowa.“

„And now?“

„I will be going north of the street tonight, John, but not for trouble. I was invited.“

„You know the rule here.“ He looked at me carefully from his hooded eyes. „It cannot be.“

„There are other ways to look, John, and I am not a trouble-hunting man.“

„The people who live here have passed an ordinance. This is their town and I am charged with enforcing their laws.“ He stated this flatly, and then he walked away, and I stood there with a lightness inside me and an awareness of trouble to come.

The cattle were checked and sold to Bob Wells. We rode together to the bank and when we went in John Blake stood square on his two feet, watching.

McDonald was a narrow man, high-shouldered and thin, dry as dust and fleshless. He looked at me and gave a brief nod and counted over the money for the cattle, which was my employer's money, and none of it mine but wages.

He watched me put the gold and greenbacks in a sack and he said, „Your business here is finished?“

„I've some calls to make.“

„You are welcome,“ he said, „south of the street.“

„Tonight I shall come to call on your niece. She has invited me.“

„You must be mistaken.“ He was a cold man with his heart in his ledgers and his dollars. „You are welcome here to do whatever business you have, and beyond that you are not welcome.“

„I am not a drunk, wandering the streets and looking for trouble. I am one who has been entrusted with these two thousand cattle and now, like you, with this money. But, unlike you, I will carry this payment across many dangerous miles back to Texas. My honesty and character are not in question there.“

„Mr. McDonald,“ Wells protested, „this is a good man. I know this man.“

„We put up with your kind,“ McDonald said, „south of the street.“

I could see my attempt had been wasted on him. The issue was not character but class. McDonald had decided to put himself above me and there was no chance he'd be seeing it differently.

„Five times I have come over the trail,“ I told him, „and I have seen towns die. Markets and conditions change, and neither of us has been in this country long enough to be putting on airs.“

„Young man, let me repeat. South of the street you and your kind are welcome, north of it you become a subject for John Blake. As for this town... I am the mayor and it will not die.“

„I have spoken with Mr. Blake. He is aware of my plans.“ I glanced over at the marshal and deep in his eyes something glinted, but whether it was a challenge or amusement I couldn't be sure. „I know him, Mr. McDonald,“ I said, „and he knows me.“

Rocking K men were in the saloons that night, and Rocking K men were south of the street, but I sat at the campfire near the chuck wagon and Red Mike joined me there.

„If you'll be riding, I'll saddle your horse.“

„Saddle two, then.“

„Ah? It's like that, is it?“

„A man must find out, Mike, one never knows. If she's the girl I want, she will ride with me tonight.“

We were young then, and the West was young, with the land broad and bright before us. We knew, whatever the truth was, that every horse could be ridden, every man whipped, every girl loved. We rode with the wind then, and sang in the rain, and when we fought it was with the same savage joy as that of the Comanches who opposed us, these fierce, proud warriors who would ride half a thousand miles to fight a battle or raid a wagon train. And no Bruce ever rode from the Highlands with a finer lot of fighting men than rode this day with the Rocking K.

„And John Blake?“

„Stay out of it, Mike, and keep others out. John Blake is a stubborn man, and if we go against him there will be killing in the town. This is a personal matter and does not concern the brand.“

With a mirror nailed to the chuck wagon's side I shaved and combed my hair and made myself ready for courting. It was much to expect of any girl, to ride to Texas with a man she did not know, and yet in those days when men constantly moved such things happened. There were few men from whom to choose in those wild small towns, and the best were often moving and had to be taken on the fly. And to me this was the girl and now was the time.

There was John Blake to consider, a man seasoned in the wars of men and cattle, who knew all the dodges and all the tricks, and whatever a man might invent he had known before. Each herd had a man who wished to prove himself against a trail town marshal, never grasping the difference between the skilled amateur and the hardened professional. John Blake looked upon men with vast patience, vast understanding, and used a gun only when necessary, but when he used it he used it coldly, efficiently, and deliberately.

In a black broadcloth suit with my hat brim down, I rode up the middle of the street with the reins in my left hand, my right resting on my thigh near my gun.

Tonight I was more than a Texas man a-courting, I was a challenge to the rule of John Blake, and it was something I had no liking for. No man from the Texas trails had been north of the street since he had been marshal, and it was assumed that no man would.

Outside the town a Rocking K rider dozed on the ground near his horse, and grazing close by was another horse, saddled and bridled for travel.

John Blake was not in sight, but when I passed the livery stable Tod Mulloy was seated under the light, minding his own business, and on the edge of the walk near the eating house Rule Carson smoked a cigar. Inside, over coffee, were Delgado and Enright. They would not interfere, but would be on hand if needed. Nor did I doubt that the rest of them were scattered about town, just waiting for my call.

At the end of the street when I turned north John Blake was awaiting me. And I drew up.

„I'd hoped it would not come to this, John, but a man must go a-courting. He must go where his heart would take him, and I think in my place, you would go, no matter what.“

He considered that, a square black block of a man looking as solid as rock and as immovable. „It might be,“ he agreed, after a moment, „but is it courting you are about, or is this a Texas challenge to me?“

„I wouldn't go risking the lady's reputation by asking her to sneak away and meet me after dark. This is no challenge.“

He nodded. „If it was,“ he replied, „I'd stop you, for kill or be killed is my job when it comes to an issue, but I'd stop no decent man from courting... although if I were giving advice about the woman in question—“

„Don't,“ I said. „A man with his heart set isn't one to listen.“

„You're not out of the woods,“ Blake added. „Believe me, I've nothing against you or any decent man making a decent call. It's the drunks and the fighting I want to keep south of the street. However, that is a thing of yesterday for me. I have quit my job.“

„Quit!“

„Aye. McDonald told me to keep you south of the street tonight, or lose my job. He has grown arrogant since he took office, and I work for the town, not just the mayor. I was hired to keep the peace, and that only. So I've quit.“

The stubborn foolishness of McDonald angered me, yet in a sense I could not blame the man, for generally we were a wild crowd and if a man did not understand us he might easily believe us capable of any evil. At the same time I had pride in my promises, and I had said I would call.

„If you've actually quit, I'd like to take advantage of the fact you're no longer marshal here.“

He shot me a quick look. „I want nobody hurt, Gavagan. I've quit, but I've still a feeling for the town.“

„It would be like this...“ and he listened while I explained the idea that had come to me.

„It must be carefully done, no fighting, do you hear?“

Turning my horse I rode back to talk with Carson, Mulloy, Enright, and Delgado. Immediately after I had finished they scattered out to talk to the others and take their positions.

„I saw them going up to the house with their rifles,“ Carson said. „Carpenter who owns the store is there, with Wilson, Talcott, and some I do not know by name, but all have businesses along the street, so I think it will work.“

Circling through the darkness I rode up to the house among the poplars, but stopped across the street. It had been quiet for the boys from the Rocking K and they ached to blow off steam and dearly loved a joke. So this might work.

Leaving my horse I crossed the alley where the shadows were deep and drew near the house. I heard subdued voices beneath the trees.

„I don't like it,“ Carpenter was saying. „Once that Texas crowd know Blake has quit they will blow the lid off.“

„It was a fool idea. John Blake has kept the peace.“

„Tell that to McDonald. He would have Blake on some other excuse if not this. The man will have nobody who won't kowtow to him.“

Suddenly there was a crashing and splintering of wood from the street, followed by a gunshot and a chorus of Texas yells that split the night wide open, and then there was another outburst of firing and a shattering of glass.

„There they go!“ Carpenter stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight. „What did I tell you?“

Down the street charged four Rocking K riders, yelling and shooting. It reminded me of the old days when I was a youngster on my first trip up the trail.

The front door slammed open and McDonald came rushing out, an angry man by the sound of him. „What's that? What's going on?“

The night was stabbed and slashed by the blaze of gunshots, and intermingled with them was the smashing of glass and raucous yells. The boys were having themselves a time.

„You fired Blake,“ Carpenter said, „and the lid's off.“

„We'll see about that!“ McDonald said. „Come on!“

They rushed for the street in a mass, and when they did I moved closer, stepped over the fence, and crossed the lawn to the house.

Suddenly as it had started, and just as we had planned, a blanket dropped upon the town. Not a shout, a shot, or a whisper. By the time McDonald got there the hands would be seated around, playing cards and talking, looking upon the world with the wide-eyed innocence of a bunch of two-year-olds.

The door opened under my rap and June stood there in a pale blue dress, even more lovely than I had expected.

„Why, it's you! But—!“ She looked beyond me into the night. „Where is Uncle Aaron?“

„May I come in?“

Startled, she looked up at me again, then stepped back and I went in and closed the door behind me. Hat in hand I bowed to Mrs. McDonald, who was behind her.

The room was stiff, cluttered and lacking in comfort, with plush furniture and a false, unused elegance. There was too much bric-a-brac, and not a place where a man could really sit. Suddenly I remembered the spaciousness of the old Spanish-style houses I had known in Texas.

„We heard shooting,“ June said.

„Oh, that? Some confusion in town. I believe your uncle went down to put a stop to it.“

She looked at me carefully, and I seemed to sense a withdrawing, a change that I could not quite grasp.

„You're not dressed for riding,“ I said.

She flushed. „You surely didn't believe... you weren't *serious*?“ She looked at me in amazement. „I thought... I mean, it was rather fun, but... could you imagine, *me* going with *you*...“

Something went out of me then and I stood there feeling the fool I undoubtedly was. Some fine, sharp flame flickered within me as though caught in a gust of wind, then snuffed out and left me empty and lost... it might have been the last spark of my boyhood. A man must grow up in so many ways.

On the street she had seemed beautiful and strong and possessed of a fine courage, and in the romantic heart of me I had believed she was the one, that she was my dream, that she was the girl who rode in my thoughts in the dust of the drag or the heat of the flank.

She stared at me, half astonished, and within me there was nothing at all, not sorrow, not bitterness, certainly not anger.

„Good night,“ I said. „I am sorry that I intruded.“

She had cost me a dream, but suddenly I was aware that she would have cost me the dream anyway, for that was what I had been in love with... a dream.

Opening the door, I was about to leave when Aaron McDonald pushed past me. Anger flashed in his eyes, and his face paled with fury that was in him. „Look here!“ he shouted. „You—!“

„Shut up, you arrogant windbag,“ I said, and walked on out the door leaving him spluttering. And to the others who were outside, I said, „Get out of my way,“ and they stepped back and the gate creaked on rusty hinges when I stepped out.

A hand on the pommel of my saddle, I stood for a moment under the stars, cursing myself for seven kinds of an idiot. Like any child I had been carried away... who did I think I was, anyway?

Yet although the fire was out the smoke lifted, and I hesitated to step into the saddle, knowing the finality of it. The things a man will wish for are harder to leave behind than all his wants, and who, at some time in his life, does not dream of gathering into his arms and carrying away the girl he loves?

The men of the Rocking K came from the saloons and stood around me, and when they looked at my face, something seemed to shadow theirs, for I think my dream was one lived by them all, and had it come true with me then all their lonely dreaming might be true also.

„We'll be going,“ I said.

Yet there was a thing that remained to be done, for as I had lost something this day, I had gained something, too.

„I'll join you at the wagon,“ I told them, and turning at right angles I rode between the buildings toward the south of town.

It was a simple room of rough boards with one window, a small stove, and a bed. John Blake had his coat off and he was packing, but he turned to face whoever was at the door.

„John,“ I said, „she would not come and I was a fool to expect it. I have grown a little tonight, I think.“

„You have grown a little,“ he agreed, „but don’t expect too much of it, for there will be other times. Each time one grows, one loses a little, too.“

„John,“ I said, „there are cattle on the plains of Texas and I’ve land there. When I come north again I’ll be driving my own herd. It is a big job for one man.“

„So?“

„There will be rivers to cross and the Comanches will be out, but there’s a future in it for the men who make the drives.“

„I like the way you straddle a town, and I like a man with judgment and principle. It is a rare thing to find a man who will stand square on what he believes, whether it is making a rule or an exception to it. So if you’ll ride with me it’s a partnership, share and share alike.“

A square, solid man in a striped white shirt and black sleeve garters, he looked at me carefully from those cool gray eyes, and then he said, quite seriously, „I’ve little to pack, for a man who has never had anything but a gun travels light.“

