

Marshal of Canyon Gap

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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He rode down from the hills in the morning, a tall, rawboned young man with the quiet confidence of one given to hard work and responsibility. He had a shock of rusty brown hair, gray eyes, and a way of moving in which there was no lost motion.

Sitting in the sunlight on the main street of Canyon Gap, I was sorry to see him come. He was a man who looked like he'd been long on the road. He also looked like trouble aplenty, and I was a man who didn't like trouble at all.

He rode into town on a rawboned buckskin and dismounted at Bacon's hitch rail. All the time he was tying that horse, he was looking up and down the street while seeming to be almighty busy with that knot.

By the time he had his horse tied he knew the location of every man on the street, and every window. I'd not seen Jim Melette before, but he was no tenderfoot, no pilgrim. A man isn't marshal of a cow town for ten years without

sizing up the men who come to town, and learning to estimate their capacity for trouble.

He stepped up on the boardwalk, a big man in fringed shotgun chaps and a blue wool shirt, wearing a black flat-brimmed hat. For a moment, his eyes caught me with full attention, and then he turned his back on me and went into the store.

That store didn't worry me so much. What I was thinking about was the saloon. Brad Nolan was over there with Pete Jackson and Led Murry.

Brad was a headstrong, troublemaking man who had a way of bulling about that showed he figured he made mighty big tracks. Trouble was, he'd never done anything to entitle him to that attitude, and he was aching for a chance. Brad was feeling his importance, and for four or five years I'd been watching him put on muscle and arrogance until I knew trouble couldn't be avoided.

Lately he had been swaggering around and I knew he was wondering how far he'd get trying me on, but he'd seen me shoot holes through too many aces and no man wants to buck that kind of shooting.

Pete Jackson was worse because he was a talker. He never knew when to keep his mouth shut, and never considered the results of his loose talk, and such a man can cause more trouble than three Memphis lawyers.

Led Murry was an unknown quantity. He was new in town, and I hadn't made up my mind what to think about Led... there was something that happened a short while back that had me wondering if he wasn't the worst of the lot, but I wasn't sure. I just knew he never said much and he had crazy eyes, and that worried me.

Brad Nolan seemed the one inclined to start trouble, but he had seen me toss a playing card in the air, draw, and put a hole in it dead center before it hit the ground. It kept him and a lot of others from starting anything.

It was time I had some tobacco. Not that I didn't have some, but Melette was buying supplies and I figured it might be a good thing to know more about him. Also, he was a fine figure of a man and that Ginnie Bacon was working for her pa this morning.

Jim Melette was looking at the trousers when I came in, and Ginnie, she was looking at him.

Lizzie Porter was there and she was talking to Ginnie like she'd been put up to it. „Who's taking you to the pie supper, Ginnie?“

„I don't know,“ Ginnie said, looking at Melette. „I'm waiting to be asked.“

„What about Brad? Isn't he taking you?“

„Brad? Oh... Brad. I don't know yet.“

„All I can say is“—Lizzie never said all she could say, but she tried hard enough—„I hope that Ross woman doesn't come.“ Melette didn't react much but I've watched a good deal of human nature in my time and I could tell he was suddenly on point.

„Oh, she won't come! Who would bring her? Not after the way she was treated last time.“ Ginnie was watching Melette, who was studying some new boots now. „She's pretty enough if you like that snooty type, too good to talk to anyone... and she must be thirty, if she's a day.“

Jim Melette went to the counter and took a list from his pocket, and Ginnie gave him one of her dazzling smiles. „What's about this pie supper?“ he asked.

„It’s tomorrow night.“ Ginnie was batting her eyes like an owl in a hailstorm and Ginnie was a mighty pretty girl. „We’ll all be there. They auction pies, you know, and if you buy a girl’s pie you get to sit with her. There’s dancing, too. You do dance, don’t you?“

„Sometimes... I can hold a girl while she dances. Who’s this Ross woman you mentioned?“

„Her?“ Ginnie wrinkled her nose. „She’s nobody. She moved into the house on Cottonwood Hill a few months ago, and the only visitors she has around seem to come of a night, at least there’s lots of horse tracks in and out of her gate. Nobody wants her around, but she came to that last social, bold as brass.“

That Ginnie... she could make a sieve out of the truth without half trying. Truth was, nobody did want Hanna Ross, nobody but the men. The women looked down their noses at her because she was a stranger who lived alone, but so far as I’d seen none of them had tried to be neighborly.

Thirty years old, Ginnie said, but Hanna Ross couldn’t be a day over twenty-four, and was one of the finest-looking girls I’d seen in a coon’s age, and believe me, I’ve seen aplenty.

Ginnie saw me coming to the counter for my tobacco. It was high time because I’d about worn out that saddle, what with turning it and studying it and picking at the stitching. „Oh! Marshal, have you met Mr. Melette?“

He turned around giving me a straight, hard look. „I haven’t met the marshal,“ Melette said, „but I’ve heard of him.“

„Name’s McLane,“ I said. „Folks call me Mac.“

„Seems to me I remember you,“ Melette said. „You’ve walked the boards of this town quite some time, haven’t you, Marshal?“

Inside I stiffened up... that there phrase „walked the boards“ might have been an accident, but from the smile around his eyes it seemed to me there was something behind it.

„Ten years,“ I admitted, „and we’ve had less trouble than most towns. The way I figure is to anticipate trouble and take steps.“

„Good idea.“ Jim Melette gathered his supplies. „What do you do when trouble comes that you can’t avoid?“

When he said that I had a chill... for ten years that had been my nightmare, that trouble might come that I couldn’t sidetrack or outsmart, and I wasn’t as young as I used to be.

„Don’t ever worry about that,“ Lizzie said. „Ben McLane had killed fourteen outlaws before he came to Canyon Gap. Many a time I’ve seen him toss a card in the air and shoot the spots out.“

„That’s shooting,“ Melette agreed. „I’ve only seen one man who could do that. Of course, I was just a youngster then, must have been thirteen, fourteen years ago.“

He picked up the rest of his supplies and walked out and I stood there looking at my hole card, and it had suddenly become a mighty small deuce. After all these years, while things shaped up mighty fine, I’d come to believe I was set for life in Canyon Gap. The town liked me and I liked the town, and one way or another, I’d kept the peace. Now it looked like the whole show was going to bust up right in my face.

Walking to the door, I watched Melette stow his stuff in his saddlebags and a sack he had tied behind his saddle. Then he dusted off his hands and started across the street.

A man can only keep the peace by working at it, so I stepped out on the walk. „Melette!“ He turned slowly when I spoke his name. „I wouldn't go over there if I were you. There's trouble over there.“

Figured first off he'd tell me to mind my own affairs, but instead he walked back to me, and then I was really scared because I thought he'd have something personal to say, and one thing I did not want to do was talk about myself. Not to him.

„All right, McLane, I won't,“ he said. „Will you tell me where Hanna Ross lives?“

He had called her Hanna, although her first name had not been mentioned inside, so my hunch was right. Trouble was coming to Canyon Gap in the person of Jim Melette. He knew more than he was letting on. I pointed the way up the street to her house.

„For a stranger,“ I said, „you seem to know a lot about folks. Why do you want to see Hanna Ross?“

He was stepping into the saddle. „Why, Mac, I think I used to know her, so I sort've figured I'd stick around for that pie supper and if Hanna Ross will go with me, I'll take her. You keep the peace, Mac!“ And he trotted his horse off toward Cottonwood Hill.

Standing there in the street I knew I was scared. For ten years nobody had come to Canyon Gap who knew me, and I'd begun to believe no one ever would. The days of gun battles were about over, tapering off, anyway, and I'd begun to feel that I had it made, as we used to say in the goldfields.

It seemed to me that I was going to get it from two directions unless I was very careful. Ginnie Bacon had been flirtin' around Brad Nolan for the past several months trying to see what kind of trouble she could help him get into. He was spoiling for a fight, and from the way she'd acted toward Jim Melette there in the store, it seemed like she might try to get the two of them to go at it.

The other thing that had me worried was that I knew who'd been leaving all those tracks around Hanna Ross's house... it was that crazy-eyed Led Murry. I didn't know what that meant, but I was afraid. Nolan and Murry were some trouble separately, but together they were downright dangerous.

Something like this had happened a time or two before, but I'd been able to break up the dangerous combinations before they realized their strength. Divide and rule, that was my motto, and I made it a point to know about people, and whenever I saw fellers getting together who might cause trouble, I got a girl betwixt 'em, or jealousy about something else, and usually I'd managed to split 'em up.

There's more ways to keep the peace than with a gun, and I'd proved it in Canyon Gap, where there hadn't been a gunfight in ten years... and in the month before I took over there had been three. Nor in all that time had I drawn a gun on a man.

Cottonwood Hill was right up there in plain sight at the edge of town, and from town everybody could see who came or went from the place, so Lizzie Porter saw Jim Melette ride through the gate up there, and she went right back in to tell Ginnie.

No need for me to read the playscript to know Ginnie would get mad... she had practically offered herself to Melette for the pie supper, and he had walked away and gone to see Hanna Ross.

Things were bunching up on me.

Ten years it had been, and I'm a man likes a quiet life. When I rode into this town on the stage and saw the snow-capped mountains 'round about, the shaded streets and pine forests on the hills around, and that stream running right through town, I decided this was the place to spend my declining years. The fact that they mistook me for a gunfighter and offered me the marshal's job had provided me with a living.

Now, between Hanna Ross, Ginnie Bacon, the Nolan outfit, and Jim Melette, I could see the whole thing blowing up in my face. It was too late for me to hunt up a new town, and I liked this one. And I never had been able to put by much in the way of money.

Worst of all, suppose Jim Melette told around town what he knew about me?

They had ten coal-oil lamps with bright reflectors behind them to light the schoolhouse for the pie supper and dance, and they had two fiddlers and a guitar player out there on the floor.

Pete Jackson, Brad Nolan, and Ginnie were there, thick as thieves, the men passing a flask back and forth, Ginnie talking fast and flashing her eyes. Led Murry was there, too, a-settin' against the wall, missing nothing but a-watching everything.

Outside by the hitch rail I waited to fend off trouble, for I could see the storm making up, and I wasn't thinking only of me. I was thinking of the town. There I was when a livery rig came into the yard and Jim Melette got down and helped Hanna Ross to the ground.

„Jim!“ My thumb was tucked in my belt, gunfighter fashion. „I want to talk to you!“

Excusing himself, Jim came over to me. „Don't go in there,“ I said, „as a favor to me. Brad Nolan's in there and he's spoiling for trouble. So's Murry.“

„Sorry, Mac,“ Melette said. „I've nothing against you, but Hanna and I must go in there. We both figure to live around here the rest of our lives, and we might as well bring matters to a head right now.“

„That's one way,“ I said, „but the wrong way. You two just dig in and hold on and folks will come around. You go in there and you'll make trouble.“

„We're going. You don't understand the situation,“ he said.

„Now, look here!“ It was time to be tough. „I—!“

„Mac—“ Jim lowered his voice—„don't you pull that act on me. When I was no more than thirteen I saw you on the stage in *Ticket-of-Leave-Man*, and a year later I saw you in *Lady of Lyons*.“

„So I've been an actor. That isn't all I've been. Now look!“

From my pocket I took an ace of hearts. „Boy, I want to show you something.“

It was time to go into my act, and it was a good act, which had kept more than one tough man from making me trouble.

He stopped me. „Let me show you something,“ Melette said. He took the card from my hand and tossed it into the air. He didn't draw and fire as I had so often,

but when the card fell he reached over and grasped my arm. I started to struggle, then let up, knowing it was no use. He knew my secret and he was going to have his say about it. Jim Melette slid two fingers into the cuff of my coat, plucking the hidden card out of its hidden clip.

„After I saw you demonstrate your shooting act in front of the theater one day I figured you for the greatest shot ever, but then a stable boy who used to work on the stage showed me how it was done. You just go out in the hills and shoot holes in fifty cards at three-foot range or whatever’s necessary and then just carry them around in a holdout, and when you pick up the tossed up card, palm it and hand over one that’s already been shot.“

„Nobody around here has ever guessed,“ I said bitterly. This was what I’d been afraid of for years, and now just when I needed some luck, things were catching up with me.

„What are you going to do, Melette?“

„I’m going to go in there and have it out with Led Murry. If any of the others want a piece of it, that’s their lookout.“

Have it out with Led Murry... I’d been thinking it was Brad Nolan who was going to be the bigger problem. „You said that I didn’t understand—exactly what is it that I don’t understand?“ I asked.

„Jim and I are married.“ Hanna Ross had walked over to us. „We’ve been married for three years.“

„We were living near Denver, but I had to go to Mexico on business. I had an accident in a little mountain village. I was laid up a long time.“

„I didn’t know what had happened. I thought he was dead.“ She whispered it, looking off into the night.

They told me their story. In hushed tones, Melette’s voice often rough with anger, they recounted how Led Murry had seen Hanna on the street in Denver and begun following her around. He’d asked her if he could come courting, but when she had told him that she was married he refused to leave her alone. He lurked around their house and spied on her at night. When she complained to the constables he would disappear for a while, but sooner or later he was back. All this time Jim Melette was helplessly trying to recuperate south of the border. He tried to send Hanna letters, but was not surprised that none of them were ever received.

Then one night Led Murry broke into Jim and Hanna’s house and tried to force himself on her. She fled, and thinking that her husband was dead, she changed back to her maiden name. Finally she found her way to my town, and became the mysterious woman that we all knew as Hanna Ross.

The story had all the elements of a great play, and when Led Murry appeared in our town it was obvious that that play had become a tragedy. Like a character from a Shakespeare play, he had become a man obsessed.

„After a long time I made it back from Sonora,“ Jim said, „and the postmaster in Denver helped me find where Hanna had gone. Now that I’m here, I’ve got to put a stop to this.“

„Led’s a bad man, McLane. He’s an outlaw, but the law never caught up with him but once and he served his time for that. He’s a mighty fast man with a gun.“

Tonight I'm going to see how fast. I'm going to tell him to leave us alone or start shooting."

"No." I spoke sharply. "I'm marshal here, actor or not. Maybe I'm an old fraud, but if you start trouble you'll go to jail. You leave Led Murry to me. He has assaulted a good woman. The next jury he stands in front of will send him away for life."

Melette looked at me like he figured I'd lost my good sense, and I knew there was no sense, good or otherwise, in what I had in mind. When a man has taken a marshal's salary for ten years, he can't hide the first time real trouble shows. My whole life was based on being something I wasn't, but fool that I was, I hoped I wasn't a coward, too.

"You're crazy, McLane. You can't arrest him without shooting."

"Marshal?" Hanna Ross spoke up. "He knows... Led Murry knows that you... well, that you did that fake shooting in the Buffalo Bill show. I threatened to go to you when he showed up, and he said you were a fraud!"

"He'll kill you," Jim Melette said. "You leave him to me."

Before he could say more I turned my back on him and walked to the hitch rail where I could be alone.

This was my town. Sure, I'd become marshal because I could play the part, but in the ten years that passed I'd bought my own home, had shade for my porch, and flowers around the garden fence. When I walked along the street folks spoke to me with respect, and passed the time of day.

When first I came to this town I was an old actor, a man past his prime and with nowhere to go but down. For most of my life I'd been dressing in cold, draughty dressing rooms, playing worn-out roles in fourth-rate casts, and all that lay ahead of me was poorer and poorer roles and less and less work. But then I'd come to Canyon Gap.

There had been a time when I'd played with a few of the best, and in the olio between acts I'd do card tricks, juggle eight balls or eight dinner plates, or sing a fair song. The one thing I could still do best was juggle... there's a place it pays a man to keep up, keeps his hands fast and his eyes sure. Even a town marshal may someday have to give up and go back to doing what he knows.

When I first came to town, the boy that took my bags to my room saw a Colt pistol in my bag... it had fourteen notches on it. That started the story that I was a gunfighter, but it was nothing more than a prop I'd carried when I was with the Bill show.

Whatever I was in the past, I was town marshal now, and I'd been playing the role too long to relinquish it. There was an old adage in the theater that the show must go on. Undoubtedly, that adage was thought up by some leading man who didn't want the understudy to get a chance at his part, but this show had to go on, and I wasn't going to fail the people who had trusted me.

There's something about playing the same role over and over again. After a while a man can come to believe it himself, and over most of those ten years I'd been a good marshal because I'd come to believe I was the part I was playing. Only tonight I could fool myself no longer. I was going up against a man whom I couldn't hope to bluff.

So up the steps I went and into the schoolhouse, and I crossed the room to where Led Murry was sitting with his back to the wall. And as I was crossing the room I saw one of my problems eliminated.

Jim Melette saw me coming and knew what I was going to do, and he started across the room to stop me. He had taken only two steps when Brad Nolan stepped out in front of him. „Look here, Melette, I—“

Jim Melette hit him. He hit Brad in the belly and then he hit him on the chin, and Brad Nolan went down and he didn't make any show of getting up. What Brad had been looking for all these years he'd gotten in one lump, and it knocked all the muscle out of him.

„Led.“ I spoke clearly. „Get on your feet. You're under arrest.“

He looked at me and he started to smile, but it was a mean smile. Nothing pleasant about it.

„Am I, now? Why, Marshal? Why me?“

„You've assaulted Hanna Ross, a citizen of this town. I'll have nothing of the sort in Canyon Gap. Get on your feet and drop your gun belts!“

He just sat there, smiling. „Marshal,“ he said, „you're a two-bit fraud. I'm going to show this town just what a fraud you are.“

It was dead still in that room. Sweat trickled down my cheeks and I felt sick and empty inside. Why in the world hadn't I stayed outside and let well enough alone?

„After I get through with you, I'll have a talk with good old Jim and Miss Hanna. But first I'm going to kill you, Marshal.“

They were watching, all of them, and they were the people of Canyon Gap, the people of my town. To them I was tall, straight, and indomitable, and though I might be an old man, I was their marshal whom they believed to have killed fourteen men. To myself I was a man who loved peace, who had never drawn a gun in anger, and who had rarely fired one, and who was suddenly called upon to face the results of the role he had created.

My audience, and an audience it was, awaited my reply. Only an instant had passed, and I knew how these things were done, for often I had played roles like this upon the stage. Only to this one there could be but one end. Nonetheless, I owed it to myself, and to the people who had kept me marshal of their town, to play the role out.

„Led Murry,“ I said coolly, „stand up!“

He stared at me as if he were about to laugh, but there was a sort of astonished respect on his face, too. He stood, and then he went for his gun.

Fear grabbed at my stomach and I heard the smashing sound of a shot. Led Murry took an astonished step forward and fell to the floor, then rolled over on his back. The bullet had gone through his throat and broken his spine.

Then somebody was slapping me on the back and I looked down and there was a gun in my hand. A gun with fourteen notches filed in the butt, a gun that had fired more blank rounds than live.

There was still the scene. Coolly, I dropped the pistol into my holster and turned my back on Led Murry. Inside I was quivering like jelly. True, we had been only ten feet apart, and it was also true that all my life I'd worked at juggling, sleight of hand... I'd had fifty years of practice.

„Marshal!“ It was Lizzie Porter. „You were wonderful!“

„He was a danger to the community,“ I choked. „I deeply regret the necessity.“

Inside I was shaking, more scared than I'd ever been in my life, but I was carrying it off... I hoped.

It was Jim Melette who forgot himself. „McLane,“ he protested, „you were on the stage! You're no—!“

„Ah, the stage!“ Interrupting him as quickly as I could, I handed him an old quote from the show, when I had appeared onstage as a companion of Buffalo Bill. „*I was shotgun messenger for the Butterfield stage, scouted for George Armstrong Custer, and rode for the Pony Express!*“ I squeezed his arm hard and said, „Forget it, Jim. Please. Forget it.“

And then I walked out into the night and started for home, my heels hitting the ground too hard, my head bobbing like I was drunk. Right then it hit me, and I was scared, scared like I'd never been in my life. I had no memory of drawing, no memory of firing... what if I hadn't been lucky?

No question about it, I was getting too old for this. It was time to retire.

Of course, I could always run for mayor.

