

No Man's Guns

by **Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013**

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AS HE DREW near the mass of tree shadows that edged out to the road he heard the voice, the clear but hesitant sound of it coming unexpectedly in the almost-dark stillness.

„Cliff—“

His right knee touched the booted Springfield and he thought of it calmly, instinctively, drawing it left-handed in his mind, as he slowed the sorrel to a walk. Now at the edge of the shadows he saw a man with a rifle.

The man called uncertainly, „Cliff?“

„You got the wrong party,“ he answered, and neck-reined the sorrel toward the trees.

Less than twenty feet away the rifle came up suddenly. „Who are you?“

„My name’s Mitchell.“

The rifle barrel hung hesitantly. „You better light down.“

Astride the McClellan saddle, Dave Mitchell didn’t move. He sat with his shoulders pulled back, yet he was relaxed. Narrow hips, sundarkened, thin-lined features beneath the slightly turned-up forward brim of a faded Stetson and everything about him said Cavalry. Everything but the rough-wool gray suit

he wore. His coat was unbuttoned and his dark shirt was unmistakably Army issue.

„You’re camped back in there?“ Mitchell asked, and he was thinking, watching the man studying him: *I’m the wrong man and now he doesn’t know what to do.* The man with the rifle didn’t reply and Mitchell said, „I’m ready to camp the night. If you already got a place, maybe I could join you.“ For a moment the man didn’t answer. Then the rifle, a longbarreled Remington, waved in a short arc. „Light down.“

Mitchell let his right rein fall as he came off the sorrel. The rifle waved again. The man stood aside and Mitchell walked past him leading the sorrel. They moved through the trees, thinly scattered aspen, then cottonwood as the ground began to slope gradually, and Mitchell knew there’d be a creek close by. Unexpectedly, then, he saw the broad clearing and a wagon illuminated by firelight.

The ribbed canvas covering of it formed a pale background for the two figures who stood watching him approach. A man, his legs slightly apart and his hand covering the butt of a holstered revolver. A woman was next to him and she watched Mitchell with open curiosity as he entered the clearing.

„Rady’s brought us a guest,“ the woman said.

The man with the rifle was next to Mitchell now. „Hyatt, he says he wants to camp.“ The woman walked to the fire, but Hyatt, his hand still on the revolver, didn’t move. Nor did he answer, and his eyes remained on Mitchell. „He said he was ready to camp the night,“ Rady added, „so I thought—“

„Open your coat,“ Hyatt said. „Hold it open.“

Slowly Mitchell spread the coat open. „I’m not armed.“

„He’s got a carbine on the horse,“ Rady said.

Hyatt glanced at him. „Go back where you were.“

MITCHELL DROPPED the rein and walked toward the low-burning fire as the woman extended a porcelain cup toward him and said, „Coffee?“

Behind him he heard Rady’s footsteps in the dry leaves, then fading to nothing, and he felt Hyatt watching him as he took the cup of coffee, his hand momentarily touching the woman’s.

„You drink your coffee, then move off,“ Hyatt said. He was in his early thirties, but a week-old beard stubble darkened his face, adding ten years to his appearance. His face was drawn into tight, sunken cheeks and he looked as if he’d never smiled in his life. To the woman he said, „I’ll tell you when we start giving coffee to everybody who goes by.“

Mitchell hesitated, letting the sudden tension inside him subside, and he thought, *Don’t let him rile you. Don’t even tell him to go to hell.* He said to Hyatt, „I’ll leave in a minute.“

„You’ll leave sooner if I say so.“

Maybe you ought to tell him, at that, Mitchell thought. *Just to see what he’d do.* But he heard the woman say, „Hy, don’t talk like that,“ and he turned to the fire again.

„You shut your mouth!“ Hyatt told her.

Mitchell sipped his coffee, his eyes on the woman. Her face was lit by the firelight and it shone warmly and cleanly. He watched her glance at Hyatt but not answer him and he said to her, mildly, „I don’t want to start a family argument.“

„We'll ignore him, then,“ the woman said. She smiled and the smile was faintly in her eyes. She'd impressed Mitchell as a woman who smiled little, and the soft radiance that came briefly into her eyes surprised him.

Still, she fell into a type in Mitchell's mind: small, frail looking, a woman who picked at her food yet was strong and you wondered what kept her going. Light hair, thin, delicately formed features, and dark shadows beneath the eyes. A serious kind, a woman who loved strongly and simply.

A woman who spoke little. This, Mitchell believed, was the most interesting type of all. The most feminine, even while sometimes reminding you of a little boy. At least the most appealing. Perhaps the kind to marry.

She said, „Could I ask where you're going?“

„Home,“ Mitchell answered. No, she didn't exactly fit the type. She talked too freely.

„Where is that?“

„Banderas. I just left Whipple Barracks yesterday. Discharged.“

„I thought so,“ the woman said. „Just the way you stand.“

„I suppose some of it's bound to rub off, after twelve years.“

„You don't look that old.“

„Older'n you. I'm almost thirty-one.“

„Were you an officer?“

„No, ma'am. Sergeant.“

„You're going home to your folks?“

„Yes, ma'am. My dad has a place near Banderas.“

„They'll be glad to see you.“

Mitchell half turned as Hyatt said, „How do we know you're from Whipple?“

„I just told you I was.“

„What proof you got?“

„I don't have to show you anything.“

Hyatt's hand hung close to his holster. „You don't think so, huh?“

„Look,“ Mitchell said. „Why don't you quit standing on your nerves.“

„Let's see your proof,“ Hyatt said.

Mitchell glanced at the woman. „You ought to keep him locked up.“

The woman half smiled. „Do you have discharge papers?“

Mitchell's hand slipped into his open coat and patted his shirt pocket. „Right here.“

„Why don't you show him?“ the woman said. „So we'll have a little peace.“

MITCHELL SHOOK his head. „It's a matter of principle now.“ A matter of principle. And a matter of twelve years someone telling you what to do.

You can take it when you're being paid to take it. But this one isn't paying, Mitchell thought. *Take that handgun off him and bend it over his head? No, just get out. You don't have any business here.*

The woman said, „Men are always talking about principle, or honor.“

„Well, I'm through talking about it tonight,“ Mitchell said. He handed the empty cup to her. „Much obliged. I'm moving on now.“ She looked at him, but said nothing.

He saw her eyes shift suddenly.

Behind you!

It snapped in his mind and he heard the movement and he wheeled, bringing up his arms, throwing himself low at Hyatt who was almost on top of him. His

shoulder slammed into Hyatt's knees and he drove forward as the pistol barrel came down against his spine. His arms clamped Hyatt's legs and he came up suddenly, his boots digging into the sand, throwing Hyatt's legs over his shoulder. Hyatt landed on his back, rolling over almost as he struck the ground, frantically reaching for the revolver knocked from his hand, almost touching it as Mitchell dropped on top of him.

They rolled in the sand, Hyatt's fingers tearing through Mitchell's shirt, clawing at his throat. Mitchell's hand found the revolver. He threw it spinning across the sand and his fist came back to slam against Hyatt's face. He pushed himself free, rolling, rising to his feet, and as Hyatt came up he swung hard against his jaw. Hyatt staggered. He started to go down and Mitchell hit him again, holding him momentarily with his left hand as his right clubbed into the upturned face. Hyatt's head snapped back and he went down.

Mitchell turned to the woman. He was breathing heavily and his left hand was pressed to the small of his back. „Are you married to him?“ he asked.

She shook her head. „Not really.“

Mitchell hesitated. If he turned away he'd never see this woman again. Something made him ask, „Do you love him?“

She looked at him, her face softly impassive in the firelight. „You'd better move along,“ she said quietly.

For a moment Mitchell's eyes remained on her, as if he were reluctant to leave. He turned to the sorrel, then hesitated again and walked over to Hyatt.

„Mister, you brought this on yourself. Your man out there thought I was somebody named Cliff and he brought me in because he was too scared to do anything else. I don't care who you are... I don't care who Cliff is—“ Mitchell broke off. „If you want to know the truth, I think you're crazy.“ He glanced momentarily at the woman before telling Hyatt, „Maybe you got some good points, but if you do you keep them a secret.“

Hyatt's head came up slowly. He watched Mitchell go to his sorrel and mount. He watched him silently, his hand covering a folded piece of paper on the ground beneath him. A square of paper folded four times just to fit into a shirt pocket.

Mitchell urged the sorrel into the trees, letting it have its head, but holding it enough to reach the road farther down from where Rady would be. The woman stayed in his mind: standing in the firelight, her eyes meeting his and not lowering even when he continued to stare at her. Some woman.

HIS BODY CAME alive as the shot sounded behind him and his hand instinctively went to the booted carbine. He turned in the saddle drawing the Springfield, the sorrel sidestepping nervously, kicking the dry leaves, throwing its head. There were other sounds in the leaves and suddenly a man's voice: „Throw up your hands!“ And almost with the words Mitchell was dragged from the saddle. Men were all around him in the darkness, two holding his arms, and as he tried to rise a fist came from nowhere, stinging hard against his face.

A rifle barrel jabbed into his back and he was taken through the trees, a man holding each arm. There were more men at the clearing and the nearest ones stepped aside as Mitchell was brought in. One man was building the fire. Another was climbing the wagon wheel, now looking inside. The rest stood in a semicircle around Hyatt and the woman.

The man holding Mitchell's left arm shouted, „Dyke, we got the other one!“

Mitchell saw one of the men turn and nod his head, then beckon them to come closer. He stood relaxed, a tall man wearing a stiffbrimmed hat low and straight over his eyes, and a tawny tip-twisted mustache that in the firelight blended with the weathered cut of his features.

His coat was open, a dark coat... and then Mitchell saw it. The deputy star against the dark cloth and everything was suddenly perfectly clear.

Hyatt was saying, „What’re you doing! We’re camped here and you barge in, shooting—“

A man said, „You scrambled for that gun quick enough.“

„How’d I know who you were?“

„You know now.“ The man laughed. Mitchell looked from this man to the others. There were perhaps a dozen in the group, but only Dyke and two or three more wore deputy stars.

„Listen“—Hyatt’s voice calmed—„I think you could’ve announced yourselves, that’s all. You’re looking for somebody and you want to ask some questions, that it?“

Dyke shook his head. „I don’t have any questions.“

Hyatt’s eyes shifted along the line of men. „We’re on our way down to Tucson. I’m going in business with a man down there.“

Dyke said nothing. His eyes were on Hyatt, studying him.

„In the freight business,“ Hyatt said. „This man’s already got contracts.“

„Are you through?“ Dyke said then.

Hyatt frowned. „What do you mean?“

„I’ll tell a story now,“ Dyke said. „It starts the day before yesterday when the Hatch & Hodges was held up an hour out of Mojave. One of the passengers, Mr. J. A. Hicks, was shot and killed when he raised an objection. Now, this Mr. Hicks was owner of the Mogollon Cattle Company—Slash M—of which I’m foreman. Mr. Hicks, besides being boss, was my best friend... which doesn’t mean much to the story aside from it’s the reason I was deputized to take out a posse.“

Hyatt said, „I’m sorry to hear that, but—“

„I’m not finished,“ Dyke stated. „You see, these holdup men separated after the robbery. We spent a whole day scratching for sign and finally we got on one we were pretty sure of. Last night we caught up with a man named Cliff something. Now, at first he said he didn’t know anything about it.“

DYKE'S EYES HADN'T left Hyatt's. „I hit this man twice. The second one broke his jaw and after that he wrote down what we wanted to know. How he was to meet his friends tonight, and where. A woman and two men posing as travelers. A man named James Rady; another by the name of Hyatt Earl.“

„Well?“ Hyatt said. His voice was controlled, and it told nothing of what he might be thinking.

Dyke brought a match out of his vest pocket and wedged it into the corner of his mouth, shaking his head as he did. „That’s all there is to the story.“

Hyatt hesitated. „Now what?“

„Now, Mr. Earl,“ Dyke said mildly, his eyes lifting then, we’re going to hang you right on that cottonwood over there.“

„What’re you talking about, hanging! You don’t even know—“ Hyatt broke off. He looked at Dyke and at his men and for a long moment he was silent, gaining control of himself. He said then, calmly, almost defiantly, „You got to take us to

trial. That's what the law says." The matchstick moved under Dyke's full mustache. „Mr. Earl, are you telling me what I have to do?“

That was it. The futility of arguing showed briefly on Hyatt's face.

He asked, „What about the woman?“

Dyke shook his head. „This Cliff said she didn't want any part of it, but you forced her into it. We're not bothered about her. Just you and Rady there.“ He nodded directly at Mitchell.

Mitchell frowned. Hurriedly then his eyes swept the clearing. Rady wasn't here! He called to Dyke, „I'm not Rady! He's the one with the Remington... was out by the road.“

Dyke studied him before answering. „There wasn't anybody out there.“

„Then he got away, but I sure as hell ain't Rady!“

„Who're you supposed to be?“

„Dave Mitchell. I just rode in a little while ago looking to camp.“ He saw Hyatt watching him, a grin softening the dark bearded face.

„Rady,“ Hyatt said, „are you drunk or something?“

Mitchell stared at him with disbelief. „What's the matter with you? Tell them who I am!“

Hyatt shook his head. „There's no use in that, Rady. Let's own up... take our medicine like men.“

Mitchell's eyes went to Dyke. „Listen. This man's crazy. I suspected it before. Now I'm sure.“

„If I was in your shoes,“ said Dyke, „I might pull the same stunt.“

Mitchell paused. „All right“—his glance went to the woman—„ask her.“

She looked at Mitchell, then shook her head. „He's not Rady. His name is Mitchell.“

Dyke said, „Uh-huh, and you're Mrs. Mitchell.“

„I never saw him before this evening.“

„Claire,“ Hyatt said sympathetically, „there's no use. Rady's got to take his medicine just the same way I do.“

The woman's face was cold and showed no emotion. „He had a fight with this man Mitchell and lost. That's why he wants to see him hang.“

„Claire! ... Rady and I were just kidding! You thought we really meant it?“

Mitchell looked at Dyke again. „You said that holdup was day before yesterday. I can prove I was at Whipple then. I was just discharged yesterday.“

„What's your proof?“ Dyke asked.

„Ask anybody at Whipple!“

„Rady,“ Hyatt said, „delaying it a few days ain't going to help any, they'll still hang you. Let's get it over with.“

Mitchell's expression changed suddenly and his hand went to his chest. „My discharge order! It's dated yesterday!“

„Keep your hand out of that coat!“ Dyke snapped. He nodded to one of the men near Mitchell. „Take a look.“

The man stepped in front of Mitchell. His hand went over the shirt, then to the inside coat pocket. „Nothing,“ he said over his shoulder.

Mitchell's hand came up. He felt the empty pocket, and the part of his shirt that was torn—

„Listen, while we were fighting my shirt was ripped. The paper fell out, that's what happened. Look around there, right where you're standing!“

Dyke continued to study Mitchell, but some of his men moved about, looking at the ground and scuffing the sand with their boots. A man said, „I don't see nothin'“, and another said, „Not around here.“

Watching them, the tension building and becoming unbearable.

Mitchell suddenly tore himself from the men holding him. They started after him and Dyke called, „Let him go!“

Mitchell came on, his eyes searching the ground, then dropped to his hands and knees, his fingers brushing the sand, smoothing it, and carefully he covered the area where the fight had taken place. He came up slowly and sat back on his heels. „It's not here,“ he said wearily. Then: „Wait! When I was pulled off my horse—“ He came to his feet quickly.

Dyke asked, „You ever on the stage?“

„I'm telling you the truth!“ Mitchell screamed. „Can't you see that!“

„I see a man fighting awful hard,“ Dyke replied, „for a life he don't deserve.“

„What do you expect me to do!“ Mitchell paused then. He breathed in and out and said, more calmly, „I swear to Almighty God I had nothing to do with that holdup.“

„That's what this Cliff said,“ Dyke answered. „Before I broke his jaw.“

„Rady,“ Hyatt spoke up, „you don't want that to happen to you, do you?“

Mitchell ignored him. Still looking at Dyke he said, „Isn't there a doubt in your mind?“ Dyke didn't answer and in the silence their eyes held.

Then, behind Mitchell, a man said, „Let's have some coffee first.“

Dyke's eyes lifted. He nodded and walked toward the fire, finished with Mitchell.

HYATT AND THE woman were moved over by the wagon. Then Mitchell was brought over. They tied Hyatt's and Mitchell's hands behind their backs and made them sit down, the woman between them.

There was nothing to be said. In silence they watched Dyke's men build another fire close to the cottonwood tree they would use. Two men entered the clearing carrying riatas, uncoiling them as they crossed to the tree. Mitchell saw his sorrel and a bay brought in and the saddles were taken off both horses.

Now what do you do? he thought.

Tell him!

I did tell him! He's hard-shelled and mean because Hyatt killed his friend and that's all he can think about. But he's calm about it, isn't he?

Judge and jury wrapped into one hard-bitten weathered face. His mind is the law and he can be as calm as he pleases, knowing his way is the only way.

Twelve years of campaigning and you're going to die under another man's name. Nobody knowing... no, two people knowing who you are. The woman—Claire—and Hyatt.

Two feet away and you can't even touch him. Get up quick and butt his face in with your head! No... come on, think straight now. Now isn't a time to think about revenge. Forget about him. You're going to die and that's all there is to it.

He said it in his mind, feeling each word: *I'm going to die*. More slowly then: *I am going to die*.

All right, now you know it. You always knew it, but now you know it.

Come on, think straight. I am thinking straight. Go to hell with that thinking straight business! There's no straight way to think when you're going to die.

What did you think about the other time? The first and only and supposedly last other time.

Nervous and not liking it, not believing that it was happening to him, but holding himself together nevertheless and thinking over and over again that it was a shame to die alone. Alone, because the Coyotero tracker didn't count. You couldn't talk about last things in sign language. Dos Fuegos had taken out a buckskin pouch in which he carried his hoddentin, the sacred pollen made from tule that would ward off evil, and with that he had readied himself.

CORPORAL MITCHELL then, Corporal Mitchell and a Coyotero tracker called Dos Fuegos—the two of them riding point and cut off from the others and their mounts shot from under them. Then holding flat to the ground, lying behind the mound and looking across to the rockscrambled sand-glaring dead-silent slope where the Mimbres were. Lying unmoving—wondering if the patrol would find them.

The Mimbres came—a few at a time, running, dodging, firing carbines; and they drove them back to cover. The second rush came before they had time to reload—but so did D Company, brought by the firing, and that was that.

Sergeant Mitchell, the next month, and less talkative.

But, Mitchell thought, you really didn't learn anything that time.

Not that you could apply to this one. Only that dying is important to you and if you can't do it in bed, sometime far in the future, then have it happen during a heroic act with a great number of people watching.

Don't talk foolish. You're going to die, that's all... so do it as well as you can.

He thought of his father and mother and for a few minutes he prayed.

The woman touched his arm and he looked up. „I'm sorry... I wish there was something I could do.“

„I wish there was too,“ Mitchell answered. „I wonder if you'd do me a favor.“

„What is it?“

„Sometime look up my father in Banderas, R.F. Mitchell, and let him know what happened.“

She nodded slowly. „All right.“

Hyatt leaned forward. „Rady, your folks don't live in Banderas.“

„You've got a real sense of humor,“ Mitchell said, mildly.

Momentarily Hyatt frowned. „You've calmed down some.“

Mitchell didn't reply. He saw Dyke, standing by the big cottonwood tree, motion to the men guarding them, and now they were pulled to their feet. Hyatt turned to the woman. „Claire, we say good-bye now.“

„Hy, tell them who he is.“

Hyatt grinned. „Honey, I did.“

„I think I'm glad they're hanging you,“ she said.

Hyatt shrugged. One of the possemen took Mitchell's arm. He looked at the woman and their eyes held lingeringly. Come on, he thought. You couldn't say it in minutes, so don't say it at all. He turned and followed Hyatt across the clearing and he knew that the woman was watching him.

„Get 'em up,“ Dyke ordered.

THEY WERE LIFTED onto the horses and a mounted man rode between them and adjusted the riata loops over their heads. Dyke looked up at them. „Mr. Rady seems to've lost his fight.“

Hyatt grinned. „He’s turned honest.“

Mitchell looked at him. „You proved your point. Now you’re wearing it out.“

Hyatt’s eyes narrowed. For a moment he was silent and he watched Mitchell curiously. „You ever see a hanging?“ he asked then.

Mitchell shook his head. „No.“

„If your neck don’t bust, you strangle awhile.“ His eyes stayed on Mitchell. „You scared?“

Mitchell shrugged. „Probably, the same as you are.“

A bewildered look crossed Hyatt's face. Apparently he had expected Mitchell to panic now, to lose control of himself pleading for his life, but he was at ease and he sat the sorrel without moving. He leaned closer so that only Mitchell could hear him say, „Rady’s ten miles away by now; but in another minute he’ll be legally, officially dead.“

„I’d say I was doing him some favor,“ Mitchell answered.

Hyatt hesitated, and the cloud of uncertainty clouded his face again.

He wanted to whisper, but his voice rasped. „You’re going to hang! You understand that? Hang!“

Mitchell nodded. „The same as you are.“

Hyatt’s teeth clenched. He was about to say more, but he stopped.

Mitchell looked down at Dyke. „He’s going to foam at the mouth in a minute.“

Dyke shook his head. „He don’t have that long.“

But now Hyatt was looking at Mitchell calmly, without bewilderment, and without the brooding anger that had been a knife edge inside of him since the fight. That had started to die as they sat by the wagon. He had tried to bring it back by taunting Mitchell, but it was no use. His anger was dead and even the memory of it seemed senseless and unimportant. Mitchell was a man. Give him credit for it.

That’s how it happened. That’s what caused Hyatt to say, unexpectedly, „Reach in the side of my boot; the right one.“

Dyke looked at him. „What for?“

„Just do it!“

Hyatt’s eyes returned to Mitchell. „You either got more guts than any man I ever saw... or else you’re the dumbest.“

Dyke’s two fingers came out of the boot lifting the folded sheet of paper. He unfolded it and his eyes went over it slowly.

The two granite-faced men, at the very gates of a hot and waiting hell, stared stonily down at the executioner.

Dyke read it completely: the formal phrasing of the discharge order, the written-in-ink portion that described the soldier, and the scrawled, illegible signature at the bottom. He looked at the date again. Then, and only then, did he look at Mitchell.

Their eyes met briefly before Dyke turned away. He said to the men near him, „Take him down and untie him,“ and started toward the edge of the trees, walking with his head down. He stopped then and turned. „Hyatt Earl too. We’re taking him to Mojave.“

When his hands were cut loose, Mitchell walked over to Dyke. „Can I have my order now?“

Dyke handed it to him. „Listen, if I tried to tell you I’m sorry—“

Mitchell turned away. Don’t listen to that, he thought. You might hit him. Don’t even think of Hyatt. He looked over at the woman and saw her watching

him. Then stopped. He'd have plenty of time to talk to her. And he thought, feeling the relief, but still holding himself calm: You've carried it this far. Hang on one more minute.

He turned back to Dyke and said, „Don't take it so hard, we all make mistakes.“

