

The Hard Way

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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TIO ROBLES STRETCHED stiffly on the straw mattress, holding the empty mescal bottle upright on his chest. His sleepy eyes studied Jimmy Robles going through his ritual. Tio was half smiling, watching with amusement.

Jimmy Robles buttoned his shirt carefully, even the top button, and pushed the shirttail tightly into his pants, smooth and tight with no blousing about the waist. It made him move stiffly the few minutes he was conscious of keeping the clean shirt smooth and unwrinkled. He lifted the gun belt from a wall peg and buckled it around his waist, inhaling slowly, watching the faded cotton stretch tight across his stomach. And when he wiped his high black boots it was with the same deliberate care.

Tio's sleepy smile broadened. „Jaime,“ he spoke softly, „you look very pretty. Are you to be married today?“ He waited. „Perhaps this is a feast day that has slipped my mind.“ He waited longer. „No? Or perhaps the mayor has invited you to dine with him.“

Jimmy Robles picked up the sweat-dampened shirt he had taken off and unpinned the silver badge from the pocket. Before looking at his uncle he breathed on the metal and rubbed its smooth surface over the tight cloth of his

chest. He pinned it to the clean shirt, studying the inscription cut into the metal that John Benedict had told him read Deputy Sheriff.

Sternly, he said, „You drink too much,“ but could not help smiling at this picture of indolence sprawled on the narrow bed with a foot hooked on the window ledge above, not caring particularly if the world ended at that moment. „Why don't you stop for a few days, just to see what it's like?“

Tio closed his eyes. „The shock would kill me.“

„You're killing yourself anyway.“

Tio mumbled, „But what a fine way to die.“

Jimmy left the adobe hut and crossed a backyard before passing through the narrow dimness of two adobes that squeezed close together, and when he reached the street he tilted his hat closer to his eyes against the afternoon glare and walked up the street toward Arivaca's business section. This was a part of Saturday afternoon. This leaving the Mexican section that was still quiet, almost deserted, and walking up the almost indiscernible slope that led to the more prosperous business section.

Squat gray adobe grew with the slope from Spanishtown into painted, two-story false fronts with signs hanging from the ramadas.

Soon, cowmen from the nearer ranges and townspeople who had quit early because it was Saturday would be standing around under the ramadas, slapping each other on the shoulder thinking about Saturday night. Those who hadn't started already. And Jimmy Robles would smile at everybody and be friendly because he liked this day better than any other. People were easier to get along with. Even the Americans.

Being deputy sheriff of Arivaca wasn't a hard job, but Jimmy Robles was new. And his newness made him unsure. Not confident of his ability to uphold the law and see that the goods and rights of these people were protected while they got drunk on Saturday night.

The sheriff, John Benedict, had appointed him a month before because he thought it would be good for the Mexican population. One of their own boys. John Benedict said you performed your duty „in the name of the law.“ That was the thing to remember. And it made him feel uneasy because the law was such a big thing. And justice. He wished he could picture something other than that woman with the blindfold over her eyes. John Benedict spoke long of these things. He was a great man.

Not only had he made him deputy, but John Benedict had given him a pair of American boots and a pistol, free, which had belonged to a man who had been hanged the month before. Tio Robles had told him to destroy the hanged man's goods, for it was a bad sign; but that's all Tio knew about it. He was too much Mexicano. He would go on sweating at the wagonyard, grumbling, and drinking more mescal than he could hold. It was good he lived with Tio and was able to keep him out of trouble. Not all, some.

His head was down against the glare and he watched his booted feet move over the street dust, lost in thought. But the gunfire from upstreet brought him to instantly. He broke into a slow trot, seeing a lone man in the street a block ahead. As he approached him, he angled toward the boardwalk lining the buildings.

SID ROMAN STOOD square in the middle of the street with his feet planted wide. There was a stubble of beard over the angular lines of his lower

face and his eyes blinked sleepily. He jabbed another cartridge at the open cylinder of the Colt, and fumbled trying to insert it into one of the small openings. The nose of the bullet missed the groove and slipped from his fingers. Sid Roman was drunk, which wasn't unusual, though it wasn't evident from his face. The glazed expression was natural.

Behind him, two men with their hats tilted loosely over their eyes sat on the steps of the Samas Cafe, their boots stretched out into the street.

A half-full bottle was between them on the ramada step. A third man lounged on his elbows against the hitch rack, leaning heavily like a dead weight. Jimmy Robles moved off the boardwalk and stood next to the man on the hitch rack.

Sid Roman loaded the pistol and waved it carelessly over his head.

He tried to look around at the men behind him without moving his feet and stumbled off balance, almost going down.

„Come on ... who's got the money!“ His eyes, heavy lidded, went to the two men on the steps. „Hey, Walt, dammit! Put up your dollar!“

The one called Walt said, „I got it. Go ahead and shoot,“ and hauled the bottle up to his mouth.

Sid Roman yelled to the man on the hitch rack, „You in, Red?“ The man looked up, startled, and stared around as if he didn't know where he was. Roman waved his pistol toward the high front of the saloon across the street. supreme, in foot-high red letters, ran across the board hanging from the top of the ramada. „A dollar I put five straight in the top loop of the P.“ He slurred his words impatiently.

Jimmy Robles heard the man next to him mumble, „Sure, Sid.“ He looked at the sign, squinting hard, but could not make out any bullet scars near the P. Maybe there was one just off to the left of the S. He waited until the cowman turned and started to raise the Colt.

„Hey, Sid.“ Jimmy Robles smiled at him like a friend. „I got some good targets out back of the jail.“

Aiming, Sid Roman turned irritably, hot in the face. Then the expression was blank and glassy again.

„How'd you know my name?“

Jimmy Robles smiled, embarrassed. „I just heard this man call you that.“

Roman looked at him a long time. „Well you heard wrong,“ he finally said. „It's Mr. Roman.“

A knot tightened the deputy's mouth, but he kept the smile on his lips even though its meaning was gone. „All right, mester. It's all the same to me.“ John Benedict said you had to be courteous.

The man was staring at him hard, weaving slightly. He had heard of Sid Roman, old man Remillard's top hand, but this was the first time he had seen him close. He stared back at the beard-grubby face and felt uneasy because the face was so expressionless—looking him over like he was a dead tree stump. Why couldn't he get laughing drunk like the Mexican boys, then he could be laughing, too, when he took his gun away from him.

„Why don't you just keep your mouth shut,“ Roman said, as if that was the end of it. But then he added, „Go on and sweep out your jailhouse,“ grinning and looking over at the men on the steps.

The one called Walt laughed out and jabbed at the other man with his elbow.

Jimmy Robles held on to the smile, gripping it with only his will now. He said, „I’m just thinking of the people. If a stray shot went inside, somebody might get hurt.“

„You saying I can’t shoot, or’re you just chicken scared!“

„I’m just saying there are many people on the street and inside there.“

„You’re talking awful damn big for a dumb Mex kid. You must be awful dumb.“ He looked toward the steps, handling the pistol idly. „He must be awful dumb, huh, Walt?“

Jimmy Robles heard the one called Walt mumble, „He sure must,“ but he kept his eyes on Roman, who walked up to him slowly, still looking at him like he was a stump or something that couldn’t talk back or hear. Now, only a few feet away, he saw a glimmer in the sleepy eyes as if a new thought was punching its way through his head.

„Maybe we ought to learn him something, Walt. Seeing he’s so dumb.“ Grinning now, he looked straight into the Mexican boy’s eyes.

„Maybe I ought to shoot his ears off and give ‘em to him for a present. What you think of that, Walt?“

Jimmy Robles’s smile had almost disappeared. „I think I had better ask you for your gun, mester.“ His voice coldly polite.

Roman’s stubble jaw hung open. It clamped shut and his face colored, through the weathered tan it colored as if it would burst open from ripeness. He mumbled through his teeth, „You two-bit kid!“ and tried to bring the Colt up.

Robles swung his left hand wide as hard as he could and felt the numbing pain up to his elbow the same time Sid Roman’s head snapped back. He tried to think of courtesy, his pistol, the law, the other three men, but it wasn’t any of these that drew his hand back again and threw the fist hard against the face that was falling slowly toward him.

The head snapped back and the body followed it this time, heels dragging in the dust off balance until Roman was spread-eagled in the street, not moving. He swung on the three men, pulling his pistol.

They just looked at him. The one called Walt shrugged his shoulders and lifted the bottle that was almost empty.

WHEN JOHN BENEDICT closed the office door behind him, his deputy was coming up the hall that connected the cells in the rear of the jail.

He sat down at the rolltop desk, hearing the footsteps in the bare hallway, and swiveled his chair, swinging his back to the desk. „I was over to the barbershop. I saw you bring somebody in,“ he said to Jimmy Robles entering the office. „I was all lathered up and couldn’t get out. Saw you pass across the street, but couldn’t make out who you had.“

Jimmy Robles smiled. „Mester Roman. Didn’t you hear the shooting?“

„Sid Roman?“ Benedict kept most of the surprise out of his voice. „What’s the charge?“

„He was drinking out in the street and betting on shooting at the sign over the Supreme. There were a lot of people around—“ He wanted to add, „John,“ because they were good friends, but Benedict was old enough to be his father and that made a difference.

„So then he called you something and you got mad and hauled him in.“

„I tried to smile, but he was pointing his gun all around. It was hard.“

John Benedict smiled at the boy’s serious face. „Sid call you chicken scared?“

Jimmy Robles stared at this amazing man he worked for.

„He calls everybody that when he’s drunk.“ Benedict smiled. „He’s a lot of mouth, with nothing coming out. Most times he’s harmless, but someday he’ll probably shoot somebody.“ His eyes wandered out the window. Old man Remillard was crossing the street toward the jail.

„And then we’ll get the blame for not keeping him here when he’s full of whiskey.“

Jimmy Robles went over the words, his smooth features frowning in question. „What do you mean we’ll get blamed?“

Benedict started to answer him, but changed his mind when the door opened. Instead, he said, „Afternoon,“ nodding his head to the thick, big-boned man in the doorway. Benedict followed the rancher’s gaze to Jimmy Robles. „Mr. Remillard, Deputy Sheriff Robles.“

Remillard’s face was serious. „Quit kidding,“ he said. He moved toward the sheriff. „I’m just fixing up a mistake you made. Your memory must be backing up on you, John.“ He was unexcited, but his voice was heavy with authority. Remillard hadn’t been told no in twenty years, not by anyone, and his air of command was as natural to him as breathing.

He handed Benedict a folded sheet he had pulled from his inside coat pocket, nodding his head toward Jimmy Robles.

„You better tell your boy what end’s up.“

He waited until Benedict looked up from the sheet of paper, then said, „I was having my dinner with Judge Essery at the Samas when my foreman was arrested. Essery’s waived trial and suspended sentence. It’s right there, black and white. And kind of lucky for you, John, the judge’s in a good mood today.“ Remillard walked to the door, then turned back. „It isn’t in the note, but you better have my boy out in ten minutes.“ That was all.

John Benedict read the note over again. He remembered the first time one like it was handed to him, five years before. He had read it over five times and had almost torn it up, before his sense returned. He wondered if he was using the right word, sense.

„Let him out and give him his gun back.“

Jimmy Robles smiled, because he thought the sheriff was kidding.

He said, „Sure,“ and the „John“ almost slipped out with it. He propped his hip against the edge of his table-desk.

„What are you waiting for?“

Jimmy Robles came off the table now, and his face hung in surprise.

„Are you serious?“

Benedict held out the note. „Read this five times and then let him go.“

„But I don’t understand,“ with disbelief all over his face. „This man was endangering lives. You said we were to protect and...“ His voice trailed off, trying to think of all the things John Benedict had told him.

Sitting in his swivel chair, John Benedict thought, Explain that one if you can. He remembered the words better than the boy did. Now he wondered how he had kept a straight face when he had told him about rights, and the law, and seeing how the one safeguarded the other. That was John Benedict the realist. The cynic. He told himself to shut up. He did believe in ideals. What he had been telling himself for years, though having to close his eyes occasionally because he liked his job.

Now he said to the boy, „Do you like your job?“ And Jimmy Robles looked at him as if he did not understand.

He started to tell him how a man elected to a job naturally had a few obligations. And in a town like Arivaca, whose business depended on spreads like Remillard's and a few others, maybe the obligations were a little heavier. It was a cowtown, so the cowman ought to be able to have what he wanted. But it was too long a story to go through. If Jimmy Robles couldn't see the handwriting, let him find out the hard way. He was old enough to figure it out for himself. Suddenly, the boy's open, wondering face made him mad. „Well, what the hell are you waiting for!“

JIMMY ROBLES pushed Tio's empty mescal bottle to the foot of the bed and sat down heavily. He eased back until he was resting on his spine with his head and shoulders against the adobe wall and sat like this for a long time while the thoughts went through his head. He wished Tio were here. Tio would offer no assistance, no explanation other than his biased own, but he would laugh and that would be better than nothing.

Tio would say, „What did you expect would happen, you fool?“ And add, „Let us have a drink to forget the mysterious ways of the American.“ Then he would laugh. Jimmy Robles sat and smoked cigarettes and he thought.

Later on, he opened his eyes and felt the ache in his neck and back.

It seemed like only a few moments before he had been awake, clouded with his worrying, but the room was filled with a dull gloom. He rose, rubbing the back of his neck, and, through the open doorway that faced west, saw the red streak in the gloom over the line of trees in the distance.

He felt hungry, and the incident of the afternoon was something that might have happened a hundred years ago. He had worn himself out thinking and that was enough of it. He passed between the buildings to the street and crossed it to the adobe with the sign Emiliano's. He felt like enchiladas and tacos and perhaps some beer if it was cold.

He ate alone at the counter, away from the crowded tables that squeezed close to each other in the hot, low-ceilinged cafe, taking his time and listening to the noise of the people eating and drinking. Emiliano served him, and after his meal set another beer—that was very cold—before him on the counter. And when he was again outside, the air seemed cooler and the dusk more restful.

He lighted a cigarette, inhaling deeply, and saw someone emerge from the alley that led to his adobe. The figure looked up and down the street, then ran directly toward him, shouting his name.

Now he recognized Agostino Reyes, who worked at the wagonyard with his uncle.

The old man was breathless. „I have hunted you everywhere,“ he wheezed, his eyes wide with excitement. „Your uncle has taken the shotgun that they keep at the company office and has gone to shoot a man!“

Robles held him hard by the shoulders. „Speak clearly! Where did he go!“

Agostino gasped out, „Earlier, a man by the Supreme insulted him and caused him to be degraded in front of others. Now Tio has gone to kill him.“

Jimmy ran with his heart pounding against his chest, praying to God and His Mother to let him get there before anything happened. A block away from the Supreme he saw the people milling about the street, with all attention toward the front of the saloon. He heard the deep discharge of a shotgun and the

people scattered as if the shot were a signal. In the space of a few seconds the street was deserted.

He slowed the motion of his legs and approached the rest of the way at a walk. Nothing moved in front of the Supreme, but across the street he saw figures in the shadowy doorways of the Samas Cafe and the hotel next door. A man stepped out to the street and he saw it was John Benedict.

„Your uncle just shot Sid Roman. Raked his legs with a Greener. He’s up there in the doorway laying half dead.“

He made out the shape of a man lying beneath the swing doors of the Supreme. In the dusk the street was quiet, more quiet than he had ever known it, as if he and John Benedict were alone. And then the scream pierced the stillness. „God Almighty somebody help me!“ It hung there, a cold wail in the gloom, then died.

„That’s Sid,“ Benedict whispered. „Tio’s inside with his pistol. If anybody gets near that door, he’ll let go and most likely finish off Sid. He’s got Remillard and Judge Essery and I don’t know who else inside. They didn’t get out in time. God knows what he’ll do to them if he gets jumpy.“

„Why did Tio shoot him?“

„They say about an hour ago Sid come staggering out drunk and bumped into your uncle and started telling him where to go. But your uncle was just as drunk and he wouldn’t take any of it. They started swinging and Sid got Tio down and rubbed his face in the dust, then had one of his boys get a bottle, and he sat there drinking like he was on the front porch. Sitting on Tio. Then the old man come back about an hour later and let go at him with the Greener.“ John Benedict added, „I can’t say I blame him.“

Jimmy Robles said, „What were you doing while Sid was on the front porch?“ and started toward the Supreme, not waiting for an answer.

John Benedict followed him. „Wait a minute,“ he called, but stopped when he got to the middle of the street.

On the saloon steps he could see Sid Roman plainly in the square of light under the doors, lying on his back with his eyes closed. A moan came from his lips, but it was almost inaudible. No sound came from within the saloon.

He mounted the first step and stood there. „Tio!“

No answer came. He went all the way up on the porch and looked down at Roman. „Tio! I’m taking this man away!“

Without hesitating he grabbed the wounded man beneath the arms and pulled him out of the doorway to the darkened end of the ramada past the windows. Roman screamed as his legs dragged across the boards.

Jimmy Robles moved back to the door and the quietness settled again.

He pushed the door in, hard, and let it swing back, catching it as it reached him. Tio was leaning against the bar with bottles and glasses strung out its smooth length behind him. From the porch he could see no one else. Tio looked like a frightened animal cowering in a deadend ravine, more pathetic in his ragged and dirty cotton clothes. His rope-soled shoes edged a step toward the doorway, with his body moving in a crouch. The pistol was in front of him, his left hand under the other wrist supporting the weight of the heavy Colt and, the deputy noticed now, trying to keep it steady.

Tio waved the barrel at him. „Come in and join your friends, Jaime.“

His voice quivered to make the bravado meaningless.

Robles moved inside the door of the long barroom and saw Remillard and Judge Essery standing by the table nearest the bar. Two other men stood at the next table. One of them was the bartender, wiping his hands back and forth over his apron.

Robles spoke calmly. „You’ve done enough, Tio. Hand me the gun.“

„Enough?“ Tio swung the pistol back to the first table. „I have just started.“

„Don’t talk crazy. Hand me the gun.“

„Do you think I am crazy?“

„Just hand me the gun.“

Tio smiled, and by it seemed to calm. „My foolish nephew. Use your head for one minute. What do you suppose would happen to me if I handed you this gun?“

„The law would take its course,“ Jimmy Robles said. The words sounded meaningless even to him.

„It would take its course to the nearest cottonwood,“ Tio said.

„There are enough fools in the family with you, Jaime.“ He smiled still, though his voice continued to shake.

„Perhaps this is my mission, Jaime. The reason I was born.“

„You make it hard to decide just which one is the fool.“

„No. Hear me. God made Tio Robles to his image and likeness that he might someday blow out the brains of Senores Rema-yard and Essery.“ Tio’s laugh echoed in the long room.

Jimmy Robles looked at the two men. Judge Essery was holding on to the table and his thin face was white with fear, glistening with fear.

And for all old man Remillard’s authority, he couldn’t do a thing. An old Mexican, like a thousand he could buy or sell, could stand there and do whatever he desired because he had slipped past the cowman’s zone of influence, past fearing for the future.

Tio raised the pistol to the level of his eyes. It was already cocked.

„Watch my mission, Jaime. Watch me send two devils to hell!“

He watched fascinated. Two men were going to die. Two men he hardly knew, but he could feel only hate for them. Not like he might hate a man, but with the anger he felt for a principle that went against his reason. Something big, like injustice. It went through his mind that if these two men died, all injustice would vanish. He heard the word in his mind. His own voice saying it. Injustice. Repeating it, until then he heard only a part of the word. His gun came out and he pulled the trigger in the motion. Nothing was repeating in his mind, now. He looked down at Tio Robles on the floor and knew he was dead before he knelt over him.

He picked up Tio in his arms like a small child and walked out of the Supreme into the evening dusk. John Benedict approached him and he saw people crowding out into the street. He walked past the sheriff and behind him heard Remillard’s booming voice. „That was a close one!“ and a scattering of laughter. Fainter then, he heard Remillard again. „Your boy learns fast.“

He walked toward Spanishtown, not seeing the faces that lined the street, hardly feeling the limp weight in his arms.

The people, the storefronts, the street—all was hazy—as if his thoughts covered his eyes like a blindfold. And as he went on in the darkness he thought he understood now what John Benedict meant by justice.

