

When Money Went to his Head

Burnt Creek

by Ernest Haycox, 1899-1950

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IT was mid-afternoon in Burnt Creek, and the three frame outhouses and one general merchandise store baked under the heat, cracked and weathered. It was a desiccated town site slit in the jack pine forest as an initial carved from the bark of a tree. A sultry, sand-ridden place, dying for want of water like all the rest of Central Oregon at that time. Old man Budd was lumped in a chair on the porch of his store, the sole witness of life.

Ralph Olmstead came out of the jack pines from the Bend-Klamath Road and urged his horse to the hitching rack in front of the store. „You ain't moved out of that chair since last Friday,” said Ralph.

„Too hot.“

Ralph came up the steps. He was a compact young man, red of hair and scorched of features. Homesteading had left its mark on him. He had the bitter expression of one pushed to the limit of endurance. „Well, I need a sack of Durham and a can of coffee.“

„Tobacco in the case. Coffee somewheres on the top shelf. Find 'em yourself.“

Ralph walked into the small store and rummaged through the cluttered shelves. All commodities were indiscriminately mixed and all alike were covered with a thin film of sand. He found what he needed and, obeying the immemorial custom of the ranchers, scratched his name and the articles on a slip of paper, transfixing it to a spike. This was old man Budd's charge system.

„Mail in the box fer Lewis,“ grunted Budd.

Ralph came out finally with his packages and the letter, scowling more than usual. A tremor of amusement disturbed Budd's vast frame. „Seems like you ain't so pleased with carryin' mail to Grace Lewis like you once was. Gosh, don't you look like a rattler bit you. She was your girl, wa'n't she?“

„She choses her own company. After this she can chose her own letter carriers.“

Old man Budd made a shrewd guess. „Scrappin' ag'in. Cats an' dogs couldn't be worse. You two oughta have more sense. The trouble is, you're both on edge with the heat an' so forth. This ain't no country or time to git your back up.“

Ralph scowled again. „The trouble is, a man comes into this country with the cards stacked against him. There ain't a chance to win. Not once chance in a million. Here I've hung on for three years, scorched in summer an' near froze stiff in winter. My crops come up good... an' then the heat ruins 'em. An' if I did become lucky and harvested a little extra hay, what'd I do with it? Who'd buy it? Here I need a new horse, need barb wire for my fence, the roof of my shanty has to be tar papered before fall sets in, and I owe you for six months' groceries. That's homeste adin'!“

„Son, you ain't tellin' me anything I ain't heard before,” said Budd. „Everybody fer forty miles owes me a year's grocery bill. We're all busted. What's the difference? I ain't seen any hard money since McKinley was President. Wouldn't know what to do with it if I did git some.“

„If Congress would only pass that bill, we might get a little courage to fight it out!” exclaimed Ralph. „But there won't be an ounce of water in the country until they do pass it... and they wait and wait and wait!“

„Reclamation projects're always kinda slow,“ said Budd. „It'll come some day.“ He turned his head. „Speakin' of money, there's a chance fer you to make five hundred dollars. Read the sign over on the wall.“

Ralph turned to a notice tacked on the rough boards and saw this announcement:

FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD
FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE
ARREST OF THE THREE MASKED MEN

WHO HELD UP THE BEND-KLAMATH
MAIL STAGE FOUR MILES NORTH
OF BURNT CREEK, JUNE 1, 1904.

„Day before yesterday,” said Ralph. „Road agents, huh? An’ we ain’t had any trouble for a couple of years now.” Then he read further:

Said three masked men bound and gagged driver of the stage, broke into an Endicott Express Co. chest, and took gold and paper coin amounting to thirty-five hundred dollars. Bandits were of medium height, weighed about one hundred and fifty pounds each, and wore corduroy pants, olive-drab army shirts, and Stetson hats. Leader of the trio heavier than the rest and had light-blue eyes. Any information should be given to the Endicott Express office, Bend, Oregon.

Old man Budd's voice lost a measure of its serenity. „When a rattlesnake sticks to its own rock, there ain’t no fuss to be made. But a varmint’s to be shot when it starts runnin’ wild. I didn’t think they’d have nerve to do it.“

„Who?” asked Ralph. Old man Budd’s mind held many shrewd bits of knowledge, and it paid to listen.

But the storekeeper had given one hint and would offer no more. „This country’s hard, but it’s sweet an’ clean,” he said. „Ain’t no room for desperadoes. They ought to be shot down like coyotes.“

„Got to find them first,” replied Ralph.

„Just you remember this,” warned Budd. „There’s danged few people can stand prosperity. A little money goes to the head mighty fast. Somebody’ll spill the beans. There’s three of ’em with more’n a thousand dollars each. It’ll burn their hands. Watch.“

Another horseman appeared from the jack pines and rode up. Ralph’s mouth, habitually set, grew still thinner. Elvy Dakin was not his friend nor his kind; the lowering, saturnine face marked the bully too plainly. The cold, blue eyes held their unsavory secrets.

„Need some chuck, old man,” said Dakin, giving an unfriendly glance to Ralph. He fetched an empty gunny sack from the pommel and stalked into the store. Budd and Ralph stared out upon the sand until Dakin came back to the porch with the gunny sack half filled. He flipped a coin into Budd’s lap. The storekeeper held it forward in his palm with a grunt of surprise.

„Gold piece. Heard tell they still coined ’em, but didn’t believe it. Thought the government had decided money wa’n’t any use to us Westerners. How d’you expect me to change this?”

„Reckon I owe you that much,” replied Dakin carelessly. “It don't make any difference.” He tied the gunny sack to the saddle.

Ralph shook his head, and he could not avoid expressing some measure of resentment. He had worked hard and honestly, with nothing to show for it save the memory of bitter struggle. „Kind of reckless with your money, ain’t you, Elvy? Seems strange to throw gold pieces around like that.“

Dakin's blue eyes glittered as he met Ralph's sober face. Then the need for explanation evidently occurred to him. „Farmin' ain't the only way to make money,” he said. „People still have thirsts.“

„Moonshinin'!” exclaimed Ralph in disgust.

„I don't like your tone an' I don't like your manner,” flared Dakin. „Don't try to put on airs. You ain't got nerve enough or brains enough to beat the law.”

Ralph's fist came up. „Once a crook, always a crook. Maybe I haven't got any brains... sometimes I doubt it fer stickin' to this country... but I can beat you to a pulp if you open that ugly mouth at me again. Now you get out of here before we have war.“

Elvy Dakin glowered and twitched his nose. Perhaps he would have accepted the challenge if old man Budd's conciliatory voice had not interrupted. „What ails you boys, anyway? It's too hot to fight. Git on your horse, Elvy, an' pull out.“

The man did so, very slowly. When he was ready to depart, he flung a warning at Ralph. „Next time you spring that stuff on me, old-timer, we'll do battle. An' it won't be just fists, either.” With that he turned toward the Bend-Klamath Road and, although the day was stifling, he urged his horse to a lope.

There was a long silence. Ralph stared at the jack pines, still ridden by the discouragement. Presently old man Budd spoke again, apropos of nothing at all. „Yes, sir, a varmint's to be killed when it gets the rabies. No mercy to be shown. Did you say you was interested in that five hundred dollars, Ralph?“

„I'm no manhunter. Against my grain to snoop after other people and their affairs.“

„Just you remember what I said about varmints. An' don't fergit about people not bein' able to stand prosperity. Just remember those things, Ralph. Think 'em over. Five hundred dollars is a lot of money.“

Ralph got his package of coffee and swung into the saddle. „If somethin' don't come my way pretty soon,” he said, „I'll blow up an' bust. Everything I turn a hand to goes wrong.“

Old man Budd's voice came after him, but he did not hear it. The Bend-Klamath Road, the intolerable heat, and the stifling sand engulfed him. His own temper was short enough to cause him many weary moments of self-discipline. Now, as he had put it, he was on the verge of a blow-up.

He plunged into the jack pines and gave the horse free rein to follow the narrow, rutted road. Old man Budd's cryptic sentences kept recurring, no matter how he turned his mind. Five hundred dollars. Why, five hundred dollars would be like a gift from the skies! It would give him heart to go on, heart to continue the weary, unequal fight for prosperity. It meant horses, fences, buildings, and seed. It meant self respect. It meant he might even ask Grace Lewis...

„Oh, no, it don't,” he said. „That little lady picks her own company, an' I ain't going to butt in any more. She shut the gate, and I'll be danged if I open it.”

Of a sudden his eyes picked up a diverging trail of hoofprints ahead, hoofprints that swung from the main road to a narrow path leading into the deeper shade of the forest. Ralph's dissatisfaction was given more fuel. „There goes Elvy Dakin to his shanty and his cronies and moonshine still!”

Then, simultaneously, his mind grasped three loose ends of information and made a strand of fact. The leader of the masked bandits was, according to the

express company notice, above medium height, heavy set, and had blue eyes. And old man Budd had repeated his mysterious comment twice: „Varmints out of their preserve... they won't stand prosperity very long. Somebody'll spill the beans... I didn't think they had nerve enough to do it.” The storekeeper quite evidently had some particular gang in mind. And perhaps it was more than a coincidence that Elvy Dakin had blue eyes and was above the ordinary height. Moreover, Elvy had partners who made the unsavory shack in the jack pines their headquarters. Several shiftless, ratty men who made and peddled white mule. They were lacking in backbone, save when drunk, but they would follow Elvy, and he had always been a restless, unpleasant character.

„So that was what the old man drove at,” murmured Ralph. „I was a bonehead not to see it.”

If he could get some proof, he would be the possessor of five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars! Then the small hint of pleasure died away from his face. „I'm no manhunter. It ain't exactly fair... unless I give him warning that I'm out-and-out against him.”

THUS thinking, he rode through the forest while the afternoon sun sank lower and lower. Somewhere beyond six o'clock he emerged to a vast prairie, and in another half hour arrived at his shanty, perched on a quarter section of land. In the distance was the huddle of another frame house—the Lewis place. Ralph made a short supper and in the twilight set across the country toward the far ranch with the letter he had brought from Burnt Creek.

He saw, presently, that there were people in front of the house. When he came closer, he recognized Grace Lewis and Elvy Dakin. His arm fell across the pommel of the saddle with an impatient slap, but he rode up through the graying dusk and joined them with a sober face. Dakin thrust out his arrogant chin and growled: „Nobody invited you over here.”

„Them's certainly true words,” agreed Ralph. “Truer than you know. But I don't always need an invitation, being in that respect like some other people.”

He slid off the horse and walked to the girl with the letter extended. „There was this for you, and I thought I might as well bring it... this time.”

She was a small, sturdy lass, and even in the dusk a glow of pink stood on her cheeks, visible to Ralph. The barren land of the West is no respecter of persons, and its toll is usually callused hands, roughened skin, and abraded beauty; but Grace Lewis seemed to have been excepted from that toll. Her eyes were dark to match her hair. A scent of rose perfume was on her clothes, the touch of gentleness unforgotten in a homestead shack. She took the letter with a faint thanks, returning his sober gaze with a slight air of confusion and defiance.

„Here Rover, there Rover,” said Dakin sneeringly. „You fetch an' carry well.”

The girl turned on him as if to protest, and her eyes snapped. Then she dropped her head and was mute.

„You're getting funnier and funnier,” observed Ralph somberly. The rankling sense of thwarted labor came again to him, and presently he was thinking of the five hundred dollars that meant security and self-respect. „By the way, Elvy, I'm looking for five hundred dollars. You ain't seen anything of it, have you?”

„Haw! That’s a good one, old-timer. You ain’t ever had five hundred dollars, and you won’t ever have five hundred dollars.”

„No, but I’m lookin’ for it.”

Some of the amusement died out of Elvy Dakin’s face and left him puzzled. The girl, too, watched Ralph closely. „What’re you talkin’ about?” demanded Elvy.

„Why, the reward for information regardin’ the holdup day before yesterday. I just said to myself, *I need that money*, so I’m looking around. I thought I’d ask you... so you’d know what I was doing. Just so you’d know, Elvy.” Dakin stepped back a pace, and his arm dropped toward a rear pocket. He was breathing fast, and a blaze of anger leaped into his hard, blue eyes. „What’s that mean?” he demanded harshly.

„Nothing in particular and everything in general. Take your hand away from your hip pocket, Elvy. I can beat you to the draw. You ought to know better. Fan out of here now. And if you see anything of that five hundred, just let me know.“

THE two men stood face to face in the dusk, swaying slightly toward each other. Dakin’s fingers twitched against his trousers leg, and every predatory bit of his nature rose to the surface and was visible. A rasp of emotion came out of his throat but no intelligible word. Ralph laughed. „You’d like to fight it out now, Elvy, but you ain’t got the crust. Go home and drink some of your moonshine, and you’ll feel more like a lion.”

The girl stepped between them. „Stop this quarreling. It’s ridiculous that two grown men must fight just like children.”

Dakin turned away and climbed into the saddle. „All right, old-timer,” he said, looking straight at Ralph. „I get you, but you won’t ever make any use of what you think. See?” Then he spoke to the girl. „Sorry our little evenin’s entertainment was interrupted. Better luck next time. An’ mebbe you’d better think over what I said.” A moment later he was lost in the thickening dusk.

„What’d he mean, *think it over?*” growled out Ralph.

„There’s no reason why I should tell you my private affairs, Ralph Olmstead,” she returned defiantly. „You’re not my guardian.“

Ralph curled his fist at the thought of how the insolence of Elvy Dakin might have made Grace equally insolent toward him, and the girl, seeing it, was suddenly angry. „There you go, doubling up your fist! Just like everything and everybody else in this damned old country! Force, force, force... that’s all people can think of. I’m sick and tired of it!”

Old man Budd’s shrewd guess was correct. Both of these young, upright people were gripped by the heat and the rawness of their surroundings. Both were on edge, needing the impact of some exciting event to jar them back to normal behavior. Ralph turned to his horse and without a word got into the saddle and gathered the reins.

The girl stood undecided, the anger dying away. „Well, aren’t you going to say something? I’m expecting to hear that terrible temper break out.“

„Them days,” said Ralph sadly, „are gone forever. Guess we don’t do anything but quarrel. That’s getting kinda monotonous. There’s a little business I got to look after tonight, so I’ll just travel on. Won’t bother you any more.“

„Wait,“ she commanded and came closer. „I... I heard you say something to him that sounded like a warning. What was it? Where are you going?“

„Well, now, I can't just tell you,“ he answered. „It's a matter of business.“ He rode away, leaving the girl by the gate. She called after him. „Ralph, don't you be foolish and go into the jack pines tonight. Do you hear me? There might be trouble.“

He refused to answer, riding on. But he had gone only a few yards when he heard a sound that set every nerve on edge. He dug his heels into the flanks of the horse and raced away. „Crying, she was!“ he muttered. „Well, I won't ever give her reason to cry any more. But how did she know what I was going to do?“

Women, he decided, were possessed by an uncanny sense of events. Somehow she had learned of Dakin and his gang in the jack pines. Of course, it was no especial secret, and yet there was nothing tangible against these men. Then he thought of Dakin's insolent attitude toward the girl, and it turned him into a cold rage. „It's got to be settled right now!“ he said to himself.

HE came to his shanty and stopped only long enough to get additional shells for his revolver and to throw a lariat over the saddle pommel. This was by way of preparation for the unexpected. „If I'm going to do it right, I've got to force the issue. That gang may be getting all their gold pieces from moonshinin', but somehow it don't seem likely. And Dakin took up my hint too quick. If there's any booty, it'll be around the cabin somewhere. Here goes.“

The dusk had turned to full-shadowed night. Above, in a clear, cold sky, a thin rind of moon let down a filter of light. Ralph urged his horse out of a walk and crossed the prairie. Turning in the saddle, he looked back and saw his shack setting in a desolate huddle. Farther away he observed some black, moving shadows against the sky line, but he paid no attention. Night riders were frequent enough in this country to attract scant notice. A few minutes later he plunged into the abysmal gloom of the pines and for a time was utterly blinded. Then his eyes became accustomed, and he saw the way ahead.

He was bound for the sinister cabin in the woods, something like a quarter mile farther along, and three or four hundred yards deeper in the brush. As he traveled, a rough plan formed in his head. He would leave the horse in the road and creep through to the shanty. It was early enough in the evening, and they would doubtless be playing cards or busy with the moonshine still. In either case, they would be together, and he would have almost an even break in the fight that would probably come.

He turned a bend of the road, and the horse picked up his head and shied to one side. Ralph came alert, but neither gun shot nor voice broke the night, and he relaxed again. „Don't be so skittish,“ he said. „Get along.“

The next moment he was brought to a sharp halt. A shadowed figure stepped from the thicket. The crackling of brush behind told of other men closing in. The sullen voice of Elvy Dakin challenged him. „That hoss has more sense than you got. I thought mebbe you'd put your head into the trap. Give a fool enough rope an' he'll always hang himself.“

„Ain't it the truth,“ agreed Ralph, sparring for time. He could not reach for his gun without precipitating a shower of lead, and he was too plain a target to afford that at this instant.

„Now,“ snarled out Dakin, „get down from that horse. I'm goin' to beat the sap outa you. When we're finished, you won't be able to talk about that five hundred dollars. Keep your hands up!“

Ralph slipped down. The horse's body shielded him from the men behind, and Dakin had not drawn his gun. He made a leap forward but, with all his planning, was not quick enough. Dakin was upon him like a tiger, beating his face and body with savage fists. There was no time, it seemed, to ward off blows. The horse reared up, turned around, and bolted up the road. The attackers closed in, and Ralph was struck a glancing blow on the temple. He went down, half paralyzed, and in the confusion of feet he took hold of a pair of boots and pulled with all his might. A body crashed on top of him.

„Clear away,“ panted one of the gang. „Gimme a chance to shoot!“

Ralph gripped his man while the fog cleared from his head. They were all around him, standing slightly off, and waiting for a chance to put in a bullet. His unwilling captive grunted like a bear in a trap and rolled in the sand. It carried them toward the brush, and Ralph, conceiving a better plan, let go and shoved his opponent away with his feet. They rose almost together.

„It's the man on the right!“ cried a voice. „Let him have it!“

„No!“ screamed Ralph's opponent, weaving as if drunk. Then it was too late. The woods thundered, and two orange blotches splayed out against the velvet darkness. There was a grunt, a cough and, as Elvy turned with his revolver, the man beside him fell heavily. Down the road echoed the patter of hoofs. „Outa here!“ ordered Dakin. „We got to beat it! Come on, Bill.“

They ran through the thicket toward the shanty. Ralph made a swift calculation. They still believed they had killed him. The scream of protest was too full of frenzy to sound like any particular person. It was such a cry as anyone might make who felt the imminence of death. The pound of the hoofs sounded clearer.

„Come on, Bill!“ bellowed Dakin, retreating farther into the brush. „We're goin' out the other trail.“

Ralph took his cue and lunged into the thicket after them. He found a narrow pathway and redoubled his speed. The others were strung out in front, and one of the two had reached the shanty. The door slammed against the outer wall, and feet thumped across the flooring. Ralph arrived in front of the place five paces behind the last man. He approached the open doorway and waited. It was pitch dark in the shanty.

„There's somebody on the road,“ said Dakin. „I'm goin' to light just one match while you get your stuff. Then we got to clear away. It'll be four hours before they gather a posse, an' that'll put us clean out of the country. Bert, did you saddle the horses like I told you?“

„Sure. Hurry an' light that match.“

„That cussed Olmstead made an awful noise. Gives me the willies. Hurry up!“

Ralph gripped the sill of the door. A match scratched across wood and flared to a dim light, revealing Dakin's face, lined with dirt and perspiration. „Bill, where

are you?" he called, and turned the match toward Ralph. The latter raised his revolver.

„Up... put 'em up... all of you. Hold that match, Elvy, and don't move.“

The lesser member of the gang stopped as if carved of granite. „It was Bill we shot, then!" he breathed softly. But Dakin was of more durable substance. The arm holding the match swept down, and the light snapped out. Ralph jumped aside as the shanty trembled from floor to beams with Dakin's shot. The mushroom of flame gave him a point at which to aim. He took another step to the side, raised his weapon, and fired. The other man had taken advantage of the pitch blackness to come into play, and the roar of another explosion beat upon Ralph's eardrums with terrific force. He moved again and came to the corner of the room, waiting in absolute silence. The acrid odor of gunpowder brought tears to his eyes. A cough broke from someone in the opposite corner, was repeated, and followed by a ragged, weakening voice. „I'm done for!" It was Dakin's voice. A chair tipped and fell, a body sprawled to the floor with an irregular impact, and a gun clattered sharply on the boards. With the chief down and the false courage of moonshine ebbing fast away, the other one was bereft of support, and the nasal voice of the ferret-faced man whined out a surrender. Ralph clutched the wall of the shanty. „You ain't got a mite of spunk," he said in a drowsy voice. „Drop your gun. All right... now light the lamp. You sure must have had a lot of hooch in your system to rob a mail stage. Or else Elvy kicked you into the idea. Hurry up!"

Out on the road there was the stir of a horse, and the swish of brush. The lamp wick spurted a flame. The ferret-faced one affixed the globe and backed against the wall. His face was chalk white. „We got Bill!" he reiterated. „Shut up," commanded Ralph in the same drowsy voice. The pistol wavered in his hand, and he found it unexpectedly hard to maintain himself upright.

Dakin was stretched awkwardly on the floor, one arm reaching outward for his revolver, and the other tangled in the fallen chair. The mattress of one bunk was dragged half from the frame, and Ralph saw the hint of a canvas bag in the boards. That, he decided, was the loot these men had taken from the mail stage.

He caught his breath. A sharp pain ran across his chest and, try as he did, the strength left his legs, and the gun would not stay up to level.

The ferret-faced one took a step forward, his eyes glittering with a sudden hope. „Winged you, huh? Mebbe you'll sing another song, after all." His arms came down, and a malicious grin covered the ashen complexion. He made a tentative step toward his fallen weapon.

„Stay back!" commanded Ralph angrily. He tried to bring the gun up again, but his fingers were as pieces of ice and entirely bereft of strength. He made a last effort to stand, then the wall refused to support him longer, and he dropped like a sack of meal. The ferret-faced one gave a shout and dived for his gun.

„Stop it!"

The ferret-faced one rolled away from the weapon as if it had been a coiled snake. In the door stood Grace Lewis, holding a rifle on the two outlaws. „Ralph, did they get you?"

„Good... girl!" he murmured. „I'm... all... right. But... no strength in my legs. Turn around, you. Hand me that gun, Grace, then take that piece of rope and tie him up. See what's happened to Elvy."

She did as requested, trussing the arms of the man. A hasty inspection of Dakin revealed a welt along the neck. „Knocked out more than anything else,“ she observed.

Ralph said: „He’ll come around soon enough. Tie him, too. We’ll leave him here.“

The girl bent over Ralph and opened his shirt front. „Ralph, the bullet just missed your lungs! Oh, I knew you’d come here. I saw it in your face. That’s why I followed. I heard the shooting, and then saw the light in the window. What would have happened!” She shuddered. „Ralph... I... I won’t lose my temper again!”

“Huh?” It seemed as if he reached a new reservoir of strength. He ripped off a piece of the shirt and made, with the girl’s help, a rough dressing to stop the flow of blood. Then he managed to get to his feet and superintend operations.

From beneath the fallen mattress he picked up the canvas bag and found therein a packet of fresh five and ten dollar bills. Beneath Dakin’s mattress was a second bag with gold pieces. Ralph explained the robbery to Grace then drove the prisoner out of the shanty and to the road. The girl had found Ralph’s horse and brought it back with her. Both mounted, and with the prisoner trudging before them, tethered by the rope, they started toward Burnt Creek. „We’ll call the sheriff on the phone and have him down here in no time. He can come after Elvy and...”

„And the dead man,“ finished the girl, shuddering again. “I saw him in the road.”

„Poor Bill didn’t get a square break,“ observed Ralph. „But the rest of them will pay for it.“

The two horses came together, and Ralph had strength enough to lean over and capture a kiss from the girl. „Say, honey, what’s been ailin’ us, anyway? There’s too much work for us to do without fighting each other.”

„We’ll never do it again, Ralph.“

„Well... not too much,“ he amended, with the semblance of a grin. Then, later, he had another pleasing thought. „Five hundred dollars’ reward. Say, that’ll put us on Easy Street. And when water comes into the country, we’ll be fixed for life. Ain’t this a great land?”

