

The Black Cat



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On the Last Trail.

BY H. W. PHILLIPS AND RUPERT HUGHES.



IF it is true that cutting off the hands of a Baxter Street clothier deprives him of all power of speech, what argument can a cowboy be expected to enforce if you take away his arms? The "short, sharp bark" of his pistol, always at hand, quick, faithful, and vicious as a watchdog, is the colleague of his disputation. It is the italics, the exclamation point, the conclusion of his syllogistic premises, and the umpire of his debate. This, at least, is the case with the very newest and roughest western settlements.

Rapid City (the "city" being the star at which the townspeople aimed, rather than an index of population) — Rapid City was an extreme example of these picturesque but unwholesome communities. The alarming death-rate, indeed, managed to secure the town a certain amount of free advertising, but even this was of a sort that tended to induce less immigration than emigration. The painful realization of this latter unpoetic truth compelled the local marshal to issue a reluctant edict forbidding man, woman, child, or broncho to "pack a gun" within the vague limits of the city. He was not blind to the heroic poetry of staking a life on a tiny bullet, or the dramatic justice of an appeal to arms; but he was there primarily to serve the municipal

advantage. So he nailed up his manifesto,— with the revolutionary effect of Luther's theses.

To the cow-punchers, the act looked like trespass upon personal liberty. Most of them asked, with true Athenian spirit, what in hell was the use of a damned democracy if a man couldn't take care of himself and keep other damned fools off his range, by God. One or two of the more sedate and learned held that the Marshal's ultimatum was "uncons'tootional." Few of them had much idea as to the exact content of the sonorous term (has any one?), but it plainly put the Marshal in a bad light.

Yet none of the rank-blooming protests fruited into active resistance. A pistol, in the sensation-surfeited mind of the cow-puncher, is a mere personal ornament and a gaudy toy, or a lightning-thoughted despot, whose decisions are both terrible and irrevocable — entirely according to the man administering it.

Now the present incumbent of the marshalcy of Rapid City had won his exalted position solely because no one could recall a time when he had been either dilatory for a fatal moment, or inaccurate for an effective hair's-breadth, in his manipulation of that product of the American desire for quick results.

So the cow-punchers took out their revenge in oaths and threats against the next election; and, from the very day after the edict, the place of the pistol knew it no more. Men had a half-clad look and a naked, defenseless feeling without their customary armament. Many a hand ran back to an unresponsive belt, and quarrels went tame and all unsatisfactory. How was a man to prove his ownership of an over-boiling "jack-pot" with only empty hands to verify his claim? How set the tenderfoot to hopping in Terpsichorean terror? How avenge the lie direct without artillery? For fists are undignified weapons on the frontier, and for use only in unimportant squabbles, and as an introduction to the higher court procedure of the revolver.

Every Rapid citizen knew for awhile the uncanny feeling of helpless fear; was timid of "declaring himself" and promulgating his ability to lick all creation; was timid of dogma and candor till his hungry eye found his adversary likewise shorn of pistolic power. All the citizens walked the town cold-spined and

so frantic to look, Janus-wise, both up the street and down, that an obliging evolution must have developed eyes in the back of their heads, had nothing occurred to nullify the marshal's ultimatum, and renew the good old régime of the revolver, until its foundations should be battered down by the insipid acids of an effete civilization — to quote a local Fourth of July effusion.

Rapid City had managed to survive about a week of this uncomfortable, negative virtue, when Jesse Bolande, Esquire, rode into town at about four of the afternoon. He had been on his range all week, and as he stood at the unmirrored bar of "Keno Jim's Place," he listened to the new state of affairs with many an oath of incredulous amaze. At his right side, hammer to the front, swung his far-famed .44 extra long revolver. To demand it of him would be calling on Hector to yield up his lance and count himself tamed.

Indeed, had Hector come back from the august companionship of the Shades and stood there at the bar with Bolande, he would have found the American towering over him, more magnificent in every proportion. Into the grip of the Trojan's famed sword Bolande's right paw could not have crammed all its fingers. Upon Bolande's great legs the shin-plates of the well-greaved Greeks would have hung ridiculous with incompetence. Though his training was not theirs, the flesh-hulks of Roman gladiators would have lumbered under his outstretched arm. Numidian cavalry-men would have been flung off in ludicrous disgrace, a dozen different ways in a dozen effective styles, by the tricky broncho wrestler Bolande clung to with amused nonchalance. Around his massy torso the cuirass of a crusader or a Knight of the Table Round would have gaped like the corsets of a society belle. The great two-handed sword that Wallace waved with such dire force, he could have brandished with one hand; he could not have fitted both into the gripe-space. No constriction, no tugging could have fitted upon him the armor of the doughtiest warriors so much sung of by the troubadours. He was the product of all the evolution their centuries of arduous training had furthered.

So Bolande stood, lounging in relaxed might across the grimy little bar, and throwing into his unseared throat glassfuls of liquid fire — that uncongealed lava of a western distillery-volcano.

Suddenly those at the window began to evince genuine excitement, a thing unusual in the more than socially *blase* cow-punchers, whom a mortal combat hardly galvanizes.

One of them blurted out, smacking his lips Valkyrie-wise in anticipation of magnificent battle: "Watch out, Bolande, the Marshal's comin'."

Bolande shrugged his whole huge frame in contemptuous indifference. Quick upon this heralding came the Marshal's august self. He paused just inside the door and blinked his eyes, an introduction to the dusk of the low-browed room. In the twilight he did not impose an heroic figure. His colossally impressive power saluted you only when the full day brought you a glimpse of a jaw that was not square and phlegmatic, but yet gaunt and nervously firm ; of eyes that did not waste their ferocious steel in a set fierceness, and yet gave hint of lurking demons. The Marshal was hardly above medium height. The Marshal was rather below medium weight. His light bones were wrapped with steel wire rather than with ponderous muscles whose bulk is their own hindrance. The Marshal wore a pistol at his side, *ex officio*. His duty demanded it, and no man feared its misuse in the dove-like gentleness of his unoffensed moods.

The Marshal and Bolande were old friends. They had once moiled on a ragged claim upon the mountains together ; they had stood back to back in skirmishes with yelling savages in a howling wilderness. And now their youthful mistress, Adventure, had lost charm for them, and they had drawn into the shell that a man in his forties will protect with his life from any encroachment, though he has no desire to make it the base of excursions into other men's preserves. But Bolande and the Marshal were still good friends, bonded with the golden link of mutual reminiscence.

When the Marshal entered the saloon, he did not, at first, see Bolande's revolver, and there was an unrestrained cordiality in the "How ! " with which he greeted him, while the warmth of Bolande's answer strove with a pacificatory uneasiness.

When finally the glint of Bolande's dingy weapon struggled through the smoke of the room to the Marshal's eye, he said quietly, that the others might not hear: "Jesse, stick your gun

behind the bar till you're leavin' town. Can't let you tote your irons in this man's town now."

Perhaps there was too much of the city official and too little of the friend in his tone, for Bolande's look took on a hint of rigor, and there was a tang of defiance in his tone as he tried to laugh out his, "Ownin' this place now, are you, Marshal?"

There was too little subtlety in Bolande's intonation to deceive the Marshal in its portent, and he flung back a sharp reply, "Any skin off you, if I do?"

And Bolande calmed before the other's frank resentment and shrugging himself again, murmured: "Nope. But thar'll be some off the man that tries to take my gun away."

Almost pleadingly the quiescent Marshal answered: "Jesse, I'll give you till six o'clock to put up your gun, or pull your freight out of this."

Still more unassumingly, but still more firmly, Bolande answered: "You'll find me right here at six. Bring your nerve with you, Marshal. Have a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Jesse. Here's 'how'!" and they drained the martyrdom with unflinching gusto. Then the Marshal turned to leave, and Bolande sang out, with no whit of banter in his tone:—

"So long, Marshal! Six o'clock, is it?"

"Six, Jesse," he answered, with as much of tender appeal in his voice as was possible in a throat made brass with the raw western air, and a heart grown flinty with years of concealed, repressed, and thereby little-known emotion. "Better think it over, Jesse."

Bolande only answered half apologetically: "I'm not heavy on the think," and retrieved himself from tenderness with a blunt, "but I'll be here, six foot two in my socks." The outer day had swallowed the Marshal.

Men hate gossip, but somehow news manages to travel among them with almost the growing rapidity of Vergil's Dame Rumor. So, by the time the little clock behind the bar was getting nervously ready to buzz and clamor the hour of six, the saloon was almost full, while uncouth forms lounged in at the windows and clogged the door. You might have thought a dance was on,

or that some one had come home from a cattle-selling as rich and as drunk as a prince, and eager to scatter free whiskeys like the largess of a coronation day.

The cynosure of all the eyes ambushed behind heavy eyebrows and low-brimmed hats was Bolande, who was again at the bar, rigid and erect as a tower. One hand played a tattoo with his half-emptied glass, the other hovered at the butt of his pistol. He was stolid, yet alert, grim, deadly. The whizz and boom of the striking clock startled every one in the almost noiseless room. The fights of frontiersmen are generally the sudden promptings of an unforeseen rage. Formal, punctual *duello* is rare. Even Bolande was a little nervous and had gulped not infrequent stimulants to whet his nerve and his anger to the nicety of a razor. With knowledge born of lifelong experience, he had equally refrained from drinking himself past the best form.

The Marshal evidently thought it only right to give his old friend three minutes of grace, for it was a little after the hour when his step was heard on the board walk outside. His lean, strong figure was clad in his best broadcloth — he would fight like a gentleman, ready for grave or triumph. That his ready-made suit was much too loose hardly marred the untheatric sublimity of his erect, stern, stubborn, Anglo-Saxon courage. In very modesty he pulled his broad-brimmed hat over the panther blaze of his ruthless glare.

When the Marshal entered the saloon, Bolande waited calmly for his eyes to learn the denser twilight of the room. His hand drew a little nearer his revolver, but forbore to draw it or even clutch its handle.

As the Marshal's searching look made out Bolande's form, and, hunting further, found his pistol undethroned, his teeth set hard upon the last plea of friendship, and with perfectly level voice, he said, inquisitorially calm, "You're still here, I see."

"I'm here," came an answer of equal phlegm.

And though there was a cry of iron rage in his voice, yet was it quiet, as the Marshal declared war thus: "Then, by God, look out for yourself!"

With epic equality and speed the weapons leaped into position.

The spectators, knowing no shots would be wasted, kept only from the immediate neighborhood of the fight. Two semicircles of faint glamour marked the path of the revolvers as they flashed from hip to aim. A spitting of quick fire — two sharp smacks of noise, so twinned that neither eye nor ear could name the earlier — and the revolvers had spoken. Neither in vain.

Bolande fought with his arm swinging freely, his whole body exposed. The Marshal's first bullet bit him in the depth of his chest and whirled him completely about. The next shot lunged into his unwounded side and thrust clean through him.

The Marshal, a little cooler and a little readier for battle, had crooked his left arm into a shield for his heart and lungs, and in its elbow rested his busy revolver: Bolande's first shot went high and, seizing on his chin, carried away the flesh of half his jaw. The second missile flung low and nipped at his right elbow, shattering the joint and shaking the six-shooter from his grasp. As he bent in fierce haste to seize it with his left hand, Bolande shot him through the top of the shoulder, breaking his spine and paralyzing the lower part of him. But even as he quivered to the floor he grasped his revolver and, agonizing into a quick aim, fired again at Bolande.

The bullet fastened on Bolande's left leg and brought the giant thunderously down. And now the desperate Marshal is crying in rabid impotence, "Raise me up, some of you! Raise me up, damn you, and give me another try at the —!"

But Bolande had gathered himself into superb position, prone on the floor, in the old fashion of Indian fighting. His pistol covered his frenzied adversary, and he said, with a paternal quietude of victory: —

"Marshal, I think we've hit our last trail. Neither of us is worth any more lead. Is it quits?"

Then the lust of killing died out of each heart, out of the heart of one in his honorable failure to sustain the sovereignty of the law, out of the heart of the other in his failure to survive trespass on his personal monarchy. And when the savage strength of resolve that supported their wrecked and shattered hulks ebbed out, it left them swooning and unconscious as fainting women.

Almost reverentially the partisans of each lifted his limp majesty from the sticky pool of his own blood, and both were carried upstairs to separate little rooms in the hotel.

Afterwhiles, in the utter rest of lifelessness, and under the crude skill of local physicians, vitality returned to each. To Bolande first, and he asked weakly: —

“Where’s the Marshal?”

They whispered him that his late enemy lay in another room — dying.

“I guess I’ll go see him,” gasped Bolande.

The watchers remonstrated with him, telling him that to move would compel and hasten death. But he persisted with crescent rage.

“I tell you I’m goin’ to see him. Lift me up and carry me to where he is, or, by God, I’ll rip these bandages off. I’m dyin’, too, you damned fools! What do I care for an hour or two more now? He was a game man, wuz the Marshal, and me and him’ll cross the Great Divide together.”

The power of a man who feared nothing that life or death could bring was not to be resisted; and they obeyed his wish, though with a reluctance as of unwilling murder.

They placed a cot near the Marshal’s bed. The only light in the darkened room came sweeping through the curtain, which glowed like a flame. Outside, the red glory of the prairie sunset was thrilling the earth to a responsive flush, as the gaze of a passionate lover brings the color to the cheek of his mistress. Within the room was a greater glory, the austere passing of two granite-couraged heroes. The very evening breeze that trembled at the dingy curtain seemed to sigh at the pity of it.

The sinewy hands of the twain lay clasped outside the coverlet. Bronzed hands they were, now blanching to gray, as the mists of the valley crept up and up.

Bolande, whose pride, thoughtless even now of repentance, had caused the ruin of self as well as friend, was the first to find power for speech in the leaking treasury of his once opulent strength. He put away his own anguish long enough to groan: —

“Are you easy, Marshal?”

“The gruff solicitude of the tone was his only apology for the

dire fruits of his wrath, and all the perfection of its acceptance was the strife at cheer in the Marshal's reply.

"Easy as a kid in a cradle, Jess. How're they comin' on your side?"

"Same here, old man. But I'm goin' fast."

"You won't beat me out five minutes, Jess."

This was their outlook on life, that each had fought for a cause he believed in. Their principles fought, not they. This was their outlook on death, that the unwelcome Inevitable should find no open repugnance in their greeting.

Under the vampire wings of the silence brooding upon the air of the room, the watchers quietly fanned the sweat-jeweled brows of the warriors, throwing their own silent souls into the struggle the twain waged with the dumb wrestler; striving, too, against the mutinous womanliness of grief in their own hard souls.

At length the Marshal looked a request, and one of the men bent over to hear his feeble mutterings, then leaned to the doctor, waiting in merely formal attendance.

A shrill hiss of whispering, and the physician murmured, with dogmatic finality: "Certainly. No use refusin' the wishes of a man what hasn't many more to make. Let 'em have what they like."

The man looked relieved, rose, tiptoed across the creaking planks, and left the room through the protesting door. Another immersion into deepest stillness. Soon he returned with two glasses of whiskey on a cracked plate.

Across the Marshal's face fluttered the wan ghost of a smile, and he spoke between fierce gulps of pain.

"You — stood the — last treat, Jess. Have one — on me — now?"

"Sure,— old hoss!" was the grisly cordiality of the tortured Bolande.

The watchers huddled their rag-limp forms to an erect position, clinked their glasses for them, put the busy life of the glowing liquor to their shivering, ashen lips. And this was Bolande's toast: —

"Better luck — in — the — next country!"

"How!" was the Marshal's acceptance; and they drank with panting effort.

The vigor and bravado of the blood of the corn ran like a prairie fire through their parched and arid frames, and Bolande's voice flung out with spendthrift recklessness:—

“ Well, it was a damned good fight, anyway ! ” He squeezed the Marshal's clammy hand as a last spasm wrung the clay dry of his soul, and he was dead.

A long two minutes of silence smothered life before the Marshal breathed a faintness, half a sigh, half an answering whisper, “ Good-by — Jess,— or — is it — how ? ” And the sands of his life were run.

So they died, stern in wrath, stern in love, with no puny cry of contrition, no wild appeal for mercy beyond the Mystery; each content, rather than proud, that he — and his friend — had died game. They were Americans. With all our faults and all our virtues, both necessary to the unrighteous wrenching of a continent away from its unworthy owners. Of such were the builders of the West.

