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**WARREN FROST**



**SACRIFICE**

**THE BOY WANTED TO BE A HERO,  
BUT AN INNOCENT MAN HAD  
TO DIE FIRST . . .**

"THERE'S THE GUN, PADRE. YOU want to be a hero, use it."

The young priest stood perfectly still facing the gnarled, phlegmatic sheriff. Only his clenched fists marred the otherwise placid façade, but his thoughts were racing up and down a scale of emotions he had never encountered before. For the first time in his life he wanted to hurt a man. Reach out with his hands and hurt this tired, inept old man standing before him.

"Well?" the lawman asked. "What are you going to do?"

Words finally came to him and he spoke them softly and slowly, as though testing their truth before he freed them from his mind. "That man is a human being, Sheriff. He's not an animal. He deserves a trial." He pointed to the half-breed crouched in the corner of one of the two small cells of the jail. Sweat poured down the faces of the three men for, although not yet eleven, the sun was baking the little town of Dobart for the tenth straight day in 110-degree heat.

"Let me tell you something, young fella," the sheriff growled. "You can't come out here with your fancy ideas and change us over in a week. You best let nature take its course like I am."

"That man is going to be . . . be murdered!"

"Padre, I'm an old man. I'm tired. I got an eyewitness to the killin'."

"A simple-minded boy. You can't take his . . ."

"I take what I want," the sheriff

interrupted. "I don't take what I don't want. My job's to keep this miserable little town happy as possible. Now I had a killin' this mornin'. I got a man says he saw that man do the killin'. And I got a town full of men who ain't happy about the killin'. If I wait for the circuit judge, it might be two, three weeks afore we have a trial, with them same men that ain't happy today sitting on the jury. I don't rightly see how it makes much difference whether they hang him today or next month. Do you?"

The noise was growing louder from across the street. All that was missing was the final spark.

The priest turned his back on the law and walked out into the hot, dusty street. He couldn't take up a gun, but he knew he must at least try to stop it. Perhaps he could reach them before it was too late—but how? At all costs, he had cautioned himself over and over on the trip west, you must avoid a pious attitude. The roughhewed would never understand.

He walked quickly across the deserted street to the saloon that now caged most of the town's male population. Men, who two hours before had been ordinary, peace-loving citizens, were now turning into animals. Through the swinging doors he saw Jerry, the eyewitness, swaggering up and down on top of the bar, the toast of the town. A simple-minded boy having a moment of glory.

He pushed the doors open and started for the bar. His sudden presence hushed the crowd. For a brief

moment the color of his habit made wild men sane and he felt their resentment. They were working toward a goal of courage. Their god was in a bottle now and they wanted no earthly representative of another faith to block their progress.

He walked straight to the bar as the silent men parted to make a path for him.

The trouble had started early that morning when Frank Craven had been shot in the back as he trudged along the old Mesa Pass road near Banner Forks. Frank was old, nobody knew how old, and harmless. Everybody had always accepted Frank as part of the scenery around Dobart. Now that he was dead, he had become everyone's best friend.

"Great old guy!"

"Never forget him!"

"Poor Frank!"

"Great old guy!"

Tempers had soared with the sudden discovery of the terrible loss of such a great friend.

"Who'd do it?"

"We ought to get a posse."

"The guy who finds him would be a hero!"

Hero! The man who finds the killer would be a hero!

This oft-repeated word reached the listening ears of the boy named Jerry, age eighteen, who swept stores, ran errands and dreamed of the day he might be a recognized part of Dobart's male society. His thoughts came slowly, but the pattern began to form.

"Sheriff," the men said, "we ought to get a posse."

"Poor Frank."

"Be calm. It's a hot day. We'll find him," the old sheriff said and went to his office, had a swig from the bottle, mopped his brow and put his feet up on the desk to think, and sleep, or just sleep.

*Hero!* The man would be a hero. The word echoed louder and louder in the empty caverns of Jerry's mind.

So, tempers rose and tempers fell and an hour later the incident was almost forgotten. Frank Craven was dead. He had his moment of fond memory and immortality in the minds of his pathetic friends and then he slipped away to be forgotten until his burial later that day.

It was at this moment that the young priest made his first public appearance of the day after an unsatisfactory breakfast of greasy eggs at the hotel, but he accepted this as part of the cross he must bear in order to bring his teachings where they would do the most good. His task was uppermost in his mind this morning, for in two days he would be celebrating his first mass and certain physical necessities would have to be taken care of.

The sheriff looked up as he entered the dirty office. "Hello, Padre. Have a swig." He offered the bottle.

"Good morning, Sheriff. I don't believe right now, thank you." This man was going to be difficult for him, yet he knew he needed the lawman's acceptance since he was the titular leader of his new parish.

"Suit yourself," the old man said.

"I hear a man has been killed?"

"You hear right."

"Is there anything I can do?"

The sheriff looked up at him again. Christ, he's an oddball, he thought, but what can you expect from someone in long skirts? "We'll bury him when the sun goes down. You can bring your little book with you if you like." It would save him the trouble of saying meaningless words, so perhaps there was consolation after all.

"Of course," the priest said with a note of scholarly reverence in his voice. He let a moment pass, then launched into the real reason for his visit. "Sheriff, I wonder if I could get some benches built. For Sunday. I realize it's relatively short notice, but I thought it'd be nice if folks could sit down."

"What folks?"

"I'm having church services Sunday morning."

"So the sign said."

"I expect a few of your citizens will attend. At least some of the ladies have indicated they would." He was being baited and he knew it. Perhaps now was the time to get their differences out in the open. He certainly couldn't operate efficiently under the conditions this man would set up if he allowed him to. "You don't like me very much, do you?" he said, bracing himself for what might come.

"I ain't thought about that one way or the other." The old man grinned showing his half-gone set of

teeth. "Would you like a definite answer right now or can you wait a spell?"

"Sheriff, I was sent here. I was sent to do a job." It was a schoolboy rebuttal, but debate had never been one of his strong points. "What your views may be on religion are your own," he concluded.

"Thank you."

"But I had hoped for some cooperation."

"Look, Padre," he snapped, as his feet found the floor and he sat up in his chair, "I ain't got nothing against you personally, but things are running pretty smooth hereabouts. We settle our troubles the easiest way we can and folks take to it that way. Now I ain't doubting your methods, but I'd just like to get one thing straight. I won't bother you none, and you can return the favor. Do I make myself clear?"

The priest made no outward sign, but tolerance was coming hard for him.

"What I'm trying to say is, I run this town my way. Folks believe in me. I wouldn't want that sort of thing changed. I'm too old for change."

"Changes come along sometimes whether we like them or not."

"Maybe in Boston, Padre, but not here. They like things the way they are. They lie still. You leave 'em that way, we won't have no troubles."

"I have no plans for making any sweeping changes, Sheriff, at the moment."

"Now that's mighty reassurin'."

The sheriff sighed. He looked about him, letting his unhappy guest hang for a moment. Finally, he continued. "This is my territory," he said, indicating the dilapidated room with the two cells in the rear. "Josh Reynolds might make you some benches for your church. That's your territory. Now you stay in yours and I'll stay in mine. You sing them songs on Sunday and you hold them ladies' hands. You bring your little book to the open graves and you forget everything else." He paused to allow the words time to sink in. "Good-by, Padre," he said, and the dismissal fell like spit at the feet of the young man.

There is no recourse with men like this, he thought. Their souls had obviously closed off the real world and were living in an abyss of self-indulgence. He spun on his heels, fought back a "thank you" that formed in his parched throat and walked out into the street to find Josh Reynolds, the casket-maker, handy man of Dobart.

He hardly noticed the boy, Jerry, casually leaning on an old broom as he came out of the jail. Jerry had heard all and he wanted to run in and shake the old lawman's hand for the way he'd handled the critter. But, the sheriff didn't take kindly to intrusions when he was aiming to rest, so the boy settled for a laugh. It was not loud enough for the ears of the retreating priest, but it gave the boy that indefinable feeling of belonging. His muddled thoughts groped back to that word, *Hero*, and

he cursed to himself because it wasn't easy to be a hero and it was so important. He figured the only way he'd ever be one was with some sort of miracle.

Ten minutes later his miracle arrived.

The half-breed reined his pinto up beside the dozing boy. "Hey, kid?" he called. "What's the name of this dumb town?" His voice was high-pitched and he spoke with a thick accent.

"Dobart," Jerry answered numbly, pulling himself awake.

"Look like not much of a town," the man sneered.

"You think so?" Jerry replied haughtily, for insults such as these demanded proper attention.

The man laughed. "Dumb kid," he said and tugged at the rein and headed across the street to the saloon.

Jerry lay the broom carelessly against the post. He stepped into the road and as though hypnotically drawn, he followed the stranger. The word was pounding harder in his mind now. *Hero! Hero! Hero!* Its staccato beat punished him and drove him forward. He watched the ugly creature tie off his horse. He watched him swagger into the bar and listened to him demand a bottle like no man should demand—least of all a man like him. Then he knew. The way two cowhands looked at the new arrival and the way the bartender gave his customer the cheapest rotgut and walked away without a word. He knew—his miracle was ready-made.

He didn't tell his story very well, but he didn't have to. "Why didn't you say something earlier?" The sheriff asked, regretting even then he found it necessary to question at all.

"I didn't know where it had happened," Jerry went on, fighting to control the twitching sensations that throbbed through his sweating body. "I was too far away to see what the guy was doing, but when he rode by me I got a good look at him. That guy in the bar is the man who killed Frank Craven. I swear it, Sheriff."

In his story he had claimed to be out for an early-morning walk and since Jerry's behavior pattern had long since defied definition it did not seem surprising.

For a moment the sheriff showed no sign. He thought of asking why Jerry didn't check to see if it had been Craven, but he discarded the idea, at least for the moment.

The old man's silence tore at Jerry because he was sure he was close and . . .

"Let's have a look," the lawman said.

A look was all he needed. The fact that the drifter could neither prove his whereabouts at dawn nor account for the sixteen dollars in his tattered pants only added fuel.

"Who tell you this?" the man screamed, as the sheriff threw him into the cell and slammed the rusty old door shut. "He lie! He lie!" the frightened man cried as he shook his cage violently.

As the unremitting sun gathered

its strength for another day of punishment, the word spread. Some of the more curious peered through the jail windows for a look, but most just accepted, because accepting was less demanding.

"Some greaser!"

"Might'a know."

"Jerry saw him."

"Jerry?" incredulously.

"Sheriff says."

"Well!"

"WELL!"

"What d'ya know."

"Hey! There he is!"

There he was, standing meekly near the jail. He was uncertain and having conscience pains. Now that it was done, maybe he shouldn't have—or worse still, maybe it wouldn't work, and folks would only laugh like always and he would have lost his chance. Christ, it was difficult figuring out things about people. And if it didn't work, maybe he ought to tell the sheriff he'd made a mistake. And . . .

"Hey, Jerry! Come on, kid. I'll buy you a drink."

Invitation! No funning? No cussing? No jokes? A real invitation, just like a real man?

"Here he is, boys. The man who got Frank Craven's killer!"

He was numb and fighting to smile. Was it true? Suddenly all his dreams were there on the bar before him and folks were passing the word. The crowd swelled and over and over he repeated his story between free drinks until the drinks and the story became one and the same and the story be-

came much more explicit and at the same time fuzzy. The room danced and faces blurred. All the smiling, happy, sweating faces that looked up at him on his lofty perch on top of the bar.

"Here's to the man who got the greaser!" a voice from the haze proposed.

The noise grew louder with the agreements and the boy danced a little and bowed deeply until they helped him regain his balance. Then everyone laughed and that felt good, too. Everybody laughing with him, and he wanted to cry. He would have, too, he thought, if he hadn't been so happy. You dream and dream and dream of happiness and when it finally comes it wraps you up in its soft cloak and makes you feel so warm and good all over.

So, the hero was made and the oft-repeated word began to fade into the jubilant background and from this fog of phony merriment another word came slipping stealthily out. Softly, hesitantly at first, but the momentum was as inevitable as the rising sun. As the parched lips grew wet with whisky, the word grew bolder and more important and more compelling—LYNCH!

No one had said a word. The priest had been allowed to enter through the crowd. He had stopped when he reached the bar and stared into the expressionless eyes of the bartender. To his left, along the bar, he could see the newly crowned hero, weaving slightly and glaring at

him through bleary eyes. He dared not turn around to face them, for his intrusion had been a grandstand move in a game he had never played before. Perhaps they will make the first move, he thought, but as the silence continued behind him, he realized it was up to him. They were giving him his moment. "Oh, My Heavenly Father," he prayed silently, "give me strength."

"Could I have a glass of wine, bartender, please?" he finally asked. His voice caught on the word "wine," but the bartender never flinched as he produced a dusty bottle, a clean glass and fulfilled the churchman's request. When the priest started for his money pouch the bartender's growl stopped him. "On the house," he said.

The priest nodded his thanks. He felt the silent words of laughter and contempt pass from eye to eye of the men behind him. The wine burned and tasted vinegary and he was ashamed of the tear that formed in his eye. He blinked it away helplessly.

From somewhere out of the forest of silent men a throat was cleared. His time had come. "*Turn and face us, Priest,*" their probing eyes demanded. "*Say your say—if you dare.*"

He turned quickly, jerkingly, for he was not able to muster the courage of a confident slow turn. There they were, waiting—a sea of hot, sweating, featureless faces staring through him and seeing inside him to his paralyzed mind and pounding heart.



He noticed Charlie Tinkham, the dry-goods storekeeper, near the front of the mob. The man's rimless glasses clung perilously to the prim little nose and his mouth twitched as the priest's eyes singled him out. "Mr. Tinkham? Hadn't you better be getting back to the store?" he asked softly. The little man sighed with relief at being let off so easily and his eyes cast about looking for a twinkle of encouragement. But the priest wasn't through. "Might lose some sales," he blundered on. He tried to make it sound light, but the laugh, which should have accompanied his little joke, caught in his tense throat.

Tinkham had passed his test. Without a word he turned toward the bar and offered his empty glass for a refill.

What frightened the churchman most was that there seemed to be no anger toward him. It was as though he posed no threat and thus rated only a passive tolerance for his trouble.

He spotted Josh Reynolds and asked the old carpenter if he'd been able to get started on his benches. "Busy!" came back the terse reply. "Building a casket for Frank Craven."

Had he tried, he could not have written a better epitaph to his peace-making efforts.

"Best be going along, Padre," Logan Answain, the giant blacksmith, advised. He spoke as though telling a small boy to leave the room so the adults could talk and the silence a-

round the dismitter only added insistence to his request.

As the crowd had parted on his entrance, so they gave way again. He made no effort to save face. No strong nod or pointed wave of the hand. He dragged himself out the way he had come. Pushing open the door before him, he passed through into the sweltering street. The door swung closed behind him and a voice inside exclaimed, "Jesus Christ! Gimme a drink!"

Twenty-eight years old and ever since he could remember he had wanted to be a priest. Hard work and honest devotion had earned him his collar. Now he was on the threshold of his first real challenge and all he had been able to offer was a silly joke—"You might lose some sales." What manner of man was he? The thoughts tore at him. Had he deluded himself so completely? He had asked for his assignment with splendid assurance. Now he stood in the dusty street, outside a saloon, a pitiful failure and he wanted to be sick.

The church had done a great deal in bringing both understanding and peace to the difficult border lands. Their task hadn't been easy, but the men who had preceded him west had cut their niche. He had read about them eagerly and he honestly felt it to be his destiny. He could have had a church in Weymouth or he might even have stayed on to teach at the seminary, but his belief was genuine and the bishop had wished him well.

He gripped the hitching post and

fought back the nausea boiling within him. He was losing a battle to self-pity and his weakness disgusted him. Slowly he gained control of his churning stomach. I am going to be a party to a murder, he thought, and he mumbled a silent prayer for forgiveness. Well, pull yourself together, he finally demanded. At least face your victim like a man. Give him solace if you can give him nothing else. He straightened up with an exaggerated effort and marched across the street to the jail.

When he entered, his eyes met those of the prisoner. They were eyes full of hate and fury. They asked for neither love nor understanding, as if they belonged to a man who had learned that such did not exist for him.

"May I speak to him?" he asked the lawman.

"Suit yourself."

He walked to the barred cage. "I'm afraid there may be some trouble," he explained weakly. "Do you know what you are charged with, my son?"

"They think I kill a man."

"An old man." The priest went on, "Did you do it?" he asked, hopefully wishing to find help for his sagging conscience.

"I kill nobody," he said defiantly. "Nobody!"

Dear God in Heaven, the priest thought, they are going to kill an innocent man. He is telling the truth. He must be, he repeated to himself as he searched the man's eyes for one sign of untruth. "I believe

you," he said solemnly. "May God give you strength, my son."

He spun away from the condemned man and walked quickly to the sheriff. For just a moment the eyes of the prisoner twinkled with a laugh of contempt, but the priest had already turned away.

"The man is innocent," he said to the sheriff. "How can you sit there and let them believe what is not true? I implore you. Have you no human feelings left? Have you slipped so far as to condone murder?"

"You say he's innocent. How d'you know?" the sheriff asked and took another drink, for time was running out.

"He told me so."

"And you believe him?"

"He wouldn't lie to me, Sheriff. What would he gain?"

"Don't ask me to figure 'em. I never could."

"You've never tried."

"Maybe I never wanted to try."

The saloon across the street exploded with the final release from the bounds of human dignity.

"They're coming," the priest heard himself say half-aloud.

The sheriff removed his gun once again from its holster and pointedly lay it on the desk before the priest. "They're doing what they want to do and doing it'll solve their problem."

"They're going to lynch him."

"Ain't never had a lynching in Dobart. Maybe they figure it's their turn," he said, but he took another drink.

The priest was white. His trem-

bling limbs quivered under his cloak as another roar came rolling across the dusty road. It was louder than before and with more assurance.

"Reckon they found the spark they needed." The sheriff mumbled, for already the alcohol was numbing his tongue.

Their spark appeared in the form of Eben Lawrence, a crony of Frank Craven's from the hotel-porch set. Eben never really slept, but he lived most of his daylight hours in the cradle-like grasp of a porch rocker. So, when he appeared now in the saloon, all the morning's events had slipped past him. He only knew that some few minutes before he had become aware that the chair beside him was not holding its usual occupant and anything that important needed looking into.

"Seen Frank Craven?" he asked one of the men on the outer ring of the crowd. "I been looking for Frank and I ain't seen him." Eben was like family and he got family treatment as they eased him through the mob and up to the bar.

"Frank's dead," somebody told him and Eben learned the assassin was resting across the street behind bars.

"I'll kill him," the old one said as he began to shake with anger. "He killed Frank and I'll kill him. Frank was my friend. My friend," he repeated, and the tears began to trickle down the sun-dried old face.

So this was the spark. An old man with an antiquated love of a dead friend.

"We'll take care of him for you, Eben," they said and the chorus grew in numbers. "Won't we?" they shouted and from somewhere came a rope. Glasses were emptied and the saloon spilled men out into the street. The men stumbled, but marched in force, for only in force, despite all the time and whisky, did they possess the courage for such an act.

And Eben sat down on the floor of the empty saloon and he cried. When you're an Eben Lawrence you can't afford such a loss for there is nothing to take its place. So you cry for it is best and it is easy and suddenly it makes you feel good because so many people really care.

As the wave rolled on, the four men fought their separate battles.

The priest found himself staring at the gun before him. His ineffectiveness had ground him to immobility as each beat of his pounding heart stabbed him for his inadequacies.

The sheriff held the near-empty bottle to his lips. Pass out, he prayed. Let me pass out right now, he begged silently.

The intended victim, when he realized the time had come, could only gather his helpless form in one last swing at the ugly world and curse it up and down in the two languages he knew. "Pigs!" he screamed and his mocking words fell in with the storm from outside and echoed aimlessly in the air.

And the boy, the hero, melted

from the crowd. His role had faded from importance with the advent of old Eben and he clung more and more desperately to his obscurity as the tension mounted.

They came as an army through the door. They pressed past that atrophied man of justice, the sheriff, and seized their goal within their hands. They passed the screaming, kicking animal among them until once more they reached the street.

Down the road they pulled and dragged the half-breed toward the single oak silhouetted against the merciless sky.

Almost without knowing it, the young priest followed. His steps were faulty and his eyes blurred from the scene as he repeated feebly his prayers for forgiveness.

The sheriff stumbled out of his sanctuary and leaned drunkenly against the porch rail. Watch, you miserable slob, he said to himself. Watch it and try your damndest to forget.

When Jerry saw the struggling man being tossed from hand to hand, he bolted. As fast as his weakened legs would carry him, he ran for the cover of the empty saloon. Over the roar of the mob the sobs of the dead man's friend came to him. He put his hands over his ears, frantically trying to close out all sound from his terrified mind.

The rope went up and over the limb and the noose came down and swayed lightly in the heavy air. They

brought up a horse and started to boost the man up. His eyes came to rest on the big knot with the loop below and suddenly he stopped squirming. His tense body relaxed as he looked from the rope to the nearest man. "Priest!" he said, and the men lowered him to the ground. The word worked its way through the crowd and presently, as they had in the saloon, the mob parted and from the end of the gantlet came the priest.

He knelt beside the still figure as a hush fell over the mob. They pushed the ring back to give space, if nothing else, to the solemn moment.

"May I help you, my son?" There was a quiver in his voice, but he didn't care. He did not feel impersonal about the act which was coming.

"Father," he began in a whisper, as he put his lips close to the priest's ears. Some few heads turned and others bowed and for the moment no man spoke.

Jerry crouched behind the bar still trying to stifle the sound from without. Then he became aware of no sound save Eben's quiet sobbing and out of this sudden silence came a memory from the dim past. The memory took the shape of a word and it reached out and seized its owner by the throat and held him in its terrifying grip. The boy fought and swung his arms wildly, as the word increased its hold. *Herol!* the memory cried. *Herol! Herol! Herol!*

the beat continued and the boy slumped flat on the floor. *Herol Herol Herol* the punishment increased and through it all came the constant accompaniment of Eben's tearful moans.

"I kill him, Father," the man confessed. "He was old. Near dead-like and I kill him. I no think he live here. I swear, Father, I never kill before." The man babbled on, but his words suddenly lost definition after the first sentence had reached the listening ear of the priest. He felt himself stiffen as the blood drained from his face. "What difference does it make?" he heard the sheriff say. "Now or in a month?" "But he's innocent! He told me!" "And you believe him?" Believe? Believe? Dear God in Heaven, do I believe in anything any more?

Somehow he listened, giving solace when he could and absolution and blessing when the man was through. Their eyes met at the last and the man smiled simply at the priest. Then he stood up stiffly.

As the man rose, the crowd moved in and the silence stopped. They needed momentum now and shouting helped, so they shouted loud and long. They pushed and shoved one another, because pushing was striking out and shoving made one mad and when one was mad one could do all kinds of things.

The roar, after the interminable silence, cut the cringing boy like a knife. He was sick now and helpless as he lay on the dirty floor. As the

sound increased in tempo, his head began to swim and he seemed to pass out only to have some unexplainable urge revive him.

Then all was deathly still and the silence settled mistlike over the boy. Whatever it is in man that keeps him from falling over that final precipice of reason, surged forth now in the boy. Suddenly he was on his feet. As he plunged through the doors he found his voice. He had difficulty projecting, but as he half-ran, half-stumbled toward the circle around the craggy old tree, it gained in volume. "Stop it," he begged. "Stop. Stop it. I lied," he cried. "I lied!"

Through the quietly triumphant mob he pushed until he stood alone within the circle. "I lied," he screamed. His words grasped each man by the throat. "I lied," he repeated as the dangling feet came menacingly close to his tear-filled face. "I didn't see anything," he muttered. His knees failed him, and he sank slowly into a heap within the swaying shadow of the dead man.

Some men bolted and others, not as lucky, fought a losing battle with their stomachs as their eyes followed, with uncontrolled fascination, their strangled victim. Their innocent victim.

The storekeeper returned to his calico and muslin and the blacksmith attempted to soothe his conscience before his anvil. Within seconds the street was clear. Clear, except for a simpering boy groveling under a shadow. Except for the

trembling sheriff, who somehow had dragged himself to the side of his accomplice and stood glassy-eyed, staring through and beyond a man who would haunt him forever. And except for the priest. I hold a secret, he thought, a secret that could free a town of its bonds. I wonder, he

mused more wisely than ever before in his short, sheltered life. I wonder? Would I free them even if I could?

The shadows dimmed that day on Dobart's last lynching. Though the street in time resumed an air of life and custom, no man who stood among them ever forgot.

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