

# The Hounding Minstrel

By CHARLES HAVEN

*A tramp's guitar strummed a haunting tune of murder which led to retribution*



**F**OR one month old John King, erstwhile insurance agent, had been a millionaire. The unprecedented land "boom" in Florida made his ten hundred thousand for him. When the bubble burst he found himself in possession of a few hundred dollars, an automobile, and a brand-new town that nobody lived in. Sylvan City, he called the town. It was miles inland from the lower east coast highway, and isolated. Florida was much over-built. Not a house in Sylvan City could be sold for enough to settle its tax levy.

But King would not give up this dream of his, and he lived there alone, a monarch among weeds, the saplings and vines of a new and swiftly growing jungle, ants and mosquitoes, lizards

and gophers, salamanders and snakes. The world-wide depression came on, and the State had its quota of human derelicts. King took in a score of these, and worked out at least a temporary scheme of salvation for them and for himself.

There appeared in Sylvan City late one afternoon two men from Louisiana. The first to arrive was a stockily built brute of a fellow, unshaven and ragged. His name was Joe Huff. In spite of him, his manner was surly.

"I heard about you, Mr. King," he began. "I—I got to eat."

King, tall and gaunt and grizzled, sat in worn whites, barefoot, on a stool in the shaded main entrance of a faded and peeling stucco building that had been meant for the town hall. He was

not favorably impressed with Huff. But the man was hungry, and King knew what hunger was.

"All right," he said. "Here's the way we run things. We take occasional trips to the beach sections for sea-shells, unhusked coconuts, thin lumber, paint, and the like. Here we carve the coconuts into Jiggs and Maggie faces, decorate the larger shells for ash receivers and pin trays, make small wooden boxes and veneer them with tiny coquina-clam shells of variegated colors. Everything is marked 'A Souvenir from Florida,' and sold to curio stores in Miami for tourists. This building is our workshop, and the building next door is our—er—barracks. We—"

Joe Huff had whipped around and was scowling at the other newcomer, a slim young fellow who also was ragged and unshaven.

"You know him, eh?" muttered King, guessing well. "Who is he?"

"They call him the Plaquemine Kid," growled Huff in undertones. "He's a bad one. He's half outlawed. He had to promise the judge—"

The Plaquemine Kid was very close now. King saw that he carried a battered guitar slung over one shoulder. This second stranger, too, was hungry. King took him on.

"You play that, eh?" said King, indicating the guitar. "I think the boys would like it, a lot. And you sing?"

"A little," was the drawled answer. "I know one fine song, in pa'ticklar. It's out o' the West."

He cut a dark eye toward Huff, who made a queer noise in his throat. Huff had gone pale. King noted it, and spoke again.

"Something between you two. What is it?"

"He's follered me," blurted Huff,

"clean from Plaquemine. I go to a fishin' camp. He's there too. I find a little job in the groves. One hour, and he comes. Always with that damn guitar. I cain't—cain't lose him!"

The Kid's eyes were narrow and hard. King addressed him: "What was it you promised the judge?"

"So you had to tell that, did you, you big rat!" the peripatetic minstrel shot fiercely at Huff. In a lower voice, which was not quite steady: "Mr. King, I promised the judge I'd never carry a gun no more, and I ain't. I've kept my word."

The monarch of the "ghost" town shrugged. "I'll not pry into your affairs. But remember this: here you must keep the peace. And you work, or you don't eat. Supper will be ready very soon. Better wash up, eh?"

"I sure am much obliged to you," said the younger of the Plaqueminers, and the other said nothing.

IT was a motley but well-behaved derelict crew that gathered, after a coarse but substantial meal at sundown, in the "barracks" building. They sat here and there on their army-style cots, smoked, did almost no talking at all, and eyed frequently the slim young man from Louisiana. It was not necessary to ask the Kid to play and sing. He had a good, clear voice, which atoned in worthwhile measure for his more or less outlandish repertoire.

There was odd, reckless abandon in his countenance as he sang. The tune was so doleful that it was funny. And the words—

*When I die, oh! bury me deep!  
Tombstone at my head and feet!  
Big white rose in my left hand—  
On my way to the Promised Land!  
On my wa-a-a-a-ay  
To the Promised Land!*

*Go tell mother to weep no more;  
Tell her I jest went on before.  
Big red rose in my right hand—  
On my way to the Promised Land!  
On my wa-a-a-a-a-ay  
To the Promised Land!*

All of them laughed and cheered. All, that is, except Joe Huff, who sat brooding, staring downward at nothing. Then the Plaquemine Kid launched upon an even more doleful thing. He sang and played this to, and at, Joe Huff, deliberately. It was that song out of the West, opened in the middle:

*Let sixteen gamblers  
Lay out my pore body;  
Let ten brave sheriffs  
Come bear me along!  
Bear me to the graveyard  
And throw the sod o'er me.  
I'm only a lone cowboy,  
And know I've done wrong!*

He watched Huff as a hawk watches a rattler. Huff had gone ashen-white. His teeth were clenched, and his jaw muscles worked. Perspiration formed in large globules on his brow. King was there; he noted the bigger Plaqueminer's profound distress and wondered what tail end of drama, of tragedy, this pair had brought to Sylvan City. The singer's eye seemed merciless as he began another verse of that Western song:

*Put bunches of flowers  
All over my casket;  
Flowers to deaden  
The clods as they fall.  
For only—*

"Stop that!" shrieked Huff. "Stop it! Graveyards, tombstones, caskets! Don't you never think o' anything else, Kid?"

"No," quietly. "Not for a long time, Joe, I ain't thought o' anything else."

"Then for gosh sakes take it out on me some other way!"

"I reckon you've forgot somethin', Joe. Forgot that I promised old Judge Moreland I'd never carry another gun." The Kid jerked his head around and forced a smile for John King. "Here's Millwheel."

He sang it, strumming an accompaniment. Other songs followed. Until bedtime he entertained them, those human—very human—derelicts. Then he glanced meaningly toward Huff, and asked King to take charge of his guitar.

"I ain't slept none for two nights," he said wearily. "I'd like to sleep to-night."

King nodded. He understood. Joe Huff would avail himself of any chance to steal and destroy the instrument, which, it was evident, he hated. King took the guitar with him up to his room on the second floor. In this room he had an army-style cot like those below, a canvas chair, and a scarred mahogany desk, the latter named a relic of the "boom."

The next day was Saturday, the day on which he was wont to make his weekly journey to Miami for the purpose of marketing souvenirs and bringing back supplies. The rear of his now ancient big car was soon well loaded with carved coconuts and shell-work. As was his custom, he took two men in the front seat with him, men who were to help in picking up shells along the beaches on the way back.

"Looks like rain," King observed, as they crossed a rotting bridge over a wide, hyacinth-choked canal that ran between Sylvan City and the east coast highway. "I know, it's said that only a fool or a stranger prophesies weather in Florida, but—"

"Last year it poured four solid days

in January," one of his companions reminded him.

THEY had barely finished their deal with a curio shop on Flagler Street, when rain began to fall almost in sheets. King decided to forget about supplies for the time being, except for groceries. The land on either side of the canal was very low, and, if this deluge kept up, Sylvan City would be marooned within a very few hours. He drove the big, rattling car as fast as he could with safety. They found half a foot of water over the rotting canal bridge, and there was still no sign of the rain's slackening.

Before nightfall the raw materials were all worked up. The men had nothing to do. Again the Plaquemine Kid with his guitar and his singing became the chief attraction.

On this night, also, John King took the instrument with him when he went to his quarters upstairs. He placed the money he'd had left after having bought a week's supply of groceries—only a little more than thirty dollars, but to him and his men a fortune—in a drawer of his desk. Then he got out of his worn whites and into worn pajamas, extinguished the flame of the oil lamp, and went to bed.

Rain was still falling, and this, ordinarily, lulled him to sleep. But now sleep evaded him. It was not the weird persistent cries of a chuck-wills-widow, nor the incessant croaking of frogs, nor the infrequent distant bellowing of canal alligators that kept him awake. The difficulty, oddly or not, was that he couldn't drive the queer pair from Louisiana out of his thoughts. Plainly, the Kid was hounding Joe Huff, for some real or fancied reason, and it was a thing that displeased King.

Notwithstanding the fact that he

was late going to sleep, he rose early. The downpour had ceased, but the dawn was bleak. He went to a window and peered through, smiled sadly at the weeds and vines and saplings that choked the main street of the town that had been his greatest dream. The scene was the more tragic in the dim, gray light.

He turned away frowning. Suddenly he realized that he was staring toward the desk drawer into which he had put the slightly more than thirty dollars. The drawer was open. Half a minute, and he had the truth. The money was gone!

King swore. Roundly he swore. The crashing of his fortunes had given him a lesser degree of perturbation. He had a thief in his crew, and it hurt. Always he had trusted them, and never before had he missed so much as a thin dime.

Then he remembered that he had two new men now, the Plaqueminers, each of whom was as yet an untried, unknown quantity.

"Either Huff or that buck-wild Kid," he told himself, "is the damned thief."

Quickly he dressed himself, except for shoes, and went downstairs. Every man jack of those who occupied the orderly rows of cots along the walls was asleep, or feigning sleep so well that King was deceived. King bent over Joe Huff, seized one of his heavy shoulders and gave it a shake that brought the man sitting bolt upright in his none too tidy underwear.

"I'm asking you," began the monarch of Sylvan City, whispering, "to give up that money. Without it we've got nothing to buy raw materials with, and next week we'll have nothing to eat. Hustle!"

"What money?"

Huff blinked. He was innocent, or his acting was superb, and in John King's opinion he was too bovine a man for superb acting.

"Keep quiet," whispered the grizzled, barefoot monarch.

AT once he walked over to the Kid and woke him, said to him the identical words he'd said to Huff. The slim young Plaqueminer stared at him out of narrowed dark eyes set in a perfect poker face, and did not open his mouth. Joe Huff disregarded King's order to keep quiet, and called boldly:

"Somebody stole your money, boss, eh? Well, if you think it was me, you can come and search my clothes, search my bed, search everything about me!"

That woke a dozen men. King ignored Huff, and again addressed the hounding minstrel.

"I hate to think you'd do that, son. But you act it and you look it."

There was a reply to this. It came in a rock-hard voice.

"Sure, I took the money. Anything which is done, why, I'm the guilty party. I'm used to that. Had to prove a alibi every week or so, back in Plaquemine."

Stumped, John King went up to his quarters and paced the floor, his bare feet making almost no sound at all. Soon a man known there as "Ohio" entered the room.

"I heard what Huff said, boss," apologetically muttered Ohio. "Why don't you search both of the new men?"

"Do you think," flared King, "that either of them would be fool enough to risk being caught with the money on him? Not a bit of it. That money is hidden somewhere, Ohio."

The gloomy Sunday morning dragged on. The Kid refused to play and sing, refused to talk, and at noon refused to eat. Joe Huff barely touched his food. King saw through this easily. The innocent one of the pair had had his feelings injured, and the guilty one was pretending that same thing.

About the middle of the sunless afternoon an unlettered, weatherbeaten thin rail of a man whom the rest of the crew called "Three Rivers" approached the minstrel with a difficult smile.

"Son, we air awful lonesome here, somehow, to-day. Ef you'll sing and play fer us, I got a purty fair old silverine watch I'll gi' you. Will you, son?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then: "King's got my guitar. Bring it here. You can keep the watch, old-timer."

Three Rivers went happily for the instrument. The Kid sat up on his cot and sang and played this ancient doggerel:

*Old Granny Hare,  
Wachte doin' there?  
Settin' on a hillside,  
Talkin' to a bear!  
Talkin' 'bout weather,  
Religion and sin;  
Talkin' 'bout crops,  
Politics and gin!*

*Granny, will yer dog bite.  
Dog bite, dog bite?  
No, child, no!  
I done cut his head off,  
Head off, head off,  
I done cut his head off,  
Long time ago!*

*Old Granny she lived  
Down under the hill.  
Put a cat in her stockin'  
And sent it to mill.  
The miller he swore  
By the p'int o' his knife,  
He never had ground  
Sech a grist in his lifel*

*Granny, will yer dog bite,  
Dog bite, dog bite?  
No, child, no!  
I done cut his head off,  
Head off, head off,  
I done cut his head off,  
Long time ago!*

He did away with his customary booming finish of chords and bass-string runs. There was a gleam in his eye as it sought the heavy, always brooding face of Joe Huff. Suddenly the Kid rose, walked over to a point near Huff and once more opened the song out of the West in the middle; he sang and played in strange, wild abandon and with tremendous verve—

*Let sixteen gamblers  
Lay out my pore body;  
Let ten brave sheriffs  
Come bear me along!  
Bear me to the graveyard  
And throw the sod o'er me.  
I'm only a lone cowboy,  
And know I've done wrong!*

“You little devil!” yelled Huff, rising—“stop that damned thing!”

LIKE an echo there was the business-like voice of the Sylvan City monarch: “Why are you doing that, Kid? For some reason or other, it’s torture to Huff, and you know it. I might add that it’s anything but music to my own ears!”

“That so?” The young Plaqueminer tried to smile, and couldn’t. “S’pose you ask Huff why it’s torture to him. See if he tells you!”

Huff glared in the sheerest desperation. He was a big man physically, but his soul was the soul of a yellow rat, and he was ready to break. The Kid lifted his guitar, struck a chord with all fingers, and sang on:

*Oh, play the fife lowly,  
And beat the drum slowly!  
Play the dead march—*

Joe Huff cut in with a choking bel-low, wheeled and ran. “I’ll leave this blasted hole! I’ll leave—”

The others didn’t catch the rest of it. King rushed into the weedy, wet street after him, shouting: “Come back, Huff! The water is waist deep on the canal bridge now and all covered over thick with hyacinth—if you miss the bridge, you’ll drop under the hyacinth and never get out; you’ll be carried, dead, down to the sea!”

The fleeing man seemed not to hear. He ran at a shogging trot out the wet shell road that led to the coast highway. King followed him, and the others followed King. They reached the water’s edge to see Huff pushing doggedly through the clogging hyacinth in the immediate vicinity of the bridge. The purple bloom brushed his armpits.

“To your left!” yelled King. “The bridge is to your left—left!”

Again Huff seemed not to hear. Then—he dropped out of sight in the canal, and the floating growth closed over him. Ohio quickly began wading toward the spot. King called him back. Not a man alive could even have located Joe Huff under that thick field of green and purple. There was a moment of bleak silence. It was broken by the erstwhile hounding minstrel.

“I reckon you’ll say I’m ’sponsible, Mr. King. Mebbe I am. But I want to tell you somethin’ before you pass judgment. Listen:

“Back in a Plaquemine lumber-camp there was a young feller from out o’ the West, who played that same guitar and sang Western songs. We called him Texas Boy. Him and me was thicker’n brothers. Him and Huff hated each other like pizen. Huff shot him in the back—in the back, mind that!—through a window one night while he was singin’ that same cowboy

song; and that's why Joe couldn't bear to hear it, him bein' the weak coward he was! They arrested and tried him, but couldn't get any proof. But me, I knowed he done it. I runs him off with the song and follers him with it, tellin' him I'll let him alone if he'll 'fess up."

"I got a notion," drawled Three Rivers, "'at ef we could find the body we'd find yore missin' money, Mr. King."

"No," said the Kid. "Because I've got it!"

"You!" cried Three Rivers in amazement.

"Yes, me. Mr. King, you rickollect Joe Huff wanted hisself searched, don't you? Well, he knowed if you searched him you'd also search me too, and he'd planted that money on me! See why,

don't you? Thought he'd be rid o' me and the guitar and the song at last, that's why. I didn't know what to do when I found it in my pocket, but—anyhow I'm comin' clean with you now, and you can do what you damn please about it, John King."

Looking the towering, barefoot monarch straight in the eye, he surrendered the slightly more than thirty dollars that meant so much to King and his derelict crew. He was no liar, and King knew it now.

"Want to stay here with us, or go back to Plaquemine?"

"Bein' as I cain't do nothin' more for Texas Boy," said the slim young man from Louisiana, "I reckon I'll stay here. Thank you, Mr. King. And I'll sing that Western song no more."

THE END



### *Sea-Going Skeletons*

**M**YSTERIES of the sea have troubled mariners for centuries, but none have been more peculiar or puzzling than the cruise of the Scottish schooner *Marlborough*, manned by a crew of grinning skeletons.

On November 3, 1913, the British sailing ship *Johnston*, homeward bound, sighted what appeared to be a schooner with its sails floating in the wind, off the coast of Chile, near Punta Arenas. The commander of the *Johnston* signaled the strange craft, and when he could discern no response, he ordered his ship put about and approached the vessel.

As the two ships neared each other, the men on the *Johnston* observed that the masts and sails of the other craft were covered with some kind of green moss, and the vessel appeared to have been abandoned by its crew. Upon boarding it, the skeleton of a man was discovered beneath the helm. The deck was decayed to such an extent that it gave under the weight of the searchers. Three more skeletons were found near a panel, there were ten skeletons in the crew's quarters, and six more on the bridge. Upon the battered prow of the schooner the words "*Marlborough, Glasgow*," could still be made out.

The *Marlborough*, shipping records revealed, left Littleton, N. Z., in 1890 with a cargo of wool and a crew of twenty-three men under command of Captain Hird. There were also a few passengers and one woman. The ship disappeared near the tip of South America, and was not seen again until sighted twenty-three years later by the *Johnston*, although apparently it had been cruising, guided by skeleton hands, all that time. *G. R. Johnston.*