



Old Joe was sprawled unconscious over the wheel

Amateur Devises

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

There was no honor among these thieves—but they, too, learned it is the best policy

TOM REED, on the way to Gila Junction to see Linda and get his mail, found old Joe Carey sprawled unconscious over the wheel of his car. Joe was something of a mess, with a bullet hole through his left shoulder and a livid crease along his bald skull. The car was half on, half off the road, with a front wheel smashed against a rimming boulder. The jumble of packages in the rear had not been touched, but the express pouch was gone.

Lifting the slight form of the old man in his arms, Tom stepped back into the saddle and headed for Gila Junction. Up to that moment he had never realized how emaciated was Linda's father. He had always seemed such a tenacious old man, spry and eager. Now, lying in Tom's arms, blue-veined eyelids closed, he seemed so worn and weary.

Linda saw them coming and was standing on the sagging porch of the stage lunchroom as Tom swung to the ground with his burden. A white ring formed about her lips, but her eyes were calm, steady.

"I've told him a dozen times he'd have a wreck with that old chariot. How bad is he, Tom?"

"Bad enough, Linda. He's been shot."

"Shot!"

"Two miles up the road. The express pouch was gone."

Linda caught her breath and leaned forward to gaze at the pale face of her father. "Bring him to the back room."

Tom spent fifteen minutes cranking the old wall phone. In the course of time he made two connections and received satisfactory answers from the doctor in Tucson and the sheriff in Brinden. Linda was going about the business of first aid in her usually calm and self-sufficient manner. Tom wondered if there was anything in the world that could upset her for any length of time. Poise was an admirable thing in the desert, but natural or assumed, Linda carried it too far. It never occurred to him that it might be her means of defense against things he would never understand.

This was on a Friday. Mid-afternoon of the following Tuesday, Linda stood on the porch gazing westward along the gray ribbon of road that split the desert toward Tucson. The sky was a brass platter under which broiled a world stricken by heat. An endless world, it seemed, with rolling hills veiled in shimmering curtains. Cactus and mesquite stood starkly submissive to the high-riding god of the sky. Not a breath of air stirred the drooping poplars down by the auto camps. Oppressive, pulsating silence. A woman without proper mental adjustment would have gone mad with it all.

Joe Carey was sleeping again, the weathered skin above his cheek bones dark with fever. Linda had changed the damp cloths so often that morning they had become a parade of white before her aching eyes. She hoped the doctor would come again on the afternoon stage, though he had made no definite promise.

At length a steady drumming beat against her ears, and a darker object broke the white mirror of heat and came lumbering eastward. When it drew up before the warped building, the driver descended to replenish the gurgling radiator. "How's Joe?" he called to her.

"About the same. You didn't bring Doctor Carter?"

The hiss of the overheated radiator drowned his reply. Linda glanced at the stage. There was only one passenger, a man who sat near an open window with chin cupped in a white palm. He was gazing at Linda with eyes the warmth and color of sleet. His mouth was wide, with thin, straight lips. Black hair powdered with dust stood out over a low, predatory forehead. His gaze could never be interpreted as impersonal, and Linda experienced a crawling sensation at the back of her neck. Quickly she turned indoors.

FIVE minutes later the stage departed with a roar that shook the flimsy building. A cloud of blue smoke was left to float on the still, hot air. Linda glanced in on her father; the noise had not disturbed him. She hoped that he would sleep on through until night brought a slight cessation of heat.

When she returned to the lunchroom the lone passenger was standing there on the porch, staring through the open door. His hands were by his sides; long hands, with slim, flexible fingers slightly curled. He was narrow of shoulder, but the open shirt disclosed a deep valley at the base of his neck—an indication of physical strength.

"You didn't go on," she stated, needing the sound of her own voice.

"No, ma'am."

"Changing here for Brinden?"

"No," shortly. "I couldn't stay on that stage another minute. The heat. It blasts through those windows and burns you to a crisp. I'm not used to it. I thought if you didn't mind, I'd stay here and rest until the night stage."

"Why—yes; just sit down. Would you like a glass of water?"

She passed him on the way to the well for a fresh pail of water, and felt his cold eyes following her. The man was lying; he didn't seem the least bit disturbed by the heat; wasn't even perspiring. There was little of dignity for a person at the end of a pump handle, but Linda did her best. Over her shoulder she saw the man flicking the whorls of fine road dust from the seat of a porch chair.

When she handed him the glass of water, his sudden smile startled her; an expression that broke his cold features into tiny fragments of warmth. Nodding his thanks he sipped slowly.

"The stage driver tells me you have a sick man here."

"My father. He was shot in a holdup."

"I thought holdups were a thing of the past out in this country. Badly hurt?"

"He'll live."

"Know who did it?" There was a shade of curiosity in those sleet-gray eyes.

"My father says there were two of them, both masked. No, we don't know."

"Hm-m-m." He placed the empty glass on the arm of the chair and stared out across the dusty yard. Facing them were the camps, the small cubicles with extended roofs, side by side like overgrown beehives. To the right of them the well, with its warped box covering. Beyond the cabins and the

well, the row of poplars were rimming a dry arroyo. Fifty feet from the end of the porch stood Joe Carey's old car, with sun-cracked paint and worn upholstery. Tom Reed had dragged it in the day after the holdup. The stranger's eyes lingered on it for a time, and Linda's heart skipped a beat.

"And you're all alone here," he stated as though summing up a trend of thought.

"If you mean we run this place alone, yes. There's considerable traffic along the road."

"Not this time of year, I imagine. Your business is mostly during the winter months." He felt in a pocket and produced a black cigar. "It don't seem right," he mused, scratching a match. "I mean that a pretty girl like you should be holed up in such a place. The best years of your life."

THE remark was out of character; the man seated in the chair was one who would take what he wanted without preliminary preamble. To substantiate this, he did not go on to tell her that she belonged in the city, with its bright lights and gay living. None of the usual palaver. Instead, his features resumed the set look, eyes fastened on the gray back of a lizard which had flattened to the ground near the porch steps.

Linda retreated to the lunchroom, exasperated with her stirring fear. With a cloth she dusted the worn counter, rubbed diligently at the festoons of fly specks on the glass cigar case and wiped the tops of the mustard jars. Whenever she glanced up she could see the back of the man's head, with the spiral of blue smoke curling above the black hair. He seemed relaxed, now, and confident. Like a patient spider.

In her father's room Linda shifted a curtain. Into the wasteland of the north struggled the rutted road leading to Brinden. It twisted and turned, vanishing at last into the fluttering edges of a mirage. What she could see of it was deserted. Every instinct warned her of impending trouble, and Tom Reed was not in sight. He had gone home the night before to attend to some neglected ranch work. Her face grew hot as her conscience acknowledged the need of him.

"Silly to let myself get worked up this way," she said aloud. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of everything. I'm just tired."

But for some reason this self-made assurance failed her when she again glanced at the man on the porch. He hadn't moved, but his attitude was a menace. Up to the present Linda had scoffed at the so-called "woman's intuition," but now she had to admit the reception of a constant vibration.

It was an hour later, while she changed the cloth on her father's head, that she heard hoofs at the rear of the house. Glancing under a lowered blind she saw the sweat-crusting legs of a horse. Gathering the forces of her calm, she went out to greet Tom Reed. He swung from the saddle and batted a dusty hat against his leg.

"Hello," he said. "How's Joe?"

"I think he's some better, Tom. You've been riding hard."

"Wanted to get back. No telling when things will break."

She moved nearer to him. "Tom, there's a man on the front porch. He got off the Tucson stage. I don't like the look of him."

"So? You think—?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Well, I'll take my horse around to the shade. You meet me at the porch."

The stranger seemed half asleep as Tom approached, but the cold eyes missed not one detail of the newcomer's appearance.

"Hot, eh?" said Tom, kicking at the lizard near the steps. "Any mail for me, Linda?"

Linda Carey smiled. She was feeling more comfortable. "Nothing on the Tucson stage, Tom. This gentleman is stopping over until the night stage. I didn't hear your name..."

The stranger flowed to his feet, a movement smooth, effortless.

"Granden, ma'am. Louis Granden."

"This is Tom Reed, a rancher from up in the hills."

Granden held out a hand, long fingers curling about Tom's broad palm. "Glad to know you, Reed." Sleet-gray eyes locked with blue. "You look fit enough. Makes me seem like a chump, getting down with the heat this way. The lady was kind enough to offer me shade."

"It'll be cooler tonight," assured Tom. "Linda, do you mind if I put a sand ring around your wash basin? Shame to spoil good water, but—"

"This way, Tom."

LOUIS GRANDEN resumed his chair and lighted a fresh cigar.

From some room in the rear he could hear a great splashing and spluttering. He guessed that the girl was standing near by with a towel. Interesting, to a degree. A sliver of a smile broke the thin line of his lips.

"What do you think of him, Tom?" whispered Linda.

"Not so good. I don't like his face."

"Then perhaps he is one of them."

"We'll find out in time. Has he looked at Joe's car?"

"Only from the porch."

While they talked, a muffled popping came from the road. Looking out, they saw a small car laboring toward the Junction. The man driving was bent forward, pushing against the wheel as though to lend aid to the faltering machine. They saw a distinct expression of relief on his face as he tooled the overheated car off the road and into the yard. When it stopped, he got out and walked around it several times. Tom walked over to him.

"Damn the blankety-blank weather. I thought the thing would explode before I got here."

"Your radiator needs some water," nodded Tom.

"Water! Why, I've poured enough water into that thing. It just won't run when it's hot. I'm going to lay up until sundown." He followed Tom to the porch and plopped into a chair. He glanced curiously at Louis Granden and pulled out a pipe. Tom went on in, eying the card the man had handed him.

"Well—" questioned Linda.

"The name is Henry Hall and, according to this card, he's a cattle buyer. I think he lies like hell."

"Why?"

"Because cattle buyers are not around this time of year; because his face is hard and he wears a gun under his shoulder. A buzzard to the feast, maybe."

Trouble was cumulative, thought Linda. Was the overheated car just an excuse? She went in to look after Joe.

The three men sat out the afternoon on the porch. Conversation was fragmentary and widely spaced; mostly concerning the variations in heat as indicated by the thermometer on a post. It was significant to Tom that neither

man removed his coat. To all appearances they were total strangers.

Just before sundown, Ben Pirtle came rattling in from Brinden. Ben was the local garage man in that town, a grimy individual, huge of bulk and always looking for a towing or repair job. Since the holdup, he had been hauling the express and freight from Gila Junction to Brinden. He swung his car in a wide circle across the yard and drew up with a flourish.

"Hiya, Tom," he greeted. "Ketched them robbers yet?"

"Not yet, Ben."

The big man shook his head. "Reckon you'll never do it now. Like as not they're clean outa the country. Linda gettin' supper?"

Louis Granden sucked at his cigar, seemingly engrossed in the intricacies of inner meditation. Pirtle's arrival had not interested him. Hall was tugging at the collar of his shirt, swearing softly at the heat. His brown-flecked eyes changed rapidly with his mood.

ASPLINTER of shadow crept eastward from the well box. The air seemed to move a little, stirring the pendent leaves of the poplars. An odor of cooking drifted out the lunchroom door.

"It's ready," announced Linda shortly. "Sorry it isn't more."

"Out of the goodness of your heart, ma'am," said Louis Granden. "You've enough to do without preparing food for we impostors."

They straddled up to the stools, Ben Pirtle eagerly, the rest with measured anticipation.

"I can recommend these beans to the inner man," said Tom.

"With biscuits," approved Henry Hall. "Ma'am, the desert has its rewards." He pushed a spoon through

half a canned peach. "I've fared worse in better places."

Ben Pirtle emptied most of a bottle of catsup over his beans and crumpled in a biscuit. He ate noisily, brushing away the occasional drop of sweat that gathered at the tip of his nose.

The food seemed to loosen their tongues. They talked of cattle, of the new dam to be built beyond the hills, of the unpaved highway and dust. But Linda could not dismiss that sense of impending trouble. Despite the easy talk, the air was full of it. She tried to signal Tom, but he was too busy answering Hall's question about the holdup.

"It was done by green hands," he stated. "The sign was ample."

"In what way?"

"Oh, the way they shot up old Joe."

"Maybe they didn't want to kill him," put in Louis Granden.

"They tried hard enough. He must have made a run for it when they threw down on him; the left side of the car was splattered up with bullet holes."

Ben Pirtle waved a dripping fork. "That proves that it wasn't done by no local talent. Any gent in these parts with a hankerin' to pull a holdup, would shoot dead center. Joe Carey would of been killed. Nope," with a shake of the head, "they'll never ketch the gents. They're clean gone."

"The sheriff," said Tom, "combed this country mighty fine. I got hold of him before the holdups could get far. The highway was blocked in every direction. Every arroyo, every clump of cactus was inspected.

"I happened to be coming into Gila Junction that day and found old Joe spread across the wheel."

"Tough on the little lady," nodded Hall.

They left the room and sauntered

out to the porch; all save Tom, who stepped into the kitchen for a moment.

"Are they going to leave?" asked Linda anxiously.

"Not yet. I've got to stay close by them. You understand."

She nodded. "Tom, you'll be careful?"

"I'm watching every step," he replied.

THE sun had nibbled deep into the horizon and offered, instead of heat, all the prismatic glory of a desert evening. Tom, returning to the porch, found that all had taken chairs.

"Along the far side of the road," he said, "I found empty shells that had been kicked out of one of those automatic pistols."

Ben Pirtle spat over the edge of the porch. "That proves it wasn't nobody in these parts. Ain't a gent in the desert would pack one of them fancy shootin' irons."

"Did they get much money?" asked Henry Hall.

"Oh, about eight or nine hundred dollars—the payroll for the Queen Bee mine just beyond Brinden. They haven't been working a big crew there this summer. The payroll money is sent in from Tucson by stage and Joe takes it on into the mine with other supplies."

"Eight or nine hundred," mused Henry Hall. "Hardly enough to take a chance for."

"Is that the car Carey was driving?" inquired Granden pointing his cigar at Joe's old crate.

"That's it."

"I think I can see the bullet holes in the side of it. They must have been nervous."

"Amateurs."

"But smart enough not to get

ketched," insisted Ben Pirtle. He spat again and ran a crooked finger over his brow. The accumulated perspiration dropped to the front of his overalls.

"If the officers examined everyone that came out of the desert and found no pouch or large sum of money, the answer is that it must have been hidden before the robbers left the vicinity of the holdup."

"That seems the likely thing," Tom agreed. "The men were afoot when they pulled the job. They'd left a car behind a low hill about a hundred yards from the road. We found grease where it had been standing."

"Car tracks are easy to follow," suggested Hall.

"Not after they get to the highway. That's the way they went."

There followed a brief silence broken only by the moist hiss of Pirtle's steady expectoration. The dusk was deepening rapidly; the broad shadows in the yard had faded. Linda entered the lunchroom.

"Amateurs or not, I fail to see a hitch in their plans," said Henry Hall after a time. "They seem to have got away with it."

"But there was a hitch," said Tom.

"Eh?" Pirtle twisted in the chair to gaze at him.

"When I went back to get Joe's car, I found the express pouch."

Louis Granden flipped his cigar into the yard and rubbed the palms of his hands over thin knees. "Where?"

"Well, I had to do the job alone, so I got underneath the car to tie fast those cross rods it's steered with. As I lay there on my back, I happened to see a bundle tied into the channel of the main frame. It was the old pouch."

"They hadn't taken it with them," stated Granden flatly.

"No. And I just lay there and

looked at the thing for maybe five minutes. It was tied into the frame with an old bandanna handkerchief. It looked to me as though that bandanna had been used for a mask; tobacco juice had been sprinkled over one end of it; as though the wearer hadn't troubled to lift the flap when he spit."

"The pouch was intact?" said Granden.

"No, it wasn't. The lock had been broken off. Old newspapers, folded flat, had been stuffed in the pouch. The money was gone."

HENRY HALL drew in a quick, deep breath. "Then what," he asked, "was the idea of putting the pouch under the car?" He knocked the ashes from his pipe and stuffed it in a pocket.

Tom sent a quick glance at the lunchroom door and saw Linda hovering just inside. Tiny wrinkles of worry creased the corners of his eyes.

"Well," he said, "the way I figure it, the original idea was safety. They didn't want to be caught with the money or pouch. The plan was, no doubt, to wait until the fuss had died down and then go back to the old car for the booty. Quite likely they figured the car would be towed in, probably to Brinden. It just happened that I found an old wheel here at the Junction that would fit. That saved Joe Carey a towing fee, and those fees come high in this country, eh, Pirtle?"

Ben Pirtle stood up and shook his heavy shoulders. The back of his neck glistened with perspiration. He looked rather longingly at his own car, not twenty feet away.

"But," said Louis Granden, "I see no object in tying a paper-filled pouch to the under part of the car."

"Maybe it wasn't filled with paper when it was tied under there the first time. I told you the lock was broken. One of those holdup gents doubled back, possibly after I found old Joe and brought him in. It wouldn't be much of a trick to take the money and put paper in its place. One of those men double-crossed the other, I'd like to see what happens when they meet."

Something like a sigh whistled through Granden's teeth. Henry Hall sat rigid, brown-flecked eyes fastened on Ben Pirtle. The garage man was pasty white. His knees were sagging.

"It's a lie," he croaked. "I didn't go back. I—"

Henry Hall's right hand slid under his coat. A dull object arched up and there came a sharp report. The bullet smacked into the ceiling of the porch above Pirtle's head, bringing down a fine spray of dust. Louis Granden was out of his chair like a cat. His shoulder struck Hall squarely in the stomach and sent the man over backward. Tom heard Linda's frightened cry as he dived for Ben Pirtle. For a minute the garage man fought like a wild beast; then he collapsed into a quivering heap, broken phrases of denial bubbling from his twitching lips.

Louis Granden was standing beside Henry Hall, holding a piece of metal the other section of which was clamped about Hall's wrist. The automatic pistol was lying near the edge of the porch.

"If you'll fetch that big ox over here I'll link him with his partner," said Granden.

PIRTLE offered little resistance.

"And who are you?" asked

Tom when the handcuff had snapped about the hairy wrist.

"A special agent for the express people." Granden didn't seem to be breathing a bit faster.

"My gosh! You sure gave me one bad afternoon."

"I guessed as much, my friend; but I had to play the game."

"I had Pirtle marked down easy enough, but whether you or Hall was his pal I couldn't tell."

"Both appeared capable of doing the job, eh? Well, not wishing to brag, I'll say that I am, at least, a much better shot than Hall. I wouldn't have splattered up the old car in any such fashion." He glanced at the lunchroom door. Linda Carey stood there, eyes wide and an old pistol in her hand. "Were you looking for someone to shoot, ma'am?"

The light of the gasoline lamp showed a red stain stealing up the girl's neck. She stooped, laid the pistol on the floor, but made no answer.

"And now what?" asked Tom.

"I'll head for Brinden with these two gentlemen. I suspect I'll find the Queen Bee money at Pirtle's garage."

Tom Reed shook his head. "Pirtle never had the money," he said.

"No? Then Hall—"

"Neither of them, Granden."

"Oh, I see; the pouch had never been broken into. You just framed that story to make them break."

"I framed the story, yes, and for that purpose. But that old express pouch hasn't been unlocked in years. Joe Carey never carried money in it. The pouch was sort of a decoy. When he had money to deliver at the mine, he always slipped it into some ordinary package of freight or express. Last Friday he put the payroll in a case of eggs. Ben Pirtle delivered that case of eggs to the mine storeroom yesterday!"

THE END



Her eyes dulled strangely as she looked into his

Murder—In Some Degree

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Was Lawyer Gillian Hazeltine, fighting a bitter courtroom battle, combating a clever hypnotist?

THE STORY HAS JUST BEGUN—START IT NOW

LAWYER GILLIAN HAZELTINE happened to be at the Greenfield airport one evening when a pretty girl giving the name of Mary Brown reserved two tickets for the morning plane to Dallas a couple of days later. He thought nothing of it at the time.

A day or so later Gillian received a telephone call from Dr. Hobart Creed, head of the Hobart Creed Hospital at Greenfield,

asking Gillian to come out. The aged doctor told Gillian of his plan, which he had not confided in anyone else, of leaving the \$15,000,000 hospital to his favorite understudy, Dan Starbuck, a surgeon. Dr. Creed was worried because of mysterious occurrences in the hospital, one of them being the systematic theft by someone of narcotics.

At the hospital Gillian met Hannah Star-