

THE ISSUE

by GEORGE BARON HUBBARD



AND SO YOU 'VE lost your nerve, eh?" The sheriff's voice was tinged with malicious satisfaction. "You brought me all the way up here to tell me that?"

Dave Wilson flushed.

"I wanted you to see the situation as I see it, that's all, Mr. Burgess. I know how the people feel about that fellow,"—he jerked

his thumb toward the motionless figure on the iron cot in the corner of the ward—"and I know they only want a leader. That's all they're waitin' for. I don't like the looks of it, and I thought you ought to know."

"I suppose it has n't occurred to you that this is a decent, law-abiding community," remarked Burgess. "Suppose there is a whole lot of bad feeling against the man, every citizen of the town knows that he will be tried, convicted and executed. We're civilized humans here, not savages, Wilson."

Wilson shrugged.

"Just as civilized as the rest of the country, and no more. Oh, I've seen it, South and West both! I know how it works."

"I suppose you want me to send a big posse up here?" said the sheriff ironically.

"Just that. If everybody knows there's a bunch of deputies up here, they won't start anything."

"Who? The deputies?" jeered Burgess. "Just as likely to as any one else. All right, Wilson. As long as you don't like to stay alone, I'll send old Bill Edwards up to keep you company."

"I'm not looking for company, though I'm likely to get it," Wilson protested. "Do you know what would happen tonight if there should be an attempt to lynch that cuss? Somebody'd get hurt."

"And you don't want to be the somebody," Burgess lounged to his feet and moved toward the door. "Well, Wilson, you stay right here. You'll need to show a little more sand if you're going to be the next sheriff. You are n't elected yet, you know. And until you are, I'll run my own job, and my deputies, too."

"One moment," Wilson's tone was crisp. "Speaking of sand, when we cornered that fellow in Jackson's mill, who crawled down into the old flume after him—you or I? He dared you to come in and get him; but you didn't take him up. You might have had to, if I'd given him time to shoot more'n once. You need n't say anything more about me bein' afraid. I don't like it." His level gray eyes held the shifting gaze of the sheriff until it wavered and fell.

"Can't you take a joke, Dave? I didn't mean anything." The sheriff laughed with an uneasy assumption of good fellowship. "I know you're all right, and you certainly did a good job when you gathered that fellow in. But you're way off about this lynching business. Why, good Lord, man, look here! Do you think anything of the kind could happen in a place like this?"

Wilson's eyes wandered about the perfectly appointed ward, with its white tiles and shining, polished metal work. Through the open doorway, he could see the nurses in their neat uniforms, flitting noiselessly about. From the other end of the corridor came the muffled click of an elevator door.

The recent gift of a local philanthropist, the hospital, though small, was perhaps the most completely equipped institution of its kind in the state. Even Wilson's unimaginative mind was impressed with a sense of the incongruity of such a setting for the scene of medieval violence he feared. He grinned shamefacedly, as he tried to tell himself that the thing was impossible, that it could never happen.

"You see?" laughed Burgess. "Your idea's all nonsense. I'll send Pierson up at twelve o'clock to relieve you. In the meantime, forget it. And, Dave, don't think any more about what I said. We're both apt to get too talky these days. I don't blame you for being ambitious; but naturally, I want to hang

on to my job, and all this stuff about your running for sheriff has got on to my nerves. So long!"

He clapped the deputy patronizingly on the shoulder, and strode off down the corridor. Wilson watched him until he was out of sight, and then walked slowly over to the iron cot and gazed down upon the prisoner securely chained to it.

A feeling of disgust and loathing, amounting almost to physical nausea, swept over him, as he thought of the brutal and revolting crime that this man had committed. What a misfortune it was that the bullet which had so seriously wounded him had not gone a few inches higher and ended his miserable life. It would have been so much better for every one, even for the man on the cot; for there was no question of his guilt. Nevertheless, now he must be nursed back to sufficient strength to enable him to stand trial, a trial that could have but one ending. All the complicated machinery of the law must be set in motion for a worthless wretch, who deserved nothing better than to be shot down ruthlessly, like the wild beast that he was.

The bandaged form under the blankets stirred slightly and muttered a curse in delirium. With a gesture of disgust, the deputy turned on his heel and walked over to the open window.

The twilight was still luminous with the last light of the sun. Wilson watched the gold and crimson of the clouds fade to a dull, depressing gray. Are lights were beginning to sputter in the streets of the town. Everything looked quiet and peaceful; but the very quiet seemed menacing and fraught with ominous meaning.

In that little community, there were hundreds of men, who, like Wilson himself, had hardly paused to eat or to sleep until the criminal had been captured; men who had hurled threats and curses after the speeding automobile, as it bore the wounded captive to the hospital, and then had gathered at the street corners, talking animatedly among themselves, only to fall suddenly silent at the approach of a stranger.

With a quick movement, Wilson turned from the window, shrugging his huge shoulders, as if to throw off some irritating burden. The thing was absurd; it had never happened here; it never could happen. The popular rage and excitement would find expression and relief in talk and clamor, wearing itself out by its own very violence.

He was a fool to think that it could be otherwise. Burgess had done right to laugh at him. And yet, had not the sheriff's laughter been a little too hearty? Still, had Burgess entertained the slightest idea that there might be any grounds for apprehension, it would have been a perfectly simple matter for him to send a posse to guard the hospital; or, as sheriff, he himself could have taken charge of the prisoner and assumed the responsibility. That was really what he ought to have done.

And then, across Wilson's mind there flashed a sudden thought that sent the hot blood leaping to his face, and set him to pacing up and down the length of the room like some caged animal. For the first time, he realized the significance of his position.

Mentioned as a possible candidate for sheriff, in opposition to Burgess, at the coming fall elections, he had a large personal following among the henchmen of the local ring, the leaders of which knew that it would be almost impossible to swing the vote away from him, should he be nominated.

If a mob did come to the hospital, it would be largely made up of the workers from the mills and factories, the coal and iron mines; voters, all of them, and nearly all his personal friends. If a lynching were attempted, and he should try to prevent it, blood would be spilt—by him. And he would have committed the unpardonable political sin, that of going back on his friends.

True, there was an element that would applaud his act and commend him for upholding the law and preserving the town from the disgrace of mob violence; but that element was not the one which on election day went in a body to the polls and put its candidates into office.

Burgess knew this; and Burgess was clever enough to absent himself and to leave his political rival to assume the responsibility, and perhaps to work his own political damnation.

Wilson clenched his hands as he realized that he was trapped and helpless. Either he must be derelict in his duty, false to his oath, or he must shoot down the men who regarded him as their friend and leader, and who held his future in their hands. He was to be made the scapegoat, and forced into a position where he must act the part of a coward, or else deliberately fire upon men who, since boyhood, had been his friends and comrades.

He was young and ambitious; why should he ruin his career to save a worthless wretch who deserved to hang, and who, in any event, would hang, by due process of law, in a few months at most?

That he himself stood more than an even chance of being killed did not, strangely enough, enter into his calculations. He knew to what unbridled lengths a body of men, inflamed by rage, and hate, would go; but the danger to his political career was the thought uppermost in his mind; and he grew hot with anger at the trick Burgess had played upon him.

A faint, distant sound set his taut nerves a-quiver, and he sprang to the window and stared out into the night; but the noise that had caught his ear was only the cry of a belated teamster, urging his horses up the steep incline at the top of which the hospital stood.

With a sigh of relief, the deputy leaned his elbows on the sill, and tried to collect his thoughts; but his mind was a seething cauldron of conflicting emotions, and try as he would, he could see no honorable escape from the net he now believed Burgess had spread around him.

Directly in front of the lawns that stretched before the hospital was a small square or park, formed by the intersection of several streets, and thickly bordered by trees and shrubbery. It was lighted in the center by a single flaming arc lamp; but the edges lay in deep shadow.

The clatter of the wagon died away in the distance; silence descended; but it was a strange, sinister silence, and the deputy stirred uneasily and shifted from one foot to the other. To his overwrought senses, it seemed that the dusky shadows beneath the trees were alive with vague, intangible forms, flitting this way and that, dodging from tree trunk to tree trunk. He could not see distinctly in the uncertain light; but surely that was not the wind stirring the shrubbery?

And then, suddenly, out of the darkness at one end of the square, emerged a knot of dim figures. Almost before Wilson realized that this was no trick of his imagination, a similar group had appeared across the way. Others followed, swiftly and silently, all moving toward the center of the square. There seemed no end to them; group followed group in an unbroken chain. In an incredibly short time, the whole open space was filled with a swaying, jostling mass of men. Wilson caught his breath and leaned farther through the window.

At first, no sound came to his straining ears; but gradually there arose a low, menacing murmur, a deep, sullen diapason, that rapidly rose and swelled louder and louder, until it grew into a hoarse, thunderous roar.

From the iron cot in the corner came a whining cry. Wilson glanced over his shoulder. A white-capped nurse was bending over the prisoner, who, conscious for the first time since his capture, realized the meaning of that sinister sound without, and was moaning and weeping in abject terror.

The nurse's face was ghastly white; her eyes dilated with horror.

"Is there anything we can do?" The words came from her trembling lips in a choked whisper.

Wilson shook his head.

"No! And don't wait! Get out of here as quick as you can! They'll come in a minute."

With one terrified glance at his drawn, set face, she scurried from the room. Wilson turned to the window again.

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