Brother Black Sheep

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By Joseph Hall

There's measley men in all trades, I reckon (said Shorty Plummer, laying his reins over his saddle horn and rolling a cigaret in brown paper); but about the measliest one that ever punched cows on the Lonesome L was a fellow I'll call Dawson. Old Tom Blodgett never did know himself why he took this hombre on, and after he got him on, why he kept him. I guess it must've been because old Tom was plumb sorry for the coyote, findin' him roamin' round out here on the prairie one day afoot and without no hat nor much clothes and nearly starved.

Leastways Tom loaded him up behind him on old Firefly and brought him into headquarters and fed him up, and when the poor nut had got some life into him again, put him to work until he could do somethin' for himself.

He was a sort of a little kind of a cuss, without no meat on his bones, and he was always seemin' to be lookin' behind him without doin' it. He didn't know nothin' about punchin' cows and he couldn't ride for shucks. But old Tom fixed him up with some clothes he had around the place and gave him a gentle mount and an old saddle and told him he had to work it out. Old Tom is a queer kind of a duck thataway, and it looked like he'd took some kind of an idea that he'd take this here worm and make a man out of him, which there's better men than old Tom has fell down on that kind of jobs before.

Right from the first he wasn't none popular in the bunk-house. He didn't seem to harmonize none with the boys. He just slept with 'em.

Sleepin' with a man can be done in lots of ways—I've slept with gamblers and murderers, and there was a puncher over on the Rio Madre that saved my life one cold night by givin' me half of his blanket. But this guy didn't do nothin' but jest use the bunk-house for a place to sleep in, and them punchers was the same as pieces of furniture to him.

Well, after he'd learned to ride some, and began to pick up a little bit, old Tom went to him one day and says:

"Jeff," he says, "I guess you've done paid me for them clothes and that grub and such, and I ain't got no more right to insist on your workin' for me no longer. It's up to you about stayin'. You can take it or leave it. The job is yours if you want it at 25 dollars a month."

It was surprisin', but that guy jumped at the job like a starved pup after a hunk of porterhouse. He hadn't seemed a bit interested, but he perked up considerable, and thanked old Tom and said he'd be glad to stay on with him without no wages at all, but Tom won't stand for that.

"I wouldn't have no man workin' for me for nothin,'" he says. "A man that works for nothin' ain't worth it."

So that's the way Jeff Dawson gets hooked up as a permanent fixture with the Lonesome L. But he ain't no more sociable as a regular than he was as a transient. He's sort of diffident, I guess, and it shore did seem sometimes like he was tryin' to do better, only he couldn't. He jest naturally didn't seem to trust nobody.'

Most every Saturday the boys rides in to Belding to have a little, go over to the Ruby Light and swap lies with the fellows from down to the Solite and over at the old Double R, but Jeff don't never go over there none for about three months after he comes to the ranch. By that time he'd kind of quit lookin' scared, and some of the boys has tried to coax a little life into that carcass of his.

Come a pay-day they always has a little somewhat of a jollification, and that time they persuaded Jeff to come along.

You know how it most usually is in a cow town on a Saturday. Most all of the outfits are in town, and there's pizen depots, and in them days there was usually plenty of games runnin', and maybe a dance-hall or two where a guy could limber up and shake his spurs around a little bit. Well' that's the kind of a place Belding was, and it was shore a real live little town on Saturday. The rest of the week it was pretty quiet, with nothin' but the passenger train from El Paso comin' through about 2 P. M., and two or three cayuses tied to the racks along Main street.

Well, when we got into town Jeff was laggin' behind some, but the boys waited for him, and the whole gang comes to roost at the Ruby Light bar. Tom Finks and Will Butts and Long-Shank Ferguson and Windy Ostram, which he ain't spoke but 33 words in his entire life by actual count, is takin' their nose-paint obstreperous and convival when we arrives

There's greetings and compliments passed and somebody sets 'em up, and there looks like a good time comin' with a stampede.

Jeff is lined up down to the end near the door waitin' to name his pizen. Slim Bursby, the barkeep, is takin' the orders, and Slim is sure some busier than a cat on a hot Arizona day huntin' shade, settin' out glasses and bottles and passin' remarks with everybody. Slim is the most popular bartender between San Antone and Albuquerque, and he's known as a square guy all over the cow country.

Slim gits down the line at last and asks Jeff what his is goin' to be, and Jeff don't answer for a minute and looks like he's goin' to run out the door. The boys ain't payin' no attention, though, and don't notice it—nobody but Slim. Slim is smilin' his regular old smile which don't fade none, but he is lookin' mighty close at Jeff.

"You're a stranger, ain't you?" he says friendly. "Guess you're with the Lonesome L bunch. Seen you come in with them. Glad to know you. Welcome to our city. What's it goin' to be, friend?"

He is still smilin', and Jeff kind of perks up and smiles back, and Slim jest kind of leans over the bar with a towel like he's goin' after a wet place down to the end, but he ain't after no wet place at all. He leans over close to Jeff away from the others and whispers something to him low.

"Whiskey," says Jeff.

Well, we had a real pleasant time, and got back to the ranch about midnight. Jeff had limbered up a powerful lot, and had got to be almost human. He actually sets into a little game of draw and loses $20 hwitout battin' a eye.

After that Jeff gets to be a plumb good puncher, and old Tom raises him to $35, which he has plum run into a fortune thataway. There's some signs of meat stickin' to them bones of his again, and he's plumb entirely quit lookin' behind him when there ain't nobody there and shyin' to one side when you come up on him easy.

He gets to be a regular visitor down to Belding, too, and that's how he happens to get to seein' that here biscuit-shooter down to the Empire restaurant. She ain't a bad-lookin' heifer at that, havin' a unusual quantity of black hair and white tinted eyes and things. She shore is a real attractive specimen of feminine allurements thataway.

There was several weeks passed by durin' which Jeff rides around after cows and digs post holes and fixes windmills like he was in a sort of daze, and every chance he gets he dolls himself up in a new silk lavender shirt he's bought up to the Ranchman's Favorite Drygood store, and bivouacs down to the Empire restaurant. Annette, that's the biscuit shooter's name, gets to be knowed as his girl, and there's pleasantries passed in the bunk-house and around the corral with allusions to the kind of a ass he's makin' of himself.

It wouldn't have made no difference, of course, all men, includin' cowpunchers, being made with a weakness for clothin' not cut for pants thataways, only it begins to tell in Jeff's work . He ain't satisfied with goin' over to Belding on Saturdays, and begins to ride over there in the middle of the week, gettin' back to the ranch along about daylight and not bein' worth a cuss the next day.

Old Tom don't like that a heap. So Tom was patient, but in about a week after supper one night, he calls him down about his work, and Jeff is surly and impolite. So old Tom tells him he can get along without him after the next payday, which comes the next Saturday.

There's one thing I ain't told you about, and that's a letter that Jeff writes up to the Mountaineer's Hotel a couple of weeks before. He writes that letter right after a talk he's had with Annette. She's gettin' tired of Belding. There's other places in the world where she's been, and she allows her looks is plumb wasted in them desert parts. So she informs Jeff she's gettin' ready to blow, and it's about all over between them unless he's prepared to come along and be a sport, which requires more or less cash.

Jeff is all cut up, him havin' planned to take his queen out of the hashery and maybe settle down out there with a couple of cows and some leased land and raise some calves and maybe other things. All that there, of course, is a kind of hazy dream, with only $35 a month to start on and all, and when this sudden movin' notion comes to life in Annette's brain, that there little pipe of his goes out.

But he persuades her to wait a while and then he writes this letter.

It's thursday night when Tom comes down to cases with him that time, but Jeff says "all right," and goes on out to the bunk-house and finds a place on the gallery off to one end. It's still daylight, and he is by himself, so he takes a letter out of his coat pocket, which he's got the night before over to the postoffice at belding and reads it over.

Friday old Tom goes into town in the buckboard, like he does every month, to get the money for his payroll and other expenses out on the ranch. He doesn't get back to the ranch till about sundown, and he jest throws his old tin box in the safe in the office and goes on out to supper.

Along about elevent thirty that night, Slim Bursby, over at the Ruby Light in Belding, looks at his watch and begins to untie his long, white apron. The Ruby Light has been pretty quiet all evenin', and the last convivial citizen of Belding has left a hour before. He got his apron half off when there was a sound of hoof-beats outside, and a cowpony stops in front of his place. Slim reties his apron and picks up his towel.

In about a minute Jeff comes in by himself. It's shore a strange time of night for a lone puncher to be gettin' to town, but Slim don't bat a eye. Jeff has got on his chaps and spurs, but he has also got on that there lavender shirt and a boiled collar that he wears when he calls on Annetec. By the time Jeff has got his foot on the rail, Slim is slippin' him the bottle.

"Howdy, Slim," he says.

In spite of his fancy fixin's Jeff is lookin' tired and haggard around the eyes, and there's a lot of dust in his voice. He don't look at Slim, pouring out a big drink and liftin' her quick.

Slim is restin' his elboys on the bar, leanin' his chin in his hands thataway, and whle Jeff is takin' another drink he's givin' him the once over pretty keen.

"Kind of late, ain't you, Jeff?" allows Slim judicious and inquisitive.

Jeff mighty near jumps, but he catches himself and pours out another couple of fingers.

"Yes," he says. "I got a late start."

The whiskey is gettin' into his blood and he don't look so haggard and hunted. He even looks at Slim over his glass.

"What time does the eastbound train come through Slim?" he asks casual.

"Twelve five," says Slim, standin' up and rollin' a cigaret. "You ain't figgerin' on leavin' the Lonesome L none are you, Jeff?"

Jeff finishes his drink and begins to pour out another one. Thereain't a sound except the whiskey gurglin' out of the bottle and splashin' into the glass, Jeff holdin' the bottle a little too high, and his hand shakin' jest a trifle.

"I got a telegram today," says Jeff slow, "sayin' my old man is about to check out. That's why I'm in such a rush. The eastbound stops at Belding, don't she, slim?"

Slim is leanin' on the bar again, smokin', and there ain't nothin' about Jeff that's got by him.

"Shore she stops," says the bartender.

"Well, I guess I'll be movin' then," allows Jeff, shovin' his glass away from him. He puts his hand in his pocket and brings out a twenty-dollar gold piece one of them big yellow boys. He see's what he's done too late and his face goes funny but he threw her over on the counter.

Slim starts to make the change but it looks like he's having trouble, and honds the double eagle back to Jeff.

"I ain't got the change, Jeff," he says. "You can just owe the house for the drinks tonight and pay up when you git back."

Jeff acts like he's goin' to object, but he don't and jest slips the money back into his pocket. He makes another mistake there, because he let it go too quick and it made a noise when it hit what else was in his pocket.

"All right, Slim," he says. "Don't let me forget it, and if I don't never come back, I'll shore send it to you. So long.

Jeff turns around and starts out, but Slim calls him back.

"Hey, Jeff," he says, "you got lots of time. There ain't nobody up to the depot this time o' night nohow, and it'll be plumb entirely lonesome. I ain't no-ways sleepy yet, and I want to have a little chatter with you thataway before you leave."

Well, for about a minute it looked like Jeff was goin' to object, but he turned around and came back.

Slim sets the bottle back on the bar in front of Jeff and slides him a glass. Then he leans back in his old place with his elbows on the bar and and his chin in his fist.

"You been out here in this country about six months, ain't you, Jeff?" Slim starts out even and commonplace, but his eyes don't never leave that puncher's face.

"Yes, jest about six months, Slim."

Jeff is foolin' with one of his spurs with his toe, spinnin' it round and he don't look up. Slim goes on:

"You remember that first day when you blowed in here with the Lonesome L outfit? Well, I knowed you right away that day, and you knowed me, and you was jest about to beat it when I got down there to you and handed you the glad word. Ain't that right? It's been two years since you seen me, but you knowed me. And you was scared of me, like all cons are scared of every other con, or every other man they've knowed inside, and that they knows is onto them havin' done time. Listen to me, kid, I got somethin' to dope you."

Well, Jeff listens. There was a whole lot of difference in the looks of them two, leanin' over that there bar in the light, talkin'. That Slim Bursby don't look like no criminal. He's got a fine face, that there barkeep has, and you can ask any man in the cow country what he thinks of Slim and he'll tell you there ain't no squarer feller nowheres. He's got a thin face with a high forehead and thin, good-lookin' nose and a mouth that's just a slash in his face when he ain't smilin', which is unusual.

When that there smile is gone, his mouth is hard as iron, and strong as hemp.

And over there, across the polished wood, Jeff's face was kind of good lookin' since he'd picked up; handsome, I guess, you'd call it, but unlike slim's. You might call it weak, but maybe it was jest kiddish.

Slim says: "I slipped you that word that day son, because I knowed you had a right to your chance and it looked like you was hittin' the right trail. That's a good bunch you was flockin' with. Them boys are all solid gold, and old Tom, he's the prince of 'em all. This here is a good country to get to make a new start. Back yonder it's different. There ain't nowhere you can go that some pigeon ain't seein' you sooner or later, and then—you can't blame a man for not wantin' to hire a jail-bird.

"I didn't figger you out right away, but after you left I looked you up. You was sent up for forgery. You had a clean record up to then, but you'd been up against a run of hard luck, and there was a skirt, if I remember. And you slumped and slipped a guy's name to a paper he hadn't signed.

Old Slim stops to roll a cigaret, and Jeff is jest standin' there with his head down, twirlin' that spur with his boot-toe. "You remember I was a trusty there, kid. I'd been there seven years when you come, and I booked you and got your record. I remember your sentence—three years. It shore did seem light to me, but I knowed that three years wasn't all. Them was jest the years you'd get inside. It was after you'd get out that hell would start."

Slim reaches out and puts his hand over on Jeff's shoulder thataway and says:

"Now, kid," says he, "you ain't goin' to leave Belding on the twelve-five. I ain't goner let you. That about yer old man dyin' is a die. You can't put that by Slim."

Well, Jeff flushes up some and he quits spinnin' his spur and stonds up away from the bar, but he don't look Slim in the face. He can't somehow, meet them blue fires that's burnin' in the barkeep's eyes. Old Slim's mouth is plumb hard, too, with the smile all wiped off thataway.

"I was willin' for you to have your chance says Slim, and his voice shore is plumb refrigerated, "and I ain't no stoolpigeon. But I'm a law-abidin' citizen, son, and I won't stand for nothin' like this. Tom Blodgett is a friend of mine. He's shore been a friend to you. He's done you the biggest favor any man ever done another. He's give you a chance and you're payin' him back, rewardin' his trust thataway, by stealin' his money. I know, see? He takes the money to the ranch today. He shows it to me in here before he left—mostly them big yellow boys. I'm an ex-con, kid, but that shore don't go none with me.

Well, jest for a minute it looked like that there puncher was goin' to fight it through. His face was plumb red in the bar light, and he looks Slim now in the face, mean, plumb mean, and he's shakin' all over like he's got a chill he's so mad and his eyes is blazin'. But old Slim is so darn cold standin' there and beatin' Jeff's eyes down with that look of his that the kid can't make no headway, and in a minute he weakens thataway and drops his head and leans up agin' the bar, reachin' for the bottle.

"All right, Slim," he says low, "go ahead and call the sheriff. I had my chance, and I was too big a darn fool to hang to it. It ain't no use nohow. I guess I'm jest a nat'ral-born crook."

Old Slim don't say a word for a minute. He jest stands there and rolls another cigaret and gives the kid the once over plumb careful. Some of the hardness kind of goes out of his face and his mouth ain't quite that straight, thin line it has been. After he's finished rollin' his smoke and has licked it and lit up, he begins to talk again:

"Listen to me kid," he says, gentle, like he's talkin' to a nervous bronc. "You ain'tn goin' to leave Belding tonight on no 12.05 train You're goin' to git on that there cayuse of yours out there at the rack and light out for the old Lonesome L.

"You and me is the only humans on earth that knows about this here little slip you've gone and pulled, and I guess maybe, you ain't altogether to blame for that. I've heard considerable about a lady, kid, which she is some palaverer thataway and quite accomplished in settin' out the ham and eggs. I believe it was a skirt that sort of started you that other time, wasn't it?

"Well, you better let that biscuit-shooter alone. And when you git back out there at the old Lonesome, I guess it won't be no more trouble to slip that bunch of money back in old Tom's desk than it was to slip it out You're goner have one more chance. And, believe me, kid, it's the darned best chance you'll ever find, out there with that bunch. And jest remember this, that it ain't no use tryin' the other way. You can't git away with it none whatever."

Jest about that time there comes the 12.05 hollerin' like a catamount and plumb disturbin' all them silences of the landscape. Jeff starts like he's goin' to the door, but Slim stops him with one word, and when he turns he's lookin' down a 45, and Slim's smile is all gone again. They stands facin' each other, and the train stops a minute, then starts out agin.

When she's plumb gone, Slim lays down the gun and unties the apron and hangs it on a peg behind the bar.

Well, Jeff is standin' up straight now and lookin Slim in the eye, when the barkeep comes out from behind the counter. He don't look like the same boy, and he's actual smilin' when he holds out his hand friendly like.

"Slim," he says, "you're called. I guess there ain't nothin' for me to do but go straight if a man'll give me the straight deal you've pulled tonight. I'm going back out there and and get Tom to take me back, and there ain't goner be no better puncher nor better man than your humble servant.

Slim slams his hand into Jeff's.

"That's the stuff, son," he says. Go to it. Good night."

Jeff climbs on that old cayuse of his and starts out. But he circles after a while and comes back to town, so's Slim won't see him none. He rides quiet down there to the railroad depo and ties old Firefly in the deep shade of the baggage room. Then he ducks along in the shadders until he's until he's up at the end, where there's some crates and chicken coops waitin' for the four-ten express train goin west. There's a man sittin' on one of the trucks. He's kind of a short, heavy set guy, with a square face and a plug hat.

When he sees Jeff he slides down off the truck and waits till the puncher is up clost.

Well?" says the square-faced coot that-way. He shore ain't got a pleasant voice.

"Nothin' doin'," says Jeff, casual and final. "I changed my mind. I guess I ain't that low-down after all. The guy you come for the guy I wrote you about, well, that guy's flew the coop, Roberts. He left on the twelve-five that there train you come on. You can keep your dirty money."

The plug-hat gent flops his hand around tord's his hip and his tone of voice in extendin them greetings was plumb honey and cream to that there snarl he lets out.

"You damned crook ,"he says, but his eye catches onto somethin' kind of bright that's pokin' a cold nose into his stomach.

"Steady," says Jeff. "Easy, Roberts. Be kinder careful who you're calling a crook around here. Didn't I tell you I'd changed? Shore. You're in awful wrong, friend, that's all. You can't touch me. It ain't no crime not to give up a man. I've served my time, and if you try to start anything with me now, don't forget that there Chambers business. That would shore send you where I used to roost, old-timer. A thousand dollars was dirt cheap for Chambers to get away into Mexico. You must've needed money about that time mighty bad.

"Now, listen, you damned lizard-hearted, carrion-souled buzzard: There's a train through here at 4.10. You'll be settin' here when she comes through, and you'll get on her and remove yourself from this respectable community, where they ain't nothin' low-downer than a gentleman coyote. And if you come nozin' oround these parts again, I'll divulge your plans and specifications to some of my friends out to the Lonesome L., and there's a nice big hackberry tree growin' on the side of a mesa all by itself over to Eagle Draw that you could see plain and conspicuous for seven miles.

"It shore would be a real inspirin' sight to watch a Hyena swingin' in the breeze seven miles away, off where you can't get no smell!"

So Jeff goes away from there, leavin' the guy huddled up on that there truck. He untied old Firefly and heads him out toward the country, and then he has a thought and turns him back again and rides around by the Empire Restaurant. Old Firefly is so used to that place that he stops and lets his head down, and Jeff goes in. There ain't nobody around but Peter, the waiter what helps them that ain't favorites and demands the services of divine Annette. Jeff sits down on a stool.

"Where's the gal?" he says when Pete slouches up. There ain't no respect at all in Pete's slouch and he ain't none particular to conceal the fact that he's givin' Jeff the quiet hoss laugh.

"Her?" says Pete. "Hell, ain't you heard about her? There's been a travelin' guy sellin' safety razors in town for two days, and him and her left together on the 12.05 tonight."

"The hell you say,"allows Jeff, and then he orders ham and eggs, just to show Pete that he don't worry none about no skirt.

When he's out on the home road, headed for the Lonesome L. Jeff reaches down in his inside coat pocket and pulls out a letter and some kind of a paper. It's plumb good moonlight and he opens the letter and reads her over. She's shore short, like this:

"Will meet you as per your letter at the depot at Belding, arrival of east-bound passenger train on date named. Jeff tears it up into little bits and scatters it along the road and then he opens the other piece of paper. It's one o tfhem circulars like you see stuck up in sheriff's offices with a guy's picture on it and his Burt Along measures and how much reward is out for him. Well, this one says there's five hundred dollars reward; and the picture—well the picture was shore a perfect likeness of Slim Bursby. You could never have seen that profile and not knowed him.

Jeff steps off Firefly in the road and touches a match to the end of the circular and it goes up in a little blaze.

Well, it worked out jest like Slim allows. There ain't no trick to slippin' them valuables back into that old tin box in Tom's old desk ,and the next day, when the outfits paid off, Jeff makes a straight talk to old Tom and asks him for another trial, and the old coot kind of likes the kid anyhow, and he says all right, and so Jeff stays. And there warn't no more cause of complaint, him makin' a real efficient cowpuncher thataway, considerin of his size.

For atime the silence was unbroken, the two ponies maintaining their steady gait, the great panorama of the Western World sweeping away the old Baldy, miles away.

"And Dawson," suggested Shorty's companion. "What's become of him?"

"Oh, he's still on the Lonesome."

"Must be away somewhere. I haven't met him."

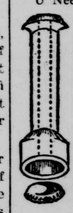
Shorty struck a match to light his newest cigaret. Then he explained: "Hell, there wasn't no Dawson."

"No Dawson? Oh, I see. And there was no Annette and no Slim and no convict and no reward and no money stolen from the ranch. You were just spinning me a yarn. Very kind of you."

The little puncher sat up.

"Wait," he said, "shore that was all so. Dawson—well, there wasn't no guy named Dawson. You see, I was Dawson myself."

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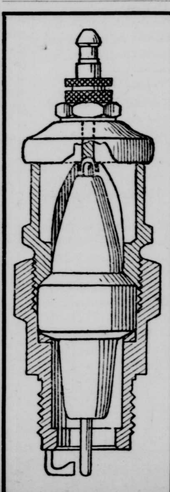
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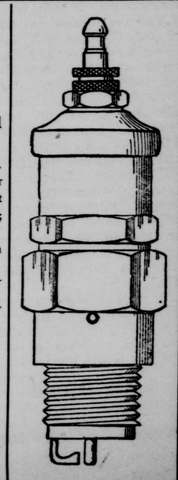
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