

TWO CREEKS
HAS A
HANGING

ARTHUR K. BARNES

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TWO CREEKS HAS A HANGING

BY ARTHUR K. BARNES

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Everybody in Two Creeks said afterward it was the best hanging they had ever seen. I guess this was because of Clay Gowan, the hangee, who weighed three hundred pounds, and was always laughing with a sound like rocks falling in a

cavern. He was a Falstaff in a ten-gallon hat and cowboy boots, and people everywhere said he was very likable.

My little brother and I got acquainted with Clay while he was in jail. There wasn't a tree in Two Creeks large enough to hang such a big man, and the execution was delayed while they built a gallows. So Timmy and I found excuses to detour on our way home from school in order to pass the jailhouse and visit.

Clay was the most entertaining prisoner you can imagine. He was always making jokes or gambling noisily with the turnkey, and he had a mouth organ from which, completely hidden in his great fist, he drew marvelous tunes.

After our third afternoon of impromptu concert amid the carpenters' clatter as they built the scaffold, Clay grinned at us kids through the bars and asked if we would do him a favor. Round-eyed, with visions of smuggling a file inside a fruitcake, we agreed.

"May seem foolish to you lads, but I always been one for cleanliness." It was true. Clay was always neat and scrubbed. "Now I'm agoin' on a long journey. You know about that? Well, I'd mark it up as a good turn if you lads could manage to sort o' wash off that there gallows, so when the time comes —y' understand?"

Of course we didn't understand such double talk, but each afternoon after the carpenters had gone home, Timmy and I solemnly poured a bucket of water over the raw, gleaming lumber. In some vague way we felt holy. We also felt

conspiratorial, because Pa was the judge who had tried and sentenced Clay Gowan, and we knew our sensations would be anything but holy if he found us out.

We were expressing the sentiments of Two Creeks, though; sympathy for Clay was almost unanimous. Even Ma ventured her opinion, something she dared to do only when she felt very strongly.

"Seems a shame," she observed, "that good-natured man has to hang. Don't someways seem right."

But there was no doubt about Clay's guilt. He had received word that his sister was very sick, so he tried to borrow Sheriff Arter's gray gelding—only horse within a hundred miles big enough to carry him. The sheriff not being what you could rightly call a warmhearted man, Clay finally just had to help himself. And horse thieves were hanged in those days. So Pa had the right on his side when he thinned out his lips and said:

"I don't make the laws, Ma. I just administrate 'em." Then Pa stared at us. "And if you boys have any notion of seein' Clay Gowan hang Saturday, you can forgit it. You're astayin' home."

But even fear of Pa couldn't keep us away from that hanging. Having waited till the folks were safely gone, we scrambled up into the church bell tower to join a half dozen other kids.

It was what you might call a gala occasion. People had come from all over the countryside, and we were told Clay had made a nice speech saying he was sorry he had found it necessary to take the sheriff's big gray, and that he hoped everyone would be glad to hear his sister was getting better. After that he had played My Bonnie Black Bess on the mouth organ, then climbed the scaffold and allowed the rope to be placed about his neck.

But as the sheriff took hold of the trip lever, Clay's face went stark white. Realization hit me for the first time that this man was intended to die, and I shut my eyes.

They opened quick, though, when Timmy gasped, "Lookee! Nothing's happened!"

It was so. The trap had not fallen and, at Pa's suggestion, Clay stepped back to let Sheriff Arter fix the trouble. Presently someone pulled the lever, and the trap dropped smoothly, and Clay took his place again, still white and not very steady. I didn't close my eyes this time, and I could see surprise actually ripple over the crowd as the trap stuck for the second time.

Then Pa called out, "Better make real certain, Sheriff. By virtue of the old law, you can't hang a man but three times."

There was real excitement then, and plenty of heads nodded agreement. Sheriff Arter glared at Pa but he was

mighty careful to check his pet gallows completely. He even stood on the trap himself, a mean-eyed runt who held his job only because of his reputation as a man-hunter. When Pa worked the lever, the trap opened, and the sheriff plunged down slick as grease, amid jeers and laughter.

But in vain. For when Clay Gowan again tried to fulfill his sentence, the trap refused to open for the third straight time. It was like Election Day, with people yelling and running about and applauding Clay and it wasn't for hours that somebody discovered that Clay had ridden off on Sheriff Arter's horse once more. I guess he figured he'd earned it.

It was Pa who solved the real mystery. He poked about the gallows for a long time while everyone watched. Finally he announced, "The trap's warped, that's all. Long as there was just a light weight like the sheriff on it, it worked fine. But Clay's so heavy he flattened it out and jammed it tight.... Funny thing, there was another case like this few years ago. English feller went free after they failed t' hang 'im. Odd coincidence."

"Tarnation odd." Sheriff Arter squinted about suspiciously. "Seein' we ain't had so much as a heavy dew fer nine weeks, how come that gallows t' be warped, Judge?"

Timmy and I wasted five seconds exchanging glances of horrified comprehension; then we skedaddled. But when Pa and Ma got home, not another word was spoken in our house about the hanging of Clay Gowan, except once.

That was when Ma said, "My, wasn't it wonderful the way things turned out? I was awful proud when your pa remembered the law just at the right time."

Pa and Ma looked at each other the way grownups do when they talk without saying anything. I thought Pa was going to laugh, but he only said, "I don't make the laws, Ma. I just administrate 'em."

[The end of *Two Creeks has a Hanging* by Arthur K. Barnes]