

Fiction

The End of the Time of Leinard

By Harlan Ellison



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Sheriff Frank Leinard felt the creeping cold of the grave—his or the old man's—riming his body. Every inch of his skin; but not the flesh of his right hand. He stood ready, right hand warm and loose, poised in limbo above the gun. His belly was drawn in tightly, his legs well-planted, body half-turned to present the narrowest target.

"I don't want to draw on you, Gus ... don't make me," he said softly. But his voice carried down the street to the old man.

The breeze coming in from the west end of town ruffled his lank brown hair. The breeze whispered of holy rain for which the town had hoped, and it bore the metallic scent of the *barranca*, miles away. The breeze also stirred the shirttail hanging from Gus Tabbert's pants. The flap of cotton shirting over the old man's holster.

Tabbert swayed. It was obvious he was drunk. "'N I ain't *gonna* make ya draw, Sher'f. But you ain't gonna take me t'no jail, neither..."

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The Sheriff's hard, square face grew even tighter. "We don't *like* drunks that make noise and shoot up the Palace, Gus. You know that. Now just settle back and don't make me draw on you."

There was a staggering movement from Tabbert, and he fumbled awkwardly past the shirttail, trying to get his fingers around the old, heavy Colt Walker.

Frank Leinard's right hand became invisible for an instant, and reappeared with the big Colt Army .44 free of the holster; and the August peace of the town was shattered by two sharp, quick reports, like a bull-whip snick-snickering.

Gus Tabbert took a tentative step, felt at himself and twisted forward, face-first into the dust. He was dead before he hit. He lay there with the revolver halfway out of its holster, his legs crushed up under him.

The breeze ruffled his gray hair.

* * * *

"Look, Frank, you gotta understand somethin'."

Pete Redallo, who ran the livery, and was also the spokesman for the City Council—what there was of it—stood with his sweat-stained hat in his

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hand. He stood before Frank Leinard's desk in the Sheriff's office with three of his fellow councilors. He had come to ask Frank Leinard to resign.

“You gotta know Bartisville ain't the same as it used to be. Things is changed, Frank.”

Leinard was a big, rangy man, with small, deep-set eyes of black and a full, gray-flecked mustache. He wore heavy lumberjack shirts and no vest, and he sweated a great deal: there were always two heavy, dark semicircles under his armpits. He wore the .44 low on the right side, with the concho thongs tied down on his thigh. There was a quiet competence about him, a strength, an assertiveness. He was the kind of man youngsters followed around with knives and whittle-sticks, begging for a little attention. He was the Sheriff, bred in the bone, anywhichway you looked at him, awake or on the nod.

His voice was soft, but never wheedling. Stronger than ever now, as he said, “How do you mean, Pete? Changed?”

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Redallo twisted the hat. He looked to his friends for aid. They nudged him with their eyes, to continue.

“Well, like this, Frank. Ya see, before, when Bartisville was just gettin’ started, when we was the end of the trail drive for everybody in this territory, we was a pretty wild town. Now we ain’t belittlin’ what you done here; you made this a decent town for our wives and kids, Frank.”

“But you got to understand something, Frank,” Morn Ashley said, with that sweet voice of his. “You gotta understand that those days are behind us. Hell, Frank, it’s comin’ up on the Turn of the Century. New times! New ways of doin’ things diff’rent from before. Why, I can run the bridge across the Shawsack without no trouble’t’all nowadays. Used to be that I’d have to drop down every man thought he could pass without payin’ my toll. But things is calmed down quite a lot, and there ain’t no call for all the gunslingin’ you do.”

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"Like I was sayin', Frank," Pete Redallo continued, asserting his position as spokesman with slight belligerence, "this was a wild town, and you came down from Kansas, and cleaned it up. Now we ain't belittlin' you at all. It was what we hadda have done, and you done it. We're mighty grateful for that. But, well, we, uh—"

"What're you tryin' to say, Pete?" Frank asked. His gaze was steady, without guile.

"Well, uh, well, there was just no call to shoot up poor old Gus Tabbert that way."

"He was drunk and disorderly. He drew on me."

Redallo dropped the hat, a flush hitting his cheekbones. "You know Gus was *always* drunk, Frank. And the little bit of shootin' he did was nothin' compared to what used to happen when Con Farlow's boys used to hit town. Tabbert oughtn't to be dead. It's just not right, is all."

Morn Ashley moved up beside Redallo.

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"Look, Frank, I'll be honest 'bout this.

"You've gotten to be more than just Sheriff 'round here. The way some folks feel, you're the law entire. The mayor, and the Council, and whatall. And that ain't right, Frank. This is as much your town as ours, but you don't act the way we figger a Sheriff should, no more.

"We're lots quieter now. The frontier days are gone, Frank. When you had to draw on every man who shot up a saloon, that was another time ... what was right then, it just don't seem proper now. Hell, Frank, old Tabbert was a friend to all of us—"

"Gus was *my* friend, too, Morn," Leinard said, softly.

"That's what we're tryin' to say, Frank." It was Karl Breslin from the B-slash-D speaking for the first time. "When you had plenty of rowdy-dowdys to tame, you were in fine style; but now that it's mostly families and such in Bartisville, you've taken to huntin' yore meat in the

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townsfolk. We just want you to understand that times change, and the men gotta change with 'em, otherwise—"

Leinard stood up slowly. He was a big man, well over six feet, graying but fit, and they edged back warily. There was no telling what burned beneath that calm surface. The way he always spoke so soft and warm. Leinard put his hands out—fingers spread, palms flat—on the desk. His face was calm, as he answered them.

"What you're tryin' to say is, you want me to resign. That right, Pete, Morn, Karl, Anse? That it?"

They stumbled and stammered and mumbled. "Well, no, that ain't *exactly...*" or "Oh, you *know* how things are, Frank..." and "Now don't get sore, Frank..." But he knew what they meant. It stuck up in their craws like a raw potato too big to get down.

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Leinard spoke quietly, surely. "You remember Louise Springer, the girl they had for schoolmarm 'bout three years back?" They nodded. His face slipped into an expression of sadness.

"Remember there was a lot of talk I was going to marry up with her?" They nodded again, and Anse Pfeiffer from the General Store added, "We never knew what happened there, Frank. Never thought it was our look-to finding out. No call to bring it up now, is there?"

Leinard nodded his head somberly. "Yes, Anse. There is. Just as there's reason to bring up now that I've never been invited to your house for supper. Nor yours, Pete, nor Morn's house, nor Karl's neither. Why's that?"

They stammered again, averting their eyes.

"When I asked Louise Springer to marry me," Frank Leinard said, with a tinge of coolness in his voice, "you know what she said?" They did not answer. Each stared elsewhere. It was not an easy thing they were asking of this big man who had served them for so long a time.

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"I'll tell you. She said: 'No, I can't do it, Frank.' So I asked her why, and after a long while she told me. I had to look up a word with Doc Crenkell, 'cause I didn't know what it was. You know what she called me, you men? She called me a pariah.

"You know what that is ... answer me! You know?"

They shook their heads. His voice was hungry, and tortured, and straining. Not soft and warm, but lost and sad.

"It means an outcast; someone no one else wants to go near. So I asked her what she meant, and she looked at me like I was shot in the belly. You understand? Like she was sorry for me. *Me!* Frank Leinard, the Sheriff! Sorry for me. Then she went ahead and said, 'Frank, you're a good man, under it all, and maybe a better man before you came here; but they've hired you to kill and that's what you are ... a hired gun. No matter if you got the law with you or not, you're a hired killer. And they know that. No matter how much anyone likes you as a man, Frank, they

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see that gun and what you are, and *no one* is going to associate with you. Because you're a pariah. They made you that, and that's the reason I'm not going to marry you, Frank."

Leinard sat back down carefully, and he turned his head away so they could not see his eyes. "So that's why I've never been invited to eat with any of you, and that's why I never got married, and that's why I made so much about this town bein' *my* town, and I wanted it to be the cleanest, best town.

"Now you come and tell me, 'Thanks, Frank, you risked your life every day, and you neatened our town for us, and now it's done, you can go.' Is that it? Is that what you're sayin' to me?"

He folded his hands; and now he turned back so they could see his face; and they saw, perhaps for the first time they truly saw that big Frank Leinard the Sheriff was not a young man any longer. They looked at one another, and Morn Ashley nudged Pete Redallo with his elbow.

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Pete said: "But, Frank, you don't get what we mean. I—I know, I mean, I know it's your town and all, but times has changed and we don't *need* a hired gun—I mean, we don't need your *kind* of Sheriff no more."

He stammered to silence, and looked ashamed.

Then they saw Frank Leinard's body stiffen, and he looked up with that strength in him, and he said levelly, "This is my town, gentlemen. I helped clean it, helped make it safe for you *little* men to run your businesses and get rich with. Now you think you're gonna throw me out and tell me to go find a nice tree out there somewhere, and bed down under it till I die, so's I don't embarrass you?"

"Well, there ain't many trees out there in *barranca* country; and there ain't many towns; and this one is mine. This is *my* time and I'm stayin'.

"There ain't one of you who can outfox me or outdraw me, so just *try* and get me out!"

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Then he stood up, and his chest swelled, and it brought the .44 into their sight even bigger, so they left. He stood by the window, watching them talking as they crossed the street to the Palace. It still felt like rain was coming.

* * * *

It got worse. Much worse. They started crossing the street to avoid him, and a petition was shoved under the office door one morning.

On the following Wednesday, a riot broke out in the telegraph office while he was eating at Fenner's, and they did not call him; they settled it themselves. That made him feel insecure, hurt, angry. So he got back at them by arresting Bill Pillby for carrying a gun in town.

Everyone knew Bill had been hunting that day and had only stopped in town to pick up some staples on his way back to his spread; but Frank saw him and threw him in the single cell before anyone could do anything about it. A delegation from the Council came, then, and told Frank he was

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getting too rambunctious, and he ordered them out. When they gave him trouble, he pulled the .44 on them. Then it took Doc Crenkell and the Judge to get Bill out.

But he held onto Pillby's well-tended and much-loved Sharps 74, and sent him out of town telling him he'd drop by the spread to return it, one day next week when he was out that way. And there wasn't anything Pillby or the Judge or Doc Crenkell could say about it being a necessity, about it being Bill Pillby's right arm, that could make the Sheriff accommodate.

A week later, in a slamming rain that had turned the main drag into an ankle-deep river of mud, he beat into insensibility two fence-riders from the B-slash-D who had brought in some forgework for the blacksmith, Quent Farrier.

Because they had to wait overnight and half the next day, the two waddies had spent some time at the Palace. Maybe they were a bit louder

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than they'd have been without having emptied a bottle of Kentucky between them, but everyone swore that when they offered to tote home the groceries for the piano teacher as she came out of the General Store, even when she resisted their roughhouse good humor—even Anse Pfeiffer, who was right there—swore to it—they were at worst tipsily polite. But all the witness they made probably couldn't have stopped Frank Leinard, who pistol-whipped and fisted them into the mud; and in the process dumped the piano teacher's goods into the mire, where they were split open and trampled.

Things went from bad to worse, and one day the bartender at the Palace had to throw Frank out for being drunk and smashing steins on the floor. He barely missed getting shot.

No one knew what to do.

So they decided to hire a gun from Silver City to wing Frank, and get him out of town.

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Frank killed the *pistolero* when the swarthy, pimple-faced man tried to take him out from under cover in an alley between the Palace and Fenner's. Then Frank went and arrested the men he thought were behind it. Three of them were innocent, but it didn't seem to matter to Leinard. So they decided to bushwhack him.

* * * *

Frank Leinard lay outside the Palace, in the dusty street. The night had closed down tightly, and a few folks had come into town for the dance. They passed him as he lay there, drunk, with his twisted, sewed-up gun-arm thrown out in a crazy *S* beside him.

One woman—Morn Ashley's wife—pursed her lips and shook her head as she went by, saying, "Ever since he got shot up like that, he's been just no good. Drunk all the time. Why do you men on the Council keep him on pension, Morn?"

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And Pete Redallo came by with his three kids. He stood for a moment, spread-legged, staring down at the drunken ex-Sheriff, and cursed softly, so the kids would not catch it.

"Should have run him out of town, not just crippled him," he said. "But you can't simple turn away a man that helped clean up the town."

They went on.

Others came by, not wanting to be late for the dance, and carefully stepped around Leinard. They all went by, and few of them heard what he was muttering, face in the dust.

Even had they heard, none of them would have understood what he meant when he said, "There's damn few trees out there in the *barranca*."

No one missed the dance that night. It was a good dance; a friendly, civilized dance, with no fights. That was because it was such a friendly, civilized town, was Bartisville.

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