

*If the First Pale Strangers Actually Were Cattlemen, Thought
the Young Sheriff, He Was a Jackrabbit's Uncle*



THE THIRD PALE STRANGER

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

THE Southwest had bred few more capable lawmen than Pete Wilson. He had known when to use his head, and when to use his gun, which was really something in the hell-roaring cow town that called itself Ironwood City. Pete tamed the place and kept it tame, until age took a hand and dealt him out. The sheriff job still held

fascination for him—he knew nothing else—and the loss made him bitter.

So he disliked his successor, two-fisted range rider Burn Kelly, and he went back to the old office now and then to have a little sly fun with the new young sheriff. Kelly was conscientious and doing his best; Ironwood City was tame again; but this had not made any difference to

Wilson.

The cowboy lawman looked around from his desk to see the tall and lean, white-mustached, white-goateed, familiar figure standing in the street doorway.

"Howdy, Pete," Burn said. "Come in and have a chair."

"Howdy, Burnham," Wilson said. "How's tricks?"

He walked to a chair and sank into it. Kelly took up a pencil, threw it down, grinned, became sober again and answered:

"Tricks, as you say, Pete, are sorta thickenin' up on me. I wonder if you saw what dropped off the southbound stage coach, hour or so ago?"

"Yeah, I saw," drawled old Wilson. "Another stranger. Pale, like the one that dropped off here yesterday. Done time in prison, both of 'em, probably. You should have figured that already, Burnham."

"I had, Pete," Burn Kelly said. "Accordin' to the hotel register, the one yesterday is named T. Hampton Grady, and the one today is Rutherford Arn. Sounds like fake names to me. I've had no man-wanted circulars to fit 'em, so I figure they're plain ex-convicts. Odd, their comin' in a day apart this way. Wondered if Arn could be on Grady's trail."

"Possible," Wilson admitted, with little enthusiasm.

Kelly pursued. "Both dressed in black, but somehow they don't quite stack up as gamblers, nor yet as lawyers, certainly not as preachers. Pete, you got any advice about deep stuff which you wouldn't mind passin' along to a pore ignorant range rider sheriff?"

He grinned broadly. Here was a bid for friendship. But Pete wasn't ready for that. His eyes twinkled as he said:

"Queer set-up, Burnham. Most anything could come out of it. Use your head, cowbuck."

"I'm tryin' to, Pete. I've already got couple deputies watchin' the bank, just in case, you know. I'm green, old-timer, awful green, when it comes to slick work. Friends put me into this job. I didn't much want it but now that I've got it, I aim to make good or bust a hamstring. Is there anything particular you feel like advisin' me on, old-timer?"

"Maybe not," Wilson said, and he scowled at the toes of his boots, "but I can give you something else to figure out. I got it from the snoopy hotel clerk. T. Hampton Grady left his room last night, was gone for hours and hours, and wasn't seen in any of the stores or saloons."

"But where could he go?"

The eyes of the old ex-sheriff were still twinkling. He rose suddenly, went to the street doorway, half turned there and told Burn Kelly this:

"Another pale stranger will likely crop up here, and in case he does he is the one you'll have a perfect hell of a time beatin' down."

"Shucks, Pete, I—"

Wilson was gone.

KELLY got up from his deck-chair, buckled on a gun-belt and ambled over to Ironwood City's combination hotel and saloon. Neither of the two newcomers was in the lobby or at the bar. The clerk volunteered information to the effect that T. Hampton Grady's room was upstairs at the front and on the right, Rutherford Arn's at the other end of the hall and on the left.

The young sheriff climbed the stairway. The door to Gray's room stood ajar; nobody was inside. Kelly walked without sound down the hall, stopped at the closed door of Arn's room, listened and heard nothing, and bent an eye to the keyhole.

Instantly the door was jerked open.

There before him stood both Arn and Grady.

"So it's the law dog," Grady said, voice sour. "Anything we can do for you, Sheriff?"

"Sure there is," Arn said in favor-currying tones. "He wants to know all about us, Hamp. Sheriff, Hamp and I had Rocky Mountain spotted fever up in another state, and as soon as we got able we high-tailed out of there. You thought it was prison pallor. Sure you did! We're in the market for a cow outfit. You happen to know of one that's for sale?"

Burn Kelly did not answer the question. He looked the two over closely. They were much alike, tall, almost thin, keen of eye and level of gaze, men of iron nerve beyond a doubt. Their black clothing was old and a good deal frayed.

"When you expectin' the other jigger?" narrowly inquired the lawman.

"What other jigger?" asked Grady.

"The other pale stranger," Burn Kelly said.

Rutherford Arn laughed. "We sure don't know what you're talking about, Sheriff."

"How come you two got in here a day apart?"

T. Hampton Grady answered quickly, "Ruther stopped off to look at ranch prospects up the country a ways."

"Where did *you* go last night?"

For the time of one second, Grady looked startled.

Then he grinned. "Oh, that. Hot in my room last night, and I took a walk, and got tired, and sat down on somebody's porch and went to sleep. It was nearly daylight when I woke up."

Too smooth, thought Kelly. Without another word he turned and went downstairs, out to the street and back to his office.

He was just a little surprised to see old Pete Wilson there again.

"What did you find out, Burnham?" Pete asked.

BURN told him everything. Wilson laughed as though he were very greatly amused. "You're green, Burnham, all right. Talked your head off. Now they know you're suspicious and will be twice as hard to catch at their devilment, whatever it may be."

"Hell," flared the Irish in Kelly, "I told you I was green when it came to slick stuff, didn't I? Look, Pete, I did the best I knew, and I aim to keep right on doing it. If only the thing will come to a shootout—that's where I shine—both of 'em are heeled; guns in armpit holsters, and they tried to stand so that I wouldn't notice. This seems to be fine sport for you, Pete. Well, just go right on having yourself a good time!"

Wilson, apparently, was more amused than ever. "Something else I can tell you, Burnham. Hamp Grady went to the liveryman's this morning, and bought the two fastest horses and the best pair of saddles the liveryman had. Might be that's another one for you to figure out."

"Offhand," muttered Kelly. "I'd say it's part of a plan for a quick getaway. My guess is that they told at the livery stable that they meant to ride out lookin' for a ranch to buy. Pete, I've worked for a lot o' cattlemen, and seen a lot more, and if Arn and Grady are cattlemen I'm a jackrabbit's uncle."

Wilson's brows lifted. "Quick getaway from what?"

"Well," Kelly said, "the bank's new vault is crammed with cash, for one possibility. If they aim to stick it up, likely they'll find an excuse for goin' in there to sorta get the lie of the place beforehand."

Up to now they haven't been in, or my two watchin' deputies woulda reported it."

Wilson straightened the broad Stetson on his white head and walked to the door. "There's such things as strong boxes on stage coaches, remember," he said, and walked out.

Later, Burn Kelly went to the livery stable. He asked the liveryman to let him know when the strangers had come for their horses. The reply was disconcerting:

"That pair saddled up and rode off half an hour ago, Burn. They had grubsacks. Grady said they was goin' to look at some mine prospects, and wouldn't be back until late tomorrow night, maybe not until the day after. They rode east."

Kelly bit an oath in two. Mine prospects, eh? So far as he knew, there was no such thing within a radius of a hundred miles.

"Probably circled the town and rode west." This to himself. To the liveryman, "How was the two horses shod?"

"New shoes on the hind feet of both. Too late in the day to do much trackin', Burn, if that's what you had in mind."

The cowboy sheriff squinted at the low sun and nodded. "If a third pale jigger happens in here on horseback, let me know quick, will you?"

"Sure, Burn."

Kelly went up the street and to the hotel. He found that Rutherford Arn had told the clerk exactly what T. Hampton Grady had told the liveryman.

"Any odd thing about 'em catch your notice?" inquired the young lawman. "Anything at all? The least thing?"

The clerk thought backward. After a minute, "No," he said, "believe not. But here's somethin', Burn, which I told Pete Wilson when he quizzed me, and which Pete didn't seem to think was important. Late last night or early this morning, some jigger walked up the stairs there who had

been walking in dirty flour. Flour you make bread out of, you know. I wiped it up. Could that mean anything?"

Kelly hadn't forgotten the ex-sheriff's telling him, "Use your head, cowbuck." Well, he was using it now. After a brief period of hard thinking, he turned back to the clerk.

"I never did like snoopin', but looks like I'll hafta snoop some on this. I want keys that'll let me into both the pale strangers' rooms. And keep your mouth shut about it."

In Arn's room he found nothing that interested him. In Grady's he saw, on the floor, the merest vestige of a dirty-white, powdery stuff. So it had been Grady who'd left the whitish prints on the stairs.

"And he was out somewhere most of last night," Burn Kelly muttered. "But where the devil did he step in that stuff, whatever it is?"

He took the keys back to the clerk. "I want to know it quick if another pale hombre bobs up here," he said in a low voice, and went to his office.

For long he sat at his desk thinking, and saw no ray of light. Much of the night following he wrestled with his problem. He had breakfast at dawn, and when good daylight came he was riding a county road westward looking for the hoofprints of a pair of horses freshly shod behind.

TWO miles from town he found them. They were not plain. But he was at home in this, and he picked them up readily. Another mile, and the trail vanished—in a shallow creek that flowed across the road.

"Slick," said Kelly to himself. He kept a ready gun hand as he rode up the stream and down the stream trying in vain to find the trail again. "Sure *is* slick."

Because he wished to be in town when the southbound stage arrived, he made no

very extended search. But he needn't have bothered. No other pale stranger was in evidence when the stage had come and gone.

Kelly left his horse at the livery stable and was headed up the street when he met Pete Wilson.

"How's tricks, cowbuck?" asked old Pete.

"So-so," Burn Kelly said. Wilson would probably hoot if he told him much of anything. He remarked casually, "Pete, I reckon you wasn't stringin' me when you advised me to look out for a third pale jigger."

Wilson replied, "I didn't say that I was certain he'd come, Burnham. But there's a big chance he will. And if he does, he is the one you'll have a hell of a time with, like I told you before."

"Who is he, Pete?"

Wilson only grinned. It was a superior sort of grin. He was enjoying this.

"Somebody's a little loco," Kelly said, and walked on.

"And it might be you," old Pete threw after him.

The cowboy sheriff went to the bank, saw that the two deputies he had watching were strictly on the job, went to the post office and found no mail worth more than a glance, then turned in at the hotel and had dinner.

Half an hour afterward, he was in his saddle again and riding for the creek that had swallowed the trail of the Arn and Grady horses.

Those horses had left the stream somewhere, of course. Kelly had more time at his disposal now, and was therefore more diligent in the search. At that, more than half the afternoon was past when he found the spot he'd been looking for. He had over-ridden it twice; the banks here were gravelly, and did not register hoofprints. He picked up the trail rods

from the creek—and it pointed back toward Ironwood City!

It lay straight as a gun-barrel eastward for a good two hundred yards. Then it turned sharply, squarely southward.

"What the hell kind o' doin's is this, anyhow?" ripped out young Sheriff Burnham Kelly.

Five minutes then, and his exasperation increased and he was even madder. For he had lost the hoofprints altogether in a vast spread of cow-country grass and had to give up hope of finding them again. He was bucking a pair of clever men, and certainly he knew it now. Perhaps Grady and Arn were sticking up the bank, or robbing the southbound stagecoach somewhere below, while he was mooning around out here?

Kelly went galloping back to Ironwood City.

He was relieved when he learned that there had been no bank stickup. If the stage had been robbed, news of it had not reached town. Burn left his horse with the liveryman and a few minutes later was sinking wearily into his desk-chair.

Again he set his head to work on the whitish-powder clue. This had struck him as being a really worthwhile clue, and the more he thought of it the more important it seemed. That old Pete Wilson hadn't regarded it seriously made no difference to Burn Kelly now.

When the sun went down the cowboy sheriff was as much puzzled as ever. At midnight he was in the same deep mental hole. He slept at last, and dreamed of a horde of strangers with white faces, and once he woke in a cold sweat.

At daybreak he was at the hotel with a question. The clerk ran upstairs, ran back with the answer:

"Grady and Arn haven't come in, Burn."

"Let me know quick when they do

come in," ordered Kelly. "I'll be at the office day and night if I'm in town."

The strangers hadn't shown up at sunset. Early in the day, Kelly had started men out riding the county in all directions, making inquiries everywhere, and these returned at dusk to tell him that nobody had seen Arn or Grady. It was almost as though the pair had been snatched off the earth by some gigantic, invisible hand.

On this night, too, Burn found sleep difficult. He had piled down on a blanket in a corner of his office, with his broad Stetson over his eyes to shut out the light of the lamp on his desk. Still again the clue of T. Hampton Grady's whitish footprints haunted him, nagged him. Clean to the marrow of his bones he felt that this was the key to everything.

Burn Kelly never knew how the solution came, was quite sure he hadn't dreamed it, would have laughed at any suggestion to the effect that his subconscious mind had worked it out. He knew only that he woke suddenly at the break of dawn with the mystery vanishing like cavernous gloom before a flash of lightning. It was as quick as that.

Springing to his feet with his left hand clamping his hat on, he ran to the back door of his office buckling on his gun-belt, then stole rapidly up the alleyway in the dim, gray light.

Two indistinct, tall dark figures were just leaving the rear of the brick bank building. One of them carried a burlap bag that was bulky enough to be discernible—it contained only a little under sixty thousand dollars in cold cash! Had Kelly been a single minute later, all would have been lost for him.

They saw him. He dropped to one knee in order to make a smaller target of himself. His heavy old range six-shooter was out of its leather and ready. He spat:

"Drop that and reach high with the juclaws, you two, or I'll blast—"

A double-action hookbill in Rutherford Arn's right hand flamed and barked. The bullet grazed the new young sheriff's scalp an inch above his left ear. It addled him a little, spoiled his aim when he shot back. Arn was talking in a voice so low that Kelly barely caught these words:

". . . kill the nosey law dog—then catch up with you—high-tail!"

Already T. Hampton Grady was running with the loot, heading for a pair of saddled horses that stood almost hidden under a liveoak in the middle of a vacant lot directly behind the bank building. Kelly now lay flat. He shot at Grady and again missed, was still a little addled. Dimly he remembered telling old Pete Wilson: "If only it will come to a shootout, that's where I shine." Well, this was it! Again he fired at the running Grady and missed.

Arn shot at the flash and bullet-holed Burn Kelly's hat. Kelly rolled over to change position, shook his head to clear it, took a more careful but quick aim at the dark hump that was Arn and let the gunhammer go.

Arn gasped half an oath and wilted, limp as a boiled rag.

There was silence then, except for a fast beat of hoofs westward and an excited, inquiring voice from over on the main street somewhere.

Kelly got to his feet and ran to Arn's horse. A moment, and he had forked the animal and was kicking it into a gallop after the fleeing Grady. Because of the insufficient light he couldn't see his man. At the edge of town he reined almost to a halt and bent an ear, and heard the fading sounds of hoofbeats off southwestward. He followed on then, as fast as the Arn horse could run.

But Grady's mount was the faster. More than a mile lay between pursuer and pursued when fair daylight came. The robber, ignorant as to his partner's fate, could not have been sure of the identity of the man behind. He kept riding as though the devil had a pitchfork at his back.

The painful throbbing of his head wound notwithstanding, Burn Kelly's eyes carried a hard light. It was a good bet that Grady, with all the bank loot, was bent upon giving Arn as well as the law the slip! So Kelly resorted to a trick, since he could not hope to overtake his man in an open race. He stopped, sat the panting horse for some minutes, and turned back toward town. When he was out of the robber's range of vision, he cut rapidly westward under cover of a long, low ridge.

T. Hampton Grady was not immediately deceived. But after considerable time had passed with no further sign of pursuit, he slowed his foam-flecked mount. He'd been leaving a plain trail, which was not so good.

A creek lay ahead. He turned right and into it. Then he turned left down the bed of the stream and kept going, hidden by bank scrub, until the west bank became rocky terrain that led to a wide stretch of badlands.

Grady rode out of the creek and into the rocky, barren wasteland, leaving a trail so dim that it would have puzzled an Indian.

EARLY in the afternoon he came upon the deserted patchwork shanty of some long gone prospector. Beside it there was a seep spring and enough water for his fagged horse and himself. He felt entirely safe here, and soon was stretched out on his back in the shanty to catch a little of the sleep he had lost the night before.

A quiet voice woke him. He sat up, reaching toward the weapon he carried

holstered in his left armpit.

"Ruther?" he mouthed sleepily—"Ruther?"

"It's not Rutherford, T. Hampton," the quiet voice said. "Take your hand off that gun!"

Grady realized suddenly that he was looking into the muzzle of Burn Kelly's six-shooter. Burn stood in the doorway. Fully awake now, Grady began making sly talk:

"How'd you find me, Sheriff?" forcing half a smile.

"Watched you from the tops of ridges and pinnacles. Take your juclaw off that gun!"

It was a fast double-action .41 hookbill, a mate to Arn's. As Grady snatched it out he fell backward in order to be under the line of Kelly's gunsights—both weapons blazed in the same infinitesimal part of a second—both drew blood.

SHORTLY after sundown of that day, young Sheriff Burn Kelly rode into Ironwood City's main street leading a horse. Tied across the saddle on this horse was that which had been the villainous, murderous pale stranger who had called himself T. Hampton Grady. A crowd gathered. Foremost in the crowd was the tall and lean, white-mustached and white-goateed ex-sheriff, Pete Wilson.

"Here, Pete—" Kelly began, one hand falling to a burlap bag tied to his saddlehorn—"look after this—"

He was deathly pale under his sunburn. He slumped and would have fallen if Wilson hadn't caught him.

Hours later he came back to himself to find that he was in bed in the Wilson company bedroom. He was in bandages that smelled like a drugstore. He blinked at the oil lamp, then saw that old Pete and the Ironwood City doctor sat near by.

Remembering, Kelly grinned. The ex-sheriff grinned too, and he spoke:

“Everything’s fine, cowbuck. The doc got the bullet out and sewed up your head, and you’ll make it, but better let me do what talking is necessary at the present. First thing, I owe you apologies, and you’ve sure got ‘em. Burnham, all the cash I’d saved was in that bank!

“All right. I made a big mistake in passing up the dirty-white powder sign. But you sure didn’t. Yeah, it was lime, lime out of mortar. The jiggers had been keeping themselves and their horses hid in the daytime and working nights under the bank, digging into the brick vault with long chisels—slow, making no noise.

Slick way to rob a bank, and one on me. I’m out of date, Burnham. I’m an old fool—”

“Shut up, Pete,” said Kelly. “You’re one grand jigger, that’s what you are. I’m still bad stuck on one thing, Pete. Who was the third pale stranger you kept warnin’ me to look out for?”

Wilson went a little red. “I’m sorry about that, Burnham. But there was a heap of truth in it, even if I did mean it as a sort of pestiferous riddle for you. Well—er, the third pale stranger is now at the undertaker’s with Grady and Arn. He got that pair. Thank goodness he didn’t get you, though he did come close to it. He was Death, Burnham.”