

Share That Tree by Fred T. Barton



MARVIN ROCKWELL might have passed as one of the several drummers who lounged about the lobby of the little Western hotel had it not been, perhaps, for the hard, almost cruel glint that shown in his steady, continuously narrowed eyes. That glint was not inductive of salesmanship. Another point which barred him from the clacking group of salesmen was the way he chewed a cigar which had never been lighted, and which had almost disappeared into his mouth, only the very tip showing between lips that neither turned up or turned down at the corners.

Perhaps it was because he was the only man sitting alone that led the old hotel proprietor, relieved of his duties at the register and key-rack by his wife, to slide into the seat to Rockwell.

"Fine evenin'?" cautiously inquired the proprietor.

Rockwell wasn't the kind of a man to admire the weather, but he grunted a half encouraging reply. He had arrived after dark,

had eaten on diner, and after registering for the night, had decided to wait until morning to finish the business which had brought him almost four hundred miles across the State.

"Your first time here?" persisted the proprietor

"Yes," answered Rockwell, eying the other out of the corner of his eyes, the bare trace of a tolerant smile twitching his mouth.

"Salesman, I suppose?"

It was on the tip of Rockwell's tongue to whip out a sharp reproof, but his ready wits saved him, and he nodded, at the same time increasing the latitude of his smile and adding: "I'm selling shoes."

The old man beamed, for he felt he had easily won a victory, which he had, for it was a part of his business, or at least he felt it was, to acquaint himself with the affairs of every newcomer. He immediately began negotiations for more information, giving in return for Rockwell's grunted answers, the prospects for placing a new line of footwear in the town.

Rockwell, despite his resolve to maintain his affected affability, was becoming intolerably bored, and was on the point of briskly ending the cross-examination when his eyes, roving disinterestedly across the lobby, settled upon a tall, powerful proportioned man, who came through the door, accompanied by a woman, and a small boy. The big man strode with the swinging, self-sure step of the West. The woman was almost dainty in her smallness beside the strapping giant. She led the boy by the hand, and he was a juvenile counterpart of the big fellow.

The man nodded to the old proprietor as he passed down the lobby. Rockwell, peering from under his shading hat-brim, observed that across the man's bronzed face, from the tip of his prominent right cheek-bone to his ear, ran a blue-white scar.

"Who is that fellow?" he asked.

"Who—oh, that's Sheriff Shelvin—Big Tim Shelvin. Lives here," answered the hotelkeeper. "You see, this is th' county seat. Shelvin's got a ranch up in th' northeast corner of th' county, but he stays in town most o' th' time since he's been sheriff."

"His wife with him?" casually.

"Yeah—she was old Sheriff Delaney's gal."

"That's a bad scar he's got," prodded Rockwell.

"Yeah, it's an old scar, all right—some years ago it was handed to him, and it all happened over Edna Delaney—she's his wife, o' course, now. That were in th' days when this county was just in th' transformation from th' open range to th' barbed wire stage, like y' find it now."

Rockwell waited patiently while the other gnawed off a chew from a black plug, and found the range of the nearest cuspidor.

"Go on," he encouraged.

"Well, old Sheriff Delaney, in them days,

had his hands full holding th' boys down to th' regular course o' law an' order. Big Tim Shelvin was only a youngster, an' a devil in some ways, but old Delaney made him deputy sheriff. Also Big Tim was sweet on Edna Delaney.

"Th' gal was only 'bout eighteen, an' was considered 'bout th' prettiest little piece hereabouts. Most o' th' boys in this end o' th' State would have given up his annual spree for a smile from Edna Delaney, but young Shelvin had th' inside track until Buck Sherwood showed up an' went to work for th' Bar T outfit over in th' next county.

"It seemed like luck played into Buck's hand, for 'bout that time Shelvin and th' gal has a spat, an' Buck begun to shine around Edna. I al'ays said she encouraged Buck so's to make Big Tim jealous. That's th' way some women do.

"Anyway, Buck was big an' handsome with black hair, but th' fust time I sees him, I don't like his eyes and th' way he swaggers 'round like he'd roped th' world and had it hog-tied. He had a way o' lookin' at a person, kinda contemptuous like, an' cold-blooded, I called it. Buck might o' been all right if he'd 'a' let th' other fellers take care o' th' liquor, but he wasn't 'round long till we all got 'quainted with his habit o' tryin' to drink all th' wet goods in th' county at certain times—an' do it all in one night.

"I run the hotel then—not this one, but the old house, and, o' course, I had the princ'pal bar in town. 'Bout th' fust time Buck decides to get full an' shoot up things—an' he done a good job—Edna must o' told him his company was not agreeable.

"There'd 'a' probably been somethin' doin' that fust night if old Delaney or Shelvin had been in town, but both o' them was out in th' buffalo grass lookin' for a cowboy who'd gone bugs and done a little shootin' that afternoon.

“It seems that after Edna Delaney turns him down, Buck Sherwood got it into his ornery head that Shelvin, an’ not th’ liquor, was to blame. He took to passin’ remarks about Big Tim whenever he had occasion. The occasions got more frequent when Shelvin begin callin’ regular at the Delaney home.

“Far as I know. Big Tim never had no words with Buck, and let him go on shootin’ off his mouth until others begins to whisper round that Shelvin’s ’fraid to call Buck’s hand. Anyway, Shelvin’s silence must o’ made Buck think he had more latitude, for he got to boastin’ that he’s a better man than Big Tim.

“I seen things was goin’ to bust when Shelvin steps into the bar one day and finds Buck, who’d just ridden into town.

“ ‘Is that big son-of-a-gun Shelvin, with a baby heart an’ a tin star, still sheriffin’ round here?’ Buck was sayin’ when Shelvin stood in th’ door behind. ‘I’m ’bout ready to run him over into Colorado.’

“I was gettin’ ready to dodge lead, when what does Big Tim do but turn and walk out without callin’ a show-down. I was sure ’shamed o’ Big Tim. It most broke my heart. Afterward I was ’shamed o’ myself for being ’shamed o’ Shelvin, for I found out it was that gal that had been keepin’ him quiet. She’d made him promise to steer clear o’ Buck, an’ he was doin’ at th’ cost o’ his own reputation.

“Buck hadn’t seen Shelvin in th’ door, but some o’ th’ others in th’ room had, an’ they told Buck. He just laughs and orders the drinks.

“ ‘Boys, he orates, th’ liquor he’d already guzzled an’ the one he’d just gulped, gettin’ in his blood. ‘Boys, I’m goin’ to run Shevlin across the prairie to-night.’

“Then he gives a whoop, an’ starts in. Y’ could always tell when Buck was startin’ in

for one o’ his big times. He never failed t’ start by bouncin’ a beer keg several times off the ceiling. He’d toss those kegs up until they’d bound back and hit the floor but smash, an’ then he’d yell like a Comanche an’ laugh and toss it up agin. Generally th’ weak-hearted began to leave when Buck begun his medicine-ball stunt.

“By ten o’clock that night Buck had completed th’ keg-tossin’ part o’ his program an’ he was a roarin’, bad man. An’ he was gettin’ filthy-mouthed. I always said a man really showed his inner character when he was drunk, an’ wore his good-behavior shell when he was sober. It was thataway with Buck.

“He cussed Shelvin and finally he began to say some pretty bad things ’bout Edna Delaney. I saw some o’ the boys fingerin’ their sixes when he begun that line ’bout the gal. Some o’ the crowd grinned and laughed, but all th’ boys with any guts would ’a’ gone to hell for th’ gal.

“They was a number o’ Big Tim’s friends congregatin’, an’ I saw a lot o’ the Big T outfit flankin’ Buck on both sides at the bar. They would ’a’ been hell, fire, an’ lead smeared all over th’ place if some o’ Shelvin’s friends hadn’t got into th’ crowd an’ cut out all who might ’a’ started somethin’ with Buck. Everybody had heard o’ Shelvin walkin’ away from Buck that afternoon when he should ’a’ talked back with lead, and they was pretty much wrought up an’ ashamed, like I was o’ Shelvin.

“But th’ word was passed that this was Shelvin’s affair, an’ it’s up to him to make good. They starts out to find him. He was at Delaney’s house sparkin’ Edna. They calls him out and tells him th’ situation of things, an’ how Buck’s roaring drunk, an’ passin’ slurrin’ remarks ’bout his gal.

“ ‘I promised to let that skunk alone only when he talks about me,’ Shelvin said. ‘I’ll

get him, pronto.'

"But the boys held him, and two o; them keeps him roped until th' rest got back to the hotel. 'Bout th' time they arrives, Buck announces he's ready and primed to chase Big Tim Shelvin over into th' next State. He spins th' cylinder o' his six-gun an' reels out. His Bar T bunch prepared to start out after him, but they meets the rest o' th' boys at th' door, and, very quietly, with their guns ready for emergency, Shelvin's friends herds th' Bar T outfit down th' street to the grocery store, and holds them there.

"Somehow, Buck misses Shelvin, who's been let loose by his friends, and Big Tim comes ambling hell-bent for election into th' hotel bar. And there was sure blood in his eye. He turns and runs out agin when I tells him Buck was out after him. An' right after he left in comes old Delaney, who had heard o' the row, an' he's lookin' for both his deputy an' Buck, preferring to meet Buck fust, ah' he did. Just then Buck comes roarin' into the door and passes Delaney. Th' sheriff calls to him to stop.

"An' when Buck turned, he turned a shootin'. I don't know just how fast it all happened, but it was mighty derved fast. I see old man Delaney stagger back, an' right behind him I sees Shelvin. Big Tim must 'a' been afraid to shoot for fear o' hittin' Delaney. I don't think Buck even seen Shelvin. It must 'a' been one o' his shots that missed Delaney that caught Big Tim in th' right shoulder. Another whipped across Shelvin's cheek and takes away part o' his ear. Th' next I knew Delaney was on the floor in a pool o' blood an' Shelvin, with his gun-arm hangin' limp, an' his six-gun on the floor half-way 'cross the room, was backed ag'in' the bar. In front o'him stood Buck Sherwood, leerin' and laughin'. Buck wasn't staggerin' no more, but he was still drunk in the brain.

"Buck, like he was playin' with the nozzle of a hose, wiggles his gun back and forth at me an' Shelvin. I might 'a' been scared an' slow, but I didn't have no gun—never carried one, and didn't even have one behind th' bar. Buck was crazy drunk and there was like to be murder right there.

"'Y're gonna run like hell in a minute toward th' Colorado line, an' 'f y' decides not to run now, y'll never run no more,' sneers Buck.

"Big Tim wa'n't sayin' nothin'—just standin' there glarin' an' slippin' down, with blood spurtin' from his cheek. I knew he was 'bout to fall. I heard his teeth grind as he hunched himself up a little. I sneaked my hand on the neck of a whisky-bottle under the bar, and prepared to make one try at Buck's head.

"Just then into the room comes Edna Delaney, her face flushed and her hair all fluffy like she'd been runnin'. Her big eyes takes in the situation. Maybe she didn't see her dad on th' floor, 'cause she didn't take her eyes off Buck. An' there was no fear in her eyes, that is, not the kind o' fear that makes a person give danger a through ticket.

"She just starts walkin' toward that crazy cow-puncher skunk of a Buck Sherwood. Once he swings his gun on her, an' I thought he was goin' to shoot. But that gal just looks at him with her big, round eyes, and I could see the forked scorn blazin' out o' them, Buck's gun wavered, an' the next moment she snatched his shooter and has it on him. business end fust.

"Then into th' door stampedes the Bar T outfit an' th' rest o' th' bunch. In th' jamboree some o' the Bar T men disappears with Buck afore any one can get their bearings. Th' boys went roaring after them, but the Bar T men scatters in the bush along th' draw, an' Buck got away.

"Old man Delaney never did get right

well after they patched him up, an' he died afore th' year was up. An' Shelvin vowed he'd get Buck Sherwood if it took him th' rest o' his life. But that's how he got that scar you was speaking 'bout."

Throughout the story, Rockwell had listened intently, chewing hard on his cigar.

"Did he ever get Burk Sherwood, do you know?" he asked.

"Never heard," answered the other. "Soon after old man Delaney died Shelvin left these parts. He was gone six years, an' when he come back Edna Delaney was still waitin' for him. Only one man ever dared ask him about Sherwood, an' he let that feller know so well that it was a closed incident; no one else ever tried it again. That was their little boy you saw. He's gonna be like his dad. We 'lected Shevlin Sheriff two years ago, an' we're gonna vote him the job again next 'lection "

Again Rockwell was silent for several moments.

"When will the next train leave going East?" he inquired.

"Why—eight o'clock in th' mornin', but, say, y're not figuring on—"

"Got to get some mail away on it," growled Rockwell. "Guess I'll go to my room and get it ready."

But the first train carried Rockwell eastward at eight o'clock the next morning.

In the governor's office at the capitol, Deputy Warden Marvin Rockwell, of the State penitentiary, conferred with the chief

executive for an hour.

"Just what do the records in the case show, Rockwell?" asked the Governor when the deputy warden had completed his story.

"That William Snellings was sentenced for from five to ten years for killing Buck Sherwood," replied Rockwell. "Snellings was convicted on a third-degree murder charge, because it was shown there was a strong element of self-defense in the case. He served one year and a few months and escaped. A convict, who was serving when Snellings was in, was paroled a while back. He saw and recognized Snellings, and tipped me. That's how I happened to go out after him."

"And he didn't mention the girl, or the old fight at the trial?"

"Never a word."

The Governor smiled and pushed a buzzer-button.

"Bring me a pardon-blank," he said to the secretary, and then to Rockwell: "I've been told you are a hard man—this is rather unusual."

"Only pardon I ever recommended in my twenty years at the pen," growled the deputy warden. "And, I might suggest you just make it for William Snellings, and, if you don't mind, I'll deliver it myself, for maybe that little woman don't know that Sheriff Timothy Shelvin was once William Snellings, convict, and I'll see she don't find out—and then there's the kid."