

L. RON HUBBARD



**Gun Boss
of
Tumbleweed**

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Blackmail Job

SOME day, hombre, one of these squeezed-out rancheros is goin' to get past your guns, and when he does, they'll be measurin' you for a sod kimono. And personally, it'll do my heart a world of good to see you skippin' over the red-hot coals of hell."

Mart Kincaid said it with insolence, a wicked flash in his eye. But somehow it was tired, too—tired with the weight of five years on the payroll of Gar Malone, King of the Concha Basin.

The sun was August hot in the searing blue bowl of the Southwest sky, but it wasn't the sun which made Gar Malone jerk his hat lower to hide his eyes.

They sat their horses for a little, on the edge of the trail, neither one of them willing to let it drop without further venom—for they hated each other as the rattlesnake hates the gila, and they had hated each other for a long, long time.

Gar Malone was corpse-thin, hot for gain, killer-ruthless in his sway of range in four hugely unsurveyed counties. His eyes were dark, his teeth were black, there was no light whatever to the flame of thirsty ambition which scorched within him, searing him on to further power, further wealth, further conquest.

He was no coward, Gar Malone, but he knew his man.

“What objections you got? Seems like you’re kinda late, Kincaid.”

“Sure, sure. I’m the fallen sparrow and my hands ain’t fit to touch a decent horse. But they ain’t my crimes, Gar Malone.”

“Crimes? Why for cripe’s sake, what kind of a baby have you turned into? What’s criminal in bein’ the biggest horn toad in this furnace? What’s so damned dirty about shovin’ weaklings and peewee stockmen out of the country? Did they invent it? God made it, Kincaid, and it’s for the one that can take it and keep it.”

“God may have made it,” said Mart, “but He sure didn’t count on a brand artist comin’ along and turnin’ it into what it is. There ain’t fifty decent people from here to Tumbleweed. It’s gettin’ kind of monotonous pitchin’ into every poor citizen that wants to eat, work and prosper within a hundred miles any direction. I don’t object to dirt but I get tired wallerin’ in it and pretendin’ it’s rose petals.”

“You goin’ to Tumbleweed, or ain’t you?” snapped Gar.

“Oh, sure, sure. I’ll go to Tumbleweed. I’ll knock out the Singing Canyon spread. I’ll stand back and let the boys throw lead into honest punchers whose only crime is bein’ loyal to a good boss. Sure, I’ll do it.”

“Now, that’s better,” said Gar, mollified considerable. “You’re the best gun in the state and the gold I pay clinks. But by all that’s holy, Kincaid, if I have to go on takin’ all this off’n you, you think I’m goin’ to forget what I know?”

“Dead men ain’t got no memories to speak of at all,” said Kincaid.

Gar's dark gaze fastened upon the silver-chased cannons in Kincaid's buscadero belt. His breath went shallow. "Try it, Kincaid. Go ahead and try it. And the Saturday I don't appear in Lawson, Jeb Barly takes the sealed packet out of his bank safe and puts it in the hands of the US deputy marshal. You won't be the only one that will get green-gilled that day. Think twice, gunman. Think twice."

"You ain't panicky, are you?" said Kincaid. His laugh was insolent, without any amusement whatever.

"You think I don't know your fanning? Why do I pay you? And we both know why you go on workin' for me. I need you. You and Gary O'Neil need me alive." Gar's mood changed into pretended lightness and warmth. "I hear," he continued, "that young Gary's ma got herself a new house on her birthday. Now wasn't that just wonderful of you boys? I tell you, it does my heart good."

"You know, hombre," said Mart, "there's times when I just plain itch to let the desert breezes fan gently through yore hide." And as swift as lightning he rolled his guns and slammed four rapid shots into a cast-off canteen beside the trail. The first made it leap into the air, the second, third and fourth rent it apart before it could fall once more.

The first shot Gar had felt in his own flesh. He didn't breathe comfortably until the white powder smoke had drifted well down the trail.

"I guess," said Mart, "that I'll be headin' out for Tumbleweed."

He jerked his pack horse forward and spurred his gray.

If he had looked back he would have seen Gar Malone still sitting his bay beside the trail, looking after him with eyes which sought furtively for a way to end this tension and still rule the Concha Basin.

But Mart Kincaid didn't look back. He was in a more than usually bitter mood. At twenty-five, he felt, he should be well on his way toward making a decent man of himself, carving a fine future from this gaudy but fertile desert realm. But who was he? Gar Malone's peacifier. At twenty-five he was Mart Kincaid, general of the forces of Concha Basin's private and personal devil, a man who used him as guns and brains and kept him chained as thoroughly as Gar's big greyhounds, imported from the East to run down and kill wolves.

It was sixty miles as the buzzard soars to Tumbleweed but it was better than twenty-nine more if one connected with the water holes and used the better trails. But Mart was in no hurry and he added six more in a detour past O'Neil's small ranch.

He felt bad and his eyes were turned so far in that as he came through the canyon below the ranch he did not see, there on the narrow trail before him, the six Malone punchers, part of the home ranch crew.

Johnny Destro saw him and pulled up, halting the others behind him with a half-raised hand. Destro had no love for Kincaid, for Destro considered himself something of a gunner—a fact which he wisely kept to himself. Destro looked at the rangy gray and the slender rider and narrowed his eyes.

Just as Kincaid would have collided with him, unseeing, Destro yanked his reins and climbed the wall.

“Hello, Mr. Kincaid,” said Destro, hurriedly assuming a smile.

“Nice day, Mr. Kincaid,” said others of the crew.

Mart rode on through them at a brisk trot, packhorse following. The last man in the line saluted with careful carelessness.

“Hiya, Mr. Kincaid.”

Mart, aware of the group for the first time, glanced over his shoulder at them and said nothing.

The group dropped uncomplainingly back into the trail and rode on.

Mart leaned out of the saddle and opened a gate. He tied his pack animal there, for he did not intend to linger, and rode on up to the house. Nobody answered his hail and he reined into a gravel path and went out through the garden to the cottage they had built for Gary’s mother.

Mrs. O’Neil had the stout heart and proud head of her Irish kings and the sorrows she had experienced were well hidden behind her fine old eyes. Aproned and flushed with the heat of a stove, she came out of the summer kitchen of her small house, carrying an apple pie which she set in the shade to cool.

She didn’t see Mart until his jingle bobs sounded immediately behind her and she whirled to find herself hugged.

“Hello, Mother!”

“Mart, you set me down. For shame, you’ll have scared the lights out of me! Sneakin’ up that way!”

“Where’s Gary?”

“He’s out with the boys putting some cattle in the south

pasture. That nice Mr. Malone's men brought them up for him. Cut them out of their herd, they did. And that's what I consider as right thoughtful. But come in, come in and sit down and I'll put some weight on you. My, my, Mart, how thin you are! Oh, those ranch cooks. Food spoilers, that's what they be."

"No, Mother," Mart said. "I've got to ride and I may not be back until around the first of October."

"Oh, another one of them special jobs. Mart, I can't see why Mr. Malone can't send somebody else once in a while. He wears you down razor thin, he does. But here. Take this pie. I've got two more and I was just a-thinkin' you might be by. Take it. Now, right in this sack. And mind you don't spoil it."

Mart kissed her and swung back on his gray, pie precariously in hand. He tied it carefully on top of his slicker, right side up, obeying all instructions and then, with a wave, he rode down to the gate.

Gary had seen the pack animal and was waiting, mounted.

They shook hands, no greeting other than that necessary or more expressive. Of the two Mart was the hard, tall one, the leader, and Gary, smaller and softer, was the worshipful follower.

"Malone business?" said Gary.

"Tumbleweed. It's the Singin' Canyon spread this time. Malone says he's tired of water hogs, but the truth is whoever owns Singin' Canyon had the rights filed about thirty years ago when the country was young as a papoose. But it's nothin' to worry about. If I don't do it, somebody will and mebbe with more blood."

“Mart, I’m worried about Mom. Her heart ain’t what it was and she had a bad one last night. I can’t keep her down. She says if she ain’t around doin’ what she can she’d plumb waste away. But . . . I smell pie.”

“You got two at the house, sonny. Don’t sheep-eye mine.”

“Can I reach you if anything happens to her?”

“They got a telegraph in Tumbleweed. I’ll send a man in every day for mail.”

“Thanks, Mart. I don’t know what I’d do . . . Well, take care of yourself.” He ashamedly shook the emotion away which had been trying to shake his voice.

“You take care of Mom,” said Mart. “I’ll do the rest.”

“Good Mart.”

“Adiós.”