

# L. RON HUBBARD



## *The Baron of Coyote River*

GALAXY  
PRESENTS

## *False Bullets*

THE man who came from across Hell's Parade Ground was stumbling, weaving from side to side in the wagon tracks, dragging up a yellow curtain of lazy dust behind him.

His high-heeled boots were battered, his angoras were heavy with mud long since dry, his yellow hair was matted from an old wound.

But he still walked and he still had his saddle. The saddle alone told its story. Here was a rider without a mount, here was a puncher who had come far.

And those who watched him come from the shadowy 'dobe of Santos read his story long before he had arrived.

If this man came from nearby he would wear leather batwings, and he would have had better sense than to stab at Hell's Parade Ground afoot in August. And the men of Santos reasoned with narrow eyes that this man was an outlaw—and as such they would receive him.

Lance Gordon did not care what they thought of him. He was too spent and hot for that. The sizzling sun made him feel like a roast pig, lacking only an apple to be served at a buzzard's banquet.

He stumbled through the outskirts of the 'dobe settlement, swerved into the main stem and limped toward a place facetiously named the Diamond Palace Saloon. The twenty-nine-inch

tapaderos trailed from the saddle behind him but the silver conchas were too smeared to shine.

He stopped for a moment in the sun and looked into the dim bar, then, taking a hitch in his already frazzled nerve, he made the last ten feet, to lean wearily against the mahogany.

The half-breed bartender left off polishing glasses. "Name your poison, stranger."

Lance Gordon paid no heed to the stray punchers who had gathered curiously at the door. With a heavy effort, he plumped the saddle down on the bar, giving it a push.

"How much will you give me for the rig?"

"I ain't buyin' rigs, stranger."

"It's Mex and it's worth plenty. Look here, I'll let you have it cheap enough."

"Sorry, stranger. But," he added with a calculating muddy eye on the saddle, "I might let you take it out in trade."

"You got a gun . . . and maybe some ammunition?"

"Well, a feller kicked off here last week and he kind of bequeathed me his gun as sort of payment on his bar bill."

"Make it the gun, plenty of bullets and a quart and it's a trade."

The bartender pulled the saddle toward him, noticing two bullet holes in the skirt. In its place he planted a belted Frontiersman Colt .45. He grudgingly added the bottle.

Lance Gordon heard a wondering murmur from the doorway and he glanced sideways without any great interest at the silhouettes of the punchers against the bright yellow sunlight outside. He picked up the gun and buckled it about

him, pocketed the cartridges and took the whiskey bottle by the neck. Then, stumbling against tables, he made his way to the far corner of the room and sat down with his back firmly against the wall. That was another bad sign.

A tall man with a heavy black beard and colorless eyes came in and leaned up against the bar. He wore batwings of extreme design which bore down their length gaudy spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds. At the sides, lashed down tight and low, were two pearl-handled, gold-chased revolvers of late pattern. The hat was straight brimmed and stiff and he wore it rakishly. For all the expression and movement he made he might as well have been a rock butte jutting out of the desert.

“Come far, stranger?” said this one.

Lance Gordon frowned heavily and raised a drink to his lips, his hands shaking until the amber fluid slopped over his knuckles.

“You never can tell,” said Lance.

Another murmur came from the doorway. Two men importantly shouldered their way through and took their stand in the center of the room. One was wearing a black vest and a dirty white shirt, the other wore a star glittering against a coat the color of dust.

“I’m sheriff here,” said the man with the star. “Brant’s the name.”

“Not *the* Brant,” said Lance with an unsteady smile.

Brant shoved his chest out a little. “That’s me.”

“Never heard of you,” said Lance.

The tall bearded one smiled.

Brant scowled until his little pinched eyes were almost invisible. His gray mustache bristled. “I came in here to find out what your business was in this town, stranger.”

“That’s easy,” said Lance. “My business.”

Brant took a step nearer, peering intently at the newcomer. He saw a disk of silver sparkle on Lance’s chin thong and on closer inspection knew that the sparkle came from a set diamond there.

Brant began to smile and inch his fingers toward his gun. “I know you now. Your name’s Lance Gordon, ain’t it? I’d know that thong anyplace. You might as well come along peaceable-like. Don’t seem they appreciated MacLeod’s killing over in the Sierras.”

Outside of an almost imperceptible tightening of his muscles, Lance received the news calmly. “Word travels fast, doesn’t it?”

“About killers,” said Brant, fingers closing over his revolver butt.

It did not seem to those who watched that Lance Gordon moved, but the gun he had just received from the bartender looked like a tunnel about to receive a train.

“I’m tired of running,” said Lance. “I’m sick of it. It doesn’t matter to you that MacLeod slaughtered a dozen men to get his land in the Nevadas. If you’ve got orders to send me back, then carry them out. But I’m not going—alive.”

Brant stepped hastily back. The bearded one against the bar smiled again.

“There’s plenty to take you over at the fort,” promised Brant.

“Then send for them,” said Lance, bitterly. “I’ve walked fifteen miles since my horse died. I’m tired. It shouldn’t take more than a company to get me.”

Still backing, Brant made the door, but there he was suddenly heaved inward again by pressure from without.

Into the room came a blue-coated, brass-buttoned cavalry officer followed by troopers who held ready carbines in their hands. The group came without a word, walking stiff-legged as though to a firing squad. Their black, wide-brimmed hats were salted with gray dust and their boots were almost white.

“Howdy, Captain Anderson,” said Brant. “I’m glad you came over. That’s Lance Gordon over there.”

Anderson turned a thin, harsh face toward his man. “I heard about it. I’ve had telegraphic orders for two days. Forgot about the new telegraph, didn’t you, Gordon?”

Lance poured himself another drink and tipped his chair back against the wall. “Well, what are you waiting for? Sure, I shot MacLeod and I knew you’d have orders. But if I still had my horse, you’d have to look all over Mexico to find me. But I didn’t have my horse very long and now I’m doing you a favor. Come on, why don’t you take me?”

He spun the revolver by its trigger guard, idly.

Captain Anderson turned to his troopers. “Take him, men.”

The revolver leveled itself. “I think,” said Lance casually, “that I might as well have a military guard to hell. Come on, gentlemen. Do you want to live forever?”

The troopers hung back. Anderson grunted and unbuckled his own holster flap.

Lance stood up, throwing the chair to the floor. He steadied himself against the table and glared at them. "Come on," he begged.

The carbines dropped to port. The troopers nervously glanced at their captain and then stepped closer to Lance.

Gordon pulled the trigger, but instead of the blasting roar of a Colt came a small snapping sound. He stared dully down at the weapon, failing to understand. The troopers pressed ahead, knocked the revolver away and quickly grasped Lance by the arms, dragging him forward.

The bartender snickered, "Think I wanted to lose my best customers? Them's duds he's got there."

Lance was sagging but he glared all the same.

Brant began to laugh with nervous relief. "Now we'll see about it. Now we'll see. What are your orders, Captain?"

"I'm to hold him here for trial and then execute him." He buckled his holster flap again and said, "Come on, men."

The tall bearded man at the bar cleared his throat. "I beg your pardon, fellers, but I wouldn't go no place if I was you."

The group halted, astounded, and stared into the muzzles of those flashy twin guns.

"For God's sake, Tyler, have you gone crazy? Put those things away. This ain't your fight." But Brant stayed where he was nevertheless.

Captain Anderson barked, "March."

"Halt," said Tyler. "Let loose of that feller."

Anderson grew red with anger. "This isn't your quarrel, Tyler, and I'm tired of your pranks. Get out of the way."

"Nix," said Tyler, grinning through his black beard. "This

is the first guy I've seen with guts in three months. You ain't takin' him anyplace whatever. Son," said Tyler to Lance, "you'll find a cayuse outside all saddled. You go out there and get going and don't let no jackrabbits pass you goin' north. I'll see you up near Coyote River this time tomorrow."

Lance shook himself free. He was smiling. "Thanks, pardner."

Anderson tried to hold Lance, but Tyler solemnly cocked his Colts one after the other. Lance went outside.

"I'll get you for this, Tyler," yelped Anderson.

"The hell you will," replied Tyler. "You'll be plenty nice to me or Washington might hear something about the dough you owe around here. Get going there, Gordon. That bronc with the rimfire saddle."

Lance mounted, sunk his spurs, applied the quirt and went out of Santos to the roar of kettle-drumming hoofs.