

L. RON HUBBARD



THE NO-GUN MAN

GALAXY
PRESBY

BLOOD FEUD

THE stage whirled across the dusty plain, leaving towers of yellow dust hanging from the intense sky. Flattened into a straight line by speed, the six horses tore through gullies and over knolls, past red pinnacles and around gray boulders. Across sagebrush flats and alkali sinks they raced, urged on by the curling, talking whip of the driver who seemed, with each pop of it, personally to throw the stage forward at a still greater speed than before.

The driver wasn't bearing the news of holdup or rebellion. He was carrying the person of Monte Calhoun and in that act he seemed to find a savage exultation which expressed itself whenever he got a chance to glance back, with rheumy old eyes, over the coach top under which said Monte was riding.

Now and then the driver would let out a sound halfway between a railroad whistle and an ailing bull's bellow, but which, if you gave it attention, would turn into a raucous song. It had something to do with somebody laying somebody else in his grave. The emphasis which the driver gave these words and the meaning he put into his glances back and down were obviously related.

In the coach, shaken up like a die in the hands of a losing gambler, rode Captain Terence O'Leary of the Seventh Cavalry, a young man and a proud man who was, for the

first time, taking something like law and order into the Superstition country. Beside him sat Monte Calhoun, a much less resplendent but somehow stronger man.

“What the devil is he bellowing about up there?” complained O’Leary, desperately trying to keep a suitcase from falling on him and not fall himself into Calhoun’s lap.

“Jesse James,” said Monte. “That’s Old Darby up there. He never could sing.”

“I must say you seem to know everything and everybody,” said O’Leary. “But if you call that singing, you’ve got a lot to learn about music, my boy. How much longer will we be on this confounded ride?”

“Until we get there,” said Monte. “I sure don’t see why you are so anxious about it.”

“I am young,” said O’Leary, “and unless I break my neck riding this coach or get poisoned by the slop they’ve called food at these stations, I yet may rise to great heights.” He strenuously put the suitcase back in place for the hundredth time.



Monte Calhoun

Monte was almost struck down by another piece of dislodged luggage, but in rescuing it, remembered what it contained and pulled out a bottle of wine. He extracted the cork with his teeth and passed the bottle to O'Leary.

They tried for the next three miles to take a drink of it, but the road, Old Darby and the state of the springs prohibited this until they pulled up sharply in the yard of the way station. They sighed as one and emptied the bottle.

There was a broken trace then and a delay and O'Leary got down to stretch his yellow-striped legs, leaving Monte the whole seat to lie across.

Old Darby was rinsing out his mouth with a tin cupful of traders' whiskey, grandly oblivious of the swearing hostlers who wrestled with harness and team.

"I think," said O'Leary, "that you must have missed some bumps back there. There are several areas of flesh on me which bear no slightest mark of a bruise."

Old Darby looked thoughtfully at the captain, then grinned and winked hugely. "Well, can't complain about a man trying to do what's right and fittin'."

"Why don't you try to break your record some other time?"

"Tain't the record, Captain. It's young Monte." And Old Darby, having gargled the remaining whiskey, now began once more his song about laying people in their graves.

"Don't," said O'Leary. "I have a musical ear."

"It's Monte," said the driver, doing a small dance and then hugging himself.

"My dear fellow," said O'Leary, "this is the tenth time

you've alluded to this. I am afraid I don't understand. Calhoun seems a very nice fellow. I couldn't possibly connect him with murder."

Old Darby laughed gleefully. "Maybe not, Captain. Maybe not. But you just wait until we get to Superstition; you'll whistle another tune. They up and done what they done and now they got to take their consequences. Yessirree. Take their consequences and get buried."

"Who?" demanded O'Leary.

"Why, old Spiegel and his condemned boys, that's who!"

O'Leary sighed. "And what does this Spiegel have to do with Monte Calhoun?"

"Why, they just killed his father, that's all. Oh, you wait! There'll be powder smoke until you can't breathe for it! You just wait!"

"You mean somebody is going to try to kill Calhoun?"

"No, no! T'other way around. Monte, he's a sly one. He ain't lettin' on." And Darby slapped the captain's back, did another dance step and jumped up to the box.

O'Leary got in and looked wonderingly at Monte. That person had now consigned himself to slumber and in sleep he looked very angelic and not at all murderous. The starting of the coach wakened him and he sat up so that O'Leary could sit down.

The captain was silent for some miles and then, in consideration of his official position, decided to brave it. He had taken a fancy to young Monte.

"Did you ever hear," said O'Leary, "of a man named Spiegel?"

Monte looked at him, pushed back his hat with his thumb and cocked his head over on one side, questioningly. "He owns the Diamond Queen. Sure."

The captain felt that he was on delicate ground. "Did you . . . er . . . have you . . . well, that is to say . . . Are you planning to kill him?"

Monte blinked. "Kill Spiegel?"

The captain shrugged. "Well, if you don't want to confide in me . . ." He was disappointed. During this long ride from the East he had decided that Monte Calhoun was a friend he would like to have and keep. The young man's unfailing humor, his calm presence and his good sense loomed large in the captain's mind.

Monte pulled his hat back down. He was frowning in thought. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "So *that's* what Old Darby has been caterwauling about! Oh, my gosh!" He looked for a moment as if he would crawl out and up to the box and give Darby a piece of his mind and then relaxed. "So that's what they've figured!"

O'Leary respected the pause, for he knew Monte would go on.

The young man settled himself and looked at the captain. "Terence, I'd forgotten that the territorial government had asked you to go to Superstition and declare war on the lawless. You're interested and you've got an explanation coming, but if you think I am going to kill anybody, you're wrong."

The captain looked relieved but still a trifle doubtful.

"Terence, four years ago this might have been the case. But I hope that the time I spent studying mining engineering also

taught me some sense. Last year my father was murdered by a person or persons unknown. I am afraid that this did not make a very deep impression on me.

“When I was very small, my mother and I were dragged West and hauled through various gold rushes and stampedes, one boomtown and then another, living on canned beans and drinking alkali water. The old man was a pretty tough fellow. He took what he wanted and he never showed anybody much mercy. Particularly my mother. He knew she was sick and yet he dragged her around with him until she finally died. I was just a little kid but I remember it well enough.

“He struck it rich the following year. Found the Deserter Lode on the east side of that range up ahead and sat himself down to gouge every nickel out of it that he could. *Peón* labor and bullets for anybody who would contest his desires. He was a tough man.

“I went to school and got out of it, learned to eat with a fork and travel a hundred yards without forking a horse. I found out there was something in life besides hating and grabbing.

“Last year my father was ambushed and murdered. Nobody ever identified the bushwhackers. The thing came to trial before Judge Talbot of the territorial government, and this man Spiegel and his three sons were freed of any suspicion. Nobody ever found who killed my father.

“I’ve got a kid brother, Dick, about sixteen or seventeen now. He’s been out here all this time, growing up like sagebrush. I’ve come out to sell the mine and take Dick back to civilization before he’s past salvaging.”

He fell silent and then, after a little, said, "So they think *that's* why I'm coming back."

"You must have enjoyed a reputation out here once for them to think that," said O'Leary.

"Perhaps. Oh, sure. When I was a little younger I thought the thing to do was drink hard and shoot straight and beat yourself on the chest to the men who drank your whiskey. But you can forget about any trouble you might have with me, Terence. I've got no intention of opening the play on a man the law has already absolved from guilt."

O'Leary sat silent, thinking about this. And then he muttered, "Maybe not now, my boy. But they've got their codes out here. It isn't so much what you'll do. What are *they* going to do?"

"What?" said Monte.

"Nothing," said O'Leary. "Just looking at that range of hills over there. Pretty, huh? Like a row of tombstones!"