

L. RON HUBBARD



Shadows from Boot Hill

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Shadows from Boot Hill

ON a hot afternoon in August, Brazos chased his shadow toward Los Hornos at a speed which indicated that all the devils from hell and maybe even some angels were hot upon him. He fled with more fury than fright, for it seemed to him that the murder of a banker ought to be considered in the light of public good. Too, he nursed a feeling of grievance, for the law had been so swift and determined that he had not even had time to collect the five hundred dollars in double eagles which was to have been his pay for the job. The buckskin money belt was damp and light beneath his buckskin shirt, just as both Peacemaker and Martini-Henry were empty at belt and saddle side.

And this was a hell of a country to try to get lost in.

And Los Hornos, ahead, was about as safe a sanctuary as a barrel of sidewinders.

Brazos swore at his luck, swore at his horse and swore at his shadow. He cursed the sage, he cursed the dust and he spat into the unoffending eye of a horned toad by the way. If he had good sense he'd larrup south to the border, but if he had better sense he'd crack a Wells Fargo safe before he went—for visitors in the land of the *dons* were welcome in proportion to their purses. It was like Brazos to barely keep a

posse's dust under the rim of the world behind and consider ways of replenishing his exchequer.

Los Hornos came writhing into sight amid its heat waves, moving slowly up in mirage as though somebody had a jack under the town and then dropping suddenly, as though the jack had slipped. Behind it, red sandstone buttes appeared ready for the frying pan; all around it, dusty sage drooped in drab boredom; in it, the inhabitants were following a theory that a fiery sun without was best combated by firewater within.

Brazos looked over his shoulder in anxiety. The posse thought he would have to head for Los Hornos, and the posse had a couple of Apache trackers along to confirm its guess. And this horse, which he had stolen from a sheepherder (which didn't make it theft) wouldn't last another league. He had to stop in Los Hornos or be stopped. His quirt fell and the weary mustang sped along.

Who did he know in Los Hornos? Only one man. Whisper Monahan. A slight shudder of premonition went over Brazos and, because he believed in premonition, he did not take the symptom in a good light. The last time he'd worked for Whisper Monahan they had not parted the best of friends. But a posse is a posse, and a half friend is better than an enemy with gun smoke in his fist, and so Brazos went streaming into the main street of Los Hornos.

A couple of Indian dogs leaped out of slumber and from under his hoofs with dismal yelps. A loafer in the shade of the store porch went right on sleeping. There was a sign, "Star Livery Stable, Whisper Monahan, Prop." Brazos swung

the horse, and the moist warmth and dimness of the stable swallowed him.

In the office, Whisper Monahan and a hostler named Henry looked languidly at the opening door and then came fully awake. For a few seconds the silence was very deep. Whisper Monahan was built close to the ground, and not all the sun in the Southwest could have turned his pasty pallor into anything but a pasty pallor. But, awkward and scared as he seemed, he always got what he wanted, no matter the methods he had to use.

Brazos was inclined to be truculent. He wasn't very tall, but he wasn't very thick, either, and when men first looked at him they thought him a forceful and powerful individual. His mouth was almost at forty-five degrees with his face, and his eyes proclaimed a dislike for the world. And now, with his buckskin stained and his flat Texas hat gray with dust and his much-used—if at present empty—gun at his side, he looked ready to take on a regiment, having just finished off a brigade.

“Hello, Brazos.”

“Hello, Whisper.”

“You come far and fast, Brazos.”

“I come with half the citizens of Tulos on my heels.”

“Well, now, Brazos, that's too bad. What happened?”

“I killed a gent that needed killing, and I didn't even collect the double eagles. This country is goin' to hell for keeps.”

“Yeah. The law is gettin' the upper hand, worse luck.”

“You gotta cover me, Whisper.”

“Why?”

“Because I said you gotta.”

Whisper grinned suddenly inside himself. “That’s too bad, Brazos. But I reckon you just better keep riding.”

“My hoss is half dead and I ain’t goin’ to keep riding.”

“Then you better start walking, Brazos.”

“You can’t do this to me!”

“You ain’t got a cartridge left in your belt and most likely none in your gun. You better be goin’, Brazos, afore them fellers come streaking in here and string you up.”

“You can’t do this to me!”

“I’m doin’ it, Brazos.”

“But they’ll kill me!”

Whisper was laughing inside himself now, though he looked very contrite and sorrowful. Brazos wore a silver cross on a silver chain around his neck, and when Brazos got pushed to it he generally fingered the cross in hopes it would bring him luck. Whisper saw him doing it, and knew that he had his man.

“Too bad,” said Whisper. “You better be goin’ afore they get here.”

“Now look, Whisper! Ain’t you always been my friend?”

“I’ve hired you once in a while,” said Whisper.

“Well, hire me again! I need help, and I need it bad!”

“Hire you? Shucks, I haven’t got anything for you to do.”

“Sure you have, Whisper!”

Whisper was hard put to keep looking thoughtful. Finally he scrubbed at his bald head and spoke doubtfully. “Well—I could get you to kill Scotty Brant for me, but you wouldn’t do that.”

“Sure I would, Whisper! You gotta help me.”

“Well—just as a favor to you, I’ll let you do it. I’ll even pay you a couple hundred for the job.”

“That’s white!” cried Brazos in relief. “I knew you’d help me.”

Whisper had won and he threw off his lethargy. “Henry, you saddle up Beans and ride hell for leather for the buttes. About dark you cut back, take to the bed of Dead River to cover your trail and come home.”

About an hour later Brazos was lying in the mow, not daring to breathe while Whisper “discovered” with shocked alarm that he had aided the escape of a criminal. But shortly Brazos breathed again, for the posse, hot for blood, went thundering out of town on the trail of Beans and Henry, flailing their jaded mounts and licking their chops as they envisioned the riddled corpse of one Brazos.

Whisper stood in the door watching them become a cloud of dust. Whisper, down inside, was laughing, but not at the joke he had played on the posse.