

Law Rustlers

by W. C. Tuttle

Law Rustlers

Me and “Hashknife” Hartley sets there on our broncs and spells out the old sign, just like it was the first time we ever seen it. The good Lord only knows why we’re back at the old sign. Willer Crick don’t mean nothing to us. Glory Sillman lives, or did live, on Willer Crick, but her name ain’t never figured in any of our conversations since the day we fogged away from Willer Crick.

We kinda left that part of the range in a hurry that day; left a surprised bunch of folks watching our dust, while a couple of enterprising bad-men went home to get patched up and another bunch throwing lead at the wrong parties, just because said parties had a gray and a roan horse.

No, Willer Crick has been a closed incident to us. Not that we’re silent folks, ’cause we ain’t. I can talk the bark off a greasewood, and Hashknife Hartley—man, he’s a conversationalist. It’s kinda funny that we never talked about the Willer Crick folks, ’cause they sure are worth talking about. Sol Vane, who does the lawin’ for the Crick, Jim Sillman, one of the Council of Three, old Ebenezer Godfrey—they’re one goshawful layout.

Of course Ebenezer Godfrey is dead. Jim Albright and Pete Godfrey, his illegal heirs, are dead, we think, but there’s a plenty of that misguided tribe left. Ebenezer was killed by Pete and Jim, ’cause the old man wouldn’t die soon enough for one of them to get visible means of support, in order to marry Glory. The old man was hard-boiled enough to hang on to life until he could will everything he owned to me and Hashknife. Willer Crick, being a

closed corporation, didn't accept me and Hashknife to any great extent.

They stole old Godfrey's body in order to establish what Sol Vane called "corpus delectable," but we got it back, or rather hid it again. We buried some dynamite in the front yard and Sol, Pete and Jim dug into it, thinking we had planted the old man there. Sol lost all his hair and all we could find of Jim and Pete was a hat with the crown gone.

Me and Hashknife weathered considerable storm, but there wasn't no use in defying the lightning too much, so we got out by the skin of our teeth, with a Winchester rifle and a vest-pocket derringer.

Me and Hashknife cut cards to see which of us would marry Glory Sillman, accept five hundred dollars in place of a wife and then leave the country. This was to save Jim Sillman from the law of the Crick, and would also allow Glory to go outside and get educated like a human being. Willer Crick had a peculiar law. It seems that they rules that a girl has to stay on the crick until she gets married. After she's hooked up she can leave. Of course, they means to make her marry one of their own bunch, but their law don't specify that. It also seems that the sins of one of the family is visited upon all the rest of that family.

Jim Sillman explains that everything he owns is on the crick, and that if Glory breaks the law they're liable to take away his property as punishment. Kind of a weak way of looking at things, but we can't all think alike thataway. He offers us five hundred dollars cash if one of us will marry her. This gives her the right to pull her freight out of there and also saves him from their locoed law.

Glory don't want a regular husband, and it's a cinch that me and Hashknife ain't no ways hankering for a wife, but it's a sporting chance and we takes it. We never collected that five hundred for the simple reason that the "uncle," who was financing the law-breaking scheme, turned out to be the sheriff of Yolo, who had been trailing me and Hashknife for six months.

Sometimes I'm kinda sorry we didn't smoke up that bunch and take Glory along with us. I spoke to Hashknife about it the day we left there.

"Easy enough," says he. "I could 'a' downed her uncle and her pa—easy. Any girl would whoop with joy to see her uncle and paw full of lead. Maybe she'd 'a' married you, Sleepy, dang your homely face. Maybe she'd 'a' married me—me bein' handsome; but any old way yuh take it, we'd 'a' busted up—me and you. Yuh can't keep a wife and a bunkie."

"Hashknife," says I, "would yuh rather have me than a wife?"

"You danged porkypine, I don't have to support you."

It's been quite a while since me and Hashknife hit for the open trails. We stayed at the Circle Dot a lot longer than we ever stayed any one place before, but when the snow fades off the hills and the grass shows green on the slopes and you can smell the sunshine—we're traveling.

"Where?" I asks.

"Anywhere," says Hashknife, jingling three months' pay. "We're follerin' our noses, cowboy. Maybe we'll get to Alaska this time."

I reckon that mostly all human beings have some outlook in life. Some of 'em looks forward to the day when they can set down by the fire and let a hired man herd the sheep, while some looks forward to the day when they can hunt a warm climate in the Winter and know that somebody is at home to do the chores.

Me and Hashknife looks forward to Alaska. What in —— we are going to do up there has nothing to do with it. It's something to look forward to, as the horse-thief said to the posse when they comes in sight of a limbless tree.

Three days after we leaves the Circle Dot, we cuts a wagon-road and there is that same old sign, sagging a little more and maybe a little more faded, but still showing:

THERE IS A CLICK ON WILLER CRICK
THE WORST IN ALL THIS NASHUN.
THE HITE OF THEIR AMBISHUN
IS TO BEAT THEIR OWN RELASHUN.

“Still advertisin', I see,” grins Hashknife. “Them folks sure are a caution to ——, Sleepy. I wonder if Sol Vane's hair ever growed on his head again. Wonder if Glory—say, Sleepy, there was a reg'lar girl. 'Member how she used to fill the magazine of her rifle after shootin' once or twice? Reg'lar little he-woman. If I wanted to git married——”

“Which you don't.”

“No-o-o, but if I did I'd——”

Hashknife squints down the road.

“By the antlers on a desert toad!” he gasps. “Here comes the joker.”

Remember the old playing-cards that had a joker which was a picture of a long-legged old pelican riding a little mule? The feller's legs are so long he has to spread himself to keep from dragging his feet on the ground, and he's got kind of a funny old face.

He rides up, insists on shaking hands with us and then reads the old sign.

"I have found it," says he proud-like.

"You've found somethin'," agrees Hashknife. "You goin' to visit Willer Crick?"

"Name's Cobb, Reverend Cobb, and I am God's pardner. Yes, I am going to visit the place, brother."

"I'm Hashknife Hartley, and I ain't got no brother. I'll say to you that Willer Crick ain't the healthiest place on this earth, no matter who your pardner is."

"I've come a long ways," says he, "a long ways on a mule. I've heard that it's kinda ungodly."

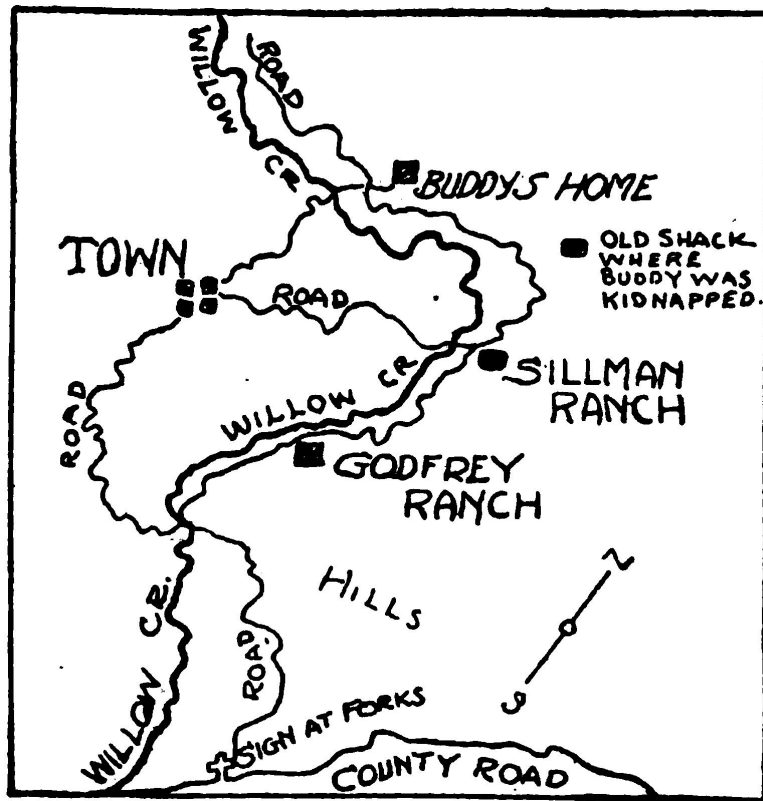
"Ungodly!" snorts Hashknife, "lemme tell yuh somethin' about that—uh—no, I won't either. You've come a long ways on a mule."

"Are they as bad as folks has told me?"

"Man," says Hashknife, "man, there ain't never been a liar foaled yet that could do that place justice. That there sign is a compliment to that community."

"Well, I'm glad to hear the worst. *Adios*, brothers."

We watches him jog out of sight and then we pilgrims on. Some time in the dim and distant past a colony of men and women and dogs and mules and kids pilgrimed from the South and settled in the Willer Crick hills. Seems that they was kinda anti-everything, and wanted to form a little empire of their own.



Map for "Law Rustlers"

They picks out this spot, took up their farms and drew sort of a dead-line against the rest of creation. They didn't want schools—not believing in education, and they made their own queer laws. They intermarried until it took 'em a month to figure out a legal heir in case one of the land owners shuffled off. A few of 'em, called the Council of Three, assisted by Sol Vane, who does the lawin' for the Crick, had enough education to see that the rest of the colony didn't get anything that the council and one didn't want 'em to get. Glory explained the system to us.

“My ——!” snorts Hashknife. “I could shoot once and kill your uncle, a cousin, a half-brother, a brother-in-law and a nephew.”

Which wasn't true in Glory's case, being as her dad had busted the law by marrying outside the colony.

This close relationship has bred a fine bunch of chinless horse-thieves, gun-men and hard drinkers. Seems like the men with the least chins always carries the most guns. There had never been a Willer Cricker arrested for anything else. Willer Crick dealt with 'em in their own way, and kept its mouth shut, except when it came to lying about their own innocence.

Me and Hashknife rides along for a while and then Hashknife pulls up his horse and looks back. I looks back too, but there ain't nothing to see except the hills.

“Sleepy,” says Hashknife, kinda like he was thinking, “what do yuh reckon they'll do to the Reverend Cobb up there?”

“Well, if Gospel was something they could steal, I'd say they'd entertain him over night.”

“That’s what I was thinkin’, Sleepy. In the words of the immortal George Washington: turn, boys, turn, we’re goin’ back.”

“George never said that,” says I. “It was Bryan.”

“All right, all right; have it your own way. What I don’t know about geography would make a set of hymn books, but I know somebody said it.”

“Why go back, Hashknife? Willer Crick wouldn’t hurt a preacher.”

“Not while he’s preachin’; but he can’t sermonize all the time. Willer Crick needs reformin’, Sleepy, but it’s got to be done in a language they understand.”

“It’s a fool idea,” I argues, “Willer Crick ain’t forgot us. They may be ignorant, but their memory ain’t weak. They may be shy on literature and art, Hashknife, but they sure as —— can shoot, and they’ll just about put the kibosh on us ever getting to Alaska.”

“You sure do get morbid, Sleepy. If Willer Crick had brains I’d pass ’em by. They can’t think beyond next drink-time.

“If they recognize us they’ll think like this: there’s them two crazy cowpunchers who depleted our community. Wonder who they’ll smoke up this time? That’s the way they’ll think.”

“And then start to shoot in self-defense. A preacher don’t mean nothin’ to me, Hashknife. What do you want to foller him in there for?”

“I dunno, Sleepy. I ain’t been to church since Sittin’ Bull first sat down, but there’s somethin’ kinda helpless about a preacher—and Willer Crick is so —— ornery.”

“Was your folks religious?”

“I don’t reckon they was. Paw and maw split up when I was knee-high to a tall Injun, and paw took me with him. Paw thought he was a two-gun man and I becomes a orphing at a tender age.”

“You helpin’ out folks thataway is goin’ to stop me and you from ever seeing Alaska, Hashknife.”

He turns in his saddle and smiles at me. Hashknife ain’t no beautiful critter. He’s one of them hard-eyed, thin nosed and thin-lipped *hombres*. His cheek-bones are kinda high and his ears kinda bat out and his hair is roan. He’ll fight at the drop of the hat; fight with a foolish grin on his face, and he ain’t afraid.

That’s why I like Hashknife. I’m kinda scary, myself, and I need moral support as I trail through life. When Hashknife smiles, every dog within half a mile begins to wag its tail. Hashknife calls me and him, “cowpunchers of disaster.”

He turns and smiles at me.

“Sleepy, I see by the almanac that she’s goin’ to be awful cold in Alaska this Winter. Mebbe we better pick out one of their warm Winters.”

“I think,” says I, kinda mean-like, “I think you’re going into Willer Crick to see somebody—and she ain’t no preacher.”

“No-o-o, Sleepy. ’Course I’d like to see her and apologize for not marryin’ her that time. Girl kinda expects a apology in a case like that. Mebbe her uncle told her why, but he’d sure paint us black so that she’d be glad I left her at the altar.”

Them Willer Crick hills sure do look natural. We rides past the old Godfrey ranch, which me and Hashknife owned for a few days. The old ranch-house is still squeegeed from the force of the dynamite, when the “heirs apparently,” as Sol Vane called ’em, dug into the alleged grave of poor old Godfrey. It looks like nobody had ever lived in it since we left.

We rides on past the Sillman ranch, where Hashknife came danged near being a bridegroom and a cash-widower. We don’t see anybody around there, but Willer Crick is a great place for folks to not be in evidence. About a mile farther on we comes to the town.

It sure is some town. There’s a saloon, a store and a blacksmith shop on one side of the street and on the other side is an old shed, a long tie-rack and a pile of old lumber. The saloon is two-stories high, and the upper half has a sign which proclaims it to be the Town Hall.

There’s several saddle horses tied to the rack. The town hall has an outside stairway and around the bottom of this is grouped four men. When we get off our broncs one of the men strolls over to us. It’s Al Bassett. Al was one of those who was very active in seeking our demise when we were in Willer Crick before, but me and Hashknife never figured him much of anything but a talker. He squints at us.

“Howdy, Bassett,” grins Hashknife. “Remember us?”

“Well,” says Bassett, drawing a deep breath, “well, ye-e-s, I do.”

He stares at us like he was kinda wondering why we came back there again. His mouth kinda gaps as he stares.

“Better look out or you’ll get your tonsils sunburned,” says Hashknife.

The other three fellers moves over closer to us. We never seen them before. Bassett turns and starts to speak to ’em, but just then we hears loud voices, and out of the the door of the store backs a man.

In one hand he’s got a six-gun and in the other is a package. He turns his head away from the open door and just then comes the thump of a pistol-shot. The feller kinda jerks around, drops his gun and package and falls against the side of the building, where he slides to the sidewalk.

He ain’t no more than went flat when out of the store come a man, bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves, with a gun in his hand. He stoops over, picks up the package and then looks down at the man. Bassett steps in past us and says:

“What was the matter, Cale?”

“Well—” the man licks his lips and then wipes the back of his hand across his mouth—“well, I tol’ him I wasn’t ’lowed to sell him nothin’. He gits kinda uppity and drags his gun. Then he he’ps himself to a bottle of medicine, flings the money on the counter and backs out. Yuh notice he didn’t git away with it, don’t yuh?”

Bassett nods and turns the man over. He’s been drilled dead-center. The storekeeper is staring at me and Hashknife.

“Mind tellin’ why yuh killed him?” asks Hashknife soft-like. “Where I came from, buyin’ medicine is a necessity—not a killin’ matter.”

“None o’ yore—” begins the feller, but Bassett stops him.

“Hol’ on, Cale. Lemme tell him.”

“I can run my own——”

“You shut up!” snaps Bassett. “This feller askin’ questions is the feller who inherited the Godfrey ranch that time. This other feller is his pardner.”

The storekeeper stares at us, and kinda grumbles to himself, but goes back inside. Them other three hombres gawps at us considerable but don’t say nothing.

Bassett leads us to the end of the little board sidewalk, and we all sets down.

“What are you fellers doin’ here?” asks Bassett.

“Waitin’ for you to think up a lie to tell us about that killin’,” says Hashknife. “Yuh might as well tell us the truth. Who was the feller what got hit?”

“Eph Sillman.”

“Jim Sillman’s son?”

“Uh-huh—Glory’s brother. He done busted all our laws. Yuh see, he married an outlander about seven year ago.”

“You’re doin’ most of the talkin’,” reminds Hashknife.

“Eph brought that woman here, but nobody’s ever had anything’ to do with her. They got a kid about seven year old. On ’count of Jim Sillman we had suffered ’em to live here and trade the same as the rest of us, but not havin’ much truck with him and his. He gets

drunk the other day and he talks too much. The council takes action on him and decides to outlaw him. They says he can't buy nor sell here. He knowed he couldn't buy that medicine, but he was hard-headed."

"His woman couldn't associate with other women?" asks Hashknife.

"Nope. Yuh see, she's a ——"

"His little kid can't play with other kids?"

"No. The other——"

"Kinda tough, don't yuh think, Bassett?"

"When a feller makes his bed he's got to lay on it."

Hashknife nods and looks at his toes.

"Bassett, did yuh ever read the Bible?"

"Nope."

"Yuh ought to, Bassett. It tells yuh how to pray."

"Pray?" says Bassett, kinda queer-like. "Whatcha mean?"

"You could learn some prayers," says Hashknife soft-like, "and then yuh could teach 'em to the rest of the Crick, 'cause they're goin' to need 'em—bad. Who will tell his widder about this?"

"The council, I reckon. Jim Sillman, Sim Sellers and Black Albright."

"Goin' to be a nice chore for Jim Sillman—tell her that his own son is dead. Didn't Glory have nothing' to do with Eph's wife?"

“Glory—I dunno,” says Bassett, scratching his head. “Some says she has. There’s been several quarrels about it in the last year. She has been watched close, but nothin’ comes of it, except that ‘Tug’ Williams got a rifle bullet into his shoulder one night.”

“Where does Eph Sillman live?”

Bassett points down the road.

“About two mile down there. Second ranch to the left. House sets back in the cottonwoods. You ain’t goin’ down there.”

“You’ve been misinformed,” says Hashknife. “We’re goin’ down there, I reckon.”

“Better keep away, Hartley. Willer Crick ain’t askin’ yore help. My advice to you would be——”

“Ignored,” finishes Hashknife. “Absolutely, Bassett. You ought to know us better than to give us advice. You ain’t forgot how we acts, has yuh?”

“Willer Crick remember you two.”

“If anybody cares,” grins Hashknife. “Come on, Sleepy.”

We swung back on to our broncs and points off down the road. Bassett joins them other three fellers and they watches us ride away. Outside of the body on the sidewalk, Willer Crick is just the same as when we rode in.

“I hope to see buzzards circlin’ that place,” says Hashknife. “I’d like to be called upon to say a prayer over the whole works.”

“What would you say?” I asks.

“I’d say, ‘The rest of you ordinary sinners stand back, ’cause there’s goin’ to be one awful fire in ——.’”

We found the place, and tied to the front gate is the Reverend Cobb’s mule.

“Whatcha know about that?” grunts Hashknife. “Leave it to a preacher to smell out things like this.”

We walks around to the back door. Standing in the doorway is Glory Sillman. She’s kinda leaning against the side of the door, looking away from us. Then she turns.

“Howdy,” says Hashknife, taking off his hat. “Nice day.” Glory kinda jerks back when she first sees us, but after the first look she kinda takes a deep breath and stares at us. I reckon she thought we was Willer Crickers at first.

Then she says kinda soft—

“You two!”

“Yes’m,” says I. “Same old two of us ma’am.”

Just then a little kid comes out beside Glory. He’s a little, round-eyed shaver, and he’s been crying dirty tears or has been crying tears on a dirty face, ’cause he sure is streaked.

“That’s his kid,” says Hashknife, kinda whispering.

“Whose kid?” asks Glory, but before Hashknife can answer her the old man comes out.

He brushes his hand across his eyes and stares at us.

“Yuh beat us up here, grampaw,” smiles Hashknife.

“Yes,” says he. “I—I reckon I did.”

Then he puts his hand on Glory’s arm and says to her:

“Girl, I want to thank yuh for your kindness to her. She tol’ me some of it. Yuh see, she never wrote to me and I never knew how things was. I decided to come, yuh see.”

“You’re welcome,” says Glory thoughtful-like.

“Seven year and a few months,” says the old man, like he was talking to himself. “Me wonderin’ why she don’t write, and—and it’s a long ways to Arizony—on a mule.”

“Woman sick?” asks Hashknife.

“Not now,” says Glory sad-like. “Maybe she’s better off, I don’t know. Anything is better than livin’ here like she had to live.”

“Where’s her husband?” asks Hashknife, like he didn’t know.

“Gone to town,” says Glory. “He—he was going to try and get some medicine.”

“Ain’t yuh got no doctor?” I asks.

“Yes, but——”

“He wouldn’t come?” asks Hashknife, and Glory shakes her head.

“She was my daughter,” says the old man, and then he says to Glory, “Will yuh come in with me and he’p me a little?”

The little kid looks at us and then follers them inside. Me and Hashknife looks at each other. We’re kinda hard-boiled, but it’s getting under our hides a little.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

