

The Sky Sheriff

The Pioneer Spirit Lives Again in the Texas Airplane
Patrol

By Thomson Burtis

The Sky Sheriff



Sure enough, there was a mounted man crossing a tiny clearing, two or three miles to the westward

The blazing sun of a Texas afternoon turned air and drab brown earth to gold. Not a breath stirred the huge white stocking that served as a wind-indicator on the airdrome of the McMullen Flight of the Air Service border patrol.

Seven men were standing in a line south of the airdrome. Six of them were tanned young chaps with the look of the open in their steady eyes with tiny sun-crinkles at the corners. The other man wore a flowing gray mustache, a sombrero that dwarfed the others' Stetsons, and ornately embossed cowboy

boots. He was known from one end of the Rio Grande to the other as Sheriff Bill Trowbridge.

A low drone came to the ears of the group, and far in the distance they glimpsed the tiny form of a ship, diving with motor on for the airdrome. Hickman looked up at the plane.

“Probably Tex MacDowell and Sleepy Spears.”

“Who’s Spears?” asked Trowbridge.

“New man from the Air Service Mechanics’ School at Donovan Field,” explained Perkins. “He’s the sleepest-looking guy in the world. Yesterday Tex and Sleepy announced they were going to fly to Laredo, if I’d let ’em, and go over to the ‘Bee’ hangout in Nuevo Laredo, and either win a fortune or else get entirely broke.”

Captain Perkins’s face was serious.

Sheriff Trowbridge glanced at him sharply. Apparently there was somewhat of puzzlement, disapproval, in the new commanding officer’s words.

Trowbridge was grinning widely. “Did yuh ever have any previous experience handlin’ wildcats?”

Captain Perkins shook his head. “Live and learn, I guess,” said he.

The ship circled northward, banked around toward the field, and the roaring motor ceased. Then the De Haviland dropped over the low fence that formed the northern boundary of the

field. Waiting mechanics in front of a hangar seized the wings and helped bring the ship into the line.

The two flyers climbed out of the cock-pits.

“See that short fellow walking as if every step would be his last?” said Jennings. “That’s Sleepy.”

Trowbridge smote his thigh.

“I get yuh now,” he stated. “Isn’t Sleepy the hombre that had a run-in with some would-be bad men up in Barnes City a few months ago?”

“He’s the one,” said Pop Cravath, wiping the sweat from his bald spot with a voluminous khaki handkerchief.

Spears’ drooping eyelids were raised to look at the little group. A slow smile stretched the already wide mouth.

“Meet Sheriff Trowbridge, Sleepy,” said Perkins.

“Delighted. I’ve heard several mouthfuls about you, Sheriff,” said Sleepy.

“Did you break the ‘Bee’?” inquired Trowbridge solemnly.

“They took advantage of us,” sighed Sleepy. “They fed us Benedictine and Mescal. The last I remember was shooting two hundred at the crap-table and then bursting into ribald grief when two sixes turned up. We woke up in the alley alongside the Laredo House this morning.”

Captain Perkins’s lean, square-jawed face was crossed with varying expressions of merriment, wonder, and disapproval.

Apparently the Captain was completely puzzled—unable to understand the facets in his flyers' characters.

"I've got to meet the four-ten from San Antone," said the Sheriff, suddenly. "My old friend George Bilney is comin' in. Say, I'm going to bring George out here this evenin', mebbe. He's station agent and storekeeper up here at Willett. He's only in town to the back train at ten, but he's got a daughter you boys ought to meet. She's the Queen of Sheba, and likewise the Lily of the Valley."

"That sure is interesting. You show us a way to meet her, Sheriff, and we'll show ourselves grateful," said Sleepy.

That evening Sleepy Spears drove a dusty roadster down the main street of McMullen. He saw the train come in and saw the sheriff meet Pappy George Bilney, a little wisp of a white-bearded man.

Sleepy then drew up to the curb in front of a drug store with a flourish and shut off the motor. As he turned to climb out, his gaze fell on the face of a tall, thin, stooping fellow with drooping brown mustachios. As if by some hypnotic influence, the stranger's close-set eyes rose to meet the flyer's gaze, then dropped. The man walked on.

"That's that foreman from Barnes City!" murmured Sleepy. "Must 'ave just got out of jail, if old man Shaler did what he said he was going to do after this bird's scheme to tar and feather poor old Correll. I wonder what he might be doing here?"

A like mental query regarding Spears was arousing fear in the mind of the "bird"—Cal Buchanan, as he called himself. For Cal

Buchanan, being a coyote by nature instead of a wolf, had within the last few hours formulated a wolf's plan to resuscitate his fallen fortunes, and when a coyote essays a wolf's role he is likely to shy at a shadow.

As he lounged along the lively street, his small eyes roved constantly, seeing nothing but mental images. Girls and women whose clothes would not have been out of place on the leading thoroughfares of the largest cities; trimly dressed men along with others in cowboy boots and flannel shirts; here a store window that might have been transplanted from Manhattan next to a display of ornate saddles and lariats; a five-thousand-dollar limousine passing a hitching-rack where drooping cowponies awaited their owners—all were vague to him as he remained immersed in his plans.

Sleepy Spears had been farthest from his thoughts until the square, sunburnt countenance had appeared with all the effect of a sudden and unwelcome vision.

His thoughts turned back to his experience with Spears six months before. While drunk, he had visited the Barnes City fair, where Spears and Al Johnson, from Donovan Field, were giving flying exhibitions. Then had come that row with Correll, Spears's mechanic, and the dream of tar-and-feathering Correll with the help of three confederates.

In a remote cabin the plan was working well, and the four men were just ready to strip Correll, when a human tornado in the form of Spears had burst in the door. From that time on, events were rather vague in Buchanan's mind. Later he had learned that Spears, learning of the plot too late to overtake the hazing

party by automobile, had made a parachute jump at night from Al Johnson's airplane in order to reach Correll in time.

Was there any possibility that Spears, recognizing him, could interfere with the scheme that he had in mind? Nervous as a cat, he finally arose, leaving his food, paid his check, and walked out. Spears or no Spears, his mind was made up. There did not seem to be any reason to believe that the flyer could possibly get on to the scheme he had in mind. And he was desperate.

Six months in the Barnes City jail had been his sentence for the attempted tar-and-feather soiree. At the expiration of his term, three days before, he had been left under no misapprehension as to whether his room was preferable to his company in Barnes City. He had drifted aimlessly toward the border, with vague plans of going into Mexico. A hundred dollars was his capital, and to his craven heart the future loomed dark—until that spry little old man, Bilney, who had boarded the train at Willett, made friends with him, and gave him an opportunity to recuperate his fortunes.

George Bilney had prattled proudly during the whole seventy-five-mile trip from Willett. He kept a general store at Willett, though it was only a tiny station and his nearest customers lived six miles away. His main source of profit, however, was his ranch business. Six ranches, ranging from six to fifty thousand acres, did all their business with him, because of the convenience of having him do the buying, and because he kept a large and assorted stock from which a hurry call for anything from tools to feed or worm-salve could always be filled. Warehouses full of feed, tools, wire, lumber, provisions, and all

the other supplies necessary for the modern ranch testified to the volume of his business. As a matter of fact, his store and its other buildings actually formed the so-called town of Willett.

His daughter, home for her college vacation, his dead wife, his boyhood in New England—the little storekeeper had told it all to the sympathetic Buchanan, and among all the details one other thing, which had set that coyote's heart to thumping as he heard it. For it appeared that most of the customers of the store paid their bills on the last day of the month—"It takes quick turnovers for cash to run my business," Bilney had said. And the money was not sent to McMullen until the next morning, on the one daily train that ran south.

Bilney had said that he was returning on the ten o'clock train that evening. Buchanan could slip into a berth, ride to the next station north of Willett, which was twenty-five miles, hire a horse, and ride back in the evening of the next day. Bilney had given him a cordial invitation to drop in for a meal at any time.

It would be absurdly simple. If the money was in a safe, he could force the old man to open it; then bind up him and his daughter, cut the telephone wires, perhaps leave a note on the front of the store saying that the owner would not be back until next day, to give him twelve hours' respite. In that time, by hard riding on the excellent saddle-horse that Bilney had bought for his daughter, Buchanan could make the border. Then for an easy life in Mexico.

Bilney, on the next evening, was reading the *San Antonio Express* by the light of a big white-shaded kerosene lamp, while Cissy, the huge negro woman who was his housekeeper,

prepared supper. On the other side of the table a tall girl with a mass of black hair and a sweet face, was fondling a bull-terrier puppy.

Buchanan paused outside the window and took in the scene. The old man lived in the rear of his store, which was now closed, so Buchanan knocked on the back door.

Bilney opened it, and for a moment peered nearsightedly through his glasses, set half-way down his nose.

“Well, well, come right in, my boy. How did you get up here so quick?” he said.

“I got me a job at the Blackburne ranch to-day, and I just thought I’d drop in t’ say howdy,” returned Buchanan, entering hesitantly.

“Glad to see you. Company’s scarce around here. Meet my daughter Judith—Cal Buchanan, Judith.”

Judith’s voice had the musical slowness of the South. Bilney set out cigars. Buchanan, ill at ease and in a nervous tremor, refused both and talked infrequently. He found it hard to meet the tranquil eyes of the girl; he devoted most of his attention to her father, who talked enough for all three.

The little sitting-room was cozy and homelike in the soft light of the lamp. The flat tints of the wall and the selection of prints and furniture showed a taste that gave subtle individuality to the room. Without knowing the exact reason for it, his surroundings increased Buchanan’s discomfort.

Supper—Judith called it dinner—was an ordeal. Bilney wore a coat over his flannel shirt and black bow-tie, and Judith's white frock contrasted with Buchanan's dirty vest and flannel shirt, open at the scrawny neck. A snowy table-cloth, simple silverware—all were foreign to his usual surroundings. Finally Judith succeeded in drawing some halting conversation from him on the subject of horses. She was a typical Texas girl in her love of riding. Occasionally he felt her large eyes resting on him, and felt the goose-flesh start on his body. Somehow or other, she seemed a bigger obstacle to him than her spry little father. The negress added to the complications somewhat, but not too greatly. He strove to steady himself by thinking of what the successful culmination of his enterprise would mean to him.

The meal over, he sat in the sitting-room hour after hour, unable to launch his offensive. When Bilney insisted on his spending the night with them, he accepted like a drowning man grasping at a plank. He forgot the value of time as he convinced himself that with the household asleep he would have greater chances for success.

At ten-thirty Buchanan huskily announced his desire for sleep. His host showed him his room, which opened off the sitting-room, as did his own room and Judith's. The store was reached through a passage from the living-room, which skirted the store office and opened directly into the passageway between two counters. His last mental picture was that of Judith kissing her father good night.

Without undressing, he threw himself across the spotless white spread and stared at the ceiling. Through the open window came the drone of myriad insects, and the almost

inaudible scratch of hundreds of them up and down the screen. The slight gulf breeze ruffled the mesquit trees outside, and occasionally the yelp of a coyote came to his ears.

How long he had waited he did not know; but when he finally removed his boots and stole out into the dark living-room, lamp in hand, it seemed as if an eternity had passed. He meant to reconnoiter a bit. With all the yellow heart of him he hoped that he might get the money and go without the necessity of binding Bilney and the two women, or of compelling the old man to tell him where the money was.

With a hand that shook so that the chimney rattled, he set the lamp down on the battered table in the office.

He drew a pair of cutters from his shirt and quickly snipped the telephone wires. The snap of a board beneath his feet nearly caused him to drop the tool.

This accomplished, his small eyes darted around swiftly. The table, a closed roll-top desk with a battered swivel-chair, and a heap of old pasteboard boxes and circulars in a corner of the tiny room represented the only furnishings. Apparently there was no safe.

He tiptoed to the window and pulled the wrinkled green shade to the bottom. He tried the top of the desk, and it rolled up obediently. Within was a small metal box, locked with a hasp and a small padlock.

He gasped with relief. His first impulse was to grab the strong-box and run. With an effort he resisted the temptation. He must make sure that the money was there.

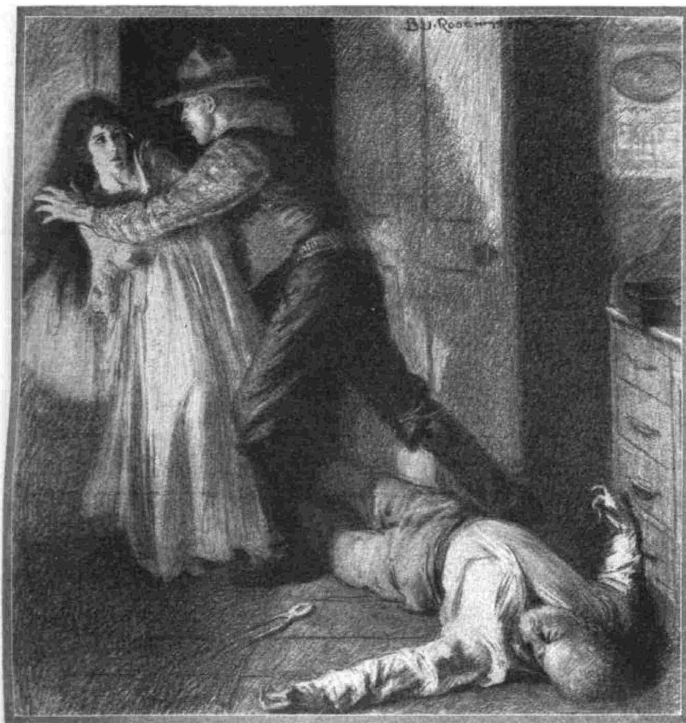
He wiped his moist palms on his overalls, and vainly tried to control the tremors that shook him. He took out the heavy cutters, with the idea of using them as a lever in an attempt to break the box. He was just starting to insert them below the hasp when padding footsteps came to his ears.

An exclamation that was like a sob burst from his ashen lips as he turned, his fingers gripped around the instrument in his hands. Dim against the blackness of the open door, because of the lamp between, he saw the scraggly white hair and peering eyes of Bilney. A trembling revolver flashed close to the door-jamb.

Blindly, unthinkingly, Buchanan leaped forward and swung. He was in an ecstasy of terror. The report of the wild shot echoed like thunder an instant before his weapon sank in the skull of the trembling old man. He dropped, limply horrible. The revolver crashed to the floor.

“Daddy!”

Swiftly flying footsteps up the passage came to his ears like the approach of some avenging fate. He met the girl as she burst through the doorway. His hand closed over her mouth. Her anguished eyes blazed into his.



He met the girl as she burst through the doorway, her anguished eyes blazed into his and for a moment she seemed petrified with terror.

He was conscious, through his trance of fear and horror, of screams rising eerily through the night. He took his hand from her mouth long enough to rip out her silken sleeve, stuff it into her mouth, and bind it there with his bandana.

She came to herself then, and fought like a wildcat as he tried to bind her hands and feet. It was half a minute before he succeeded.

He did not wait to bind her feet, but hurried back toward those screams, careless of the blackness of the passageway. He ran into the table in the dining-room, and blundered toward the kitchen. The screams rose in a crescendo of utter terror as he approached.

Moonlight filtered through the windows of the tiny bedroom, and by its dim illumination he could see the whites of staring eyes in the corner behind the bed. He jerked the gibbering old negro to her feet and his fist crashed to her jaw. He ripped and tore at the bed-sheets like a wild man, finally securing strips that answered for a gag and strands to secure arms and legs.

He ran back to the office, to fall over the prone body of the old man. He rolled away from it as if from some living menace. He scrambled to his feet, his breath coming in labored gasps, and turned toward Judith, whom he had flung in the chair before the desk. She was limp, her face still set in lines that seemed frozen in agony. He finished his task of binding her.

With the cash-box in his arms, Buchanan fled. It was the work of a moment to enter the small corral, fling the saddle that hung in the shed on the back of Judith's saddle-horse, and mount.

The whispering mesquit was the voice of phantom pursuers, the solitude terrible.

He galloped to the little shack depot, and let himself in by smashing a window. The moon-rays through a window gave enough light to enable him to smash the telegraph instruments and the telephone.

Then, without food or water, he set off at a wild gallop southward. His convulsed face was twisted backward over his shoulder as if he expected the blurred buildings behind him to give forth some avenger to follow him through the shadows reaching for him from every side.

Captain Perkins was sprawled in the swinging hammock on the porch of the recreation building, puffing deliberately at a short pipe. It was a little after ten o'clock in the evening. Presently the sheriff happened along.

The lean-faced, square-jawed commanding officer was wrestling with some of the problems that his new detail had brought him. Transferred from the engineers a few months before, he had found that flyers bore little resemblance to the correct young West Pointers he had known in the infantry and the engineers. And his first detail as a commanding officer, he admitted frankly to himself, had him guessing.

"I ain't been around the border cavalry since Washington crossed the Delaware for nothin'," the Sheriff advised him. "Cap'n, in my judgment, you got to figger this here Air Service as different from any other. Course, I may be jest a foolish old-timer which ought to o' passed out quiet and decent a matter o' ten years ago, but this here bunch o' yours, and the other boys from down Laredo and Marfa way that I run into, have kinda sneaked under my hide. By and large, the idee o' these planes spannin' the border from California to the Gulf o' Mexico, risin' out o' little cleared spots in the Big Bend and out there in Arizona, and these boys flyin' 'em over them El Paso mountains and the deserts and this Godforsaken strip of mesquit, riskin'

their lives every minute they're in the air—it's kind o' doggone romantic to even an old sand-rat like me.

“And rememberin' the times when fellers like Sam Edwards, which is now fat and a mayor and washes his neck regular, was r'arin' youngsters ridin' down main streets drunk and shootin', and rememberin' what true-blue buddies and real hombres they was, makes me judge your boys in the same class.

“And listen, son: the old days in this country meant that a man had to have guts or go under. Because they was men ridin' the range and maintainin' their necks as good as new by their own gun-play, the same red blood which showed in them things was responsible for what's known now as the old 'wild West' stuff.

“I reckon your boys are pioneers, Cap'n. To my notion, any man that picks this here flyin' as a profession ain't ever goin' to get no kick out of a ten-cent-limit poker game. Where would yore Air Service be if the men in it was playin' things safe?”

He raised his voice at the last words, for the brooding silence of the night was shattered by the rolling explosions of a motor.

Spear's battered roadster shot down the road, its huge headlights probing the darkness. It swooped around the sharp corner with breath-taking speed, stopped with startling celerity, and died into silence. The flyer strolled toward the porch, peering briefly at the two occupants thereof.

“Hello,” he greeted them briefly, as he sank on the steps. “I want to inquire about the ringleader of that Barnes City tar-and-feather party I saw get off the train yesterday afternoon. Tall, hungry-looking guy with a long mustache.”

“Name o’ Buchanan?” asked Trowbridge interestedly.

“I don’t remember his name, but it wasn’t Buchanan then—at least, not in his home town. He must have just got out of the lock-up.”

“I met the individual referred to yesterday—Pappy George Bilney introduced him to me. They ’peared to have struck up considerable of a friendship on the way down,” the Sheriff said slowly. “I ain’t seen this feller around the town to-day, neither. Prob’ly George told him all his secrets, too, on the way down. He never has learnt that there’s bad men runnin’ around the border. I’ve often thought of what a good chance fer a robbery George’s emporium was, ’way off by itself thataway. By Godfrey, to-day’s the first o’ the month, too. I believe I’ll mosey up to see George and Judy t’morrer.” The Sheriff turned to Captain Perkins. “Cap’n, how about one o’ the boys flyin’ me up to Willett t’morrer? I shore am anxious to git up that way.”

The commanding officer readily assented.

“Thanks, Cap’n,” returned Trowbridge. “Sleepy, I ain’t noticed you rushin’ forward to offer yore services as chauffeur—”

“Oh, I’ll be tickled pink,” yawned Sleepy.

Helmet and goggles in hand, Sleepy, the next morning, made his way to the line, where a huge figure interestedly watched the efforts of the mechanics.

“Mornin’!” came the jovial hail of Trowbridge.

Sleepy nodded. The big twelve-cylinder Liberty increased its roar as the sergeant shoved the throttle wide open. The men,

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