

The Laughter of Slim Malone

By Max Brand



Time has little to do with reputation in the far West, and accordingly the name of Slim Malone grew old in the region of Appleton, and yet the owner of the name was still young.

Appleton was somewhat of a misnomer, for the region had never known anything save imported apples or any other sort of fruit since the time of its birth into the history of whisky and revolvers. But a misguided pioneer in the old days had raised a few scrubby trees and had named the town forever. The dreams of the early agriculturalists had died long ago, but the

name remained to pique the curiosity of travelers and furnish jokes for inhabitants.

The town lay at the conjunction of three gorges in the heart of the Rockies, and the little plain where it nestled was crowded with orchards which bore everything but apples. The six original trees which had given the town its name now stood in the back yard of Sandy Orton's saloon—old trees with knotted and mossy limbs which suggested a venerable age due to the hard climate rather than to the passage of years. They were pointed out to casual travelers with great pride, and they were the established toast of Sandy's place. But Sandy's was frequented by a loud-voiced and spendthrift crowd not usual to agricultural towns.

In the old days, when Appleton was a name rather than a fact, the hilarity had been as absent as the men; but after gold was discovered in the three gorges which led from the settlement into the heart of the mountains, the little town became a rendezvous of a thousand adventurers. The stages to and from the railroad thirty miles away, were crowded with men eager to face the hardships of the climate and the great adventure of the gold-fields.

It was then that Slim Malone appeared. It was said that he had first come upon the scene as the owner of the Red River strike, which was finally owned by Sandy Gleason. It was further rumored that Sandy had beaten Slim Malone out of the claim by a very shady deal at cards; but Sandy refused to discuss the matter, and Slim Malone was rarely within vocal range, so the matter had never been sifted. Sandy was rarely more vocal than a grunt, and when Slim Malone appeared, people had

generally other things to think about than questions concerning his past.

A certain percentage of lawlessness is taken for granted in a mining town. People are too busy with their own concerns to pay attention to their neighbors, but when three stages in succession, passing from Appleton to Concord, the nearest railroad station, were robbed by a rider on a white horse, the community awoke and waxed wrath. The loss was too much in common to be passed over.

The first effort was an impromptu organization of half a dozen angered miners who rode into the Weston Hills. They found fresh hoof-prints after an hour of riding, and went on greatly encouraged, with the pistols loosened in their holsters. After some hours of hard travel they came upon a white horse in the midst of a hollow, and then spread into a circle and approached cautiously. But not cautiously enough. While they were still far from the white horse the bandit opened fire upon them from the shelter of a circle of rocks. They rode into town the next day with three of their number badly hurt and the other three marked for life. That started the war.

As the months passed posse after posse left Appleton and started to scour the Weston Hills for the marauder. The luckiest of the expeditions came back telling tales of a sudden fusillade from an unexpected covert, and then a swift white horse scouring into the distance. The majority came back with no tales at all save of silent mountains and the grim cactus of the desert.

In the mean time the stages from Appleton to Concord were held up with a monotonous regularity by a rider of a fleet white horse, and the mining town grew more and more irate. Men cursed the name of Slim Malone. An adventurous singer in one of Appleton's dance halls invented a song featuring the marauder, and it was taken up by the matrons of the town as a sort of scare-crow ballad to hush their children.

Then the new mayor came to Appleton. He owned three claims on Askwarthy Gulch, and he ran on the double platform of no-license for the Appleton saloons and the end of Slim Malone. The women used their influence because of the first clause in his platform, and the men voted for him because of the second. His name was Orval Kendricks, but that didn't count. What mattered was his red hair and the statements of his platform. Slim Malone celebrated the new reign of holding up two stages within the first five days.

But the new mayor lived up to the color of his hair, and proved worthy of his platform. He held a meeting of every able-bodied citizen in town three days after his inauguration, and in his speech the men noted with relief that he forgot to mention the saloons, and that he concentrated his attention on Slim Malone. He stated that the good name and the prosperity of Appleton depended upon the capture of this marauder at once. Divorced from the mayor's rather sounding rhetoric, the populace of Appleton realized the truth of his remarks and applauded him to the echo. His silences were as much appreciated as his words.

After a carefully prepared peroration he built up to his climax by the proposal that the community import "Lefty" Cornwall, at

a salary of five hundred dollars a month and five thousand bonus, to act as deputy sheriff until the apprehension of Slim Malone. Then the crowd applauded to the echo. In their midst were men who had lost more than five thousand at a blow owing to the strenuous activity of this Slim Malone. They were equal to any measures for his suppression even if it meant the importation of Lefty Cornwall.

The fame of Lefty had begun in Texas when he mortally wounded one greaser and crippled two others in a saloon fight. Since then it had increased and spread until he was a household word even farther north than Appleton. He came from that sun-burned southland where a man's prowess was gaged by his speed and dexterity with his "irons," and even on that northern plateau of Appleton men knew that to cross Lefty Cornwall was death or murderous mutilation.

At first there were some dissenters. Men stated freely that Lefty would never dream of coming as far north as Appleton for a paltry five thousand dollars. There were even a few dissenters who claimed that even should he come he would never be able to cope with Slim Malone, but these were laughed and hooted down by a radical minority who came from the southland and knew the fame of Lefty Cornwall in detail. The sheriff accounted for the others by stating that he had already communicated with Lefty, and had received his assent by letter. This announcement dissolved the meeting in cheers.

Appleton decreed the day of the arrival of the new sheriff a festival occasion. The farmers from the adjoining table-land drove into town, the miners from the three valleys rode down.

And when the stage arrived from Concord the incipient sheriff dismounted in the midst of a huge crowd, and cheers which shook the sign-board of Sandy Orton's saloon.

Now the mayor of Appleton had declared deathless war against the saloons in his platform, but since his election he had been strangely silent upon the liquor question. He was as canny as his red hair suggested, and he had a truly Scotch insight into the crucial moments of life. He perceived the arrival of Lefty Cornwall to be such a moment, and he perceived at the same moment the correct way of meeting that crisis.

It was with surprise no less than pleasure that the throng heard the lusty voice of their chief official inviting them to Sandy Orton's saloon, and where they were in doubt, his beckoning arm put them right. They filled the saloon from bar to door, and those who could not enter thronged at the entrances with gaping mouths.

The sheriff was equal to the occasion. He mounted the bar much as a plainsman mounts a horse, and standing in full view of his fellow citizens, he invited Lefty Cornwall to join him in his prominent position. Nowise loath, Lefty swung onto the bar in the most approved fashion, and stood, locked arm in arm with the dignified official of Appleton. In the mean time the bartenders, thrilled equally with surprise and pleasure, passed out the drinks to the crowded room. It was apparently a moment big in portent to Appleton, and not a heart there but pulsed big with pride in their mayor.

"Fellow citizens," began the mayor, raising a large freckled hand for silence.

A hush fell upon the assemblage.

“Boys,” continued the mayor, after a proper silence reigned, “I haven’t got much to say.”

“Here’s to you!” yelled a voice. “I hate a guy that’s noisy.”

The mayor frowned and waved a commanding hand for silence.

“I spotted you, Pete Bartlett,” he called. “If you don’t like silence you must hate yourself.”

The crowd roared with approving laughter.

“Boys,” began Orval Kendricks again, when the laughter had subsided, “this here is a solemn occasion. I feel called upon to summon the manhood of this here town to listen to my words, and I reckon that most of the manhood of the town is within hearin’.”

A chorus of assent followed.

“I don’t need any Daniel Webster to tell you men that this here town is hard hit,” continued Mayor Kendricks. “It don’t need no Henry Clay to tell you that these diggin’s are about to bust up unless we have the right sort of a strong arm man in town. We’ve been sufferin’ patiently from the aggressions of a red-handed desperado who I don’t need to mention, because his name just naturally burns my tongue.”

“Slim Malone!” cried a dozen voices. “We’re followin’ you, chief!”

The mayor thrust his hand into his breast and extended the other arm in imitation of a popular wood-cut of Patrick Henry.

The crowd acknowledged the eloquence of the attitude with a common gaping.

“There may be some of you guys,” cried the mayor, rising to the emotion of the moment, “there may be some of you guys who don’t know the man I mean, but I reckon that a tolerable pile of Appleton’s best citizens spend a large part of their time cursing Slim Malone.”

“We ain’t through damning him yet,” yelled a voice, and the crowd voiced their assent, half in growls and half in laughter.

“He has tricked our posse as an honest man would be ashamed to do,” went on the mayor, warming to his oration; “he has shot our citizens, and he has swiped our gold! I’m askin’ you as man to man, can a self-respectin’ community stand for this? It can’t. What’s the answer that Appleton makes to this desperado?”

He paused and frowned the audience into a state of suspense.

“There is only one answer to this gun-fighter, and that answer stands at my right hand,” bellowed the mayor, when he judged that the silence had sunk into his hearers sufficiently. “The name of the answer is Lefty Cornwall!”

The following burst of applause brought a momentary blush into even Lefty’s cheek. At the reiterated demands for a speech he hitched at his revolver in its skeleton holster, removed his sombrero, and mopped his forehead with a ponderous hand. When it became evident that the hero was about to break into utterance the crowd became silent.

“Fellows,” began the gun-fighter, “makin’ speeches ain’t much in my line.”

“Makin’ dead men is more your game,” broke in the wit of the assemblage.

A universal hiss attested that the crowd was anxious to hear the Texan gun-man out.

“But if you are goin’ to do me the honor of makin’ me sheriff of this here county and this here city of Appleton,” he continued, letting his eye rove down Appleton’s one street, “I’m here to state that law and order is goin’ to be maintained here at all costs. Right here I got to state that the only costs I’m referrin’ to is the price of the powder and lead for this here cannon of mine.”

The crowd broke in upon the speech with noisy appreciation, and many cries of “That’s the stuff, old boy!”

“I been hearin’ a tolerable pile about one Slim Malone,” went on the new sheriff.

“So have we,” broke in the irrepressible wit of the assemblage, only to be choked into silence by more serious-minded neighbors.

“Sure,” agreed the sheriff. “I reckon you’ve heard a lot too much about him. But I’m here to state that all this talk about Slim Malone has got to stop, and has got to stop sudden. I’m here to stop it.”

He hitched his holster a little forward again as he spoke and a deep silence fell upon the crowd.

“Fellow citizens,” he continued, spitting liberally over the side of the bar, “whatever gun-play is carried on around here in the future is to be done strictly by me, and all you men can consider yourselves under warning to leave your shootin’-irons at home, unless you want to use them to dig premature graves.”

This advice was received with an ironical chuckle of appreciation from the crowd.

“As for Slim Malone,” he went on, “I’m goin’ out into the Weston Hills to get him single handed. I don’t want no posse. I’ll get him single handed or bust, you can lay to that; and if I come back to this town without Slim Malone, alive or dead, you can say that Malone has the Indian sign on me.”

Having finished all that he had to say, Lefty felt about in his mind to find a graceful manner of closing his exordium, when the mayor came to his assistance. He recognized that nervous clearing of the throat and wandering of the eyes out of his own first political experiences. Now he raised his glass of colored alcohol and water, which in Appleton rejoiced in the name of Bourbon.

“Boys,” he shouted, “there ain’t no better way of showin’ our appreciation of our new sheriff than by turnin’ bottoms up. Let’s go!”

Every hand in the barroom flashed into the air, and after a loud whoop there was a brief gurgling sound which warmed the heart of Sandy Orton.

It should have been the signal for a day's carousal, and the good citizens of Appleton were no wise averse. They desired to hear the voice of their new sheriff in friendly converse. They desired to see him in that most amiable of all poses, his foot on the rail and his hand on the bar. They wanted to look him over and size him up just as a boy wishes to fondle his first gun. But the sheriff objected. He was sorry to spoil the fun. He said that they could go ahead and have their little time, but that they must leave him out. He had business to perform that didn't admit of drinking.

There might have been adverse criticism of this Spartan strenuousness, but at this point a diversion occurred in the shape of four wild riders who broke into Appleton and brought the word that Slim Malone had been out again. This time he had held up a mule train on its way to carry provisions up Bender Cañon to Earl Parrish's claim. With his usual fine restraint Slim had taken no lives, but he had winged two of the drivers badly and had helped himself from the provisions without unnecessary waste. He had even lingered to give first aid to the two drivers whose courage had overcome their sense of proportion.

If anything had been needed to spur on the new official of Appleton it came in the form of the message which Slim Malone had left with the wounded man before he rode away.

"Tell the new sheriff," he called, as he sat easily in the saddle, "that I've heard of him, and that I'll organize a little party for him as soon as possible so that we can get better acquainted. Tell him that the one thing he lacks to make him a good fighting man is a sense of humor."

Lefty Cornwall heard this message in silence the while he spat with vicious precision into a distant spittoon. Afterward, and still in silence, he retired and worked for an hour cleaning his already shining revolver and patting and oiling the holster. He performed these grave functions in the house of the mayor, and that dignitary announced later that he had wound up by practising the draw and point, walking and sitting down, and at every angle. The mayor was impressed past speech.

When Lefty issued at last he found a score of hard riders standing by their horses in the street.

“An’ what might all this here gang be for?” inquired Lefty mildly.

“We’re the posse, waitin’ to be sworn in,” announced one of the men.

“Swearin’ in takes a terrible lot of time,” said Lefty, “an’ besides, I don’t know how it’s done. I don’t want no posse, as I said before. I wouldn’t know how to handle it. Anyway, twenty men on horseback make enough noise to scare away a whole gang of bandits. You might as well start lookin’ for trouble with a brass band, because you’d sure find the trouble.”

He hitched at his belt in his customary manner when at a loss for words, and his right hand dropped gracefully upon the handle of his gun and drooped thereon somewhat sinisterly.

“This here Malone,” went on the sheriff, “may be a tolerable bad man in his way, but I ain’t no shorn lamb myself. I’m goin’ out to get him, an’ I’m goin’ to get him by myself. I reckon that’s final.”

They accepted his announcement with cheers, and set about offering all the information in their power. It was generally believed that the bandit lived somewhere at the far end of Eagle Head Cañon, about fifteen miles from the town. His dwelling had never been spotted, but he was most frequently seen riding to and from this place. Thrice posses had raked the cañon as with a fine-toothed comb, but they had never come upon a trace of his habitation; but the cañon was thick with caves, and heaped with giant boulders which offered innumerable places of concealment, and the legend was strong that Slim Malone lived in that place.

The next thing was to find a proper mount. This proved a more difficult task. The sheriff knew horses from nose to hoof, and he was hard to please. At last he selected a tall roan with a wicked eye and flat shoulders which promised speed. These preparations made, he swung to the saddle, waved his hand to the crowd, and galloped out of town.

There was not much bluff about Lefty Cornwall, as the curious-minded had frequently discovered in the past, but as he swung into the narrow throat of Eagle Head Cañon, he began to realize that he might have gone too far. While he was in the town it had been easy enough to make ringing speeches. Now that the evening began to come down by lazy, cool degrees a certain diffidence grew in him.

He had fought many men during his brief life, but he had never come across a reputation as strange or as fascinating as this of Slim Malone. If the challenge which the bandit had sent him was irritating, it also roused in his mind a certain degree of

respect, and as he rode up the cañon, winding slowly among the boulders, a hundred doubts infested his mind.

If he had been back upon the level reaches of the Texan desert, which he knew, these uncertainties would probably have never entered his head, but here every half mile of his journey was passed under the eye of a thousand coverts from which a man could have picked him off with the safety of a hunter firing from a blind at partridges. Moreover a curious loneliness akin to homesickness came in him, located, as far as he could discover, chiefly in the pit of the stomach.

The mountains were blue now, and purple along their upper reaches, and as the sun left off the moon took up her reign over the chill blue spaces. It was very solemn, almost funereal to the thought of Lefty Cornwall. And the silence was punctuated with the melancholy howling of a far-off coyote.

It was complete night before he reached the upper end of Eagle Head Cañon, and he was weary from the stumbling gait of his horse over the rocks. Moreover, the mountain night air was cold—very cold to Lefty. He wanted desperately to turn back, but he had not the heart to face the inquiries which would meet him at the town, and the covert smiles which would welcome the hero returning empty handed, the man who needed no posse.

Lefty was a very brave man, but like almost all of the physically courageous, he dreaded derision more than actual pain. Yet, in spite of this he finally decided that it was better to go back to the town and face the smiles than to remain through the cold night in these dread silences. He wished heartily that he had

taken one other man with him if it were only for the companionship. As it was he felt that it was no use to hunt further, and he started back down the cañon. He had not gone far when his horse stumbled and commenced to limp.

Lefty got off with a curse and felt of the fore hoofs. The difficulty proved to be a sharp, three-cornered rock which had been picked up under the shoe of the left fore foot. He was bending over to pry this loose between his fingers when he caught the glint of a light.

In his excitement he sprang upright and stared. At once the light disappeared. Lefty began to feel ghostly. His senses had never played him such tricks before.

He leaned over and commenced work on the stone again, but as he did so his eye caught the same glint of light. There was no possible mistake about it this time. He remained bent over and stared at it until he was certain that he saw a yellow spot of light, a long, thin ray which pointed out to him like a finger through the shadows.

This time he took the bearings of the light carefully, and when he stood up he was able to locate it again. Lefty's heart beat high.

He threw the reins over his horse's head and commenced to stalk the light carefully. Sometimes as he slipped and stumbled over the rocks he lost sight of it altogether, only to have it reappear when he had almost given up hopes of finding it again. And so he came upon the cave.

The light shone through a little chink between two tall boulders, and as Lefty pressed his eye to the aperture, holding his breath as he did so, he saw a long dugout, perhaps a dozen paces from end to end, and some five paces wide. Behind a partition at one end he heard the stamping of a horse, and as Lefty gazed, a magnificent white head rose behind the partition and looked fairly at him. His heart stopped as that great-eyed gaze turned on him, the ears pricking and the wisp of hay motionless in the mouth. But after a moment the horse dropped his head again and went on crunching his fodder, stamping now and then and snorting as he ate.

At first he saw no other occupant of the place, but by moving his eye to one side of the aperture he managed to get a glimpse of the bandit himself. There was no question about his identity. From the descriptions which he had heard while in Appleton he knew him at once, the expressionless gray eyes, and the thin, refined face with an almost Greek modeling about its lower part.

He sat tilted back in a heavy chair smoking a pipe and reading, and Lefty saw that he sat facing a blanket at the far end of the room. Evidently this was the entrance. So far as Lefty could see the bandit was unarmed, his two long guns lying on the table half a dozen paces away.

Very softly he crept along the side of the boulder, and finally came to an aperture, as he had expected. It was just wide enough for a man to press through, and from the chisel marks at his sides it had evidently been artificially widened from time to time. At the end of the narrow passage hung the blanket.

If Lefty had proceeded cautiously up to this point, his caution now became almost animal-like. Behind that blanket he had no idea what was happening. Perhaps the bandit had heard a noise long before, and was now crouched against the wall in another part of the place, ready to open fire at the first stir of the blanket. Perhaps he had stolen out of the cave by another entrance and was now hunting the hunter. The thought sent a chill down Lefty's back and he turned his head quickly. Then he resumed his slow progress. At the very edge of the blanket he paused for a long and deathly minute, but Lefty was not a woman, to fail at the last moment.

He swung the blanket aside and crouched in the entrance with his gun leveled. The little round sight framed the face of Slim Malone, who still sat reading quietly and puffing at a black-bowled pipe.

"Hands up!" said Lefty softly.

Even then, with his bead on his man, he did not feel entirely sure of himself. It seemed that this could not be true. Opportunity had favored him too much. There must still be some turn of the game.

The meaningless gray eyes raised calmly from the book. It seemed to Lefty that a yellow glint came into them for a moment like the light that comes into an animal's eyes when it is angered, but the next moment it was gone, and he could not be sure that it had come there at all. The rest of the face was perfectly calm. Malone lowered the book slowly and then raised his hands above his head.

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