



LOUIS BRAMMOUR

AMERICA'S FAVORITE STORYTELLER

BORDEN CHANTRY

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Louis L'Amour

 BANTAM BOOKS

To Tom and Jose



BORDEN CHANTRY
A Bantam Book

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I

Dawn came like a ghost to the silent street, a gray, dusty street lined with boardwalks, hitching rails and several short lengths of water trough. False-fronted buildings alternated with others of brick or stone, some with windows showing goods for sale, some blank and empty.

A door slammed, a well pump came to life, complaining in rusty accents, then a rooster crowed... answered by another from across the town.

Into the end of the street rode a lone cowboy on a crow-bait horse. He saw the sign of the Bon-Ton Restaurant, and turned toward it, then his horse shied and he saw the body of a man lying beside the walk.

He glanced at it, dismounted, then tied his horse at the rail. He tried the restaurant door and had started to turn away when the sound of footsteps drew him back. The door opened and a pleasant voice said, "Come in. There's coffee, breakfast ready in a few minutes."

"I ain't in no hurry." The cowboy straddled a chair, accepting the coffee. "Dead man out in the street."

"Again? Third this week. You just wait until Saturday. Saturday night's when they let the wolves howl. You stick around."

"I seen it here and yonder. Ain't figurin' on it. I'm ridin' over to Carson an' the steam cars." He jerked his head toward the street. "You seen him?"

"No... don't aim to. I seen a dead man. I seen two dozen of them, time to time. Ain't nothin' about bein' dead pleases me. Some drunken fight, no doubt. Happens all the time."

A woman came along the street, her heels clicking on the boardwalk. She passed the dead man, glanced back,

then turned her head away and walked on to the post office.

A man crossing the street turned aside and bending over the dead man took the head by the hair and turned the face around. "Him? Prob'ly had it comin'," he said, and walked on.

Down the street another door slammed and somebody sang, off-key, of the streets of Laredo. Another pump started to squeak.

Finally the woman emerged from the post office, glanced at the body, then went to the door of the marshal's office and rapped vigorously.

"Borden? Borden? Are you in there?"

A tall, young man came to the door, slipping a suspender over his shoulder. "What's the matter, Prissy? You outa stamps?"

"There's a dead man lying in the street, Borden Chantry, and it's a disgrace. It... why, you should be ashamed! And you call yourself a marshal!"

"Wasn't even here last night, ma'am. I was clean over on the Picketwire. Prob'ly just some drunken shootin'."

"No matter what it was, Borden Chantry, you get that body out of the street! What's this town coming to, anyway? Dead bodies lying around, shootings and stab-bings every night. You call yourself a marshal!"

"No, ma'am, I don't. The city council does. I only figured to be a rancher until that norther came along. Why, I was fixin' to be a rich man come spring!"

"You an' how many others? You get that body up, Borden, or I'll have the committee on you."

Borden Chantry chuckled. "Now, now, Prissy, you wouldn't do that, would you? Why, those old biddies—"

"Hush your mouth, Borden! If they heard you speak of them like that, why—!" She turned around and went back to the post office.

A tall, handsome man with sandy hair stopped on the walk across the street. "What's the matter, Bord? You in trouble?"

"Seems like. There's a body in the street an' our post-

mistress is reading the riot act over it. You'd think she'd never seen a dead man . . . at her age."

"Less you say about age to her, the better off you'll be, Bord." He glanced at the body. "Who is it? Some drunk?"

"Prob'ly. I never did see so many men couldn't handle liquor. They get to drinkin' that block an' tackle whiskey and right away there's trouble."

"Block an' tackle whiskey?"

"Sure," Chantry chuckled at the old joke. "One drink an' you'll walk a block an' tackle anything!"

"Had breakfast. Bord? You get him off to the barn an' come on in. I'll stake you to some ham and eggs."

"All right, Lang. You just hold your horses. I'll get Big Injun. He'll tote him off for me."

Langdon Adams crossed the walk and entered the Bon-Ton, seating himself at a table near the window. It was a small town but a good town, and he was at home here. It was one place he really wanted to stay, for despite the occasional brawls between cowmen and miners, it was a pleasant enough town.

He watched the old Indian back a buckboard up to the hitching rail and then saw Borden Chantry and the Indian load the dead man into the back. The Indian drove off and Borden dusted his hands off and came inside.

A fat, buxom woman came in from the kitchen. "Here! You boys start on this. Ed's fixin' some more ham an' eggs. Why, we had a cowboy in here this morning that et enough for three! I never did see such a man!"

Borden Chantry walked through to the kitchen and poured water from a bucket into a wash-pan and rinsed his hands.

"Who was he?" Ed turned from the fire, spatula in hand. "Know him?"

"Never saw him before, Ed. Nice-lookin' feller, though. He surely doesn't look the part."

Borden Chantry walked between the tables to the one near the window.

Langdon Adams looked up, smiling. "Well, how does it feel to be the marshal of a cowntown?"

"Don't care much for it, Lang. I'd rather be ranching,

but I will say the city fathers were mighty nice to offer me the job. I was really wiped out."

"You and how many others? I never did see so many big men become small overnight. I was lucky. I hadn't many cattle and they were down yonder in the breaks and out of the wind. I don't think I lost over three or four head."

"Neither did Blossom. That widow-woman makes about as few mistakes as anybody I know. She trimmed her herds down, sold off all her scrub stuff, only kept good, sturdy stock that could last through, and they did."

"She's a fine woman."

Borden glanced at his friend. "You really shinin' up to her? Can't says I blame you. She's a mighty pretty woman, and she's got the best ranch left around here. And if you buy the old Williams place—"

"I haven't bought it yet. I'm not even sure if I want it."

"What? If you had that ranch, right next to hers, and then you two got married, you'd have about thirty sections of the best grazing in the state all to yourselves."

Ed brought the ham and eggs himself, then refilled their cups. He sat down, straddling a chair. "You catch that horse thief, Borden?"

"Uh-huh. He made him a good run, but I got him. He stole those two mares of Hyatt's. He couldn't have done worse. Why, there isn't two horses in the state look like them, or have their quality. Worst of it was, ever'body in this part of the country knows those mares. Hyatt Johnson's talked them up so much, and showed them around... A man would have to be a damn fool or a stranger to steal them."

"Well, which was he?"

"A stranger. He surely doesn't talk like any damn fool," Chantry commented. "I come up on this camp just shy of daybreak and waited until he rolled out of bed and went into the brush. Then I just stepped up and taken his gun belt and rifle and set there a-waitin' when he come back. He was mighty upset."

"Anybody got away since you been marshal, Bord?" Ed asked curiously.

"No... but there ain't been but four or five I had to go

after. A man steals something, I try to get him. If a man kills somebody and then cuts and runs, I take in after him and bring him back for a hearing. If a man tried to prosecute every man who has a shooting or a knifing against him, there'd be nobody in town but the preacher, an'—"

"Preacher?" Ed scoffed. "You just don't know the preacher. He's had him a few scraps here and there."

"Well... I don't know about that. As long as it's a stand-off fight, nobody cares, and I certainly don't feel like trying to bring a man before a judge when the jury will surely turn him loose. Killing a man in a fair fight is about the safest thing you can do around here."

"Want to take a ride down to my place, Bord? Might get some wild turkeys."

"No... no, thanks, Lang. I got to see to this body. Get him identified and bury him, if there's no relatives."

"How many have relatives that show up?" Lang asked.

"One in ten. If you find out where their family's at they usually just say to bury him and send them whatever he left... which isn't much after a night or two boozing it up down to Henry's."

"Why bother? Seems a kind of thankless job to me. Just so as they get a Christian burial it should be enough. The town can't afford it."

"Costs only a coupla bucks, Lang. A blanket to bury him in if he hasn't one of his own, and somebody to dig the grave. Comes to that, I've dug nine graves so far this season, dug 'em myself."

They ate in silence. After a moment, Langdon Adams asked, "Bord, have you thought of going to Hyatt Johnson for a loan? To get started again, I mean. He knows you're a good cattleman, and he just might come up with the money."

"You've got to be joking. Money goes into that bank of Hyatt's. It doesn't come out. Anyway, I'll make my own start when I can. I won't be beholden to any man, nor work half of my life to pay no banker."

The door opened and a short, wiry man slouched in, unshaven, the hair under his narrow-brimmed hat

uncombed and still showing fragments of straw from the barn where he had slept.

He sat down at a table, almost falling into the chair, then crossed his arms and leaned his head on his arms.

Ed came in and put a cup of coffee in front of him. "Johnny? Here she is. Y' look like y' need it. Drink up."

Johnny lifted his head and stared at the chef. "Thanks, Ed. Been a long time since the ol' Slash Seven days."

"It surely has. You want some flapjacks, Johnny?"

The drunk shook his head. "Stomach wouldn't hold 'em. Maybe later, Ed. Thanks." He gulped the last of his coffee and staggered out to the street.

Ed looked over at them. "Y' wouldn't know it now, but that there was the best puncher in this country when I come in here. That was six year back. He could ride anything wore hair, and was a better than fair hand with a rope, but he just can't handle whiskey.

"Top hand. Any outfit be glad to have him on the payroll. Now he couldn't get a job anywheres."

"Does he ever pay for the grub you give him?" Langdon asked skeptically. "I didn't see any money."

"He doesn't need it here," Ed replied shortly. "I like Johnny. He lent me a hand time an' again when I first hit this country, and never mentioned it.

"He was in a poker game, settin' around a blanket with some other punchers. I was sort of standin' by. Flat broke, no eatin' money. No job.

"I ast them if any knew where there was work, and they said no, an' I said I had to find a job pretty quick for I was sure enough broke.

"Johnny, he just reached over to his stack of money and taken off two or three bills and handed 'em to me. "There's eatin' money till you make it," he said. I made out to thank him an' he just waved me off.

"A couple of days later he slipped me three bucks on the street, and when I got a job, I paid him back."

"I know," Borden Chantry said, "Johnny was a good man . . . one of the best."

Langdon Adams pushed back his chair. "If you change your mind, Bord, come on out. We could shoot some turkeys and I'd show you the place."

"Maybe. I haven't seen Bess yet. I came in late and rather than wake them up I slept in the office. If I come in late and wake her up she doesn't get back to sleep."

Adams went out, and Ed brought a cup of coffee to the table. "Got any idea who that dead man was?"

"No, Ed. Some drunken cowboy, I guess. They will drink too much and get into arguments with the miners. Some of those Mexicans are tough... And then there's so many drifters coming through. Since the war there's a lot of footloose men who can't seem to find a place to light.

"As long as they shoot each other, nobody much cares, at least so long as it's a fair fight. Nobody likes murder or back-shooting, but there hasn't been one of those around here in years."

"Not since George Riggins was marshal. He had one... least, I always figured it for murder. Far as that goes, Helen Riggins always figured the marshal was murdered."

"I wasn't around when that happened."

"Rock fell on him. He was ridin' some rough country out yonder, an' was close under a cliff. Three days before they found him."

"That dead man... did you see him around?"

"If it's the same one, he came in here to eat. Quiet man." Ed scowled. "Borden, that man didn't size up like no trouble-hunter. Quiet man, like I say. He sat alone, ate his meal and left."

"Pay for it?"

"Twenty-dollar gold piece. I give him change." Ed pushed back his chair and got up. "I got to clean up. Dot ain't comin' in today. Headache or somethin'. Sure is hard to get help... women-folks is always ailin' when you need 'em most."

Borden Chantry walked out on the street. He should go home, let Bess know he was back, anyway. She always worried whenever he rode out after outlaws, but so far it had proved less dangerous than handling wild horses or longhorns.

He'd go home, but first he'd stop by the old barn and have a look at the dead man. He didn't care for the job,

but it was his to do, and he had to make a show of doing it. He told himself that, yet at the same time he knew he had never done anything just for show. He was no marshal. He'd never figured on being a law officer, but as long as they'd given him the job he'd do the best he could.

It was gloomy in the old barn. The body was laid out on an old worktable. The place smelled of moldy hay, and light came in through various cracks in the siding and roof.

Big Injun sat down against one wall, a tall old man in a high-crowned, undented black hat with a feather in it, a black shirt and worn blue pants made for a smaller man.

Borden Chantry walked across the dirt floor strewn with straw and looked down at the dead man.

A handsome man he had been... maybe thirty years old, could be younger or older. Not shabby. Face still, taut, brown from sun and wind. An outdoors man, a rider, by the look of him. Certainly no booze-fighter. Chantry glanced with interest at the large-roweled, many-pronged spurs. They were silver, with little bells.

Nothing like that around here, for they looked southwestern... Mexican, maybe, or Californian. Most of the hands around right now were Wyoming or Montana hands... or from Kansas.

Gently, not to disturb the body, he went through the pockets. Three gold eagles... a handful of change. A red bandanna handkerchief... no papers of any kind.

Removing the thong from the gun hammer, he drew the man's six-shooter, smelling the barrel. No smell of powder smoke, only gun oil. He checked the cylinder... five bullets. Fully loaded, as most men let the hammer down on an empty chamber when riding across country. It was safer that way. He did it himself.

Well... no gunfight. The gun had not been fired and the man had not been expecting trouble, as the thong was still in place. His first action would have been to slip that free.

There was a bullet hole through the man's shirt near the heart. No blood around it to speak of, but that was often the case.

He looked again at the body, frowning a little. Disturbed, he studied it. What was bothering him?

The shirt... that was it. The shirt was too large for the man's neck. Of course, a man needing a shirt would buy what he could get... but there was a difference here. This man's clothes fitted to perfection... finely tooled black boots, the silver spurs polished, the black broadcloth pants fitted perfectly, and so did the fringed buckskin jacket, beautifully tanned to an almost white. This was a man who cared about his appearance, a neat, careful man, so why the too large shirt?

Well... There might have been many reasons and it was time he got back home. He started to slip the gun back into its holster, then glanced at it again.

It was a gun that had been much handled... The holster, too, was worn. Polished and in good shape, but worn. It was the gun and the holster of a man who knew how to use a gun, and who would have been good with it.

"Big Injun? What do you think?"

The Indian stood up. "He good man... strong man. He ride far, I think. No drink. No smell. No bottle. Face strong... clean."

Borden rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, studying the dead man again. Big Injun didn't like it and neither did he. Something was wrong here.

"Murder," Big Injun said. "This man... no know he would be shot. Sudden, I think."

Uneasily, Borden Chantry stared at the dusty floor. Damn it, was he going to have problems now? Why couldn't the dead man have been the drunken brawler he had expected?

Big Injun believed the man had been shot from ambush. Or, at least, shot when he did not expect it. Perhaps by someone he trusted... But in the street? Who? And the man was a stranger. Could someone have followed him?

It was a one-street town... one business street, at least, with a few side streets and back streets on which there were residences.

His small white house was rented from Hyatt Johnson,

a square, four-room house with a white picket fence around it, a few feet of lawn, with some flowers carefully cultivated and watered by hand, and behind the house a small red barn and a corral.

Across the lane to the left there was a considerable pasture where he ran a dozen head of cattle and a few horses. Borden Chantry always kept a half-dozen horses, his best riding stock, in the corral at the barn.

He went down the lane and through the back gate. He could hear a faint rattle of dishes from the kitchen so he went up the steps.

"Oh, Borden! You're back!" Bess came to him quickly. Her eyes scanned his face. "Was it bad? Is everything all right?"

"He's in jail. I recovered the horses."

"Are you all right?" She held his arms, looking up into his face.

"Sure. It was nothing."

"Sit down. There's coffee, and I'll fix some eggs."

"I'll have the coffee, but I had breakfast with Lang. There's been some shooting down there. A man's been found dead in the street."

"Another one? Oh, Borden! I wish . . . I wish we could move back east. Anywhere. I don't want Tom growing up with all this shooting and killing. All this violence."

It was an old discussion, and he merely shrugged. "You married a rancher, Bess, and when I can get on my feet, I'll go back to ranching. This is my country and I belong here. As for being marshal . . . somebody has to do it."

"But why does it have to be you?" she protested.

"I am good with a gun, and they know it. More than that, I know when not to use a gun, and they know that, too."

The coffee tasted good, and it was pleasant here in the kitchen. Bess moved about, doing the usual things for breakfast, and he leaned back in his chair, still a little tired from the long, hard ride.

The man had taken two horses and had swapped saddles, that was what had fooled Kim Baca. He had good horses and he stopped only long enough to switch rig-

ging, and so he had overtaken the horse thief before he could get far. Baca had expected no pursuit to catch him. That was half of it, of course, getting there fast and unexpected.

"This is no ordinary killin', Bess. Leastwise it doesn't look it. Nice lookin' young man, maybe about my age or a mite older. Somebody shot him when he wasn't expecting it. Laid for him, likely."

"Will you be gone all day?"

"Most of it." He finished his coffee and went into the bedroom to change his shirt. His mind kept returning to the dead man. Of course, he could simply bury him and that would be an end to it, but it wouldn't be doing his job. Not doing it right. He'd been hired by the city fathers and it was his job to keep the peace and punish the evildoer . . . or hold them for judgment.

He frowned. The dead man had eaten at the Bon-Ton, had paid for his meal and left. He should have asked whether it was breakfast or dinner . . . or even supper. Anyway, it would seem, the man had been around town a few hours.

Well, what did he have? The victim had left the Bon-Ton. The next morning he had been found dead . . . So where had he been? Not that there were so many places to go.

Chantry came out of the bedroom, stuffing his shirt into his pants. Bess turned on him. "Borden? Where did the man come from?"

"We don't know," he said. "That's something to find out."

"And how did he get here?"

He glanced at her, grinning. "Now why didn't I think of that? How *did* he get here? Pays to have a smart wife."

"It's just common sense, that's all. If he did not come by stage, he had to ride horseback."

He picked up his hat. "So where's his horse? I'd pin my badge on you if I could find a place to pin it."

She pushed him away. "You go find out how he got here. That will keep you out of mischief."

He closed the gate behind him thoughtfully. There was one stage in and one stage out each day. If the

stranger had come by stage he had arrived sometime around midday, which meant he had been around town . . . a town with less than six hundred people . . . for several hours. Somebody had to have seen him.

Strolling along the dusty street Chantry reached the boardwalk, paused and stamped dust from his boots. A girl was walking toward him, a pretty girl with a lively face, big blue eyes, and just a little overdressed and overbangled.

"Lucy Marie?"

She paused, apprehensively. It was partly the badge, he suspected, and partly that he was known to be happily married.

"How's Mary Ann?"

"Ailing. She don't seem to get much better. I . . . I wish she could get away from here. She needs a rest."

"Tell her I asked about her."

Mary Ann Haley had lived in town for two years, occupying a house on a back street with Lucy Marie and a couple of others. Now she was ill . . . consumption, probably. A lot of the girls on the line seemed to pick it up.

Chantry returned to the barn and looked at the dead man on the table. He would have to be buried soon, yet the weather was cool to cold and they could wait a little while. Yet somehow he was reluctant to commit the man to the earth. Such a man must have a home . . . He kept himself too well to be just a drifter.

The door opened and Doc Terwilliger came in. "Is that the man?"

"It is. Look at him, Doc. There's something wrong. That man's mighty well dressed in frontier style. I mean his clothes fit . . . he's had them made for him. He's got a gun that's seen use. He's wearin' spurs that look like Mexico or California, and most of the riders around here these days are Kansas or Missouri boys with a few drifters from Texas. He's been out in the sun . . . you can see that. His gun ain't been fired lately but it's cared for. Seems to me the only thing that don't look right is that shirt. I can't see a man who dresses as careful as him wearin' a shirt two sizes too big."

Doc Terwilliger was forty-five, with twenty years of it in army service, and there was little he had not seen.

"I was just settin' here, Doc, wondering how you'd get a shirt off a dead man who's prob'ly started to stiffen up."

"Let's get the coat off first. He's not as stiff as you'd expect. Here... lend a hand."

Lifting the dead man they worked his arms from the sleeves and got the buckskin coat off. Doc examined it thoughtfully, then handed it to Borden Chantry.

He held the coat up. There was a little blood on the back, but very little, considering the wound had been in the front. And there was no bullet hole.

"I'll be damned!" he said. "Looks like the bullet never got through."

"It did though," Doc said grimly. "Look here a minute." With his surgical scissors he cut the shirt up the back and they took it off. Doc tilted the body on one side and they looked at it. Doc's face was grim.

"Shot twice," he said, "the first one in the back at point-blank range. See? The powder burns? And scattered grains of powder penetrated the skin."

"That shot was supposed to kill him, but it didn't. See here? He was shot a second time, and from the trajectory the killer was either lying on the floor shooting up or he was standing up as the supposedly dead man started to rise off the floor. I'd say the latter."

"Only one bullet hole in the shirt," Borden said. "Doc, d' you figure whoever it was shot this man, but not wanting it to look like he was shot in the back, he switched shirts, taking off the one the dead man had and substituting another that was too large? He was probably planning on shooting the dead man again, and then the victim started to sit up, and he shot him... killed him... although he would have died from the first shot."

"Then he put the man's coat on him and dropped the body where it would look like he was killed in a drunken fight."

Doc nodded. "That sounds right, Bord. This was deliberate, cold-blooded murder, the way I see it."

"I reckon so . . . I reckon so."

"What're you going to do, Bord?"

Chantry shrugged. "Doc, a killin' when both men are armed and responsible is one thing. Outright murder's another. I'm never going to quit until we get this man in jail."

"Bord, think of what you're facing. We've only a few hundred people in town, but there's over a hundred miners and prospectors around, and probably fifty or sixty cowboys and drifters. Why, the man who did this is long gone."

"No," Borden Chantry spoke slowly. "I don't think so, Doc. No drifter would have bothered to cover it up like this. He'd just have run. He'd have got him a horse and pulled his stakes."

"This here is murder, all right, an' I'm bettin' the man who done it is still around!"

"Then be careful, Bord. Be very careful. When the murderer realizes you suspect somebody local, your number's up. He'll be running scared, Bord, and his only way out will be to kill you!"