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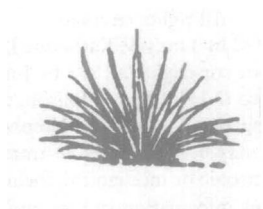
LOUIS L'AMOUR

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



MONUMENT ROCK

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LOUIS L'AMOUR



BANTAM BOOKS

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MONUMENT ROCK

A Bantam Book

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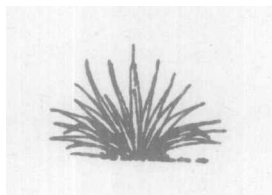
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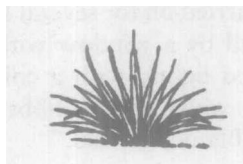
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A MAN NAMED UTAH



The small glow of the lamp over the hotel register, shaded as it was, threw his cheekbones into high relief and left his eyes hollows of darkness. The night clerk saw only a big man, in dusty range clothes, who signed his name in the slow, cramped manner of a man unaccustomed to the pen. Hibbs handed him his key and the man turned and started up the steps.

As he climbed, the light traveled down over his lean hips and picked out the dull luster of walnut-stocked guns, then slid down to worn boots and California-style spurs. When the heels vanished, Hibbs waited no longer but turned the register and peered at the name. Without another instant of delay he came from behind the counter, cast one quick glance up the stairs, and hustled out the door.

The quick, upward glance did not penetrate the darkness. Had it done so, he would have seen the stranger

standing in the shadows at the head of the steps, watching him. When Hibbs hurried across the dark street, the rider was at his window, looking down. The clerk disappeared into an alley.

It was a small thing, but the rider knew the wheels had begun to turn. Already they knew of his presence, and already he had gathered his first fragment of a fact. Somebody was almighty interested in his arrival, and that somebody had a working deal with the hotel clerk. Not much to know, but a beginning.

The clerk had hurried on for several hundred feet then turned and stopped by a window with three inches of opening. He tapped lightly with a coin, and at a cautious response, he whispered, "Hibbs, here. Gent just registered as Utah Blaine, El Paso."

"All right."

Disappointed at the lack of reaction, Hibbs waited for something else to be said; then, when it did not come, he added, "He looks salty."

"All right."

Hibbs walked slowly back to the hotel. His round, rather querulous face sagged with vague disappointment.

The man behind the darkened window rolled on his side and picked up a carefully prepared cigarette that lay on the table by the bed. When it was lit he lay back, his head on the bunched-up pillow. Against the vague light of the window, the cigarette glowed and he stared up into darkness.

How much longer dared he continue? The pickings were rich, but he was feeling the uneasiness that preceded danger. He had a bag full, no doubt about that. Maybe it was time to pull his stakes.

He knew nothing of Blaine, yet that the man had been asked here was evidence that someone believed he was the man for the job.

Jack Storey had been tough and fast . . . a drunken miner named Peterson had been egged into shooting him in the back. Three other marshals had preceded him and they were buried in a neat row on the hill. The man on the bed inhaled deeply and knew he had managed well up to now, but his luck was sure to run out.

He had the gold taken from miners, gamblers, and casual travelers and only Hibbs knew who he was, only he knew the murders and robberies had been engineered by one man. And the clerk could be removed.

So he would quit at last. This was what he had planned when he first came west, to work at a quiet job and amass a fortune by robbery and murder—then he would quit, go east, and live a quiet, ordered life from then on.

From the beginning he had known there was a limit. So far he was unsuspected. He was liked by many. His whole plan had depended on the crimes seeming to be unrelated so they would be considered casual crimes rather than a series planned and carried out by either one man or a gang.

Yet it would be foolish to continue. Three marshals . . . it was too many. Not too many lives, just too many chances. Too many risks of discovery. No matter how shrewd this new man might be, or how dumb, it was time to quit. He would not pull even one more job. He was through. Putting out the stub of his cigarette, he turned over and quietly went to sleep.

A solid-looking man in a black suit and boots was sitting on the creek bank when Utah Blaine rode up. The new

marshal's sun-darkened face had a shy grin that livened his features. "Hi, Tom! Mighty good to see you."

"Sure is!" The older man gripped his hand. "Long time since the old days on the Neuces."

Blaine started to build a smoke. "So, what're you gettin' me into?"

Tom Church dug at the sand with a stick. "I don't really know. Maybe I'm crazy in the head. We've had fourteen murders this past year, an' it worries me some. This here town was started by my dad, an' he set store by it. We've always had the usual cowpuncher shootin's an' the like of that, but something's different. No other year since we started did we have more'n three or four."

He talked quietly and to the point while Blaine smoked. Nobody in town showed an unusual prosperity. No toughs were hanging around town that couldn't be accounted for. Nobody left town suddenly. Nobody hinted at secrets. The murdered man was always alone, although in two cases he had been left alone only a matter of minutes. All the murdered men had been carrying large sums of money.

A half-dozen men carrying smaller amounts had left town unhindered; only two of the fourteen had made killings at gambling. Others had worked claims, sold herds of cattle or horses. All fourteen had been killed silently, with knife, noose, or club. Which argued a killer who wanted no attention. "This town means a lot to us. My boys are growin' up here, an' two of the men killed were good friends of mine. I think there's a well-organized gang behind it."

"Got a hunch you're wrong, Tom."

"You think there's no connection?"

"I think they tie up, but I don't think it's a gang. I think it is just one man."

"How's that?"

"Look at it. Nobody has flashed any money and nobody has talked while drunk. That's unusual for a gang. You know there's always one wheel that won't mesh. I'll get to work on it."

Tom Church got up and brushed off his pants. "All right, but be careful. We've lost three marshals in the last ten months."

It was to Utah Blaine's advantage that he did not make a big show of looking for information. He did not throw his weight around. He let people know that he thought the marshal's job was mighty easy if people would just let him be. And while he sat around, he listened.

Hibbs at the hotel might be the key. Hibbs had rushed word of his coming to someone, and Blaine had seen the street he went into. For the first four days Utah Blaine strolled about, rode into the hills, talked little, and listened a lot. He heard a good deal of gossip about conditions of the claims, who was making it and who wasn't. There was talk about cattle and cattle prices. Most of this talk took place on the worn bench outside the barbershop.

It was late on the fourth night that he received his first test as marshal.

Blaine was at a table in a back corner of the saloon when a wide-shouldered young man with red hair smashed through the swinging doors and glared around him. Obviously, he had been drinking, just as obviously, he was not so drunk that his speech was slurred or his reactions slow. "Where's that two-bit marshal?" he demanded.

"Over here. What's on your mind?"

The casual tone upset Red Williams, who was trouble-hunting. Nevertheless, he took three quick steps toward

Blaine, and Utah did not move. "You're the marshal? Well, I hear we got to check our guns! You figurin' to take mine away from me? If you do, get started!"

Blaine chuckled. "Red," he said conversationally, "don't you get enough trouble wrestlin' steers? Why don't you fork your bronc and head on for home?"

Red Williams was disturbed. It was not going as expected. Instead of being a hard-eyed marshal who immediately started for him, this man talked like another cowhand. "You tellin' me to get out of town?" he demanded.

"Just advisin'," Utah replied casually. "If you figure to do a day's work tomorrow, you better sleep it off." He pushed his hat back on his head. "I call to mind one time when I rode for Shanghai Pierce. We was—"

"You rode for *Shanghai*?" Red's truculence was forgotten.

"Took a herd over the trail for him in 'sixty-seven," Utah said. "The next year I took one up the trail for Slaughter."

Red Williams swallowed hard, his stomach sick with sudden realization. "You . . . you're *that* Blaine? The one who stopped the herd cuttin' north of Doan's Store?"

"Yeah," Blaine replied quietly. "That was later."

"Wow!" Red backed up, suddenly grinning. "Mister, if that's who you are, this town is off-limits for my kind of trouble!"

Squaw Creek was impressed but not convinced. Twice Blaine quietly talked his way out of trouble that with any other marshal would have meant shooting. Days passed with no gunfights, no brawls, and surprisingly, no robberies and murders.

Once, sitting on the bench in front of the barbershop,

he was asked about the killings of Van Hewit and Ned Harris, the two last murders before he took the job of marshal. He shrugged and replied, "I'll handle the crime that comes my way, but I say let the dead past keep its dead."

Before the saloons opened, the benches in front of the barbershop were the usual loafing place. It was there he stopped to gather what facts he could. "Nice idea," he commented. "Gives a man a place to sit and talk."

"Pickard's idea," they told him. "Built 'em for his customers to wait on."

Pickard was a man of medium height, smooth-faced but for a flowing mustache. Square-jawed and square-bodied, he was a friendly man, skillful at his trade, and a good listener. "Mighty fine barber," Tom Church said, "I'll be sorry when he goes."

"He's leavin'?" Blaine asked.

"Brother died, back in Illinois. Got to go back and manage the property."

It was their second meeting since Blaine's arrival, and Church was visibly disturbed. "The rest of the city council, the men who pay your salary, Utah, they're complaining. You've kept it quiet, or it's been quiet, but you've found no killer. I promised that you would."

"You don't catch a killer right away any more than you take a herd to Montana by wishin' it there."

He knew more than he was telling Tom Church. Things were beginning to add up. All the killings had been within five miles of town. All but two had taken place at night or early in the morning. The two had occurred at midday. Five men lived on that street into which Hibbs had gone on the night of his arrival. Childress, Hunt, Newcomb, Jones . . . and Tom Church.

Actually, it was a one-sided street. The houses faced south, which had them looking across the street at the

cottonwoods that line Squaw Creek. Behind those cottonwoods were the back doors of the business buildings on Main Street. The saloon, barbershop, marshal's office, harness shop, and general store backed up to the trees.

Hibbs lived in the hotel and did not drink. He was an odd personality, not talkative, and yet he had a habit of always being around when a conversation developed. Unobtrusively, Utah Blaine watched him and waited, knowing his time would come.

Hibbs was never found near the barbershop. For a man so interested in gossip, this was interesting if not odd. Hibbs went to the barbershop only when he needed a haircut.

From the beginning Blaine had known that Hibbs was his key to the situation, yet while watching Hibbs, he had listened and studied the town, and one by one he eliminated the possibilities. The more men he eliminated, the more certain he became of the killer's cunning. He had left no loose ends.

Utah Blaine had learned, long since, how to apply simple logic to a problem. Men were creatures of habit. Therefore he must observe the habits of the possible suspects and watch for any deviation from the usual.

Opportunity was a consideration. Not more than a half-dozen men in town would have been free to move at the hours of the two midday crimes. Childress could not leave his store at the noon hour, and had a wife who insisted upon his being on time for supper. Hunt was a man who habitually drank his supper at the saloon, a convivial soul whose absence would have been noted and commented upon. So it was with most of the others, yet Pickard was a bachelor. He had means of learning, through the talk around the shop, of who had made strikes and who did not, and he could be safely absent at the hours of crimes. Moreover, the cottonwood-cloaked

creek bed back of the shop offered an easy means of leaving and returning to town unobserved. All of these were logical reasons for suspicion, but none of it was proof.

On the morning of his tenth day in town, Utah went to the barbershop for a shave. Pickard had gentle hands and he worked carefully and swiftly. He was shaving Utah's throat when Utah said, from under Pickard's left hand, "Goin' to be a break soon. I've got a lead on the man who's been doin' the killing around here."

For only a second the razor stopped moving, and then it continued more slowly. "I thought," Pickard said, "it was the work of casual drifters, or maybe a gang."

"No," Blaine said decidedly, "it's been one man. One mighty shrewd man. He's done it all, and he's been smart enough to protect himself. But every man has to have help, an' I've got a lead on that."

Pickard started to strop his razor, and then the door opened, and closed. "How are you, Mr. Church? Blaine tells me he has a lead on those murders we used to have before he came."

"That right, Utah?"

The razor smoothed a patch on his chin. "Yeah. Fact is, I've had a lead ever since I came to town. From the very hour I got in, you might say."

Pickard finished his job and dusted Blaine's face with powder. Utah sat up in the chair and felt his face. "You sure do give a fine shave, Pickard. . . . Close," he said, looking at the barber, "but not too close."

When they had gone, Blaine and Church walking together, Pickard stared after them. A lead since the very moment . . . he might have seen Hibbs!

Yet, what could he have seen? And suppose he had seen Hibbs come to him? It would prove nothing, and Hibbs could not talk. He would not dare to talk. So

there was nothing to worry about. Nevertheless, he did worry.

He had not been fooled by Blaine. The tall gunfighter was too friendly, too casual. His manner did not go with his cold, watchful eyes and the strong-boned face. Alone in the apartment back of his shop, Pickard paced the floor and thought.

It was time to go, but he must be careful. Suppose Blaine was only waiting for him to uncover his loot and so be caught with the goods? Or suppose he frightened Hibbs in some way and forced him to talk? The more he considered, the more he worried. He had been a fool to wait so long. He could have gone long ago. Why, he had over sixty thousand dollars!

Slowly, he went over the problem again. Hibbs might talk, of course, but he had already made plans for Hibbs and it was time he put them into operation. Pickard was a coolheaded man and utterly cold-blooded. He had long known that before he left, Hibbs must die. Aside from the knowledge of Hibbs's past, the one thing he knew was that Hibbs would wait for him to recover the hidden loot, and then Hibbs would try to murder him for it. Pickard knew that idea lay in Hibbs's mind as if he himself had written it there. And to an extent, he had.

If Hibbs betrayed him, he'd never get a chance at the money. It also allowed him the chance to trap Hibbs. So now to prepare that trap, he had to lead Hibbs out of town into the hills, and then kill him.

Blaine had formed the habit of riding out of town at least once each day. He varied the times of these rides so as to allow for no easy planning of future crimes or observation of his moves.

First, he rode to the scenes of the crimes and studied

the terrain and approaches. There were, of course, no tracks. There had been rain and wind since, but they were not what he was searching for. Nor was he looking for any clue that might have been dropped. He was trying to imagine how the killer would have concealed his loot, for he would not have dared to risk being seen carrying it back into town.

The other rides were short, and they ended in a small clump of juniper atop a ridge outside of Squaw Creek. There, with a pair of field glasses, Utah Blaine watched the town.

The break came suddenly. On one bright and sunny Sunday morning he saw Hibbs come from the hotel and walk across the street. Going down the alley between the buildings, Hibbs turned suddenly into the old, abandoned store building on his right. Not two minutes later he stepped out, only now he had a rifle and a canteen.

Utah Blaine settled himself firmly and watched with care. Hibbs went down into an arroyo and out of town, working his way up the hill right toward Blaine's position! Just when he was sure he must move or be seen, Hibbs stopped and, settling down, began to wait.

Almost an hour passed and then Pickard came from the back door of the barbershop and slid down into the creek bed. Watching, Blaine saw the man working his way downstream, then saw him come out among some boulders. Hibbs got up and began to work his way along the flank of the mountain, keeping Pickard in view. Keeping higher and staying among the junipers, Blaine kept pace with Hibbs. Then the junipers grew more sparse and scattered out. Reluctantly, Blaine swung over the crest and kept the ridge between himself and the two men. From time to time he climbed higher and let his eyes seek out the clerk, then suddenly the man was gone.

Blaine swore bitterly. To cross the ridge within view of

either Hibbs or Pickard would ruin the whole plan, and his only chance lay in riding ahead to intercept their trail as it left the ridge, which ended a few miles farther along. So swinging his horse, he rode down into the wash and followed it out until the ridge ended. It was only then that he realized how that ridge had betrayed him.

Some distance back the ridge divided into a rough Y, and he had been following the southernmost of the two arms, while Hibbs had obviously followed along the northern. It was at least two miles across the bottom to the other ridge and it was very hot now, and close to noon.

Before crossing the gap, he studied it with care, but there was no sign of either man. He crossed as quickly as he could, then climbed the far ridge and, taking a chance, mounted the crest. As far as the eye could reach, there was no living thing.

Irritated, he rode down the far side, scouting for tracks. He found none. The two men, and both on foot, had lost him completely. How long since he had lost Hibbs? He checked the sun and his memory. It must have been almost an hour, as best he could figure. Turning back, he rode toward town. He had gone no more than two hundred yards when he drew up sharply.

Before him on the trail lay the sprawled figure of a man, half-covered with the rocky debris of a landslide. Blaine dropped from his horse. It was Hibbs, and he was quite dead. Climbing the hillside, Blaine found scuff marks in the dirt where someone, almost certainly Pickard, had sat, bracing himself while he forced a large boulder from its socket of earth with his heels.

Pickard must have known Hibbs would follow, or had seen him, and had pushed down these boulders, probably coming by later to make sure there was no doubt. Yet allowing for the time it took Hibbs to get to

this point on foot, it could have been no more than twenty to thirty minutes ago that he had been killed!

If he rode swiftly now, he might overtake Pickard before he could get back to Squaw Creek!

Yet his ride was in vain. All was quiet when he rode into town and stabled his horse. Pickard was quietly shaving Tom Church and had the job half-done. He glanced up at Blaine and nodded. "Hot day for riding, I guess," he said conversationally. "You can have it. I'd rather stay in my barbershop."

Baffled and irritated, Utah did not trust himself to speak. There was no way the man could have gotten back here that fast. It must be someone else whom he had seen, it must— He stopped. Suppose Pickard had a horse waiting for him out there on the ridge somewhere? And had raced back, changed shirts quickly, and returned to his work as he did each day? But where was the horse? And where had he been concealed?

Utah Blaine dropped in at the saloon for a drink and the first man he saw was Red Williams. The latter grinned, "Howdy, Marshal! No hard feelin's?"

Blaine chuckled. "Why should there be? What are you doin' in town in the middle of the week?"

"Come in after some horses. The boss keeps a half-dozen head of good saddle stock down at his creek barn in case any of the boys need a change of horse."

"Creek barn? Where's that?"

"Just outside of town a ways. We got two outfits, one west of town, an' the other seventeen miles northeast. We switch horses at the creek barn every now and again. It's a line shack right out of town."

"You taking all the horses?"

"Nope. Just four head. We're mighty short of saddle