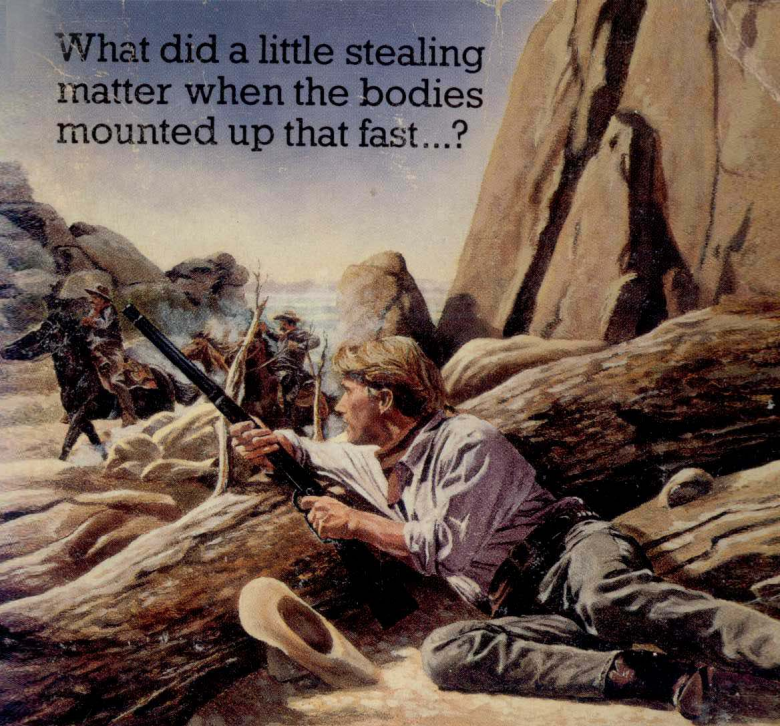


What did a little stealing
matter when the bodies
mounted up that fast...?



THE OUTLAWS

A BLUESTAR Western

ARTHUR MOORE

Author of **THE HUNTERS**

FAWCETT
GOLD MEDAL

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THE OUTLAWS

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Arthur Moore

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Chapter One

THE U.S. government's disburser in Kansas City was on vacation. It was the beginning of spring and his assistant, Daniel Evans, was in charge of the office. Evans was a small, dark man with an eternally crabbed expression. It was said of him that he had never been known to smile. His wife said to her close friends that he had not even smiled on his honeymoon. He was also a pinchpenny.

When the allotment for the Indian reservation, Santa Cruz, came across his desk, Evans was aghast. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars was to be delivered to the Indian agent there. The voucher was properly made out and signed. He could find no fault with it.

The money was to be delivered in cash.

Evans brooded about it all day and told his wife at supper that night. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash! The crazy fools in Washington were throwing our tax money away!

His wife, named Nattie, seldom agreed with anything he said or did. But after seven years of marriage and a thousand spats, she kept that knowledge from him. She made the best of her situation and put a little aside when she was able, out of the household fund.

It was a week after Evans had mentioned the reservation allotment that Nattie's brother, Marty Nevers, stopped by the

house as he was passing through Kansas City. Marty was older and the black sheep of the family. It was said that Marty ran with Matt Moody, the notorious outlaw.

Marty looked very fine, respectable even, dressed in new store clothes with a gold watch chain across his middle. He and Nattie sat down for coffee in the parlor.

As a matter of course they discussed the family, though Marty was not much interested in the topic. But when she mentioned the reservation money, his eyes lighted up. She knew very little about it, however. It would be in cash, according to her husband, and would be sent from the federal building to the train, then transferred to a stage and taken to the reservation.

Marty made a joke about it, told her he was on his way east, asked her not to tell Evans he had stopped by . . . and went to the door.

She said, "I don't tell him ever'thing I know."

He kissed her cheek and left.

The shipment to the Indian agent, Mr. Harbourg, was well marked with big black letters. The greenbacks were packed into a stout wooden box painted dark blue. The box had four iron straps around it and was fastened with a heavy padlock. The markings read: PROPERTY OF THE U.S. GOV'T. CON-SIGNED TO SANTA CRUZ RES.

It was very heavy.

Marty Nevers sat in a window across the street from the federal building. He watched with binoculars as a green express wagon drew up to the side door and several men carried out boxes and stowed them in the panel wagon. He easily spotted the iron-bound box marked "Santa Cruz."

He followed the wagon to the train depot and was able to get very close. He made certain the blue box was put into the train baggage car. Then he sent a wire to Matt Moody in Hayestown and boarded the same train west.

It took the train two days to arrive at the little whistle-stop named Wilkins. Matt and three others were there: Clell, T.R., and Lem Bowman. They lounged on the platform and

watched as the box and other goods were loaded into a stage-coach boot which was surrounded by five heavily armed uniformed guards.

Matt asked Marty, "How much is in the box?"

"One hundred and fifty thousand in cash."

Matt whistled softly.

Marty, still in respectable store clothes, bought a ticket and boarded the stagecoach with several others, ostensibly bound for Durham in the south. When the stage moved out, it was followed closely by the five guards.

And followed at a distance by Matt and the gang.

It was a dreary journey, south and west; the stage moved steadily all day long with short stops every hour or two, and a longer stop at a way station.

Near nightfall the stage rolled into Elland, a small burg built up around the stage station. The passengers were informed they would spend the night in one of the tiny rooms provided. The stage would then go on, scheduled to reach Elk Hill the next night.

There was a short bar built into the restaurant wall, and after supper Marty had a drink, one foot on the rail. He asked the bartender, "Isn't there an Indian reservation somewhere near here?"

He looked surprised. "You want to go there?"

"Hell, no. I was just curious. But the stage don't stop there?"

"Naw. The stage goes on south. The reservation is west from here."

Marty nodded, looked at his watch, and finished his drink. He wandered out into the cool night. That meant the money box would be loaded onto another wagon to go to the reservation. He lit a cigar and walked out to the road. It was time to meet Matt. He waited only a short time till the other showed up, grinning at him in the night.

Marty said, "I better come with you tonight, Matt." He repeated what the barman had told him.

"All right. You got any luggage back there?"

"Nothing I want."

Matt said, "They going to ask questions in the morning when you don't show up."

"That's a hell of a shame," Marty said and got up on the horse behind Matt.

The four others in the gang had made camp in a valley a mile east of the station. They welcomed Marty and gave him coffee while he told them what he knew.

"The stage will go on south, but they got to load the agent's box onto a buckboard, prob'ly, and take it west to the reservation."

"We'll be watchin'," Clell said.

"There's five guards."

"Five or forty," Matt said. "We ambush the wagon and too bad if they git in the way. The best time is before they get settled. As soon's they turn off the stage road, we hit 'em hard. Shoot the horses and stop 'em right there. What you say, Marty?"

"That's good. They won't have time t'think."

Lem said, "They'll prob'ly go damn early. . . ."

"So we'll git there earlier."

It went exactly as planned in the morning. There was a shallow arroyo close to the turnoff road. They corralled the horses a short distance away and slid into the arroyo with rifles before first light.

When the reservation buckboard arrived from the station with the five horsemen, Clell and Lem Bowman shot the team mules, and the wagon bumped to a halt. A fusillade knocked three men from the saddles—but two galloped away over the plain.

The gunmen unhooked the dead mules, pulled the wagon away, and backed two horses into the shafts. Marty mounted the third horse, and the gang went south with the wagon and the blue treasure box.

"Hell, there wasn't nothing to it," Matt said, and Marty grinned back.

Chapter Two

JOHN Fleming, Chief of Security Operations, West, met Laredo and Pete Torres in Kansas City in the Chandler Hotel bar. Fleming was just coming off a two-week rest that he had spent in Kansas visiting relatives.

The room was nearly deserted at that hour, and Fleming's cigar made the air blue. He said, "You've probably read in the papers about Matt Moody . . . ?"

Laredo nodded. "It's suspected he just held up a reservation cash shipment. Is it true?"

"We think it is. It has Moody's stamp on it. He's ambushed other shipments exactly the same way."

Pete asked, "Any witnesses?"

"Two of the reservation guards got away with slight wounds, as the newspapers report. But neither of them saw anything. It happened suddenly and unexpectedly. Neither of them had time to fire a weapon."

"Too bad . . ."

"But we've talked to several witnesses who describe a man on the stagecoach who we're positive was Martin Nevers. We have a photograph of him taken in jail, and the witnesses all pointed him out."

"He was on the stagecoach that carried the money box?"

"Yes. We think Marty learned of the shipment somehow, right in this city. We've got detectives working on that angle. It may have been an inside job. Maybe he paid off someone

in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Very few knew of the shipment, of course. Those things are always kept as secret as possible."

Laredo rubbed his chin. He was a tawny-haired young giant with regular, square features. He was dressed conservatively in a dark blue suit; the coat seemed to be stretched across his shoulders, and his shirt buttons threatened to pop off. He said, "Then you think Marty Nevers followed the shipment west and somehow met up with Matt Moody and the rest of them?"

"Exactly." Fleming puffed his cigar. He was a large, paunchy man whose coat sleeves had tiny burn holes from his incessant cigar smoking. "That's what we think, yes. Of course, we have no details. But we want the money back."

Pete Torres was also a big man, maybe slightly larger than Laredo, and dressed in a pearl-gray suit. He was dark, with hair black and shiny. He was a top-of-the-class graduate, as was Laredo, of the Tanner Training Center near Springfield. They had met at the school and had been posted one, two in a class of twenty. They were now members of the elite Blue-star Unit. The Tanner Organization did work almost exclusively for the government.

Pete asked, "You want us to bring in Matt Moody?"

Fleming put down the cigar. "Let me tell you what the government feels. Everyone is fed up with Matt Moody. He has robbed too goddamn many government shipments and killed too many agents. This reservation affair is the last damn straw. We want Matt Moody dead or alive—preferably dead—and his entire gang with him. Yes, we want you to bring him in under his own power or slung over the back of a horse dead as a man can get. We don't really care which."

Pete grinned. "That's pretty clear."

"It's not for publication," Fleming warned, waving the cigar. "To the reporters, we say that Moody is a menace and we will put a stop to him and his depredations. To you, I say track him down and shoot the son of a bitch." He puffed the cigar. "I never said that."

Laredo smiled. "We get the idea. And now we want to know everything we can about him."

"He is not married. We know he sends money to his mother who lives in the little town of Peryton, and he has been seen there infrequently. She is locally famous as his mother. Moody enjoys a sort of Robin Hood reputation, strangely enough. He is anything but. However, he has apparently fostered the notion—Moody is no fool. He is about forty-three and has a slash birthmark across his left cheek that cannot be disguised easily. It stands out prominently in daylight." He opened a folder. "Here are prison pictures of him and three of the gang."

He passed them across. Moody had thick brows that met in the middle, and his expression was glowering. He wore a heavy black mustache, and the birthmark was very evident.

Laredo studied the photograph of Clell Timmins. He was a young man, maybe in his mid-twenties, dark and good-looking, with a slight smile on his smooth face.

Fleming said, "Timmins is a fancy dresser. He likes girls and spends money lavishly on them. He has no family, and he is a killer. We think he likes it."

The picture of Marty Nevers showed a square-faced man who looked to be about forty. He was dark, with a smaller mustache but no marks.

Fleming pointed to the photo. "Nevers is mean as a snake. He's also unmarried and is fast with a gun. Take no chances with him."

The photograph of Toby Rogers showed a slim young man, clean-shaven and almost baby-faced. Fleming tapped the picture. "They call him T.R., and he's quick and good with a gun. We're sure he's killed six men."

He had no picture of Lem Bowman. "He's never been in a jail that took pictures. He is married, but we don't know where his wife is. He is exceptionally good with a rifle, and they say he doesn't talk much. You can keep the pictures."

Laredo asked, "Where would we start looking for them?"

"They have two hangouts we know about, one in Hayes-town and the other in Camp Hill. Both are little burgs with

no law. We know they have gone to both to rest up and have fun between jobs. Hayestown is not far from the spot they robbed the reservation money."

"Interesting . . ."

"I'll try to find more information for you. Keep me posted where you are."

Pete asked, "How many have gone after Moody?"

"Quite a few, including some U.S. marshals. Moody spent a few years in a territorial prison when he was younger. He was arrested drunk five years ago, but his gang broke him out before he went to trial. Moody likes to drink."

They decided to go first to Hayestown and rode in at night. As Fleming had said, the town was a tiny collection of shacks, saloons, and dance halls, and not much else. It was located across the river from the large town of Ackland. Although the two towns were connected by a long wooden bridge, they were situated in different counties, and the law in Ackland turned a blind eye to the many sins of Hayestown.

Laredo and Pete joined the considerable traffic across the long bridge. Obviously the citizens of Ackland visited the pleasure palaces of Hayestown in numbers. It was the middle of the evening and the saloons were going full blast, the dance halls overflowing.

No one gave them a second glance.

However, Laredo thought it might be a mistake to ask for Matt Moody. It would certainly draw attention to them.

"Then let's ask for one of the others," Pete suggested.

They entered the largest saloon in town and found it bustling. In the back of the saloon was a stage where a band was playing and girls in tights were dancing. Laredo got the bartender's attention.

"D'you know if Clell Timmins is in town?"

The other gave him a hard look. "You know 'im?"

"He's my cousin."

The barman nodded, then looked around the room. "Be right back."

Laredo watched him beckon to one of the painted girls

and lean over the bar to talk with her. He pointed out Laredo, and she studied him, nodded, and in a moment came toward him.

"You Clell's cousin?"

"Yes. On my mother's side. Is he here?"

"He never mentioned a cousin to me. . . ."

He smiled. "Well, I never talk about him either."

She pursed her lips. "Yeh, I guess I don't know half my cousins neither." She was dressed in saloon finery, and she was well made up. She's probably older than she looks, he thought. She never looked directly at him, her eyes kept sliding off and returning. She said, "What's your name?"

"Fred Burns. What's yours?"

"Cora."

He asked, "Is Clell in town?"

"Yeh, he is. He's over at Charlie's place. You know where that is?"

"No."

"All right. I'll get Donny to show you." She turned away and paused. "You stay here, huh?"

He agreed, and she went toward the back of the saloon, disappearing in the crowd. Laredo nodded to Pete, who leaned on the bar several paces away.

Cora was back in about ten minutes with a younger man, poorly dressed, with lank brown hair, and no chin. She said, "This's Donny. He'll show you."

"Thanks."

Donny said, "Let's go thisaway." He threaded his way through the crowd to a door beside the theater stage. It led to a hall, then to a back door and steps down to the dark alley where there were half a dozen horses in a picket line and barrels of trash. Donny led the way down the alley for a short distance then climbed a low fence and halted.

"You'n Clell know each other by sight?"

"Yes, of course," Laredo said. "But I haven't seen him for a while. Has he changed any?"

"Naw. He'll never change much. Still the same slick dresser." Donny pointed. "He's in that house there. You jus'

go knock on the door." He went back across the fence and hurried away.

Laredo watched him go. When he had disappeared in the dark, Pete came across the fence. "What did he tell you?"

"He said Clell's in that house."

Pete glanced around and made a face. "This feels like a trap. You think they believed that cousin story?"

"Maybe not. I wonder if there's another door. That's a pretty small house."

"I'll go look." Pete edged around the little house and returned in a moment, shaking his head.

Laredo picked up a stick, motioned to Pete to stand aside, and stepped to the door. Reaching out, he rapped on it with the stick. Instantly there was a booming crash, and a large jagged hole appeared in the middle of the door. Someone had fired a shotgun!

In the next moment the door opened, and a man looked out, a pistol in his hand. He peered at the ground, evidently expecting to see a body. Then he glanced up, saw Laredo's shadowy figure, and fired.

Laredo fired back, and the man crumpled. He stumbled down the steps and fell sprawling as the revolver clattered away.

Laredo advanced, pistol ready, but no one came from the house. He knelt and turned the body over, moving the head so the mealy light from the house fell full on Clell Timmons's features.

Pete asked, "Is he dead?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

Pete went up the steps and slipped into the house. He was gone only a minute and came out holstering his Colt. "No one in there. It was a trap, all right. I expect they thought you were the law."

"Looks like it."

Laredo stood, poked out the brass, and reloaded. Pete went to the fence, listening. "I think they're coming this way."

They went back over the fence as men came from the

saloon, talking loudly. They had heard the shots. Laredo looked back once at the body and shook his head. A clumsy trap . . .

In the shadowy main street they mounted and rode slowly back across the rickety bridge to Ackland. There was now one less of the Moody gang.

Pete said, "That girl in the saloon—she didn't trust you."

"Maybe she knew Clell had no cousins."

"Yes, that was probably it. They're a hair-trigger bunch."

Laredo agreed. "And they'll be worse now."

Chapter Three

THE death of Clell Timmins caused no stir at all. It was effectively covered up—by someone. No notice got out to the *Ackland Weekly Dispatch*.

Laredo wired John Fleming, in code, telling him of the incident, and Fleming wired back saying it might be best to leave matters at that. It would serve no purpose to spread the death over the papers. He had no new information for them.

Pete said, "Why don't we try something different—since we need information. Why not advertise for it?"

Laredo's brows went up. "Advertise for information about Matt Moody?"

"Exactly. Offer to pay for it."

"Would anyone dare answer?"

"How do we know unless we try it?"

Laredo chuckled. "All right. Let's go talk to the people at the newspaper."

The *Ackland Weekly Dispatch* was housed on a side street, the offices in front and the composing room and presses in the back. The sign outside informed passersby that job printing was also done to order at reasonable prices.

A skinny, cigar-smoking clerk met them at a counter, and Laredo wrote out the ad: Cash for information concerning Matt Moody. Strictly confidential. No names.

The clerk read the ad and stared at them. "Are you lawmen?"

"In a way," Laredo replied. "Do you have a box number to attach to the ad?"

"Yes. But I never heard of the law advertising like this."

"It's the age of invention," Pete said.

The clerk frowned at him.

Laredo said, "When will the ad come out?"

"With the next edition, in three days." The clerk took the payment, still shaking his head.

They went out to the walk, and Pete rolled a cigarette.

"What if we get no answers?"

"Then we'll try something else. Maybe Fleming will send us something."

The newspaper came out on time, but it was several days before they received an answer. A sealed note was delivered to the box. How much did they offer for information? The note suggested they leave an answer with the local priest, Father Julian.

The Catholic church was in a run-down building off the main street in the center of town. When they called on the priest, he knew about the note. Father Julian was an older man, very gray, and almost feeble. He received them in a tiny, cluttered office.

"I regret being in the middle of this, gentlemen, but there appears to be no help for it."

Pete asked, "What can you tell us, Father?"

"Almost nothing I'm afraid, at the moment anyhow. Are you lawmen?"

"We work for the federal government. We want to bring in Matt Moody."

The priest smiled. "Every honest person wants that. He is a scourge."

They showed him their credentials, and the old man nodded. "I will endeavor to get you together with the writer of the note. Of course, he wishes to know what payment he can expect. I assure you, he is a poor man."

Laredo handed over a gold piece. "Give him this then, if you will. When will you see him?"

“Very soon. Perhaps you can return here this evening . . . ?”

They nodded, and Pete said, “We’ll be here.

The writer of the note turned out to be a man about Father Julian’s age. His name was Andrew Lara, and he was very nervous, saying he was deathly afraid of Moody and his gang.

“They are killers, all of them. . . .”

“Nothing you tell us will ever get out,” Laredo promised. “The only way Moody will know you told us is if you tell him yourself.”

“God forbid!” Lara sat down, shaking his head violently. “I never want to see any of them again!”

“Tell us how you know them,” Pete suggested.

“Yes. I have been a school teacher since my college days. My father had a retail business in Illinois with Tom Bowman. I got to know Bowman quite well, as well as his son, Lem. Lem was a peculiar boy, even then.”

“In what way?” Laredo asked.

“He liked to take chances, and he ran with a rather wild crowd. I heard my father argue with Mr. Bowman about Lem many times. After I went off to college, they broke up the partnership, and Lem apparently started with the Moody gang. A few years went by, my father died, and I started teaching, and I thought I would never see Lem again. But he showed up at my house one night with another man, needing a place to stay for a few days. The other man was Matt Moody.”

“Were they running from the law?”

“Yes. They stayed a week that time—but they paid me well. I had to take the money, to make ends meet.”

Laredo asked, “They stayed with you other times?”

“Oh yes, many times over the years. I sold the business after my father died, but I kept the house which was ideally suited to the gang; it was surrounded by an orchard and was not close to other houses. It had a barn and corrals. A dozen men could stay there, and no one would be the wiser. That was a big reason they liked it. And of course I, being a