LOUIS L'AMOUR

THE WORLD'S BESTSELLING WESTERN WRITER

TUCKER

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A BOY CAN KILL AS GOOD AS A MAN!

I went up the steps two at a time. A door was opening a crack, darkness inside.

My shoulder hit the door and smashed it open. Somebody fell to the floor with a crash.

There was a dim reflected light in the room . . . Stepping back I held my gun on the fallen man and said quietly, "Get up slowly and light a light. I can see you well enough to shoot and I've just killed one man."

TUCKER
by **Louis L'Amour**

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TUCKER
UNDER THE SWEETWATER RIM
WAR PARTY
WHERE THE LONG GRASS BLOWS

To
REX MARTINDALE,
of
Montana,
Wyoming,
and
California

CHAPTER 1

When I rode up to the buffalo wallow pa was lying there with his leg broke and his horse gone.

It was mid-afternoon of a mighty hot day and pa had been lying there three, four hours. His canteen was on his horse, so he had nothing to drink in all that time. I got down and fetched him water with my canteen.

"Thanks, boy. Looks like I played hob."

"Well," I said, "you got you a busted leg, but your jaw's in good shape. You been arguin' at me for months, now, so you just set back an' argue some more whilst I fix up your leg."

"You got to saddle and ride, boy." A body could see he was fighting pain. "Everything we own and most of what our neighbors own is in those saddlebags. You just forget about me and hunt down that horse."

If I'd been older in years instead of being just man-size I might have thought about the money first, but likely not. There was twenty thousand dollars in those saddlebags, and less than a third of it was ours. It was the sale money for a steer herd we'd driven up the trail from Texas, and folks back home was a-sweating until we got back with that money.

"We'll take care of your busted leg first," I said.

There was mighty little to do with out there on the prairie, but I broke some mesquite and trimmed it with my knife, shaping some splints for pa's leg.

We'd never been much on gettin' along together, pa an' me, and we wrangled most of the time on something or other. Here I was, seventeen and feeling uppity with

the growing strength in me and the need to make folks see me as a man. About all I could do, come to think about it, was ride a horse and shoot a gun.

Pa objected to the company I kept, and down deep inside I more'n half agreed with him, but stubborn-like, I wasn't going to be told. Pa objected to me spending time out in the gully practicing gun-slinging. He was forever telling me that no gunman he'd ever heard tell of ever had anything but a bad reputation with folks who mattered.

"Time of trouble," I objected, "a man who can handle a gun is good to have around, and on your side."

"Sure," pa would say, "but when trouble is over folks can't get shut of him fast enough."

Well, I'd always told myself I could make as big tracks as any man, but now I was faced up with it and had no idea what to do.

One thing I knew. I needed a water hole and some shade for pa. Once he was bedded down I could high-tail it after that horse. The quickest way to water might be to trail pa's horse, anyway, so I hoisted him into the saddle with some help from him, and we'd taken after pa's gelding.

That fool horse ran straightaway, then slowed to a walk. From time to time we could see where the horse stopped to look back, or to nibble on some mesquite or such. When the tracks began to edge off toward the southwest I was hopeful he was headed for water.

Pa sat up in the saddle and he didn't say aye, yes, or no. This was up to me now, and we both knew it, and he held his jaw. It had me feeling guilty and responsible all at the same time. And then an hour short of sundown we fetched up to some other tracks.

They came in from the northwest and they were shod horses. Three in the bunch ... and they'd caught pa's horse.

Half the outlaws in the country lived in that part of the territory, and the chances were that anybody riding across here was an outlaw, or kin to them. Not to say that many a man who passes for honest wouldn't help himself to twenty thousand dollars and a lost horse.

"Don't you take notions, son. You ain't about to go up against three men. Not with me in this condition."

It was shy of sundown when we came to the creek. It wasn't much. Two, three feet wide and a few inches deep, running through a sparse meadow between low-growing willows, with here and there a clump of cottonwood. When I had pa off his horse and bedded down, I unslung my canteen and filled it at the creek.

"You set quiet, pa. I'll go fetch that horse."

"Don't be a fool, Edwin. You stay here."

Pa never called me Edwin unless he was mad or upset, and it was plain to be seen now that he was a worried man. Well, I was some worried my ownself.

Pa had always taken on about what it meant to have a good name, and how a man was judged by the company he kept. Whenever he saw me strutting it around with Doc Sites, Kid Reese, and them, he would read the riot act to me.

They bragged they had rustled cows, and maybe they had. They never worked that I could see, but they always had them a few dollars, which was more than I could say, and pa kept me working morning until night.

For the first time I was beginning to understand what it might mean to have a good name. If we showed up back home without that money some folks would believe our story, but others would recall that I'd been trailing around with Doc Sites and Kid Reese, and they would talk it up. Some others would come to believe there'd been something wrong, and the first thing you knew they'd give pa a bad name as well as me.

We'd never had much. When I was born pa lived back east, but after a bad time he came west and got himself some land of his own. Fire burned him out that fall, and the following spring he put in a crop with borrowed seed, and the grasshoppers taken the crop.

He worked almighty hard, but two years of drouth followed, and we lost the place. I've heard folks talk as if anybody who didn't have money must be no-account, but they didn't know some of the hard-working folks I'd known.

We moved to Texas then and filed on a claim and worked like dogs for three years. We built a house and a

barn, and got a couple hundred head of stock. Then Comanches raided us, burned us out, and ran off the stock. They killed my Uncle Bud that time.

The herd we had just sold was the first we'd been able to put together, and once we got home with that money we'd have an edge on the future for the first time. We were headed home when pa and me had a big argument and I rode off and left him, mad as all get-out and swearing not to come back.

Only a few hours later I did turn back, and lucky I did. Pa's horse had shied at a rattler and throwed him, breaking his leg. If I hadn't quit sulking and turned back he might have died right there.

Had I been with him I could have caught up his horse and we'd have only the broke leg to worry about. As it was we stood to lose all we had, and all our friends had as well, and they'd trusted us.

Well, anyway, I taken after our horse and those men, and hadn't gone more than a mile from where I'd left pa before I smelled smoke. They had them a fire under some cottonwoods alongside that same creek where I'd left pa, and before they saw me coming I'd recognized them. It was Doc Sites, Kid Reese, and a square-shouldered man in a cowhide vest and a black hat. That had to be Bob Heseltine.

How many stories had Doc and the Kid told me about him? He was, they said, the best rider, the best shot, and the fastest man with a gun anywhere around. Bob Heseltine had held up the Garston Bank. He had killed Sheriff Baker in a gun battle. He had, they said, made two Texas Rangers back down. All they talked about was Bob Heseltine and the big things they'd do when he got back . . . and here he was.

He was a mite shorter than me but wide in the shoulders, and the hide of his face was like tanned leather. He wore his gun tied down, and a body could see he was a mighty tough man.

There was pa's horse, still saddled. The saddlebags were off and the money dumped on the blanket. They would be some disappointed when they saw me riding up to claim it.

"Howdy!" I called out, riding into camp.

Fixed on the money as they were, they jumped for their guns, ready to fight.

Kid Reese relaxed when he saw me. "It's all right, Bob. He's a friend of ours."

"I see you found pa's horse." I was mighty dry in the mouth, all of a sudden. "And our money."

Heseltine turned his head around at me, real slow. His hard blue eyes looked mean at you over high cheekbones. Doc's lips kind of thinned down, and Kid Reese taken a slow breath, just a-staring at me. Firelight flickered on their faces, on the shining flanks of their horses, and on the gold and silver coins heaped on the blanket. It flickered off their gun barrels, too.

"What d'you mean? *Your* money?" Heseltine demanded. "This here is our money."

"Hey, now!" I objected. "Look—"

"You look." Heseltine fixed me with those hard blue eyes. "I never seen you before. You come ridin' in here and lay claim to our money. You ain't about to get it. Not a lousy two-bits worth."

"They know me." I indicated Doc and the Kid. "And they know that horse. Pa bought that horse in East Texas, and has papers on him. The Kid knows that horse—he's seen me ride him often enough. And that's pa's saddle."

Nobody said anything, and suddenly I was scared. Sure, me and the Kid and Doc, we had talked big of robberies and such, but that was fool kid talk . . . or was it?

"That's his pa's horse, all right," Reese admitted.

"You shut your trap," Heseltine said.

"That money belongs to us and to the folks back home," I said. "You know that, Doc."

"Hell," Doc said, "they never did nothing for me back there."

"You could come in with us," Reese suggested. "Just like we planned it would be when Bob came back. We can start right from here, the four of us—but with money."

We had done some talking about rustling cattle and robbing stages or banks, but now they wanted to steal our money, the money pa and me and our neighbors had

sweated for. Right then I began to take a different view of things. It was one thing to talk of being bandits, but I guess I'd never really thought of it as anything but talk. Now I could see how it hurt a man to be robbed of what he'd worked hard for.

"Pa's back up the creek with his leg broke," I said, not thinking how much I was giving away to them. "I've got to get back to him with that horse and the money."

Bob Heseltine was facing me. "You may have been a friend to the boys here, but you're not taking any money away from here. Not you nor anybody else."

All three of them were facing me, all squared away to make their fight. Kid Reese was suddenly grinning like a fool. He'd always looked down on me, anyway. Doc had a rifle in his hands, and Heseltine had laid it on the line for them.

They stood ready to kill me. And these were the boys I'd been hanging out with all summer. These were the friends I'd defended to my pa.

They had me euchered. Pa, he used to tell me that when a man was holding the wrong cards it was always better not to try to buck the game. It was better to throw in your cards and wait for another deal.

Only thing I was wondering now was, would they let me get out of here?

"You won't be needin' pa's horse," I said.

I caught up the reins and rode out of there, but it was all seeming unreal to me. I was expecting any minute to get a bullet in the back. It was Heseltine who worried me. Then I heard Reese say, "You ain't goin' to let him ride off? He'll have the law on us."

"For what? For finding money?" But I kept on going.

Riding back to where pa lay, I kept telling myself that if it hadn't been for pa I'd have shot it out with them, but way down deep I wasn't so sure.

Pa was setting up, his back against a tree. He looked mighty relieved when I rode in, but his face was gray and drawn. He was surely in pain. So I built us a fire and made coffee whilst I told him about it.

"Son, we've got to get our money. Folks trusted us with their stock, an' we given our word."

So I explained about Bob Heseltine, who was maybe as tough as Wild Bill Hickok.

"Who says so, boy? Those two-by-twice hitch-rack outlaws? Neither Sites nor Reese would know a tough man if they saw one."

"I saw him. He sizes up mighty mean."

Pa looked at me out of those level gray eyes of his. Old eyes, I suddenly realized. I'd never thought of pa as old, but he was. I'd been a son born to his later years.

"How tough are you, boy?" he asked now.

"Me?" I was startled. I'd never thought of myself as really tough. Well, I take that back. Time to time down in the gully where I'd practiced with a six-shooter I had told myself what I'd do if faced with trouble ... only this here was no daydream. "Why, I don't know. I guess a man has to find out."

What surprised me more than anything was pa suggesting I might be tough. He'd always played that down.

"You're right, son. You never know how tough a man is until you've tried him. Edwin, you he'p me up on that horse. We're a-goin' back."

"You got you a broke leg."

"My trigger finger ain't broke." Pa, he looked at me. "Edwin, you and me worked side by side doing the work of five or six men to put that herd together. We taken it up the trail short-handed. We held it together against Indians, hailstorms, and stampede. We taken it over land and through water and we ate dust and went through hell to do it.

"Now those three are takin' it from us, three men who were never good for anything, nor did an honest day's work in their lives. If a man won't fight for what is rightly his, if he won't fight for what he believes, then he ain't much account. We're goin' back up there, you and me, and if it's fight they want they've bought themselves a packet."

Well, I just looked at him. I'd never seen pa like that, nor believed he had it in him. I'd seen him fight Indians from inside a house, but I'd never seen him r'ar up all teeth an' talon like this.

All of a sudden I was wondering how I'd measure up

when the showdown came . . . and to think I'd been low-rating pa all this time.

They were gone. There was a thin smoke from a dying fire, and some trampled sod, but they had taken out.

"Scared," pa said, contempt in his tone, "scared of a boy and a man with a broke leg. We got to catch them."

"Look, pa, you're in no shape to ride. We can go home and—"

"Boy, what're you talkin' about? It's a week's ride to the ranch, three days to the nearest folks we know. If they get that much start we'll never catch them."

They did not sleep that night, I was sure, and neither did we. The moon was high and white, the cap-rock prairies like a floor covered with thin grass. The tracks were there, the only marks across that grass where nothing had walked since the buffalo passed.

Pa sat straight in his saddle. He neither whimpered nor groaned. When we watered in a coulee with day a-coming I thought I'd never seen a man so drawn and tight, yet all the night long he had followed a trail that was scarcely more than a shadow on the grass.

There in that coulee I helped pa down and covered him with a blanket. He slept some, so I unsaddled the horses and let them roll in the dust, then picketed them out. I lay down, just to relax a mite, and when I opened my eyes the sun was over the horizon in the east.

Pa floundered into a sitting position and I scouted buffalo chips to make a fire. Careful to make no smoke, for this was Comanche country, I made coffee and sliced bacon into a skillet.

"We got to find a place," I said. "You surely need rest."

"I spent more years in the saddle than on my back, son, and if I die it'll be in the saddle."

When I helped him into the saddle again I accidentally bumped his leg and he winced, his face went white, and sweat started from his forehead. Ashamed of my clumsiness, I climbed aboard the hammer-headed roan I was riding.

That horse was not one a man would choose

a-purpose. He was raw-boned and no-account-looking and he had a devil in his eye, but he could go all night and the next morning, then give him a few mouthfuls of antelope bush or bunchgrass and a hatful of water, and he'd be off and going again.

All the time I kept thinking what would happen when we fetched up to Heseltine and them. There was nothing behind me that made me fit to buck the likes of them. I said as much.

"You can be as tough as you're of a mind to be, son. I've watched you, boy. I've watched you work and seen you ride the rough string, and you've got all any man has got. I've seen you handle that gun, too, and you're good, boy, mighty good. I know nothing about Heseltine, but there's nothing in Sites or Reese that need worry you."

Pa had never said a word of praise to me that I could recall. Nor had I any idea he'd seen me practicing with a gun. But he had to be wrong. I'd never fought with any man, with either knuckle or gun.

Heseltine was a hard man. I won't deny the clothes he wore added to it. There was a swagger about him. My clothes were nothing. I'd never owned a store-bought suit. I had a shirt my shoulders were beginning to split, and I'd outgrown my jeans two summers ago. My boots were down-at-heel.

The wind was raw and cold on the high plains. Hunching our shoulders, we pushed against it, riding a land that offered us nothing but prairie and sky.

We had only their tracks to guide us, and the anger that grew more terrible as the hours drew on. Pa sat up in his saddle and made no sound. His cheeks hollowed down and his eyes sank back into his skull, but the light in them scared me. If I was Bob Heseltine I'd be a worried man.

"You've got the makin's, Edwin," he said suddenly. "You'll make big tracks on the land. There was a Texas Ranger once who said there was no stoppin' a man who knew he was in the right and kept a-comin'."

Big tracks on the land. They were words he used of few men, only such as Jim Bowie, Sam Houston, Goodnight, and Slaughter.

Pa began to speak of them, telling me stories of the Goodnight-Loving Trail, of mountain men, trail drivers, and Texas Rangers. Of ancestors of ours who fought with the Green Mountain Boys, of Decatur and Andy Jackson, and all sorts of people and things I'd never guessed he knew of. Alongside of some of those men, Bob Heseltine didn't sound like much; all the stories I'd heard of him began to sound like a man hollering into an empty rain barrel—the sound coming back, but nothing there.

Cold, spitting rain began to fall, the tracks grew faint. From time to time we'd find a hoof-print, the stub of a cigarette, or some small thing to mark their passing.

Pa's leg looked awful. It was swollen around the splint, but he wouldn't let me touch it. He'd taken his knife and slit his pants-leg to ease the pressure, and toward nightfall he asked me to split his boot. His gasp of relief when I done it told me how awful the pain had been before.

When I got back into the saddle it came over me all of a sudden that pa wasn't going to make it.

I knew then that he knew it, too. He was just hanging on, hoping we'd come up with them whilst he could stand beside me at the showdown. He would get back the money he'd been trusted with, and he could leave me fixed for the future.

That was it. I knew what he was thinking, and why. He was thinking of the two things that meant most to him. His given word, and me.

Was I worth it? Was I really worth all that? Was I worth any part of the hard work and suffering pa had gone through?

Was I?

CHAPTER 2

A moment there I sat very still . . . what *would* I do?

There had always been pa. Somehow I'd never had to worry because he was always there, telling me what to do. Time to time he got my dander up and I'd growl around for a few days, or I'd ride off to town to talk to Doc or the Kid, but when I got around to riding home, pa was always there.

Come to think of it, he had never held it up to me.

Inside me there was a horrible, sinking feeling. Without pa, what was there? I'd be alone.

So far as I knew, I had no kinfolk anywheres at all, and the friends I had were pa's friends.

"Your ma," he said suddenly, "was a fine woman. I wish you could have knowed her. Educated, too. She came of good folks, and she had book learnin'.

"Her family was New England Irish . . . lace-curtain Irish. Time was I mentioned her family name to an Irishman and he says hers was an old family, born of the old chiefs of Ireland going back to before the Danes came."

Ma died when I was three and I remembered her only as somebody warm and wonderful who held me close and made much of me when I was hurt or feeling bad. She'd been a pretty woman. Pa said it, and that much I remembered. She died of a fever on Cache Creek when we was traveling to Texas.

It was sundown when we saw the fire, and it was far off. The country was no longer level, but broken into ravines, some of them choked with brush.