

The Hangin' at Golgotha

by

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No one knew for sure where the town of Golgotha got its name. Some said it was from the huge longhorn skull that was found by the water hole that the community was built around. It still hung, with its eight foot spread, over the door of the rough-sawn cedar building that housed the town hall, the Sheriff's office, and the jail. Others thought it was from the bitter taste of the water, which took a mite of getting used to. Anyone unacquainted with the local theories probably assumed that it was just that Golgotha seemed to be the most God-forsaken place in Arizona.

Actually, Golgotha didn't seem at all bad to the residents. It had the only reliable water hole for nearly a day's ride in any direction. The north-south and east-west trails through the desert crossed here. Cattlemen, miners, prospectors, freighters, gamblers, gunfighters, and outlaws came and went. The town boasted two hotels, a livery station, several saloons, a general store, a dry-goods store, a bank, and a bawdy house.

No one would have been too surprised about the hold-up if it hadn't been for the extraordinary details that were being embellished with each retelling. It seems that a soft-spoken young stranger had waited quietly for his turn at the teller's window. He politely urged several people go ahead of him, so he was the only customer left in the bank when his turn at the window came. As he approached the window, he pulled the kerchief that he wore around his neck up over the lower half of his face, drew his gun, and forced the teller into the banker's office.

When the banker had opened the safe at gunpoint, he directed the teller to put exactly ten-thousand dollars in a leather sack he supplied himself. After making her count the money out to him as if it were a business transaction, the robber ordered the banker to tie her to a chair. He checked the bonds to make sure they were secure before turning to face the banker. Standing face to face with the man, he suddenly bared his face and shot him point blank in the abdomen.

Leaving the banker to die the miserable death of the gut-shot, the murderer walked calmly out the front door and disappeared down the trail west of town. A posse was organized within half an hour, but the fleeing gunman was mounted on such a powerful animal that nothing but well-shod tracks was ever found.

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Six-hundred miles northwest of Golgotha, a young rancher's wife prayed alone in the night. Everything was dry and dusty. Whatever cattle had survived the drought were too weak to survive a drive to the rail yards for shipping. There wouldn't even be a drive until next year. The bank had already cut off the ranch's credit, and served notice of foreclosure if the loan was not paid on time.

"Lord," she prayed, "We need ten-thousand dollars by the end of the week, or we're finished here. Please, Lord! Chris is a good husband, even if he's not a Christian. Help him to find the money somewhere."

Chris arrived home late the next afternoon, tired and dusty from so many hours on horseback. "Did you get any money?" his wife asked, kissing him as he came through the door.

"Yep, Debbie," he replied. "Got enough to pay the whole thing."

"Where'd you borrow it?" she asked excitedly.

"Didn't have to borrow it," Chris answered cheerfully. "Ran across someone who had borrowed ten-thousand dollars from my Dad just before he died. Since I was the only heir, he paid me on the spot."

"Who would have owed your Dad that much?" Debbie asked curiously. "I never knew he had loaned anything to anyone."

"It's a long story, Deb," he answered evasively. "He had a big ranch, and sometimes dealt in fairly large sums of money."

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Ten years had come and gone. The ranch had recovered well. Chris had made yearly cattle drives, each with nearly twice the profits of the last one. They had bought out two neighboring outfits, and now hired more than twenty cow hands. Besides that, a two-year old son was in the little bedroom next to theirs. But Chris had become more and more morose as the years dragged by. He didn't enjoy Debbie the way he used to, or the baby the way he knew he should. He was miserable!

It was on the ninth cattle drive that Chris hired Tom. He was a soft spoken man with a quick smile and a keen sense of humor that kept the other cowhands in stitches around the campfire. But when the conversation turned raunchy, Tom always found something elsewhere that needed doing.

Chris himself had gotten disgusted with the crudeness of the fireside chatter one evening. Rising from the boulder he had been sitting on, he sauntered over to the remuda to check his horse's hooves. From there, he saw Tom sitting on the weathered trunk of fallen tree beside the creek, and walked aimlessly over to join him.

"What'cha doin', Tom?" he asked jauntily.

Then, noticing that the man's eyes were damp with tears, he apologized.

"Sorry, Tom," he said awkwardly. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Naw," Tom answered softly. "Sometimes when the conversation gits too cruddy I jist go away 'n sit down at the cross."

"What do you mean?" asked Chris. "I don't see any cross."

"The cross of Christ, Chris," Tom answered softly. "When I get ta thinkin' 'bout all the wicked things I've done, I like ta sit down an' think about what Christ had ta suffer to take 'em all away. I love ta 'magine that the closest hill I kin see is Calvary, or Golgotha, as it's sometimes called. You know, the hill that Christ was crucified on."

The word, "Golgotha," struck Chris like a charging mossy-backed steer.

"Go on," he urged.

"Well," Tom continued, "I kin see those soldiers drivin' spikes through 'Is hand. I hear the ring a' the hammer, an' feel the pain 'E felt with each blow as those nails spread the bones apart. I can see it all repeated on the other hand. Then it's repeated again when they drive the nails through 'Is feet. Then they pick up that cross an' drop it into the hole they dug fer it. Can't you jist feel the pain when all 'Is weight jars against those nails?"

"And then," Tom went on, "They leave 'Em hangin' there on those nails. 'Is hands hurt so much 'Es got to push up with His feet ta take the weight off a' 'em. But when 'E puts 'Is weight on 'Is feet, they hurt so bad 'E's gotta back off and shift the weight back ta 'Is hands. There ain't no way to 'leviate the pain."

"I look at 'Is face. It's been beaten almost beyond recognition. I can't imagine how much the cuts from the lashes on 'Is back must a' hurt 'Em. Everyone is jeerin' at 'Em. They're darin' 'Em to come down from the cross, if 'Es really God."

"An' then it gits worser yet. It turns dark right at noontime. It's jist as though God pulled a curtain over the whole thing, an' put my sins on 'Is back. 'E calls out, 'My God, My God, why 'ave Ya forsaken Me?' Chris, that's 'cause 'E was bearin' my sins in 'Is own body on the cross."

“‘Lord Jesus,’ I pray, ‘Thank You for suffering all that fer me.’ Sometimes I jist can’t hold back the tears when I think about what it costed ‘Em ta’ be able ta fergive my sins.”

“He would never forgive me, Tom,” Chris said huskily. “I... I gut-shot a man in cold blood.”

“Chris,” Tom said earnestly. “The Bible says that all who believe in ‘Em are justified freely from all things. That includes robbery, murder, even gut-shootin’. Ya gotta quit fightin’ ‘Em and take ‘Em at ‘Is word. He promised, ‘If eny man comes ta Me, there’s no way I’ll cast ‘em out.’”

Chris didn’t sleep a wink that night. “Lord,” he finally agonized brokenly as dawn approached, “I give up! You know I deserve to die, and I believe You died in my place. Thank you for forgiving my sins--all of them.”

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The cattle drive went smoothly. Chris got a good price for his stock and hurried home to Debbie and the baby.

Debbie greeted him with a hug that meant more to him than any of her hugs and kisses had meant for a long time. The baby’s face looked so sweet and peaceful on the pillow that he could hardly wait until he woke up to hold him.

“Deb,” he said at the table that evening, “I met God on the drive. I can hardly believe it, but He forgave all my sins.”

Debbie jumped up with a squeal of joy and ran over to his end of the table to kiss him, but he fended her off.

“Wait, Honey,” he said solemnly “There’s a problem you’ve got to know about.”

“What’s wrong, Chris?” she asked shakily.

“You remember the ten-thousand dollars I got when we were going under? I robbed a bank to get it.”

“Well,” she said pensively. “Couldn’t we pay it back, like with interest?”

“We could, Deb. The problem is that I killed a man doing it.”

Debbie was stunned. He half expected her to walk out on him on the spot. Instead, she just stood there, tears coursing down her face.

“Honey, I’ll stand by you whatever happens,” she finally said. “I thought you said it was owed you.”

“It was, Deb. The man I killed robbed my Dad of the ten-thousand dollars he got for his part of a multi-ranch cattle drive. He was considered a friend of the family, and came in to greet Dad when he returned from the drive. Thinking they were alone, he pulled a gun and relieved Dad of the cash. Then he shot Dad in cold blood and left. I had been serving a time-out in my room for some childish naughtiness. The door was ajar, and I saw the whole thing, though I hardly comprehended what had happened until he had left.”

“I tried to tell the Sheriff who did it, but this man was an outstanding businessman in our community. Everyone thought it was my childish imagination, and he went scot free. He went to Golgotha and started a bank, partly with Dad’s money.”

“I just intended to collect what was really mine, but the sight of that hypocritical banker’s face filled me with such awful memories that I gut-shot him. I’ve suffered with the guilt of it ever since, until one of my cow hands took me to the cross and introduced me to Jesus. What do you think I should do now?”

Debbie sat quietly, considering the situation for several minutes. Finally she spoke.

“Tom, the money was really yours, and the banker should have been hung for killing your Dad, but the law wouldn’t listen to you. You and I know that, and morally we probably don’t need to do anything about it. But you know as sure as I do that sooner or later someone will recognize you, and you’ll probably hang for a killing that was justified, at least to a point.”

“It’d be more justifiable if I hadn’t done it with such hate,” Tom mused. “From that standpoint it wasn’t simply justice, it was murder.”

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Two years later the knock came at the door while they were eating supper. When Debbie answered it, a man wearing a star spun her around in front of him as a living shield, and advanced toward Chris with a drawn gun.

“Chris Hunter,” he announced. “Yer under arrest fer the murder of Harvey Boyd in the bank of Golgotha twelve years ago.”

“We’ve been expecting you,” Chris said quietly, raising his hands. “Let the little woman alone, and I’ll come peaceably.”

“Wish you’d a-drowed so’s I could shoot ya.” The Sheriff growled as he handcuffed Chris.

“Bye, Dear,” Chris said softly. “It’s been good. Tell the young’un his Daddy loved him. And remember, I’m in God’s hands-- ‘Forgiven,’” he added with a smile.

She gave him a kiss before the Sheriff tore him away, and then they were gone.

It was a grueling ride to Golgotha, especially in handcuffs. The Sheriff slapped Chris around every chance he got, but the rancher endured it without a complaint. They arrived at the Golgotha jail some ten days later. Chris was the only prisoner there. His trial was scheduled for the following day, without giving him any opportunity to hire a lawyer.

The trial was a ten-minute affair conducted by the judge and the Sheriff, with no one else even aware of it. After listening ostentatiously to the Sheriff’s embellished account of the robbery, the judge asked Chris if he had indeed killed Harvey Boyd. Chris acknowledged that he had, and was not allowed to say anything more.

“What more do we need?” the judge asked. “You are sentenced to hang at noon on Saturday. That’ll give enough time fer everyone ta hear ‘bout the hangin’ so’s anyone who so desires kin come an’ watch.”

As the appointed time for the hanging approached, a large crowd gathered around the elaborate gallows specially erected in front of the town hall. It was a festive occasion for most of them--Prime entertainment!

Chris was led up the ladder of the gallows with great aplomb. The Sheriff announced his name, and stated that he was being hung for the cold-blooded murder of Harvey Boyd. With that introduction, Chris asked if he could address the crowd.

“No way!” replied the Sheriff. But the request had been heard by the crowd, and they demanded to hear what he had to say.

“We come here ta watch a hangin,’” one old cowhand called out. “Un’ we want the whole program.”

“Yeah,” the crowd yelled. “We want the whole program. Let ‘em speak.”

When the Sheriff saw that he couldn't buck the crowd, he stood back officiously, and let Chris speak.

"I'm being hanged for shooting a man in cold blood," he began. "I'm as guilty as sin!"

"Soon my body will be swinging from this noose up here," he continued. "You will give me a pauper's burial, and more or less consign my soul to hell. But my soul's not going to hell, because my sins are forgiven."

"Two years ago a cowboy that I had hired took me to Golgotha. Not this town, but the place where Christ was crucified. He got me to imagine that the hill across the creek from where we were sitting in Wyoming was where the crucifixion took place. He told it so realistically that I could hear the ring of the hammer on the nails that were driven through His hands and His feet. I could hear the groans that escaped His lips as he hung there on those nails. I could feel the pain of His weight pulling on the nails in His hands, but when He tried to shift His weight from His hands to His feet, they hurt just as bad. There was no way to ease the pain."

"I felt His reproach as He hung exposed on that cross while they mocked and jeered Him. I felt the love that kept Him there when they taunted Him to come down from the cross, if He was really the Son of God. I felt the agony His holy soul felt when God laid all the sins of the whole world on His back. What I did to Harvey Boyd was there. So was what he did to my Dad. So were your sins, every one of them."

"His face was so battered that I could hardly make out His features, but I understood the meaning of love when He called out, 'Father forgive them, 'cause they don't really understand what they're doing.' That's what broke me up. If He could forgive the very ones that were murdering Him, I figured He'd also forgive me for killing Harvey Boyd."

"Finally, Christ called out triumphantly, 'It is finished,' an' He died. Folks, the debt for all those sins was paid in full, so God raised Him up and gave Him the highest place in heaven. And he offers forgiveness to all who believe on Him."

"How could I help but love such a man?" Chris asked with eloquent simplicity! "I'll soon be up there with Him because of what He suffered on that cross for me," he added huskily. And you can be forgiven and on your way to heaven too, if you'll take Him as your Savior."

"Bout that whole program," someone called out from the crowd, "What did ya mean 'bout what Harvey did ta yer Dad?"

"When I was a kid, I watched Harvey steal ten-thousand dollars from my Dad," Chris replied. Then he shot him in the heart and walked away. I think He used the money to start his bank."

“No one would believe me because I was just a child, but that sight has haunted me like a nightmare ever since. When my ranch was going under in that drought we had about a dozen years ago, I came to the bank and withdrew Dad’s ten-thousand dollars at gunpoint. I hadn’t intended to hurt anyone, but Harvey’s face brought back that awful scene, and I gut-shot him on the spot. I killed him in cold blood.”

“That’s why He only took ten-thousand dollars when there was so much more in the safe,” someone else shouted. “He even made my Mom count it out a second time.”

The next thing Chris saw was the town’s ancient doctor climbing feebly up the ladder despite the Sheriff’s attempts to rebuff him. Chris leaned over to give him a helping hand, and the white-haired old man spoke out with remarkable clarity.

“Harvey only lived a few minutes after he was shot,” he called out. ‘Bullet went through his aorta. But he told it exactly as Chris did. He confessed the whole thing, and acknowledged that he had only got his comings. When I asked him who the shooter was, he said he knew, but he refused to tell me. All he would say was, ‘He was justified.’”

“I can confirm that,” the parson added, scrambling up to join the doctor. “And so could Harvey’s son, who is the present Sheriff, if he only would. Harvey Boyd died calling on God to forgive him in the name of Jesus.”

When the judge saw that the crowd’s sympathies were with the condemned man, he vaulted onto the platform. “Hold on!” he called out. “Chris Hunter, I’m changin’ the verdict ta ‘Not guilty,’ on the basis a’ new evidence. Yer free ta go.”

“Maybe it’s the Sheriff that should be hung,” someone suggested loudly.

“Yeah,” the fickle crowd roared. “Let’s hang the Sheriff.”

Suddenly a crusty old rancher was joining the speakers on the stage that the gallows had become. “We ain’t havin’ eny lynchin’,” he announced authoritatively. “We came ta Golgotha taday ta see a hangin’. Well, we seen one. We seen Jesus Christ hangin’ on Golgotha’s cross fer ar’ sins. We seen ‘Em stay there when they dared ‘Im ta come down, so we wouldn’t have ta die fer ar’ own sins. I can’t speak for the rest a’ ya, but I’m askin’ ‘Em ta fergive my sins right now.”

“I’ve seen enough hanging ta last me fer the rest a’ my life,” he continued. “Let’s go home!”

And they did.