

A man on a roan named Lady picked his way through the rocky waste, going west whenever the way was passable. Once in a while, he saw the tracks of the horse that carried the man he was following. For the time being, that was his only guide.

The man was Jackson Mains, and he was a bounty hunter. The man he pursued called himself Tom Cudder, but who knew if that was really his name. He was wanted for shooting a shopkeeper dead and robbing him in Wichita. Mains hoped he was on the right trail. Although he was a skilled tracker, there was the possibility that he was following the wrong tracks. He was two days behind Cudder, and his quarry might not have gone west from the last town; he could be following the wrong person.

Mains grimly thought that even if he was following the wrong man, that man could have a price on his head just the same. No one would undertake this wandering journey through the canyons and rocky screes, through the creosote and spiny blackbrush, except to evade pursuit.

Reaching the top of a slope, Mains looked ahead and saw nothing but the sun and more misery for him and his horse ahead. Soon it would be time to bed down for the night. He knew he was gaining on Cudder because a few hours ago he'd found the outlaw's campsite from the night before last. Cudder had to find a way through this trackless land, while Mains merely followed, which peculiarly made Mains faster.

An hour or so later, having found two more signs of Cudder, Mains called it a day. He unloaded Lady, brushed her, and gave her some oats and poured her some water from a leather bag into a small pail. He got out his cooking gear and made a small fire with dead twigs and branches. He heated some beans from a can, ate them, and sopped up the juices with a couple of hardtack biscuits. Arranging his saddle as a pillow and Lady's blanket for warmth, Mains reclined on the ground and slept soundly.

In the morning when Mains awoke, Lady was looking his way as she always did. He fixed her breakfast, and then his: oats and water for her, and boiled dried meat, bread and coffee for him. He cleaned up, saddled Lady and went westward on the trail.

His day was uneventful. He followed the trail and eventually camped as he had done the night before. The day after, he found some sign of Cudder at a nearly dry water hole in a streambed; he stayed there a while to let Lady eat some green grass and herbs, although Cudder's horse had gotten the best already. He could not gather more water because it had been fouled. Did Cudder crap in the water because he knew he was following?

The third day, as the afternoon was waning, Mains sat on his horse on a hill overlooking a town. For the first time in the last few days, he didn't have to look directly into the sun and he could see the town laid out below. At the far end there was a running creek, reflecting the sunlight, and quite a few buildings; nearer to him was deserted empty space except for the high street running toward him and a frame structure that he thought was a saloon. This was where the trail led him, so he went on, down the slope. He tied Lady in front of the saloon, gave her a feedbag, and entered through the hung oilcloth that served as a door. A badly-painted sign said "Jacks".

The bar was a 12-foot plank supported by two barrels. There were five men inside, and only one of them was dressed in good clothes. He stood by the bar. Three looked like down-on-their-luck wranglers, and they sat at a sort of table made of planks and a tree trunk; the last man was the bartender, who wore an apron over a dirty shirt and pants. Ignoring everyone, Mains strode to the bar as well as he could after a day of riding, and asked for water and whiskey, and laid down a quarter dollar.

The bartender grinned, picked up the quarter, ladled some water into a tin cup, produced a tiny glass from a hidden shelf, obtained a bottle from the wall behind him and filled the glass half-full of a reddish-brown liquid. The men at the table didn't move or speak, nor did the well-dressed fellow. Mains drank the liquor down at a gulp, sipped some water, and asked, "What's this town?"

"This here town is Hargis," the barman replied. "I got the idea you came in from the east."

"That I did," said Mains. "I think you saw me. I'm hoping it was worth the journey."

"We saw you," said the bartender. "It's not often that we get travelers from that direction. You want another?"

Mains nodded and placed another quarter on the plank. "I started at Wichita and ended here. I'm looking for a man, you see. He would have come from the east, just as I did. Maybe you saw him."

"Maybe, maybe," said the bartender. "But he wouldn't stay long at this end of town. He could find lodging at Hattie's down the street, and entertainment at the Ace of Hearts. Fact is, there's not much left of Hargis since the railroad passed us by."

Now the well-dressed man walked a couple of steps closer and said, "I'm Jack. What's your name, sir?"

"My name is Mains. I'm pleased to meet you, Jack." They shook hands and Jack leaned back against the plank, which he would have dislodged were it not nailed to the barrels. Mains observed that Jack's clothes were clean, he wore a vest and tooled boots, and sported a pearl-handled Colt revolver.

Jack said, "Well, Mr. Mains, are you looking for a friend or just a man?" He nodded to the bartender, who dug up another glass and poured a drink for him, and gave Mains another refill as well.

"I can't say that he's a friend," said Jackson Mains. "For one thing, he leaves behind a dirty camp."

Jack showed his teeth and shook his head. "That's the sign of a man who lacks responsibility. We wouldn't like him much, here in Hargis. Larry told you he probably went to the other end of town, and I'd guess he's moved on from there, too."

"I suppose I'd better look for him there, then. I need to find a place to stay tonight, too."

"Hattie's is a good place. You'll see it down the street on the right," Jack told him. He lowered his voice. "Can I ask a favor? These poor fellas" – he indicated the three men at the table – "would probably like a drink. If I buy them a drink, it'll never end, but if you do..."

Mains scowled for a second, because he knew it was expected of him. He had expected the touch and the brush-off, as well. "OK, here," he said, and produced a silver dollar. "I'm much obliged for the advice to stay at Hattie's."

"And I thank you, Mr. Mains," said Jack. Mains nodded at him and at the bartender and headed for the door. As he mounted Lady, he heard whooping from inside. Shaking his head wryly, he headed up the street. Hargis had once been a more important place, he saw. A hundred yards from Jacks, the high street intersected perpendicularly with a road, and on the corners there were a former bank building,

made of stone and vacant; a general store, closed; and two other buildings of unknown origin and purpose. To the left and right, down the cross street, he could see a few houses with gardens in front of them.

Mains rode past, seeing a few other vacant buildings and a store that still was in business, and came to Hattie's, a neatly painted frame building where a placard saying "ROOMS" hung by the door. Across the street from Hattie's was a saloon called "Ace of Hearts" from which he heard piano music. However, the establishment beyond Hattie's, a livery stable, attracted his attention and he went there first.

As he dismounted, a man came outside. "Well!" he said. "I'm sure glad to see you, stranger! I'm Virgil Stayborne, and I'm guessing you need stabling for your horse... and I see that you might need some new leather there... and there. I can fix you right up."

Mains introduced himself and shook hands with Virgil, a wiry fellow about 55 or 60 years old. Virgil had more to say: "I can take care of your horse, what's her name? and let me show you around, there's a bit of fenced pasture out back with some good grass. Let me get acquainted with this girl... her name is Lady? And a lady she is. Let's go inside."

The inside was well-maintained, with six stables. Virgil led Mains to the back and showed him the corral, contained within a bend of the creek that Mains had seen from the east end of town. The grass inside was better than Mains expected, and Lady hadn't seen good grass for four days on the rocky trail. It was just about sundown.

"It's fifty cents a day," Virgil Stayborne said as they walked back to the front. "Lady gets brushed daily and can have all the grass she wants, all day. At night she gets oats and the stable. What do you say?"

Mains agreed, and then Virgil said, "Let's look at your saddle." Virgil indicated that the leather supporting the left stirrup was worn, and Mains agreed to have it replaced. Virgil winked and said that he could sew leather as well as anyone alive. Then Virgil said:

"Really, you could use a new saddle. Lady has outgrown the one you have. Look here, the saddle is rubbing on her barrel too hard because it was made for a smaller horse. The width is all right, but it's too narrow on the sides. You see what I mean?"

Mains was not ready to spend almost all his money on a new saddle for Lady, although he was already aware that the saddle was too small, so he refused. He suspected that Virgil had a saddle that he had somehow acquired and was trying to sell for a profit.

"That's all right. Now, if you don't want a new saddle, here's the other place where you need some leather work." Virgil pointed to the scabbard that held Mains's Winchester. "I'll bet you didn't notice."

Mains looked and saw that the stitching on the scabbard was coming loose. "OK, fix it," he said. "Here's a dollar, for one day of stabling and the leatherwork. All right?"

Virgil said it was all right and mentioned that Hattie's, next door, was the best place to get a room. Virgil grinned and said he already knew, got his saddlebags and his rifle, said goodbye to Lady and walked over to Hattie's. He knocked on the door and immediately a woman's voice told him to come in. He entered and saw a fairly large room with a dining table in front of him.

“Hello and welcome, I'm Hattie Moran. We've already had dinner, but we have some leftovers. Do you plan to stay?”

Jackson Mains looked at Hattie and realized that he was interested in her as a woman. She had blond hair with a few gray streaks, a full figure with no extra weight, and a fine handsome face. She seemed to be in her mid-thirties. “Yes, ma'am, I'd like some dinner. I'm Jackson Mains. I've been eating my own cooking for a few days on the trail, and I'm sure your cooking is better.”

Hattie laughed a little, and Mains liked her laugh. She said, “Don't give me any credit for the food. This is Mr. Rufus McStayley, who does the cooking here.” A black man about 50 years old poked his head out of a doorway in the rear and smiled. He said, 'I'm gonna fix you right up, sir,” and retreated. Hattie continued, “If you want lodging for the night, dinner is included. It's a dollar a day or part of a day. You can pay extra for breakfast – it's fifty cents – or the saloon across the street has a sort of breakfast, too,”

Although Mains was well supplied with cash, he asked, “How much is breakfast at the saloon?”

Hattie looked him sideways, and said, “I think it depends on how many rats they catch. They call it ham.”

Mains laughed. “You can expect me for breakfast here.”

At a gesture from Hattie, he sat at the table and Mr. McStayley brought out pork chops, greens, fried potatoes and cornbread with butter. Hattie asked, “Do you mind if I sit and keep you company?” and he said, certainly not, remembering not to speak with food in his mouth.

After a few bites, he said, “Mr. McStayley is a good cook. Please tell him I said so.” Hattie said she would, but just then, Rufus McStayley poked his head out again and said, “I heard that, thank you. Miss Hattie, I'm going home. Everything's done except Mr. Mains's dishes and banking the stove.”

Hattie said, “Thank you, Rufus. I'll see you tomorrow.” Rufus disappeared. Hattie said, “What brings you to Hargis, Mr. Mains?”

Mains decided to be direct. “I'm looking for a man I've tracked here. He's wanted in Wichita.”

Hattie said, “I have another boarder, Mr. Clinton. I hope he's not who you're looking for, because it sounds like you mean trouble.”

“Tell me about Mr. Clinton, please.”

Hattie hesitated. “He arrived here early yesterday, and he doesn't know when he's leaving.”

“How did he arrive?”

“He seems to be on foot. I think he came up the south road, past Mr. McStayley's house.” She smiled. “I get most of my gossip from Rufus and his wife. Between them, they know just about everything that happens in Hargis.”

Mains ate for a while without saying anything, but he looked at Hattie. "I tracked my man from the east, across the hills, and he was on a horse."

Hattie frowned. "No, that doesn't seem to be him. You saw Virgil, right? That's the only stable for horses in town."

"Virgil didn't have any other horses," Mains acknowledged. "I thought about this already."

Hattie smiled. "I could see that you are a smart man. Do you want dessert?"

"No ma'am, thank you. Where is my room?"

"Of course. Let me show you the room."

Hattie led Jackson through a doorway off the front room to a hallway and showed him a room and the location of the privy. She told him to wait a few minutes and she'd bring him some hot water. It only took her a minute. "Mr. McStayley left this water on the stove," she said. "I'll leave you now, so you can clean up. If you don't want to go to bed yet, the Ace of Hearts is yonder. Have a good night."

Mains thanked her and used the water to bathe himself. He hadn't been cleaned up since the last town. Then he opened his grip and removed the tissue paper from a laundered shirt and a collar. He changed his underwear and put the shirt and collar on. His pants were acceptable, and he didn't have another pair, anyway. He rubbed them with some sage that he had found on the trail.

He left his room, went down the hall and out the front door. He stood on the porch for a minute. Piano playing and singing from the Ace of Hearts stirred him a little bit. It had been a while since he had been in a place socially. He crossed the street, nodded to the man outside the Ace of Hearts who had watched him on Hattie's porch, and entered through the batwing doors.

This was a different sort of place, not like Jacks at all. It had a real bar, it had a piano, it had tables that were manufactured tables. Perhaps there was a different kind of whiskey, he thought.

There were 15 or 20 people inside. Some were playing poker or faro at tables for that purpose; others were hanging around the bar; a few were assisting the piano player with their voices. Mains gravitated to the bar and leaned against it and looked around. He had a fair idea of Tom Cudder's looks from a drawing on a wanted poster, and he didn't see him. A bartender asked him what he wanted, and he laid a quarter on the bar and asked for a whiskey. It arrived immediately.

He told the bartender, "I'm new in town," and the man nodded. "I'm Jackson Mains," he said, and the bartender said, "I'm Joe Bishop," and they shook. "Any other new people?" Mains asked, and after a suspicious look, Bishop said, "No, only the other fellow who's rooming at Hattie's. He was here earlier, but he left."

"I'm looking for a particular man. He might have been here yesterday or the day before and left already."

The bartender said, "No, there's been no other visitors in town for a week or more. Excuse me," and he went to get a drink for some other customers.

Mains leaned against the bar and figured this was a washout. The man he was looking for had already left town or had never been here at all.

While he mused, his attention was distracted by a woman who came up to his side. "I'm Corrina," she said. She smiled and came closer, touching him on his arm.. "I wonder if you'd be interested in getting to know me better,"

Mains said, "What do you know about the other new man in town?"

"Well, really!" Corrina said. "Aren't you interested in me?"

Mains smiled and displayed a silver dollar. "Tell me what you know about him. I heard from Hattie that his name is Clinton."

Corrina kept her eyes on the coin. "Yes, that's his name. He's been here two nights. He was here earlier, and he doesn't like me. He spent some time with Mary. He's gone now."

"Do you know where he went?"

"Nope. He leaves but he doesn't say where. Mary doesn't know, either. He don't talk much. He's not interesting, like you..." Corrina snuggled a little closer. "I can see you've got an angle. That information was free. I can earn that dollar, and more, just try me."

Mains smiled again, a little differently, put the dollar away and gave her a quarter. "Thanks for the information. Don't tell anyone I was asking."

Corrina pouted and said, "Sure," and flounced off.

Mains shook his head, and figured the bartender had lied out of habit. Men didn't tend bar for long if they talked about one customer to another. It struck him that the bartender at Jacks, and Jack himself, had been talkative but told him nothing.

He sighed and got another drink.

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Across the street, Hattie was seated at the table with Virgil Stayborne. Virgil said, "I think this Mains feller is a bounty hunter. What's more, look at this." He pulled out a wanted poster and showed it to Hattie. "Doesn't this look like your roomer, Mr. Clinton?"

Hattie squinted at the drawing and allowed that it did. "But it's only a drawing, and it doesn't look very much like him. The eyes... yes. But the shape of the face is wrong, and everything else."

"It looks closer than that to me. I found it in a pocket in Mr. Mains's saddle when I was doing repairs. It might not look much like him, but it's a powerful coincidence, don't you think?"

"Oh. Virgil, you've got quite an imagination. I don't think so. I'll ask Mr. Mains when he comes back." After a second, she said, "Or I'll ask Mr. Clinton."

“Don't do that!” said Virgil. “It says here he shot a storekeeper and robbed him. You'd practically be accusing him of murder. What if you're right?”

Hattie laughed. “Virgil, don't take me so seriously. I've told you before I never ask my roomers their business. When Mr. Moran was alive, we'd have bankers and businessmen coming through Hargis and he told me not to be nosy, and I think he was right.”

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When Mains crossed the street back to Hattie's, Virgil was gone, but Hattie was still at the table, drinking tea and reading a book. “Hello, Mr. Mains,” she said, “Will you have some tea?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Moran, that sounds good,” Hattie got up and went to the kitchen to get another cup. Mains waited for her to return and sit down before he seated himself. The tea was aromatic and hot. Mains said, “I've made tea sometimes when I'm on the trail, but it's not like this.”

“I reckon it's not. You throw in a few leaves from chaparral and some Mormon tea, and maybe some hemp, I'll bet.”

“That's right, ma'am. It doesn't taste like this.”

“This is real tea from China with some wild chamomile I found last Spring. Right now, you might find chamomile on the trail, but it would be bitter. Best to get it before it flowers. It would make your chaparral tea better, I assure you.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Oh. Don't ma'am me, Jackson. Not while we're drinking tea. Call me Hattie.”

Jackson smiled. “Yes, Hattie.”

Neither of them spoke for a while, but they looked at each other. Hattie broke the silence. “What do you plan to do, Jackson?”

“Well. The man I'm looking for doesn't seem to be here. So I might go back east and see if I can pick up his trail.” He hesitated. “I have other jobs I might do, too. But this one would pay the best.”

“I like a man who wants to make money,” said Hattie forthrightly.

Mains's smile was a little twisted. “Perhaps I also think I'm on the side of justice. Right against wrong.”

“Don't be cynical. You do what you do.”

“That is very true, Hattie. I like what I do. And... I'm not sure that's cynical. In my better moments, I think I'm one of the good guys, and I'm hunting the bad guys. I get a certain satisfaction from that.”

“I hope you find him.”

Mains said, “I usually do.”

Both of them had finished their tea. Hattie said, "It's time for me to go to bed. Breakfast is at dawn. I like you, Mr. Jackson Mains. Maybe your work will bring you back to Hargis again someday, and I'll be here."

"Thank you, Hattie. I like you, too. I'm going to go to bed, too. It's been a few days since I've been in a bed. I hope I can go to sleep."

"The beds here are comfortable, Jackson. Sleep well." Hattie got up, cleared the table and went into the kitchen.

Mains headed for his room, still wondering where his quarry had gone, and how he had gone wrong. He got ready for sleep, but he felt confused. Once in bed, he lay a while, thinking of Hattie and thinking that one day he'd give up bounty hunting, but then knowing that he never would. It was what he did.

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In the morning, Hattie got up and started fixing the coffee. While it perked, she thought about Jackson Mains and what he might look like after a night of sleep, when he wasn't so tired.

Jackson Mains woke up at dawn, as always, washed his face in the water on the stand, and headed for the privy.

Mr. McStayley arrived, greeted Hattie and started cutting up potatoes for breakfast. The usual breakfast at Hattie's was two eggs, bacon, potatoes fried in bacon grease and corn bread from the day before. Hattie started the bacon, and then went to set the table. Hattie and the two guests would have breakfast. Rufus had already eaten at his house on the road that led south from Hargis, where he lived with his wife and two sons.

While Hattie set the table, she heard some unusual noises from the guest area. Some voices, a sigh, a thud, some footsteps. Maybe the voices and footsteps weren't so unusual, she thought.

Mr. Clinton entered the dining room, carrying all his gear, and Hattie said, "Good morning,"

Clinton said, "Hattie, I'm leaving. I can't stay for breakfast. I'll pay for it anyway, though. Here." He threw a half-dollar on the table.

"What do you mean, Mr. Clinton? You can stay for breakfast!"

"No, I can't. I've got to move on... I've decided. I'm getting my horse from Jacks and leaving town."

"You have a horse, sir?" This was strange. Hattie remembered her other roomer. "Where is Mr. Mains? Have you made his acquaintance?"

"I haven't met the man. I'm leaving." He turned toward the door.

Hattie remembered what she had heard, and said, "Not so fast, Mr. Clinton."

Clinton turned back to Hattie with a snarl, and she pulled a .44 over-and-under from the pocket of her

apron and shot him. Then she shot him again. He tried, but he never cleared his gun.

Hattie went back to the guest rooms and found what she hoped she wouldn't find: Jackson Mains lying on the hallway outside the privy with his throat cut.