The Last Hero

Robert F. Young

Laramie never ceased to marvel at his aim. It seemed he couldn’t miss. The burnished six-shooter in his capable brown hand spat bullet after bullet, and with each recoil a holster tumbled from the saddle and became a mound of dusty denims on the hillside.

He could hear Ellen’s excited breathing just behind him. He could almost feel her small hand pressing softly on his shoulder. He stole a glance at her, between rustlers, and her fair loveliness made him wince with ecstatic pain. As always, she was smiling at him courageously; as always, her liquid eyes were filled with love and admiration. Her hair was an aureate handful of sunlight, a symbol, in its brightness and purity, of the West he had come to love. Another rustler bit the dust, then his pistol hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. Quickly, Laramie exchanged the gun for the one Ellen had reloaded, and again the rustlers felt the fury of his lead. But there were so many of them, riding over the vast plain and up the rocky hill, that he knew he couldn’t hold them off forever, that sooner or later some of them would reach the outcropping behind which he and Ellen had taken shelter after the horse they were riding double had collapsed beneath them. And then—

Laramie shuddered—not from fear of death, but from fear of the fate worse than death that would befall Ellen if the rustlers captured them. No, he could never let that happen. Never. He reached up and patted her hand, trying to reassure her.

She sensed his thoughts. “Promise me you’ll never let them take me alive,” she said.

He evaded her noble request. “Don’t give up yet, gal,” he drawled. “As long as my ammo lasts, they’ll never take us!”

But would it last? he asked himself, knocking three more rustlers from their saddles. And even if it did last, could he continue to hold the rustlers off till the posse arrived? As though in answer, his gun jammed, and with a groan of despair he grabbed the one Ellen had just finished reloading. He emptied it deliberately, and six more riders threw up their arms and toppled from their mounts. Their companions, however , seemed to divine that something was wrong, and, emitting a series of triumphant yowls, they came thundering up the hillside, lust and lechery shining in their eyes.

Laramie reloaded furiously, but haste made his fingers clumsy, and the chamber jammed. The dust of the approaching horsemen hovered over the hilltop like a malevolent cloud now, and the ground reverberated with the pounding of hooves,

Suddenly Ellen threw her arms around his neck and smothered his lips with a passionate farewell kiss. The kiss gave him the incentive he needed, and he stood up, exposing himself to the fusillade of enemy fire, and flung the gun straight into the face of the leading rustler. The fellow dropped from his saddle, and the horse next in line tripped over him, throwing its rider. A sort of deus ex machina chain-reaction ensued, horse after horse stumbling, rider after rider hitting the ground. But the dismounted rustlers were undaunted and they resumed their charge on foot.

Laramie thrust Ellen behind him, shielding her body with his own. Bullets whined all around him. One nicked his earlobe, another lodged in the flesh of his shoulder. Presently the rustlers were upon him and he was swinging savagely with his fists, hearing the crunch of smashed cheekbones and fractured jaws and broken teeth. But he was hopelessly outnumbered and he felt himself being driven back, inch by inch, to the cliff that comprised the other side of the hill.

He was about to give up hope, about to seize Ellen and leap with her to their deaths on the jagged rocks below, when he heard the thunder of hooves resounding over the plain and the staccato blasts of friendly six-shooters reverberating in the summer air. The rustlers heard, too, and they threw up their hands and cowered in a straggling line along the edge of the cliff as the posse, red handkerchiefs fluttering, claparajos flapping, sombreros swinging triumphantly in sun-browned hands, breasted the hilltop.

Laramie was surprised and a little apprehensive when he saw Ellen’s father dismount from a hard-breathing palomino and come walking toward them. He had not thought the white-haired old codger physically up to the rigors of riding with a posse, and his heart pounded in admiration for the Grand Old Man.

“You’ve saved our ranches, Laramie,” the Grand Old Man said, as Ellen embraced him, “and you’ve saved my daughter from a fate worse than death. Never can it be said that I am unmindful of favors, or reluctant to reward those who perform them. Let bygones be bygones, my son. My daughter is yours and tomorrow you take over as foreman of the Bar-B-Q. I have spoken.”

Ellen ran into Laramie’s arms and he rejoiced in her warm, virginal loveliness. He bent and kissed her in the red radiance of the setting sun, the two of them silhouetted against the majestic backdrop of the rolling plain and the polychromatic sky—

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Laramie could never understand why he invariably chose that particular moment to take off for town and go to a movie. It was a sort of conditioned reflex, he supposed; a reoccurring compulsion that was as much a part of his life as the open trail, the roundup, and beans and bacon cooked over a campfire in the light of the Western stars.

The theater was the same—huge, empty, the projection booth suspended from the ceiling, the remnants of its broken ladder dangling tantalizingly thirty feet above the floor. Laramie remembered all the times he’d tried futilely to gain access to that lofty, all-important chamber so that he could deactivate the automatic projector, or at least insert a different film. He was sick of the same old movie, day after day after day. He knew the plot by heart and he loathed every; second of the action. But still he kept coming, again and again and again...

He walked up the aisle, still savoring Ellen’s kisses. An empty popcorn dispenser iridesced in a corner of the foyer and an equally empty candy machine stood forlornly by the door. The theater proper was drafty and cold. The huge screen was lit up, a panorama of muted chiaroscuro, and the movie was just beginning. Reluctantly, Laramie identified with the only character—

A creature named Smith.

Smith walked down the littered street, carrying his club, glancing watchfully from side to side, listening, always listening. There was an occasional scurrying sound in the shadows, the sporadic howling of a distant dog-pack Stars showed above a ragged skyline of brooding buildings, glittered now and then on the panes of a still-intact window. The November wind sent dead leaves rattling over broken walks and ruptured macadam, round the rusted hulks of cars. Smith shivered.

When he came to the corner with the S-bent lamppost, he turned. Lord, he was hungry!

He was always hungry—hungry and cold and miserable. And he wanted a woman, and in this twilight world there were no women, nor men either, for that matter—except himself.

But there was food. The rats and the dogs had eaten up everything they could find, but canned food had proved to be beyond their ken. When he reached the supermarket, Smith stepped through the shattered display window and picked his way through the dark aisles. He knew from long familiarity the location of each item, and he chose beans and pears and beer. Then he crouched in a corner, still watching, still listening. He ate the beans by impaling them on his pocket knife. He used his fingers for the pears, scooping the dripping halves out of the can and shoving them into his mouth, tilting the can afterwards and draining the juice. When he finished, he gulped down the beer.

He hadn’t intended to fall asleep, but the food and the alcohol, and the heavy tiredness that was always with him, combined, and he slumped down in the corner, still gripping his club. He thought evanescently of Ellen and the ranch and he wished desperately that the movie would end so that he could get back to being Laramie. If he had his way, he’d be Laramie all the time; but the movie kept intruding itself and he had to be Smith, whether he wanted to or not, till it had run its daily course. And it was a waste of time to try to return to the ranch ahead of time. He’d tried that once, but the action had only integrated itself into the plot and the movie had run its course any-way. The answer to his dilemma, of course, lay in the projection booth. If he could only gain access to it, he could turn the movie off and be rid of Smith forever. Off...or on? For a moment he felt dizzy. If he turned it off, would he cease to be Smith, or would he cease to be Laramie? He pressed his hands against his temples. Slowly, sanity returned. Why, he’d cease to be Smith, of course! Smith—was the fictitious character, Laramie, the real one. What was the matter with him anyway? Presently his head bent forward till his forehead rested on his knees. His eyes closed—

The yelping of dogs awakened him. There were four of them in the dawn-gray street, sniffing the sidewalk that fronted the supermarket. They had his spoor , and he knew f rom past experience that it would be useless to try to outwit them. He stood up stiffly, raised his club. Terror numbed him as the first dog leaped through the broken window, then he reminded himself that this was, after all, only a movie, and that no real harm could befall him, and he caught the dog—a huge collie—squarely on the top of its head with his club. It dropped at his feet and in an instant the rest of the pack was upon it, tearing it to pieces, bolting its flesh, and Smith was running up the aisle to the street and then down the street to his apartment house.

Inside his apartment , he closed and locked the door . It was one of the few apartments in the building that was still habitable. He wondered briefly who had lived in it before, but he did not really care, and presently his thoughts drifted back to his own past. Flashback! he thought deliberately, as the memories of his wife and son straggled through his mind, and he wiped the memories away.

He lay down on the bed and dropped into a fitful sleep. But not for long. There was something he had to do, something even more vital to his continued existence than food. He arose, picked up his club, and descended to the street. The sky hung over the city like unwashed laundry. The wind was raw and whispered “winter.” He slouched down the street, turned down a broad avenue. When he came to the half-demolished brick building, he turned up the walk. Towers, like steel, leafless trees, stood immobile in the gray afternoon light, some of them bent, some broken, a few still intact.

Inside, he descended to the subterranean control room. He checked the bank of dials and gauges, listened critically to the steady humming of the big generator. He made the few adjustments that were necessary, then he lay down on the battered couch and tried to sleep. Sleeping made the movie slip by faster, and besides, he was tired, he was always tired...Half-awake, half-asleep, he half-dreamed of all the shifts he had once put in, in this very room, of the shift in particular, when he had crouched behind the thick foundation wall. and listened, terrified, to the sound and fury of Armageddon. Flashback! he thought again, and turned angrily on his side...

The windows were dirty with dusk when he awoke. He got up, checked the control panel once more, and left the building. He started walking. Dogs were barking in the distance and leaves rustled beneath his feet. He stopped in the supermarket for supper, then returned to the street. He walked along, whistling, “Home on the Range.” Night had fallen, and the ragged sequence of lights supplied by the last generator straggled like incoherent morse code towards the last theater.

His footsteps quickened. He no longer felt the cold, nor the loneliness, nor the fear. The marquee was an oasis of reassuring brightness, of twinkling, multicolored lights that spelled out The Man With The Golden Gun. He entered the foyer, hurried down the aisle between the rows of empty seats to the place where he always sat. The wide, rectangular screen was already flushed with technicolored reality. There were plains and mountains and rivers; valleys, hills, trees—

Laramie reined his horse on the lip of the valley. He shifted to a more comfortable position in the saddle, tilted his sombrero so that it shaded his keen gray eyes. There was a ranch house in the valley, and the green land for miles around was stippled with grazing cattle. In the distance a small town showed, and Laramie visualized swinging doors and gun fights, and beautiful women waiting to be fought for.

He spurred his horse gently, nosed it down the green hillside. He could almost smell the adventure and the romance and the happiness that would soon be his. And he promised himself that this time, when he took Ellen in his arms, he would not forsake her for a horror picture about the sole survivor of World War III.

But he knew he would. After an hour and a half, the reality of the western plains had an inexorable tendency to turn into the fantasy of the bombed-out city. Once, a long time ago it seemed now, things had been the other way around: the city had been the reality, the plains, the fantasy.

But if you were the last man in the world, you had to have something to live for, even if it meant sacrificing your sanity—

Besides, who was there around to call you crazy?