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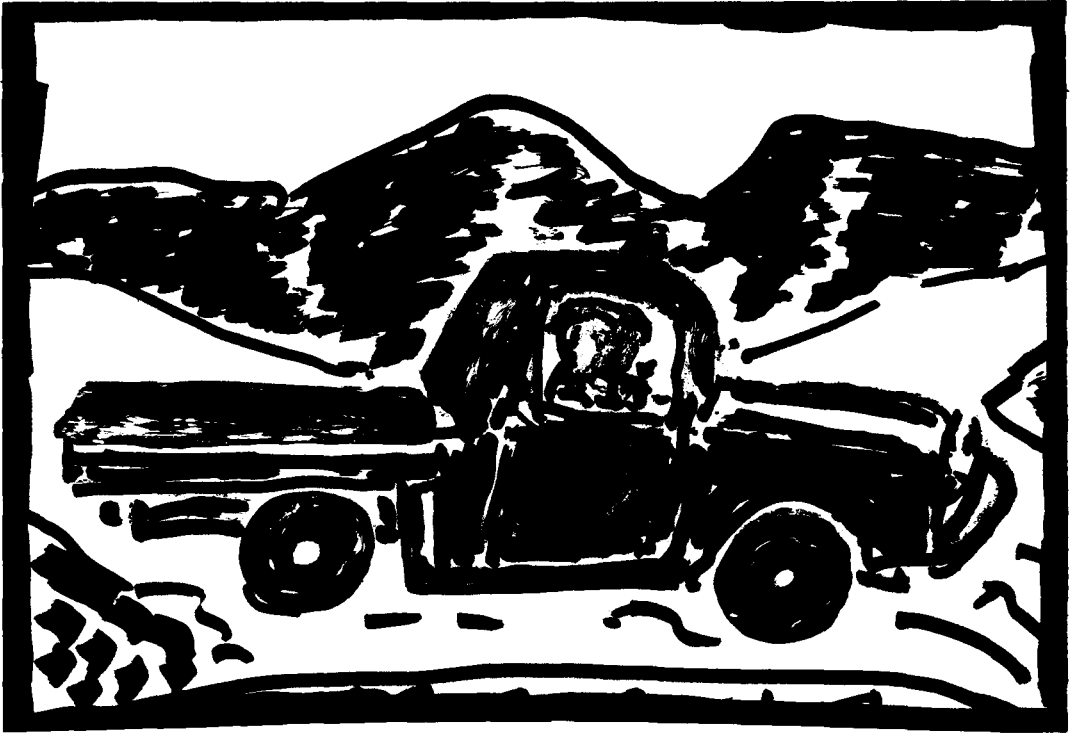
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THE LAW

by J.C. Starker

The Folks in Cherokee Hollow had their own ideas about the "Law", especially when it had to do with kinfolk troubles.

The James boy had been missing for three weeks when folks in Cherokee Hollow became a little worried over his being gone. Somebody suggested sending down for the sheriff. They wouldn't have said anything about the law if it hadn't been for the red scarf the dogs drug down the road leading out of the hollow one hot August evening. The boy had kept the scarf, dirty and ragged as it was, tied around his neck the whole summer he'd been visiting the Mullinses, cousins on his father's side thrice removed. No, they weren't the type of folk who had much to do with the law, except for an occasional case of

paying fines to bring somebody home out of jail for drinking too much where drinking too much put a man behind bars. "Give unto Caesar," someone would say, and two or three of the men would go down out of the mountains, go forty miles away to Bowling Green, and bring home the poor foolish soul who'd gotten caught in Caesar's land. The young boys were warned not to have truck with the big town, and the young girls were told stories that made them stick close to the mountains and the church. But the red scarf, telling what it told coming down the road with the dogs, wouldn't have been carried outside

the hills if the boy had been close blood. Close blood would have called for something else besides the telling of it to the law in Bowling Green. It was, one old man in the hollow said, a duty-bound telling because the boy was from Detroit and his people up there would want something said to the law. People in the city liked things written down on a record. That was what the old man said and he knew because once he had visited a cousin in the city and learned that records were almost more important than people in places like that.

Jesse Estep was chosen as one of the carriers of the scarf because he had the only running motor in the hollow. Chester Riley was sent along with him since Chester had been over to Bowling Green two or three times and hadn't gotten into trouble. He was, folks had a mind to say, a man who could get along better than most with the law. He'd look after Jesse and the truck and whatever else that came up.

Cherokee Hollow was tucked back into a group of mountains that rolled on and on across the whole state of Kentucky. At least that's what most people in the hollow believed. The twelve families who had settled there, breeding until the hollow was full of Esteps and Rileys and Claytons and Mullinses, had long ago decided that Cherokee Hollow was, in fact, the center of the state. There wasn't any use to go looking outside for anything much worth the time it took to look, they'd tell the young folk growing up, no use at all. They intermarried, worked hard for the company man who gave them a shovel and told them where to dig for coal, and they went to church when a preacher showed up to marry someone or give them back

to God. It was August, 1938, when Jesse and Chester went looking for the law.

"Dang it, Jesse, you ain't got good springs on this thing," Chester shouted as soon as the truck started down the bumpy road leading out of the hollow.

"The heck I don't," Jesse shouted back. "I got the best danged springs on this truck you'll ever ride on."

Chester leaned out the broken side window of the flatbed truck and watched the front tire wobble badly after they bounced through a deep hole in the road.

"Your derned tires is about to fall off, too," he grunted.

Jesse leaned out his side and gave a low whistle through his teeth, then ducked back in with a chuckle rolling out of his throat.

"Derned if them ain't good tires," he said. "Got them from that boy who runs the filling station down in Brookside."

Chester sighed and worked his shoulders to loosen up the stiffness that sitting in the truck always shook into him.

"And I'm betting he was about to burn them," he groaned.

Jesse laughed and gave a blast on the horn he'd just finished putting in.

"Ain't that the prettiest sound you ever heard, Chester?"

"Now, no. Druther hear a bull beller."

They rode on in silence past the mouth of the hollow and turned off onto a two-lane dirt road running toward Brookside. Jesse hung one of his long arms out the window while driving with one hand and tried to catch a fistful of dust blowing up from the road. He

loved the feel of moving, loved to watch the trees and mountains rush beside him. Sometimes he became so carried away trying to catch the dust and watching things move that he forgot to watch the road and Chester would yell out, "Heck, boy, you want to git us kilt?" Then the tires would try to grab a piece of the mountain and Jesse would jerk the wheel around so they could get back where they belonged once more. Chester would duck his long, sober face and pretend to cover his head against the impact. Once they were clear he'd raise his blue eyes toward Jesse and say a few "dangs" or worse. He said a-plenty going over the two mountains they crossed to reach Brookside. After an hour and much warning on Chester's part and laughing on Jesse's, they reached the small town containing a total of ten houses pushed together, a store, a filling station, and the only school house for miles. They'd both gone to school there for a couple of years until they'd learned how to sign their names and call the teacher a fool... or worse.

Jesse pulled into the filling station and laid on the horn until a tall, red-haired boy came out from behind the cement building rubbing his greasy hands on a rag.

"Tuck, you son-of-a-gun. How you all doing?" Jesse called out.

"Split my britches," the boy called back. "What you doing down here again so soon, Jesse?"

Jesse leaned back in the cab of the truck and put his feet up on the dashboard.

"I'm on my way to find the law," he said.

The boy leaned against the window and looked in.

"You running now, Jesse?" he asked. "How's about passing out a snortful for me."

"Shucks, you think I'm that big a fool. Chester and me on our way down to the sheriff in Bowling Green 'count of that cousin of the Mullinses. He's done got into trouble with somebody up in the hills, I reckon."

"You talking about that shikepoke passed through here a few weeks ago... kinda skinny with slick black hair?"

"Now hold on, boy," Jesse said jerking his feet down, "ain't nobody calling names."

The red-haired boy backed up a couple of feet.

"I ain't about to call no names where they don't fit, Jesse. You know me better than that."

Jesse settled back in the seat. "What'd the heck he do down here? Steal one of your rotten tires?"

The boy's face flushed as red as his hair, and his fists curled a little.

"You can have your danged two dollars, Jesse, if you..."

"Now hold on boys," Chester broke in. "Ain't no call to git riled up over a boy none us gived a shuck fer. Come on, Tuck, have your say. Jesse, you tell the boy them's good tires."

Jesse leaned out the window. "Ah, Tuck, I was just saying to Chester these is fine tires. Anyways, the boy was a no-good come to think of it. What with him being dead maybe...didn't seem proper somehow."

Tuck came back over to the truck, a sheepish grin on his face. "Well, why didn't you say so in the first place. I ain't one to go around calling names on the dead."

"Now we don't know the boy's dead exactly," Chester put in. "We've got to get on down to Bowling Green and tell what we know fer the records up in Detroit."

"How's come you called him a no-good," Jesse asked. "Besides us knowing he couldn't tell beans from bullfoot."

"All I know," the boy said, "is that he got into it over at Silas's store with some boys from up your way. Don't recall exactly which ones...wait now, somebody name of Clem believe was one... but was about some girl hereabouts he'd been see'd with. That boy got to bragging. Seems that girl got caught with her skirt up. Anyways, they busted up the store real good with their fighting and then this boy near split Silas's head when he tried to break it up. That's all I know. Nobody around here took to him trying to bust Silas's head."

Chester poked Jesse in the side to shut him up. There wasn't but one Clem left up in the hollow and he had a brother who followed him around like a pup.

"That's poor showing," Chester said, leaning over Jesse. "Poor showing. You tell Silas we're mighty sorry over it and there won't be no more trouble from our boys. I'll see to it myself."

"You fellers want some gas?" the boy asked, sensing that there wasn't going to be anymore talk about the trip to Bowling Green.

"Sure enough," Jesse said, "and give me a couple of them R.C.'s to drink along the way."

The boy turned and pulled down the hose for the gas.

"Hell fire," Jesse whispered to Chester, "you hear that about them Mullins boys?"

Chester nodded and rubbed his hands

through his blonde hair. "Shucks" he muttered, "ain't two finer boys in the holler."

Tuck finished filling the tank and then went to get the Colas. "That'll be two dollars," he said as he handed the R.C.'s through the window to Jesse.

Jesse pulled out the money and started to hand it to him, but kept a hold on one corner. The boy looked up into Jesse's coal-black eyes.

"I'd appreciate it, Tuck, if you'd fergit the one was named Clem," Jesse said real low.

Tuck looked down at the broad hand that held the other end of the dollar and shrugged.

"I don't reckon I heard about nobody named Clem," he said.

Jesse let go of the dollar and yawned. "You tell Silas we're real sorry about his trouble. Ain't gonna be no more from our neck of the woods."

"Sure will," Tuck said obligingly. "Ain't no hard feelings neither way now."

"Thank you, Tuck. Thank you kindly."

"No bother, Jesse," the boy yelled as Jesse stepped on the accelerator and the truck bumped back onto the road.

He drove for ten minutes as hard as the old engine would go, then he let up on the pedal and took to watching the curves come at him a little slower. He snorted and leaned closer to the windshield, hoping to see better through the dust covered glass. The thought that a good wipe or two might make it easier to see flickered through his head, but he ignored that and squinted his eyes a bit more.

"Heck, what are we going to do now?" he asked, shifting the rocking truck into

first gear as they started to climb the mountain.

Chester rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Yep, you plum forgot to ask Tuck to wipe the glass,” he answered slowly.

“Chester Riley, you know danged well what I’m talking about, and it ain’t that derned glass.”

“I know what you’re talking about all right. I’m just thinking, that’s all.”

The road curled up the side of the mountain, weaving and twisting like the grapevine deep in the woods. Halfway up they crossed over to Potter County where someone had thought to spread pitch over the dirt so that dust wouldn’t fly back on anyone unlucky enough to be following behind the heavy coal trucks that used the road. Chester could feel the tires pick up loose rocks with the pitch and then heard the rocks thrown up against the bottom of the truck.

“Dang,” he swore, “why don’t folks leave well enough alone. I swear all a body would have to do is start sliding and we’d be over the side.” He looked over the shoulder out the back window of the truck. They were high up now, almost to the top, and looking down on the world with just a little bit of luck holding them up there. On the bad curves, the ones you couldn’t see around, the county had put up little wire fences no higher than a man’s kneecap. More than one had been torn down as some wild boy, showing off, tried to make the curve too fast. Deep holes yawned through the trees where the fence was pushed away. Chester shuddered.

“Reckon how far you’d fall,” he asked as he slid down in the seat, “I mean with the weight of the truck raking back them bushes and hitting trees and all?”

Jesse swore and stopped to wipe his side of the windshield as soon as they reached the top of the mountain.

“you worry a person, Chester,” he said with a grin. “Worry the hell out of them sometimes.”

He eased off the brake going down the other side, but he kept his foot hovering over it, pressing down quickly when the truck took to rolling faster than it should. Fifteen minutes later they hit the straight section of the road which ran on for ten miles hugging the foot of the mountain before it started to climb again.

“I been thinking,” Chester said, “I been thinking on what Tuck told us. It don’t take much sense to figure it out.”

“Shucks,” Jesse laughed, “that sheriff down in Bowling Green ain’t got no sense at all.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but we go on down there with this here red bandana,” Chester said grabbing the scarf off the floor board and flinging it on the dash, “and tell them dogs drug it down the holler and even the stupid sheriff gonna feel bound to come along asking questions. It don’t take no sense to start putting Clem Mullins and that missing boy together.”

“Tuck said. . .”

“Tuck, hell, everybody in Brookside knows about that fight at Silas’s.”

Jesse slowed down and turned his head toward Chester.

“Won’t nobody up there talk to the law.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Folks most likely mad at all three of them boys,” Chester said. “No matter what happened, Clem was that boy’s cousin on his daddy’s side. Folks in Brookside

might start calling names to the law seeing as how them boys was kin. Ain't no telling."

Jesse grunted and turned back toward the road just in time to miss hitting the side of the mountain.

"What you reckon happened up in them woods, Chester, to make them boys fight kin against kin?"

Chester scratched the back of his neck and looked up toward thick, shadowed woods.

"Way I got it figured," he said, "Way I got it figured is that boy from Detroit got to messing with Clem's girl. That boy weren't too smart. In fact, he was downright mean come to think on it. Ain't like Clem to cause trouble. I'm reckoning that boy was mean and Clem had call."

Jesse shifted into first gear again at the foot of the mountain where the county had decided to lay paving. The truck bounced and then settled on the smooth hot road. A huge sign warned against falling rock.

"That's about how I figured it too," he said. "Hey, Chester, you 'member a couple of years back when Clem's daddy fell under that coal car down at Number 4?"

"Yer derved tooten, I 'member. Ain't nothing gonna make me ferget. I was one of them that held him down while they cut off his leg. Course, wouldn't much cutting left to do after that car rolled over it. It was clean cut."

"Them boys done right by their ma, Chester. They been good boys and took proper care of her and their crippled daddy ever since."

"I knowed that, Jesse."

"Don't seem right somehow going

down to Bowling Green to see that sheriff about something that was kin trouble. Don't seem right."

Chester stretched his long legs and looked back down the way they'd come up. Just a little slip, a slight bounce in the wrong direction could kill a man on the mountain, and most of the time his own foolishness could be blamed for his end.

"I recollect hearing ," he said slowly, "that the boy's people in Detroit sent him down here to keep him out of jail for robbing a store. 'Member, too, he was bragging about that and bragging about beating somebody over the head with a shotgun butt while doing it."

"Yep, that's what I heard," Jesse agreed. "That James boy had a mean streak running clear through him." He looked down at his rough hands hugging the steering wheel. "You reckon he hit some old man like Silas over the head up there in Detroit?"

"Reckon he wouldn't minded doing something like that. No, reckon he wouldn't," Chester muttered.

He whistled for a while, thinking about that old man up in Detroit. He thought until he had the whole thing clear in his mind.

"When we git up to the top," he said finally, "let's stop fer a spell. I got a notion we need to stretch our legs before we walk in to see that sheriff."

Jesse nodded thoughtfully and Chester went on whistling until they came to a halt on a narrow path of grass beside the road. From there they could look down the mountain to the buildings in Bowling Green, fifteen miles away. Chester could imagine the heat weaving up from the narrow crowded streets in the town, so

thick that it made people forget the sweetness of the wind blowing in to clean a man's mind so that he could see things clearly. He opened the door of the old truck and stepped out. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and stood staring downward. Jesse came up beside him and squatted down, picking a blade of grass to chew on.

"That town is fifteen miles away," Chester said softly, "yet a man can stand up here and watch that town wake up and go to sleep. But there ain't a man down there can look up here and figure us standing beside the road watching. The law down there can't see past them trees at the foot of this mountain. They just look up and all they can see is trees and a lot of mountain. They got so far away, they can't see the men on it. Don't even want to know most the time. And when they do come looking, they still just see trees." He bent over and picked up a rock from the side of the road. The sunshine bouncing off the pavement flooded onto his face and he was blinded for a moment as he straightened up and weighed the rock in his hand.

"What we gonna tell the sheriff, Chester?" Jesse asked, taking the blade of grass out of his mouth and holding it.

"Way I reckon," Chester said slowly, "way I reckon is we ain't got no choice except to tell him something fer them records up in Detroit...something like maybe that boy got hisself drowned in Yellow River."

"Ain't good," Jesse said in agreement, "these being dog days and all, to go swimming in the river. A youngen in the mountains knows that you could come down with the fever or worse."

Chester tossed the rock from one hand to the other, swaying a moment before he answered. "That boy, him being from Detroit, took it in his head to go in by hisself. Went in down below the holler, across the road in back of Old Man Jessup's place where the river's so yellow this time of year that a man can't judge how deep it is or how swift it might be under."

He threw the rock over the side of the mountain, watching it twist and turn and then disappear into the trees.

"I bet I could never find that rock again if I looked a hundred years," he said, "but them dogs, though, them dogs found the bandana. Found it down by the river, I reckon, and drug it back up the holler. I reckon Clem would agree with the way I figure."

Jesse spit out a piece of grass and stood up. "That's what I been thinking, too. And that sheriff ain't gonna question kin sending down word about kin drowning. He ain't that stupid."

He looked up at Chester's sober face.

"You figure that girl Clem's fixing to marry, you figure it was her they took to fighting over. They's saying she's in the family way. Maybe it ain't Clem's..."

"I don't reckon, Jesse," Chester said climbing back into the truck, "that's any of our figuring to do."

The trip down the other side of the mountain was smooth on the paved road, smooth like Yellow River looked in August. Jesse drove slowly with both hands on the wheel and his foot close to the brake. He had decided, he told Chester, that a man couldn't be too careful when he didn't know the lay of the road very well.