

The Bones Of Dragons

By Gus Prouty | 3897 words

The barren Colorado plains stretched out below Jack Carpenter. His perch amid the rocky outcroppings of the hill let Jack survey the entire valley. It made finding his target almost too easy. His employer had given him very clear directions. The wagon was due to be passing through these parts by mid-day, find it, and relieve it of its contents. The drivers were not to have any say in this.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the wagon finally came into view from behind the nearest mesa. Shifting from his haunches Jack stood, stretched, and turned to his horse. The bronco stamped his hooves and whinnied miserably.

“Come on, Lazy Ass. Time to earn your keep,” Jack said, pulling himself into the saddle with the ease of a lifetime rider.

Despite Lazy Ass’s protests, Jack’s spurs were enough motivation to get him down the hill and towards the unsuspecting wagon below. Only a few minutes after spotting it, Jack was within shouting distance of his quarry. The two drivers looked at each other uneasily. The man before them had to be in his late forties at least, almost an old man. But there was something about his posture. The way he carried himself, upright in his saddle as if he still held the utmost confidence in himself. Someone who rode like that was either truly experienced or a fool. Either was just as dangerous.

“Howdy fellas,” Jack said, an easy grin on his face.

It was in the next moment, when the drivers once again turned to each other, seeming to have decided on fool, that Jack made his move. His revolver was in his hand lighting quick and four shots echoed out across the empty plains.

The horse's reins fell away neatly, almost sliced clean by the four bullets, now only hanging limply from the hands of the stunned drivers. The drivers went for their own weapons only to stop short at the sound of Jack's hammer being cocked back.

"Now, now fellas, I still got two rounds left. I'd just as soon use 'em as not, so how 'bout you boys decide for me. You can climb on those horses and ride on back the way you came none the worse for wear. I'd be happy to look after this here cargo while you're gone. You can even tell your bosses that. Course if you'd rather help me find a couple of targets to shoot at, that'd be fine by me. So what'll it be?" Jack leveled his gun at the pair, a look of utmost patience on his face.

Ten minutes later Jack was watching the driver's backs disappear from view as they tore away from their forgotten cargo. Satisfied that they were too far away for an ambush, Jack finally allowed himself to inspect his prize. Content that Lazy Ass was grazing nearby, Jack pulled the tarp back to reveal the wagon's treasures.

The empty eye sockets of several strange and massive skulls stared back at him. So these are dinosaurs, though were might be more accurate. Jack still couldn't wrap his head around the scale of it all. Animals older than the rivers, the rocks, even the land itself? It didn't seem possible. He heard from somewhere that the people who found the first of these thought they were the bones of dragons. That seemed a better description from where Jack was standing.

Then again he was no expert in these things. Though the so called expert who hired him didn't seem much more interested in these old bones than Jack was. He seemed far more concerned with keeping them out of the hands of his rival. The whole thing didn't strike Jack as particularly intellectual. Just another contest between two men over who's was bigger. That, Jack

had plenty of experience in, as well as what usually happened when those contests grew to involve other people. People like him.

He shook himself from his thoughts. The two boys who were transporting these bones were going to be fine. A bit wounded in their pride but that particular wound was rarely fatal. A little bit of petty theft never hurt anybody too badly, after all. At least that was Jack's experience.

Escaping his thoughts through action, Jack began to pack away the largest bones into Lazy Ass's saddle bags. The bronco grumbled as best as a horse could about the added weight, but stood still enough. Among the various oddly shaped bones Jack was happy to discover a few other treasures.

First, a couple sticks of dynamite. This would make his next task a good bit simpler. After he had all of the best bones packed away, he was to dispose of the bits and pieces left over however he could. Jack was worrying that would mean reburying them somewhere out of the way. But fortunately those two boys had given him a much faster solution.

The whole order struck him as silly in the first place. If these old things were so important, then why was it so easy to order him to destroy them? Personally Jack wasn't too keen on the idea. Despite his doubts about their identification, he had to admit that there something appealing to him about the bones. He felt bad just blowing them to kingdom come, as if he was destroying something rare and precious. Still, he wasn't being paid for his opinions.

Before the fireworks however, there was one other thing buried in the cart that caught his eye. A map, outlining the various sites where people pulled these bones from the ground. Jackpot, this was the ticket to an even bigger payday. If he could secure an entire dig site in addition to just these bones, then his employer would surely be willing to up his fee. Hell, even if

the place had already been claimed, another location to steal bones from was sure to make his boss's day.

Double checking that he had all that he could carry, he lit the stick of dynamite with the longest fuse. Tossing it into the back of the wagon he road Lazy Ass hard to get clear of the blast. The horse shivered from the force of the explosion. Jack reached down to gently pet his head. It was alright. Today was a good day and it was only going to get better.

Even riding at a good clip, or at least Lazy Ass's best approximation, it was still most of the day to get to the dig site. The sun was beginning to peek behind the ever looming mountains when Jack at last made it to the edge of the gully overlooking the site. A collection of scrappy tents huddled together in the basin of what had, at one time, been a raging river. Tarps were stretched over various hollows in the earth to protect their contents from the winds.

That combined with the nearly dozen people gathered round the beginnings of a fire had Jack cursing his rotten luck. Until his eyes adjusted to the light and he realized the situation was a good bit more complicated than he first anticipated.

The men weren't gathered round the fire in the traditional sense. An inner circle of men sat with their backs towards the flames, while the four or five men in the outer circle stood with pistols leveled at the others. This was a hold up.

Reflex honed through years of close scrapes had Jack pulling Lazy Ass back from the edge as quickly and quietly as he could. Once he was satisfied the horse wouldn't get him spotted he lashed his reins to the nearest rock. For his part Lazy Ass just seemed content to not have to walk anymore.

Dropping onto his belly, Jack inched his way back to the edge of the gully. Peeking over again he saw to his relief that his reaction hadn't tipped anybody off to his presence. Jack didn't exactly fancy taking on half a dozen men with only his horse for backup. His heart went out to those folks down by the fire, honestly it did. But it wasn't his job to protect people any more.

Movement drew Jack's eye to one of the tents. Another man emerged from inside. His posture told Jack that he was one of the bandits, and he wasn't very happy with the situation. But it was only once this man made his way by the fire that Jack really *saw* him. That scar drawn up from one corner of his mouth gave him the look of a perpetual smirk, and those blue eyes that even at this distance seemed to bore right into Jack's soul. This wasn't right. Jack couldn't know this man, he just couldn't.

And suddenly Jack was no longer a man in his late forties, working from payday to payday as a 'dinosaur rustler' on the wide open plains of Colorado. He was a thirty something lawman for the town of Perfection, Nevada. Some folks had come into his office earlier that day, scared out of their wits over cattle bandits that had been spotted in the area.

So he rode on out to the last spot they'd been seen and sure enough, there they were, living it up after rustling a particularly big batch of cattle. It wasn't a long fight. The guys were as green as they were mean. Jack barely got a word off before the shooting started. Thankfully for Jack, the rustlers missed, he didn't.

That's how he came to be standing over the only survivor of the bunch, barely old enough to shave. The boy was nursing a bullet wound on his arm. The scar on his face made it look like he was smirking at Jack even as his piercing blue eyes clouded with fear.

"Please don't kill me, Sherriff," the boy said. Jack looked back at him impassively, gun still leveled squarely at his chest.

“What’s your name kid?” Jack asked.

“Bobby. Bobby Styx, sir. So please don’t kill me.”

“Why are you here Bobby? What would your mamma think if she knew you were rustling cattle?” Bobby blinked, seemingly taken aback by the question.

“She’s dead, sir. Guess that accounts for how I ended up out here. But please, if you let me go I’ll never do another bad thing as long as I live. You can keep my gun and my horse and I’ll just walk on out of your hair. Please sir, we weren’t trying to hurt nobody.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Jack said under his breath but evidently not under enough as Bobby froze, eyes widened in fear. Jack sighed, a long exhale through his nose. “I ever see you around these parts again I’ll shoot you on principle, you hear?”

Bobby didn’t seem to hear at first but then all of a sudden he was shaking and nodding. He gathered himself up and began sprinting out into the open desert plains.

“Oh, thank you sir. Thank you!” Jack didn’t think it was worth that much but he shrugged and returned to his horse where Bobby quickly faded from his mind. Though sometimes he did wonder whatever happened to that boy he let run off into the desert. That was until a few years later when gold was found in the hills nearby Perfection. Then he tried not to think of much at all.

The fever hit and it hit bad. Brother turned on brother, father on son. It seemed like the whole town had torn itself apart over night. Jack himself could be charged for a good chunk of that as there seemed no end to the people forcing him to do them in. Friends and neighbors suddenly ended by his own hand. And the kicker to it all, the precious gold that cost so many lives turned out to be only the fool’s variety which Jack, in a dark way, found incredibly fitting.

By that point, there weren't enough people left to make up a dinner party never mind a town and Perfection became just another casualty of the west. It took Jack's sense of justice with it. He didn't like to hurt people, it wasn't his nature, but he was done raising his gun for anyone other than himself.

As soon as they had come the memories began to fade back into the mists of his mind, leaving Jack feeling older and more tired than he had in a long time. Suddenly he wanted nothing better than a long nap in a cool place. But it didn't seem like that was in the cards any time soon.

Jack's sudden return to reality had him jolt physically, and this knocked off some loose material from the gully's edge. It wasn't much but the clattering earth was enough to catch the attention of the bandits below, particularly Bobby. His eyes met Jack's for a brief moment.

In a flash Jack was on his feet, gun in his hand. He was firing before half the men knew what was happening. But they caught on quick and they had a lot more guns. A searing hot pain ripped up Jack's arm, causing him to almost drop his gun. It wasn't a bad graze, but it sure felt like one.

As Jack shifted back due to the pain, the loose gravel under his feet gave way and he found himself sliding down the side of gully. This time he did drop the gun. When he landed his ass on the dried riverbed, it was hard enough to twist his whole body up in agony. When he next opened his eyes, half a dozen gun barrels were leveled at him. Smiling down from behind the closest one was Bobby Styx's scarred face.

“Hell of a small world, ain't it Sherriff?”

The bandits, at the behest of Bobby Styx, wasted no time in dragging Jack over to the fire and the other hostages. But he wasn't tied up with the others. No, he was thrown down in front of Bobby, definitely the ringleader of all this, so the two could 'catch up' as Bobby put it.

"What's it been? Must be near twenty years," Bobby said.

Jack grunted in response.

"It really is hell, growing old I mean. I can't imagine what it's like for you. I'm barely thirty and I already feel like my best years are behind me," Bobby looked to Jack for some confirmation but only got a glare.

"Is there a point to this or can I bleed in peace?" Jack said. It was like Bobby never heard him at all.

"So about a year back I was holding up this Chinaman, and he gets to talking, begging really, but that's beside the point. See, he tells me about this thing the emperors used to do when they were getting old. They would grind up dragons' bones and drink them, and then they would keep on living, maybe forever. So of course I shot him. But then I got to thinking, I'm no emperor, but then what's the harm in giving it a try?"

"Well sorry, but I haven't seen too many dragons round these parts, can't help ya I'm afraid."

"That's the rub isn't it? But tell me, what do you think this looks like?" Bobby held up a drawing of a large lizard like thing with horns and a long spikey tail. Suddenly it clicked for Jack.

"These men aren't digging up dragons' bones," Jack said like he was explaining it to a small child.

“Says who? Some eggheads who can’t even figure out if they have the head or the ass end of these things? Well I say, if it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, and acts like a duck then it’s a dragon. Not that it matters, bastards haven’t found any bones, not even one.” Jack’s veins turned to ice. “But you did, didn’t you Sherriff?”

Jack said nothing.

“That’s why I was so happy to run into you again. I heard about how you’ve been making your living and I have a proposition for you. You’ve got enough bones for the lot of us. Why don’t you come ride with us and we’ll split them?”

“You want me to ride with you?” Jack was dumbfounded.

“Rustling bones and cattle ain’t so different. How I figure it, you’re just like me back when we first met. So why not run together? You could use a little extra life more than any of us,” Bobby ended his pitch with an almost eerily genuine smile.

Jack didn’t say anything right away. What could he say? This man was clearly nuts, but so what? He could go along with it at least until he found a chance to escape. But what would he have to be party to until that time came? The deaths of these workers surely. Jack tried to imagine it, his own face placed over the faces of the various men he had seen commit such acts of cold blooded murder. Could he do it? Would he even want to leave by the time he had found the opportunity, if he did? Deep down Jack already knew the answer.

“You can have your bones,” Jack said, Bobby’s face began to break into a smile, “just as soon as I shove them up your ass.”

Bobby’s face fell much quicker, some ghostly approximation of sadness lingered on it. Before he could speak again a commotion drew all heads towards the edge of the gully.

It was Lazy Ass, of all things. The horse had dragged the rock he was tied to all the way to the edge of the cliff in his panic at the gun shots. Of course, the bronco didn't expect it when the rock slipped over the edge and pulled him along with it.

As all attention focused on his horse, Jack made his move. He threw himself at the nearest gunman, tackling him to the ground. This prompted a few of the hostages to also make their own plays and charge the bandits. Pandemonium erupted in the dig site.

Jack managed to wrestle the man's rifle away from him. One shot ended any further struggling. He made a b-line for Lazy Ass who had just about shaken himself free from his anchor as well as most of the packs he was carrying. As soon as the reins came free he was off sprinting in no particular direction. All the horses in the camp, both worker and bandit alike, followed his lead.

But Jack wasn't concerned about that he was more interested in the packs Lazy Ass left behind. He just made it to the bags and a low wash he could use as cover when the bandits opened fire. He tried to return the favor but he was playing against a loaded deck. He had to fire with his off arm and he couldn't even steady his aim without locking up from pain. The best he could hope for was a lucky shot.

Jack ducked down focusing his whole attention on rooting through his bags. The sounds of the gunshots told him the bandits were advancing on him. It just about sounded like they were on top of him when he finally found what he needed.

As the two bandits sprung over the wash expecting to find a wounded Jack, they instead saw a stick of dynamite with its fuse almost burned up. The resulting explosion drowned out any thoughts they had on *that* discovery.

Jack was far enough clear to watch the fireball created set several tarps and tents alight. Now the place looked like how it felt, hell. Most of the workers were fleeing like ghosts into the night. The few that were staying to fight seemed to be taking equal losses as the bandits they were fighting.

A bullet whizzing past his head sent Jack scrambling behind the nearest feeding trough that had not yet caught fire. As he popped up to return fire he saw who his target was, Bobby. The empty clicking of his gun sent Jack back down almost immediately. Damn it. He had one bag of bones that he snagged before hightailing it. How was that supposed to win him a gunfight? The bag slipped open a bit in his loose grip and he happened to get a look inside. Well, if that was his only option.

“I give up!” Jack shouted from across the battlefield.

“What?” Bobby’s voice was skeptical.

“I’m out of bullets. I’ve got the last bag of bones with me, trade them for my life.”

“So that what you want? A reverse of how we first met.”

“If that’s what it will take. I don’t feel like dying, I’m begging here.”

“Fine, walk them to me.”

“Not if you still have your gun drawn.”

“Alright, just start moving.”

So Jack walked, as calmly as he could amid the sound of gunfire, and met with Bobby in the middle of the maelstrom. Jack passed him the bag, Bobby took it, seemed satisfied by its weight, and then shot Jack in his other arm.

“Just as long as we’re revisiting old times, see you around Sheriff.”

Jack, knocked down by the shot, tried to crawl away from Bobby as quick as he could. This may have concerned Bobby more if not for the low sizzling sound that he discovered coming from the bag. Pulling it open he was just in time to see the last of the fuse disappear into the stick of dynamite nestled amid the various bones.

“Aw shi-,” that’s all Bobby managed before being engulfed in the explosion.

Jack’s prone position helped protect him from the blast, but he did get a clear view of the results. And he had to cringe at whatever force saw fit to smite Bobby Styx with such an ironic end. The force of the blast had driven several of the dinosaur teeth in the bag straight into Bobby’s chest, in a half moon eerily similar to a jaw mark. It was as if a dragon had bitten Bobby about the head and shoulders.

Jack lay there as the last of the fighters either gave up and ran or gave up and died. He may have lost consciousness or just passed into sleep. He wasn’t sure. All he did know is that the next time he awoke it was to horse slobber all over his face. Lazy Ass stood there preening proudly.

“Don’t act like any of this was your idea,” Jack said as he managed to pull himself up into the saddle. Lazy Ass snorted but began a brisk trot towards the nearest town.

If Jack made it that far he would collapse in front of the nearest doctor, and if he somehow made it past even that, then he didn’t know. Maybe he would stick around and see if the place needed any extra lawmen. He hadn’t quite decided yet. The one thing he did know was that he was out of the rustling game, dinosaur or not. He didn’t want anything to do with any more dragons’ bones.

The last of the sun disappeared behind the mountains. Jack’s eyes slipped shut along with it. It was finally cool and so he slept.