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"A Date with the Hangman"

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"ODE TO T.V. PRODUCTION 1"

*The lights are on.
The stage is set.
The cameras wait in ready.
The Director sits in the highest seat,
Nervous, hot and sweaty.*

*The floor manager awaits his first command,
just to give the signal.
The actor's raring to go, yet
pale and green and dismal.*

*Oh, the dream of a perfect take,
the master gives his directions
But then, one small unexpected mistake
and all are in a mist of rejection!*

*But try and try again say we.
I know we'll win out in T. V. 3*

— Sharon Murphy

"A Date with the Hangman"

by Scott Tomkowiak

As of this moment, I share a prison cell with five rather large rats and a colony of cockroaches. It has been six sweltering days since the U.S. marshals threw me into this wooden lockup and I can't wait to get out. Even so, I'm a doomed man. In about thirty minutes, I, along with five other shackled men will face the gallows and the devil. From my small barred, window I can see the hideous concoction that will transport me into the next life. Outside, I view wagonloads of townspeople, settlers and other hangers-on to watch this event. My God, there must be over a thousand people out in that field!

Thoughts race around in my head quicker than the fastest stagecoach. Maybe President McKinley will grant me a last minute pardon to set me free. If that happens, I might croak anyway. Regardless, this isn't a fairytale. Pardons for scum like myself come once in a blue moon.

My memory sends me back to two weeks ago when I shot that grimy cowpoke for his new boots and fancy ivory six-shooter. The blood came gushing out of his chest so rapidly that his body looked like a red oil well. He deserved all the pain I gave him, for calling me a lazy, no good, sonofabitch. I watched him die there in the dust with a great deal of pleasure. As luck would have it, there were witnesses to what I did that would eventually seal my fate. Perhaps I would have done the same thing if I were in their position.

In front of my cell door, the clock reads 6:30 a.m. In less than thirty minutes it will all be over. The crowd outside has more than doubled since the last time I looked out, most of them being curiosity seekers. The newspapers around the country publicized the multiple hangings as the "executions of the century." It was played up big, my story and the others as well, along with a few interviews with the parties involved. There has been a lot of hype about this day, mainly since something like this has never happened in Hicksville before.

For my last meal, the guard gave me a plate of cold beans which I promptly threw back in his face. I specifically requested steak and lobster, and a woman for dessert. Unfortunately, fancy foods and females are in short supply here.

The local preacher has just entered and he is asking God to have mercy on my soul. He's also talking about burning in hell while a cold sweat runs down my neck. It is now that the butterflies in my stomach are giving me fits.

Could it be that I am afraid to die? And when I do breathe my last breath, what happens after that? Is there a hell that the preacher keeps babbling about? If it exists, what is hell like?

THE WHITE RIDER

*he rode into the night, the destroyer of dragons.
bringing golden light, the first ray master.
he charged straight ahead, the fastest of fast.
tearing through the red, the fiercest of fierce.*

*twas a dangerous mission, deceit was about.
twas a perilous mission, death was common.
he kept to his strategy, he kept to his goal.
he was swift with sheer liberty, he stood true and tall.*

*the night did grow darker, the day was't seen.
the evil was still thicker, the good seemd so far.
-came the white rider, with a battle cry.
his sword did flame higher, his power surged forth.*

*came the white rider, the evil did flee.
came his white legions, the kingdom is saved.*

The questions have certainly popped into the heads of many men before the noose finds its way around their necks. It is a strange and nauseating feeling for me as I look at the clock above the deputy's desk. It reads 6:40.

Now the local sheriff and his assistants walk in with handcuffs and legirons in their hands. My hands are secured behind my back, while my ankles are chained together with just enough play for me to walk. In a few minutes, I'll be walking that last mile.

I ask that I be left alone for a minute or two to write something down for my brother in St. Louis. Just a few lines of scrambled thoughts is all I can think of. Perhaps he will understand, if he cares at all.

My heart skips a beat when I realize it is time to go. The blood pressure in my body rises, and my head feels like it's aflame. For the first time in a week I am in the morning sun.

We are now in the midst of the throng.

"Get ready to meet you maker!" cries a voice from the mob.

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"Get ready to meet your maker!" cries a voice from the mob.

"Hanging them isn't brutal enough! Guillotine them all!" shouts another.

About fifty feet from the platform stands the U.S. marshal who first arrested me.

"It'll satisfy me plenty to see your filthy carcass hanging from the end of that rope, you bastard!" he beams.

With my hands and feet bound, I have no other choice but to spit in his eye and laugh sarcastically. We're all hustled up the stairs and onto the platform.

The ritual begins. The six of us are asked if we have any last request or words we would like to say.

"Let's just get the goddamned thing over with," bellows one prisoner. "I am just as eager to get out of this world as you are to see me go!"

Next, black woolen bags are placed over our heads and the nooses are fit snugly around our necks. The hangman, about 50 years old, is a short man with a walrus mustache and wire glasses. A very homely fellow.

With the preacher saying the final rites, my mind is wandering. My life has been nothing more than cattle drives, drinking sprees in strange towns, and affairs with nameless women. What words will be inscribed on my epitaph?

"JOHN BURNS. Drinker, gambler, vagabond. Born, January 5, 1869 — Died, August 13, 1899."

I can literally smell the lillies on my grave and can see the mountains and the skies. For a man who is about to die an unnatural death, the sights are breathtaking.

My feet are on the trapdoor, ready for it to suddenly give out on the orders of the executioner. Any second, I'll be ten feet under the platform.

"READY..."

I can hear the heavy breathing of the man next to me. It sounds as though he has water in his lungs.

"SET..."

He's going to spring the trap now! I can hear it creaking!

"Go!!!"

It gives way!!! I'M FALLING AND...