

The Passing of Cock–Eye Blacklock

Frank Norris

Table of Contents

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock.....1
Frank Norris.....2

The Passing of Cock–Eye Blacklock

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock

Frank Norris

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

WELL, m' son," observed Bunt about half an hour after supper, "if your provender has shook down comfortable by now, we might as well jar loose and be moving along out yonder."

We left the fire and moved toward the hobbled ponies, Bunt complaining of the quality of the outfit's meals. "Down in the Panamint country," he growled, "we had a Chink that was a sure frying-pan expert; but this Dago — my word! That ain't victuals, that supper. That's just a' ingenious device for removing superfluous appetite. Next time I assimilate nutriment in this camp I'm sure going to take chloroform beforehand. Careful to draw your cinch tight on that pinto bronc' of yours. She always swells up same as a horned toad soon as you begin to saddle up."

We rode from the circle of the campfire's light and out upon the desert. It was Bunt's turn to ride the herd that night, and I had volunteered to bear him company.

Bunt was one of a fast-disappearing type. He knew his West as the cockney knows his Piccadilly. He had mined with and for Ralston, had soldiered with Crook, had turned cards in a faro game at Laredo, and had known the Apache Kid. He had fifteen separate and different times driven the herds from Texas to Dodge City, in the good old, rare old, wild old days when Dodge was the headquarters for the cattle trade, and as near to heaven as the cow-boy cared to get. He had seen the end of gold and the end of the buffalo, the beginning of cattle, the beginning of wheat, and the spreading of the barbed-wire fence, that, in the end, will take from him his occupation and his revolver, his chaparejos and his usefulness, his lariat and his reason for being. He had seen the rise of a new period, the successive stages of which, singularly enough, tally exactly with the progress of our own world-civilization: first the nomad and hunter, then the herder, next and last the husbandman. He had passed the mid-mark of his life. His mustache was gray. He had four friends — his horse, his pistol, a teamster in the Indian Territory Panhandle named Skinny, and me.

The herd — I suppose all told there were some two thousand head — we found not far from the water-hole. We relieved the other watch and took up our night's vigil. It was about nine o'clock. The night was fine, calm. There was no cloud. Toward the middle watches one could expect a moon. But the stars, the stars! In Idaho, on those lonely reaches of desert and range, where the shadow of the sun by day and the courses of the constellations by night are the only things that move, these stars are a different matter from those bleared pin-points of the city after dark, seen through dust and smoke and the glare of electrics and the hot haze of fire-signs. On such a night as that when I rode the herd with Bunt anything might have happened; one could have believed in fairies then, and in the buffalo-ghost, and in all the weirds of the craziest Apache "Messiah" that ever made medicine.

One remembered astronomy and the "measureless distances" and the showy problems, including the rapid moving of a ray of light and the long years of its travel between star and star, and smiled incredulously. Why, the stars were just above our heads, were not much higher than the flat-topped hills that barred the horizons. Venus was a yellow lamp hung in a tree; Mars a red lantern in a clock-tower. One listened instinctively for the tramp of the constellations. Orion, Cassiopeia, and Ursa Major marched to and fro on the vault like cohorts of legionaries, seemingly within call of our voices, and all without a sound.

But beneath these quiet heavens the earth disengaged multitudinous sounds — small sounds, minimized as it were by the muffling of the night. Now it was the yap of a coyote leagues away; now the snapping of a twig in the sage-brush; now the mysterious, indefinable stir of the heat-ridden land cooling under the night. But more often it was the confused murmur of the herd itself — the click of a horn, the friction of heavy bodies, the stamp of a hoof, with now and then the low, complaining note of a cow with calf, or the subdued noise of a steer as it lay down, first lurching to the knees, then rolling clumsily upon the haunch, with a long, stertorous breath of satisfaction.

Slowly at Indian trot we encircled the herd. Earlier in the evening a prairie-wolf had pulled down a calf, and

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock

the beasts were still restless. Little eddies of nervousness at long intervals developed here and there in the mass — eddies that not impossibly might widen at any time with perilous quickness to the maelstrom of the stampede. So as he rode, Bunt sang to these great brutes, literally to put them to sleep — sang an old grandmother's song, with all the quaint modulations of sixty, seventy, a hundred years ago:

With her ogling winks
And bobbling blinks,
Her quizzing glass,
Her one eye idle,
Oh, she loved a bold dragoon,
With his broadsword, saddle, bridle.
Whack, fol-de-rol!

I remembered that song. My grandmother — so they tell me — used to sing it in Carolina, in the thirties, accompanying herself on a harp, if you please:

Oh, she loved a bold dragoon,
With his broadsword, saddle, bridle.

It was in Charleston, I remembered, and the slave-ships used to discharge there in those days. My grandmother had sung it then to her beaux; officers they were; no wonder she chose it, — "Oh, she loved a bold dragoon," — and now I heard it sung on an Idaho cattle-range to quiet two thousand restless steers.

Our talk at first, after the cattle had quieted down, ran upon all manner of subjects. It is astonishing to note what strange things men will talk about at night and in a solitude. That night we covered religion, of course, astronomy, love-affairs, horses, travel, history, poker, photography, basket-making, and the Darwinian theory. But at last inevitably we came back to cattle and the pleasures and dangers of riding the herd.

"I rode herd once in Nevada," remarked Bunt, "and I was caught into a blizzard, and I was sure freezing to death. Got to where I couldn't keep my eyes open. I was that sleepy. Tell you what I did. Had some eating-tobacco along, and I'd chew it a spell, then rub the juice into my eyes. Kept it up all night. Blame near blinded me, but I come through. Me and another man named Blacklock — Cock-eye Blacklock we called him, by reason of his having one eye that was some out o' line. Cock-eye sure ought to have got it that night, for he went bad afterward, and did a heap of killing before he did get it. He was a bad man for sure, and the way he died is a story in itself." There was a long pause. The ponies jogged on. Rounding on the herd, we turned southward.

"He did 'get it' finally, you say," I prompted.

"He certainly did," said Bunt, "and the story of it is what a man with a' imaginary mind like you ought to make into one of your friction tales."

"Is it about a treasure?" I asked with apprehension. For ever since I once made a tale (of friction) out of one of Bunt's stories of real life, he has been ambitious for me to write another, and is forever suggesting motifs which invariably — I say invariably — imply the discovery of great treasures. With him, fictitious literature must always turn upon the discovery of hidden wealth.

"No," said he, "it ain't about no treasure, but just about the origin, hist'ry, and development — and subsequent decrease — of as mean a Greaser as ever stole stock, which his name was Cock-eye Blacklock."

"You see, this same Blacklock went bad about two summers after our meet-up with the blizzard. He worked down Yuma way and over into New Mexico, where he picks up with a sure-thing gambler, and the two begins to devastate the population. They do say when he and his running mate got good and through with that part of the Land of the Brave, men used to go round trading guns for commissary, and clothes for ponies, and cigars for whisky and such. There just wasn't any money left anywhere. Those sharps had drawn the landscape clean. Some one found a dollar in a floor-crack in a saloon, and the bar-keep' gave him a gallon of forty-rod for it, and used

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock

to keep it in a box for exhibition, and the crowd would get around it and paw it over and say: 'My! my! Whatever in the world is this extremely cu-roos coin?'

"Then Blacklock cuts loose from his running mate, and plays a lone hand through Arizona and Nevada, up as far as Reno again, and there he stacks up against a kid — a little tenderfoot kid so new he ain't cracked the green paint off him — and skins him. And the kid, being foolish and impulsive-like, pulls out a pea-shooter. It was a twenty-two," said Bunt, solemnly. "Yes, the kid was just that pore, pathetic kind to carry a dinky twenty-two, and with the tears runnin' down his cheeks begins to talk tall. Now what does that Cock-eye do? Why, that pore kid that he had skinned couldn't 'a' hurt him with his pore little bric-^-brac. Does Cock-eye take his little parlor ornament away from him, and spank him, and tell him to go home? No, he never. The kid's little tin pop-shooter explodes right in his hand before he can crook his forefinger twice, and while he's a-wondering what-all has happened, Cock-eye gets his two guns on him, slow and deliberate-like, mind you, and throws forty-eights into him till he ain't worth shooting at no more. Murders him like the mud-eating, horse-thieving snake of a Greaser that he is; but being within the law, the kid drawing on him first, he don't stretch hemp the way he should.

"Well, fin'ly this Blacklock blows into a mining-camp in Placer County, California, where I'm chuck-tending on the night shift. This here camp is maybe four miles across the divide from Iowa Hill, and it sure is named a cu-roos name, which it is Why-not. They is a barn contiguous, where the mine horses are kep', and, blame me! if there ain't a weathercock on top of that same, — a golden trotting-horse, — upside down. When the stranger an' pilgrim comes in, says he first off: 'Why'n snakes they got that weathercock horse upside down — why?' says he. 'Why-not,' says you, and the drinks is on the pilgrim.

"That all went very lovely till some gesabe opens up a placer drift on the gar side the divide, starts a rival camp, an' names her Because. The boss gets mad at that, and rights up the weathercock, and renames the camp Ophir, and you don't work no more pilgrims.

"Well, as I was saying, Cock-eye drifts into Why-not and begins diffusing trouble. He skins some of the boys in the hotel over in town, and a big row comes of it, and one of the bead-rock cleaners cuts loose with both guns. Nobody hurt but a quarter-breed, who loses a' eye. But the marshal don't stand for no short-card men, an' closes Cock-eye up some prompt. Him being forced to give the boys back their money is busted an' can't get away from camp. To raise some wind he begins depredating. He robs a pore half-breed of a cayuse, and shoots up a Chink who's panning tailings, and generally and variously becomes too pronounced, till he's run outen camp. He's sure stony-broke, not being able to turn a card because of the marshal. So he goes to live in a' ole cabin up by the mine ditch, and sits there doing a heap o' thinking, and hatching trouble like a' ole he-hen.

"Well, now, with that deporting of Cock-eye comes his turn of bad luck, and it sure winds his clock up with a loud report. I've narrated special of the scope and range of this 'ere Blacklock, so as you'll understand why it was expedient and desirable that he should up an' die. You see, he always managed with all his killings and robbings and general and sundry flimflamming to be just within the law. And if anybody took a notion to shoot him up, why, his luck saw him through, and the other man's shooting-iron missed fire, or exploded, or threw wild, or such like, till it seemed as if he sure did bear a charmed life; and so he did till a pore yeller tamale of a fool dog did for him what the law of the land couldn't do. Yes, sir, a fool dog, a pup, a blame yeller pup named Sloppy Weather, did for Cock-eye Blacklock, sporting character, three-card-monte man, sure-thing sharp, killer, and general bedeviler.

"You see, it was this way. Over in American Canon, some five miles maybe back of the mine, they was a creek called the American River, and it was sure chock-a-block full of trouts. The boss used for to go over there with a dinky fish-pole like a buggy-whip about once a week, and scout that stream for fish and bring back a basketful. He was sure keen on it, and had bought some kind of privilege or other, so as he could keep other people off.

"Well, I used to go along with him to pack the truck, and one Saturday, about a month after Cock-eye had been run outen camp, we hiked up over the divide, and went for to round up a bunch o' trouts. When we got to the river there was a mess for your life. Say, that river was full of dead trouts, floating atop the water; and they was some even on the bank. Not a scratch on 'em; just dead. The boss had the papsy-lals. I never did see a man so rip-r'aring, snorting mad. I hadn't a guess about what we were up against, but he knew, and he showed down. He said somebody had been shooting the river for fish to sell down Sacramento way to the market. A mean trick; kill more fish in one shoot than you can possibly pack.

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock

"Well, we didn't do much fishing that day, — couldn't get a bite for that matter, — and took off home about noon to talk it over. You see, the boss, in buying the privileges or such for that creek, had made himself responsible to the fish commissioners of the State, and 'twasn't a week before they were after him, camping on his trail incessant, and wanting to know how about it. The boss was some worried, because the fish were being killed right along, and the commission was making him weary of living. Twicet afterward we prospected along that river and found the same lot of dead fish. We even put a guard there, but it didn't do no manner of good.

"It's the boss who first suspicions Cock-eye. But it don't take no seventh daughter of no seventh daughter to trace trouble where Blacklock's about. He sudden shows up in town with a bunch of simoleons, buying bacon and tin cows 1; and such provender, and generally giving it away that he's come into money. The boss, who's watching his movements sharp, says to me one day:

"'Bunt, the storm-center of this here low area is a man with a cock-eye, an' I'll back that play with a paint horse against a paper dime.'

"'No takers,' says I. 'Dirty work and a cock-eyed man are two heels of the same mule.'

"'Which it's a-kicking of me in the stummick frequent and painful,' he remarks, plenty wrathful.

"'On general principles,' I said, 'it's a royal flush to a pair of deuces as how this Blacklock bird ought to stop a heap of lead, and I know the man to throw it. He's the only brother of my sister, and tends chuck in a placer mine. How about if I take a day off and drop round to his cabin and interview him on the fleetin' and unstable nature of human life?'

"'But the boss wouldn't hear of that.

"'No,' says he; 'that's not the bluff to back in this game. You an' me an' Mary-go-round' — that was what we called the marshal, him being so much all over the country — 'you an' me an' Mary-go-round will have to stock a sure-thing deck against that maverick.'

"'So the three of us gets together an' has a talky-talk, an' we lays it out as how Cock-eye must be watched and caught red-handed.

"'Well, let me tell you, keeping case on that Greaser sure did lack a certain indefinable charm. We tried him at sun-up, an' again at sundown, an' nights too, laying in the chaparral an' tarweed, an' scouting up an' down that blame river, till we were sore. We built surreptitious a lot of shooting-boxes up in trees on the far side of the canon, overlooking certain an' sundry pools in the river Cock-eye would be likely to pursue operations, an' we took turns watching. I'll be a Chink if that bad egg didn't put it on us same as previous, an' we'd find new-killed fish all the time. I tell you we were fitchered; and it got on the boss's nerves. The commission began to talk of withdrawing the privilege, an' it was up to him to make good or pass the deal. We knew Blacklock was shooting the river, y' see, but we didn't have no evidence. Y' see, being shut off from card-sharpening, he was up against it, and so took to pot-hunting to get along. It was as plain as red paint.

"'Well, things went along sort of catch-as-catch- can like this for maybe three weeks, the Greaser shooting fish regular, an' the boss b'iling with rage, and laying plans to call his hand, and getting bluffed out every deal.

"'And right here I got to interrupt, to talk some about the pup dog Sloppy Weather. If he hadn't got caught up into this Blacklock game, no one'd ever thought enough about him to so much as kick him. But after it was all over, we began to remember this same Sloppy an' to recall what he was; no big job. He was just a worthless fool pup, yeller at that, everybody's dog, that just hung round camp, grinning and giggling and playing the goat, as half-grown dogs will. He used to go along with the car-boys when they went swimmin' in the resevoy, an' dash along in an' yell an' splash round just to show off. He thought it was a keen stunt to get some gesabe to throw a stick in the resevoy so's he could paddle out after it. They'd trained him always to bring it back an' fetch it to whichever party throwed it. He'd give it up when he'd retrieved it, an' yell to have it throwed again. That was his idea of fun — just like a fool pup.

"'Well, one day this Sloppy Weather is off chasing jack-rabbits, an' don't come home. Nobody thinks anything about that, nor even notices it. But we afterward finds out that he'd met up with Blacklock that day, an' stopped to visit with him — sorry day for Cock-eye. Now it was the very next day after this that Mary-go-round an' the boss plans another scout. I'm to go too. It was a Wednesday, an' we lay it out that the Cock-eye would prob'ly shoot that day, so's to get his fish down to the railroad Thursday, so they'd reach Sacramento Friday — fish-day, see. It wasn't much to go by, but it was the high card in our hand, an' we allowed to draw to it.

"'We left Why-not afore daybreak, an' worked over into the canon about sun-up. They was one big pool we

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock

hadn't covered for some time, an' we made out we'd watch that. So we worked down to it, an' clumb up into our trees, an' set out to keep guard.

"In about an hour we heard a shoot some mile or so up creek. They's no mistaking dynamite, leastways not to miners, an' we knew that shoot was dynamite an' nothing else. The Cock-eye was at work, an' we shook hands all round. Then pretty soon a fish or so began to go by -- big fellows, some of 'em, dead an' floatin', with their eyes popped 'way out same as knobs -- sure sign they'd been shot.

"The boss took and grit his teeth when he see a three-pounder go by, an' made remarks about Blacklock.

"'Sh!' says Mary-go-round, sudden-like. 'Listen!'

"We turned ear down the wind, an' sure there was the sound of some one scrabbling along the boulders by the riverside. Then we heard a pup yap.

"'That's our man,' whispers the boss.

"For a long time we thought Cock-eye had quit for the day an' had coppered us again, but byne-by we heard the manzanita crack on the far side the canon, an' there at last we see Blacklock working down toward the pool, Sloppy Weather following an' yapping and cayoodling just as a fool dog will.

"Blacklock comes down to the edge of the water quiet-like. He lays his big scoop-net an' his sack -- we can see it half full already -- down behind a boulder, and takes a good squinting look all round, and listens maybe twenty minutes, he's that cute, same's a coyote stealing sheep. We lies low an' says nothing, fear he might see the leaves move.

"Then byne-by he takes his stick of dynamite out his hip pocket, -- he was just that reckless kind to carry it that way, -- an' ties it careful to a couple of stones he finds handy. Then he lights the fuse an' heaves her into the drink, an' just there's where Cock-eye makes the mistake of his life. He ain't tied the rocks tight enough, an' the loop slips off just as he swings back his arm, the stones drop straight down by his feet, an' the stick of dynamite whirls out right enough into the pool.

"Then the funny business begins.

"Blacklock ain't made note of Sloppy Weather, who's been sizing up the whole game an' watchin' for the stick. 'Soon as Cock-eye heaves the dynamite into the water, off goes the pup after it, just as he'd been taught to do by the car-boys.

"'Hey, you fool dog!' yells Blacklock.

"A lot that pup cares. He heads out for that stick of dynamite same as if for a veal cutlet, reaches it, grabs hold of it, an' starts back for shore, with the fuse sputtering like hot grease. Blacklock heaves rocks at him like one possessed, capering 'an' dancing; but the pup comes right on. The Cock-eye can't stand it no longer, but lines out. But the pup's got to shore an' takes after him. Sure, why not? He thinks it's all part of the game. Takes after Cock-eye, running to beat a' express, while we--all whoops and yells an' nearly falls out the trees for laffing. Hi! Cock-eye did scratch gravel for sure. But 'tain't no manner of use. He can't run through that rough ground like Sloppy Weather, an' that fool pup comes a--cavortin' along, jumpin' up against him, an' him a--kickin' him away, an' r'arin', an' dancin', an' shakin' his fists, an' the more he r'ars, the more fun the pup thinks it is. But all at once something big happens, an' the whole bank of the canon opens out like a big wave, and slops over into the pool, and the air is full of trees an' rocks and cart--loads of dirt an' dogs and Blacklocks and rivers an' smoke an' fire generally. The boss got a clod o' river--mud spang in the eye, an' went off his limb like's he was trying to bust a bucking bronc' an' couldn't; and ol' Mary-go-round was shooting off his gun on general principles, glarin' round wild-eyed an' like as if he saw a' Injun devil.

"When the smoke had cleared away an' the trees and rocks quit falling, we clumb down from our places an' started in to look for Blacklock. We found a good deal of him, but they wasn't hide nor hair left of Sloppy Weather. We didn't have to dig no grave either. They was a big enough hole in the ground to bury a horse an' wagon, let alone Cock-eye. So we planted him there, an' put up a board, an' wrote on it:

Here lies most
of
C. BLACKLOCK,
who died of a'
entangling alliance with
a

The Passing of Cock-Eye Blacklock

stick of dynamite.

Moral: A hook and line is good enough
fish-tackle for any honest man.

"That there board lasted for two years, till the freshet of '82, when the American River -- Hello, there's the sun!"

All in a minute the night seemed to have closed up like a great book. The east flamed roseate. The air was cold, nimble. Some of the sage-brush bore a thin rime of frost. The herd, aroused, the dew glistening on flank and horn, were chewing the first cud of the day, and in twos and threes moving toward the water-hole for the morning's drink. Far off toward the camp the breakfast fire sent a shaft of blue smoke straight into the moveless air. A jack-rabbit, with erect ears, limped from a sage-brush just out of pistol-shot and regarded us a moment, his nose wrinkling and trembling. By the time that Bunt and I, putting our ponies to a canter, had pulled up by the camp of the Bar-circle-Z outfit, another day had begun in Idaho.