

*The
Ghostmaker's
Lesson*©

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This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

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“Use the ropes on them bunch quitters, ya lazy greaser, are you blind? Do it or I’ll teach you a lesson and use a rope on you,” Bull Ryan yelled at the outriders on the herd. The big, bull necked ramrod spit out a chew of tobacco and cursed under his breath. “Lazy good fer nothing Mexicans.” He had a square jaw, a perpetual two-day growth of beard and close set brown eyes beneath heavy brow ridges that always seemed to be scowling.

“Quite needlin’ them, Bull,” the cowboy who rode along beside Ryan said. “You ride them vaqueros awful hard.”

“I need an opinion out of you, Silence I’ll slap it out of you.” Ryan was a head shorter than the grey, grim figure that rode beside him but wider across the chest by a half and with arms that all but burst from his flannel shirt. He was known for his ability to bend a horseshoe without much exertion.

“I don’t work for you, Bull; I don’t have to take your guff.” Ryan’s companion was a tall, spar man, with a scar along his jawline that disappeared down the collar of his grey coat. His eyes were flint grey chips that seemed to miss nothing in the space around him. His attitude was grim at best and when Ryan spoke to him his thin lips tightened and his voice lowered.

Ryan snorted a full deep throated laugh full of dark mirth. “I wouldn’t hire you no how; so don’t loose no sleep over what I do.” Ryan spurred his mount and moved ahead to yell at one of the outriders moving the small herd leaving Silence to glare after him with cold grey eyes.

One of the vaqueros who had been near enough to hear the exchange rode up beside the grim rider and spoke. “You should not question him, senor, Silence,” the Mexican said, “ He is muy loco en la’ cabasa.” The rider had features that hinted at Indian ancestry and in fact he had Yaqui blood in him.

“Why do you put up with him, Juan?” the grey rider asked. “There are other spreads around here to work for that pay as much as Bull.”

The handsome Mexican shrugged his shoulders. “His father was a good man to

work for; a fair man. When Senor Bull took over he felt he had to prove himself,” the Latin gazed off across the dusty plain toward the foreboding badlands to the north and made a gesture that was half shrug and half a sigh of resignation. “He was always cruel but when he come back from the sea, since his father’s stroke he has become muy worse.”

“So why not go?”

“Most of us have families and we have been here so long; it is not a easy thing to change.” The two of them rode along by the small herd, the New Mexico dust swirling around them like unasked questions. “And,” the Latin continued, “it is not so different with many other Americano; many do not like Mexicans- in some ways he is just more honest.”

Silence gave a shallow nod. “Honest is the last word I’d use to describe Bull Ryan.” When the vaquero laughed as well the grey rider gave him a ghost of a smile then waved a farewell and rode off toward his own spread to the East.

“Stop jawing with no good squatters and get back to work, Juan, “ Ryan called from a distance ahead. “We gotta get this beef up to the west range by nightfall; it’s Saturday night and I got me a bunch of drinking to do tonight.”

The Mexican shuddered at the thought; Bull Ryan was a hard man sober but he was a dangerous man drunk.

Bull Ryan made it into the town of Newton’s Hope after a quick bath and a shave. By seven o’clock while there were still some of the ‘descent’ townsfolk out and about, scurrying to finish their chores and get off the street before the monthly ‘fun’ began.

One of the townsfolk was Miakoda Greycloud. She was a Southern Ute Indian who had studied back East at reservation expense to become a schoolteacher.

She was tall and thin, with pretty features and piercing dark eyes that proclaimed her intellect and self-assurance. She was dressed in a high-necked homemade brown dress. She wore her long black hair piled high on her head without a bonnet and had a

red shawl pulled around her shoulders against the chill of the New Mexico night.

“Hey, ‘Breed,” Bull called from horseback as his roan lopped along on the street parallel with the woman. “You need a date for the night?”

She kept her pretty face focused forward, used to crude comments from many of the cowpunchers, and particularly from Bull who had often made a point of making his opinion of Indians and schoolmarms widely known around town.

“I’m talkin’ to you, Indian,” he said. He made Indian a dirty word by his tone. “You deaf as well cheap?” He spit a chew of tobacco so that it struck the grown near her feet, some of the black slug splattering on her skirts.

“I hear the wind,” she said without looking at him, “I hear the birds and the sound of rain in the distance; but I have no ears for the whining of dogs in heat.” She quickened her pace.

Bull glared at her for a long moment then laughed a snorting laugh and rode ahead into a side street that would take him to the Golden Cactus Saloon.

Bull Ryan went on to the Golden Cactus with little or no more thought about the Indian teacher, his mind was already going to the saloon girls who worked at the ‘Cactus, particularly, Molly with her golden hair

When Ryan pushed through the doors of the saloon there was a breath’s pause in all those in the room. Eyes darted to the swinging doors and then quickly darted away for fear of giving offense. It was a smoky room with a real oak bar and genuine brass spittoons placed along the foot rail.

“Bull!” Molly breathed beer breath on him and her over made-up face split into a grin, “I sure missed you, honey.”

He picked her physically off the floor for a hug that made her grunt with discomfort then set her down hard.

“Let a man wet his whistle first, Molly,” he said, “Then you can get to appreciate me. Now I’m ready to do some drinkin’ “ he called to all who could hear. “Who’s with me?”

It wasn’t long before bull had removed his jacket and pushed back his left sleeve to show off his tattoo to the newcomers. It was a topless mermaid, crudely etched in

blue on the inside of his massive forearm.

“I got me this when I was a mate on the Empress of the Sea out of San Francisco.” The cowpunchers that had never seen a tattoo, crowded in and gaped openly at the blue image of the nearly naked figure.

“Didn’t it hurt?” one of the young cowhands asked.

“Not more than a pin prick,” the giant said as he drained another mug of beer. He grinned and puffed his chest out, leering at one of the saloon girls obviously that Molly felt compelled to reach over and swivel his head around to plant a long kiss on his lips.

“I was sore fer a day but worth it.” Bull said when Molly let him come up for air. “Them island folk do it all the time.” He leaned in as if imparting a great secret to the young cowhand. “Them little brown girls don’t hardly wear nothin’ ‘scept a grass skirt all the time.”

“No!” more than one herder gasped.

“Yer fibbin’,” one young man who was new to the town said, “Can’t be no such place.”

Everyone in the room who knew better inhaled with anticipated some sort of explosion.

“What’d you say?” Bull asked with a crocodile smile on his broad face. Molly knew him well enough that she backed away from him.

“I said t’ain’t no such place,” the tall thin wrangler said. He was a freckled faced boy of no more than eighteen with rough cloths that seemed to big for him.

“You callin’ me a liar?” Bull asked in a quite voice. Before the cowpoke could answer Bull smashed the beer mug across the boy’s face, shattering the thick glass and spraying blood and beer across the front of everyone around the pair.

The young cowpuncher staggered with a high-pitched cry of agony.. He cursed the big ramrod and moved his bloodied hand toward his gun.

Bull stepped in and snatched the gun from the bleeding man’s hand and used the handle to bludgeon the injured man to his knees. Then Ryan kicked the man in the head so that he toppled over bloodied and unconscious on the barroom floor.

“Another round,” Ryan called out with great mirth in his tone, “ And let me tell you about this dance the girls do they call the Hoolah!” The crowd continued to drink and laugh with forced enjoyment at Bull’s stories while the cowpuncher on the floor bled into the sawdust for most of the night.

Miakoda Greycloud read for a short time when she reached her modest two-room cottage but she rationed herself. Her good friend Rachel Silence, who lived on a ranch about a hour out of town with her husband and child, had come in to stay with Rachel’s parents and to have her year old son christened at the Mexican church the next morning.

The pretty Ute woman dressed in a cotton nightdress and let her long black hair down. She sat at the edge of her bed with a single candle burning on the nightstand beside her and combed her hair.

“Hey!” a muffled voice startled the woman. There was the sound of something breaking and then a curse.

Miakoda shot to her feet and grabbed for a shotgun she kept by her bed as the door to her room was kicked violently inward and the dark bulk of Bull Ryan squeezed through.

“You outta been nice to me, you lowlife half breed,” he said in a slurred voice, “You think you’re better than us range folk. But you’re gonna be nice to me now.”

The Indian maiden started to raise the gun but the ramrod moved while he spoke with surprising speed, flashing across the room and backhanded the woman into the wall. The violence of the collision knocked the candle off the nightstand. She slid down the papered wall dazed and near unconscious.

The flame from the candle ignited the bedclothes and within a few moments the flames cast dancing shadows on the walls of the room.

“Now you’re gonna pay for snubbing Bull Ryan, bitch!” he pulled his belt of his pants and snapped it in the air in promise of violence. He stepped to loom over her and

began to lay about her with it drawing red welts from the skin of her face and fore-arms. "I'm gonna make you beg to be my woman!" His muscles in his bare arms knotted with the effort and he was soon sweating as he brought the thick belt down as hard as he could on the defenseless woman.

She gritted her teeth and refused to cry out as he struck her again and again.

He was grunting with the exertion now, the leather repeatedly slicing into her back until the cotton shift was in tatters and her back was slick with blood. His eyes shone with the joy of it and his face was flushed the blood that also flowed to his groin. His face was fixed in a wide, hungry grin.

The sound of the flames roused him from his trance and he realized the walls had begun to ignite.

He stepped away from the cringing woman and the flames that illuminated her and nodded his head in satisfaction of his work done.

He backed out the door his eyes wide and watery with joy. Then he turned and ran from the front door of the cottage jumped on his horse and headed across the bridge to Mex Town at a fast trot.

Bull Ryan rode directly to the El Gaucho Cantina, the only saloon in Mex Town. It was where Bull usually ended his drinking evenings in Newton's Hope though he was earlier than usual.

It was not the décor that drew Ryan there, nor the cheap Tequila or the fact that he had the run of the house because none of the Mexican population of the town dared to throw the Gringo out of the saloon. The draw for Ryan was a songstress named Maria.

Maria Consuelo Gomez was beautiful by any standard, Latin or Caucasian. She was still serenading the half full room of the cantina she owned when Bull strutted in.

Like Molly at the Golden Cactus, Maria raced across the room to wrap her arms around the muscular giant who stood like a king in the doorway to her establishment.

Accusing dark eyes followed her across the room and flashed a momentary hooded challenge at the cruel giant.

“Bull, I was afraid you would not come to visit me this month!” Maria said. She was able to put just the right amount of longing into her voice to keep Ryan from suspecting she was just trying to avoid trouble. Each month since the first time he had wandered in after leaving one of the white saloons where he had had a fight Maria had been able to deflect the drunk Ryan from violence by flattery and guile. It only took fawning attention and Tequila to keep him so befuddled that he was soon dozing in a corner convinced she had affection for him.

The customers, themselves used to appeasing other Americano to avoid trouble, watched her work her magic and did their best to stay out of her way. All the while they watched for her safety. If she should draw his anger down on her many of them were prepared to take action even knowing they would be calling the wrath of the white community regardless how justified they were.

She noticed that Bull was more agitated then usual when he entered the El Gaucho. He pulled Maria to him with more power than he needed, pressing his lips down on hers without noticing her reluctance.

His blood was still hot from his beating of Miakoda and he wanted to feel the Mexican woman pressed against him while he drank. He held her close and grabbed the bottle of alcohol taking a deep swing that emptied a third of the bottle in one gulp. He coughed and then laughed.

“You know I’d never miss my little Mex darlin” he slurred. “You are my song bird!” He kissed her again, grinding his lips against hers. “Sing me a song, baby.”

The woman was glad to pull away from him then and waved a hand to the balding old man seated near the end of the bar. He pulled the instrument onto his ample lap and began to strum the strings. He coaxed sounds from it that should have come from some fine European masterwork instead of the near wreck it seemed to be.

Maria cast a glance over at the vaquero Juan who sat with three other riders at a table in the corner of the room playing cards. He was her brother and she noticed he eased his chair back to give him a free space to draw his gun if he had to. She flashed

him a glance that told him that she could handle it then she began to sing the love ballad 'Sombrero Blanco'. Her voice showed none of the strain that she felt as she performed for the brutish man at the bar and despite the tension in the room all eyes watched her instead of him. The hard faces softened to smiles as she serenaded them. She kept most of her focus on the muscled giant who continued to drink at the bar but her instinct as a performer caused her to work the whole room.

At that moment Bull Ryan was sure he ruled the world.

The moment lasted for as long as the song for just as she finished the sound of shouts from outside drew everyone's attention to the door. The cry of "Fumar! Fumar!" filled the night and those who looked out the doorway could see the telltale flicker of light from somewhere in the darkness.

Most of the people ran to the door and poured out to the hard packed dirt that was the sidewalk outside the Cantina. When Maria made an attempt to do so Bull grabbed her arm. "You ain't gotta see some stupid house fire," he said, "You need to stay here and drink with old Bull!"

She looked at him with a puzzled expression. "How do you know what it is?" She asked.

"It's the Ute's house!" one of the men outside the door called. "The school-teacher."

The Cantina owner's expression darkened further. "You knew." It was an accusation and Bull sneered at her when she said it.

"I know lots of things," he said, "and one of them is that I don't like no backtalk from a greaser slut."

She snapped her open hand at his face to slap it but even drunk his reflexes were snake-quick and he caught her hand.

"You shouldn't a done that, bitch!" he said in an ugly tone.

"Release her, senior," Juan said. He stood letting his chair tip over behind him to clatter to the ground and kept his right hand away from his body and open in preparation to draw.

"You standin' up to me, Mex?" Bull said. Instead of releasing Maria he pulled

her in front of him so that her brother could not fire without endangering her.

“You must not harm my sister,” Juan said. He tried to take the challenge out of his voice and still command his sister’s release playing the delicate game his race had to play when dealing with the American’s who employed them.

“I can do any damn thing I want to, Juan,” Bull said, “If you want to have job on Monday.” He glared at the Mexican and waited for the man to back down.

Maria looked at her brother and shook her head. “It is alright, Juan. Senor Bull did not mean any harm by it. “ She tried to laugh it off to avoid bloodshed. “I will sing him another song. Pepito, play!”

The oldman with the guitar started to play again but the swinging doors exploded inward and stopped him.

In the doorway Josiah Silence stood like a grey ghost, his face covered in soot, his clothing singed and his eyes ablaze with fury.

“Let the girl go or I’ll drill you through the head you sidwinding coward,” Silence said. “And you know I can do it.”

Everyone for three counties around knew that Josiah Silence was known as the Ghost Maker, a dead shot who never missed in a gunfight.

“Watch your language. This ain’t no business of yours,” Bull insisted, a little confused by the tall man’s presence but well aware of the man’s reputation. “This Mexican back talked me.”

“Its about time somebody did, Ryan.” Silence stepped to the side of the open door and kept his body angled to get a clear shot at the ramrod. Maria squirmed from Bull’s grasp and ran to stand behind her brother.

‘I ain’t gonna draw on you, Silence,’ Ryan said real fear creeping into his voice. “You know that’d be murder if I draw against you.”

‘It’ll be murder if that woman you beat near to death dies,’ Silence said.

“Senorita Greycloud?” Maria asked.

“He set her house on fire in hopes we wouldn’t know but she got out just barely alive.” Silence’s voice was as cold as the grave.

“I didn’t do any of that,” Bull said. “I was here drinkin’.”

“You knew about the house on fire before anyone,” Maria said. “You knew.”

“I didn’t do none of that.”

“Take off your gun, Bull,” Silence said. “If you don’t I’ll shoot you in the stomach and let you die slow.”

There was real fear in the big man’s eyes. “You can’t do that. There are witnesses.”

“You think I care?” Silence’s tone made it clear he did not care.

“We will see nothing, senior,” Juan said. He looked directly into his boss’ eyes and gave a mirthless smile. “Don’t you know that greasers have very bad eyesight?”

Bull ran his tongue along his lips and considered his options. His eyes darted from the door to the bar and to Silence and back to the door.

“Drop the gun belt, Bull and if you can get past me you get on your horse and keep going.” Silence began to unbuckle his own gun belt. “You let him go if he does, okay, Juan?”

The Mexican drew his own gun slowly and covered Bull while Silence let his own gun rig drop to the floor, pushing aside with a foot. “As you say, senior. I give my word I will not stop him if he gets past you.”

“Juan!” Maria said, “Senior Bull will-“

“Shh, Chica,” Juan said quietly, “Senior Silence knows what he was doing.” The two fighters were physically both imposing with Silence having a slight reach advantage but Ryan outweighed him by thirty pounds of solid muscle. The Mexican was not looking at the size or weight of the two men however, but at the righteous fire that was burning in the grey avenger’s eyes.

Bull didn’t see that fire. All he saw was a man he out weighed by enough pounds that it should be no match. He saw a way to get out of town. Once back on his ranch he had enough hired hands to hold off any posse that might want to question him about some Indian girl.

“All right, Silence,” Ryan said. He took off his gun belt and dropped it on the bar. “I’m gonna give you a lesson in pain like I taught that Indian bitch.”

Bull moved forward with his body in a half crouch, his meaty hands flexing and

unflexing like claws held before him. His face was a hideous thing to see, his deep-throated laugh at the prospect of hurting Silence more like a beast's snarl than a human sound.

Silence came forward upright, his hands in loose fists and held up before him. He moved lightly on his feet and shuffled across the center of the room to draw bull away from the bar and his gun on it.

The crowd that had been in the bar were torn between going to the fire and watching the fight in the cantina. The imminent violence won and they packed the doorway and pressed their faces up against the heavily leaded window.

Bull did not do the expected and wade in like a wild man, instead he locked eyes with Silence and moved slowly in a circle in the center of the room. He kept his hands moving randomly in front of him, surprisingly light on his own feet.

"You like to needle everyone, Bull," Silence said in a voice that was almost a whisper, "the men who work for you- yes, men, not slaves even if you treat them like they were." "You ain't got nothin', squatter." Bull said. Bull made a grab for Silence's lead hand but the grey warrior was able to dodge the grab.

"I'm gonna have a good time pounding your face into porridge, boy." Bull said.

"Gonna pound it like you pounded Miakoda's, Bull?" Silence said. He darted in and launched two quick jabs at the broad chested brute then jumped back before bull could secure a hold on him.

"Gonna needle me to death like you needle everyone around you cause you ain't man enough to stand up without putting everyone else down?" Silence quickly reversed his direction and threw another jab that slipped in on Ryan's left side, driving his knuckles into Bull's skull under he left ear.

It hurt the big man and he grunted to show his displeasure. Then Bull sprang forward, his fleshy mallet-like fists moving faster than any watching could have thought possible and slammed two hard blows into his opponent's side.

Silence backpedaled out of Bull's punching range and went back to 'needling' the big man with short jabs.

Bull tried several times to lure Silence into grappling but the grey avenger contin-

ued his jab and retreat strategy. His strikes worked on the big man's ribs and twice, when Bull dropped his guard, he landed hits to the big man's face bloodying his nose.

Ryan kept his head, however, and fought defensively maneuvering silence so that he was between Bull and the two Mexican siblings.

Then Ryan charged, sweeping aside Silence's warding hands and driving his full weight into the grey warrior. The momentum of the charge carried both men into the table that Juan and Maria were standing behind.

Juan pulled Maria out of the way but the table slammed painfully into his legs knocking him to the floor.

The two fighters smashed onto the top of the table with Bull's full weight pinning Silence to the rough wood. The grey warrior had the wind knocked out of him and felt some of his ribs crack under the massive cowpuncher's assault. He saw splotches of red haze as his airway was constricted, the blood to his brain was crimped off and his consciousness started to fade.

Bull pressed his advantage, wrapping his powerful hand around Silence's throat and applied himself to squeezing the life out of him.

"Juan!" Maria knelt by her brother's side. The Mexican's knee was twisted badly and his pistol pinned beneath him. Maria tried to roll him off the gun but the table behind her tipped at that moment as the squirming men on it overbalanced it. The table and the men fell over onto the two siblings.

Silence used the disruption to smash a short punch into Bull's throat. The brute shielded his windpipe by hunching his shoulders but in doing so his grip slackened and Silence was able to pull away.

Maria was screaming and squirming in the tangle of arms and legs while her brother tried to pull her away. He was in pain from his twisted knee but he gritted his teeth and tried to extract his sister, pulling her by her arms.

Silence rolled to his knees but Bull gave him no chance to rest. The brute drove forward throwing a wild right punch that glanced off the tall man's shoulder. It rocked Silence back but he rode the force of it and as Bull came in behind the punch Silence swung an elbow up into Ryan's temple.

It was a hard hit. Bull grunted with the impact and shook his head to clear his suddenly blurred vision.

Silence followed up on the elbow strike by slipping his right arm around Bull's neck from the back and locked it in place by grabbing it with his left. He squeezed to cut off the blood in the carotid arteries but the big man clawed at the grey avenger in an attempt to break free of the hold.

Silence hung on even when the giant struggled to his knees and then to his feet. Ryan pulled Silence with him until both men were standing and the brute was arched over to one side with the grey warrior clinging to him.

Bull had no air to roar but he snorted his derision and tried to punch the man clinging to his neck but he could not dislodge the hold. In desperation he slammed backward into the wall, ramming Silence into the adobe and plaster.

The grey avenger cried out involuntarily in pain and his grip loosened.

Bull rammed backwards again and this time Silence was forced to let go. Bull spun around to pummel the grey rider but Silence let his knees buckle and dropped below the flailing fists of the giant and fired his own barrage of punches into Bull's thighs and stomach.

The blows were telling and it staggered the brute enough that when Silence drove upward with a two-handed uppercut bull was unable to avoid it. The blow collided with the point of bull's chin and snapped his head back knocking him on his heels.

Silence followed up with the ultimate insult to a fighting man; he began to slap Bull with open-handed blows. He put all the fury of his body in the blows and after four the brute's face was pink, blood and snot running down his cheeks.

Bull began to cry, "No more, No more!" and then dropped to his knees and put his hands up to cover his head. "Please no more!"

Silence stood back from the blubbing man swaying slightly. 'You are a waste of flesh, Bull and a disgrace to the human race.' Silence staggered and leaned against the wall.

"No more," Bull was crying like a baby now, bent over almost in a fetal position.

"I'm sorry I soiled my hands by touching you." Silence said. He turned to head

toward the door. "I'll get the sheriff." He started to move toward the door of the saloon using the wall as support. The Ghostmaker knew that no matter what sentence Bull Ryan received he was a broken man already, shamed before the Mexicans he so derided and shown for the coward he truly was.

He had been taught a lesson he would never forget; a lesson that would last longer than the scars he had given Miakoda and Silence hoped would hurt more deeply.

The end

A large, stylized, light gray letter 'B' is centered on the page. The letter is rendered in a classic serif font with a slightly rounded, elegant appearance. It is positioned below the text 'The end' and above the bottom of the page.