

# Murder Ballads

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After brushing a few spare chips into a pile, the portly dealer took the top card from the deck and slapped it forcefully on the discard pile to burn it. He placed the next offering as the fifth card in the middle of the table, and flipped it. The eight of diamonds. If the tavern windows weren't shut tight, Clive would have sworn he felt a breeze. He tried to keep his expression blank as he revisited his hand and scanned the faces of his opponents.

Gamblers have always been a superstitious lot. Lucky numbers. Blowing on the dice. Sizing up the dealer for some intangible sign of loose cards. Clive had never been an exception. The only reason he'd wound up in the Black Hills in the first place was a streak of bad luck in Duluth that left him in arrears to the wrong people and placed his face on reward posters. For a few weeks, his westward relocation had improved his fortunes.

Luck always runs out, he reminded himself.

He held a ten of spades that did him no good. The card that concerned him, however, was the ace of clubs. Unable to see find any clue in his compatriots' expressionless faces, Clive believed that the ace could win the full pile as easily as it could ruin his life. Probably both.

The dealer nodded his great head at Clive, who feigned curiosity at his hand before putting most of his remaining chips in the pile to match the others. If this was his last bet, no reason to fold.

He signaled for the barmaid, who brought him his third corn whiskey of the night. Clive handed her a couple of silver coins and finished the drink in one gulp. It was nasty stuff, with an aftertaste of tobacco and ammonia, but it kept his hands steady.

“Call,” the gout-stricken man seated to his left said upon matching the pot.

Clive saw all four sides of the square table drop practiced deadpans at once. He noticed, too, that their game had outlasted most of the other customers, who had either retired upstairs or journeyed out into the cold fog of late October.

Only an unruly bunch at the other end of the building kept silence away. Even without its benefit, though, Clive could hear three pistols pulled slowly from their holsters, none of the other men around him able to fully silence the swipe of metal against leather. He would probably have made the same mistake if he hadn't kept his gun inconspicuously unsheathed for most of the night, balancing on his right thigh.

The scrawny old man across from Clive wiped his white mustache, and turned up his cards. The nine of spades first. Then the ace of hearts. Two pairs. Aces and eights, nine high. Clive had him beat, and the man was out of chips. The old-timer gave a wheezy laugh, whistling through his missing front tooth, and fixed his gaze on the Texas cowhand to Clive's right. He was the type Clive thought the others would worry about most — big, top-heavy from physical labor, and with a few knife scars that argued he could handle himself. Clive fretted more about the old man; he seemed nervous, had spoken little all night, and was freshly busted.

No messing around on the cowhand's part. He flipped both cards at once. Five of clubs and ace of spades. If Clive was cursed, he was in good company. All eyes on him, he revealed his cards with his left hand, keeping his right on his pistol in case anyone got any ideas, now that his was the high hand.

The dealer threw his useless pair of twos down with his meaty left hand, strangely agitated about not matching the others. Not much of a card counter, Clive couldn't calculate the odds of three cursed men at one card table, but he had never feared reaching for his winnings before.

"Well, fellas..." he began, only to be interrupted when the big man to his left rose and went for his gun. He would have had Clive in his sights, but his swollen thigh hit the table hard on the way up. Clive ducked just as the old man turned his weapon on the bulky one. The first bullet hit the dealer square in the stomach, causing the barmaid to scream and duck behind the bar, and the other customers to scamper up the stairway.

Though blood was already pouring out, the dealer's sheer size meant it would take more ammunition to put him down. It was the best luck Clive had all day. By the time the old-timer had emptied his revolver, the big man was dead on his feet, but Clive was already behind him. Using the hulking corpse as a shield, he put two shots in the old man, and two more in the cowhand across the table.

The latter hadn't drawn yet, and Clive had enjoyed talking with him early in the game, but a cursed man is a desperate one.

Dropping the dealer's remains onto the bloody floor, Clive rounded the table, keeping his weapon raised in case of any movement on the stairs. He checked his three bested opponents for any remaining life. "Sorry, partner," he said as took the black stetson from where the cowhand had left it on the table. He wouldn't be needing it. Or his gun, which he hadn't had a chance to fire.

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"Come on out," Clive said when he reached the bar, dumping a hatful of chips on the pine counter. He could hear the barmaid breathing behind the bar and rounded the side with his gun pointed at her. She cowered at the sight of him, but he put a finger to his mouth as a warning and used his weapon to indicate the silver key near the till. She hesitated until he pulled back the hammer, then got to her feet and opened the lockbox with all the money from the game.

He made her dump the money into a saddlebag he'd brought, and had her empty the till too while he was at it. The bag was heavy, but Clive wouldn't have gotten this far in life without some raw strength.

The barmaid's eyes told him she had the same question he did about what he would do with her, since she was the only witness who had seen his face. He could hear the floorboards upstairs

creaking, increasing the odds that someone was going to try sneaking downstairs to see what was happening. At least he could tell none of them were the law; if lawmen were trying to be silent, he'd have heard nothing until a gun clicked. Still, he had to act fast.

Quietly, he took a coil of rope from his saddlebag and tied the barmaid's hands behind her back, before binding her arms against her torso. It took him only a few seconds, but he twice had to warn her to be quiet at gunpoint. Clive wrapped a bandana around her mouth as a gag, tightening it when she tried to protest. He considered a blindfold, but he'd already been seen, and there was no reason for her not to see where she was walking. Once the hostage was secure, he held her in front of him as he backed out the tavern door, checking around him until he found a tethered horse that must have belonged to one of his deceased opponents.

As he rode east past the county line, Clive kept his right hand on his pistol and his left on the rein, the sack of money tied just as thoroughly as the frightened barmaid seated in front of him. "I'll let you go before I head for Grand Forks," he promised more than once, getting her used to the destination's name. As long as she cooperated, he wouldn't be a complete liar.

By the time he could see the first inklings of a rising sun, Clive felt secure that anyone who might have tried following him was nowhere nearby. Near a road that split off in two directions, he stopped the horse and dismounted, pulling the barmaid with him. She cringed when he pulled his knife, but he used it to cut the rope and let it fall around her. The woman took out her own gag, and panted from dehydration as the cold air hit her lungs.

Clive pointed with his gun back the way they'd come. "Go on. Get going," he said as he hopped back on the horse. "There's a town a few miles down the road." She stumbled on the frozen ground, but soon found her footing and began to run. Once she was safely out of sight, Clive turned the horse. He hoped anyone the barmaid met on the road would aim to find him going north to Grand Forks, buying him some extra time.

When Clive reached Iowa a few days later and caught a train west, he would have been hard to recognize. He'd traded the horse from the tavern for another, taken off a ranch hand too inquisitive to leave upright, and he'd used his knife to unevenly trim his hair. He and his money were soon on their way to Colorado.

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Clive passed back through the Black Hills only once, after a few years had gone by. He'd found work as a muleskinner for the railroad line, and was driving a particularly obstinate herd across a swath of South Dakota. By that time, he'd taken to coloring his sandy hair with black walnut, and had let his beard grow nearly to his chest, but still feared someone might find him familiar.

He was staying in a tavern across town from the site of his triple murder, though he had noticed the other still stood. Never one to resist a beverage, he was drinking a foul firewater when a short man in a white suit struck up a conversation. Once Clive learned he was talking to the publisher of the town newspaper, he asked enough seemingly innocent questions about the town's history to fill in his gaps about the earlier visit.

Clive hadn't known the identity of the other players the night he drew the fateful hand, but the old man seated across from him had once been the sheriff of a small town outside Cheyenne. The man's reputation was such that his successor felt the need for vengeance, and hired a posse to bring in anyone responsible for his death.

As his unblemished neck demonstrated, Clive had left no clues as to his identity, and nobody in town had known his name. The barmaid had been less fortunate. Someone had to hang for the crime, and the posse found it suspicious that she returned to town unharmed from the clutches of a murderer. The sheriff agreed she must have been in cahoots with the man she wouldn't name, even though she couldn't have if she tried. The Wyoming contingent even gave the sheriff some horses for his efforts to mete out punishment, if not exactly justice.

The roaming gambler had enough conscience left to feel sore about how things turned out, but still felt some relief at the matter being settled without him. For good measure, though, he paid a visit to the sheriff's home on the way out of town, liberating the man's prize horses, helping himself to a sturdy dapple grey, and leaving the gate open to make it look like an escape.

Even as he drove his mules to Montana on the freshly commandeered steed, he thought about the unlikelihood of his circumstances. A gambler who survived the dead man's hand had to ride his luck as long as it lasted. It had to run out eventually.

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“I call that one ‘The Black Hills Gambler,’” Clive told the small group of drunk patrons the first time he sang about the card game and the unfortunate barmaid. The name had stuck, and the old card player perfected the tune as he stopped at taverns through Nebraska and on down to the Indian Territory. These days, he could usually find an establishment that would provide him a free room for a few nights and a healthy quantity of cheap whiskey if he offered to play a few story songs for the drunks and gamblers.

Looking back, he wasn’t sure how it happened. Clive was old now, and life had answered every run of luck with a streak that evened it out. Leaving little to show for his time above ground but a litany of tragic stories and the few possessions he could carry in a makeshift guitar case. None of his exploits ever stayed secret, but the responsibility never seemed to come back to him either. Instead, his adventures seemed to take on their own lives in the telling. Like the newspaper man back in Dakota, he found plenty of folks willing to fill in details, and a few willing to help him write down his own legend like he was just some curious onlooker passing through town and taking notes.

One time outside of Reno, a barkeep overheard him singing a tune he’d made up about shooting the man who killed his wife more than twenty years back, something he’d concocted to pass the time while traveling on his own. The stranger offered him a bed and an open bar tab if he’d fill in for the piano player who was supposed to perform that night, but had instead wandered in front of a train while inebriated. The crowd liked it enough that Clive knew he’d found a new vocation. He had more than enough source material.



What interested him most was the way people gave him credit for putting these things to song, as if he were some old-time wandering minstrel collecting stories, and not a miscreant hiding in plain sight. They didn't even realize the guitar he'd taught himself to play on had come from the unfortunate rail-splitter whose meeting with Clive had inspired "Snake River Grave."

Maybe it was that people didn't seem to move around as much as they used to, or that a roaming gambler ceased inspiring unease as his hair quit growing and gin blossoms put down roots across his thin face. Clive's fortunes still fluctuated on a game of dice, a blackjack deal, or whatever wager he could find in the various taverns to which he gave his custom. Poker was the one vice from which he abstained, ever since the shootout and the curse he'd managed to keep at bay.

No reason to tempt fate any further.