

LET 'ER RIP

by

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BLACK SCREEN

The pounding of a Judge's gavel--

BANG, BANG, BANG!

JUDGE (V.O.)

Tom Ketchum, you have been found guilty of felonious assault upon a railway train on August sixteenth, eighteen-ninety-nine. I hereby sentence you to hang by the neck until dead.

A CROWD explodes in shouts and cheers. A MAN can be heard over the others in the background--

MAN (V.O.)

We're gonna have a hangin'!

The Judge continues to BANG the gavel with no affect.

JUDGE (V.O.)

Order! Order!

BANG, BANG, BANG!

FADE IN:

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - MORNING

The gavel banging transitions to a CARPENTER hammering on a new gallows. A sandbag dangles from a rope through the single trap door.

A CROWD starts to gather in the square. Picnic blankets are placed to reserve a good spot.

SUPER: CLAYTON, NEW MEXICO TERRITORY - APRIL 26TH, 1901

The adobe brick building next to the gallows is the jail. A window with bars is visible on the side of the building.

INT. JAIL - CONTINUOUS

The jail is small with just two cells. Only one is occupied.

The lone inmate is TOM KETCHUM (36). Medium build, dark hair and handlebar mustache.

Tom stares blankly at the ceiling from his cot as he listens to the distant bangs that come through his window.

Footsteps approach on the creaky wood planks.

SHERIFF (O.S.)
Ketchum...you got a visitor.

Tom turns his head. SHERIFF GARCIA (50) and ROB KINCAID (30) stand on the other side of the bars. The Sheriff is red-faced from too much drink and Kincaid is dressed in a suit and derby.

TOM
Who in the hell are you?

As Kincaid extends a hand to Tom, the Sheriff slaps it away.

SHERIFF
No contact. Five minutes.

Kincaid rubs his wrist and nods nervously as the Sheriff goes to sit on a nearby bench.

KINCAID
Yes, sir, sorry.
(to Tom)
Mister Ketchum, I'm Robert Kincaid with the Denver Times. Our readers are very interested in your story and I'd like to ask you a few questions.

Tom's a bit bowled over by the statement and sits on the edge of his cot. It's now visible that Tom lacks his right arm at the shoulder.

TOM
You don't say. Interested in me or my hangin'?

Kincaid adjusts his collar.

KINCAID
To be honest...the hanging. It's the twentieth century and hangings aren't an everyday occurrence these days. But you can take this opportunity to tell your side of the story.

Tom ponders this for a moment, then speaks frankly.

TOM
Not much to tell. I tried to wave down a train and the engineer put two loads of buckshot in me.

(MORE)

TOM (cont'd)
(pats his right shoulder)
They arrested me, cut off my arm,
and now I've been Judged.

KINCAID
Do you claim innocence?

TOM
Of felonious assault of a train?
Tell me...how does one assault a
moving train? And how does that
translate to a hangin'?

Kincaid scribbles in a notepad and doesn't look up.

KINCAID
You have a point, Mister Ketchum,
but what about the other train hold
ups, banks and post office
robberies? And the murders of
Albert and Henry Fountain?

Tom scoffs at the remark.

TOM
Well...that ain't what they tried
me for.

Kincaid stops writing and looks Tom in the eye.

KINCAID
Why'd you do it? Why'd you do,
well, what they say you did?

Tom grins, leans back against the wall, and massages his
shoulder where his right arm used to be.

TOM
Why do you think? You ever been a
cowboy? Now THAT'S hard work. And
it don't pay near what they say I
did. If'n you had a taste of the
good life, could you go back to
punchin' cattle?

KINCAID
Was it worth it?

Tom rubs his belly.

TOM
 Hell, been eatin' three squares a
 day for almost two years now. This
 here cot ain't half bad neither.

The Sheriff checks his pocket watch.

SHERIFF
 Time's up, Kincaid.

KINCAID
 Okay, okay. Any last words for our
 readers?

TOM
 Just tell 'em goodbye. And make
 sure they bury me deep.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - LATER

The park bustles with MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN. Everyone
 dressed in their Sunday best. Vendors sell peanuts, cotton
 candy and souvenirs.

As the front door to the jail opens, the crowd goes silent
 except for a couple of boys that chase each other, that is
 until their MOTHERS slap them silly to hush up.

The Sheriff escorts Tom out and towards the gallows. Tom has
 his left wrist shackled to his thigh. He scans the crowd.

TOM
 (to the Sheriff)
 Y'all went all out, didn't ya?

SHERIFF
 Never hung anyone in these parts
 before. Frankly, we didn't know how
 to do it. Sent your height and
 weight to Chicago just to get it
 right.

TOM
 Thanks for the consideration.

He stops at the bottom of the stairs. He looks at the
 gallows construction and whistles in admiration.

TOM
 Well, she's a dandy, all right.

SHERIFF
 Sure is. Now, come on. Up you go.

Tom ambles up the stairs and onto the trap door. The Sheriff loosens Tom's collar and places the noose around his neck.

JUDGE MILLS (60), suit and string tie, stands opposite on the gallows.

Tom nods to the Judge.

TOM
Mornin' Judge.

JUDGE
Good morning, Tom.

Tom looks down and sees Kincaid front and center.

TOM
Hey, Kincaid. How's about this crowd, eh? What people do for a dollar. Just ain't right.

Kincaid looks about and scribbles in his notepad.

SHERIFF
You got anything else to say, Tom?

TOM
I'll be in Hell before you start breakfast, boys. Let 'er rip!

The Sheriff places a black hood over Tom's head and summarily pulls the trap door lever.

CLOSE ON KINCAID

A collective GASP emanates from the crowd. Kincaid winces as droplets of bright red blood speckles his face.

Kincaid begins to write furiously on his notepad.

KINCAID (V.O.)
Every one of the large crowd within and without the park held their breath and their hearts gave a bound of horror when it was seen that his head had been severed from his body by the fall.

Kincaid looks up from his pad and studies the scene developing in front of him. He writes more...

KINCAID (V.O.)

His body alighted squarely on its feet, stood for a moment, swayed, and fell. Great streams of red, red blood spurted from his severed neck, as if to shame the very ground upon which it poured. Every face turned pale...the head rolled aside and the rope released, bounded high in the air and fell with a thud on the scaffold.

He flips his notepad closed and places it in his coat pocket. He does an about face and walks away to get lost in the crowd.

KINCAID (V.O.)

Apparently Chicago wasn't informed of Tom's three square meals and the extra thirty pounds since his incarceration.

SUPER: THE KETCHUM HANGING WAS THE FIRST AND LAST HANGING EVER IN CLAYTON, NEW MEXICO TERRITORY.

FADE OUT