

What's in a Name?

Western

2,900 Words

'What's in a name?' - Chris Matravers

The saddle creaked as for the umpteenth time he eased his weight; trying to relieve the pressure on the painful sores, rubbed raw on his inner thigh. His horse, young in age but worn down and made old by the ceaseless travel of the previous month, stumbled as his restless shifting unbalanced her momentarily.

'Easy girl,' he muttered through cracked lips; the words rasping from his dry, swollen throat. This too was part of the routine of the seemingly endless miles they had covered together. Both settled, they continued heads bowed on their way.

Around them the prairie stretched barren and flat, its surfaced relieved by neither hill nor tree. The only feature being tumbleweeds: still and lifeless in the oppressive heat, waiting for moisture to grow or for wind to move them. To dispel the all-pervasive dust.

After more miles, the rider raised his head once again and peered through anxious, slitted eyes, and was rewarded. The small town could not be seen but he knew it was there, sheltering from the open prairie, at the foot of the small ridge just visible at the extreme edge of his vision. Thoughts of a bath, a meal and a rest lifted his spirits. Heartened, he patted the mare; offering her words of encouragement for one last effort. Straightening in the saddle he automatically eased his sores once again before turning his thoughts to what was to come. The mare felt the change in him and lifted the pace a little. It was several hours, however, before the man finally rode through the sun-bleached shacks and warehouses of the town's outskirts and turned into the main street. The vast openness of the prairie had deceived him once again.

The livery stable, itself little more than a warehouse with stalls, was on the left next to the grain store at the far end of the street. The rider was conscious of the townsfolk examining his face, clothes, horse and travel weary state as he passed by. They looked with curiosity, watching closely but as yet without fear, and, as was the custom in all small mid-west towns, a few called out a greeting to the stranger, but none questioned who he was or where he was from. In the West a man's business was his own until he made it otherwise. The man affected not to see the small boy, darting from door to door, taking short cuts through the alleys, shadowing him during his passage through the town.

The main street was the same as could be found in any of the similar towns dotted throughout Nebraska. A saloon, general store and sheriff's office all occupied prime positions with an eating house, barber's, doctor's surgery and bath-house accommodated between them and down small side streets. The cat-house, naturally, was at the extreme end; away from the small wooden church and the school house that gleamed with fresh whitewash and were surrounded by the only green, well-watered grass for miles around.

With a sigh of relief, the horse and rider pulled up at the hitching rail in front of the stables.

'Howdy. your mare looks in need of even more rest than you do feller! Want me to see to her while you go and fix yourself up at Mary Lou's?' Jed, the owner of the livery stable, eager for business, grinned at the man and stroked the mare's ears as he surveyed the sweat-streaked flanks and other evidence of the pair's travels. 'Leave her to me, I'll have her right as rain, you'll see.'

'Who's Mary Lou?' Came the guarded response.

'Mary Lou? Well, she runs the best eating and bath house in this here town. Of course, them's the best on account of they're the only ones!' Jed chortled.

The man grunted his agreement. 'See you care for her well. We'll be here one, maybe two days. I'll be staying at the saloon.' He gave his horse a final pat and turned to leave.

'Hey, feller. I ain't prying but what's your name? Where you from?' Jed's curiosity overcame his manners.

The man stared at him, not long as time goes, but long enough for Jed to feel discomfort. 'Folks call me Jim, Jim Franks. OK?' Without waiting for an answer, he made his way to Mary Lou's. The boy followed at a safe distance.

The eating house showed all the care that a poor town and poor owner could afford. Timber walls, patched and uneven, were fronted by a well swept porch. A hand painted sign proudly proclaimed the owner's name above the curtained windows.

'Stranger, you look in need of my ministrations, come on in, what'll it be first, bath or beef stew?'

Franks grinned. Mary Lou was the sort of woman a weary man needed. Middle

aged, plump and cheerful, she had the right personality to keep the eating house full most meal times and the towns folk were some of the cleanest for mile around.

'Mary Lou, I declare I'll take both at the same time. Lead me to a hot tub and bring me the stew while I wallow! Franks was already infected by her good humour and the strains of his journey were easing fast. 'My name's Jim, I've come a long way and I surely do appreciate the welcome, this is a mighty friendly town you have here, I guess you ain't had none of the troubles like Alliance and the other big towns.'

Mary Lou's answering grin faded, 'And we aim to keep it that way, Jim. This is a law-abiding place; we don't hold with outlaws and the like.'

'Whoa there,' Franks stifled the smile that threatened to form as he pretended to cower before Mary Lou's irate expression, 'I'm friendly, honest!'

Her expression softened a little. 'Good, because our sheriff is right now tracking three men who killed a stranger in the saloon last night, shot up the bar and rode out fast.'

Franks grimaced as her words sunk in and as suddenly as hers had done, his mood changed.

'Did you say three men shot a fourth stranger, here, last night? What did they look like?' His voice was steely and his fixed stare demanded a swift, truthful answer.

Now Mary Lou was confused, 'You'll get no more welcome here if they were friends of yours.' She stood, hands on hips, defiant and outraged.

'I swear they're no friends of mine. Now, just tell me...'

Mary Lou squinted as she judged the sincerity of his words, then relented. 'One of the three was a Mexican, the other two may have been brothers and the one they shot was a tall blond feller'. The words came tumbling out in a hurry. Why was he so intensely interested? Why had she felt so compelled to answer?

She'd confirmed Franks' fears. 'Damn, too late again'. Grief stricken and weary he slumped into one of the sturdy wooden chairs that were placed neatly around the red and white check clothed tables of the eating house.

'Jim, what's it to you?' Mary Lou asked, confusion replaced by concern.

He sighed, 'It's a long story but the man they shot was my partner. We've been following the other three since they killed a sheriff in South Dakota six weeks ago. My

partner and I split up to cover more towns, but agreed to meet here. I just missed those three in Scott's Bluff last week and I've trailed then night and day ever since.' He got up to leave.

'Where do you think you're going Jim. ' Mary Lou planted herself firmly in his path. 'You're exhausted. You don't know where to start looking to pick up the trail and anyway, the sheriff will be back tonight or tomorrow, you can work with him...' her voice tailed off and her expression hardened. 'That is assuming you're some kind of a lawman and not some jackal of a bounty hunter!'

Jim sighed, fumbled in the pocket of his dust-caked coat and found his badge. 'OK? I'm a US Marshall.'

'Oh! Mary Lou bobbed her head as she apologised.

'That's OK, but now.. Are you really concerned about me or are you just scared of losing a customer? Get that water on and where's my stew!' He smiled as she grinned back and hastened away.

The sun had been down for several hours when the town sheriff eventually returned. Franks was sipping a whisky in the saloon. Relaxed and rested after a meal and bath and change of clothes, but anxious for news. He looked up as the doors swung open.

'Mary Lou said I'd find you here, Marshal. My names Buck. I'm the sheriff, Sam 'Buck' Barrett'.

'Pleased to meet you Buck, can I get you something to wash the dust from your throat?'

The two men seemed to fit comfortably together, each recognising in the other the quiet, confident self-assurance of a competent lawman.

'You surely can, I'll take a beer'. Buck sipped and then, accepting Jim's growing impatience, wiped the froth from his mouth and began. 'Jim I ain't got good news. Mary Lou explained about your partner and I'm truly sorry but I lost the outlaws' trail as they left the ridge and entered the foothills. Thought I'd found it again when I was casting around on my way back but I guess it was an old trail cos it headed the wrong way, I'm sorry feller.'

Jim was silent for a moment as he absorbed the news and his hopes fell. He

smiled weakly and thumped Buck's shoulder, 'That's OK Buck, I know you did your best, I'll rest up for tomorrow and see my partner gets a decent burial then I'll head for the next town. Maybe I'll catch them there.' Despite his words Jim's spirits were low and his shoulders drooped as he sank his whisky.

'Jim, there's one more thing', Buck paused, embarrassment on his face, 'How long have you been a Marshall?'

Franks' expression became guarded, 'Why Buck? Don't you believe me, I showed Mary Lou my badge?'

Buck studied Franks' face a long time, then: 'Jim, I've been a sheriff in several towns, hell I've been looking at wanted poster for fifteen years or more', he paused again, 'Jim I ain't accusing but you ought to know what I'm thinking. I remember a gunman I heard about, reckoned to be fierce fast he was. A left-handed gun too, just like you, called himself Frank James. Must be five or ten years since I last heard of him'.

Jim returned Buck's thoughtful gaze. 'Buck, would you say that a young, fast gun who grew up to know right from wrong and who learnt to keep his gun holstered more often than not would make a good lawman?'

Buck grinned, 'I reckon such a man would make a fine lawman...if such a thing ever happened. Coincidence about them names ain't it ... Buy you another drink?'

The barman who'd been listening attentively hurried to refresh the drinks but was frustrated when the two went and sat at a table for the rest of the evening, he'd wanted to hear more. Still, he now had plenty tell about the mysterious stranger.

The next morning, Jim was breakfasting on steak and eggs at Mary Lou's when the tall gangly kid, who trailed him since his arrival, came in and sat at a nearby table; trying not to make his stare too obvious. When Mary Lou brought Jim some fresh coffee and a roll to mop up the sweet, yellow yolk from his eggs, he asked her quietly about the boy.

'Who's the kid Mary Lou? He keeps staring at me'.

'Want me to shoo him away, that's Stan's boy' she replied.

'Stan, the saloon keeper?' She nodded. Jim glanced again at the boy. 'No, that's OK, thanks for the coffee and roll; this is a fine breakfast.' Jim grinned at Mary Lou's obvious pleasure that she had another contented customer and finished his food. He sat

for a few minutes, thoughtfully sipping his coffee, then quietly he said, 'Why are you looking at me boy?'

The lad jumped up and made as if to run out.

'Hold on there, no need to rush off, I ain't goin' to hurt you, what's your interest in me?' Jim got up and moved across to the boy.

'I'm sorry sir', the boy stuttered, 'I didn't mean no offense, it's just that I ain't seen a real gunslinger before.'

'Boy, I'm no gunslinger, I'm a US Marshall. Who told you otherwise?' Jim's eyes had hardened and his bluff manner scared the boy more.

'Pa must have been mistaken but he heard you and Sherrif Barrett talking in the saloon last night.' The boy was shaking now.

Franks calmed down. 'Your Pa should know better than to listen to folks business lad. Besides he's wrong I'm no gunslinger, but if I was, why would you be interested?'

The boy had trouble looking Jim in the eyes, but he stopped shaking as he realised Franks' anger was gone. 'Mister, you may not be a gunslinger', he said, 'but I bet you're fast, I can tell by the way you hang your gun. I'm fast too, Pa gave me a wooden pistol and I've been practising. I'm goin' to be the fastest gun in the West, you'll see!'

Jim's eyes softened, 'Son', he said, 'it's good to have ambition, to want to be the best, but gunfighting is bad; that ain't no future for a bright lad like you. Gunslingers ain't heroes and they mostly die young. Now git on home, tell your Pa what I said.'

The boy opened his mouth to protest but before he could speak they heard gunfire in the street. Franks hurtled out onto the sidewalk searching for the source of the shots and froze at the scene that confronted him.

Buck lay motionless in mid-street. Nearby the Mexican and one of the brothers writhed in the dust. The remaining, elder brother held Mary Lou in front of him as a shield. He was backing warily towards his horse; holding the townsfolk at bay with his six-gun.

Franks' mind worked fast. The outlaws probably hadn't known he was here. He guessed they'd backtracked after dusk and come into town, soon after sun Up; looking for the sheriff who they knew would be trying to track them. It looked as if

Buck had shot two of them before being gunned down: now it was up to Franks to finish it.

'Get back! Clear the street!' Jim shouted but the townsfolk, mesmerised by the scene, shuffled around him as he faced up to the outlaw.

'One more step Marshall and she gets it!' The outlaw was panicky, his partners were shot bad, suddenly his back-up was gone.

'You have one chance', Franks said, 'drop your gun, release the woman and give yourself up. Give up or I'll shoot you dead'. His statement finished Franks stood feet apart, hand poised over his gun and just stared at the outlaw. Maybe it was the stare that unnerved him; or perhaps it was the calm certainty of Franks' tone, a tone which brooked no questioning. The outlaw screamed at him.

'Get back or she's had it, and I'll take some more of these with me too!' As he spoke the outlaw waved his gun at the townsfolk. It was his last action; a shot rang out and he fell: a third eye blossoming on his forehead. Even before the outlaw hit the ground Franks' gun was back in his holster. Few of the townsfolk even realised who had fired but the young boy had seen it all.

Franks stayed until the following day, to see to the burials for his partner and Buck. He knew he'd overstayed his welcome. The townsfolk were grateful for his help but also blamed him for the trouble. After all he had chased the outlaws to their town. Franks knew the blame was unjust, but he understood it. He'd seen it all before. Once he'd left, the townsfolk would forget and the town would begin to return to normal. There was one in particular who needed to forget. The saloon keepers son was following Jim even more closely now; hero worship in his eyes. Jim didn't want to be responsible for encouraging the gunfighters of tomorrow.

At the Livery stable Jed was sorry to see Franks leave, he'd hoped for a few more days rent, but true to his word the mare was in fine shape.

'There you are Franks, fit as a fiddle. I've looked after your horse; you've looked after our town.' Jed laughed uncertainly. 'I hear tell that you used to be Frank James the gunfighter, guess that explains your speed...' He grew silent under Franks' stare and hustled to saddle the mare. 'No offense, no offense, he blustered...After all what's in a name?'

'Quite.' Jim said, dryly; he mounted, stiffly into the saddle. 'By the way, you see the saloon keepers boy over there? What's his name?'

Jed turned and squinted across the street. 'The kid? That's Billy', he said.

Franks rode out.