

THE FASTEST GUN ALIVE

By David Henry Wilson

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MR. PRITCHETT, headmaster of Wimpleford Junior School, pointed his finger like a gun, and two hundred and fifty pairs of eyes turned toward the target. Melvin Woolaway had been talking in prayers! Little Melvin, the smallest boy in Miss Arnold's class, squirmed like a maggot.

"You were talking, boy!" roared Mr. Pritchett, his face as red as a boiled beetroot. "Ten housepoints off!"

There was a gasp from the whole assembly. Everyone at Wimpleford belonged to one of four houses, and the house that finished with the most points was The Best House. You got points for good work, good behavior, sports, and other activities, but if you lost points it was worse than losing your pocket money. Losing pocket money only hurt *you*, but losing housepoints hurt everyone in your house. It was a disgrace. And losing ten housepoints was a *big* disgrace.

Melvin Woolaway's heart thumped like a drum, and his face went a similar color to Mr. Pritchett's. All he'd done was ask Simon Baxter to get off his foot, *and* he'd said please, but you can't start explaining that when you're being pointed at in front of the whole school. The world was a very unjust place.

Miss Arnold felt sorry for Melvin, because she knew he was a good boy, and so she was extra nice to him all day and made sure he had a double helping of apple pie and custard at lunch. But sympathy from Miss Arnold was not enough to fill the enormous and terrible gap left by the removal of ten housepoints. Comforting words from Mrs. Woolaway, a be-a-man-son talk from Mr. Woolaway, cream cakes for tea, another cream cake after tea—nothing could console Melvin for his pointless present.

He only brightened up when he was allowed to watch "The Fastest Gun Alive" on TV, and at least while Clint Samson was filling the living room with lead, Melvin Woolaway's mind was off his housepoints. But when Clint Samson finally rode off the

screen, into a sun that was as round and red as the face of Mr. Pritchett, and Rancher Caine and his wife and his pretty daughter stood waving from the ranch house door with faces as sad as the heart of Melvin Woolaway, the feeling of loss was as strong as ever.

And the news that it was bedtime didn't raise his spirits either, even though Daddy acted the part of Simba the horse, and with Clint Woolaway on his back went galloping up the stair-hill to the bedroom-ranch.

But at last Melvin's head came to rest on the pillow, his eyes closed tight, and everything was still except his brain, which carried him down the dusty road of Wimpleford Creek....

"Howdy, partner," says the old-timer sprawled out on the veranda.

Big Mel doesn't say a word, but walks straight past, shoulders his way through the swinging doors, and surveys the saloon. The drinking stops. The card playing stops. The piano playing stops. Everything stops. The whole crowd turns to gaze at the tall, powerful stranger.

The tall, powerful, two-gun stranger speaks. "I'm lookin' fer Pritchett," he says. Nobody moves. The bartender licks his lips nervously.

"He . . . he ain't here, mister."

The tall, powerful, two-gun, lethal-with-either-hand stranger looks straight into the eyes of the bartender, who squirms like a maggot on the end of that steely gaze.

"Go git him," says the stranger.

"Yes, sir!" says the bartender.

"An' tell him," says the stranger, "tell him Big Mel sent yer."

The bartender scurries out like a mouse that's just bumped into a tiger. Big Mel walks slowly to the bar, and the crowd falls back to make way for him.

"Give us some o' that there apple pie," says Big Mel, and a woman hurries to obey.

"Make that a double," says Big Mel.

"Here y'are, Big Mel," says the woman.

"Thanks, honey," says Big Mel. "What's yer name?"

"Belle," says the woman. "Belle Arnold."

"I likes custard wi' my apple pie, Belle."

"Sure thing, Big Mel."

The crowd stares in disbelief as Big Mel crunches the apple pie in his powerful jaws and gulps down the custard as if it were weak as water.

“Now,” says Big Mel, coldly scanning the crowd, “any of you folks friends o’ Pritchett?”

Not a murmur.

“Cos if y’are,” says Big Mel, with a ghost of a smile flickering over his handsome lips, “ye’d better start sayin’ prayers for him. An’ I don’t want no talkin’ in them prayers either, or I’ll be puttin’ ten bullets through yer hide.”

The bartender creeps through the door.

“He’s comin’, Big Mel. Pritchett’s comin’. An’ he’s real sore. He’s bin knockin’ housepoints off everyone he sees.”

“When I’ve finished with ‘im,” says Big Mel, “he’ll be a lot sorer than he is now.”

The saloon doors swing open, and there stands the dreaded Pritchett, seven feet tall with a face like a boiled beetroot. There’s a mad scramble as everyone dives for cover—every-one, that is, except Big Mel Woolaway, who leans casually on the bar, licking the apple pie crumbs off his lips.

“Stand up when I come into the room!” says Pritchett. “Five housepoints off!”

A murmur of horror goes round the saloon, rising up from under the tables where all the heads are hiding.

“Are you speakin’ ter me?” says Big Mel.

“Don’t answer back, boy,” says Pritchett.

Big Mel slowly straightens up . . . and up . . . and up, until his head nearly touches the ceiling, and he gazes down on little Pritchett like a giraffe gazing down on a baby chimpanzee. “So you’re Pritchett,” he says. “You don’t remember me.”

“I certainly do not,” says Pritchett, trembling a little.

“I’m Little Mel,” says Big Mel. “Little Mel Woolaway. An’ I’ve come for my housepoints.”

“H . . . h . . . housep . . . points?” says Pritchett.

“*Ten!*” roars Big Mel. “An’ I wannem now.”

“But . . . but . . . I haven’t got any here,” says Pritchett, beginning to look more like a cabbage than a beetroot.

“I wannem, Pritchett,” says Big Mel. “An’ if I don’t gettem, I’m gonna fill you so full o’ holes you’ll look like a hunk o’ Swiss cheese.”

With a desperate lunge, Pritchett reaches for his cane, but before he can raise it higher than his hip—*Piaow! Piaow!*—two shots, and he’s left holding a splinter. There’s a gasp from under the tables. The voice of Belle peals forth. “Gee, he’s the fastest gun alive!”

“Hold up that thar splinter,” says Big Mel.

Pritchett’s hand goes up, like a five-fingered jelly.

“Keep it still,” says Big Mel, “if you don’t want them hands turnin’ into mittens.”

Piaow! And the splinter goes flying.

“Now then, Pritchett,” says Big Mel, “do I get my housepoints, or do I take your fingernails off?”

“You . . . you . . . you g . . . g . . . get your h . . . h . . . housep . . . points,” says Pritchett. “T . . . t . . . twenty!”

Sliding his guns back into their holsters, Big Mel says, “Go get ’em.”

“Y . . . y . . . y . . .”

“Stop talkin’, boy!” says Big Mel. “An’ get goin’.”

Pritchett backs out of the saloon like a whipped dog, bodies crawl out from under tables like worms after a shower, and Big Mel—Huge Mel—smiles the smile of a satisfied lion.

“Milk all round!” says Big Mel. “An’ make mine a double.”

And then just about everybody from Wimpleford Creek crowds around to congratulate him.

“We were all scared of him!” they keep saying. “Nobody ever dared stand up to him before!”

“Well,” says Big Mel, “he won’t scare yer no more. Not so long as Big Mel’s around.”

Three cheers for Big Mel! Hip-hip-hooray! Hip-hip-hooray! Hip-hip-hooray! And Belle Arnold kisses him on the cheek . . .

“Wake up!” said Mrs. Woolaway, kissing Melvin on the cheek.

In prayers that morning, Mr. Pritchett showed no sign of recognizing The Fastest Gun Alive, but later on in the day, a strange thing happened. Miss Arnold told all the

children in her class to write a story, and Melvin Woolaway wrote down everything that had happened in the saloon at Wimpleford Creek. Miss Arnold said it was the best story she'd read in "donkey's years," and when Mr. Pritchett chanced to come by, she asked him to read it, too. And Mr. Pritchett laughed and laughed till his face was as red as two boiled beetroots.

No one had ever seen Mr. Pritchett laugh like that before. In fact, he laughed so much that Mr. Roberts came in from the class next-door to see what all the noise was about. Then he had to read the story, and he also laughed and laughed till his face was as pink as two pieces of boiled salmon.

And when, at last, all the laughter had died down, Mr. Pritchett gave Melvin Woolaway five housepoints for his story, and Mr. Roberts and Miss Arnold also gave him five each, which made a total of . . . well, you couldn't have a much easier sum than that, could you? Little Mel added it up even faster than Big Mel could have fired that number of shots.

But Little Mel still wasn't quite satisfied. After all, Big Mel had fought for justice, and justice still hadn't really been done. *Winning* fifteen housepoints and losing ten housepoints are quite different things, so he plucked heroically at Mr. Pritchett's sleeve.

"Well, what is it, Big Mel?" said Mr. Pritchett.

"S . . . sir, thank you for . . . for the housepoints, but . . . but you shouldn't have taken those ten off yesterday because . . ."

"Because it wasn't your fault, eh?" said Mr. Pritchett. "Someone stamped on your foot."

"Y . . . yes, sir!" said Melvin. "But . . . but how did you know, sir?"

"Aha," said Mr. Pritchett. "Well, even a headmaster occasionally knows what's happening in his school. And you're quite right to tell me off about it. So you can add on the ten housepoints I took off yesterday, and that gives you a grand total of . . ."

Well, see if you can add it up as quickly as Melvin did.