

Bounty

Joe Sweeney

The merciless southern sun baked the barren Chihuahuan desert. Bill Bergmann's back was aching. His neck was aching. His shoulders were aching. His buttocks were aching from being seated upon his faithful horse for the last eight hours. But the journey had been worth it. Far ahead of him in the distance, Bergmann could vaguely make out the shape of a small town coming into view. He allowed himself a small smile. The last few hours had been agonizing, but the prospect of a hot meal, a bath, and a real bed to sleep in gave him a fleeting moment of joy. He gently kicked his horse into a light trot and set off towards the town.

An hour and a half later, Bill Bergmann was sitting in a saloon, with an empty glass and a clean plate on the table in front of him. He rose from his seat and left the saloon. Across the road, a lone, worn-down building stood. There was a wooden sign hanging from a post that read "Sheriff's Office". Bergmann pushed the door open and looked around. A gaunt, pasty-faced man was crouching in a cell on his own, muttering gibberish to himself. On the opposite side of a desk, a man was reclining in his chair, with his feet up on the desk and his hat covering his eyes. Bergmann approached him slowly and opened his mouth to speak. "I'm here about the bounty."

The sheriff did not respond, nor give any indication that he had heard Bergmann.

Bergmann stepped closer and repeated himself.

The sheriff slowly rose his head and stared at Bergmann. His eyes were ice blue. He snorted loudly and spat a glob of phlegm into a saucer lying nearby, making a slight pinging sound upon impact.

“The bounty?” asked the sheriff.

“Yes, sheriff, the bounty,” replied Bergmann impatiently.

The sheriff lazily lifted a finger and pointed at the wall behind Bergmann. Bergmann turned and approached the poster that was tacked to the wall. It read: [Wanted Dead or Alive: Lily Hynes. Reward of 100 dollars upon return.](#)

Bergmann tore the poster off the wall, placed it in his jacket, nodded at the sheriff and left the office.

An hour later, Bill Bergmann was back on his horse, galloping through the desert. Lily Hynes' last known location was an old house, located very close to where Bergmann was now. The house appeared on the horizon without warning. Bergmann slowed his horse down to a trot and dismounted with his rifle. He crept towards the house and studied it silently. There appeared to be no activity around the house. Bergmann pushed the front door open. It creaked loudly but swung open very easily.

He entered the house to find it in a state of disrepair. Furniture was strewn about everywhere and it appeared as if there was a fight here. Gripping his rifle tightly and staying as quiet as possible, Bill Bergmann ascended the stairs of the house. He stopped suddenly. He had heard something. A gentle sobbing was coming from the

second floor. Bergmann advanced quickly, excited at the prospect of what he would find. He stopped in his tracks. A boy no older than sixteen was lying on the floor, in tears.

“What’s your name, lad?” Bergmann asked the boy gently.

“Jacob,” sobbed the boy, as he started shaking uncontrollably.

“Jacob, where is Lily Hynes?” asked Bergmann firmly.

Jacob slowly raised his head and looked towards the bedroom.

Bergmann turned and looked at the room, then back at Jacob.

Jacob nodded.

Bergmann gripped the handle of his rifle and entered the bedroom.

There was a bed in the centre of the room. A duvet was covering a large, human-shaped lump. Breathing heavily, Bergmann steeled himself and yanked the covers back. Lily Hynes was lying in the bed. Her throat was cut open in a crimson smile. Bergmann felt the breath catch in his throat. He put two and two together a split second before a creak behind him alerted him to the immediate danger. He spun on the spot and caught Jacob mid-leap with the barrel of his gun. The barrel jammed in between Jacob’s ribs and Bergmann did what came naturally to him; he pulled the trigger.

A burst of smoke and a deafening blast momentarily blinded Bergmann and he felt himself be thrown to the ground by the recoil of the blast. When the smoke cleared, Jacob was on the floor, motionless. The gaping hole in his stomach and his shallow, brittle breathing told Bergmann that Jacob had very little time left. Bergmann could taste blood in his mouth; he had bitten his tongue.

He grimaced and unsteadily rose to his feet. Lily Hynes was still lying where he had found her.

In the end, Bergmann chose not to take the body with him. The experience had left him shaken and with a bad taste in his mouth. And sometimes it just wasn't worth it.