

A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

by
Bud Morris

George Crowder checked his suitcase and boarded the west-bound train at the Boston depot. He chose a window seat near the caboose. The noisy confusion of the station heralded his exchange of the formal elitism of the Boston area's upper crust for the wide open spaces of the wild west. The contented sigh that whooshed from his soul rivaled the hiss that accompanied the release of the air brakes as the train began to roll. The odors of coal smoke and oily steam would soon be exchanged for the nostalgic smells of sagebrush, leather, horses, and cattle.

The young doctor's small suitcase contained his freshly printed diploma from Harvard, his stethoscope, and virtually everything else he owned except for the clothes on his back. His wallet contained about two hundred dollars in greenbacks, and pre-paid tickets all the way to the wide open spaces around Wilcox, Wyoming. From there he would purchase a horse and ride on to his parents' ranch in the rolling hills about seventy miles northwest of the Wilcox station. The strange thing was that he hadn't heard from them for almost a year now.

George disembarked during a four-hour lay-over at Cheyenne, Wyoming. He purchased a shave, a haircut, and a hot bath at the barber shop for seventy-five cents. As he walked past the holster's corral, an exceptionally well built bay gelding nickered softly at him. It was love at first sight for the doctor. When he inquired about the horse, he found that its owner had been killed while attempting to rob the bank. The Marshall was selling it along with a tooled leather saddle, a bridle, and a pair of matching saddle bags--all for the owner's burial expenses and the holsters fees for the horse's upkeep. After a trial ride, the doctor purchased the fine animal and its tack for a mite less than thirty-eight dollars. "I'll call him Fundy, after the Bay of Fundy," he murmured to himself as he counted out the money.

"Be sure to keep the bill of sale with you at all times," the Marshall advised. "We really don't know where that horse came from, or who might try to claim it down the road."

George paid an additional three dollars to ship the horse to Wilcox and had plenty of time to get it loaded on a cattle car before the train moved on. He would have preferred to ride with the horse, but since it was less than four hours to the Wilcox station, he contented himself with trying to catch some shut-eye in the passenger coach before they arrived at that destination.

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The trail-wise traveler unloaded his horse, tack, and suitcase at the Wilcox station that evening. He slept out the night on a bench inside the station. He purchased a few meager supplies at the general store the next morning, reserving most of the space in the saddlebags for the contents of his suitcase. He traded the thick leather suitcase for a bed roll and purchased a used Winchester repeating rifle that he hung in a scabbard around the horse's neck. There was always a possibility of running into an irritable Grizzly along the trail. By mid-morning he was headed up the trail to the family ranch a two-to-three day ride northwest of Wilcox.

George followed the narrow trail into the deep ravine that snaked its way along the southern edge of the Crowder graze with increasing anticipation at seeing his parents after four long years away from

home. He could almost feel Mom's welcoming hug as he crossed the nearly dry creek at the bottom, and climbed the narrow cut that he and Dad had dynamited out of the rocky cliff along the northern edge of the ravine. He was trotting happily down the trail almost in sight of the house when a rifle bullet ricocheted off a boulder just to the left of him. A second bullet struck even closer as the surprised traveler wheeled Fundy into the trees on the right side of the trail. He beat a hasty retreat behind the cover of the trees, not stopping until he reached the cover of the wash-out, which he entered where a smaller wash-out joined it.

The confused traveler rode well beyond the far edge of the Crowder graze under cover of the washout—all the way to where the road to the settlement crossed it. He took the road into the small town, which consisted of a half-a-dozen houses, a saloon, a general store, a small inn, and a tiny bank building. There was another small building that was boarded up. The church was in poor repair, and appeared to be unused. There was no Marshall's office or jail of any kind.

George tried the door to the bank, but it was locked. The windows were dirty with fly spots and cigar smoke residue. He crossed the street to the inn, and could see that it was disreputable the moment he opened the door. He beat a hasty retreat to the general store, where he recognized the proprietor at once.

"Yer the Crowder kid, ain't yah?" the old man asked.

"Yes," George answered, "And I'm kind of confused."

"Come in here," the man invited him conspiratorially as he opened a side door into his office. "Hurry," he added in a low voice when George reacted slowly.

"What's going on?" George asked as the storekeeper closed the door behind them.

"You've no ideer?" the old man asked.

"No," George replied. "I just got back from the east after finishing school. I havn't heard from my folks for nearly a year."

"Connor brung a lot a' cattle in here nigh ta a year ago, 'n chased everyone else out. He's taken over everything fer at least twenty miles ever way uv' here, 'n e's killed everbody as has resisted 'em."

"Where's my folks?" George asked.

"Dead." The man answered, shifting his gaze away from George's face. "Connor's gang burned their house down on 'em when they refused ta leave. Kenny 'n I retrieved their bodies that evenin,' 'n buried them back in the hills where nobody would notice the graves."

Tears filled George's eyes. "Thanks for burying them. Please tell me more," he begged.

"Son," the old man replied sympathetically, "You git out a' town 'thout attractin' enny attention right now! Slip back ta my house tonight after dark. Come in cross-country behind the house 'n leave yer beast in the barn. I'll tell ya everthing I know. Mind me now! Yer life may depend on ut," he added as he peeked out the door before motioning George out to his horse. "If a darkish hontre with a knife

scar on 'is right cheek challenges ya, don't draw on 'im. 'E's Brigsie, Connor's man, 'n e's dropped everone as has tried 'im."

The shocked young doctor walked his horse out of town in the opposite direction he had come from as nonchalantly as possible. No one followed. He slipped off the trail into the first sizable clump of trees along the way and dismounted. After brushing out the tracks where he had left the trail with a small leafy tree branch, he paused to gather his thoughts. Upon further consideration, he rode deeper into the trees, watered Fundy at trickling creek, and tied him to a low hanging branch with a slip knot. He spent the next few minutes praying out his agony to God over his parents' untimely deaths. Finally, he lay back peacefully against a tree to catch some sleep, trusting Fundy to let him know if any danger threatened.

It was pitch black when George awoke. The overcast sky allowed little moonlight to fall. He rode most of the way to town on the road, leaving it to approach the store proprietor's house from behind while still well beyond earshot of town. He left his horse saddled in the barn and knocked lightly at the back door. A hoarse whisper came from the adjacent window.

"Leave quietly. They're out front a'watching the house."

George crept back to the barn and led the horse back the way he had come from. When he was sure he had not been detected, he mounted and rode carefully beyond town and back to the road. He rode on down the trail until the sky cleared before daring to stop for some sleep. He saw no reason to put the store owner in a dangerous predicament by trying to contact him again.

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The trail George was following skirted the Medicine Bow River for some miles before circling back down to Rawlings. He entered Rawlings from the northeast three days later. His first stop was at the Marshall's office.

"Marshall," he asked after introducing himself, "Can you tell me what's going on around Medicine Bow?"

"I hear the whole area has been bought out by a big rancher by the name of Connor," the Marshall answered. "Don't sound as if it's all on the up-'n-up either."

When George explained what little he had found out, the Marshall seemed surprised. "Didn't know it was that bad," he responded. "If I was you, I'd either take a pot shot at Connor from a distance er hustle over ta Laramie and talk ta the U.S. Marshall. He's the only one with any real authority that fur from enny honest-ta-Pete town."

"I'm a Christian, Marshall," George responded. "I don't even carry a hand gun, and I leave such things up to the proper authorities."

"Then ya best scurry down ta the station and catch the train back ta Laramie," the Marshall advised. "It leaves in about an hour."

The hurried man was able to purchase a ticket and get Fundy loaded in plenty of time. As he walked down the isle looking for an unoccupied seat he recognized one of the passengers as Greg Summers, a former neighbor he had known since he was a child. The man recognized him immediately, and they were soon in a deep conversation.

"It all started when a very friendly doctor came to town and established a busy practice in very short order," the man told him. "Then the doctor's brother came and started up a bank. He looked the picture of innocence until he had almost everyone's money under his control. Then he started trying to foreclose on a lot of ranchers who claimed they had never borrowed a penny from him. When a couple of ranchers complained, the U.S. Marshall's office at Laramie investigated the bank. The banker produced what appeared to be legitimate mortgage papers, and the Marshall backed the banker. Just when things got real ticklish, the banker absconded with everyone's money, the doctor disappeared, and Connor moved in and began forcing everyone to sell out cheap. Most of those who resisted died in one accident or another, and the persistent ones ended up shot in the back by 'unknown' assailants. I saw what was happening and left for the greener pastures right next to Thayer. Your parents stayed and ended up dead."

"What do you think I should do?" George asked.

"Go and start up a medical practice somewhere else," the older man advised. "The banker got all your parents' money. Their home place has been burned to the ground, and Connor has usurped all the government graze they used to control. You can bet your bottom dollar that every cow that had the Crowder brand on it has been sold and shipped to market months ago. Even if you wanted to ranch, you'd be better off homesteading somewhere else where you wouldn't be risking your life fighting a gang of murderers every day."

The two men lapsed into thoughtful silence, and the rancher's head began nodding before anything more of significance was said. "His advice is sound," George had to admit to himself before dropping off to sleep beside his neighbor on the thinly cushioned bench they shared. He stopped by the U.S. Marshall's office in Laramie the next day, but was curtly informed that an investigation had been done and the case was closed. Any further discussion appeared to be useless, so he dropped the matter.

George hung around Laramie for several days, discussing how the various towns in Wyoming were fairing with travelers and businessmen. He wanted to start his practice in an economically stable area that was not overpopulated with doctors, if possible. His cash was running low, so he spent the nights outside of town in carefully chosen camp sites that were well off the beaten path.

On his third day in Laramie George hired on with a group of locals for a cattle drive to stock the Birdsfoot Ranch near Casper with White Face cattle shipped in by railroad from the east. The Birdsfoot brand was a "V" with an extra line between the other two, making a three-toed bird's foot. They wanted to try White Face cattle because they were reported to forage better and gain weight faster than the standard Long Horns of the west.

The young doctor did not reveal his profession to the hands on the drive. He had been raised with cattle, and knew how to handle them well. Fundy proved to be an excellent cutting horse, which helped George gain acceptance among the other hands. They were only half-way to their destination when the Birdsfoot foreman's horse stepped in a prairie dog hole and fell. The man's neck was broken, and he died on the spot.

As the hands stood around in stunned silence, George took over. "Gentlemen," he addressed the group, "I propose that we bury the foreman's body right here beside the trail, and drive this herd right on up to the Birdsfoot Ranch. We can demand payment for our work before handing these unbranded cattle over to their rightful owner, if necessary."

"Agreed," one of the hands spoke up; and a nod of assent showed on every face. "I think we should make George the foreman and spokesman for our group." Every man acquiesced; and George took over the leadership without a hitch. They reached the ranch a week and a half later, where they were welcomed by the cowboys on hand. All of them appeared genuinely saddened by the death of their foreman.

"I'll get Lacy to settle with you guys," one of the hands volunteered as they approached the homestead; but Lacy had heard the cattle lowing and was already riding out to meet them. She was visibly shaken by the death of the foreman, but got control of herself commendably well and paid the men off in cash without hesitation. Most of the men took off for the saloon with their earnings, but George held back. He liked the congenial attitude of the Birdsfoot outfit.

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Lacy, it turned out, was the rancher's daughter. It's not that she couldn't muck a stall or even pig a calf, but she was all woman and did it with a touch of femininity. She could even handle a gun persuasively, if need be. She wore culottes around the house that were practically indistinguishable from the long skirts that the city women wore, but she generally wore a pair of self-altered Levis when riding the range. The brush and brambles in the graze could shred a pair of culottes in next to no time at all.

Lacy's problem was that her mother suffered from the dropsy, and her father had been diagnosed with angina pectoris. Mom's legs were swollen, and she got out of breath just walking across the room. Dad got chest spasms whenever he exerted himself overly much. The new doctor in town constantly warned him to stay indoors and avoid strenuous exercise. The doctor treated both of their illnesses with a tonic that "Stimulated their hearts," but they didn't seem to be improving very much.

To say the least, the young woman was busy. Besides the cooking, housework, and laundry, she took care of her parents and tried to manage the ranch. She was doing pretty well at it, too, but now her trusted foreman was dead. "How can I possibly keep up with all I have to do?" she asked herself when she got back to the house.

The Birdsfoot cowpokes invited George to stay for dinner and spend the night in the bunk house. "Lacy never turns anyone away," they assured him. The food was excellent; and the hands appeared to be intensely loyal to the brand. None of them seemed to resent working under the supervision of a woman. "I might ought to stay around and observe the community for a while before committing myself to practicing medicine here," George told himself. "I'll see if I can hire on in the morning."

Lacy liked the clean cut young man that applied for a job the next morning. He spoke intelligently, was congenial, and had exhibited integrity and leadership in bringing the herd in after the foreman had died.

"I'll tell you what," she finally proposed, "None of my present hands care to be foreman. They just want to wrangle cattle. The other drovers bragged on your leadership during the drive. How about you hiring on as acting foreman for the time being."

"Fine," George agreed. "I'll leave my stuff on my bunk and start learning how you like to do things."

"No," she replied, "The foreman sleeps in the house, across the hall from Mom and Dad. You will eat with the family and keep everyone informed on whatever is happening on the ranch. Mom doesn't care to get too involved, but the rest of us will talk virtually everything over between us so we will always be on the same page. I sleep upstairs, which is off limits to men. Everybody goes to church on Sunday morning unless they want to muck the stables for the rest of the week."

Lacy and George saddled up that first afternoon, and she showed him around the ranch. It was strictly a business expedition. Neither of them read anything more than that into their time together, though each of them genuinely enjoyed the other's company.

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Dinner on George's first night at the ranch house was a simple affair. He and Lacy got home right at dinner time. He put the horses away while she scurried into the kitchen and rustled up some warmed-over beans and cold roast beef sandwiches. The meal was topped off with cold apple pie and coffee.

George was impressed with Mr. Byrd, or Bob, as Lacy's father was called. He laid out his philosophy on ranching to his new foreman clearly and concisely. He appeared to be well informed on everything that was happening on the whole spread; and he knew every hand's strengths and peculiarities. He was not only "With It," he was in control of it. He also seemed to trust his daughter's ability to make appropriate decisions in his absence.

The evening went well, but the night went horridly. The new foreman was awakened by at least three sessions of agonized groaning from behind the older couple's door. He couldn't tell for sure which one was groaning. Sometimes it seemed that they both were. The doctor in him longed to go to their aid, but they didn't even know that he was a doctor. Besides, even a doctor couldn't just invite himself in to other people's health problems.

Breakfast was supposed to be at dawn. George showed up in the kitchen shortly after he heard the dishes rattling. Lacy handed him a cup of coffee and went back to frying bacon and eggs. "Mom and Dad wake you up last night?" she asked as she sliced the bread before putting the meal on the table.

"Three times," he answered. "It sounded like they were really in agony."

"They were," she assured him. "They both get severe muscle cramps when they stretch or even roll over in bed. They just have to grit their teeth and wait out the cramps."

"I've heard," he ventured slowly, "That stretching cramped muscles tends to help relieve the cramps."

"I doubt if it would help them," she answered, emphasizing the "Them." "Stretching seems to cause their cramps."

George let the matter drop. The older Byrds understandably slept through breakfast that morning.

The new foreman spent the next week or so getting acquainted with the cowhands. He wanted to be as familiar with them as Dad Byrd was. He let Bob determine what assignments were appropriate for which hands, and spent most of his time observing how they worked. He bantered jokingly with them and complimented them when he could, but he rarely interfered with how they approached their tasks. They liked him a lot, but they weren't beyond trying to get him on their orneriest horse.

When he felt the time was right, George allowed the staff to get him on a ruggedly built raw-boned wild-eyed cayuse. Bob and Lacy showed up at the last moment to watch, confirming to George's mind that this was meant to be prime entertainment for everyone. He had scarcely climbed aboard when the horse went to bucking and whirling like few horses can. George egged the pitching beast on with his spurs and rode it to a standstill without needing to grab leather. Another time, a cowhand's mustang was knocked out from under him by an angry steer. The bull turned on the dismounted man with a vengeance, but George's loop tightened around the base of its horns just in time to avert a gory disaster. He loved these guys, and they were learning to love him.

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George had been with the Birdsfoot outfit for about a month when he met the Byrds' physician. The foreman had seen a couple of wolves hanging around a bit too close to the herd. He had come into the house to get some ammo for the rifle that Bob had asked him to try out. When he knocked lightly on the couple's bedroom door, he was invited in. The doctor glared at him while Bob got the ammo out of his gun closet.

The man was greying, probably about fifty years of age. He wore a well-trimmed goatee and dressed a bit more formally than the circumstances demanded. His hands were soft, his clothes were flimsy, and his eyes were narrow-set and seemed a bit shifty. The Birdsfoot foreman was not favorably impressed, although he could not put a finger on what bothered him about the man.

The next morning the nearly empty bottle of tonic in the kitchen window above the sink had been replaced with a full one just like it. That evening George watched Lacy prepare the tonic for her parents. Ten drops in a half a cup full of water for Bob, and seven drops for his wife. They each downed the draught in four or five quick gulps. Both of them made wry faces when they were done. "It's bitter!" Bob volunteered with a wink at George. That evening the cramps were worse than they had ever been.

The following morning the older couple did not come to breakfast. Lacy was exhausted and frustrated. "I was up with my parents most of the night," she announced. "They were in so much pain that they were in a state of agitation that kept them awake until just before time to get up. It was awful. I think it's time to make you the permanent foreman so I can devote more time to them."

"Lacy," George replied, "I can't take the job."

"Why not?" She asked. "You've been doing it better than anyone else we've ever had."

"Can you sit down so we can talk confidentially?" he asked.

"I'm too exhausted to do anything else," she replied. "Go ahead and have your say."

"OK Lacy, I was raised on a ranch and I love every aspect of ranching, but I went to Harvard and became a doctor in order to help others. My diploma is in my room if you want to see it. I've been checking out this area, and am satisfied that this is where I want to set up my practice."

Lacy was too dumbfounded to answer.

"While we're on the subject, I want to tell you that Dr. Prichard is so behind the times that he is treating your parents like they would have a hundred years ago." Reaching over to the bottle, he shook it before removing the lid. Touching a finger to the inside of the lid and then to his tongue, he continued. "This tastes like a solution of Strychnine. It will be a very weak one, but it can still cause mental agitation and muscle cramps. The reason your parents had so much trouble last night is that he's got a fresher and probably stronger solution in this new bottle. You've got to get them to a more competent physician".

"But it stimulates their hearts," she replied. "Dr. Prichard says they'll die if they quit taking it."

"Strychnine doesn't do anything for the heart," the young medical graduate replied. "Your mom needs to be taking a fresh preparation of Foxglove leaves for the digitalis in it; and if your dad has angina, he should be using nitroglycerine for the chest pain."

After some consideration, Lacy gave in. "Mom and Dad think Dr. Prichard is the greatest thing that ever happened to this community," she said. "They would never accept any criticism of his treatment."

"We could do this surreptitiously for a couple of weeks," George suggested. "Then we can tell them why they are getting so much better."

"I'm in for a two-week trial," she agreed co-conspiratorially. "How do we do it?"

"Have you still got that old bottle?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"Dilute a bit of the new stuff about four-to-one in the old bottle," he suggested. "Be sure to mark the weak one so we won't get them mixed up. I'll find some excuse to get to Casper and pick up some Foxglove and nitro today if they're available locally. If we can't buy the pills, we'll have to make a fresh solution of Foxglove, which is not as effective as the pills would be."

"You won't need an excuse if you hurry," Lacy volunteered. "My parents will be sleeping most of the day."

George had to order some dried Foxglove tablets from Boston. He prudently added some chemicals to test for strychnine to his order. A prospector he met on the street sold him a small amount of nitroglycerine, which he carried gingerly in a small bottle nestled in a scrap of cloth. He planned to put it into some chalk tablets if and when it was needed. He has seen some wild Foxglove plants along the trail on the way to town, which he picked on the way home.

Lacy had the diluted strychnine solution ready before breakfast. She added some tea from the Foxglove leaves George had picked to Mrs. Byrd's portion. George decided to hold up on the nitroglycerine for Mr. Byrd until they could determine whether or not the strychnine was the sole cause of his problem.

The couple's muscle cramps and mental agitation were gone within two days of the lowered dose of strychnine. Mrs. Boyd's swelling decreased within a week and was gone by the end of the second week. Her shortness of breath was immensely improved as well. So far, Mr. Byrd had not had any episodes of chest pain since the surreptitious experiment had been implemented.

"That new bottle of Dr. Pritchard's tonic has certainly helped us a lot," Dad Boyd mentioned as they gulped down their first dose of the third week at the breakfast table.

"Dad," Lacy answered. "I have a confession to make."

"Go ahead," Dad encouraged her.

"Do you remember how sick you and Mom were after the first dose out of the last bottle of tonic Doc Prichard gave you?"

"Sure do," he answered. "But we're a lot better now."

"I talked with another doctor after that stuff made you so sick. He advised diluting the tonic by eighty percent. Neither one of you have had a muscle cramp or a sleepless night since."

Lacy's dad was miffed. "Why would you take a chance on us dying just because some doctor you don't even know recommended a different dose?"

"I know the other doctor far better than you know Dr. Prichard, Dad. And you're the one who was just bragging on how much better you both have gotten since we changed your dose."

"Conceded," Dad agreed. "We'll continue what you are doing as long as it's working. Who is this doctor that you know so well?"

"George," she asked coyly, "Will you get that paper you mentioned to me for Dad to see?"

"Sure," George responded as he rose from the table. "I'll be right back with it in less than a minute."

"I guess this means there's a doctor in the house?" Dad mused in a subdued voice as he surveyed George's diploma.

"Yes it does, Dad," Lacy answered proudly for him. "And he's going to start practicing right here in our little community."

"There's more to tell you," George interjected, "But please don't tell anyone about the doctor thing until we're ready." The words slipped out so naturally that he scarcely realized that he was including Lacy and her parents in his plans.

"I believe that most, if not all of your chest pain was caused by that tonic that Dr. Prichard was giving you. That still remains to be seen, but there is a far better medicine available for angina than strychnine."

"Strychnine!" Bob repeated in horror. "You mean that Doc Prichard is trying to poison us?"

"I doubt it," George assured him. "Don't be too hard on him. Very weak doses of strychnine were widely used to stimulate the heart a hundred years ago. Now we know that it never helped a bit. It treated the doctor's self-esteem rather than the patient's heart."

"On the other hand," George continued, "Digitalis from Foxglove leaves treats heart failure like Mom has pretty well. We've been slipping a bit of it into her tonic, and that explains why her swelling is down and her breathing is so much better. We've ordered some of the best tablet form of it, which we plan to switch to when it arrives in a couple of weeks. Is that OK?"

"Dr. Crawford, whatever you prescribe is what we will take. Right Mom?"

"You bet!" Mrs. Byrd answered with more enthusiasm than she had exhibited in several years.

"One more thing," George finished up. "May I continue on as foreman of the Birdsfoot until we are ready to set up our practice? It may be a few months yet."

"You sure can," Dad replied, "And I'm going to provide the funds to get you started when you are ready."

Lacy could scarcely hide her grin at the way the young doctor was unwittingly including her in his future plans. Dad had obviously come to the same conclusion.

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When the green Foxglove pills arrived, George started Mrs. Byrd on them. She was soon so much better that she was able to resume the cooking and lighter housekeeping duties for the family. This left Lacy free to spend more time on the range. Her parents observed that George generally found an excuse to be busy somewhere in the vicinity of wherever she chose to work. Although he never actually seemed to be courting her, they were becoming inseparable friends. "It's bound to happen sooner or later, Mama," Bob told his wife.

Dr. Pritchard showed up about a month after George had taken over Mrs. Byrd's treatment. He was obviously shaken by the improvement of both of his Birdsfoot patients. After listening to their hearts and lungs a bit longer than usual, he asked Lacy to bring the bottle of tonic for his inspection. Lacy went to the kitchen to get the newer bottle, and poured most of it down the drain before returning to the bedroom with the nearly empty bottle. He tasted it in the same way George had, and handed it back to Lacy. "I hadn't planned on stopping here today," he grunted tersely. "I'll drop a new bottle-full by here tomorrow."

Mr. Byrd paid the doctor for the visit, including the price of the promised refill. When the doctor was out of sight down the road, the rancher burst into a merry laugh.

"What's so funny?" Lacy asked

"That old fraud forgot to put the stethoscope in his ears while he listened to Mom's heart," he replied.

"George didn't laugh when they told him about the fraudulent auscultation that evening. "We've got to be careful, Bob," he said. "I'm beginning to wonder if that old scoundrel isn't purposely trying to harm both of you."

"Well said," Mr. Byrd replied. "We'll play along with him a bit and see what he tries next."

"Please don't actually take anything he prescribes for you," George warned solemnly.

Dr. Prichard left another bottle of tonic at the house the next morning. "I'll drop by and see how you are doing next week," he promised.

"By the way," the doctor continued from outside the door. "What did that foreman of yours study back east?"

"He's pretty tight-lipped," Bob replied reflectively. "I don't guess I've asked him much about his past. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," the doctor answered. "He just doesn't strike me as anyone I'd want around my house."

"Thanks for your concern." Bob answered curtly. "I'll be watching him," he added as he shut the door.

That evening George and Lacy put a teaspoon-full of Dr. Prichard's tonic from the new bottle and one from the previous one into separate identical clear glass drinking tumblers. They filled both glasses to within one-half an inch of the top and added a quarter of a teaspoon-full of sulfuric acid to each glass. After dropping a potassium permanganate tablet in each glass the newest tonic turned a much darker violet color than the earlier one. "He gave you a stronger solution of strychnine this time," he told Mr. and Mrs. Byrd. "I suspect that he has been trying to poison both of you slowly enough that no one will realize that you were poisoned."

After her parents went to bed, Lacy grabbed George's hand. "George," she asked, "Pray with me. I'm getting scared that this thing may be more serious than meets the eye."

George held her hand while they both knelt at the couch and prayed for the Lord's protection for Mr. and Mrs. Byrd. "I'm praying for Lacy too, Lord," George added. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost her." George felt the warmth rise in his face as he realized what he had just admitted, mostly to himself. Lacy's heart was just as warm as George's face had been as she climbed the stairs to her room.

A couple of weeks later one of the cow hands cut his hand on a sharp piece of metal. The wound was not serious, but it needed a few stitches. George could have taken care of it there at the bunk house, but he had been wanting to get a look at the inside of Dr. Prichard's office. He hitched a buckboard up while Lacy cleansed the wound with soap and water. They dragged the reluctant cowboy into town and had Lacy take him into the office. Dr. Prichard told Lacy to wait in the waiting room while he stitched the wound closed in the treatment room. While the doctor was busy, Lacy opened the door quietly and let George in. George examined the Harvard College of Medicine diploma on the wall, copying down the

name, date, and certificate number just as written. He remained in the office with Lacy and paid the cowpoke's bill with Birdsfoot cash before leaving. If looks could have killed, George would never have gotten out of the doctor's office alive.

George went directly to the telegraph office and wired the diploma specifics to one of his favorite professors at Harvard. When they got back to the Birdsfoot spread, he examined Pritchard's repair job. He had to admit that it was a decent job of suturing. Within a week George received a telegram stating that Harvard had never numbered its diplomas, and that no one with the first name of Percival or the last name of Pritchard had ever attended or graduated from Harvard's College of Medicine. Pritchard's credentials were just as fraudulent as George had suspected they were.

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As Dad Byrd had predicted, "It" did indeed happen—more sooner than later. George fell madly in love with Lacy, and she was just as in love with him. Mom and Dad Byrd were pleased as punch with the match. One evening as the younger couple sat out on the porch swing, Lacy asked George more about his parents. As he told her what had become of them something clicked in Lacy's mind. "Do you think that that doctor from your home town was a fraud like Pritchard?" Lacy asked.

George's face paled. "Get your dad out here!" he almost shouted at her.

Tracy called her dad out of the parlor, where he had been reading a book while Mom sat contentedly knitting at his side.

"Bob," George started before the man was even seated, "How long has the Birdsfoot's bank been in town?"

"Probably a year or more," Mr. Byrd reflected. "It started up about the same time Dr. Prichard came."

"Have you got a lot of money in there?" George asked.

"Only about fifteen thousand dollars after we bought the White Faces. They're doing so well it won't take very long to get our account back to where it was. There's still plenty more in the older bank. How much do you need?"

"I'm not asking for money, Bob. Let me tell you what happened to my folks."

Mr. Byrd's face grew more and more pensive as George told what had happened to his home town and to his parents.

"George," he said as the young doctor finished his account. "We need to get someone from your home town to come and tell us if Prichard and the banker are the same ones as the doctor and banker that destroyed their town. Meanwhile, I've got to invent some plausible scheme to get our money out of this bank. You can bet your bottom dollar that he'll find some way to keep it if he thinks we're on to him."

"I can telegraph Greg Summers over by Thayer," Greg suggested. "He's the one who told me what really happened back home."

“Tell him the Birdsfoot Ranch will pay him two hundred dollars to come; and we’ll reimburse his expenses if he can come right away.”

“I’ll send that telegram tomorrow morning, Mr. Byrd. Meanwhile, I’ve been thinking that it might be smart for us to buy a couple of really good White Face bulls. There’s a couple of near perfect ones I was about to recommend that we buy in Omaha for seven thousand dollars apiece.”

“I’ve been thinking along the same lines,” Dad replied. “Show me the flyer they’re advertised in tonight. I may send someone out with the money to buy them tomorrow. If the banker is thinking of stealing the ranch, he’ll just consider the bulls as an investment--until we stop this thing in its tracks, of course.”

The banker did not try to dissuade Mr. Byrd from withdrawing most of his money for the bulls. A couple of the Birdsfoot cow hands with a lot of cow savvy went to Omaha, purchased the bulls after due examination of them, and had them shipped back to Wilcox with them. They met up with Greg Summers on the trail, and the three men herded the bulls on up to the Birdsfoot holdings without any trouble.

Mr. Byrd and Greg Summers hung around Casper for a few hours, and Greg confirmed that Pritchard and the banker were the same pair that had bankrupted George’s home town as soon as he saw them. The two men dropped by the U.S. Marshall’s office with the information.

“If we can prove that this is indeed the banker from George’s home town, he’s a wanted man,” the Marshall assured them. “I’ll start looking into it right now. The doctor will be harder to prosecute, unless we can link him to a murder or some other crime. If you think of any tangible evidence, let us know right away. Meanwhile, we’ll be watching him from a distance.”

That very night the banker sent out nearly a dozen foreclosure notices to some of the leading ranchers in the Birdsfoot area. None of the loans cited had ever been made. These ranchers were invited to the Birdsfoot headquarters to discuss the situation. The following morning the banker was arrested by the U.S. Marshall on their testimony.

“Marshall,” Mr. Byrd reminded the Lawman, “Doc Prichard is a fraud, and he’s in this up to his ears. He’ll drop by the bank within a few nights, and try to get away with everyone’s money.”

“Good thinking, Mr. Byrd,” the Marshall complimented him. “We’ll stake out the building and try to catch him in the act. Then we can arrest him for bank robbery even if we can’t pin anything like attempted murder on him.”

“Thank you,” the rancher replied genuinely. Things were nerve-rackingly quiet for another week or so.

* * *

A week-and-a-half after the banker had been arrested George and Lacy stepped out back of the house to enjoy an exceptionally beautiful harvest moon. As they gazed at it, George kissed the back of her hand. I think your finger needs this on it, he mused as he slipped the biggest diamond she had ever seen on her ring finger. Her eyes were large and warm as he gathered her into a prolonged kiss. “Will you marry me, Honey” he whispered in her ear as they broke it off.

“Of course I will, sweetheart” she whispered back as she pulled him into another kiss. And then she saw it.

“George,” she yelled, “There’s fire in the barn!”

The two rushed into the barn to find a man crouched on the floor trying to light the new-mown hay that had just been stowed in there. Fortunately, it was still a bit too green to ignite as rapidly as it might have been expected to. The man rose to face George, drawing his gun as the young doctor bowled into him shoulder first. The shot went wild as the gun sailed into the air, lighting somewhere in the loose hay.

The arsonist got his feet tangled beneath him as he staggered backwards from the momentum of George’s collision with him. There was a loud crack as he fell into a groaning heap in the floor. It didn’t take a lot of medical knowledge to perceive that both bones in his left lower leg were shattered.

Lacy grabbed a burlap sack and beat the reluctantly burning blaze out while George frisked the writhing culprit’s body for more weapons. He removed a derringer from his belt and a six-inch hunting knife from the boot on the uninjured leg. Help arrived from the bunk house by the time the man had been disarmed.

Ignoring George’s pleas for gentleness, the furious cowpokes unceremoniously dragged the intruder into the light of the bunkhouse by the back of his collar. George was beginning to fear that they would lynch him on the spot, but they contented themselves with tossing him on an empty bed while his injured leg flopped painfully in the breeze. He had a very dark complexion and a vivid knife scar along his right cheek.

“You’re Connor’s man, Brigsie,” George accused.

When the culprit complained that he was in too much pain to talk, George went into the house and drew up a large dose of laudanum. Twenty minutes later the scufflaw was talking freely under the influence of the narcotic.

“Yep,” he bragged, “I done most ‘a Connor’s killin’ til ‘e called me a fool. Then I shot ‘em just like ‘e ‘ad me shoot all them other folks. ‘E thought ‘e was gonna be rich,” he sneered, “but now ‘e’s just as dead as everbody else we done away with.”

“What did the doctor and the banker have to do with all this?” George asked.

“Connor ‘n them was the three Jones brothers from Missouri,” Brigsie volunteered. “They figured there was erl in the ground ‘round here, so they was a’stealin’ all the land they could. Piercy warn’t really no doctor. ‘E was scared ‘a killin,’ so ‘E just tried ta git folks so sick on that tonic a’ his that they didn’t feel up ta fightin.’ Jimmy was the sneakiest ‘un. ‘E could forge enny signature ‘e ever seen, ‘n ‘e loved the feel a’ money. Piercy wrecked their health so they couldn’t fight back; n’ Jimmy forged their signatures on bogus loans. When they couldn’t pay up, either Piercy furchlosed on ‘em er Connor bought ‘em out cheap. Then Jimmy ud’ run away with money Connor paid ‘em, so it didn’t cost the Joneses nothin.’ Ennybody as didn’t cooperate died one way er another. That was my job, n’ I done ut real good.”

“Piercy ain’t found out ‘bout Conner yet,” Briggsie continued. “‘E give me fifty bucks ta burn this barn tonight, ‘n he offered me a hunnert more iff’n I would kill that doctor as lives here while they fit the fire. Ah’ll do it, too,” Briggsie snarled, trying to stand up. One of the cowboys held him back, and he was soon in a deep narcotic-induced sleep. Dr. George Crowder set his leg and stabilized it in a plaster cast while he slumbered.

They took the cold-blooded murderer to the Marshall’s office in a buckboard the next morning. “We caught Dr. Prichard at the bank last night,” the Marshall announced. “We waited until he came out with about a hundred thousand dollars in a sack so we could make the charge of robbing the bank stick. I ought to put Briggsie under his care in the jail and see how he fares with Pritchard’s outmoded medical finesse.”

“Actually,” George said, “Our prisoner told us that the banker, Prichard, and Connor were the three Jones brothers. Whoever they are, they’re from Missouri.”

“We’ll find out,” the Marshall asserted confidently. “They’re probably wanted back there too.”

“Just give the prisoner a good dose of laudanum for pain, and he’ll brag you to death with their crimes,” George answered.

George got back home at dinner time. When he walked into the Byrds’ kitchen, Lacy met him just inside the door. “Tell me this really happened,” She begged, holding out her partially flexed hand with the diamond on it.

“Looks real enough to me,” he laughed, dragging her into a deep kiss. Mom and Dad Byrd walked in on them right in the middle of it. “Looks like you finally got your brand on our filly,” Dad quipped. “When’s the wedding?”

“In about a week or so,” George said in a pleading voice as he looked into Lacy’s eyes.

“Next Saturday,” she answered authoritatively.

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Practical Historical Dates:

Foxglove (Digitalis) 1785

Strychnine 1818

Modern plaster bandage casts 1850s

Binaural Stethoscope: 1851

Culottes mid to late 19th century.

Dynamite 1867

Harvard Medical School 1868

Air Brakes 1869 Westinghouse

Medical Nitroglycerine 1879