

CHRISTIAN WESTERN SHORT STORIES

Distinctly Christian Fiction

by

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CHRISTIAN WESTERN SHORT STORIES

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Preface

The rough and rowdy culture of the American Wild West had pretty well succumbed to civilization by the end of the nineteenth century. The heyday of the American cowboy era highlighted the last forty-some years of it, from the 1850s into the 1890s. The stark realities of this relatively lawless period lend themselves to vivid tales that tend to stretch the fuzzy distinction between self-defense and transgression beyond credibility. Settling petty grievances, dares, and insults with guns and knives was not self-defense. It was murder, whether the fight was considered fair or not.

In my mind, Louis L'Amour was the undisputed master of western fiction. I will never approach his ability to recreate the Wild West, but I can at least try to keep up with the spellbinding pace he set in his work.

CHRISTIAN WESTERN SHORT STORIES is a collection of short western tales written from a distinctly Christian perspective just for the fun of it. Although the stories are fictional, the significant historical details mentioned have been carefully researched. I hope these stories will appeal to gospel-loving readers who resonate with the old West.

Quote Note

I wrote my quotes the way they fell,
In mangled words so hard to spell
That it was difficult to tell
If things were going very well.

My spellin' checker had a fit,
But I'll be honest 'n' admit,
Although it rankled me a bit
I was awready used to it.

But what to me was rather sad
Was though I nearly always had
Quotation marks around the bad,
The grammar checker drove me mad.

God Can Change Anyone

The stranger stepped wearily out of the saddle, wiping the worst of the sweat-muddied dust from his face with a large bandanna. He was still half-hitching the reins to the rail when the hostler came out to take his horse. The traveler followed them back to the stable, where he personally rubbed the tired black down before inquiring about lodging for himself.

"If you like it rowdy, try the Paradise, two doors down on this side of the road. If you want good food, a hot bath and a clean bed, go to the Traveler's Inn further down on the other side. Either way, this is Saturday, so the Hanging Noose boys will be hanging around. Steer clear of them if you don't want trouble," the hostler advised.

The stranger slipped his rifle from its scabbard, gathered up his saddlebags, and stumbled across the dirt ruts that served for a street. He registered as "A. Stranger" for a single night at the Traveler's Inn, and went straight upstairs for a hot bath.

The huge old grandfather clock in the lobby was chiming the seventh hour of the evening as the refreshed stranger walked into the hotel dining room. He had deep set twinkling eyes, a wide jaw, and broad muscular shoulders. He dressed neatly and wore a well groomed beard. He wore no guns, and might have been a wrangler, with his sun-burned face and red neck; but he chose a seat near the rear door at the far end of the room and kept his back to the wall. He seemed at ease, but never took his eyes off the slowly changing crowd of diners for long.

A petite waitress was at his table in an instant. Her reserved demeanor, simple hairdo, and unpainted features complimented the delightfully feminine form that shaped her modest clothing perfectly. She poured his coffee without even asking. He ordered a simple meal, and had to consciously pull his eyes away from the girl to resume his careful appraisal of each person in the room as he sipped the hot strong liquid.

"Any church service in town tomorrow?" he asked when the pretty waitress brought his food.

"Used to have it in here from ten to eleven o'clock every Sunday," she answered quietly, "But the Noose boys busted up the service and chased the minister out of town a couple of months ago. They said we didn't need a church in this town, and most folks are probably afraid to come anymore. Dad says it isn't their town, and he'll have church any time we've got a preacher."

"If your father is willing, ask him to spread the word that we'll have a short service at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. We'll keep it simple. No music to rile up the opposition, and I'll try to finish early enough to avoid a ruckus, if possible."

The girl was agreeing to the plan when a tall tough-looking wrangler strutted up and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her feet off the ground and hugging her crudely against his body. As quickly as it happened, the stranger's hand shot out, grabbing the cowpoke's wrist in a twisting grip that forced him to drop the girl to her feet. Not a word was spoken as the stranger continued twisting the offender's arm with a strange, almost detached expression on his face. Muscles rippled under the stranger's shirt and resistant sweat broke out on the cowboy's brow, but the arm continued twisting until the cowboy dropped to his knees as an audible pop resounded through the suddenly silent room.

Grabbing his injured arm with an oath, the cowboy swore a blue streak of vengeance. When he ran out of profanity, the stranger answered almost casually.

“Sorry about your arm, I didn’t mean to hurt it; but you stay away from that girl!”

Then, nonchalantly picking up his fork, he lit in to his dinner as if nothing had happened while the injured cowboy slunk sullenly out the door cradling his injured arm in the other one.

The stranger had scarcely returned to his room when there was a firm knock at the door. He opened it to find a small dignified middle-aged visitor who introduced himself as Timothy Thomas, Jenny’s father.

“I just came by to thank you for protecting Jenny tonight,” He announced. “She’s getting harassed more and more by the Noose boys lately, and there’s little I can do to stop it, short of starting an all-out shooting war with their outfit.”

“Jenny says you’d like to have a church service here in the morning,” he continued. “I’m all for it, but you need to understand that they’ll probably try to run you out of town. That was Rod Nero, son of the owner of the Noose outfit that you tangled with this evening, and the ole’ Bull’s pure poison. He brought a bunch of gunmen in here about ten years ago, and rustled all the Orton cattle away. The Ortons disappeared the night the renegades bragged that they had shot their son. Bull took over their place and brought their cattle back down from the hills where they had held them, with the Noose brand on ‘em. Everyone could see that all they had to do was add a short upright to the top of the Orton ‘O’ to make the ‘Noose,’ but no one dared to challenge ole’ Bull. They’ve swallowed up several smaller outfits since, and now they seem bent on taking over the town.”

“They sound tough,” the stranger replied, “But I’d like to have the service. God can change anyone—but how much damage are they likely to do to your dining room? Maybe we should have it somewhere else.”

“We’ll have it here,” the inn keeper replied firmly.

“OK,” the stranger answered, “But I don’t want any guns in the room. They can’t shoot an unarmed man in front of a bunch of witnesses.” “And, Mr. Thomas,” he added, “In case they try to make more trouble for Jenny, I want your family sitting right in front of me.”

“OK,” Jenny’s father agreed. “Ten o’clock in the dining room tomorrow morning.”

“Let’s pray on it,” the Stranger suggested.

The two men knelt together to ask God’s protection on the congregation, His blessing on the town, and His control of the opposition. “...and Lord, we know you can change anyone,” the stranger finished his prayer.

* * *

Many of the old congregation arrived at the dining room promptly at ten o’clock the next morning. The tables were quickly shoved aside and the chairs arranged for the service. The stranger strode confidently up to the small home-made podium and started with a prayer. He held the congregation spellbound as he reviewed the life of the patriarch, Jacob. He likened Jacob’s selfish conniving to obtain his brother’s inheritance to the naturally selfish human heart; and proceeded to show how Jacob thought he was growing rich by his own cleverness, when it was really God that was blessing him. God wrestled with him, and eventually changed this self-centered man into true worshiper of God. The Stranger was just starting to explain how a person could be changed by being born again when about a half a dozen riders from the Noose outfit swaggered arrogantly through the door.

Four or five of the gunmen dragged out a table and pulled up chairs while the leader walked directly up to the front row to confront Mr. Thomas. “Tim,” he growled as he slapped the smaller man viciously across the face,

“didn’t I tell you we weren’t having no more church in this town?” Then, jerking Jenny out of her chair by the bodice of her dress, He commanded her to get coffee for the boys.

Before the bully could shove the girl towards the kitchen, the stranger stepped around the pulpit and grabbed him in a vice-like grip from behind, one hand across each shoulder. As the man let go of Jenny, the stranger commenced a slow-motion, almost rhythmic shaking of the big rancher’s shoulders so powerfully that his head seemed to bounce slowly back and forth between his chest and his back. The gunmen at the table could not shoot without endangering their boss, and after the first jerk, there was little resistance from the Bull. He couldn’t control his hands to reach for his guns, and would have sunk to the floor except for the grip that held him up while delivering the rhythmic punishment.

A half a dozen horrific jerks later the stranger spun the Bull around like a tin soldier, grabbing him by the front of his shirt. Jerking his bloodied face close to his own, he commanded the dazed man, “Don’t you or any of your men ever touch that woman again.” Then, holding the sagging man at arm’s length towards the awed cowpokes, he commanded them to come forward and carry their boss home.

No one really noticed him move, but the stranger was suddenly back at the pulpit calmly explaining that those who accepted God’s accusation that they were hell-deserving sinners, and appropriated Christ’s death on the cross as the payment for their sins, were born again--Changed into new creatures capable of living up to God’s expectations. He closed the service with prayer, announced that he would be back the following Sunday, and was out of town before anyone realized that not one of them knew who he was.

* * *

The Stranger was already in the same seat in the dining room the next Saturday evening when Jenny saw him. As she poured his coffee she blurted out, “Thanks to you, Sir, I am born again now. I’ve always hoped I was a Christian, but now I know I am. You explained it so clearly that I know that Jesus has taken my sins away.”

Jenny thought she saw tears well up in his eyes as he exclaimed, “Thank God, Jenny! I knew you’d understand.” She moved on with her duties to the other tables, but every time she glanced at the Stranger, he seemed to be looking right at her, and she liked it. She wished she knew his name, and maybe even his age, but she was far too reserved to ask.

That evening Mr. Thomas and the Stranger prayed long into the darkness. They were well aware that Mr. Thomas could lose his hotel, and lives could even be lost the next day, but both of them were resolved to hold the service again. They would even try some music from the little pump organ in the dining room

The service began promptly at ten, with even more people present than before. They sang a few well known hymns, accompanied by Jenny’s capable playing on the organ. The Stranger’s sermon was from the life of the Apostle Paul--How God changed a proud and arrogant self-righteous man into a humble servant of the church who looked at himself as the chief of sinners, because he had persecuted the church of Christ. Paul’s gospel of, “All have sinned and come short of the Glory of God,” but, “Christ died for our sins,” so, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,” was stressed.

The service was just closing when the Noose boys crashed through the doors with drawn guns. “We want the preacher,” they shouted as they rushed up to the pulpit. He attacked Bull from behind last week.” they chided. “Now he’s goin’ ta git it!

“You know I had to do that because he was bothering a woman,” the Stranger countered. “But I’ll go with you if you’ll leave everyone else alone.”

A large cowpuncher punched him mercilessly in the belly as they pigged his hands and led him out the door, where Bull waited for him. Some of the congregation came outside to side with him, but the Stranger asked them

to go back and send the congregation home.

Two burly gunmen held the Stranger from behind while the Bull commenced raining wicked full-force blows on his unprotected face. He clamped his teeth together to help stabilize his jaws and teeth so they wouldn't break with the onslaught. Besides, it helped prevent him from accusing them of the cowardice they were practicing. "When He was reviled, He reviled not again," kept running through his reeling mind until blackness finally intervened and he felt nothing.

* * *

When he came to the next morning, the Stranger was nearly blinded by his massively swollen eyelids. He hurt everywhere from the kicks and stomps the Noose gang had delivered to his unconscious form after he had fallen. He still hadn't moved a muscle when he felt a gentle kiss on his forehead. Sensing it was Jenny's he held out for second and third one. When he felt a tear spill on his face he could scarcely resist reaching up and pulling her to himself, but he didn't want to embarrass her by letting on that he knew she had kissed him.

When she stepped out of the room, he tried to sit up, and the involuntary groan that escaped his lips brought her right back. "Are you finally waking up?" she asked joyfully.

"I think so," he mumbled through pulpy lips.

"Anything I can get you?" she queried.

How about some cool cloths across my eyes?" he asked. "Maybe if I could get the swelling down a bit I could see the angel that's been caring for me."

"Hate to disappoint you, Mister," she quipped, "But you aren't in heaven. This is just your room in the Traveler's Inn."

"Still got my angel," he answered, reaching out toward her voice. She took his outstretched hand and squeezed it gently for a precious moment before scurrying out to get the cloths.

The preacher was in extraordinary health, and was able to sit up painfully to eat the supper they brought to his room that evening. By morning he was able to wobble down the hall to the bath room, and by Wednesday he was eating in the dining room. The only thing he regretted was that he didn't have Jenny so close to him anymore.

On Friday the Stranger slipped quietly to the livery and saddled the black. It felt good to be in the saddle again. He took the road south of town, but veered into a patch of trees some two miles out and cut back, keeping in the edge of the forest that circled the town to stay out of sight. He made his way northward toward the Noose headquarters, and sat astride the horse in the edge of the trees on the hill above the buildings. He swatted the horseflies that lit on the black's neck a long while as he studied the details of the place. A couple of men were butchering a hog near the barn. Someone else was decorating the front porch of the house. The Noose outfit was preparing for a celebration of some kind. After satisfying himself of the layout, he turned the black back the way they had come, and returned to town in time for supper.

* * *

Mrs. Thomas rushed to meet the Stranger as he entered the Travelers Inn late in the afternoon.

"Sir," she gasped, "Jenny's missing. We think the Noose boys have kidnaped her. Their tracks went north toward the Noose headquarters as far as the trackers dared to go. The Sheriff won't do anything, so Tim's getting a citizens' posse together. Most people thought you'd left town for good, but we were hoping you'd come back in time to lead the posse."

An armed posse of about twenty men was quickly assembled. The Stranger addressed them before they rode out:

“Gentlemen, this is a hunt for a missing woman. There will be no shooting except in self- defense, unless I give the word. There will be no lynching. If they harm Jenny, they will be turned over to whatever sheriff this town appoints when we get back. Anyone not in agreement with this policy should turn back now. One-by-one each member of the posse voiced their acceptance of the Stranger’s leadership.

“Another thing,” The Stranger continued. “I went up in the hills for a secret look at the Noose headquarters this afternoon. They were preparing for a shindig of some kind. I suspect that they’re going to try to force Jenny to marry Rod Nero this evening. We’re going in from the hills behind the ranch and try to stop them. If they fire on us you may return the fire. Don’t miss!”

By dusk that evening the posse was bunched at the Stranger’s vantage point from earlier in the day. The home place was brilliantly lit with lamps inside and torches outside. It appeared that the outside dinner was over. As they watched, Jenny’s hands were tied behind her back and she was dragged inside the house, presumably for the ceremony.

“We’ll slip down as close as we can get on foot,” the Stranger ordered. If we can capture those outside by surprise it will save a lot of lives. Tim and I are going inside. If you hear any shooting in there, those who are nearest should come in to help us. When we get Jenny free, her Dad will hustle her back here and head for town. A couple of men should accompany them. It’s every man for himself. Don’t let them kill you. Let’s go!”

The posse crept towards the buildings in the darkness. Tim and the Stranger broke off toward the back door and slipped into the house. They could hear a few isolated shots outside, but no major battle was taking place. The two men encountered a couple of drunken cowpokes in the hallway. Tim knocked the first one senseless with his gun barrel while the Stranger took the other out with a solid punch to the jaw.

Bursting into the parlor, the two men found a renegade priest trying to recite the wedding vows in a drunken slur. They heard Rod say, “I do.” Bull was twisting Jenny’s arm in an attempt to force her repeat, “I do,” after the priest. Jenny was refusing to speak, despite the pain.

Bull grabbed Jenny around the waist with his left hand when he saw the intruders. He swung her towards them as a human shield and crouched in an amateur gunslinger’s stance with his right hand hovering over his gun. The Stranger faced him from across the room with a practiced nonchalance, but his hands never moved far from his guns. He was as ready to draw as the Bull was, just not so obtrusive.

“Wonderful,” the Bull exclaimed sarcastically. “The bride’s Daddy has come to give her away, and the Preacher’s come to witness the ceremony. Say, ‘I do,’ you little prissy.”

“Bull,” the Stranger interrupted authoritatively, “Don’t force me to shoot you. Let her go!”

“You draw and you’re buzzard bait,” the Bull replied savagely.

“Careful, Dad!” Rod suddenly urged. “I just recognized who this is. He’s the Crusader. I saw him kill Quicksilver up in the Unitas. He’s won more than twenty gun fights, every one of ‘em fair and even. No one here stands a chance against him.”

“I got the girl ta shield me,” the Bull gloated, suddenly going for his gun.

The Crusader’s hand blurred, and Bull’s gun was shot from his hand before it had cleared leather. Howling with pain and rage, he shoved the girl to one side and hurled himself at the legendary gunfighter.

The Crusader easily sidestepped the rush of the insane man, grabbing his shoulders from behind as he rushed by. A couple of strong jerks later the man was on the floor holding his neck in a daze of agony.

“Rod, get me a piece of paper and a pen,” the Stranger ordered. Grabbing the Bull by his shirt collar and belt, he lifted all two-hundred and fifty pounds of him off the floor and slammed him into a chair. “Start writing,” he dictated as he shoved the pen in his hand.

“I..., Bull Nero..., do hereby deed..., all the Hanging Noose cattle..., back over to Hugh Orton..., who I stole them from.” “Now sign it!” he commanded as the thoroughly whipped outlaw finished writing.

Pocketing the paper, the Stranger turned to Rod. “You have your Dad off this place by noon tomorrow. You can take two saddle horses and two draft horses with a wagon for your personal stuff with you. Don’t ever set foot on this ranch again.”

“You can’t get away with this,” Rod replied spunkily. “We own this place.”

“Actually,” the Stranger replied, “Mr. Orton has the original deed to this whole place; and he’ll be here on tomorrow’s stage to retake possession of the property your Dad stole from him.

“That’s right, Rod,” Mr. Thomas put in. “Your Dad shot the Orton’s thirteen-year-old son, and ran them off this place ten years ago. He’s whipped now, and you’d best have him out of here before all the folks he’s robbed and lorded it over gang up and come after him.”

None of the Hanging Noose hands had been seriously injured by the posse. All of them were handed their belongings and provisions for the trail, and sent packing the following morning. The old sheriff voluntarily resigned.

Mr. Orton and a few salty no-nonsense ranch hands arrived on the Saturday stage as planned. The Orton deed was verified by the official recorder and exhibited to the local bankers before the Stranger rode out with the new arrivals to occupy the vacated ranch.

* * *

Sunday’s service started promptly at ten, with most of the town in attendance. The Stranger moved humbly to the podium after the music was finished.

“Friends,” He spoke with earnestness. “God can change anyone!”

“I was born and raised in ranch country just like this. When I was a teenager I was shot and left for dead in a gully on our ranch. My Mom and Dad found me alive late that night, and carried me bodily over the mountain to an old trapper’s cabin under cover of darkness. He took us in until I was well enough to travel.”

“Mom never wanted to come back, and Dad was willing to let well-enough alone for her sake; but as I grew into manhood, I wanted revenge! I lifted weights, wrestled, boxed, and struggled to prepare myself to come back and kill the man that shot me and stole my parents’ ranch. Dad sent me to school, but I ran away to the Unita Mountains, where I trapped winters and mined summers.”

“I never killed a man unjustly or even unfairly, it’s just the hateful vengeance that was behind it. When thieves stole my horse I chased them down and shot it out with them and came home with my horse and theirs too. Over time I killed approximately twenty bad men who had tried to do me or someone I knew in. I hated injustice, and often took the law into my own hands to avenge it.”

“One day I happened on two men trying to rob an old man along the trail. I shot them both and helped the battered old man back to his camp. He turned out to be a faithful old minister of the gospel. When I told him I had

killed his assailants, he looked me right in the eye and told me I had no business killing men unnecessarily. I should have just run them off.”

“I resisted that old preacher for days, but God was laying hold of my soul, and I knew that I shouldn’t have killed those folks. If Christ died for their sins against God, how could I justify killing them for their sins against me? I finally gave myself to the Lord, and all the guilt of all I’d done was washed completely away in the blood of Jesus.”

“As the Apostle Paul said, ‘Such were some of you: but you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.’ I put the hate out of my heart, went back to my folks, and studied to become a preacher.”

“If you haven’t guessed by now, my name is Carl Orton. They called me ‘Crew,’ because I always wanted to ride with the crew. I’ve changed so much outwardly over the last ten years that none of you recognized who I am. Yes, I was known as ‘The Crusader’ for a time; but God has changed me even more on the inside.”

“My Mother died recently, and my grieving Father decided to come back and reclaim his ranch. I thought I’d better come along and help him evict the outlaws, only this time with a proper respect for human life.”

“Jenny,” he blurted out spontaneously as his eyes fell on her, “You and I used to play man and wife when we were kids. As we entered our teens, we swore that neither of us would ever marry anyone else. Will you be my wife?”

The crowd sat breathlessly while Jenny rose from her seat by the organ and walked over to face the Stranger.

“Crew,” she said, looking straight into his eyes. “My heart died when they told me you were dead. I never looked twice at another man until you came along. I didn’t know why I was so attracted to you, but I knew you were my man from the first moment I set eyes on you. I’ve always wanted to be your wife. I want to serve your God, and go where you go, and feel what you feel till death do us part.”

Crew wrapped her into his arms and kissed her shamelessly, while the whole congregation clapped and cheered; and she returned his kiss with a matching passion.

“We need preacher to marry us,” he murmured as he pulled away.

Solitude

The huge rider swayed so naturally with the movement of the grey that their winding progress up the boulder-strewn trail could have been choreographed by a musician. Solitude, as they called him, was browned by the sun and leaned by hours in the saddle. His wary eyes constantly probed the terrain, both ahead and behind him, especially since he had seen the buzzards. As he approached the top of the rise, he turned the horse off the beaten path and paused for a studied look. Whatever was drawing those circling specks in the sky wouldn't be too far beyond the boulder strewn crest.

Moving on towards the crest, the horse and rider slipped into the cover of a small clump of trees a few feet off the trail. Peering down between the trunks, the man could see a saddled dun standing near the still form of a man lying beside some large boulders along the trail. Removing his binoculars from his saddlebags, he studied every inch of the surrounding territory carefully before riding into the situation below with his right hand close to the colt on his belt.

The dun whinnied as the rancher drew closer, but shied to the other side of the prone body of a young cowhand when he dismounted to check on the hapless stranger. The cowboy had been shot through the right upper chest with a rifle. Rolling the body over, he was surprised by a groan that explained why the buzzards hadn't lit yet. The exit wound alternately sucked and spewed air with the injured man's respirations. His pulse was fast and thready.

The unconscious cowboy was obviously not in any condition to be moved very far. Grasping him by the back of his collar, the bigger man gently drug him off the trail into a defensible space between some huge boulders. The dun followed, standing nearby as the rancher positioned the cowboy in the shade with his head slightly elevated. He gathered a few sticks for a fire, and hastily boiled some water in his coffee pot. After bathing the wounds in hot water, he hacked a wide slice off the edge of a partial side of bacon from his saddle bags, and bound it over the sucking wound to seal it.

When the rancher had done what he could for the gravely ill man, Sol turned away from him to care for the horses. The dun acted well-treated, and stood calmly by his master without drawing away when the rancher reached for his bridle. Sol removed the blanket tied behind its saddle and spread it gently over the still form of the injured man. Unsaddling both horses, he watered them in a small stream several hundred yards on down the trail and rubbed them down with handfuls of grass. He hobbled them close to the makeshift sickroom.

The big rancher spent a few minutes gathering enough wood for an all-night fire before brewing a pot of coffee and frying himself some bacon. After scouring his utensils with creek sand, he knelt for a prolonged moment of prayer before settling down beside the wounded man for a long night's vigil.

The stricken man seemed to breathe more and more evenly as the night progressed. Just after dawn, while the rancher was brewing more coffee, he came to. When he raised himself on one elbow, Solitude was instantly at his side, holding a tin cup of water to his lips. After a few noisy sips, the cowboy lapsed back into semi consciousness, so Sol fried himself a huge skillet-sized flapjack, sprinkled it with sugar, and rolled it up. Then he pulled out his worn-out old pocket Bible and sat on a rock to enjoy his concoction with coffee while he contemplated his passage for the day

When Solitude watered the horses that morning, he was impressed with the friendliness and faithfulness of the

dun. He followed the rancher obediently when he led him to the stream, but he seemed anxious to return to his master's side. After cutting a couple of small pines for poles, and slinging his own blanket between them, the rancher hitched the dun to the makeshift travois. He lifted the cowboy on to the primitive conveyance for the twenty-mile ride to Solitude's small ranch.

The trip home was tediously slow. By mid-morning the unconscious cowboy was wide awake, so Sol stopped and offered him his canteen. He said his name was Johnny, but everyone called him Patches because he liked to sew deer-skin patches on the knees and elbows of his clothing to make them last longer. He had left his last job when he discovered that the foreman was rustling cattle, and he was heading back East to get married when he was shot. He figured that the rustlers had shot him to keep him from talking.

"None of them would dare meet me head-on," He explained matter-of-factly, "So they drilled me with a rifle from a distance. I'll settle the score when I find out who did it," he vowed with the confidence of a man who was accustomed to accomplishing whatever he set out to do.

Every movement shot pain through the cowboy's chest, so they paused long enough to brew a pot of strong coffee, which seemed to infuse energy into the weakened man's body. A few minutes later he volunteered that he was ready to go, but preferred riding to jouncing along on the travois. The ride was painfully slow, but they reached the cabin on Sol's little ranch just as the sun was setting in the western sky.

* * *

Patches did little more than sleep and eat for the better part of a week; but when Sol awoke the eighth day, Patches was nursing a fire in the stove. Sol whipped up some biscuits while Patches brewed the coffee and fried the bacon. The cowboy sat respectfully while Sol asked the Lord's blessing and thanked the Lord for the food. The minute the dishes were put away, Patches wanted to check on the dun, but when he stepped out on the porch he looked so pale and weak that Sol wouldn't let him, though the horse was nickering to him from the corral

The rancher ordered the reluctant cowpoke to stay in the cabin while he rode out to check on the stock. Patches admitted that he was still awfully weak, but when Sol arrived home around supper time, he noted that the dun has been groomed immaculately. A few minor chores, like fixing the leather door hinges had also been done.

The two men hit it off well. Sol kept busy on the range while Patches puttered around closer to the cabin, doing whatever he was able. They chatted like old friends every evening as Patches continued to recover.

* * *

Sol seemed so genuinely interested in Patches' life that the usual reservation of the rugged western culture broke down, and the man shared much of his history quite candidly with him. He turned out to be an outgoing, friendly, and intensely loyal individual who loved cattle. Though he was as tough as any, he was clean living. He didn't smoke or drink, and hadn't looked sideways at another woman since he left his sweetheart back East to come West and learn the cattle business. He had inherited a bit of money when his Dad died, and intended to go back home and get married this fall. The couple wanted to come back in the spring to establish a ranch of their own.

The better Patches felt, the more he smoldered about being shot in the back. It was a cowardly act, and he aimed to avenge it. Sol understood his anger, but tried to mitigate it with moderation.

"Why get yourself killed going after a bunch of men who would just as soon bushwhack you?" He asked.

"It's a matter of respect," Patches replied. "I'm way faster than they are, and if I let 'em get by with it they'll come back and finish the job."

“I think the little woman would rather you’d come home and get married than stay out here and get buried,” Sol urged. But Patches resented the injustice and cowardice of his would-be assassins too much to listen to reason.

Patches welcomed the chance to look for his enemies when Sol asked him to help him drive some cattle from his small ranch to the sale lot in town some forty miles in the right direction. The two men rounded up about a hundred head of Sol’s branded stock to take to market.

Patches turned out to be an excellent cowhand, and the dun was absolutely devoted to him. They worked together like a well-oiled machine that was beautiful for the older man to watch. They proved invaluable at keeping the herd bunched together on the trail.

About noon on the first day, they were watering the stock where the trail crossed a mountain stream. They had just dismounted to let the horses drink when a rattler buzzed dangerously close to Patches’ foot. Sol’s hand blurred in the fastest draw that Patches had ever seen, and his shot splattered the rattler’s triangular head just as it began its strike.

“Thanks, Sol,” the younger man said with genuine admiration. “I’m considered fast, but I’ve never seen any shootin’ anywhere near that fast; and you drilled that snake dead center of the head, too. I hope you’re around when I catch up with the yellow cowards that shot me.”

Sol slipped the spent cartridge from the Colt’s cylinder, and reloaded without comment.

The men arrived at the cattle pens at the edge of town two days later, without further incident. Sol was greeted warmly by the buyer, and introduced Patches as a personal friend. He was given a fair price for his stock without any dickering at all.

It was twilight by the time they had corralled all the cattle, so the two men checked in at the town’s only hotel. They scrubbed the trail dust off with hot water and lye soap, shaved, and went down to the hotel’s restaurant, where Sol ordered steaks for each of them.

Patches was impressed with the warmth that people showed for Sol. Nearly everyone greeted him like a long-lost friend. The whole restaurant even seemed to hold their conversation down as he bowed his head briefly in silent thanks for his food. Patches was used to being respected, but this man was loved.

After dinner, as the men rose from the table, Sol collided with a drunken cowboy who had inadvertently staggered into him. It was clearly the cowhand’s fault, but Sol reached down to help him up, apologizing profusely for his “Carelessness.”

The embarrassed cowboy tried to cover his inability to hold his liquor with a string of oaths. Get your dirty hands off ‘a me,” he bellowed as he pulled himself upright with Sol’s vacated chair.

“I didn’t mean to bump you,” Sol replied gently, as he removed his hands. But the enraged drunk stood swaying with his hand wavering shakily above the gun holstered on his belt.

“Draw, ya yellar-bellied idiot!” he shouted at the gentle man before him.

“Easy, Sam,” Sol answered softly. “We’ve been friends a long time. We have no quarrel with each other, and I’m surely not going to draw on you.”

“Yer a chicken-livered coward,” the drunk snarled back. “You know you’d never have a chance against me.”

“Probably not, Sam,” Sol answered consolingly. “Can I buy you a dinner?”

"I don't take nothin' from sissies," the drunk sneered angrily as he swaggered unsteadily towards the outside door.

When he was gone, the two men walked nonchalantly up the stairs to their room. Once inside, Patches asked curiously, "Why didn't you take him when he insulted you so much, Sol? He couldn't be half as fast as you are, even when he's sober."

"Patches," Sol replied earnestly. "Tom is a really nice guy when he's not drunk. He really loves his wife and kids, and works hard to provide for them. He doesn't drink often, 'cause he can't handle the stuff. It irritates his brain, somehow. Somebody must have talked him into a drink this afternoon, and who knows what'll happen to the poor guy now?"

"I'd 'a taken anyone who insulted me that much when he called me," Patches answered. "I'm not goin' ta be insulted like that!"

* * *

"Let me tell you something no one else around here knows," Sol replied softly.

"I used to drink a lot, and as the alcohol took effect I got more and more morose. I'd sit at the bar and brood. That's why they got to calling me 'Solitude.' Everyone around there avoided me on those occasions, 'cause they knew how fast my gun could be. But every now and then someone who fancied himself to be a gun slick would be itching to try me. It didn't take much prodding back then to get me to draw, and those who succeeded died before they figured out what had happened.

"Understand, Patches, it was always what men call a fair fight, if there is such a thing. They asked for it, and I gave it to them--right in the heart. But how right was it for a naturally fast man to kill a slower man just because he didn't have enough sense to realize that he wasn't as fast as he thought he was?"

"Anyway, one time a cocky little drunk picked a fight with me kinda' like Sam tried to do tonight. He yelled, 'Draw,' and was dead before he had cleared leather. As his body lay there on the floor, his distraught little wife ran in and threw herself on it. "O Tom," she wept. "I knew this would happen to you sooner or later. How can I live without you? "Who's gonna support the kids? O Tom," She cried as she hugged his body. "I loved you so much!"

She was such a forlorn little wisp of a woman that it cut my soul to the bone. She lay there hugging his body, weeping her heart out for half an hour or so, until some friends came and pulled her off so the undertaker could remove it."

"It sobered me instantly. I couldn't shake it. I realized that this man that I had killed so heartlessly meant everything to someone else. I had unnecessarily ruined not only his life, but hers and her kids' lives too. It haunted me for days, and the days became weeks that stretched into months. I never drank again, never wanted to.

"I tried to give her money, but she angrily refused it. I tried to excuse myself, but my conscience wouldn't let me off. I lost weight. I left town, but the guilt of it was unrelenting. It followed me wherever I went."

"Finally, Patches, I ventured into a small church when no one else was there. I was crying out to God for forgiveness on a bench in the back when the pastor happened by."

"This man was a real man of God. He didn't try to smooth over my guilt, or tell me I hadn't done anything worse than anyone else would 'a done. Instead, he showed me from the Bible that Christ took the guilt of all my sins, and paid the price for them by His own death. He showed me that all who believe in Him are justified freely from all things. I left there a saved man, born again and free from guilt 'cause Jesus Christ had died for me."

"I settled here, Patches, on the little ranch that you've been recovering on. It isn't much, but it supports me well enough that I can even contribute a bit to the needs of others. Mostly, I'm at peace with God, and that's good enough for me.

I'd rather you'd keep my past quiet so no half-cocked gun slick will want to try me. I don't think I'd ever be able to draw on another man again."

After his story, Sol knelt at his bedside and poured his heart out in thanks to God for the forgiveness of his sins, and his peace with God.

Patches slipped away, so as not to disturb this man who had commanded his respect so fully. As he stepped outside for some fresh air to clear his confused mind, a single gunshot rang out from down the street. Quickening his pace, he rounded a corner to find several men kneeling over a stricken man. It was Sam.

"Tell Molly that I loved her," Sam gasped as the last of his life ebbed away.

One of the kneeling figures looked up at Patches and murmured, "Poor fool picked a fight with a faster man," as they closed his eyelids.

Suddenly Patches was very glad that Sol hadn't accepted the foolhardy challenge of this inebriated man. It was a dastardly way to treat someone who was not in control of his senses. The somber man went straight back to the hotel to tell Sol. "He'll know just what to do," he thought half aloud.

Sol was up instantly. "I wanna be the one who tells Molly," he said as he dressed hurriedly.

"I'll go with you," Patches volunteered.

The two men walked quickly to a small neatly-kept cabin at the edge of town, where Sol strode grimly to the door as Patches followed pensively.

When Sol knocked, Molly's voice called out, "Is that you, Sam?"

"No, Molly, it's Sol," the big man answered just loud enough to be heard.

"Be there in a minute," a muffled voice called, as they heard her scurrying to get dressed.

"Is Sam in jail?" Molly asked anxiously as she opened the door.

"No, Molly, he's dead," Sol replied gently. "He picked a fight with the wrong man this time, and got shot in the heart."

"O Sol," she anguished, leaning her forehead on the big man's chest. "It was bound to happen. He just couldn't stop drinkin' whenever someone got him started."

Sol placed his holy hands on her shoulders, infusing spiritual strength into her aching soul as she leaned her head on his broad chest and wept.

"We loved each other so much," Molly finally said as she pulled back, emotionally stabilized.

"You want I should arrange the funeral with Hurley?" Sol asked gently.

"Please do, Sol," she said through her tears. "I've got to go and tell the kids."

"Want me to stay?" he asked.

“Thanks,” she replied. “I need to do it alone!

Hurly agreed to a simple funeral in the morning. Since the town’s only minister was out of town, they settled for a quiet grave-side ceremony. Molly asked Sol to “Say the words.”

Sol’s earnest discourse flowed with the tender elegance of a man as acquainted with God as he was with grief--a man who truly loved the folks he was addressing. He preached the sinfulness of mankind, the righteousness of God that must judge our sins, and His love in sending His Son down to pay for those sins on the cross. He urged one and all not to forfeit the payment by refusing to accept Christ as their personal Savior. Tears trickled from many a hardened eye as the Word of God came alive in that ten-minute eternity that held them so spellbound. Sol finished by praying for Molly, and the children, as well as the unknown man who caused this senseless disaster.

The reality of what had happened sank into Tom and Molly’s ten-year-old son when the grave diggers began shoveling dirt over the simple pine box that held his father’s remains. His pathetic sobs brought tears to Sol’s eyes, which mingled with the child’s as the big man leaned over to hug him. Molly finally got enough control over her own grief to sustain the child, and the family walked forlornly toward home hand-in-hand.

When they were free to go, the two men headed back toward Sol’s ranch. It was a somber ride, each man lost in his own thoughts. After a couple hours of silence, Patches suddenly blurted out, “Forget the revenge, Sol. I want to know your God.”

“You want I should introduce you to 'Em, or should we get a preacher?” Sol asked slowly.

“You’re the best preacher I know,” Patches answered earnestly. “You help me!”

“I’d love to,” the big man replied softly as he reigned in and reached into his shirt pocket for his familiar little Bible. There was joy in the presence of the angels for the rest of that day.

High Stakes

The stakes were high in the Wild West,
Where guns settled petty strife;
When the proud men drew and the bullets flew,
At the risk of the gunman's life.

If he lost he died, if he won he lost,
For he added to all his sin,
The dreadful guilt of the blood he'd spilt,
Just to prove what a man he'd been.

An instinctive fear that the Lord is near
Is a motive for doing right
But where flagrant pride has been glorified
The Devil controls men's plight.

The Hangin' at Golgotha

No one knew for sure where the town of Golgotha got its name. Some said it was from the huge longhorn skull that was found by the water hole that the community was built around. It still hung, with its eight foot spread, over the door of the rough-sawn cedar building that housed the town hall, the Sheriff's office, and the jail. Others thought it was from the bitter taste of the water, which took a mite of getting used to. Anyone unacquainted with the local theories probably assumed that it was just that Golgotha seemed to be the most God-forsaken place in Arizona.

Actually, Golgotha didn't seem at all bad to the residents. It had the only reliable water hole for nearly a day's ride in any direction. The north-south and east-west trails through the desert crossed here. Cattlemen, miners, prospectors, freighters, gamblers, gunfighters, and outlaws came and went. The town boasted two hotels, a livery station, several saloons, a general store, a dry-goods store, a bank, and a bawdy house.

No one would have been too surprised about the hold-up if it hadn't been for the extraordinary details that were being embellished with each retelling. It seems that a soft-spoken young stranger had waited quietly for his turn at the teller's window. He politely urged several people go ahead of him, so he was the only customer left in the bank when his turn at the window came. As he approached the window, he pulled the kerchief that he wore around his neck up over the lower half of his face, drew his gun, and forced the teller into the banker's office.

When the banker had opened the safe at gunpoint, he directed the teller to put exactly ten-thousand dollars in a leather sack he supplied himself. After making her count the money out to him as if it were a business transaction, the robber ordered the banker to tie her to a chair. He checked the bonds to make sure they were secure before turning to face the banker. Standing face to face with the man, he suddenly bared his face and shot him point blank in the abdomen.

Leaving the banker to die the miserable death of the gut-shot, the murderer walked calmly out the front door and disappeared down the trail west of town. A posse was organized within half an hour, but the fleeing gunman was mounted on such a powerful animal that nothing but well-shod tracks was ever found.

* * *

Six-hundred miles northwest of Golgotha, a young rancher's wife prayed alone in the night. Everything was dry and dusty. Whatever cattle had survived the drought were too weak to survive a drive to the rail yards for shipping. There wouldn't even be a drive until next year. The bank had already cut off the ranch's credit, and served notice of foreclosure if the loan was not paid on time.

"Lord," she prayed, "We need ten-thousand dollars by the end of the week, or we're finished here. Please, Lord! Chris is a good husband, even if he's not a Christian. Help him to find the money somewhere."

Chris arrived home late the next afternoon, tired and dusty from so many hours on horseback. "Did you get any money?" his wife asked, kissing him as he came through the door.

"Yep, Debbie," he replied. "Got enough to pay the whole thing."

"Where'd you borrow it?" she asked excitedly.

“Didn’t have to borrow it,” Chris answered cheerfully. “Ran across someone who had borrowed ten-thousand dollars from my Dad just before he died. Since I was the only heir, he paid me on the spot.”

“Who would have owed your Dad that much?” Debbie asked curiously. “I never knew he had loaned anything to anyone.”

“It’s a long story, Deb,” he answered evasively. “He had a big ranch, and sometimes dealt in fairly large sums of money.”

* * *

Ten years had come and gone. The ranch had recovered well. Chris had made yearly cattle drives, each with nearly twice the profits of the last one. They had bought out two neighboring outfits, and now hired more than twenty cow hands. Besides that, a two-year old son was in the little bedroom next to theirs. But Chris had become more and more morose as the years dragged by. He didn’t enjoy Debbie the way he used to, or the baby the way he knew he should. He was miserable!

It was on the ninth cattle drive that Chris hired Tom. He was a soft spoken man with a quick smile and a keen sense of humor that kept the other cowhands in stitches around the campfire. But when the conversation turned raunchy, Tom always found something elsewhere that needed doing.

Chris himself had gotten disgusted with the crudeness of the fireside chatter one evening. Rising from the boulder he had been sitting on, he sauntered over to the remuda to check his horse’s hooves. From there, he saw Tom sitting on the weathered trunk of fallen tree beside the creek, and walked aimlessly over to join him.

“What’cha doin’, Tom?” he asked jauntily.

Then, noticing that the man’s eyes were damp with tears, he apologized.

“Sorry, Tom,” he said awkwardly. “Somethin’ wrong?”

“Naw,” Tom answered softly. “Sometimes when the conversation gits too cruddy I jist go away ‘n sit down at the cross.”

“What do you mean?” asked Chris. “I don’t see any cross.”

“The cross of Christ, Chris,” Tom answered softly. “When I get ta thinkin’ ‘bout all the wicked things I’ve done, I like ta sit down an’ think about what Christ had ta suffer to take ‘em all away. I love ta ‘magine that the closest hill I kin see is Calvary, or Golgotha, as it’s sometimes called. You know, the hill that Christ was crucified on.”

The word, “Golgotha,” struck Chris like a charging mossy-backed steer.

“Go on,” he urged.

“Well,” Tom continued, “I kin see those soldiers drivin’ spikes through ‘Is hand. I hear the ring a’ the hammer, an’ feel the pain ‘E felt with each blow as those nails spread the bones apart. I can see it all repeated on the other hand. Then it’s repeated again when they drive the nails through ‘Is feet. Then they pick up that cross an’ drop it inta the hole they dug fer it. Can’t you jist feel the pain when all ‘Is weight jars against those nails?”

“And then,” Tom went on, “They leave ‘Em hangin’ there on those nails. ‘Is hands hurt so much ‘Es got to push up with His feet ta take the weight off a’ ‘em. But when ‘E puts ‘Is weight on ‘Is feet, they hurt so bad ‘E’s gotta back off and shift the weight back ta ‘Is hands. There ain’t no way to ‘leviate the pain.”

"I look at 'Is face. It's been beaten almost beyond recognition. I can't imagine how much the cuts from the lashes on 'Is back must a' hurt 'Em. Everyone is jeerin' at 'Em. They're darin' 'Em to come down from the cross, if 'Es really God."

"An' then it gits worser yet. It turns dark right at noontime. It's jist as though God pulled a curtain over the whole thing, an' put my sins on 'Is back. 'E calls out, 'My God, My God, why 'ave Ya forsaken Me?' Chris, that's 'cause 'E was bearin' my sins in 'Is own body on the cross."

"'Lord Jesus,' I pray, 'Thank You for suffering all that fer me.' Sometimes I jist can't hold back the tears when I think about what it costed 'Em ta' be able ta fergive my sins."

"He would never forgive me, Tom," Chris said huskily. "I... I gut-shot a man in cold blood."

"Chris," Tom said earnestly. "The Bible says that all who believe in 'Em are justified freely from all things. That includes robbery, murder, even gut-shootin'. Ya gotta quit fightin' 'Em and take 'Em at 'Is word. He promised, 'If eny man comes ta Me, there's no way I'll cast 'em out.'"

Chris didn't sleep a wink that night. "Lord," he finally agonized brokenly as dawn approached, "I give up! You know I deserve to die, and I believe You died in my place. Thank you for forgiving my sins--all of them."

* * *

The cattle drive went smoothly. Chris got a good price for his stock and hurried home to Debbie and the baby.

Debbie greeted him with a hug that meant more to him than any of her hugs and kisses had meant for a long time. The baby's face looked so sweet and peaceful on the pillow that he could hardly wait until he woke up to hold him.

"Deb," he said at the table that evening, "I met God on the drive. I can hardly believe it, but He forgave all my sins."

Debbie jumped up with a squeal of joy and ran over to his end of the table to kiss him, but he fended her off.

"Wait, Honey," he said solemnly "There's a problem you've got to know about."

"What's wrong, Chris?" she asked shakily.

"You remember the ten-thousand dollars I got when we were going under? I robbed a bank to get it."

"Well," she said pensively. "Couldn't we pay it back, like with interest?"

"We could, Deb. The problem is that I killed a man doing it."

Debbie was stunned. He half expected her to walk out on him on the spot. Instead, she just stood there, tears coursing down her face.

"Honey, I'll stand by you whatever happens," she finally said. "I thought you said it was owed you."

"It was, Deb. The man I killed robbed my Dad of the ten-thousand dollars he got for his part of a multi-ranch cattle drive. He was considered a friend of the family, and came in to greet Dad when he returned from the drive. Thinking they were alone, he pulled a gun and relieved Dad of the cash. Then he shot Dad in cold blood and left. I had been serving a time-out in my room for some childish naughtiness. The door was ajar, and I saw the whole thing, though I hardly comprehended what had happened until he had left."

"I tried to tell the Sheriff who did it, but this man was an outstanding businessman in our community. Everyone thought it was my childish imagination, and he went scot free. He went to Golgotha and started a bank, partly with Dad's money."

"I just intended to collect what was really mine, but the sight of that hypocritical banker's face filled me with such awful memories that I gut-shot him. I've suffered with the guilt of it ever since, until one of my cow hands took me to the cross and introduced me to Jesus. What do you think I should do now?"

Debbie sat quietly, considering the situation for several minutes. Finally she spoke.

"Tom, the money was really yours, and the banker should have been hung for killing your Dad, but the law wouldn't listen to you. You and I know that, and morally we probably don't need to do anything about it. But you know as sure as I do that sooner or later someone will recognize you, and you'll probably hang for a killing that was justified, at least to a point."

"It'd be more justifiable if I hadn't done it with such hate," Tom mused. "From that standpoint it wasn't simply justice, it was murder."

* * *

Two years later the knock came at the door while they were eating supper. When Debbie answered it, a man wearing a star spun her around in front of him as a living shield, and advanced toward Chris with a drawn gun.

"Chris Hunter," he announced. "Yer under arrest fer the murder of Harvey Boyd in the bank of Golgotha twelve years ago."

"We've been expecting you," Chris said quietly, raising his hands. "Let the little woman alone, and I'll come peaceably."

"Wish you'd a-drawed so's I could shoot ya." The Sheriff growled as he handcuffed Chris.

"Bye, Dear," Chris said softly. "It's been good. Tell the young'un his Daddy loved him. And remember, I'm in God's hands-- 'Forgiven,'" he added with a smile.

She gave him a kiss before the Sheriff tore him away, and then they were gone.

It was a grueling ride to Golgotha, especially in handcuffs. The Sheriff slapped Chris around every chance he got, but the rancher endured it without a complaint. They arrived at the Golgotha jail some ten days later. Chris was the only prisoner there. His trial was scheduled for the following day, without giving him any opportunity to hire a lawyer.

The trial was a ten-minute affair conducted by the judge and the Sheriff, with no one else even aware of it. After listening ostentatiously to the Sheriff's embellished account of the robbery, the judge asked Chris if he had indeed killed Harvey Boyd. Chris acknowledged that he had, and was not allowed to say anything more.

"What more do we need?" the judge asked. "You are sentenced to hang at noon on Saturday. That'll give enough time fer everyone ta hear 'bout the hangin' so's anyone who so desires kin come an' watch."

As the appointed time for the hanging approached, a large crowd gathered around the elaborate gallows specially erected in front of the town hall. It was a festive occasion for most of them--Prime entertainment!

Chris was led up the ladder of the gallows with great aplomb. The Sheriff announced his name, and stated that

he was being hung for the cold-blooded murder of Harvey Boyd. With that introduction, Chris asked if he could address the crowd.

“No way!” replied the Sheriff. But the request had been heard by the crowd, and they demanded to hear what he had to say.

“We come here ta watch a hangin,’” one old cowhand called out. “Un’ we want the whole program.”

“Yeah,” the crowd yelled. “We want the whole program. Let ‘em speak.”

When the Sheriff saw that he couldn’t buck the crowd, he stood back officiously, and let Chris speak.

“I’m being hanged for shooting a man in cold blood,” he began. “I’m as guilty as sin!”

“Soon my body will be swinging from this noose up here,” he continued. “You will give me a pauper’s burial, and more or less consign my soul to hell. But my soul’s not going to hell, because my sins are forgiven.”

“Two years ago a cowboy that I had hired took me to Golgotha. Not this town, but the place where Christ was crucified. He got me to imagine that the hill across the creek from where we were sitting in Wyoming was where the crucifixion took place. He told it so realistically that I could hear the ring of the hammer on the nails that were driven through His hands and His feet. I could hear the groans that escaped His lips as he hung there on those nails. I could feel the pain of His weight pulling on the nails in His hands, but when He tried to shift His weight from His hands to His feet, they hurt just as bad. There was no way to ease the pain.”

“I felt His reproach as He hung exposed on that cross while they mocked and jeered Him. I felt the love that kept Him there when they taunted Him to come down from the cross, if He was really the Son of God. I felt the agony His holy soul felt when God laid all the sins of the whole world on His back. What I did to Harvey Boyd was there. So was what he did to my Dad. So were your sins, every one of them.”

“His face was so battered that I could hardly make out His features, but I understood the meaning of love when He called out, ‘Father forgive them, ‘cause they don’t really understand what they’re doing.’ That’s what broke me up. If He could forgive the very ones that were murdering Him, I figured He’d also forgive me for killing Harvey Boyd.”

“Finally, Christ called out triumphantly, ‘It is finished,’ an’ He died. Folks, the debt for all those sins was paid in full, so God raised Him up and gave Him the highest place in heaven. And he offers forgiveness to all who believe on Him.”

“How could I help but love such a man?” Chris asked with eloquent simplicity! “I’ll soon be up there with Him because of what He suffered on that cross for me,” he added huskily. And you can be forgiven and on your way to heaven too, if you’ll take Him as your Savior.”

“Bout that whole program,” someone called out from the crowd, “What did ya mean ‘bout what Harvey did ta yer Dad?”

“When I was a kid, I watched Harvey steal ten-thousand dollars from my Dad,” Chris replied. Then he shot him in the heart and walked away. I think He used the money to start his bank.”

“No one would believe me because I was just a child, but that sight has haunted me like a nightmare ever since. When my ranch was going under in that drought we had about a dozen years ago, I came to the bank and withdrew Dad’s ten-thousand dollars at gunpoint. I hadn’t intended to hurt anyone, but Harvey’s face brought back that awful scene, and I gut-shot him on the spot. I killed him in cold blood.”

“That’s why He only took ten-thousand dollars when there was so much more in the safe,” someone else

shouted. "He even made my Mom count it out a second time."

The next thing Chris saw was the town's ancient doctor climbing feebly up the ladder despite the Sheriff's attempts to rebuff him. Chris leaned over to give him a helping hand, and the white-haired old man spoke out with remarkable clarity.

"Harvey only lived a few minutes after he was shot," he called out. "Bullet went through his aorta. But he told it exactly as Chris did. He confessed the whole thing, and acknowledged that he had only got his comings. When I asked him who the shooter was, he said he knew, but he refused to tell me. All he would say was, 'He was justified.'"

"I can confirm that," the parson added, scrambling up to join the doctor. "And so could Harvey's son, who is the present Sheriff, if he only would. Harvey Boyd died calling on God to forgive him in the name of Jesus."

When the judge saw that the crowd's sympathies were with the condemned man, he vaulted onto the platform. "Hold on!" he called out. "Chris Hunter, I'm changin' the verdict ta 'Not guilty,' on the basis a' new evidence. Yer free ta go."

"Maybe it's the Sheriff that should be hung," someone suggested loudly.

"Yeah," the fickle crowd roared. "Let's hang the Sheriff."

Suddenly a crusty old rancher was joining the speakers on the stage that the gallows had become. "We ain't havin' eny lynchin'," he announced authoritatively. "We came ta Golgotha taday ta see a hangin'. Well, we seen one. We seen Jesus Christ hangin' on Golgotha's cross fer ar' sins. We seen 'Em stay there when they dared 'Im ta come down, so we wouldn't have ta die fer ar' own sins. I can't speak for the rest a' ya, but I'm askin' 'Em ta fergive my sins right now."

"I've seen enough hanging ta last me fer the rest a' my life," he continued. "Let's go home!"

And they did.

Prayer

Dead-eye had stumbled on to his trapper's paradise two seasons ago. He had climbed a ridge on the mountain to get a better view of an area he thought might make good trapping. The ridge initially appeared to be a part of the rocky peak behind it. But when the trapper reached the top of the ridge he found that it dropped precipitously into a two-hundred feet deep valley about an eighth of a mile wide and over a mile long. The far wall of the valley rose abruptly up to the mountain peak. The ridge blended so well with the peak beyond it, that viewed from even a short distance below, the keenest eyes would never suspect the hidden meadow nestled behind it.

The trapper could not imagine what ancient mighty force might have split the ridge away from the mountain, but the resulting valley would be perfect for his purposes if he could find a reasonable way into it. He worked his way back down the ridge to the tree-line, where he had left his horse. Mounting up, he rode parallel to the ridge, but found no entrance into the valley in either direction. Finally, as dusk approached, he dismounted near an overhang beside a mountain stream, and built a nearly smokeless fire from some dry dead fall. After frying some bacon and brewing a pot of strong coffee, he bedded down under some pine trees, well back from the light of his fire.

Early the next morning, Dead-eye resumed his search. The sun was nearly overhead before he discovered a crack in an outcropping of coarse-grained granite that seemed a bit more pronounced than most of the crevasses he'd seen along the ridge. It was about twenty feet wide, and its base was effectively concealed by the scraggly trees that struggled for survival at that altitude. A small rivulet of glacial run-off spilled down the western edge of the crevasse into a pool of crystal-clear water that filled the lower side of the crevasse floor as far back as the cleavage appeared to go. Outside the crevasse, the pool spilled over into a larger stream that carved an erratic white-water course on down the mountainside.

The trapper ground-hitched his horse and scrambled along the pool on the higher side of the floor of the crevasse. From the outside, the crevasse appeared to dead-end within thirty feet or so, but from the inside a dimly lit cave could be seen branching off at a sharp angle to the left. As Dead-eye entered the cavernous opening, he could see that the cave was actually a natural tunnel with light at the other end. A more placid stream traversed the far side of the tunnel and poured into the pool that filled the lower side of the crevasse.

The dry side of the floor of the tunnel was smooth rock that resounded eerie hollow-sounding echoes from the heels of Dead-eye's boots as he traversed the cathedral-like passageway. He was easily through the tunnel and into a rocky canyon on the other side in less than a minute.

Dead-eye returned to the opening of the crevasse and whistled shrilly for his horse. The muscular mountain-bred stallion scrambled gamely up the debris of fallen rock and on to the crevasse floor. "Come on, Trigger," he coaxed as the animal side-stepped a bit at the entrance to the tunnel. After a few tentative steps the trembling beast's ears pricked forward, and he settled down and walked calmly through to the other side. Once out in the open, they rode through the ever-widening canyon into the valley he had seen from above.

The delighted man spent the rest of the day exploring his hidden valley. It was totally secluded, and appeared to be a box canyon without any other openings that a horse could negotiate. There would be good grass here from the spring thaws till the fall snows, plenteous enough for haying for winters. All he'd have to do to keep his pack animals contained was to put a gate at the narrow exit.

Dead-eye had a fifty foot fence with a sturdy gate built across the narrow end of the canyon within the next few days. He spent the next three weeks building a stone lean-to against an overhanging pinnacle on the valley wall

that diverted the avalanche scars above it, and had no fallen rocks or talus at its base. He finished the two-room building by packing clay chinking between the stones and covering the top with freshly cut poles and overlapping pine boughs for a leak-proof roof. He'd keep his furs in the second room at the back. The finished cabin was nestled behind some large boulders that hid it from the valley floor, and provided a defensible palisade in front of the building.

The young mountain man had wandered far from the beaten path to find a secluded place to trap. He had chosen this area because of its remoteness, and the abundance of game trails and beaver dams on the mountainside. He was well aware that others would come, but he had not seen any signs of Indians or prospectors within two or three days ride in any direction. Only the wary survived, but he felt secure enough here to travel to the trader's for pack animals and supplies.

When Dead-eye returned several weeks later, preparation for the trapping season began in earnest. He stored his traps in the hide room and his hoard of bacon, coffee, sugar, and flour at the other end of the cabin. He built an open-hearth fireplace on the down-wind side of the cabin for warmth and cooking. He made himself a bed of fine spruce tips stuffed into an old mattress ticking. He built a corral and a stone shelter with a roof for the horses, and began cutting the hay they would need for a strenuous mountain winter. He started cutting racks of firewood, and built drying racks for the venison he would preserve in the fall. He had worked from dawn till dark almost every day, but things were in good shape for a hard winter by the time the first significant snowfall smothered the valley.

Dead-eye's first trapping season on the mountain was phenomenal. He had nearly twice as many prime beaver hides as he had gotten last season, to say nothing of some prize mink and fox skins that would add to his profits. He returned from his early summer trading trip with all the supplies and ammunition he could carry on three pack horses, and a comfortable amount of credit with the trader for future supplies. He even brought a small cast-iron cook stove back to the valley with him, though it required purchasing an extra pack horse just to carry it.

The skillful trapper's second summer in the area was less hectic. He added another storage room to his lean-to cabin, and had time to explore more of the mountain side for a suitable route for a second trap line. He also spent a lot of time searching for other ways out of his hidden valley. He was able to climb out by several perilous routes, but he could not find a second way to get a horse in or out.

The second trapping season on the mountain was taxing. The extra trap line nearly doubled his take of hides, but left him exhausted by the time spring brought the season to a close. All four of his pack animals were loaded to the limit on his annual trip back to the trading post.

The trader was not so fair this time, often devaluing genuinely prime hides for no perceptible reason. He pumped the trapper for information on where he was operating throughout the haggling process. Sensing the man's greed, Dead-eye was careful not to betray even the general direction of his trap lines.

* * *

Dead-eye was always wary, but now he was downright suspicious. He took his entire payment in supplies and gold, which visibly irked the trader. He left the trading post late in the afternoon in a direction at about ninety degrees to his final destination. Several other trappers had eyed his take with overt jealousy, and he suspected that he would be followed—especially since it was known that he carried nearly two hundred dollars in gold in a leather pouch on his belt.

Knowing that he would be at a tremendous disadvantage with his loaded pack horses, the skillful mountain man left the beaten trail where it forded a stream a few miles away from the trading post. He rode a mile or so upstream in the water, and came out in a rocky spot, being careful to leave a few poorly concealed signs to lure any trackers that way. He worked harder and harder at concealing his tracks as he worked his way upstream, and was finally reasonably sure that his trail would be lost to all but the most astute trackers. Finally, he re-entered the stream at

another rocky spot, and rode downstream by the light of the moon until he had crossed the beaten path. Continuing several more miles downstream, he finally exited the stream on a rocky shelf and rode out in the opposite direction from his real destination, doing his best to conceal his trail.

The cagey trapper never stopped that first moon-lit night. Morning found him in a forested area some twenty miles away from the trading post. Once concealed in the trees, he unloaded the horses and let them rest. He watered the animals and drank from a small stream nearby, but did not chance a fire lest any malicious followers see the smoke. By noon he had reloaded the pack horses and was on his way towards another tier of mountains at least seventy miles away from his true destination.

Dead-eye kept a close watch on his back trail, but never detected anything amiss. Still, he pressed on to his decoy destination without taking any chances. He reached the mountains on the fourth day out, and finally allowed himself the luxury of a fire. Hot coffee never tasted so good. Neither did flapjacks and bacon.

The mountaineer climbed a good ways up the first mountain on the range and chose a concealed campsite under the overhang of a cliff where he could watch over his back trail to the mountains. After a couple of days he was satisfied that he was not being followed. He had decided to strike out across the wilderness for his real destination the next morning when he caught a faint glimpse of a tiny campfire flickering in the dusk a half a mile or so below his camp sight. It was so strategically concealed that he felt fortunate to have seen it at all.

As darkness fell, Dead-eye crept soundlessly down the mountainside to the trees surrounding the fire. He fully expected to see one or more unscrupulous trappers who had managed to work out his trail, but when his arms carefully parted the last few branches obscuring his view, he was flabbergasted to see a woman crouched as close as possible to the fire. She was dressed in disheveled buckskins without a coat, and seemed to be shivering despite her proximity to the flames. She appeared to be unarmed, except for a stout length of stick that lay beside her

Suspecting a trick, Dead-eye spent a cautious hour carefully encircling the area of her campsite in the darkness without finding any evidence of horses or other people. Satisfied that she was alone, the trapper turned his attention back to the woman. Her face was swollen grotesquely, and caked with dried blood and debris. By this time she was nearly convulsed with shivering, and seemed conscious of little else than the life-giving warmth of the fire.

Dead-eye fought the temptation to slip back into the forest and strike out for his hidden valley in the morning, as he had planned. He'd already been delayed nearly a week, just making sure he wasn't being followed. Now this! Why should he get involved in someone else's problems? But try as he would, he simply could not force himself to leave a disabled person to die alone in the wilderness, especially a woman.

When the trapper stepped out into the woman's line of sight she gave a startled gasp, and rose up to run; but she didn't manage more than two or three steps before she crumpled to the ground and lay still. Bending over her unconscious form, he could see that she was gaunt from hunger. Her face and the bare parts of her arms were covered with bruises. The calves of her legs showed more bruises beneath her buckskin skirt. She didn't seem to have any belongings with her, which indicated to the trapper that she had struck out suddenly, without any preparations. She was likely fleeing from someone who had given her a vicious beating.

Suspecting that she might be chased, Dead-eye gathered up the unconscious woman and threw her lightly over his shoulder. He cautiously worked his way back to his own campsite, leaving as few signs as possible under the circumstances. Although her campsite was fairly well chosen, he had no idea how visible a trail she might have left to it, and he was well aware that the trail he was making away from it as he carried her in the darkness would be fairly easy for an experienced tracker to follow in the light. He would have to move on with the first light of morning.

Dead-eye laid the limp woman down on his only blanket near the dying embers of his own fire. He threw as much

wood as he dared on the glowing coals to start warming her up. As the fire's light increased, he could see a greenish-yellow cast to her bruises, which indicated that she had avoided any attempts at capture for several days. After wrapping her awkwardly in the blanket, he shredded some jerky into the skillet full of water, and was warming it at the edge of the fire when she stirred a bit.

The woman was able to swallow several spoonfuls of his jerky broth before she drifted back into semi-consciousness again. When she seemed to be sleeping, Dead-eye retired back into the trees with his saddle blanket, and settled back to catch some rest before morning.

He awoke several hours later to the crashing rumble of a predawn thunderstorm. Erratic flashes from frequent lightning bolts revealed that the woman had wrapped herself more tightly in his blanket. He moved back under the shelter of the overhang, and threw a few more pieces of wood on the fire to keep her warm.

The outdoors man was pleased with the storm. His campsite under the cliff was staying dry, and the rain seemed strong enough to wash out all but the worst traces of any trail the woman might have left, as well as whatever trail he had made bringing her up here. They would be reasonably safe remaining at this campsite a few days, until the woman could travel on her own.

Dead-eye was too anxious to get on with his preparations for next season's trapping to be impressed by the woman's femininity. While he didn't exactly resent her presence, he viewed it as a necessary inconvenience. He was relieved to see her hobble painfully off into the woods for a few moments when the rain was over, and was glad to see her place a few more sticks on the embers before snuggling back into his blanket when she returned. She was going to be OK; and he'd soon be able to be on his solitary way to his hidden valley.

The small woman awoke again when he approached the fire to make some coffee. She struggled out of his blanket but had difficulty raising her battered arms to smooth her hair with her hands. Having finished the task, she turned his way as if seeing him for the first time.

"Is this your camp?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yeh," he answered quietly, "But yer welcome to stay 'til yer feelin' better."

"Thanks," she answered as she moved slowly towards the stream. When she returned, the grime and dried blood was washed from her face. Her wet hair suggested that she had taken a quick bath.

"Feelin' better?" he asked as he poured coffee into his only cup and handed it to her.

"Lots." she answered, grimacing as her smile cracked her swollen lips. "How did I get here?"

"I found ya huddled over a small fire down the slope a bit last night. Ya didn't look like ya was goin' ta make it, so I brought ya up here ta warm ya up."

"Thanks," she replied. "I thought I was going to die. You probably saved my life."

"How'd ya get so cold?" he queried as he sliced enough bacon for both of them into his frying pan.

"I came over the mountain," she replied. "It was snowing awfully hard up there, but I had to get away. I'd have died a thousand times if God hadn't been with me."

When he started frying flapjacks in the bacon grease, she was so unresponsive to his questions that he could see that she could hardly concentrate on anything but the food. Still, when he handed her a plate of bacon and flapjacks she bowed her head in silent thanks before wolfing it down. He had planned to eat directly from the skillet while she used the plate, but her part of the breakfast was gone so fast that he placed his part on the plate as if he'd made it all for her. He fried more for himself while she polished off the second portion he had offered

her.

By the time the woman was through eating, her lids were drooping. Almost involuntarily, she lay back on the blanket and dropped into a deep slumber. Dead-eye flipped the unused half of the blanket over her and slipped noiselessly down to a grassy meadow he had noted while watching his back trail from the vantage point of his camp. She was still asleep when he returned with a field dressed deer in the afternoon. When he was nearly done skinning it out, he was startled by her shadow falling across his own. As sore as she was, she could move as soundlessly as he could. While he cut some of the venison into strips for smoking, she disappeared with the hide; and when he returned from cutting poles for a drying rack, she had a good-sized roast on a spit over the fire.

Night fell as they finished eating the roast. Suddenly she broke the silence, as if she had decided to trust him. "My name is Betsy, she announced. My Dad called me 'Bitsy,' 'cause I'm so small, and the Indians called me 'Little Deer.' What's your name?"

"I'm Dead-eye," he answered. "Tell me who yer running from, an' why."

"Dad and I came out West after Mom died, when I was sixteen," She began. "We were going to preach the gospel to the Indians, but we were such greenhorns that we got caught by an Indian war party. They killed Dad and made me a slave of the chief's squaw. It didn't take me long to get used to Indian life. I learned how to cook over an open fire, tan hides, and sew doeskin clothing. More importantly, as we gathered food and herbs I learned how the Indians hid their trails, how they picked their campsites, and how to survive in the wilderness. I always watched for a chance to escape, but they watched me too closely for me to get away."

"Last week they announced that I was being given as a second wife to the most obnoxious brave in the village. I refused, and the village squaws beat me and left me unconscious behind his tepee. When I woke up just before dawn no one was watching me, so I crawled into the forest. When I came to a stream, I waded upstream because I knew they would figure I'd have enough sense to go down the mountain. When the stream got too small, I climbed way on up to the tree line and hid in a cave for two days. On the third day I saw them coming, so I climbed over to this side of the mountain. That's when God sent a late snowfall that would keep them from being able to follow my trail. I was afraid to stop, so I kept going downward until it got dark. When I was too weak to go any further I built a fire, but I couldn't seem to get warm. I was too exhausted to gather more wood, and thought I was going to die, but I woke up here instead."

"I was going ta stay here 'til you got well 'nuff ta be on yer way," Dead-eye told her. "But since they know ya come down this side a' the mountain, we'd best be a-leavin' at dawn tomorry. I'll load three a' the pack horses heavy, an' you kin ride the fourth un." But when Dead-eye went to get the horses in the morning, they were gone.

A quick glance at the cut ropes told Dead-eye that the horses had been stolen. Hurrying back to the camp site, he grabbed the blanket off of Betsy. She jumped up quickly and glided silently behind him into the trees without a word of explanation. He handed her his knife and the blanket and struck out noiselessly in the opposite direction from where the horses had been, with his rifle ready in his hands. As Betsy followed him, he saw that she knew how to run without leaving a trail as well as he did.

After an hour of running she seemed to be falling behind, so they stopped to reconnoiter. They had left everything behind except his rifle, the blanket, and the knife, but they were still alive. Fortunately, his money was still in the pouch on his belt. He could have gone on at this pace all day, but she was just too weak to keep it up. They would have to slow down for now, and hole up before the day was over.

As he stood there thinking, she suddenly dropped to her knees. Thinking she had fallen from exhaustion, he bent over her only to hear her muttering a prayer for God's guidance for him. It angered him that she was not keeping her eyes opened for a possible attack, but she was back up and watchful within a few seconds. He let the matter drop. He'd never understand women!

When the fugitives resumed their flight, they came across a sizable stream. As they waded in, she looked to him for which direction to go. He chose upstream, and they waded slowly for nearly an hour before emerging on the opposite side in a heavily forested area. It seemed that the coldness of the water had literally drained whatever energy she had left out of her, and he knew that they'd have to stop soon. When her feet started dragging, he picked her up and carried her up to a rocky overhang in the side of the mountain. There would be no fire for several days, so he wrapped her in the blanket and let her sleep while he kept watch from slightly above her position. She awoke in the early evening, and felt able to move on, though at a much slower pace than before.

When Dead-eye stopped just before dusk, he was in a quandary about what to do for food. He did not dare to discharge the rifle to shoot game, and they wouldn't have been able to cook it without advertising their position with a fire anyway. As bad as she needed nourishment, they slept on empty stomachs. When he awoke at dawn her blanket was empty. A half hour later she returned with handful of bulbous roots that she encouraged him to share with her. The taste was not unpleasant, and he felt his depleted energy returning a bit after eating them.

* * *

That morning, while Betsy prayed, Dead-eye made his decision. He would have to take her to his hidden valley, where both of them would be safe. He had an axe, traps, spare cooking utensils, and a hoard of ammunition there. They could survive in the valley until she was well enough to make it on her own. They spent the morning descending the mountain while keeping an extra close watch on their back trail. Betsy slept throughout the afternoon, and he did not waken her until dark.

They started over the plains that night under cover of darkness. There was no moon, but the stars were so bright that navigation by them was easy. Betsy was so weak that they had to travel slowly, only covering about fifteen miles before stopping in a clump of cottonwoods by a stream before daybreak. They slept through the day, taking turns on watch, and covered another fifteen miles the next night. The next morning Dead-eye shot a deer coming to drink near their campsite. They cooked some of the best meat on a smokeless fire of dead cottonwood branches before dropping off to sleep. They traveled another fifteen miles the next night, and stopped in the edge of the forest at the far edge of the plains. That afternoon they made another ten miles to the foothills of Dead-eye's trapping range before sleeping through the night. They'd travel the rest of the way to the hidden valley by day.

The next morning Betsy was so exhausted that they stayed at the campsite. Dead-eye killed another deer, and they spent the next two days smoking some of the meat. With the better rest and adequate food to eat, Betsy was strong enough to travel the third morning. It took the greater part of the next day to reach the vicinity of the entrance to Hidden Valley. Dead-eye camped a couple of miles from the entrance, and spent most of the next day scouting the area to be sure no one was around before leading Betsy into the tunnel.

Betsy was dumfounded at how perfectly concealed the natural entrance to Hidden Valley was. She marveled at the beauty of the tunnel. And as the canyon opened into the idyllic valley she was completely overwhelmed. Looking up into the sky, she blurted out, "Thank you Lord, for bringing us into this haven of safety."

Her prayer of thanksgiving to God was the last straw for Dead-eye frustrated frame of mind. "God didn't bring ya here," he spat out. "I did!"

"I'm sorry," she said apologetically. "But don't you think both are true? I mean, don't you think God helped you get me away from the Indians?"

"No," he replied hotly. "I done it myself! Un' I lost my horses and a whole season's worth a' supplies doin' it," he gritted out as his anger mounted.

"I wish I had some way to repay you," she whispered contritely"

"Forget it," he grunted as he saw a pair of unbidden tears spill down her cheeks.

"I can't," she answered mournfully. "I owe you my life as well as all you lost while saving me."

His anger melted as he gazed at her forlorn face. The grotesqueness of her bruises and swelling was almost gone, and for the first time he saw her more as a person than a miserable inconvenience. "Sorry I mentioned it," he said gruffly. "I jist don't buy this 'God' stuff, that's all."

"Why not?" she asked quietly.

"If God was a-helpin' me, why'd He let them Indians get my stuff? If there is a God at all, He sure didn't go out a His way none ta make it any easier for me ta help a prayin' person like you. An' if He's a-helpin' you, why'd he let them Indians capture ya in the first place?"

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "But I know that He sent His Son to die for my sins. And if He loved me enough to give His Son to save me from hell, He won't let anything happen to me that isn't for my good."

"You're telling me gettin' beat half-to-death was fer yer good?" he asked sarcastically.

"It led to us meeting each other," she whispered to herself as she turned away from him.

"Lord," she began praying that evening, "Please repay Dead-eye for all the things he lost because of me."

* * *

When they arrived at Dead-eye's lean-to, he moved his traps and hide stretchers to the stable, and made a temporary bed for Betsy in the hide room. She kept the blanket she had been using; and he resurrected an ancient one for himself. "Soon as she gits strong 'nuff ta travel I'll take her ta the trader's, where she kin find 'er way back East," he told himself. "Then I kin git a horse an' some supplies, an' come back here an' git to work."

Betsy slept a lot her first couple of days in the valley, and ate as if famished from meals prepared from a deer Dead-eye killed, and the few supplies he had left over from the trapping season. On the third day she was up early, made the coffee, and fried some flapjacks for both of them. Somehow, her flapjacks were better than his. When he went out to kill another deer for more jerky, she found the hide of the first one, scraped it well, and weighted it down with stones in the bottom of the stream that ran through the valley. Two days later she scraped off the hair and coated both sides of the hide with a gooey paste she made by squashing the deer's brains. On the fourth day she soaked it clean in the stream again, and smoked it over a fire to make it water proof. By starting each hide as he brought it in, she was able to tan several hides a week while they dried jerky over an opened fire.

By the end of the third week in the valley Betsy seemed fairly well recovered from her beating and subsequent flight from the Indians. As the time of their departure approached she spent more and more time alone in her room, which suited Dead-eye just fine. He wasn't used to "Jawin'" much "Enyhow."

On the evening of the day that he announced that they would be leaving for the trading post at dawn the next morning she presented him with a new pair of buckskin trousers and a matching jacket. They were decorated with fringes and bits of buckskin embroidery. "Sorry I didn't have time to make some beads for it," she apologized as he held it up to examine her workmanship.

"I had no idear you was doin' this," he told her appreciatively. "They're beautiful," he added admiringly as he sat down on his stool and bent over to examine the intricacies of her workmanship.

"Not good enough for the man who's done so much for me," she replied with a blush. Then, fleeing to her own room, she threw herself on the bed and sobbed out the ache in her breaking heart. How could she live without this gentle he-man who had been so kind and considerate of her without any obvious ulterior motives?

“Wimmen!” he muttered to himself bewilderedly, without the slightest inkling of why she had taken off so precipitously. No wonder he didn’t want one hangin’ around!

When Dead-eye emerged from the lean-to early the next morning, he had a heavy back-pack of jerky and other necessities for their journey to the trader’s on his back, and his rifle in his hands. As he stood there in the golden morning light Betsy thought he was the most handsome and manly figure she had ever seen. A sigh escaped her quivering lips as he headed down the path towards the tunnel that led to the lonely world outside his valley. Shouldering her own lighter pack of blankets and cooking utensils, she fell in bleakly a few steps behind him.

As Dead-eye stepped cautiously outside the exit of the tunnel, the sound of a heavy rifle shot startled Betsy from her depression. Dead-eye was spinning around as he fell back into the tunnel. His rifle clattered heavily to the ground at her feet.

Instantly alert, the Betsy grabbed the rifle in one hand and the collar of Dead-eye’s new jacket in the other. Born by a strength she did not naturally possess, the little woman dragged the fallen man about thirty feet further back into the tunnel. Leaving him barely conscious in the center of the tunnel floor, she moved deeper into the tunnel and threw herself into a prone shooting position in the dim light along the edge of the passageway. She pulled the hammer back to cock the gun when she saw the shadow of a man creeping towards the opening on the far wall of the crevasse.

“O Lord,” she prayed, “I’ve never shot a man before. Please help me to protect Dead-eye.”

Part of the intruder’s face showed as he craned his head around the outside edge of the tunnel. Knowing that he probably hadn’t seen her because she had been several steps inside the tunnel, Betsy held a steady bead on the center of the villain’s chest and waited as he crept up to Dead-eye’s fallen form. When he stretched out a knife to finish Dead-eye off, she pulled the trigger. She couldn’t bear to look as the assailant jerked backwards and fell dead on the floor.

The crash of the shot reverberating through the tunnel brought Dead-eye wildly to a sitting position. He tried to rise, but the thigh-bone of his right leg was broken by the unknown enemy’s bullet, and would not support his weight. A wave of semi consciousness from the pain of his efforts dropped him back to the floor. In the reeling blackness he had a vague impression of an incredibly lovely angelic face kissing him back to consciousness. As the blackness faded Betsy was bending anxiously over him with tears in her eyes.

“How’d I get back into the cave?” he asked as she stood up.

“I dragged you back here,” she answered.

“I gotta get back to the cabin,” he told her, as if she couldn’t figure it out for herself.

“First, you’d better see if you know who that is,” she replied, pointing to the body at his feet.

“Turn ’is face toward me,” he requested.

Gagging all the while, she raised the head of the hapless outlaw and turned it towards him.

“That’s one uv the trappers that seemed a-way too innersted in my hides ut the trader’s,” he murmured pensively. “They call ’im “Gunner” ’cause everyone spect’s ’im of gunnin’ down other trappers from a distance, an’ stealin’ their stuff. I wonder how ’e got here?”

Dead-eye struggled to a sitting position. Sweat stood out on his brow as he tried to scoot backwards through the tunnel. After gaining less than three feet in as many minutes, he flopped back to a supine position. “I can’t make

it," he uttered hopelessly.

"I'll try to drag you again," she offered. But try as hard as she would, she could barely move him along the stony floor of the tunnel without jerking him so painfully that he begged her to stop.

"If we had a horse I could make a travois, like the Indians use," she mused aloud.

"Why don't ya pray fer one?" He jabbed cynically.

"I'm going to!" she answered, bowing her head. "Father," she spoke confidently. "We need a horse, please...and Dead-eye needs to see that you can provide one. I'm asking for one in Jesus's name. Your will be done. Amen."

"Too bad Trigger got stolen," Dead-eye commented, pointedly ignoring her prayer. "If he was around all I'd have ta do ud be ta whistle like this...an' he'd come a-runnin'." He had interrupted himself with a loud whistle between his teeth at the appropriate place in his statement. "E was the best horse I ever owned," he finished pensively.

Both Dead-eye and Betsy fell silent as the echoes of the whistle died out, each lost in his own thoughts. Suddenly there was a clatter of hooves, and Trigger rounded the bend into the tunnel and skidded on his haunches, stopping not three feet from where Dead-eye lay.

"Trigger," Dead-eye yelled happily as the horse lowered his head to take a tentative sniff at the injured trapper's outstretched hand. After patting the horse for a few seconds, Dead-eye suddenly gasped with amazement.

"God," he called out hesitantly, "I'm sorry I doubted Ya. Ya really did answer Betsy's prayer."

"He's done more than that for you, Dead-eye," Betsy interjected. "He sent His son to die for your sins too."

"Why don't ya git a couple uv poles from the dryin' rack an' make that travois?" he suggested. "You kin tell me more 'bout God when we git back ta the lean-to."

Getting Dead-eye on the travois was awful. Every movement of his leg was agonizing. Each tiny bump that jarred the travois along the trail to the lean-to sent groans through his tightly clinched teeth. He passed out completely when Betsy dragged him through the door to his bed on his blanket. She rolled the unconscious man into the bed and covered him with the blanket before going back outside to unhitch Trigger. She led the gentle stallion to the stream for water before turning him lose in the corral.

After a quick snack of jerky, Betsy put a pot of water on the stove to boil. When it was hot, she used Dead-eye's knife to cut his trouser leg off a few inches above the gunshot wound. Despite his groans, she washed both the entry and the jagged exit wounds with hot water and lye soap. When she was done, she tied a rag from an old shirt she found in the lean-to around the wound.

When Dead-eye looked at his leg that afternoon, he decided that it would have to be set. He directed Betsy to cut a few stout green poles about an inch or more in diameter and about three feet in length. Then he had her tie his foot to the bed frame with wide buckskin strips. When he was ready, he asked her to try to line up the bone while he stretched the leg by shoving back with his other foot. She could see the leg stretch as he gritted his teeth and heaved away. She struggled valiantly to align the two halves of the bone, and finally felt the broken edges snap into place in a fairly straight position. Sweat poured from his temples as he held tension on the leg until she had the splints bound tightly in place with stretchy strips of buckskin cut from a tanned deer hide she had on hand. He fell into a deep slumber shortly after he was able to let the tension off the leg.

The morning after Dead-eye was wounded, his leg was swollen and purple from the blood in the tissues, but he was not fevered. As they talked it over, both of them vaguely recalled that a broken thighbone would take at least six weeks to heal enough to hobble on, and a lot longer to be ready for any strenuous activity. That meant that

Betsy would have to do the hunting as well as whatever else needed doing until Dead-eye could get about. He would be lucky to be able to trap at all this winter.

When Betsy stepped out of the lean-to the next day, Dead-Eye's four loaded pack horses were grazing outside the corral next to Trigger. She opened the gate and they all plodded over to the stable as if waiting to be unloaded. The trapper could scarcely believe his eyes when she started carrying sacks of flour and sugar and coffee into the lean-to. "There's more stuff there than I bought from the trader," he marveled.

"I figure ole Gunner must a' managed to track me ta our campsite without gettin' seen," he mused. "It was probably him 'stead a' the Indians, that stole the horses. He probably thought he'd found my trappin' area, an' was a-plannin' ta shoot me in the back at the first oppertunity. When we gave 'im the slip, 'e probably took the horses back ta the vicinity of the tradin' post un' gave Trigger his head, knowin' that the mountain stallion would be smart 'nough ta find 'is way home from there. I think if God wasn't lookin' out fer me, I'd be dead right now."

"By the way," he asked Betsy, "What'd you mean the other day 'bout Christ dyin' fer my sins?"

"Dead-eye," she said. "You are a very good person, compared to anyone else I know. You went out of your way and risked your life to save mine. And despite what it was costing you, you took generous care of me until I was well enough to look out for myself. But you were sinning by refusing to believe that there was a God, when all creation tells you that there has to be a God. The Bible says that we are all sinners. You are sinning when you refuse to believe that you are a sinner and deserve to go to hell. You are sinning when you insult God by refusing to accept the death of His Son as the payment for your sins."

"I don't understand it, Betsy. I always thunk I was purty good. I try ta be 'sponsible. I don't drink, er steal, er pick fights with other men. What does God want from me, enyhow?"

"He wants your heart, Dead-eye. He wants you to quit justifying yourself and start worshiping Him as your Savior and your Lord."

"But I really ain't been that bad." He replied.

"Dead-eye, did you ever just want to clobber someone?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied. "But I didn't do it."

"But God says the very desire to do wrong is sin," she answered.

"I think I see it," he said slowly. "Even the desire ta do wrong shows that we're sinful inside."

"That's it!" she exclaimed. "But Christ took our sinfulness as His own and died for us so we wouldn't have to go to hell."

"I guess I orta thank Him for dyin' in my place," he said as he bowed his head in silent prayer.

When he looked up she was gone, pouring out her heart in thanksgiving to God for saving his soul. "Lord I love him," she prayed earnestly. "Now that he's one of Yours, can I have him?" And somehow she felt that He was answering, "What did you think I sent him to you for?"

* * *

Dead-eye's convalescence went smoothly. The soft tissue wounds healed quickly, and the bone healed slowly. Betsy cooked, kept the cabin clean, washed their clothes, hunted deer, chopped firewood, and even started cutting grass for next winter's hay.

After a couple weeks, Dead-eye could drag himself around a bit without putting any weight on his leg. Betsy hitched Trigger to a dead fall and drug it up close to the lean-to so he could while away the time sitting outside in the sun. She ignored her own exhaustion and began teaching him to read and write in the evenings. She was impressed at how fast he was catching on. Besides, it seemed to her that he might actually be appreciating her company a bit.

Then, one day when she leaned over to help him sound out a word, it started to happen. "God," he breathed wonderingly, "That's the face a' that angel what kissed me in the tunnel."

A few days later he was idly watching her cut hay from his perch on the log. He was impressed with the expertise she had developed at swinging the scythe. But the rhythmic choreographics of the task accentuated her feminine attributes in a way that was impossible not to notice. He became so spellbound by the intrigue of her profile that he had no concept of how much he might be invading her privacy. "Lord," he breathed up reverently, "She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

From that time on, he was obsessed by a stronger and stronger urge to fold her into his arms and kiss her. He hardly dared to hope that she might even return the kisses. He watched her hungrily from dawn until dark. He could hardly wait for evenings to come so she would sit beside him to help him read, but he couldn't seem to keep his thoughts on the lessons. She meant everything to him. He had never dreamed that it would be possible to love a woman so much.

Finally, when Dead-eye was able to bear most of his weight on his injured leg, he suddenly announced that it was time to get ready to go to the trading settlement. He was standing facing her, and she looked up into his face to ask, "Why so soon?" As she waited for an answer he saw a tear start down her cheek. He stooped over impulsively and kissed it away. When she did not draw back, he wrapped his arms around her as his hungry lips sought hers. Her hands slipped around his neck as her trembling lips rose to meet his. It was the first real kiss for either of them.

After a brief eternity of bliss he broke it off to utter, "'Cause we need ta find a preacher ta marry us."

"Yeh," she agreed breathlessly as he drew her back into another kiss. "Let's get started."

The Hat that Won the West

The initial quest of the Wild West
Was to cover the white man's head,
'Cause their powdered wigs drew so many digs
That they wanted a hat instead.

Now the beaver's pelt made the perfect felt
For the ponderous stove-pipe hat,
So the public's yen for the rodent's skin
Sent the trappers in search of that.

They explored the land with their traps in hand
In pursuit of the beaver's hide,
To be worn back home on a white man's dome
With his hair tucked away inside.

And they lived their lives by their guns and knives
And their ken of the Indian's lore,
While they blazed the way for a better day
For the sake of the hats men wore.

They risked their hair with a stoic air;
Disregarding how dumb it is,
To expose one's pate to a naked fate
So a stranger could cover his.

But the mercantile dropped the stove-pipe style
When the Stetson hats took hold,
So the epic fact of the hat's impact
Is a story that's seldom told.

Endurance

The big black came into the settlement of Coyote with the unmistakable gait of a thrown shoe. Mark knew exactly when it had happened. He had seen that the trail looped around a steep slope, and decided to save himself a mile or so by short-cutting down the slope. He knew his mountain-bred gelding could do it.

As he approached the bottom of the slope, Mark realized that a twenty-foot layer of dangerous shale-like talus was the reason the trail had looped around the ridge. Still, the black had handled worse than this was lots of times.

The sure-footed horse spread his front feet, leaned back on his haunches, and slid gamely down the talus, leaping the last five or six feet of the loose rock to rejoin the trail. That's when Mark noticed the change of gait. Evidently a sharp piece of rock had wedged the shoe off the black's left front hoof.

"Why, when I'm in such a hurry, Lord?" the harried traveler asked silently." Then, a moment later, "Sorry Lord, I'm taking out my frustration at my own stupidity on You. I should have realized that there was a reason why the trail didn't go down that slope. Give me the patience to take this delay cheerfully...and please remember that I'm supposed to preach in Tucson this week-end."

Mark half-hitched the powerful stallion at the building marked, "Blacksmith," and strode through the opened door. No one was around, but the coals at the forge were still glowing. He crossed the street and entered the ill-fitting doors of a poorly lit saloon to enquire of the whereabouts of the smithy.

"Out back watchin' the fun," the slovenly bar tender grunted, jerking a thumb towards the back door. "Bout to go out there myself, soon's I git a minute."

The dirt on the unswept wooden floor muted the sound of Mark's boots as he made his way to the back door. Throwing it open, he saw about a dozen men gathered in a semi-circle to his right. The center of attraction was a small Indian who appeared to be hung by his wrists to a couple of large nails driven into the back wall of the saloon. Blood stained the rawhide pigging strips that secured him to the nails. Angry welts crisscrossed his bare back.

A heavysset drover with a short bullwhip was yelling angrily, "Are ya gonna take us ta yer camp, er do ya want more?"

"I'd die before I would betray my people," the victim's voice rasped out weakly.

Elbowing his way into the crowd as another vicious lash was administered with the whip, Mark asked the man next to him, "How long has this been going on?"

"Bout a half an hour," the grinning cowpoke replied.

"What's he done?" Mark asked.

"He's an Injun," The cowpoke replied. "Ain't that enough?"

"Not for me," Mark replied grimly, breaking through the ring of spectators.

“That’s enough!” Mark announced angrily as he stretched up to untie one of the Indian’s wrists.

“Out of the way, Stranger,” the drover answered nonchalantly. “This ain’t no concern of yours.”

Turning to face the bully, Mark found the bullwhip snaking around his ankles. One jerk of the whip, and the would-be rescuer was lying face down in the dirt. Scarcely breaking his rhythm, the drover began a figure-of-eight swing that laid alternate lashes on Mark’s back and the Indian’s.

Scrambling desperately inside the blows, the traveler wrapped his arms around the bigger man’s legs and heaved him off his feet. As the bully hit the ground, Mark was on him. An audible gasp escaped the tackled man’s lips as the traveler drove his knee into his solar plexus. A couple of solid blows on his chin left the drover unconscious.

Mark ignored the stunned crowd, and turned his attention back to the Indian on the wall. As he stretched upward to remove the pigging strings that tied the victim’s wrists to the nails, he saw that they were simply earlier bonds that had not been completely removed. The Indian’s hands had actually been nailed to the wall.

A roar of righteous indignation escaped his lips as he dropped back from his stretch. He was swiveling to face the cowardly crowd when he noticed the hammer that had been used to do the dastardly deed lying on the ground under the Indian’s feet. As he grabbed it, he saw that it was one of those newfangled claw hammers that could be used to pull nails as well as to drive them.

Stretching himself back to the Indian, he yanked, rather than levered the nail from the Indian’s left hand. As he got the claws on the right hand nail, he felt the furious crowd tearing into him from behind. As they pulled him down, he hung desperately to the hammer, managing to lever the nail out, though it exerted crushing pressure on the already injured hand.

The Indian’s form drop to the ground as the enraged crowd gang-tackled Mark. The preacher came up swinging right and left with the hammer as he struggled to get free of the crowd. Then something clobbered him heavily on the head, and everything went dark.

When Mark began to regain his senses, he was lying, tied hand and foot, in total darkness. Every effort to sit up shot red hot pokers of pain through his head. Waves of dizziness threatened his befuddled mind as he finally gained a sitting position.

“What’s going on, Lord?” the confused man asked desperately as he scooted backwards until his back stabilized against a wall. He felt a rat take an exploratory nibble at the heel of his boot, and heard it scurry away when he jerked his feet back. He banged his head against the wall to crush a roach that crawled across the back of his scalp. Fortunately, the blow drove the fogginess from his mind.

Mark struggled for an hour or so to loosen the thongs from his wrists. After chaffing the wrists to the point of bleeding, he was resigned to the futility of getting them untied. He leaned back exhausted, and began to take serious stock of his situation.

The musty coolness of the dark enclosure, and the smell of rotting potatoes, convinced him that he was being held in an abandoned root cellar. Scooting backwards along the wall, he came to a corner within a short distance. When he rounded the corner he came to a stairwell leading upwards. After inching backwards up five or six stone steps, he backed into a solid wooden door. At least now he had his bearings.

Mark was about to hunch himself upright against the door when he heard the latch click. He froze as the door cracked opened.

“Senior,” a conspirative voice whispered, almost in his ear. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he whispered back, startling the owner of the voice at his unexpected proximity to him.

The door opened slowly, pausing with each muffled creak. Then Mark felt a small body on the stairs beside him.

“Hold still while I cut the thongs from your wrist,” he heard, as small hands fumbled awkwardly with the bonds.

He felt a knife sawing on the thongs. Suddenly they loosened. As he pulled his hands free he felt the small hands slide down his arm and put the knife in his hand.

“Cut your feet free,” the voice urged. “Hurry! The guard has only gone to the outhouse for a moment.”

“When you come out, shut the door quietly and take my hand and follow me,” the voice instructed as Mark sawed at the bonds around his ankles. “We are fortunate that the moon has not risen yet, Senior.”

As the bonds parted, Mark stepped outside while the voice urged, “Hurry, Senior, he is coming!” He eased the creaking door shut, grasped his rescuers hand, and followed catlike behind him.

They squatted behind a bush as the heavy-footed guard passed by on the other side of it.

It was not until they had covered about a tenth of a mile that the voice whispered, “Not so tight, Senior. You are hurting my hand.”

“Sorry,” he whispered. “Are you the one they nailed to the wall?”

“I am, Senior. Thank you for rescuing me.”

* * *

About mile from the unfriendly settlement, they dropped into a dry creek bed.

“How did you get away?” Mark asked the small Indian, no longer whispering.

“They were so angry with you that they neglected me,” he replied. “Senior, you left at least three of them lying in the dust with unpleasant dreams before they got you.”

“As I slipped between the buildings,” the Indian continued, “I saw a strange horse tied in front of the blacksmith’s shop. It had to be yours, so I jumped on it and galloped back the way your tracks came from. After dark, I watered him in a creek and circled around the town. He is just around the bend in this dry creek bed.”

As Mark mounted the black, the Indian spoke again.

“Senior, I filled your canteen,” he said. Then, continuing as he took the reins from Mark’s hands, “It is so dark you must let me let me lead your horse to the trail. It’s not very far. Then we will part.”

“Where are you going?” Mark asked the Indian.

“To my village,” the Indian replied. “My companions will expect me to escape and come home.”

As the moon eased itself into the midnight sky, Mark noticed that the Indian’s pace was slackening. He was about to suggest that they switch places when the smaller man suddenly collapsed in the deep sand. Reproaching himself, the preacher cradled the Indian’s head with one hand and moistened his lips from the canteen with the other. When he noticed that the Indian felt fevered, Mark made up his mind that the preaching would have to

wait. This was a victimized human being in real need of help, and he was taking him to his village.

Laying the lad, who weighed less than a hundred pounds, across the black's neck, Mark remounted. Once in the saddle, he dragged the Indian into a sitting position in front of him, and proceeded towards the trail with one hand on the reins and the other arm supporting the weakened man. When they reached the trail, Mark put the stallion in a pacing gait that ate up miles with minimal jarring of his patient.

The Indian regained his senses a mile or so down the trail. When he was able to straddle the horse without aid, Mark began plying him with questions. He was a Yaqui, a small tribe with a long history of betrayal by the Spaniards. His name was Amiel. He was fourteen years old. His father was the chief of his village, and had sent him to help a trapper who had lived at peace with the Indians in exchange for teaching Ameil the English language.

Amiel had been captured because he was found on foot after his pony broke its leg in a prairie dog hole during a buffalo hunt. His captors had brought him to Coyote, claiming that the Indians were trying to steal their cattle. They were trying to force Amiel to lead a posse to the rest of the hunting party.

Mark and Amiel were traveling along side of a rocky creek when the morning sun peaked over the mountain. They turned off the main trail into the creek when it was light enough to see. After riding in the stream for an hour or so, Mark brought the stallion out of the water in a rocky spot that would leave no trail, and picked his way through the trees. The Indian walked behind for a mile or so to obliterate, any traces of their passing. They finally found a well-disguised campsite, and curled up to sleep, trusting the stallion to alert them of any approaching danger.

* * *

The sun was afternoon high when Mark awoke. Gazing down on the sleeping Indian, he began to realize how much pain the youth had been through. The Indian jerked wide awake when Mark reached down to feel his forehead. He was still fevered.

That afternoon Amiel rode behind Mark, pointing out the way along game trails through the hills and scrub junipers until they came to a larger Indian trail. Since they were in friendly Indian territory, Mark stuck to the softer areas along the way because the black was still missing a shoe. It took another two days to reach the Yaqui village. By the time they reached it Amiel's fever was so high he was a bit delirious.

When they arrived at the village, the delirious youth was taken straight to his father's lodge, where an Indian healer woman began treating his wounds with her native remedies. Mark was escorted directly to the council lodge immediately adjacent to the chief's hut for interrogation. The chief spoke broken English, and listened closely to every detail. He raised the back of Marks shirt to see if there were any whip welts to verify that part of his story. When the chief was satisfied that Mark was telling the truth, he was given an empty lodge to sleep in.

Mark detected a distinct somberness in the village the next morning. He suspected that Ameil was not doing well, and asked to see the youth. When he was admitted into the chief's hut, the little Indian was tossing deliriously on a deer skin on the floor. His forehead felt hot and dry. Both his hands were massively swollen.

Suddenly Mark knew what he had to do. He drew his knife as he kneeled over the boy, and gently took his hand in his own. The hair rose on the back of his neck as he wondered what the Indians were thinking, but they raised no objections. He carefully slipped the tip of his blade under crust of the wound on the palm side. Pus oozed around the tip of the blade, and literally poured out of the wound when he raised the crust. As he pressed gently to express the rest of the pus, he saw approval on the face of the Indian healer. He asked for hot water. A short time later Amiel's mother brought some, and the healer woman began bathing the wound.

In a stroke of inspiration, the white man offered his knife to the Indian woman as he held Amiel's other hand still for her. Her eyes lighted in appreciation of his respect as she slid the point under the crust on her side, obtaining

much the same results as Mark had. The Indians finished bathing both Amiel's hands, and covered the wounds with a poultice that smelled like creosote. Amiel seemed less restless when Mark walked out of the hut.

The hunting party arrived back at the village about noon that day. They had found Amiel's dead horse and read the story of his capture from his trail, but had been unable to locate him at Coyote after a whole day of spying. Finally, they had headed back for their village, running across a small herd of buffalo on the way home. They were laden with fresh meat when they arrived. Amiel's father asked Mark to be their guest at the feast they would be holding that evening.

Mark had shared the trail provisions from his saddlebags with Amiel, which meant that neither of them had eaten a full meal since they had left Coyote. By mid-afternoon the aroma of roasting meat was eliciting anticipatory gurgles from deep inside him, somewhere near his appetite. He was half-heartedly grooming the black to take his mind off his hunger when he realized that this was Sunday—the Lord's Day. As he tried to imagine how the congregation felt when the visiting preacher failed to show, it suddenly struck him that maybe God had brought him here to preach the gospel to the Indians.

"Lord, I don't know the least thing about Indian customs," Mark prayed. "If you want me to preach here, please have the chief to ask me to speak." Inwardly convinced that it was going to happen, he spent the rest of the afternoon in prayer and contemplation for guidance in what he should say.

When the feast was ready, the Indian braves sat cross-legged around a fire in front of the council hut. Mark was directed to a position next to the chief. After they had stuffed themselves on roasted buffalo, flat bread, and speckled beans, the chief raised his hands for silence, and asked Mark to tell them why he had risked his own life to save Amiel's.

Mark stood to address the braves. He spoke slowly as the chief struggled to translate for him. "I helped Amiel because the son of God once gave his life for me," he replied. Then he gave a brief account of how a holy God saw that all men were sinners that deserved to die. But God loves us so much that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place. He described the crucifixion—How they had nailed Him to the cross and dared Him to come down, and how God turned his face from him because He was bearing our sins. Mark finished by explaining how God forgives all the sins of those that will admit how sinful they are and accept the death of Jesus Christ as the payment for their sins.

When Mark sat down, the chief remained standing. "Jesus Christ was weak to allow men to treat him that way," he declared. "Our elders used to claim that flowers came from the blood that dripped from His cross, but we have only heard His name spoken in anger as the white men mistreat us. We resent the way the His followers despise us, and chase us off the good land. We have learned to hate that name. We will not follow the white man's God!"

Suddenly Amiel appeared on the opposite side of the circle from his father. He looked gaunt and weak, but his eyes were clear. He raised his wounded hands in the flickering firelight.

"I, too, have felt nails being driven through my hands," he began in a surprisingly strong voice. "Was I weak," he asked, "When I chose to be nailed to the wall rather than to betray my companions? Was I weak to remain there and be beaten, when I could have agreed to betray them and been taken down?"

A chorus of "No's" rose from the circle of braves. "You were strong."

"I know," Amiel asserted, "What Jesus Christ suffered for me by staying on that cross. It was only His love for me that kept Him there."

"The men who nailed me to the wall used the name of Jesus Christ with contempt," Amiel continued. "I believe He died for me, and I will use His name with respect," he added decisively.

“Well spoken, little warrior,” the chief replied after a long moment of shocked silence. “If the rider of the black stallion with the missing shoe is willing, this village will hear more of Jesus Christ at the fireside tomorrow.

Ridin' fer the Brand

Late-flowering trees scattered pastel splotches throughout the delicate foliage of the earlier trees along the waterways of the Bighorn Basin. Songbirds strutted their best plumage as they battled for the choicest nesting sites. Fawns nuzzled the does as they grazed on the tender shoots of the plateau. Foggy-breathed Wyoming mornings were giving way to sunny afternoons that crowded seventy degrees on the bunk house thermometer. Spring sang in the souls of the Triangle-T riders.

“Listen up, now,” Butch, the burly foreman of the T in T, bellowed over the light-hearted banter in the ranch’s mess hall on Sunday evening. “The boss is sendin’ five-hundred head uv startin’ stock up Montana way ta his newly-wed daughter n’ ‘er hubby. He wants ya ta be startin’ the better built heifers towards headquarters as you ride this week. We’ll bunch a herd next week and be ready to hit the trail two weeks from today.”

The next morning Torrance Grishom emerged from the bunkhouse into a blaze of pink glory that filled the “Big sky” to the east. The sunrise colors stretched from the purple peaks of the distant Bighorns to the powder blue patches above his head. After splashing his face with ice cold water from the pump, he stepped around the building to admire God’s handiwork for those few awesome moments before the sunrise would fade into mediocrity. As the colors dissipated he made his way to the mess hall for a quick cup of coffee. Shorty always had coffee ready for any early comers.

“Hi, Tort,” Shorty greeted him from the kitchen end of the mess hall. “Where ya workin’ on this glorious Monday morning?”

“Probably in the draws down by the Circle Y, the way I understand the program,” Tort replied. “They kinda want ta keep the cattle away from the Circle boys this time a the year nohow. I’ve heard tell that there’s too many Triangle-T branded cows nursing Circle Y calves down that-a ways ta be entirely accidental.”

“You watch yerself down there,” Shorty warned. “There’s some right salty hands on the Circle Y. Might be better ta lose a few T in T calves now n’ then than ta lose yer life guardin’ the Ole Man’s property.”

“Thanks, Shorty,” Tort replied. “But I ride fer the brand.”

“Ya always did,” Shorty agreed, “But you ain’t a gun slick like some uv those guys are. Some uv their kind ‘ud kill just fer the thrill uv ut.”

The conversation dropped off as a stream of cowpokes stumbled into the mess hall. Shorty was suddenly busier than a black bear in a honey tree. The T in T crew could soak up bacon faster than one person could fry it.

As breakfast came to a satisfying close, Butch began assigning the week’s duties to the crew. “Terry,” he finally called out, “You have Tort pack up a load of flour n’ taters, n’ you two head ta the line cabin down towards the Circle Y. You’ll be reliev’in’ Bob n’ Brady. Tell ‘em ta high-tail ut back here fer new assignments soon as yas git there. I want you guys ta keep ar’ stock well back from the creek that separates ar’ range from the Circle’s. Put a Triangle-T on everything ya see that ain’t awready marked.”

Tort shrugged off the hurt of being assigned to a younger man than himself and began packing vittles for their deployment to the cabin. He was confident that he could fork a tougher bronc and toss a wider loop than any

puncher on the T-in-T, and his ability with a rifle was uncontested. He could generally hit a wolf before anyone else even saw it. "If they want gun fighters down there, why did they send me at all?" he muttered to himself as he finished loading a pack horse with supplies, including a hundred pound sack of flour, fifty pounds of sugar, three sacks of potatoes, and several large slabs of bacon.

Terry chatted pleasantly on the balmy ride to the cabin, and Tort's resentment could not smolder long. Spring heals a lot of wounds.

* * *

Terry and Tort arrived at the line cabin about noon. Terry started fixing lunch while Tort unloaded the pack animal. When the grub was stored he grabbed a broom and had the floors swept before Terry had a meal of fried potatoes and thick-sliced bacon ready.

"Don't know where those guys are workin'," Terry mused as they finished their lunch. "I'll ride east and you ride west along the boundary, and whoever finds 'em kin send 'em back ta headquarters."

When Tort got to the creek that demarcated the southern border of the T in T, he turned his horse westward towards the Bighorn River. He had ridden over an hour without seeing any cattle when he detected a faint column of smoke rising from a clump of cottonwoods that edged a two-hundred foot loop in the creek. The loop opened toward the T in T side of the creek

Concerned that whoever had built the fire might not be the missing T in T hands, Tort rode into the trees upstream from the loop and tied his horse with a slip knot. Grabbing his Henry repeating rifle, the cautious cowpoke crept through the trees along the stream until he could see the open area within the loop.

A small but sturdy holding pen filled much of the grassy area. Strong wooden lead-in fences funneled into its gate. At least a dozen Triangle-T branded cows with young calves milled about in the pen. As Tort watched, Brady released a cow and her calf from the pen. Bob instantly roped the calf, and had it pigged on the ground as a stranger stepped in with a red hot branding iron from the fire. Tort's vantage point was close enough that he could tell that the brand was round rather than triangular shaped.

"Wrong brand, Mister," Tort announced as he stepped out of the trees with his finger on the trigger and his rifle pointed loosely toward the three errant cow hands. "These are T in T stock.

Bob and the stranger raised their hands, but Brady went for his gun. The rifle boomed and the foolish cow boy was knocked to the ground as Tort levered another shell in the Henry so fast that the action was heard more than seen.

"Sorry I had ta do that Brady," Tort called to the injured man, "But ya forced it on me. Ya need ta get right with God."

"You two coyotes," Tort ordered the other outlaws, "Lower yer gun belts real gentle like n' step back a ways afore I have ta plant yas." He kept the rustlers covered, holding the unwavering rifle in his right hand as easily as if it had been a pistol, while he gathered their guns.

"Yer missin' out on a good thing, Tort," Bob pled with him. "You kin draw from the T in T n' the Circle Y at the same time. All ya gotta do is burn a circle brand on whatever Triangle's calves ya kin git away with, n' you'll be a'making twice what ya used ta."

"I ride fer the brand," Tort replied. "You guys help Brady on ta his horse n' light out fer the Circle Y headquarters. Ya won't be welcome on the T in T after I talk with the boss. Spread the word that from now on iff in we see another Circle hand on this side uv the creek we'll be a'shootin' first n' askin questions later. Now git!" he added

when the three disarmed Circle Y riders were mounted.

Tort finished his survey of the southern edge of the T in T without further incident. He returned to the cabin by a more northerly route, arriving about dusk.

“Ya come in late so’s I’d have ta cook again?” Terry asked jovially as he came in the door.

“Ya really think I wanna eat yer cookin’ again?” Tort grinned back. “I’d sooner eat beans from a can.”

“You’ll have ta open the can with yer jack knife, then,” Terry responded. “There don’t seem ta be no can opener ’round here.”

“By the way, did ya run across Bob and Brady this afternoon?” Terry asked as they sat down to eat.

“Sure did, n’ I sent the coyotes packin’,” Tort replied. “Caught em brandin’ Triangle calves with Circle irons. They was drawin’ pay from both outfits.”

“No wonder they was always volunteerin’ ta man the southern cabin,” Terry mused. “Wonder how many calves they’ve misbranded over the last couple uv years.”

The next two days the pair of punchers kept busy hazing cattle in a northerly direction. They bunched over a hundred T in T cows nursing misbranded calves to take to headquarters with them.

On Wednesday evening Butch came to the cabin looking for Bob and Brady. “I’m a’hopin’ they haven’t got their selves into a shootin’ match with the Circle riders,” he explained.

“It’s worsen un that,” Tort told him. “They’re the ones that were misbrandin’ the calves. I caught em red-handed. Brady drawed on me n’ I plugged ‘im with my Henry.”

“I just can’t believe it!” Butch retorted.

“It’s a fact,” Tort answered adamantly. “They was a’drawin’ pay from both outfits. Even tried ta git me ta join ‘em, but I told ‘em I ride fer the brand.”

“We got a herd uv more’n a hunnert cows with misbranded calves fer evidence if ya want a see um,” Terry chimed in. “Don’t cha remember how Bob n’ Brady always wanted ta work down here the last couple uv years?”

“They did, at that,” Butch admitted. “It’s still hard ta believe those curs was a’double crossin’ us all that time.”

“You guys start that herd uv misbrands fer headquarters tamorra,” Butch instructed. “Them calves ar’ so young that you’ll have ta move purty slow. Pick up enny more misbrands ya run across as ya go. I’ll try ta get the sheriff ta come out n’ certify that the calves are T in T’s next week. Then we’ll keep ‘em as far away from the Circle Y as we kin until they’re old enough ta ship.”

* * *

Terry and Tort had the misbranded herd in a holding pen near headquarters by Sunday afternoon. The sheriff came by on Monday and certified that the misbranded calves were genuine Triangle-T stock. Butch sent the herd further north with another couple of hands while Terry and Tort stayed near headquarters to help gather the Montana herd.

Butch was at the holding pen on Friday evening when Tort and Terry brought the last of the herd to the pen. “That does it,” Butch congratulated the hands. “This is as fine a startin’ herd as I ever seen. The Ole Man’s sendin’ a chuck wagon n’ five gun-handly riders that wanna move out Montana way ennyhow. ‘Is son-in-law sent a trail

boss n' two riders from their end. They come down the Bridger trail, n' said its loaded with good grass n' water. They're gonna head out Monday mornin'."

"Ya know, Boss," Tort suggested hesitantly, "This whole thing reminds me uv a school marm takin' 'er kids on a picnic. Remember how the younger kids kinda follered the older ones in the right direction? Iffin I was the trail boss, I'd take a few older cows n' maybe a mossy-back along. One of 'em' ud be bound ta take the lead n' keep them yearlings moving a lot smoother than they'd go by themselves."

"Yer right!" Butch exclaimed. "I been a'thinkin we was missin' sompthin'."

"At least they'd have something ta butcher iffin' they ain't no help," Tort added, relieved that Butch hadn't resented his input.

Sunday morning the Old Man sent to the mess hall for Tort. He wanted to talk with him immediately. Tort left his empty plate, refilled his coffee cup, and sauntered over to the ranch house. Taking a deep swig of coffee, he stepped up the stairs and crossed the full-width porch, "Its been a long time since I've been here," he thought as he knocked softly at the door—but that's all over now. While waiting an answer he read the familiar aged brass name plate once again. Something clicked as he read it:

T. R. Angle
Triangle-T Ranch

"So that's where the Triangle-T brand came from." he thought. "The Old Man's name almost spells 'Triangle,' and he put the wide side of the triangle on top. By dropping a line straight down to the bottom point he made a 'T' fer 'is first initial. No wonder 'e calls ut the 'T in T.' I always thought ut was 'TNT,' like dynamite." His musings were suddenly interrupted as the door swung open.

"Come in, Tort," the old man said warmly, "Been a while since I've seen ya."

"Hello Mr. Angle," Tom answered. "Butch says yer a'wantin' ta talk ta me."

"Yeh," the rancher confirmed. "Butch told me yer suggestion 'bout mixin a few older stock with that herd uv heifers. I got ta thinkin' on ut, un blamed iffin I didn't begin ta realize that all the riders was kinda young as well. Even that herd boss that Riley sent is scarcely dry behind 'is ears. I want you ta go along as a stabilizin' influence. You'll git expenses n' pay both ways, so ya won't be out none."

"Boss," Tort objected, "I'm barely twenty-five myself."

"Yeh," the Old Man responded, "But ya handled that misbrandin' deal better'n me er Butch would uv; n' ya showed Butch what was lackin' in that herd without riling 'em up. Ya know how ta lead without bein' in charge, n'yer just the man fer the job."

"Thanks, Boss," Tort answered pensively. "Do ya mind iffin'I pray on ut taday n' let ya know in the mornin'?"

"O.K. by me," the Old Man grinned, "As long as yer answer is 'Yes.'"

Half-dazed with the magnitude of what he had been asked to do, Tort strolled back through the trees along the creek that skirted the T in T headquarters. Almost automatically his footsteps took him to the sandstone outcropping where the creek dropped over a four-foot-high cliff into a deep blue pool. Here, at his virtually private prayer grotto, he fell to his knees, tears trickling down cheeks.

"Lord," he agonized, "You know how much I loved Carrie. Ya know how bad I wanted 'er; but I didn't have nothing ta offer 'er. Then Riley came along n' she married 'im. She's his now."

“Lord,” he continued, “I’ve wanted ta go ta ’er so bad I could hardly resist, but ut wouldn’t uv been right. Now they’re sendin’ me there. Please tell me what ya want me ta do, Lord, n’ help me ta do yer will.”

The words ceased, but the prayer didn’t. Tears flowed in absolute agony and perfect surrender as Tort prostrated himself before his God. It was the closest thing to Gethsemane he’d ever experienced.

Somewhere in this agonizing tryst the cowpoke fell asleep. When he awoke the agony had been replaced with absolute peace. He could not have told anyone how he knew for sure that he should go, but he knew it as surely as if the Lord had actually spoken aloud to Him.

“Thank yah, Lord,” he murmured as he rose to return to the bunk house.

* * *

Sandy, the trail boss, was livid when Tort reported for duty Monday morning. “I’m trail boss, n’ I’ll pick my own riders,” he bellowed at the Old Man.

“The herd’s mine till it gets to Carrie’s,” the Old man shot back. Iffn you want ta leave without enny cows, ride out; but iff in yer takin’ my cows yer takin’ Tort,” the Old Man gritted out with an air of finality that settled the issue.

“Saddle up, Tort,” the rancher commanded as he turned his back on Sandy. “I put a letter n’ some emergency cash in yer saddle bags,” he whispered to Tort as he walked past him toward the ranch house.

With that difficulty settled, they were off along the Bighorn River toward Kirby Creek, where they would pick up the Bridger Trail. “You kin ride drag,” Sandy sneered at Tort when they were well away from the Triangle-T. It was meant, not only as an insult, but also as a deterrent. The last rider on a herd generally breathed copious amounts of dust as he hazed any straggling stock back to the herd. Thankfully, they were so early in the season that the earth was still damp with spring rains and the dust was minimal.

By noon of the first day it was more than evident that Sandy and his two riders from Montana knew nothing about cattle. The cow punchers knew a herd would begin losing weight, even on good grass, if driven more than about ten miles a day. Sandy and his cohorts set out in the lead, determined to make twenty-five miles a day. The cattle, of course, would have none of it, and Sandy laid the blame on Tort.

“Yer at the back,” he griped when they stopped for lunch. “Push ’em harder. We gotta get this over with.”

“Yer welcome ta ride drag with me if ya want,” Tort drawled easily, “But cattle don’t drive that fast. You’ll kill most uv ’em if ya push ’em too hard fer long.”

“Don’t try ta tell me how ta do my job,” Sandy growled threateningly, his right hand drifting toward his gun.

“My job’s ta see that the Old Man’s cattle don’t git hurt on the way ta his daughter’s in Montana territory,” Tort retorted evenly.

The two men stared intently at each other until Sandy finally broke eye contact. “We’ll settle this when the job’s done,” Sandy growled. Tort did not reply.

That evening Jack, Bob, and Sam, three of the T in T hands ate around the campfire with the three Montana hands. Tort ate at the back of the chuck wagon with Zeke, the old black cook, and Tim and Tom, the other two hands from the Triangle ranch. After dinner the chuck wagon group moved to the fire, but the conversation of those who were already there was so filled with raunchy braggadocio that the latecomers soon drifted to their bed

rolls and curled up around the chuck wagon.

The next morning Sandy divided the hands into three teams; the Montana group, the T in T group that had eaten with them, and the chuck wagon group. "Couldn't uv done ut enny more pleasantly myself," Tort thought. "But that Montana group aint nothin' but gunslingers. They ain't got the slightest ideer how ta drive cows." Nevertheless, the Triangle punchers had evidently confirmed Tort's statement that the herd shouldn't be driven more than ten miles a day, because Sandy quit trying to move them so fast.

That evening Sandy presented a night schedule. "The Montana team will take the dangerous watch from dinner ta tin a'clock," he announced. The TNT team gets from tin a'clock ta two a'clock; n' the chuck wagon team takes over from two a'clock till breakfast. No rotation of the duty schedule was offered.

"Some schedule!" Tim grunted that evening after the Montana team saddled up to guard the cattle.

"Yeh," Tom echoed in the same tone. "They took the best shift without enny rotation at all."

"We can rotate within ar shift," Tort suggested. "We kin keep two riders on the prowl each night, and leave one ta kinda keep track uv what's goin' on here at the campsite."

"That's a right good ideer," Tom chimed in. "Me n' Tim don't trust no one in those other groups," he added confidentially.

The third day out was difficult from the start. The yearlings were resistant to moving out. When they were hazed they often darted, sometimes in small groups, for the draws along the way. To make matters worse, the inexperienced Montana riders would often take out behind them, driving them further away instead of cutting them off and hazing them back to the herd like a more skillful cow puncher would be able to do.

Tempers were beginning to flare by lunch time, when Old Zeke quietly saddled a horse and concentrated on getting the mature stock started down the trail. As if by magic the cantankerous heifers began to follow their lead, and the herd began to move. With the herd finally moving, the crew did not dare to stop for lunch.

Because so much time had been lost in the morning, Sandy insisted on moving on until dusk that evening. The exhausted cowboys converged on the chuck wagon to find the arthritic old cook sitting on a boulder, barely able to move after the strenuous riding he had done. Tim, Tom, and Tort had pitched in to whip up a quick meal of fried ham, biscuits, and canned beans, but by the time the stove was hot even that took an hour or so to prepare.

When everything was finally ready, Tort stepped out of the wagon and called the crew. When everyone else was served, Zeke rose painfully from the boulder he had been sitting on to help himself to a plate of food. Seeing him rise, Sandy grabbed the upper part of the front of his shirt and jerked him forward. "This better not happen again, old man," the trail boss snarled in his face. "When we stop I want dinner ready."

"Mistuh Sandy," the old man explained, "Ah cain't drive the chuck wagon n' cook at the same time. 'N' we have ta stop befoe Ah kin even light the fire."

I don't want excuses, I want dinner when we stop," the irate bully bellowed, shoving the old man backwards.

As Zeke fell to his rear end Tort stepped in front of the gun slick to protect the old man. "Cut it out, Sandy," he commanded, grabbing the gun slick's wrist as he reached for his gun. The sheer strength of the cowpoke's grasp on his wrist cowed the gunman, but Tort held it so casually that his grip looked more like a friendly restraint than a forceful one. Tort did not disarm the trail boss in front of the rest of the crew.

"Zeke don't ride no more 'cause of 'is arthritis," Tort explained. "But he rode ennyway ta save ar bacon this morning, " Tort reasoned with the irate man. "Didn't you see that it was his trail savvy that got the herd under

control so we could move on? Leave 'em alone."

Dropping Sandy's gun hand in a dare that only he and the gunman understood, the cow boy turned his back on him and reached down to help the old man up from the ground.

"Zeke," Tort asked quietly after the Montana team rode out for the first shift that evening, "Have you got a gun in that wagon?"

"Don't you worry none," Zeke assured him. "Ah keeps a four-shot revolvin' shot gun undah the seat."

"Ya'd best start sleepin' in the wagon with that scatter gun at yer side," Tort advised. "This ain't shapin' up ta be no picnic in the park."

"Right!" the other two agreed.

The heifers had become more manageable with the mature animals in the lead, and the group reached the mouth of Kirby Creek, about forty miles from the Triangle-T, on the fourth evening of the drive.

* * *

The herd moved better yet over the more defined Bridger trail. The drive was actually averaging nearly twelve miles a day without seeming to stress the cattle. Gold prospectors straggled past at irregular intervals. Most were mounted on horses or mules leading pack animals, but some were on foot carrying little but their rifles and a pick axe. The Triangle-T herd was obviously the first drive of the season along the trail.

While everything was going smooth on the outside, Tort was noticing less and less comradery between the Montana and the T in T teams. As they slept near the Nowood River he heard a suspicious owl hoot from the east. One of the T in T boys crawled out of his blankets and crept toward the place it came from. He was gone far too long to have been answering the call of nature.

Tort hazed a couple of heifers to the area the call had come from during his shift in the darkest part of the night. When it was light enough to see he rode after them, finding tracks that confirmed that the puncher had met with a rider on a well shod horse.

Later that day a figure silhouetted himself beside a boulder in a way that invited the drag rider to swing by and investigate. Tort was approaching the area with his Henry across his saddle when a familiar voice came from behind the boulder.

"Ya don't need the gun this time, Tort. I'm ridin' the Lord's brand now."

"Brady?" Tort asked quietly.

"Yeh, Tort," the visitor answered. "I'm just here ta warn ya that half-a-dozen Circle Y riders are goin' ta try ta hijack yer herd afore yas hit the Greybull River. They was in cahoots with that Montana bunch, but now they're double crossin' everybody else includin' the Circle Y, un takin' the herd fer themselves. Three a yer men from the Triangle T ar in on ut too."

"Why are ya tellin' me? Tort ask.

"Ya warned me that I should get right with God, un I done ut. I didn't know how bad I was hurt when ya shot me, Tort. I was a'lyin there wonderin' what my mom ud think when she heard that I died rustling cattle, n' realized what a fool I had been. When I found that my cartridge belt had took the worst uv the bullet, I thanked God n' went ta see the closest preacher. He showed me how Christ had died fer my sins. I accepted it and repented, n'

now I'm born again."

"That's great, Brady," Tort replied, grasping his hand with a hearty grip.

"No hard feelins?" Brady asked.

"None at all," Tort replied. "N' thanks fer the warnin'. We been wonderin' what they was up to."

"I gotta git outta here a'fore they catch on ta me," Brady continued. "I rode with 'em until we found ya so's I could warn ya. I'm movin' on ta Virginia City fer a fresh start now."

"N' Tort," Brady said as he started to mount up. "That Riley guy's hand-in-hand with the Circle Y. He just married the Ole Man's daughter ta get 'is ranch. He had 'im so buttered up the ole coot practically forced Carrie to marry 'im, 'n' all the while she was sweet on you. Guess she just got so discouraged that ya didn't come a'courtin' when she was a-moonin' over ya so bad thet she just gave up."

"I wish I'd uv knowed ut," Tort mused aloud. "I'd a give my life fer that woman, but I didn't have nothing ta offer her."

"Ya had yerself," Brady retorted, "'N' yer more uv a man than ennyone else in the Basin."

Tort rode unobtrusively back to the herd, mulling everything over in his mind. He did not doubt the validity of Brady's warning, though he wasn't so sure about Carrie's being sweet on him. "Don't make no difference no how," he thought bitterly. "She's awready married ta Riley, no matter how big a crook 'e is."

That night was so cloudy a man could barely see his hand in front of his face. "They won't come on a night like this," Tort told himself, curling up comfortably in his blankets. When their shift came at two A.M. Tort roused Zeke along with the other two men on the team, placing a warning finger over his lips for silence. When they were well away from the camp site he related his encounter with Brady.

"I believe 'em," Tom said emphatically.

"Yeh," Tim agreed. "He wasn't a bad kid until he got ta hob-knobin' with Sam."

"They'll probably hit us on a moon-lit night during the T in T shift," Tort mused. The easiest way ta 'liminate any resistance would be to stampede the cattle through the camp 'n' wipe most uv us out, so we'd better start sleeping under the chuck wagon where we'll be safe from that. They'll have a holding area up the trail a ways that they'll turn the cattle inta. Then they'll pick us off one-at-a-time when we follow the cattle in."

"That's just about how it'll have ta be," the others agreed. "We'd best be ready between tin n' two on the first moon-lit night."

We ain't got a chance uv stoppin' the stampede," Tom mused, "But we'd better be a'ridin' behind the herd so's we'll know where it goes. Then we cun sneak up on 'em instead uv walkin' right inta their trap."

"If we start saddlin' our horses n' tyin' um ta the wagon every night, we'll have 'em ready without cuin' the rustlers off when the stampede comes," Tim added.

The chuck wagon team started tying their saddled horses on the up-trail side of the wagon before bedding down the very next evening. "Saves trying ta saddle 'em up in the dark at two A.M.," they explained to the others.

The group was in the part of the trail between the Bighorn and Greybull Rivers when the anticipated attack came. The night was so perfect for it that Tort and his sidekicks were up and fully dressed the moment the T in T

riders disappeared into the moonlight to take their shift. The instant Tort heard the commotion on the far side of the herd he yelled a warning to the Montana gang.

“Stampede!” he called loudly, awakening the sleeping gunmen. “Git up here agin’ the wagon, quick!”

The other two Montana men abandoned everything and ran for the safety of the wagon, but Sandy hesitated, groping for his boots. When he sat down to pull them on Tort rushed out and grabbed him by the collar, dragging him under the shadow of the wagon just as the front line of the herd swept past. Dust filled the air, long horns clacked together, and the wagon shuddered as bovine shoulders glanced off it. Then it was over as suddenly as it started. The cowering gunmen were too buffaloed to notice the silhouettes of at least a half-a-dozen riders bringing up the rear of the thundering herd.

The three chuck wagon cowpokes mounted instantly and followed the herd at a distance, confident that the noise of the stampeding cattle would drown out the sounds of their galloping horses. The rustlers let the herd run until it was exhausted before turning it into a blind canyon several miles from the trail. The honest punchers took their bearings as well as possible in the moonlight before returning to the campsite. They’d have their work cut out for them, come dawn.

Zeke had a hearty fire going and plenty of coffee ready by the time the cowpokes got back to camp. The mood of the gun slicks was so humorous that Tort was glad it was too dark for them to detect his grin. Their guns had been smashed by the herd, and they were stumbling around as deflated as a couple of kids caught in their skivvies at the swimming hole.

“If you hadn’t uv grabbed me I could uv saved my guns,” Sandy complained.

“You weren’t a yard from becoming dust when those cows came through,” his buddies admonished. “Tort saved your life at the risk uv ’is own.”

By dawn Tort, Tim, and Tom were creeping up to the rim of the mouth of the canyon where the exhausted cattle were being held. Looking over the edge, they saw nine rustlers sitting around a fire drinking coffee not two hundred feet below them in the narrow mouth of the canyon.

“We don’t dare let them get away,” Tort advised, “Or some uv us might be killed.”

“We can’t take ’em captive,” Tom mused. “There ain’t no law ta turn ’em over ta within two hunnert miles uv here.”

They tried ta kill us last night,” Tim reasoned, “’N’ iff’n we don’t clean ’em out they’ll pick us off one-at-a-time as we ride herd on the cattle they wanna steal.”

“Which three do ya want?” Tom asked stoically.

Tort was about to object when something at the blind end of the cul-de-sac spooked the old mossy-back they had brought with the herd. Bawling out in terror, he charged toward the mouth of the canyon. Startled cattle jumped to their feet tearing blindly after him. In a matter of seconds the stampeding herd funneled through the bottleneck of the canyon, crashing toward the unsuspecting rustlers. The walls of the bottleneck were too steep to climb, and the scrambling rustlers were trampled mercilessly into the ground by the fleeing herd.

“Bear’ er a cat must uv jumped ole Mossey,” Tort muttered as the three hands scrambled for their horses and headed down toward the herd.

“Just foller ’em easy-like,” Tom advised. “These cows is too tard ta go very fur.” True to his prediction, the herd settled down to graze on a good patch of grass by a creek a mile or two up the trail.

"I hate it!" Tort groaned ruefully as the cowpokes surveyed the rustlers' bodies later in the morning. All nine of them were dead, most trampled almost beyond recognition. Tort left Tom and Tim to bury the dead while he returned to camp to get Zeke and the Montana team. They camped where the cattle had stopped that night, and reached the Greybull River on the evening of the third day after the stampede.

* * *

The trail followed the Greybull about twenty miles before veering northwest some sixty or more miles as the crow flies to Montana. Tort was always careful to refer to Sandy as the trail boss at every chance, but he was accepted as the leader in every important decision. He hired three cowpunchers that were traveling the Bridger Trail to reach the Virginia City gold fields. They weren't too happy about Sandy's night schedule, but they were low on cash and were glad to have employment that took them toward their destination.

The seasoned herd took to the trail every morning as a matter of habit by this time. The cowpokes' biggest problem was keeping Indians and hungry pioneers from siphoning off occasional animals to butcher at night. They had crossed the Montana line and reached the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone River when three shady-looking gun slicks met them with a message for Sandy from the Sweet Grass area where the Riley ranch was located.

The next morning Sandy and his re-enforced gunslingers were standing nonchalantly around the chuck wagon drinking coffee when Tort and his sidekicks came in from their shift. "Watch it, Tort," Tom whispered as they rode toward the wagon. Tort slipped his Henry from its scabbard, resting it across the pommel of his saddle as Tom and Tim split away so as to form a triangle around the gunmen. The three prospectors had been unaware of the undercurrents on the drive, and were caught flat-footed without weapons.

"Riley got killed holdin' up a bank last week," Sandy announced to Tort and his sidekicks. "Since I was his segundo, that leaves the herd ta me. We won't be needin' you guys no more."

"As Mr. Angle explained ta yah," Tort replied evenly, "The herd is his until it's delivered ta his daughter's ranch."

"She ain't got no ranch," Sandy replied. "I do."

Tort turned his horse a bit without shifting the Henry, and suddenly the rifle was pointed directly at Sandy. "It's pretty much a stand-off, Sandy," he said, "'N' this gun's awready pointed at you. Call your dogs off!"

"Don't be a fool, Tort," Sandy bluffed, "We got ya three ta six."

"Ya didn't count on this here scattergun, Mistuh Sandy," Zeke called from inside the wagon. It holds four loads that'll cut a man most in two whenever yer ready."

With the balance of power more or less evened up, the gunslicks backed away slowly. Bullies don't generally like to fight unless the odds are in their favor.

"We won't shoot yas in the back iff in ya leave peaceably," Tom called out to them.

"This ain't the end uv this," Sandy threatened through clinched teeth as the outlaws mounted up and galloped off.

"Thanks, everyone," Tort told the remaining faithful after the outlaws were gone. "That one had me sweatin' a bit."

* * *

The depleted crew reached the Bozeman Trail without further incident. They turned westward towards the cut-off which would take them to the Sweet Grass area, some ninety miles down the trail. Tort managed to hire a couple more cow-savvy prospectors to help the exhausted Triangle-T punchers.

The group was nearing the cut-off to the Sweet Grass Prairies when they ran into a vigilante gang of about a dozen hard-nosed ranchers from the Bozeman area. Sandy and his henchmen rode with them.

"That's my herd," Sandy pointed out, "And those are the rustlers that stole it."

"And just where did you get possession of five-hundred Triangle-T cattle?" Tort retorted.

"I was bringing 'em up ta my ranch in the sweet grass," Sandy replied, "'N' you guys stampeded 'em through ar' camp 'n' stole 'em. Yas kilt half my crew with those cattle."

"He's got a bill of sale fer the cattle," the leader of the vigilantes replied. "'N' we're hangin all the rustlers we kin find around here."

"He don't got no legitimate bill a sale," Tort replied, "Cause these cattle still belong ta the Triangle-T until they're delivered ta Mr. Angle's daughter."

Suddenly the mob was grabbing Tort, and after a brief struggle his hands were pigged behind his back.

"One last request," Tort asked as they strung a loop around his neck. Mr. Angle left some cash n' a letter ta his daughter in my saddlebags. Please take the money 'n' pay off these prospectors who ain't got the slightest ideer what's goin' on here, 'n' get the letter ta Carrie."

The vigilantes waited while the leader unbuckled Tort's saddle bags and fished out the envelope with the money and the letter in it. He was counting out the money when another rancher called out, "Hey, that letter's addressed ta Torrance Grishom. Who's he?"

"That's me," Tort replied. "They just call me Tort fer short. I thought that letter would be ta Carrie, so I didn't look at it. Would ya read it ta me?"

The rancher began reading the letter aloud to the group:

Tort,

Use this letter as my authorization for you to take over the herd if you have to. I'm beginning ta think I made a real bad mistake in insistin 'on Carrie marryin 'Riley. Be sure the herd is delivered ta Carrie herself.

I don't think that Sandy fella that Riley sent would know a piggin 'string from the G-string on a fiddle. Don't trust 'em!"

"It's signed by T. R. Angle, whoever that is," the rancher finished.

"Suppose you ask Sandy who Mr. Angle is 'n' what 'is brand means," Tort suggested. "He never met the man until Riley sent 'em down there ta be trail boss on this drive. Sandy's an outlaw gun slick just like Riley was. We had ta teach 'im how ta ride herd, 'n' 'e still can't rope a fence post."

"O.K. Sandy," the leader commanded, "Explain the brand ta us."

"Its jest a triangle," Sandy bluffed. "Someone else already had a triangle so 'e drew a line down from the point ta the bottom ta make ut unique."

“Actually,” Tort replied, “Sandy’s not cattle savvy ’nuff to notice that the point on the Triangle-T brand is on the bottom. It’s a triangle ’cause Mr. Angle’s initials ’n’ name look like the word, ‘Triangle,’” Tort explained. “’N’ ’e put it upside down ’n’ drew a line ta the bottom point ta represent ’is first initial. That’s why ’e calls ut the “T in T.”

“One more thing,” Tort added. “I’d almost bet that Mr. Angle’s name is spelled, ‘A-N-G-E-L,’ like with wings n’ a harp, on that bill of goods Sandy sold yas. Most people spell ut that way at first, but the Ole Man wouldn’t uv misspelled ’is own signature.”

A quick look at the bill of sale proved it was faked. The hangman removed the noose from Tort’s neck; and the vigilantes hanged Sandy on the big Oak tree that grows at the turn-off to the sweet grass on the Bozeman Trail.

They were digging Sandy’s grave when three riders came over a rise on the trail from the north. A few minutes later Brady vaulted off his horse and helped Carrie dismount.

“When I heard that Riley was dead I went ta the ranch n’ got yer woman,” he told Tort. “I told ’er what ya said, ’n’ she brought the preacher with ’er. Now go put yer brand on ’er!”

“Carrie,” Tort stuttered hesitantly as he walked up to her “I know I don’t have anything ta offer ya, but I’ve loved ya with all my heart fer years.”

“I never wanted anything but yer love, Tort,” she answered softly.

“We’ll be poor,” he warned, “We won’t have nuthin’ but each other.”

“Yeh,” she answered demurely, “Nothin’ but each other ’n’ a sweet grass ranch with five hundred head of the best startin’ cattle in Montana. Dad made Riley put the deed to the homestead in both of our names before he’d let ’em marry me, so I still own it.”

“I heard Riley braggin’ that ’e was gonna kill me soon as the cattle got here,” she said, choking up a bit. “But he got ’imself killed instead. If we get married right now we can get the deed transferred to ‘Torrance and Carry Grishom’ at Bozeman, and circle on up ta home with the herd.”

There was a long pause before she became aware of his whisper, “Carrie?” He was reaching for her, and then he was squeezing her tightly against himself in a fervent kiss. The vigilantes looked on in jealous amusement as she returned his kiss with matching passion.

He Rode for the Brand

They found the old cowboy
face down on the ground
He'd met up with rustlers
and taken a round.
He'd worked for his outfit
for many a year,
And rode for the brand
throughout all his career.

They lowered his body
down under the sod,
While praising his life
of devotion to God;
And up in the heavens
a nail-punctured hand
Gripped his and re-echoed,
"You rode for the brand."

If you believe Jesus
was dying for you,
Repent of your sins
without further ado,
And take up your cross
with the sanctified hoard
Who ride for the brand
of their crucified Lord.

Winnie's Wolf

Ten-year-old Winnie Sue Sutton sneaked out of the back door of the Single S ranch house right after dinner. She slipped stealthily along the back side of the house to the north side, where neither of her parents were likely to be at this time of the day. From there she trotted over to the barn where her expectant little Morgan mare was stabled. Squeezing through the fence, she let herself into the stall. Disappointed that Fudgie had not foaled yet, she petted the nervous mare affectionately. When the filly relaxed enough to nuzzle her, the girl fed it a lump of sugar she had snatched from the kitchen.

Winnie was just turning to leave when she heard a plaintive whimper from the darkest corner of the stall. Tiptoeing over to investigate, she found a small puppy crouched in the straw. She picked the skinny little white pup up and cuddled it in her arms. It snuggled weakly against her body, and looking trustingly at her face, it let out a soft whine.

Winnie slipped over to the milk cow's stall. She deftly coaxed a cup or so of milk from its udder into a shallow tin can that she found on a shelf. The puppy lapped up the milk and crawled back to its corner. The girl stooped to pet it, and it was soon fast asleep.

By this time the young girl was in danger of being found out. She scurried back to the house, and slipped into the kitchen. Dad was still sitting at the table and Mom was just starting the dishes. Winnie grabbed a towel to dry.

"Anything happening yet?" Mom asked

Winnie blushed deeply at finding she hadn't put anything over on Mom and Dad after all... Nothing but the pup, at least. "Nah," she replied, "But she's pretty nervous."

"So's Dad," Mom answered. "He'll probably check her every hour or so all night. He knows that colt means a lot to you."

"Thanks, Dad," Winnie squealed, running over to kiss him. "Can I watch with you?"

"Your Mother and I have decided that you can stay up until it comes, Honey."

Winnie went out with Dad to check on the mare three times before midnight. She held the lantern while he examined Fudgie. The child was rather discouraged, but Dad insisted that everything was going fine.

"Will it come tonight?" she asked.

"I'm pretty sure it will," he answered. "She's been waxing over a week now, and she's obviously in labor."

The child drifted off to sleep on the couch about midnight. Dad awakened her just before dawn. "Come on out, Winnie. It's coming pretty quickly."

Ten minutes later the foal dropped to the ground, and Fudgy turned to sniff it.

"She's not opening the sack so the foal can breathe," Dad hollered. "I'll hold her while you rip it off."

They rushed into the stall together. Mr. Sutton grabbed Fudgie's halter and held her away while Winnie stuck a finger through the sack and ripped it off the foal. The new baby kicked a bit and raised its head immediately. Fudgie began to lick it down, and within a few minutes it struggled awkwardly to its feet and began nuzzling at its mother.

"Everything's OK," Dad finally announced. "Let's thank the Lord and go in and get some hot cocoa." Winnie closed her sleepy eyes while Dad offered a simple prayer of thanksgiving, and they went back to the kitchen. She was asleep in her chair before the cocoa was ready, and Dad laid her gently on the couch without awakening her.

It wasn't until breakfast that Winnie thought of the puppy again. When Mom left the kitchen for a moment, she threw a sausage and some left-over scrambled eggs into an old bowl and ran out to the barn. When she opened the stall, Fudgie bared her teeth threateningly at her, and she had to take the time to soothe the new mother with her voice and hands before she could get into the stall. She found the pup under the hay where she had left it. It seemed a bit stronger, and squirmed happily against her as she picked it up. It wolfed the sausage and eggs down, and whined a bit when she put it down. Winnie slipped down to the cow and filled the bowl with milk. She barely had the pup back under the straw when Dad came in to check on the foal.

"Looks like a great one," he mused as he looked it over. "I don't see any obvious faults at all so far. What are you going to call it?"

"How about Cocoa?" Winnie asked.

"I like that," Dad replied, tousling her hair a bit.

All this time Winnie had been holding her breath, lest the puppy should reveal its presence. She had no intention of hiding it too long, but she wanted to wait for an opportune time to introduce the idea of a dog to her parents. When Dad left, she grabbed up the pup and moved it to a rarely used storage area at the back of the barn where it would be less likely to be discovered prematurely.

The Single S foreman dropped by the house to talk to Mr. Sutton later that day. In the conversation he mentioned that four days ago one of the hands had shot a wolf about a mile from the home place. "First one we've had around here for twenty years or more," he said. "I kinda' miss hearing them howl. This one was nursing a litter, but we couldn't find the den. I hate to think of a whole litter of cubs starving."

"One didn't starve," Winnie interrupted. "I found it in the barn."

"Let's go out and catch it," Dad suggested as they rose from their chairs.

"You don't have to catch it, Dad," Winnie answered. "It whimpered for me from the corner of Fudgie's stall, and it snuggled right up to me when I cuddled it."

"Let's go see it, Winnie," Dad said as he led the way to the barn.

"It's pure white," Winnie announced as she reached into the straw and gathered up the cub. It snuggled into her arms and started licking her fingers.

"Acts just like a pup," the cowhand commented as he took it from Winnie. "From its chest and shoulders I'm guessing it's going to be huge. How'd you tame it so fast?"

"I didn't have to tame it," Winnie explained. "It was this friendly from the moment I heard it whimper. I think it was begging me to feed and mother it."

"What'd you give him?" Dad asked.

“I gave him some milk last night, and some table scraps and milk this morning.”

About that time the cub looked directly into Dad’s eyes and whined softly. Dad’s heart melted like butter, and he sent Winnie to get a bit more warm milk from the cow.

“It’s definitely a wolf,” both men agreed.

“Never saw a white one before,” the cowhand remarked.

“Neither did I,” Dad added, “But I’ve heard of them. We’d best just call it a dog so none of the neighbors will want us to shoot it.”

“Can I keep it, then?” Winnie asked for confirmation.

“Long as it stays this friendly,” Dad answered. “I think it might make a good watch dog.”

“I’ll never tell anybody it’s a wolf,” the cowhand assured them.

Winnie moved the cub back into Fudgie’s stall that night, and the foal and the wolf grew up together.

* * *

The next three years passed quietly on the Single S Ranch. There had been no unfriendly Indian activity, and no ranchers had tried to horn in on the government acres that the Suttons held. Winnie was thirteen years old and had finished as much schooling as her parents could provide her with. She was an avid reader and enjoyed algebra and geometry. She was absolutely adored by the cow hands. They taught her to wrangle cattle and shoot rifles. She loved the way the ranch butted up against the Medicine Bow Mountains to the East. She couldn’t imagine living elsewhere, but her parents were educated people, and were planning to send her back East for a college education as soon as she was old enough.

Winnie had two loves besides the ranch itself—her wolf and Fudgie’s colt. Cocoa was not only a show-quality Morgan, he was also a people horse. Winnie spent hours pampering him, and teaching him tricks. At her bidding he would follow her anywhere like a heeling dog. He would stand without being tied all day if she forgot to give him permission to move. She was constantly inventing new tricks that amazed everyone who saw Winnie put Cocoa through his regimen.

Winnie’s wolf matured into a huge and beautiful animal. He was completely devoted to the girl, and was anxious to please her in every way. He never showed the slightest unwarranted animosity toward any human being, but he had to be taught not to bother the domesticated animals. He had killed several chickens before Winnie caught him in the act, but one remonstrance was all it took. Winnie was heartbroken when he killed a newborn calf, but this, too, was a single incident when he was quite young. After being shamed for it, he seemed to catch on to the difference between domesticated and wild animals.

Basically, Avalanche, as Winnie called him, seemed to consider himself part of the Sutton family, although he would not romp with anyone but Winnie. He never barked like a dog, but he occasionally howled at the moon. Those familiar with the howl of wolves generally remarked that he sounded just like one, except his howl was considerably deeper and fuller than any wolf they had ever heard. He always seemed to appreciate the friendly advances of the family’s guests and hired hands, and was downright gentle with the few children that he came into contact with. Winnie’s only regret was that her mom was always a bit uneasy about her having a wolf as a pet.

The only time Avalanche ever threatened a person was one evening when a drifting cowboy was invited to eat and bunk with the cowhands. After dinner, he got entirely too familiar with Winnie while she was in the barn

teaching Cocoa to stretch. When the troublesome cowboy put his arm around the girl, Avalanche detected her distress. The snarling wolf backed the obnoxious visitor into a corner of the stall. The frightened girl bolted for the house while the wolf kept the cowering cowboy at bay until Mr. Sutton arrived to call him off. It was all the family could do to keep the hired hands from lynching the offender on the spot. That incident endeared the wolf to Mom, and she felt better about letting Winnie ride alone as long as the wolf was with her.

* * *

In the height of that spring, Winnie had ridden Cocoa to the farthest reaches of the ranch to enjoy the delicate foliage of the trees along a forested bit of mountainside. Seeing a doe slip into the trees, she dismounted. Leaving her little stallion ground-hitched, she tiptoed into the forest in hopes of seeing a fawn. The cowgirl was thoroughly engaged in watching the deer when a strong dark arm wrapped across her chest. She let out a yell, and Avalanche flew to the attack. Before he could spring she heard the twang of another Indian's bow, and saw the animal go down with an arrow buried in its chest.

Within moments a half a dozen Indians had surrounded Winnie. She was quickly bound and gagged and tied on an Indian pony. The Indian who had grabbed her mounted Cocoa, and led the mustang Winnie was tied to behind him as they followed the rest of the raiding party.

Winnie's hands had been tied tightly behind her back, and they began hurting her as she rode; but she was determined not to show any signs of weakness or fear. When they stopped at a mountain stream to water the horses, her captor came closer and looked her over insultingly. She kicked him in the face with her riding boot, and he grabbed her hair and pulled her head down to his level. The angry Indians blindfolded her and switched her legs and back mercilessly with supple sprigs cut from young trees before they rode on. The captive girl had no idea which direction they were going because of the blindfold. Come dusk, the Indians loosed her hands long enough for her to have a drink of water and chew a small amount of dried venison before tying her to a tree for the night.

Winnie spent a very cold and uncomfortable night. Whenever she woke up shivering, she prayed for the Lord's protection in her predicament. She prayed for comfort for her parents. She prayed that they would find Avalanche and help him if he were not already dead. Most of all, she prayed that she would find a way of escape from these merciless savages.

Winnie was kept blindfolded for the rest of the journey. She could tell that they were in the mountains because of the way the pony's back sloped upwards, sliding her towards its haunches or downward slipping her toward its neck. After about ten days of traveling they came to an Indian village, and the blindfold was removed. Winnie counted twenty-one wickiups in the primitive community which was little more than a camp site.

Winnie was bound hand and foot and shoved into a wickiup with a couple of older squaws for her first night in the village. She was loosed in the morning and allowed to breakfast with the squaws. Then she was put to work scraping deer hides along with her two companions.

The two squaws spoke a little broken English between them. "Little Fawn," the skinnier one said, pointing to herself as they worked. "Me Little Fawn." Then pointing to the other squaw, who was somewhat overweight, she said, "Pregnant Doe." The other burst out laughing, and threw her hide scraper at Little Fawn.

"Me Running Antelope," she said, still laughing. "Could outrun braves until right one try. Then catch me quick"

"I'm Winnie Sue," Winnie replied.

"No, you white woman, we Sioux," both squaws corrected.

"Just call me Winnie," the girl answered when she caught on that these were Sioux Indians.

As Winnie got to know the two squaws that she was assigned to, they became good friends. They taught her the ways of the Indian women, and soon allowed her to go out berry picking and foraging for edible and medicinal herbs with them. They constantly scolded her for leaving signs along the trails that might bring murderous war parties from enemy tribes down on their village.

The young white woman learned that these two squaws were widows whose husbands had been killed in raids on other villages. They were given their share of the game that the warriors caught, and were expected to cook and make clothes for the young bachelor braves who had not yet proven themselves as warriors worthy of manhood and marriage.

As Winnie became acclimated to the Indians' way of life she made herself a nice buckskin outfit. She was becoming fluent in the Sioux language, and her Indian-style cooking became so tasty that she had to start purposely overcooking or under flavoring the food to discourage some of the bachelors from trying to court her.

One thing that bothered Winnie was that Screaming Eagle, the chief's son, ended up taking possession of Cocoa. Squaws were not generally welcome at the village remuda, so Winnie rarely saw her horse, but one day she saw Screaming Eagle beating the horse in the village. She flew at him tooth and toenail, and the young bully beat her up so badly that her face was swollen for several weeks. After that he took pleasure in mistreating the horse in front of her.

In the late fall the village followed the migrating game to its winter quarters in the forest by the lower meadows. During the move Winnie was careful to find out from the squaws how to pick safe camp sites, as she planned to escape when the opportunity presented itself. Often, as she lay awake praying for a way of escape, she would hear wolves howling in the distance. What others had told her was true; Avalanche's howl had been deeper and fuller than any of these wolves.

That winter turned out to be a bad one. Game became scarce and hard to find. Most occupants of the village became downright gaunt before spring uplifted everyone's spirits. After a couple weeks of spring buffalo hunting, everyone started filling out again.

By mid-spring the braves broke into several war parties and headed over the mountains to plunder other tribes and whatever other victims they could find. After the war parties left, Little Fawn and Running Antelope began noticing that Winnie was developing into quite a shapely young woman. The two squaws had evidently talked it over together, for on one of their foraging trips they approached Winnie with a warning. They told her that the chief's son had let it be known that he intended to win the status of a warrior this spring so he could have the beautiful white squaw as his wife.

"He is mean," they warned her. "You must run away before he returns."

"Where could I go?" Winnie asked.

"You could go north until you find the wagon roads," they suggested. "There you would find white men who would help you get home."

From that time onward, the three women began to plan a daring escape for Winnie. It would have to be at a time when she would not be missed for hours. It would have to be in a place where she could hide her trail from the best of Indian trackers for many miles. She would have to use guile to make them believe she had gone in a different direction that she intended to go. She would have to save up as many provisions as she could carry, and keep them hidden where no one would suspect her. Although the squaws had taught her how to make snares and catch fish, she would not be able to hunt the larger game that sustained the Indians because she would not have a rifle.

As hard as they tried, the squaws could never come up with the ideal conditions to help Winnie escape. And then

one day, earlier than expected, Screaming Eagle's war party returned. He had three scalps on his lance, and announced that he would be taking Winnie as his wife on the next full moon, which was only a week away.

* * *

When Winnie did not come home for supper on the day that she was abducted, Dad gathered all the hands and started a search. Darkness had settled in and the discouraged party had returned to the ranch house when Avalanche struggled in more dead than alive. The arrow had traversed his chest, and was sticking out both sides. Dad carefully removed the arrowhead and withdrew the shaft, sealing the exit and entry holes with rags dipped in lard. The beast's breath was terribly labored, and he seemed to be exhaling more bloody froth than air. No one expected him to be alive in the morning, but he actually blew less and less froth as the night progressed. By morning it looked as though he might make it.

The arrow pretty well convinced the searchers that Winnie had had an encounter with unfriendly Indians. After half a day's search, one of the cowhands found Cocoa's tracks where Winnie had dismounted, and they were able to piece together enough evidence to know that the youngster had been abducted. They followed the trail for two days before losing it permanently when a cloudburst wiped out all remaining signs of the Indian's pathway. The grieving parents' only comforts were their faith in the power of prayer and the fact that Winnie's wolf was recuperating.

When Avalanche was able, he returned to the spot where he had last seen Winnie. There had been several pelting spring rains since the kidnaping, and even the wolf's keen nose could not follow the Indians' trail. He returned to the ranch house as dejected as the parents were.

The deep and mournful howl of the wolf could be heard on the Single S almost any night, and no one resented it. Everyone on the ranch felt like howling out their own grief too. And then, about a year after Winnie had disappeared, the white wolf was gone.

* * *

Avalanche had been in the habit of visiting the place he had last seen Winnie and Cocoa frequently. In the late spring, as he approached the area, he detected Cocoa's familiar scent mingled with that of other horses. The white wolf was instantly on the trail. His nose told him that these were the horses of the Indians that had taken his mistress. Winnie was not there, but she might be wherever Cocoa was going.

Within three days the wolf was in visual contact of Screaming Eagle's war party. Remembering his wound, he slunk behind the entourage as only a wolf can without being seen. In the middle of the night he slipped up and sniffed noses with Cocoa, but his presence disturbed the other horses so much that the Indians jumped up to investigate. Avalanche had to slink back into the trees. He stealthily followed the Indians all the way the way to their village, where he detected Winnie's scent. He hid out in the forest until the quietness of night had settled over the village before calling for her. Winnie was lying wide awake praying earnestly for the Lord to help her escape, when she heard Avalanche's deep howl. Recognizing it immediately, she was up and running for the forest in an instant. The squaws were peering into the darkness from the curtain over the opening of the wickiup as the white wolf rushed to meet her. The girl met him head on with a mighty hug, and the huge wolf groveled at her feet like a puppy.

When Winnie returned to the wickiup, the white wolf followed her in. Little Fawn and Running Antelope were cowering in the corner wide-eyed with fright. They obviously considered this very strong medicine.

Don't be afraid, Winnie encouraged them. I raised the white wolf from a cub. He will not hurt you or any of my friends. Screaming Eagle was riding my horse, and the wolf probably recognized the horse's scent. He followed them here to take me home. I will go now, with the wolf. He will protect me and show me the way.

The squaws quickly helped Winnie get her pack on her back, and after hugging them both, Winnie headed into

the forest with the white wolf at her heel. Although Winnie would never have thought of it, the two Indian squaws were up at the crack of dawn, unobtrusively walking over the wolf's tracks to blot them out.

Screaming Eagle was unaware of the girl's escape until the next day. The squaws played innocent as to when she had left and where she might have gone. The cruel brave mounted Cocoa, and had little difficulty in following the white woman's trail. He came upon her as she rested on a deadfall about noon of her second day of freedom.

Screaming Eagle rode right up to Winnie. She knew it would be useless to run. He was reaching out to grab her when the white wolf sprang from his hiding place in the thicket. This time there were no other Indians to shoot the wolf, and the young brave went down with the vengeful beast's teeth deep in his throat. The struggling brave tried to draw his knife, but Winnie was on him in an instant. She was able to hold his hand long enough for the grinding jaws of the wolf to finish him off.

Winnie shed a few tears over the awfulness of the death she had just witnessed, but before long she felt Cocoa nuzzling her. She took the Indian's knife and its leather sheath that was tied to his waist and mounted the Morgan. There was a rifle that Screaming Eagle must have captured on his last sortie hanging on a scabbard around the horse's neck. Looking down at Avalanche, she said, "Let's go home." The white wolf started off at a lope without hesitation.

Winnie rode until it was nearly dark before veering off the trail into the forest. She removed the Indian bridle from Cocoa's mouth. The exhausted girl sat down on Screaming Eagle's blanket and leaned back against a large tree with low hanging branches to share some of her dried venison with Avalanche. She had intended to rub the little stallion down a bit, but her weary eyes closed and she was fast asleep before she had finished eating. The horse began cropping at the grass and weeds around the campsite, and the wolf lay down against his beloved mistress as if to keep her safe and warm throughout the night.

When Winnie awoke at dawn, she let out a shrill whistle for Cocoa. True to his training, the stallion came trotting right up to where she stood. She took the scabbard and the blanket-like Indian saddle off him so he could have a good roll while she visited the nearby mountain stream for a drink. She returned and rubbed the stallion down with a large pinecone she found by the stream.

Before replacing the scabbard on Cocoa's neck, Winnie pulled the rifle out to see what it was. She had not looked at Screaming Eagle's revolting scalps, and had supposed that the gun would be an ancient flintlock taken from another Indian. To her delight, this was a new Winchester "Yellowboy" repeating rifle that must have been taken from a white man. The rifle was fully loaded, so she had seventeen cartridges to last her until she got home.

Winnie made poor time for the next two days. The Indian trail she was following through the mountains was narrow, with many drop-offs that would have killed her if Cocoa had miss-stepped. Sometimes she was just as glad that she had been blindfolded on this part of her journey to the Indian village. There was nothing to do but travel at a slow walk, sometimes for hours at a time.

The next morning a low growl from Avalanche awoke Winnie. The wolf slunk into the foliage, and within seconds the young traveler was surrounded by Indians. She could tell that they were Sioux from their language, but they were from a different clan than the one she had escaped from. As they discussed what they should do with the pretty white woman, Winnie remembered how superstitiously the squaws had reacted toward her relationship with Avalanche.

"I am Winnie, the wolf woman," she greeted the Indians, rising regally in the best Indian tradition she could muster. "Sit down," she commanded them authoritatively.

When the Indians hesitated, she called Avalanche out of the ticket. The great white wolf came to her side, standing alert, ears forward, watching the Indians for the slightest threat against his mistress. "Sit," she ordered the beast, and he sat. "Shake," she ordered, and the wolf raised his huge paw toward the astounded Indians.

“Careful now,” she warned them, “Each of you shake hands with him.”

When the Indians hesitated, she exhorted them, “Do not insult the medicine wolf.”

One by one the Indians gravely shook the wolf’s paw, and Winnie knew she had won the day. Just to top off her victory, she whistled for Cocoa. When the Morgan arrived, she made him bow to the seated Indians before commanding him to stretch. Cocoa preformed the old regimen perfectly, stretching until his belly was not over a foot from the ground. The wolf woman slowly and deliberately placed her tack and gear on the stretched out stallion. Mounting the animal, she commanded him to rise, and the little stallion raised into as pretty a show stance as she had ever seen. Raising her hand palm-forward, she said, “You may go now,” and turned her mount toward Avalanche. The great white wolf trotted off in the lead. Winnie didn’t dare to look back, and neither did the Indians.

Winnie was across the worst part of the Medicine Bows by the end of the second week of her journey. She had run out of jerked venison, and decided to try her luck at killing a deer. After trying unsuccessfully to sneak up on one, the frustrated girl wasted most of her ammunition trying to shoot one from too great a distance. Finally, she sent Avalanche to get one. The wolf took out after the deer, and came dragging it back to Winnie within an hour.

Winnie found what she thought would be a good campsite and began butchering the deer. She had helped with field dressed carcasses many times in the Indian village, but she had no idea how to handle a whole one. She found it a much more difficult task than she had ever imagined. It took her so long to get the carcass dressed and skinned that she had to hang it in a tree and wait until morning to start making a new supply of jerky. She roasted a hunk of shoulder meat for herself and Avalanche before curling up in Screaming Eagles blanket for the night.

That night the howl of the mountain wolves was deafening. Winnie awoke when Avalanche began to growl. She threw more wood on the fire, and counted a half a dozen pairs of eyes gliding around within thirty feet or so of the fire. The girl knew that wolves seldom attacked people except when starving. She finally concluded that they were after Avalanche rather than her. He was a stranger that had invaded their territory.

There were still several hours of darkness left, and Winnie feared that she did not have enough firewood to keep a hearty fire burning until dawn. She grabbed up her rifle and shot between a pair of eyes that had stopped moving. That wolf disappeared but the others still hovered around just outside the ring of firelight. She killed a second and third wolf before they moved back out of range. When dawn came Winnie climbed a tree to relieve Avalanche’s anxiety for her. As soon as he felt that his mistress was safe he dashed out and ripped the throat out of the closest wolf in a single slash of his teeth. The other two wolves fled into the forest.

When Winnie checked her rifle that morning, all the ammunition was gone. She whistled for Cocoa, and became alarmed when he did not show up right away. Ten minutes later he thundered up to the relieved maiden’s side. He had apparently slipped away before the wolves had arrived, and survived mostly because Avalanche had been their main concern.

Winnie spent two days smoking as much jerky as she could carry. She left the camp site on the third day, glad to get away from the stench of the decaying wolves. She was now going downhill more than up, and figured that she’d soon be completely across the mountains. She had no worries about finding her way, for Avalanche had never faltered the whole journey.

Winnie was anticipating getting home within a day or so, and got careless about choosing a camp site on her last night out. She celebrated with a hearty fire, and couldn’t seem to get to sleep until quite late. Suddenly she was awakened by human voices, and two disreputable-looking men were standing over her.

The pretty young woman felt more fearful in the presence of these uncouth men than she had felt at any other time on her journey. As she arose to face them, she could feel their lustful eyes appraising her every movement.

“Where’s your guardian, sweetheart,” one of the men asked.

She was about to answer, “Out there in the bushes,” when the other exclaimed, “We’re in luck, Jake. There ain’t no other tracks here.”

“She’s a purty one, ain’t she?” Jake laughed

“Reckon she’d do in a pinch,” the other scofflaw laughed, reaching out to pinch the frightened girl.

As the ne’er-do-well reached for Winnie, she shrilled out a desperate whistle for Cocoa. At the same instant the big white wolf leapt into the clearing and sprang for the offender’s throat, bearing him down to the ground with a severed jugular vein. Jake was drawing to shoot the wolf when Cocoa barreled into the gunman from behind. As the man hit the ground the furious stallion reared and stomped down on him again and again. It didn’t require any professional skill to know that both the men were very dead

At dawn the shaken girl tied her gear on the heroic stallion and started down the trail behind Avalanche. In the late afternoon she recognized the spot where she had been abducted. By then the big wolf was running. When they topped the last hill, Avalanche pulled up, and the girl reigned in beside him. The great beast gave a long, deep howl before trotting regally down to the Single S homestead.

* * *

Mr. and Mrs. Sutton were finishing a late supper that evening. “I’ve been praying a whole lot for Winnie today,” the man remarked to his wife. “It’s been over a year since she disappeared, and somehow she’s been especially on my mind today.”

“Me too, Dear,” Mom replied. “This morning I was finally able to give it all to the Lord and accept His will, whatever that might be,” she continued through unbidden tears.

Suddenly they heard the howl.

“That’s Avalanche!” Dad exclaimed, jumping up to open the door.

“I think you’re right,” Mom replied hurrying out after him.

Then, through the gathering dusk, they saw Winnie’s wolf trotting proudly toward the house. And right behind him was a prancing Morgan stallion carrying their beautiful grown up daughter.

After a tearful greeting and a brief relating of Winnie’s tale, Dad went to the bunkhouse and invited the astounded cowhands up to the ranch house to greet his long-lost daughter and hear her story. There was scarce a dry eye when Dad finally stood and thanked God for caring for Winnie. “And thank you, Lord, for Cocoa and Winnie’s wolf,” he finished.

For Better or for Worse

Pa was a good man. He had run the busiest general store in Independence Missouri for the last ten years. There was money for the taking in outfitting pioneers for their journey west on the Oregon Trail. Not that Pa took advantage. He just kept a good stock of quality goods coming in on the river boats, and sold it at fair prices. His reputation was the secret. Anyone who inquired about the best place to buy their stuff for the trail was likely to be directed to Lane's Supplies.

Ma and Pa were educated people from New York. I think they could have hobnobbed a bit in higher society, but it was too frivolous for serious-minded folks like my parents. They had come to Independence to go west themselves, but Pa was so irked by the way the local businessmen were ripping off the pioneers that they settled there and opened the store. That's when Pa found out that Ma wasn't really that anxious to go west anyhow.

I was close to Ma. She poured love and learning into me from the beginning, and I took to both of them well. Not that I was all scholar. I was expected to chop wood and work in the store too, and Pa could be mighty persistent if I slacked off my duties to the family.

When I was twelve years old, Ma died trying to bring another baby into the world. I was beside myself with grief, but when I saw how devastated Pa was, I determined that I was going to help him get over it. I was soon as close to him as I had been to Ma.

We made a real team at the store, Pa and I. He ran the business end, and I enjoyed the physical part. I was never very big, but now that I was fifteen I was five-feet-eight-inches tall, weighed one-hundred-forty pounds, and could toss a hundred pound sack of flour on my shoulder and load it in a customer's wagon without straining at all.

Trouble was, Pa was a Union sympathizer; and Missouri was a divided state. Most of the folks in the St. Louis area were pro-Union, but the majority of the rest of the state had roots in the South. The state was officially a border state, represented by congressmen in Washington D.C. But General Price was using the Missouri Militia to fight for the South, so Missouri was also represented by the thirteenth star in the Confederate flag.

It was in May of 1862 that Pa made his decision to go west. Colonel Buel had an unpopular garrison of Union troops in Independence, but rumor had it that Colonel Hughes's Confederate forces, including Quantrill's Raiders, were planning to eliminate it. With his sympathies known, Pa didn't want anything to do with Quantrill's murderous ways.

I still remember the day when Mr. Settles came into the store to talk to Pa. He was a clean-cut man from out in the country, with twinkling eyes and a clear laugh like Pa's. He had been a Union sympathizer until the brutal atrocities of the guerillas of Lane's Brigade and Jennison's Jayhawkers drove him to switch allegiances. These Kansas outlaws ruthlessly plundered any Missouri residents they chose to accuse of complacency with the South, and they did it with Union military approval—and Missouri was under martial law. Settles was in as much danger from the Kansas guerillas as we were from Quantrill's Raiders.

After a long subdued conversation with Mr. Settles, Pa asked me to watch the store while He went to the telegraph office. He came back looking younger somehow—softer lines on his brow, I think.

A few evenings later Pa locked the doors of the store from the inside, and led me back into his office.

“We’re going west,” he announced, knowing that it would please me well.

“How’s come?” I asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“Because Quantrill’s Raiders will eventually hit Independence, and they’ll destroy the store when he finds that we’ve been for the Union.”

“What will we do with everything here?” I asked pensively.

“I got a good price for the store from one of our suppliers back East,” Pa replied. “He’s taking it all, lock, stock, and barrel. He’ll hire a secessionist to run it, so Quantrill will leave it alone. And if the Jayhawkers come, they’ll argue that it’s owned by a Unionist.”

Then Pa’s eyes began to glitter as he opened the closet beside his big oak desk and took out a brand new .44 rim fire Henry repeating rifle. “Always consider it loaded and never point it at anything you don’t aim to shoot,” he instructed as he handed me the gun.

“I got one for me too,” he continued. “We might need them on the trail.” Mine was factory engraved, but I noticed later that his was plain. That’s just the way Pa was.

It took the rest of the month to get the house sold. Pa had to let it go cheap, but we really needed to be gone. Quantrill could show up any time now, and he’d incite the whole town against us. Pa stayed on at the store a couple of weeks to help the new manager learn the ropes. They were quick to get a new sign on it so everyone would understand that it wasn’t Pa’s anymore. Then the manager fired Pa for refusing to run up the confederate colors on the flag pole. The story spread like wildfire, and helped to establish that it was no longer a Union establishment. I had a feeling that Pa and the manager had planned it that way. Truth was, no one ever actually got around to raising either flag at the store.

Pa had purchased a new-looking Conestoga wagon right after he sold the store. He stored it in the barn and spent three or four evenings working on it without asking for any help from me. I spent my time looking for oxen, and finally found a matched team of young ones that were well built and seemed to be good pullers. Pa checked them out and bought them on the spot. “Well chosen, son,” he said when we harnessed them to the wagon for a trial run.

Pa and Mr. Settles signed on with Captain Young’s wagon train; and we were ready to go when it pulled out on June first. I really liked Mr. Settles. His wife was dead, but his fourteen-year-old daughter, Jenny, caught my attention the minute I saw her. She was intelligent, modest, and read a lot of books. She didn’t wear frilly dresses, but she would have been better looking than any other girl I knew in anything shy of a flour sack.

* * *

Our first day in the wagon train was relatively easy. Captain Young assigned places for each of the twenty-two wagons in the train. We were next to last, followed only by the Settles. It would be a dusty spot, but Cap told Pa that he felt safer with the coolest heads bringing up the rear. A couple of scouts rode ahead of the train, sometimes dropping back for a look at our back trail.

We had two panic drills that day, when the scouts galloped by the train shouting, “Injuns, draw up.” The lead wagon would start a wide turn, and the rest would follow as the leader swung around behind the last wagon, leaving us in a tight circle that would be defensible. We did the same maneuver every night when we camped. Each family built its own cook fire inside the circle. Pa and I shared a fire with the Settles; and Jenny cooked for all four of us.

Generally, Pa would drive the wagon while I walked along beside to lighten the load. Sometimes we'd try to talk, but the noise of the oxen hooves and the rattling of the wagons made it too hard to carry on a conversation from more than a couple of feet apart. After a while I got to lagging behind to talk to Jenny as she walked beside their wagon. She didn't seem to resent my company, and I certainly liked hers. After a couple of weeks we kind of lagged behind, where her dad couldn't see us, and I reached down and squeezed her hand. She returned the squeeze, so we walked along hand-in-hand for quite a while. That evening we got a lot of teasing from just about everyone in the train. Neither Pa nor Mr. Settles teased us. They didn't seem to disapprove of our budding romance, either.

Tragedy struck us on the Nebraska prairie on the fourth week out of Independence. Mr. Settles was harnessing his wide-horned ox when a horsefly bit it on the shoulder. The generally placid beast swung his head to scrape it off, and its horn gored deeply into the pioneer's chest, tearing a major artery. Jenny ran to Pa for help, but Settles was bleeding out.

"Take care of my daughter, Jim," he gasped to Pa.

"I'll care for her as my own," Pa promised the dying man earnestly. Settles relaxed in Pa's arms, and was dead within a couple of minutes.

The teary-eyed members of the wagon train dug a grave there beside the trail. One of the pioneers was a pastor, and he had a comforting word from the Bible at the grave side. Pa seemed to be more moved by the pastor's words than Jenny. A peaceful expression crept over his face as he made a wooden cross with Mr. Settles name and the date on it to mark the grave. Then, placing his arm around Jenny's shoulders, he escorted the grieving girl to our wagon. I drove our wagon for the next few days, while Pa drove Jenny's. We'd let her decide what to do with her stuff after the shock of her father's death wore off.

One of the wagons busted an axle a week after Mr. Settles died. Folks pitched in to try to fix it, but the wagon's frame was so rotten it could not be securely fixed.

"I couldn't afford any better," the owner apologized. "I guess we'll have to drop out."

"Why don't you borrow my wagon?" Jenny volunteered. "You can return it when you get settled out west."

"What about all your supplies?" the grateful man replied.

"We'll take enough to feed another mouth on our wagon," Pa interrupted, "And Jenny can sell the rest to anyone who's afraid they might run short."

Within an hour, Jenny's wagon was empty; and she had several hundred dollars in cash tucked away in her small chest that we had managed to pack into our wagon.

When it wasn't raining too hard, Pa and I slept under the wagon to give Jenny more privacy. I hadn't seen her shed a tear after the day her father died, but one night I heard her sobbing up above me in the wagon. I crawled out from under my blanket and climbed into the wagon with her. She threw her arms around me and cried silently on my chest. I was kind of rocking her in my arms as she wept all those pent up tears away when it suddenly struck me that was really my woman. The time wasn't right to ask her to marry me, so I just hugged her tight until the tears subsided. Then I kissed her and went back under the wagon to my blankets while she dropped off to sleep.

"Well done, son," I heard Pa whisper as I crawled under my blanket.

"I love her, Pa," I whispered back.

"You couldn't do better," he murmured back in a satisfied tone.

The next morning Pa took me into the wagon as soon as Jenny was up. "Son," he almost whispered, "You're a man now. I think I'd better share some things with you before we go any farther."

"First," he continued, "Most of our money is under a false floor I built over the rear axle of the wagon. There's over twenty thousand dollars in 1862 one-hundred dollar U.S. greenbacks hidden there, so if anything happens to me don't let the wagon get away from you. There's too much stuff piled over it to show you how to open the compartment, but take the plank with the brass screws off first, and the rest will be easy."

"Second," he added as he pulled a box out from the depths of the wagon, "It's time you started wearing these."

The box contained two Smith and Wesson .32 six shooters. They used the new brass rim fire cartridges, so they could be reloaded almost instantaneously. My eyes nearly popped out of my head when he handed them to me with their tooled leather holsters from Mexico.

"Third," he went on, "I've found peace with God, like your Mother had. I'll explain it to you as we go along. Don't neglect God in your life!"

"Fourth," he finished, "Never forget the value of a human life. Christ died for the Indians just as much as He died for you and me. Never despise anyone's life, or let anyone taunt you into an unnecessary killing in this lawless land."

Then Jenny called us to breakfast. She was a good cook, not that it made a lot of difference in how I felt about her.

I was proud that Pa considered me a man now, but his sense of urgency in preparing me in case something happened to him bothered me. Did he have some sort of a premonition of impending death, or was he just thinking of what had happened to Mr. Settles? That evening he left Jenny and me talking by the fireside, and turned in early. I edged over real close to swipe a kiss from Jenny, and she returned it so passionately that it stirred me to the quick. I wanted to ask her to marry me, but I couldn't get up the courage, so we just sat real close together and talked until the moon came out before retiring to our beds.

The next morning was my sixteenth birthday. I was thinking to celebrate a bit, but when I got up Pa was dead in his blankets. There was a peaceful smile on his face, and no signs of a struggle. I drew the blankets off and searched his already stiff body, but there wasn't a mark on it. He had made his peace with God, taken care of his business, and died peacefully in his sleep. How I'd miss him!

The rest of the men in the wagon train dug the grave for us. Pastor White spoke at the graveside, but I was too overcome with grief to listen. We were just turning to go when someone raised the issue about who was going to take care of Jenny and me. Cap started to assign us each a guardian when I vetoed the whole proceedings.

"The fee for our wagon was paid just like everyone else's," I stated bluntly. "And we'll just keep going the way we are."

"It wouldn't be right with you and that girl," one of the women objected. "I saw that kiss last night."

"Then we'll just get married right now," Jenny interjected.

"Yeah," I added, "Right now while the pastor is still here."

And that's all there was to it. We were married right then and there beside Pa's grave, without any fanfare at all. We sat right up against each other on the wagon seat the rest of the day, while I drove the oxen. I was glad we were the last wagon in the train, with no prying eyes to invade our privacy 'cause I couldn't help but hug her every

now and again, and she literally melted in my arms. I didn't know whether to cry or to celebrate that night, but when Jenny snuggled up to me in the bed she'd enlarged for us in the wagon I realized that it was possible to do both.

It was wonderful to see how happy Jenny was. We both had the grief of losing our Pas, but it just drew us closer together. Her face was always bright, and everyone in the whole wagon train simply loved her. I considered myself the luckiest guy in the world to have her at my side; and she rarely left me for more than a moment or so. Pa was right, I couldn't have done better. And oddly enough, Cap left us at the rear of the train, even though there were many better men than I in the train.

We were approaching Wyoming territory, and had some decisions to make. Pa had intended to go all the way to the west coast and start up another store there. Mr. Settles had planned to ranch cattle somewhere in Wyoming or Colorado. Neither Jenny nor I had given a lot of thought to what we wanted to do. Now that it was our decision we'd have to make up our minds fairly soon.

Our wagon train pulled into Fort Laramie late one evening. Cap wanted to spend a couple of days resting the animals and restocking supplies there. Jenny and I bought deerskin outfits made by friendly Indians. Hers showed her off in a modest way that I really liked. We both found Indian moccasins especially comfortable.

While we were at Fort Laramie a coarse young trapper started following Jenny around. I stayed right with her all the time, but he continued stalking her, and even making occasional suggestive comments that angered me more than it scared her. After about the third comment, I accosted him.

"Hey, this is my wife," I said angrily. "You leave her alone."

He never answered me; he just slugged me in the belly. I was about to draw one of my S&Ws when I remembered what Pa had said about the value of human life, so I just punched him back, right in the solar plexus. He commenced to give me a beating such as I had never imagined, but I stayed on my feet and kept slugging back. Finally I landed a good one on his jaw, and he sank to the ground and lay still. We went back to the wagon, where Jenny cleansed the cuts on my lips and face with cool water. I didn't venture out of the wagon again until the next day, but several people dropped by to compliment me on how well I had defended my wife. Cap told me my opponent had ridden out of the fort in shame when he came too. Although I felt that I had done a necessary thing, I sure didn't see anything glorious about fighting.

We were only two days out of Fort Laramie when the Indians hit us. They had planned their ambush well, and we were hard put to get into our defensive circle. A couple of our drivers got overanxious and failed to pull up tight enough to the wagon ahead of them. This didn't leave me enough room to get into the circle properly, so the back-end of our wagon stuck out as a weak point in our defense.

I hunkered down beneath our wagon and opened up with my Henry. Jenny was supposed to be inside the relative safety of the wagon, but the next thing I knew she was right beside me with Pa's Henry. We held off everything in our area, but the Indians breached the circle in the gaps left by the overanxious drivers.

When I heard scuffling behind me, I drew my S&Ws and waded in to the hand-to-hand fighting within the circle. I was making every shot count, and I believe it was those little revolvers that Pa had given me that turned the tide and drove the attackers back outside the circle.

When the Indians had had enough, they gathered their dead and wounded and rode off into the hills. Cap went around the circle checking our casualties. Although we had a lot of relatively minor injuries, and a few potentially serious ones, the couple that had borrowed Jenny's wagon were the only two fatalities.

Cap assigned Jenny's oxen as replacements for some of the beasts that had been killed in the Indian attack. We were about to abandon the wagon when it struck me that Mr. Settles might have been the one who had gotten Pa

to make the hidden compartment in our wagon. After the contents of the wagon had been apportioned to the various members of the train, I took an empty flour sack into it, and found a plank with two brass screws over the rear axle. While Jenny watched to be sure no one came inside, I removed more than ten thousand dollars in the same currency that Pa had brought with us from the compartment. I screwed the plank back in so no one would be aware that we had removed anything of value. We stowed the currency in that old flour sack underneath some full bags of flour in our rig. We supposed it was what Mr. Settles had planned to buy his initial herd with.

When our dead were buried and our wounded stabilized, we moved on to a better camp site. I was beginning to realize that although we were the youngest couple in the train, we were probably by far the wealthiest.

Neither of us could sleep that night. "I just can't get over killing those Indians," I confided to Jenny sometime after midnight.

"I'm struggling with it too," she replied. "It's awful to think of snuffing out other people's lives."

"Yeah," I said. "We had to do it or die, but someone's going to miss those dead Indians just like we miss our folks."

"It's what happened to their souls that bothers me," she continued. "Where are they now?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't even know where I'd be now if I'd had been killed."

"Me neither," she agreed.

"Pa seemed to have figured it out from something the pastor said at your Dad's burial," I told her.

"I'm glad he got it settled before he died," she mused.

"Maybe we should talk to Pastor White about it tomorrow," I suggested.

"I'll ask them over for dinner if you'll ask him to help us," she volunteered; and we both drifted off to sleep. The next morning Jenny had a visit with Mrs. White before we broke camp.

"I told them what we wanted, and they agreed to come," she told me when she got back to our fire.

"Good," I grunted, a little apprehensively.

That day the scouts killed a couple of buffalo. Jenny wheedled some good steaks from them, so we had a regular feast for our company; steak with fried bread and gravy. Jenny even made some applesauce from some dried apples she had hidden away in our stuff. After dinner I told the pastor how disturbed we were at having killed the Indians, and asked him how we could be at peace with God.

Pastor White didn't mince any words. We weren't at peace with God because we were sinners and deserved to die like everyone else. God would not be righteous if He did not punish us for our sins, but He loved us enough that He sent His Son from heaven to take our punishment for us. If the wages of sin was death, Christ died for our sins. If we would repent and accept the death of Christ as the payment for our sins, God would accept us as His children. But if we tried to justify ourselves, we were essentially rejecting that payment as unnecessary, and God would still have to punish us for our sins throughout eternity.

As we sat around the last embers of our cook fire, it all made good sense.

"I'm accepting Christ as my Savior," Jenny volunteered.

“Me too,” I added.

“Why don’t you just tell that to the Lord in prayer right now,” the pastor urged. So each of us prayed the only real prayer we had ever prayed right there under the stars, while the pastor and his wife encouraged our hesitant and tearful words.

Jenny had brought her Dad’s Bible when she came to our wagon. We started reading a chapter from it every morning when it got light enough. We spent a lot of evening time with the Whites, asking them questions about what we had read. We were happier than ever now.

Indians hit us again before we reached Louis Guinard’s toll bridge across the treacherous North Platte River at Platte Bridge Station. This time everyone was more disciplined; and we held them off without any casualties. We really weren’t sure what we should do, so Jenny and I shot more for the horses than for the Indians themselves. That night I asked Pastor White what he did in the engagement with the Indians.

“I fought for the lives of my wife and my friends,” he answered tersely. “I didn’t want them to die because they erroneously counted on me to protect them.”

We understood his point, but Jenny and I privately agreed that we didn’t want to settle where we would have to face the dilemma of self-defense regularly. We could go on to more civilized areas in Oregon or California, which was still a long ways off, or maybe work our way down towards Denver. We understood that “Gentiles” were not really welcome in Utah.

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When we arrived at Platte Bridge Station we met a young scout named Dan, who had spent the last three years prospecting for gold in northern Wyoming Territory. He had given up on striking it rich, and was headed cross country for Denver. Cap knew him to be an excellent scout, so we asked him to take us with him. He wasn’t too enthusiastic about it, but agreed to guide us to Denver for sixty dollars.

We spent our final evening on the wagon train with the Whites, who were going on to serve the Lord in Oregon. Tears filled their eyes when we handed them two thousand dollars in cash. They tried to tell us that we couldn’t afford to give that much, but we explained that both of our Pas had brought enough money with them to purchase new businesses, and we’d hardly miss the money. “Just take it from the Lord and don’t tell anyone else about it,” Jenny urged them; and they took it with heartfelt thanks.

After we got back to our own wagon, I spent a couple of hours stitching more than thirty-thousand dollars in currency into false backs in my saddlebags. The next morning we sold the wagon and most of our supplies for a pittance, bought a couple of good horses, and prepared ourselves as best we could for the trip to Denver.

Dan was appalled at how green we were on the trail. He threatened to take us back to Platte Bridge Station until I promised him another forty dollars when we got to Denver. He finally agreed, and began teaching us how to ride without leaving an obvious trail. When he saw that we were quick and willing learners, he began to share more and more of his trail savvy with us. We learned how to pick good camp sites, build virtually smokeless fires, and more importantly, how to remain acutely aware of our situation every moment. It was not long until we had become good friends.

Dan didn’t like to wait around for our morning Bible reading, so we switched to reading a chapter together around the campfire before we bedded down in the evenings. He tolerated that a bit better, but would not sit around the fire with us. “Spoils your night vision so you can’t look out for yourself,” he explained.

We traveled south along the eastern slopes of the Medicine Bow Mountains, managing to avoid any Indians primarily because of Dan’s alertness. He saw the tracks of several war parties, but skillfully steered us clear of

them.

Jenny and I wore our buckskins, and really enjoyed living off the land. We paused now and again to smoke some jerky from a deer or an elk we had shot. About the only luxury we enjoyed from civilization was our coffee and some sugar. Jenny and I missed the privacy of our wagon, though.

We were breaking camp on a boulder strewn mountain stream near the Colorado line one morning when a rifle report rang out. Dan dropped on the spot, and Jenny and I dived behind some boulders where our Henries lay.

“Keep hidden, but fire an occasional shot towards that large bolder on the hill over there,” I whispered to Jenny, pointing to where I had seen a puff of smoke. I slipped off to the right where I could get a better view of the area, and hunkered down to watch. I was careful not to give my position away by moving, and within a couple of minutes I detected someone slipping from boulder to boulder towards our camp. I aimed at the next clear spot he would likely cross and waited. I fired when I saw movement, and a body came tumbling down to the creek.

“Stay put, Jenny,” I whispered as loud as I could. “There may be more of them.”

When nothing else moved after a half hour or so, I asked her to keep me covered while I checked on Dan. He was dead, with a bullet in his heart. After another half an hour of searching the area for movement I slipped down to the creek, where I found the body of a white desperado, shot through the spine of his neck.

I buried both bodies in shallow graves dug with Dan’s Bowie knife, and stacked boulders over them so the wild beasts wouldn’t dig them up. We would miss Dan’s leadership, but we would miss his friendship even more. Since the murderer had killed Dan without any provocation at all, and probably intended to kill us as well, I hadn’t felt too bad about killing him. But as I scooped the dirt on his face, I was all but overwhelmed at the awfulness of what I had been forced to do.

We got as far away from there as we could before dark. That night, under the privacy of the milky way, I told Jenny how awful I felt about killing this man, evil as he was. “What else could I have done?” I asked.

“You had to protect me and the baby I’m carrying,” she answered demurely.

“We’re havin a baby?” I asked as a grin of comprehension spread over my face.

“Yep.” she answered as I hugged her tight. Nothing ever thrilled me more.

I knew that if I continued in a southerly direction, and stayed east of the mountain range to our right, we would have to come across a fairly major trail that led into Denver sooner or later. Now that Dan was gone, I had to become more alert. We paused frequently to watch our back trail, and stopped to survey any uncovered ground ahead of us carefully before stepping out into the open. The fact that Dan had been shot with such ease in what he had considered a fairly secure camp site made me a lot more picky about where we bedded down nights.

We reached Denver in a bit more than three weeks after we had left the overland trail. By this time Jenny was having a lot of nausea, especially mornings, so I wanted to get her a room where she could rest. We left our horses at a livery station that was well mucked. When I asked the holster where we could find a quiet lodging, he directed us to a small hotel a couple blocks away that he considered reputable and clean.

I carried my saddle bags while Jenny carried our Henries. We hadn’t gone a block before we noticed a couple of unkempt ne’er-do-wells edging up behind us. I threw the bags across my left shoulder and took my Henry from Jenny. At the sound of both our rifles cocking they backed off and turned down the next street.

We registered at the plain-looking hotel and went directly to our room. I was uneasy about leaving our money unguarded, so Jenny went to the dining room and brought enough food back for both of us. We spent an

uneventful night.

Come morning, I used my hunting knife to slit the threads to the false backs on my saddle bags, and took all the currency out. I put three hundred of those one-hundred-dollar greenbacks in an oilcloth sack, and stuck one of my S&Ws in my belt. I put the other S&W on top of the money in the sack.

The Kountze Brothers Bank was about twelve blocks from the hotel. I left Jenny sleeping, and started walking to the bank with the sack in my left hand. When I turned the corner at the third block I saw one of the hoodlums that had stalked us yesterday coming up behind me. In another block or so I saw his partner approaching me from the front. I put my right hand into the sack and cocked the S&W. Just as I reached the approaching robber, I stepped abruptly to the right and spun around. That maneuver saved my life, for a revolver boomed behind me and the hapless robber ahead of me took the bullet that was intended for me in the gut. I shot the other crook in the chest with my S&W without removing it from the sack, and proceeded to the bank without even stopping.

When I told the teller what I wanted, she had an armed guard escort me to one of the bank president's offices. Noticing that the guard's hand was always close to his gun, I placed my sack on the desk with a warning that there was a loaded gun in it, and stood back.

The banker removed the gun gingerly and handed it to the guard. His eyes nearly popped out when he pulled that bundle of hundreds out to examine them. "They're genuine U.S. currency," he finally announced; "The 1862 issue that we have to allow full face value for by law."

"Where did you get these, Son," he asked me. I didn't blame him, being as I knew I looked pretty young. I knew the Kountze Brothers bank was reputable, so I told him our story. He remembered Pa's store from ten years ago when he came west, and took me at my word.

When the money was counted, and placed in the safe, he asked me what I was going to do with it. "Jenny and I haven't decided what we want to do yet," I replied. We just want our money safe where we won't have to guard it any more.

"I noticed the powder burn in the sack," he said wryly.

"A couple of hoodlums jumped me on the way over here," I told him. "I shot back when one of them took a close up pot shot at me." When I told him the story, he burst out laughing.

"You gave them just what they deserved," he crowed gleefully.

"Sir," I reproached him, "I don't see anything funny about any shooting, no matter how justified it might have been."

I returned to the hotel by a different way than I had come, with a receipt for our deposit in either or both of our names. Jenny and I had lunch in the dining room, and went back to the bank to leave her signature before shopping for some city clothes. The banker told us that rumor had it that an unknown assailant had taken out two of the most vicious thugs in town.

"And by the way," he added. "You have the right attitude about shootings."

Jenny enjoyed our shopping trip. She bought several tasteful outfits with expansion room. After ordering a tailor-made suit, I bought a money belt and put our fourteen remaining one-hundred-dollar greenbacks in it. It would be a relief not to have to follow that money around everywhere we went.

I couldn't sleep that night for thinking about how I'd killed another man. "Maybe I should have just let them have the money," I suggested to Jenny.

“Nonsense,” she replied. “He had five more shots in that gun, and if you’d have waited another second you’d have left a widow and a fatherless child.”

She was right, of course, but there was still uneasiness deep down inside me.

Jenny and I walked the business district of Denver for the next two weeks. We were looking to buy a store, or at least detect a need for some particular kind of store. There were so many saloons, and bawdy houses that we felt out of place in the business district.

One time a young man about my own age swaggered out of a saloon and bumped into me in an obvious attempt to pick a fight.

“Apologize for bumping me,” he demanded arrogantly.

“Sorry, friend,” I said apologetically. “I guess I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“I’m going to shoot you,” he threatened, as he crouched slightly with his hand hovering over his Colt Peacemaker. “Draw!”

“Friend,” I answered softly. “I have no quarrel with you, and I’m surely not going to try to shoot you just to prove I am not afraid of you.

“You are afraid,” he jeered, “And I’m going to shoot you anyhow.”

“Before you draw,” I suggested, “Let me show you what you are up against.” Picking up about a half a dozen dark porter style beer bottles from the litter in front of the saloon, I set them up in a row against a low berm across the street.

“When you say draw, I instructed, we’ll both draw. Whoever gets the most bottles wins.”

“Draw!” he shouted.

I drew fast, and had broken three bottles before his first shot was fired. I had hoped my little demonstration would warn him off, but he swung his gun towards me instead, and I had no choice but to shoot him. Thankfully, I only got him in the fleshy part of the shoulder, but he’d had all he wanted, and dropped his gun and ran.

“Should a killed ’em, son,” an old timer from the bench in front of the saloon told me. “Now you’ll have to watch your back until he’s dead.” I knew there was some truth in what he said, but I was still glad I hadn’t killed another man.

That evening Jenny and I read Matthew twenty-six. I couldn’t believe my eyes when we got to the fifty-second verse. When Peter tried to defend the Lord, He told him to put up his sword, “For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”

“Jenny,” I said pensively, “Does this mean that the Lord does not want us to protect ourselves and our families?”

“I’m not sure,” she mused. “I saw something like that in the middle of Revelation the other day,” she continued, as she took the Bible from me and thumbed through the last part of it for a few moments.

“Here,” she exclaimed, holding out the Bible to show me. “It’s Revelation 13:10:”

“He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the

sword. Here is the patience and faith of the saints.”

After contemplating this passage in the context of the beast that made war with the saints and overcame some of them, I was inclined to think that it referred to the persecutors rather than the persecuted—though I could not prove it. Either way, I didn’t feel that it negated what the Lord had said to Peter.

“But every one that goes to war does not necessarily die in a battle some time” Jenny argued; and I had to agree.

“Maybe these passages just refer to when we are being persecuted for our faith,” I suggested without overmuch conviction.

* * *

By the time we had been in Denver three weeks, Jenny was convinced that it was no better than Indian country. “You’ve already had to shoot two people right here in town,” she reminded me. “Why don’t we go way off by ourselves and raise cattle, like my Dad wanted to do.

“I think I’d really like ranching,” I replied. “But it seems to me that where there is no law enforcement, a man has to become his own protector.”

From that time on, we started looking for a trustworthy friend in the cattle business. We met a cowboy at the little church we were attending who had broken his leg when his horse fell during a cattle drive to town. His name was Bob Riley. He had stayed in Denver for treatment, and was rapidly getting better. He was an earnest Christian with a jovial personality. We invited him out to dinner with us so we could discuss our dreams with him.

“You know,” Bob responded. “The owner of the ranch I work for is getting too old for it, and has no heirs. He’s got a big herd of shorthorns on an isolated piece of government range just about like you guys are talking about. I’ll be going back there in a week or so. Why don’t you come with me, and try your hand at cow poking. If he likes you, he just might sell you the herd.”

After we had talked it over, we agreed to go back with him. The ranch really was remote. It was across Berthoud Pass on the other side of the front range of the Rockies. It would mean a hundred mile cattle drive over precarious heights to get to Denver’s stockyards every year, but it had been working out all right for the present owner.

We were awestricken with the beauty of the trail through Berthoud Pass. It took five days to get to the ranch. It was impressive with its buildings nestled right up along the Rockies and its picturesque graze lands stretching down into the valley.

Bob introduced us to the rancher, Mr. Lance, the moment we got there. He invited us in for supper and didn’t even ask us about our reasons for being there. He insisted that we stay in the guest room in the ranch house. The next morning I told him that Bob had brought us there because I wanted to try my hand at cow punching. He was amused, but offered me a job at thirty dollars a month. Of course you’ll have to stay in the house with me, he insisted. Your little woman will just have to pretend she’s my daughter while you are out on the range.

“She’ll be presenting you with a grandchild in about seven months,” I told him. He really liked that.

By the time we had been there a month, I was getting fairly acclimated to cow punching. I was still struggling with roping, but could do it sometimes. “You’re doing OK,” Bob assured me. It’ll take you a year or so to really get the hang of it.”

We spent a lot of the fall searching all the dips and hideaways in the valley for unbranded calves. Whenever we found one we had to rope it, build a fire, and brand it on the spot. We also cut hay for the horses, and mended the

corral fences and holding pens as necessary. As winter approached, we brought all the stock we could find closer to the ranch house where we could protect them from marauding beasts. We shot any wolves that got too close to the cattle, and I was quickly recognized as the best shot of the twenty hands that Mr. Lance retained.

All the cow hands got free room and board. I tried to pay for Jenny's keep, but Mr. Lance enjoyed doting on his adopted daughter so much that he would not hear of it. Jenny was beginning to look at him as a father figure too, which made me a bit jealous every now and then.

Come spring, Mr. Lance called me in to his office one day and asked me if I would like to become a partner in the ranch. When I told him we could pay a fair amount for the herd, he offered to sell me the whole set-up including the herd for twenty thousand dollars. "I'll file a claim and we'll build me a cabin up here near to the big house so you and Jenny can have your privacy," he suggested. Then I can watch the kids grow, and have you over for dinner occasionally.

When I objected that his price was way too low, he assured me that he had more money than he knew what to do with, and he would not take another penny for it. We rode into Denver together to take care of the paper work at his lawyer's office the next week. I came home with a title to the ranch headquarters and a certificate of ownership for the Lazy L brand. No one at the ranch ever learned how little I had paid for it.

Mr. Lance's foreman retired when I took over the ranch. We talked him into homesteading right next to Mr. Lance, and helped build him a cabin too. The two of them were like two peas in a pod, and gave excellent advice about how to run the ranch when asked. Bob Riley was the new foreman, and he consulted with them regularly.

Our son was born the last day of May. You should have seen the expression on Mr. Lance's face when we told him his name was Lance Lane. He loved that baby just like it was his own. Being a former algebra teacher, he called him "L squared." He even added an upside down "L" connected at both ends to a lazy "L" to make up a rectangular brand, and had the "L squared" brand registered in Lance Lane's name the next time a wagon was sent to Denver for supplies.

We had a daughter when Lance was eighteen months old. She was so cute that she wormed her way into the hearts of every hand on the ranch. It was all we could do to keep her from becoming spoiled rotten. I had become a pretty fair cow puncher by then, and could do my share of the work as well as any of the hands. The ranch was doing great, and we had been able to bank about five thousand dollars a year above and beyond our business and personal expenses.

In the spring of our fourth year on the ranch, another rancher brought about a thousand head of longhorns over the pass and started moving in on what we considered our range. We resented it, but it was government graze, and perfectly legal.

Then new rancher, Dice Brown, was a bully just spoiling for a fight. He kept pressing his cattle closer and closer to ours, and his men took occasional pot shots at our punchers whenever their ways crossed.

Dice was obviously trying to force us into a range war in order to get our spread; but I had been studying the beatitudes in Matthews's gospel, and was impressed with the thirty-ninth verse of the same chapter:

"But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: But whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

I swallowed my pride, and had the boys keep pushing our cattle to the south until our home spread was at the extreme northeastern corner of our range, and we could go no further. Then the boys began to report that Dice's gang was reworking our Lazy L brand into his diamond brand. Seeing my own Herford shorthorns mixed with his herd of Texas longhorns was pretty hard to take.

I was still struggling with what would be the godly thing to do when a group of Diamond toughs rode into the old foreman's yard and gave him twenty-four hours to vacate their range. "Sorry boys," he replied, "I've got a title to this homestead, and I'm staying here." They shot him in cold blood, and burned his cabin down on his body. Our chuck wagon cook witnessed the whole thing, but was powerless to stop the bloodthirsty gang that committed the murder.

I knew that Mr. Lance would be next, and begged him to move into the ranch house with us, but he refused. I ordered the boys to stay close to headquarters, and drew up my plans for defending the old man. I knew they'd come up the trail to his cabin and call him out just like they had the old foreman, so I assigned a sheltered spot behind the most appropriate trees and boulders around his cabin for each hand on the Lazy L.

We saw the dust from their horses some twenty minutes before the riders appeared down the trail; and we were in position when they arrived. There were a dozen of them, all hired guns. When they called Mr. Lance out, he shoved a scattergun through the window and loosed a shot at them. They were too far from the cabin to be significantly injured by the shotgun pellets, but it sure got their attention. When they started blazing away at the cabin, our boys cut loose on them from all around. Most of their murderous crowd died on the spot, and the few who escaped carried a heavy burden of lead with them.

The sight of all those dead bodies made me heartsick. I helped the boys gather them up in a wagon, and we buried them reverently side-by side in a mass grave up north of our range where they should have stayed. I read the Holy Scriptures over them myself, exhorting our hands to respect human life, just as Pa had exhorted me that day so many years ago. I hope I never become calloused to the awfulness of death, no matter what the circumstances that lead up to it may be.

We never saw another Diamond rider. When we realized that Dice had abandoned his cattle, we hazed the Diamond longhorns a mile or so north of our previous range. We kept all the shorthorns regardless of the brand they wore; and included all the altered Lazy L's in our drive to Denver that fall.

Dice was waiting at the cattle yards with the Sheriff and several crusty deputies when we arrived. The lawmen were bent on arresting us for rustling the Diamond cattle, but they could not argue with the certificate for the L Squared brand when I produced it. The uprights on our 'L's were about one and a half times longer than the horizontal parts, so each altered brand was clearly an L Squared rectangle rather than a symmetrical Diamond.

"Dice," I told the whipped owner of the Diamond herd. "Your longhorns are still roaming the range. We won't interfere if you send a crew to drive them back to Denver." He sent some decent hands back with us, and we helped them round up the longhorns for the drive back through the pass.

That winter Mr. Lance caught pneumonia. We moved him to the guest room of the ranch house, but he deteriorated until he was so weak he could hardly talk. He finally called Jenny and me to his bedside and gave us a notarized copy of his will. He was leaving his entire fortune of about a quarter of a million dollars to us. "The will is registered with my lawyer in Denver," he gasped out. "You know the place." He died in his sleep that night. It was like losing our Pas all over again.

In the spring of 1868 we presented affidavits of Mr. Lance's death to his lawyer in Denver. We were awarded his fortune without hassles. We had it transferred to our bank, which was now known as the Colorado National Bank. On the banker's advice, we invested a healthy sum in the fledgling Denver Pacific Railroad Company, which was building a line to the Union Pacific part of the transcontinental railroad at Cheyenne, Wyoming. It was no mistake.

Our investments went well, but we always made our residence on the ranch we had learned to love. The beauty and seclusion of the place were unsurpassed. After 1876, when statehood with the authority to sell agricultural lands was granted to Colorado, we were able to purchase our entire range for our posterity.

Oftentimes, as Jenny and I sit on the porch of Mr. Lance's cabin watching our grandchildren play, we discuss the

issue that has plagued us all our married lives. Is it right to use lethal force to protect ones property, his family, or himself? It was a sense of duty to protect my family and myself as their provider that had generally determined my actions. Still, those actions were largely based on hasty speculations about what was going to happen if I didn't used force. But who knows whether or not the Lord would have intervened if we had just left our defense up to Him. We have a great legacy for our family, presumably because we resisted evil when we thought necessary, but maybe the eternal reward of those in Hebrews chapter thirteen, of whom the world was not worthy because they did not accept deliverance, is better.

If you have the answer to our dilemma, drop by and share it with us. Be sure to count on staying for dinner. We've got plenty of beef; and Jenny's still a mighty good cook.

Bully for You

"I'll get my way," the big man vowed,
"I'm stronger than the rest.
I'll force the weak to bow and scrape
While I enjoy the best."

"I'll use a gun," the weak replied,
"To equalize your power.
I'll force my will on everyone,
And make the strongest cower."

"I'll use my brains," the crafty thought,
"To subjugate the strong.
I'll conjure up some shady scheme
To make them sing my song."

"I'll break the rules," the coward mused,
"That others use to win.
I'll shoot my betters in the back
And save my tender skin."

The fastest draw became the law,
And murder ruled the day;
Till peaceful men joined hand in hand,
To strip their power away.

The bullies thought they could impose
Their wills on all the rest;
But law and order have prevailed
To civilize the West.

The Mountain Lily

The fleeing prospector vaulted over the water-logged dead fall with his left hand, landing prone in the sandy gravel behind it. It had been a close call, but he had won the first round. Bill Dawson's chances of survival weren't great, but they were better than they had been a moment ago.

It was the glitter in the sediment in the bottom of Bill's prospecting pan that had distracted him. Its promise had momentarily dulled his awareness. The arrow that glanced off the pan brought him back to the realities of life and death on the frontier; and initiated his hectic dart across the stream to the shelter of the dead fall. The arrows that whizzed along his erratic path encouraged all the speed his moccasins could muster.

The Indians had attacked from the forest on the other side of the stream that flowed from the Big Horn Mountains down to the prairie below. Bill's problem was that there was still about fifty feet of alluvial gravel and sand between him and the forest on his side of the stream. He might stand two or three Indians off with his handgun, but a major defense would be difficult without his rifle, especially if there were enough Indians to work their way across the stream and get behind him. Unfortunately, his '64 Joslyn was still in its scabbard on Buck; and Buck was still ground-hitched in a nest of boulders about a mile downstream where he had first started seeing those flecks of gold. Gold had a habit of making fools out of men!

Bill drew his Colt from its holster and squirmed his way to the swollen root end of the dead fall that had been deposited along the edge of the creek by flood waters of some bygone storm. Peering between the abbreviated remnants of the roots, he made out the forms of three Indians with nocked arrows across the stream in the edge of the woods. They were playing the waiting game; and if they could wait, so could he. Worst come to worst, he'd try to slip across the open area behind him to the safety of the forest come dusk, if he lived that long.

The prospector's position in the afternoon sun was miserable. Rivulets of sweat ran sideways across his back, soaking the lower side of his shirt. He licked cracked lips as water that might just as well have been miles away sparkled tantalizingly three feet in front of him. He dared not move lest the savages catch a glimpse of his face through the rotting roots that concealed him. To top off his misery, the red ants were beginning to carve small chunks out of his legs.

As the prospector watched, one of the Indians finally loosed an arrow directly at Bill's head. Ducking the arrow, the prospector raised his torso above the dead fall and returned the fire. He heard the smack of his bullet on human flesh as he ducked the volley of arrows that sped toward his position.

Dawson was on his feet instantly, plunging erratically for the cover of the trees. Arrows swished on all sides, but not a one struck his gyrating form. But as the desperate man entered the forest three more Indians who had been sneaking up behind the prospector gang-tackled him, throwing him face down in the mossy earth of the forest floor. He scarcely knew what had hit him before his hands were tied mercilessly tight behind his back.

The Indians jerked their prisoner to his feet, buffeting him with their fists. Although he knew it was hopeless, Bill fought back with everything he had. He managed to land a couple of solid kicks on a brave or two before they realized how powerful he was. His only chance now was to show enough spirit to win their respect. Not that it would prevent their killing him, but it might stave it off long enough for him find a way to escape.

When Bill stopped struggling, the Indians hustled him back across the stream to the rest of their war party. There

were seven braves in all, though the one Bill had shot appeared to be seriously wounded. The pain on his face wrenched Bill's heart, and he suggested in his halting Sioux that they moisten the suffering man's lips with water. Someone understood him well enough to put a cup of water to the Indians lips. It seemed to revive him a bit.

The war party built a fire near the spot where the attack had taken place, and settled down for the night. Bill was tied to a tree in a standing position, with no consideration for his comfort. The Indians snacked on dried meat without offering the prisoner any. As the Indians dropped off to sleep, Bill leaned against the tree and catnapped as best he could. The pain and numbness in his hands prevented any real rest. As the cool of the mountain night bit into him, he suggested that they move the injured warrior nearer to the fire. Again, someone responded by dragging the chilling Indian closer to the fire.

The following morning the party mounted up and struck out towards the southeast. Bill's hands were left tied behind his back; and he was placed on a barebacked pony that was led by a watchful brave. His mind naturally turned to Buck, but he was not worried about the resourceful horse. He had been ground hitched, which meant that he would be free to move when hunger overwhelmed his training. More than once he had seen the horse toss his head in such a way as to flip the reins over his head to hang on the saddle horn, so he knew the beast would survive despite the gear that was attached to him.

The wounded man was drug behind his pony on a travois. Every time they crossed a stream, Bill urged them to give him more water. After a while, they started giving Bill a drink whenever they gave their patient one. That helped a lot.

The party rendezvoused with a larger party of about a dozen more braves that afternoon. The braves of the larger party touted many fresh scalps of whites and Indians alike. They drove several oxen ahead of them; and the entire group made camp near the edge of the prairie within a couple of hours.

The larger party had a prisoner too. She was a small shapely squaw, which Bill suspected was the reason why she had not been killed outright. As the prospector watched from the tree they had tied him to, an arrogant brave approached her with a lewd gesture. When she spit in his face he picked up a club and beat her mercilessly. She remained defiant; hurling what Bill gathered was a Sioux insult in his face.

Shortly after the party made camp an ox was slaughtered. The crude butchering was accomplished with knives and axes; and soon the aroma of roasting meat was wafting from the various fires that had been kindled. At Bill's suggestion, the wounded brave was given broth to drink. The Indians consumed an incredible amount beef throughout the evening, but the prisoners were given nothing.

The next morning the wounded man was strong enough to mount his horse. Bill was famished but knew better than to evidence any weakness by begging for food. That afternoon the war party spotted a small wagon train several miles south of them on the Bozeman Trail. Bill watched helplessly as the Indians raced towards the hapless settlers. After the slaughter, the victims were scalped and the wagons were looted. There were no survivors as far as the prospector could tell.

The Indians returned with several cases of whisky, which they lit right into. The more they drank, the more boisterous they became. Soon they were butchering another ox, which they devoured without consideration for the prisoners.

Eventually the festive Indians turned their attention to the prisoners. Bill's bonds were cut free; and the struggling prospector was dragged over to a large ant hill. Four stakes were driven into the ground; and each of his limbs was tied to a stake with a piece of bloody un-scraped cow hide from the butchered ox. He was left tightly stretched over the swarming ants, with no way to protect himself.

"Die well!" he heard the still bound female prisoner encourage him in English as the drunken Indians began to taunt her. Her spunk gave him the determination not to gratify his tormentors by showing any pain as the ants

devoured his body.

The pain of the ant bites was not as severe as Bill expected. Slowly he began to realize that they were more interested in the bloody cowhide that bound his hands and feet than in his body. Despite the many bites that he was getting, he lay perfectly still. Before the sun went down, he began to feel the disappearing bonds loosening a bit, but it would not do to let the Indians realize what was happening.

By the time it was dark, the Indians were far too drunk to pay much attention to the prospector. At first they had seemed to be squabbling amongst themselves over the squaw, but even that did not last long. One by one they were falling into drunken stupors on the ground, bottles often still in hand. Around midnight Bill felt the bond on his right hand give way. Reaching over to the left, he was able to worry that one loose as well. He sat up quietly without being detected and managed to untie his feet within a few minutes.

* * *

The freed man fought the impulse to slip away as rapidly as possible. No self-respecting man could leave any woman, dark or light, to the humiliating death the female prisoner was bound to suffer. Gliding silently around the drunken Indians, he slipped up to the tree where she was tied. She awakened as he fumbled with her bonds, and leaned back into the tree to create more slack for him to work with. The job was painstakingly slow in the dark, for she was tied well; but a half an hour later they were slipping away in a westerly direction from the Indians' camp.

Bill wanted to try to swipe a couple of horses, but the squaw insisted that they were guarded by a several braves that had not been allowed any alcohol. They were too likely to be caught unarmed in the act, so they struck out towards the Big Horns in the starlight of the prairie sky.

Before dawn the sky began to cloud up and a cold wind sprang up. As the prairie darkened the Indian woman placed a trusting hand on the white man's shoulder so she could follow him in the blackness. Thunder rolled, and jagged lightening flashed ominously as a vicious storm bore down on the fugitives.

Suddenly a great blast of wind all but knocked the fleeing pair down, as rain began to pelt them mercilessly. They hunkered down on the ground as the tall grass whipped their faces. Bill could feel the squaw's trembling hand against his back as eerie ghosts of ball lightening rolled over the prairie, some close enough to illuminate their unprotected bodies. Then hail began to spatter down, small at first, and then occasional pieces as large as hen's eggs. Bill reached back and drew the small woman around to the front of him, hunching over her to shield her from the beating he was taking. After five minutes or so the hail stopped and a few minutes later the rain slacked off to a cold drizzle, while gusts of wind chilled the soaked victims to the bone. They huddled against each other on the prairie floor for warmth until dawn arrived and the rising sun brought partial relief from the cold.

When Bill stood up in the morning light, he could see a meandering string of trees a mile or so to his left. As he headed towards the stream the little squaw followed Indian fashion a respectable distance behind him.

The advantage of the storm was that it would have wiped out all traces of their trail from the Indian camp. The disadvantage was that it was impossible not to leave an obvious trail across the wet knocked-down prairie grass as they moved farther from their enemies. Anyone happening by would be able to track them without effort.

When they reached the stream, they walked upstream in the swollen water. At least the trees hid them from distant eyes, and they were no longer leaving a trail. Around noon Bill sat down on a boulder in the stream, while the Indian woman stepped into the trees. She returned a moment later with a four foot green stick which she sharpened by rubbing it on a rough stone. Within a few minutes the woman had speared a couple trout, which she scaled and gutted with a sharp stone. It was their first food since their capture. Since a fire was out of the question with the Indians searching for them, they ate it raw.

Going up the creek was slow, but both of them knew that it was their best bet for freedom, so they moved on

silently without rest until dusk. When they stopped, they wove supple green tree branches with the leaves on them together for a small hut about three feet tall, five feet wide, and six feet long. Both of them climbed in and lay down back to back. As the night grew colder, they unconsciously scooted against each other for warmth.

The next morning Bill realized that they were beyond the devastation of the storm, so he struck out across the prairie in a more direct path towards the mountains. By evening he was beginning to recognize features of the distant mountains that told him where he was. They slept by another stream the next night, but it was warm enough they did not build a shelter. They were so chilled by morning that they found themselves huddled together again for warmth. Maybe a shelter would have been more appropriate, he told himself as they eased away from each other.

Until this time there had been little real communication between the white man and the Indian woman. Their concern had been to escape from their captors and survive the elements despite the coolness of the altitude. Bill had spoken as often as necessary, and the squaw had answered intelligently in perfect English as needed. She had accepted his leadership without question, and they had survived. But on that third morning the little woman asked, "Where are you taking me?"

It was a new idea to Bill. His immediate objective had been to find the area where he had been captured. Buck would probably be waiting around for him, and the Joslyn would greatly help their situation.

"I think I can find my horse and my rifle," he answered. After that we can figure out what each of us needs to do."

By evening they had found the right stream, but were considerably downstream from where Bill had left his horse. That night the squaw built a fire in the shelter of the forest by rubbing two dry sticks together, a trick that Bill had never been able to do. Fish was way better cooked than raw.

By noon the next day they had found the place where Buck had been ground-hitched. When Bill let out a shrill whistle the horse trotted out of the woods to him. The saddle had slipped under its belly, but the Joslyn was still in its scabbard around the horse's neck. A search of the area turned up the prospector's saddlebags and the blanket that had been rolled up behind the saddle. There was an extra knife in the saddlebags, but they never found Bill's skillet. Life would have been a lot less complicated if there had been two blankets, Bill thought.

When the Indian woman saw the rifle, she exclaimed, "I can make another blanket out of deer skin if you can shoot me a couple of deer."

They rode double up the stream to a small meadow, and found a good campsite in the edge of the woods, anticipating that a few deer would come out to graze as evening approached. Bill was able to drop a buck before dusk, which they field dressed and hung in a tree. They huddled together under the blanket that night, and actually felt warm when they awoke. The prospector got another buck in the morning.

While Bill skinned the deer, the Indian woman built a smoking rack under the trees. Bill started smoking thin strips of venison while the squaw began scraping the hides, leaving the hair on them. Hours later, when they were thoroughly clean, she smeared the under sides with squashed deer brains, working the pasty gruel into all parts of the hide until it was equally slippery throughout. A day and a half later she washed the brains off in the stream, wrung out the tanned hides, and smoked them on the smoking rack for several hours. Finally, she sewed the hides together lengthwise to make herself a suitable blanket. From then on they slept on opposite sides of their camp sites.

As the two partners of fate worked together they began to converse more freely. She was a Sioux from a village that had been cultivated by Christian missionaries. The village's acceptance of Christianity had estranged them from the other divisions of the Sioux to the point that they were considered traitors of their people. She had been educated by the missionaries and hoped to become a teacher of Sioux children if she could find acceptance among her people. Red Cloud's war was making this highly unlikely for the moment.

Her name was Lily, taken from the mountain lilies of the Rockies. She had been captured by the Sioux in a stage coach attack along the Bozeman Trail while on the way home from a temporary teaching assignment at a mission near Fort C.F. Smith. Her captors were unsure what to do with her because of her Sioux heritage, so they claimed to be taking her back to their village. Bill was still of the opinion that her shapeliness had more to do with the reason she was spared than anything else. She was truly a beautiful woman.

Lily's immediate need was to get back to her mission village which was off the Oregon Trail about fifty miles northeast of Fort Laramie. It would be about two hundred miles to the southeast of their present position as the crow flies, but Bill was ready to return to the warmth of civilization for the winter anyway. He agreed to escort the little Indian woman at least down to the Oregon Trail, and all the way to her home if necessary.

They would ride double to Fort Reno, on the Bozeman Trail. They could obtain another horse there. From Fort Reno they could avoid the almost certain harassment by Red Cloud's associates along the Bozeman Trail by heading due south across the country to the Oregon Trail. If the Oregon Trail was reputed to be safe when they crossed it, they would follow it to Ft. Laramie. If there was too much harassment on the trail, they could continue south to the Medicine Bows, and cut east to Fort Laramie. The rest would be easy.

The ride to Fort Reno took just over three days. Bill actually found himself enjoying Lily's company. The gentle touch of her hands on his shoulders, her arms clasped around him to stabilize herself on steep places they had to cross, and mostly just her trust in his judgment and leadership were comforting. The typical squaw stereotype was giving way to a more realistic image of an intelligent and intriguing woman in his mind. When they dismounted at the stockade he proudly escorted her into the fort. He was disgusted to find her less than welcomed by the soldiers, though she was better educated and certainly better looking than most of them.

The prospector had a mediocre season's worth of gold in his saddle bags, and was easily able to purchase a good horse for Lily, complete with tack. He also purchased an S&W .32 rim fire revolver with a hundred rounds of ammo, which he asked her to carry "for him;" since it was illegal to provide fire arms to the Indians. He replaced the Colt revolver that the Indians had taken from him with a new one for himself.

* * *

A supply detachment of over a hundred soldiers from Fort Reno was scheduled to leave for Fort Laramie within a couple of days. If Bill and Lily could accompany them down the Bozeman Trail, they would be relatively safe from all but largest parties of marauding Indians. It would probably be safer than the cross-country route they had expected to take to the Oregon Trail; and it would save them days of rough uncharted cross-country travel.

When Bill approached the captain of the detachment for permission to accompany them, he was told that he would be welcome to come. "But I won't have that heathen woman in my party," the captain said. "She might double cross us and signal our position to Red Cloud."

"But I just rescued her from Red Cloud's men," Bill argued.

The captain was adamant. "I won't have a heathen in my detachment," he hissed.

"Sir," Lily addressed him respectfully, "Why do you call me a heathen? I believe in Jesus Christ the same as you do."

"I don't believe in God," the captain retorted. "If He's out there, why does He let these Indians get away with killing so many people?"

"When you think about it, Sir," she replied earnestly, "If I believe in Christ and you don't even believe in God, then I am a Christian and you are the heathen."

The captain turned away with an air of finality, but the reality of what Lily had said struck deep into Bill's conscience. He had never given any thought to what he believed. If a heathen was someone who didn't believe in God, he was probably a heathen himself.

The travelers stocked up with supplies and left the fort in the early afternoon. Bill wanted to get as far away from the beaten path as possible to reduce the probability of meeting a Sioux war party before making camp. That evening they had flapjacks, bacon, and coffee for supper instead of deer jerky; and they enjoyed it immensely.

Before they retired, Bill asked the Christian woman about her people. "How can they be considered heathens if they believe in the Great Spirit?" he began. "Isn't the Great Spirit God?"

"I don't think so," she responded. Jesus said that if people really believed in God, they would believe in Him as well. By and large, the Indians reject Jesus Christ, so they must not believe in the true God. I think the captain was right to consider most of my people heathens. But they are no more heathen than any white person that does not believe in God; and if a white man does not believe in Jesus Christ He is really rejecting God and is just as heathen as the Indians are."

"But nearly all white men believe in Jesus Christ," Bill mused.

"Bill," she said so seriously that it shook him. "There's a difference between believing about Christ and believing in Him. "If you believe in history you believe about Him. You know, the great teacher of two thousand years ago that taught that men ought to love one another. But believing in Him goes much further."

"Believing in Christ," she continued as she unconsciously rose to face him, "Involves believing His testimony that we are sinners that really deserve to be punished in hell for ever. It's believing that God sent His Son down to earth as a man to die on the cross as the payment for those sins. It's believing that if we accept Christ's death on the cross as the payment for our sins we are completely forgiven. It's repenting of our resistance to God and believing that He gives those who trust Him a new life that loves Him and wants to do His will instead of our own. The Bible calls it being born again."

"But Lily," he asked, rising to face her. "How can God consider me that bad? I don't go around swearing, drinking, stealing, or fighting. I was willing to risk my life to save yours, wasn't I?"

"Bill," she answered, throwing her arms around him spontaneously. "You don't know how much I appreciate all you've done for me. You not only saved my life, you saved my dignity...my womanhood...my virtue." She laid her head on his chest as she spoke, bursting into uncontrollable sobs. His arms went around her as if to protect her as she wept away the horror of what she had anticipated as a captive of those Indians. The sobs gradually subsided, and she finally pulled herself away from him.

"Thank you so much, Bill Dawson," she said through her tears. "But, God still says we are sinners and need a Savior. I'll be praying that you'll understand that."

Bill didn't sleep well that night. The issues she had stirred up confused him; and he had to admit that he was not the Christian he had always considered himself to be.

The cross-country trip down to the Oregon Trail was difficult and dangerous. Both the travelers were experts at leaving as little evidence of their passage as possible, but they were acutely aware that any Indians that recognized their passage were likely to come after them. Bill kept a constant watch on the way before them as well as on their back trail. They spoke little as they rode, always conscious of the need for caution. He was not about to let the savages get this woman that he had learned to respect so much.

It took the travelers eight days to reach Emigrant Gap. They ran across recent tracks of several war parties, but

saw no Indians until they came to the south fork of the Powder River. As they looked down from a high forested hill, they could see a party of Sioux warriors nearly thirty strong camped on the banks of the river.

“Why are the Sioux so hostile?” Bill asked Lily as they waited for the Indian war party to move on.

“Red Cloud’s war is actually over the Fort Laramie treaty that the United States made with the Indians in 1851,” Lily answered. “The Indians agreed to accept specific boundaries, giving the U.S. government the right to establish roads and outposts within those areas. The United States agreed to protect the Indians from infringement of their territories by its citizens. Because many Sioux did not recognize a central government within the Sioux nation, they did not feel obligated to abide by the treaty. And more and more U.S. citizens infringed on the Indian territories to hunt, trap, prospect, and even ranch. Neither the Indians nor the United States government were willing or even able to uphold their sides of the treaty; and each side feels that the other side’s violations invalidate it. Red Cloud is primarily trying to defend the Sioux nation from annihilation or forced assimilation into the white man’s culture.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come out here in the first place,” Bill mused aloud. “Do you think I should go back east?”

“One man’s leaving wouldn’t change a thing,” she answered. “Where would you go? The whole United States was taken from the Indians. But in all fairness,” she continued, “The Indian also took whatever land they could conquer and hold. Tribal boundaries were largely determined by whoever was the strongest; and the white man’s technology makes him the strongest. At this point the Indians cannot survive without assimilating into the white man’s culture.”

The travelers remained in their concealed vantage point for a full day before the Indians moved off towards the east. Bill saw Lily shutter violently several times as she peered down at the distant savages. They did not detect any other fresh signs of Indians the rest of the way to Immigrant Gap.

Fort Casper was only a day’s ride along the Oregon Trail from Immigrant Gap. They rode up to the fort the next evening, but Lily was not even allowed to enter the stockade. “No savages in here!” the guard told Bill. “If I had my way I’d shoot every Injun I seen, no questions asked.”

“And you call her a savage?” Bill answered hotly, emphasizing the “Her.” “She’s one of the gentlest people I’ve ever met.” They camped outside the stockade that night, and started out on a long week’s journey to Fort Laramie at dawn the next morning.

Four days later they topped a rise in the prairie to see a wagon train under attack by a small group of Indians. “You ride back up the trail towards the fort, Hon,” he yelled, not realizing that he had used a term of endearment. “I’ve got to help those people.”

When Bill got close enough, he opened fire from behind the Indians. That’s when he noticed that Lily’s horse was at his horse’s hindquarter; and she was blazing away with her little S&W. The additional firepower from outside the tightly circled wagons turned the tide, and the Indians took to the hills in a northerly direction.

The wagon master thanked Bill heartily for their salvation. “That’s quite a squaw you’ve got there,” he added.

“She’s not my wife,” Bill explained. “She’s just a Christian lady that I am escorting to her home.”

“Thanks for the term,” she murmured inaudibly; but she wasn’t sure whether she meant the respectful one or the endearing one herself. “Maybe both,” she thought.

They made Fort Laramie in six days, a little earlier than they had expected to. They purchased more supplies that afternoon, so as to be ready to leave for Lily’s village the next day.

“Where are you headed for?” the storekeeper asked Bill.

“To Nazareth,” Lily replied.

“Oh,” the man grunted disdainfully.

“Why do you call it Nazareth?” Bill asked Lily that evening after supper.

“Because Nazareth was where Christ lived,” she answered. “It was a place of derision. When they said that He was from Nazareth, everyone kind of thought, ‘Oh,’ just like the storekeeper did today. It’s where we who have chosen to live for Christ bear His reproach. We are hated by our own people because we follow Him. We are poor because we do not plunder the pioneers. We have no horses to help us hunt. We are not allowed to have guns. We have to make our own clothes, but can scarcely kill enough deer and buffalo to eat, much less to clothe us. We are despised and rejected, as Christ was, by Indians and whites alike; but we have the joy of the Lord in our souls.” Tears were trickling down her cheeks as she finished; and it was all he could do not to blot them away with the kerchief he wore around his neck. What a woman!

Two days later they rode into Nazareth. The mission consisted of a log home for the missionaries, and a small dilapidated church building. About twenty forlorn tepees surrounded the buildings.

The barking of dogs alerted the people of their arrival. Young and old folks poured out to greet Lily with unmasked joy. The missionary couple held her in a double embrace that she finally squirmed out of long enough to introduce Bill. “He rescued me from a war party,” she explained.

“We’ve been praying for you since you disappeared,” everyone answered.

Lily was hustled off to her parents’ tepee. Bill was invited to spend the night with the missionaries. The dinner was sparse, and he realized that they were suffering everything that their Indian converts were. There was nothing hypocritical about them at all.

Bill was urged to stay longer, but a strange uneasiness had settled on him. As he saddled Buck in the morning, Lily brought her horse to him. “Take him,” she urged. “You are the one who bought him.”

“Lily,” he answered genuinely, “I want your people to have him.” Perhaps he will help them find more meat and skins. And don’t let the soldiers catch you with that gun,” he added.

When he was ready to leave, he turned to face her. “Good bye little lady,” he managed to say. And then, scarcely realizing he was doing it, he bent down and kissed her forehead. Tears glittered in her eyes as he mounted and rode off without daring to look back.

* * *

Bill Dawson rode mechanically back to the trail. When he reached it he turned east for no particular reason. Four days later he was eating lunch at a saloon in the new railroad town of Cheyenne. As he chewed aimlessly on his food two men at the bar got to disagreeing over whether or not the town should have been called “Cheyenne.” The bigger one suddenly backhanded the smaller one. The smaller man responded by taking a punch at his opponent. Suddenly the man who started the fight was crouching in an amateur gunfighters’ stance, bellowing, “No one punches Jack Robbins and lives.”

Caught up in the excitement of the fight, Bill hoped the smaller man would draw and shoot the bully. He deserved it! Suddenly the smaller man yelled, “Draw,” and both men went for their guns. Five seconds later they were both on the floor, mortally wounded.

Bill was sick. Two men had killed each other over what the name of the town should have been.

“God,” he breathed, “We really are as bad as you said we are. I really hoped that man would kill that bully over

nothing at all. Forgive me Jesus; I'm no better than anyone else. I want You to change me."

"That shootin' shake you up that much?" the man across the table jeered as he saw Bill's reaction.

"Yes it did," Bill answered as he arose. "I'm a Christian, not a savage."

The new Christian stepped out the door to his horse. A strange peace settled over him as he took the trail back to the west. He had believed, he had repented, and he was born again. "Thank you, Lord," he murmured over and over again, occasional tears trickling down his cheeks.

At first Bill rode aimlessly, hardly knowing where he was going. But as the hours passed, he began to realize that he had been going back to Lily all the while. He longed for the feel of her gentle hands again. He wanted her arms around his waist again. He wanted to feel the softness and warmth of her body against his again. He wanted Lily more than he had ever wanted anything else in his life.

Three days later Bill topped the last rise to Nazareth. He was shocked! The cabin and the church were burned. The tepees were slashed. There was no activity in the village. Horrified, he rushed down to the devastation before him. The swollen bodies of young and old lay decomposing on the ground where they had been shot.

Madly he checked each corpse as he found it. Lily was not among them. Racing to the remains of the buildings, he found only the charred bodies of the missionary and his wife. Gradually the shock wore off to where he was able to think a bit.

This was not the work of Indians. No one was scalped. At least a dozen iron-shod horses had ridden off over the prairie after the massacre had occurred. There was no wealth in Nazareth. The only thing they could possibly have wanted was his beautiful woman. Bill mounted up and followed their trail at a mad gallop. What had they done with Lily?

The maddened man's senses gradually returned to him as he rode. He would have to slow down and save his horse. The massacre had happened at least two days ago, and it would take at least two or three days to catch up to the murderers. Then he'd have to find out if they had taken Lily captive or not. He had no illusions about what could happen to her. These desperadoes were every bit as savage as any Indians were.

The culprits' trail was fresh enough by noon of the third day that Bill knew he'd catch up with them soon. He caught sight of them when he topped a steep rise just as the sun touched the horizon. They were setting up camp in the trees by a stream, about three hundred feet from where he stood. He drew back a ways to ground-hitch Buck where he would not be visible on the horizon, and squatted to survey the situation through the seed heads of the grass. He was planning a route down to the camp when he heard a yell, and saw Lily racing up the hill in his direction. In an instant he was astride Buck, racing to meet her. Three or four men were strung out behind her, but she was outdistancing them all.

Bill took Buck past Lily on her left side, blazing away at her captors with his Colt in his right hand. He circled back on her right side as she turned around to face him. He slowed the horse, kicking his left foot out of the stirrup and reaching for her with his left hand. She grasped his hand with her left as she slid her left foot into the empty stirrup and swung her lithe body up behind him, wrapping her arms firmly around his waist.

Buck was galloping full tilt up the hill; and unfriendly rifles were crashing away as Bill cut a bit to the left to get a better angle to fire at desperadoes behind him. Suddenly he felt a tremendous shock as a bullet smacked him in the left side of his chest. He started to go down, but Lily grasped the reins with both hands and held him erect between her arms. A moment more and they were over the rise into the relative safety of the back side of the hill.

It was already dusk; and the escaping woman knew that darkness would enshroud them if she could just hold out

for a few more minutes. She gave Buck his head, and the faithful beast literally flew over the prairie, putting more and more precious distance between her captors and freedom. Within half an hour it was dark enough that she knew they would be safe until morning. She slowed the horse to a steady walk and settled in for an all-night ride.

When Buck crossed a stream, Lily drew up in the trees and helped the wounded prospector dismount. She lit a fire and put water on to boil while he reloaded his gun. When Bill was ready she pulled his shirt up for a look at his wound. To their relief, the bullet had plowed a five-inch long groove along his rib cage, glancing off a rib without entering the man's chest cavity. The wound had bled a lot because they had not been able to stop and dress it, but it was not nearly as serious as it could have been. Lily boiled a long hair from Bucks tail and sewed it up by firelight, so it would heal faster.

When the moon came out, the couple remounted and rode down the stream in the water for several hours. When they came to the third tributary they turned up it and rode against its current the rest of the night. As they rode, Lily remarked that it was amazing that she had seen Bill and Buck on the horizon in that instant when they first popped over the top of the rise. "It was because a repentant believer in Christ had been praying for you for three solid days," he told her. He felt her arms tighten around his waist possessively when she understood what he meant.

By dawn Buck was totally exhausted. The fleeing pair had little choice but to hole up in some cottonwood trees and wait for him to recover. Bill took the first watch, and Lily took over about noon. By nightfall, they felt that they were safe from the murderous savages that had massacred Nazareth.

As they sat by a small fire that night, Bill blurted out, "Mountain Lily, will you marry me?"

"I will, Bill Dawkins" she answered. "Adam got his bride from a wound in His side when God made Eve from one of his ribs. Christ got His bride from a wound in His side by allowing Himself to be crucified for His church. Now you've got a wound in your side from rescuing me. I want nothing more than to be your wife."

One evening nearly a week later the Christian lovers showed up at the minister's house in Cheyenne. "Sir," Bill addressed him, "Lily and I have been through a lot together, especially in the last two weeks. By the grace of God we have survived almost insurmountable odds. You've got to marry us tonight, because I can't wait another minute to have her as my bride."

A few hours later they were snuggled up on a deer skin ground cover under a single blanket beneath the brightest stars that Wyoming prairie had ever seen.

Spunk

The stage tore into Cornerstone at a full gallop. It always did. Everyone knew that no matter how slowly it had climbed the hill into town, Happy always cracked his whip and let out a loud, “Yee-haw” as they rounded the last bend, charging up to the hotel at a breakneck speed. The squeak of breaks always accompanied the cloud of dust that settled on the coach as Happy pulled the horses into a panic halt right in front of the hotel. No one in town could imagine it being any other way.

Matt watched unobtrusively as the passengers piled out of the coach for dinner at the hotel. It was his job. He was nearly always on hand to see who came in with the stage, and more importantly, who didn't pile back into it when it departed after dinner at the hotel. All kinds of people rode the stage, and his practiced eye could size them up pretty well at a glance.

A couple of eastern businessmen were the first to disembark. They appeared unarmed and were obviously passing through to a distant destination. Next was a cowhand with a sunburned face shaded by a dilapidated Stetson. He wore a single well-worn Colt 45 that was not strapped down. He'd probably mind his own business unless challenged. Finally, a petite young woman with blond hair and a beautifully tanned complexion hopped lightly to the ground despite the full skirt she was wearing. She appeared to be the only one around that was unconscious of her startling figure.

The young lady called for her bag, which Happy grabbed from the rack atop the coach. Matt stepped up to help as he handed it down. It was heavy, so He carried it to the covered walkway in front of the hotel, setting it down by her.

“Where would you like this, Ma'am,” he asked respectfully.

“I'll take it, thanks,” she replied pleasantly, as she picked up the bag as effortlessly as he had, and walked into the hotel.

Forcing her from his mind, Matt walked over to the undertaker's office to arrange the burial of the stranger that had been found shot to death on a little used trail south of town that morning. He had just gotten back from picking up the body when the weekly stage had arrived. He would mail the victim's belongings to his family after dinner, if he could find an address in any of his belongings.

The sun was directly overhead when he stepped on to the street again, so he headed back to the hotel to get his dinner. Besides, the stage hadn't left yet, so “She” might still be available for another look. It was a pity she didn't live around here.

The intriguing young lady was sipping coffee alone by the front window when Matt came into the hotel. He took a seat a safe distance away, ordered a steak, and just drank in the sight of her as he waited for his meal. It wasn't often that he paid attention to women, but she was undoubtedly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—modest, too.

The young beauty seemed fidgety, looking down the street from the window most of the time, and going to the door for a better look occasionally. Finally she left her bag at her table, and came over to take a seat at his table.

“Sheriff,” she said, “I was supposed to meet my brother here before noon. I’m starting to get worried. It’s not like him to be late.”

“How’d you know I’m the Sheriff?” He asked, since he wore his badge inside his vest—only showing it when needed.

“Simple,” she replied. “Two guns, not tied down. Acutely aware of what’s going on around you, but no attitude like a gunfighter. What else would you be?”

“Sharp,” he said admiringly. “What’s your brother’s name? What does he look like?”

“He’s about your size and build,” she replied pensively. “His name is Rod Macey.”

It was the name on the papers he had found in the dead stranger’s pocket this morning.

“Ma’am,” he said sympathetically, “Rod Macey was shot to death on a deserted trail about three miles south of town this morning. I’m sorry.”

Tears trickled from her eyes as she struggled for control. Matt asked the Lord to help him comfort her as he unwrapped a napkin from an extra silverware set and handed it to her. When she got control she asked where the body was.

“Across the street at the undertaker’s,” he told her.

“Can you show it to me?” she asked.

Grabbing her bag, he walked with her to the mortuary.

“Tom,” he addressed the undertaker, “This is Rod Macey’s sister. She’d like to see the body.”

“My condolences Miss...,” he said, halting.

“Macey,” she filled in for him. “I’m Sherry Macey.”

Matt fell in a few steps behind Tom and Sherry as they walked through the double doors to the back room where the body was. She stared at its face while Tom pulled back the window curtains to let in more light. Then she gently unbuttoned the shirt for a look at the bullet wound over the heart. Finally, she re-buttoned the shirt, smoothed the coat back in place, and asked that the burial take place immediately, if a preacher was available to officiate.

“The town’s minister is available and the grave’s already dug, so we can do it right now,” the surprised undertaker replied.

Matt and Tom stood, one on either side of Sherry, while the minister read a few words from the Bible, and prayed over the deceased man’s body. Then the simple pine coffin was lowered into the grave and covered with dirt as the officiate and three attendants of the funeral looked on.

“Thanks for your help, Sheriff,” Sherry said as they walked away from the grave. “As soon as I get a room at the hotel, I’d like to see the place where Rod was shot.”

“If we hurry, we can get there while there’s still plenty of light,” Matt answered.

Matt helped her to get registered at the hotel, and carried her bag up to her room. He waited in the hall while

she changed her clothes. When she was ready, he took her to the livery stable.

“Ain’t got nothin’ a woman kin ride,” the hostler grunted. But Sherry insisted on a well-built grey gelding with alert ears from the lot. Matt saddled his horse while the hostler saddled hers, and they were off. She rode astride. The gelding tried side stepping and crow-hopping a bit, but she controlled him with a firm hand, and he settled right down. They rode silently to the place where Rod had been shot.

When they dismounted at the site of the crime, Matt showed Sherry the place where he had picked up the body. There was still a small spot of blood on the ground where it had lain. “The murderer ambushed your brother from behind that rock,” He told her, pointing to a large bolder about forty yards from the trail. “If it’s any comfort to you, your brother injured him too. He must have been quite a shot to do that with a revolver.”

They climbed the slope beside the trail to the bolder as Matt continued, “He waited up here quite a while before Rod came along. There were four cigarette butts, as well as an empty 44 caliber Henry cartridge on the ground. And, as you can see,” he added, “There’s a large pool of blood on the ground up here, too.”

“There was a bank withdrawal slip for eight thousand dollars in Rod’s coat pocket,” Matt went on, “But no money in his saddle bags. That’s a pretty strong case for robbery as a motive,” he continued.

“Sheriff,” Sherry replied pensively. “There’s something strange going on here. I don’t really know who I can trust, but I saw you bow your head in thanksgiving before you ate, so I’m going to assume that you are a trustworthy Christian. The less anyone else knows, the better—at least until we figure out what’s happening.”

“In the first place,” she divulged, “That body may have had Rod’s papers on it, but it was not my brother. That’s why I wanted it buried so quickly, before anyone else found out.”

“Secondly,” the bullet hole in my brother’s coat was high on the left shoulder. The bullet hole on the dead man was directly over the heart.”

“Are you sure that it was your brother’s coat?” Matt asked as he berated himself for failing to notice so significant an inconsistency himself.

“Definitely,” Sherry answered without hesitation.

“What are you thinking?” Matt asked.

“I think someone knew that Matt would be along with the money he had withdrawn to buy cattle, or something. When the attack came, Rod was injured, but still managed to return the assailant’s fire. Rod must have suspected that several people were in on the plot to kill him. When he saw that his assailant was dead, he drug his body down to the trail, switched coats and horses with him, and left his identity on the body. Then he took his money and high-tailed it out of here on his assailant’s horse, so any accomplices would think that the bushwhacker took the money for himself and fled.

“Excellent!” Matt answered. “Let’s see if we can find any drag marks between here and the spot where the body lay.”

A careful search of the area did not reveal any drag marks, but they found several deep boot heel-prints and ten or twelve scattered drops of blood. “Looks like he carried the body, even though he was wounded,” Matt surmised. “He must be strong as an ox.”

“He is,” Sherry replied softly. “So don’t try to double cross me,” she added with a winsome smile that none-the-less let Matt know that she was still unsure if she could trust him.

“Sherry,” he answered, “I really want to help you. In a way it’s my job, although the shooting didn’t technically happen in town. Your brother is injured, possibly even lung-shot. We’ve got to find him before whoever’s after him does. I need to know everything you can think of so I’ll understand what we’re up against.”

“OK,” she said reluctantly. “But God help you if you do anything to hurt my brother!”

“I’ve been a Christian since I was a kid,” he assured her. “I serve the Lord with this badge just like the preacher does with his Bible. It gives me lots of opportunities to tell troubled people about Christ,” he added. “Why don’t you tell me the whole story while we try to trail your brother? If we’re moving, we’ll know there aren’t any eves-droppers.”

“Good enough,” she agreed more readily, as they started out along the obvious trail that Rod had left through the scrub brush and junipers on his initial breakneck gallop from the site of the ambush.

“Rod and I grew up on a ranch in Nebraska,” Sherry began. “My mother died when I was born, so Dad raised me the only way he knew how--as a boy. I learned to ride and rope and shoot just like the men.”

“Dad remarried when I was fourteen years old,” she continued, “My poor stepmother did her best to teach me to be a girl. They eventually sent me to school back east to learn to be a teacher, but the real reason was to make a lady out of me. I hated it, but I endured it for Dad and Mom’s sake.”

“After I came home, our ranch house got hit by lightning and burned to the ground while I was at work at the local one-room school. Mom got trapped upstairs, and Rod and Dad went up to rescue her. Both Mom and Dad died when the house collapsed, but Rod was right by a window, and survived by jumping out as the roof fell in.”

“Every time Rod saw the place where the house had been, it brought back such horrible memories of watching Mom and Dad die that he wanted to leave the area. The idea appealed to me, so we sold the place, and Rod went further west to find us a ranch while I finished teaching out the school year. He found a place he liked out here in Wyoming, about thirty miles north of Cornerstone.”

“When I finished teaching, I came out here on the stage. I was to meet Rod at the hotel in Cornerstone so we could travel to our ranch together. I don’t know why he would have had so much money with him,” she added pensively. “Maybe he just had the withdrawal slip in his coat pocket, and the money’s hidden away somewhere.”

Rod’s trail away from the spot where he was ambushed had been plain enough for the first mile or so. Then the trail started to get more and more difficult to follow, and they lost it all together within another mile.

“Sherry,” Matt finally said, “I hate the idea of leaving an injured man out here alone all night, but from his trail he seems able to look out for himself. We didn’t come out here prepared to spend the night, and we can’t hunt for his trail in the dark anyway. I think we need to get back to town and make some plans. Maybe he’s already there looking for you.”

“You’re probably right,” the concerned woman answered. “If he doesn’t show up, I can resume the search the first thing in the morning.” With that, she turned the grey and struck out cross-country for Cornerstone without the slightest doubt of her bearings.

* * *

Matt and Sherry parted when they left their horses at the livery. He checked for any messages at the Sheriff’s office. Finding none, he made a cursory round of the business district. Nothing seemed awry, so he made his way back to the hotel dining room for a bite to eat.

The lawman chose a seat near the back door, where he could keep an eye on the entire room. The local banker was seated with his back to him at the next table towards the front of the dining room. Matt was familiar with

everyone in the establishment except the well-dressed stranger sitting across the table from the banker,

When Sherry came in the front door, He heard the banker say in a low tone, "That's his sister by the door."

Sherry's eyes roved around the room until she saw Matt. When she started in his direction as their eyes met, he gave her a barely perceptible negative head-shake. She immediately averted her eyes and took a seat nearer the front, giving him the distinct impression that she fully understood.

Matt strained to tune in to the low toned conversation next to him. Every now and then he forced down a bite of his dinner to throw off any suspicion of eaves-dropping. But try as he would, he only caught an occasional phrase, like, "She identified him," followed by, "Already buried." Once he heard, "Looks like Slick double crossed us," spoken in a louder angry tone. Finally, the men rose and went to the cashier, where the banker paid the tab before they went out the door.

Matt slipped out the back door and crept back to the street in the narrow space between the hotel and the dry goods store. The stranger had already mounted one of the horses tied in front of the hotel. He turned the animal southward and rode out in the darkness at a good clip. The banker walked towards his own home, north of town, while Matt mentally berated himself for not having noticed the brand on the stranger's horse earlier, while it was still light.

Matt returned to the Sheriff's office and lit a lamp so Sherry would know he was there. Sure enough, he heard a light rap at the door within a few minutes, and rose to let her in.

"Hear anything significant?" she asked.

"Maybe," he answered. "Nothing for sure."

After some discussion of what Matt had heard, they agreed that the banker and the stranger, whoever he was, bore watching, but might not be involved at all.

"Sherry," Matt warned, "If you are going to hunt for your brother tomorrow, be careful. If they suspect a double cross they'll have an expert on Rod's trail too. Carry a weapon and watch your back trail."

"I may go on foot tomorrow," she answered, "And I'll be ready for them."

Matt was mounted and on the trail before dawn the next morning. As he approached the site of the shooting, he pulled his mount into some trees and proceeded on foot. The sun was just peaking over the horizon when he reached the boulder that the bushwhacker had hidden behind. He carefully scooped the blood-stained dust from the area and dropped it in a crevasse several hundred feet away. Returning to the hiding place, he stooped and smoothed over the ground he had disturbed, scattering a bit of dried grass over the area.

When Matt was satisfied that his alteration of the scene was undetectable, he rose to find himself face-to-face with Sherry. She was dressed in doeskin trousers with a matching doeskin jacket, complete with Indian embroidery. Her doeskin moccasins had matching beaded decorations. The outfit fit her as perfectly as if it were tailor-made in a New York fashion store. The gasp that escaped his lips was more at her beauty than at his surprise at seeing her.

"I was going to do that before I resumed searching for my brother," she said, amused at his chagrin at not detecting her approach. "I think maintaining the illusion of a double cross might work in our favor; and I definitely don't want whoever was after Rod to know that he's alive."

The girl turned to check the trail below them as she spoke, and her profile burned a picture in Matt's memory that would be his standard for beauty for the rest of his life. It was not until she started to blush that he realized

how invasive his stare had become.

“Sorry, Sherry,” he stammered. “It’s just that you’re so...so...beautiful.”

“I guess I should say ‘Thanks,’” she answered, lowering her eyes. “You’d dress up well enough for any woman yourself, you know.” Then the incident was over.

“I guess we’re both expecting someone from the other side to be here pretty soon,” Matt commented. “My guess is that it won’t be long. I think I’ll move my horse further away so he won’t whinny at theirs.”

“Move mine too,” she requested. “It’s beside yours. I’ll be looking around for the best spot for us to watch ’em from.”

Matt didn’t get the horses moved any too soon. He had barely gotten back and settled into the vantage point Sherry had chosen when they heard traffic on the trail. A few moments later the stranger Matt had observed at the restaurant showed up with an Indian tracker. Without dismounting, the white man pointed out the dust-covered bloodstain on the trail. The Indian dismounted, studied the scene a moment, and headed up the slope to the boulder where Rod’s assailant had hidden. He spent a moment or so there, returned to the trail to get his horse, and trotted off along the obvious trail Rod had left with his assailant’s horse.

When the tracker was out of sight Sherry started to rise, but Matt pulled her back down with a cautionary “Shhh.” A few moments later the tracker’s horse appeared in the shadows where it had disappeared from. “I figured he’d check to see if anyone was snooping on him,” Matt whispered. After all, he’s seen our tracks on the same trail as Rod’s.”

When the Indian went back up the trail, Matt and Sherry returned to their horses. “What do you think I should do?” Sherry asked Matt. “He’ll see me if I try to follow him.”

“I think we should slip back into town by different routes,” Matt reasoned. And much as I hate to say it, we should also avoid being seen together so they won’t suspect that you’ve got the law working on this. My office is generally unlocked. You leave a note in the top drawer of my desk if you need to contact me, and I’ll leave a lamp on with the window shade up just a bit if I need to contact you.”

“And Sherry,” he continued, “Can we try that dress-up thing together after we get this resolved?”

“I think I’d like that, Matt,” she answered without hesitation.

As they neared town, Sherry drew up near some trees, and drew a long brown skirt from her saddle-bags. “Helps avoid scandal,” she explained as she pulled it over her trousers. She rode on into town on the trail while he took to the scrub and followed a bridle path that led directly to the livery stable.

When Matt stabled his horse, he checked on Rod’s dun. “Sherry could be using him,” he told himself, “Except that anyone combing the area for the supposed double crosser might recognize his tracks.” “Unless...” he thought as he checked its shoes. “Yes,” he told himself, “he could use re-shoeing right now. Then he’ll have different hoof prints.”

There was an excellent smithy in town, so Matt led the dun to his establishment and left him for a new set of shoes. “The shooting victim’s sister will pick him up later this afternoon.” he told the blacksmith.

“She that good-lookin’ little thing I been seeing around town?” he asked.

“Sure is,” Matt replied.

“Think she can handle a powerful animal like this?” the smith asked.

“Positive,” Matt replied as he headed up the street towards his office.

There were no notes on Matt’s desk, and a slow walk around town did not stir up any inklings of trouble. He busied himself sweeping the floor and straightening up a mite, in case Sherry dropped in to leave a note. At noon he went into the hotel dining room for lunch. He took a seat where he could keep an eye on the road, and ordered a light meal.

Sherry came in and took a seat at the next table from Matt just as he was being served. He stood up and addressed her in the most officious voice he could muster. “Miss Macey,” he said, “I would appreciate it if you would drop by the Sheriff’s office and pick up your deceased brother’s belongings. We can talk about how to dispose of his horse while you are there.”

“I’ll be over right after dinner, Sheriff,” she replied disinterestedly. “Maybe you can help me sell the horse,” she added.

As Matt re-took his seat, a dusty cow hand rose from a few tables away and came to Sherry’s table.

“Are you Sherry Macey?” He asked.

“Yes,” she replied in an intonation that sounded more like a question than a statement.

“I knew your brother,” he said in a low voice. “We need to talk.”

“Drop by the Sheriff’s office in a few minutes,” she answered softly.

Matt finished his meal quickly, asked for some coffee to take out, and sauntered nonchalantly back to his office. Sherry showed up a few minutes later, and he told her about getting the horse re-shod. “I told the smithy you’d pick him up,” he finished up.

Just then the expected cowhand showed up.

“What do you know about my brother?” Sherry asked anxiously.

“I’m Clint Collins,” the man replied. “Rod and I competed at bull riding together at rodeos while you were away to school,” he told Sherry. “I got busted up by a bull, and had to quit, so I came out here and started ranching. Just before round-up time rustlers hit me so hard that I couldn’t make the last payment on the ranch. When Rod heard that the bank here at Cornerstone was foreclosing on me, he offered to loan me the eight-thousand I needed until next year’s roundup. He was going to bring it by after he picked you up, but he never arrived, so I came to town to see if anyone had seen him.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be telling his business here,” he said as he shrugged his shoulders, while cocking his head questioningly towards Matt. “He’s OK,” she assured the suspicious cowpoke. “He’s helping me find Rod.”

“I thought Rod was dead!” the cowpoke exclaimed.

“Not the way we’ve got it figured,” Matt replied.

“No one else knows it, but the body Matt picked up wasn’t Rod,” Sherry interjected.

While Matt and Sherry told their story, Clint was putting two and two together. “The way I figure it,” he said when they had finished, “The banker here at Cornerstone didn’t want me to make that payment, ‘cause he’d be getting my ranch for way less than it’s worth; and someone from Rod’s bank was collaborating with him, or he’d

never have known that Rod had the money. I wonder if the other guy in that conversation you heard was Rob's banker."

"Sounds good," Matt and Sherry agreed.

"We know they'll be lookin' for whoever has that money," Collins mused, "So I think we'd better find Rod before they do. There's an area that's so rugged no one can ranch it between where he got shot and my place. I'm guessin' he holed up somewhere in there to nurse his wound, and he may not be well enough to protect himself."

"How do we search while that Indian's out there?" Sherry asked.

"They're startin' from this end, we'll start from my place," Clint suggested.

"Why are you so sure he headed for your place?" Matt asked skeptically.

"Cause he needs to get the money to me, and he wants everyone except Sherry and I to think he's dead," Clint explained. "He can't afford to be spotted trying to contact Sherry in town. Also," he continued, "The enemy's not going to expect their supposed double-croser to show up at the very place where the money was supposed to go."

"I'm turning in my badge," Matt bantered. "You guys are better detectives than I am."

"Let's meet just north of town and strike out for my place," Clint urged. "We can stock up for the search there."

"What if they saw you come in here?" Matt asked.

"I've still got a week before the pay-off is due," Clint answered. "Maybe if I drop by the bank and beg for more time it will alleviate any suspicions that we're on to them."

Sherry went to the blacksmith's to pick up Rod's horse. Matt went to the livery to get his, and Clint went to the bank. The three of them met on horseback in a clump of trees a bit north of town; and Clint lead the way across the scrub to his place. They arrived at Clint's ranch as an orange sun was setting in the western sky.

* * *

The three searchers packing their animals by lantern light in Clint's barn before dawn the next morning. The plan was to ride together over the plains until they reached the hills to the east. Then they would spread out within gunshot-hearing range of each other and search for signs of the bushwhacker's horse, or any likely place where an injured man would hole up.

As they approached the hills, Clint pointed out helpful landmarks they could use to keep their bearings. He told them that the tallest visible hill was about half-way between the crime scene and their present location. A distinct red cliff near the top marked the center of the six by ten mile rugged area he had in mind. They would rendezvous every hour or so.

Before they separated Matt asked if they could pray together that they would be successful.

"Good idea," Sherry responded.

"Couldn't hurt nuthin'," Clint added.

Matt removed his Stetson, bowed his head, and prayed; "Dear Lord, we need your help finding Rod. We don't know what condition he's in, so please be with him until we find him. And, Lord, there are unscrupulous people out

here who want to find whoever has that money first. Please protect both Rod and us from their evil intents. Amen.”

“Amen,” Sherry chimed in.

As the terrain became increasingly rugged, the search became more and more grueling. Each member of the party was having to dismount more and more often to check out places that horses could not negotiate. Everyone was pretty discouraged when they stopped for lunch on the fourth rendezvous. “At the rate we’re going we won’t cover a third of this area by dark,” Matt declared. “I think we should spread out more.”

“Probably should,” Clint agreed.

“Why don’t you two spread out and do a once-over for tracks while I stay behind look more for hideouts,” Sherry suggested. “We can meet under that red cliff about dusk if we haven’t found Rod by then.”

The group had some hot coffee and a snack of beef jerky and hard bread while Matt and Clint divided the remaining area in two. Each man was to cover his part as thoroughly as he could before dusk. Sherry continued on a more methodical search of every likely spot she could find in the whole area.

It was mid-afternoon when Clint ran across a clear and unmistakable footprint of the missing horse. He followed the deer trail it was on, and found other less defined hoof prints scattered sparsely along the way. When he was certain he was on the right trail he fired three shots in the air in rapid succession. A three shot volley confirmed that it had been heard, so he waited for Matt in an open area where he would be easy to spot. Matt rode in to meet him about twenty minutes later. Since Sherry did not answer their volleys, they assumed she was too far back to hear.

The two men trailed the horse into a blind canyon that widened into an idyllic ten acre meadow rimmed by a forty-foot rocky wall. At the far end of the meadow a small stream spilled over the ledge in a picturesque waterfall. The horse they were trailing was grazing beside the stream as it meandered through the scene.

Matt and Clint separated, each circling around one edge of the rim. When they met at the far end, they found a deep cave-like overhang that stretched under the falls. A sleeping man was huddled under a blanket at the deep end of the overhang, behind the falls.

“Rod,” Clint called softly, laying a hand in the sleeping man’s shoulder, “Rod, wake up.”

The man stirred, and opened glassy confused eyes. He was shivering uncontrollably.

“Rod, it’s me, Clint.”

Rod’s eyes finally focused. A look of relief flooded his face.

“I got shot,” Rod explained in a weak voice. “Tried to reach your place, but got I got so weak I could hardly ride. Lost too much blood! I holed up here, but I just can’t do anything...” his voice trailed off.

Matt had taken the scene in at a glance and was already gathering wood for a fire. They soon had a warm blaze going, with water heating in the coffee pot. Matt shredded some jerky into a tin cup, adding hot water when the pot started boiling. Rod drank half the broth and fell back semiconscious on his blanket. Clint covered him with his own blanket and let him sleep

* * *

At about the time that the men had found Rod’s trail, Sherry had made a difficult climb on foot to an isolated

high point to look over the area for likely hiding spots. From her vantage point she could see a grassy valley nestled between the surrounding rocky hills. It was so packed with cattle it couldn't be anything but a holding site. Remembering that Clint had said no one was ranching in the area, she slipped close enough to read the brand on the closest cattle. They all wore a lazy eight.

As Sherry slipped back to her mount she detected the smoke from Matt and Clint's fire. She dropped everything else and began working across the rugged terrain towards the smoke. An hour later she was standing on the rim of the valley the men were in. Although they were in the cave, their ground-hitched horses assured her that the fire was theirs.

Sherry was studying the rim for a way into the sheltered meadow when she saw two horsemen coming through the entrance to the canyon. The one dressed in buckskins looked suspiciously like the Indian tracker they had seen yesterday. The other was a white man, possibly the diner they had observed with the Cornerstone banker.

Matt and Clint had just finished cleansing the semiconscious man's wound when the banker and the Indian slipped into the cave. The two Samaritans were caught flat footed, with no choice but to raise their hands and yield their weapons to the outlaws.

"Trying to horn in on someone else's money, Sheriff?" the banker asked mockingly. "I didn't think a lawman would sink so low."

"What money?" Matt asked in a surprised tone of voice. "We were trailing a killer's horse."

"You trying to deny that you have the money?" the banker snarled.

"No," Clint and Matt said together. "We haven't seen any money."

"Guess I'll have to force Slick to tell me where he stashed it," the banker grunted, jerking the blanket off the wounded man with one hand while keeping a gun on Matt and Clint with the other.

"Hey, that's not Slick," he exclaimed. "That's Rod Macey. 'He's supposed to be dead!' Then, swinging his gun toward Rod he aimed between his eyes.

A loud report echoed through the cave as the banker fell dead at Matt and Clint's feet. The Indian jumped through the waterfalls and escaped as Sherry walked into the cave carrying her Henry rifle. Its barrel was still smoking. "Hated to do that," she stated almost apologetically, "But he was going to finish my brother off."

The rifle report awoke Rod. "Sherry!" he exclaimed as he rose shakily to his feet. She grabbed him around the body and hugged him. Then, noting his weakness, she helped him sit down on a stone.

"Say, Clint," she asked, "Who has the Lazy Eight brand around here?"

"Never heard of it," he replied. "Mine's the Double 'C'."

"When Sherry told of the Lazy Eight cattle held in the secluded valley, Matt asked slowly, "How hard would it be to change two side-by-side 'C's' into a sideways '8'?"

"Hey," Clint exclaimed, jumping up excitedly. "Those'll be my cattle. I bet the banker was going to move them right back to my ranch as soon as the foreclosure went through."

"Speaking of foreclosure, Rod," Matt asked, "Have you still got that money?"

"It's in the saddlebags buried behind that big stone at the back of the cave," Rod assured them. I covered them

with Slick's saddle blanket and buried them the first thing when I got here"

* * *

The four friends spent the night in the cave. The warmth of a fire, and some nourishment worked wonders for Rod. He felt able to ride to Clint's the next morning. They stopped long enough to verify that the Lazy Eight cattle Sherry had found were indeed Double "C's" with worked-over brands.

The following morning Clint and Matt rode in to Cornerstone with the money, while Sherry stayed at the Double "C" to tend Rod's bullet wound. Matt stopped at the telegraph office to send an official inquiry on who the Lazy Eight brand was registered to. By noon, he had an answer to his query. The brand belonged to Barry Milton, the Cornerstone banker. The only problem would be to link him personally to the crime so he could be prosecuted.

That afternoon Clint paid off his loan, much to the banker's disgust. When the banker told him to come back in the morning for his title, Clint reached over the desk and grabbed him by the collar. "You will sign the papers now, you intolerable cheat," he said, twisting the collar tight.

"OK, OK," the banker complied, removing the title from his top drawer and signing it over to Clint. "But a ranch never did a dead man very much good."

"Neither did a bunch of cattle with altered brands," Clint replied. The banker's head jerked like Clint had slapped him. He stared pure hatred from across his desk as the rancher took his title and rose to go. The hair raised on the back of his neck as he went out the door, half expecting a bullet in his back.

Clint went directly to the Sheriff's office, where he reported Barry's veiled death threat. "Don't take it lightly," Matt warned him. "He's up to his ears in fraud and murder, and he'll send someone after you if he doesn't come himself."

"Matt," Clint said pensively, "He's got to do something with those cattle, now that he knows I'm on to him. Maybe you could arrest him for rustling if he goes out there himself."

"It'd stand up in court," Matt agreed, "But I think he'll send someone else to move the cattle. I think he'll personally try to ambush you. If I were you, I'd go right home and get your boys to move those cattle back to your range. If he claims them, all you have to do is kill one cow, and show the court the underside of the brand. Don't use any beaten trails on the way home, though."

Clint went home cross-country the next day. Matt stayed in town, keeping an unobtrusive eye on the banker. Within a couple of days the town began to fill with strutting gunfighters who dressed well, wore tied-down guns, and spent money freely. Several gunfights erupted between the hired guns, but every shooting was declared a fair fight by the witnesses, so Matt made no arrests.

On Saturday morning the gunfighters began riding south of town by twos and threes. Matt watched for the banker, but he never showed. Finally he walked around back of the bank, where he found fresh manure where the banker's horse had been tied. His tracks headed south of town, and Matt was sure they would join the small army of gunfighters as soon as they were out of sight.

Matt rode north of town to the jumping off point where Clint had led them to his place before. He pressed his animal as hard as he dared, and rode into the Double "C" in the midafternoon. Clint could only muster about a dozen cowhands in the short time they would have before the outlaws arrived.

Matt kept Clint, Rod, and Sherry in the house, with all but Clint stationed at upstairs windows. He stationed the rest of the outnumbered defenders carefully in pairs at strategic points near the buildings and along the road. "Let them come all the way into the yard," he instructed. "These guys are ruthless killers," he warned them. "They'll

wipe us out if we don't get them on the first round. They'll open the game, but when the shooting starts, shoot without mercy. Each of you has got to account for at least two of them."

After a half-hour's wait, the outlaws arrived. The defenders held their fire as ordered. The banker called out to the house as the desperadoes grouped behind him. "Clint Collins, we've come to get the Lazy Eight cattle you stole from my holding area. We don't need any rustlers around here, so we're going to burn you out."

"Those Lazy Eights are illegally worked over Double 'C's, Barry," Clint called back. "Go back home or pay the consequences."

"I'll personally tend to you when we're done moving the cattle," Barry called back, taking a pot shot at the door. As planned, that shot brought a sustained crash of gunfire from the upstairs windows, the barn loft, the bunk house roof, and the closest vantage place along the trail. Horses reared, and confused outlaws hit the ground without ever clearing leather. Some wheeled their mounts to flee, only to meet the withering fire of Matt's enfilade along the trail. Thirty long seconds later half the hardened murderers were either dead or dying. Another quarter of them were wounded, some severely. Of the few that escaped, most would carry lead to their graves.

While the upstairs defenders kept the wounded covered, the rest gathered the guns of the defeated enemy. Unfortunately, when the dead and wounded were identified Barry Milton was not among them. "He'll show up and try to kill you some day," Matt warned Clint.

It was during dinner the next evening that Barry Milton materialized at the dining room door. "Reach," he ordered, and everyone's hands went up except Sherry's. "You too," he screamed at the little woman across the table as he stepped closer to her.

"I didn't think a gentleman would treat a woman that way," she answered, still refusing to raise her hands.

Barry swung his gun down on her, sighting between her breasts. Believing he would shoot at any moment, Matt jumped to his feet to draw his fire away from her. As the crazed banker swung his gun towards the heroic Sheriff, Sherry shot him from under the table with the derringer in her hand.

"Beaten by a woman, in the end," he muttered ruefully as he sunk to the floor.

"Actually," Matt told his dead body, "She beat you that day she had the presence of mind to not let on that a dead man was not her brother."

Later that evening Matt spied Sherry standing alone on the porch. As he approached her he saw a tear trickle down her cheek. He reached out a finger to wipe it away, and she burst into sobs. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her forehead to his chest. "Hurts, don't it," he sympathized when the sobs subsided.

"Yeh," she answered as she looked up into his face, "Do you think the Lord approved of me shooting him?"

"More people would have died if you hadn't," he answered, stooping to kiss her. Her lips rose to meet his as they each began to realize how much the other had come to mean to them.

"Bout that dress-up thing," he said as she pulled away, "do you think we could do it in Cornerstone before you and Rod leave for your ranch?"

"I'd be terribly disappointed if we didn't, Matt," she replied. "I'm going to miss you, you know."

"I'll be coming around pretty often if you promise not to shoot me," Matt responded with a grin.

"I'll hold my fire for you," she promised demurely. "Every bit of it," she added silently to herself.

The Sheriff of Saddle County

The sheriff of Saddle County
Was the fastest in the West,
Each criminal who braced him
Had been duly laid to rest;
Till a youth who was distinguished
By a lock of whitish hair,
Came a'calling for the lawman
With a bold and taunting air.

It wasn't very long until
The lawman showed his face.
The arrogant young gunman
Drew at an astounding pace.
The lawman beat him soundly
And got off a second round,
Before the outlaw's bullet
Cut the lawman to the ground.

The Sheriff addressed the gunman
With the ebbing of his life,
"I knew you wouldn't believe me,
But your mother was my wife.
I never ceased to love her
So there's blanks within my gun,
'Cause I'm the dad you never had,
And you're my only son."

Standin' Upright

Tom Tyler stepped off the tired paint at the hitching rail in front of Grant's general store, and dropped the reins over the handsome gelding's head.

"Thanks, Fella," he murmured as he paused to pat the horse's withers affectionately. At a nudge from the big animal's soft nose, Tom hung a feed bag in place and left his mount without tying him to the rail. He knew that Fella would stay ground hitched until he returned for him.

"Hi, Grant," Tom greeted the storekeeper as he entered the door. "Just checkin' fer mail, n' I need three cartons of .44's."

"Sure thing," Grant replied. "Ya startin' a war?"

"Nah," Tom replied. "Just gittin' a mite low on ammo at the cabin n' didn't want ta run out."

"Never could figure out what ya do with all the handgun cartridges ya buy," the friendly storekeeper commented. "Ya always have a rifle in yer scabbard, but ya never wear a handgun ta town."

"I wear a couple a guns on the range," Tom replied, "N' they've saved my bacon more 'un onest. Killed a downright unfriendly grizzly that caught me off my horse filling my canteen last year; but wearin' guns ta town is just invitin' a fight."

"Ya look like ya could take care uv yerself purty well," Grant answered, "N' ya don't strike me as yellin'."

"No, Grant, it ain't that I'm yella," the big cowpuncher replied seriously, "But I don't think God justifies a man fer killing another just ta prove he ain't yella. The law may call that kind uv a killin' a fair fight, but God calls ut murder."

"Ya mean if somebody calls ya, ya ain't gonna take 'em up on ut?" Grant asked incredulously. "The whole town 'ud despise ya fer the rest uv yer life."

"They despised my Savior," Tom replied earnestly. "They jeered 'Em because they didn't believe 'E was who 'E said 'E was. They jeered 'Em cause 'E always did the right thing. N' they jeered 'Em while 'E hung on the cross n' died fer my sins. I reckon I kin take a little jeerin' if ut comes ta that."

"Good luck on that," the storekeeper replied dubiously as he checked the mail bag. "Hey, you gotta letter, n' it's another one uv them that stinks purty."

Tom paid for his shells and put them in his saddlebags. He opened the letter with his pen knife as he headed down the street to Ma Murten's for lunch.

"Tommy Tyler," Ma called out as he walked in the door. "Ain't you a sight fer sore eyes!"

"Lo, Ma," Tom replied. "Ya got enny uv that pot roast ya usually make today?"

"You betcha," Ma replied, hurrying back towards the kitchen. "Made some apple pie for ya, too."

"Now Ma," Tom grinned, "You couldn't possibly 'uv knowed I wuz commin' ta town today."

"Yeh," she agreed jovially, "But I'd rather you'd git it than ennyone else."

"Thanks, Ma," Tom replied. "Sounds mighty good."

"When's yer wife gettin' here?" Ma Murten asked Tom as he finished his lunch.

"Just got a letter sayin' she'll be on the stage tomorra," he replied. "Weather's been so good back east that school shut down a week early so's the kids could help with the plantin'. To bad I wasn't smart 'nough ta bring the buckboard today. I wouldn't uv had ta return home tanight n' come back with it tomorra."

"It's fer the best," Ma answered. "You're better off ridin,' 'cause you'd just fret yerself crazy till she got here tamorra ennyways. How'd ya meet 'er?"

"She was a school marm at a country school in Ohio," Tom replied. "I met her at church when I went to east to get some white-faced stock a couple a years ago. We got ta writtin' cause she likes the west. I went back ta Ohio and married 'er last Christmas. We only had a week together afore I had ta come back ta the ranch."

"Yeh, I know," Ma replied. "It broke the heart of every girl within a hunnert miles a here when they found out ya was gittin' married."

"Aw, cut ut out," he grinned. "I never courted enny uv 'em."

"That's a fact," Ma admitted, "But a girl kin dream, can't she? How's come ya didn't bring 'er back with ya then?"

"She was obligated ta stay in Ohio n' finish out her teachin' contract."

"I'd a come right out with ya," Ma mused.

"Not Wendy, Ma. She agreed ta teach the year, n' neither uv us thought she should break 'er promise. 'Sides, I needed some time ta clean out the cabin a'fore she seed ut."

"Betcha did, at that," Ma grinned "I'll have some real goodies ready iffen you'll bring 'er in fer lunch before ya take 'er home tamorry."

"I'll do that, Ma. I want ya ta meet 'er."

"What's she look like?" Ma asked.

"She's the purtiest woman I ever seen," Tom answered enthusiastically. "She's about this tall," he mused, placing his index finger crosswise along his chin. "She's got dark brown hair, bright blue eyes, n' the sweetest smile ya ever saw."

"I just bet she's all a that n' a bit more," the savvy woman mused as she watched the handsome cowpoke walk out the door.

When Tom got back to his horse, Grant called him to the doorway where several cowpokes were admiring a gun.

"Check out this new toy," Grant suggested. "It's an S&W .32 rim fire."

Tom took the beautifully engraved revolver from Grant's hand and spun the chamber.

“Perfectly balanced!” he said enthusiastically, “And real ivory grips.”

“Try ’er out,” Grant urged as he shoved a few of cartridges into the cylinder.

A sparrow flew from its perch on a rooftop across the street, and the gun boomed as Tom’s wrist flashed. Feathers flew as the bird disintegrated. More sparrows took to the sky at the report of the gun, and Tom dropped two more of them in two more quick shots.

“Say, that’s awright,” he said approvingly as he handed the gun back to the storekeeper and mounted Fella for the twenty-mile trip home.

“Some shootin,!” someone from the awestricken group murmured softly. “Smooth, fast, and deadly accurate,” another chimed in. “Wonder how fast he can draw?”

“Doubt if we’ll ever find out,” Grant replied. “Tom don’t approve uv gunfights.”

* * *

Tom rode directly to the barn when he arrived home after dusk. He rubbed Fella down, forked him some hay, and dumped a bait of oats into the feeding tray. Having cared for the horse, he picked up his rifle and stepped wearily through the kitchen door at the back of the cabin. On lighting a lamp, he saw muddy tracks on the kitchen floor. There were also coffee grounds spilled on the sink board. The pump handle was up, and Tom always left it down.

A quick look through the cabin failed to reveal anything grossly out of order, so Tom just assumed that some cowhand had stopped by and made himself some coffee. “He could uv cleaned up after ’emself,” the cowboy grumbled as he swept the dried mud out the door before frying himself some flapjacks and bacon. He kneeled for a couple of minutes of silent prayer before climbing into his bed, where he slept until dawn.

As Tom dressed in the morning, he began to realize that his belongings had been riffled. The neatly folded clothes in his drawers were somewhat ruffled. Raising the top on his big roll top desk revealed that his neatly stacked business papers had been scattered helter-skelter over the desk top. Someone had been looking for something there, but Tom didn’t keep any really important documents there. They were hidden in a carefully disguised fireproof safe under the potatoes in the root cellar.

Straightening up the papers quickly, Tom put them in a drawer. He’d have to re-sort them later, but that would have to wait until he checked to see what he could discover about the intruder. He circled the cabin and then the corral before he found the tracks of several men around the pen where he kept Hero, his prize white faced bull. Whoever had been there wore typical nondescript cowboy boots with an average amount of wear. There was little to go on except that one of the men had been heavy enough to have considerably deeper tracks than the other. The lighter man had mounted a horse with a deep v-shaped nick in the center of its left front shoe.

Tom absent-mindedly rubbed the broad space between the big bull’s eyes with his fingertips as he contemplated the tracks. Hero leaned into his hand, enjoying the sensation. “I don’t believe you’d hurt a flea,” he told the big Hereford as he withdrew his hand. He wanted to follow the tracks in the worst way, but he needed to hitch his pair of greys to the buckboard and get to town before the stage arrived.

The greys were full of vinegar in the cool morning air, and trotted without urging for the first mile or so. When they came to the shallow ford at the half-way mark, Tom pulled them up for a drink and a brief rest. The horses hadn’t even worked up a sweat, but Tom held them to a brisk walk the rest of the way into town, arriving about an hour before the stage. He brooded uneasily as he drove. “Who would have been at his home, and what could they possibly have wanted?”

The cow puncher parked the buckboard in front of Grants, and left a list of supplies for the storekeeper to load while he waited for the stage. As he walked out of the store, it suddenly struck him. This was not just his problem, Wendy would be there too! Whirling back through the door, Tom asked Grant if he still had the S&W .32.

“Sure,” Grant answered, “But ain’t it a bit small fer you?”

“It’s fer my wife,” Tom answered. “She’s comin’ on today’s stage, n’ someone’s been a-snoopin’ around my place.”

“I’ll pack it under the buckboard seat,” Grant assured him.

“Put a half-a-dozen cases uv cartridges with ut, ” Tom instructed, “I’ll probably have ta teach ’er ta shoot.” Then he was off for the stage office.

The stage was rolling up in a cloud of dust just as Tom arrived. He stepped up to open the door, and found himself staring into the lovely face of his wife. She literally hurled herself into his arms from the door of the stage, placing a quick kiss on his cheek. He whirled her around two or three times, hugging her to himself before they became aware of the onlookers grins. After being sure her baggage was stowed safely in the stage office, Tom offered her his arm, and walked her over to Ma Murten’s for lunch.

True to her promise, Ma had outdone herself for the noon-day meal. She hovered over the young couple like a mother hen, wisely saying little and seeing lots. She was an astute judge of human character, and she liked Tom’s bride. “They’re made fer each other,” she kept telling herself as they ate.

“Git outta here,” she laughed as she brushed Tom’s money away when he rose to pay her. “This un’s on me, and I enjoyed every minute of it.”

As Tom and Wendy walked toward the buckboard, a slim well-dressed young man about Tom’s age strode out of the saloon behind them. He wore tied down guns, and followed them far too closely to be anything but suggestive. Tom swung Grant’s door open wide enough for a single person to enter, and stepped aside to let Wendy in. Stepping in behind her, he closed the door as if unaware that the gunslinger was following. He introduced Wendy to Grant, made a few purchases that Wendy wanted, paid off his bill, and escorted her to the buckboard. After helping her to the seat, he went around to his side. As he was climbing aboard, the young gunslinger stepped up to Wendy’s side of the wagon, placing a hand on her arm.

“Mister,” Tom spoke authoritatively, “Take yer hand offen my wife.”

The gunslinger’s hand dropped for a draw, and Tom leaped across Wendy, bearing the off-balance gunslinger to the ground. Tom’s knee came down with all his weight in the gunman’s solar plexus, and the wind escaped his lips with explosive power. The man was still gagging and trying to catch his breath as Tom took both his guns and dumped them in the watering trough. Then backing the greys nonchalantly, he headed the buckboard toward the stage station, where he loaded Wendy’s trunks before striking out for home.

“Thanks, Honey,” Wendy whispered as she snuggled against him. “I didn’t realize that I had married such a hero.”

“Just thank the Lord that no one got hurt,” Tom admonished. “That guy was drawing to shoot. If the edge of the wagon hadn’t been in his way you might uv been buryin’ yer first husband right now.”

* * *

Tom and Wendy rode arm-in-arm for an hour or so, more or less silently enjoying each other’s presence. Tom finally broke the silence.

“You ever shoot a gun, Wendy?”

“Sure,” she replied. “I used to sneak out with my brother and shoot squirrels with his .22 now and then. My mom didn’t think shooting was very lady-like, so we never told her that I shot a lot of the squirrels he brought in for dinner.”

“How about a handgun?” he asked.

“A little tiny neighbor girl named Annie Mozee taught me how to shoot one when we lived near Woodland, Ohio,” she replied. “My mom wouldn’t allow me to have my own gun so I didn’t shoot a lot, but Annie could hit anything.”

“How do ya like this?” he asked, drawing the S&W from under the seat.

“It’s beautiful,” she answered. “And it fits perfectly in my hand.”

“I got it for you this morning,” Tom said gravely. “There was someone snooping in the house yesterday while I was gone. They purdy well went through everthing I’ve got, but I couldn’t find anything missin’.”

“Anything to worry about?” she asked calmly.

“I don’t know, Honey. They went through some papers un spent some time lookin’ over our best bull. The future of our breeding ranch is pretty well tied up in that bull. He’s proolly the best Hereford in America, n’ he’s puttin’ out more like ‘imself” all the time.”

“I thought western cattle were mostly longhorns,” Wendy replied.

“They used ta be, but lots uv ranchers ar startin’ ta switch over ta white faces. They’re hearty, they forage well, n’ they have more beef on ’em. That’s why I’ve invested most of ar assets in the best available Hereford breedin’ stock. I’ve been makin’ more than we ever made raisin’ range beef, n’ it’s all on ar’ own titled ground without the hassle of holdin’ on ta huge amounts uv govermut land. Other folks are always tryin’ ta horn in on anyone that’s doing well on govermut acres.”

“Sounds good to me,” Wendy replied.

“We’ve got the title ta about tin square miles uv land that stretches in a triangle along the creeks from the mountain ta where the creeks converge into the Torrent River near the house. Dad purchased most of it from homesteaders who gave up during a drought about fifteen years ago. They were abandonin’ their land ennyway, and would sign over their titles fer five er ten dollars apiece. I bought up everything else within ar’ boundaries as people moved off fer one reason or another. The last parts had ta be purchased at consider’bly more than they was worth, but we needed a fenced ranch fer ar’ breedin’ program, n’ the owners were glad ta sell fer what we offered ’em. Too bad Mom n’ Dad died before I got the titles combined into a single document, n’ fenced the whole thing off. It was their dream, and I’m carryin’ it on.”

“We’re carrying it on,” she corrected him, “Cause I know I fit into that dream pretty well.”

“Yer the purtiest part of it,” He replied, drawing her tighter against himself. “From the very beginnin’ my part uv’ that dream has always had a purty little woman with brown hair waitin’ ta meet me at the door with passionate kiss.”

“Well?” she replied a bit breathlessly, with an exaggerated pause and a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

He dropped the reins and gathered her into a passionate kiss that lasted until they ran out of breath. "I love ya, honey," he whispered as they broke it off. Then he grabbed the reins and slapped the greys into a faster walk towards home.

The virtual newlyweds arrived at the cabin after dark that evening. Tom pulled the buckboard up to the front porch, and asked Wendy to wait a moment while he went inside to light a few lamps. Grabbing a piece of paper he must have left on the table and shoving it into his pocket, he returned to the buckboard, gathered Wendy into his arms, and carried her over the threshold into her new home.

"I love it," she assured Tom as he set her on her feet inside the front door. "It's totally romantic."

After Tom had carried Wendy's trunks into the bed room, he unhitched the buckboard where it stood by the porch, so they could unload it in the morning. Wendy did a quick perusal of the kitchen cabinets while he was taking care of the horses. She was already fixing supper by the time Tom got back from the barn. After five months of separation, this evening was essentially going to be a repeat of their wedding night.

* * *

The next morning Tom discovered the paper he had placed in his pocket the previous evening. It must have been lying face down on the table, because a note was clearly scrawled across the other side of it:

Ya ain't got no right ta fence govermut land. We ar' bringin a big herd into this area and will be usin' the land between the creeks. Ya got 2 days ta leave.

Seeing the shocked disbelief on his face, Wendy came over to read the note.

"How can they do that if it's titled land?" she asked, looking up into Tom's face questioningly.

"They can't," Tom replied with resolution in his voice. "Every title was verified and recorded by the Land Office when we bought it, and again when I got the title consolidated."

"Will the Sheriff help us?" she asked.

"There 'ud probably have ta be a trial first. Then the federal marshals 'ud help us," Tom answered, "but that all takes time. In the meantime, we'll have ta keep 'em from tearing' up the place ar'selves."

"If that's the way it has to be, so be it," Wendy replied with a resolution that matched his own. Then, humming a hymn, she started fixing breakfast without the slightest hint of fear in her bearing.

Wendy was washing the dishes while Tom unloaded the buckboard. When he returned from putting the wagon up, she met him at the door. She was dressed in an old pair of his coveralls that failed to camouflage her figure very well, and she had the little S&W in her hand.

"I want to try out this gun," she announced.

"Wait'll I get mine," he answered. "Since we got that note I should be wearin' 'em all the time ennyhow."

Wendy was loading the S&W like she knew what she was doing when he returned with his gun belt strapped on. Matching Colt .44's protruded from his holsters. She dropped the .32 into the large right-sided pocket of her overalls and took his hand. They walked hand-in-hand towards the barn.

"I'll set up some targets," Tom volunteered as he strolled towards a small rise about forty feet from where she was standing. He was placing targets of wood chips, dirt clods, and whatever else lay around the knoll when two

riders came around the corner of the barn with their guns leveled on Tom.

“We’re takin’ the fence down now,” the lead rider drawled arrogantly around a lighted cigar. Tom whirled at the voice, but dared not draw while he was covered by two guns.

“This is titled land, and you can’t do that,” Tom replied evenly.

“We’ll take care uv the titles,” the man sneered triumphantly. “You’d better pull in yer horns n’ start packin’ ta leave. The little lady can stay here with us if she wants ta,” he added with an insinuating chuckle.

Wendy had just dropped her hand into her pocket to retrieve her gun when the intruders showed up. Seeing that their attention was riveted on Tom, She drew the S&W and shot the cigar from the mouth of the speaker in one lightening smooth movement.

“Ouch!” the surprised outlaw exclaimed, raising his gun hand to explore his stinging lips with the tips of the fingers that were outside the trigger guard.

“Hey! Give me that afore ya hurt someone,” the second man growled, stretching his hand toward her as he stepped his horse closer.

Swinging the gun slightly, Wendy fired again, and the second outlaw’s hand flew to the ear that she had notched.

Tom drew both guns in the confusion, putting the outlaws to the disadvantage.

“Take their guns while I keep ’em covered, Honey,” Tom said softly to his wife. “Now beat it!” he added when the outlaws were disarmed, “N’ don’t be a’commin’ ’round here again.”

“Some shootin’, Wendy!” Tom exclaimed when the intruders were a well down the road.

“What did you expect?” she asked roguishly. “I told you that little Annie taught me how to shoot.”

* * *

“While we’re at the barn, let me show ya the horse I’ve been savin’ fer ya,” Tom suggested.

“I kind of thought there might be one around here for me,” she answered. “Where is it?”

“Come n’ see,” he invited, leading her by the hand.

Fella nickered from the first stall when Tom came in. He paused to pat the big horse before opening the door to the next stall.

“This is Misty,” he told Wendy, almost like an introduction.

She looks just like Fella, except smaller,” Wendy observed delightedly as she held out a hand for the horse to smell.

“They had the same grand sire,” Tom explained as the horse took a friendly step toward Wendy. “A lot of his second generation colts look just like he did. They’re mustangs with a few generations uv Arabian n’ Morgan bred inta ’em.”

“Wanna saddle up n’ see the ranch?” Tom asked

“Sure,” Wendy replied.

Tom brought out a brand new hand-tooled western saddle with a matching bridle for Wendy. They saddled up, and he helped Wendy adjust her stirrups after she mounted. The pair stopped at the house long enough to pick up some food and get a couple of rifles before cantering off along the stream to their right. They kept an eye on the fence as they rode.

“The streams provide water for the stock year 'round,” Tom explained. “N’ if they run dry we still have two spring-fed waterin’ holes near the middle of the ranch that didn’t even falter in the big drought that drove so many people away from here. One uv ‘em was on our original homestead, n’ we bought the other one from a homesteadin’ couple that just didn’t like the solitude, n’ wanted to go back ta the social life back east. The water supply is prob’ly why those guys want ar land so bad.

They found the eastern fence in good shape, and turned left along the northern edge of the ranch. The whole northern boundary was wooded. It ran for nearly four miles along a granite outcropping on the edge of a mountain, and required little fencing.

Tom showed Wendy an old mine blasted out of the solid granite cliff by a miner who evidently had taken out just enough gold to keep him at it for several years before he gave up. The cagey miner had made the opening in the side of a natural crevasse that hid his mine from passersby and marauding Indians. Tom had found this spot when he was a child, and had furnished the man-made cavern with a roughhewn table, a couple of old chairs, and a makeshift bunk covered by a heavy old buffalo robe. More recently he had stored some tinned food, an axe, a hunting knife, an old Henry repeater rifle, and a good stock of ammunition in the room in case of emergencies. There was also a good supply of dry firewood stored there.

“If ya ever get caught out here in the weather,” he suggested, “Go ta the mountain n’ foller the cliff until you come ta this place. Ya could easily survive a two week blizzard in here if ya had to. There’s even a little spring commin’ out uv the cliff about a hunnert yards west of here”

The couple ate their lunch in the old mine by the light of a coal oil lamp, and remounted to continue their circuit around the ranch. They stopped to repair a place where the fence had been breached near the northwest corner. The familiar horse track with the V-shaped notch had traversed the breach more than once.

* * *

Tom and Wendy saw smoke billowing towards the southeast while they were still several miles from home. Tom kicked Fella into a gallop, and Wendy followed close behind. The burning cabin collapsed, showering sparks into the dusky sky just as they topped the last rise.

Tom galloped right past the embers that had been his home and on to the barn, while Wendy stopped in shocked dismay. Hero’s pen was opened, and the big bull was nowhere in sight. The greys had been turned loose, and were grazing contentedly about a quarter of a mile up the stream. The buckboard was still where he had left it, beside the barn. The fence was cut in several places.

The enraged cowboy grabbed a coal oil lamp from the barn and studied the tracks in its dim light. The v-shaped nick that Tom had observed the day before stood out like a sore thumb. Whoever was riding that horse was either totally clueless, or he was challenging Tom head on. The tracks were only two or three hours old, but it was already too dark to follow them until morning. Besides, Tom had Wendy to worry about.

The cowboy shook out a loop and lassoed one of the greys. The other followed them back to the barn, where Tom caught it easily. He was grimly hitching them to the buckboard when Wendy asked what he was doing.

“I’m taking ya ta town where you’ll be safe,” he stated.

"I'm staying with you," she answered firmly.

Tom tried to stare her down, but her stare, accompanied by an impudent grin, was every bit as steady as his.

"We'll both go ta town n' stay the night," he compromised. "We need to get that title ta the bank or somewheres safe a'fore they find it ennyways."

When the buckboard was ready, Tom slipped into the root cellar and got some money and the title from the safe by candle light. He hid them beneath a false floor in the hinged box he had built behind the seat. After he had tied Fella and Missy on leads behind the wagon, he helped Wendy into the seat and struck out for town.

"We'll stay at the hotel," Tom told Wendy as they began to recover enough from their shock to start think things over.

"That's where they'll look for us if they think we've got that title," Wendy suggested. "Anyplace else we could stay?"

"We could try the minister's house," Tom mused. "They're good folks and would do anything they could fer us."

"Sounds good," she replied. "I want to get acquainted with them anyway."

It was about two o'clock in the morning when Tom rapped at the minister's door. After a brief conversation the minister said, "You are welcome to stay here if you'd like to, but my barn isn't adequate to hide four horses and a buckboard in. I'd go out to Ma Murten's place if I were you. She's a mile out of town and has a large barn. Her husband used to board horses there before he died."

"And Tom," the minister added, "I wouldn't trust the banker if I were you. He's quit coming to church, and several shady acting people have been hanging around his place lately. Something's wrong there."

"Thanks," Tom told him genuinely. "We'll head fer Ma's right now. I want the horses hidden away before dawn."

Ma was up the instant Tom rapped on her door. She held a sawed off shotgun ready until she heard Tom's voice. Suspecting trouble, the first words she whispered were, "Get the horses and the buckboard in the barn and come in the back door. She had coffee ready by the time Tom and Wendy had the buggy hidden and the horses stabled.

Ma Murten listened to their story with very little interruption. When the couple finished talking, she said, "I been wondering when sumpthin' like this would happen. They're just usin' beef as a cover-up fer huntin' fer Murten's Mine."

"What's that?" Tom and Wendy chimed in.

"My granddaddy had a mine in the edge of the mountains near your place nigh ta sixty years ago. After two or three years of blastin' and diggin' he gave up and tried Californy. He wrote that he had made a good strike, sold 'is claim, and was comin' home a rich man. It 'pears that the mine he sold petered out purty quick, n' the story got around that he had high-graded the ore with gold from his first mine. They prob'ly lynched 'em, 'cause 'e was never heard from again."

"Somehow that rumor keeps surfacin'. Ever now n' then folks from all over the world drop by ta see if I'm related ta 'im, and what I know about the mine. I tell 'em grandpa had a minin' engineer check ut out, n' found out it was purty useless, so he abandoned ut. Sometimes I have ta show 'em his letters afore they'll quit pesterin' me. I 'magin' these folks has heard the story n' think there's a hole full a gold on the back edge a yer place. If they was a-wantin' ut fer ranchin' they wouldn't uv burned the house."

"Makes sense, Ma," Tom mused. "I found the mine while I was a'huntin' squirrels as a kid. There's no gold in ut. When this is all settled I'll show it ta ya."

"I'd love ta see ut, Tom." she said, "But iff'n I knowed where it was folks ud be pesterin' me ta take um there till my dyin' day."

"Now you kids lie down n' get some rest a'fore dawn," Ma ordered as she showed them to her spare bed room.

* * *

Tom got up when he heard Ma Murten rattling around in the kitchen. Wendy was still out like a light. "You take that title ta the preacher's house," Ma told Tom over coffee. "That way iff'n they find yer horses has been here they still can't steal your primary proof that ya own that land."

"I'll do it now, a'fore them outlaws 'll be up ta see me," Tom replied. He saddled Fella as Ma saddled her horse to go to her café. A half an hour later he was having a second cup of coffee with the minister and his wife as dawn was breaking. "We'll hide your title with our own papers," they assured him.

Tom was half-way back to the Murten place to get Wendy when a thunderstorm overtook him. He arrived soaking wet, but was thankful that the tracks that would tell that they had been to the minister's house would all be washed away.

"What'll we do for dry clothes?" Wendy mused when she saw him.

"We'll have ta buy new clothes ennyways," Tom reminded her. "Everthing else we had was burned up with the cabin. There's still quite a bit uv cash in the wagon box," he added.

Tom and Wendy had to kill time until Grants opened at eight A.M. They had what would normally have been a leisurely breakfast at Ma's, if they hadn't been so frustrated. Suddenly Wendy blurted out, "Tom, we've been so busy with all this stuff that we've been forgetting the Lord. We need to be praying about what to do."

"Right," Tom answered, blushing a bit. "We need ta pray silently right here, n' we'll pray aloud together soon as we git goin in the buckboard. We don't want them outlaws ta hear enny plans we're a'makin with God."

Despite the number of customers in the café, Tom and Wendy each took the other's hands across the table and bowed their heads in silent prayer for several minutes. Their prayer session was suddenly interrupted by a snarling voice.

"Hey, pantywaist, yer the guy that knocked me down while I wuzzant lookin' the other day. Stand up and draw!"

Wendy's face went white, but Tom answered calmly.

"You were bothering my wife n' I stopped ya face-ta-face. That's over now, and I'm not goin' ta murder ya just ta prove that I kin."

"Ya got guns on," the gunman taunted. "Stand up like a man n' say ya beat me fair."

"I already said it," Tom replied evenly. "Now beat ut and leave us alone."

"Yer as yella as I heard ya was," the gunman jeered, spitting at Tom's boots as he turned towards the door.

"Not yella," Tom replied, "Just a Christian who don't believe in murder." But when he looked around all his acquaintances had their heads down and refused to look at him.

"It's awright, Tom," Ma called out loudly as they rose to go to Grants and get some clothes. "Whether 'e realizes ut er not, ya faced 'em down with what's right."

"Yeh," Wendy agreed. "I'm proud of you for doing what's right."

As they walked towards Grants, they saw the two men they had chased off their place huddled in a conspiratory conversation with the Sheriff across the street in front of the jail. "So much fer enny help there," Tom muttered to Wendy as he jerked his head slightly towards the trio.

"Looks like we're on our own," Wendy acknowledged with a twinge of disappointment in her voice.

"We still got the Lord," he reminded her, and she squeezed his hand in agreement.

The couple purchased a wagon load of supplies and some bedding as well as a couple of outfits apiece at Grants. After the supplies were loaded Wendy stepped out the door with her arm draped with the clothing while Tom finished paying Grant. As Tom stepped out the door, the troublesome gunman was pulling Wendy toward himself with his left hand around her waist. "How 'bout a kiss fer Silverslick," Tom heard the outlaw taunting as his eyes watched Tom warily.

Anticipating that the gunman would draw with his right hand, Tom grabbed it with his left as it dropped toward the gun. At the same time Wendy threw herself backwards against the arm around her waist, interfering with the gunman's left-handed draw. By the time the gunman had found his other gun Tom's right fist was crashing against his unprotected jaw. The unconscious thug dropped like a sack of potatoes, and Tom calmly stooped to help his wife pick up the clothing they had purchased.

"Not too yella, at that," a bystander commented to no one in particular. "N she's a brick."

After the promised prayer session in the buckboard when they were well out of town, Wendy asked if they hadn't better stay in Murten's Mine. "No," Tom replied thoughtfully, "We'd best save that as our ace. There ar' still a couple uv log homesteader cabins standing on the place. One uv 'em's nigh as nice as the house they burned, and it's purty well hidden in the trees around one of the springs. I think we should go there first."

"Whatever you think," she smiled, scooting closer and putting her arm around his waist trustingly.

Tom forded the Torrent River at a rocky spot about five miles from the Triangle ranch. They followed a barely perceptible rut toward the mountain for several hours before coming to a crude gate in the western fence of their ranch. "We're 'bout half-way acrost the ranch," he told Wendy as he closed the gate and forded the stream. "The cabin we'll use is about two miles due east uv here as the crow flies, but we'll have ta thread ar way through the hills so ut 'll take more 'un n' hour ta git there."

An hour or so later the couple was climbing stiffly out of the buckboard. Wendy liked the rustic mountain style log cabin the minute she saw it. Grabbing a broom, she commenced sweeping a huge cloud of dust from the pinned plank floor while Tom unloaded the buckboard. He stabled the horses in a lean-to out back and hid the wagon in the trees before he came back in, hanging the tack on some nails in the wall. They fried some bacon and ate it with a tin of beans before they went out and picked some tender pine tips to stuff in a ticking for a mattress. It was dark by the time they finished. Tom read a chapter aloud to Wendy by candle light before they knelt in prayer at the bed side, and snuggled in for some much needed sleep.

At dawn Tom and Wendy were saddling up for a reconnaissance trip. The closer they got to the home place, the more long horn cattle they ran across. "They's mostly rustled stock." Tom told Wendy, pointing out the healing cinch-ring art on the brands. "They're bringin' that stuff in here ta turn the community against us so we'll be lynched."

“What’ll we do, Tom?” she asked, her eyes full of amazement.

“We’re gonna try ta git ta the neighbors first,” Tom answered.

* * *

When Tom and Wendy arrived at the closest neighbor toward town’s place, there were at least ten horses tied outside the house. As they came to the door they could hear a familiar voice inciting the ranchers for the lynching. “You’ll all find some uv yer cows with worked over brands over there,” the speaker was saying.

“It’s that guy whose ear ya notched,” Tom whispered. “You stay out here n’ I’ll go in n’ tell ’em what’s goin’ on.”

Throwing the door opened, Tom stepped into the room empty handed. “Hold ut,” he called out.

“Git ’em,” the speaker yelled, going for his gun. Tom’s left hand flashed, and the man’s other ear was notched before his hand even touched his gun. The outlaw’s hands raised in surrender instantly. No one else moved.

“Gentlemen,” Tom continued as he dropped his gun back into its holster, “My wife put that notch on that guy’s other ear when ’e n’ ’is side kick behind ’em there tried ta run us offin’ ar place. Since then someone has burned down ar home, cut the fences ta ar titled land, n’ chased ar prize white faced bull off. They’ve drove some, ut least, uv yer rustled cattle onta ar place so you’d help ’em run us off.”

Watching from an opened window at the back corner of the room, Wendy saw the other outlaw drawing his gun surreptitiously from behind the first one. Her gun boomed and his hands went up as blood trickled from his ear too.

“How would burnin’ down ar own place and drivin’ the best Hereford bull in the USA away help us rustle yer cattle? Tom continued when the echo died down. “N’ do yas really believe we’d be stupid enough to bring a bunch a half-healed altered brands ta ar home place where we’d be sure ta be caught red-handed with ’em?”

“I guess not, Tom,” the owner of the house answered apologetically. “We was lettin’ these guys lead us like the Pied Piper. You ain’t never been ennything but honest long as I’ve known ya.”

“I ain’t convinced,” a surly younger rancher spoke up. “I don’t trust nobody that ain’t got the sand ta stand up n’ face ennyone who braces ’em. I say let’s hang ’em.”

“Now that ya’ve seen Tom shoot, ya know that ’e would uv kilt that tin horn a’fore ’e’d cleared leather if ’e went up agin’ ’em,” another rancher admonished. “Tom was standin’ upright. Ut wouldn’t uv been upright fer ’im ta kill that fool just ta prove ’e ain’t yella. Ut would uv been cold blooded murder.”

“Yella’s yella no matter how ya look at ut,” the surly man insisted. “Tom’s yella!” he challenged as his hands dropped to hover over his guns. Two other men’s hands began drifting almost imperceptibly toward their guns as he spoke.

“Mister,” Wendy cut in angrily, “Tom beat that gun toting cow thief up twice with his bare hands when he was trying to take advantage of me. If you three guys in there with itchy trigger fingers knew what was good for you, you’d be covering your ears with those hands instead of thinking about drawing.”

All eyes were still on the window that framed Wendy’s flaming face and flashing blue eyes like a picture when Ma Murten stepped into the room with two strangers.

“U.S. marshals,” the strangers announced, flashing badges from under their vests. “We’re arresting those two

men with the bloody ears for rustling, robbery, and fraud. The rest of their gang is already incarcerated.”

“The telegraph operator tipped the banker off, and he thought he could lose us by mingling his tracks with others along the road,” one of the marshals explained. “But,” he continued, covering his ears theatrically with his hands, “There was such a pronounced V-shaped notch on one of his horse’s shoes that even a woman could have followed him.”

“Ma,” Tom queried as the marshals led the handcuffed outlaws out the door, “How’d the marshals git involved in this?”

“I finally figured out who that banker was, n’ tellygraphed their office.” she replied. “He’s a notorious shyster called ‘Honest Ike,’ who travels around startin’ up banks in small towns n’ runnin’ away with everyone’s money. I recognized ’em from a poster on the stage, only he didn’t have no toupee er mustache on the poster. I noticed the toupee when ’e jerked ’is head against my arm tryin’ ta signal that gun slick ta start something with ya.”

“What’d those gangsters want with yer land, ennyway?” One of the ranchers asked Tom.

“They heard one uv those fool ghost town rumors that there was a lost mine full uv gold on our property,” Tom answered. “I found the old Murten’s Mine they was a’huntin’ way back when I was a kid,” he continued, “n’ I’m still slavin’ my life away raisin’ cattle ’cause there never was more un a lick n’ a promise uv gold in ut. Ma Murten says that’s why her grand pappy abandoned ut in the first place.”

“Speakin’ uv cattle,” another rancher spoke up with a grin. “That big bull uv yers is over ta my place servicin’ my stock fer free. I keep a’tellin’ ’em ’e orta ta go home, but ’e won’t listen ta me. I’m ’spectin’ some mighty good calves early next spring.”

“Thanks fer tryin’ so hard ta git ’em ta go home,” Tom answered in mock sarcasm. “We’ll be over ta git ’em soon as we kin.”

“We’ll need ta get back to town and buy some material for curtains first,” Wendy added demurely.

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The guard squinted into the driving snow, jerking his rifle to readiness for an instant hip shot as he barked out the order. A late winter blizzard limited his vision to twenty feet or less.

"Just a traveler in need of shelter," a muffled voice answered through the howling wind. A moment later the indistinct shadow in the blinding white-out materialized into a man leading a horse.

"Enter under guard," the soldier ordered, keeping the rifle in readiness as the gate to the stockade of Camp Weld swung open wide enough to admit the man and his beast.

"Name?" The soldier continued.

"Brock Phillips."

"Rank?"

"Civilian."

"Business?"

"Dodgin' Indians at the moment. They were hot on my trail when this blessed blizzard sprang up, so I was able to give 'em the slip."

"Put your horse in the stables and report to Major Wynkoop in the blockhouse," the soldier ordered in a more friendly voice. "The Major'll want ta know 'bout the Injuns right away."

Cold as he was, Brock took the time to brush the snow from his horse's coat and feed him a bait of grain. When the horse was cared for, he threw his heavy saddlebags over his shoulder and crossed the stockade to the blockhouse. He barely had time to get his slicker and coat off when he was escorted into an office to be interviewed by Major Wynkoop.

"Good afternoon," the Major welcomed Brock as the soldier that escorted him withdrew from the room. "I'm Ed Wynkoop, in command of Camp Weld. I understand you had a brush with some hostile Indians out there."

"Yes Sir," Brock replied. "I was on the way up from Texas to deliver an urgent business dispatch in Denver City. About an hour after I broke camp down in the valley this morning I detected a scouting party on my back trail. Looked like Arapahos. They must have happened on my campsite and started following me along the trail. I led them on a merry chase for Camp Weld, but I couldn't shake them until this blizzard finally broke off the chase. I'm rather partial to my scalp, so I didn't stop until I got here."

"Wise decision," agreed the Major. "What makes you think they were Arapahos?"

"Might be wishful thinking," Scot replied. "I'm quite familiar with the Cheyenne, and somehow these guys just

didn't seem to have quite the same habits as the Cheyennes."

"How are you so familiar with the Cheyenne?" the Major asked.

"I was fourteen years old when my family came out west," Brock replied. "I was running a buffalo to get some meat for our wagon train when my horse stepped in a prairie dog hole and went down with a broken leg. I lost my rifle in the fall, and that ole bull swung around and attacked me before I could regain my feet. He was grinding me into the ground with his head, and I could feel my ribs breaking when I managed to get my pistol out and shoot him in the eye. The next thing I knew, some Indians were pulling a dead buffalo off me. I could hardly breathe for the pain in my chest, and every breath was frothy with blood. They made a travois and took me to their village."

"For a week or so I struggled for every breath I took," Brock continued. They managed to spoon a little broth into me occasionally, and finally my breath started coming easier. Within a month I could get around a bit as long as I didn't strain myself. Then I began to make friends with some of the Indians my own age."

"The Indians told me they had tried to communicate with our wagon train, but could not get near it without getting shot at. The folks in the train sent out search parties to look for me for several days, never allowing the Indians to get close enough to communicate with them. When the trail boss finally found my dead horse, the wagon train moved on without me. My parents probably assumed that I'd been killed by the Indians that they thought were trying to attack the train."

"I lived with those Cheyennes until I was well enough to ride. They gave me a pony and I started west on the trail in search of my folks. I found their well-marked graves on the banks of the Platte, where they had died in a cholera outbreak.

"I returned to the Indian village, and lived with them for about two years. They accepted me as one of their own, and taught me the Indian skills of the woods and plains. I was satisfied enough, but when they started attacking wagon trains I knew it was time for me to leave. I am still on pretty good terms with most of the southern division Cheyennes. They call me 'Red Breath'"

"Could you take me to that campsite where the Indians found you?" asked the Major.

"I could," Brock replied, "But I need to get that dispatch to Denver City first. Those Indians will either be long gone from there or you'll find them right on the trail if they're still looking for me. You won't be needin' my help either way."

"Unofficially, what's the hurry to get to Denver," the Major asked curiously.

"Can anyone hear us in here?" Brock asked softly.

"No!" the Major answered assuredly. You can tell me anything you want to in confidence and safety.

"Sir," Brock replied in a confidential voice. "There's ten thousand dollars in these saddlebags. If it doesn't reach the Kountze Brothers Bank this week, an honest man in Texas is going to lose his ranch. His money from last year's cattle drive was stolen, and he just recovered it in time to save his ranch."

"Say," Major Wynkoop mused, "Our paymaster has to pick up the payroll funds at Kounce Brothers this week-end," He'll have an armed Calvary escort, so you might want to go with him."

"Thanks," Brock replied, "But I need to get this duty done and over with before Friday. I prefer to travel unsuspected and unhampered anyway. I'm planning to leave first thing in the morning if the blizzard is abated."

"Understandable," Major Wynkoop mused. "Would you like to store your saddlebags in the safe and eat with me

in the officer's mess?"

"Sure," Brock agreed.

Receiving a receipt for the locked saddlebags from Major Wynkoop, Brock accompanied him towards the officers' mess. The Major introduced him to Joseph Whitefeather, a Cheyenne scout for the Army, on the way to dinner. "I'm Red Breath," Brock volunteered in the Cheyenne language.

"I've heard of you," the scout responded enthusiastically in his own language. "You speak our language very well."

"Yes" Brock replied. "I owe my life to the Cheyenne people. Bull Bear's village nursed me through a severe injury from a disagreement with a buffalo when I was a youth. I used to visit him occasionally, but that's a bit difficult now that his people have joined the Dog Soldiers.

"I understand," Whitefeather agreed. "He hasn't got much use for me since I became a U.S. citizen and took a job with the army. Most of my people don't understand that their way of life is outmoded, and they are going to have to abandon it eventually.

"I'm sure it's a very difficult concept for most of them grasp," Brock replied. "Maybe you can help them."

"Not at the moment," Whitefeather answered sadly. "They consider me a traitor."

"I'll pray for you," Brock assured him as he moved on with the Major.

"You really do speak their language well, Brock," the Major commented as they moved on to the mess hall. The Major introduced Brock to the three other officers at the table; General Chivington, his superior officer--visiting from the 3rd Colorado Cavalry, Captain Silas Soule, and the camp's paymaster. Captain Soule and the paymaster shook Brock's hand heartily, but the general acknowledged the introduction with a lukewarm handshake, at best. He sat across the table from the others, and seemed lost in his own superior thoughts.

During dinner Major Wynkoop began questioning Brock about his understanding of the causes for the Cheyenne raids on the homesteaders and wagon trains.

"The way the Cheyenne see it, Major," Brock explained, "Is that the Government keeps making treaties with the Indians, and then allowing its citizens to breach the terms for trapping, prospecting, ranching, or whatever else. When the Indians finally rise up in retaliation, the Government takes the attitude that the treaty is null and void because the Indians broke it. Actually, it's the US citizens that break it on a regular basis, and the Indians finally strike out in defense of their lands."

"Whose side are you on, Mister?" General Chivington interrupted threateningly from across the table.

"I don't exactly condone the Indians' atrocities, General," Brock replied evenly; "But I can't help but interpret their behavior as extremely frustrated acts of self-defense."

"The law of this land long before the white man came was that whoever was strong enough to take it and hold it owns it," the General growled. "That was just fine with the savages for centuries, until the white men came along and were strong enough to take it from the Indians and hold it. Now, all of a sudden, they want to cry, 'Foul.'"

"I concede your point, General," Brock answered; "But I hate to think of my country as a federation of unprincipled bullies who refuse to abide by treaties they supposedly make in good faith with the opposition."

"It's military power that counts in the end," General Chivington thundered as he rose from the table and stalked out of the room.

“Wow, that was a rather strong mouthful for a man of the cloth, and a Methodist minister, at that,” the paymaster mused after the general left.

“He’d just as soon that the Indians just be exterminated,” Captain Soule added ruefully.

* * *

Brock was let out of the fortress at sun-up the next morning. The sky was a glorious pink to the east, and the snow-capped mountains of the Front Range punctuated it majestically to the west. The trail was a mixture of waist-deep drifts and windswept voids that promised a challenging trip into Denver. Nevertheless, Brock was hitching his mount to the rail in front of the Kounce Brothers Bank by two o’clock that afternoon.

Taking his saddlebags in his left hand and his pistol in his right, Brock proceeded confidently into the bank and asked to see the manager. After the money had been counted and the payment certified, he strolled out of the bank and posted the receipt to Texas. He stabled his horse at the livery and rubbed it down before taking a room at the Buffalo Inn. By the time he had gotten a hot bath, a shave and a haircut, it was dinner time.

The traveler rested up from his strenuous days on the trail for the next couple of days. He had no interest in the casinos and the bars, but ate his meals in the saloons, where he kept his ears opened for chances of employment. If he did not find an opportunity for a job, he could always live off the land while he panned for gold in the mountains during the summer, and the Cheyenne would always let him trap in their lands for the winter.

The young outdoorsman enjoyed a rare opportunity to attend church on Sunday, hearing an enthusiastic sermon that bolstered his appreciation of what Christ accomplished for us by taking our sins as His own on the cross. His faith was encouraged and strengthened. “Thank You, Lord,” he breathed as he rose to leave.

Sleeping was a problem for Brock in Denver. The sounds and songs of debauchery were more discordant to him than the howl of the wolves or the chorus of the coyotes on the trail. On Sunday night an interminable conversation in the next room kept him awake as it drifted through the thin inner walls of the hotel. Just as he was finally drifting off to sleep there was a knock at the door, and a louder excited voice joined the conversation. Brock groaned inwardly as he wrapped his pillow around his head to deaden the sound, but he couldn’t drown it out. Finally the word, “Paymaster,” registered on his frustrated brain, and suddenly he was all ears.

“Yah, Boss,” the new voice insisted. The Paymaster from Camp Weld will be leaving Denver with twenty thousand dollars cash before noon tomorrow. He only has two soldiers with him, and they’re so drunk that they’ll be pretty hung-over. We can pick ‘em off from the rocks at that hairpin curve beside Colters Creek and take the money.”

“We’ll do it!” The boss’s voice replied. “You and Bob be there and get hidden before dawn. I’ll watch the bank to be sure they get the money, and then I’ll come on a bit ahead of ‘em. When I get out of sight around that bend, I’ll hustle up to where you guys will be, and we’ll pick all three of ‘em off at the same time. Don’t tell anyone else, and we’ll only have to split the money three ways.”

Turning over what he’d heard in his mind, Brock decided to warn the Paymaster when he showed up at the bank to withdraw the funds in the morning. When he arrived at the Bank before opening time, there was a powerful horse tied in front of the saloon across the street. Brock entered the saloon and ordered breakfast from a seat by the front window. He used the time it took to eat his breakfast to study the well-dressed gunman that had to be the boss of the thieves.

When the bank opened, Brock rose from his seat and crossed the road to it. Once inside, he took a seat in the area where prospective borrowers waited for a conference with a loan officer. Within minutes, the paymaster entered the building, and Brock rose to greet him.

“Paymaster, we meet again,” Brock exclaimed as he grasped the man’s hand.

“Hello, Brock,” the paymaster grinned as he shook his hand.

“There’s a plot to waylay you, Sir,” Brock murmured just under his breath.

“Come in to the manager’s office, with us,” the paymaster requested.

Once in the privacy of the office, Brock revealed the plot that he had overheard through the thin hotel wall.

“We wondered what the Prince was doing over there,” the banker mused. “We’ve already alerted our staff to be prepared for a hold-up. Every one of us has a loaded pistol at his fingertips, and there are three deputies with rifles stationed behind those columns on the balcony.”

“What do you think we should do?” asked the paymaster.

“You can’t wait for them to open the game,” Brock replied. “Cause they’ll be shooting to kill.”

“If we take an alternative route, we can’t arrest them in the act,” the paymaster mused.

“Why not step into the trees just as soon as the Prince disappears around that bend?” Brock asked. “They’ll probably come down after you when you don’t show up on the path as expected.”

“Yah!” the soldiers agreed, “Then we’ll have the drop on them, and if they don’t surrender they’ll die wishin’ they had.”

“I watered my horse and gave him a rest in the spot where they’ll be when I came up the trail last week,” Brock volunteered. “It’s a forested area. If you can delay things here for about twenty minutes to give me a head start, I can be up in the rocks behind them when you get there. I’ll drop a huge pine cone that I brought up from Texas on the side of the trail where you should step off on the left side. You do the talking, but I’ll have an extra gun on them in case anything goes wrong.”

“Thanks, Brock,” the paymaster agreed. “We’d appreciate your back-up”.

Brock took the trail at a trot until he was well out of sight of the Prince. Then he galloped to within a mile of Coulter creek, and tied his horse well off the trail in a rocky alcove in the forest. After exchanging his boots for moccasins, he slipped noiselessly to the location of the intended hold-up. He could smell the smoke of the outlaws’ cigarettes and listen in on their conversation as he settled in behind them to wait the paymaster’s arrival.

After about a half an hour Brock heard one of the outlaws call out to the other, “Douse your cigarette. Here comes the Prince, and the loot’s only a quarter mile behind him. Shortly the Prince rounded the hairpin bend and Brock watched him scramble up to their vantage point above the trail.

“I’ll get the first one,” Brock heard the Prince instruct the others. “Tim, you take the middle one, and Bob, you get the last one. Hold yer fire until I give the order.”

“Where are they at?” Bob queried after a five minute wait.

“I don’t know,” the Prince whispered. “They were right behind me.”

“We ain’t lettin’ ’em git away, are we Boss?” Tim pleaded. “I had my heart set on that loot.”

“You guys slip down there and take a look,” the Prince ordered. “I’ll keep yas covered.”

The two outlaws slipped down to the trail and crept around the bend with drawn guns.

“Drop your weapons,” one of the soldiers ordered from behind the trees. “We’ve got ya covered.”

As the two outlaws were being handcuffed, the Prince slipped down to the trail with drawn guns to try to free them. Brock waited until the last minute, so the boss would be seen by the soldiers before ordering him to drop his gun too. When all three outlaws were hand cuffed, Scot gathered all the horses, and the cavalcade of soldiers and prisoners rode on to Camp Weld with Brock bringing up the rear as an extra guard.

At the Major’s insistence, Brock spent the rest of the day at Camp Weld. That evening he was invited to Major Wynkoop’s office “as a personal friend.”

“Brock,” the Major opened the conversation, “This week I’ve given a lot of thought to what you said about the Indians’ grievances. There’s a copy of the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie in our files here, and I have to admit that the United States government has not kept its side of the bargain any more than the Indians have kept theirs. I am not prepared to assign the blame on either side, but I now understand, at least partially, why the Indians don’t trust the U.S. government. We have indeed allowed our citizens to invade and appropriate lands conceded to the Indians, and are now using our military to help them hold those lands. What do you think we, as Christians, should do?”

“Major,” Brock replied thoughtfully, “There’s very little that you and I can do to preserve the Indians’ rights. Unfortunately, what General Chivington said is true. ‘It’s military power that counts in the end.’ The Indians will either integrate themselves into what we call civilization, or unscrupulous power-hungry people like Chivington will literally exterminate them.

“If they could only be converted to Christ...” the Major started out wistfully.

“How can Christians who are appropriating the Indians’ lands convince the same savages to believe in a God of righteousness and justice, and especially love, Major?”

“There’s a fundamental contradiction there, isn’t there?” the Major agreed.

“Major,” Brock started to say.

“Just call me Ed,” Major Wynkoop interrupted.

“You’ll always be ‘Major’ to me,” Brock replied, “Although I’ll mouth it with affectionate familiarity.”

“Major,” he began again, “The place to start is to try and convince the Indians of the overwhelming odds against them, and the absolute need for them to make peace.”

“Brock, you’ve shown yourself to be a man of conscience, courage, and resource. Will you help me do that?” the major asked, his voice almost cracking.

“I will, Major. You can count me in to the best of my ability.”

“Thank you,” Major Wynkoop exclaimed enthusiastically as they shook hands warmly. “Can you hang around here a while so we can start developing a strategy?”

* * *

The following morning Major Wynkoop asked Brock to meet him in his office. Captain Soule was also there. “He’s very sympathetic to the Indian cause,” the Major assured Brock.

The three friends decided that Brock should set about renewing his friendship with the Cheyenne as soon as possible. He was to try to reason with the tribal leaders about the impossibility of resisting the white mans' advance, and work towards an immediate cession of hostilities against the whites. Meantime, the Major and Captain Soule would try to drum up support for peace rather than extermination of the Indians in the political community of the Colorado Territory.

Brock immediately sought out Whitefeather, who listened quietly to his thoughts.

"You need to contact Black Kettle first," The Indian advised him. He is already convinced that the whites are capable of annihilating the Indians. His dilemma is whether it would be better to fight to the death or give up the Indians' claims to the land."

"Where can I find him?" Brock asked.

"Promise me you will not betray him," Whitefeather demanded.

"I assure you that I will not personally betray him, Whitefeather," Brock answered. "But there are many that would kill him at the first chance they got. The only ones around here that I know you can trust are Major Wyncoop, Captain Soule, and myself."

"Black Kettle has a village on the Big Sandy River about forty miles north of where it dumps into the Arkansas," Whitefeather told Brock. "I'll get word to him that Red Breath can be trusted. He'll be expecting you in the next week or so. The sooner the better, Red Breath. I fear for my people."

"I fear for them too, Whitefeather. I'm going as soon as I possibly can."

Brock Phillips entered the Cheyenne village on Sandy Creek in March of 1864. He found that Black Kettle, White Antelope, and several other Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs already favored reconciliation with the white men. Several of them had been to Washington D.C. on President Lincoln's invitation, and had personally observed the immensity of the U.S population as well as the vast superiority of the white mans' technology.

These chiefs had already met with Indian Agent Sam Colley at Fort Larned, in Kansas, to discuss peace. With this situation playing out satisfactorily, Brock turned his efforts to recruiting the Dog Soldiers to the cause of peace. His only significant success was that chief Bull Bear and a few of his friends were becoming more and more sympathetic with the "Peace chiefs."

These peace chiefs were trying to separate their people from the Cheyenne Dog Soldier coalition that was pressing for all-out war with the United States government. Mr. Colley and a trader named William Bent had already tried to arrange a meeting with Colorado Territory governor John Evans. Evans had refused to grant it because some of these chiefs had snubbed his efforts to get them to ratify a treaty stripping them of their 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty rights to the richer parts of Colorado the previous year. Brock could do little more than make sure that he did more than his share of the hunting, and encourage these peace chiefs in their determination to avoid war with the U.S. military.

Meanwhile, Major Wynkoop and Captain Soule met with one rebuff after another in their efforts to drum up support for a peace initiative. The increasingly savage raids of the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers and their Arapaho counterparts served only to muster support for the extermination of all Indians, and more and more people literally agreed that the only good Indians were the dead ones. The need for military readiness to defend the Western Territories from the Confederacy seemed to be the only hindrance to a military campaign of extermination advocated by many of the more vocal military leaders.

Come May, Major Wynkoop was handed command of Fort Lyons, entrusted with protecting traffic along the

Santa Fe Trail. This moved him to within seventy-five miles of Black Kettle's village on the Big Sandy. He found the fort in terrible disrepair with severe troop morale problems, largely due to the arrogant attitude of Major Scott Anthony, its former commanding officer. Wynkoop immediately petitioned for Captain Soule to be assigned to him as second in command, and requisitioned more troops for the fort. When Wynkoop requested what his policy towards the various Indian tribes should be, General Chivington wrote, "The Cheyenne will have to be soundly whipped before they will be quiet. If any of them are caught in your vicinity, kill them, as that is the only way."

Although Wynkoop and Soule were stationed much closer to the area that he worked in, Brock only visited Fort Lyons one time. It was obvious to all three of these friends that the Indians were not likely to trust him if they felt that he might be divulging their whereabouts as they moved from camp to camp to avoid detection by scouting sorties of the U.S. Cavalry. He saw that the efforts for peace by Sam Colley and William Bent were meeting with fair success, and he did his best to rally support for the peace they sought, although he felt that their motives might be more selfish than his own.

At the end of August, Black Kettle and seven other peace chiefs wrote a letter requesting a peace council to Major Wynkoop at Fort Lyons. Brock offered to deliver it because of the danger to any Indian caught in the vicinity of the fort, but chiefs felt that it was more likely to be taken seriously if it were delivered by some of their own number. The letter read:

Cheyenne Village, August 29, 1864.

We received a letter from Bent wishing us to make peace. We held a council in regard to it. All came to the conclusion to make peace with you, providing you make peace with the Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahos, Apaches and Sioux.

We are going to send a messenger to the Kiowas and to the other nations about our going to make peace with you. We heard that you (sic) some prisoners in Denver. We have seven prisoners of you which we are willing to give up providing you give up yours.

There are three war parties out yet and two of Arapahos. They have been out some time and expect now soon. When we held this council there were few Arapahos and Siouxs present; we want true news from you in return, that is a letter.

Black Kettle and other Chiefs.

The peace letter was delivered to the fort on September sixth by One Eye and his wife, accompanied by Eagle Head. One Eye explained that despite the danger of being killed when he approached the fort, he was willing to sacrifice his life to make peace for the Cheyenne and Arapaho. This impressed Major Wynkoop so favorably that he determined to see to it that these Indians' initiative for peace would not be in vain, even if it cost him his military career.

Major Wynkoop and Captain Soule felt that they did not have time to send for and await orders by horseback from General Curtis in Kansas or even General Chivington, who might not even be at Camp Weld at the time. One Eye warned them that the Indians had to move frequently to avoid capture, and they needed to rescue the prisoners, who were children, immediately. They collected 130 volunteers from the Fort and accompanied One Eye to Smokey Hill, where the peace chiefs had been hiding from the army with nearly 2000 Indian troops. Wynkoop's forces were well aware that they faced almost certain death if their trust in the peace chiefs was misplaced or betrayed

As One Eye preceded Wynkoop's troops into the Indian camp, hundreds of Black Kettle's braves drew into a defensive battle line, forcing Wynkoop's volunteers to assume an opposing defensive stance. A pow-wow was arranged for the following day, at which both sides aired their grievances. After some quarreling among themselves, the peace chiefs finally agreed to Wynkoop's offer to escort them to Denver to negotiate peace with

Governor Evans. They handed the four white children they actually had on hand over to the Major as a show of good faith.

Wynkoop reached Denver near the end of September. Governor Evans feared political backlash if he wavered on his extermination policy against the Indians, and initially refused to meet with the peace chiefs. It was only Wynkoop's personal determination and persuasive abilities that convinced him to meet with the chiefs.

Governor Evans and General Chivington reluctantly attended the meeting with the peace chiefs on September 29th. They were anything but hospitable, correctly denying that they had any authority to negotiate any peace with the Indians. The conclusion was that any Indians that desired peace were to surrender to Major Wynkoop at Fort Lyons, and the army would consider them prisoners of war. They were to live wherever Major Wynkoop assigned them, and fly a white flag under the United States flag in their villages. Any permanent treaty would have to be negotiated by General Curtis or General Buel.

Wynkoop and the peace chiefs arrived back at Fort Lyons on October 8th. The Major sent the chiefs back to their people with instructions to bring all who would submit to U.S. military authority back to the vicinity of Fort Lyons. At this time he sent a report of his peace initiative to General Curtis, requesting official approval of the Camp Weld conclusions. On October 18th chiefs Little Raven and Left Hand arrived at Fort Lyons with 650 submissive Arapahos, which Wynkoop instructed to camp about two miles from the fort.

On November 5th Major Anthony arrived at Fort Lyons to relieve Major Wynkoop of his command. Wynkoop was ordered to report to General Curtis at Fort Riley to answer for his unauthorized activities, which were inconsistent with the General's intentions of indiscriminate punishment of all the plains Indians. Anthony immediately sent Curtis a dispatch announcing that a large contention of Southern Cheyenne were on the way to Fort Lyons, and requested that the Camp Weld accord not be honored.

Outwardly, Major Anthony feigned cooperation with the Arapahos and Black Kettle's new arrivals, promising to uphold Wynkoop's Camp Weld agreement until further orders. Wynkoop assured Black Kettle that everything would be all right, and that he was reporting to General Curtis to try to obtain official sanction of the Camp Weld conclusions. Meanwhile, Anthony collected the Indians' arms and ordered them to camp on Sand Creek under the American flag--while he subtly awaited enough reinforcements to destroy them.

On November 28th General Chivington arrived unannounced at Fort Lyons with a force of well over 600 troops. Despite the vehement objections of most of the resident officers, he claimed the authority to commandeer 125 additional Fort Lyons troops, and headed towards Sand Creek with an army of at least 750 men. At sunup the next morning they opened fire on Black Kettle's peaceful Cheyenne camp that flew the U.S. flag with a white flag of surrender underneath it. The Indian braves fled to the forest where they could fight back, while Chivington's troops indiscriminately slaughtered around 75 old men, women, and children in the village. They killed another 75 of the braves in a running battle along the creek. Captain Soule's and Lieutenant Cramer's troops from Fort Lyons refused to take part in this cowardly massacre. When the fighting was over, Chivington's troops returned to desecrate the bodies of the victims.

Black Kettle escaped into the forest. Brock returned with him that night, well knowing that Chivington would execute both of them if they were discovered. They found Black Kettle's wife lying where she had crawled under some brambles after being shot nine times. Miraculously, she was still alive, and they were able to whisk her away. She survived against tremendous odds.

Chivington had successfully stolen Major Anthony's hope of glory. He sent a dispatch to Denver claiming a victorious campaign with 600 hostile Indians killed. After searching in vain for Little Raven's band for the better part of a week, he returned to a hero's welcome in Denver.

Before taking his troops back to Fort Lyons, Captain Soule sent Brock Phillips straight to Fort Riley to report what had really happened at the Sand Creek Massacre to Major Wynkoop, Brock's report put the blustering General

Curtis on the defensive, especially after he found that General Chivington's enlistment time had expired several months prior to the massacre. Realizing that the public's reaction to the truth could ruin his own career, Curtis was forced to drop his vendetta against Major Wynkoop, and start distancing himself from General Chivington. He restored Wynkoop's command of Fort Lyons and instructed him to investigate Chivington's massacre of the peaceful Indians. Wynkoop's report led to both formal military and Senate investigations that condemned and disgraced General Chivington for life, but he was not prosecuted for his war crimes because of an amnesty agreement for officers of the Civil War.

After testifying in both the military and Senate investigations of the Sand Creek Massacre, Captain Soule left the army and took up residence in Denver. He was treacherously murdered by a supporter of General Chivington within a year, but no hard evidence could be uncovered to implicate Chivington in the murder.

Major Wynkoop was soon promoted to Indian Agent for the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians. He put Brock Phillips on the pay role as a scout, and Brock was influential in helping him win back the personal confidence that the peace chiefs had originally placed in him. But although they continued to lobby their own people for peace, they would never trust the U.S. military again.

After nearly four years of diligent peace negotiations with the Indians had been persistently thwarted by both the Army and the Dog Soldiers, Major Wynkoop resigned from the Indian Agency in frustration. The very next day Black Kettle and his wife were killed in a surprise attack on his village on the Washita River by Colonel George Custer's 7th Cavalry troops. They were shot in the back while crossing the river almost four years to the day after the Sand Creek Massacre. Their deaths were avenged when Custer was killed at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

End note:

Blessed Are the Peacemakers is the story of the untiring efforts of Major Edward Wynkoop and Captain Silas Soule to arrive at a peaceful resolution to the Cheyenne and Arapaho resistance to the white mans' encroachment on their land.

References to Brock Phillips, Whitefeather, the paymaster and the outlaws are fictional gimmicks to maintain the flow of this otherwise true-to-arguable-history account.

The Piece-Maker

The "Peacemaker," the Colt was called,
Along the nation's border;
It was the gun that tamed the West,
And brought in law and order.

But in the hands of violent men
It was the antithesis
Of peace and safety in the land,
Which blew the peace to pieces.

The Spores of Hatred

Nick Norton sat wearily on the wooden bench of the Cheyenne train station, where he had spent the night. Rain rolled off the roof of the building, flowing briskly into the ditch along the tracks and on down towards the trestle. From there it was caught up in the reckless careenings of a creek which was threatening to overflow its banks. Flooding had temporarily stopped all rail road traffic south towards Greeley, Fort Collins, and Denver.

"If this doesn't let up pretty soon, I'd better get a hotel room," he told himself. "No telling how long I'm going to be here."

Nick dug his slicker out of his suitcase at noon. It hung loosely about his tall form as he picked his way across the muddy street to the hotel. He took a seat near the back of the dining room, facing the front so he could observe the crowd. He enjoyed watching the other diners as he lunched on coffee and a cold roast beef sandwich. Some were friendly, even jovial; some looked so much like they carried the weight of the world on their shoulders that it stirred up sympathies from somewhere deep inside him. He made it a point to smile at such people, though few seemed able to muster much of a response.

A steady rain was still falling when Nick arose from his leisurely meal. He stepped into the lobby and registered for a single room.

"First one down the hall ta the west," the clerk told him. "It'll be noisy this close ta the dinin' room, but it's all I got left."

"Thank you," Nick answered cheerfully as he pocketed the key. "I'm sure it'll beat another night at the station."

"Last rain like this shut 'er down 'most a week." The clerk replied. "Best pick a good book er two 'n' settle in. There's a couple a' cases full of 'em as has been left here on either side a' the fireplace. Just be sure ya leave 'em in yer room when ya check out."

Most of the tattered books in the cases were either classics that Nick had already read, or pulp stuff that generally repulsed him. He finally settled on a copy of *Ivanhoe*, which he hadn't read since he was a child. "I'm too tired to read anything heavy," he mused.

The young doctor went directly to his room. A quick glance in the mirror startled him. His face, sandy-colored hair, and matching beard were streaked with coal soot that made his light blue eyes seem to glow from their sockets. His wry smile at the specticle emphasized the healthy whiteness of the teeth that showed evenly through his darkened lips. "That's what I get for riding so close to the engine," he thought; although he wouldn't have traded his seat near the marvelous machine for anything.

Nick pulled a clean pair of Levi's and a dark blue shirt from his suitcase. He proceeded down the hall to the men's tub room, where scrubbed the railroad grime away with lukewarm water and lye soap. Returning to his room, he sprawled on the bed with his book. For the next three hours he was lost in the intrigues of medieval Europe. Finally, the clatter of dishes and the dull roar of multiple conversations competing to be heard in the dining room brought him back to Wyoming. He stood up, brushed the lint and wrinkles from his clothes with his hands, and went to supper.

The dining room was overflowing that evening. Nick was forced to share a table with three other travelers who were stranded by the floods. They were a rancher and two of his cowhands who were on the way home from Omaha after accompanying their cattle to market on an eastbound train. The rancher had been impressed with the ease and speed of shipping by rail as opposed to cattle drives. The cowhands said little at his enthusiastic endorsement of the rails, though their faces registered their disappointment at this victory for progress. Nick half-heartedly entered into what little conversation took place, his mind being on the beautiful and virtuous Jewish maiden, Rebecca, so skillfully created by Sir Walter Scott.

After polishing off the best part of a huge steak, Nick excused himself at the first polite opportunity to return to his book. He finished it by the light of a coal oil lamp just before midnight. He was downright disgusted with Sir Walter Scott's bequeathment of Rowena to Ivanhoe when Rebecca seemed to him to be the perfect woman. He blew out the lamp and went to sleep, only to rehash the book in his dreams. Even though he awoke to a gloriously beautiful day, his heart was still aching for the lovelorn Rebecca. How he longed for a girl like her!

After a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, Nick moseyed over to the train station to find out when the service to Denver was likely to resume. The overnight westbound had just arrived; and the place was a confused chaos of stranded passengers trying to re-adjust their travel arrangements. The line to the telegraph window extended out the door and into the muddy street. Harried passengers, too anxious and exhausted to converse, converged at the ticket windows. Respecting the other travelers' dilemmas, the young doctor took a seat on a bench next to a seemingly unruffled Hispanic man. He had all the time he needed, and could wait until the confusion cleared a bit without significant inconvenience.

The man Nick sat by was dressed as a gentleman, but his hands and face marked him as an outdoorsman who wasn't afraid of work. "Quite a lot of disappointed people," Nick remarked to the middle-aged gentleman.

"Yes," he responded in English that would have been perfect except for a hint of the natural cadence of the Spanish language. "My niece has just reached the window to ask how long it will be before we can catch a train south towards Denver."

"That's what I came to find out," Nick replied. "Mind if I wait here until she gets back?"

"You are more than welcome, Sir," the man answered with a genuine smile.

Suddenly an intriguing young woman took a seat on the other side of the friendly Mexican. She also took the breath out of Nick.

"Hi," she interrupted their conversation.

"I'm Juan Morales, and this is my niece, Miss Nita Morales," the gentleman announced proudly as the well composed young lady reached a gloved hand towards Nick.

Noting her somewhat olive complexion, Nick's mind screamed out, "This is Scott's Rebecca, if anyone ever was."

"I'm Nick Norton," he managed to eke out as he shook the young lady's proffered hand almost worshipfully. In his mind he was kissing it.

"What did you find out about the train?" her uncle asked causally.

"It will be two to three days for those who already have tickets, and another day or more for those who don't," Nita answered. "Anxious as we are to get home, we'll just have to accept the Lord's will about it. At least we have tickets."

"We'd better try to beat the rest of this crowd to the hotel," Mr. Morales stated as he started to rise from the

bench. I want you to have a room tonight, Nita.”

“The hotel filled up yesterday,” Nick announced. I got the last room, but Nita is welcome to it. I’d sure hate to see her have to sleep on a bench in here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Norton,” she replied. “But what would you do?”

“Your uncle looks like a man who enjoys the outdoors,” Nick answered. “I’m sure he and I could slip out of town and sleep on the ground quite comfortably, now that the weather has cleared.

“Thank you for your generosity, Nick. I accept your offer over my charge’s objections,” Mr. Morales announced firmly.

At that instant the report of a large bore hand gun boomed in the room. Mr. Morales slumped on the bench. Nick heard the hateful words, “There’s one less dirty Mex,” as he rose to see what could be done for the victim.

“I’m a doctor, Nita,” he assured her as he lowered Juan to the floor.

As he knelt on the floor beside the stricken man, Nita knelt on the other side. “Tell me what you need me to do,” she murmured without the slightest hesitation.

“Cross the street to the hotel and have them send some hot water and a clean old sheet to room 1A.” he directed. She was off like a flash. A few onlookers volunteered to help carry the unconscious man to Nick’s room, where He could examine him better. Others brought the Morales’s baggage.

Morales was lung shot. Nick cleansed the wounds with hot water and soap, swabbed them generously with Listerine, and covered the sucking entrance and exit wounds with Vaseline coated patches torn from the sheet the hotel had provided. He finished his treatment and laid the man on the room’s only bed with his head and chest propped up on pillows.

It’s very serious, Nita,” he told her. We’ll get some extra blankets so you can sleep on the floor, but I’ll need to sit up with him tonight. I’ll be praying for him, as I’m sure you will be too. Shall we pray together now?

The girl stepped up beside him at the bedside, and he took her right hand in his left as he laid his right on the patient’s shoulder.

“Father,” he prayed in a subdued conversational voice, “We’ve done all that we can for Juan. He’s in your loving hand, and we know that you always know what’s best. Please comfort Nita, who I’ve come to, uh, admire in this unfortunate incident. Help her to accept your sovereign will as best. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

“Amen!” re-echoed a husky but firm feminine voice from beside him.

As he dropped her hand, the young doctor saw a couple of unbidden tears starting down her cheeks. He spontaneously took her by the shoulders, pulling her into a slight hug; and she leaned her head on his chest and cried for a few moments.

“Thank you for your support,” she finally said as she began pulling away from him. It was all he could do to relinquish his hold on her. This, his heart told him, was his woman.

Nick sat at the head of the bed throughout the rest of the day. Nita sat at the foot as the hours dragged on. Finally they began to talk.

“He is a lawyer,” she told Nick. “He has been working for the State of Colorado in Washington D.C.”.

“He is a U.S. citizen, then?” Nick asked.

“Yes,” Nita replied. “My grandparents immigrated from Spain in 1825. They tried to settle among the Spanish speaking people of Texas, but the political instability there disturbed them too much. They were of Basque decent, from the Pyrenees Mountains, and after twoyears of misery they moved up into Colorado-- where they felt more at ease. They made friends with the Indians, who let them settle in a small valley isolated by mountains on two sides and a deep canyon on another. The valley opened onto the plains towards the east. My people were the first whites to settle in that area. We were there a whole generation before any of the ranchers came. We have always raised sheep for wool and mutton, which we sell to the Indians and to the Mexicans to the south of us. We will soon be shipping wool and mutton all over by rail.”

“Uncle Juan and my father were U.S. citizens by birth. Both of them filed for 160 acres right after the Homestead Act, and got titles to that ground five years later. We were among the first to purchase land after Colorado was granted statehood, when they needed money in 1876. The whole little valley is now in our name, with all the mineral and other rights intact. We are not a large ranch, but we are comfortable and secure.

“Where, exactly, is your ranch?” Nick asked as his eyes feasted on this charming young lady.

“It’s on the Chiquita River northwest of Estes Park,” she replied.

“Gracious!” he exclaimed. “Our ranch is the Lightning-N. Our brand is just a capital “N” with the first stroke lengthened downward and the last one engthened upward so the brand looks kind of like a streak of lightening. We’re on the Chiquita, looking right up into the mountains. We must be neighbors.”

“We probably are,” she answered in a bit of an off tone, “But we raise sheep.”

The conversation trailed off for a half an hour or so while Nick changed the dressings on his unconscious patient. He was much too intrigued by this beautiful young lady to let it drop for long.

“Tell me about your parents,” he requested.

“My Dad is of pure Spanish descent, like Uncle Juan. Both of them were sent to Boston for their educations. While Uncle Juan studied law, Dad studied engineering. I got my mathematical bent from him. We are both fascinated with numbers.

“And your mother?” he continued.

“She was a New England manufacturer’s daughter from Boston. She was on summer break from Mt. Holyoke when my Dad met her. They got married within a month, which almost got her expelled from school. Only her Dad’s money and Uncle Juan’s ability at law saved her. She loves botany, and has drawings and classifications of most of the wildflowers in Colorado. She has discovered nine or ten new species over her lifetime, and plans to publish a book on western wildflowers soon.”

“And yourself?” He asked breathlessly.

“I just finished my nurses training at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. I passed everything including bedpans with flying colors,” she added with a cute blush. I love the mountains and hope to work in a rural area as close to them as I can get.

“Now you tell me about yourself,” Nita probed.

“I was raised on the Lightning-N,” he began, “And was becoming a pretty fair cowhand. But when my baby

brother got whooping cough and died without a doctor, I decided I was going to study medicine. After getting my M.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, I studied at several places in Europe. I'm twenty-six years old now, and am returning to Colorado after being away for eight years. I hope to practice somewhere along the Front Range."

Neither of the young people had even thought of eating until Nita suddenly felt hungry. She rummaged through a food basket and came up with a loaf of bread and a few slices of baked ham. As they finished eating, Uncle Juan suddenly pointed to the sky. "I see Him," he said excitedly. "There are scars in His hands." The effort brought on a coughing spell, and by the time it subsided he was dead.

"I'm sorry, Nita," Nick whispered as he took off his stethoscope.

Suddenly she flew into his arms and wept like a woman should. He held her tightly against his body, and she clung to him like she belonged there until the tears quit rolling. Finally she pulled away, reluctantly, it seemed to him.

"I guess I'd better call an undertaker," Nick finally suggested.

"Can't we keep him here until morning?" she asked. "He was like a second father to me."

"If that's what you want, I wouldn't think it would hurt anything," he mused. "But now that your uncle has passed away I can't stay here."

"Of course not," she agreed as she got her thoughts together.

"I'll be back as early in the morning as is reasonable," he promised as he tore himself away from her. He slept on a chair in the lobby, which wasn't conducive to a very good rest, especially with the lovely woman of his dreams so near, and yet so far from his arms.

* * *

Nick was at Nita's door at seven o'clock in the morning. She answered his knock promptly. She looked like she had been crying, and seemed to be very glad to see him.

"So what do I do now?" she asked him.

"Let's go to breakfast and talk it over," he suggested.

Over a light breakfast they agreed on a plan. First, they would contact the undertaker and the sheriff. Then they would catch the first train down to Longmont. From there they would travel by stage coach to Estes Park. They would have to use a livery rig to travel back up north from there to their respective homes.

The undertaker was a small somber man who seemed pretty well-versed in his business. First he removed the deceased's watch, ring, and wallet, handing them directly to Nita. "We can have the burial here today if you'd like," he told her, "Or I can embalm the body and you can ship it home to be buried with his relatives."

"I never thought of that," Nita responded. "I think he would have wanted to be buried by his wife. She was a wonderful Indian girl who died trying to give him a son. But we'll have to ship it to Estes Park and take it the rest of the way ourselves," she added.

"I'll get started right away," the undertaker promised. "But since he was murdered, I'll have to get clearance from the sheriff. Why don't you stay here until he comes to talk with you? I'll go get him now."

"A short time later the sheriff appeared. The railroad had called him about the shooting, and he had already

interviewed several eye witnesses. "What did you see?" he asked Nick and Nita.

"I just heard the shot and saw Mr. Morales slump in his seat," Nick said. "As I rose to help him, I heard something about a 'Dirty Mex,' although Nita tells me that he was of Spanish descent rather than Mexican. Some bystanders helped us get him to the hotel, where I treated his wounds. He never regained consciousness, and he died about 10 o'clock last night."

"You're a doctor, then?"

"Yes."

"Anything to add, young lady/" the sheriff asked Nita.

"No, I had very much the same impressions. I'm a nurse, and we were more intent on saving Uncle Juan's life than catching the murderer. We hoped maybe you would do that."

"Looks like none of us were very successful," the sheriff answered a bit testily.

"The witnesses said the assailant looked like a middle-aged cowpoke with a long jaw," the sheriff continued in a more relaxed tone. "One of them said he took his hat off to wipe his forehead just before he drew his gun, and he was bald. He had a red beard and wore a tan Stetson, a red shirt, and blue Levis. Better keep an eye opened for anyone that looks like that in case he's got it in for your whole family."

"I'm not part of the family," Nick told him. "Mr. Morales was a perfect stranger to me before I sat down beside him in the crowded railroad station. He had just introduced me to his niece when he was shot. She and I have both been at school out east for years, and now that we've met we find that were pretty close neighbors up north of Estes Park. I hope to escort her home, as least as far as propriety permits."

"Looks like a pretty pleasant responsibility," the sheriff remarked with a twinkle in his eye.

"It is indeed," Nick answered as a blush spread from his neck into his face. Nita turned her face to hide an irrepressible grin.

The good weather held. After two more days of constant interaction, Nick and Nita were able to board the first train southbound for Longmont. A pine shipping box containing Mr. Morales's remains was in a freight car on the same train.

The ride down to Greely, across to Ft. Collins, and on down to Longmont took less than half a day. Nita dropped off to sleep and slumped against Nick's shoulder. He placed his left hand across her lap to keep her from slipping off her seat and let her body twist with the bumps until it lay across his chest so he could support her right shoulder with his right hand. Her exhaustion was his dubious rational for an unforgettable trip from Ft. Collins to Longmont. He feared she'd be terribly embarrassed when she awoke, but she didn't seem to be in all that big a hurry to extract herself from her predicament when she began to stir a bit. When he finally leaned down and kissed her forehead he felt a shiver go through her body as she straightened up.

The young couple took rooms at opposite ends of the hotel in Longmont that night, and caught the stage to Estes Park the next morning. Uncle Juan's temporary coffin was strapped atop in the luggage rack. They disembarked in front of the hotel in Estes Park in time for a late lunch.

"How are we going to travel together from here on?" Nita suddenly asked Nick disappointedly. "We'll have to spend at least one night on the trail, and probably two."

"Nita," he answered hesitantly, "I knew you were the girl for me the moment I saw you. If you feel the same

about me as I feel about you, we could get married this afternoon and go home together as man and wife.”

“Is that a proposal?” she asked point blank.

“It is, Honey. I’m so madly in love with you that I can’t imagine ever being without you, ever.”

“You know,” she answered with a grin, “When I started my nurses’ training I asked the Lord to give me a doctor for a husband before I returned home. It kind of looks like He made the deadline just in the Nick of time, doesn’t it?”

“In my short experience, when you give the Lord a deadline He pretty well holds you to it,” he mused, grinning at her quip.

“Well, I’m glad He’s offering me this particular Christian doctor, because after getting to know him I would never be able to settle any other man,” she said, pantomiming dreaminess.

“Nita,” he said, pulling her into a total body hug, “I love you too much to take advantage of these circumstances. Are you absolutely certain this is what you want?”

“Positive!” she answered, locking her fingers behind his neck and pulling his head down for a kiss. “Let’s find a preacher.”

A brief inquiry at the registration desk of the hotel was all it took. By 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon they were standing beside each other with a church elder and his wife as witnesses.

As the Pastor lectured them rather lengthily on the sanctity of marriage, Nick was thinking, “I wish he’d get done with the ‘Dearly beloveds’ and on to the ‘I dos,’” which he did in due time.

When the minister asked, “Do you, Juanita Morales, take this man...?” Nick felt an urge to say, “No, she’s Nita,” before it dawned on him that “Nita” was simply the diminutive form of “Juanita.”

The nuptial kiss after the long-awaited pronouncement was worth the delay. Nick tipped the minister and witnesses appropriately; and the newlyweds walked back to the hotel hand-in hand. They registered as Nick and Nita Norton, and went directly to their room.

Nick and Nita rose early the morning after their wedding. A quick tally of their combined resources was a bit discouraging. The extra expenses of their delay at Cheyenne and Mr. Morales’ embalming fees had left them a bit short on pocket money. There was not near enough cash between them to buy a horse and buggy to carry the pine box in. They thought about borrowing from Uncle Juan’s wallet, but there still would not have been enough to buy a buggy, so they left his money alone. They scarcely had a hundred dollars between them, but it would be enough if they were frugal. They kept back Uncle Juan’s seventy-five dollars to bail them out of any further emergencies.

“How will we get Uncle Juan’s body home without a buggy?” Nita asked. “We can’t just leave it here. There must be a way.”

“Nita, we can buy two Indian ponies to ride and a pack animal to carry the body,” Nick remarked. “But we’d have to dispense with the pine box and tie the body over the pack horse like they do when someone gets killed out on the range.”

“It wouldn’t bother him any,” Nita answered, “And it would certainly be better than burying him here instead of at home beside his wife.”

They bought three Indian ponies that appeared to be reasonably sound for ten dollars apiece, a couple of old

range saddles for fifteen dollars, and two blankets apiece. They also bought enough trail rations for a two or three day journey, a cast iron skillet, and a blue porcelain coffee pot. Nick picked up a used Henry Yellow Boy for another ten dollars at a pawn shop. He already had a colt .45 in his suitcase. He strapped the hand gun on his waist for the journey.

While Nick saddled the horses and tied on their paraphernalia, Nita went to their room to change. She left the key with the clerk and came back wearing Levis taken in at the waist and a matching denum blouse, neither of which disguised her figure very well. "I'll have to ride astride on these rough trails," she explained, and she was absolutely right. They were the appropriate clothes for such a journey.

The newly-weds were well up the mountain trail wending north from Estes Park by noon. Nick was relieved to see that Nita knew how to avoid leaving unnecessary signs of her passage along the trail; and she admired his practiced eye which always seemed to be watching for danger both ahead of and behind them. They stopped by a white water creek for lunch, and did not stop again until dusk. Nick picked a well hidden campsite that impressed Nita. "I see you haven't lost your trail savvy after being in civilization so long," she complimented him.

"The privacy was what I wanted," he grinned; but his campfire showed all the marks of a seasoned man of the trails. As they sat around the fire enjoying each other's company with newly-wed delight, he wished he could keep her there forever. Nor would she have objected, but they had a body with them that desperately needed burying.

The young couple breakfasted on bacon and hotcakes. Nita took the skillet down to the stream to scour it with sand while Nick started packing the horses. Just as he finished Nita came running back.

"Sioux," she mouthed in a muted warning as she leapt on her pony and galloped up the trail.

Nick mounted instantly, jerking his mount around and urging it after her. The pack horse followed of its own accord.

Nick was impressed with Nita's horsemanship. Although she was tearing full-speed up the trail there was nothing reckless about her flight. She was in full control of her mount, her lithe body clinging to the pony like she was part of it. The other thing that impressed him was that about a half-a-dozen savages were closing the distance from behind him, their blood-thirsty yells emphasizing the need for speed.

Nita's Indian pony was holding its own, but with Nick's weight his pony was beginning to lag. The beleaguered man began looking for a defensible refuge when he heard the first wild shots fired from the backs of the Indians' horses. Veering into a nest of boulders, he jerked his mount to a stop and leaped into the marginally adequate shelter with his Yellow Boy.

Nick's first shot knocked a brave from his horse. He could see the injured Indian writhing in pain as the rest of the savages thundered around a bend in the trail in pursuit of Nita. He grabbed the injured Indian's pony and took off after the other Indians, but he was hopelessly behind the frenzied warriors by this time.

Nita was staying comfortably ahead of the Indians, praying more for Nick than herself. She had heard the shots fired in Nick's brief skirmish, and decided to circle back through the forest to find him. A rotting deadfall lay across the path, and she cut her horse to the right a step before they jumped it. Unfortunately, the ground behind the deadfall was damp, and the already unbalanced pony's hoofs slipped as they landed. Nita jumped free as the speeding pony fell hard, rolling over several times and breaking its neck.

The dismounted woman fled into the forest on foot. Within moments she noted that the Indians were no longer yelling. She was instantly aware that they had seen her dead horse, and would be stalking her as she fled. She ran away from the trail, leaving as little evidence of her pathway as possible. The fleeing woman was making good headway until she came to a sheer drop-off of several hundred feet into a stream that flowed along below it. Seeing a slight movement above her, she turned down-hill, watching for a way of escape as she ran. Suddenly a fierce brave stepped out of the undergrowth, blocking her retreat. She stood silently on the edge of the precipice

as five armed Sioux braves formed a formidable semicircle around her.

Lust gleamed evilly from one of the brave's eyes as he took a step toward the cornered woman. Well knowing what would happen if she were captured, Nita took a step closer to the cliff. Grinning, the Indian took another threatening step toward her, and she stepped dangerously close to the edge. The message was clear. She would hurl herself over the precipice before submitting to the degradation they had in mind for her. Guttural voices conferred with amusement as the other Indians looked on with anticipation.

The unabashed brave was crouching to make a grab for Nita when an arrow struck him in the back, piercing his heart as it protruded through the front of his chest. The stricken Indian sank to the ground as the others turned to flee. An instant barrage of arrows flew at the remaining Indians. Two of them died instantly. The other two were riddled with arrows, but still alive.

A band of seven or eight Utes stepped out of the undergrowth as Nita stepped away from the precipice. "Nita," one exclaimed in the Ute tongue, "You are a brave squaw. I would be honored if you would become my wife."

"Thank you for saving me, Sleeping Bear," she replied in his dialogue. "You honor me, but I am already married."

At this point Nick stepped into the crowd of friendly Indians.

"Nick," Nita called to him, "Come and meet a good friend of ours."

"Sleeping Bear," she addressed him in the Ute language, "This is my husband, Nick Norton. He is a learned healer."

"Greetings, friend," the Indian answered in the Ute tongue, raising his right hand with his palm facing forward. "We had been trailing the Utes ever since we found their tracks in our hunting grounds. We caught up with them just as they caught up with Nita. I envy you. Your squaw is both beautiful and brave."

Nita blushed as she translated for his words to her husband.

"Greetings, Sleeping Bear," Nick answered. "Are you prospering?"

Nita translated a few polite inquiries between the men that were culturally necessary before Nick could get around to thanking the Indians for saving his wife. Then she continued her subdued conversation with the Sleeping Bear while the other Indians began scalping the dead and alive Sioux. Nick finally interrupted Nita to tell her that there was an Injured Sioux down the trail that needed his attention.

Several of the Utes accompanied Nick down the trail to where the gut-shot Sioux lay. The bullet had severed his spine and he had been unable to move off the trail. The savages looked on in amazement as Nick knelt to administer his services to his dying enemy. After disarming him, Nick built a fire close by and began heating water. He put a warm compress over the wound to help relieve the pain, and injected some laudenum in his hip. Finally, he covered him with his own blanket.

As the patient began to relax he reached out a hand and grasped Nick's arm weakly. "You are good man," he said in broken English. "Red rancher gave us fire water to kill sheep woman." He was mumuring, "I am sorry, " as he dropped into his last sleep.

"He will die by nightfall," Nick told one of the Utes who could speak a little English. "We will make him as comfortable as possible until then. He is a man, and when he dies, I will bury him with respect."

While they waited for Nita and Sleeping Bear to rejoin them, the Indian told Nick of Nita's standoff with the Sioux. "What else would I expect from the perfect woman," Nick told himself as he breathed up a prayer of thanks for the woman that fit the description of Scott's Rebecca so perfectly.

One of the friendly Utes shot a small deer, and the whole party roasted steaks over the fire as the Indians sat by to observe Nick's strange behavior. The white doctor and nurse did everything within their power to ease the wounded man's passing, but he died while the moon was still low in the sky.

Come morning, the Indians helped Nick dig a shallow grave, and stood in awe as he prayed over the body before lowering it gently into the earth. They disappeared into the woods a somber crowd, deeply impressed by the white doctor's respect and sympathy for the enemy he had been forced to shoot. This was incomprehensible medicine to their way of thinking!

"We won't see them along the way again," Nita remarked, "but if I know Sleeping Bear, they'll be watching over us all the way home. "He tells me there is bad blood between the ranchers and my folks," she continued as they started down the trail again. "He is not sure what the argument is about."

"It's probably the age-old argument between the shepherds and the cattlemen." Nick surmised. "The cattlemen hate the shepherds because the sheep crop the grass so short it dies, especially if it's overgrazed. The shepherds resent the fact that the cattlemen crowd them onto the poorest graze, forcing them into overgrazing."

"Sleeping Bear thinks the situation is pretty volatile at the moment," Nita told her husband.

"I hope our families are not at odds with each other," Nick mused to himself. "We need to get home!"

One of the Utes had caught Uncle Juan's horse, as Nita and Nick called it. Shortly after the Indians took their leave, the white couple headed north, determined to finish their journey that day if at all possible. Nita rode Nick's horse, and he mounted the Indian that he had shot's horse. It was a bigger animal that would not struggle so much under his weight. Before noon they were beginning to see occasional familiar sights of their childhoods.

* * *

Nick and Nita rode up to the Morales' homestead at about two o'clock in the afternoon. As they approached the house, they could see her father standing in front of four mounted ranchers with his gun drawn. The cattlemen were facing away from the house towards the canyon of the river, as if the shepherd had slipped up behind them after they had addressed the house.

"This valley is titled ground," Nita and Nick heard the Spanish American explaining. "You'd be welcome here if you came in peace, but don't you ever come back here threatening my family again."

The leader of the ranchers, a tall man with a clean-shaven face, answered vehemently. "Yah got the drop on us this time, ya dirty Mex, but we'll be back. We ain't 'lowin' no sheep in Colorado."

"We were here long before any of you cattlemen came along," Mr. Morales explained patiently, "And we're staying here. The next time any cattleman crosses the stone wall across the mouth of this valley, he is liable to be shot without warning, unless he's alone and carrying a white flag of truce."

Nick rode up to side Mr. Morales while Nita hurried on to the house. As Nick's approach drew the sheep rancher's attention, the spokesman began a draw. Before he had cleared leather a shotgun boomed from an upstairs window of the house. The distance was too great for any serious injuries from the scattergun, but the ranchers' horses' rumps' were stung enough to start them bolting and bucking. The offending cattleman was unseated, and Nick grabbed the gun that he had lost as he hit the ground.

Nick's gun was out before the other horses could be brought under control. Grabbing the rider-less horse's bridle, he waited until the arrogant cattleman had remounted. Then, handing him his gun grip-first in a calculated dare, he barked out, "O.K.! You guys ride out and don't come back until you've made peace with Mr. Morales."

As the men rode off, the sheep rancher turned gratefully to Nick. "Thank you, young friend," he said as he offered his hand. "May I ask who you are?"

"I'm Nick Norton, Nita's husband," Nick replied. "I think whoever shot from the house saved our bacon."

That would have been my wife," the sheepman said as he mulled over what Nick had said. "If this is Nita's man she sure picked a good one," he muttered to himself. "Let's go inside so I can greet my daughter," he added in a more understandable tone of voice as he recovered from his shock.

The Morales's reunion was a joyful one, though saddened by the news of Uncle Juan's death. Nick really liked Nita's mother. She accepted him as part of the family simply on account of his obvious love for her daughter. The newly-weds were placed in a guest room in the second story of the original home that the Morales immigrants had built out of mountain boulders and cement. The only thing Mediterranean about it was the ceramic roof made from home-made tiles. The building looked nearly as impregnable as a medieval castle.

Uncle Juan was finally laid to rest next to his wife the next morning. The family held a graveside service, where Nick and Nita related the vision of Christ that he had seen just before he died. The priest reminded the family of the reality of heaven for all those who trusted in Christ. His homily lent a bittersweet essence to their tears, and made it much easier for the family to give him up.

Nick and Nita struck out for the Lightning-N shortly after the burial. When they went through the gate in the sturdy stone wall that delineated the eastern edge of the Morales property, Nick declared that they were on the Norton ranch. "Strange," he mused, "That we rarely crossed this wall. I guess it was solid enough that we never had occasion to look for any strays on the other side of it. We played a bit over there once in a while, but since we were not allowed to take our horses across we never penetrated the valley far enough to see your homestead. Dad hated sheep, so I guess we just naturally avoided the place after we found out that there were sheep in there."

Nick's enthusiasm at coming home was building so fast that he did not notice that the closer they got, the quieter Nita was becoming. By the time they finally rode up to the house she was scarcely responding to his comments at all. When he helped her dismount, she clung to him, trembling a mite.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart?" he asked, concerned.

"They'll hate me. I'm a shepherd's daughter," she answered.

"No, Honey, they'll love you because I love you," he assured her, placing an arm around her as if to ward off her anxiety.

Nick led his wife into the house through the back door into the kitchen. His mother was just taking a batch of cookies out of the wood-fired oven.

"Nick," she gasped out joyfully as she rushed to greet him. She hugged him tight as he stooped to place a kiss on top of her head. Her hair was much greyer than it had been when he left the ranch.

"Mom," he said, pulling away. I want you to meet my wife, Nita. We got married on our way home from the east."

"Where are you from, Nita?" Mrs. Norton asked sweetly.

"She's a Morales, Mom," Nick said. "She was raised just across that stone wall to the west of the Lightning-N."

"Oh," Mom said rather flatly. "Dad's over at the neighbor's and won't be back until evening. Why don't we sit

down and have some coffee and cookies. The three of us need to have a talk.”

“How is Dad?” Nick asked when they were served.

“Not good,” Mrs. Norton answered.

“What’s wrong?” Nick asked, concern written all over his face. “Is he sick?”

“No,” Mom continued, tearing up. “He’s just allowed himself to become so full of prejudice and hate that he’s ruining himself.”

“He hates my father?” Nita asked

”Yes, Honey,” the rancher’s wife answered. “He’s going to be fit to be tied when he finds out that you and Nick are married. I wish I could make him understand what he is doing to himself and his neighbors, but he seems to be under some strange outside influence, and won’t listen to me.”

Nick’s mother rose from her chair as she spoke. Walking around the table to Nita she threw an arm around her. “I’m going to love you, little daughter; but there’s going to be some rough times for both of us before this is over with.”

“Mom,” Nick broke in. “Dad might as well know from the start that Nita means everything to me. I will not stand by and have her demeaned, nor will I stand by and see her parents mistreated by him or anyone else.”

“You need to stand firm in that resolve, Son.” His mother answered. “A bunch of ranchers are over at the X-in-O ranch planning an attack on the Morales place right now. It’s the Rowe place. Their graze is just south of ours. Your dad will be full of liquor and hate when he gets back, and I’d suggest that you have Nita out of here by then.”

“I think we’d better leave now,” Nick suggested to Nita. “I need to have a talk with your Dad, and then I’m going to that meeting.”

“Thank you, Mom,” Nita said as she drew the older woman into a hug. “Whatever happens, I’ll know it’s not your fault. Please don’t let our marriage drive a wedge between you and your husband.” The ladies kissed each other before separating. Nick and Nita went straight home to the Morales homestead.

Mr. and Mrs. Morales was still sitting at the lunch table when Nita and Nick burst into the house,

“It didn’t go well?” Mrs. Morales asked as she looked at their troubled faces.

“Nick’s mother accepts me as her daughter, but she fears that her husband won’t,” Nita answered.

“Dad has no idea that I’m home, much less that I’m married to Nita. He’s at a meeting to plan an attack on us right now,” Nick added.

“Why would they start giving us trouble after all these years?” Mrs. Morales queried. “Our ancestors built that heavy stone wall to contain our sheep in this valley. We’ve never had any trouble with the ranchers or even the Indians afore.”

“I’d better go out and start preparing the help for war,” Mr. Morales mused as he rose from the table.

“Can we talk a minute first, Dad?” Nick asked.

“Sure, come into my office,” the sheep rancher replied.

"I'm going to that meeting," Nick announced. "I'm going to warn them that this is titled land again. They obviously didn't believe you. Can you show me the titles so I can tell them I have seen them."

"Sure," Mr. Morales answered, turning to open a huge safe that stood next to his heavy Mediterranean desk.

"The top one's the original homestead with the buildings, and the bottom one is the whole valley with both a description and a sketch of our holdings," the older man explained as he handed Nick the papers.

After a brief but honest appraisal, Nick was completely satisfied that the documents were in order. The Homestead title was from the United States Land Grant Office and the overriding title for the purchase of the valley and its mountainous borders was from the State of Colorado. "Pray for me, Dad," he said as he gave his father-in-law a token hug, and turned resolutely to strike out for the X-in-O.

* * *

The heat of the afternoon sun was tapering off a mite by the time Nick arrived at the X-in-O headquarters. He tied his mount at the hitching post near the house and knocked at the heavy wooden door to the cedar-sided house. A startlingly beautiful young woman about his own age answered his knock. "Hi, I'm Becky Rowe," she said, welcoming him in.

"I'm Nick Norton," the young doctor replied. "Is my father here?"

"Yes," she replied in a noticeably less enthusiastic voice. "Dad's guests are in the parlor. Just go through that door. No need to knock." Then she turned and walked away without even excusing herself.

"They call her Rebecca, but she's really just Rowena," he muttered almost inaudibly as he stepped toward the indicated door.

Nick's father stood up from the table to greet him the moment he entered the room. After a hearty hug, he introduced him to a group of about a dozen other ranchers. "This is my son, Nick Norton, he announced proudly. He just returned home from studying medicine out east and in Europe."

Most of the ranchers that had seen Nick at the Morales ranch sat by rather sullenly, while those that hadn't greeted Nick enthusiastically. The guest who was sitting by Mr. Norton moved across the table to allow Nick to sit by his father. A generous glass of whisky was poured for the newcomer, which Nick left untouched. As things settled back to normal, the host resumed his dominance of the conversation.

"Nick," he began, "I know you didn't understand things when we met yesterday. That Mex has moved in on us with a bunch a' woolies. We've warned 'im to get 'is dirty hide out of here with all 'is miserable sheep, but 'e won't listen ta reason. We ain't a'gonna have ar' government graze ruined by sheep, and we ain't 'lowin' no Mexes in ar' part a' Colorado. We're chassin' 'im out er wipin' 'im out."

"We're gonna burn 'is house tamarly night just after dark," Nick's dad whispered in his ear." His voice was slurred from alcohol.

"Gentlemen," Nick stood as he addressed the guests, "You are being misled. I don't know if the Morales hire any Mexicans or not, but they are Spaniards who have been in that valley for three generations. They were here at least fifty years before any of us arrived, and their sheep have been contained in their valley by that huge stone wall the whole time. They have the title to that whole valley and an additional thousand feet into the mountains that border it."

"Them deeds will be Mexican land grants that ain't valid any more," Mr. Rowe assured the group. "They ain't got

no right ta live here, un' we're runnin' 'em off."

"I've examined their deeds, Mr. Rowe," Nick cut in. "That valley was purchased from the State of Colorado in 1876, when the State was rather strapped for cash."

"Them Mexes poisoned a bunch a my cattle, 'n' we're runnin' 'em outta here," Nick's dad declared.

"Dad," Nick said clearly, "The Morales are Christian people who would never stoop to that. Nita Morales is my wife, and I'll be helping to defend her and her folks. I wouldn't shoot you for anything, but if one of my bullets takes you in the dark when I can't identify you, I'm sorry in advance."

Nick turned to go, but the young cowboy sitting next to him rose to face him.

"We'll settle this right now," he yelled. "Draw."

Nick's opponent's hand dropped for his gun. As it came up Nick shoved it wide with his arm as if he were blocking a punch, and stepped in with a driving right to the tip of the jaw. The surprised man fell backwards, his arms reflexively bracing behind him to break his fall. He was heavily built, and an audible pop was heard as his right elbow dislocated from the force of his fall.

The young man writhed in pain, his elbow bent significantly backwards. Nick stooped beside him, pushing his gun out of reach. "Your elbow is dislocated," he told the injured man. "I can stop most of the pain right away if you'll let me put it back in place."

"You would do that for me?" the young man grunted out in amazement.

"Of course," Nick responded, taking the subdued man's hand in his own as his other hand slid gently along his forearm to examine his elbow. A steady pull followed by a quick twist one way and then the other had the elbow back in place. After the initial shock of the sudden maneuver, the pain subsided quickly to a tolerable level. Nick helped the young man to his feet and advised him to wear a sling on the arm for a couple of weeks. The doctor was out the door before anyone noticed he was leaving.

Nick galloped away from the X-in-O, slowing to a fast walk after a quarter of a mile or so. He arrived at the Morales homestead just after dark. Nita's anxiety spread into a lovely smile as she greeted him with a heartwarming kiss at the door. She clung tightly to him the way he loved her to as he recounted his visit to the X-in-O. "No one except Dad knows that he divulged their plans to me," Nick assured the Morales. "And he was so drunk that he probably doesn't remember telling me."

* * *

Mr. Morales took Nick for a ride around the valley the next morning as they planned their defense of the home place. The grounds around the house and outbuildings had been planted with a heavy "U"-shaped cover of trees that completely hid them from view except from the front, which relied on the canyon for protection. The trees stretched about a hundred yards beyond the front of the house to form a living colonnade along either side of a wide picturesque drive coming up to the front porch.

"They'll come as close as they can in the trees," Mr. Morales surmised, "So we'll have to watch for them from the outside edge of the cover. If everyone holds their fire until someone has to shoot to prevent their gaining cover, we should be able to break their backs before they get situated. We'll have all the help up here for dinner, and have them take up their stations at dusk."

Nick felt that the old man had planned an excellent defense. "Why don't you and Mom and Nita stay in the house to fire from there if needed?" he suggested. "The rest of us will be outside trying to hold them back."

“Good idea,” Mr. Morales admitted. “We’ll do that.”

The two men rode through the valley explaining the plan to the hired shepherds. “If you will return home to protect the women,” Mr. Morales suggested, “I’ll contact Sleeping Bear for some help too.”

There were at least fifteen men at the dinner table that evening; Spaniards, Americans, Mexicans, and Indians interacting amiably. After a hearty meal they moved into the dusky shade of the trees to take up sheltered positions for the defense of the Morales homestead. About two hours after dark they could see an army of about thirty men creeping up to the trees by the light of the moon. A passing cloud threw the whole scene into darkness just as the first of them reached the trees, forcing the defenders to start firing.

If it had not been for the poor light, most of the attackers would have been cut down in that first barrage of fire. As it was, at least a third of the ranchers’ ill-fated gunmen were wounded. The attackers were thrown into confusion, and those who were able fled for their horses.

All the outside defenders returned to the house without injury, but Mr. Morales had been shot in the shoulder as he watched from an upstairs window. Nick and Nita operated immediately, quickly and efficiently removing the bullet from the bone it was lodged in. “It will be fine if it doesn’t get infected,” Nick assured everyone as he dressed the wound. The tough old man never let it slow him down.

The following morning three wounded ranch hands and a couple of dead bodies were discovered on the grounds. Nick treated the wounds of the living and put the gut-shot one to bed in the house. He hog-tied the other two wounded men and loaded them and the two bodies into a buckboard. He carted them off to the Lightning-N, where he would not be likely to be fired upon.

The injured men were so sullen that Nick finally addressed them. “Don’t act like we wronged you,” he lectured. “You came trying to kill us, and you got your comings. If that cloud hadn’t come along when it did, you’d be dead.” They remained sullen and unbelievably hateful.

The young doctor tied the reins to the hitching post outside the door of his parents’ homestead. As he slipped into the kitchen he heard sobbing in his parents’ room. Opening the door softly, he saw his father weeping over a dead body in the bed. A sheet was pulled over the face, but it was the unmistakable form of his mother.

Nick stepped up beside his dad slipping a supporting arm around his waist. Without looking up, the distraught rancher murmured, “She had a cold last night, and she died this morning,”

As Nick stooped to peek under the sheet his father suddenly stepped away, and he heard the distinct click of a handgun being cocked. “Don’t touch ‘er,” his dad warned. “Ya rejected us ‘n’ sided with that dirty Mex, ‘n’ ya ain’t welcome here no more.”

“Dad.” Nick plead. “Nita and I had a nice visit with Mom two days ago. We love you both.”

“Ya chose that dirty Mex over us, ‘n’ married ‘is daughter. Now git afore I shoot ya.”

“OK Dad,” Nick said, his voice cracking. “But I’m not rejecting you, you’re rejecting me.”

The younger Norton walked out the front door with a bleeding heart. He unloaded the bodies of the deceased onto the front porch. Then, lifting the two hog-tied cowpokes to the ground, he drew his knife and sliced through the rawhide thongs that bound their wrists. He left their feet tied to disable them long enough for him to get away from his birthplace safely, knowing that they would be able to extricate themselves within a minute or so. Turning his rig towards the Morales ranch, he urged the horses into a trot and never looked back.

Nita was heartbroken over her husband's grief. She sat on the couch, cradling his head on her lap for most of the afternoon. She encouraged him to talk about his childhood memories of his parents, patiently nipping each trace of resentment against his father in the bud. She had already eaten lunch, but neither of them ate any supper. When the emotionally exhausted man finally dropped off to sleep, she wiggled carefully out from under his head, placing a couch pillow under it. She spread a light blanket over him, and catnapped in an overstuffed chair beside him. She wanted to be there to share his grief if he needed her.

Three days later Nick and Nita rode towards the Lightning-N. Finding the foreman out looking over the cattle, he asked him how his dad was. "E's sleepin' off a douzy of a drunk," the foreman replied. "E ain't likely ta wake up 'til evenin'. Iffin' ya wanna see yer mom's grave, this 'ud be a good time," the sympathetic man added. "I'm sure sorry about what's goin' on, 'n' I'm doin' my best ta keep the boys outta ut. It just ain't right."

"Thanks Tom," Nick replied. "We'll go on over to see the grave before we head home. Please get word to me if you detect any softening in Dad's attitude."

"I surely will," Tom replied, offering his hand to Nick. After a firm handshake, Nick turned and rode to the grave with his wife. Holding hands with Nita, Nick was finally able to weep away at least a part of his pent up grief.

As the couple rode towards home, Nita spotted a dead longhorn bull. Several other cows stood listlessly by. Suddenly Nick noted a bloody discharge draining from the dead animal's mouth. A quick check of the nearby cattle confirmed his suspicion. All of the listless ones had evidence of bleeding from every orifice of their bodies. "Don't touch them, Nita," he warned. "That's anthrax."

Nick and Nita rode quickly back to the Lightning-N. "Tom," he began when they found the foreman unsaddling his horse, "We just found some sick cows. One's already dead. Don't touch them, it's anthrax."

A shudder rushed through Tom's frame as he comprehended what the couple had told him. "Show me where they're at," he requested.

"Why don't we take you there on our way home?" Nita suggested.

Within a half an hour the three brought up their mounts a short ways from the stricken cattle. Another had already died, and as they watched, a third one dropped to the ground. "Lord help us," the foreman breathed up a prayer. "No wonder Mr. Norton thought someone 'ud poisoned 'is cattle."

"Keep your horses' heads up so they can't eat any of this contaminated grass," Nick warned the other two. Tom, you be sure your boys understand how contagious this is. It fits what Dad said about how Mom died."

"I don't know what ta do," Tom said confusedly.

"Warn the boys tonight," Nick suggested. "I'll be back early tomorrow to get some samples. A German named Pasteur made a successful vaccination for anthrax in sheep four years ago. We'll try his method for cows and maybe people, but it's going to take a while. Meanwhile, I'd push all your healthy cattle except the ones right around here to the far side of your range."

"How are you going to use Pasteur's method, when it is a patented secret?" Nita asked as the couple rode on towards home.

"I see you've been keeping up with the best medical literature." Nick complimented her.

"Yes, but how's that going to help us when we don't know how Pasteur did it?"

Because I was a friend of one of his assistants," Nick answered smugly. "He told me that Louie actually used

Toussaint's potassium dichromate method because he wanted to be the first to break with the vaccine. He had an idea for a similar way of weakening the bacillus with oxygen, which would bypass Toussaint's patent, but hadn't perfected it yet. Pasteur's method did pan out, but Toussaint's works too."

"We should send back east to get some potassium dichromate right away," Nick told Nita as they rode towards home. "That's liable to be the biggest delay in producing our vaccine."

"I know a miner that has some for assaying," she replied. "I'll get him to bring us a box of it tomorrow."

* * *

Nick and Nita were up at daybreak the next morning. She started boiling down some gelatin to prepare some sheep's-blood medium to grow the germs on. He put on some of Mr. Morales' oldest clothing, wore an old jacket, and rode to the spot where the anthrax infested cattle had been seen. Only one was still alive, and it dropped as he approached it. After putting on some gloves, the doctor obtained a syringe full of infected fluid from the orifices of the still struggling animal. Capping the syringe, he discarded the clothing in a heap, pouring coal oil on it then and igniting them with a match. He rinsed his hands with Listerine before putting on some fresh clothes from his saddlebags. The couple plated out their cultures of *Bacillus anthracis* the next morning.

Meanwhile, Tom was having troubles of his own. About a third of the Lightning-N hands quit and left the area when they heard of the anthrax epidemic. The remaining faithful cowpokes who truly rode for the brand helped move the healthy cattle to the far side of their range. When Mr. Norton reported Nick's findings at Mr. Rowe's next meeting, the brazen rancher convinced everyone that it was just a cover-up for more cattle poisoning by the "Dirty Mexes,"

Watered with the family's prayers, Nick and Nita got several pure colonies of *Bacillus anthracis* on their first attempt. By the middle of the second week they had their first batch of cattle vaccine fomenting; and two weeks later Tom was vaccinating the Lightning-N's healthy cattle, though no one was really sure if it would work. None of the vaccinated stock had sickened by the time they were ready for their second and final dose.

Nick was helping administer the second dose of vaccine to some sheep over by the edge of the valley about a week later when a shot rang out. He dived for the ground as a bullet stung the fleshy part of his forearm. He had seen the gun flash, and returned the fire with his Henry from a prone position. He heard a grunt that indicated that his bullet had found its target. When no movement was noted for some time, he went up to investigate. When he found a body behind a nest of boulder his face turned grey.

Nick staggered back to his horse, retching on the way. He sat down on a boulder in a sweaty daze. When he did not speak or move, one of the shepherds rode his horse to the house to get Nita. When she could not get him to respond, she got the shepherd to show her where Nick's victim lay. "Senora," he gasped out as he crossed himself, "It is his father."

Nita returned to sit silently by her husband. Placing her arm around him, she wept the bitter tears that the overwhelming anguish of his soul could not produce. About dusk, he rose and helped her up. They walked back to the house hand in hand without either one needing to say a word.

Mr. Norton's funeral was held in the little stone chapel in the Morales valley. The priest could say little to comfort Nick, except that the man had probably lost his mind. "We can hope that he trusted in Christ before he lost it," he suggested. The body was interred beside his wife's.

Nick inherited his father's cattle and the title to the Lightning-N homestead. The Rowe riders started crowding some of their cattle onto the Lightning-N's graze during the funeral. Tom had anticipated the move, and his men were ready. It only took a few well-aimed shots to convince the Rowe riders that they wanted no part in a range war with the crusty faithful of the Lightning-N.

The next morning Nick had Tom and his men start dousing the skeletons of the deceased animals with coal oil and burning them to cinders right where they lay. Anthrax germs form spores that can survive in the soil for fifty years or more if you don't eradicate them," he warned the cowpokes. We'll have to vaccinate for the disease for several years as a precaution against surface spores.

Several nights later Nick's injured forearm began to swell. He considered it no more than a bother since the arm was painless. He started soaking it in Epsom salts every morning and evening. Three or four days later the whole arm was swollen, and there was a black eschar of full thickness dead skin where the original bullet scrape had been.

Nick dressed the wound and went directly to Nita. He pulled her tenderly to a chair and sat down beside her. "Darling," he addressed her gently, "I wish I didn't have to show you this." As he exposed the wound she gasped out, "Anthrax!"

"Yes, Honey, it's cutaneous anthrax," he admitted. "It's not fatal quite as often as the pulmonary form of the disease. It's too late to try the cattle vaccine, but the infection itself will serve as a vaccination if I survive long enough. Prayer and good supportive treatment might save my life.

Nita put on a brave front. "Tell me what you want me to do," she urged.

"I'll probably get delirious," he surmised. "You can use frequent warm compresses to combat the infection," he told her. "And force me to drink plenty of water with a teaspoonful of salt and a tablespoonful of sugar or honey to the quart in it for hydration and nourishment. The most important thing is to burn all cloths and bandages, and disinfect your hands with Listerine every time you touch the wound. You can't let yourself get the disease too."

Nick demonstrated the treatment he wanted Nita to use as the day wore on. When he finally went to sleep in his chair, she went to their laboratory and injected herself with a dose of the cattle vaccine proportional to her weight. After offering up a fervent prayer for her husband, she went to bed.

Come morning, Nick was delirious. Nita treated him exactly as he had asked without fear of death. The vaccine had worked on the cattle, and she was sure it would work on her if she could just stave off the disease for the better part of two weeks. She would not let anyone else in the room for their own safety.

Nick remained toxically delirious day after day. Every time his eyes focused on Nita he began raving about his love for a girl named Rebecca. Sometimes he raved of her beauty, sometimes her bravery, sometimes it was her intelligence or her modesty, or her purity. Sometimes he spoke so intimately of his love for Rebecca that Nita blushed. One thing was sure. He was hopelessly in love with this Rebecca.

Nita was broken-hearted. The way she figured it, her husband had married her on the spur of the moment, when he was actually in love with someone else. Someday he'd wake up and hate her. "I should never have faked that sleep on the train," she berated herself remorsefully. "I wanted him to hold me so badly, but his holding me is what sealed his infatuation with me."

Nick's continual raving about Rebecca never diminished Nita's love for him a bit. "I wish I'd never taken that vaccine," she often mused. "Then I would die of anthrax and leave him free to marry his beloved."

Nick's arm was suddenly much better on the tenth day of his confinement, but Nita's throbbing heart was still agonizing over his love for Rebecca, whoever she was. When the somber silence of the home was broken by a knock at the door, Mrs. Morales opened it to find a beautiful young woman asking to see Doctor Norton. "He's been quite sick, but I can call his wife down to see you," Mrs. Morales ventured. "She's scarcely left his side for ten days, and its time she took a moment's break."

Mrs. Morales coaxed Nita downstairs to see the visitor with difficulty. She was too crushed to see anyone, but she couldn't bear to tell her mother.

Putting on a brave front, she introduced herself. "Hello," she said as cheerfully as she could, "I'm Nita Norton, the doctor's wife."

"You must be blessed," the other woman answered. "I'm Becky Rowe."

"Oh," Nita gasped. "I've been wondering who Rebecca was. My husband has been delirious for ten days. He raves about Rebecca from dawn to dark. Were you his childhood sweetheart?"

Sensing Nita's brokenness, Becky placed an arm around the exhausted woman waist. "Come outside, Nita, we need to talk," she urged gently. "You have nothing to fear."

"He's not in love with you?" Nita asked, her tearful eyes searching for the truth.

"No, Nita, I've only seen him once, for less than a minute. He's very much in love with you."

"You're positive?" Nita asked through quivering lips.

"Very," Becky assured her. "When I answered his knock at my dad's door, he evaluated me momentarily, as men do woman-only maybe a bit more intensely. I pointed him to the parlor door, and as I left the room he muttered something to himself so inaudibly that it took me several minutes to reconstruct it. I finally put it together as, 'They call her Rebecca, but she's really just Rowena.' I was a bit miffed until I realized that he was comparing me to his own sweetheart. Then I envied the woman who was so perfect in the mind of this devoted man."

Nita stared blankly at her visitor, not comprehending what she was getting at. "You're too tired to see it right now, Nita," Becky assured her. "Reread Ivanhoe tonight and you'll see how much the doctor loves you."

"Thank you," Nita blurted out, still unconvinced. "Can I help you with whatever you wanted to see the doctor about?"

"Our cattle are dying," Becky started. "Tom says that Doctor Nick can help us, but Dad's too proud to ask. Besides, he's coming down with a cold."

"Is it anthrax?" Nita asked.

"Tom says it is," Becky answered, anxiety showing on her face. "He says your husband has a vaccine for it."

"My husband is just coming back from the brink of death from the milder form of the disease," Nita told her. "But if you can get Tom to help you, he knows how to administer the vaccine and dispose of the dead stock properly."

"He'll help!" Becky assured her. "We're engaged. You're the first to hear it."

"O Becky," Nita shrieked. "He's a wonderful man!"

After a bit of girl-talk, Nita's mind returned to reality. She needed to get back to Nick. "Why don't you take some vaccine home with you so Tom can get started right away?" she suggested. As Becky started for home with the vaccine, something somber dawned on Nita. "Bet her dad will be dead within a day or so," she muttered.

Nick's mind was completely normal the day after Becky's visit, though he was terribly weak. Nita was confident that his full recovery was just a matter of time. She had borrowed her dad's old leather-bound volume of Ivanhoe, and when her husband dropped off to sleep she sat down at his bedside and took it up. It fell open to a picture

of the beautiful and virtuous Rebecca.

Nita was still staring the picture when Nick awoke. He was reaching out to squeeze her hand when he saw the book. "Ivanhoe," he broke the silence. "I'll never forgive Scott for marrying him off to Rowena when Rebecca was the perfect woman. The moment I saw you, Nita, I knew you were my Rebecca. Sometimes I actually catch myself calling you that in my mind."

She stood up to stare wonderingly at his face as his hungry eyes took in every detail of her form. Suddenly she threw herself on him with abandon, tears streaming from her eyes. His arms wrapped around her as he crushed her to himself. Their lips met in the confidence of love. She was the mystical Rebecca that had filled his every thought, even as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

* * *

Mr. Rowe passed away on the second day after Becky had visited Nita. No one wanted the infected body in their church, so the Morales offered them the use of their little stone chapel. Since Nita claimed immunity to the disease, she volunteered to prepare the body.

"Thank you, Nita," Becky choked out. "I'm ashamed to tell you this, but I owe it to you. The southbound train from Cheyenne was flooded out last time Dad came home from selling cattle, so he hitched a ride down the Soda Lakes spur from Laramie. He bought a mule from a prospector to ride on home, and ran across a dead mountain goat along the way. He picked it up in hopes of infecting your herd with it, but it got to smelling so bad that he abandoned the carcass on the Lightning-N before he got to your place. I guess he's a victim of his own prejudice and hate."

Mr. Rowe's family asked that he be laid out in his best red shirt and blue Levis. Nita washed his body and put the clothes on it. She crossed his hands and laid his tan Stetson on his chest. When she stood back to critique how he looked it clicked. He had a bald head, red stubble, and a long jaw.

"It fits," Nick agreed when she told him who Mr. Rowe was, "He was in Cheyenne during the floods, and was always projecting his own inadequacies on harmless Hispanics." Neither of them ever told anyone else who shot Uncle Juan.

Historic Time Line of Interest to The Spores of Hatred

1820--Sir Walter Scott published Ivanhoe. Sold 10,000 copies in the first two weeks.

1837--Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary was established.

1858--Denver City was founded. The area was virtually unsettled until the late 1850s.

1859--City of Estes Park was established.

1862--U.S. Congress passed the Homestead Act.

1867--Cheyenne, WY was established. The Union Pacific Railroad reached it from the east later that year.

1868--Denver Pacific RR Company built a link from Cheyenne through Greely to Denver.

1869--Eastern and Western segments of the transcontinental railroad joined at Ogden, UT.

1872--Vaseline was invented by Robert Cheesebrough.

1873--Levi Strauss's rivet re-enforced blue jeans were patented.

1873--The Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing was founded in NYC on Clara Barton's principles of nursing.

1875--Robert Koch identified the bacillus of Anthrax.

1876--Colorado statehood was granted by U.S.A.

1877--Colorado Central Railroad built a link from Golden through Longmont to Hazard, WY. (Colorado Junction Station west of Cheyenne?) See 1883.

1877--Stage coach line from Namqua (Now Longmont) to Estes Park was established.

1879--Listerine was formulated as a surgical antiseptic by Lawrence and Lambert. Lawrence sold out to Lambert Pharmaceutical Co. in 1885.

1880--Laramie North Park and Pacific RR built Soda Lake Spur South from Laramie to U.P. RR's Soda Lakes (Now Meboor & Gelatt Lakes). The spur was used until 1901.

1881--Louis Pasteur demonstrated 100% efficiency of his anthrax vaccine on 25 vs. 25 sheep.

1883--The Railroad from Ft. Collins to Colorado Jct. was re-routed back to Greely and up to Cheyenne.

1885--Ideal part of the American cowboy era for this story to take place.

1915--Rocky Mt. National Park was established.

2012--Although Mt. Chiquita lies north of Estes Park, the Chiquita River had to be invented for this story. Place it anywhere you find a picturesque mountain stream rushing down Mt. Chiquita, through a small pastoral valley, and on to the plains of eastern Colorado. The stone wall is probably long gone, but you might find some remnants of it.

A Time to Kill

The trip West had not gone well for eighteen-year-old Ehud Martin—at least not since they had left Springfield Missouri for the gold fields in California. In the first place, the wagon train had been caught in a violent thunderstorm on the Santa Fe Trail when they had scarcely gotten into Kansas. Ehud's mother had come down with pneumonia from the cold soaking she had gotten when the wind whipped the canvas cover off their Conestoga wagon./p>

Ehud was a tightly built young man of average height with black curly hair and golden-brown eyes that roved appreciatively over his surroundings. He was left-handed, of stocky build, and had filled out a lot in his seventeenth year. The six weeks that he had smithied along the trail seemed to have toned his already well-muscled body to perfection. There was not an ounce of flab on him.

The entire Martin family came down with cholera shortly after they crossed the Cimarron River. Although Ehud and his father survived the ordeal, his mother and two sisters were buried along the trail. Mr. Martin led his son in a tearful prayer of parting with their loved ones as well as thankfulness for their own survival. "In a sorrowful crisis like this," the good man admonished his son, "if we don't accept that our heavenly Father loves us enough to always do what is best for everyone involved, we are likely to turn away from Him when we need Him the most."

Although Ehud and his father arrived at Mesilla, New Mexico relatively late in the season, the Southern Emigrant Trail did not present the winter difficulties of the more mountainous Oregon Trail. Desert conditions, outlaws, and possible encounters with Indians would be the primary dangers along the extreme southern Gila section of the route.

* * *

After resting their oxen and restocking their supplies, the Martin blacksmiths left Mesilla for southern California. Because of reports of current disruptions on the Gila Trail, they opted for the more southern Cooke's Wagon Road, which actually breeched the Mexican border for over a hundred miles. Since they had few belongings except for their tools, they were able to make room for a comfortable four barrels of water in their Conestoga. It was nearly Fall when they took to Cooke's Wagon Road.

The Father-and-son team had averaged over ten miles a day for more than a week when the banditos hit them. They had hidden their wagon in a clump of cottonwoods on a small creek, and stopped for the night. While they were drinking their coffee early the next morning, six Mexican soldiers came upon them with drawn guns. Resistance would have been foolhardy, and both of the Americans' hands were quickly tied behind their backs.

"How come you are arresting us?" Mr. Martin asked politely.

"You are come to our country illegally," the leader replied.

"Don't you come and go freely without harassment in our country?" Ehud asked.

"I am Pedro. I go wherever I please," the soldier laughed.

"But why are you arresting us?" Mr. Martin continued. "We are peaceful men who don't even carry guns."

“That is why we arrest you, Senior,” Pedro laughed. “It is easy to arrest fools.”

“We are Christians,” Ehud interjected. “We would almost rather be killed than to kill anyone else.”

The renegades finished off the Martins’ coffee and remounted their horses. They tethered the captives to two of their mounts and started off at a brisk walk, forcing the prisoners to accompany them on foot. They lashed them maliciously with a small whip whenever they slowed down or attempted to communicate with each other. Although the banditos drank freely from their canteens, the captives were only given water every couple of hours.

Both the blacksmiths were in excellent physical condition, and were able to keep up with the plodding horses without too much trouble. About noon of the third day the party climbed a gigantic barren hill, pausing to rest the horses at the top. The small mountain towered above a deep valley watered by a meandering spring-fed stream. The valley appeared to be about two miles wide and perhaps ten miles long. A good-looking herd of longhorn cattle grazed throughout it. A huge adobe hacienda dominated the eastern end of the valley just before it narrowed into a short blind canyon.

It took another hour for the group to wend their way down the narrow horse path into the valley and on toward the hacienda. A huge white man wearing a ridiculously decorated military-like uniform came out to meet them as they encroached upon the adobe structure. “Ah, the Generalissimo is here,” Pedro exclaimed approvingly while they were still out of earshot. “He will pay us well for these men.”

“I see you have got them, Pedro,” the big man observed. “Come inside for your money. You have earned your wages well.”

“Hurry, Pedro,” one of his henchmen urged, “the cantina is still two hours west of here.” Pedro returned shortly with a leather bag full of pesos; and the banditos galloped down a wagon rut and out the western end of the valley, hastening towards the distant cantina.

* * *

A couple of leering slave drivers with short whips like the banditos had used took immediate possession of the captives. They led them to a row of posts about ten feet tall, each with a rope strung through a pulley near its top. “Don’t display your strength,” Ehud’s Dad warned in a whisper as he was led past the boy to the next post. The victims’ backs were bared and their hands were placed through nooses on the ropes. Finally, their arms were stretched tightly above their heads as the “Generalissimo” arrived.

“I have purchased you as my slaves,” the big man proclaimed brashly. “Now I will show you who is the boss in this valley.” With that introduction, he commenced beating them mercilessly with one of the whips. Neither of the blacksmiths let out so much as a groan, nor would they plead for mercy. When their backs were thoroughly raw with cuts and welts, their arms were released and they were led past a kennel of about twenty snarling bloodhounds and on to one of about thirty one-room adobe huts.

“You will live here,” the taskmasters instructed them. “You will be the blacksmiths that repair the tools in the general’s silver mine. You will be given an adequate ration of rice and beans as long as you are able to work from dawn to dark. Most people last a couple of years or more. Anyone who tries to escape is hunted down by the bloodhounds and executed in front of all the other slaves. No one has ever gotten away, so don’t try it!”

A loud gong awoke the blacksmiths before dawn. They dressed their painful bodies and joined the crowd of miners trudging silently across the valley to the entrance of the silver mine. The mine followed a large horizontal vein of rich silver ore several thousand feet into the hillside. A hand-truck rail ran down the center and out to a small yard just below the mine, where the ore was smelted into rough ingots of low grade raw silver.

The forge was outside the mine about a hundred feet to the left of the entrance. Mr. Martin was put to work repairing tools and straightening and sharpening drill bits while Ehud was assigned to help design whatever was

needed in the refinery. Both men were called upon to shoe horses and repair wheels as needed.

When the gong sounded at dusk, the blacksmiths trudged back to their hut with the same silent unemotional crowd of workers. Once inside their hut, the father and son were finally able to begin assessing their situation together.

“They have broken the wills of all the slaves,” Ehud remarked as the elder man put some beans on to boil. “We must act like our wills are broken too, but we must not let it happen to us.”

“You are right, Son,” Mr. Martin agreed. “We must be as meek as sheep and as wily as coyotes. We must pray continually; and with the good Lord’s help we will escape this place.”

The Martins quickly fell into a routine of soaking their beans and rice all day so they would cook more quickly in the evenings. There was never enough time to cook their rice in the mornings, so they cooked it in the evenings and warmed it up for breakfast in the mornings. Otherwise, they would only get one meal a day.

It didn’t take the blacksmiths long to realize that they had it easy compared to the miners. As long as they feigned a fair degree of fear of the slave drivers they were more or less left alone to accomplish their work. It was the miners and smelters that bore the brunt of the bullying of the drivers. They were beaten if they did not extract enough ore from the mine or smelt enough silver from the ore no matter what the cause of their failure to produce might have been. The smithies did their best to keep the equipment in perfect condition to help them maintain adequate production; but fatal beatings were not unusual. Pedro always showed up with appropriate replacements for the dead within a few days.

The Martins had been in the valley for several months when Pedro and his banditos brought in a couple of new slaves just at dusk as the slaves were returning to their huts. The generalissimo was angry that he had come at that time of day, and threatened to have him beaten like a slave. The conciliatory slave trader was somehow able to diffuse the despot’s wrath. Something fell to the ground and bounced into a wash when the outlaw pulled out his bandana to wipe the sweat from his brow as the Generalissimo walked away. In the still of the night Ehud returned the area where the encounter had taken place, and was able to find the huge gold nugget that he had seen fall from Pedro’s pocket in the edge of the wash.

* * *

The Generalissimo’s cattle that roamed the valley were becoming so numerous that they were polluting the water in the river. The despot resented any visible filth in his drinking water so much that he had severely beaten several house servants before someone suggested a well. Because of his strength and integrity Ehud was chosen to dig the well.

The younger smithy dug a nice well about three feet across and ten feet deep without striking water. When the water diviner who had determined the place to dig was about to be executed, Ehud asked if he could lower a smaller person into the rather cramped hole to fill buckets with earth. He would lower the digger into the well and winch the bucketfuls of earth up to the surface until the well was deep enough to strike water. A small recently acquired slave named Lenny, who normally chopped the kindling and kept the hacienda stoves stoked, was assigned to work at the bottom of the well. Ehud’s blood boiled at the crassness of these monsters who were extracting forced labor from a lad so young his voice hadn’t changed yet, but the young man remained remarkably cheerful.

The well-digging went well. Ehud let Lenny down the first thing every morning. He worked tirelessly at the bottom of the well, filling bucket after bucket full of dirt, which Ehud winched up from the bottom and dumped in a nearby wash-out. Lenny kept the well straight by using the bucket and its rope as a central plumb line. Every couple of hours Ehud winched the energetic little digger up for a breather or a necessary break. Young as he was, Lenny was the only other slave the blacksmiths had met whose personality had not succumbed to the hopelessness of their situation.

During the next several weeks Ehud and Lenny became personal friends. They were careful not to converse any more than necessary in public, but Lenny spent more and more evenings after dark at the Martin hut, hashing out ideas for escape with the blacksmiths. Mr. Martin initially hoped to take all the slaves with them, but Ehud and Lenny convinced him that it would be safer to escape themselves, and bring a militia back to rescue the others. Lenny was always urging prayer on each suggestion that was raised.

Ehud and Lenny were beginning to encounter moist earth at the bottom of the well during their third week of working together. As Ehud was winching Lenny up for a break, he leaned over to get a look at the bottom of the well. The steep downward angle of his vision steered his unsuspecting eyes down the slightly sagging neckline of the front of his companion's sweat-dampened shirt. He caught a momentary glimpse of enough femininity to know that Lenny was a woman before he could avert his innocent eyes.

Ehud's first reaction to what he had seen was anger at being duped; but he was of too fair a disposition to hold that against Lenny for long. Her intrigue had not been directed at him. It was an obvious necessity for her survival in these circumstances. "And," he mused, "she's probably a lot closer to my age than I ever imagined." By the end of the day he was feeling downright protective of the little woman, and maybe a bit possessive as well.

Ehud remained relatively quiet throughout the discussion at the Martins' hut that evening. He could hardly keep his eyes off of Lenny's cleverly veiled figure. She was intelligent, she was small, she was lithe, and she moved like a woman. In his eyes she was nothing short of feminine perfection!

Mr. Martin addressed his son after their co-conspirator left the hut. "You caught on today?" He asked.

"Yeh, Dad," he answered, "I accidentally saw the evidence. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only suspected it," the father replied. "How do you feel about it?"

"I'm loving her more by the minute."

"Then go get her, Son. She's a delightful Christian young lady"

The next evening Mr. Martin winked at his son and stepped out to the outhouse as Lenny rose to leave their hut. The enchanted young man wasted no time in moving in close to hug the girl. She started to pull away; and then suddenly locked her hands around his neck and pulled his head down into a kiss. "I thought you'd never see me for what I am," she giggled as she released him.

"Honey," he whispered, "we've got to get out of here before the Generalissimo figures it out."

That evening the two Martin men talked most of the night.

"The way I figure it," Mr. Martin said pensively the next morning, "the Generalissimo keeps everything so tightly controlled under his own fist that no part of this outfit can function without his personal say-so. All we have to do is take him out, and there'll be so much confusion about who's supposed to do what that we'll have enough time to commandeer some guns and horses and get away."

"I think you are right, Dad" Ehud replied. But how are we going to do that without killing him?

"It is time to kill him," Mr. Martin stated emphatically. "Do you really think we should let him live to continue working men to death and murdering those who don't submit to him? He is a wicked mass murderer who will continue killing others as long as he can get by with it; and the Mexican government is tolerating his murder of Americans because of the ill will between the two countries. How many more people will die if we don't kill him?"

"Much as I hate it, I have to admit that you are right, Dad," Ehud agreed reluctantly. "Let's form a definitive plan

as soon as Lenny gets here tonight.”

* * *

The plan that the three enslaved prisoners developed that evening was simple. When the well was finished Lenny would undoubtedly return to her normal job in the house. She would watch for where the guns were stored, and find out where the key was kept if possible. When she knew, she would report it at their nightly meeting at the hut. The blacksmiths were familiar with the stables because they frequented them to re-shoe the horses. They would be choosing which mounts they should abscond with as opportunity presented itself. Ehud would secretly forge himself a double-edged dagger about a foot long to do away with the Generalissimo. When the time was right, he would lure the Generalissimo within reach with Pedro's nugget, by telling him he had discovered gold in the valley. Like his namesake in the Bible, the left-handed blacksmith would strike a fatal blow into the murderous despot's innards. Lenny suggested that they do it at siesta time, because she had noted that the bodyguard generally slept just outside the generalissimo's door during the big man's siesta.

Lenny would unlock the kitchen door for Ehud and hide in the gun closet. She would arm herself, and wait for Ehud's coded knock. She would be selecting the guns while Mr. Martin proceeded to the stables, ostensibly to re-shoe one of the horses. Ehud would disable the general's body guard, strike the general, take his gun and keys, and meet Lenny at the gun closet. They would bring the guns to the stables where Mr. Martin would be saddling the horses.

A week later everything was in readiness for siesta-time, just after the noon meal at the hacienda. Ehud entered by the unlocked kitchen door and slipped silently towards the Generalissimo's apartment. As Lenny had suggested, the body guard was sleeping peacefully just outside the door. A solid blow to the head with the iron handle of the heavy dagger knocked him out of the action, probably for several hours. Ehud bound and gagged him before replacing the dagger back into the sheath that dangled through the slit pocket in the left side of his pants.

Ehud slipped quietly into the Generalissimo's office with the huge nugget between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Much as he hated it, the time to kill had arrived. Suddenly he was aware that the huge man was sitting at his desk watching him with his cocked side arm in his hand. Amusement played in the corners of his mouth as he turned his chair toward the cornered blacksmith and voiced the question, "Yes?"

"General," Ehud whispered conspiratorially, rolling the nugget tantalizingly between his outstretched fingers. "I have found gold between the huts and the mine. I didn't think you would want anyone else to know of it yet."

The despot's eyes literally glittered as he reached out to take possession of the nugget. Just as he had it between his fingers, the dagger in Ehud's left hand struck him full force through the belly. The stricken despot let out a muffled grunt and slowly fell forward to the floor. Leaving the dagger completely buried in the wound, Ehud took up the fallen handgun and removed the key-ring from the clip on the dying desperado's belt before proceeding to the gun closet.

Fear struck Ehud in the gut as he realized that Lenny was not answering his knock at the closet door. Retracing his steps, he found her bound and gagged inside the Generalissimo's bed chamber. She motioned him to silence as he untied her bonds, and they slipped quietly to the gun closet together. Taking the key-ring from Ehud's hand, she flipped directly to the right key. When they were inside he closed the door and folded her tightly into his arms. "Did he hurt you?" he asked

"No, he caught me when I slipped into his office to get the key. No telling what would have happened if you hadn't come, 'cause he knew that I was a woman the moment he grabbed me. Then he heard the sound when you hit the bodyguard and realized that someone else was coming."

After a brief kiss that somehow promised more, the couple gathered three Jennings repeater rifles and three gun belts with full bullet loops and two revolvers apiece. They were approaching the stables before the first confused alarm sounded from the hacienda.

The armed escapees had no trouble securing the stables. The unsuspecting guard wisely yielded to their arms and was bound and gagged. The few slaves who were mucking the stalls barely responded when promised release in the near future. They just kept on working while the escapees saddled their horses. Knowing that they had no idea where to find water along the way, the runaways confiscated four canteens full apiece. Confusion still reigned at the hacienda as the trio galloped towards the trail that led out of the valley.

Once out of the valley, the fugitives rode at a brisk trot northward towards the U.S. border for an hour or so, finally slowing to a brisk walk. They rode more cautiously as night came on, navigating northward by the stars. They happened on a small stream at sunrise, where they watered the horses and refilled their canteens. They were leery of camping anywhere near the water because they knew that's what would be expected of them. They finally stopped in a concealed draw to get some sleep and rest the horses in the shade until nightfall.

Ehud took the first watch while Mr. Martin and Lenny got some sleep. He awakened them around noon-time when he detected the dust of a rather large company of men coming in their general direction. The fugitives saddled up and walked their horses up to the edge of the draw where they could observe group. After an hour or so they were able to determine that a U.S. Cavalry detachment was approaching.

Mr. Martin insisted that Lenny and Ehud remain hidden while he rode out to contact the group. If he kept his hat on, the two younger people would know that it was safe to join the group, but if he took it off, they were to remain hidden and make their way back to the U.S. border, where they could obtain help.

Two soldiers from the group rode out to intercept Mr. Martin. After identifying themselves as U.S. Army soldiers, they politely took possession of the fugitive's arms, escorting him back to their captain. As they approached the captain, they asked the blacksmith to dismount. The captain also dismounted and walked up to the visitor.

"Hello," the captain greeted his visitor, stretching out his hand. "I'm Captain Rodgers, U.S. Cavalry."

"I'm Nathaniel Martin, a U.S. citizen, and I'm very glad for this fortunate meeting," Mr. Martin replied, clasping the captain's hand in a warm handshake. "I'm on my way back to the U.S. after having escaped slavery in a Mexican silver mine."

"We have breached the Mexican border in search of a notorious slave trader who masquerades as a Mexican Soldier," the captain explained. "He has been kidnaping pioneers along the Gila Trail as well as Cooke's Road. He waylaid a couple of our soldiers above the border a two-days ride west of here three days ago. Our official goal is to get them back"

"That wouldn't be Pedro by any chance, would it?"

"That's what he calls himself."

"Captain," Mr. Martin exclaimed eagerly, "we can lead you to a silver mine where he sells some, if not all, of his captives. We took out the Generalissimo that ran the mine, and escaped in the subsequent confusion. There are about forty hopeless slaves still there. If Pedro takes your men there, he will have the initiative to take over the operation. Are you prepared to rescue that many men who's wills are so broken that they will be unable to help you?"

"I have fifty men in case we encounter resistance from the rather undisciplined Mexican Army," Captain Rodgers replied. "Do you have others?"

"Just my son and the girl that escaped with us," Mr. Martin replied. "They'll be riding in here just as soon as they are sure it is safe. I have already given them the signal. She'll be impersonating a man, and I wouldn't try to disarm them if I were you. He'd fight to the death for that woman."

“Understood,” The captain agreed. “Sargent, restore Mr. Martin’s arms to him and welcome his two companions as allies when they ride up. “I think I see them in the distance now.”

That evening the captain, a scout, and the three escapees gathered in the captain’s tent to plan a rescue operation. “We will assume a certain amount of organization, especially if Pedro is there,” Captain Rodgers mused. “I want Pedro and his group taken prisoner for prosecution in the U.S.A.”

“I hope you will take the taskmasters and guards too”, Lenny suggested.

“Unfortunately, their crimes were committed entirely in Mexico, and cannot be prosecuted by the U.S.A.,” the captain replied, “but we know that many of Pedro’s kidnappings occurred well inside the U.S.A.”

“Can we legally take the rescued slaves back to the U.S.A.?” Ehud asked.

“Actually, the international legality of this entire mission is questionable,” the captain answered. “We are justifying it as an attempt to rescue two U.S. soldiers. Whatever else we do will be off the record unless we get challenged by the Mexican Army. I hope to capture Pedro and his banditos--who all pose as Mexican soldiers, complete the rescue, and be back on U.S. soil within five days if possible.”

“Captain,” Mr. Martin stated, “these slaves are so psychologically damaged that they will probably need to be cared for for the rest of their lives. With your permission, I’d like to suggest that Ehud, Lenny, and I be allowed to bring any of the mine’s silver ingots we can find back to the U.S.A. on pack horses so we can establish a fund for their care. That way no one can accuse the U.S. Army of robbing a Mexican mine.”

“The army elects not to interfere with anything the victims of the mine, including yourselves, confiscate as remuneration for their forced labors,” the captain assured him. “The slaves will also need horses to get them back to the U.S.A.”

* * *

Two mornings later the strategists were glassing the late “Generalissimo’s” valley from the trail, planning their attack. Someone was obviously in control, as everything seemed to be operating normally again. Even as they watched, a pack train of a dozen horses was being loaded with ingots at the smelter.

“I guess Pedro, or whoever is running things, is planning to ride out with the silver this morning,” the captain observed. “If we are patient we can let him have the honor of bringing it up the trail for us.”

“They may go out the rut at the western end of the valley,” Mr. Martin warned.

“We could stage our assault from that end of the valley, then,” the captain mused. “We’ll send two groups of fifteen men each in from the west, and keep twenty men at the trail’s head. They’ll see our forces coming and try to escape up the trail where the rest of us will be waiting. We’ll capture the horses and men from whichever way they come.”

The two groups were hastily organized and sent to enter the western edge of the valley. Ehud guided one group and Lenny, whose gender had not been disclosed to the men, guided the other.

As the captain had surmised, Pedro and his banditos headed up the trail when the lower forces were detected. They were dragged from their horses one-by-one as each one rounded a hairpin turn in the trail. The pack-train of silver was left to Mr. Martin’s disposal.

There was no resistance to the soldiers’ take-over of the valley. The missing soldiers, though painfully beaten, were recovered. The employees of the establishment were detained to delay any possible communications with the Mexican army until the convoy was ready to leave.

Lenny took charge of the slaves. They were accustomed to following orders without questions, so she ordered them to mount whatever horses could be found for them without giving them any explanation that might render them too uneasy to cooperate. Those too dependent to ride alone rode double behind whatever soldiers took pity on them. The whole group was ready to leave the valley by noon. Just before their departure the soldiers stampeded the employees' horses towards the western edge of the valley to give the convoy more time yet to reach the U.S. border ahead of any Mexican army interference. The whole convoy crossed safely into the U.S.A. without incident.

When the convoy finally reached Tucson, Mr. Martin sold the low-grade silver ingots to the bank for a fair price. He deposited most of the sizable amount of money to the Slave Miners Rehabilitation Fund, and set about establishing a not-for-profit organization to administer the funds. As the first president of the organization, he hired a sympathetic full-time supervisor to build a home for, and oversee the care of these unfortunate people. By common consent, the Martins kept enough of the commandeered money to replace the wagon, beasts, blacksmithing tools, and the cash that they had lost in the incident. The mine owed them much more than that.

Pedro and his side-kicks were condemned to death for multiple kidnappings by a military tribunal; and the army hanged them without further ado. Lenny began wearing women's clothing the moment they reached civilization. She proved to be a graceful and sparkling young woman; and Ehad wasted no time in sparking her. They were married within a month of their arrival in Tucson. Since the California gold rush was tapering off rapidly, the elder and younger Martins remained in Tucson, where the men established a successful and respected blacksmith shop. Lenny became the mother of three sons that favored the Martins and a daughter that looked just like herself.

Cleanin' Up the Town

The town was a cesspool of evil controlled by the vilest of men,
Who saw to it most of the people were kept in the clutches of sin.
He flaunted licentious temptations at those who were able to pay,
And murdered whoever objected to how he led people astray.

The decent folks asked that a ranger be sent to clean up all the crime,
But no one showed up but a preacher, who came at the opportune time.
He preached of the need for repentance, how sin should be strictly abhorred;
And many a crusty old sinner was saved by the grace of the Lord.

They gave up their quest for a ranger and hired a marshal instead.
The outlaw who empire was threatened came after the officer's head.
The preacher slipped into the jailhouse and caught the cop cleaning a cell;
He swung the gate shut to ensnare him, ignoring his frustrated yell.

He put on the marshal's old Stetson and pinned an old badge on his chest.
He strapped on the officer's gun belt and stepped out to make the arrest.
The outlaw exploded in fury, his hand streaking down for his gun.
The gleam in his eye was triumphant because of the battles he'd won.

But all of a sudden he staggered, the front of his shirt spouting red;
The instant he knew he was beaten the arrogant gunman was dead.
So why such precipitous judgment on one who refused to repent?
The preacher who came with the gospel was the ranger the governor sent.

The Cougar Kid

Lightening flashed and peals of thunder re-echoed off the mountain as the wind-whipped rain pelted down on the preacher's little two room log cabin. Judy snuggled closer to her husband; and he put a protective arm around her without seeming to awaken. "What more could a woman want?" she ask herself as she thought of Ron's devotion, and the baby in the crib at the foot of their bed.

Judy was just dropping off to sleep again when the baby began to cry. Forcing herself awake, she lit a lantern in the other room and changed his diaper. She put the soiled diaper in the bucket beside the door, and turned to see that the crying babe was crawling after her. Ron was awfully proud that Chuckie was already crawling. So was she; but it meant that she'd have to watch him like a hawk now that he was able to get into things.

The preacher's wife crawled back into bed, and laid the babe between herself and Ron. When he was finished nursing, she sat up on the bedside, patted his back until the bubble came, and placed the sleeping child back in his crib. She felt that she had barely gotten back sleep when there was a loud knock at the door.

Ron was up and dressed almost instantly. He opened the door to find an Indian lad begging him to come to the Indian settlement about a three hours climb up the mountain trail from the cabin.

"It's Sunday," Ron told him. "I have to preach at the church before I can come."

"Parched Earth dies, maybe already." the Indian boy begged. "He longs to hear of the Son of God again."

"Just a minute," Ron requested. He invited the Indian in, and placed a quarter of a loaf of bread before him before going in to talk things over with Judy."

"You have to go," Judy told him bravely. "Hitch Frisky to the shay before you leave, and I'll take Chuckie to church. I'll ask Brother Jones to give the sermon for you. He does a good job when you are needed elsewhere."

"Thanks, Hon," he replied, folding her into a hug and a kiss. "Frisky's actually very gentle, and I'm sure you can handle her without any trouble."

Ron started up the trail afoot with the Indian shortly after dawn. His thoughts were with the little woman that was making his life so bright. How it had thrilled him when she agreed to give up being a school marm to take on the duties of a preacher's wife, especially since he was more of a missionary to the Indians than a preacher to his own people.

The travelers moved quickly, arriving at the Indian settlement at about nine o'clock in the morning. He was taken directly to Parched Earth's wickiup. The old Indian had been attacked from behind by a huge cougar while he was skinning out a deer. The beast had bitten him in the back of the neck, crushing the vertebrae and partially paralyzing him. The arrival of several other Indians had scared the cougar off before it had finished off its victim.

The old man's respiratory system was barely working by the time Ron got to him. Gently the missionary reviewed the gospel story with the dying man. How God must punish sinners to maintain his righteousness; how He placed all our sins on His own Son as He died on the cross; and how the death of Christ pays the debt of sin for all who acknowledge their sinfulness and trust Him for forgiveness.

"Parched Earth has been too evil for God to forgive," the old man replied, raising his right eyebrow almost hopefully.

"No," Ron explained, "The death of God's Son covers every sin. He says he will not turn anyone who comes to Him away."

"I will come," the Old man gasped out. "Take me, O God, as you promised you would." A smile crossed his face as he closed his eyes in death.

Ron stayed for a few minutes to comfort the family, but they showed little remorse that the old renegade had died. Except for the young Indian who had called Ron to the Indian settlement, they were totally uninterested in the gospel.

The younger Indian was a grandson of Parched Earth, named "Screaming Eagle." He accompanied the missionary part-way down the trail asking many questions about the white man's religion. He cheerfully agreed to start attending the village church before returning to his wickiup.

* * *

Just about the time that Ron had arrived at the Indian settlement, Judy had bundled Chuckie up and placed him securely in the portable wooden bassinet that Ron had built while they awaited his arrival. She grinned as she remembered him dubbing it, "The ark," because the finished project looked somewhat like a miniature flatboat with a fold-down handle. Placing the baby beside her in the seat, she started down the rut towards the village of Glitter. Frisky behaved like a lady, even when they forded the swollen Color Creek just before they hit the main road to Glitter. Judy grinned again as she thought of how much she had learned to do since she had left city life behind to come out west. She didn't miss society a bit, especially since she had met Ron and become a Christian.

Glitter was a stable mining community surrounded by minimally productive one or two-man gold mines sparsely scattered along Color Creek. They yielded a good living to those who were willing to put in a hard day's work for a somewhat better-than-average livelihood. No one was going hungry, but neither were they likely to strike it rich. Besides the church, the town had a dry goods store, a grocery store, a hotel with a restaurant, a livery stable, a barber shop, a telegraph office, and several saloons, one in the inevitable red-light district that was ubiquitous in mining towns.

Judy stopped at Brother Jones's house to ask him to take the sermon, and hurried on to church to arrange the home-made benches and set out the hymnbooks. She filled out the rest of the time before people started arriving by sweeping the floor and dusting.

The singing was hearty, if a bit off key. Judy longed for a piano or pump organ to help the less gifted miners stay on key. The sermon was excellent-on the Prodigal Son; and Judy congratulated Brother Jones for a job well done. She nursed the baby after everyone had left, locked the doors, and headed homewards.

When Judy reached the creek the water was even higher than it had been in the morning, but Frisky didn't hesitate to plunge right into the ford. The faithful horse was already ascending the opposite bank when a wall of water five or six feet high came crashing into the side of the shay. Judy heard the shafts splinter as the shay overturned in the flash flood. She was thrown out and carried several hundred feet downstream before she was cast ashore half-drowned at a sharp curve in the creek. Spluttering and coughing, she searched the water for any signs of the baby, but he was nowhere in sight.

The frantic mother rushed back up the shore of the creek, tearing her dress to shreds as she crashed through thick patches of underbrush to reach the ford; but although Frisky had been able to hold the shay from washing away, Chuckie and his bassinet were gone. "Nooo!" She wailed as she rushed back down the creek looking vainly for any sign of her baby.

* * *

An hour after Judy should have arrived home, Ron started walking down the rut to meet her. When he came upon the little horse, still attached to the shay by the traces, he released her and sent her home with a swat on the rump. By this time the water level had fallen considerably, so the shay was no longer in danger of washing away.

The distracted man rushed down the side of the creek, tearing through the underbrush as his wife had done. Judy's stocking-footed tracks told him she was still alive. The shreds of her dress told him of her reckless hurry to find the baby. He ploughed through the underbrush on her trail until at last he found her several miles downstream. She was wandering about in a disoriented fashion with a vacant look in her eyes. By this time she was chilled to the bone and spoke only in incoherent sobs.

The desperate man had no matches with him to start a fire. He wrapped his wife in his shirt and jacket, but could not get her to come with him. Eventually he picked her up and carried her back up the creek towards home. She snuggled into his arms clutching him so tightly it was almost painful. "Please Lord, help me not to give out until I get Judy home," he prayed.

It was well into the night when Ron struggled through the cabin door and laid his unconscious wife on the bed. He stripped her wet clothes away and dressed her in a flannel nightgown before covering her carefully with several blankets. He lit a hearty fire in the fireplace, put a kettle of water on to boil, and went outside to put Frisky in the barn. He fed her a bait of oats, forked her some hay, and stumbled back into the cabin. He tried to get Judy awake enough to drink some hot coffee, but eventually gave up and gulped it down himself. Finally, he found some dry night clothes and crawled into bed with Judy, spooning himself against her to share his warmth with her.

When Ron awoke the next morning Judy was turning the house upside down searching for Chuckie. She was coughing a lot, and her skin was very hot. Because of her confusion he was afraid to leave her to go for the doctor. He mixed some lard with turpentine and rubbed her back and chest down. He managed to coax her into drinking some hot tea loaded with honey.

Along about mid-morning there was a knock at the door. A couple of miners had recognized the shay and pieced out enough of the story to figure out what had happened. Many of the townspeople were already searching for the baby's body. The miners were on horseback, and one of them rode out to get the doctor while the other went out to rub Frisky down. "She doesn't seem any the worse for the wear," he reported as he went back outside to chop some firewood.

The doctor arrived about noon. After listening to Judy's chest, he reported that she had pneumonia. He sent some ill-smelling dark liquid back to the cabin after he left, but Judy refused to take it, as a child might have done. Ron kept rubbing her rib cage down with lard and turpentine, and was able to get her to drink honeyed tea occasionally. Her legs and arms were horribly scratched from her flight through the underbrush, and her breasts were painfully swollen by this time. She was miserable of body and delirious of mind.

The doctor returned on Wednesday, and seemed rather grave when he left. Over the next several days Judy got steadily worse. By Friday she was fighting for every breath, and seemed too unaware of her circumstances to even remember that she had a baby. Ron's anguish was almost unbearable. Brother Jones came to comfort him; and Screaming Eagle came and volunteered to take care of Frisky, the chickens, and the milk cow.

The Indian slept in a blanket on the floor by the fireplace. He was fascinated by Ron's tenderness for his wife. He also heard Ron's prayers for Judy, and watched curiously to see if they would be answered or not. By Sunday Ron had given up all hope for his wife's life. That night the Indian heard his anguished prayer as he kneeled at her bedside:

"Lord, you know how much Judy and I loved Chuckie, but in your wisdom you took him. Now it looks like you are taking Judy too. Lord, you know how much I love her, but I know you know what's best. I give her into your tender care Lord, but I'm not sure if I can live without her. Thank you Lord Jesus, for giving her to me for this little

while I've had her."

As Ron prayed, a sense of serenity flooded his soul. Shortly after Ron's prayer all the Indian could hear was his snores and her restless tossing. When they awoke the next morning Judy's fever had broken and she was breathing much easier. God has answered your prayers and given you back your squaw," the Indian told Ron. I will give myself to this powerful God.

* * *

The huge male cougar weighed well over 200 pounds and was nearly ten feet long from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail. He had jumped a large bull elk; and the beast had thrown its head backwards and caught the big cat between its antlers and its backbone before the predator could administer its typical vertebrae-crushing bite to the back of the elk's neck. The cougar had bailed off the bull with a shattered scapula, and had been unable to rush its usual prey for more than a week when it came across Parched Earth as he skinned the deer. When the cat was chased away from the injured Indian, his feline anger knew no bounds.

The disabled cougar had traveled painfully down to the creek to hunt smaller game, maybe even a porcupine, when it scented the female's nursery. She was out hunting; and he entered the den unchallenged. He quickly dispatched the three cubs, swallowing them almost whole in his hunger. The female returned to the den as the big male was leaving. Hissing and spitting, she flew to the attack, noting the smell of the Indian as well as that of her cubs on his breath. Her swiping paw caught him on his injured scapula, and he fled with a yowl that only a cat could make.

The female surveyed her den nervously, but the damage had already been done. Letting out an almost human wail, she abandoned the empty den and headed aimlessly down the creek at a steady lope. She had covered nearly a dozen miles when she heard the weeping of a damp and hungry human child. Ever curious, the deprived mother cat soon found the crying baby wrapped in a blanket in the bassinet, which now rested against a deadfall just off the bank of the receding creek. Carefully picking the child up by the blanket, she carried it back to her empty den and lay down to watch it with a strangely stirred motherly instinct.

When Chuckie found himself on the floor of the den, he crawled out of the blanket and snuggled up to the large warm beast like her own cubs had done. The cougar instinctively rolled to her side to present her painfully distended breasts to him, and he began nursing vigorously. The child was soon fast asleep, little knowing what relief his nursing had brought to the cougar. It had sealed the bond between them so firmly in her brain that she would have fought to the death for the preservation of her adopted cub. She spent many an hour purring encouragement to her strange new cub as it nursed.

Chuckie seemed so helpless that his cougar mother rarely left the den except to hunt for her own sustenance. She contented herself with catching small game close to the den where she could keep an eye out for the huge male that had killed her cubs. A week later he scented the child in the den, and tried to enter while the female was present. She met him with a ferocity that he had not anticipated, scratching his right eye with a lightning-fast stroke of her paw. He retreated to seek easier prey at a considerable distance from the den. From that time on he would be blind in that eye.

The patient mother cat was kept busier and busier keeping the child in the den. At first she herded him with her paws and head when he strayed toward the entrance. Finally, when she began losing weight because she had so little time to hunt, she took to smacking him gently with her claws retracted. It didn't take many swats to teach him to stay in the den. In this way she also taught him to maintain absolute silence whenever she grunted a warning. Thus, the child learned obedience early in life.

After a month or so the mother cougar began bringing scraps of meat back for her human cub. At first he ignored them. Slowly he learned to suck on them, finally developing a taste for their flavor even though he did not have the teeth to actually eat the meat.

By the end of the second month Chuckie was climbing all over his foster mother's body. He learned how to grasp her ears with his hands and pull himself up to a standing position. Finally he was toddling around inside the den.

When the child was walking fairly well, the mother cougar waited for him as she left the den. Sensing the invitation in her soft grunt, he grunted back and followed her out into the sunshine. After a couple of moments of squinting as his eyes adjusted to the light, he began looking about with keen interest. The light stirred latent memories of a pleasant life somewhere in his past, and he sat down to puzzle over them as the cougar lay watching over him from the rocks above his head. As the evening drew on she grunted a call and led him back into the den.

Chucky's outings became longer and his excursions wider as the days went by. The cougar let him play by the creek, even letting him fall into the water and learn a healthy respect for it before rescuing him. She showed him how to look under rocks for tasty bugs; and he quickly learned to distinguish between those that bit or stung and those that were safe. But the cat was adamant that he stay in the den while she was hunting. She cuffed him severely if she caught him outside when she returned home.

Chuckie had been with the cougar for about four months when she suddenly became nervous and irritable. When she left the den, he could hear her caterwauls echoing from the cliffs of the mountains that towered above the den. After a couple of days, she failed to return to the den one night.

* * *

When Judy had recovered enough from her bout with pneumonia, the church held a memorial service for Chuckie. The town had searched for his remains for at least ten or twelve miles along Color Creek, but not a trace of the baby could be found. Brother Jones preached a comforting service on the widow's son from 1 Kings 17; "Give me your son." He encouraged the grieving parents to give their little one up to a loving Lord who would surely raise him up at the last day.

Ron had been able to cast his grief at the feet of the Savior for solace, but Judy blamed herself for the accident and could not find any comfort outside of the love and understanding that Ron lavished on her. By the end of four months she had lost weight down to scarecrow proportions. She went about with sunken eyes and a hauntingly troubled expression on her face. Ron would often awaken in the night to find her sobbing her heart out on the other side of the bed.

One night Ron rolled over in bed and reached a comforting hand for Judy but she wasn't there. He suppressed a sympathetic groan and sat up on the side of the bed. As his senses sharpened with wakefulness he could hear her sobbing in the other room of the cabin. Tiptoeing through the door, he could just make out her shadowy form in the glow of the embers from the fireplace. She was kneeling at the love seat. As he approached her, he could hear her agonized prayer.

"Lord," she sobbed, "It's been so hard. I trust your love, and I accept your will. But Lord," she continued, "I need some sort of closure to this nightmare. Please let someone find the remains to Chuckie's body, so I can at least have a grave to look at."

The big man knelt softly beside her, placing an aching arm around her waist. "Yes Lord," he added, "Please grant Judy this simple request. In Jesus's name we pray."

Judy arose with a glimmer of hope in her eyes, and they returned to the bedroom. Taking her into his arms, Ron could feel a more cheerful response to his embrace. "We'll go looking together in the morning," he whispered as they crawled under the covers. Judy slept like a baby for the first time since the accident.

Ron and Judy were up at the crack of dawn. Her cheerfulness amazed him, especially considering the task they were undertaking. It was like she had just been relieved of a grievous burden. She had breakfast ready and a lunch packed by the time he had cared for the animals. Hand in hand they walked towards the ford where the accident

had happened.

Still hand-in-hand, they meandered slowly downstream, checking every conceivable spot where the remains of their son could be resting. They had thoroughly covered over two miles of creek bank before stopping long enough to share a lunch together. While they were eating she suddenly stiffened. "Do I hear a baby crying?" she asked.

"You do!" he acknowledged. "Come on, let's go! Someone's in trouble."

The alarmed couple rushed up the mountain side, and suddenly came upon a naked baby crouching cat-like among some boulders.

"It's Chuckie!" she called, reaching for the babe.

"The baby responded by spitting and hissing like a cat."

Ron stepped behind the child, picking it up with both hands around its waist.

The baby hissed, spit, squirmed and scratched, even trying to bite Ron. Ron held him until the exhausted baby relaxed. Then taking off his shirt, he wrapped it and handed it to Judy.

As Chuckie was cuddled in his mother's arms, those old memories awakened afresh. This was the most pleasant feeling he could remember. This woman smelled like the blanket that still lay on the floor of the den. He snuggled into her bosom, and looking into her face he mouthed that long-forgotten word, "Mmuh."

Judy sat on a boulder and talked baby talk to the little one, who cooed responsively for a half an hour before Ron interrupted.

"Let's get home," he urged. "We need to let everyone know that we found Chuckie alive, though how he survived, we'll never know."

"He acted just like a cat when we first found him," Judy remarked thoughtfully.

* * *

The village of Glitter was alive with gossip about the preacher's son. Every imaginable theory was offered, from fraud on Judy's part to kidnapping by the Indians. Ron and Judy did not reveal the cat-like behavior he had exhibited when they first found him, but neither did they forget it. It was enough just to have their baby back from the dead.

One thing Ron and Judy noticed from the start. The child obeyed their commands instantly, like he had been well disciplined. Nor were there any marks of abuse on his body. At first, he spoke no words except, "Mmuh," and seemed to be trying to communicate with grunts. Within a few months his vocabulary became appropriate for his age. His re-integration into civilization went relatively smoothly, although some mothers at church were reluctant to let their children play with him when they noted how he hunted bugs, and ate them with relish.

The child loved the outdoors so much that Ron built a four-foot picket fence around the back yard so Judy could let Chuckie play outside without watching him one hundred percent of the time. One busy day she left him unattended for nearly a half an hour. When she glanced out the back window, she saw him asleep with his head pillowed on a cougar. She was paralyzed with fear until she saw the beast turn its head to lick the child's face. Putting two and two together, she became convinced that this huge cat was the one that had kept the child alive for four months in the wilderness.

When Judy told Ron what she had seen, he was ready to go on a cougar hunt to insure the child's safety. "Would

you really kill the beast that nursed your son all the time that he was gone?" she asked.

"Of course not," he replied as comprehension dawned on him. "I guess she has earned visiting privileges." From that time on, they stayed out of the way and allowed the cougar to visit whenever she dropped by.

As the child grew and learned to communicate reliably, he told his parents snatches of hazy memory that came to him at odd times. He recounted how she had encouraged him to snuggle up to her on chilly nights. He remembered the spat that his cougar mother had had with the huge male, and how she had ferociously protected him from the larger beast. He remembered how she had shown him how to find edible insects under the rocks. Ron and Judy taught him to keep such memories within the family, as most people would be slow to believe his experience with the cougar. They also taught him not to eat unconventional things, lest he be despised by un-understanding people.

As he matured, Chuckie would often slip into the forest to bound over the rocky heights with his cougar friend. He quickly developed a cat-like agility to land on his feet when he happened to fall. By the time he was a dozen years old he could run barefooted behind her for hours, sometimes along hair-raising trails where one slip of the foot would have sent him hurtling to his death hundreds of feet below. Occasionally they visited her dens, where she allowed him to play with her cubs as if they were kittens. As the cubs got older he sparred playfully with them, sharpening both their agility and his own.

Chuckie had been an able student at school from the first, always producing the nearly flawless work of an intelligent and well-disciplined child. The only upsetting incident occurred when an older student began picking on a younger girl that Chuckie secretly liked. Suddenly he was in the face of the bigger bully hissing and spitting like an angry cat. Two or three lightning-fast cuffs with his open hand sent the bully running to the teacher for protection. Chuckie took the teacher's switching with his head held high, determined not to show any repentance at all.

The older students at the school occasionally earned petty amounts of spending money by trapping small animals for their furs. Chuck didn't have to trap them, he ran them down. A miner who happened to see him in action swore that he scented the animal before he gave chase. One way or another, Chuck was able to earn enough money in his thirteenth winter to purchase a beautiful hunting knife that was sheathed in a tooled leather case. It had an eight inch blade that the lad kept honed to razor-like sharpness.

Chuck's cougar suddenly stopped coming by the cabin the next summer. Sensing that something was wrong, he set out to find her. He quickly picked up her scent and followed her to a new den, which reeked of the scent of the tyrannical old one-eyed cougar. She had been terribly mangled in a failed effort to defend her cubs. Chuck gently placed the 160 pound cat on his shoulders and carried her home, where Ron helped him build a temporary lean-to against the side of the barn to shelter her from the weather.

The next morning Chuck was searching for the old one-eyed mountain lion at the crack of dawn. He scented its trail high in the crags, and began following it at a dead run. The path eventually led along a precarious crack on the face of a two-hundred foot cliff, which Chuck was familiar with. He knew that it petered out into sheer smooth rock about a quarter of a mile from its beginning.

Knowing his quarry was trapped; Chuck drew his blade and worked his silent way along the crack. The wind was from his front, so the huge male would have little warning of his presence. There was a horizontal ridge of harder rock running down the cliff that protruded about four feet further out than the rest of the wall. Chuck waited behind the near edge of this ridge. It was an ideal position. The cougar's blind eye would be toward him as it came around the ridge, giving the boy the advantage of a surprise thrust of his knife on the unsuspecting beast.

As Chuck pressed his body against the face of the cliff, knife in hand for an overhand strike into the heart, his mother carried a five pound hunk of venison out to the injured cougar that had nursed her son. The cougar was used to seeing her work in the garden as she lay in the shade with Chuckie, but the wise woman had never approached her before. She came directly to the cat as though she expected to be tolerated if not welcomed. The cat kept wary eyes on her as she offered it the meat. Slowly the cougar overcame her distrust and took the meat

out of the woman's hand. Judi sat beside her as she ate, and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder when she had finished. Gradually the big cat began to purr as the woman stroked its fur. They were Chuckie's mothers.

Chuck awaited old One-eye's coming with Indian-like patience and absolute alertness. A failure to get in the first disabling blow would likely be tantamount to death by claws, jaws, or a fatal fall. He was tensed and ready when the big beast came around the corner. His thrust was true, but the big animal took a desperate swipe at him as it fell, yowling and spitting, to its death on the rocks below. Its claw snagged Chuck's shirt; and the young man was jerked off his precarious foothold on the narrow crack. Catlike, he managed to right himself and grab the crack with his left hand. The claw ripped loose from the shirt, leaving Chuck dangling from the crack by his left hand. He calmly waited for his body to stop swinging before placing his other hand on the crack and pulling himself up until he could get a knee on the narrow pathway to regain his footing. Chuck trotted back to the origin of the crack and worked his way down the mountainside to where his knife had fallen. Recovering the knife he skinned out the hide of the only real enemy he had ever had. He left the head attached for a superior trophy rug.

The young man arrived home after dark with the rolled cougar skin lashed to his shoulders. He stashed it in the lean-to by the old female and went into the house eat. When his parents asked where he had been so long, he told them he had gone after the cougar that had injured his second mother.

"How could you possibly tell which cougar injured her, much less find him?" his father asked.

"By the scent, of course," the boy answered as if it should have been obvious.

"So how do you expect to kill it?" Ron continued.

"I got him with my knife, Dad," Chuck replied. "His hide is out there by our cougar."

When the family went out to see the cougar skin the next morning, they found that the old female had unrolled it. She was lying on the furry side of the hide with her head up like a victorious queen. She recovered quickly, and took to sleeping by the back door of the house, waiting for the family to come out and fraternize with her. Chuck sold old One-eye's hide to a taxidermist for enough money to buy a rifle so he could hunt meat for her, but the cougar never stopped hunting for herself.

Months later Screaming Eagle, the Christian Indian, pointed out the place where Chuck's fight with old One-eye had taken place to Ron. The astounded Indian had observed the fight from a distant hidden vantage point. The missionary never told his wife of the precarious place where their son had nonchalantly killed the huge cougar singlehandedly with nothing but a knife.

Chuck was sixteen years old when his mother found the old she-cougar dead at her accustomed spot beside the back door of the cabin. Ron helped Chuck dig a grave for her on the back side of their property. Tears trickled down all of their cheeks as they gently lowered her body into the grave. They had lost an almost human friend that had been a godsend to the whole family, and they thanked God for providing her when her help was so dreadfully needed years ago.

* * *

Someone began robbing the miners along Color Creek of their gold troves during Chuck's eighteenth summer. Several of the miners had been shot in the back, and the sheriff had been unable to figure out who the culprit was. One day as Chuck was crossing the trail from the mines to the village with a deer carcass over his shoulders, he met the girl who he had protected at school years before galloping madly towards town on a horse. She stopped long enough to gasp out that her father had been robbed, and was unconscious at the entrance to his mine. Chuck advised her to proceed to town and get the doctor and the sheriff while he went to the mine to see if he could be of any help to her father.

Chuck found the miner still unconscious, with a nasty lump where he had been hit on the back of his head. He appeared to be breathing easily, so the curious young man began to snoop around to see if he could piece

together what had happened. He noted that there was a patch of sage brush growing in the tailings of the mine. It must have been seeded from an outside source, because sage brush did not normally grow in forested areas. He found stocking-footed footprints leading from the sage patch to and from the mine. Carefully avoiding the sage, he stepped around it and found the same footprints leading into the edge of the forest. Once out of sight of the trail, the rider had put his boots on and ridden off through the pine needles on a horse.

At that point in his investigation Chuck heard the doctor's buckboard rattling up the path, and returned to help load the unconscious man into it for the trip to town. The doctor asked Chuck to drive while he attended the patient. The frantic girl had stayed in town to get the sheriff, but had been unable to find him. She was waiting at the doctor's office when they arrived with her father.

The miner was a popular man, and several friends, including the banker, had gathered at the door awaiting news from the doctor. As they waited, the sheriff rode lazily into town. He stopped when he saw the anxious crowd.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Billy Reynolds has been hurt," the banker replied.

Suddenly interested, the sheriff asked, "Mining accident?"

"No," someone responded. "His daughter said he's been robbed."

"I'll go right up there and see who done it," the sheriff promised, turning his horse.

"No need to do that," Chuck spoke up. "It's pretty obvious who did it."

"I don't need any interference from anyone else," the sheriff retorted hotly. "I'll solve this professionally."

"No," Chuck replied, "You don't want anyone else investigating because you did it yourself."

Instantly the sheriff was off his horse facing Chuck. "And just what makes you think I done it?" he demanded, leering into Chuck's face. "I haven't been anywhere near Billy's mine for weeks."

"If you'll check his socks," Chuck explained to the crowd, "You'll smell sagebrush. There may even be bits of sage caught in the cloth. There isn't any sage anywhere near here, except for a patch in the tailings of Billy's mine, and the robber walked right through it in his stocking feet."

Suddenly the sheriff drew his gun, pointing it at Chuck's chest. "Since you know so much about a mine that don't belong to you, you're under arrest for robbery, and for murder if Billy don't survive.

"Yah," someone in the crowd spoke up. "How'd you come to be up there when the doctor arrived?"

"I met Ruthie coming down the trail," Chuck answered clearly. "I went up to help her dad while she came to town for the doctor."

"We'll check that lie out later," the sheriff responded. "Meanwhile you are going to jail. You won't be allowed no visitors to help you cook up an alibi, neither."

"I'm not going anywhere until someone checks out those socks," Chuck answered calmly.

"You're goin' now," the sheriff replied, cocking his gun with his thumb.

Suddenly the cat in Chuck awakened. His head leaned forward and his jaw protruded, dropping until his mouth opened unbelievably wide. His facial muscles tensed into a snarl that emphasized his eye teeth, and some of those

who saw it even swore that his ears folded back against his head. He grabbed the gun from the sheriff's hand in a lightning-fast swipe before the lawman could pull the trigger. Turning the weapon on the sheriff, he commanded him to take off his boots and pass his socks to the crowd.

"Now," he addressed the banker, "Do you smell sage on the sheriff's socks?"

"Yes," the banker admitted.

"Is there any sage or sage-colored seeds caught in the weave?"

"Yes."

"Does anybody here disagree with that?" Chuck demanded as the socks were passed around.

When no one spoke up, Chuck emptied the gun's chambers, slammed the hammer against a boulder to render the gun useless, and dropped it into a public watering trough.

"You'd better arrest your sheriff," he advised the crowd as he disappeared cat-like into the forest and headed toward home. He picked up his deer carcass along the way. He told Ron and Judy what had happened right away.

"What makes you so sure the sheriff was the robber?" Ron asked.

"When he rode up I recognized the scent of the stocking-footed footprints, Dad. Without his boots on, the scent was so strong there was no possibility that it could be anyone else."

"Did you really expect anyone who does not know you to believe that?" Ron asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Nope," Chuck replied. "I told them to smell his socks for sage. He denied being anywhere near Billy's mine for weeks, and those tracks went right through the only sage brush within fifty miles of here. No one could miss that odor. Besides, there are sage seeds in the weave of his socks."

About nine A.M. the next day a citizens committee surrounded the cabin with drawn guns. "Chuck," they ordered, "You are surrounded. Come out for questioning with your hands up."

"Actually," Chuck called back from the barn where he had been working, "I'm back here in the barn, and could easily have given you the slip, but I have nothing to hide, so I'll come."

Chuck came without raising his hands. No one had the crass to object since he was not armed. "Well, what do you want to question me about," he asked when no one spoke up.

"We're not completely satisfied about exactly what you were doing at Billy's mine when the doctor got there," someone stated. "The sheriff still insists that that proves you are the guilty person."

"Did you ask Ruthie if she agreed that I should go there in case he needed help while she went for the doctor and the sheriff?" Chuck queried.

"The problem is," someone else chimed in. "The sheriff says that she's too upset to talk to anyone."

"Hey!" a tall man with a tied down holster growled out at the speakers. "The sheriff deputized me to lead this committee, and I'll ask the questions."

"I'll answer any man's questions except yours," Chuck responded softly. Then turning to the rest, he told them, "I'd better come into town with you so you'll know that I'm not running away. But you have to talk to Ruthie before this can go any farther."

“Saddle his horse so we can take him to jail,” the deputy instructed one of the men that obviously looked up to him.

“I don’t have a horse,” Chuck told them. “I’ll just run into town and you can follow me.”

Turning before the cocky deputy could object, Chuck started down the rut at a pace that forced the horses into a trot. Every member of the committee expected him to slow to a walk in a short time, but Chuck was used to following the mother cougar over much more difficult terrain than this at a similar pace for hours. He cleared the ford in a single bound, and was still running easily when the horses were beginning to lather.

When the amazed group stopped at the hotel, the deputy dismounted and turned to face Chuck at point blank range. You’re going to jail, he snarled, hunching into a gunfighter’s stance. An instantaneous cuff to the side of the face from Chuck’s right hand knocked the obnoxious deputy to the ground. Chuck pounced on the dazed man like a cat would a mouse, jerking his gun from its holster. He disabled the gun just as he had the sheriff’s, and handed it back to the deputy as if nothing had happened.

OK, gentlemen,” he addressed the committee. “Let’s go to see Ruthie. I’m kind of partial to her anyway.”

Chuck led the way to the Reynolds home, but no one answered the door.

“Two of you go in and see if she’s in there,” Chuck commanded. “Her mom’s dead, so she should be the only one at home.”

Two of the men went through a window for a look around. They came out the front door after a brief search.

“She’s not here,” they reported. “But her bedroom is a mess. Looks like there’s been a scuffle or something.”

“Let’s check the doctor’s office,” one of the men suggested.

“She left here about midnight,” the doctor told them. “I told her that her dad might be unconscious for several days, and sent her home to get some sleep.”

“Looks to me like someone didn’t want us talking to her,” one of the committee members said thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Chuck replied. “I was wandering when someone would catch on to that. We need to have a couple of men guard Billy so no one can polish him off if they suspect that he knows who clobbered him. Then we need to track the sheriff to find out what he did with Ruthie. His tracks were all around her house.”

“Them tracks was made with moccasins,” the deputy snarled. “What makes you think they’re the sheriff’s?”

“Let’s just say I could scent ‘em,” Chuck replied. Then, suddenly turning on the deputy, he whipped the surprised man’s arms behind his back. “Put his handcuffs on him,” he directed the committee member who seemed to be catching on.

When the deputy was handcuffed, Chuck addressed the committee. “Gentlemen,” he spoke earnestly, “Ruthie is in grave danger. That sheriff has abducted her, and may kill her when he finds that this conspirator was unable to get you to jail me. Be sure you keep this man under guard in jail. The key will be in his pocket. I’m going to trail the sheriff to wherever he took Ruthie. Pray for her!”

“We’ll go with you,” most of the committee volunteered.

“Some of you had better guard the jail so no one can let the deputy out to alert the sheriff,” Chuck advised. “Some of you should guard Billy until he recovers enough to defend himself. Maybe someone else could follow me

with an extra horse for Ruthie, but no one will be able to keep up with me if that trail leads through any rough terrain.”

Two men were appointed to follow Chuck. They kept up with him along the trail until it turned to circle a rough rocky area. Then they saw something they never could describe quite right. Chuck was leaping from rock to rock and foothold to foothold without ever slowing down. Within a minute he was lost to their sight.

The amazed men continued along the trail, and soon saw Chuck’s footprints where he had re-joined it. His shortcut across the rough terrain had gained him ten minutes or so.

The cougar-man noted that another horseman had joined the sheriff along the trail. Suddenly his face lighted up as he figured out where they were likely to be going. There was a small cave hidden by some huge boulders that the female cougar had occasionally used for a den about five miles up this trail. Anyone coming up the trail could easily be seen and picked off with a rifle from among those boulders.

Thinking about Ruthie’s danger made Chuck begin to realize just how partial he really was to her. She was always the woman he pictured coming home to. She was always the woman he pictured mothering his children. She was always the woman of all his dreams. If he hadn’t been so shy he would have been courting her long ago. Suddenly he struck out across country for that cave with reckless abandon, leaping wider gaps and taking greater chances than he ever had before.

The cave was on a part of the mountain trail that doubled back on itself as all such trails have to do occasionally, so Chuck actually hit the trail somewhat beyond the cave and worked his way back down toward it. He was approaching the rifleman from behind when he detected a female cougar bringing meat to its cubs. At the same moment a puff of wind confirmed that this was now an active den. As the cougar scented the rifleman, she crouched, the black tip of her tail twitching nervously. Cautiously she stalked the gunman from the downwind side. Just as cautiously, Chuck approached the den from behind her. He had to beat that cougar to the den or Ruthie was dead meat.

As the cougar sprang on the rifleman from behind, Chuck slipped into the den. Ruthie was sitting against the side wall of the den, bound hand and foot, and gagged with a rag. Once inside, Chuck gave a desperate grunt, and three fluffy kittens came out of hiding. He quickly scooted behind them, herding them towards the entrance of the den. By the time he had them beyond Ruthie and himself, the mother cougar was crouching at the mouth of the den.

Chuck slowly and deliberately drew his knife, being careful not to make any sudden moves. There he stood, staring down the crouching cougar, her mouth agape and her ears flattened against her head. Finally she grunted to her cubs, and they ran out beyond her. She issued a warning hiss and turned to follow her cubs to safety.

Stepping behind the astounded young woman, Chuck untied her gag. Then cutting her bonds he came around to face her. Taking her by the upper arms, he lifted her up and hugged her to himself. When he bent down to kiss her, she met his lips with her own.

“Sure took you long enough,” she said as they came up for air.

“I came as quick as I could,” he answered defensively.

“I meant the kiss,” she replied impudently. “I’ve been waiting for it ever since that day you stood up for me at school.”

“Me too,” he answered, pulling her close for another one. “We’ll get married as soon as we get back to town.”

“You’re askin’ a lot, she answered with a mischeivous twinkle in her eyes, “But I guess I can wait that long.”

* * *

The lovers checked on the rifleman when they came out of the den. He had died almost instantly from the cougar's bite through the spinal cord of his neck.

"We really ought to bury him," Ruthie remarked with a shudder.

"Not yet," Chuck replied. "We're going to have to use this as part of my defense. The sheriff is trying to pin the robbery of your dad on me."

"He did it himself," she retorted hotly. "They talked about it right in front of me. There's a third man named Chet involved."

"If they talked about it in your hearing, he'll likely try to kill you before you spill the beans," Chuck warned. "We'd better go to town cross country just in case he is lying wait for us along the trail."

"Lead the way," she told him, "But don't expect me to run the way you do."

"How'd you know how I can run?" he asked.

"Can't a girl even watch the man of her dreams run with the cougars without criticism?" she asked mischievously. "There's a spot about a mile up from Dad's mine where I could see you lots of times. At first I could hardly watch, but I gradually realized that it was as easy for you as it was for the cats. How'd you ever make friends with that beast?"

"That beast," Chuck replied, "Pulled me from the creek before I was a year old. She nursed me in a den about like the one we just came from for four months," he added with misty eyes. She was literally my second mother until my parents found me again. She's been dead a couple years now," he confided brokenly.

"So that's how you knew how to handle that mother cougar so well a while ago," she mused. "You are literally The Cougar Kid."

"And proud of it," he added.

It took Chuck and Ruthie the rest of the day to reach town. Chuck took her to Brother Jones's wife, asking them to keep her hidden until the sheriff was captured. Then he slipped up to the doctor's office to inquire about Billy's condition.

"He came around this afternoon," the doctor told him. "Someone took a potshot at him from the upstairs of the hotel while they were taking him home. The shot missed, but one of the guards returned the fire. When they went up there, they found the sheriff shot through the heart. You sure called that one right."

"The sheriff had Ruthie tied up in a cougar den way up on the mountain," Chuck replied. "The cougar killed her guard, but Ruthie says they spoke of another man called Chet as being involved."

"That's the guy you jailed this morning," the doctor informed him. The banker sent a telegram to Denver and found he's wanted for claim jumping and murder. He'll be under heavy guard until the marshal from Denver gets here to pick him up."

"Then everyone's accounted for, so I can take Ruthie back to her dad's tonight," Chuck answered. By the way, you are invited to our wedding tomorrow at noon. It's too late to get Dad to marry us tonight.

"Humph!" the doctor grunted. "She's one of my favorite patients. I've been wondering how it could take someone as bright as you are so long to see what a great little woman she is."

* * *

Chuck and his parents came to town early the next morning so they could start decorating the church for the wedding. The whole congregation pitched in to help. If I knew where my stolen gold was, I'd treat everyone to dinner at the hotel," Billy told Chuck.

It'll probably be hidden in or around that old log cabin along the trail to the Indian settlement," Chuck told him. "All three of those criminals reeked of Bee Balm, and there's a lot of Bee Balm growing around that cabin." A delegation was sent to the spot by horseback, and returned with all the recently stolen gold before noon.

"We want you to be our next sheriff," the citizens committee told Chuck. "You seem to be able to sniff out the details of other men's misbehavior."

"We'll consider that on our honeymoon," Chuck promised. "But as soon as dinner is over, we're headed for the mountains to be together with God for a couple of weeks. We want to be sure that He is the rallying point of our marriage."

Chuck and Ruthie were married with everyone's blessings right at noon. At Ruthie's suggestion, they spent their first night together in the old den where Chuck had been nursed by the cougar. "It's the closest I'll ever come to sharing that experience with you," she said.

"Nothing could please me more," he replied, pulling her into a passionate newly-wed kiss.

The Whisper

"Yi-Yi-Yiii!"

Little Fox awakened instantly from a deep sleep the moment the alarm was sounded. Grabbing his small bow and arrows, he rushed out of the family tepee and into the forest that surrounded the Indian village. The twelve-year-old Indian boy melted silently into the darkness among the trees. When he was safely away from the village, he squirmed under the rotting trunk of a large fallen tree and nocked an arrow in defensive readiness.

From the relative security of his position the Little Fox could hear the horses thunder away from the village remuda. He sensed, more than heard Indian warriors creeping through the forest, but could not differentiate the attackers from the defenders of the village. His safety lay in motionless patience. The young Indian scarcely moved a muscle until dawn began to lighten the eastern sky.

All appeared to be quiet as the light of dawn began filtering into the forest. The young Sioux Indian cautiously eased himself out of his hiding place. With every sense alert he started working his silent way back to the village. Soon he detected other children slipping from shadow to shadow as they made their way home. Tenseness showed on every face until they could make out the squaws tending their cooking fires by their tepees. Then animated conversation took over as they rushed into the village to find out what had happened. But their curiosity had to await the return of the braves who had rushed out to recover their stolen horses.

Most of the braves did not return until the third day. They had only recovered about half of the horses. Wounded Bear, the Little Fox's father, was not with them. Neither was the small pony that the Little Fox had been allowed to ride. The body of a dead brave was tied across one of the horses. The Little Fox's heart ached as the widowed squaw took up the death wail when she recognized the victim. He wondered if his mother would soon be wailing too.

The Little Fox's anxiety for his Father increased throughout the night. About noon the next day, just when the young boy's Indian stoicism was about to fail, the Wounded Bear came riding in to the village on a fine-looking stallion. The brave dismounted painfully, and went straight to his tepee. He had taken an arrow in the fleshy part of the back of his shoulder during the initial attack on the village, but his wound only made him the more determined to avenge himself on the attackers. He had caught up with one of them and taken his horse and his scalp. "Surely you have heard how terrible a wounded bear is," he quipped through his pain.

The Little Fox was furious at the loss of his pony. His anger smoldered for a week or so, and then burst into flames of determination to become an outstanding warrior. He spent virtually all his time practicing shooting with his bow and arrows, throwing his tomahawk or spear, and tracking his friends in the plains and forests. At the age of fourteen he killed a fair-sized black bear single-handed with his spear. He purchased a horse with its skin.

The superior prowess of the Little Fox was obvious to all. The village shaman urged him to purify himself for the vision quest. After a day of fasting, he confidently took his place in the sweat lodge by the river with half-a-dozen other youths a mite older than himself. The fire was lit to heat the stones, and the village elders painted symbols on each of the participants. The shaman led the group in chants until the stones were red hot. Then he began spooning water on the stones to produce steam. The sweating participants began pleading to the Great Spirit for guidance and wisdom in their lives. Slowly the participants began recalling their faults and misdeeds with tears of oppression and guilt.

After a seemingly endless time each of the other youths seemed to see a different manifestation of a distant brightness. A sense of peace and oneness with creation settled on them, and they were released to run to the river and dive in.

“But I didn’t feel anything except the heat and the sweating,” the Little Fox told the shaman.

“Then you are not cleansed,” the old man replied sympathetically. “You are not ready for a vision quest to seek a guiding animal spirit. You will have to try again next year.”

But the next year brought the same results—nothing in the soul of the young up-and-coming brave.

That year, while the Little Fox was fifteen years old, the braves recovered a young Sioux squaw from the Kiowa during their annual spring raids. Her name was Morning Mist. She had lost her mother at birth, and had been raised by a young white couple who had been ranching on the prairies. Her adoptive parents had been killed by the Kiowa when she was ten years old, and she had been a slave to a Kiowa medicine woman for four years. It was only natural that she be placed under the supervision of the aging medicine woman in the Sioux village.

Besides the usual duties of a squaw, the Morning Mist spent a lot of time gathering medicinal herbs for the medicine woman. She was blossoming into a beautiful young woman, but it was her poise that impressed the Little Fox. Somehow he sensed that she had a serenity that ran deeper than the normal Indian stoicism.

One day the Little Fox was hunting in the forest when he happened across her tracks on a bit of soft ground she had needed to cross to pick some herbs. She had been walking as skillfully as any brave, leaving little evidence of her passage. The young Indian took up her trail as a challenge to see if he could follow her. He had trailed her with difficulty for several hours before he found her seated on a boulder beside an idyllic waterfall reading a book.

To his chagrin, the little squaw detected the Little Fox as he was slipping up on her. “Hello, mighty brave,” she greeted him mischievously. “What brings you here just now?”

“The challenge of your trail,” he answered admiringly. “You leave fewer signs than most of the braves do.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “My teacher was a Kiowa medicine woman who beat me if I left any careless signs on my trail.”

“What’s that?” the Little Fox queried, pointing to the book, “Part of your totem?”

“This in my Bible,” the Morning Mist replied, holding it out for his examination. “It tells me the words of the true God.”

“I hear nothing,” he replied as he took the book from her and held it curiously to his ear.

“No,” she answered, “It doesn’t work that way. My white parents taught me how to follow the trails of the marks in the book. They lead us to God just as surely as my tracks led you to me today.

“Show me how to follow these trails,” he replied.

“See this little mark?” she asked, pointing to an “A”. “It is the footprint of the sound, ‘Ah.’ You have to learn the footprints of all the sounds. Then you can put them together to follow the trails of the words of God.”

“A brave does not learn to follow trails on the ground in a day, the Morning Mist continued. “I will help you if you want me to, but it will take you several moons of tedious work to become skillful at following this kind of trail. It is called, ‘Reading’”

For the next several months the Little Fox and the Morning Mist met at every opportunity for an hour or two of

reading lessons. They went to their pre-determined rendezvous spots separately, being careful to leave no trails. It was not considered proper for young braves and squaws to fraternize, especially without supervision.

The Little Fox's initial motive was simply to learn this medicine of reading, but in spite of himself, he found that he enjoyed the company of the Morning Mist far more than that of any of the young men his age. She was more skilled in Indian wood lore than any of his male companions from the village, and she was modest about it. She was intelligent, could think independently, and enjoyed sharing her thoughts with him. And her maidenly figure intrigued him far more than any other squaw he had ever seen.

Within a few weeks the Little Fox could sound out the words in the English Bible, but they made little sense to him. Slowly and patiently the young squaw began to teach him a bit of the English language as well. Almost imperceptibly he was beginning to get a concept of who the God of the Bible was.

* * *

The Wounded Bear was killed in a raid on a Cheyenne village when the Little Fox was seventeen years old. The Indian youth was devastated by the wails of his mother and sisters, but he showed no emotion other than to praise his father as a great hunter and warrior. Being the only son, the Little Fox suddenly found himself head of the family.

The young Indian adjusted quickly to his new situation. He hunted tirelessly and skillfully, so there was no lack of meat in his mother's lodge, and plenty to share with others. His new responsibilities caused him to feel a need of superhuman guidance, forcing him to approach the shaman for a third session of purification at the sweat lodge.

"No!" the shaman responded. "It will not work. You must embark on a distant vision quest by yourself. You will search the highest crags of the sacred mountain for a place to fast. You will take your most precious possession as a sacrifice to the Great Spirit. You will not eat anything as you contemplate all that is going on in your life and your soul. You will focus on your faults, and when cleansing is granted your guiding animal spirit will come to you. It could take many sleeps, but if you persist it will work. Do you understand?"

"Yes," the Indian youth replied. "I will start tomorrow, on the new moon."

Taking nothing except his blanket, his weapons, and the Bowie knife that his father had taken from the body of a white man, The Little Fox began his journey to the sacred peak, just visible from his village on clear days. It took him three days to reach the mountain and another to climb up to the highest crags. There from heights that looked down on the nesting eagles, the Little Fox found a shallow cave, not over twenty feet deep. After leaving his Bowie knife in plain sight at the opening for a sacrifice to the Great Spirit, he lay down on his blanket inside the cave.

The cold of the mountain dawn found the Little Fox wrapped in his blanket sitting on the ledge in front of the cave. As he forced himself to think of his faults, he remembered reading, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" in the Morning Mist's Bible. He began to understand that even his driving ambition to become a great warrior plundering other Indian villages and killing their braves was sin. He saw himself as thoroughly sinful, a robber and murderer at heart!

For the first time in his life the concept of sin being an affront to God began to fill the Little Fox with guilt and dread. As he contemplated throughout the day he began to question how fasting and sweating and sacrificing his possessions could possibly atone for his guilt.

By evening the Little Fox was physically weak from hunger and emotionally worn out from his load of guilt. He certainly did not feel at all cleansed as he crawled into the cave and rolled up in his blanket. Soon a fitful sleep claimed him.

Sometime in the middle of the night a fierce storm awoke the exhausted lad. The wind raged so hard at the mouth of the cave that huge chunks of rock were wrenched from its edges to fall noisily down the mountainside.

Occasional great blasts of wind penetrated the cave and tore at his blanket.

The terrified youth shrank to the back of the cave where an indescribably dreadful horror far more disturbing than the terror of the storm gripped his soul. Suddenly the indistinct form of a huge bear appeared at the mouth of the cave. Though it seemed to have little substance to it, a swipe of its paw ripped more rock away from the entrance, allowing it to waddle into the cave. The apparition shook real water from its coat, sniffed the air, and walked right up to distraught boy. Little Fox could feel its warm fetid breath on his face.

“Brother Little Fox,” the bear growled in the Sioux language, “I have come to be your guide. I will give you the strength to overcome your enemies. None will dare accuse you of wrong, for you will have my strength to destroy them. You will take many scalps with my help. I will make you great, and you will thank the Great Spirit for my help.”

“No!” the distraught Indian lad shouted. “I don’t need help committing more sins, I need cleansing from the sins I have already committed.”

“Then we are not brothers, but enemies,” the bear roared as it raised a paw to strike the boy. Then, as if displaced by some unseen force, it turned abruptly and faded away.

The Little Fox lay back, totally drained. He was just dropping off to sleep again when it seemed that a terrible thunder clap shook the mountain—only it didn’t quit shaking. As the ground beneath him trembled violently, a huge vapid-looking buffalo bull squeezed its way into the cave. Its red eyes seemed to broadcast horror and malice everywhere they looked. “Little Fox,” the buffalo grunted, “I have come to meet both your physical needs and spiritual needs throughout your life. I will see that you have plenty of meat in your lodge and many horses in your remuda. You will be at peace with the world and all that is in it. You will be completely satisfied, and forget your faults. You will praise the Great Spirit for...”

“Never,” the lad interrupted. Forgetting my faults will not cleanse me from them. I do not need your kind of help.”

The earth shook more than ever as the great beast pawed at the floor of the cave, but the Little Fox stood his ground. “Then the stomachs of your household will never be satisfied,” the buffalo bellowed as it disappeared into thin air.

The Little Fox dropped back into a troubled sleep on his blanket. This time he dreamed that he was falling off the mountain into an ocean of fire. Awakening suddenly to the smell of burning sulfur, he saw several fiery spheres of ball lightning skittering about the entrance to the cave. Psychedelic shadows danced on the walls as the horror of spiritual darkness again assailed the boy’s soul. The balls of fire coalesced and contorted into the shape of a huge iridescent snake that glided up to youth.

“Little Fox,” it hissed, “I am of old the messenger of light. Accept the serpent as your guide, and I will give you the power of deceit. You will be able to vanquish your enemies by treachery. You will be wealthy, and I will help you convince the world that there is no such thing as sin. I will...”

“Go away!” The Little Fox replied, “I need not deceit, but truth. Take this dread that surrounds you and leave me alone. Go!”

“We will be mortal enemies,” the serpent spat out venomously as the vision began to fade, “And I will be waiting along your trails to strike your heels.”

By this time there was no sleep left in the Little Fox. He hunched his shivering body against the back of the cave, staring into the empty darkness as the storm blew itself out. More and more stars began to appear in the sky, until the Milky Way angled across the mouth of the cave like a trail across the heavens.

As a glorious sunrise ushered in the day, the sound of a gentle breeze broke into the Little Fox's reverie. "Little Fox, come out of the dark," it seemed to whisper.

As the Little Fox stepped out of the cave the quiet voice continued, "You did well to refuse the spirits that enticed you, for they are evil. True peace and wisdom are found only on the trail of the Son of God. Follow it in the Bible and you will find that God sent Him to die to cleanse you from your sins. He sends His Holy Spirit to guide those who trust Him. Worship God!"

The Little Fox slowly rolled up his blanket and picked up his weapons. Finally he picked up the Bowie knife he had brought for the great spirit and started down the mountain towards home.

The moment the Little Fox re-entered the Indian village the shaman called him to his tepee. "Did you find a spirit guide?" the old man asked in a fatherly way.

"Yes," the Little Fox reported guardedly, knowing that the shaman would not be pleased that he had rejected three animal spirit guides.

"Which spirit did you hear?" the old man persisted.

"The whisper of a still small voice that brought me peace and instructed me how to find the trail I must follow," the youth replied.

"This is not the usual way, Little Fox," the shaman replied skeptically. "We will see how it goes for you without an animal spirit guide. Meanwhile, you will be called, 'The Whisper.'"

* * *

The next day the Whisper tracked the Morning Mist to one of their favorite meeting spots. He found her prostrate on the ground sobbing out a deep internal anguish.

"Morning Mist," he called gently. Her head jerked up, her swollen eyes staring reproachfully at him.

"Leave me alone!" she said fiercely. "Go to your spirits and leave me alone." Mystified, he stumbled away without the slightest idea of what was wrong.

The rebuffed youth tried time and again to speak to the Morning Mist, but she avoided him at every turn of the way. He missed his reading lessons. How could he follow the trail of the Son of God without access to a Bible? But even more, he missed the girl herself. "Spirit of God," he prayed, "Please help me speak to the Morning Mist."

The Whisper tried to drown his anguish in work. He used his father's favorite horse to hunt for hours on end, often at great distances from the village. He brought field-dressed carcasses of deer from miles away to present them to his mother or the village widows. Occasionally he would get up the courage to leave one at the tepee of the medicine woman, but the Morning Mist remained as intangible as her name implied. "Holy Spirit," he often prayed, "Please show me how to win the Morning Mist."

One day a feeble-minded child of the village wandered into the forest and did not come home. When the Whisper heard that the child had been missing all night he headed into the forest to find it. The trail wandered aimlessly without purpose or destination, but the young brave persisted until he found the lost child a return walk of several hours from home.

"Follow me," the Whisper urged the lost child. "I'll show you the way home." They started out for the village, but the child turned aside at every little thing that caught the fancy of its feeble mind.

"That's not the way home," the frustrated guide would say. "But I want to go home this way," the child would

answer. Eventually the Whisper had to gather the wandering child into his arms and carry it to its mother in the village.

“Father God,” the Whisper prayed that evening, “Forgive me for wanting your Spirit to help me follow the trail that I have chosen instead of guiding me along the trail that You want me to travel. Help me learn to follow the guidance of your holy Spirit.” Although the ache for the Morning Mist did not leave his heart, a peace that he could not understand made it more tolerable.

A few dawns later the Whisper went on foot to a picturesque lake not too far from the village. He had hoped to kill a deer there, but the old medicine woman had beaten him to the lake. She sat on an old deadfall canting the chant to the sunrise. No deer would come this morning.

The Whisper sat down a few feet from the medicine woman. The two of them watched the rising sun transform the thin mist over the water into a delicate golden shroud that vaguely obscured the silhouette of the landscape beyond the lake. Suddenly the shadow of a drifting cloud blotted out the golden rays of sunlight.

Turning to acknowledge the youth’s presence, the old woman spoke. “I have learned to love the morning mist,” she muttered tonelessly. “Why have you taken the golden sunshine from her heart?”

“I wish I knew what drives the sunshine from her heart, Grandmother,” he whispered brokenly. “My soul rains tears because she will not speak to me.”

“She will be here at dawn tomorrow,” the old woman assured him as she rose to leave.

Early the next morning the Whisper found the Morning Mist sitting on the dead fall staring vacantly into the water. She had lost a lot of weight and the circles under her eyes were dark. Slipping up behind her, he placed his hands lightly on her shoulders. She seemed to shrink beneath his touch, but did not shrug him off.

“Morning Mist,” he said softly. “God’s holy Spirit told me to follow the trail of the Son of God in the Bible, but you are keeping it from me. I wish to resume reading the Bible with you.”

“What happened on your vision quest?” she asked tremulously.

“First,” he said, looking toward the sacred mountain as if to re-visualize the scene, “I realized what a sinner I was. It was very wrong of me to want to rob and kill other Indians. Then the spirit of the bear came in the wind. When it left the spirit of the buffalo came in an earthquake. When it left the spirit of the snake came in a fire. Each of them offered to be my spirit guide, but none of them could take my guilt away. They were all so evil that I rejected them.

“Finally,” he finished, “A still small voice like a whisper told me to follow the trail of the Son of God in the Bible. He would take my guilt away, and God’s holy Spirit would be my spirit guide. That is why they call me the Whisper.”

The Morning Mist rose to her feet and turned to face him with tears in her eyes. “I have been wrong,” she whispered remorsefully. “I will start studying the trail of the Son of God with you again.” Then, rising up on her tip-toes, she pulled his face towards hers and kissed him on the lips before fleeing into the forest.

A warm glow filled the Whisper as he watched the girl’s lithe form disappear into the trees. He walked light-heartedly toward the village.

* * *

The Whisper studied the Book of John with the Morning Mist whenever possible until winter interrupted them. He quickly came to understand the basic doctrines like the Trinity and salvation by grace through faith in Christ; but when the weather became too cold to study outdoors, their meetings came to an abrupt halt. The only way he

could contrive to see her was to bring meat to the Medicine Woman's tepee.

By the time the swollen buds on the trees were ready to pop into spring, the Whisper was absolutely consumed with desire for the Morning Mist. When his mother saw that his appetite had declined so much that he scarcely ate, she approached him alone in the tepee.

"Your heart cries for the Morning Mist?" she asked.

"How did you know?" he replied.

"Did you not realize that your mother would notice how often the two of you were absent from the village at the same time last year?" she answered. "Have I not watched you walk out of your way to pass the medicine woman's tepee all winter? Have I not seen the little squaw look at the ground with unseeing eyes whenever you are near? Do not those same eyes glow as they follow you when you have passed?"

"What shall I do, Mother?" He asked miserably. "I love her."

"You have had your cleansing and your vision quest," the woman mused. "There are more than enough of your father's horses left in the remuda to offer the medicine woman a rich gift. Go quickly and speak to the shaman, for the cruel Angry Cougar stares lustfully at the Morning Mist."

Fear gripped the Whisper's heart as he thought of someone else getting the Morning Mist. "Thank you my mother," he said as he rose to go to the shaman.

The Whisper stopped a few feet from the shaman's tepee and coughed unobtrusively.

"Yes?" the shaman greeted him as he came outside. "What does the Whisper desire?"

The Whisper's lips were dry. "I want the Morning Mist for my squaw," he replied shakily. "I have horses to give the medicine woman."

"The Whisper is young, and has not proven himself yet," the old man reminded him. "You have not been on any raids or stolen any horses. You have no scalps on your spear. You must follow the customs of the ancients."

"I am eighteen winters old," the Whisper replied. "My arrows fly as straight as any brave's in the village. I have brought more meat to the village since my father died than any other brave has provided. I can follow trails that many braves cannot see. But my guiding spirit does not permit me to kill or steal. Must I always be a bachelor?"

"It will be decided by the village council at the next full moon," the shaman pronounced decisively, turning to re-enter his tent.

Two weeks later a beautiful spring day forced its way up the mountainside. The lovesick Whisper saw the Morning Mist walk demurely past his mother's tepee as she wended her way into the forest. He waited an hour before leaving the village on the opposite side. When well away from the village he circled around and picked up her trail. He found her waiting for him beneath a rocky overhang hidden behind a clump of evergreens. She stared bashfully at her feet.

Whisper placed his hands on her shoulders. "Morning Mist," he said softly. "I love you." He felt a shiver go through her body as he spoke. "I have asked the shaman if I can have you as my squaw," he continued. "Are you willing?"

"I am, Whisper," she answered readily, raising her eyes to his. "I love you too. We can follow the trail of the Son of God together, hand-in-hand."

"The shaman says I have to prove myself first."

“Surely you will not kill or steal?” she pled.

“I told him that my guiding Spirit forbids it,” he assured her. “I will have to try to prove myself in other ways.”

* * *

The Whisper’s case came before the council the next week. After much discussion, it was decided that the voice the Little Fox had heard on the sacred mountain could not have been from the Great Spirit if it forbade raiding other tribes. All the other guiding spirits actually aided the braves during such raids.

“No,” the Little Fox agreed, “It was not from the Great Spirit, but from the true God, who sent His Son to die for our sins. The spirits of the bear, the buffalo, and the snake came to me, but they encouraged me to sin instead of cleansing me. I sent them away, for I will only follow the true God’s Holy Spirit!”

“Why are we still discussing this?” The Angry Cougar interjected. “The Little Fox has insulted the animal spirit guides, and is afraid to prove himself in valor. He is but a weakling and a dreamer, and is not qualified for marriage according to our customs.”

A heavy silence settled on the gathering around the council fire. Finally the shaman spoke.

“We do not acknowledge the spirit of the whisper, Little Fox. You will bring the anger of the Great Spirit on our village if you stay here. You must leave at once.”

“I will leave if you fear for me to stay;” the Little Fox answered humbly, “But the Morning Mist has followed the same God as I do almost since birth. I will give the medicine woman our four spotted horses for her if you will let me take her with me as my wife. They are some of the best in the remuda.”

After consulting the medicine woman, the council agreed to let the Little Fox take the Morning Mist with him as his squaw.

“No!” shouted the Angry Cougar. “I too desire the Morning Mist for my squaw. According to our customs, I challenge the cowardly Little Fox to a fight to the death for the little squaw.”

“It shall be settled as the Angry Cougar demands,” the chief pronounced. “Let us go to the fighting pit.”

The Little Fox was about to decline for conscience sake, but the thought of the Morning Mist having to live with such a bully as the Angry Cougar for the rest of her life dissuaded him. Grabbing his knife from its sheath, he followed the challenger into the pit. As they faced off Little Fox noted that the Angry Cougar held his knife in his left hand

The two opponents, one in full manhood and the other but a well-developed youth circled each other warily with drawn knives. Suddenly the Angry Cougar charged, stabbing downward at the Little Fox’s neck. The youth caught the bigger brave’s blade on his own, warding it off skillfully as he backed away. He was at once aware that besides being left-handed, his opponent was unbelievably strong. He would have to fight this battle with cunning and skill rather than brute force.

Again and again the bigger brave charged, while the Little Fox sidestepped or parried his lethal blade. Both fighters glistened with sweat as they maneuvered in the pit. The Little Fox was knocked down three times, but was always able to regain his feet before the bigger man could harm him.

Just when the Little Fox was beginning to wonder how much longer he could last before his strength gave out, he detected a pattern in his opponents attacks. If his charges were thwarted, he generally steered his momentum past the left side of his opponent in order to avoid the knife in his right hand. He always pivoted to keep facing his

enemy as he went by.

On the next charge, the Little Fox planted his right foot as he caught his opponent's raised blade on his own. Instead of backing away as he had been doing, he leaned into his knife with all his strength. His surprise move gave him the leverage on his pivoting opponent's upstretched arm, unbalancing him. As the brave back-stepped to regain his balance, Little Fox hooked his leg with his own left foot, tripping him backwards.

The Little Fox threw himself onto the Angry Cougar's falling body. They landed with Little Fox's left hip pinning the Angry Cougar's knife hand to the ground and the point of his blade resting firmly against the side of the defeated challenger's throat.

"Do not move, Angry Cougar," the youth warned the helpless brave, twisting his blade menacingly against his enemy's throat.

"Do you agree before the council to relinquish all claims to the Morning Mist?"

"I do," the Angry Cougar gritted out sullenly. "You were lucky."

"You may rise, I have no desire to harm you," the Little Fox continued, ignoring the insult as he stepped away from his opponent.

Little Fox tied his few belongings on the stallion that he usually rode. The shaman brought a fine little horse that the medicine woman, who really had learned to love the Morning Mist, was giving to the bride. The bridegroom squatted expectantly across the embers of the council fire from the other braves. The village squaws wrapped the Morning Mist in a blanket and carried her to him. "Here is your squaw, Little Fox," the shaman announced as the women deposited her at his feet. "I fear for your pathway together without an animal spirit to guide you." Little Fox concluded the abbreviated marriage ceremony by declaring, "You are mine," as he tapped his bride's bundled form gently with an arrow as if he were counting coo on her.

* * *

The outcast couple rode slowly into the forest with the Little Fox in the lead. When they were well out of sight of the village, He turned towards that idyllic spot by the waterfall where their friendship had begun. They spent their nuptial night there, under the western stars that glittered through the treetops like a giant chandelier.

"Whisper," the Morning Mist addressed him as the light of dawn intruded on their privacy.

"They took that name away from me," he answered ruefully.

"You will always be the 'Whisper' to me, she answered. Does it not thrill me every time you whisper love to me? But," she continued, "I will call you 'Elijah,' after the prophet that heard the still small voice, if you will call me 'Misty,' like my white parents did. They were the first people who really loved me."

Elijah and Misty spent a few blissful days together in the seclusion of the forest as they contemplated what they should do. He killed a deer, and she prepared enough jerky for a longer journey. They needed to get further away from the village that feared their presence.

"We cannot go to any of the Sioux," Elijah reasoned. "They will all fear that we will bring the wrath of the Great Spirit on them."

"Most of the white men would despise us because we are Indians," Misty added. "There were some Christian Sioux on the ranch where I was raised," she continued, "That is why my white parents were allowed to raise me, but I do not remember where that was."

"Tell me what it was like," Elijah urged her. "Maybe we can find it?"

"I remember," Misty reminisced, "that it was at the foot of a very tall mountain, on a large stream that watered the cattle. They called it the 'King's Cross Ranch because my parents' name was 'King,' and their brand was the cross."

"We must find that place," Elijah mused. "Other Christians will help us follow the trail of Christ. We will pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us to His people." Right then and there the Christian Indian couple began the habit of praying together.

"The sun rose on the far side of the mountains," Misty remembered later; so the youthful couple headed for the western edge of the mountain range they were in. Within a week they were dropping off the western slopes of the Sangre de Christo Mountains onto the Colorado plains that spread out beneath them.

Turning south by chance, they rode for a day and a half before they came across a ranch house nestled at the foot of the mountains. "We can inquire about the King's Cross Ranch there," Misty suggested. "They may be able to steer us in the right direction."

The Indian couple was scarcely within earshot of the house when a cowpoke on the porch called for them to stop. He was covering them with a rifle, and there was nothing friendly about his demeanor.

"You thievin' Injuns better make yerselves scarce a'fore I start shootin'," the cowboy called out.

Elijah did not understand enough English to know exactly what was said, but the general meaning was clear enough. He turned his horse to retreat, but Misty rode closer to the house.

"Sir," she addressed the irate man in perfect English. "We are not here to steal anything. We just need to ask directions to the Kings Cross Ranch, if you've heard of it."

"Ya speak good English," the cowpoke replied, lowering his rifle a mite. "I'm Harry. What do yas want with the King's boys?"

"I was raised by the Kings before they were attacked by the Kiowa," she replied. "We were hoping to find some Christian Indians that I used to know there."

"Some Kings still owns the ranch," the cowpoke responded, easing the hammer on his gun back down, "Un I've heard that there's some Christian heathens around there too. Foller along the mountains fer about seventy-five er eighty miles till yas reach the Crestone Creek un you'll find the ranch house just acrost the water. I'll tell the guys not ta bother yas none."

"Thank you," the little squaw murmured. "You can't imagine how much we appreciate your help."

Elijah and Misty camped in some trees along a small creek an hour or more south of Harry's ranch that evening. Well after dark they heard a group of horsemen moving a bunch of cattle up the creek towards the mountains.

"That's got to be rustlers," Misty whispered to her husband. "You follow them while I ride back to the ranch and tell Harry. They think it's the Indians that are stealing their cattle."

Elijah followed the rustlers, who drove the cattle a ways up a small insignificant-looking canyon and camped at a narrow spot, keeping the cattle from returning to the grass lands. After memorizing a few landmarks, the Indian returned to where he and Misty had separated, awaiting the arrival of help.

A group of ten or twelve armed cowboys arrived at the Indian's campsite well before dawn. With Misty translating, Elijah was able to tell them where the rustlers were hiding.

“That’s Horse Creek Canyon,” the ranch foreman concluded from Elijah’s description. “Everyone says it’s a blind canyon, but they’s found a way ta sneak cattle into the mountains through it.”

“We can surround them in the darkness,” Elijah assured them, “and probably capture them without a fight at dawn.”

“Lead the way,” Harry urged him. “We’d like ta put a stop ta this rustlin’ un get back on good terms with the Injuns.”

With his superior night vision Elijah was able to station the cowboys in excellent offensive positions around the sleeping rustlers. When the first rustler arose, Harry called out that they were surrounded, and ordered them to surrender. They were able to capture all of the rustlers without firing a shot.

Before leaving with his prisoners, Harry scribbled a note for Elijah and Misty:

These are good injuns who alerted us ta rustlers un helped us capture um. Treat um right!

*Harry
Foreman ov the Capital K*

Two days later Elijah and Misty crossed the creek and rode unchallenged right up to the Kings Cross ranch house. Elijah hung back timidly while Misty banged the huge brass knocker against the door three times, just as she used to do as a child. After a moment a well-preserved middle-aged woman opened the door, wiping a stray wisp of grey hair from the side of her forehead.

“Mom,” Misty squealed, gathering the surprised woman joyfully into her arms. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Misty,” the older woman responded, clinging to her daughter tearfully. “You don’t know how I’ve prayed for this!”

After a long moment, Misty pulled away. “This is my husband, Elijah,” she said, pulling him forward. “He brought me home so we could be with other Christians.”

Hardly comprehending what was happening, Elijah was instantly drawn into a big hug from Mrs. King. “Welcome to our home, Son,” she breathed out earnestly as she released him. “May the Lord bless your lives together.” Then, seeing that he did not understand, she repeated it all in perfect Sioux.

“You speak our language?” he asked incredulously.

”Sure,” she assured him. “Most of our friends are Sioux.”

“Do they follow the trail of the Son of God?” he asked anxiously.

“I’m happy to say that they do,” the older woman replied. Then, seeing his smile, she continued, “And I’m glad that it pleases you.”

“Mom?” Misty queried, “How have you been doing without Dad?”

Mrs. King looked blankly at her long-lost daughter for a moment before she comprehended what she meant. “He didn’t die Misty. The Kiowa got three arrows into him before our Sioux friends arrived and drove them away, but the Lord pulled him through. Nothing has changed here except that we have been mourning the loss of our beloved daughter.”

“Mom,” Misty blurted out through happy tears, “I thought you were both dead. I had my Bible with me when I was captured, and it has been my only comfort until Elijah fell in love with me.”

Suddenly Mrs. King exclaimed, “I don’t know what’s the matter with me! Misty, you and Elijah run out and raise a white flag on the cupola of the horse barn. That’ll bring Dad a-flyin’ when he sees it. Then put your horses up while I start supper.”

“You’ll like Dad,” Misty assured Elijah as they walked back from the barn to the house. When I introduce you to him, he will greet you by taking your right hand in his and shaking it gently up and down. Return his shake with about the same amount of pressure, and let go when he does. When he sees that you don’t speak much English he will switch to Sioux so you can understand him. Don’t be anxious, he will accept you into the family as readily as Mom did.”

When supper was over and experiences had been rehashed, Mrs. King started to put the married couple in Misty’s old room.

“Better wait a bit on that, Momma,” Mr. King advised. “Elijah’s had a pretty stressful day, and I’d bet my new pony he’d rather sleep out under the stars. We’re not trying to make a white man out of him.”

“Of course,” she agreed, “I wasn’t thinking too straight, was I?”

“Thanks, Dad,” Misty allowed. “I’ll probably feel less cooped up out there myself, after all these years without a house. We’ll see you in the morning.”

The first things Mr. King did to make Elijah feel accepted into the family was to trust him with a gun. The Winchester repeating rifles had just come out, and after the rancher had taught him how to shoot he loaned him his personal one. Elijah brought several deer back to the ranch that week, and Misty tanned their hides. She sewed them into elaborately decorated buckskin clothing for her husband and herself. Within a few weeks the Indian had become a crack shot, killing many wolves in the vicinity of the ranch. He was able to buy his own rifle from the money he got from his wolf, cougar, and even occasional bear hides.

Misty and Elijah initially took up residence in the Christian Sioux village at the edge of the forest, about ten miles from the King Cross ranch. The village had an Indian church pastored by a converted shaman who loved the Lord and studied His word continually. Elijah drank in His soul-stirring sermons, and grew rapidly in the Lord. He was able to study the Lord’s Word more and more independently as his English improved.

Elijah’s ability as a tracker became legendary with the white community. He was frequently hired to track everything from missing people who had gotten lost or injured in the wilderness to outlaws being chased by the law.

Mrs. King invited Misty and Elijah to the ranch house for supper about a year after they had come to the area. The rancher and his wife were sitting on the porch when the younger couple rode up. Observing the tender way that Elijah helped his pregnant wife off her horse, Mr. King remarked, “We couldn’t have picked a better husband for Misty if we had gotten the chance.”

“No,” his wife agreed. “It’s pretty obvious that the Lord himself made that choice. Isn’t it fun to be around such a happy couple?”

Within a short time Elijah began to realize that the nomadic ways of the Native American were doomed with the arrival of the white man. The Indians’ only chance for independent survival was to change with the times. He began working as a cowboy at the ranch, and soon became a top cowhand. Misty had been an American citizen by adoption, and Elijah claimed citizenship by marriage to her, so they could not be forced into any Indian reservations.

The younger couple moved into the ranch house just before their second child was born. The Kings built a small retirement home about half-way between the Christian Sioux's village and the ranch headquarters, where they would be less prone to interfere with the younger couple's privacy. Their fellowship with these Indians, who were not accepted in either the white man's culture or their own, was much appreciated. They deeded the ranch over to Elijah and Misty King long before they died.

Elijah hired all the Indians from the village who were willing to work on the ranch. The discipline of regular employment was difficult for them to adjust to, but his patience won most of them over. He encouraged the Indians to find a niche in the changing world instead of futilely resisting the inevitable.

Misty and Elijah raised four children, hiring a tutor to educate them. Two of them ended up with college degrees, and they all choose to follow Christ. When the old pastor of the Indian church died, Elijah was the natural choice to replace him. His oldest son took charge of the ranch, and Elijah and Misty moved into the King's vacant retirement house.

Who Owns the Land?

The Indian tribes felt the land was theirs
If they had the strength to maintain it,
So they fought the tribes that contested them,
And the strongest tribe would retain it.

Then the white men came with their deadly guns,
And the Indians fought to repel them,
But they took the land that the Indians claimed
'Cause they had the power to expel them.

Next the ranchers gobbled up all the range
That the guns of their men could order,
And they drove the settlers with lesser power
Away from their empire's border.

But the government of the U.S.A.
Claimed the land was its territory,
And consigned the land to its citizens
While retaining the inventory.

Now the land's divided in legal plots
That belong to specific donors
Who are charged each year by the government
For the privilege of being owners.

And a man can lose what he thought was his
If a squatter contrives to possess it
For a squatter's rights are a legal claim
If the courts decide to assess it.

The Hangin J's

John Jackson and Jack Johnson were survivors of the Union's Vicksburg Campaign. Their reorganized regiment, the 34th Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry was later deployed to blockade duty at the Port of Los Brazos de Santiago as the Civil War wound down. General Lee had surrendered a month before the Union's young Colonel Barrett ordered an attack on the Confederates guarding the cotton that awaited shipment from Brownsville, Texas.

Jackson and Johnson were captured together in the poorly conceived Union foray, which turned out to be the last battle of the Civil War. The Confederate commander, Colonel Ford, paroled the many Union prisoners he had captured within a couple of weeks.

The two disgusted soldiers mustered out of the army as soon as they were released. They purchased a couple of outstanding Texas mares and traveled together from Brownsville to the Pecos River. They more or less followed the Pecos most of the way to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they hired on as amateur cowboys at a small cattle ranch. They quickly developed into proficient cow hands.

Each of the military buddies had married an accomplished young Hispanic woman by the time they pooled their resources and set out to establish their own ranch. The two couples eventually homesteaded side-by-side on the south edge of the Colorado border, a bit north of the ancient town of Questa, New Mexico. They built their headquarters and buildings on their combined 320 acres of titled "Homestead" land, and grazed their stock on thousands of additional government acres traditionally assimilated on a first-come, first-served basis. They called their ranch the "Hangin J's," their brand being a horizontal bar with two "J"s hanging down from it. The overall effect looked like two side-by-side capital "J"s with their exaggerated top-caps joined.

Things went well for the Hangin J's ranch. The men were able to purchase a nice herd of long-horned cattle at a good price from a Colorado rancher whose wife insisted on going back east after their only child died. Johnson loved to work with the cattle, but Jackson was more interested in horses. When the ranch began generating a significant amount of cash, he was able to purchase an outstanding stallion that had belonged to a gun-slick who had been hanged for murder by the tough little town town of Questa. It was throwing excellent colts from the offspring of the mares that the ranchers had brought with them from Texas.

The Johnsons had a four-year-old son and another child on the way, and the Jacksons had a two-year-old daughter when disaster struck at the Hangin J's spread. A Kiowa cow hand who they had hired became quite ill about two weeks after visiting his village. The ranchers' wives had moved him into the house where they could nurse him, when he broke out with small pox. The two soldiers immediately inoculated themselves and their families by the process of variolation. They simply collected some pus from some pock lesions on the Indian by knife-point, and introduced the pus under the skin of their family members with the same blade.

The crude vaccinations infected the men and children with a milder form of the disease. Neither the ranchers nor Johnson's son, James, became terribly sick, but Jackson's daughter, Janie, ended up with a moderately pock-marked face. The ranchers' wives had been heavily exposed for over a week before the disease was identified, and both of the young mothers died of smallpox.

Both Jackson and Johnson had been deeply in love with their wives, and neither man had any inclination to remarry. As time went on, Johnson spent more and more time out on the range, while Jackson stayed closer to home to care for the children and the horses. When James was six years old, Johnson sent him back east for the

rancher's parents to oversee his education. The boy ran away "To go back to Dad" shortly after his thirteenth birthday, and had not been heard of by his family since.

Jackson undertook the education of his daughter himself, and she was an avid learner. Attending church was difficult from the ranch, but the good man did not neglect his daughter's spiritual needs. They spent many happy and profitable hours pouring over the Bible together. Janie considered the Lord her closest friend.

By the time Janie was sixteen years old she had developed into a shapely but modest young woman. She had never been particularly conscious of her pock-marked face until her dad began taking her to a few social gatherings in town. She really enjoyed their occasional visits to church, but her shapely figure elicited enough jealousy from the girls her own age that she rarely attended a party without hearing a catty remark about her face. The humble teenager was essentially unaware of her personal intrigue, and her self-esteem was deteriorating to the point that she disliked showing her face in town, except for church.

* * *

Janie took a break from her gardening and her many household duties on her seventeenth birthday. She had never felt more carefree as she rode out the gate of the Hangin J's headquarters. The steel-grey mare under her wanted to run, and it suited the lithe young cowgirl just fine.

"Go for it, Whinny," she urged as she leaned forward and gave the mare her head.

Janie gloried in the mare's speed and action as she let her run along the lane towards Questa. This was one of the finest mares the Hangin J's had ever produced, and Janie had gentled her since birth. She hadn't actually needed to break the mare. She had gotten her used to a pony bit and a bit of weight on her back long before she was grown. When it was time to break her she had just climbed astride and started training her. The horse had enjoyed it every bit as much as Janie had. Now, at four-years-old, she was an excellent cutting and roping horse.

After a fast half-mile, Janie tugged the mare into an easy canter, and then down to a brisk walk. As they approached the ford across Kiowa Creek she heard a cow bawling in distress. Riding upstream towards the sound, she soon found the cow mired up to its belly in a narrow strand of quick sand. The experienced cowgirl shook out a loop and tossed it over the distressed beast's horns. Snubbing her rope around her saddle horn, she backed the mare, slowly easing the cow to firmer footing. Just as the cow regained her footing Janie snapped her rope to loosen it, and set the animal free. Whinny had pulled the rescue off perfectly.

Janie continued her aimless ride down the lane for several more miles. She was approaching the Hangin J's southern border when she met an uncouth-looking hombre with tied down guns. The man blocked Janie's pathway with his horse and held up a hand to stop the young cowgirl.

"I'm foreman of the Yoke Ranch across the Rio Grande from the Hangin J's", he began. "That mare yer ridin' belongs ta us. You guys had no right ta brand 'er."

"No way," Janie answered. "She's out of our best stallion and a foal of one of the mares my dad brought up here from Texas. She has the typical looks and conformation of the Hangin J's stock."

"She's ars, 'n' Ah'll jest take 'er now," the gun slick asserted, reaching out to grasp Whinny's reigns just below the bit.

Janie kned her powerfully built mare sharply towards the stranger, and Whinny struck his horse so hard with her shoulder that it was knocked to its knees. Wheeling her mount, Janie took off for the Hangin J's headquarters

with all the speed Whinny could muster. As she stretched the distance between herself and the grungy stranger, he fired several angry shots in her general direction.

"Thanks for helping me get away from that creep, Lord," Janie murmured half aloud when the stranger gave up the chase. She went straight home and found her dad in the kitchen baking her a birthday cake. "Jack 'll be home for supper at six," he told the girl. "We'll all discuss this together after we've eaten."

The family sat down to dinner together at about dusk. Janie's dad discussed the generalities of how the ranch was doing with Jack during the meal. Jack mentioned that the unusually hot weather seemed to be driving a lot of the cattle into the shade of the draws, where they were harder to keep watch over. John finally brought out a slightly over-baked chocolate cake, which he served to the tune of Happy Birthday and whipped cream.

When Janie could keep silent no longer, she divulged the details of her confrontation with the strange rider. Both men became deadly serious.

"Maybe those missin' cows aren't in the draws after all," John mused.

"Yeh," Jack answered. "I wonder if that 'Yoke' brand won't be a cinch-ring adjustment to the Hangin J's. All they'd have to do is drop two lines down to the tips of the 'Js' and our brand would look like an ox yoke."

"You mean they're rustling our stock?" Janie asked.

"Could be," both men answered in unison.. "That guy made it rather plain that they even wanted our horses," Jack added.

"All this reminds me of your birthday present," John remarked. "We went together to get you these," he added as he pulled a set of S&W 32 rim fire six shooters in beautifully tooled leather holsters out of a feed sack under his chair. The matching double action hand guns were factory engraved and fitted with fancily checkered ivory grips.

"We weren't expecting you to ever need them, but now I think maybe you'd better start wearing them whenever you go outside, at least for a while," Jack advised.

"Thank you, Dad; thank you, Uncle Jack," Janie squealed as she hugged each of them in turn. "I can hardly wait to try them out."

"There's a case of ammo for them in the pantry," John added. "You can ride and shoot a rifle as well as any cowpoke I know, but with what you just told us, you'd best start practicing with these first thing come tomorrow morning."

* * *

The following morning found Janie and her dad setting up targets against the bank of a creek. "Hold it straight out to your side like this," Dad instructed the girl. "Look sideways along your arm and aim it just like you would a rifle."

Janie had a steady arm. She followed her dad's instructions, and had no problem hitting the targets they had set up. After a few minutes she holstered the guns. She did not like the feel of their weight hanging from her slender waist, and resolved not to wear them any more than whenever the men pestered her into doing it.

The man and his daughter were walking back to the house when they noticed a young stranger riding into the Hangin' J compound. He was clean-cut, neatly dressed in well-worn clothes, and wore a single gun, as most cowhands did, but his was holstered butt-forward on his left side as some gunmen preferred. He had chestnut-colored hair combed neatly back and held in place with a decoratively beaded Indian headband. It curled a tantalizing bit at the edges, which were cut straight slightly above the shoulders.

"Howdy," the man expressed with a winning smile. "Name's Jim. Any chance you guys are hiring these days?"

"Might be," John answered slowly as he looked the stranger over from head to foot. "Come in and sit a spell."

The rider dismounted and ground-hitched his horse. He patted it affectionately on the shoulder before turning to accompany John and Janie through the door.

The men proceeded to the kitchen table where Janie produced three cups of strong black range coffee.

"What kind of a job are you looking for?" John asked after a bit of friendly small talk.

"I'm an experienced cow hand," Jim responded, "but I like working with good horses the best. I've been hearing about the Hangin' J's horses ever since I left Wyoming, so I came down to see if I could get work here.

"We're a small enough outfit that all the hands are expected to do whatever's necessary anywhere on the ranch," John told him. "You can start by mucking out the stables today if you want to, but my partner will have to agree to it before we actually hire anyone."

Jim accepted the day's work cheerfully, and Mr. Jackson took him to the barn to show him what was expected of him. He sat about the task like he knew what he was doing, so "Mr. John," as the hands called him, left the stranger hard at it. Janie took him a sandwich and some cookies just before she and her dad sat down to lunch.

"How's he doing?" Dad asked when she returned.

"The horses like him," she reported. "They're watching him with their ears pricked forward, but they aren't acting upset or uneasy. He doesn't look like he's straining himself any," she continued, "but he's accomplished a lot more than I could have done in the time he's been at it. I think he'd be an excellent man, around horses, at least."

"Jack will want to watch him work the cattle for a bit before we commit to hiring him," Dad replied, "but I'm betting he'll like him. This kid talks well and seems to be a genuine gentleman."

Jim finished mucking the stables that afternoon. He was invited to eat with the family that evening so "Mr. Jack" could get acquainted with him.

"He feels just like family," Jack volunteered when the new hand went out to the bunk house. "I'm hoping he's as good with the cattle as he is with the horses."

Any questions about Jim's ability as a cowhand were put to rest the first day he worked with Mr. Jack. He was an excellent rider, threw an awesome loop, and just plain had a lot of cow sense. It almost seemed that he could out-guess the next move of whatever cow or bull he was working with before the beast itself knew what it would be doing.

"You're hired if you still want the job," the ranchers told Jim that evening, after they had discussed Janie's recent scare. Janie was in complete agreement with their judgment.

“That incident probably won’t lead to anything further,” Jim mused, “but I’m ready if it does. Let me assure you that I’ll do everything I can for the brand.”

* * *

Jack, John, and Jim spent the next few days searching for more of the Hangin J’s cattle. They found surprising few in the draws, and all of the men were becoming more and more convinced that well over a thousand head had been rustled from the Hangin J’s holdings.

“You know,” Jim mused on the ride home after another unproductive day of combing the washes, “All of these draws start as shallow washes somewhere along Sleeping Ute Mountain, generally to the west of our graze. If the cattle were really in the draws, any rustlers would just drive them up the washes into the forested land on the mountain. Since everyone knows that the mountain is sacred to the Utes, no one would be likely to go up there very far. The cattle could be held in the forest until their altered brands were healed, and then slipped across the Rio Grande at night to some of the graze on the other side of the river.”

“That sounds pretty much the way it’s got to be,” the partners agreed. “The other side of the mountain actually stretches nearly to the Rio Grande. We ought to check out the mountain soon as we can.”

Early the next morning the three men followed one of the larger draws up the climbs of Sleeping Ute Mountain. It seemed to them that most of the draws petered out on or near the smoother northwestern slope that leveled out quite close to the Rio Grande. As they started down that side of the mountain, they ran across a clearing containing a small holding pen. Jim drew up his horse in the trees to look over the set-up. John stopped his mound beside him, but Jack rode on into the clearing towards a deserted-looking little shanty on the far side of the pen.

“Whoa, stay out of sight!” Jim called softly to the careless man. The rancher wheeled his horse back towards the trees just as a rifle cracked. Jack made it well back into the forest before falling from his mount. John pulled the unconscious man’s shirt up for a look, and turned a pasty green. Jim dressed the chest wound below the injured rancher’s collar bone with his cravat while John stepped into the trees and lost his lunch.

When the wound was dressed, Jim swung up behind the saddle of his big gelding. John boosted his partner up into the saddle so Jim could hold him between his arms as he rode. “I’ll take him home if you’ll go to Questa for the doctor,” Jim suggested. John nodded his agreement as he removed the bridle from his partner’s horse and sent the faithful beast home with a sharp swat on the rump.

Jack was more dead than alive when Jim rode through the gate of the Hangin J’s compound. His call for help brought Janie to the front porch just as he reached the house. Janie helped carry the unconscious man to his bed. Jim lit a lantern and helped her strip the rancher and get him into his night clothes. They re-dressed the wound, sealing it with clean lard-smearred strips from an old pillow case. Janie pulled a chair up to the bedside and prepared to sit out the night with her patient. When Jim went out to take care of his horse, he found Mr. Jack’s beast waiting at the barn. Jim joined Janie at the patient’s bedside after the animals had been cared for.

Jim and Janie talked in subdued voices throughout most of the night. Jim told her that he had been captured by the Cheyenne on his way out west on the Oregon Trail when he was thirteen years old. He had been forced to live as the son of a childless Indian couple for over three years. His adoptive Indian father had been a cruel former Cheyenne Dog Soldier. When Jim was rescued by an Indian agent at age sixteen, he had found a job wrangling cattle on a Wyoming ranch. A couple of years later, just as he was becoming a proficient cow puncher,

some traveling Cheyenne recognized him at the ranch. He had left the area to avoid trouble for his employer, and had wandered down to New Mexico looking for a job with horses.

Jack's condition was not noticeably different come morning. Janie finally found her bleary-eyed way to the kitchen to start her daily tasks while Jim went out to care for the horses. John arrived about mid-morning with the doctor, whom he had spent the night sobering up.

The doctor thumped around on the patient's chest, finally rolling a piece of paper into a cone and listening to the patient's breathing with the smaller end in his ear. "He may rally for a day or two," the doctor finally announced, "but I doubt that he'll live more than three or four days at best." He injected a dose of laudanum and left a bottle of foul-smelling medicine to ease the patient's pain. He charged two dollars for his services, including the medicine.

True to the doctor's prediction, Mr. Jack rallied the next day. By mid-afternoon, while John was sitting with him, he was conscious enough to talk for a few minutes.

"Bring me a piece of paper and some ink," the good man requested of his partner. He took the paper and painfully scribbled out a will in which he left everything to Janie. "She's all I've got since I lost James," he reminisced. "She's been as good as a daughter to me, John," he added as he signed the will.

"You sign this too, as a witness," Jack urged his partner. "Please give it to Janie after I'm gone," he instructed. And if she takes it too hard, remind her that I died trusting in Christ for my salvation. It will be well with my soul." Then he coughed, and was gone.

* * *

Jim seemed to take the death of Mr. Jack every bit as hard as Mr. John and Janie did. Tears streamed down his cheeks as the pine box containing the remains was lowered into the grave. That evening Janie walked dejectedly out to the barn to weep off some of her grief. As she slipped through the door she heard Jim praying softly in the loft.

"Lord," he wept, "I'm sorry. I thought I'd have more time than I did. Now he's gone, Lord, and there's nothing I can do about it. Be with me, Lord. My heart's breaking and I need your comfort."

Tears coursed down the girl's face as she climbed the ladder and knelt by her new friend's side. He took her hand as they wept together. Finally they stood, smiled at each other, and left the barn by separate exits without needing to say a word. Both of them felt immensely comforted by the incident.

The next day John called his daughter into the ranch office and gave her Uncle Jack's will. "Here's mine too, Honey," he almost whispered. "I wrote it out when you were ten years old. Hide these in a safe fireproof place where no thief can find them. They'll insure that if anything ever happens to me this whole spread will be yours." He gave the young woman a quick hug, and left the room with tears brimming in his eyes.

Janie wasted no time hiding the wills. She put them in a square metal cookie tin with a tight lid, and hid them in a hollowed out space behind a loose block in a dark corner of storm cellar. It was where she had hidden her cherished treasures when she was a little girl, and no one had ever found her hideaway.

The next morning Janie announced that she wanted to go into town for kitchen supplies. "You can't go alone with what's happening," her dad insisted, "and I need to stay home and watch the horses. They're about all we've got left, you know."

"We're all but out of flour and potatoes, and I used the last of the coffee this morning, Dad," the young woman replied.

"If we're out of coffee, I guess I could send Jim with you," Dad replied as his face crinkled into a smile.

Jim brought the buckboard up to the front porch. Janie came down the steps in a skirt, and he took her arm to help her climb into the seat. The touch of his hand sent a completely unexpected shiver through her body and lit her face with a rosy blush. As he climbed into the seat beside her and took up the reins she realized what a handsome man he really was.

"You're looking mighty pretty this morning," he said admiringly, "but don't you think you ought to be wearing your guns?"

"How could I wear a gun belt over a skirt?" she asked, looking into his eyes. *"Maybe he was teasing her."*

"Now that's a problem I've never faced," he replied with a grin. "Maybe you should get a pocket derringer," he said more seriously as he slapped the reins to start the team."

"I'm a Christian," she retorted pointedly as they rode through the gate. "I don't want to shoot anyone."

"I love the Lord too," the young man replied earnestly, "but these guys are playing for real. They've already killed Mr. Jack, and they've actually shot at you. If I'd been on the ball I could have shot that guy instead of standing there yelling at Mr. Johnson to take cover. Your uncle would still be alive if I hadn't been such an idiot."

"It wasn't your fault," Janie assured him, "and he wasn't really my uncle," she added, tearing up a bit. "He was just my dad's best friend, and he helped raise me." It was then that she noticed a tearful glitter in his eyes too. He squeezed her hand for an ecstatic moment as he gazed at her face. Then he dropped it like a hot potato.

The rest of the trip was endured in uneasily silence. "My face turned him off, Lord," she agonized as they approached Questa, "but I think I love him anyway."

* * *

Jim parked the buckboard in front of the dry-goods store and politely helped Janie down from her seat. He seemed distracted, like a barrier had come between them. It was then that she noticed how carefully he watched the boardwalk and the street, almost as if he half expected to meet up with something or someone dreadful.

Get what you need, and wait inside for me he instructed her so earnestly that she wasn't even miffed by his bossiness. After she was safely in the store, he stepped up the street to the gunsmith's shop. "Have you got a sweet little derringer that would really stop an assailant?" he asked.

"I got some 22's," the gunsmith answered, "but they wouldn't stop no one afore they could shoot back. How 'bout this little 32? It's small 'nough fer a sleeve gun, 'n' you could cross-cut yer bullets ta make 'em expand when they hit."

"It's not for me, it's for a woman," Jim answered curtly, "but let's see it."

The small gun was pretty much what Jim had in mind for Janie. He purchased it on the spot. It came in a small unmarked box. The cowboy slipped into the ladies clothing store and got the clerk to gift wrap it for him.

She did a nice job, and placed the package in a larger box to protect it on the trip home. She charged him fifty cents because he would not let her in on what woman his gift was for.

Janie took quite a while at the dry-goods store. She purchased at least a month's worth of supplies, including a lot of canned goods. She was helping Jim load the last of her purchases when she heard a passerby accost Jim.

"Well, well, if it ain't Injun Jim," the angry assailant shouted. "Yer the one thet tole all them lies 'bout me back ta Wyoming."

As Janie stepped around the wagon she saw the grungy thug that had confronted her on the Hangin J's graze. "Those weren't lies, Taggart," Jim answered evenly. "I watched you sell whiskey to the Indians for three years. Every time you came around you got them drunk, and then you incited them to attack some nearby settler or rancher's place. They came away with their victims' scalps and horses, and you came away with their money and cattle and stuff. I was just a kid, but when the Indian agent rescued me, I told him what was going on."

"Well, now yer gonna pay fer ut," the insanely angry man shouted. "Draw!"

Janie thought the thug was drawing lethally fast, but Jim's draw was so much faster that the scufflaw threw up his hands and stepped back a step as Jim's gun came out. "Unbuckle your gun belt and let it fall to the ground," Jim ordered the man authoritatively. Then, stepping in, he cuffed the jerk across the face with his opened hand. "Get on your horse and ride out, Taggart," Jim ordered. "I'm warning you now. If I ever see you in this area again I'll kill you on the spot."

The trembling man turned and ran for his horse. He mounted up and took the road south out of Questa at a gallop.

"That's the man that shot at me," the pale girl told Jim as he helped her into the wagon.

"I'd have killed him if I had known that," he replied as his face turned hard.

"Somehow I'm glad you didn't," Janie answered. There was little other conversation on the way home. Jim was struggling to get control of himself, and Janie was agonizing over the pock marks on her face.

* * *

Jim came into the house at breakfast time to give Janie his present. Janie urged him to sit down and eat with her dad and herself. As they finished off their coffee, Jim addressed the girl. "I've got a present for you, Hon," he said as he pulled the beautifully wrapped gift out of its outer box. Her heart jumped with hope at the term of endearment, but she really wasn't sure she had even heard him correctly.

"It's a beautiful package," the girl said as he set it before her.

"The package is part of the gift," her father commented, "but the wrapping's nothing without what's inside the box. You've got to open it," he grinned as he stepped out of the room to give the kids a moment of privacy.

"This beats those six guns all to pieces," she confessed to Jim while her dad was out of the room. "I want to go outside and try it out."

"Bring your six guns too," Jim urged her. "I want to show you how to use them correctly."

"I can hit pretty well with them at fairly close range," she said defensively.

"Please bring them, Janie," he urged. "Your life might depend on it."

"I'll get them now," she conceded as her mind flashed back to the difference between what her dad had shown her and what she had seen Jim do.

"Forget the sights," Jim instructed Janie. "They're great for target practice, but you can't use them in a defensive draw. Just cock the gun with your thumb as you draw it, and point it like you would point your finger as you pull the trigger. And don't quit shooting until your assailant drops his gun," he added as an afterthought.

"I hate this," Janie gritted out as she tried a quick draw, "But it works," she grinned as her target disintegrated before her eyes.

"All decent men hate it," Jim reflected, "But whoever is shooting at you will not be a decent man. Out here where there is little law and order, you may be the only one around to defend yourself. Janie, please don't let some evil person snuff out your life just because he is evil. If you don't stop him, he'll not only get you, but he'll put his next victim in the same predicament he put you in."

"I'll think on it," Janie promised. "Meanwhile, how do I use the derringer?"

"The same way you use the six guns," Jim replied. "Only derringers are so short that they are too inaccurate to use on anything except very close targets. Carry it as your last resort."

"Thanks for the lesson, Jim," Janie said genuinely as they started out for their respective duties. "I'll practice all I can for a while." She wished he'd give her a friendly hug or something, but he had seen her face.

* * *

Janie was filling the upstairs lanterns the following morning when her reverie was broken by the sound of gunfire from behind the house. Running to the window, she saw her dad shooting it out with Taggart. Dad was in the sideways stance he had taught Janie, and Taggart was emptying his gun into the older man. Janie jerked her rifle from her closet and returned to the window to find that Dad was down, still firing as Taggart was trying to reload. As she drew a bead on Taggart, the outlaw suddenly stretched on his toes, and fell forward without moving.

As Janie's eyes took in the scene, the barn doors swung open and the best of the Hangin J's horses were being driven out of the building before two strange riders. Janie's rifle spoke twice, and both riders dropped from their horses. Janie strapped on her gun belt and rushed downstairs and out to her dad. He was literally full of holes and had no pulse. She checked on Taggart next. He was shot through the right eye and was very dead. *"Good for Dad! Taggart won't be forcing anyone into any compromising predicaments anymore."*

Suddenly the two riders that Janie had plugged were up and running on foot. "Hold it!" Janie yelled, firing a warning shot over their heads. They stopped, raising their hands.

"You two pick up that body and carry it to the house," Janie ordered.

"Lady, we're shot. I've got a busted arm and he's shot through the leg. We can't pick him up," one of the horse thieves argued.

"You'll have a bullet in your gut if you don't move it," Janie threatened, motioning them towards the body with one of her six guns.

The men picked up Mr. Johnson's body and carried it toward the house. Janie shot at their feet whenever they let it drag on the ground. When they had the body properly laid out on the rancher's bed, Janie marched them to the root cellar and locked them securely in it. She hitched Whinny to Taggart's body and dragged it out of the compound.

When the bodies were taken care of, Janie anxiously checked around the compound for Jim. When she entered the bunk house where he slept she found a note on the table:

Mr. John,

I think what we saw on the mountain was just the outlaws' hideout. They probably hold the cattle in some meadow nestled in the trees closer to the river, with a stream running through it. That way they'd have a temporary supply of grass and plenty of water to sustain the stock.

I doubt that the Yoke ranch exists. They likely just registered a brand that will vanish after your cattle are butchered.

I am on my way to see if I can find your herd before it's too late.

"Injun" Jim

Fear gripped the young woman's heart. He had lost Uncle Jack and Dad...what if she lost Jim too?

Janie saddled Whinny in record time. She had no intention of riding across the grasslands to Sleeping Ute Mountain in plain sight. Instead, she rode directly towards the river, arriving there in the middle of the afternoon. She turned south under cover of the trees along the river bank, noting where the quicksands lay as she rode downstream. She was approaching the western slopes of the Sleeping Ute at dusk when she heard cattle bawling—lots of them.

Janie rode cautiously onward until the trees along the river began to merge with the forest sweeping off the mountain. Suddenly she was almost among the cattle, which were milling in the gathering darkness as a dozen or so riders bunched them for a night crossing. She dismounted, placing her hand on Whinny's nose to stifle any nickers. As she watched by moonlight, an Indian canoe drifted down to the crossing, and a large Hispanic man with a leather satchel leapt ashore, easily within Janie's hearing.

A single rider broke from the herd and rode over to the newcomer.

"That you, Mex?" the rider asked as he dismounted.

"Si Señor," came the answer from the moonlight-speckled darkness.

"You got the money?"

"Si, twelve thousand dolares."

"We agreed on fifteen thousand, Mex."

"You will get the other three thousand tomorrow when the herd is counted," Mex replied.

"It's now or never," the rider countered angrily.

"Si?" the big Mexican questioned sarcastically. "And you will do what with twelve hundred head of rustled cattle and no grass left? You will take them back to the Hangin J's, no?"

Suddenly the rider buried a punch in the Mexican's paunch. Mex responded by knocking the smaller man to the ground. In an instant they were rolling around on the ground wrestling, slugging, kicking, and gouging at one

another's eyes. The Mexican finally managed to get his knife out and was stabbing the rider repeatedly when Jim suddenly materialized from the shadows. Lying on the ground, he Indianed up to the fighting men in the darkness and grabbed the satchel. He wormed his way back into the trees without being detected.

"This way, Jim," Janie whispered as loud as she dared. "I've got Whinny here."

Suddenly "Injin" Jim was beside her, mounting the horse. "Get on behind me he whispered," grabbing her hand and dragging her up behind him.

Janie expected Jim to jump the horse away as fast as he could, but he turned it gently in the darkness and walked it soundlessly out of the area instead. Hardly daring to breathe lest any noise would draw a shot in their direction, she wrapped her arms around Jim's waist and buried her face in his back, trusting him to get her home safely. After a half-hour's ride Jim stepped the mare up to a brisk walk over the grasslands towards home.

Jim finally broke the silence. "Good thing you called me when you did," he murmured. "I saw someone riding my horse, so they probably have someone waiting to knife me in the back when I get back to where I left him."

"Jim," she answered huskily, "They tried to get all our best horses this morning. Taggart killed Dad, but Dad's last shot took him in the eye. He's dead too, and I've got two slightly injured horse thieves locked in the root cellar.

"Sorry about your dad, Honey," He said tenderly. "I know you're going to miss him an awful lot."

This time she knew she had heard him correctly.

* * *

Jim and Janie arrived home just as the sun was peaking over the Sangre de Christo Mountains. They were both dead tired, but neither of them was sleepy. After drinking a pot of coffee together, Jim went out to the shop to build a box for Mr. John while Janie rode into town to ask the preacher to come at noon. Enough townspeople came to help Jim and the preacher lower the coffin into the grave after a comforting homily on the saving grace of God.

The sheriff arrived in a buckboard just before the service. He took Taggart's body and Janie's captives back to Questa after it was over. The destiny of horse thieves in the West, where a man's life often depended on his horse, was taken for granted. If convicted at trial, they would surely be hanged.

Janie was so emotionally drained that evening that she was even too numb to mourn for her dad. But try as she would, she could not suppress something bouncing around in the back of her mind about Jim. Somehow she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She tossed and turned for several hours, only getting brief snatches of restless sleep. She finally got up and lit a lantern. Grabbing a pencil and a piece of paper, she started jotting down what she knew about Jim, one item at a time. And then it came to her:

Jim and James are variations of the same name.

Jim was definitely a Christian.

Uncle Jack's son, James, was raised as a Christian, at least until he was six.

Jim made himself accepted out west by learning to handle cattle and guns.

James probably felt rejected by his father when he was sent back east.

Jim came out west at age thirteen.

James ran away to go back to his dad at age thirteen.

Jim was captured by the Indians on his way out west.

James disappeared when he tried to go back to his Dad

Jim was hurt more than most new employees would have been by Jack's death.

James would have been terribly hurt by Uncle Jack's death.

Jim came clear across Colorado specifically to get a job at the Hangin J's Ranch.

The conclusion was obvious. Jim was Uncle Jack's long lost son. Come to think of it, they even looked a mite alike.

Janie invited Jim in for breakfast the next morning. He seemed preoccupied, even nervous. As they finished off the coffee, he finally spoke. "I guess I'll have to leave now?" he stated in a questioning way.

"James Jackson," she retorted, rising to confront him. "Half this spread is yours, and you talk of leaving? Even if we didn't get our cattle back, we've still got the horses."

"You figured me out," Jim grinned as he rose to face her, "but Uncle John told me that Dad left his part of the Hangin J's to you."

"That was just because you waited too long to tell him who you were, Jim. He mourned for you from the day you disappeared until the day of his death. And by the way, I burned that will in the stove this morning. If we look through his stuff we'll probably find one with your name on it. Either way, you are still his heir."

"Actually, we didn't lose the cattle," Jim pointed out, "we just sold them kind of cheap. There really were twelve thousand dollars in that satchel, and the bad guys don't have the slightest idea where it went."

"What do you think they'll do now?" Janie asked him.

"Mex killed Taggart's right hand man last night," Jim replied. "Without their leadership, I think that Taggart's rustlers will disband, and Mex's riders will drive the cattle to some shady buyer, maybe down Texas way."

"Then maybe we can relax a bit," Janie mused.

"Hold on a minute, Janie," he answered earnestly, his wind coming in short breaths, "I made the mistake of not leveling with Dad until it was too late. I'm not going to make the same mistake with you. Honey, I love you with all of my heart. I can't live without you!"

"But what about my face?" she asked with quivering lips as a tear started down her cheek. He reached out and wiped at it with his finger.

"What do you mean?" he asked as he traced his finger on down the side of her face.

"The pocks." She said, as if it explained everything.

"Janie," he said, taking hold of her by the shoulders. "You have a stunningly beautiful face. I've never even noticed any pocks. It's like the bow on top of a beautiful package. It adds to your beauty, but it's the whole package that's beautiful. You have the most beautiful body I've ever seen. You also have the sweetest personality I've ever met up with, and you are the most precious soul God ever made. I want everything you are Honey-- body, and soul, and spirit. Will you marry me?"

Looking up at his face through her tears, Janie locked her fingers around his neck and pulled his head down to hers. When their lips met, they locked into a passionate kiss. She finally pulled away. "Can it be today?" She asked.

The Lord's Way

Jim Haynes wasn't exactly a big man. He might have made five feet ten inches tall if you pulled his leg right hard, but at first glance that didn't appear to be a healthy option. It's not that he looked mean, but he was built on a heavy-duty frame that carried nearly two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of solid muscle. Still, the man was soft spoken with a ready grin on his face.

Jim had arrived at Lucky Strike in the spring, with a Conestoga load of tools and hardware. It was pulled by four huge draft horses. After spending the better part of a day perusing the dry goods store and other business that sprawled along the main dirt road through town, he purchased three adjacent lots in the business district. The next day he began cutting hefty cedar logs from the mountainside and dragging them to his building site with his horses. Come fall, he traded tools for labor and erected his building on the middle lot, leaving plenty of room for a fire-break between his log building and the unpainted cedar frame buildings on either side of him.

As the structure went up, Jim divided it into two parts by interlocking a wall of the same hefty construction into one of the sidewalls about three quarters of the way to the back of the building. He interlocked this wall to another one like it that was interlocked with the back of the building, leaving a hallway to the back door along the opposite sidewall from his living quarters. Outside the back door stood two appropriately labeled outhouses of rough-sawn cedar, with a privacy wall in between. He painted one pink and the other blue.

After the building was roofed, the entrepreneur produced two four-foot by eight-foot drawn glass windows from his Conestoga, which were installed along the boardwalk to display his goods. Rumor had it that he carried the cast iron stove he would use to heat the building in from his wagon singlehandedly with apparent ease. He also put a small cook stove with an oven in the back room that was to serve as his living quarters

Jim dug a well near the boardwalk on one of his side lots before the ground froze for the winter. It would not only supply his own needs, but would also provide drinking water for passersby and a convenient source of water for a nearby public watering trough for horses. He placed a couple of picnic tables near the well for the public to use. And one dark night he even slipped out and scattered a large assortment of native wildflower seeds that he had gathered during the growing season over both of his side lots. Finally, Jim placed a large sign above the front door, "HAYNES HARDWARE AND HARNESS;" and brought what remained of the contents of his wagon inside, displaying his hand tools in the windows.

Lucky Strike was originally a cow town along the transcontinental railroad. As its name implies, gold had also been discovered in the surrounding mountains, adding a strong mining contingent to the town's economy. The young businessman attended a town council meeting when his store was ready to go. Some members of the council expressed sincere concerns about possible competition with some of the struggling businesses in town. Jim laid these to rest satisfactorily.

"I didn't come to compete with this town's businesses, but to compliment them," he explained. "I checked every establishment in town, and none of them carries a significant stock in the kind of things I envision selling. I intend to specialize in tools, hardware, saddles, leather goods, farm implements, and the like--that would otherwise be essentially unavailable in this community." Having satisfied the town fathers of his non-subversive intentions, Jim contracted his big horses to them for snow plowing and road upkeep for the oncoming winter. The town would pay the hostler's fees in exchange for the use of the horses until spring.

* * *

Jim's first winter at Lucky Strike proved to be exceptionally difficult. Deep snows and bitterly cold weather struck unrelentingly; and Jim seemed to be the only one capable of doing the snow plowing. He worked at it all alone with a willing grace and a cheerful face that endeared him to most of the town's residents. Nor did the spring thaws bring Jim any relief. He put the snowplow away only to begin harrowing the deeply rutted road, often on a weekly basis. The road needed more gravel—lots more!

On the first balmy Sunday afternoon of spring, as Jim left the church he ambled on past his place to where the mountain-fed creek crossed the road at the edge of town. There he staked out a 160 acre homestead claim with the creek angling through the front corner of it. He received a lot of ribbing about getting married when he registered his claim, but truth was that he had no such plans in the foreseeable future. In his thoughts, he was still settling in.

As spring advanced, more and more shipments of farming and mining equipment arrived at the railroad freight office for Haynes Hardware. Everything from John Deere's steel "Grasshopper" plows, mining jacks, stoves, and even a sewing machine or two began gracing Jim's store. Misleading rumors of huge gold strikes brought a new influx of miners, and Jim was selling his inventory almost as soon as it reached the store.

The downside of the town's economic surge was that gamblers, swindlers, and con artists descended on the community like vultures squabbling for a share of the gains. To top it all off, a bawdy house sprang up on the other end of the business district, across from the taverns, and increasingly more rowdiness was noticed at the taverns. Jim watched the moral decay with an aching heart.

Rev. James Lawrence, the town's only minister, preached an angry denunciation of the town council the Sunday after the bawdy house opened. "Surely they had known what the new building was going to be used for. Why didn't they do something to stop it? What kind of Christians were they, anyhow." He called for a community meeting to straighten things out on Monday evening.

Monday's meeting was attended by the staunch of the church, several of the town fathers, a few interested townspeople, the sheriff, and the tavern owners. The owner of the bawdy house came incognito. Rev. Lawrence pretty well repeated his angry denunciation of everyone who would not take a stand against allowing a bawdy house in the community. When he had finished, he challenged the president of the council to defend the council's actions.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the councilmen began, "This council has refrained from forcing its preferences on the citizens of this town. We did not ask Jim Haynes what he was building, and we did not demand to know the purpose of the building now in question. If any illegal activities take place in any building in town, we will take appropriate measures to stop it. But quite frankly, Mr. Lawrence, a bawdy house is not illegal in this state at this time. Despite anyone's opinion to the contrary, we cannot legally close this enterprise down."

"Mr. Councilman," Mr. Lawrence responded angrily, "If you and your cronies on the council are unwilling to stop this disgrace, you are duty bound to step down and let the citizens of this community elect a council that will shut it down. Whether you like it or not, we intend to take whatever measures are necessary to rid this community of this shameful blight. The government cannot force this travesty of our freedom upon us."

The unknown owner of the bawdy house took the podium next. "Mr. Lawrence, the woman began, "You speak as though you represent the majority of citizens in this community. You do not. I would like to inform you that experience elsewhere assures me that my establishment will have more attendants from this community every day than your church will have on any given Sunday. Do the math, if you are capable. This means that seven times more citizens of this community want a gentlemen's club than want a church. We have a product that men crave, and we are here to stay."

The enraged minister quickly edged the woman away from the podium. "Madame," he blustered with righteous indignation, "A woman of your morals has no right to darken the door of a church, much less presume to take the floor."

"That's hilarious," the woman snickered, edging into the forefront again as she lifted her outstretched hands in an attempt to raise supporting laughter from the audience. Many preachers have visited my establishments elsewhere, and I'll guarantee you that more men of your congregation than you would ever guess will sneak in to us after dark."

When the Madame was stared down by the unsympathetic audience, she stomped loudly down the aisle and out the door.

The sheriff took the podium next. "Ladies and Gentlemen of Lucky Strike," he began. "I want you to know that I am a Christian and I sympathize with the distaste many of you have for the establishment in question. Nonetheless, the councilman was absolutely right that we have no legal recourse by which to close the place down. Unfortunately, the Madame is probably correct in assuming that the Christian opposition to her establishment is the minority position. My suggestion is that unless you can find legal grounds to shut the bawdy house down, you restrict your opposition to prayer and evangelization in order to make the establishment an unprofitable venture. And let me inform you in no uncertain terms that I will arrest those who attempt to shut it down by illegal means just as readily as I arrest any other criminals. Pastor, would you please close this meeting with prayer for our community."

The deflated minister closed the meeting with a brief and rather petulant prayer, and the attendees walked out quietly with rather subdued expressions on their faces.

* * *

The minister stormed into Jim's store on Tuesday morning. "Why didn't you support me at the meeting last night?" he demanded angrily of Jim. "Are you one of the churchgoers that will actually patronize that place?"

"No, Pastor," Jim replied earnestly. "Although I'm just a newcomer here, my heart aches at the direction the town is moving. Unless something changes pretty soon, we will become a typical wicked frontier town."

"You see it coming, and yet you don't support my efforts to nip the evil in the bud?" The preacher demanded accusingly. "Who's side are you on, anyway?"

"Pastor," Jim replied as a tear started down his usually cheerful face. "How much did you pray about your sermon last Sunday? How much did you pray before calling that meeting Monday night?"

"God appointed me as your Pastor, young man. Questioning me is questioning Him," the minister shot back. "This situation demands immediate action. We have to strike while the iron is hot."

"I'm sorry, Pastor," Jim replied. "As far as I can see, our meeting last night accomplished little for us. It polarized the council against us, and provided a platform for the Madame to point out that our assumption that Christians constitute a majority in this community is tenuous. I fear that she was right that more of the townspeople will frequent her establishment than will attend ours. I think the sheriff was right that prayer and evangelization that changes men's hearts will rein in the evil more than any amount of force will."

"So much for any help from you," the minister said bitterly as he turned on his heel and stalked away.

Right then and there Jim resolved to share the gospel of forgiveness of sins through repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ at every opportunity. "Conversion to Christ actually frees men from their wicked ways," he mused inwardly as he set about his work at the store.

When Jim consciously began to look for chances to share the gospel, he found that God would set him up with plenty of appropriate opportunities to share the gospel with others. A miner might recount a narrow escape from a cave-in, giving Jim a natural opportunity to ask him where he would be right now if he had died in the incident. Or a cowboy might share his awe of the great outdoors; and the Holy Spirit would prompt his willing servant to share the awesomeness of the Creator of the outdoors. But when Jim showed up at church on Sunday, he was turned away by the pastor, supported by the reproachful stares of the faithful followers that stood behind him.

Jim's enthusiastic evangelism brought little visible results for some time. The only thing that kept him at it was his growing enthusiasm for Christ. He soon found that he could scarcely refrain from talking about the Lord, because his mind was full of the greatness and love of Christ. Prayer and reading his Bible moved in his subconscious thought patterns from being a Christian duty to becoming a Christian privilege. He was the happiest he had ever been.

But Jim's work was not in vain. One day two miners and a cowboy came into the store at closing time. "We've been discussing what you have told us about God," they explained. "We would like to know Him like you do."

"Hang on while I lock up," Jim suggested. When the doors were locked and the cash placed in the safe, he led them into his living quarters in the back of the store. While they found makeshift seats around the table, Jim put the coffee pot on the stove. Soon they were in animated conversation over cups of strong black coffee that would have burned right through the stomach linings of less rugged individuals.

After a bit of congenial chatter and jovial joshing, Jim opened his Bible and reviewed the basic elements of the gospel of Christ with it. The universal sinfulness of the human heart, the righteousness of God that must punish the sin, and the love of God that sent His own Son to bear our punishment on the cross. He finished up by pointing out that God had done all that could be done to pay the price for our sins, but if anyone refused to acknowledge his sinfulness and accept the payment, there was nothing left but to pay the price themselves in the eternal fires of hell.

Jim encouraged these men to breathe up a silent prayer of acceptance to God right there in their chairs. He advised them to kneel at their bedsides and confirm their repentance and faith in Christ when they got home. He also invited them back for a Bible study on Friday night, which he figured would be the most tempting time for them to return to a life of unbridled sin. When they were gone, Jim collapsed to his knees at his bedside, praying earnestly for help for these men to follow through with their good intentions.

Meanwhile, a member of the town council contacted an influential law firm back East by telegram. He was advised that the town could ban certain kinds of morally objectionable businesses if the electorate voted to do so. Rev. Lawrence immediately drew up a petition demanding a special election on the matter. Although no one personally approached Jim for his signature, a signature sheet showed up on his sales counter. After a couple days of prayerful consideration, Jim signed his name to the petition.

It only took a week for the petition to garner enough signatures to force a special election. Rev. Lawrence ramrodded it through the council despite the fact that regular elections were only two months away. Considerably less people voted for the ban than had signed the petition and the proposition was beaten by more than a two to one margin.

* * *

Throughout most of the summer Jim was too busy at his store to start implementing the requirements for his homestead claim. He needed to take up residence on the land, but his business demanded so much of his time that he only managed to cut and drag in one or two logs a week for his log cabin. He needed almost fifty logs for

a single-room cabin. Still, he refused to consider canceling his Friday night Bible study. There were now five new Christians attending it, and they desperately needed his Scriptural encouragement in their lives. Suddenly Jim realized that he needed to be praying about the secular things in his life as well as the spiritual ones.

On Friday morning of the week that Jim began praying about his homesteading predicament a young woman came running into his establishment. The out-of-breath woman slipped quickly towards the back of the building, obviously looking for a place to hide. Seeing the terror on her face as she looked back towards the door, Jim jerked his head toward the door of his living quarters. She had scarcely slammed the door behind her behind her when a rough-looking man came barging through the front door.

“Where’d that woman go?” he demanded of Jim.

“Excuse me?” Jim replied, coming to stand before the rogue.

“I said, ‘Where did that woman go?’” the man repeated pointedly, grabbing Jim by the front of the shirt.

“Mister,” Jim commanded, “You take your hands off of me and explain what you are in here for.”

When the man hesitated, Jim shoved his right hand against the bully’s throat, pinning him against the wall. He held him there until his face began to turn blue and his hands dropped to his side. Loosening his grip to where the man could breathe, Jim demanded why he wanted the woman.

“She owes me twenty-five dollars for bringing her from Denver to the Madame,” the man replied. “She took one look at the Madame’s establishment and bolted. The Madame won’t pay me if the girls don’t stay.”

Suddenly the woman was beside Jim. “You told me you were bringing me to a hotel where I could work as a housekeeper,” she accused angrily. “Instead you brought me to that disgraceful place and tried to force me to stay there with that awful woman. Now I have no means to get back to Denver, even.

“She ain’t that bad,” the currier replied. “Yer the first woman I’ve brung ta ‘er over the years that ain’t been glad ta git the job.”

“Hold it!” Jim cut in. “You are telling me that the Madame pays you to recruit women to work for her, and to bring them to her establishment?”

“Yep,” the man replied proudly, “An’ it’s an easy livin’.”

“But you tell them you’re bringing them to a job in a hotel?”

“Sure,” the man guffawed at his own cleverness. “Don’t a lot a’ men spend the night there?”

“Suddenly Jim tightened his pressure on the man’s throat again-- to the point where he was wheezing. “Ma’am,” he said urgently, “Run down the street to the jail house and get the sheriff. If he’s not there, he’ll be across the street getting his breakfast. Hurry, before I actually hurt this piece of scum.

The sheriff was at Jim’s place within three or four minutes. After hearing Jim’s accusation, he tied the man’s hands behind his back and marched him off to the jail.

“What am I being arrested for?” The man objected.

“For fraud and trafficking in human beings,” the Sheriff replied.

* * *

When the man was gone, the woman turned to Jim. “Thanks for saving me from this humiliating situation. I’d rather starve than stay there—even as a housekeeper, which was never their intention anyway.”

“Ma’am,” Jim responded, noting the gauntness of her otherwise pleasant face. “You told that man that you had no way back to Denver. I can supply you with a railroad ticket and enough money to travel comfortably, if you’ll take it.”

“Thanks, Mister, but what’s the use. I walked the streets of Denver for over a month without finding a suitable job for a Christian woman. I guess it was pure desperation that finally made me come with that disgusting man. You wouldn’t have a job for me, would you?”

“I don’t exactly handle goods that women are generally familiar with,” Jim began to hedge.

“You might be surprised,” she answered. “I’ve been helping Dad at the mine ever since Mom died until he was killed in an avalanche last winter. Then a couple of men jumped our claim and I had to run for my life. I’m knowledgeable about mining and mining equipment, as well as harness and leather goods,” she continued with a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “Let me show you what I know about your stock”

Without waiting for an answer, the woman began to explain how the various pieces of mining equipment Jim had on display were used. She interspersed short anecdotes on amazing successes and tragic misuses of the equipment that held Jim spellbound. She had a good knowledge of leather and harness goods as well, often mentioning the brand simply by the appearance. She was weak on farming equipment and lumbering tools, and knew nothing at all about guns. “I’ve never fired one,” she admitted, “but I can learn.”

“Ma’am,” Jim exclaimed enthusiastically, “I’m impressed.” Then, handing her fifty dollars out of his cash drawer, he added, “Here’s fifty dollars for you to live on while I try to figure out whether or not the details of hiring a woman can be worked out.”

“I can’t take that without earning it,” she replied, handing it back towards him.

“Lady,” he stated gently, “Your face shows the marks of genuine hunger. You are a Christian friend on the verge of starvation, and I would face the wrath of God if I failed to help you. Please take this as from the Lord Himself.”

“OK.” She relented, “but if you consider me a friend, please call me Pam.”

“If you’re Pam, I’m Jim. OK Pam?”

“Yes Jim,” she agreed as they grinned amiably at each other.

By the way, Jim advised as she headed out the door, I’d recommend the Plainsman Hotel for quality food and clean rooms. It’s where you found the sheriff this morning. I’ll drop in to discuss the job with you tomorrow at breakfast time.” But when Jim arrived at the Plainsman in the morning, Pam was not there.

Jim was confused. Had this woman been using him, or was she genuine? His gut feeling was that she was transparent. Something was wrong. After waiting nearly an hour, Jim finally asked the manager to check her room. The manager was back within a minute.

“There’s been a fight up there,” he reported. “There’s some blood, and she’s been abducted.” Jim crossed the street to the sheriff’s office, and found the lawman in a deep unrousable sleep. The prisoner was gone.

Jim rushed over to the president of the town council’s house. Fortunately, he was home. “The sheriff has been drugged, the prisoner is gone, and his victim has been abducted,” Jim explained.

"You'll have to take over until the sheriff wakes up," the man told Jim. "Do you swear to uphold the laws of this country and this community to the best of your ability?" He asked, holding out his Bible.

"I do," Jim answered, touching the book.

"Here's a deputy's badge, Jim," the councilman replied. "We'll take care of the sheriff. You try to find the abducted woman."

This was new ground for Jim. He forced himself to sit back and pray for wisdom. "Who would have abducted Pam?" he asked himself. "The Madame? The escaped prisoner? Both of them were implicated in the prisoner's fraud and human trafficking."

"The Madame seems too frail to abduct a girl who had worked a mine," Jim reasoned. "She would be the one that drugged the sheriff and freed the prisoner. He would be the one who abducted the girl. Where should he start looking for him?"

A quick check with the hostler showed the prisoner's horses and buggy were still in town. So were the Madame's. "Good, both the prime subjects are probably still in town, but where?"

As Jim kept turning the case over in his mind it finally struck him. If the Madame sprung the prisoner, it was to keep him from implicating her in his crimes against these women. She would certainly kill him herself if she hadn't done it already, or hire it done. She'd do away with Pam before she could testify as well. "Thank you, Lord," he breathed. "Can you help me find them before it's too late?"

Returning to the councilman's house, he found the others gathered with their president. They saw the logic of Jim's solution, and since there was no judge in the community, they issued Jim a "Warrant" to search the bawdy house. "Would one of you married men bring his wife along," Jim asked, blushing.

"Wise move," the councilmen agreed, choosing the oldest couple to accompany Jim. The men armed themselves before the trio headed to the bawdy house.

"Come in, Jim," the Madame invited him sarcastically. "It's been several weeks since you've been here."

"I've never been here, and you know it," Jim retorted angrily. "But we are here on official business to search your place," he added, showing his deputy sheriff's badge.

"I knew you couldn't stay away forever," she mocked, "but come in and satisfy yourself that no one is here."

"Don't worry, Jim," the councilman's wife whispered to him. "We know that you don't even enter the drinking establishments."

The group searched the establishment thoroughly, finding no evidence of scuffling or of the missing people. Discouragement showed on Jim's face as he trudged over to the sheriff's office. A coarsely made up young woman awaited him there.

"Sheriff," she started hesitantly. "I'm one of the Madame's girls. I was brought here on a promise of a laundry job at a hotel. When I tried to refuse the Madame's demands, I was blindfolded and shoved into a root cellar a very short distance from the back door of the establishment. I was held there for several days, until I yielded for fear of my life. Now I'm such a sinner that I'm headed straight for the gates of hell, but maybe this will help you save that new recruit. She looked absolutely horrified when she saw where she had been brought."

Jim gathered several armed business men into a small posse as he returned to the bawdy house. Starting from the back door, they searched the yard without finding a trace of the reported root cellar. As they returned to the back porch, one of the men remarked at how new the basket-weave wooden skirt around the porch looked. Suddenly they were pulling it away, and there, under the porch, were the stairs leading down into the cellar.

When the cellar doors were thrown open, both the victims were found thoroughly bound and gagged. The escaped prisoner had so many deep scratches across his face that the searchers burst out into frank laughter. Pam had a black eye and a horribly bruised face. Her legs had fallen asleep from her cramped position, so Jim picked her up and carried her up the steps. The way the relieved woman clung to him made him want to shelter her from ever getting hurt again.

As Jim reluctantly relinquished his hold on Pam, something clicked in his mind. He tore around to the front of the building, just in time to intercept the Madame as she rushed out her front door. She put up a fight, and he finally had to tackle her and hold her for help in tying her up. Since they could scarcely put her in the single-celled jail with a male prisoner, they put her in the root cellar until they could come up with a more civilized arrangement where she would be secure. Within an hour Jim's personal quarters had been emptied of everything but a single bed and a chair. The shackled Madame was housed there under both male and female guards.

That night the bawdy house burned to the ground. Only a torrential thunderstorm kept the fire from spreading throughout the business district. The next morning the body of a young woman was found in the debris of the fire. She appeared to be the one who had told Jim of the root cellar.

When the Madame was moved to more appropriate quarters, Jim hired Pam, turning his personal quarters over to her. He began sleeping on his claim, in his Conestoga wagon. When Pam was comfortable running the store, Jim began to assemble his logs in earnest. He had to have a home there as soon as possible, and he wanted it big enough for a wife. He had the perfect one in mind.

Two weeks after the fire the Sheriff arrested a member of Rev. Lawrence's church for arson and murder. The man confessed, showing little repentance. "It was time someone got rid of it," he maintained.

The evening after the arrest was made, Rev. Lawrence came by to talk to Jim. "Jim," he acknowledged, "I refused to listen to your request for a prayerful solution to the bawdy house. All that my hateful ranting and raving accomplished was to incite one of my parishioners to burn it down, causing an incidental murder. And the problem had already been solved the Lord's way--through prayer. I'm leaving the ministry for a teaching career. Could you do the preaching for us for a few weeks until my replacement arrives from the East?"

"Sure, Pastor," Jim agreed, giving the man a big hug. "I hope he'll be good at funerals and marriages and other such gruesome festivities."

"I'm sure he'll be able to handle your immediate needs," the minister remarked with twinkling eyes.

The Gristly End of the Drive

We started out for Omaha
with many miles to go,
And quite a herd of branded beef
that traveled way too slow.
A mossy-back was in the lead,
mean as a steer could be;
And every time he looked my way
he shook his horns at me.

We hit the Platte a few days out,
the water was too high;
We knew if we crossed over then
a lot of cows would die.
That mossy shook his horns at me,
and took the herd across.
The current washed the weak away
and caused a major loss.

We bunched our restless stock that night,
a smaller herd by far,
And sang aloud to bed them down
beneath the northern star;
But when old Mossy heard my voice
he strictly disagreed.
He dropped his head and shook his horns
and started a stampede.

We did our best to round them up,
but only found a few;
And where we bedded down that night
the rustlers only knew.
They left old Mossy all alone
beside the water pail;
When we awoke he shook his horns
and chased us off the trail.

We straggled in to Omaha
without a cow to show;
No money left to buy a meal,
and nowhere else to go.
Old Mossy met us in the street,
and gave his horns a shake;
I put a slug between his eyes
and had a gristly steak.

Staircase to Heaven

Preface:

The Grand Staircase-Escalante area of southeastern Utah is intriguing. The area's rugged landscape leaves an immense impression as layer after layer of rock formations expose themselves in a gigantic geological staircase.

This wilderness north and west of the Colorado River was the last part of the contiguous forty-eight states to be mapped. The task was accomplished by a surveying team directed by Major John Wesley Powell and Professor Almon Thompson, who guided a rafting expedition down the treacherous river around the heyday of the American cowboy era. The group discovered the Escalante River there in 1872.

The main characters of this story are fictional, but the people and incidents involving the geological survey team are more or less derived from Fred Dellenbaugh's firsthand account of the expedition, *A CANYON VOYAGE*.

Junction was the original name for the present town of Fruita, but the area along the Fremont River was not actually settled to any appreciable extent until the mid-1880's. The Army post at Spanish Fork was abandoned back in 1862, though there could still have been a token presence there since the Army still owned it. Mr. Thomas Blake did not exist, nor have I run across a single incident of the early Mormons condoning the kidnaping of wives in my research.

The Mormons developed a strategic corridor of settlements and towns from Salt Lake City southward along the western edge of this wilderness under Brigham Young's brilliant leadership. It supported their expansion down into Arizona admirably well. My apologies if I have misrepresented them in any way. The polygamy, the leadership's options on the laity's wives, the blood atonement, and other doctrinal references to early Mormonism are well documented—generally from their own writings.

Staircase to Heaven

Chapter 1

Dusty Winters drew his horse up at the top of the tallest rise on the Lonely Circle Ranch. Off to the north, the browning range of the Lonely Circle blended imperceptibly into the distant hills of the Single Bar spread. Turning his gaze from the northern horizon, he looked regretfully down at the ranch house and outbuildings of the Lonely Circle outfit. That bunkhouse down there had been home to him for the past three years—the closest thing to a real home he had known since coming out west.

Heaving a silent sigh, he turned the Indian pony down the trail towards the bunkhouse. The muffled sound of each succeeding step of the little horse was punctuated by a small puff of dust. It was dry!

Dusty slipped in to the bunkhouse early, before the other hands would be back from the range. Relieved that no one else was there, he deftly packed his few belongings and a few trail supplies into his saddle bags, buckled on his gun belt, picked up his Winchester repeating rifle, and trudged dejectedly out to the corral. He let out a low whistle, and his big strawberry roan trotted expectantly out of the shade of the barn, ears forward and alert, to the gate where Dusty waited. He patted the horse's withers affectionately, bridled him, and led him to the barn to saddle up.

The young cowhand tightened the cinch, threw the saddle bags on behind, strapped on his bedroll, dropped his rifle into its scabbard, and led the horse quietly into the trees behind the barn. The horse nudged his shoulder reproachfully as he tied the reins loosely to a branch. "Easy Buster," Dusty chuckled, "I only rode that other horse today so you would be fresh tonight. Unless I miss my guess, we'll be headin' out this evenin'." Patting the horse reassuringly again, he turned determinedly towards the ranch house.

Dusty all but winced as he mounted the steps to the large veranda across the front end of the big weathered cedar ranch house. Crossing the bare wooden porch with a steady stride, he rapped firmly on the heavy door that marked the house as off limits for the cowboys.

"Who's there?" boomed the gruff voice of the burly rancher.

"Just me," Dusty called back loudly enough to be recognized easily.

"Come in, Dusty. You ready to take on the Single Bar?"

"That's just it," Dusty answered almost apologetically. "I can't help you do that, Mr. Rodgers."

"You can't what?" exploded the big man angrily.

"I can't help you take over the Single Bar, Mr. Rodgers. It ain't right."

"Well, I'll be!" Rodgers retorted as his face darkened and the veins bulged up in his neck. "I never guessed anyone who can shoot like you would be so yella!"

"It ain't that I'm afraid, Mr. Rodgers," Dusty answered steadily. "It's just that it ain't right."

"Don't you try to tell me what's right, you coward!" yelled the old man. "This is rough country, and a man's gotta

do what it takes to survive. I took what I got with my gun, and I'm still tough enough to take whatever else I need. With this drought I need the Single Bar grass. They can move over if they want to stay!"

"Mr. Rodgers," the younger man pled, "The Single Bar was there before you came here. There's nothin' south of here. The grass ain't much, but there's enough land there to support our cattle through the drought. Couldn't we go that direction?"

"I know what I want," the old man bellowed. "The Single Bar has the best graze around, and I'm going to get it."

"Then I'll be ridin' out after supper, Mr. Rodgers," the discouraged cowboy replied.

"If you're not going to back me after all I've done for you, you'll be riding before dinner, you sneakin' cur," Rodgers replied, grabbing Dusty by the shirt and leaning in to leer in his face.

"Mr. Rodgers," Dusty replied evenly, "I've earned my keep here. I've cared for yer stock and yer stuff day and night, as I would my own. Besides, you owe me a month's wages."

"Get out!" screamed the enraged man, shaking Dusty by the shirt for emphasis. "You'll die of lead poisoning if I ever see you on the Lonely Circle again," he spat out threateningly.

"I'll be needin' my wages then," Dusty replied evenly, placing his hands nonchalantly on the rancher's arm. "Now, Mr. Rodgers," he added as he removed the rancher's hands as easily as if they had been a baby's."

Somewhat cowed by the young cowboy's strength, the rancher turned sullenly to open the large safe behind him. Drawing a twenty dollar gold piece from the safe, he threw it insultingly at Dusty's feet.

"That's to be thirty dollars, Sir." Dusty said evenly as he stooped for the coin.

Hiding his movements with his body, the rancher drew a loaded revolver from the safe. Swinging the gun around triumphantly, he found himself looking down the business end of Dusty's forty-five that seemed to materialize from nowhere. "Ten more dollars, please," Dusty requested easily, a slight movement of the gun toward the safe urging the rancher to retrieve the remainder of his wages.

Taking another ten dollars from the paling rancher's hand, Dusty said sternly, "I'm ridin' out now, Mr. Rodgers, just as soon as you lock that gun back in the safe so as no stray shots will accidentally hit me in the back. I didn't ask for no trouble here, and I don't want it follerin' me none. Good bye, sir."

Turning on his heels when the gun was safely locked away, Dusty felt the hair on the back of his neck tingle as he walked toward the trees where Buster awaited him. He had never shot anyone and was revolted at the thought of it. The few times he had drawn were actually more of a bluff than a threat. He knew deep down that there would have to be a mighty good reason for him to shoot another human being, but being naturally fast in this environment of guns helped to make that reason a remote possibility, he thought.

Mounting his fidgeting horse, he rode briskly through the protection of the trees to the trail that meandered away from the Lonely Circle. He didn't want any part of an unjust range war. It was hard to understand how such things could still happen in 1871. "Well Buster," he clucked to the roan, "Yer all I got and I'm all you got, and neither of us has the slightest idea where we're a'goin'." The roan nickered back as they struck a trail south into the vastness of the Utah wilderness.

Chapter 2

Dusty rode steadily down the trail until the sun turned orange over his right shoulder. As dusk began to settle, he turned Buster down a sandy draw where a small creek trickled through a clump of cottonwoods that towered above the scattered junipers of the desert. A twelve foot cliff of sandstone, carved out in wetter times at a curve in

the creek, afforded some protection from the night breeze and the dangers of the raw Utah wilderness. Dismounting, he removed his gear, rubbed down the horse, led him to the creek for a drink, and hobbled him for the night. Finally, the lone cowboy built a smokeless fire under the cliff from some dry juniper scraps. It was always best to build a fire where it could not be seen by any hostile Indians or desperadoes of the desert trails. He made some coffee from the clear creek water and fried a few slices of bacon and a sliced potato for supper. After washing his plate in the creek, he doused the fire and rolled out his blanket near the ashes under the cliff. Although he was dead tired, he did not drift right off to sleep as he usually did.

The restless cowboy tossed on his blanket for an hour or so, and finally climbed up on the edge of the cliff to sit in the moonlight. Fleeting memories of his youth chased each other through his roving mind: His mother and father as they worked their way west on the wagon train. Their grief as they buried the baby on the plains during the cholera outbreak. That final day when the Indians ambushed the wagon train. How he hunkered under the wagon side by side with his dad after they had run out of ammunition. How the deadly arrows rained down in relentless waves from the rocky outcroppings on either side the stranded train. He would never forget Dad's gasp as the arrow thunked into his chest, his earnest plea for Dusty to study his Bible and serve the Lord, and his final rasping charge to care for his mother if they survived. But when the attack was over, Dusty found that his mother had also been killed by a stray arrow through her heart as she crouched on the floor of the wagon.

The rest was a blur. The dead were buried in a mass grave, as a few inadequate words were said over them by men that scarcely acknowledged God even at times like this. All Dusty could do was to resolve to read his Bible regularly, in honor of his father's dying request.

The captain of the stricken train gave the oxen of the deceased to the survivors who had lost their own beasts in the fight, with little consideration for the surviving children's rights. Dusty was assigned to finish the trip with the Wright family, who took the Winters' one surviving ox and tied their saddle horse behind their own wagon. The Winters family's wagon and most of their goods had to be left to decay in the desert.

Fourteen year old Dusty had refused to succumb to grief. He could see that the family he was assigned to resented another mouth to feed, and it was obvious that they did not appreciate his presence in their family circle. He soon took to riding his father's horse with the scouts, and rapidly learned how to observe and interpret the signs of the trail. It was the scouts that really took him in. They taught him the ways of the trail, and he was quickly recognized as a natural tracker and out-doors man. He ate and slept beside their campfire, and his rifle regularly contributed game to the train's sparse food supply.

When the train reached Fort Bridger, it split up into those who were going southwest to the Mormon country in Utah, and those going farther along the Oregon Trail to the northwestern territories of the U.S. or even to California. As Dusty watched the good-byes between the two groups, Mr. Wright stepped up to claim the young man's horse. "Sorry, Mr. Wright," Dusty said, turning to face him. "This was my dad's horse, and it's rightfully mine."

"Now you listen here, you thankless brat," insisted the wagoner. "I've cared for you and that horse ever since your parents died, and now I'm taking him down to Kanab with me."

"No way, Mr. Wright!" the boy answered with amazing calmness. "He's grazed his own way across the prairie without a quart of your feed. And," he added, "I've taken care of him the whole way myself. He's mine!"

"Get down from there," the livid man shouted as he jerked the boy off the horse and grabbed for the reins.

And then, as if by magic, Dusty's gun was out of its holster, and the rawboned man was backing off with his hands in the air. "Git this straight, Mr. Wright," the boy said with steel in his voice. "You kin keep my parents' ox, but I'm keepin' their horse and their guns. They're all I've got," he added lamely, more to himself than anyone else.

"The kid's right," exclaimed one of the scouts, "He's taken care of himself, and you've eaten more of his meat than he ever ate of yours. And besides, I don't think you'd best go up against a draw like that."

“You betcha!” several awestricken voices exclaimed from the crowd.

Dusty himself had been surprised at the speed and the smoothness of his draw. It just came naturally. He had scarcely drawn a gun before, except maybe to shoot an occasional rattler on the trail.

Gradually the glory of the desert stars and the beauty of the wild terrain under the full moon calmed Dusty’s thoughts. “Dad would be proud that I did what was right today,” he told himself as he crawled back to his blankets and fell into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 3

The chill of the desert morning woke Dusty just as the sky began to lighten. He rekindled the fire and rustled some coffee from his saddle bags. Sipping it slowly from a tin cup, he soon had bacon sizzling in the cast iron skillet he carried. Finally, he fried a single large flapjack in the bacon grease, and wolfed down the standard meal of the trail, without butter or syrup. Those were chuck wagon and bunkhouse luxuries, to Dusty’s way of thinking.

When breakfast was gone, Dusty doused the fire with water from the creek, pausing long enough for a deep drink for himself. Then, after filling his canteen, he climbed back to his seat on the cliff to read his chapter from the Bible for the day.

Dusty was no theological scholar, but his methodical Bible reading for the six years since his father’s death had familiarized him fairly well with the Bible. He didn’t understand a lot of it, but he knew what it said and could have repeated the parts that impressed him almost word for word. There were few Bible stories that he did not know well. He understood in a vague sort of a way that Christ had died for the sins of the world, but his religion, if he had thought about it, was simply to behave uprightly and leave the rest to God.

When he had finished his chapter, Dusty saddled up and continued aimlessly southward. He was always on the lookout for signs of Indians, and paused frequently at strategic spots to study his back trail. The changes in the land intrigued him as it went from grasslands and desert sage to evergreen forests, back to increasingly rugged grasslands, and finally, after several days riding, to a landscape of stony bare gullies sparsely covered with stunted junipers, all punctuated by great gray mesas that towered nakedly above the level of the plains. It was unlike anything he’d ever seen.

Dusty’s saddlebags were beginning to run low on supplies by the fourth day, so he detoured westward into a hilly patch of evergreen trees in hopes of killing a deer. Riding slowly through the trees, he came to a narrow meadow that sloped down to a shallow rocky stream. A towering sandstone wall several hundred feet high curved around the far side of the stream as far as he could see in either direction. The view was breathtaking.

The hunter’s instinct in Dusty told him there would likely be deer down there. Slipping out of the saddle, he half-hitched the reins to a small limb, and stood silently in the trees at the edge of the meadow for a few minutes, scanning the valley for game. Seeing a buck grazing cautiously near the trees about three hundred yards downwind, the hunter backed stealthily into the forest, and moved noiselessly to a position that would be downwind of the deer before creeping back to the edge of the trees. Despite his caution, the animal suddenly stiffened and gazed intently upwind before taking suddenly to the trees near Dusty’s position.

A greenhorn might have dropped the buck as it bounded by, but Dusty’s attention focused instantly on what might have startled it. He was carefully studying every boulder and juniper in the suspect area when a couple of Indians came into view along the bank between the far side of the creek and the large sandstone backdrop. As they drew nearer, Dusty decided that they must be newlyweds, completely absorbed in each other. They were holding hands a bit more than necessary as they helped each other over the rocks along the way, sometimes half embracing as they chatted softly together in the seclusion of the wilderness.

Dusty had never seen an Indian with his guard down before. Instead of the usual impassive expression, their

faces were relaxed and expressive. Instead of aloofness, this couple obviously cared for each other. As he crouched undetected in his hidden spot behind the trees, he realized that Indians were not necessarily murderous savages to be avoided or fought, but living, emotional human beings much like he was. Surely they had to hurt just as much when one of them died as he had hurt when the Indians had killed his parents. Death was a terrible thing--even for the Indians.

The Indian couple was directly across the creek from Dusty when he caught a shadowy movement on a low lying ledge just above them. Straining, he detected another gliding movement and finally made out the outline of a large mountain lion. Another slinky move confirmed that the beast was stalking the couple.

Dusty was hesitant to yell. It was too apt to alert any hostile Indians who might be nearby. Then, as the huge cat gathered for a final leap, the cowboy almost automatically raised his Winchester to his shoulder, cocking it as it came up. Sighting on the brute, he waited to see what would happen. As the cougar sprang, he squeezed off a shot.

The rifle report echoed thunderously off the rock wall, and Dusty saw the mortally wounded beast's body strike the woman in the back, knocking her harmlessly to the ground. Without waiting for further developments, he whirled and ran for his horse. Wherever there was a squaw, there would likely be other Indians in the area, and they might not understand his motive for that impetuous shot.

The fleeing white man jerked Buster's reigns free and leaped into the saddle. He rode away hurriedly, picking a silent path over a thick carpet of fallen pine needles while avoiding any noisy underbrush as much as possible. His first thought was to ride back out of the trees to the trail he had been following, but he thought better of riding into the open as he approached the edge of the forest. After some deliberation, he holed up in an undercut beneath the roots of a large tree in a dry wash until dark. Then, before the moon rose, he would ride out of the trees in the darkness and use the light of the rising moon to find the distant trail.

After dark, Dusty let Buster pick his way back towards the east, and the sure-footed horse found the trail within a couple of hours. Dusty patted his neck affectionately as he urged the animal along at a fast walk for several hours before stopping for a meal of cold jerky and tepid water. There was no way he was going to chance a fire so close to the Indians.

Chapter 4

Dusty was off at the crack of dawn the next morning. As the sun peeked over the eastern horizon he noticed that the landscape was getting rougher. Awesome formations of red and white half-formed rock rose from the bare reddish ground that was dotted with eight to twelve foot shrubs. There was little other ground cover, and the landscape seemed to be an endless series of mounds and washes. There was little water, and virtually no game except for an occasional jack rabbit. The altitude seemed lower, and the dry air hotter--near a hundred degrees, he suspected. He finally stopped about noon to give his thirsty horse a break, resting under a juniper until the sun was well into the western sky before moving out again.

As they rode along, Dusty was beginning to wonder if they would ever find water. Still, this was obviously an Indian trail, and they would have had to have water as well. Surely they would find it soon. Sure enough, before sunset Buster drew up suddenly, almost back pedaling. They had come to the rim of a tall crumbly red rock drop-off that stretched as far as the eye could see to the west and north. The trail turned eastward and angled its way down the face of the rift into a narrow green valley below. There would be water here.

At sunset Dusty crossed a small river flowing out of a narrow rocky canyon about a half of a mile south of the edge of the rocky reef. After allowing Buster a small drink, he walked him along the southern bank into the high walled canyon to a defensible spot, removed his tack from the horse, rubbed him down, and led him back to the river for a fuller drink. Lighting a small fire, he brewed coffee and fried the last of his bacon. He had nothing else with him to eat, but he slept well, certain that he would find plenty of game here.

Pinkish daylight brightened the sky above the solid rock walls of the gorge that they had camped in. As Dusty crawled out of his blankets and slipped noiselessly towards the river he saw several deer coming down to the stream to drink. Dropping back to get his rifle, he crept back Indian-like to where he could get a good shot, and was dragging a mule deer back to camp within minutes. His position was relatively safe, and after frying a fresh steak, he set to work slicing the better parts of the meat into small strips for drying. He didn't have enough salt for long term preservation, but he made a crude drying rack from two forked sticks supporting a third one to hang the thin strips of meat on. Then, after building a fire of dried mesquite under the rack, he began smoking enough meat to satisfy his appetite for five or six days. After reading his daily chapter in the Bible, he decided to spend the day there, letting Buster rest and graze, and doing the meat slowly for better flavor and preservation. He tried panning for gold in the stream, but found no color at all. He finally gave it up after an hour or so, and just rested, cleaning his guns, and turning the meat or tending the fire occasionally. He sacked out right after dark and slept more soundly than usual.

As Dusty drank from the river the following morning, a shadow fell across him. Startled, he looked up to see two mounted Indians towering over him. Paiutes, he thought. His guns were back by the fire with his saddle and gear, and he stared steadily at the nearer brave feeling absolutely defenseless. Finally the Indian spoke. "White man hard to follow," he said. Then, as his face softened a mite, he added, "Good shot! Save squaw." Beckoning the other Indian to come forward, he said, "We have gift for white man;" and Dusty realized that the second Indian was a woman—a beautiful one at that.

The woman dismounted and untied a roll from behind her. Smiling shyly, she said, "Your hide." Holding it above her head she let the scraped hide of a cougar unroll almost to her feet. "I fix for you," she said. "Thank you," she added as she handed it to him. Then mounting, they were gone as silently as they had arrived. Dusty picked up the hide and walked shakily back to the fire. He shouldn't have been so careless, but he knew that these two Indians would be his friends for life.

Packing the meat that had smoked all night, Dusty broke camp and continued up the canyon. It was widening as he plodded along. Within an hour or so it was about a hundred yards wide, and the trail was wider too. Then the sky began to cloud up, and he began to urge his horse a bit faster, not wanting to get caught in a flash flood. Within a few minutes thunder was echoing in the canyon, and occasional bolts of lightning stabbed downward from the ragged sky. Finally, the south wall of the canyon ended abruptly, opening into a luscious green valley that gradually faded into desert further away from the river. Dusty could make out a purplish mountain range merging into the clouds far to the south of the valley.

The trail-wise cowboy immediately headed into the higher ground off to his left, keeping an eye out for some kind of shelter from the oncoming storm. All he could find before it broke was a huge rock formation that afforded a bit of protection on the downwind side of the storm. There he stood, back against the rock, holding Buster's reins and stroking him reassuringly for an hour or so, until the thunderous storm blew on down the canyon.

When the storm was over, Dusty rode back to the previously placid little river, which was now a frenzied turnpike of roaring turbulence, three or four times as deep as it had been before the storm. He could only imagine how it must have thundered through the narrow part of the canyon he had just come through.

As Dusty made his way on upstream, the right wall of the canyon also petered out. Rounding its final edge, he could see the large red cliff that he had descended the night before several miles to the north, as it shrank to oblivion on the western horizon. And amazingly, there was a tiny settlement several miles on up the river.

Chapter 5

Dusty was impressed with the farm on the stream between the canyon and the settlement. It wasn't exactly a ranch, like the Lonely Circle, but there were a few cattle on the pasture along the stream. Nearer to the buildings, fenced fields striped with irrigation ditches from the river supported crops of corn and wheat. The barn and corral

were separated from a large bare wooden farm house by a productive-looking apple orchard, A dairy cow chewed its cud contentedly in a small fenced side pasture. It was downright amazing to a cowboy used to nothing but the open range.

Approaching the house, the curious cowboy found three women, all sitting in the shade of the large front porch. "Howdy, ladies," he said as he dismounted and doffed his hat. "Could you tell me who runs this outfit?"

"State your business," the wary voice of the oldest-looking commanded austere, as the others gazed pointedly at their sewing without looking up at him or her.

"I'm just a cowhand lookin' fer some grub, n' maybe a job," he answered candidly.

"Do you follow the Prophet?" she asked suspiciously.

"I ain't follerin' no one, ma'am," he denied, shaking his head negatively. "Just ridin' through."

"Yer a Gentile, then?" she asked accusingly.

"I guess so," he answered confusedly. "Least I ain't no Jew to my knowledge."

"Go on 'round back and git a drink," the woman replied severely, jerking her head to point the way to the back door. As he walked around the house in the indicated direction he heard her call sternly into the house, "Missy, git this heathen saddle tramp a drink at the back door, and send him packin'."

As Dusty walked slowly around to the back door, a slim golden haired young woman about his own age limped out with a glass of fresh milk and a thick slice of buttered bread. "Eat it quickly, before she sees it, or I'll be in a peck of trouble," she whispered with a grin.

He gulped down the milk between hurried bites of bread. "That was good," he said as he handed the empty glass back to the waiting girl. "Thank you, ma'am. I'm Dusty Winters," he continued, fidgeting with his hat.

"I'm glad you liked it," she replied with a winning smile. "I'm Missy. You'd better leave now. If you want to talk to Mr. Johnson, you'll probably find him up at the settlement." Then, turning around, she limped back to the door, pausing for a brief wave before disappearing inside the house.

"Thank you, ladies," Dusty called out as he rode by the porch. They ignored him pointedly.

The traveler rode on up to the little settlement of seven or eight buildings, including a small store and a blacksmith's forge. He assumed the houses were where the proprietors' families lived. There was also a small church building complete with a spire.

Dusty stopped at the store first. It was small, and mostly carried simple staples like sugar and flour. There were also a few essentials like cartridges and coal oil for lamps. When he tried to purchase some flour, the woman in the store told him he'd have to talk to Mr. Miller.

"Where?" he asked.

"At the church," the woman said, pointing up the street; so Dusty walked up to the small chapel. Tying Buster to the hitching rail outside, he entered the door. Three men sitting together on one of the split log benches rose to face him as he entered.

"Howdy," Dusty said apologetically. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"No problem," one of the men replied. "We just finished our business. What can we do for you?"

"Is Mr. Miller here?" Dusty asked.

"That's me," another man spoke up. "I'm the Bishop, and Mr. Johnson here is one of our worthies, and Mr. Shepherd is another. How can I help you?"

"I'd like to buy some coffee and flour for the trail," the cowboy answered.

"I can help you with a bit of flour," he replied, "but our supplies are really for the saints along the Fremont River—unless," he continued, "you happen to be a worthy Mormon."

"Don't reckon I'm anything but a Christian, sir," Dusty answered. "But I'd sure 'preciate some supplies fer the trail, 'lessen Mr. Johnson's got a job on the farm for a hard-workin' cowpoke."

"I could use some help picking apples for a week or so," Mr. Johnson cut in, "if you can refrain from alcohol and coffee while you're with us."

"I don't drink and I'm out of coffee," Dusty replied, realizing how they knew he wasn't a Mormon, "and my horse needs the rest."

"Three meals and a dollar a day, starting tomorrow," Mr. Johnson offered, "And you can sleep in the barn."

"If I kin sleep in the barn tonight, I'll be ready at sun-up," the cowboy agreed, and they shook on it.

Chapter 6

Dusty got up with the song of the birds the next morning. He was washing the last of the lather from his face at the trough when Missy showed up, barely visible in the early light. She presented him with a plate of bacon and eggs and a glass of milk for his breakfast. "Gentiles aren't allowed at the family table," she remarked with an impish grin, "So they sent me with your breakfast. Eat fast. Mr. Johnson will want help harnessing the team, and I gotta milk."

Dusty gulped down the plate of food, and went back into the barn where Missy was already milking the cow in the glow of lantern that complimented her long soft curls. "Which way does Mr. Johnson hitch the horses?" he asked, "Un where's the harnesses?"

"The mare on the right and the gelding on the left," she answered, pausing to look up at him like it should have been obvious, "And the tack is probably in the wagon, since he used it yesterday." Dusty had the team harnessed to the buckboard in a jiffy, before his new boss arrived. "That was fast," Missy commented approvingly as she turned the cow out to pasture and picked up her bucket full of fresh milk. "He'll like that. See you at noon," she finished up as she limped out of the barn with the milk.

Mr. Johnson was a fast no-nonsense worker. He quickly taught Dusty to pick the apples that were just ready to ripen, and pack them carefully in shipping crates without bruising them. "They've got to arrive in Provo in good shape," he cautioned, "or I'll hear from headquarters at Salt Lake City." The cowboy followed instructions well, and earned Mr. Johnson's confidence quickly. They worked together almost silently anticipating one another's moves as an efficient team, and Dusty could sense that his work was appreciated, despite their differences. Missy brought them some sandwiches and milk from the kitchen around noon, scarcely saying anything in Mr. Johnson's presence. Dusty caught a smile behind the big man's back just before she turned back towards the house. Sweet little thing, he told himself he as watched her go. It's a pity such a beautiful girl has to be so crippled.

The men quit picking at sunset, hauling the fruit to the spring house in the buckboard. After unloading, Dusty drove the horses to the barn, unhitched and watered them, and rubbed them down carefully with a piece of

burlap. He was just putting them in their stalls when Missy showed up with a large plate of beef and potatoes and several thick slices of bread. She did the evening milking as the tired cowboy ate his meal.

“Thanks, Missy. That bread was terrific,” he said as he handed her the empty plate.

“Don’t mention it too loudly,” she replied. “Nina doesn’t like to waste it on Gentile hands.”

“Nina’s the bossy one?” he asked.

“Very,” she grinned.

“She his wife?” he continued.

“All three of ‘em.” she answered. “Nina’s the first,” she continued, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

“You a hired hand?” he persisted.

“Worse!” she answered. “His stepchild. Mom told me that Indians raided our wagon train and killed my dad when I was only two years old. Mr. Johnson was kind enough to rescue us by buying us from them, and Mom was so appreciative that she married him. When he brought her home, she found she was number four, with no way out. Mom lived till I was ten, but Nina always hated her, and tried to work her to death. She warned me never to join the church,” she blurted out.

Then looking up suddenly, she said confidentially. “I’ve never told anyone else, but somehow I trust you—even if you are a Gentile,” she added mischievously.

“What’s this ‘Gentile’ stuff?” he asked.

“You are either a worthy Mormon or a Gentile around here,” she answered. “And ‘worthy’ isn’t necessarily the right word for some of ‘em, either.” Then, grabbing up her frothing milk pail, she exclaimed, “I gotta get going or Nina’ll have a fit,” and she was gone.

Chapter 7

Dusty worked from dawn until dusk throughout the week, making sure that he earned his keep. Missy brought his meals, and he managed to have the cow milked before she got there on several evenings. The first time, she hung around to chat a bit, explaining a bit more about the Mormon religion.

“It takes over where the Bible leaves off,” she told him. “The angel, Moroni, told Joseph Smith about some golden plates from God, which he dug up and translated into the BOOK OF MORMON with some special spectacles that had been buried with them. He also got some revelations from God, which he wrote up in DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS. He also got about thirty wives, but I don’t think God had anything to do with that,” she added wryly.

“Do you believe all that stuff?” he asked incredulously.

“It confuses me,” she replied.

“Missy, I think God would be fair. If He sent ennyone ta us with a new message, He’d give ‘em enough miracles or somethin’ ta prove they really came from Him.”

“What about when the seagulls came and ate the swarms of grasshoppers that were destroying the early Mormon’s crops?” she asked.

“It could’a been an answer ta prayer,” Dusty admitted. “But it could’a just happened. It wasn’t an undeniable

miracle like the crossin' of the Red Sea er the Jordan River.”

“What about all the Mormon healings by the laying on of hands?”

“All I kin say's when Jesus healed folks, even His enemies had ta admit that He really done it.”

“Mom always said the Mormons couldn't be right, the way they treat women,” Missy volunteered. “She quit going to church, and then she died. Nina says God was angry ‘cause she quit going to church.”

“I read my Bible every day,” Dusty answered, “and I know that Jesus treated women as good as he treated men. He met one at a well once, and told her she was wrong ta have more'n one husband. She went away happy cause he knew all about her sins, and forgave 'em all, I guess.”

“We don't read the Bible much,” she said. “Brigham says the Book of Mormon takes precedence over it anyhow.”

She sighed deeply, shrugged her shoulders, picked up her pail full of milk, and went bleakly back to the house.

The next time she lingered to talk, Mr. Johnson walked in on the conversation. He curtly sent her back to the house. Then, turning to Dusty, he said, “Don't be bothering Missy with your infidel questions. You're a good worker and would make a good Mormon. If you want to learn the truth, come to church in the morning. We won't be working on the Sabbath anyway.”

Dusty walked behind the family to the church the following day. He was appalled as Mr. Miller explained that God the Father came down in the flesh to father a son by Mary. It just wasn't consistent with the Biblical accounts, and both of them could not be true. The rest of what he heard was a mixture of Biblical-sounding quotations and contradictions that left his head spinning. One thing he knew, he didn't want any more of it—ever.

Dusty walked out of the church without speaking to anyone, and went straight back to the barn. Buckling on his gun belt, he saddled Buster and rode south into the desert to exercise the horse and clear his dumfounded mind. “How could anyone familiar with the Bible believe such things?” he kept asking himself.

Buster was anxious to go, and Dusty let him run a while before turning him in a wide arc that would get them back to the barn before dinner. They were riding down the lane to the barn as the sky turned orange before sunset.

As Dusty dismounted, he heard an angry shout in the barn. Dropping the reins, he stepped quietly inside to see a well-dressed middle-aged man staring arrogantly at Missy. He had her cornered between a stall and the barn wall, and seemed to be studying her almost as if evaluating livestock. Dusty slipped easily up behind him, and when the stranger made a coarse remark about her figure, the enraged cowboy spun him around by the shoulder.

“What do you think yer doin'?” he challenged as Missy limped into the lengthening shadows.

“Mind your own business, Gentile,” the aggressor shouted back angrily.

“I work here,” Dusty replied evenly. “What happens to Mr. Johnson's daughter is my business.”

“I'm Thomas Blake, the Area President of this stake,” he replied haughtily. “If I want his daughter, he has no choice. I could even take his wife if I wanted to.”

“She has a choice,” Dusty said grimly. “She's not a member of yer church, and you'll be ridin' on without her.”

“I'll decide that,” he replied as he slipped a hand nonchalantly into his coat. Dusty anticipated his move, and he was staring down the barrel of Dusty's Colt before his derringer was half-way out.

“I'll take that,” the cowboy said easily as the enraged man handed it over. “Now git and stay git.”

The man huffed out of the barn to the house, and within moments he returned to the barn with Mr. Johnson. Both men were armed with shotguns.

“Dusty, come here a minute,” Mr. Johnson called up to the loft where Dusty usually slept, as both men cocked their weapons.

“Sure thing,” Dusty replied as he stepped out from a stall behind them with his revolver in his hand. “I’m right here. Ya won’t be needin’ those guns ta talk ta me, so I’d suggest that ya put ‘em down nice and careful like so they won’t go off and hurt someone,” he continued casually.

“Mr. Johnson,” he said as the two men lay their guns down gingerly, “if you knew how this man was a-lookin’ at Missy, and heard what he said to ‘er, you’d have that gun pointed at him.”

“A man’s got a right to check out a prospective wife,” the stranger retorted.

“Missy may be crippled,” Dusty answered angrily, “but she’s a respectable human being, not a piece of merchandise. And she’s way too good for that kind of treatment.”

“Crippled!” shouted the visitor, turning on Mr. Johnson. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Figured it was self-evident, Mr. Blake,” Johnson said defensively. “She’s a good worker and an excellent cook.”

“I don’t need no cripple,” the man spat out as he huffed out of the barn towards the house. And Dusty was sure that Missy was safe for the moment.

When he heard the door slam, Mr. Johnson turned on Dusty. “Don’t you be gettin’ me in trouble with the church,” he growled angrily. “The big wigs are the law around here, and they can do as they please.”

“I can’t believe ya’d let ennyone treat a woman like that.”

“Nobody asked you,” the man replied sulkily. “You’re fired!” he added as he drew his wallet from his pocket and handed Dusty the six dollars that he owed him before stomping out the door to join the churchman.

“I guess I’m on the road again, then,” Dusty muttered as he put their guns in a dark corner of a stable to allow him a bit of get-away time. Then, gathering his things, he swung back into Buster’s saddle again. He rode around the barn and circled through some trees toward the lane in front of the house, where Missy stepped out of the bushes to meet him.

“I figured you’d come this way,” she whispered loudly. “Brought you enough supplies to get away,” she said breathlessly.

“I’m not about to run from him,” Dusty replied, “But it seems that I’ve worn out my welcome here.”

“There’s a wagon rut with a scattering of Mormon homesteads running west of here, but don’t go that way now. Mr. Blake is in control out there, and he’ll convince them that you’re an enemy of God and get them to hunt you down. Just leave!”

“Let me take you out of here, Missy,” he offered. “Somebody’ll git ya iffing I don’t,” he urged.

“Not when they see I’m crippled,” she replied with a grin. “It turns ‘em all off.”

“Suit yerself, Missy,” he said. “But listen! That book can’t be true if the Bible’s true. They’re downright contradictory. Don’t let ‘em mislead you.”

"I'll be thinking on it, Dusty," she said. "I've got to go. They'll half kill me if they find I gave you any supplies." She looked up into his face and uttered, "Thanks!" He thought he saw tears glistening in her eyes as she turned to limp back towards the house.

Dusty picked his way slowly back down the river trail in the moonlight, deeply concerned about the young crippled girl's future.

Chapter 8

After camping in the canyon downstream from the farm, Dusty decided to follow the Fremont River downstream to the Colorado River. Why not? He was in no hurry, and he knew he would run into the Colorado sooner or later, if he just kept working his way east.

The trail along the Fremont became less and less distinct as that first day wore on. By sunset it wasn't really a trail anymore. The cowboy had no idea what lay ahead, but he felt as rugged as the land that stretched to the horizon before him, and as invincible as the purple mountains that flanked it to the south. He had no qualms about his ability to survive, as long as he had ammunition and kept close enough to the river to get water for himself and his horse.

He rode along the river for days on end. Sometimes it led him into canyons that became impassable, forcing him to backtrack for hours only to fail again by another impassable route. He was often forced to cross to the other side of the river, or even swing wide of it into the wilderness for miles at a time. Sometimes the way was forested, sometimes desert, occasionally plains. Mile after mile might be rocky, or sandy, or treacherous bare washes of unstable eroded earth that would have been difficult to traverse on foot, let alone on horseback. Once he led Buster for a day and a half without ever mounting the beast. Dusty gloried in the challenge of it!

A couple of weeks downstream, the Fremont joined another quite muddy river that doubled its size. The dirtier water was so alkaline that it was hardly palatable, but there was nearly always rain water to be found in hollows in the rocks. The enlarged river seemed to be cutting in a more southerly direction as it wound its way towards the Colorado. The canyons seemed more and more rugged, and the roar of the rapids in the narrower places became downright exhilarating as the river grew.

The starkness of the land took on a peculiar beauty that few people could appreciate. Dusty was one that could. He loved it, respected it, feared it, and endured it all at the same time. Time ceased to exist, except for the rise and fall of the sun as the days rolled on.

Dusty lived off the land. He killed deer, pausing to smoke the meat and rest his horse every five or six days. He made no money and couldn't have used it if he had. His only regret was that he had no coffee, and even that seemed to fade into triviality with time.

As time went on, the journey became a spiritual one. He continued to read his Bible daily, but his brush with such a contradiction to it seemed to give it more significance. He was on a retreat with God, searching for answers to Missy's dilemma, though he never expected to see her again. He'd read a passage, and reread it until it took on meaning. He found himself praying, first in his morning devotions, and then more and more as he rode along. At first he was asking for God's help. Finally he was talking to God as a friend along the way.

The significance of the virgin birth impressed him first. Then the perfect life of Christ made him realize how short he came of the righteousness that God demands. And finally, the significance of the crucifixion fell into place. Christ didn't simply die for the sins of the world, He died for Dusty's sins. And as these things crystalized in his soul, he began to understand that the love of God was personal. He consciously accepted Christ as his Savior, and he was born again.

Neither the beauty of the land nor his newfound closeness to God made Dusty careless. He watched ahead of him, around him, and behind him. He was careful to keep his footprints undetectable, his campsites defensible, and his campfires invisible. He wanted a shirt on his back and a scalp on his head when he reached civilization. He saw rattlesnakes, he saw bears, he even saw a mother cougar with her kittens. He ran across the ruins of past Indian civilizations, he ran across cold signs of contemporary Indians, but he never saw a single human being. Not one! He was alone with his horse and his God, and he loved it.

Chapter 9

The landscape seemed to change a bit as the river turned due south. The top lands were flatter, sometimes with grazing space and occasional buffalo, but the canyons were steeper and deeper. And then, early on the morning of the last day of September, Dusty suddenly found himself at the junction of a much larger river. It had to be the Colorado.

Sitting astride Buster at the top of the rocky red bluff overlooking the larger river, after nearly a month of solitude, the cowboy was shocked to see a large boat come into view around the bend to the North. Then another one, and yet another, each sporting a United States flag.

Half-hitching Buster, the cowboy scrambled down the bluff as the first boat put in to shore. A surprised cry of alarm went up as Dusty stepped into view, and guns came up on the shoulders of several men on the twenty-one foot boat.

“Easy there,” Dusty called out casually without raising his hands. “I was here first,” he continued with a grin. Friendly laughs came from all over the craft as the guns came down, and someone tossed him a rope. Dusty pulled the boat to shore, and several men jumped out to secure it.

A large impressive one armed man rose from a chair strapped in the middle compartment of the first boat. “John Wesley Powell,” he greeted with his outstretched hand as he jumped nimbly to the ground. “May I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Dusty Winters,” the cowboy answered, shaking the hand heartily. “I’m just ridin’ through lookin’ for an honest job, maybe in Colorado or back up ta Wyoming.”

“Got any supplies?” Thompson asked, looking around.

“I left my horse up on the bluff when I saw yer boats,” he answered. “I don’t have anything but a bit of trail-made jerky in my saddle bags. It won’t go far in this crowd, but yer welcome ta it.”

“We’re a geological survey team for the U.S. government,” the big man stated. “We were supposed to meet an army detail with our winter supplies here at the mouth of the Dirty Devil, but they couldn’t get through from either Glencove or Kanab.”

“This is the Dirty Devil, then?” Dusty asked. “They called it the Fremont back at Junction.”

“We labeled it the ‘Dirty Devil’ on our first trip down the Colorado in ‘sixty-eight. Now we’re following up to map the area. We were going to resupply here and winter at the mouth of the Paria, but we’ve had to change our plans. Now we’ll resupply at El Vado, the Passage of the Fathers, and winter near Kanab.”

“I just came along the Fremont from Junction,” Dusty replied, rubbing his chin. “I wasn’t in no hurry, but it took me nearly a month. I doubt that enny supply train could make it through that-a-way either. Had ta walk my horse n’ double back a lot. That’s plumb rough country, sir.”

“Man!” Major Powell interrupted enthusiastically. “We’re supposed to map that country. Can you sit a while and

tell me what it's like?"

"Sure," Dusty replied, "If there's coffee. I ain't had a cup fer a month er more."

"Andy, bring the man some coffee," Powell called out to the cook. And Dusty recounted his trip in the minute details that only a mountain man or an Indian would have remembered, while Powell and Professor Almon Thompson, the second in command, scribbled madly on note pads.

After an hour or so, when Dusty was finished, the two geographers put their notes aside, and Dusty showed them an old Indian trail he had crossed on the way down the bluff. They followed it on foot to a deep gulch a mile and a half downstream to see if it would be suitable for horses before returning to camp.

Meanwhile, the camp was a beehive of activity. After a thorough check of their larder, Andy announced that they only had rations enough for five or six more days. Captain Francis Bishop, who had been a teacher at Illinois State Normal School in Bloomington, Illinois, took observations for time, and recorded their position. He found a jack knife while kicking around on the campfire ashes from Powell's first expedition, and the Major was so thrilled with it that Cap gave it to him for a souvenir. Others busied themselves with minor repairs on the boats and catching up with their various reports. Andy made the standard meal of fried bacon, coffee, and fresh bread baked in a Dutch oven for lunch. Meals varied little for the group, except for an occasional pot of beans and rarer concoctions from dried fruit.

An amateur geologist named John Steward related the expedition's experiences rafting through Desolation, Grey, and Cataract Canyons. He boasted that this group had successfully run so many terrifying rapids that he wouldn't be afraid to "run the gates of hell" with them. He told of how they often had to unload the boats and let them down some of the more violent rapids with hundred foot ropes an inch thick. Sometimes a man or two would remain in the boats to hold them off the rocks as they were lowered through the rapids. Sometimes they would have to wade along beside the boats, horsing them over half-submerged boulders, all the while struggling to prevent them from being dashed apart against the rocks.

It was all so intriguing that Dusty would have volunteered to accompany them on down the river if it hadn't been for Buster. There was no way he would ever give him up, but he stayed with the group all day, sharing his jerky with them for their evening meal.

After supper, Powell came and sat down on a rock beside Dusty. "What made you come across the desert that way?" he asked.

"I quit my job cow-poking when they started talking range war," Dusty answered. "Un' I got fired from my job in the Fremont valley fer interferin' with how they was a'treating a very fine young lady. I didn't have nothin' ta do, so I just decided to head out this way fer the fun of it. I ain't sorry, neither. I saw God's country back there."

"You're not running from the law, then?" Powell asked directly.

"I try ta do right, Major," Dusty answered. "I ain't never had a run-in with the law, but there ain't much law out here, or there wouldn't be range wars. The Mormons seem ta be a law unto themselves," he added as an afterthought.

"Good enough," the expedition leader added. "You're just the man we need. Would you like a job as a scout with us?"

"I'd be obliged, sir, but..."

"You'd be working for the U.S. government on a basic military salary, and would have to follow instructions fully," Powell interrupted.

"I'd take it," Dusty replied, "but I've got a good horse with me that couldn't be brought along with the boats."

“Okay,” Powell replied pensively, “but if you could meet us in Kanab this winter, we sure could use your expertise.”

“I’ll puzzle on it,” Dusty replied. “Meanwhile, if you don’t mind, I’ll scout around a bit before dark to be sure we’re safe tonight, n’ be on my way tomorrow or whenever ya’s leave.”

“Go ahead,” the big man answered. “I’m turning in early.”

So Dusty climbed back up to his original viewpoint to care for Buster, and spent an hour or so satisfying himself that there were no hostile Indians around before returning to the camp at dusk.

Chapter 10

The survey camp ran efficiently. Everyone was up at dawn, and breakfast was served well before six o’clock. Powell and Thompson decided to leave one of the boats at the mouth of the Dirty Devil, to provide transportation for the mapping detail that would work their way back to the Dirty Devil from Kanab over the next year or so. A young man named Fred Dellenbaugh seemed to be in charge of stowing it away. Dusty showed him a perfect hideaway that he had found a short distance downstream while scouting about the night before, where a huge slab of rock had fallen against a cliff of the river bluff. There was a space about twenty five feet long and eight feet wide between the cliff and the slab that leaned against it above their heads. Six men emptied the Canyonita and carried it to this “cave.” Although the spot was about two hundred feet from the river and some forty feet above water level, driftwood in the area suggested that the water had risen that high in the past. They filled the boat with sand and rocks to keep it from moving in case the water got to it. Despite his youth, Dellenbaugh was so efficient that the whole task was accomplished by nine o’clock that morning.

The Major and Mr. Jones climbed the bluff to survey the area while professor Thompson and Cap Bishop took the number two boat, the Nellie Powell, a mile and a half downstream to the gulch they had seen on the Indian trail the night before. They followed the trail another five or six miles and climbed out of the canyon to find that it was coming from the direction of the Unknown Mountains, which stood in snow-capped majesty to the west-southwest of the camp. Steward measured the altitude of the canyon rim at 1950 feet and studied the Unknowns with a telescope. He reported that they were largely sedimentary rock interspersed with lava pockets jutting out of them like blisters. Finally, the first boat, the Emma Dean, was moved down to where the Nellie was moored, and camp was prepared for the night.

Dusty was particularly impressed with Cap. He was quite jovial, but in such a wholesome way that Dusty suspected he was a Christian. As they ate dinner that evening, Dusty asked him what he knew of Mormonism. “As far as I’m concerned,” Cap told him, “it’s based on the lusts of Joseph Smith. First he imagined that God the Father had sex with Mary to conceive Jesus. Then he based man’s eternal reward on his sexual activity in this life. And finally he introduced polygamy so he could revel in sex.”

“Sounds like one of the ‘Other gospels’ that the Apostle Paul condemned in the introduction to the book of Galatians,” Dusty mused aloud.

“I certainly don’t consider it Christian,” Cap agreed.

That evening the Major and the Professor read appropriate selections of Tennyson and Whittier to the group, and Steward quoted several pages of Robert Burn’s poetry by heart. They finished the evening by singing “Annie Laurie”—led by Jack Hillar with a mouth organ accompaniment by Steward. On an impulse, Dusty read the Nineteenth Psalm aloud and told the group how much he had enjoyed the passage in this environment. The Captain, especially, seemed to enjoy his input.

The geological party left early the next morning, while Dusty watched from the canyon rim. Then he sat down in

the flaming orange light of the early morning sun to read his chapter for the day. He often found himself praying his heart out to God during these sessions, since he had developed a personal relationship with Christ. This morning he asked for guidance about where to go next.

Dusty's best options seemed to be to strike east across the Colorado--which he was confident Buster could swim in a quieter spot--head north to find a job punching cows in Wyoming, or strike out overland for Kanab to work with the survey team. The more he thought about it, the more difficult finding a wrangling job as winter approached seemed. Finally, he drew out the map of the river that the major had sketched for him, and started down the old Indian trail that headed southwest towards the Unknown Mountains in the general direction of Kanab. He knew it was well over a hundred miles by the river, although probably less by land, unless he had to double back too much. His only concern was whether or not the fall graze would be sufficient for Buster.

Dusty's old Indian trail was rough. It meandered around boulders, alongside of rocky cliffs, and skirted deep canyons of soft eroded sandstone containing miles of white and red layered badlands--often without visible creeks at the bottom. The trail soon veered more easterly, and wormed its way into the Unknowns. Although it tended to stay in the valleys, Dusty encountered heavy snow squalls that made for a bitterly cold campsite on the third night, when it took him over the top. He would have feared to ride a lesser horse than Buster through the new fallen snow on the narrow overhangs he encountered on the way down the next morning. As it was, he wisely dismounted and led the horse through some of the more dangerous passages.

By noon the next day Dusty was safely down in the valley again. He killed a deer and smoked a lot of jerky at his campsite near some dry graze for Buster that night. A horse's snort awakened him before dawn, and he grabbed his Winchester and faded into a cluster of boulders beyond the light of the smoky fire. Hunkering down in the pre-dawn chill, he scarcely breathed as he waited for further developments. Suddenly, he felt the prod of a six gun in his back, and a snarling voice ordered him back to the fire with his hands up. Unfortunately, the intruder had been just behind him.

"Watcha doin' here?" the ill-kempt stranger queried as they reached the fire.

"Tryin' ta pick my way across to Kanab," Dusty answered steadily.

"You ort'a watch yer fire better," the man advised. "Now yer a'goin' to lose yer horse and yer gun, 'cause this old prospector needs 'em," he continued. "But first, I want ya ta make us some coffee."

Under the prospector's armed gaze, Dusty carefully brewed some of the coffee that the survey team had given him. Then pouring a cup he handed it toward the unkempt man's outstretched hand. Just as the man touched the cup, Dusty jiggled it hard enough to spill the hot liquid all over his hand. Dusty was ready when the man cursed and jerked his hand back. In one smooth move he grasped both the stranger's wrists and twisted them until the gun fell heavily to the ground.

"Guess you ought ta watch my fire better too, mister," he said easily as he shoved the stranger backward and picked up his gun. "Buster don't like your attitude none, so he's a'stayin' with me. Now sit down on that rock across the fire from me 'thout making enny false moves, n' we'll both have a cup a' coffee before we freeze ta death."

So they drank the whole pot of coffee together while Dusty asked why the man was being so ornery.

"Just a prospector down on my luck, I guess," the man admitted. "An' yer people won't help a feller none. Can't buy no supplies anywhere around here."

"If you're referrin' ta the Mormons, they're not my people," Dusty retorted. "But if ya don't offend 'em, I'm sure some of 'em will help ya a bit. They're probably just like enny other folks. Some er kind and some ain't. But what ya really need, Sir, is God's help," Dusty advised. The man just guffawed.

It was light enough to see by the time they had finished the coffee. Dusty picked up his gun belt and buckled it around his waist. Sticking the prospector's gun in his own back, he marched him to where he had hidden his horse. It was a rather malnourished Indian pony that had seen better days, still saddled and bridled with an old Winchester rifle tied to the saddle. Bringing them back to the campfire on foot, he sat the prospector on a convenient rock away from any close cover. After he packed his bed roll, he filled his saddle bags with the new jerky, leaving a generous amount for the prospector without comment.

"I'm gonn'a leave yer horse n' guns a couple of miles down the trail," Dusty told him. "You'd die out here without them. You kin walk down n' pick 'em up in an hour or so. Meanwhile, think about gettin' right with God," Dusty pled. "He really does care about ya." Then, leading the Indian pony, he rode briskly down the trail a couple of miles, where he tied the paint before riding on at a trot.

"I hope I did right, Lord," he prayed conversationally.

The trail was scarcely visible when he came out of the mountains around noon, and Dusty was about to start cutting more southward towards Kanab when he remembered what Missy had said about the wagon rut west from Junction. Seeing the prospector's scrawny paint had gotten him concerned about Buster. He still had the thirty dollars from the ranch plus the three dollars from picking apples on him. That, with the forty dollars he had already saved up, would be more than enough to buy food for the horse plus whatever he needed. They could cut south to Kanab along the established road when they got to the other side of the unmapped canyon lands. He didn't really make a conscious decision; he just found himself drifting back toward the north, hoping to intersect the rut a bit west of Junction.

What Dusty found himself thinking about was that little Missy girl. Somehow the fact that she was crippled seemed to be fading into the background of her personality. And besides, she was downright cute, except for that limp.

So it was that he found himself cutting more and more northward towards Junction, instead of beyond it. And the more he thought about Missy, the more anxious he became to see her. He began to resent all the cliffs, and impassable canyons that he had to go around. He became frustrated when he had to double back to get around large areas of badlands. And in his frustration, he became careless of his own safety, the trail he was leaving, and even his campfire.

Chapter 11

Dusty's frustration and carelessness led to the inevitable. About noon ten days after he left the Colorado, he saw a small group of hard-riding Indians on his trail. Buster was more than equal to the task of outrunning Indian ponies, but Dusty wasn't sure how much stamina the roan had left in him after nearly two months of nothing but desert graze. He ran the horse for a few minutes, and seemed to be outdistancing his pursuers, but there was really no good place to hide. He finally turned into an area of weird rocky formations and found a defensible pile of boulders big enough for both him and the horse. Buster scrambled gamely into the hideaway and Dusty pulled out his Winchester and peered down his trail between the boulders.

Shortly, the band of Indians thundered by in the direction Dusty had been going, and just as he let out his breath someone jumped on his back. Wiry dark arms pinned his arms to his side and guttural voices indicated that there were several assailants. His gun was jerked from his holster. Dusty swung around desperately, bashing the Indian on his back against the rocks so hard he heard his ribs crack. Grabbing the arm that was trying to raise his gun, he twisted until something snapped and the Indian went down to his knees. Then something hit him on the back of his head and everything went black.

Dusty awoke in the dark. He was cold and ached all over. He was lying on the ground with his arms bound tightly behind his back. When he tried to rise, he found that his feet were tied together. Waves of nausea and dizziness added to his confusion.

Lying there in the dark he struggled to comprehend what was going on. Slowly the details came back to him. He was obviously a prisoner of the Indians, maybe in a hut or a cave. He was probably brought here draped over a horse. That would explain why he ached so much.

Sitting up, he waited until the dizziness passed. When he felt stable, he stood up, banging his tender head on a pole so hard that it knocked him back to the ground. "This must be a totally enclosed wickiup," He told himself. He must try to escape.

The cowpoke struggled with the rawhide strips around his wrists for what seemed like hours without accomplishing anything but a good chafing. As the light of dawn filtered into the wickiup he looked for something to cut the bonds, but couldn't find anything that would serve the purpose. When he began hearing activity outside, he moved to a sitting position directly across from the door. Finally, the boughs were pulled back at the entrance, and a graceful Indian woman peered into the semi-darkness of the wickiup. Satisfied that he was still bound, she entered and held a bowl of water to his lips so he could drink.

"Thank you," he said softly. And then she was gone without saying a word.

An hour later, two young braves came in and grabbed Dusty roughly by the shoulders, half dragging him out the door. As his eyes became adjusted to the light, he saw that he was in a fair sized village with well over a dozen wickiups, which were nothing more than conical arrangements of cedar boughs about seven feet high with variably sized uncovered openings for doors. He tried to look around for Buster, but the braves manhandled him unceremoniously into a larger wickiup that had a small fire burning in the center of the floor. They plunked him down on a log across from the door, and sat down on either side of him.

Soon an impassive older Indian flanked by two escorts entered and took a seat on a stool placed on a bear skin rug directly across the fire from Dusty. He stared coldly at the prisoner's eyes for fully five minutes without uttering a sound. Dusty returned the stare without wavering, trying not to betray any emotion at all. Finally, the chief spoke.

"You put up good fight, hurt two men."

"I had no desire ta hurt anyone; Chief, but yer men attacked me. I was fighting' ta keep my scalp on. It's too cold ta lose it this late in the year," he added

Despite himself, a faint twinkle played for an instant in the chief's eyes. "White men pushed us here. Now you come here too. We kill."

"Chief," Dusty replied, "I am only passin' through. I have no quarrel with Indians."

"White men kill my father," the chief said savagely.

"Indians killed my father," Dusty retorted evenly.

"You fight for life," the chief said with an air of finality. "You run line at hot sun. If you live, you go with horse and guns. If you die, we keep horse and guns. Finished." The chief arose and exited regally.

Dusty was taken back to his original wickiup, and shoved through the door. A few minutes later the door was pulled away, and the squaw that had given him water brought him some thin soup. As she held it to his mouth so he could sip away at it, she whispered, "You good man. Eat, rest, run well, fight hard, they let go." Then looking furtively at the door, she quickly loosened his bonds considerably. "You feel better this way," she whispered, "but keep on till fight," she commanded. Then he was alone.

Dusty prayed for wisdom, for help, and for safety. Then, feeling at peace, he lay down and drifted right off into a

deep sleep. After what seemed like only a few moments, his guards arrived to escort him to the line.

Indians of all ages had formed a double line about forty feet long. They were in a festive mood, laughing and chatting like they were at a sporting event or something, but they fell quieter as Dusty approached. Each held a weapon of some kind to hit him with, from sticks and stones for the smaller children to heavy clubs for the braves. Even the woman who had fed him appeared to be taking an enthusiastic part in the festive occasion. Two guards stood behind Dusty with bows and arrows ready, to prevent his escape while he was loosed. His hands and feet were numb, and he jumped up and down rubbing his wrist to get the circulation back. Only then did he realize how much the squaw had done for him in loosening his bonds. But there she stood in the line with a stout two inch thick stick in her hands.

As Dusty looked down the line, he saw everything from amusement to downright hatred on the faces. One larger brave stood in spiteful readiness near the beginning with at least a ten pound club raised above his head. Dusty had a minute or so before silence fell as the chief took his place beyond the line, where he would judge the victim's performance without interfering.

When the chief gave the signal, Dusty sprinted through the first few children and squaws, who rained relatively harmless blows on him, most striking too late to get a solid hit. Then, as the brave with the big club began his swing, he stopped short, letting the brunt of the blow fall ahead of him. Seizing the club, he wrenched it from the surprised Indian, and sprinted down the line, parrying many of the blows with the club. He noticed that the squaw that had treated him so kindly had taken a position across from a fierce looking brave, and managed to swing her stick so awkwardly that it blocked his vicious well-timed blow. He had to do some fancy stepping to throw off some of the real warriors' timing, but he ran the entire gauntlet without receiving more than a couple of staggering blows. Pulling up short before the chief, he produced an exaggerated bow, and announced that he still had his scalp, making motions as if trying to remove it for the chief's inspection. The whole crowd cheered, and the chief pronounced, "Good! Son home tonight. You stay for feast, leave tomorrow." Then he rose and went to his wickiup.

Dusty was left unbound, free to roam the village at will. Everywhere he went, the children followed, gazing wide eyed at him like he was a circus exhibit. He finally grabbed up one of the braver children and placed him astraddle his neck for a ride. This was an instant success, and he ended up giving many more rides for the next hour or so.

A hunting party returned to the village in the middle of the afternoon, and after dispensing the meat its leader came to investigate the laughter of the children gathered around Dusty. As he approached, he suddenly grinned and grabbed the cowboy by both shoulders. "You saved wife, remember?" he asked. Dusty finally realized that this was the Indian whose wife had given him the cougar skin. "I tell my father. He chief."

Dusty ended up a hero at the feast that evening. He ate with the chief and his son. He learned that the chief was Screaming Eagle, and his son was Hunting Bear. Hunting Bear's wife, who had shown him so much kindness, was Bashful Doe. The name suited her well.

Dusty slept in the empty wickiup on his own blankets with his guns at his side that night. Hunting Bear brought Buster, saddled and bridled, to Dusty early the next morning. They rode together to the place where Dusty had been captured. Dismounting, they sat on a rock and Hunting Bear got directly to the point.

"Why you leave such plain trail like that?" he asked. "You very careful before. Now act crazy, like in love."

"I guess I am," Dusty admitted. "She's a girl in Junction with a limp."

"You mean Missy?" asked the Indian.

"You know her?" Dusty asked incredulously.

"Everyone know," Hunting Bear replied. "She good; she kind; she help all."

“She was sure good to me,” Dusty reflected.

“Cook good, make good squaw,” Hunting Bear continued, rubbing his stomach. “Look good too,” he added mischievously. “I take you there two days.”

“I don’t know if she wants to see me,” Dusty objected.

“Not find out here,” the Indian ventured. “I show you village, leave. You talk to Missy.”

Dusty tried to object to Hunting Bear’s kindness, but the Indian replied, “You saved woman I love. We are brothers,” and started his horse across the desert leaving Dusty to follow.

“Thank you, Hunting Bear,” Dusty answered from behind. “I am proud to be your brother.”

Although Dusty considered himself trail wise, he was totally intrigued with the Indian’s ability to pick his way through the desert without leaving tell-tale signs that could be followed. Several times the native of the desert pointed out unnecessary signs the white man was leaving, and how they could be avoided. By evening, Hunting Bear was grunting his approval of Dusty’s ability to put the Indian’s savvy into practice.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, Dusty could see the red edge of great reef that stretched westward from Junction. Hunting Bear reigned in an hour or so later, and Dusty pulled up beside him. The Indian pointed out the rocky landmarks that would lead Dusty the rest of the way.

“Thank you, Hunting Bear,” Dusty said genuinely.

“It was nothing, my Brother,” Hunting Bear replied. “I tell tribe Missy your woman,” he said with a hint of a grin as he turned his horse to return to his village. Suddenly alone, the cowboy felt painfully bashful, without the slightest idea of what to do next.

Chapter 12

Dusty rode to the Fremont a bit east of Junction and made camp in a clump of cottonwoods just before the western edge of the Canyon petered out. At dusk, he hid Buster in the trees, exchanged his boots for some Indian moccasins, and struck out on foot for the Johnson farm. He slipped Indian fashion through the trees behind the barn and crept through the open door just as Missy finished milking.

“Missy,” he whispered loudly.

The girl put her bucket down and turned toward his voice.

“Over here, Missy,” he whispered again, coming closer. “It’s me, Dusty.”

The surprised girl let out a muffled squeal and literally threw herself toward his dim form.

“O Dusty,” she whispered as she hugged him close. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

Dusty held her tight for a long moment. She felt so soft and warm and wonderful against his body that he wanted to hold her there forever, but he wasn’t sure if she greeted every long-lost friend that way, or if she really felt a special affection for him. He grabbed her arms and pushed her back to gaze at her face, and then her lips were coming to meet his. It was the first kiss for either of them, a holy one as full of purity as desire. Dusty broke it off. “Missy,” he whispered, “ya don’t know how bad I’ve been a’wantin’ to see ya.

“Dusty,” she answered through her tears. “I’ve hardly been able to eat since you left. I can’t believe you’ve come

back.”

“You gotta get back ta the house before they come a’lookin’ fer ya,” he said. “How do ya think folks here will feel ’bout me...about us, I mean?”

“I haven’t heard your name mentioned here since you left,” she whispered. “I don’t think they actually hate you, but no one around here would be very happy about me associating with a Gentile. They’ll probably try to run you off. Why don’t you wait for me in the barn, and I’ll slip back out here to talk in a little while, after everyone’s asleep.”

“No! It ain’t right fer me ta be sneaking around Mr. Johnson’s place. He could easily turn it into a legitimate complaint against me. I’m camped just around the edge of the canyon down there. I’ll be watching fer ya if you can think of an excuse ta come down that way. Otherwise, leave a note in those trees where ya met me when I left here, and I’ll pick it up after dark.”

After another reassuring hug, he was slipping back into the trees behind the barn, feeling ten feet tall. Missy picked up her milk pail and walked back to the house, scarcely feeling the ground beneath her.

Chapter 13

The next morning Nina mentioned that they needed to get a steer butchered for more fresh meat. Seeing her chance, Missy replied that it sure would be nice to have one last batch of fresh fish before the river froze over. Nina fell for it and sent her down to the canyon to catch some trout.

Dusty winced as he watched Missy limping down the trail from his vantage point behind some rocks on the canyon wall. When she turned the corner behind the wall he scrambled down to meet her. Their second kiss was just as wonderful as the first, maybe better. When they backed off, she told him she had to catch some fish and get home in a reasonable time.

“Great,” he answered, grabbing her hand. They walked slowly to his campsite where he got his line and hooks from his saddle bags. When they got to the river bank, they took off their shoes and socks and waded into the shallow water.

“Does it hurt ya ta walk?” he finally got up the courage to ask.

“Not a bit,” she smiled back at his concern. “I’ll tell you all about it sometime, but it doesn’t hurt a bit.”

The two of them caught about a dozen trout in about an hour and a half. Then she brought out a couple of bread and jelly sandwiches for lunch while he scaled and filleted the fish.

Dusty never took his eyes off Missy while they ate. Every feature of her profile intrigued him. She was perfect as far as he was concerned.

“That bread was great, Missy,” he told her. “Huntin’ Bear said ya’d make a great squaw,” he continued, rubbing his stomach in a perfect pantomime of the Indian.

“You’ve met him?” she asked.

“He calls me his brother,” Dusty answered.

“You’re lucky,” she replied. “He feels that the whites forced his tribe into the canyon lands, and now they want that too. I don’t blame him for being bitter. The only reason he tolerates us here is because of Bashful Doe. She and I used to meet each other picking berries, and we became best friends. She taught me a bit of the Paiute

language, and I taught her enough English that she came up with 'Strutting Cock' for Mr. Blake all by herself. She taught me how the Indians fish, and I taught her how to bake light bread. I wonder how she's doing?"

"She was fine three days ago. She treated me well." Dusty said. "And Huntin' Bear brought me here ta see ya. He said he'd tell the tribe that you was my woman now."

"Huh," she sniffed. "Isn't that my decision?" But by now he already knew what she had decided.

"Missy?" he asked, "Have you been readin' the Bible?"

"Some," she said a bit evasively. "Why?"

"Because if ya'd read it ya'd see how inconsistent this Mormon myth is with the Word of God."

"How can I be sure, Dusty?" she pled. "I'm afraid to buck it. If Joseph Smith really got those revelations from God, we'll be damned if we reject it"

"Honey," he argued earnestly, "the Bible teaches holiness. Joseph Smith's religion was nothing but an excuse fer him ta sin. Didn't ya tell me he had over thirty wives? That's downright sinful! I want you, Missy," he continued, turning bright red, "more'n anything I've ever wanted. But I want ya in holy matrimony. Just the two of us walkin' together with God, n' enjoying each other the way He intended it."

"That part I agree with," she replied. "I'm not sharing you with anyone else."

"How can ya believe part of it n' reject the rest of it? Smith was either a prophet of God or a blatant liar. Un' the unholy way he used his new religion ta get all those women pretty well proves which. It's that simple!"

"Oh, Dusty, be careful! Don't blaspheme!" She pled, looking around as if she half expected instant judgment on the spot.

"Honey," he said as she buried her head in his chest. "Read yer Bible! That's how I found my personal relationship with God."

"You mean you think you have some special relationship with God that no one else has?" she asked angrily as she pushed back from him.

"No," he answered calmly. "Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are the ones that claimed a special relationship with God. The personal relationship that I have with God is open ta everyone. It's based on bein' born again by admittin' that we ar' personally hell-deserving sinners, repentin' of ar' sins, n' acceptin' the death of Christ on the cross as the payment fer 'em. If the wages of sin is death, then Christ died fer ar' sins so we could live."

"You call others sinners when you drink coffee and the like?" she asked heatedly.

"Missy, folks can't just decide that coffee is sinful n' polygamy ain't. Cap Bishop told me that the Mormons seem ta think right n' wrong are just whatever God happens ta choose at the moment. He said that Mormon men hope ta be gods of their own planets someday. Then they'll git ta decide what's right n' wrong there. But right n' wrong ain't like that. Even God can't change 'em. He couldn't just overlook ar' sins 'er He wouldn't be holy ennymore. That's why He had ta send His Son ta die fer 'em in order ta save us."

"Let me think, Dusty," she replied in a calmer voice. "I want to believe you, but I'm afraid. What if you are wrong?"

"Don't believe me, Honey, believe the Bible. Ya just gotta start readin' it regular-like."

“I will, Dusty, if you’ll try reading some Mormon writings.”

“It’s a deal!” Dusty replied.

Suddenly she noticed the sky and sucked in her breath. “Whoops, I’d better get back and bake that bread.”

“Missy,” he said solemnly. “We can’t keep a’hidin’ like this. I’ve got a job waitin’ fer me in Kanab, working fer a government survey team. I’ll get back whenever I can. Please study the Bible while I’m gone. Write me if you kin, n’ get word ta Huntin’ Bear if ya really need me. We’d better say goodbye now so’s you kin get back.”

A tearful hug, and a passionate kiss, and each turned to go.

“If he only knew how much I need him,” she murmured as she trudged home with the fish.

“If she only knew how bad I want ’er,” he muttered to Buster.

Chapter 14

Dusty skirted Junction wide enough to keep out of sight in the afternoon sun. He headed west along the rut that followed the Fremont River. It was a rough but tolerable ride on horseback, and he could imagine that it would have been a downright difficult trip with a team. Alone with his rested horse, he sorted out his emotions. The one thing he knew was that he wanted Missy terribly.

He made good time, passing a couple of homesteads on either side of the river. No one was visible at either place and Dusty passed them by without stopping. He covered nearly twenty miles before turning up a small creek that flowed into the Fremont, where he found a secluded campsite in a cut that was hidden by a clump of small trees. There was graze for Buster and enough fresh water for a bath before dark. There was enough jerky in his saddlebags for about two meals.

The next morning he forced himself to read a little, and finally put his Bible down and fell on his knees to pour his bursting heart out to God. His prayer was for Missy, her safety, and that somehow she would find her way out of this cult that held her in such fear. Comforted, he mounted up and rode back to the Fremont, where he easily killed a fairly large buck. He field dressed it on the spot, tied the 150 pound carcass on Buster, and led him back to his campsite. This late in October it was cool enough that he could butcher it properly and save some of the choice portions for steaks. He jerked about twenty-five pounds and smoked the meat the rest of the day and throughout the night. The dried graze in the area still had some heads on it, and provided excellent nourishment for Buster. The night was cold enough that he slept close to the fire, confident that there would be few marauding Indians out this time of the year.

The next day was brisk and beautiful. Dusty struck out for the road that ran south along the Mormon corridor that stretched along the mountains from Salt Lake City all the way to Kanab. He rode steadily without stressing his horse, camping early in defensible areas that were sheltered from the weather, and allowing Buster plenty of rest and grazing time. Twice he was given evening meals and a berth in the barn of some plucky Mormon settlers, neither of whom appeared to have more than one wife. They impressed him as hard working, hospitable family men that were relatively free from the real doctrines and practices of the Latter Day Saints.

It was nearly November when Dusty finally hit the established road at Marysvale. The town was a small but enterprising community, boasting both a hotel and a livery stable that served the steady traffic between the LDS Headquarters at Salt Lake City and their southern Utah settlements. He left Buster at the livery barn, where he would get his first real hay and oats in several months, and carried his saddlebags to the hotel, where he booked an upstairs room.

The cowboy’s next order of business was at the general store, where he purchased a new outfit from the skin

out, including boots. Then he headed for the hotel's common bath at the end of the hall, where he enjoyed a long hot soak, removing the trail grime with a large bar of lye soap.

After shaving, Dusty donned his new clothes, strapped his gun on, and strode out to find a meal. He was impressed that the Mormon community did not have the saloons and brothels of the "Gentile" cow towns, and for the first time he began to see why Missy might be afraid to renounce the religion. He ate a steak and potato dinner at a quiet restaurant and retired for the night.

The traveler had bacon and eggs for breakfast at the restaurant, before stocking up on bacon, flour, salt, and ammunition at the general store. It grieved him that there was no coffee to be had in the whole community. He found Buster as fit as a fiddle, and rode south from town around nine o'clock in the morning. The road was good and dry this time of the year, and Buster had no trouble making well over thirty miles that day, and a bit past Panguitch the next. He spent the fourth night at Mount Carmel and arrived at Kanab late in the afternoon of the fifth, on the second day of November. He purchased a copy of the Book of Mormon in keeping with his promise to Missy, before putting up for the night at the hotel. He found Major Powell just down the hall from his room preparing to leave the next day to bring his wife and their three month old baby back from Salt Lake City. The major was overjoyed to find that Dusty had come to work for the survey team. They had congenial dinner together at a local restaurant.

That evening Jacob Hamblin, the famous Utah Indian fighter and statesman, arrived in town with some prospectors and a few friendly Navajos from Arizona. The survey crew had ferried the Hamblin party over the Colorado at the mouth of the Paria while they were waiting for an overdue supply train from Kanab. Hamblin's crew had not seen the supply train along the path, even though it had left Kanab nine days before. Everyone was concerned that the group, guided by an older resident of Kanab named Magnum, must have met with foul play.

The next morning Hamelin sent part of his party back to the survey crew at the mouth of Paria with fifty pounds of flour and some butter from Powell, while the Major dispatched Dusty to find out what had happened to the missing supply train. He was to direct the survey crew to move from the Paria to House Rock Springs, which was closer to Kanab, when he met them at El Vado.

It didn't take Dusty long to realize that Magnum didn't know where he was going. He trailed the supply train out into the desert, where they seemed to have meandered aimlessly in the general direction of El Vado. They were obviously lost, and had doubled back frequently. Worse than that, they had not found much water. On the third day he found a dying burro that they had abandoned, and had to shoot it because it was too far gone to survive. Finally, he found where other boot tracks joined theirs. After studying the tracks, he figured out that they had received help, probably from part of the Survey team itself that had set out to find them. He followed their footsteps and found them recovering from their ordeal at the survey camp on the Paria that evening. He reported Powell's instructions to move on to Professor Thompson.

Dusty was glad to be reunited with the survey team. Although he had only spent a couple of days with them at the mouth of the Dirty Devil, he had never felt so at home with any other group of men. Even though most of them were college graduates, they seemed to recognize his natural intelligence, and accepted him as one of themselves. He was sorry to find that Andy's knees had swollen so bad he could hardly walk, Stewart was so sick he could barely stand up, and Jones was on crutches from a recurring bone infection due to an old Civil War leg injury. Hamblin's Mormon sidekicks kindly volunteered their horses to take the invalids back to Kanab with the Professor.

Chapter 15

The Professor started back on the trail towards Kanab with the bedraggled invalids at noon the next day. Dellenbaugh and Dusty went back to the spot where the missing supply train had been found to recover Riley's canteen, which had inadvertently been left there. They returned to the camp at the mouth of the Paria to find the rest of the party out of breath from chasing a small steer that the supply train had brought with them for beef. Dusty and Buster roped the animal in moments, and the party broke camp and caught up with the slower traveling

sick men along the Vermillion Cliffs of the Paria canyon before nightfall.

The party intended to camp at a spring called Jacob's Pools the next evening, but some of the disabled hurt so badly they just couldn't move fast enough to make it. The sky was spitting snow at dusk, and they finally stopped at dark for the invalids' sakes. They obtained enough muddy water for a scant cup of coffee apiece by digging in a moist spot, but were unable to water the animals that evening. The temperature dropped to eleven degrees and there wasn't enough wood lying around to make a decent fire, so they spent a miserable night there. The next morning they found they were only two miles from Jacob's Pools, where they would have been much more comfortable.

The following night was spent under two large slabs of rock that had fallen together in such a way as to make a rude sort of open-ended chalet. Some previous traveler had scratched "Rock House Hotel" on the wall, so they named the place "House Rock" on their official map. They butchered the steer the next morning, leaving the offal in a nearby gulch. They smoked the meat all day and throughout the next night, and found that wolves had disposed of the offal during the night.

Prof, as Professor Thompson was called, headed across the Kaibab for Kanab with Stewart and Jones the next morning, leaving Cap, Dellenbaugh, Clem, Andy, and Dusty at House Rock. They pitched a heavy tent to sleep in and rolled a few good sized rocks around the fire to sit on and made themselves at home. They explored the area thoroughly, finding many ancient and more modern Indian relics, while awaiting further orders from Kanab.

Fred Dellenbaugh was actually a couple of years younger than Dusty, but Dusty admired his intelligence and pluck. He had never so much as slept outside before he joined the expedition, but he was game to try anything. They became close friends, and Dusty taught him much about tracking and trail savvy. On the other hand, Dellenbaugh saw that Dusty was quick at mental math, and introduced him to the basic concepts of algebra. "As long as you do the same thing to everything on both sides of the equation, they stay equal," Dellenbaugh told him. "So you just have to do whatever's needed to get your unknown by itself on one side." During the time they spent at House Rock, Dusty learned how to work simple algebraic equations with a real understanding of what he was doing.

Wolves were abundant and brash, stealing any meat or leather goods left within their reach. At times they had to drive them back with stones. Dusty helped Cap Bishop rig up a six shooter trap that would go off whenever a baited string was tugged. Cap collected quite a few wolf pelts with it, but one night the wolves even got to those, and mangled them all.

Prof returned with supplies and mail a week later. The area was full of dry Pinyon Pine seeds, which burned like candles, so they were able to read at night. Dusty had a short letter from Missy that Hunting Bear had posted for her. It assured him that she was reading her Bible, and that it was growing more and more on her. This stimulated Dusty to keep his end of the bargain by applying himself to the Book of Mormon. As far as he was concerned, it seemed full of internal conflicts and sometimes didn't even seem very coherent. He hated it, but he forced himself to stay with it for Missy's sake. The rest of the group read and reread the newspapers and magazines that Prof had brought.

Cap told Dusty more of the history and claims of Joseph Smith, which confirmed Dusty's suspicion that he had been less than reputable. Dusty would have liked to learn more, but Cap was beginning to develop nervous complications from an old gunshot wound, and confided in Dusty that he was going to have to abandon the survey project. Dusty also had to talk Clem out of leaving due to a bad case of homesickness.

Major Powell finally got back from Salt Lake City with his wife and child and the professor's wife, who was Powell's sister. They set up camp just outside Kanab, and sent for the Rock House group to come and help plan the winter's activities. The whole group had become totally bored, and were more than ready to leave immediately.

The geological survey camp was located about three miles east of Kanab. Three large tents were set up, one for the Powell family, one for the Thompsons, and one for the rest of the men. The wolves were just as bad as they had been at House Rock, but never became aggressive towards the people. Dusty worried that they would get Mrs. Thompson's short-legged Dandy Dinmont Terrier, but they never did. Dellenbaugh fired Riley's shotgun at a brazen one that had invaded the cooking area one night, but only managed to perforate a bunch of tin soup plates in the mess kit.

By this time Andy had recovered his health. Prof. and Mrs. Thompson took Cap, Clem, Andy, and Jones south with a couple wagon loads of supplies to set up a camp from which the party would establish a reference line for surveying the area. Jacob Hamblin had negotiated a fairly stable peace with the Navajos the previous year. Later that year, at Brigham Young's suggestion, Powell had hired Hamblin to introduce him to the Kaibab Navajo chiefs in preparation for the Expedition. The Navajos had agreed not to harass the group, so the Indians in the area did not seem to be much of a threat.

Dusty and Dellenbaugh rode into Kanab on Sunday afternoon, and were much impressed with the planning and organization of the settlement. It had been started and abandoned because of Indian hostilities several times since 1858. Although the present settlement was only a year going, fruit and shade trees were already planted in strategic places for future commodity and beauty. Domestic livestock were well cared for, and eggs and dairy products were already easily available. They received mail from Salt Lake City twice a week, and there was even a telegraph office in town.

"These folks are improving the land, instead of fleecing it like everyone else does," Dellenbaugh remarked admiringly.

"They sure are good organizers," Dusty admitted, "un' it shows."

By the time Dusty had finished the Book of Mormon, he was so sick of it that he secretly burned his copy. Still, it had done him a lot of good to read it. He appreciated the significance of the Scriptural doctrines like the Trinity, the virgin birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the rapture more clearly now that he had seen them perverted. When he found that Kanab had regular mail service, he posted a letter to share what he had found with Missy:

Dear Missy,

You don't know how much I miss you. I never kissed anyone before, but it must be addicting. I'd give anything for another one right now.

When I see how happy the major and his wife are when they're together, I can hardly stand being away from you. And when I hold their baby, I just plain get jealous.

Honey, I've read the whole Book of Mormon, and it doesn't do anything like the Bible does for me. What amazed me was that it condemns the plural marriages of the Old Testament:

"Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord." (Jacob 2:24)

And three verses down, it forbids plural marriages:

"Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none." (Jacob 2:27)

If the book Joseph Smith claimed to have gotten from God contradicts his later claims, none of his claims should be considered reliable.

Please write to me in care of Major John Wesley Powell at Kanab. I'll be waiting anxiously to hear from you.

*With all my love,
Dusty*

Emma Powell, the major's wife, was a graduate of Wheaton College, which was a reputable Christian school near Chicago. Her degree was in Biology, and she could hardly wait for spring to come so she could start studying the botany of the region.

Dusty's gentle manners caused Mrs. Powell to suspect that he was a born-again Christian, and she wasted no time in finding out where he stood.

"Dusty," she asked point blank, "are you a Christian?"

"Yes Ma'am," he replied. "I love the Lord, even if it doesn't show very well."

"It shows," she assured him. "I could tell right away by the way you talked."

"Thank you, Ma'am," he answered. "Sometimes I wonder."

Mrs. Powell was about fifteen years older than Dusty. Before long she was assuming a sort of big sister role to him that was the closest thing to a mother that he had known in years. When she teased him about being single, he confided everything about Missy to her. She was more than worthy of his confidence, and promised to pray for his sweetheart every day. She also advised him not to let the embers of Missy's love grow too cool by too long an absence.

The Major's wife was amazed at how well versed this uneducated cowpoke was in the Scriptures. In one of their spiritual conversations Dusty couldn't remember where he had run across something in the Bible. She looked it up for him in her Cruden's Concordance. This opened a whole new spiritual arena for him, especially when she showed him how he could trace a word or theme through the Scriptures with it. When they saw how much he borrowed their concordance, the Major and his wife ordered Dusty a small one that would fit in his saddlebags.

The Major was supposed to pick up the payroll checks for the group in Salt Lake City right after New Year's. Emma was afraid folks might think he was carrying cash, and would consider the one-armed man easy prey. She talked him in to sending Dusty, who was supposed to be good with a gun. Of course her secondary motive was to give Dusty a chance to see Missy.

Before he left, she called Dusty to their tent and asked him to read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 aloud to her. She expressed her hope and belief that Missy would see the error of the religion she was struggling with, but warned Dusty of the consequences of marrying someone who was not a Christian. "You could never truly be one with someone who does not share your love for Christ," she told him. At first, he was a bit miffed with her meddling, but as he thought about it, he had to admit to himself that she was right. He anguished over it all the way to Salt Lake City, but finally resolved not to marry Missy if she did not come around.

Chapter 17

Dusty left for Salt Lake City the day after Christmas. Since he was on Government business, he could leave Buster at livery stables, where he would be well fed and cared for every night and morning. They made good time because Dusty ate his morning and evening meals at restaurants, so he didn't have to stop so often to prepare much food along the way. He found he was received hospitably everywhere as long as he did not advertise the fact that he was not a Mormon.

The scout picked up a sealed leather case of checks at Fort Douglas, in Salt Lake City, and placed them at the bottom of his saddle bags. In the morning he headed back down the road that went through Provo towards Marysville, where he intended to detour over to Junction to see Missy.

The cowboy was anxious to get to Missy, and got started off right at dawn on his second morning out of Salt Lake City. It didn't take the trail-wise cowpoke long to suspect that the mounted traveler behind him was up to no good.

When he slowed down, so did the rider; and when he sped up the rider kept up. Dusty began searching the terrain ahead for likely spots for a hold up to take place. After about five miles, just as the trail entered a wooded area, the rider drew right up behind him, and Dusty drew his Colt, holding it under the flap of his half-buttoned sheepskin jacket.

Suddenly another rider rode out of the trees and stopped his horse directly in front of Dusty. "Hold it," the man commanded, drawing his Colt as Dusty reined Buster in.

"Let's have a look in those bags," the other man said as he rode half way up beside Buster and leaned over to unbuckle the saddle bag on that side.

"Sorry, guys, it's all in checks," Dusty replied, sitting stock still in his saddle, still holding his Colt hidden inside the flap of his coat.

"It had better not be," the bandit replied threateningly as he dug deeper into the saddle bag.

Dusty waited until the man's hand was deep in the bag before spurring Buster hard into the horse that was trying to block his way. Buster was well fed and in perfect shape, and literally bowled the other horse over. The bandit was jerked so hard that his shot went wildly into the trees, and his horse landed so hard on his leg that he lost the gun entirely. Buster's lunge had jerked the man whose arm was in his saddle bag off his horse, nearly twisting the arm out of its socket. Now Dusty sat above the injured men, gun drawn and ready, as they cursed each other for the muddled robbery.

"No need to blame each other," Dusty cut in. "Yer both to blame for anything so amateurish as that." After searching both men, he tied their hands behind their backs and followed them with his gun drawn and ready all the way to Provo, where he turned them over to the Mormon authorities for prosecution. Dusty thanked the Lord that he had not had to shoot someone in the incident.

It was evening by the time Dusty had given sworn statements to the authorities, so he found the livery at Provo and paid for Buster's care. After rubbing the horse down, he booked a room at the hotel and moseyed over to the restaurant that the stable hands had recommended. While eating his dinner, he saw Thomas Blake across the room. Although he drew his hat down and averted his gaze, it wasn't long until he could see the glint of recognition in the Mormon official's eyes. Presently, the man arose and hurried out of the building.

Hoping to avoid any trouble, Dusty waited a couple of minutes before slipping out the door and walking briskly to the hotel. He quickly gathered his things into his saddlebags, and hurried over to the corral where Buster was penned. Whistling for the horse, he saddled up quickly and rode south to the edge of town on a side street. Then, cutting back to the main road, he galloped Buster until he was blowing a bit before slowing to a more maintainable speed.

The man and his horse turned off the road about fifteen miles south of Provo, and picked a strategic campsite well hidden in the cut of a small stream. Dusty tied Buster in the trees, and spread his blankets back in the trees away from his fire. He snacked on bacon and coffee, and intentionally left his camp fire smoldering to decoy any followers.

Sure enough, he heard a couple of riders at the campsite about midnight.

"He's been here, but must have heard us coming," one voice commented.

Dusty strapped on his Colt and slipped to the edge of the trees, where he could see two mounted riders. One dismounted and looked carefully at the tracks he had left around the fire. "It's him, all right," he affirmed. "Can't be far. We can wait here and arrest 'im in the morning."

"OK with me. Let's get some sleep," the other rejoined as he dismounted.

“Why don’t ya just drop yer guns real easy-like and tell me why we’re a’lookin’ fer ’em?” Dusty called out authoritatively as he stepped into the open with his gun drawn. The riders’ hands came up, and then dropped slowly to unbuckle their gun belts very carefully, letting the holstered guns fall to the ground.

“Cause you threatened one of our leaders with a gun, that’s why.”

“Did he tell ya why?” Dusty asked.

“Don’t matter,” the other answered. “He’s the law around here”.

“Then your law goes around harassin’ crippled women?” Dusty asked, disgust on the edge of his voice.

“He’s got special privileges from God,” the first answered, almost apologetically.

“You ortta be wonderin’ what’s wrong with a religion that gives immoral privileges to its leaders,” Dusty retorted. “You tell that reprobate that I’m carryin’ a government payroll, n’ any interference from him will be investigated by the army. They won’t be too impressed with his status in the church, neither. I’ll be reportin’ this n’ that hold-up attempt ta the officer in charge of the Army post in Spanish Fork tomorry. Meanwhile, I’ll shoot any man fool enough ta follow me, n’ make no mistake, I’m dead accurate.”

“You got that?” he demanded at their silence.

“We got it,” one of the men answered more softly. “But don’t think you can buck the church in Utah. They’ll gitcha, son,” he added genuinely.

“Thanks,” Dusty replied. “I don’t aim ta stay here long after I git what I’m here fer, but I’m not leavin’ till I’ve got it.”

“Good luck,” the other added, more skeptically than angrily.

“I want you guys ta walk up the creek a bit so’s ta give me some movin’ room,” Dusty commanded. “When I’m gone ya’s kin come back and get yer horses n’ guns. Un’ please don’t force me ta shoot ya further down the road, cause I won’t be handin’ out enny more peace offerin’s.” When the riders were sufficiently distanced from their guns, Dusty slipped back to Buster, and rode the few miles to the military outpost at Spanish Fork by the light of the moon.

In the morning, he reported the robbery attempt to the officer in charge, who assured him that he would send a detail to Provo to pick up the robbers. Dusty had to leave sworn affidavits here too.

When he was done, he told the officer about the attempted arrest during the night. The officer told him that most of the Mormon leadership was reasonable enough, but problems with this particular individual were not unusual. “He’ll let you alone now that he knows you’re on government business,” he said, “but he’ll get you blackballed in every Mormon establishment from here to the Arizona border, and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop that.”

When Dusty rode out, he found that the captain knew what he was talking about. When he applied for services down the road, folks at restaurants and hotels replied that they only served worthy Mormons and their families. It didn’t take long to figure out that his description as an undesirable had been telegraphed all along the road, and Dusty found himself camping out in the dead of winter. There were, however, enough non-Mormon and occasional cooperative “So-what” Mormon establishments to keep him in supplies.

Disgusted with the treatment he got at Manti, Dusty stocked up for the trail at a Mormon outfitter’s, who sold him all he wanted at the back door after dark. “What are they sayin’ against me?” He asked the merchant.

“Just that you are a blasphemer of the Prophet,” the man replied. “Same as they say of anyone they have a disagreement with.”

“Thanks,” Dusty replied. “I guess I’m guilty as charged, n’ totally unrepentant, too.”

“Yer not quite as alone as it may seem out here,” the man replied.

After stocking up, Dusty camped a few miles south of Manti. The next morning he struck out across country through the mountains on an old established Indian trail that the merchant had described to him. It was rough going, with snowy altitudes that sometimes reached about two miles above sea level. Still, he preferred it to the resentment he felt along the Mormon corridor. It also saved him a couple days travel over the Marysvale route.

The trail-worn traveler reached the familiar trail along the Fremont River three hard days out of Manti. He figured he was still about three full days from Junction when he made camp that night, if Buster held up well.

Chapter 18

The three days to Junction seemed to take forever. He could hardly wait to get Missy in his arms, and yet he had growing fears that she might not receive him, considering how he felt about Mormonism. It was well past dusk when he circled around Junction to his old campsite just inside the canyon east of town. He wasted no time in securing Buster to a tree, and slipping through the trees along the river to the dairy barn behind the Johnson house. He had the milking done before Missy showed up for her chores. She puzzled over the full bucket of milk for a moment before calling Dusty’s name in a loud whisper as she turned towards the hay loft.

“Yes?” Dusty answered, stepping up to embrace her from behind. “How’d ya’ know it was me?”

“You’re the only one that’s ever done the milking for me,” she giggled, squirming around to face him. And then they were lost in a kiss that said everything that was pent up in their hearts. This time neither broke it off until they needed a breath.

“Dusty,” she said, snuggling into his arms. “I miss you so much.”

“I just can’t stand bein’ away from you either, Honey,” he answered. “Did ya git my letter?”

“No, did you really write me?”

“Sure did,” he replied. “Told ya what I read in the book of Mormon.”

“Oh,” she said, “guess what I found there.”

“What?”

“No one should have more than one wife. It’s in black and white in the book of Jacob.”

“That’s what I sent ya,” he said.

“Dusty,” she said, burying her face in his chest, “I know it isn’t true. My mom warned me not to buy it long before she died, but it scares me so much when I wonder if it’s just my stubbornness that rejects it. I used to think I was pretty good ’cause I never did anything extra bad, but since I’ve been reading the Bible I realize that I’m not very good—I don’t deserve you.” She was crying now.

He stroked her hair, letting her cry.

“Missy,” he said as her sobs subsided. “That’s what bein’ a Christian is all about. We see that we are really hell-deservin’ sinners, just like God says we ar’. And then we find that Christ bore ar’ sins as His own on the cross. He died fer ’em so we wouldn’t hafta die, n’ as we receive this, we’re born again as children of God.”

“That’s beautiful,” she smiled up through her tears. “I’ll stand on it.”

“Missy, will you marry me?” he asked breathlessly.

“Of course, Dusty. I’ve never wanted anyone else.”

He pulled her into another kiss, one that he felt really belonged to him, and she gave it willingly.

“How kin we get married out here?” Dusty finally asked?

“You’re not getting married!” a voice cut in from the barn door as Mr. Johnson came charging in.

“Missy, you get that milk in the house right now!” he commanded. Then turning to Dusty he spat out, “I figured you’d be sneaking in here some time when I saw that letter you sent her. She’s not available for a Gentile.”

“You stay right here, Missy,” Dusty countered. “We are gettin’ married, Mr. Johnson.”

“She’s my daughter, and the church won’t let her get married without my permission,” he shouted.

“I’m not your daughter, Mr. Johnson. You married my mom without telling her you had other wives, and she always warned me not to have anything to do with your religion. I’m a born again Christian now, and I’ll never join your church.”

“Your mother was a stubborn Gentile that never converted,” he shouted back, “But I’ve raised you a good Mormon and you’re going to obey me.”

“You’ve always treated me more like a slave than a daughter, Mr. Johnson. I’ve slaved in your kitchen and done everything your wives dumped on me ever since I was able. I’ve more than earned my keep here, and I don’t owe you anything.”

“Mr. Johnson,” Dusty interrupted as his hand dropped dangerously close to his gun. “Missy and I are leavin’ here tonight.”

“And you call us immoral!” he answered sarcastically.

“We’ll behave until we kin git married,” He said, reddening.

“Dusty, I can’t leave yet,” Missy interrupted. “I have a half-sister three years younger than me upstairs who is paralyzed from her waist down. She can’t leave the house, and I’m the only one that loves her enough to care for her. She’s dying now, and I can’t leave her to die alone.”

“I’ll stay as long as Mary lives, Mr. Johnson, but I am marrying Dusty when the time comes.”

“Go on in, Honey,” Dusty replied. “I’ll talk ta Mr. Johnson.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Mr. Johnson stated as he turned back towards the door.

“Sir,” Dusty said in a voice that made him turn back. “Missy’s twenty-one now, and kin legally make ’er own decisions. Ya may have put one over on her mother, but yer not putting anything over on her. If Missy stays here we’ll be seeing each other openly whenever we choose. You stole one letter. The next one had better git through.

Un' iffing anything happens ta her you'll be answerin' ta me."

"You talk big while I'm unarmed, young man," the salty settler replied. "You'll sing a different tune when I've got an equalizer on. And rest assured, the church will never let you marry one of its members."

"May I remind ya that Missy never joined enny church," Dusty stated, rather than asked.

Johnson grunted something under his breath as both men turned away, and Dusty returned to his campsite in the dark.

Chapter 19

While Dusty was cooking his dinner that night, Hunting Bear stepped quietly into the firelight. Dusty's hand was already drawing his Colt when he recognized him.

"Huntin' Bear," he called out joyfully as he dropped his forty-five back into its holster.

"My Brother," Hunting Bear laughed. "You fast. I speak first next time."

"Sorry, Huntin' Bear," he said as they gripped each other. "Are you well?"

"I am well. Bashful Doe greets Missy."

"Missy agreed ta bein' my woman tonight, Huntin' Bear."

"She never leave sister," Hunting Bear stated. "Never."

"She says 'er sister is dyin'," Dusty replied. "I will wait fer 'er."

"Good!" Hunting Bear grunted. "Good woman."

As they sat around the camp fire Dusty introduced Hunting Bear to coffee. He made a wry face, but drank the whole cup. He even took a second when Dusty offered it, but the cowboy found where he had poured it out behind the bolder he was sitting on after he left.

"What white men do at Kanab?" Hunting Bear asked.

"They're measurin' the land," Dusty replied. "They'll ask the big chiefs at Washington ta let the Indians keep their land."

"One Arm OK?" Hunting Bear queried.

"Yes, they're all OK."

"We will keep peace," Hunting Bear declared.

"Thank you," Dusty answered. "I will tell One Arm," and they were soon asleep in their blankets not too far from the fire.

The next morning Dusty asked Hunting Bear to wait while he visited Missy.

"I will watch," Hunting Bear promised, taking up a niche in the canyon wall that offered a good view of the house.

Dusty walked in plain sight right up to the barn where Missy should be milking. She was there, waiting for him with another delicious hug and kiss.

“Ennything more happen last night? he asked.”

“Nobody’s spoken to me,” she replied. “Not even a word.”

“What are ya goin’ ta do?”

“I’m going to keep up all the chores I’ve always done, just like nothing ever happened,” she said. “It’ll be rough for a while, but it will blow over until you show up again.”

“I gotta git back ta Kanab as soon as possible,” he told her. “I’ve got the survey’s payroll in my saddle bags. Write me often, and let me know iffin’ yer receivin’ my letters.”

“Why don’t you get Hunting Bear to tell you how to cut across the desert?” she suggested.

“Good idea” he replied. “He’s watching from the canyon wall right now. Bashful Doe sends her greetin’s”

“Dusty,” she said. “My little sister is nothing but skin and bones now. She’s so weak she can hardly roll over She can’t last much longer. I’ll get word to you when she’s gone.”

‘You’re doin’ right,” he assured her. “I’ll wait as long as necessary.”

Another kiss, and each forced themselves to turn back to their own duties.

Hunting Bear assured Dusty that the desert could be crossed if one knew the way, but said he was unable to lead Dusty across at the moment. The ceremony where he would replace his aging father as official chief was coming up in a few days, and he would be tied up for some time. Dusty understood.

“I will be brother to the chief,” he announced.

“Yes, my Brother,” Hunting Bear agreed.

So Hunting Bear went back into the desert while Dusty returned to Kanab along his previous route, avoiding any more contact with the Mormons than was absolutely necessary.

It was almost February when Dusty got back to the main survey camp near Kanab. Everyone was happy to see him, especially since he had the payroll. Beaman, the expedition’s photographer, had decided to leave the expedition for good, and the Major could settle up with him now that the money was here.

Mrs. Powell could hardly wait to find out how things went with Missy. She had really sympathized with the young woman’s struggle to get free of her fear of Mormonism, and tears welled up in her eyes when Dusty told her that Missy was definitely born again now. She let out a squeal of delight when he told her they were engaged to be married.

“She’s a good woman to care for her sister that way, Dusty,” she exclaimed.

“I’m right proud of ’er, ma’am,” Dusty replied.

Chapter 20

By the time Dusty got back to the camp at Kanab, the winter work was in full swing. Initial reference points on

highly visible hilltops had already been established and flagged for use in mapping the area. When Dusty asked what purpose they served, Dellenbaugh nailed some small boards from an old packing crate together to show him the difference in the stability of three and four sided figures. The angles of the rectangular figure could be distorted so that opposite corners moved closer together or further apart, but the angles of a triangular figure were stable, and could not be distorted to change the distances between the corners. "We only need the length of one side of a triangle, and we can calculate the lengths of the other sides by measuring any other two angles of the triangle," he explained. Dusty was intrigued with the simplicity of the principle of triangulation, and was able to work with a real understanding of why they were doing what they were doing.

The major and Mrs. Powell left for Salt Lake City on the first day of February, planning to return to Washington D.C. to get more funding from Congress. This left Prof. Thompson in charge of the expedition. He had been superintendent of the Bloomington, Illinois school system, and was a great organizer.

Six days after the major left, Clem and Bonnemort, the new photographer got back from trying to photograph the Kanab Canyon. They had lost his camera and much of his equipment when their pack mule smashed it in a fall. They were totally discouraged at not getting any photos at all. The prospector who had accompanied them had been educated at the University of Michigan, but came west to seek his fortune in gold. He didn't find it in the Kanab Canyon.

On February sixteenth, the group abandoned the central camp at Kanab, breaking into small parties assigned to specific tasks. A week later Prof. and Mrs. Thompson, Dellenbaugh, Jones, Dodds, and Dusty started out to map the Kiabab Plateau, north of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. Their pack train of supplies followed a wagon road south of Kanab most of the first day, finally breaking away into the mountains that skirted the desert. Their Mormon guide from Kanab showed them a nice campsite beside a refreshing spring, where they spent the first night.

The following day a fierce snow storm stopped them at the site of an abandoned saw mill, where the Thompsons pitched their tent while the single men found refuge in an old log cabin with half the roof missing. They were stranded there for three days before the snow stopped. The professor climbed the mountain to an elevation of about a thousand feet, and then climbed a 125 foot tall tree for a look at the area. He thought he could see the Grand Canyon from his vantage point. Their group's immediate problem was that the snow had covered the graze for the horses and they had to let them go to forage for themselves as best they could.

When the weather broke the group split up. The Mormon guide and his assistant went back to Kanab for more supplies. Dusty, Dellenbaugh, and Andy were sent to the southwest corner of the Plateau, while Jones and Dodds were to take the southeast corner. After considerable trouble finding the horses that had wandered off in search of grass, they went on their respective ways. At first they found themselves braving chest high snow drifts in areas that would have been hard to navigate under optimum conditions, but within hours they had come down low enough that there was plenty of graze for the horses. The grass was already beginning to turn green in the mild climate of the Kiabab.

Dusty and his companions spent two weeks triangulating the area before the whole party packed and headed up the Kanab Canyon. Its rocky walls towered 1200 feet above them on either side as they rode along the edge of the creek. One of their pack horses fell down a gully, and it took some time to extricate the animal before they could move on. On the third day they cut up Pipe Spring Wash and climbed out of the canyon. Dellenbaugh remarked that the whole area was like a giant staircase from one geologic platform to the next. As Dusty considered this in the clear night sky, he thought of it more as a staircase to heaven.

The company reached Pipe Spring the afternoon of the third day. Mr. Winsor, the Mormon proprietor, graciously put a large vacant stone house with a huge stone fireplace at the group's disposal, though Professor and Mrs. Thompson chose the privacy of their own tent over it. There was a constant stream of prospectors through the area at the time, because of inaccurate reports of nearby gold.

Winsor was building two matching homes twenty feet apart, allegedly for defense against Indians and desperados. The walls of the houses were of sandstone blocks, fully three feet thick, and the court between the

houses was protected by high log walls fitted with heavy gates. Water from the spring was piped unobtrusively underground from the spring into the complex. When Winsor bragged that Brigham Young himself was a partner in the project, Dusty suspected that this was where the Mormon leader intended to make his stand if the Gentiles ever tried to murder him, as they had Joseph Smith. The survey team spent two weeks triangulating the Pipe Spring area for topographical mapping.

On March twenty-first the survey party left Pipe Spring for the Unikaret Mountains. Clem remained behind to look for the gun he had lost the previous day when his horse ran away. They found no water on the first day, but found a great sparkling pool of rain water in a large hollow in the rock the second day. They spent about a week establishing reference points at high points in the mountains. Dusty found a human skeleton complete with a wicker basket at the bottom of a water hole. The party was stopped dead by heavy mountain snows during the second week. They did what work they could, but were finally reduced to staying in their tents reading and writing reports. They finally gave up and moved into the lower country around St. George.

On the way down, the group was engulfed in a white-out of wind and snow. Advancing cautiously on foot, they found themselves at the brink of a tall cliff. Not knowing which way to turn with any degree of safety, they scraped the ground clear of snow and ate their dinner there. Later that evening the snow cleared, and they were able to find a better campsite shielded from the weather by some trees.

The geological party spent another month surveying the area along the Virgin River from the Pine Valley Mountains to the Grand Canyon, but Dusty's heart was not in it. He had not received any news from Missy, and was beginning to feel uneasy about having left her in Junction. How he longed to hold her in his arms again! Only his deep sense of commitment kept him from leaving the group altogether. He heaved a sigh of relief when they finally returned to Kanab to put their records in order so the geologists could begin preparations to resume their voyage down the Colorado River.

Chapter 21

Dusty reluctantly consented to guide Andy and Captain Dodds to the mouth of the Paria River to check on the two boats that had been left there. They spent a day and a half at Lee's crossing, established by a Mormon zealot named John D. Lee. Rachel, one of Lee's many wives, held the group under scrutiny at rifle point until Lee was satisfied that they had come in peace. In the end, Lee was a surprisingly good host, even if it was Sister Emma, his eighteenth wife, who served the dinner. He gave the group an evangelical dissertation on Mormonism, which Dusty would have contested if he were free to do so. Andy finally slipped up and cocked a gun behind Lee's back, which was quite disconcerting to the preacher.

Dusty didn't understand Lee's touchiness until they had moved on, and Dellenbaugh told him that Lee had been implicated as a leader in the infamous Mountain Meadows Massacre. The Mormons had incited the Indians to help them murder over a hundred emigrants in cold blood to prevent the Gentile infiltration of Utah during the Mormon War era. The LDS church had cut Lee off in an effort to distance itself from the crime, but Lee maintained to his death that the LDS hierarchy had ordered the raid. He told Dellenbaugh that he had not participated in the massacre at all, but had actually tried to stop it. Lee apparently lived in constant fear of retribution from the U.S. government.

The party found the two boats in good shape, although the oars and some of their cached goods had been stolen. Having accomplished their goal, they returned to Kanab, arriving there on May fifteenth.

There was finally a letter from Missy:

Dearest Dusty,

I have written you many letters, each of which was a replacement for the one before it. There's just no way to post a letter out here without help. Hunting Bear was at the barn tonight, and offered to send this one to Marysvale with a brave that was going there to trade some pelts. He said that Bashful Doe is pregnant, and I'm jealous in a happy sort of a way. He didn't kiss me like you do, so I let him go.

My sister is somehow holding on to life, although completely bed ridden now. I doubt if she weighs seventy-five pounds. I have shared the true gospel with her, and she has lost all fear of death. I read a chapter of the Bible to her twice a day, and she says it's like a taste of heaven. She just wants to die and be with Jesus now.

I am all alone except for Mary. The rest of the community shuns me entirely, and I would fear the blood atonement if I didn't know that they need me here to care for Mary.

I love you so much! Please come soon,

Missy

Dusty tried to get several of the Mormon employees of the expedition to explain the blood atonement that Missy referred to, but they all denied that they had ever heard of any such thing in the Mormon religion. He went to the Mormon book store in Kanab, but they curtly refused to sell the notorious Gentile anything at all. He sent a toned-down letter from Kanab by return mail, knowing that it would be read by Mr. Johnson, whether Missy ever received it or not.

Dear Missy,

I am sending this letter by registered mail to be sure that you receive it. My work here will be finished in another month or so, and I will come by for a visit just as soon as I can get away.

I am praying for Mary and the rest of your household. I am also studying the doctrine of atonement, as it is a topic that I never gave any thought to before. Keep reading your Bible.

With all my love,

Dusty

Chapter 22

Dusty grew more and more uneasy about Missy over the next few days. He finally went to Professor Thompson, explaining that he needed to leave the survey and get back to Missy. The Professor proposed that Dusty accompany a small party directly across the desert towards the mouth of the Dirty Devil, where the Canyonita was cached. "You can leave the party when you find the trail you took from the Colorado River through the Henry Mountains. If you miss that you can lay over at Junction, and then guide them down the Fremont to the mouth of the Dirty Devil. Either way, you would probably reach Junction just as soon as you would if you took the road up to Marysvale and cut over to Junction. Dusty agreed to this arrangement, and Thompson paid him in advance so he could leave the party at the appropriate time without delay.

On May twenty-fifth a small contingent started across the desert for the mouth of the Dirty Devil. Tactical problems like difficulty finding water, some party members getting lost, and some forgotten arrangements delayed them at Johnson, on the Vermillion cliffs. The frustrated cowboy was really chomping at the bit by the time they finally got underway on the last day of May.

The group camped at the small settlement of Clarksville the first evening out. They hired a Paiute Indian as a guide and interpreter. The next few days were spent traversing mountainous hills, canyons, and beautiful peaceful valleys. George Adair, one of the Mormons, marked out a claim for himself in a particularly beautiful spot, aiming to come back and settle there later. They passed a grave marker labeled E.A., which stood for Elijah Averett, a victim of the Utes back in 1866. The grave had been unearthed by predators, and the ground was strewn with his bones.

On June sixth the party arrived at what the rest of the group thought was the Dirty Devil River. When Dusty heard them call it that he insisted, "I've ridden the Fremont and Dirty Devil complex from one end to the other. This is neither the Dirty Devil nor the Fremont, as it is called upstream from the Muddy River junction." After some discussion, the geologists agreed that this river flowed south of the Henry Mountains, while the Dirty Devil was north of them. They decided to label the newly discovered river the Escalante, after the early Spanish Catholic

explorer. Now they understood why none of the supply trains had been able to get to the mouth of the Dirty Devil from Kanab.

The Escalante was a wild thing, enchanting and treacherous as a woman right out of the Proverbs. It ran for miles through solid grey rock canyons rising up hundreds of feet on each side of the river at an angle that could sometimes be traversed by foot. Great cracks in the rock offered footholds for some scrawny root-bound junipers, and occasional larger trees. Dusty considered this the wildest and most infatuating country he had ever seen, and he'd seen plenty. But although this was quite a discovery for the white men, Dusty realized that Hunting Bear's tribe probably frequented the area regularly.

The group was unable to cross the raging Escalante at this time of the year, and was forced to turn in a northerly direction, proceeding all the way to the Potato Valley. The Indian guide became quite uneasy in this area, and was given enough supplies to return home. At Potato Valley the group split into a contingent that would return to Kanab for supplies, and a group that would continue on to find the Canyonita at the mouth of the Dirty Devil. Dusty was to assist those continuing on towards the Canyonita.

After several days more travel, Dusty's party ran across an Indian village. On seeing them, the inhabitants fled into the trees and rocks, but after some time they were persuaded to come back to the village and smoke a peace pipe together. Eventually the Indian chief was able to communicate enough by a mixture of sign language, English, and Paiute to tell them the way to the mouth of the Dirty Devil. It was basically the same path that Dusty had followed when he came across the Henrys after his first meeting with the survey party, and was therefore judged reliable. With the acquisition of this information, Dusty was free to leave the group for good.

As he took his leave, Dusty warned the professor that they would be skirting Hunting Bear's village. He advised them to tell any Indians that he met that they were friends of Missy and Hunting Bear's brother, Dusty. Then he was off in the direction of Junction.

Chapter 23

By striking a large arc north and east, it only took Dusty a few hours to find the trail Hunting Bear had used to take him from his village to Junction. Now that the survey party was off his mind, he was gripped with a sense of urgency to get to Missy. He would never forgive himself if anything had happened to her in his absence. How he longed to hold her in his arms. He rode as fast as he could without hurting Buster, and the strawberry roan seemed to sense his urgency, hurrying along without much urging. They rode right up to the barn at dusk on the second day.

Entering the barn, Dusty found one of Mr. Johnson's secondary wives doing the milking. She gasped and sat up straight as he walked in.

"Where's Missy?" he asked anxiously.

"Gone," she answered, burying her forehead in the cow's flank and attacking her milking ferociously.

"Where?" he asked desperately. "Where'd she go?"

The thin straight lipped woman paused to stare vacantly in his direction. "Mr. Johnson took 'er away after they buried Mary."

"Which way?"

"West along the rut."

"When?"

“Bout two weeks ago.”

“Where’s Mr. Johnson?” Dusty’s hand drifted unconsciously down toward the butt of his gun.

“Ain’t back yet.”

“Sairy, where’s that milk?” a querulous voice complained as the door swung open.

“Oh! It’s you,” Nellie spat out as she saw Dusty.

“Sairy, you git in the house. I’ll handle this blasphemous Gentile.”

Sarah obediently picked up the milk pail and headed for the house. When the door slammed in the distance, Nellie turned vehemently towards the cowpoke.

“If yer lookin’ fer Missy, you can forgit it.”

“What happened ta ’er?” Dusty asked commandingly as he regained his composure.

“She married a worthy Mormon and went ta live with ’m,” she replied arrogantly.

“Who?” Dusty asked incredulously.

“Mr. Blake, the one you tried ta chase away from here,” Nellie answered smugly. “And you’d better leave a’fore I tell the church that I caught ya in the barn with Sairy,” she retorted triumphantly.

“I don’t believe it.” Dusty said, shaking his head.

“Don’t make no never mind what ya believe,” she replied saucily.

“Where are they now?”

“Didn’t want ya ta know, so they wouldn’t tell a single soul where they was a’going.”

“If ya weren’t a woman I’d get ta the bottom of this right now,” Dusty declared through clinched teeth.

“Ain’t no bottom ta it when ya buck the church,” she sneered, turning and strutting back to the house.

As Dusty considered his dilemma of how to wring the truth from a bunch of women, he realized that he might have to wait for Mr. Johnson to come home. Surely he wouldn’t be gone too much longer. He finally went out and brought Buster into a stall, loosening the cinch but leaving him saddled and bridled. He helped the horse to a couple of scoops of oats from the bin by the ladder to the loft, and forked him a bit of hay by the light of the lantern that Nellie had forgotten to snuff out. Leaving the door of Buster’s stall open, he doused the lantern and leaned back to get some sleep in a sitting position in the corner of the stall closest to the barn door.

About midnight he heard Mr. Johnson’s team at the barn door. The settler ran the wagon in the barn, lit the lantern, and unhitched the team, tossing the tack into the wagon as Dusty supposed he would. When he stepped back towards the barn door, Dusty stepped out of the stall to face him.

“Where’s Missy?” he demanded.

Johnson went for his gun, and the cowboy’s right hand literally streaked for his. Dusty’s shot was off before Johnson’s gun was half way up, and the bullet smashed the gun right out of the settler’s hand. Stepping in, Dusty grabbed the big man’s throat with his left hand and shoved him against the wall. Holding him there until he turned

purple, Dusty eased up as he demanded again, "Where's Missy?"

The settler drew a hoarse gulp of air and rasped out triumphantly, "You're too late, she's married to Blake."

"Not willingly, she ain't," Dusty replied, increasing the pressure until Johnson's eyes looked like they were about to pop out. "Where'd ya take 'em?"

"To Marysvale," the big Mormon grated out gleefully after a couple wheezy gulps of air. "There's no way they'll let you get near her now."

"Ya dirty snake," Dusty gritted out. "I ort'a beat ya within an inch of yer life."

Suddenly a rifle boomed behind him, and Dusty was slammed against the wall beside Johnson.

"Nice shot, Nellie," Johnson commended as Dusty struggled to remain on his feet. Waves of dizziness fought to bring him down, but he literally willed himself to keep his feet. Catching a breath, he gave a stunted whistle and Buster thundered out to him, knocking Nellie flying. With a grunt of pain, the injured man threw himself into the saddle, spurring the big roan out the door at a gallop. Feeling the saddle slip a bit, he reigned up in the trees where Missy had met him before. As he dismounted to tighten the girth, he heard Sarah's whisper.

"Mr. Dusty."

"Yes?" he grimaced.

"They won't be a'comin'. They're too scairt uv ya."

Dusty got the cinch tightened and was about to remount, but felt so weak he wondered if he could.

"Mr. Dusty, are ya hurt bad?"

"I don't know, Sairy."

"I brought ya some food," she said. "Missy's the only one that ever treated me right."

"Thanks, Sairy. Can you help me up?"

"Sure," she agreed, giving him a surprisingly hefty boost into the saddle.

"Mr. Dusty...Missy wouldn't say 'I do.' Mr. Johnson was a'holdin' her from behind when Mr. Miller said, 'Do you take this man?' n' she yelled, 'no way!' Mr. Johnston said, 'I command ya to.' Then Missy says, 'Over my dead body,' so they tied 'er up. She was all mussed up from fighting 'em when they dumped 'er in the wagon n' headed up the rut fer the main road. I don't know where they was a'goin'. God help ya find 'er a'fore it's too late." Then she handed him a small sack of food, and disappeared into the darkness.

By now Dusty's side was really beginning to hurt. He could feel the blood soaking into his shirt as he started the horse down the rut as quietly as possible, to keep from arousing suspicion against Sarah. The further away he got, the more his side hurt, but he dared not stop. Buster sensed his weakness, and more or less balanced him on his back as they went through the night. The wounded man finally fished a rawhide thong out of his saddlebags and tied his hands to the saddle horn with a slip knot to keep from falling off the faithful horse.

Chapter 24

Dusty awoke astride Buster sometime after dawn. Looking around groggily, he finally realized that Buster had

brought him to the first campsite he had established the last time he had followed the rut this way. Working his hands free with his teeth, he fell off the horse. He fainted when he tried to raise himself, and woke up feeling cold an hour or so later. Buster was still right beside him. With a supreme effort, he pulled himself up with a stirrup, and got hold of the saddle horn. Steadying himself for a moment, he was finally able to fumble the buckle on his saddlebag loose, and get some matches out. Dragging his bed roll with him, he slipped back to the ground and lay there exhausted while the sun warmed him up.

By noon Dusty felt a bit stronger. He crawled stiffly over to the creek and had a good drink. Pulling himself to a sitting position, he pulled his bloody shirt off and examined his wound. The rifle bullet had entered the back of his right side about an inch below the ribs, and exited on the front at about the same level. Although its trajectory must have been nearly an inch deep, it did not seem to have entered his abdominal cavity. At least he wasn't sick at his stomach. He decided that his weakness was more from the shock and loss of blood than anything more serious.

The drink seemed to clear Dusty's thinking a lot. He crawled around and gathered enough sticks to light a fire to boil some water for cleansing his wound. As he took stock of the situation, he remembered that this was a well-chosen camp site in which he could hole up relatively safely. The weather was warm enough that he would not need a fire at night, though one would be handy for cooking. He crawled back to Buster and dragged the saddle and bridle off. The horse nuzzled him a bit, and then trotted over to the creek for a drink. Dusty was confident that he would graze nearby, and come running at his whistle. Finally, he opened the sack that Sarah had given him, and found a sandwich of summer sausage and a few potatoes from the garden. He ate the sandwich with gusto, and crawled into his blankets for another sleep.

Dusty awoke at dusk. He pushed his sticks back together and lit a fire for coffee. He drank some of the stiff brew before frying a bit of bacon and a potato. He didn't have the energy for anything else, so he doused the fire and wrapped up in his blankets again. He never woke up until dawn.

The wounded cowpoke could hardly believe how hard it was to move the next morning. There was little pain as long as he lay still, but his wound, being mostly muscular, burned like a red hot poker whenever he moved. It took him ten minutes to crawl out of his blankets, but after that he loosened up more quickly. The pain was severe when he stood up, but the dizziness was gone. He whistled for Buster, and the horse came thundering to his side in a moment. They evaluated each other, and both seemed satisfied, so Dusty slapped him on the rump and sent him back to graze.

As Dusty considered his options, he began to realize that he needed the Lord's help to find Missy. He stopped everything and read his chapter for the day. Then he poured out his worries and needs to God, and felt much relieved of his anxiety.

He realized that he would be recognized, and probably expected, along the corridor from Salt Lake City to Kanab. He might be able to hide behind a heavy beard and mustache if he got a different horse, but that would be questionable, at best. He could find Hunting Bear, but the Indians would not be free to circulate in the white man's company very well. He needed an insider, but how could he ever find that? What he really needed was divine help, and so did Missy. He began breathing up prayer after prayer to God as he struggled for a reasonable plan, and he felt the peace of God returning to his soul.

In the morning, Dusty saddled Buster and headed out into the desert to find Hunting Bear's village. He hadn't shaved in three days, so he already had a head start on the beard. He found the trail from Junction to the Indian village before dusk, and got a few miles of southerly riding in before dark. He was absolutely exhausted by the time he curled up in his blankets that night. He felt stronger in the morning, and rode all day without stopping except to water the horse from a pool of rainwater. He finished the last of his food that night, and rode into the Indian village tired and hungry late the next afternoon.

"My brother," Hunting Bear greeted him. "Sairy said you hurt. We ready to look for you, but you find us."

“Thank you, Chief,” Dusty replied. Blake took Missy.”

“Strutting Cock bad man!” Hunting Bear said, shaking his head angrily. Eat now, then talk.”

Bashful Doe brought Dusty some venison stew, which he ate so fast she brought more. She was showing just a bit, and Dusty thought she never looked cuter with her face glowing so happily.

After dinner, Dusty told Hunting Bear everything he knew about Missy’s disappearance. The chief’s face grew harder and harder as the story progressed. “We kill now,” he said, standing up abruptly.

“Wait!” Dusty pled. “What will that accomplish?”

“Settler hate my brother,” he stated simply. “I kill.”

“No! Huntin’ Bear. My God teaches me ta be kind ta my enemies.”

“No kill,” Hunting Bear finally grunted. “Chase away. Chief Hunting Bear has spoken.”

“Please don’t,” Dusty held his ground. “What about Sister Sarah?”

“Your God is weak,” Hunting Bear grunted.

“It is harder ta love your enemies than ta hate ’em,” Dusty argued.

Hunting Bear grunted and rose to leave.

Dusty changed the subject. “Kin ya keep Buster fer me, n’ maybe lend me another horse?”

“You choose horse, my brother,” he said as he pointed towards the Indians’ rotunda.

“I need one the Mormons won’t recognize.”

“You ride Hunting Bear’s horse,” the chief replied, pointing to a well-built paint. “I ride yours.”

“Thank you, my brother,” Dusty replied.

The exhausted visitor was given a wickiup to sleep in, and he slept soundly from dusk to dawn.

Chapter 25

Dusty felt pretty good when he awoke in the Indian village. Bashful Doe filled his saddlebags with jerky, dried fish, and pemmican for the trail. Hunting Bear brought his horse, which became restless when saddled and downright spooky by the time the saddle bags were added. This relieved Dusty’s fear that the fine animal might have been stolen from a white man. He didn’t need to be accused of stealing horses in the unfriendly environment he was about to infiltrate.

It would be impossible to actually track Missy’s captors, but Dusty had been trying to figure out how they would think--trailing their minds. Since Blake was advancing in the Mormon society, he would not want to get too isolated from the opportunities to further his career at Salt Lake City. They would expect Dusty to come searching for Missy, if he was still alive. They would figure that he would come along the rut to Marysvale, probably turning north on the main road to Salt Lake City as the obvious place to start his search. His other option would be to head south at Marysvale, but they would be forewarned by telegraph long before he could reach the southern settlements. Why not retrace his steps around the Escalante River and slip unexpectedly into Kanab or St. George? Dusty thought. He would get a pack mule and pose as a prospector while he checked out the Mormon corridor

from south to north.

Hunting Bear's horse put on a real bucking exhibition when Dusty mounted him, and Dusty met it with a clinic of western riding that impressed even the Indians. When the animal finally stopped, Dusty was soothing it with a calm voice and a firm but gentle hands, while the Indians were rehearsing the episode with frank admiration. He didn't let on how much the ride had hurt his healing wound.

The paint was wiry and game. It seemed to know the desert. Whatever direction Dusty turned, the horse soon found a trail to follow. Dusty wondered if this pony hadn't run wild in the area before Hunting Bear acquired him. The cowboy was on the hills of the Wasatch cliffs overlooking Potato Valley in three days flat.

Three days later Dusty met a discouraged prospector at a secluded campsite situated a couple of hours out of Mt. Carmel. The down and out soldier of fortune had responded to the recent false rumors of gold in the Grand Canyon, and was flat broke. He literally jumped at Dusty's offer to buy his pack mule and prospecting tools.

Although Dusty's beard was fairly heavy by now, he rested that evening, waiting until just after dark to ride through the newly resettled Mt. Carmel. He was unable to get much farther in the dark, and had to hole up a short way out of town. It took three more days to reach St. George, where he intended to start the search for Missy.

Dusty circled into the desert south of St. George late in the evening, camping three or four miles from town. He rode into town the next morning looking every bit like a prospector just passing through. He tied his beasts outside one of the general stores, and moseyed around through the merchandise a bit, listening to the idle talk of the customers. He purchased a few necessities and moved on to the livery stable, where he left his animals. He finally went into a busy looking restaurant and ordered a steak. He kept his ears open, but might just as well have been out in the desert, for all he heard. Blake was a church man, and Dusty desperately needed information on his whereabouts from inside the church. But how could he get it?

That afternoon Dusty tried the general store again. "Any place a traveler can buy coffee around here," he asked. "Try the Gentile store on the north edge of town," the proprietor advised. Walking up to the non-Mormon establishment, Dusty struck up a conversation with the clerk.

"How's business?" he asked.

"Terrible."

"Mormons resent yer invasion of their town?"

"They don't buy here unless it's absolutely necessary," the man answered, looking up curiously at Dusty. "What's bothering you?"

"Enny way to crack the system?" Dusty asked.

"They let me stay to lure the prospector and Gentile business to town, but you can't buck the church."

"How would a guy go about findin' out where a specific churchman happens to be?"

"Looking for Thomas Blake, are you?" he asked.

"How'd ya know?"

"He's the bad apple around here—a protégé of Bishop Snow. Why don't you just join the church and get inside?"

"Ugh!" Dusty responded wryly. It was an idea he hadn't even considered.

“Yeah,” he told himself later that evening as he sipped his coffee from a tin cup at his campsite south of town. “I could be my own insider.”

He prayed about it, but got no peace about it either way.

Dusty returned to the Gentile store the next day to ask how the Mormons dressed for church. “Just wear your best,” the proprietor advised. “New shoes and a black suit wouldn’t hurt anything. And don’t ask a lot of questions about the controversial stuff, or they’ll suspect you.” So the cowboy turned prospector purchased some city clothes.

What amazed Dusty was that no one at the Sunday service seemed to question whether he was a Mormon or not. He sat in the back, near the door, and listened to a sermon on marriage. Not being acquainted with Mormon perversions of religious terminology, he couldn’t follow the sermon too well. Apparently their successive marriages after the first one were called “spiritual marriages,” though they were obviously quite physical. What was more significant to Dusty was that marriages outside the Mormon temples were only for this life, whereas temple marriages were for eternity. This gave Dusty the distinct impression that Blake’s alleged marriage to Missy was more to spite the cowboy for humiliating him than from any genuine care for Missy. The preacher also confirmed that the Church’s hierarchy had the right to marry the wives of the laity “In order to secure them a higher status in the after-life.”

Dusty left the church with little hope that another trip would get him any closer to finding where Blake might be. He was not all that disappointed when one of the Mormons that had worked with the Survey blew his cover by greeting him by name on the porch as he walked out. There would be no further advantage to masquerading as anything else now.

The next best thing Dusty could think of was to go back and talk to the officer in charge at the army post at Spanish Fork—the one who had mentioned some previous run-ins with Blake. He wasted no time in hitting the road northward, keeping his eyes and ears opened for any chance clues along the way. He tried to buy supplies at Cedar City, but was pointedly snubbed at all the Mormon establishments. The town boasted the first iron refinery built west of the Mississippi, and drew more Gentile craftsmen than most Mormon communities, so he had little trouble finding other sources of supplies. He sold the mule to a passing prospector.

One of the Gentile merchants was bemoaning the fact that he was not allowed to sell alcohol. “These Mormons are so blasted religious that there’s scarcely a saloon in the whole state of Utah,” he griped.

“I’m just as happy you kin buy a meal without going into a drinkin’ establishment,” Dusty told him. “But as far as I’m concerned, half the homes around here ain’t nothing’ but private brothels fer the man of the house.”

“You got something there,” the merchant replied thoughtfully. “Maybe they’re not so all-fired better than everyone else after all. Maybe their avoidance of coffee and alcohol makes them seem so pious that it takes everyone else’s attention off their polygamy.”

“Refraining’ from coffee may seem righteous,” Dusty observe, “but there’s nothing’ in the Bible that indicates that God doesn’t want us drinking coffee. It’s not like it’s so addicting that folks end up stealing and killing ta git it, anyhow.”

The paint wasn’t as good a road horse as Buster was, but Dusty encouraged him along at a fair clip from dawn till dark every day, camping off the road in defensible seclusion by night. He met Major Powell a ways north of Panguitch on June twenty-first. The Major was returning to Kanab to resume the Geological Survey’s expedition down the Colorado after his successful trip to Washington for more funding. He had ridden the railroad to Salt Lake City, and was finishing the journey to Kanab on horseback with several friends. While they ate lunch on the road together, Dusty told the explorer about the discovery of the Escalante River, which really tickled him. “That will impress Congress,” he gloated between bites of jerky that Dusty had offered him.

Chapter 26

Dusty rode into Spanish Fork late in the afternoon of the eighth day after his chance meeting with Major Powell. He left the paint at the livery stable without any trouble, and checked into to a hotel without any problems. He took a warm bath and put on the city outfit he had purchased at St. George. It was already dark by the time he crossed the street and walked a couple of blocks to get a meal at a restaurant. No one challenged him there either. He was beginning to feel uneasy about the change in attitude towards him when Mr. Johnson walked in with two men armed with single barrel shotguns.

"That's him, all right," he called out excitedly as the two leveled their guns at Dusty.

"It's me all right," Dusty replied. "What's this all about?"

"You sent the Indians to burn me out," Johnson answered heatedly. "That's what it's all about!"

"I'm sorry if the Indians burned ya out, Mr. Johnson," Dusty replied. "But I had nothin' ta do with it."

"No! You had nothing ta do with it!" Johnson echoed sarcastically. "That's why their chief was riding your horse."

Dusty felt sick. Evidently Hunting Bear had gone ahead with his threat to drive the settler out. "He had my horse because we traded horses so I could use his ta cross the desert after your wife shot me," Dusty retorted.

"We've got a right to shoot anyone we catch snooping around in our barn," the settler replied. "We shot you there, and we shot an Indian there a couple of weeks later."

"No one was snoopin' around," Dusty replied. "I came there ta see Missy, n' found that you had helped Thomas Blake kidnap 'er."

"How can you say we kidnaped her?" Johnson queried angrily. "It's my responsibility to do what's best for her."

"These people need to know that Missy's not yer daughter, n' she didn't marry Blake, n' you and Blake hauled 'er away against 'er will. Furthermore, that Indian probably came there ta see if Missy was back. If you'd let folks speak ta members of yer household in the open, they wouldn't have had ta do it in the barn. How did ya think the Indians would respond ta shootin' one of their men? By bringin' ya flowers? Looks ta me like ya got exactly what ya asked fer."

"Is Sister Sairy all right?" He asked as an afterthought.

"We all escaped with our lives despite your intentions," Johnson said as the men moved in to arrest Dusty.

"Ya wouldn't have survived if the Indians hadn't wanted ya to, and you know it," Dusty replied, waiting for the armed men across from him to come right up to the heavy oak table where he was seated. As they got there Dusty flipped his edge of the table up against their shotguns, throwing himself on the floor behind the tilted table top. The edge of the table came up so high it prevented either shotgun barrel from dropping enough to stay on target, and a shower of buckshot ripped into the floor several feet behind him as the guns boomed in unison. Knowing how long it took to reload a shotgun, the cowboy rose calmly with his Colt drawn.

"I'd suggest ya drop those things before somebody gits hurt," he ordered. Picking up the shotguns, he backed to the door, keeping the room covered with his Colt. Leaping from the boardwalk, he dropped the guns in a watering trough at the edge of the street. He dashed straight across the street, ran between two buildings, and cut parallel to the road down to the back door of the hotel. Running up the stairs three at a time, he slipped into his room and grabbed up his saddle bags, leaving the old prospecting outfit in a heap on the floor. Slipping back out the door, he ran down to the bath room at the end of the hall, locked the door, dropped his saddlebags out the window. He

slipped feet first out the window. Hanging by his hands from the window sill, he dropped about ten feet to the ground, grabbed the saddle bags, and ran away between some houses. The commotion back on the street warned him that he would not be able to get to the livery undetected, so he walked carefully out of town perpendicular to the highway, scarcely leaving a trail that could be followed. About a mile out into the wilderness, Dusty began to circle towards the Army post near the town.

Dusty slept in a clump of boulders about a half mile from the inactivated Fort Crittenden, at Spanish Fork. It irritated him that he had lost Hunting Bear's horse, but he had every confidence that the Indian would be perfectly capable of retrieving the paint if that became necessary. He arose as dawn streaked the sky, and carried his saddlebags to the Army post, where he was welcomed by a skeleton crew that had been left to maintain possession of the fort. The commanding officer invited him to breakfast with the few soldiers who were there; and Dusty began telling him the story of Missy's kidnaping. The officer was sympathetic, but reminded Dusty that it was a matter of his hearsay word against their actual witnesses, so there was probably nothing he could do except to privately alert Dusty if he gained any knowledge of Blake's or Missy's whereabouts.

Before Dusty got to his being shot, the officer was called away, and Dusty was left to finish breakfast alone. When he came back, he was accompanied by two armed soldiers. "I'm sorry," the officer announced, "but I have got to arrest you for inciting the Indians to attack a settler."

"Why do ya take Johnson's words over mine?" Dusty asked evenly.

"You've got to admit that they've got a good case," the officer answered. "You've already told me enough to establish a motive, and folks are claiming that the horse you left at the livery is Hunting Bear's. Is that true?"

"It's Huntin' Bear's horse," Dusty admitted, "but ya haven't heard me out."

"I'm arresting you, not convicting you," the officer replied. "I will investigate everything both sides have to say, but I'll have to keep you in custody for now. Besides, they'd probably lynch you if I didn't. The U.S. Army will be responsible for your safety here."

The two soldiers were prepared for a scuffle, but Dusty assured them that he would come peaceably. "I'm not afraid of the justice here as long as you don't turn me over to the Mormons," he told them. Receiving assurance that he would get a fair trial, Dusty raised his hands and let them remove his Colt. He felt totally vulnerable without it.

Dusty was led to the post jail and put into an empty cell. "Just let me know if you need anything reasonable, and we'll get it for you," the young guard assured him.

"I'd like my Bible from my saddle bags, n' maybe a key to my room, sir," Dusty replied.

"I'll get your Bible," the soldier agreed, "but the last guy we gave a key to left without giving it back, so we don't have an extra one," he quipped.

At least the guard isn't unpleasant, Dusty mused.

That afternoon the commanding officer came to Dusty's cell to hear his side of the story. Dusty told him everything from his conversations with Sister Sarah and Hunting Bear to his reason for coming to Spanish Fork in the first place.

"Do you have any witnesses of where you were on June twentieth?" the officer asked.

"Probably not," Dusty said thoughtfully. "But I ate dinner with Major Powell near Panguitch on June twenty first. If I had been enny where near Junction on twentieth, there's no way I could have gotten to Panguitch by the twenty-first."

"It may take a while to check that out," the officer mused.

"Try the telly-graph ta Kanab," Dusty urged: "But don't wait until the Major starts his crew down the Colorado again, or I'll be in here forever."

"The bed's soft and the food's good," the officer teased, but Dusty felt that he believed his story.

The telegraph was sent that afternoon, and the Major responded two days later when he learned that he had a message at the telegraph office:

CAN CERTIFY THAT I ATE LUNCH WITH DUSTY WINTERS 15 MILES NORTH OF PANGUITCH JUNE 21, 1872 / WILL VOUCH FOR HIS CHARACTER ANYTIME.

MAJOR J.W. POWELL, U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

The officer came to release Dusty immediately after receiving the telegram. "As far as I'm concerned the case is closed," he informed Dusty. "I'll inform the Mormons that anything that happens to you will be investigated." He had already taken custody of Hunting Bear's horse, and advised Dusty to get the Paint and Buster exchanged again as soon as possible. He also promised Dusty that he would be trying unofficially to locate Blake and Missy while the cowpoke went back to the Indian village to exchange the horse with Hunting Bear.

Chapter 27

Dusty resented taking the time away from his search for Missy to find Hunting Bear, but felt he had no choice. He started for the Fremont as soon as he was released from the army post, and was riding east along the wagon rut five days later when a group of Indians in full war paint stumbled across his trail. He was over a mile ahead of the yelling savages, and felt he could outrun them with Hunting Bear's Paint. After twenty minutes all the Indians but one had dropped back quite a ways. The lone Indian appeared to be gaining on him, despite an all out run. Finally, Dusty cut south of the rut into some low hills where he could make his defense. Passing a good place for an ambush, Dusty circled back through the rocks and trees to the spot and hunkered down with his Winchester to wait for the faster Indian. Two or three minutes later Hunting Bear came charging into view on Buster. Dusty laid his rifle in the rocks and stepped into full view of the chief, who drew up astonished. The two just stared at each other for a moment, and burst out into guffaws that would have done justice to a frontier Saloon.

"My brother," Dusty finally eked out between laughs. "You seek my scalp?"

Hunting Bear was off Buster in a second, and the horse stepped up to nuzzle the cowboy. "Your scalp would spoil my collection," Hunting Bear laughed as they sat down to wait for the rest of the raiding party.

It was with great difficulty that Dusty was able to convince Hunting Bear to stop harassing the few settlers along the Fremont. "There are bad men everywhere," he reminded the chief. "You do not punish your whole tribe for one man's wrong. Would you kill all settlers because one shot an Indian."

Hunting Bear listened patiently, and finally grunted. "We will return to our village, but the white men have been warned."

"I will explain this ta the soldiers," Dusty replied as he transferred his gear from the paint to Buster.

"No wonder Buster outrun Paint," Hunting Bear remarked at testing the weight of Dusty's saddlebags. After quick good-byes Dusty mounted Buster and headed for Spanish Fork while Hunting Bear's war party headed home.

Dusty arrived at Spanish Fork five days later, to find that two more settlers had been driven out of the Fremont valley. The Officer in charge was planning a disciplinary counter attack when Dusty talked to him.

"I don't think ya have anything more to fear from Huntin' Bear," Dusty pled. "Johnson shot one of his men who was probably tryin' to find out if there was enny news of Missy from sister Sarah. What would ya expect from the Indians if ya shot one of them? Hunting Bear told me that the white men had been warned, and he would stop harassin' 'em, but if ya come down there looking fer trouble, they'll consider it self-defense ta resist."

"Do you really think he'll stop?" the officer asked.

"If the settlers let him alone," Dusty replied. "He calls me his brother, n' he gave me his word."

"Can the settlers go back safely?"

"I think all but Johnson would be OK," Dusty replied thoughtfully. "But if they rile the Indians up again they're asking fer trouble. Missy was best friends with Huntin' Bear's wife, n' they resent what Mr. Johnson did to 'er. I don't know what would happen if he went back there."

"I think we'll let well enough alone," the officer announced after a moment's thought.

"Thank you," Dusty replied with a sigh of relief.

"By the way," the officer said offhandedly. "There's some fairly credible rumors that Blake is swimming with the big fish in Salt Lake City."

"Thanks," Dusty replied as his eyes lighted up. "I'll git started fer there right away."

"You be careful," the officer warned.

Chapter 28

By the time Dusty reached Salt Lake City, his strategy had changed. Blake had made it very plain that he didn't actually care for Missy, and the cowboy was certain he had kidnaped her primarily to spite him for interfering with his treatment of the girl at Junction. If Dusty spoke openly against Blake's behavior, the vindictive man was likely to try to taunt him at some time when he thought he had the upper hand. Dusty would make his business known, and hope the pompous churchman would call his hand.

The first thing Dusty did when he came into town was to purchase a couple of hacksaw blades. He slipped one into the lining of his left boot. He used his knife to slit a few of the stitches that held the sole of his right boot on, and worked the other blade between the sole and the under sole of the boot. When this task was done to his satisfaction, he began asking everyone he met if they knew where he could find a churchman named Blake, who had kidnaped his fiancée. Most people pointedly ignored him, looking the other way. A few stared unbelievably at him, and once in a while some well-meaning soul would warn him to be careful what he accused a churchman of, or he could get arrested. Dusty kept it up here and there throughout town most of the day, slipping out of the city to make camp after dark. The next day he left Buster in a patch of graze a ways from town, hid his guns and tack nearby, and walked into town. He went right up to the temple inquiring for the whereabouts of Mr. Blake.

Before noon a crusty looking individual wearing a star on his vest asked Dusty why he was looking for President Blake.

"Because he kidnaped a woman from Junction to try to force her ta marry him," he replied.

"Why don't you come over to the office and file charges?" the wily Sheriff invited.

"Sure will!" Dusty replied, telling the lawman what had happened as they walked to the Sheriff's office and jail.

Once inside, the Sheriff drew his gun, and had a deputy search Dusty. Gleeefully snaking the saw blade out of Dusty's boot liner, he handed the boot back for Dusty to put on. "That's where they all put it," he remarked nonchalantly as Dusty tried to look disappointed, "Thought you might be better'n most."

"What's the charges?" Dusty asked, taking a seat on the cot in the otherwise empty cell.

"Officially," the Sheriff replied, "Disturbing the peace. "Unofficially," he continued, "You know as well as I do."

"You mean you arrest ennyone who objects ta immorality in yer church's leadership?" Dusty asked innocently. "I wouldn't wanna be associated with any religion that sanctioned immorality."

"If you knew your future, you wouldn't want to be associated with anyone around here," the Sheriff retorted, stepping back out the door.

Dusty was handed a plate of fairly good food for supper. The jail was guarded throughout the evening, so he rolled up in a blanket and catnapped. About nine o'clock the guard slipped out the door to go home, after checking on his prisoner. After a few minutes, Dusty crawled out of his blanket and fished the saw blade out from the toe of his right boot. Dipping his bandanna in his drinking water and wrapping the first bar with it, he quietly sawed all but through the bottom of the bar in less than half an hour. He had four bars in a row ready within a couple of hours. When he was done, he packed a putty of spit, iron filings, and dirt from the floor into the defects to hide his handiwork before returning to his cot to sleep away the rest of the night.

Throughout the next day he badmouthed Blake to his jailors mercilessly. He told them Blake was a pompous hypocrite, an immoral abuser of helpless women, a deceiver of the upright, and everything else insulting that he could think of. He wanted the vindictive churchman as angry as possible, and it worked.

About eight o'clock that evening Blake knocked softly at the jail door, and was admitted by the jailer. Brushing a trace of rain off his coat, he came up to face the prisoner. The man was drunk with triumphant rage. "Hello, you loudmouthed cowpoke," he chided Dusty. "Thought you could outsmart me, didn't you?"

"I'd beat the stuffin' out of ya if I weren't locked behind these bars," Dusty replied, egging him on.

"Write that down for the trial, will you, Jake?" Blake urged the jailer. "See what a vicious criminal he is?"

"Is it criminal to try to rescue a woman who's been kidnaped by a religious hypocrite?" Dusty asked.

"May I inform you that this woman came to this city because she married me?"

"You brought her here tied hand and foot because she refused ta marry ya," Dusty charged.

On and on they bantered, Dusty doing everything he could to stretch out the encounter until it was time for the guard to leave. It ended up being nothing short of an oral bar room brawl, with Dusty getting in most of the licks, only letting his opponent score a point whenever he seemed ready to break off the conversation. Finally, about five minutes before nine, Dusty suddenly asked, "How is Missy, anyhow?"

"She's really happy to be rid of you," Blake smirked. "She and I are getting along just great together," he added with triumphant grin.

"Yeh, I could tell," Dusty replied sarcastically, "by all those scratches on yer face."

Blake was enraged. "She'll find out what happens to insubordinate Mormon women."

"She's not a Mormon," Dusty replied. "She never joined the LDS church, n' she never married you, and you'll

answer to me if anything happens to 'er."

"You won't be around to see what happens to her," Blake chuckled. "She'll either be my wife or atone for her stubbornness with her own blood."

That one shut Dusty up. "So that's what the blood atonement is," he thought as Blake strutted out the door with the jailor, feeling totally victorious.

Dusty stood there in the darkness, listening for which way their horses went. Then, jerking the filed bars loose at the bottoms, he bent them out of the way and sprawled out the window. Pausing long enough to pull the bars back in place, he headed off in the direction the horses had gone at a dog trot. The sky had cleared, and a child could have followed the tracks in the damp earth, even under the muted light of the last quarter moon. They led him straight to a large white house on the north side of town.

Chapter 29

Dusty's dilemma was that he would be a wanted man by dawn. He could either try to find Missy now and try to escape to his secret camp tonight, or go back to the campsite for his horse and his guns, and return to take Missy by force tomorrow. He decided that tomorrow would be too dangerous, after his jail break. Besides, they might move the girl when he turned up missing.

Leaving his boots outside the house, Dusty tried the back door. It was locked. He tried a couple of side windows that were also locked. Slipping barefoot to the front door, he cracked it opened easily. Easing it back slowly so it wouldn't creak, he slipped in and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. There was an ornate wooden staircase to the left of the door, and Dusty slipped over to it. Feeling the carpeted treads with his hands, he slipped noiselessly up to the second story, where he paused to listen. Soft snores came from under one door, heavy breathing from another. Tiptoeing beyond the opened door of an unoccupied bedroom, he detected muffled voices through a heavy door at the back of the house. Creeping closer, he could make out Blake's gloating voice, too muffled to be understood.

Easing the door opened, Dusty found himself in a double closet with another door at the opposite end. Blake was bragging that Dusty would soon disappear. Then Missy's voice; "No matter what happens to Dusty, I'll never be your wife."

There was the sound of a scuffle, and Dusty tried the door, but it was locked. Then an oath, and a threat about atoning for that. Then someone was stomping towards the door. Dusty slipped behind the clothing in the closet as Blake opened the door. The angry bully, turned to taunt, "I'll see that Dusty dies tomorrow for that," before shutting the door and turning the key in the lock.

Dusty waited until Blake had time to get to bed before trying the door again. The key had been left in the lock, and he entered the room, closing the door behind him. "Missy," he whispered, and she was in his arms in a second flat. After a long kiss, he broke it off.

"Are ya OK?" he asked.

"Yep," she said.

"We gotta slip away tonight. Git what ya need."

"This nightgown is all I got," she answered. "He sees to it that I don't have anything to run away in." Dusty took off his shirt, and she put it on over the light nightgown as quickly as she could in the dark. "That's better," she said. "There's no windows in this room, so we'll have to go out through the hall."

They slipped through the door together, and Dusty locked it, leaving the key just as he had found it. Then they slipped past Blake's closed door, past the other bedrooms, and down the stairs to the front porch. Once outside, Dusty retrieved his boots, and they started through the city streets in the darkest part of the night. Other than an occasional barking dog, they had no trouble reaching the edge of town undetected. Dusty took Missy's hand and led her over the rocks in an attempt to slow the trackers that would be coming as soon as it was light. The first streaks of dawn were showing as they reached Dusty's hidden campground.

Handing Missy his city clothes from the saddle bags, he stepped behind the rocks while she put them on. "A bit of overkill for a disguise," she laughed embarrassedly as she returned his other shirt.

"This spot ain't good enough ta hide in, we gotta keep movin'," Dusty commented. So they rode double into the trees and headed southwest for the closest hill country. Dusty was never more careful to avoid leaving any signs that could be followed, and he circled back in rocky areas to leave false spurs several times. He paused frequently to study their back trail at strategic vantage points, but as far as he could tell they were not being followed yet. Still, he knew that their situation was downright precarious.

"Missy," he finally said, "we're in the clear fer now, but we're wearing Buster down, so I'm goin' ta walk while you ride. If they get wind of us, I want you ta ride like the wind while I hide. "You'll have the rifle, I'll have the Colt. Try ta get in touch with Huntin' Bear if we git separated. He'll protect ya until I git there." Turning a deaf ear to her objections, he started out on foot while she followed wearily on Buster.

The fleeing couple went until dusk without seeing any trace of civilization in the rocky forested hills. Dusty finally chose a campsite in a small canyon that would be virtually invisible from the surrounding area, where he built a fire for coffee to wash down some stale jerky. He put on his jacket and gave her the blankets to sleep under. She slept soundly, but he slept fitfully, waking often to listen for pursuers.

The next morning they had a breakfast of coffee and hot cakes before reading a chapter in the Bible and praying together for the first time. Then they sat down to discuss their situation. "I'll be considered a criminal fer breakin' jail," he said. "First, we gotta be sure we don't git caught. Then we gotta get another horse so we can stay together if they find us."

"I've got to get some decent clothes," Missy added.

"And," he continued, "we gotta get married, but how?"

"The way polygamy desecrates marriage, I wouldn't want the Mormons to marry us, even if they would," she mused. "Aren't there any other churches in Utah?"

"There's some in Salt Lake City," Dusty replied, standing up and whistling for Buster. "But we don't dare go back there."

"Say, Missy," he said as she brought the bridle, "Yer hardly limpin' at all."

"Oh," she answered. "It's just force of habit. Mary and I were in a runaway wagon that tipped over. It broke her back and bruised my leg where I could hardly walk. Mother insisted that I keep that limp until we could get away. I just kept on limping after I got better, even after Mom died. I figured the right guy wouldn't let it stop him, and the wrong ones wouldn't bother me. It's worked pretty well, and it's likely to reappear if we get caught," she assured him.

Chapter 30

Dusty's objective in starting out in a southeastern direction from Salt Lake City had simply been to gain the cover of the nearest forested hill country. Now he wasn't sure where to go. He thought of striking northeast to Wyoming

through the Uinta Mountain wilderness, but Missy would need proper warm clothing before they could even consider such a trip. They could go more directly east through the desert to Colorado, but the risk of discovery by hostile Mormons or marauding Indians would be significant that way. They could continue south through the forests to Hunting Bear's deserts, but they would still be fugitives in the Utah Territory. Whatever they did, he was getting desperate to get married before their reputations were ruined. Besides that, he hardly dared to allow himself to look at Missy, let alone touch her when they stopped at night.

When the cowboy discussed their options with Missy, she told him she had some things back at Junction that they ought to pick up. "Several hundred dollars in gold, my mother's wedding ring, my father's will, and some papers Mom thought might be valuable someday," she said. "Mom told me she never let Mr. Johnson know she had them."

"The Indians are supposed ta have burned the house," he reminded her.

"I always suspected they would," she told him, "so I hid them in a glass jar behind a loose block in the spring house. It'll be there." They struck south through the forested wilderness keeping east of the main Mormon corridor.

That morning they struck an Indian trail that was going in the right direction, and they were able to make fair time, even with Dusty walking. He estimated that they would be about even with Provo by evening, and considered slipping into town after dark to try to get help from one of the Gentile traders, but Missy nixed that. "We're still too close to Salt Lake City for that," she argued. He had to admit that she was right.

At dusk that evening Dusty spotted a poorly situated campfire in the valley below them. "That traveler is a greenhorn," he told Missy. "Let's find out who it is. Who knows, maybe he kin help us."

Approaching the traveler, Dusty asked Missy to hold Buster while he slipped Indian style up to the camp site. The man appeared to be unarmed, and was reading a book. As Dusty got closer, he was convinced that it was a Bible.

"Hello!" Dusty called out as he stepped into the light of the fire. The traveler jumped up.

"Whew! You startled me."

"Sorry," Dusty replied. "Just wanted ta know if that was a Bible yer readin'."

"The Word of God!" the man replied. "Are you a Christian?"

"I am," Dusty answered enthusiastically. "I read my Bible every day."

"I'm George Dodge," the stranger said, offering Dusty a hand, "preacher of the gospel and territorial Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the U.S. Government."

"Dusty Winters here," Dusty said, shaking the hand heartily.

"Praise the Lord, and right out here where there's not another soul for fifty miles."

"Don't count on it," Dusty warned. "There's always dangerous people about, and not necessarily Indians. Did you say that you are a minister?"

"I am, Sir. At your service in the name of Christ."

"Do you...Kin you marry people?" Dusty asked.

"Only in the Lord, Son," Dodge replied.

“Missy and I are both Christians,” Dusty assured him. “She’s back there in the trees waiting on me. We’re running away from a Mormon that kidnaped ’er and tried ta make ’er a plural wife. He got me thrown in jail, but I escaped n’ rescued Missy. They’re hunting fer us right now, I’m sure.”

“I’d have to pray about it,” Dodge replied thoughtfully. “Why don’t you bring Missy here so we can talk.”

“Mr. Dodge,” Dusty answered, “Yer camp fire is inviting every Indian, prospector, outlaw, n’ the folks that are hunting fer us ta investigate it. I saw it miles back. Would ya mind coming along with us while I find us a safer campsite?”

“Whatever you say, but I thought this was great.”

“It’s a great place ta lose your scalp or get bushwhacked,” Dusty told him. “Come along with us, and I’ll find a better spot, but we’ll have ta git several miles from here. Saddle up n’ bring your horse,” the seasoned trails-man urged.

Dusty led the preacher back to Missy, who was glad it was too dark for him to see her in her outlandishly ill-fitting men’s clothing.

“Missy,” Dusty explained, “This is Mr. George Dodge. He’s the preacher we’ve been a’prayin’ fer.”

“Really?” Missy squealed, forgetting her appearance for the moment. “Glad to meet you,” she said, recovering her poise.

“Glad to meet you, too,” He replied, “Even in these unorthodox circumstances.”

It took Dusty about two hours to find a good camping spot, but he didn’t want it anywhere near the beacon the preacher had displayed. He finally stumbled on a wooded spot surrounded by large boulders on a mountain stream. He explained that they simply could not have a fire that night, so they ate the last of their jerky, and turned in for the night. Missy bedded down a ways from the men, and Dusty stayed awake for some time, listening for any sounds of danger.

Dusty allowed them a fire in the morning, and Missy fixed coffee and hot cakes for everyone, apologizing for her appearance repeatedly. Dodge observed their wholesome behavior, and their reverence for the Scriptures, and detected a real love for the Lord in their prayers. He felt satisfied, even enthusiastic about this marriage.

Chapter 31

Dusty and Missy told Mr. Dodge their entire story that morning. He was very interested in cultivating their good relationship with Hunting Bear’s tribe. The minister also had some suggestions for their marriage.

“Your marriage day is one you will want to remember with real pleasure. With a little patience we can make it that way even out here. I can ride into Provo and buy Missy some suitable clothes. Not a wedding gown, but something nice and practical that she can wear on down the trail. If you’ve got the money, I can even get you a ring, though it might need resizing later.”

“If you don’t mind, we need a horse a lot more’n we need a ring. Missy has ’er mother’s ring, which will have ta do fer now. Why don’t ya git ’er several outfits n’ a horse n’ saddle?” Dusty requested as he fished more than enough cash from his saddlebags. “We’ll stay here n’ make some jerky.”

“Fine,” the minister agreed. “I know a fine Christian lady in Provo that would pick out some clothes for Missy for us, if you’ll just tell me what size to get. I’ll find a good horse. I may not be very trail wise yet, but I’m a fair judge of

horseflesh.”

“I’ve never had any store bought clothes before,” Missy admitted. “But I think size six would fit.” So Dodge started out on horseback for Provo while Dusty killed a deer for him and Missy to jerk and smoke.

Dodge did not show up that evening, but Dusty and Missy were so busy preparing a large amount of jerky for the trail that they didn’t have time to worry. The preacher arrived so early the next morning that Dusty asked where he had camped.

“About a quarter mile downstream,” he answered. “Close enough to observe your behavior when the preacher’s not around. You are every bit as upright as I had hoped.”

Dusty was impressed with the new horse. The little dun was a well-muscled gelding about fifteen or sixteen hands tall without any glaring unsoundness. His ears pricked forward and he took a friendly step or two towards Missy when she approached him. She absolutely fell in love with him. The saddle was a light western one that would be practical on the frontier trails. There were even tooled leather saddle bags. “He actually belonged to the lady that bought your clothes for you,” the preacher told her. “She’s getting a bit too old to ride, and really wanted you to have him, tack and all. His name is Nugget, and she says he’s pure gold.”

Missy slipped up the creek with one of her new outfits for a bath. She returned in a tasteful beige outfit, rosy cheeked and delighted. She was downright beautiful in properly fitting clothes. Dusty went the other way for his bath, and had to wash his best clothes in the stream. He left them on a rock to dry in the sun.

By lunch time they were about ready for the wedding, when Missy suddenly burst out, “Oh, I just thought of something. I want to be baptized before we get married.”

“Me too,” Dusty chimed in enthusiastically. “Would ya baptize us together, Mr. Dodge?”

The two of them were baptized, “Unto Jesus, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” in a little pool in the stream. Missy had to put her dry outfit on to be married.

The ceremony was simple. Mr. Dodge read Ephesians chapter five--about Christ and the church--without comment, and cut straight to the vows. Missy’s voice was clear and positive when she responded, “I do.” Dusty’s had a hitch in it.

“I pronounce you man and wife,” the minister finished up. “Now you may kiss.” Dusty gathered his wife into his arms, and when the matrimonial kiss was over, Mr. Dodge was gone. A new blanket and a certificate of marriage was on a rock beside the fire, and they were alone. “I didn’t even git ta give him nothing’ fer his services,” Dusty lamented.

“We can mail him something later,” Missy mused. “Meanwhile, we need to decide what to do.”

“We can’t stay here.” Dusty told her. “That preacher, bless his heart, probably left a trail that a blind man could follow with his fingertips.” So they packed up and headed south. Nugget proved to be perfectly well behaved, and appeared to have limitless stamina. They made at least twenty miles that afternoon.

Dusty watched for a good camping spot early in the evening. He found one as scenic and secure as any he had ever seen, and they were done with dinner by dusk. The warm flickering light of the campfire and the music of the babbling stream lent a special enchantment to the evening. After kissing and hugging to their hearts content, they spread their blankets together on some sweet smelling pine boughs under the splendor of a brilliantly starry sky. Never was there a more spectacularly glorious marriage suite than the one they shared that night.

The morning was brisk, and neither Dusty nor Missy wanted to get up. They just lay their snuggling, and enjoying each other’s warmth. Finally Dusty crawled out and lit a fire for coffee. When he looked up, Missy had climbed on

to a boulder at the edge of the camp site. "Watcha doin', Sweetheart?" he asked as he joined her.

"I just want to fix this place in my memory," she said. "It was so lovely," she said as the tears welled up in her eyes. Dusty held her close as she cried a few happy tears. Finally, her sentiments satisfied, she pulled away and they ate breakfast. Then they were on the trail again.

Chapter 32

With their immediate needs supplied, Dusty and Missy struck out in earnest for the Fremont valley, keeping parallel to the southerly Mormon corridor, but some twenty to forty miles east of the main road. Dusty rode carefully, meandering along in a way that would leave as little trail as possible. Missy got exasperated. "Why don't you lead in a straighter line, without wasting so much time?" she asked.

"Ta keep from leaving a trail," he replied. "Let me show you something."

Circling around to return to their own path about a mile back, he showed her how much of a trail she was leaving, even when he had picked the general path. There were horse tracks in mud that could have easily been avoided by going three or four feet either side of a soft spot. There were broken twigs from riding too close to clumps of low vegetation. There was crushed grass where she could have ridden on rocks or harder earth just to the side of the tracks she had left.

"Why didn't you show me before?" she asked. "Won't they find us now?"

"They lost us early," he replied. "They probably figured we went into the Uintas. I left an obvious trail for a few miles that direction before I rode into Salt Lake City that last morning. After that bit of rain, they probably couldn't tell just when it was laid. But ya kin count on them tracking us in their minds. They'll be looking for us down around Marysvale n' all along the western Fremont Valley, as well as at Kanab, unless I miss my guess."

"You mean it's going to get worse?"

"I think so, Missy. If they come after us, you and Nugget head into the desert without leavin' enny more trail than ya have ta. I'll lead 'em away, and then come n' find ya."

For the next couple of days Dusty got Missy to lead, while he showed her how to pick her way through the landscape, scarcely leaving a clue that she had been there. She was already an excellent rider, and now she was becoming a fair trails woman. Under Dusty's tutelage she quickly became as good as a lot of men that fancied themselves experts on the trail. It slowed them down a bit, but Dusty was downright proud of his wife's new ability.

When they reached the headwaters of the Muddy River, Dusty took the lead again. The small stream increased in size as they followed it southeast along the edge of the mountains and out of the forest into the desert where few men cared to go. "You kin foller this river back ta the forest if enny thing happens ta me," Dusty told Missy, "or you kin foller it ta the Fremont n' cut back towards Junction n' the country ya know."

"Don't you let anything happen to yourself, Dusty," she shuddered, clasping him intimately to herself for a reassuring hug. "I just couldn't stand it."

Two days into the desert, Dusty began cutting more directly south by Hondu Arch. Skirting the arch, he led Missy over Cedar Mountain, where they spent a day resting up before their final jaunt down to Junction from the north. He figured that this approach would not be likely to be watched. They crossed the desert to the edge of Capital Reef the next day, and waited till after dark to descend into the Fremont canyon just east of Junction. They camped where Dusty had originally camped in the area. As before, Dusty killed a deer the next morning, and they spent the day replenishing their supply of jerky in the seclusion of the canyon.

Early the next morning they filled their saddlebags with fresh jerky and rode to the edge of the canyon overlooking Junction. Leaving their horses out of sight, they climbed to a good vantage point on the edge that overlooked the burned out homestead. Dusty studied the settlement west of the farm for an hour or so before he decided that it was at least temporarily deserted. When he was finally satisfied that it was safe, they moved in for a look at the ruins of the burned out homestead. Missy went directly to the spring house, which was mostly underground and had suffered no damage. She threw the door open and groped for the loose block in the dark. She rocked it back and forth with her fingers, working it out of its place until it fell to the floor. She found her jar of keepsakes and papers in the hollowed out space behind the block just as she had left it years ago. Replacing the block, she put the ring in her pocket and the rest in her saddle bags before joining Dusty in sifting through the ruins.

The couple spent most of the morning collecting whatever salvageable iron cookware and tools they could find, which they stored in the spring house in case the Johnsons should choose to come back. "I feel sorry for them," Missy told Dusty. "They put everything they had into this and lost it all."

Finally, Dusty brought Missy up to the church. "I want to get rid of any false marriage record while there's no one else around," he told her. After a couple minutes of searching, they found the marriage records. "Thomas Blake and Missy Johnson" was the last marriage recorded.

"I didn't marry him," Missy growled angrily.

"Think we should burn the records?" he asked her.

Looking over his shoulder, she noticed that the false record was the only entry on that page so far. "All we have to do is remove this page," she pointed out, "and it will be gone without destroying anyone else's record." So Dusty carefully cut the page out with his knife, and Missy worked the remaining edge out of the sewn binding piece by piece so no one would ever suspect a page had been removed.

"That was a great idea," she told him. "I'm relieved that it's done and over with."

Being this close to Hunting Bear's village, they started across the desert in that direction, finding the trail to the village within a few hours. Missy could hardly wait to visit Bashful Doe and share a few womanly words with her.

When they stopped for the night, she handed her mother's ring to Dusty. It was of heavy yellow gold and looked as good as new. He slipped it on her left ring finger, and it fit perfectly. "Now you may kiss," he reiterated in a perfect rendition of the preacher's voice; that made her giggle as he pulled her into a kiss that she returned with newlywed passion.

"We'll git another when we kin," Dusty promised. But Missy wanted to keep it this way.

"It's the only link I have with my real parents," she explained, "Mom didn't get to wear it very long, so I'll wear it for her."

The couple arrived at the Indian village the next evening, and were received warmly by the Hunting Bear and Bashful Doe. A vacant wickiup was provided for their use while they were there. When Hunting Bear expressed surprise at Dusty having found Missy, Dusty explained that he prayed to God, "and He put thoughts in my mind that led me to Missy."

"Maybe your God is strong!" Hunting Bear exclaimed.

The Indian chief was impressed with Nugget. "Too good of horse for woman," he remarked. "Should be warrior's horse."

"She might need a good horse, my brother," Dusty replied. "The white men are after us because I broke out of

their jail, and Struttin' Cock wants ta hurt me by hurtin' Missy."

The following morning one of the Indians was leaving to do some trading at Kanab. Dusty remembered that he had forgotten his gratuity to Mr. Dodge for marrying them, and posted a letter with a ten dollar note addressed to him at the Indian Bureau in Salt Lake City. Missy posted a card of thanks to the Christian lady in Provo that had chosen her clothes so well. The Indian came back a week later with a telegram from Mr. Dodge:

RELAX / BLAKE DEPOSED / NO WINTERS RECORD IN SLC. / LETTER TO FOLLOW
DODGE

Both Dusty and Missy suspected a trap, and decided to wait for the letter before exposing themselves. The problem was how to get the letter. They finally contrived to send an Indian with a pack horse to Kanab to buy a couple of hundred-pound sacks of flour to be donated to the village. He carried the cash from Dusty as well as a signed note asking for Dusty's mail. He returned about eight days later with an official looking letter from the U.S. Department of Indian Affairs:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Winters,

I'll never forget that wonderful wedding in the wilderness. It was my favorite, I think.

Thanks for the ten dollar gratuity. It wasn't necessary, but God used it to show me how to contact you. Please keep in touch by mail, wherever you go. You were such an encouragement to me. I wish my wife could meet you.

I heard rumors that Brigham Young had dethroned a younger cohort named Blake, who had become so ambitious that Young perceived him as a future threat to his leadership. He may have made advances to one of Brigham's many wives as well. On investigation, I have on good authority that Young stripped Mr. Thomas Blake of his advanced status in the LDS organization, and "banished" him to Arizona to oversee the LDS missions there.

I checked the court records in Salt Lake City, and found there was no record of your arrest. Apparently, whatever Blake was planning to do was going to be done off the record so it could not be traced. You may be persona non grata, but you are not a wanted man, at least not in the official sense. I'm sure Missy still wants you.

I would like for Dusty to consider working as an official scout for me at the Indian Bureau. His wilderness skills, and both of your abilities to befriend the Indians, would be invaluable to the government's objectives.

We would love to have you at our church in Salt Lake City as well. Please pray together about it.

In Christ's service,

Rev. George W. Dodge

Utah Superintendent of Indian Affairs

"I guess we've been a'runnin' fer nothin'," Dusty apologized to Missy.

"After the first day or two, anyway," she answered cheerfully, "But it sure made for a great wedding and wonderful honeymoon. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Dusty and Missy left the Indian village for Panguitch the next morning, intending to work their way up the main road to Salt Lake City as quickly as reasonably possible. Missy purchased a team and a buckboard wagon with some of the money from her jar, so she would not have to ride side-saddle in civilization. They would sell it again when they got to the Salt Lake. They were able to put the horses up in livery stables and stay in hotels whenever they desired, although both of them really preferred cuddling up together under the stars in secluded campsites along the way. It took them about two weeks to reach Salt Lake City.

Dusty and Missy applied at the Office of Indian Affairs on a Monday morning. Mr. Dodge greeted them with enthusiasm. "I hope you are coming to take the job we offered you, Dusty," he said.

"We're here to discuss it, Mr. Dodge. Exactly what would I be doing?"

"First," he replied, "You'd accompany me to the Indian villages as I try to improve relationships between the government and the Indians throughout Utah. You would be responsible for scouting, choosing routes and campsites, and insuring the safety of our party as much as possible. You might be called on to track down bad Indians that have raided mails, wagon trains, and settlers. And you would be expected to promote peace with the natives in a non-official capacity."

"I'd only do it as long as I thought the Indians were bein' treated fairly," Dusty answered. "I won't have nothin' to do with punishin' 'em fer retaliating against atrocities committed against 'em, and I won't participate in enny activity that I am not satisfied is just."

"Dusty," Dodge assured him, "I am committed to the fair treatment of the Indians. I want to be able to look them in the eye without reproach when I tell them about the love of Christ, and I'll resign my post and apologize to them if I can't do that in my official capacity."

"Kin we live safely here in the Mormon headquarters? Will Missy be safe while we are away?"

"So far, the Mormons have not harmed the fundamental Christians in the area. There are Episcopalian, Methodist, and Baptist churches here. Frankly, even if they wanted to, they want statehood bad enough to refrain from angering Congress. We'll help you find a place to live, and I think Missy'll be safer here than out on the frontier," Dodge assured him.

"If we kin git a suitable place to live, I'll take the job," Dusty agreed.

"Good," Dodge replied. "Come to our house for lunch, and we'll start looking for a home for you this afternoon."

The statesman minister escorted them on foot to his home, a well-built frame house on a quiet street lined with nice shade trees. "Honey," he called as he entered the front door. "This is Dusty Winters and his wife, Missy. Dusty's going to work for the Department, and Missy will be needing a friend."

"Welcome for lunch," Mrs. Dodge responded. "George talks about you so much that I feel I already know you. Missy and I can be temporary widows together while you guys go around flaunting your scalps to the Indians. There's a vacant cottage just around the corner that would be just perfect, if you want to rent."

The two couples enjoyed a light lunch of soup and bread together, while Dodge told them about the church. "We have about twenty members," he stated proudly. "You guys would be a ten percent increase."

"We'll certainly give it a try," Dusty and Missy agreed together.

Dodge's sermons were filled with the Word of God, the love of God, and the Spirit of God. The congregation was close knit in their isolation from like-minded Christians in this Mormon stronghold. Dusty and Missy gained new understandings of the Bible regularly, and thrived in this spiritual environment. And Dusty did a credible job of filling the pulpit on the few occasions when Dodge was ill. This was bliss, except that Dusty and Dodge had to be away on government business entirely too much to suit their wives.

Dusty didn't just guide the Indian Affairs superintendent, he taught him. He showed him his own amateurish trail, much as he had shown Missy, and then he showed how to avoid advertising his presence. He taught him how to evaluate the signs of the trail, and how to pick a secure camp site. And although the man was an eastern city slicker, he became acceptable to ride with. "You'll do to take along now," Dusty finally complimented him.

One evening Missy asked the Dodges for dinner. During the conversation, Dusty dug the papers out of Missy's jar. "Do ya have enny idea what these are?" he asked the Indian Agent.

After looking them over, Dodge exclaimed, "These are founding stock certificates for a bank in Chicago. If it's still operational, they could be worth thousands of dollars. I'll wire my broker in Washington and find out what they're worth."

A few days later he took the couple aside after church. "That bank has thrived, and the stock has divided several times since its inception. You have about ten thousand dollars there, and more to come if you hang on to it."

The couple had no need for any more than Dusty's salary supplied, so they had the certificates transferred to Missy's name, and left them alone.

Chapter 34

When Mr. Dodge decided to invite all the Indian chiefs from the territory for a discussion, he sent Dusty down to talk Hunting Bear into attending. When Missy heard where he was going, she insisted on going along. "Bashful Doe is about due," she reminded Dusty as she knitted a warm newborn outfit and a matching blanket.

The couple decided to take their own horses, and follow the general path they had taken on their nuptial flight. It was a second honeymoon, a time of reminiscence and re-commitment to each other and to God.

They spent an emotional evening at their wedding night campsite. They took a detour to meet the Christian woman who had sold Nugget to them. They found that someone was attempting to revive the old Johnson homestead, but they did not chance stirring up a conflict by revealing their proximity to the area. After traveling more than three weeks, they finally reached the Indian village.

Bashful Doe was the proud mother of a two-week old son. "Proud" didn't do justice to Hunting Bear's attitude. The Indian mother really appreciated the white woman's thoughtful gift, and cooed over her baby in the little knit outfit just like a white woman would have done.

Dusty took the opportunity to explain the love of God in giving His only Son to die for our sins to Hunting Bear. The Indian grunted without giving the slightest indication of whether he appreciated it or not. At least he didn't appear to be angry at Dusty's "Preaching."

Hunting Bear consented to come to the proposed meeting with Dodge, even agreeing to urge some of the other chiefs to accompany him. With Dusty's mission accomplished, the white couple struck out for the Mormon corridor northwards, arriving at the hotel in Panguitch three days later.

Missy felt too tired to eat that evening, so Dusty had dinner alone at the restaurant. Half way through his solitary dinner he saw a man enter the room, look around, and leave abruptly. If I didn't know better, he thought, I'd swear that was the evening jailer that guarded me in Salt Lake City.

Dusty bought a newspaper before returning to their hotel room. Missy was gone when he got there. Must be getting a bath, he thought. Sure left things in a mess. He flopped on the bed and read the paper while he waited for her return. After an hour or so he became anxious, finally asking a woman he chanced upon in the hall to check on her. "There's no one in the bath room," she assured him. He was returning to their room when he remembered the man he had seen at the restaurant.

Rushing downstairs, he asked the clerk if he had seen anyone that resembled the jailer. When he denied it, he rushed to the livery. The stable boy insisted that no horses had been taken that evening. Rushing back to the hotel, he found the tracks of three horses near the back door. There was evidence of a physical struggle there, and Missy's footprints were involved. The tracks were several hours old. Although he tried to track the horses with a

lantern, he found it impossible to make any headway in the dark, especially since the tracks were mostly obliterated by the heavy traffic in the town.

Returning to the hotel room, he found a note under Missy's pillow:

I have taken my wife back. Do not risk your life by interfering.

Thomas Blake

Dusty recognized right off that the note was more of a challenge than a warning. Blake would probably be waiting to dry-gulch him, and the vindictive beast would be at a tremendous advantage.

Grabbing the lantern off the dresser, along with his rifle and saddlebags, he locked the door and rushed to the livery. He saddled Buster in record time and he galloped to the northern edge of town before pulling up hard to dismount. He lit the lantern and studied every track on the road until he was positive those particular horses had not come this way. Remounting, he checked the road south of town, with the same results. Finally, he tried the trail that he and Missy had come in from the wilderness on. The telltale tracks were there as big as life, with no apparent attempt to hide them. Blake and the jailer had taken Missy into the desert, and they were daring him to come after them.

Dusty was forced to ride slowly, dismounting and lighting the lantern frequently to be sure the kidnapers had not turned off the trail. Finally, about midnight, he dismounted and lit the lantern for the umpteenth time. As he studied the trail, the lantern exploded in his face, throwing burning kerosene all over the front of him. He heard the boom of a rifle as he dove face first in to the desert sand to snuff out the fire. A couple more rifle shots spit sand nearby, but he was invisible to the gunman without the light of the lantern. The shaken cowboy smelled like a singed turkey when he arose from the ground, but the sand had snuffed out the fire before he got any significant burns. He rode on in the dark, but when he finally dared to risk the light of a match, he found he had missed the trail completely. There was nothing to do but pray and wait for morning.

Dawn found Dusty walking Buster along his back trail looking for the tracks he had missed in the dark. Shortly after it became light enough to see, he found the tracks heading due east through the trees. The hair rose on the back of his neck as he thought of how easy it would be for them to circle back and pick him off. The only reason they wouldn't try to kill him would be that they wanted him to see whatever they were going to do to Missy. His fear for her drove his own danger to the back of his mind.

Dusty soon realized that Missy's captors were trying to play with his mind. They'd leave a plain trail for miles at a time, and then hide their trail so well that it would take him an hour to find it again. Once they actually split up and one horse circled back to a perfect spot to ambush him, seemingly just to remind him of how precarious his situation was. They stayed well-ahead, slowing him down by one trick after another. There was nothing he could do but follow along like a sheep to the slaughter. His only comfort was a growing confidence that they wanted him alive, at least for the present. He was determined to be there when the time came, and they'd best be ready.

By evening the trees were thinning out, and they disappeared entirely by the time it got too dark to track. They were not following any established trail that Dusty could count on, so he simply bedded down for the night. Early the next morning he was at it again, as the tracks wended their way east across the desert. Occasionally, Dusty could get a glimpse of the three horses on hilltops several miles ahead of him, and he was sure they could see him just as well. He was more and more certain that they were headed for the Escalante area, with its canyons and cover. Why not get there first?

Dusty chose the wash of a small stream that would be a tributary of the Escalante for cover. Dipping into it, he rode beside the stream, and occasionally in it as it wormed its way towards the bigger river. The going was slow, and he was not sure how much he was gaining by his strategy, but he stayed with it until after noon. He finally climbed to the top to study the landscape where Blake should be. After some time spent working out the lay of the land, he concluded that Blake was on the other side of a distant ridge that stretched towards the Escalante. He

would be safe from detection as long as he kept to his side of the ridge. Striking out parallel to this ridge, Dusty and Buster quickly made up for the time they had lost in the stream bed.

Just before dusk the exhausted cowboy climbed up his side of the ridge for a good look. He was surprised to see the renegades' horses picketed about even with him a couple of miles away from the ridge. They already had their camp fire going, and it chafed him to think of the harassment Blake was likely giving Missy. He would have ridden over to put an end to it all right now, but traveling blind in the dark in this weird and rugged terrain was too apt to be fatal. He'd have to wait.

Dusty slept on the ridge, hoping to be able to surprise Blake and the jailer at dawn. But the renegades had evidently become uneasy about his whereabouts, and pulled out at the earliest possible moment. The trail savvy cowboy dropped back down his side of the ridge and rode hard for the Escalante. About noon he climbed the ridge again, and saw that he was several miles ahead of Blake, who was obviously watching his back trail with some apprehension. The Escalante canyon was visible in the distance, and Dusty dropped back down the ridge and made for it as fast as possible in the increasingly treacherous sandstone washes.

Around the middle of the afternoon, when he could go no further on his side of the ridge, Dusty clambered to the top for another look. The broad buff white Escalante Canyon sloped precariously for three quarters of a mile down to the river below, rising back up like a giant mirror image of itself on the other side of the river. The other party was not in sight, and Dusty suspected that he might have gone beyond their intended destination. So much the better! He could approach them from an unsuspected direction.

The cowpoke turned Buster loose on a miniature mesa of about five acres of graze land, confident that the Strawberry would come running at his whistle. Stuffing his pockets with jerky and filling his canteen from a rocky hollow full of rain water, Dusty scrambled back along the top of the canyon looking for signs of Blake. He moved slowly from one piece of cover to the next, be it a boulder, a juniper bush, or a crack or fold in the solid rock of the canyon. Within an hour he found a narrow path angling ever so gently down a fault in the canyon wall. He could see how Missy, probably faking her limp again, had managed to drag her boot on a rock near the entrance to leave him a clue. There were no other signs.

Dusty wished he could cross to the other side of the canyon for a direct look at this side, but instinct told him that time was running out for Missy. He backtracked about a mile, and started working himself down the precarious slope of the canyon wall. A ten foot slide to a crack with a stunted juniper to grab hold of. A quick run along the crack to a small rocky knob in the sandstone wall. A steep thirty foot scramble to the crack below, with a do-or-die stop before a hundred foot drop. A rest stop against a pithy dead fall that had toppled down from the canyon rim years before. Dusty slowly worked himself a quarter of the way down the sandstone incline to the major crack the kidnapers had traversed.

The desperate lover felt certain that he was beyond the renegade's hideout, and started working his way back up the wide crack, taking advantage of any natural cover he could find. After ten minutes or so he saw the jailer sitting on a jagged rock watching for Dusty with his eyes glued to their back trail. Slipping closer Indian fashion from bush to bush along the crack, Dusty began to see that a hunk of rock a hundred feet in diameter had been wrenched out of the canyon wall when the upheaval that caused the crack occurred. He could see what remained of it lying in the river bed a thousand feet below. Apparently Blake and the Jailer were holing up in the hollow it had left in the canyon wall.

Dusty slipped off his boots and advanced bit by bit towards the guard, who was still studying the incoming trail in anticipation of Dusty's overdue appearance. When he reached the platform of the hideout, Dusty sprinted noiselessly up behind him, clamping a hand over the big man's mouth and trying to throw him to the ground. The man was considerably larger than Dusty, and strong as an ox. Reaching backwards over his shoulders, he grabbed Dusty's head and heaved him over his own body. Dusty landed in a sitting position, his bare feet dangling over the precipice. The cowboy's grip on the jailor hurled the bigger man head over heels off the precipice by the violence of his own action. Dusty watched in horror as he fell, flipping over and over through the air to smash headlong on the canyon wall several hundred feet below. A sickening thud echoed back to announce his demise as his body

rolled another hundred feet down the incline. It was as though he had fallen down the staircase to hell. Dusty sat there stock still, suspended in time with his bare feet dangling over the cliff. There was no sense of victory, relief, remorse, or anything but shock, finally broken by a muffled yell from somewhere in back of him.

Scrambling up, Dusty was dumbfounded by what he saw behind him. Rocks had been brought in to build a stone house against the back of the hollow in the canyon wall. A rock fence restrained the horses. A spring bubbled out of the rock to provide water. It was as secure a hideout as any outlaw could imagine in his wildest dreams. Blake and Missy had to be in that house.

Dusty crept catlike to the window and rose up furtively for a peek. Missy lay on her back on the floor, her hands tied behind her, and her feet tied together; Blake leered down at her with a large hunting knife in his hand. "Soon as Jake brings that husband of yours in to watch," he gloated, "You are going to atone for refusing to marry me with your own blood. Brigham says it's the only way to get you to heaven. I say it's the only way to get even with Dusty. I can't wait to see his eyes bug out. I'll do it slow, I'll make it hurt, and then I'll put out his eyes with the same knife and watch him try to find his way out of the canyon in the dark."

Blake bent down over Missy to emphasize the horror of it all, and she lashed out like lightning with her feet, knocking the knife into his cheek. Dusty took advantage of the situation by slipping through the door behind Blake. The door creaked

"Got 'em, Jake?" the wretched man asked as he dabbed his bleeding cheek with his kerchief.

"I'm here, Blake," Dusty answered evenly.

Turning around easily to taunt his prisoner, he suddenly realized that Dusty was alone.

Blake shook his left fist threateningly at Dusty to distract him while his right hand went for his revolver. Dusty's hand blurred and his gun bucked just before Blake's flashed. Double reports re-echoed through the rocky room. Dusty felt the sting of a passing bullet along his right shoulder as he stepped to the left and fired again. Blake was down, trying to raise his gun, and Dusty fired a third time. The fiend's face contorted in hate as he fell back with three bullets in his heart. Dusty stood there trembling uncontrollably as he gazed at the body.

Missy let him stand there struggling with the shock a while. "Untie me, Honey," she finally called in a subdued voice.

"I killed him," Dusty said unbelievably as he moved towards her to comply. "I killed a man, Missy. I sent him to hell."

"Dusty," she said gently as she rubbed her tingling wrists, "You had to do it to save all three of us."

"Not Jake," he corrected her. "Jake fell off the cliff. He tried ta throw me off the cliff, and ended up going over the edge himself." By now he was coming out of his shock.

"Not him, Dusty," she interjected. "The baby. You're going to be a daddy."

He stared at her dumbfounded. "Me?...We're havin' a baby?" He could hardly speak for the wonder of it all.

,"Yes," she reiterated. "In about seven or eight months we're going to have a baby."

He shook off the last vestige of his shock and pulled her to himself. His kiss was long, not so passionate as tender, more mature.

"Thank you, Darling," he said as he released her.

Chapter 35

It was too late in the day to leave the canyon hideout, so Dusty dragged Blake's body away from the house to the edge of hollow; there was no soil to bury it in. Missy lit a fire and cooked a good meal from the tinned goods in the larder. As dusk came on, they lit lanterns and searched the entire spot. They found leather bank bags full of gold, and a heavy Wells Fargo container that was locked.

"These guys were robbing banks or stages or something," he told Missy, and she was sure he was right.

The next morning they headed up the trail to the canyon's edge on the outlaws' horses. Dusty rode back to get Buster, who was not very happy about his riding another horse. "OK," Dusty laughed as Buster nudged him half out of the saddle. "I'll switch."

They hadn't traveled over a couple of hours before they met a hard-riding bunch of armed men, who accosted them rather rudely. "Have you seen two men around here?" the one with the U.S. Marshall's star demanded as he stared suspiciously at their horses.

"Might have," Dusty answered easily. "What'd they do?"

"Pulled off several bank robberies and hit up a stage near Prescott. There's a five thousand dollar reward out for each of 'em, dead or alive, and even more for recovering the money."

"Who decides who gets the reward," Dusty asked innocently.

"I do," the Marshall answered.

"Name's Dusty Winters," Dusty announced. "The men you are lookin' fer kidnaped my wife n' kid, n' I come n' took 'em back."

"Where's the kid?" the Marshal asked, looking around.

"Right here," Missy answered, coloring a bit as she patted her tummy.

The men couldn't help a grin or two.

"You'll find yer men down a narrow ledge on the canyon wall about five miles along the rim from here," Dusty told the posse. "I marked the entrance with a pile of stones. After about three quarters of a mile the crack opens in ta a holler where they built the niftiest hide away ya ever seen, all of stone. You'll see Jake's body about three or four hundred feet down the canyon wall, and you'll find Blake along the far edge of the hollow with some lead in his heart. There's a lotta bags a gold n' a locked Wells Fargo trunk in the house."

"We gotta git the kid home," Dusty continued with a grin, "but we'll be a'waitin' fer that reward at the hotel in Panguitch."

The posse rode brashly off along the rim of the canyon, while Dusty and Missy headed out for Panguitch.

"What'll we do if they really come across with that reward?" Missy asked as they crawled into bed after delicious hot baths at the hotel that evening.

"How's about goin' ta Wyoming and buyin' a ranch?" Dusty asked. "I think we kin even trade that lifeless old paper stock of yer's fer some honest ta goodness live stock, if we kin jist figure out how ta do it."

"Sounds like a great way to raise kids," she agreed as she snuggled up to him.

“Un’ maybe I won’t have ta shoot ennybody else,” he murmured sleepily as he pulled her closer.

A Doctor in the House

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.

* * *

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 haven'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 hombre 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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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 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. Byrd'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 Byrd 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.

* * *

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. Pritchard 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. Pritchard’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. Pritchard’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. Pritchard 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.

* * *

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 Gorge, 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 everybody 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 furclosed 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," Brigsie 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," Brigsie 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 Brigsie 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.

Practical Historical Dates:

Foxglove for heart failure 1785
Strychnine source discovered 1818
Plaster bandage casting 1850s
Binaural Stethoscope: 1851
Culottes mid to late 19th century.
Dynamite 1867
Harvard Medical School 1868
Westinghouse Air Brakes 1869
Medical Nitroglycerine 1879

Ode to the Docs of the West

The doctor's job in the Wild West
Was daunting task indeed;
To say the least he could never rest
While a patient was still in need.

Though the hook on which his diploma hung
Was a nail that was bent and filed;
He could drain the pus from a putrid lung,
Or deliver a stubborn child.

He could set a bone with substantial skill
Or remove a hunk of lead,
While the relatives held the patient still
On the top of the family bed.

Though his meds were poor he inspired a hope
That would help the sick survive
As they clawed their way up the slippery slope
To arrive at the top alive.

The pay he got from his clientele
Was whatever the folks could give,
So his bank account never did too well
Though he got what it took to live.

Machochistic Murder

Cletus Brown dressed well. The guns in the strapped down holsters at his hips sported elaborately carved ivory grips. He wore heavy metal wedges in the heels of his boots, not so much to make them wear longer, but more because he liked the impressive sound they produced on wooden floors. He gloried in the fact that his acquaintances had shortened his name to "Cleats."

The noise level in the City Saloon fell off abruptly as the gunman entered the door from the winding dirt road that seemed to straighten itself just long enough to squeeze through the mining town of Quartzite. The only one who did not seem to notice his arrival was Lew Steiger, the preacher. His earnest pleadings dominated the volatile silence as he struggled to persuade a tipsy young wrangler to go home to his wife.

Everyone held their breath as Cleats stomped across the rough plank floor towards Steiger. "Let 'im alone, Stagger," the gunman ordered. "'E kin stay here as long as 'e wants ta."

"Johnny," the preacher urged, ignoring the gunman, "Jeanie needs you at home. You'll be gambling all the grocery money away again if you get any drunker."

"I said, 'Let 'im alone,'" Cleats snarled, grabbing the back of the preacher's collar and jerking him away from Johnny.

"Cleats," the preacher said softly, "Jeanie and the kid are nearly starving to death because you guys keep getting Johnny so drunk that you can win all his money at the card tables. You don't really want to hurt a sweet little woman like Jeanie, do you?"

"'Ut's none a' yer business what I want, Preacher," Cleats yelled.

"Johnny," Steiger begged, turning away from Cleats. "Please go home now."

"Don't you turn yer back on me, Stagger," Cleats roared as he jerked the minister away from the bar again.

As the preacher turned to face him, Cleats yelled, "You've got a gun. Draw!"

"Cletus," the preacher said softly, keeping his hands well away from his gun. "I'm not going to draw on you or anyone else. My gun is for bears and rattlesnakes on my little ranch, not for murdering people who disagree with me."

"You callin' me a murderer?" Cleats replied angrily. "Draw!" This time Cleats drew both guns and got off two shots before he even realized that the preacher had not reached for his gun.

The minister of the gospel sagged to the floor in a sitting position against the bar. He was shot once through the belly and once through the chest.

"Cletus," he addressed the murderer, "You've killed me without provocation. I forgive you, but you need to seek forgiveness from God too. In a couple of minutes I will be leaving a five-year-old daughter, an eight-year-old son, and a wife who will have difficulty supporting them. Since there's no one else to look out for them, I have no

other option but to charge you with their care. I'm in God's hands now, Cleats. No hard feelings here. Send Johnny home, and God bless you."

The occupants of the room sat in shocked silence as the preacher finished. Cleats slunk out the back door of the saloon un-noticed just before the Sheriff came running into the room with drawn guns. "Who shot ya, Preach?" he asked as he bent over the dying man.

"Sheriff," the man-of-God gasped in a hoarse whisper, "I forgave the shooter from the bottom of my heart. Please don't ask who did it," he continued as a bit of blood began to show at the corner of his mouth. "Promise me you will not prosecute anyone for my death. I don't think he believed that I wouldn't draw on him." Then his eyes rolled back and he was gone.

* * *

Cleats circled around the saloon to the street as quietly as possible. A quick glance revealed that the road was clear, so he walked briskly to his horse. He loosened the slip knot that held the animal to the hitching rail, mounted as quickly as he could without drawing attention to himself, and rode northward out of town as nonchalantly as possible. As he passed the cemetery just beyond the first curve in the road, he put his big bay into a full gallop until it began to lather significantly. Finally, he slowed to a brisk mile-eating trot, and started watching for a good spot to leave the beaten trail.

A half hour later the fugitive had still not seen any signs of anyone trying to follow on his back trail. He left the road in a patch of virgin evergreen forest that was covered with a layer of dead pine needles nearly a half-an-inch deep. He walked the horse slowly through the trees, being careful not to break any twigs or trample any weeds, until the sky was glowing with evening color. Finally satisfied that he was safe, at least for the night, he made camp near a small white-water mountain stream. There was enough tree cover to conceal a small fire, so he brewed some coffee and fried a few slices from the partial side of bacon that he always kept wrapped in oilcloth in his saddlebags. As darkness settled in, he stretched out on his bed roll, knowing that he should best be moving on at the crack of dawn. He could gain an hour or more on anyone trying to track him down before there would be enough light to follow his horse's steps across the spongy pine-needle floor of the deep forest.

Sleep came hard for Cleats that night. He was confused. Why hadn't the preacher drawn? Many had drawn against him and died in the act. He had killed at least a dozen over-confident men like himself, more than anxious to prove their manhood in a "fair fight" to the death. Others had refused to draw against him out of fear, but no fear had shown in Steiger's eyes. He had refused to draw because he considered killing others, even in fair fights, to be murder. If that was murder then he, Cletus Brown, was a murderer. And to make matters worse, since Steiger had refused to fight in the presences of witnesses, killing him made the killer guilty of murder in the eyes of the law. Cletus Brown would have to consider himself a fugitive from justice for the rest of his life.

Cleats was more than ready to get up the instant he detected a lightening of the eastern sky. He had had his coffee and some rather tasteless flapjacks by the time he could see well enough to ride without leaving a perceptible trail. He had heard an old trapper brag about finding an ancient Indian trail across the mountain that ended in this forest. That trail would be his ticket to freedom if it really existed. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had to find it.

As Cleats picked his way up hill through the forest, his thoughts returned to Lew Steiger. He had to admit, grudgingly, that the man had exhibited a lot of courage to refuse to fight out of principle rather than fear. Cleats wished that he had drawn. Not that the outcome would have been any different. Cleats had never even come close to losing a gunfight, and never expected to. Still, if Steiger had only drawn, Cleats would have been a victorious hero instead of a fleeing fugitive.

Late that afternoon Cleats found a game trail through the thinning forest that led northeast toward the mountain. Following it with moderate difficulty, he soon began to see evidence of some crude attempts at

improving the most difficult parts of the trail. Confident that he was on the fabled Indian trail, he soon found himself riding along a narrow ledge on a granite cliff that dropped off precipitously for hundreds of feet to his right. In one particularly narrow spot, he could see that the cliff wall had been chipped back a foot or so to accommodate horse traffic. Cleats felt fortunate that his big bay was mountain bred, and seemed comfortable even on the most precarious parts of this trail.

Just before dark, the man and his horse happened on a wide enough place to spend the night safely. Cleats knew that a fire up there would be little short of a beacon to advertise his position to any pursuers who might have managed to work out his trail. Neither he nor his horse had anything to eat that evening. They spent a miserably cold night in the wind up there, and headed on up the mountain just as soon as there was enough light to negotiate the perilous trail successfully.

The next day the trail led through a natural pass along a low spot on the peak, and they started down the other side of the mountain. More at ease on the way down, Cleats took the time to enjoy the view. The sunset was so beautiful that evening that Cleat began to wonder if there really might be a God that had created all this beauty. It was a new and unsettling thought to him. What about all those murders he had committed?

The old Indian trail petered out about noontime on Cleat's third day out from Quartzite. The gunman followed a stream on down the mountainside, and detected some sort of a village in the valley below him just before dusk. He camped by the edge of a mountain meadow where there would be graze for his horse. After hobbling the beast, he built a smokeless fire from some dry deadfall far enough back in the trees to hide it from any marauders. He fried what remained of the bacon from his saddle bags. Come morning, he'd have to restock in the village beneath him.

Cleats was approaching the village from the west just before noon the next day. Normally he would have tied his guns down and swaggered into the saloon with an attitude that invited a gunfight. Today the thought of killing another man somehow seemed repugnant to him. He had no desire to become guilty of yet another murder. Suddenly he reigned in, his mind made up. He shucked his gun belt, placing it carefully in his left saddlebag. If Steiger could do it, so could he.

Cleats was a tall man in good shape. He weighed about two-hundred twenty pounds without an ounce of fat on him. He felt almost naked without his guns as he entered the saloon to get a bite to eat, but there was not so much as a hint of fear in him. He ordered a steak and some coffee. He was enjoying the bread that came with the meal when someone about his own size with tied down guns arrogantly drew out the chair across from him. Cleats knew the type. He was one of them.

"What'cha doin' here stranger?" the gunman asked belligerently.

"Mindin' my own business," Cleats answered, looking the challenger straight in the eyes. "What're you doin'?" "Ah'm a'throwin' you out a' here," the man answered, suddenly reaching across the table and grabbing the front of Cleat's shirt to drag him across the table.

Cleat was expecting the move, and had placed his feet far enough under the table to get enough leverage to resist it. Placing his right hand calmly on his antagonist's outstretched wrist, he began twisting it, and suddenly slammed the man's hand down against the table with knuckle-breaking force. Letting go of the man's wrist, Cleats stood up and cuffed him full force across the cheek before he could draw. The blow knocked the man off his chair, and he did not attempt to get up off the floor. The nonplused victor walked calmly over to the counter, paid his bill, and led his horse across the street to the hostler's barn. He rubbed the bay down, forked him some hay, gave him a generous bait of oats, and sauntered over to the town's hotel. Somehow the fight had not exhilarated him the way such things used to. He really didn't like fighting anymore.

The fugitive and his horse rested in this isolated village for the rest of the day. Late in the afternoon Cleats got up the courage to step into the village church. He found the pastor painting the chair rail atop the wainscoting that circled the lower fourth of the auditorium walls.

“Are you the pastor?” Cleats asked almost timidly.

“Yes,” the good man responded. “And you are the man that beat up Billy Meyers?”

“I didn’t get his name,” Cleats answered, his face turning red.

“I don’t exactly recommend that lifestyle,” the pastor replied, “But someone had to do it before he killed somebody.”

“Doubt if that’ll stop em long,” Cleats responded, “but iff’n he kills a man in a fair fight, would that be murder--I mean ta God?”

“Yes Sir,” the pastor answered earnestly. “Pretty much any killing that is not in defense of yourself, someone else, or your country would count as murder in God’s sight.”

“What should a guy do iffen he’s awready done ut?” Cleats asked in a barely audible voice as an unbidden tear trickled down his cheek.

“Sir,” the pastor started...

“Uts Cleats,” the agonized man interrupted. “Cletus Brown.”

“Well Cleats,” the pastor continued, “That’s what Christ died for. God saw that we were hopeless sinners, so He sent his Son down to die on the cross for us. Jesus paid the debt for all our sins. When we accept God’s accusation that we are sinners, repent of our sins, and accept the death of Christ on the cross as the payment for them, we are saved. If we ignore God’s salvation or reject it, there’s nothing left for us except to pay for them ourselves, forever in hell.”

“Thanks Pastor, I gotta leave in the morning, but Ah’ll be a’thinkin’ on what you done told me.”

“Here, take my Bible with you,” the pastor urged. “Start by reading the Book of John,” he added as he placed the bookmarker between the end of the Gospel of Luke and the beginning of the Gospel of John, and handed the book to Cleats.

Cleats started reading the Book of John that evening. He read well into the night before dousing the lantern in his room and kneeling at the beside to offer up the first prayer he had ever addressed to God—a prayer for forgiveness from his sins. Instead of leaving town in the morning, he stayed in his hotel room all day and finished the Book of John. He tried to contact the pastor the following morning, but found that he had left town to go back east and get married. He would not be back for several months.

The former gunman had gained an uneasy peace about his status with God. He knew that his sins were forgiven, but somehow he could not forget Lew Steiger’s dying charge to him. His duty was clear. He had to return and look after the preacher’s little family, but how could he do it without being arrested and probably hanged for Steiger’s murder? “Well,” he reasoned, “I’d best stock up on supplies and head back toward Quartzite while I puzzle on ut.”

* * *

Cletus Brown was a different person as he retraced his way back across the mountain to Quartzite. He stopped earlier in the evenings so there would still be enough light left to continue reading his Bible. He proceeded right on from the Book of John into the Book of Acts. There He found that God was even willing to forgive the very people who had called for the crucifixion of His Son, if they would repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. This gave him a more settled peace about his own forgiveness for murdering others just to prove his own masculinity. "Now," he mused, "I have been forgiven by Steiger and by God. But the law will still be after me."

Cleats mulled his predicament with the law over more and more in his mind as he got closer and closer to Quartzite. As he thought about it, he realized that although he had lived in that community for almost a year, he didn't have a single friend he could trust there. He'd been too arrogant and hateful, so he'd have to lay low, and see what he could find out about his status with the law on his own.

The penitent murderer was approaching Quartzite at dusk less than two weeks after he had gunned the preacher down. As he passed the cemetery he could see the mound of earth over a fresh grave. On a whim, he tied his horse to a tree branch, and walked slowly to the rough-sawn cedar cross at the head of the grave. As expected, it read, "Louis Steiger, 1836-1869."

Cletus knelt at the grave, silent tears streaming down his face. Finally he began pouring out his penitence to God and to Lew. "Ah'm sorry, Lew. I had no right to challenge you, and I never guessed you wouldn't draw un' try ta get me in self-defense. I never seen that happen a'fore, 'ceptin' from cowards; un' I didn't see no fear in yer eyes. You weren't no coward."

"Lew," Cleats went on, "Ya fergave me un' tole me I needed ta git right with God. I done ut, un' He fergave me too. I came back here ta make things as right as I kin, God a'helpin' me."

What Cleats didn't realize was that Becky Steiger, newly widowed, had come on foot from the back side of the cemetery to mourn over the same grave. "God," she gasped when she raised her eyes as she approached the grave, "help me." Stepping behind a tree, she listened to every word of Cleats' prayer.

"What you don't realize, Mister Brown," she muttered hotly under her breath, "is that there's another person involved here, and she'll never forgive you." She would have chased his horse off if she had thought she could have gotten to it without being detected.

Cleats rode back toward the mountain a ways and prepared a temporary camp site hidden beneath an undercut on the stream north of town. When he was well out of sight, Becky proceeded on to the grave, where her tears spilled over Cleats' as she wept out the agony of her love to Lew again. It was dark before she retraced her steps up the trail to the little log cabin that Lew had built for her. She loaded both barrels of Lew's shotgun and placed it within reach of her lonely bed before she blew out the lantern and retired for the night.

* * *

The reformed gunman didn't dare show himself on the road anywhere near Quartzite lest he be arrested or even shot. He spent most of the next week reading his Bible, praying, and puzzling over the best way to approach the Sheriff about his debt to the law. He also needed to find Lew's wife, and ask how he could go about helping her, but he didn't even know her name, much less where their homestead had been.

By the end of the week, Cleats was so low on supplies that he had to go hunting. He slung his Springfield sixty-six rifle over his horse's neck and headed out at the streak of dawn. He'd gone stealthily upstream about a half-an-hour when he heard cattle bawling over a ridge on the other side of the stream. The outlaw-savvy gunman forded the stream and slipped to the top of the ridge. Four armed wranglers were driving about a thirty unbranded dogies out of the meadowlands towards the forestlands across the stream. Their horses were branded with the Dollar Lowbar brand Cleats had often noted on Lew Steiger's horse. The brand was actually an "L" superimposed on an "S" as in "Lew Steiger's initials."

The implication was obvious. The Steiger hands were siphoning off the unbranded dogies from the herd they were supposed to be protecting. Cleat's impulse was to start shooting, and recover the cattle from the dead rustlers, but he couldn't bring himself to shoot another human being. After a few second's consideration, he slipped back down to his horse and rode headlong for town.

"Sheriff," Cleats called out as he ran into the jailhouse, "There's rustlers up the creek with a small herd a' unbranded dogies." The sheriff jumped up from his chair, drawing his guns as he came to his feet.

"Whoa," Cleats exclaimed, raising his hands, "I aint wearin' no guns. Ah'm not here ta cause ya any trouble. Lew tole me as 'e was a-dyin' that I had ta look out fer 'is wife since I shot 'im. I was out huntin' this morning, un' I run acrost four guys with Lew's brand on their horses. They was a'drivin 'bout thirty dogies up towards the forest. We can't let 'em rob the poor woman bankrupt, kin we?"

"I'd lock ya up un' go out there right now, Cleats, but I wouldn't be able ta find the rustlers. Ah'll have ta trust ya fer now, un' we kin talk later. I'll grab a couple a' deputies un' we'll ride out there right away. Be ready in five minutes."

True to his word, the sheriff was ready to leave with three other men within five minutes. They rode behind Cleats, watchful lest they might be riding into some kind of an ambush the outlaw had arranged. A half an hour later they were slipping up on the rustlers, who had stopped for breakfast and were sitting around a small fire drinking coffee.

When his men were situated in strategic positions, the sheriff addressed the men from behind a large tree. "OK men, yer surrounded. Raise yer hands a'fore we plant yas right there 'round yer fire. The rustlers surrendered without a fight. The deputies drove the cattle back to the Steiger range while Cleats and the sheriff tied the men's hands behind their backs and escorted them to jail on their horses.

"Sheriff," one of the rustlers complained, "hows come yer arresting us fer rustling while yer ridin' with the man who gunned Lew down in cold blood?"

"Fair question," the sheriff replied. "Just before he died, Lew tole me that his killin' was a sort of an accident, un' he didn't want me to prosecute ennyone fer ut. Cleats un' I will have to come ta an understanding about that soon as we git a chance ta discuss ut. Meanwhile, you guys were caught in the act, and yer goin' ta jail."

"Sheriff," Cleats began as soon as the rustlers were securely jailed, "when kin we have that there discussion?"

"Where are you staying?" the sheriff asked.

"Been hidin out jist outside a' town fer the last few days," Cleats told him.

"Yer attitude is so different that somehow I trust ya," the sheriff replied. "Come over ta my house this evenin', so's we kin get this straightened up. Don't bring enny guns er you'll scare my wife ta death," he added.

That evening Cleats told the whole story to the sheriff, unembellished. "So you thought that Lew was drawing on you?" the sheriff asked.

"It ain't so much that I think 'e was drawin' on me as I just assumed 'e would," Cleats admitted. "Ut never entered my mind that 'e wouldn't, cause I didn't know nothin' 'bout what a Christian was like. I had never killed no one, 'ceptin in a fair fight. I 'spected 'em ta draw, un' when ut was all over with I couldn't believe that I'd actually killed a man who didn't draw when I dared 'em ta."

"I got out a' there while I could," Cleats continued. "I found that old Indian trail acrost the mountain un' figured I'd gotten clean away from the law. But what Lew tole me 'bout forgivin' me, and gittin' right with God, un' takin'

care a' 'is woman got ta me. I got saved, Sheriff, un' I come back ta take care uv Lew's wife un' 'kids, jist like 'e tole me ta. "

" I was still a 'puzzling on how ta talk ta ya 'thout gittin' shot, when I seen them rustlers. I thought about shootin' 'em, but I jest couldn't kill another man so I come a'runnin' ta ya fer help."

"Cleats," the sheriff finally responded, "I can't jist ignore this er everyone else u'll be askin the same question the rustler did. I think ut's best that we have un inquest, un let a jury decide yer fate. Ah'm gonna tell um what Lew said 'bout you not seein that 'e didn't draw, un' askin' me not ta prosecute ya; un' Ah'm gonna ask 'em ta put ya on probation 'til everyone is satisfied that you aint a'gonna hurt no one else. Ut'd help if Becky would go along with that, but Ah'm warnin' ya that she's purty hurt. She jest might take a notion ta go after ya 'urself. Ah'd advise ya ta stay outten 'er sight until 'er soul heals a mite."

"Ah'I be a-stayin' around where ya kin find me, Sheriff," Cleats promised. "How do ya think I kin help Becky most?"

"Ya might better jist deposit a bit a' money in 'er account ever now 'n then fer now," the sheriff replied; "Un ya probably ought ta keep un eye on 'er ranch from away back from the house. We just jailed most uv 'er ranch hands. Ah'll let 'er new foreman know that you'll be a-snoopin' around, un' available to lend a hand whenever 'e needs yer help. 'E's Bobby, the stocky guy that helped us catch them rustlers."

"Thank's, Sheriff," Cleats responded gratefully. "I ain't got much money left, but Ah'll be helpin as much as I kin."

The inquest went well for Cleats. The only one who seriously objected to nothing but indefinite probation for Cleats was Becky. "Do you really want me ta prosecute 'em when yer dying husband begged me not ta?" the Sheriff asked her when she objected.

"No," she replied in a subdued tone. "I want whatever Lew wanted, but somehow I can't forgive him. He killed my husband!"

"Tears rolled down Cleat's cheeks as she spoke. "Ma'am," he said remorsefully, "I don't blame ya a bit."

* * *

Cleats moved his campsite to the trees below the ridge where he had first seen the rustlers. It was only a half-a-mile or so from the Steiger holdings and Becky's cottage. As time permitted, he threw up a well-concealed single-room soddy, built from sod he personally cut from the prairie-like meadow across from the ridge. He cultivated the ground where the sod had come from, and planted a large enough garden to supply both himself and Lew's bereaved family.

Becky never dreamed that the vegetables that Bobby kept supplying her with actually came from the sweat of Cleat's brow. When she finally found out, she accosted Bobby vengefully. "I don't need anything from that murdering brute," she shouted at him.

"He owes it to you, Becky," Bobby reasoned with her. "And your kids need the wholesome food he is providing you with."

"Un' Becky," he added gently, "Your hate is destroying you, not him."

The disgruntled woman stomped back into her bedroom angrily. Throwing herself face-down on the bed, she wept out enough of the hate in her soul to be able to cast herself on the Lord. She apologized to Bobby the next

day, but she was still reluctant to take any help from Cleats. Bobby kept bringing the produce anyway, and Becky kept receiving it “for the kid’s sake.”

Cleats had been raised on a ranch and knew how to handle cattle. He took the task of keeping the Steiger cattle grazing well within the Steiger-held government acres upon himself without asking. Although they didn’t discuss it, Bobby appreciated his help immensely. It generally kept Cleats well beyond Becky’s sight, and saved her the expense of hiring another wrangler. Cleats always drove any Steiger cows with unbranded calves closer to the homestead where Bobby’s crew would find and brand the calves so no opportunistic cattlemen or passersby could appropriate them.

Becky had no idea how much Cleats was doing for her. At first she just caught an occasional glimpse of him on the periphery of her range. When she asked Bobby to run him off, he reminded her that all but the actual 160 homestead acres was government land that did not technically belong to her. He could not legally order anyone off of it, although many ranchers would have. The frustrated woman had to accept the truth. By the end of the summer she was tolerating his distant presence without quite so much resentment.

Bobby and the other two cow hands had been cutting hay for the horses all summer long. They stored it in the barn. Longhorn cattle were adept at kicking lighter snows off the grass for winter grazing by themselves. When the snow got too deep, they generally foraged on the seed heads of the taller grasses, weeds, and even sage brush if necessary. Cleats had a healthy respect for winter, and singlehandedly cut and stacked a tremendous amount of hay in an area protected by a natural windbreak of trees just over the ridge by his soddie. He also built a soddie shed to protect his horse against the cold.

The fall roundup was discouraging for Becky. The better cows had to be kept through the winter for next year’s calves. The branded beef that was left to ship barely paid the expenses for the year. In other words, Bobby explained to her, the ranch did not make a significant profit that year.

“I’ll just bet that that murdering Cleats has been stealing our cattle,” she suggested to Bobby.

“No, Becky,” her foreman told her gently, “the rustlers that Cleats discovered had apparently siphoned off a significant part of your stock before they were caught. Cleats is the reason that you are not losing the ranch.”

“And besides that, Becky,” the foreman continued, “Cleats has worked day and night out there heading your cattle home when they strayed off the ranch, driving the cows with unbranded calves closer to headquarters so we can brand them, and keeping the calves safe from wolves and bears and even lions. He’s done it all on his own without any input from me, but you would have had two more salaries to pay if he had not been there. You ought to be thanking God that he feels a responsibility to make up for what he did to you and the kids. He’s a genuine servant of God.”

Tears of exasperated hate filled Becky’s eyes. “Lord, why do I have to tolerate this?” she asked that night. “Can’t you send someone besides the man who killed my husband?” But no one else came.

* * *

Winter came early, and with a vengeance. One cold spell after another rolled off the mountain, across the forest, and onto the prairies of the Steiger holdings. Becky and the kids were pretty much confined to the house while Bobby and Craig struggled daily just to keep the stock alive. They used a horse-drawn snow plow to keep some of the snow cover shallow enough that the cattle could penetrate it. When they could no longer keep up with the amount of snow that had fallen, they started hauling hay in sleds from Cleats’ cuttings to the homestead area where the cattle huddled in the valley, tails to the wind. They had to ration the hay lest they run out before spring. The horses were overworked and losing weight, the cattle were underfed and losing weight, the men were worn out and losing weight.

A late blizzard struck the area in early March. Cleats was hauling a sled load of hay from his place to the homestead when it descended. Seeing the storm approaching, he unhitched the horses and drove them into the barn. Within minutes everything was whited out. Visibility was down to a couple of feet—if anyone could keep his eyes opened in the stinging wind-whipped snow long enough to squint out a look.

Cleats rubbed the sweaty work horses down in the dim light of the closed barn. He forked a bit of hay to each one of them before throwing a ragged old tarp on the hay and bedding down under some relatively clean saddle blankets. The exhausted man was soon fast asleep in the barn.

The sleeping cowboy awoke suddenly to the whinnying of several of the horses. As he forced his bleary eyes opened, he barely heard a weak whinny from out in the storm. He climbed down the ladder from the loft and forced the barn door open a bit against the howling wind. The small pony that Becky's son usually rode forced its way into the barn, dragging its reigns between its legs. It was fully saddled, although the left stirrup had been ripped off. What had happened, and where was the kid?

Cleats took a quick moment to unsaddle the pony and remove its bridle. He fed it a bait of oats from the meager supply that was left, and forked it a bit of hay. It needed more care, but Buddy Steiger needed it worse—probably much worse.

The worried man struggled through the storm to the house. He looked like a snowman by the time he was pounding at the door. Becky opened it without seeing who he was.

"Where's Buddy," he gasped as he pulled off his cap.

"What's it to you?" she asked coldly as she recognized him.

"Is pony just come ta the barn," he answered. "Ut was saddled un' bridled, but the left stirrup's been yanked off."

"He's upstairs sleeping," Becky answered, pointedly turning her back on the man.

"Becky," he persisted, "are you sure?"

Becky went confidently to the stairs and called her son. When he didn't answer, she turned to Cleats. "I told you he was sleeping," she said, almost triumphantly.

"Please check un' be sure," the distraught man pled. "He must be outside somewheres,"

Sudden understanding flooded Becky's soul, which had been blinded by the hate she was cherishing. She rushed up the stairs calling Buddy's name. His covers were thrown back, and the child was gone.

The pale woman let out a moan, and flew back down the stairs. "He's gone, Cleats," she gasped, "please go and get him."

"I will, Becky," he promised as a tear ran down his cheek. "Any idear where 'e might uv gone."

"None," she uttered hopelessly. "How can we possibly find him in time?"

"Let's pray on ut," he suggested, turning to face her.

"Lord." He began in a subdued voice, "Thank Ya fer commin' here ta die fer are sins. We've repented, Lord, un' now we're Yer children. Not ta bother Ya, Lord, but we're kinda in a fix. Buddy's out there in the blizzard, un'

we need to find 'em. Lord Ah'm askin' Ya fer Becky's sake. I killed 'er husband, un' now 'er son's in awful danger. Please don't let 'er lose 'em too. Please help us figure out where ta look fer 'em..."

Becky's wounded spirit was restored as the big man prayed. "He's really familiar with God," she mused as her soul prayed with him. She didn't know when it happened, but when his "Amen" came, she found that she was gripping his big hands in her little ones as they prayed, and she was not ashamed.

It came to Becky the moment she dropped Cleats' hands. Carrie might know where Buddy had gone. Cleats followed her up the stairs to the child's bedroom. She woke the child gently and asked her if she knew where Buddy had gone. "I promised him I wouldn't tell," the child replied. "Honey," Becky coaxed, "A terrible storm has come, and Buddy might be out there freezing to death. You've got to tell us where he went so Mr. Cleats can find him."

"I don't want that bad man to find him, Mommy," she whimpered.

"He's not a bad man anymore, Honey. He's a very good man now, and he wants to go out and get Buddy before he dies."

"Is Buddy going to die, like Daddy did?" the child asked, her eyes opening wide with fright.

"Not if Mr. Cleats can find him in time," Becky assured her with a bit more confidence than she really felt.

"Buddy said he heard you talking to Bobby, and you needed more money, so he went to Daddy's mine to get you some gold. He said I could have a new dress when he got back if I didn't tell on him."

"Where's the mine?" Cleats asked Becky when they got back down the stairs.

"It's in that big ridge to the south, on the far edge of our holdings, Becky answered. "Lew saw a vein of quartz in the rock, and it had a few flecks of gold in it. He was trying to find out if it amounted to anything in his spare time. He actually came home with an ounce or so of gold the last time he went there. Then he...a...died."

"Lord, help me," Cleats prayed silently as he pushed his way back to the barn against the wind. It was bitter cold and the visibility was still essentially zero. He saddled his bay and struck out towards the south. Within a few minutes he was more or less disoriented. He couldn't see and the only thing he had to go by was that he knew the wind was blowing pretty much from the north.

The going was necessarily slow. The bay needed to feel each step it took before committing its weight to the unknown. It took two hours to reach the ridge, and another to ride the entirety of its length. Visibility was too poor to actually find the vein of quartz Cleats was searching for. After three hours the half-frozen man turned his horse against the wind, and the faithful beast began plodding toward home.

Cleats was virtually in a daze when he heard a cow bawling nearby. Knowing that he must be in the valley where the cows wintered, he adjusted his direction a bit to the west, and suddenly saw the bawling cow heave itself rump first to its feet, almost catching the horse with its eighteen-inch right horn. There at its feet lay the unconscious Buddy.

The relieved man dismounted and slapped the boy's cheeks to no avail. Wondering if the child might already be dead, he placed him as far forward in the saddle as possible, and climbed into the saddle behind him. The cow lay back down without another sound, as if its duty was done. Cleats raised the hem of his parka and slid it back down over the boy, both to warm him up and help the exhausted man hold him up in the saddle. He gave the bay its head, and woke up when the horse stopped at the door of the barn. It was dark, but the wind had died down considerably.

Cleats dismounted with the child under one arm, and let the horse into the barn. Still holding the boy under his arm like a sack of potatoes, he forced his numb legs to carry them to the house. When Becky opened the door at his knock, he sprawled headlong onto the floor.

Becky dragged Cleats' feet into the house, grabbed the collar of his coat, and pulled his body across the wooden floor to the fireplace. She threw a quilt over him, and carried the child up to her bed. She buried it against her body under her blankets. It seemed like forever before she felt it breathing.

Cleats awoke at dawn with a start. His fuzzy mind figured out that he had been asleep fully dressed and in his coat inside Becky's house. He had to get out before she caught him there. He stumbled out the door and made his way to the barn. His horse was standing in its stall fully saddled and bridled. He automatically removed the tack, rubbed the animal down, and fed it, before climbing back into the loft where the tarp and saddle blankets still lay. He woke up to a blue sky around noon, saddled his horse, and made his way back to his soddie. He could tell that someone had spent the night there by the live coals in the stove. "Don't matter none," he mused, "long as they left me some coffee un' food."

The heroic man was still in a stupor-like state when he finished a late lunch of scalding cowboy coffee and homemade deer jerky. He crawled under his covers and slept through the rest of the day and most of the night. He awoke with a fever, a cough, and some painful frostbite on his cheeks, the tops of his ears, and the tip of his nose. Sensing that he was significantly ill, he went out and opened the door of the horse shed so the beast could get out and forage for itself. The bay knew where the hay stack was, and could take care of himself well enough to survive.

The trip outside drained Cleats' energy. He walked shakily back to the soddie and threw himself across his bunk. There he lay for the greater part of four days, alternately chilling and sweating. His only activity was a few trips to the outhouse and making an occasional pot of strong hot coffee. "Strange how I keep nightmares about being lost in a blizzard," he mused to himself.

* * *

Bobby and the two less experienced greenhorns of the Steiger ranch had been loading a second sled with hay when the blizzard struck. They turned the horses loose near the hay stacks and made their way across the ridge to Cleats' soddie. It was a bit crowded, but they kept warm and toasty within the foot-thick walls of the earthen structure. When the sky cleared, they caught the horses and were about to head out for the homestead with a load of hay when they noticed the fresh tracks of a large elk at the far end of the row of hay stacks. Since the tracks went in the general direction of the homestead, they followed them in the sled, hoping to get a shot at the game animal. Its meat would be a welcome addition to the ranch's dwindling larders.

The cowpokes followed the elk's tracks for several miles before they were able to shoot the huge bull. They ran across Cleats' fresh tracks when they cut back to the trail. Assuming him to be all right, they continued on to the homestead, where they learned of Buddy's near tragedy. The child was fine except for some moderate frostbite. They returned to the sled that Cleats had abandoned along the trail when the blizzard struck, and pulled it home with a team of horses. With two full loads of hay, they would not need to return Cleats' set-up for several days, especially since the snow was melting away pretty fast.

Cleats woke up feeling much better after four days of mind-boggling illness. Although it had turned warm enough that most of the snow had melted, he felt too weak to do any work. He decided to go to town for some basic supplies instead. He needed to check in with the sheriff anyhow, because he was technically still on probation.

One of the greenhorns from the Steiger outfit had been in town for supplies for the ranch the day before Cleats got there. He had spread the story of Cleats' service to Becky's ranch, and his heroic rescue of Buddy. Those responsible for his probation had all agreed to release the hero from his obligation to the law.

It was the sheriff who told Cleats what he had done for the child. "The whole thing jist seemed ta me like an unending nightmare from bein' so sick," the humble man replied. "Ah'm glad the child made it, though." Cleats purchased some flour, potatoes, kerosene, and matches, before heading back for home. The relatively short trip to town had totally exhausted him.

Becky's two greenhorn cowpokes had come to Cleats' place for more hay while the man was in town. They reported that it appeared that Cleats had left the area. Becky feared that it was true, mostly because of the way she had treated him before Buddy's rescue. Bobby advised her not believe it.

A week later Cleats was back on outskirts of the Steiger ranch. Most of the cattle were hanging around the homestead area, where the guys were still supplementing their diet with hay. When the reformed gunman passed a clump of early-blossoming wild crocuses, he picked them for Becky. The little woman had taken the children out for a spring walk, so Cleats crept into the house and placed the flowers in a glass jar full of water. He pulled a piece of scrap paper from the waste basket under her desk and scribbled, "Peace?" on it. He set the note on the table with the flowers atop of it, and rode out to continue his survey of the far edges of the Steiger holdings.

Becky returned home to find Cleats' peace offering on the table. She knew where it had to have come from. She had to blink back tears of remorse as she thought of all that Cleats' had done for her, even before he had saved Buddy's life. She baked a cake that evening, even frosting it. The next morning she sent a huge piece of it to Cleats' soddie with a note; "Peace! Welcome at our table any time." Since Cleats was out on the range, the cowhand placed the note on his simple table with the cake on a plate atop of it. "Thank Ya, Lord, fer peace," Cleats breathed out as tears of joy glittered in his eyes when he read the note.

* * *

Nothing much changed for Cleats that spring, except that he could work the range without fear of upsetting Becky. She even invited him in for supper occasionally, when their ways crossed. He got acquainted with Buddy and Carrie. On one of these occasions, Buddy cleared up the mystery of the cow that had played a part in his rescue. "I bottle fed that heifer two years ago when her mother died," he explained. "When my pony fell while I was trying to get home, she heard me calling out for help. She came and laid down beside me, so I snuggled up and went to sleep against her downwind side to keep warm. When she heard you coming, she must have started calling for you to come and get me."

"She's gonna have a calf this year." Carrie added to the conversation.

"Going to have a calf this year," Becky corrected her daughter.

"I never heard uv a cow rescuin' a person before," Cleats said in amazement. "I think ut must ov been the Lord that put 'er up ta ut," he added.

"I'm sure it was, Cleats," Becky added pensively. "We have an awesome God!"

"Yeh," the kids chimed in. Becky grinned with happiness, and didn't correct their grammar this time.

The hands on the Steiger holdings were very busy throughout the calving season. Besides watching over the stock, keeping them on their range, and branding the calves as they found them. There were the more mundane tasks of mending the corral fences, cleaning out the springs, shoeing the horses, and mending the tack. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as the summer set in.

Cleats was chasing a stray along the southern edge of the Steiger range early one morning when he caught a glimpse of white reflecting the morning sun through the trees along the ridge. After the cow was safely back on

the Steiger holdings, he went back and found Lew's vein of quartz. Sure enough, there were flecks of gold in the milky-colored rock.

"Doubt iff'n there's enough color there ta amount ta anything," Cleats mused to himself, "but Becky oughta stake a claim on ut." After considering the matter for a few days, he staked out a claim and wrote a fair description of its location. The next time he went to town he stopped by the government Land Office. It was empty except for an agent, who was re-reading an old newspaper he had received in the mail. "Is it this quiet here all the time?" the cowpoke asked.

"Yeh," the registrar replied. "Ar little gold rush here at Quartzite has purdy much petered out, un' the goverment's gonna close this place down enny day now. They promised me a job further west iff'n I want ut."

"Lew Steiger found a small vein uv quartz over ta his place before he died," Cleats drawled nonchalantly. "He didn't never find more'n a few flecks ov color in ut, but it has some sentimental value ta 'is widder. I owe 'er a lot, so I wanna register a claim on Lew's diggin's un' give ut ta 'er on 'is birthday this Fall. 'Er name's Rebecca Steiger, un' here's the description uv the claim."

"It'll be useless, like everthing else around here," the agent commented as he recorded the claim, "But iff'n it'll make 'er feel better, why not?" The cowpoke placed the claim certificate in his saddlebags, purchased a few supplies, and headed back for home.

As summer progressed, things got dry. When it hadn't rained for seven weeks, Cleats suggested that the starving cattle should be sold before they became too weak to drive to the nearest railroad shipping yards, over a hundred miles from Quartzite. Bobby agreed, but Becky felt that somehow she would be letting Lew down if she sold the breeding stock he had purchased. The three of them prayed for rain, but not a drop came. Cleats kept his garden alive by bucketing water to it from the nearby stream.

As the cattle got thinner, Cleats took Becky out on the range to impress her with the need to sell them quickly. By the time they had ridden to the far side of the Steiger holdings, she was convinced of the necessity of selling them right away. As they rode side-by-side back toward the homestead a large rattler buzzed almost under Becky's horse's nose. The startled animal reared up, dumping the surprised woman to the ground right beside the agitated snake. As the horse fled, the poised serpent's head swayed back and forth, its tongue flickering as it stared at the unmoving woman.

As Cleats comprehended what was happening, his hand flashed in a quick draw. His shot splattered the rattler's head all over the frightened woman. The cowboy was off the bay in an instant, stooping to help the shocked woman to her feet. As he raised her up, she yelped with pain in her right ankle. It was obviously badly sprained, or maybe even broken.

Cleats lowered the small woman back to the ground. Slipping his big right hand under the small of her back and his left one under her thighs, he picked her up effortlessly. When she draped her arm around his neck for stability an electric shock passed between them. The big man wasn't sure whether it was from static electricity or exhilaration. He could have held her there forever, but he dutifully helped her get her right foot in the stirrup of the bay's saddle, and boosted her on up onto the horse. He led the horse slowly to her home and carried her into the house, gently laying her on her bed. Then he rode on to town for the doctor.

Becky's ankle was not broken. She insisted that the men drive the starving cattle to the stockyards immediately. She would be fine hobbling around the house with the kids to help her. The men got a discounted price for the cattle because they were so thin. There would be little profits from the ranch for the second year in a row.

When the men returned to the Steiger place, Becky paid them off with the receipts from the cattle. There were tears in her eyes as she bade them good-bye, and the tears that glittering in theirs told her that they understood.

She tried to include Cleats on the pay roll, but he refused to accept anything from her. She would be hard put to survive the winter with what little money was left. Then what?

With scarcely anything to do on the range, Cleats secretly started chipping away at the quartz vein he had claimed for Becky. The deeper he got, the richer the vein got. It wasn't over a week or so before he had removed several thousand dollar's worth of gold flakes. He placed it all in a leather poke that he kept hidden in a terra cotta pot with a lid. He kept it buried under a cedar tree on the Steiger homestead, just out of sight of the house.

Cleats kept his garden going, bringing most of his produce to Becky. His secret love for her kept him working at the little surface mine every spare moment. He wanted to secure her well-being for the rest of her life. Fact was, he couldn't put her completely out of his mind even for a moment. Just seeing her beautiful form walking about the home place was driving him crazy. Finally, he had the whole half-a-gallon sized pot full of glittering flaked gold. He decided to present the claim papers and the gold to her on Lew's birthday, and leave the area before he went stark raving mad.

Lew's birthday came, but Becky never mentioned it. She actually invited Cleats to dinner on that very evening. After she had put the kids to bed, she walked Cleats out to his horse. "Becky," he began awkwardly, "You know that vein of quartz that Lew was exploring?"

"Yes," she answered. "I don't think it will ever amount to much. And besides," she continued, "It isn't even on our property."

"I happened acrost ut one day while I was chasin' an obstinate cow. Ut really did have some gold in ut so I staked a claim on ut in yer name. There's enough gold there ta support you un' the kids fer the rest of yer lives, so I'm leaving to find work."

"Cleats," she replied as her voice began to crack, "You took the first man I ever loved away from me. Are you going to take the second one away from me too?"

"Who is 'e?" the man replied. "Tell me, un' Ah'ii do everthing I kin ta get 'em ta stay."

"It's you, Cleats," she answered, breaking into tears. "How can I live without the man who has devoted his entire being to me for the last year?"

"Ya mean ya could love me after what I done ta ya?" he asked in total wonder.

"Yes, Cleats, I love you just as much as I've sensed that you love me. Come into the house for a minute so I can show you something."

When they got into the house Becky disappeared into her bedroom for a minute. When she returned, she handed him a beautifully engraved silver-plated revolver with Ivory grips. Each grip sported an artistic scrimshaw engraving of a hooded figure carrying a scythe. "Do you know what this is?" she queried.

"Wow." Cleats gasped, "that's one uv the guns uv the legendary Grim Reaper. 'E killed ut least twenty-five men in what men call fair fights a'fore 'e vanished. Everone's a'wonderin' what become uv 'is guns after 'e disappeared."

"Everyone but Lew and I," she explained. "The other one's in there in the drawer. You see, Cleats, Lew was called the 'Grim Reaper' before he got saved. I could get thousands of dollars for his guns, but I'll never sell them because I know that he would rather be known as the man who died because he refused to draw. In a sense, you only gave him his just comings."

They stood peering into each other's eyes for a long moment, and then somehow she was snuggling into his arms as his longing lips sought hers.

"Let's go tell the kids they're getting a new Daddy," she suggested when they ran out of breath. "They haven't been able to understand why we haven't gotten married ever since you rescued Buddy."

"Iffin ut's OK with you, we kin take care uv that little detail tamarry mornin'," he suggested. And they did.

A Couple of Big Ones

Bertie Burgess's heart was charged with anxiety as the laboring engine finally topped the final mountain grade on the Cattle Spur and began to pick up speed again.

The weariness of the five day railroad journey lapsed into the brooding silence of insecurity as the train descended towards the destiny that awaited her in the town at the bottom of the mountain.

The well-dressed young woman scooted lower in her seat; but small as she could make herself, she still towered nearly a head above the next-tallest person in the car. She knew that she'd have been downright good looking if only she hadn't been so tall. She had more than enough feminine attributes to catch any man's eye, but what man wanted a wife nearly a head taller than himself?

"Lord," she cried as the tears ran down her soot-streaked face, "I'm sorry for my dishonesty. You know how I've longed for a family, and now I've gotten myself into trouble over it. When Mr. Barry asked, I wrote that I was six feet and four inches tall, only I wrote it in numerals. But you know as well as I do that I made the '6' look more like a carelessly written '5' by not closing the loop; and O, You know how I doctored it." Her face burned with shame as she confessed her deceit.

"Please, Lord," she continued when she got control of herself, "please don't let this man who seems so kind in his letters be too discouraged. He has every right to turn me down. Whatever he does, please don't let my dishonesty hurt him too much."

Even as the penitent mail-order bride finished her heartfelt confession she could sense the slowing of the train. In another couple of minutes she'd be reaping the results of her sin. Suddenly the train was emitting a vengeful-sounding hiss as it jerked to a stop.

"End of the line, everybody off," the conductor shouted. All baggage and trunks will be available at the ticket office within fifteen minutes."

Bertie grabbed her handbag and day case and stumbled off the train, steeling herself for the rejection she deserved. Her eyes roved over the small crowd of passengers and greeters, looking for a red-bearded man about three inches shorter than she was. No one approaching that description was visible. She hurried into the station. It was almost empty.

Exasperated, Bertie walked dejectedly towards the front doors of the depot. The heavy double doors opened onto a boardwalk that was roofed all the way across the front of the public building. A wide stairway provided access to the rutted dirt road that was obviously the main street of the cow town. Several horse-drawn wagons and a run-down surrey were tied to the hitching rail across the ruts. A few saddled horses were hitched to another rail in front of the saloon a bit to the south. The pungent odor of the stock yards drifted in from somewhere further south along the rails. The nearest building to the north was labeled, "Hotel," in gaudy letters. A few broncs were tied next to a public watering trough in front of that building as well.

Bertie sat down on a bench on the boardwalk and pulled the well-worn letter from her handbag. She began reading it once again, though she had it memorized from many readings:

Dearest Bertie,

Enclosed is a one-way ticket to Copperton.

I'll meet you at the railroad depot, and we'll be married at the town church right away so we can head out for the ranch as man and wife. I'm a bit over 6 '1" tall and have a red beard, so I shouldn't be too hard to recognize. I can hardly wait to set eyes on the little woman I believe the Lord has reserved for me.
With all my love,

Robert Barry

"Lord, she breathed out silently. How could I have done this? He's expecting a "Little" woman, and I'm so awfully big."

As she prayed, a stunningly beautiful blonde woman astride a palomino gelding reined her mount in about thirty yards up the street. Within a few seconds a well-kept wagon pulled up to the hitching rail across the street. As one of the tallest men Bertie had ever seen stepped down from the wagon, a quick motion up the street caught Bertie's eye. The blonde had slashed the palomino in the flank with her quirt, spurring it forward with the heels of her riding boots. She screamed fearfully as she approached the big man.

The chivalrous man glanced toward the scream, and stepped nonchalantly into the road. His strong right hand grabbed the reins just below the bit while he threw his left arm around the horse's neck. He had the run-away stopped within twenty feet. After calming the horse a bit he stepped around and helped the blonde off the beast. She fell all over her rescuer, but he took her hands firmly in his and led her to the other end of the bench that Bertie was sitting on.

"Can you watch her for a second while I get her a drink?" the big man asked Bertie. Assuming her positive answer, he walked over to the canvass water cooler that hung on the wall, and dipped a tin cup full of water for the lady.

"Would you care for one too," he asked Bertie as he returned to the water bag. He carried a cup full of water to Bertie and stood by silently while she drank it. "More?" he asked as she finished the drink.

"No Sir," she shook her head, "but thank you."

The big man returned to the cooler and dipped himself a drink. He drank it slowly before returning to the women. "If you're ready to go, Sandy," he said, "I'll bring Rowdy." Not waiting for an answer, he crossed the street and brought the horse, which had behaved perfectly even though he had only been ground hitched since the incident. The blonde took the reins from his hand rather petulantly; and mounted up to ride off at a brisk trot. When Bertie looked back, the kindly giant was gone.

A few minutes later Bertie drifted back into the station and asked the agent for a schedule. There were no other trains expected up the spur for a couple of days, so a schedule mix-up was unlikely. "Guess I've been stood up, Lord," she breathed. "It's no more than I deserved though." Still, she waited on a bench hoping against hope that her fiancé would show up.

The big man walked through the station every half-an-hour or so, touching his tan Stetson in a brief salute to Bertie every time he passed her by. He was at least three inches taller than she was, and there wasn't an ounce of flab on him. Each glimpse she got of him impressed her more at how humbly handsome this clean shaven brute of a man was. As the afternoon drew on, he finally stopped to talk.

"Ma'am," he began, "I don't know who you are waiting for, but they won't be coming by train for at least two days. Can I help to get you settled at the hotel or something?"

"Oh no." she stammered. "I can walk, seeing it's only half-a -block away."

"You don't want to go anywhere near there," he answered. "It's not reputable. The real hotel is three blocks north. You don't even want to be caught walking past the one across the street."

"Thank you," she replied. "Maybe I'd better accept your help and get settled in before dark. I have a trunk in the office."

"Show me which one," he urged her. "It'll be safer kept in your room."

When Bertie pointed out her trunk, he picked it up effortlessly and threw it over his shoulder. She noted the muscles bulge under his shirt, though he did not appear to be straining a bit as he carried it to his buckboard. He stowed it in the back, and stepped around to help her up to the seat. He didn't wait for her to climb in; he just wrapped his monstrous hands around her waist and deposited her up there. She was still catching her breath as he climbed on beside her. He smelled of freshly cut hay and saddle leather, with a hint of cologne. When he clucked to the horses they responded like they were used to his gentle voice.

As they rode along Bertie thanked him profusely for his help. "And by the way," she added, "that was a brave rescue of that woman on horseback this afternoon."

"Thanks," he answered. "I don't know why she always has so much trouble with that horse when he seems to be so gentle."

"It's none of my affair," she replied, "but she wasn't havening any trouble with him at all. She actually slashed him in the flank with her quirt after you got out of the wagon. I saw the whole thing."

"I kind of suspected something like that," he mused. "Now why would she do that?"

"Mister..." she hesitated.

"Just call me Bob," he interjected.

"O.K. Mr. Bob, whether you realize it or not, you're as handsome as you are big. I imagine it's just as simple as that."

He blushed like a school girl, and they rode on in silence.

After helping Bertie register, Bob carried her trunk into her room and sat it in a convenient out-of-the-way spot along the wall. When he was satisfied that everything was in order he took leave of her and disappeared down the hallway. Although it made her feel a mite guilty, Bertie almost hoped that she had indeed been stood up, and that this handsome gentleman would come around more often.

About six o'clock in the evening the confused woman went down to the dining room for a bite to eat. As she walked across the lobby, the gentle giant rose from an easy chair to meet her. "May I have the pleasure of your company for dinner this evening, Ma'am," he asked, offering his arm.

"Mister Bob," she answered, turning to face him. "I am engaged to be married. Much as I appreciate all you've done for me today, I hardly think it would be fair to my fiancee."

"I'm also engaged to be married," he retorted mischievously; "that is, if you are five feet four inches tall."

Bertie's face turned crimson. "If you'll look closely, she whispered with downcast eyes, it really is a six, even if I camouflaged it a bit."

"So I finally noticed," he grinned. "A hastily written five is as easily confused with a six as a sloppily written

seven is confused with a one. Right? I didn't want to scare a five-feet-four-inch woman off so I made six-feet-seven-inches look more like six-feet-and-one-inch; and I shaved off my beard so it wouldn't scratch your face. I never dared to dream that you'd be just the right size for me.

Suddenly his arms were around her, and she was snuggling into his chest. She fit there perfectly. After a long kiss right there in public, he broke it off.

"The preacher and my best friend are waiting at the church", he whispered huskily. "You wanna have dinner now, or wait 'til we're married?"

"First things first, Mister Barry," she answered happily. "Where's the church?"

"Maybe we should put something in our vows about never deceiving each other again," he teased as they walked hand-in-hand up the church steps.

"I've learned my lesson if you've learned yours," she answered. "I'm not telling any more big ones."

"Me neither," he agreed; and they both started giggling like a couple of teenagers on their first date.

About the Author

Morton C. (Bud) Morris is a retired country M.D. from Delavan, Illinois. He practiced medicine in central Illinois for nearly forty years, except for a four year stint as a medical missionary at Loloma Mission Hospital in rural Zambia.

Bud and his wife, Shirley, have eight grown children, all born-again Christians. He spends his retirement preaching, visiting Christian prison inmates, writing poetry, and photographing wildflowers he finds along the roadside while riding his motorcycle.

CHRISTIAN WESTERN SHORT STORIES is a collection of short stories written just for the fun of it over a period of several years. Bud's Christian and secular poetry, fiction, papers, and favorite personal photos can be perused at www.BudMorris.net.