

For Better or for Worse

by

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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-foot-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 Hughs'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 she 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 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 Pa, 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 advise 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.