

Machochistic Murder

by
Bud Morris

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 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.

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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 bookmark 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 bedside 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.”

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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.

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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 told 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."

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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.

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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 nightmaring 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 heared 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 iffing 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 guverment's gonna close this place down enny day now. They promised me a job further west iffing 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 iffing 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.

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