

Ridin' fer the Brand

by

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tort shrugged off the hurt of being assigned to a younger man than himself and began packing vittles for their deployment to the cabin. He was confident that he could fork a tougher bronc and toss a wider loop than any puncher on the T-in-T, and his ability with a rifle was uncontested. He could generally hit a wolf before anyone else even saw it. "If they want gun fighters down there, why did they send me at all?" he muttered to himself as he finished loading a pack horse with supplies, including a hundred pound sack of flour, fifty pounds of sugar, three sacks of potatoes, and several large slabs of bacon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Butch was at the holding pen on Friday evening when Tort and Terry brought the last of the herd to the pen. “That does it,” Butch congratulated the hands. “This is as fine a startin’ herd as I ever seen. The Ole Man’s sendin’ a chuck wagon n’ five gun-handly riders that wanna move out Montana way ennyhow. ’Is son-in-law sent a trail boss n’ two riders from their end. They come down the Bridger trail, n’ said its loaded with good grass n’ water. They’re gonna head out Monday mornin’.”

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

“Yer right!” Butch exclaimed. “I been a’thinkin we was missin’ sompthin’.”

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

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

T. R. Angle
Triangle-T Ranch

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

“Come in, Tort,” the old man said warmly, “Been a while since I’ve seen ya.”

“Hello Mr. Angle,” Tom answered. “Butch says yer a’wantin’ ta talk ta me.”

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

“Boss,” Tort objected, “I’m barely twenty-five myself.”

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

“Thanks, Boss,” Tort answered pensively. “Do ya mind iff’n I pray on ut today n’ let ya know in the mornin’?”

“O.K. by me,” the Old Man grinned, “As long as yer answer is ‘Yes.’”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Right!" the other two agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

“Ya don’t need the gun this time, Tort. I’m ridin’ the Lord’s brand now.”

“Brady?” Tort asked quietly.

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

“Why are ya tellin’ me? Tort ask.

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

“That’s great, Brady,” Tort replied, grasping his hand with a hearty grip.

“No hard feelins?” Brady asked.

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

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

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

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

“Ya had yerself,” Brady retorted, “‘N’ yer more uv a man than ennyone else in the Basin.”

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

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

“I believe ‘em,” Tom said emphatically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The group was in the part of the trail between the Bighorn and Greybull Rivers when the anticipated attack came. The night was so perfect for it that Tort and his sidekicks were up and fully dressed the moment the T in T riders disappeared into the moonlight to take their shift. The instant Tort heard the commotion on the far side of the herd he yelled a warning to the Montana gang.

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

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

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

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

"If you hadn't uv grabbed me I could uv saved my guns," Sandy complained.

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

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

"We don't dare let them get away," Tort advised, "Or some uv us might be killed."

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

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

"Which three do ya want?" Tom asked stoically.

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

climb, and the scrambling rustlers were trampled mercilessly into the ground by the fleeing herd.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She ain’t got no ranch,” Sandy replied. “I do.”

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

“Don’t be a fool, Tort,” Sandy bluffed, “We got ya three ta six.”

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

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

“We won’t shoot yas in the back iff’n ya leave peaceably,” Tom called out to them.

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

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

* * *

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

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

“That’s my herd,” Sandy pointed out, “And those are the rustlers that stole it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rancher began reading the letter aloud to the group:

Tort,

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

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

“It’s signed by T. R. Angle, whoever that is,” the rancher finished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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