

Standin' Upright

by

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Tom Tyler stepped off the tired paint at the hitching rail in front of Grant's general store, and dropped the reins over the handsome gelding's head.

"Thanks, Fella," he murmured as he paused to pat the horse's withers affectionately. At a nudge from the big animal's soft nose, Tom hung a feed bag in place and left his mount without tying him to the rail. He knew that Fella would stay ground hitched until he returned for him.

"Hi, Grant," Tom greeted the storekeeper as he entered the door. "Just checkin' fer mail, n' I need three cartons of .44's."

"Sure thing," Grant replied. "Ya startin' a war?"

"Nah," Tom replied. "Just gittin' a mite low on ammo at the cabin n' didn't want ta run out."

"Never could figure out what ya do with all the handgun cartridges ya buy," the friendly storekeeper commented. "Ya always have a rifle in yer scabbard, but ya never wear a handgun ta town."

"I wear a couple a guns on the range," Tom replied, "N' they've saved my bacon more 'un onest. Killed a downright unfriendly grizzly that caught me off my horse filling my canteen last year; but wearin' guns ta town is just invitin' a fight."

"Ya look like ya could take care uv yerself purty well," Grant answered, "N' ya don't strike me as yeller."

"No, Grant, it ain't that I'm yella," the big cowpuncher replied seriously, "But I don't think God justifies a man fer killing another just ta prove he ain't yella. The law may call that kind uv a killin' a fair fight, but God calls ut murder."

"Ya mean if somebody calls ya, ya ain't gonna take 'em up on ut?" Grant asked incredulously. "The whole town 'ud despise ya fer the rest uv yer life."

"They despised my Savior," Tom replied earnestly. "They jeered 'Em because they didn't believe 'E was who 'E said 'E was. They jeered 'Em cause 'E always did the right thing. N' they jeered 'Em while 'E hung on the cross n' died fer my sins. I reckon I kin take a little jeerin' if ut comes ta that."

“Good luck on that,” the storekeeper replied dubiously as he checked the mail bag. “Hey, you gotta letter, n’ it’s another one uv them that stinks purty.”

Tom paid for his shells and put them in his saddlebags. He opened the letter with his pen knife as he headed down the street to Ma Murten’s for lunch.

“Tommy Tyler,” Ma called out as he walked in the door. “Ain’t you a sight fer sore eyes!”

“Lo, Ma,” Tom replied. “Ya got enny uv that pot roast ya usually make today?”

“You betcha,” Ma replied, hurrying back towards the kitchen. “Made some apple pie for ya, too.”

“Now Ma,” Tom grinned, “You couldn’t possibly ‘uv knowed I wuz commin’ ta town today.

“Yeh,” she agreed jovially, “But I’d rather you’d git it than ennyone else.”

“Thanks, Ma,” Tom replied. “Sounds mighty good.”

“When’s yer wife gettin’ here?” Ma Murten asked Tom as he finished his lunch.

“Just got a letter sayin’ she’ll be on the stage tomorra,” he replied. “Weather’s been so good back east that school shut down a week early so’s the kids could help with the plantin’. To bad I wasn’t smart ‘nough ta bring the buckboard today. I wouldn’t uv had ta return home tonight n’ come back with it tomorra.”

“It’s fer the best,” Ma answered. “You’re better off ridin,’ ‘cause you’d just fret yerself crazy till she got here tamorra ennyways. How’d ya meet ‘er?”

“She was a school marm at a country school in Ohio,” Tom replied. “I met her at church when I went to east to get some white-faced stock a couple a years ago. We got ta writtin’ cause she likes the west. I went back ta Ohio and married ‘er last Christmas. We only had a week together afore I had ta come back ta the ranch.”

“Yeh, I know,” Ma replied. “It broke the heart of every girl within a hunnert miles a here when they found out ya was gittin’ married.”

“Aw, cut ut out,” he grinned. “I never courted enny uv ‘em.”

“That’s a fact,” Ma admitted, “But a girl kin dream, can’t she? How’s come ya didn’t bring ‘er back with ya then?”

“She was obligated ta stay in Ohio n’ finish out her teachin’ contract.”

"I'd a come right out with ya," Ma mused.

"Not Wendy, Ma. She agreed ta teach the year, n' neither uv us thought she should break 'er promise. 'Sides, I needed some time ta clean out the cabin a'fore she seed ut."

"Betcha did, at that," Ma grinned "I'll have some real goodies ready iffen you'll bring 'er in fer lunch before ya take 'er home tamorry."

"I'll do that, Ma. I want ya ta meet 'er."

"What's she look like?" Ma asked.

"She's the purtiest woman I ever seen," Tom answered enthusiastically. "She's about this tall," he mused, placing his index finger crosswise along his chin. "She's got dark brown hair, bright blue eyes, n' the sweetest smile ya ever saw."

"I just bet she's all a that n' a bit more," the savvy woman mused as she watched the handsome cowpoke walk out the door.

When Tom got back to his horse, Grant called him to the doorway where several cowpokes were admiring a gun.

"Check out this new toy," Grant suggested. "It's an S&W .32 rim fire."

Tom took the beautifully engraved revolver from Grant's hand and spun the chamber.

"Perfectly balanced!" he said enthusiastically, "And real ivory grips."

"Try 'er out," Grant urged as he shoved a few of cartridges into the cylinder.

A sparrow flew from its perch on a rooftop across the street, and the gun boomed as Tom's wrist flashed. Feathers flew as the bird disintegrated. More sparrows took to the sky at the report of the gun, and Tom dropped two more of them in two more quick shots.

"Say, that's awright," he said approvingly as he handed the gun back to the storekeeper and mounted Fella for the twenty-mile trip home.

"Some shootin'," someone from the awestricken group murmured softly. "Smooth, fast, and deadly accurate," another chimed in. "Wonder how fast he can draw?"

"Doubt if we'll ever find out," Grant replied. "Tom don't approve uv gunfights."

* * *

Tom rode directly to the barn when he arrived home after dusk. He rubbed Fella down, forked him some hay, and dumped a bait of oats into the feeding tray. Having cared for the horse, he picked up his rifle and stepped wearily through the kitchen door at the back of the cabin. On lighting a lamp, he saw muddy tracks on the kitchen floor. There were also coffee grounds spilled on the sink board. The pump handle was up, and Tom always left it down.

A quick look through the cabin failed to reveal anything grossly out of order, so Tom just assumed that some cowhand had stopped by and made himself some coffee. "He could uv cleaned up after 'emself," the cowboy grumbled as he swept the dried mud out the door before frying himself some flapjacks and bacon. He kneeled for a couple of minutes of silent prayer before climbing into his bed, where he slept until dawn.

As Tom dressed in the morning, he began to realize that his belongings had been riffled. The neatly folded clothes in his drawers were somewhat ruffled. Raising the top on his big roll top desk revealed that his neatly stacked business papers had been scattered helter-skelter over the desk top. Someone had been looking for something there, but Tom didn't keep any really important documents there. They were hidden in a carefully disguised fireproof safe under the potatoes in the root cellar.

Straightening up the papers quickly, Tom put them in a drawer. He'd have to re-sort them later, but that would have to wait until he checked to see what he could discover about the intruder. He circled the cabin and then the corral before he found the tracks of several men around the pen where he kept Hero, his prize white faced bull. Whoever had been there wore typical nondescript cowboy boots with an average amount of wear. There was little to go on except that one of the men had been heavy enough to have considerably deeper tracks than the other. The lighter man had mounted a horse with a deep v-shaped nick in the center of its left front shoe.

Tom absent-mindedly rubbed the broad space between the big bull's eyes with his fingertips as he contemplated the tracks. Hero leaned into his hand, enjoying the sensation. "I don't believe you'd hurt a flea," he told the big Hereford as he withdrew his hand. He wanted to follow the tracks in the worst way, but he needed to hitch his pair of greys to the buckboard and get to town before the stage arrived.

The greys were full of vinegar in the cool morning air, and trotted without urging for the first mile or so. When they came to the shallow ford at the half-way mark, Tom pulled them up for a drink and a brief rest. The horses hadn't even worked up a sweat, but Tom held them to a brisk walk the rest of the way into town, arriving about an hour before the stage. He brooded uneasily as he drove. "Who would have been at his home, and what could they possibly have wanted?"

The cow puncher parked the buckboard in front of Grants, and left a list of supplies for the storekeeper to load while he waited for the stage. As he walked out of the store, it suddenly struck him. This was not just his problem, Wendy would be there too! Whirling back through the door, Tom asked Grant if he still had the S&W .32.

“Sure,” Grant answered, “But ain’t it a bit small fer you?”

“It’s fer my wife,” Tom answered. “She’s comin’ on today’s stage, n’ someone’s been a-snoopin’ around my place.”

“I’ll pack it under the buckboard seat,” Grant assured him.

“Put a half-a-dozen cases uv cartridges with ut,” Tom instructed, “I’ll probably have ta teach ’er ta shoot.” Then he was off for the stage office.

The stage was rolling up in a cloud of dust just as Tom arrived. He stepped up to open the door, and found himself staring into the lovely face of his wife. She literally hurled herself into his arms from the door of the stage, placing a quick kiss on his cheek. He whirled her around two or three times, hugging her to himself before they became aware of the onlookers grins. After being sure her baggage was stowed safely in the stage office, Tom offered her his arm, and walked her over to Ma Murten’s for lunch.

True to her promise, Ma had outdone herself for the noon-day meal. She hovered over the young couple like a mother hen, wisely saying little and seeing lots. She was an astute judge of human character, and she liked Tom’s bride. “They’re made fer each other,” she kept telling herself as they ate.

“Git outta here,” she laughed as she brushed Tom’s money away when he rose to pay her. “This un’s on me, and I enjoyed every minute of it.”

As Tom and Wendy walked toward the buckboard, a slim well-dressed young man about Tom’s age strode out of the saloon behind them. He wore tied down guns, and followed them far too closely to be anything but suggestive. Tom swung Grant’s door open wide enough for a single person to enter, and stepped aside to let Wendy in. Stepping in behind her, he closed the door as if unaware that the gunslinger was following. He introduced Wendy to Grant, made a few purchases that Wendy wanted, paid off his bill, and escorted her to the buckboard. After helping her to the seat, he went around to his side. As he was climbing aboard, the young gunslinger stepped up to Wendy’s side of the wagon, placing a hand on her arm.

“Mister,” Tom spoke authoritatively, “Take yer hand offen my wife.”

The gunslinger’s hand dropped for a draw, and Tom leaped across Wendy, bearing the off-balance gunslinger to the ground. Tom’s knee came down with all his weight in the gunman’s solar plexus, and the wind escaped his lips with explosive power. The man

was still gagging and trying to catch his breath as Tom took both his guns and dumped them in the watering trough. Then backing the greys nonchalantly, he headed the buckboard toward the stage station, where he loaded Wendy's trunks before striking out for home.

"Thanks, Honey," Wendy whispered as she snuggled against him. "I didn't realize that I had married such a hero."

"Just thank the Lord that no one got hurt," Tom admonished. "That guy was drawing to shoot. If the edge of the wagon hadn't been in his way you might uv been buryin' yer first husband right now."

* * *

Tom and Wendy rode arm-in-arm for an hour or so, more or less silently enjoying each other's presence. Tom finally broke the silence.

"You ever shoot a gun, Wendy?"

"Sure," she replied. "I used to sneak out with my brother and shoot squirrels with his .22 now and then. My mom didn't think shooting was very lady-like, so we never told her that I shot a lot of the squirrels he brought in for dinner."

"How about a handgun?" he asked.

"A little tiny neighbor girl named Annie Mozee taught me how to shoot one when we lived near Woodland, Ohio," she replied. "My mom wouldn't allow me to have my own gun so I didn't shoot a lot, but Annie could hit anything."

"How do ya like this?" he asked, drawing the S&W from under the seat.

"It's beautiful," she answered. "And it fits perfectly in my hand."

"I got it for you this morning," Tom said gravely. "There was someone snooping in the house yesterday while I was gone. They purdy well went through everthing I've got, but I couldn't find anything missin'."

"Anything to worry about?" she asked calmly.

"I don't know, Honey. They went through some papers un spent some time lookin' over our best bull. The future of our breeding ranch is pretty well tied up in that bull. He's proly the best Hereford in America, n' he's puttin' out more like 'imself" all the time."

"I thought western cattle were mostly longhorns," Wendy replied.

"They used ta be, but lots uv ranchers ar startin' ta switch over ta white faces. They're hearty, they forage well, n' they have more beef on 'em. That's why I've invested most of ar assets in the best available Hereford breedin' stock. I've been makin' more than we ever made raisin' range beef, n' it's all on ar' own titled ground without the hassle of holdin' on ta huge amounts uv govermut land. Other folks are always tryin' ta horn in on anyone that's doing well on govermut acres."

"Sounds good to me," Wendy replied.

"We've got the title ta about tin square miles uv land that stretches in a triangle along the creeks from the mountain ta where the creeks converge into the Torrent River near the house. Dad purchased most of it from homesteaders who gave up during a drought about fifteen years ago. They were abandonin' their land ennyway, and would sign over their titles fer five er ten dollars apiece. I bought up everything else within ar' boundaries as people moved off fer one reason or another. The last parts had ta be purchased at consider'bly more than they was worth, but we needed a fenced ranch fer ar' breedin' program, n' the owners were glad ta sell fer what we offered 'em. Too bad Mom n' Dad died before I got the titles combined into a single document, n' fenced the whole thing off. It was their dream, and I'm carryin' it on."

"We're carrying it on," she corrected him, "'Cause I know I fit into that dream pretty well."

"Yer the purtiest part of it," He replied, drawing her tighter against himself. "From the very beginnin' my part uv' that dream has always had a purty little woman with brown hair waitin' ta meet me at the door with passionate kiss."

"Well?" she replied a bit breathlessly, with an exaggerated pause and a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

He dropped the reins and gathered her into a passionate kiss that lasted until they ran out of breath. "I love ya, honey," he whispered as they broke it off. Then he grabbed the reins and slapped the greys into a faster walk towards home.

The virtual newlyweds arrived at the cabin after dark that evening. Tom pulled the buckboard up to the front porch, and asked Wendy to wait a moment while he went inside to light a few lamps. Grabbing a piece of paper he must have left on the table and shoving it into his pocket, he returned to the buckboard, gathered Wendy into his arms, and carried her over the threshold into her new home.

"I love it," she assured Tom as he set her on her feet inside the front door. "It's totally romantic."

After Tom had carried Wendy's trunks into the bed room, he unhitched the buckboard where it stood by the porch, so they could unload it in the morning. Wendy did a quick perusal of the kitchen cabinets while he was taking care of the horses. She was already fixing supper by the time Tom got back from the barn. After five months of separation, this evening was essentially going to be a repeat of their wedding night.

* * *

The next morning Tom discovered the paper he had placed in his pocket the previous evening. It must have been lying face down on the table, because a note was clearly scrawled across the other side of it:

Ya ain't got no right ta fence govermut land. We ar' bringin a big herd into this area and will be usin' the land between the creeks. Ya got 2 days ta leave.

Seeing the shocked disbelief on his face, Wendy came over to read the note.

"How can they do that if it's titled land?" she asked, looking up into Tom's face questioningly.

"They can't," Tom replied with resolution in his voice. "Every title was verified and recorded by the Land Office when we bought it, and again when I got the title consolidated."

"Will the Sheriff help us?" she asked.

"There 'ud probably have ta be a trial first. Then the federal marshals 'ud help us," Tom answered, "but that all takes time. In the meantime, we'll have ta keep 'em from tearing' up the place ar'selves."

"If that's the way it has to be, so be it," Wendy replied with a resolution that matched his own. Then, humming a hymn, she started fixing breakfast without the slightest hint of fear in her bearing.

Wendy was washing the dishes while Tom unloaded the buckboard. When he returned from putting the wagon up, she met him at the door. She was dressed in an old pair of his coveralls that failed to camouflage her figure very well, and she had the little S&W in her hand.

"I want to try out this gun," she announced.

"Wait'll I get mine," he answered. "Since we got that note I should be wearin' 'em all the time ennyhow."

Wendy was loading the S&W like she knew what she was doing when he returned with his gun belt strapped on. Matching Colt .44's protruded from his holsters. She dropped the .32 into the large right-sided pocket of her overalls and took his hand. They walked hand-in-hand towards the barn.

"I'll set up some targets," Tom volunteered as he strolled towards a small rise about forty feet from where she was standing. He was placing targets of wood chips, dirt clods, and whatever else lay around the knoll when two riders came around the corner of the barn with their guns leveled on Tom.

"We're takin' the fence down now," the lead rider drawled arrogantly around a lighted cigar.

Tom whirled at the voice, but dared not draw while he was covered by two guns.

"This is titled land, and you can't do that," Tom replied evenly.

"We'll take care uv the titles," the man sneered triumphantly. "You'd better pull in yer horns n' start packin' ta leave. The little lady can stay here with us if she wants ta," he added with an insinuating chuckle.

Wendy had just dropped her hand into her pocket to retrieve her gun when the intruders showed up. Seeing that their attention was riveted on Tom, She drew the S&W and shot the cigar from the mouth of the speaker in one lightening smooth movement.

"Ouch!" the surprised outlaw exclaimed, raising his gun hand to explore his stinging lips with the tips of the fingers that were outside the trigger guard.

"Hey! Give me that afore ya hurt someone," the second man growled, stretching his hand toward her as he stepped his horse closer.

Swinging the gun slightly, Wendy fired again, and the second outlaw's hand flew to the ear that she had notched.

Tom drew both guns in the confusion, putting the outlaws to the disadvantage.

"Take their guns while I keep 'em covered, Honey," Tom said softly to his wife. "Now beat it!" he added when the outlaws were disarmed, "N' don't be a'commin' 'round here again."

“Some shootin’, Wendy!” Tom exclaimed when the intruders were a well down the road.

“What did you expect?” she asked roguishly. “I told you that little Annie taught me how to shoot.”

* * *

“While we’re at the barn, let me show ya the horse I’ve been savin’ fer ya,” Tom suggested.

“I kind of thought there might be one around here for me,” she answered. “Where is it?”

“Come n’ see,” he invited, leading her by the hand.

Fella nickered from the first stall when Tom came in. He paused to pat the big horse before opening the door to the next stall.

“This is Misty,” he told Wendy, almost like an introduction.

She looks just like Fella, except smaller,” Wendy observed delightedly as she held out a hand for the horse to smell.

“They had the same grand sire,” Tom explained as the horse took a friendly step toward Wendy. “A lot of his second generation colts look just like he did. They’re mustangs with a few generations uv Arabian n’ Morgan bred inta ’em.”

“Wanna saddle up n’ see the ranch?” Tom asked

“Sure,” Wendy replied.

Tom brought out a brand new hand-tooled western saddle with a matching bridle for Wendy. They saddled up, and he helped Wendy adjust her stirrups after she mounted. The pair stopped at the house long enough to pick up some food and get a couple of rifles before cantering off along the stream to their right. They kept an eye on the fence as they rode.

“The streams provide water for the stock year ’round,” Tom explained. “N’ if they run dry we still have two spring-fed waterin’ holes near the middle of the ranch that didn’t even falter in the big drought that drove so many people away from here. One uv ’em

was on our original homestead, n' we bought the other one from a homesteadin' couple that just didn't like the solitude, n' wanted to go back ta the social life back east. The water supply is prob'ly why those guys want ar land so bad.

They found the eastern fence in good shape, and turned left along the northern edge of the ranch. The whole northern boundary was wooded. It ran for nearly four miles along a granite outcropping on the edge of a mountain, and required little fencing.

Tom showed Wendy an old mine blasted out of the solid granite cliff by a miner who evidently had taken out just enough gold to keep him at it for several years before he gave up. The cagey miner had made the opening in the side of a natural crevasse that hid his mine from passersby and marauding Indians. Tom had found this spot when he was a child, and had furnished the man-made cavern with a roughhewn table, a couple of old chairs, and a makeshift bunk covered by a heavy old buffalo robe. More recently he had stored some tinned food, an axe, a hunting knife, an old Henry repeater rifle, and a good stock of ammunition in the room in case of emergencies. There was also a good supply of dry firewood stored there.

"If ya ever get caught out here in the weather," he suggested, "Go ta the mountain n' foller the cliff until you come ta this place. Ya could easily survive a two week blizzard in here if ya had to. There's even a little spring commin' out uv the cliff about a hunnert yards west of here"

The couple ate their lunch in the old mine by the light of a coal oil lamp, and remounted to continue their circuit around the ranch. They stopped to repair a place where the fence had been breached near the northwest corner. The familiar horse track with the V-shaped notch had traversed the breach more than once.

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Tom and Wendy saw smoke billowing towards the southeast while they were still several miles from home. Tom kicked Fella into a gallop, and Wendy followed close behind. The burning cabin collapsed, showering sparks into the dusky sky just as they topped the last rise.

Tom galloped right past the embers that had been his home and on to the barn, while Wendy stopped in shocked dismay. Hero's pen was opened, and the big bull was nowhere in sight. The greys had been turned loose, and were grazing contentedly about a quarter of a mile up the stream. The buckboard was still where he had left it, beside the barn. The fence was cut in several places.

The enraged cowboy grabbed a coal oil lamp from the barn and studied the tracks in its dim light. The v-shaped nick that Tom had observed the day before stood out like a sore thumb. Whoever was riding that horse was either totally clueless, or he was challenging Tom head on. The tracks were only two or three hours old, but it was already too dark to follow them until morning. Besides, Tom had Wendy to worry about.

The cowboy shook out a loop and lassoed one of the greys. The other followed them back to the barn, where Tom caught it easily. He was grimly hitching them to the buckboard when Wendy asked what he was doing.

"I'm taking ya ta town where you'll be safe," he stated.

"I'm staying with you," she answered firmly.

Tom tried to stare her down, but her stare, accompanied by an impudent grin, was every bit as steady as his.

"We'll both go ta town n' stay the night," he compromised. "We need to get that title ta the bank or somewheres safe a'fore they find it ennyways."

When the buckboard was ready, Tom slipped into the root cellar and got some money and the title from the safe by candle light. He hid them beneath a false floor in the hinged box he had built behind the seat. After he had tied Fella and Missy on leads behind the wagon, he helped Wendy into the seat and struck out for town.

"We'll stay at the hotel," Tom told Wendy as they began to recover enough from their shock to start think things over.

"That's where they'll look for us if they think we've got that title," Wendy suggested. "Anyplace else we could stay?"

"We could try the minister's house," Tom mused. "They're good folks and would do anything they could fer us."

"Sounds good," she replied. "I want to get acquainted with them anyway."

It was about two o'clock in the morning when Tom rapped at the minister's door. After a brief conversation the minister said, "You are welcome to stay here if you'd like to, but my barn isn't adequate to hide four horses and a buckboard in. I'd go out to Ma Murten's place if I were you. She's a mile out of town and has a large barn. Her husband used to board horses there before he died."

"And Tom," the minister added, "I wouldn't trust the banker if I were you. He's quit coming to church, and several shady acting people have been hanging around his place lately. Something's wrong there."

"Thanks," Tom told him genuinely. "We'll head fer Ma's right now. I want the horses hidden away before dawn."

Ma was up the instant Tom rapped on her door. She held a sawed off shotgun ready until she heard Tom's voice. Suspecting trouble, the first words she whispered were, "Get the horses and the buckboard in the barn and come in the back door. She had coffee ready by the time Tom and Wendy had the buggy hidden and the horses stabled.

Ma Murten listened to their story with very little interruption. When the couple finished talking, she said, "I been wondering when sumpthin' like this would happen. They're just usin' beef as a cover-up fer huntin' fer Murten's Mine."

"What's that?" Tom and Wendy chimed in.

"My granddaddy had a mine in the edge of the mountains near your place nigh ta sixty years ago. After two or three years of blastin' and diggin' he gave up and tried Californy. He wrote that he had made a good strike, sold 'is claim, and was comin' home a rich man. It 'pears that the mine he sold petered out purty quick, n' the story got around that he had high-graded the ore with gold from his first mine. They prob'ly lynched 'em, 'cause 'e was never heard from again."

"Somehow that rumor keeps surfacin'. Ever now n' then folks from all over the world drop by ta see if I'm related ta 'im, and what I know about the mine. I tell 'em grandpa had a minin' engineer check ut out, n' found out it was purty useless, so he abandoned ut. Sometimes I have ta show 'em his letters afore they'll quit pesterin' me. I 'magin' these folks has heard the story n' think there's a hole full a gold on the back edge a yer place. If they was a-wantin' ut fer ranchin' they wouldn't uv burned the house."

"Makes sense, Ma," Tom mused. "I found the mine while I was a'huntin' squirrels as a kid. There's no gold in ut. When this is all settled I'll show it ta ya."

"I'd love ta see ut, Tom." she said, "But iffing I knowed where it was folks ud be pesterin' me ta take um there till my dyin' day."

"Now you kids lie down n' get some rest a'fore dawn," Ma ordered as she showed them to her spare bed room.

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Tom got up when he heard Ma Murten rattling around in the kitchen. Wendy was still out like a light. "You take that title ta the preacher's house," Ma told Tom over coffee.

“That way iff’n they find yer horses has been here they still can’t steal your primary proof that ya own that land.”

“I’ll do it now, a’fore them outlaws ’ll be up ta see me,” Tom replied. He saddled Fella as Ma saddled her horse to go to her café. A half an hour later he was having a second cup of coffee with the minister and his wife as dawn was breaking. “We’ll hide your title with our own papers,” they assured him.

Tom was half-way back to the Murten place to get Wendy when a thunderstorm overtook him. He arrived soaking wet, but was thankful that the tracks that would tell that they had been to the minister’s house would all be washed away.

“What’ll we do for dry clothes?” Wendy mused when she saw him.

“We’ll have ta buy new clothes ennyways,” Tom reminded her. “Everthing else we had was burned up with the cabin. There’s still quite a bit uv cash in the wagon box,” he added.

Tom and Wendy had to kill time until Grants opened at eight A.M. They had what would normally have been a leisurely breakfast at Ma’s, if they hadn’t been so frustrated. Suddenly Wendy blurted out, “Tom, we’ve been so busy with all this stuff that we’ve been forgetting the Lord. We need to be praying about what to do.”

“Right,” Tom answered, blushing a bit. “We need ta pray silently right here, n’ we’ll pray aloud together soon as we git goin in the buckboard. We don’t want them outlaws ta hear enny plans we’re a’makin with God.”

Despite the number of customers in the café, Tom and Wendy each took the other’s hands across the table and bowed their heads in silent prayer for several minutes. Their prayer session was suddenly interrupted by a snarling voice.

“Hey, pantywaist, yer the guy that knocked me down while I wuzzant lookin’ the other day. Stand up and draw!”

Wendy’s face went white, but Tom answered calmly.

“You were bothering my wife n’ I stopped ya face-ta-face. That’s over now, and I’m not goin’ ta murder ya just ta prove that I kin.”

“Ya got guns on,” the gunman taunted. “Stand up like a man n’ say ya beat me fair.”

“I already said it,” Tom replied evenly. “Now beat ut and leave us alone.”

“Yer as yella as I heard ya was,” the gunman jeered, spitting at Tom’s boots as he turned towards the door.

“Not yella,” Tom replied, “Just a Christian who don’t believe in murder.” But when he looked around all his acquaintances had their heads down and refused to look at him.

“It’s awright, Tom,” Ma called out loudly as they rose to go to Grants and get some clothes. “Whether ’e realizes ut er not, ya faced ’em down with what’s right.”

“Yeh,” Wendy agreed. “I’m proud of you for doing what’s right.”

As they walked towards Grants, they saw the two men they had chased off their place huddled in a conspiratory conversation with the Sheriff across the street in front of the jail. “So much fer enny help there,” Tom muttered to Wendy as he jerked his head slightly towards the trio.

“Looks like we’re on our own,” Wendy acknowledged with a twinge of disappointment in her voice.

“We still got the Lord,” he reminded her, and she squeezed his hand in agreement.

The couple purchased a wagon load of supplies and some bedding as well as a couple of outfits apiece at Grants. After the supplies were loaded Wendy stepped out the door with her arm draped with the clothing while Tom finished paying Grant. As Tom stepped out the door, the troublesome gunman was pulling Wendy toward himself with his left hand around her waist. “How ’bout a kiss fer Silverslick,” Tom heard the outlaw taunting as his eyes watched Tom warily.

Anticipating that the gunman would draw with his right hand, Tom grabbed it with his left as it dropped toward the gun. At the same time Wendy threw herself backwards against the arm around her waist, interfering with the gunman’s left-handed draw. By the time the gunman had found his other gun Tom’s right fist was crashing against his unprotected jaw. The unconscious thug dropped like a sack of potatoes, and Tom calmly stooped to help his wife pick up the clothing they had purchased.

“Not too yella, at that,” a bystander commented to no one in particular. “N she’s a brick.”

After the promised prayer session in the buckboard when they were well out of town, Wendy asked if they hadn’t better stay in Murten’s Mine. “No,” Tom replied thoughtfully, “We’d best save that as our ace. There ar’ still a couple uv log homesteader cabins standing on the place. One uv ’em’s nigh as nice as the house they burned, and it’s purty well hidden in the trees around one of the springs. I think we should go there first.”

“Whatever you think,” she smiled, scooting closer and putting her arm around his waist trustingly.

Tom forded the Torrent River at a rocky spot about five miles from the Triangle ranch. They followed a barely perceptible rut toward the mountain for several hours before coming to a crude gate in the western fence of their ranch. "We're 'bout half-way across the ranch," he told Wendy as he closed the gate and forded the stream. "The cabin we'll use is about two miles due east uv here as the crow flies, but we'll have ta thread ar way through the hills so ut 'll take more 'un n' hour ta git there."

An hour or so later the couple was climbing stiffly out of the buckboard. Wendy liked the rustic mountain style log cabin the minute she saw it. Grabbing a broom, she commenced sweeping a huge cloud of dust from the pinned plank floor while Tom unloaded the buckboard. He stabled the horses in a lean-to out back and hid the wagon in the trees before he came back in, hanging the tack on some nails in the wall. They fried some bacon and ate it with a tin of beans before they went out and picked some tender pine tips to stuff in a ticking for a mattress. It was dark by the time they finished. Tom read a chapter aloud to Wendy by candle light before they knelt in prayer at the bed side, and snuggled in for some much needed sleep.

At dawn Tom and Wendy were saddling up for a reconnaissance trip. The closer they got to the home place, the more long horn cattle they ran across. "They's mostly rustled stock." Tom told Wendy, pointing out the healing cinch-ring art on the brands. "They're bringin' that stuff in here ta turn the community against us so we'll be lynched."

"What'll we do, Tom?" she asked, her eyes full of amazement.

"We're gonna try ta git ta the neighbors first," Tom answered.

* * *

When Tom and Wendy arrived at the closest neighbor toward town's place, there were at least ten horses tied outside the house. As they came to the door they could hear a familiar voice inciting the ranchers for the lynching. "You'll all find some uv yer cows with worked over brands over there," the speaker was saying.

"It's that guy whose ear ya notched," Tom whispered. "You stay out here n' I'll go in n' tell 'em what's goin' on."

Throwing the door opened, Tom stepped into the room empty handed. "Hold ut," he called out.

“Git ‘em,” the speaker yelled, going for his gun. Tom’s left hand flashed, and the man’s other ear was notched before his hand even touched his gun. The outlaw’s hands raised in surrender instantly. No one else moved.

“Gentlemen,” Tom continued as he dropped his gun back into its holster, “My wife put that notch on that guy’s other ear when ‘e n’ ‘is side kick behind ‘em there tried ta run us offin’ ar place. Since then someone has burned down ar home, cut the fences ta ar titled land, n’ chased ar prize white faced bull off. They’ve drove some, ut least, uv yer rustled cattle onta ar place so you’d help ‘em run us off.”

Watching from an opened window at the back corner of the room, Wendy saw the other outlaw drawing his gun surreptitiously from behind the first one. Her gun boomed and his hands went up as blood trickled from his ear too.

“How would burnin’ down ar own place and drivin’ the best Hereford bull in the USA away help us rustle yer cattle? Tom continued when the echo died down. “N’ do yas really believe we’d be stupid enough to bring a bunch a half-healed altered brands ta ar home place where we’d be sure ta be caught red-handed with ‘em?”

“I guess not, Tom,” the owner of the house answered apologetically. “We was lettin’ these guys lead us like the Pied Piper. You ain’t never been ennything but honest long as I’ve known ya.”

“I ain’t convinced,” a surly younger rancher spoke up. “I don’t trust nobody that ain’t got the sand ta stand up n’ face ennyone who braces ‘em. I say let’s hang ‘em.”

“Now that ya’ve seen Tom shoot, ya know that ‘e would uv kilt that tin horn a’fore ‘e’d cleared leather if ‘e went up agin’ ‘em,” another rancher admonished. “Tom was standin’ upright. Ut wouldn’t uv been upright fer ‘im ta kill that fool just ta prove ‘e ain’t yella. Ut would uv been cold blooded murder.”

“Yella’s yella no matter how ya look at ut,” the surly man insisted. “Tom’s yella!” he challenged as his hands dropped to hover over his guns. Two other men’s hands began drifting almost imperceptibly toward their guns as he spoke.

“Mister,” Wendy cut in angrily, “Tom beat that gun toting cow thief up twice with his bare hands when he was trying to take advantage of me. If you three guys in there with itchy trigger fingers knew what was good for you, you’d be covering your ears with those hands instead of thinking about drawing.”

All eyes were still on the window that framed Wendy’s flaming face and flashing blue eyes like a picture when Ma Murten stepped into the room with two strangers.

“U.S. marshals,” the strangers announced, flashing badges from under their vests. “We’re arresting those two men with the bloody ears for rustling, robbery, and fraud. The rest of their gang is already incarcerated.”

“The telegraph operator tipped the banker off, and he thought he could lose us by mingling his tracks with others along the road,” one of the marshals explained. “But,” he continued, covering his ears theatrically with his hands, “There was such a pronounced V-shaped notch on one of his horse’s shoes that even a woman could have followed him.”

“Ma,” Tom queried as the marshals led the handcuffed outlaws out the door, “How’d the marshals git involved in this?”

“I finally figured out who that banker was, n’ tellygraphed their office.” she replied. “He’s a notorious shyster called ‘Honest Ike,’ who travels around startin’ up banks in small towns n’ runnin’ away with everyone’s money. I recognized ’em from a poster on the stage, only he didn’t have no toupee er mustache on the poster. I noticed the toupee when ’e jerked ’is head against my arm tryin’ ta signal that gun slick ta start something with ya.”

“What’d those gangsters want with yer land, ennyway?” One of the ranchers asked Tom.

“They heard one uv those fool ghost town rumors that there was a lost mine full uv gold on our property,” Tom answered. “I found the old Murten’s Mine they was a’huntin’ way back when I was a kid,” he continued, “n’ I’m still slavin’ my life away raisin’ cattle ’cause there never was more un a lick n’ a promise uv gold in ut. Ma Murten says that’s why her grand pappy abandoned ut in the first place.”

“Speakin’ uv cattle,” another rancher spoke up with a grin. “That big bull uv yers is over ta my place servicin’ my stock fer free. I keep a’tellin’ ’em ’e orta ta go home, but ’e won’t listen ta me. I’m ’spectin’ some mighty good calves early next spring.”

“Thanks fer tryin’ so hard ta git ’em ta go home,” Tom answered in mock sarcasm. “We’ll be over ta git ’em soon as we kin.”

“We’ll need ta get back to town and buy some material for curtains first,” Wendy added demurely.