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Volume 3

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Volume 3

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The Tales

Stoddard's Gold

By John Putnam

An old, all-too-familiar voice haranguing a small knot of drunken miners outside a riverside grog shop caught my ear as I hurried back to my home. I'd long thought him dead, and he looked near to it, beard wild and gray, eyes sunk deep inside a face with cheeks as bilious as any corpse. Busy men rushed past him without a glance but I stopped, just as I had three years ago. Today, here at the junction of the Yuba and Feather Rivers, Marysville had boomed as a supply center for the gold mines upstream, and I'd become an important part of that growth, all because of Stoddard.

After mining along the American River near Greenwood Creek that first winter, and doing quite well until our claim finally played out, Anderson and I had opted to move north in hopes of finding an even more productive spot. We'd heard rumors of big strikes near the Yuba River; so in late May we'd arrived in Nevada City, just another gold boom mushroom town called Deer Creek Diggings in those days. I'd left Caldwell's Store heading for the Bella Union where a French lady was supposedly dealing twenty-one when I first saw him. He stood out front, a smattering of drunken miners around him much like today, except back then Stoddard had fire in his eyes, grit in his voice, and one of the biggest nuggets I'd ever seen in his hand.

"My name's Stoddard and this is what I found. Look at it," he cried, shaking the gold high overhead. "It's big and coarse, not smooth and small like the gold you mine downstream. Most men think that means it comes from closer to the source, closer to the mother lode. There's a lake full of nuggets just like this one high up in the mountains and who knows what else is there, but I need help to get it out. Injuns jumped us just after we found these nuggets.

We were forced to run for our lives and I haven't seen my partner since. I think they might've killed him. I need twenty-five good men who can shoot straight and aren't afraid of a scrap. Who here is ready to go? Step up."

"I'll go." It was Anderson, my close companion for the past year. He took a step forward into the circle of men then noticed me. "Come on Micah," he pled. "This is just what we're looking for, our big chance to make enough to get a good start in life."

"But it sounds so risky," I replied, my mind stuck on Stoddard's dead partner.

"Yeah, but is it any more risky than the dangerous trip we made together last summer, all the way from St. Joseph across plains, mountains and deserts just to get here?" he pointed out with a bit of heat in his normally well tempered voice.

"We didn't have a shooting fight with Indians then," I replied with my own fire.

Stoddard stepped right into our little dust up. "It ain't for sure we'll have a set-to with Injuns. The ones I saw could've been a hunting party. They weren't likely to live near the lake so I reckon they're long gone from there, but it's always best to be safe."

Anderson grinned at me. "See Micah, it's not so scary now is it?" he said in that cocky way he had.

I shrugged, knowing Anderson had won me over again, but still unsure of the size of the mess I was about to walk into. "Okay, I'll go, but only because you talked me into it," I countered; remembering the many things Anderson had convinced me to do since we'd been together. He'd been right more often than not.

As the other men moseyed off—either they already had a good paying claim or were far wiser than I—Stoddard stuck his nugget back into a leather bag. "Come inside," he offered. "Let's have a drink and I'll give you the details. We leave in two days."

Inside the saloon I saw her at once, sitting near the back playing cards with eight or nine miners. She was lovely, and the first woman I'd seen in months. I barely listened to Stoddard as he recited chapter and verse the details of our trip. When he was done I found a seat at her table. I lost a hundred dollars that night. Folks might think that a lot but I never minded one bit. Here men often lost ten times that at the turn of a card.

And even though she barely spoke to me, just being around a woman was worth every cent.

The next two days were busy. On Saturday Anderson went with me to buy two stout mules with packsaddles from a man on Brushy Creek to add to the two we'd come here with. We spent the rest of the day getting four months worth of food and our mining gear ready to go. Then on Sunday, while Anderson helped Stoddard recruit more men for our daring adventure, I rode to Selby Flat where I'd heard of a man willing to sell a new Colt revolver at a reasonable price. The idea of a fracas with a party of wild Indians still had me inordinately disconcerted and the pistol was a big step up from my one shot rifle.

And in spite of a planned early start in the morning, I couldn't resist the urge to see Madame Reynard one last time before we left for Stoddard's mysterious lake. Like before she looked as winsome as anyone I'd ever seen, her face flush and full with lips red like a ripe cherry, and her hair, soft and buff as a young spring fawn, draped about her slender neck in tight coils. I sat across the table from her and quickly lost fifty dollars while beguiled by the sparkle of the lamplight reflected in her deep blue eyes.

Then she stood and, looking directly at me, said in her thickly accented English, "It is hot here. I need air," and calmly sauntered across the room with every man's gaze following her, leaving me feeling uncomfortable, unsure if there was some special meaning in her look.

It seemed impossible that a woman so pleasing could have any par-ticular regard for me, but without her here I also had no interest in gambling and, with a long, hard day likely in store for me tomorrow, I knew it was best to return to camp. I gathered the remnants of my funds and walked outside into the night. Once there I looked around for the Madame but since I didn't see her anywhere I went on to my horse.

"You are going with Monsieur Stoddard tomorrow, oui?"

It was her. I spun to the sound of the voice just as she stepped from the shadows, a look on her face that I could interpret in no other way than concern, but concern for what, for who? "Yes, how did you know?" I replied, honestly at a loss.

"One hears things in the Bella Union, mon ami. But you must be careful. There is a man, Monsieur Raush, who has pledged to follow you and take your gold for himself."

"Raush," I exclaimed. "I've never heard of him."

She stepped closer and I felt her hand on my arm. "He is a very big man and a very bad man, très mal. He has many others with him. He will kill you all if he must," she whispered, her mouth close to my face.

Once again my poor mind couldn't grasp the right words, but without a warning she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me quickly full on the mouth. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she breathed as she pulled away. "Find your gold then look for me when you return, s'il vous plaît." With that she disappeared into the darkness, leaving me still bewildered and unable to believe what had just happened.

Riding back to our camp along Deer Creek on that warm, moonlit night, my blood turned chill more than once at an unexplained sound from the woods, or a shadow that loomed threateningly over the trail. Madame Reynard had left me perplexed and ill at ease in no small way with her tale of Raush and his threats to kill us all for the gold that Stoddard would lead us to. But even more unsettling was why she'd done it, and the taste of her lips that lingered still on mine.

Her soft voice flowed again through my clouded mind. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she'd said, but I'd hardly spoken twenty words to her. How did she know my name? Few people here did. And then I'd let her run away without even asking her full name in return. Whatever caused such a lapse in my well-learned manners was beyond my reasoning at the moment.

"Look for me when you return," she'd said next. No matter which way I turned the words over in my head it all came out the same. She cared about me somehow. Why I couldn't fathom but the kiss seemed the proof of the pudding. Women don't do things like that for no reason, or are such things different in France? I had no idea. The only girl I'd ever kissed was Betsy Pike and that only one short buss before I left for California.

Then there were the Indians who'd probably killed Stoddard's partner. Maybe it was a hunting party that they'd happened to stumble across, but that was no guarantee that we wouldn't run afoul of another group along our way. Nearly every week on the trail to California there came a rumor of Indians killing white men, but I had personally seen no sign of any serious trouble. Still, deadly incidents happened, and all too often.

I knew little of Indians, and that mostly from the wild tales told on the trip west. We'd seen Pawnee riding in the distance as we crossed the

prairie to Fort Kearney. Soon after fording the South Platte a whole party of Sioux, men, women and children, passed right in front of us. And near Fort Bridger Shoshone came into our camp wanting to trade. They were a pathetic, lice infested lot but seemed harmless enough.

I tied Buddy, my young chestnut, to a long tether in the grassy meadow behind our camp, then pulled out the new Colt revolver from my saddlebags and stuck it into my waistband. I was a fair shot with a rifle, but had had little use for a handgun on my family's farm in Kentucky. Yet knowing I had a new repeating pistol so close at hand gave me some small comfort against the host of demons so recently rising around me.

The fire burned low in our camp and I was disappointed to find Anderson tucked into his bedroll. I'd thought of nothing better than to talk with him about the events of tonight. Ten years my senior and married to a woman in Pennsylvania that he adored and spoke of constantly, I hoped he would have some soothing words for my troubled spirit. But not wishing to disturb my only true friend in California, I pulled off my boots, and crawled under my blanket as quietly as I could, making sure the Colt would be easy for me to get to, just in case.

Then Anderson rose on his elbow. "You've been at the Bella Union with Michelle Reynard again, haven't you?" he asked with a chuckle to his voice.

"Yes, I—"

"How much did you lose this time?" he demanded, still with a smile to his tone.

"Not so much," I mumbled, "but how do you know her first name?" I inquired with a lot more mettle, knowing Anderson to be dead set against gambling. He hoarded every ounce of gold he found and sent most of his money home to his wife.

"She asked about you today, while you were at Selby Flat. I think she's sweet on you, Micah."

I could tell from his manner he was teasing me about her now, and enjoying himself a great deal at my expense, but I needed some answers. "She warned me about a man named Raush who plans to follow us and take the gold we find at Stoddard's lake. Out of the blue she kissed me and afterwards told me to look for her when I get back. Then she ran off into the shadows." I said, all the while wondering if I would ever make it back here from wherever it was we were going.

"She kissed you, did she? I was right. She has set her cap for you, you Romeo," he laughed openly, enjoying his joke.

"I'm no Romeo!" I retorted, only knowing the meaning of the word because he'd used it to tease me about Betsy Pike when I'd told him about her one night along the trail. "But what about Raush," I asked. "He could be more dangerous than the Indians."

Anderson turned serious. "He could be. I saw him today too. He made quite a rhubarb when Stoddard told him we had as many men as we needed, threatened to follow us, and, yeah, even kill us if he didn't get his way. But he was drinking heavy. The truth is we'll likely slip out tomorrow before he sobers up. I'd worry more about the Indians than Raush."

"Well, if you say so," I muttered, unconvinced.

"You bet I say so. And when we get back here this fall, pack mules loaded with nuggets like the ones Stoddard has in his poke, you find that French gal and marry her. She's a catch. Her husband got killed a while back by a road agent who stole his gold. It left that lady in a whale of a pickle but she's done right well for herself it seems."

In spite of his teasing, Anderson's reaction to Madame Reynard and his suggestion that I marry her after we return from out trip did ease my mind a good deal, although the idea of wedding a woman I'd just met seemed too farfetched for my taste. Yet I knew that if I lived long enough I had to see her again, no matter what I had to do to find her. But it was the living long enough part that sat hard in my gut, twisting my insides into tight knots. The dual threat of unknown Indians and the all too real Raush wore deep across the grain of my better judgment.

"I still think this trip is risky, Anderson. First it was just Indians. Now there's Raush. Maybe we'd be best to stay here. Men are finding gold everywhere. Just tonight I heard more than a little talk about big finds on Rock Creek. Let Stoddard have his lake full of nuggets. Let Raush go with him," I implored.

"Micah, if you want to stay here and woo the French lady then you go right ahead. Lord knows you're at that age when a woman tends to settle heavy on a man's mind, and I'll grant there's a wagon load of danger in Stoddard's plan, but a man has to take some risks in life if he's going to make something special for himself. This is one of those things that could pay off beyond anything we've ever imagined. Now, you're as level headed

as any young man I've ever met, and you've grown as close to me as a brother, but you need to make your own decision about going."

As was his habit, Anderson had hit the core of my dilemma dead on, and moreover he'd trusted me to decide for myself, like he usually did. He was more a brother to me than my own flesh and blood who had never treated me with the respect Anderson does. I'm the youngest and Jacob is about Anderson's age. After our Pa died he'd run the farm with an iron fist, never once leaving me any say in what happened there, and because of his bullheadedness I'd left for California without his blessing. But I couldn't imagine parting with Anderson just yet, not after all we'd been through together.

"I feel the same about you, Anderson, and I can think of nothing I'd like less than our splitting up." I said without reservation. "But this venture with Stoddard has me as skittish as a raccoon that my old blue tick hound, Babe, ran up the elm tree beside our house, and it isn't just the Indians and Raush, it's Stoddard. I mean, what do we really know about him? Is he telling the truth? He could have gotten those nuggets anywhere."

"It's a good point, Micah. I believe his story about finding that gold in the lake," he said. "But in all truth, Raush has been rattling at my predilections more than I wanted to let on to you. I got a sense Stoddard knew him somehow, that there was bad blood between them. But when I asked Stoddard about it he denied knowing the guy. How about we meet up in the morning like we planned. If Raush is there causing trouble we'll back out of this trip. But if everything looks good, then we go. Sound fair to you?"

"Well, I guess I'm willing to go that far anyhow," I agreed, mostly because the idea of saying a final farewell to Anderson right now seemed a whole passel less appealing than the more distant and uncertain danger from Indians or Raush.

"Fine," Anderson declared. "Now let's get some rest. Lord knows we'll need it. Good night." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

"Good night," I echoed and curled up under my own bedroll, but sleep came slow. Yet when it did, in colors more vivid than any provided by nature, I watched an unfolding tableau as my mind dove deep into the many and various plots and ploys a band of angry Indians would use to protect their land. Then the brightness paled, just as colors do after sundown, and I probed the dark shadows of subterfuge and skullduggery

that Raush might ply to wrest our hard earned gold from us after we'd beaten back the savage attack of the red men.

All too soon I woke to the sounds of Anderson working over an early morning campfire, coffee brewing over the flame with leftover beans and bacon warming nearby.

"Morning," I said, then flipped back my blanket and sat up.

"Breakfast will be ready in few minutes," he said in the down to earth manner he started each day with.

I picked up my bedroll, and walked to the meadow where I saddled Buddy and loaded the mules. By the time I returned Anderson had a plate of food and a cup of coffee waiting for me. I ate quickly and soon we were riding up to Caldwell's Store. There I counted ten men waiting, none seemed like they might be Raush. But I looked over to Anderson and, understanding my trepidation well, he shook his head no. It was a good sign. Maybe all my fretting had been for nothing.

Stoddard arrived before we'd had a chance to greet the others in the party and with a hard look around he asked, "Any more men coming?" When no one spoke up he added, "Let's go then," and without further ado struck out toward the Yuba River.

Anderson and I waited for everyone else to leave town just in case Raush would show up late, but when he didn't Anderson turned to me. "Do we go?" he asked.

I shrugged, still ill at ease about it all. "I guess so," I said. We had made our deal last night, if Raush wasn't around causing trouble we would go, and I wasn't about to break my word to a friend. "I thought there would be more men here though," I went on.

"It just means more gold for us," Anderson asserted and then led our four mules northward. I followed, head swiveling constantly to the rear, right hand on the handle of my new Colt revolver, nerves ragged. Raush could show up at any time.

Just north of Selby Flat we came to Rock Creek, and though no one was mining where we crossed men were hard at work both upstream and down and the place had all the signs of productive gold country. Again I had to wonder why we were chasing Stoddard's dream of a golden lake when we could find all a man would ever need right here. And yet I'd worked in the gold fields long enough to know how fickle a miners fate can be. One claim

along a stream like this can hold pockets worth thousands of dollars while just a few feet away another plot can be close to worthless. Still, the men who worked hard and kept at it almost always made money while those who lazed the day away then gambled late into the night most often didn't.

We came to the South Yuba a little after midday and nooned across the river from a large group mining along Illinois Bar. The break gave me a chance to get acquainted with the men that would be my companions for the near future. There were three eager, friendly brothers fresh down the Siskiyou Trail from Oregon named Carl, Thomas, and the youngest, Zeke, who was about my age. And so too was Lem, who'd mined Deer Creek last winter with his father, Jedidiah, and done pretty well, according to Lem.

Four southerners, Ike, Jake, Luke and Harry, were all business. They called themselves the Natchez Mining Company, and had traveled by steamship to Panama then crossed the jungle before taking another steamer to San Francisco. They'd gotten to the mines early last summer and then worked the rich placers around Hangtown for almost a year. None of these men had gotten wind of Raush's threats and I wondered if there were a dozen more miners somewhere who had heard them and then decided not to show up.

But the most peculiar guy in this whole impromptu expedition looked more like the mountain men around Fort Bridger than any miner in California. He gave his name simply as Bird and carried a rifle with a bore as big any I'd ever seen. He called it a bear gun and that's about all the tight lipped Bird bothered to disclose before he walked off to the riverbank alone.

Stoddard rousted us from our rest much sooner and with a sense of urgency far more pressing than I thought necessary. His face taut, eyes darting repeatedly to our back trail, he badgered men to mount up and cross the river with wild waves of his arms and language strong enough to bring a blush to the cheeks of a lumberjack. But if others in the group felt as I did they hid it well. The Oregon brothers and Lem splashed into the water laughing and joking as if this was a simple summer outing. Bird had already crossed and I caught sight of him through the trees as he climbed the ridge.

I took the mules from Anderson. He'd put up with them all morning and deserved a break. We crossed the South Yuba together then Anderson dropped back behind our mule string much like I had this morning. Wary

that Raush would soon show up, I'd kept a close eye to our rear all along the way, and now I noticed Anderson spent as much time looking over his shoulder as I did. He worried about Raush too.

Soon we were enveloped in a deep forest of sugar pine with trunks as a large as twenty-five feet around. I thought of the sawmill not many miles from my home in Kentucky and how just a few of these monstrous trees could keep it in timber for a year. In this one stand of pines alone there must be enough wood to build a thousand towns each a thousand times as big as Nevada City. The wealth of California lay not only in its gold, it seemed.

One of the new mules we'd picked up Saturday caused me no end of bother and I'd fallen behind the rest of the group. But I had no trouble following their track; eleven horses and twenty-one mules leave a clear trail along the forest floor. Near sundown I came to a small creek running southwest down from the ridge. I stopped to let the animals drink their fill of the cool, clean water. Anderson rode up from behind me.

"Any sign of Raush," I asked as he jumped to the ground and led his pinto to the creek.

"I saw no indication of Raush or anybody else following us," he said and then pointed upstream. "But he sure looks interested in something down our back trail."

I turned to look and there, atop a large rocky prominence above us, sat Bird on his mustang, peering into the valley we'd left just hours earlier.

"Yeah, he seems real engrossed in something," I agreed. "He's a strange one. He's the only man here who only brought one mule, and I'd bet everything we found last winter that he's never washed out a single pan of gold in his whole life."

"If you'd been more interested in what Stoddard said and less in what Madame Reynard looked like that night in the Bella Union you might remember how we were told that Bird was a trapper who worked around here for years and he's supposed to help Stoddard find this lake we're going to," Anderson said in the condescending tone he always used when I'd not been paying attention to business like he thought I should. And he was right.

"Do you think he's looking back at Raush?" I wondered.

"Why don't you ride up and ask him. I'll take care of the mules. They don't seem to cause me as much trouble as they do you anyhow," he said.

"But you had them all morning," I protested, always one to pull my fair share.

"Go on now. We'll both rest easier if you know what's happening down in the valley."

I grinned. "Thanks Anderson," I said sincerely, then hopped on Buddy and sped up the hill. Near the top of the outcrop Bird's mule stood at the forest's edge contentedly chomping at the lush saw grass that grew there. I saw no sign of a pick or shovel handle sticking out anywhere from the pack, it seemed like Bird didn't have any plans to mine.

He sat there on top of his horse as still as the statue in front of our county court house back home. He didn't move a muscle, not even a twitch, as Buddy's iron shoes clattered across the rock to his rear. And when I stopped beside him he didn't turn to me, but instead calmly raised his big bore bear gun to point down the hill to where a thin blue ribbon of the South Yuba slashed across the dark green tops of sugar pine. "That what you come up here to see?" he asked.

Far below, in the middle of the stream, I saw a man on horseback, looking no bigger than an ant, headed this way. And as he passed from view behind the treetops another man, this one leading a mule, rode into the river, and then another, and after him still more until I had counted fifteen men and maybe twice as many mules, and I knew others had crossed before I got here. If it was a mining party it was awfully big and very well supplied. "Is it Raush?" I asked.

"Like as not," Bird said with a voice as smooth as a traveling tent preacher, and completely lacking the faintest tinge of fear.

"How many did you see," I asked as my hand instinctively caressed my Colt.

"Four dozen, maybe more," he said then turned to me. "You scared, boy?"

I looked deep into his cold gray eyes and knew he could read me like a book. "I guess I'm a little on edge," I muttered. It was all I could force myself to admit to.

"If that's Raush you'd damn well better be more than a little on edge. The man's more dangerous than a mad dog," he asserted, still without a hint of fear about him. Then, as he calmly turned and rode away, I broke out in an icy, bone shivering sweat.

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For the next two days Stoddard pushed us relentlessly, leaving me little doubt that he thought Raush was indeed following us, but I'd heard no mention of it among the other members of our party. I'd also talked with Anderson about wanting to go back to Nevada City. He pointed out that if I did I would run smack dab into Raush on the way. So I continued on, much like I had the first day, sharing time leading our mules or bringing up the rear of the column and keeping a watchful eye to our back trail.

We'd crossed the Middle Yuba late Tuesday and camped up the ridge on Kanaka Creek, named for the Sandwich Islanders from Honolulu who were mining there. And like so many others we had passed, the place had all the indications of gold, but Anderson urged that we press on, assuring me that Stoddard's mythical lake would, in the end, bring us a bounty we could find nowhere else. But I wasn't the only one who saw missed opportunity. The four men of the Natchez Mining Company had begun to openly carp over passing by so many prime locations to mine such easily available placer gold.

The next day saw more of the same. We were in the saddle before sunup, crossed a stony Oregon Creek at midday, then another high ridge beyond and by sunset were descending into the valley of the North Yuba River alongside a small brook that tumbled from rocky pool to rocky pool under a thick canopy of fir trees. After skirting a large boulder I led our four mules into a small clearing where I saw a stranger dressed like a miner talking with the men from Natchez.

It was clear right off that Ike and the rest of the Southerners were grilling the man about the amount and location of gold strikes along the North Yuba. News of gold in the California mines traveled by mouth faster here than it could on the new fangled telegraph wires back east. Practically everybody had heard how a Scotsman named Downie and the handful of colored men partnered with him had spent last winter at the forks of the North Yuba, and how they got snowed in and almost starved to death. Even the two Goodyear brothers, who'd worked a gravel bar downstream from the forks since last summer, had stayed the winter. Nobody would tolerate cold Sierra snows without a reason. Miners were pouring into this area now. That likely meant a lot of rich finds around here.

But if you cornered a miner working a good paying claim and asked him straight up, face to face, if there was much gold around, he'd hem and haw worse than an old mule bedeviled by a swarm of horse flies in the middle of August. And as soon as I got within earshot I heard the fellow rambling on about all the rich finds on Rock Creek and the South Yuba, or Kanaka Creek and the Middle Yuba, and how he thought that smart fellows like us should head back south where a lot more gold could be found.

"I see your point," agreed Ike, the oldest and cagiest of the Natchez boys. "But we've heard of a brand new mining town nearby and could all use a drink or two and maybe a good meal that ain't been cooked over an open fire before we go."

The miner stuck his thumbs into his waistband and grinned wide. "Oh, yes sir, we got a town alright," he bragged. "More saloons than you can count, bakeries with fresh bread, butcher shops with lean beef, a whole passel of tasty places to eat, a number of hotels, if you're a mind to sleep with the bed bugs, and everything here built since the winter snow melted. Some folks already call it Downieville, after the Scotsman."

He climbed up on a pretty mustang filly then looked back to Ike. "Heading there myself to play a little faro at Craycroft's Saloon. Look me up. Name's Tucker." He gave a quick tip of his beat up felt hat and rode off down the hill.

Ike watched until the miner was out of earshot. "Well, you heard what the man said. Is there anything else you need to know?" he asked the rest of his companions. When no one spoke out he continued. "Are we all of one mind then?"

To a man the three other members of the Natchez Mining Company sounded their agreement with him.

"Good," he continued. "We still have an hour or so before dark. Let's make sure we find the right spot to camp tonight," And the four of them rode off down the stream, leaving me feeling like a fly on the wall. It sure seemed like they'd made some sort of pact and were all agreed on doing something. Whatever it was must be pretty important because they'd been so wrapped up in it that nary a one of them had noticed me, even though Buddy and I'd been right behind them with all four of our mules for a good while.

Later, over a simple supper of beans and salt pork, I told Anderson

about what Ike had said earlier to the Natchez boys and my suspicions that they had made a plan to do something that they weren't letting the rest of us in on.

"Micah, you worry too much," he'd told me in his warm but reproving way. "First it was the Indians, then Raush, and now it's the Natchez crew. You need to learn how to take things as they come. Worrying over what might be is nothing but a waste and causes a man too much unnecessary consternation. We've had a hard day and tomorrow is likely to be worse. Get some sleep." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

He was right about the hard day and likely about tomorrow too. Each day had been like that as we climbed up from the last river valley and over a higher and a rockier ridge. We were heading deeper into the Sierra and Stoddard said that now we would follow the North Yuba east directly into the high backbone of the mountains.

I snuggled dog tired into my bedroll, but sleep didn't come so easily for me. And, like Anderson had said, it was because of the worry that boiled and churned in my mind much like the water in the small stream beside our camp that sloshed and spumed as it scurried down the steep, rocky slope of the river valley. But my turmoil wasn't from Indians, or Raush, or even Ike and the Natchez boys. It came from a blue eyed, brown haired French girl who'd somehow stolen my heart with one fleeting kiss on a moon swept night outside the Bella Union, and whether she'd be waiting if I ever returned.

But at last my exhaustion overcame my fixation with the beguiling Michelle Reynard and all to soon I woke into the half-light before sunrise to the smell of wood smoke and the sizzle of bacon frying. Anderson looked over to me but before he could offer a morning greeting a string of wild oaths erupted from downstream where the Natchez party had camped in a small clearing separated from us by a large rock outcropping. Instinctively I grabbed my Colt revolver and cocked the hammer.

Anderson held up his flat palm to stop me. "Easy, Micah, that sounds like Stoddard and he's coming this way."

Trusting my friend I put the pistol down, but close to hand, and tugged on my boots just as Stoddard rode into our camp, his face as heated as the embers of the cook fire. "Did either of you see them damn Southerners sneak off last night?" he yelled.

Anderson glanced at me with a raised eyebrow then turned to Stoddard.

"No, but I take it they're gone," he answered.

"Ran off in the dead of night like thieves. Ought to shoot 'em." Stoddard shouted.

Anderson grabbed the skillet in a gloved hand and, with one sure motion, flipped the salt pork to brown on the other side. Then he calmly asked, "What did they steal?"

Stoddard sat on his horse and spewed and sputtered, unable to answer.

So my wise friend stepped in to help him out, as was his wont. "I believe Ike and his crew have stolen nothing. They are all honest and upright fellows, but they did make an agreement to this expedition that they've reneged on. Since there was no binding contract there is little we can do. We still have enough men to find the lake, but I think an open and frank talk with everyone is called for before we start out today. And if any more of us wish to leave, there isn't much we can do to stop them either."

"But we're shorthanded now," Stoddard fumed. "What about the Injun's?"

"What about the Indians?" Anderson retorted.

"Yeah," I piped in. "Worrying about what might happen just causes unnecessary consternation." I said, suddenly seeing the truth in what Anderson told me last night exposed in the creases across Stoddard's face that read as clear as the lines in a book.

"But they killed my partner," Stoddard rebutted with fury.

"And you've never mentioned his name, have you?" Anderson countered. "Could he have also been a Raush, and could it be that it's his brother who follows us now?"

"Damn you," Stoddard yelled. "How do you know that?"

"I guessed, but now you've confirmed it. Do you care to tell us what happened?"

Stoddard's face paled, but he looked Anderson square in the eye. "My group crossed the Sierra by Lassen's northern route, a big mistake. We were starving. Two of us went hunting, got lost and wandered for days. Then we found the gold. I was high up the ravine when I heard his shot. He didn't have a chance. They were all over him, so I snuck away. Raush thinks I killed his brother for gold. I didn't, but I did run out on him."

And with that short speech I took pity on Stoddard for the first time.

Just before sunup we met with all the men who were left, except for Bird who wasn't around much anyway. Anderson did most of the talking

and made as fine a job at it as any famous orator I'd ever heard of. He informed everyone about the Natchez crew's leaving for what they thought was the easy gold at hand around here, and then went on to explain why he believed in what Stoddard had said and how, if we just held together a little longer, we'd all have more money than some old king named Midas, who could turn anything he touched into pure gold.

Then Anderson did what he'd always done with me and told us that it was our choice and each man had to make up his own mind. He explained how nobody would hold it against anyone who backed out. I'd long thought Anderson had a quality that made him special, but now I saw firsthand how he held a power to persuade men to his way of thinking that was far beyond what most others could ever hope to achieve. Every man among us cheered and eagerly vowed to continue on no matter what lay ahead.

The sun still hung low above the mountains to the east when we came within view of the North Yuba. The dark silence of the forest was broken by the loud splash of water, white and fast, breaking over a host of boulders and snags in the riverbed then boiling together in great convulsions at the forks where the North Yuba, rushing in from the east, collided with the Downie River ramming into it from the north. At the edge of the Yuba stood a tall stand of fir trees with graceful willows on each side, and above them, across the flanks of the deep ravine, sturdy oaks interspersed with towering pines and a few white flowered dogwoods climbed high into a clear blue sky as broad as all eternity.

Nestled in the forest east of the Downie and just across the Yuba lay the town, a motley collection of several log buildings, a few crude shacks, and a number of tents in all sizes and shapes, and all mostly hidden by the trees. Yet to me, the tiny settlement exuded a wonderfully brave demeanor. Humbled by the majesty of the mountains, cowed by the sheer power of the swirling water, and shrouded under the thick cloak of nature's foliage, the town seemed to bravely lift its collective face to us and say, "I am here, built by the hand of man, and I intend to stay." Although there lurked an understated fragility to the place that led me to wonder if it would all blow away in a strong wind.

But in spite of the lure of multiple saloons, fresh meat, a soft bed—bedbugs excepted—or a more savory meal, we kept heading east along the river. By a unanimous vote of all who remained with us we had determined that the town, as tempting as it appeared, would only be a time consuming

distraction likely to cause more problems than the small comforts it provided would be worth. And, after crossing to the north shore at the first good ford we found, we rode on, climbing ever higher into the mighty Sierra along the frothing torrent of the North Yuba River.

I soon realized we rode on a well used path and, judging from the amount of fresh mule droppings I came across, it must be frequented by the supply trains, often fifty animals long, that traveled the river valleys all the way from Bidwell's Bar supplying miners with food, clothing, tools and just about everything else a man needs to survive so far from civilization. It was a clear sign that more mining was happening upriver. But traveling along a well used trail was easier than cutting through the raw country like we'd done the first three days and we made good time.

It was near midday when I heard the hoof beats pounding from my rear. It sounded like one horse coming at a run. My old fears of Raush overwhelmed me and I spurred Buddy off the path and into a narrow defile in the steep side of the ravine. No sooner had I gotten turned back toward the trail than the hoof beats stopped and a chilling quiet descended over the forest. The birds stopped their endless prattle, even the wind refused to rustle the leaves; the only sound the deafening chatter of my teeth.

I looked all around me but saw no one. Sweat oozed from under my hat, stinging my eyes. The man on the trail had simply stopped riding and the only reason I could think of was that he knew I was here. Who was he? What was he planning on doing? Then came the unmistakable click of a gun hammer cocking. It had to be the most bloodcurdling sound I'd ever heard. I pulled out my new revolver then held my breath, hoping that would stop my whole body from shaking.

"I eat rattlesnake raw and rassle grizzlies with my bare hands," the rider yelled. "I can shoot the eyes out of a hawk and gut a deer quicker than a mountain lion. I know where ya are. Come out, 'fore I come in and get ya."

Oh, Lord, I'm dead, I thought. Then it dawned on me that I knew that voice. "Bird?" I asked in a weak but ever so hopeful tone.

A loud roar of laughter erupted from the trail. Bird was enjoying himself mightily at my expense. But right now I didn't mind a bit, so happy was I that he wasn't Raush or some other rapscallion. I nudged Buddy and rode out onto the path. Bird sat on his mustang, the bear gun across his lap, and wore the biggest grin I'd ever seen.

"How'd you know where I was?" I asked.

"Ya spend a lifetime in the wilds ya learn to read sign, son," he said and pointed to Buddy's feet.

Even I could see where I'd turned and left the trail. A heavy horse with a rider atop leaves a deep print in soft earth. "Okay, but how'd you know it was me?" I asked.

"Every animal, every man, leaves a clear mark on the land—personal like. Ain't hard t' see once ya learn how. Besides I been followin' ya all day."

Along the trail to California I'd heard endless tales of the mountain men and how they knew the wilderness nearly as well as the Indians did. It seemed a pretty good skill to have, especially in the midst of the rugged country we were in now. "Do you think you could show me a little about how you read these signs, Mr. Bird?" I asked.

He looked at me with squinty eyes and the grin he'd had turned suddenly sad. "The days of men like me are done, son. Won't be long 'fore the wilderness is gone, a lotta the animals too. The gold brung all these men to California. It'll bring others."

"But everyone I know plans on going back East as soon as the gold is gone. Most say it can't last more than another year." I offered, hoping to provide him some comfort.

"Men say a lot, then mostly do the opposite. They're here now. More'll come. They ain't going back. There's too much in California. It's a rich country, mighty rich. And it ain't just the gold."

He nudged the mustang to a walk and I rode alongside him since the trail was wide enough here. I wanted to learn more from this down to earth man who had such a deep love for the wild and seemed so convinced that his way of life would soon end. "What are you going to do then? I mean when the wilderness is gone," I wondered.

"Oh, men like me'll find a way to stay alive, but this ain't no time for a young, smart feller like yourself to turn to what I do. The world's changing and it's folks like you what's got to lead the way. Anderson say's you got a gift, say's you're special, and he's 'bout the smartest man I ever met. You'll be stayin' in California I 'spect, and like as not you'll do somethin' important too."

I felt the blood rush to my face. Back on the farm, Jacob had always told me how I didn't know anything, that I was stupid. Now Bird tells me Anderson thinks I'm special. Well, I didn't feel special. Here I was, just

twenty years old, miles away from any but the most rustic trappings of civilization, a continent away from home, and feeling awful puny under the shadow of the mountains towering above me. But knowing that someone I respect as much as I do Anderson could feel that way left me feeling real pleased.

Still I had a lot of questions, so I started in. "How long have you been here, I mean in California?" I asked.

"Been a long time son. Started out working the Rockies twenty year ago, been here near ten. But it's been some good years," he said with a wistful sigh.

"How do you make money," I continued. Bird sure didn't look like he had much of it. Except for his felt hat and leather boots his clothes were hand made from deerskin. Still, he had a fine horse and saddle and, with the bear gun and the huge knife he carried, it all must've cost a pretty penny.

He eyeballed me with the same broad grin he'd had before. "Sort of had a job, son, trappin' beaver and other critters and sellin' 'em at the Hudson Bay Company's Fort Vancouver in the Oregon Territories," he said, sounding like a man who loved his work.

"But you just said you had a job," I pointed out. "What happened to it?"

"Things are changin' everywhere, son. Oregon is a part of the States now. Don't know what'll happen to the fort. Hudson's Bay Company's out of Canada ya know. Maybe I'll just take some of this here gold we're after and settle down somewhere. It's a hard life and I'm gettin' on in years." And then a strange sadness crept into his eyes.

"Do you know where Stoddard's lake is, sir?" I asked, to change the subject.

He looked to me again, the sadness replaced by a sudden sparkle. "I ain't sure, but it just could be I do," he boasted without a whiff of bluster about him.

The trail we were on had gradually climbed along the side of the ravine high above the level of the river. I'd been so enthralled in my talk with Bird that I'd paid little attention, but now, riding abreast of him, I realized how close to the edge of a sheer cliff I was and how far down the rocky stream seemed. It gave me an uneasy feeling, a fall would be deadly, but I'd not had such a good opportunity to talk to Bird and I still had one abiding question for him for which my sense of survival demanded an answer.

And so I dared ask. "I wonder, sir," I began. "You just rode up pretty fast

from behind me somewhere and without your mule, would I be correct if I thought you'd looked into Raush and the men with him? Are they still following us?"

A raised brow enhanced the sparkle in his eye, and he chuckled softly. "I can see how what Anderson said about you was right. You do have a way about ya, son," he said. "Raush is still behind us all right but—"

Then the chilling scream of a man came from the trail ahead, and another scream in a different voice that went on far too long and was mixed with the roar of some deep-throated and fierce sounding beast.

"Damn!" Bird exclaimed and immediately galloped off. I followed as best I could, afraid to ride fast so close to the sharp edge of the treeless cliff. In no time all hell had broken out, shouts, more terrifying screams, mules braying wildly, two gunshots, the appalling squeal of a badly hurt horse or maybe two horses, then the loud boom of a rifle—Bird's bear gun—and another deep-throated roar, a pistol shot, then another and finally only the bray of the mules and the voices of men trying to calm them.

Then the path widened and I came upon Anderson, feverishly trying to settle our four skittish mules and his own panicky horse. He waved me on without a word and Buddy and I managed to squeeze by. Next I found the Oregon boys, Carl, Thomas and Zeke, hard at work soothing their panicked mules and horses. All of them had faces as white as the stars on our flag. But here the trail had narrowed again so I tied Buddy to the branch of a small fir, checked my new Colt revolver and pulled out my rifle.

As I wound through the unsettled pack animals I looked directly at Zeke, "What happened?" I asked.

But he gazed back at me with blank eyes and slowly shook his head like he didn't want to talk about it, so I hurried on until I could see Bird's mustang standing twenty yards ahead in the middle of the path, completely calm and untroubled by the frightened animals all about, a remarkably well trained mount. Another thirty yards on Stoddard stood on the trail holding a rifle. Behind him his horse and three mules were tied to a branch, one mule I recalled as Bird's from that first day when he'd waited beside the rock outcropping where Bird and I had watched Raush and his men cross the South Yuba.

But I'd seen no hint of Lem, his father Jedidiah, or their animals. Normally they would be traveling between Stoddard and the Oregon boys.

Then, as I passed the mustang, the scene that unfolded in front of me turned my stomach. Bird was bent over Lem, at least I thought it was Lem. The skin had been ripped from his face and blood was everywhere.

I turned my eyes from this spectacle of horror and saw Lem's pretty mare lying beside the cliff, guts spilled onto the ground, a gunshot wound in her head from someone who'd taken pity and ended her suffering. Just past the mare lay the brown body of an enormous grizzly bear who, on her hind legs, must have stood over twelve feet tall, and undoubtedly was the cause of this whole ghastly scene. Blood dripped from a huge hole in her head, a reminder of why Bird called his large bore rifle a bear gun.

As I stood there, trying to stifle an almighty urge to bring my breakfast back to the light of day, it came to me that I hadn't seen Jedidiah or any of their other animals. And though my mind was near numb from all the death around me, I knew without asking what else must have happened here. While it wasn't hard to look away from this scene of gore, I shook like a leaf in the wind as I walked to the edge of the cliff.

Loose flour, sugar and coffee covered the rocky face of the ravine. Tools, supplies, pots and pans were strewn everywhere along the descent. Jedidiah lay near the water's edge, dead without a doubt. No human body could contort itself in such a way. Close by him the rear end of a mule could be seen on the shore, it's head under water. A few hundred feet downstream another mule had hung up on a rock in an eddy. The rest of the animals were gone, likely washed away by the power of the North Yuba.

I raised my head a bit and gazed out into the emptiness of the ravine. Several small flat objects floated on the up drafts, playing cards that had fallen from Jedidiah's pocket. My mind, perhaps seeking escape, or relief or some simple semblance of sanity, harkened back to that last night of gambling with Michelle Reynard at the Bella Union. I could feel the pressure of her lips as she kissed me. I heard her voice, as clearly as I did that night, as she urged me to look for her when I returned from this fateful undertaking.

Her words, which had at first seemed a plea, now sounded more like a command that I should live in order to return and marry her, as Anderson had once suggested. And for a man who'd fled across the continent to avoid the oppressive orders of my own brother on a farm left to the both of us by our father, I suddenly felt this mandate from Michelle to be the very

breath of life itself and the only reason for hope amongst all this despair. I would live. I would find the gold we sought, then I would find her again. She was now my reason to survive against Raush, the Indians, and the very wildness of the country we crossed, and what an enticing motive she was.

How long I stared into the void of the canyon, I don't know, but at last I heard Anderson. "Micah, we need you over here," he cried. "We have things to discuss."

I walked back toward where I'd heard his voice, back to where Buddy waited tied to a tree, and found all the members of our party already gathered except Zeke. The Oregon boys were adamant; they had had enough. The death of Jedidiah and the mauling of Lem were too much for any of them to digest. We all understood.

As we talked, Zeke was tending to Lem's broken bones and patching up his many gashes, including sewing his face back together. No one really thought Lem would live, except Zeke and he wouldn't leave his friend. Carl and Thomas would stay with their brother and meantime they would rope Jedidiah back up the cliff and give him a proper burial. Even Anderson agreed this was for the best.

Stoddard, however, was beside himself after Bird informed us all that Raush was still a half-day behind, but along the way more and more miners had joined his cause. Now there could be four of five hundred men with him. It was a testament to the vast pull of temptation that a mere tale of a lake full of gold could have on the minds of men.

With heavy hearts those of us who were left moved on, our numbers reduced from thirteen to four in less than a day. But I went with a new resolve. I would find the gold we sought and live to see Michelle Reynard again. It's what she wanted. I knew it now.

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After an hour of hard riding we passed the last miners working the river below. That night we made a cold camp with no fire and only leftover beans and biscuits to eat. Well before sunup we were on our way again and by midmorning we'd come to the southern edge of a huge valley covered with sagebrush, dotted with bright, sweet scented wildflowers and ringed by snow capped peaks that loomed thousands of feet above us. Except for

the marshes fed by melt water from the winter snows, the whole place resembled the high deserts Anderson and I had crossed on the way to California.

Again we stayed in the saddle until the last of the daylight had faded, but as we prepared for another cold camp all of us noticed a red glow that spread wide across the horizon from somewhere along our back trail.

"Campfires," said Bird. "Looks like a whole army's behind us, don't it?"

"Mount up," yelled Stoddard. "It's Raush. We gotta ride all night."

"No!" countered Anderson. "We're all dog tired. We need rest."

Stoddard started in again. "But Raush—"

"Raush ain't gonna catch us just yet," Bird interjected as calm as ever. "I got a little trick in store for him, if you fellers can stand more hard mountain ridin', but it'll save us three, maybe four days at least."

Bird's idea cheered us all and well before the next sunrise we rode out of our camp heading slightly east of due north so we would give the impression that we were going to follow the valley as far as the flat land would take us. Then, when we came to a marshy area fed by snow run off flowing from a gap in the mountains, we turned and rode northwest through the stream, thereby leaving no tracks for Raush and his followers to find. But to add to his ruse, Bird took all our mules with him and continued on in the same direction we'd been going. He seemed sure there would be yet another stream coming in from the west that he could take so as to rendezvous with us later.

And sure as shooting by midday he'd caught us. Together we climbed steadily up a ravine that drained the melt water of two peaks, one to our right and the other to our left, the flanks of both covered with the same sugar pine and red fir we'd seen all along the way. There was no trail and our progress was slower than it had been.

That night we all camped together in a narrow canyon sheltered from the view of the valley. Somehow, while he led our mules off in the wrong direction, Bird had managed to bag two prairie hens and we enjoyed a hot meal of fresh meat for the first time in days. Our spirits were high, even Stoddard seemed to think that Raush and the men with him might have been fooled by Bird's clever ploy.

We started out again just after sunup and soon crossed a flat saddle on the high pass we traveled and began to descend. By mid afternoon we came

to another valley, long and narrow and vastly smaller than the first, but covered in the same sagebrush and wildflowers and fed by a meandering stream that often jumped its banks and flooded the ground around it.

Stoddard, his two mules in tow, rode up beside me as I led our string of four along easily. The animals walked willingly now, like they were grateful for the flat, soft earth of the valley after the hard rock of the mountains we'd just been through. But Stoddard seemed unusually nervous and continually looked around in all directions.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Stoddard?" I asked.

"It's the Injuns," he asserted, fear in his voice. "They're out there watching us."

"Have you seem them," I wondered as my hand grabbed the handle of my Colt.

"No, you never see 'em, not till it's too late," he claimed. "But they're out there."

Anderson rode up beside me. It was plain he'd heard what we were talking about. "The Indians here in California are pretty friendly, Stoddard. If we stay peaceable we shouldn't have any trouble with them," he divulged.

"They killed my partner," Stoddard responded. "Never gave him a chance."

"Did he shoot first?" Anderson inquired and I knew it was a good question.

Stoddard's head jerked around, his eyes pinched. He was still edgy and ill at ease. "They jumped him, sudden like. They didn't have no guns," he said, and then swept his arm across the ridges that rose on both sides of us. "They could be watching us from anywhere out there, we got to keep a sharp eye out, all of us," he urged.

"I'll keep looking, don't worry," I promised, just as scared of Indians as he was.

"See to it," he declared then yanked on the reins to his mules and loped off toward Bird who rode alone in front of everyone.

When Stoddard had gotten out of earshot I turned to Anderson. "Is he right about the Indians?" I asked.

Anderson smiled reassuringly. "I don't know if he's right or not, but I think our biggest concern if we do meet Indians is that Stoddard just might do something dumb, like shoot at them. Maybe we should keep an eye on him," he said.

"Do you think Stoddard's partner shot first?" I mused.

"I wouldn't doubt it," he answered.

The rest of the afternoon my head swiveled from side to side just like Stoddard's had, searching the mountainsides for any sign of an Indian. At dusk we camped in a small copse of oak trees and I kept my Colt revolver ready, just in case they snuck up on us in the twilight. Then, when I bedded down, I carefully placed the pistol under the saddle that I used as a pillow where I knew I could get to it quickly if I needed to.

Still, the idea that Indians could be anywhere around us had me so fretful that I couldn't sleep. Eventually, perhaps in an effort to escape my fears, my mind returned to the Bella Union and I could see again the soft curls of Michelle Reynard's hair as it bounced about her neck while she passed out cards at the gaming table. The red glow from the lanterns brought a warm, comfortable hue to her soft skin and cast a dazzling fire into her beautiful blue eyes.

I could even see her long, thin fingers as she shuffled the cards then dealt one to each player in turn, and still hear her voice, so heavily accented yet incredibly lyrical, as she asked the simple questions of a twenty-one dealer to the players. And I'll never forget her cozy, almost gleeful smile as she raked in her winnings at the end of each play.

Somewhere amidst my musings I must have drifted into sleep for the next thing I remember was a loud voice that woke me to the grunts of men scuffling. Immediately I grabbed my Colt and rolled out from under my blankets and hid behind a tree. The Indians were here, I was sure. Then a light blazed into the moonless night. Someone had lit a twig from the embers of the fire. I could see Stoddard's face in the glow.

"Yeah, this is him. Get your rope ready, Grimes," a man ordered in a rough bass voice. I didn't recognize it but it wasn't an Indian, that's for sure, so it must be Raush. My hands were shaking. I knew if I tried to shoot I couldn't hit anyone.

Then somebody threw a rope over a limb of the oak tree I hid behind and I could see shadowy figures coming closer. One was a big man who pushed Stoddard toward me while holding a pistol to his head. The same man who'd thrown the rope put a noose over Stoddard's head. They were going to hang Stoddard right here, right now and right in front of me. Where were Anderson and Bird, I wondered? Were they all right?

"There's an empty bed roll here, Raush," the one called Grimes said in a shrill, nasal kind of voice and I knew he was talking about my blankets.

"Get him," the low voice of Raush ordered.

Grimes would find me soon. Then they would hang Stoddard. I knew I couldn't let that happen. Raush was only five feet away, tightening the rope around Stoddard's neck. I stepped out from behind the tree and cocked the Colt. "Let him go, Raush, or I'll shoot," I yelled in the bravest tone I could muster.

"What?" he barked. "Who the hell are you?"

"Just let Stoddard go. I mean it," I ordered.

"Hah," he laughed. "It's the boy," he said to Grimes and then looked to me. "You got the guts to pull that trigger, boy? You brave enough to kill a man in cold blood?"

"You're planning on killing Stoddard aren't you?" I yelled back.

"He killed my brother!" Raush bellowed.

"He says Indians killed your brother," I retorted.

"He's a damn liar!" A burning rage spewed from the big man's mouth.

Then I felt cold steel against my temple, and heard the incredibly loud click of another Colt cocking close by my ear. It was Grimes. Somehow he'd managed to sneak up beside me without me having any idea he was coming.

"Put the gun down, boy," he said in his reedy, whiney voice.

"No! If you shoot me I'll still shoot Raush," I cried, and regretted it at once.

A wave of terror washed over me and I was ready to fall to my knees and beg Grimes for mercy when I heard another gun hammer clicking loud and sounding all too familiar. "Ever seen what a big bore bear gun'll do to a man's head, Grimes?" said Bird, who must've had the drop on Grimes, and so welcome relief flooded back into my heart.

But then came another loud, big bore bear gun hammer click, "But, mon ami, you know well what such a gun will do, oui?" And the dread washed over me again. Someone had a gun trained on Bird, I was sure, someone who had an accent like Michelle Reynard, and it bothered me no end that anyone whose voice reminded me so much of her could be threatening my friend Bird, and then, I guess, me too.

"Frenchy Chabot, as I live a breathe," Bird said, still sounding as calm

as he always did. "I thought the Piutes south of the Truckee did you in two years ago,"

"Mon Dieu, they came very close, monsieur, but Chabot, he knows the trick with the melt water too," Frenchy Chabot said with a smug chuckle.

"That's too bad," Bird groused. "I should've known Raush would dig up a skunk like you."

"It is too bad for you, mon ami," Frenchy went on.

"Maybe not, my friend." It was Anderson and he'd stressed the words my friend real loud just as his own Colt revolver cocked.

Then he added, "I take it you're the last of this little party of murdering swine, Frenchy, and that makes me the only man here without a gun aimed at his head. Am I right, Raush?" Anderson yelled out the last few words.

Then came a silence that seemed to go on forever.

"I ain't saying," Raush finally growled.

"Oh, so you're not saying, Raush," Anderson reflected. "How about you, Frenchy? Are you the last one of this little party of pigs?" There was an edge in his tone that I hadn't heard before, a fierceness he'd never shown in the year we'd been together.

"Mon Dieu," was all Frenchy could say.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. There's only the three of you. It seems we have situation here, gentlemen." Anderson continued. "Well, I got nothing to worry about, so how about I just shoot you, Frenchy?"

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed.

I'd never heard Anderson talk like he just had. Sure that he'd lost his mind and that the fat would soon hit the fire, I thought about Michelle Reynard once more, convinced I'd never see her again. The hand that held my Colt shook harder than ever.

Then Raush yelled out. "I don't care what ya do to the damn Frenchman. I paid him to find my brother's killer and he's done it. Now I'm gonna hang Stoddard,"

"And all those men following you will be real happy that you killed the only man here who knows where the lake of gold is, right Raush?" Anderson replied.

"They can find their own gold," Raush hollered back.

"Maybe they will," Anderson agreed. "But maybe some of them might be mad enough at you to string you up beside Stoddard. What do you

think, Frenchy?" Anderson asked and at once I realized his plan. Maybe I would see Michelle one more time after all.

"Mon ami," said the Frenchman quietly, like he was talking directly to Anderson. "I think I will shoot Raush myself, s'il vous plait."

"Oh yeah, Frenchy, you go ahead. Shoot away," Anderson sang out, loud.

"I'll still kill the boy," yelled Grimes and pushed the pistol hard up against my temple. My newfound hope instantly drained away.

"Before I blow your fat head into little tiny pieces, Grimes," Bird chirped in. "What axe you got to grind here?"

"It's family," answered Grimes. "Raush is my cousin."

"Wait up!" barked Raush suddenly. "Don't nobody shoot. How about we sit tight till sunup. Then we can settle this right."

"What do you think about that, Stoddard?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, anything, anything, just don't let him hang me," Stoddard whimpered. He sounded like a young schoolboy who'd been pounded on by the class bully.

"All right, Raush," Anderson hollered out. "Let Stoddard go. We won't shoot."

Raush looked around warily, but pulled the noose from Stoddard's neck then gave him a hard shove toward me. Stoddard tumbled to his hands and knees and started blubbering like a two-year-old baby that hadn't been fed all day.

"There's your killer," Raush growled. "Grimes, you and Frenchy get over here."

I felt the hard steel of Grimes' Colt leave my temple. "Be careful, boy. I still got my eye on you," he whispered in my ear before he slithered away.

"Frenchy, you comin'?" Raush snarled.

"I stay here, s'il vous plait," Frenchy said real calm like.

"To hell with ya," Raush snapped back. "We'll string you up too. Come on, Grimes." And both men disappeared into the darkness.

In spite of my own fear I ran the few feet to Stoddard and knelt in front of him. His eyes were wild and unfocused, spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He mumbled over and over again, "Don't let him hang me, mama. I'm a good boy. I am. Don't let him hang me." And for the second time on this journey I felt pity for Stoddard.

"Sacrebleu," whispered Frenchy and I realized he stood beside me.

I looked up into a round, frowning face with a bushy moustache that drooped below the chin. "This Stoddard, he knows. There are more of the Grimeses," Frenchy held up four fingers, "and more of the Raushes," three fingers now. "They will be here after the sunrise."

"No," I blurted. "I won't let that happen. I can't." I turned back to Stoddard. "Can you ride?" I asked in a soft voice.

"I can ride, Mama," he said. "I can ride real good."

Oh, Lord, I thought, he's lost his mind but he still deserved a chance at least. I found his horse and in no time had him saddled and ready. Then I filled the saddlebags with as much food as I could cram into them and led the horse back to Stoddard.

Anderson grabbed my arm. "But the lake, Micah?" he whispered.

"I can't let him hang," I protested

Then in a hushed, confident tone Bird told Anderson, "We'll find the gold."

I pulled my arm free. "Here's your horse, sir," I said to Stoddard, and helped him into the saddle.

The panic flashed in his eyes again. "But the Injuns are out there," he cried.

"Don't worry about the Indians," I said, thinking fast. "They're on our side. They like you but they don't like Raush and Grimes. Just remember not to shoot at them."

"I won't shoot at anybody, mama, I promise," he muttered.

Then Bird walked up and pointed into the distance. "Do ya see the bright star just above that dark mountain peak?" he asked and Stoddard nodded. "Just ride towards it till ya get to the river then turn downstream. You'll be fine." And he whacked the horse's rump so hard that Stoddard near tumbled off as he galloped into the night.

"It'll be light soon enough. Best we get an early start," Bird said as he tossed a pile of kindling onto the smoldering embers of our campfire and stuck a large pot of leftover beans close by to warm. The small fingers of flame quickly grew bright.

"I hear horses coming," I announced, pointing to the direction we'd come from.

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed. "Raush has heard Monsieur Stoddard leave, I think. We'd best stay out of the light. He will shoot if he can."

"Good thinking, Frenchy," Bird said and we all moved away from the fire.

I hid behind the same oak tree as before and watched as Raush slowed from a gallop to a walk along the dim shadows across from the flames.

"Frenchy," he yelled. "Was that Stoddard who rode outta here?"

"That was Monsieur Bird, mon ami," Frenchy called back, lying through his teeth.

"Like hell!" Raush roared. "Come on Grimes, let's ride," he yelled back and spurred his mount just as Grimes rode up. In no time they'd disappeared into the dark.

After a quick meal of leftover beans, and in the dim twilight before the sun rose over the mountains, we also rode out of camp, following the prints of three horses pressed deep into the soft earth. Not long afterwards we heard a gunshot from somewhere ahead of us, then came frightened shouts and another shot. Soon terrible screams began, chilling my blood to the very bone. But I couldn't tell who it was. None of us could.

Then Frenchy stopped. "Mes amis," he began with a somber look on his face. "I think maybe the Indians have killed Raush and Stoddard. So I am safe now. I will go back and tell the men behind you that Stoddard is dead. They will not follow you then."

Bird nodded. "Much obliged," was all he said as Frenchy turned and rode off.

Soon more tracks came from the west. Bird said they were from unshod Indian ponies. It looked like they followed the same path as had Stoddard, Raush and Grimes, but there were so many that they covered the marks of the shod horses. Then the prints got all muddled together like everyone had stopped and milled around some. There was a lot of blood on the ground, and two sets of tracks led off, one to the west and the other on up the valley in the direction we were going, like the Indians had split up. We all figured that somebody had given up the ghost here, but had no idea who.

We'd all heard the terrible screams earlier this morning, and now we were sure some Indians were ahead of us so my hand never got far from the handle of my Colt and my head whirled constantly from side to side. No wild, savage Indian would sneak up on me, not if I could help it. Yet Bird and Anderson rode along as cool as could be, totally unruffled by

what I knew to be our impending doom. By late afternoon the soft ground gave way to hard rock again and the tracks vanished.

Soon we rode northwest atop a deep, steep chasm thick with red fir, with a river at the bottom that ran a calm deep blue in some spots but mostly roared along spewing white foam across the many rocks in its path. The country here struck me as even more rugged than what we'd encountered around Downieville, and we were certainly much farther from any hint of civilization. Yet, in spite of keeping as close an eye out as I could, I'd still seen no sign of Indians, Raush, or Stoddard.

After two more days we came to a narrow valley, a half a mile long by thirty paces wide, at the bottom of a gorge hemmed in by near perpendicular hills thick with fir where the river plunged past a bar of gravel that even from the height at which we rode seemed to sparkle with the luster of gold. Unable to believe my eyes I stopped and stared. But I'd mined gold for a whole year now and never had any mining site I'd ever seen shown as many signs of wealth as this one, in spite of it sitting so far down the bluff.

The others had ridden on, like they hadn't noticed. "Anderson, Bird," I cried. "There's gold down there. I'm sure."

They stopped and looked into the gorge. Suddenly Bird grinned like he'd just gotten a plate of the best beefsteak in California cooked by the prettiest girl around. "This might be the spot Stoddard found, son," he said more excited than he'd ever been.

"But this isn't a lake, sir," I replied.

"Naw," he said. "Stoddard lied about the lake. He had to say something to throw folks off his trail."

Then Anderson added, "I think you're right, Micah. It sure looks like there's gold in that gravel. Why don't we find out?"

Leading his mule and the two Stoddard left with us, Bird began to work his way down the cliff face to the river. I followed Anderson, each of us with two mules, something we'd decided to do because of the incident with Lem and Jedidiah. This way, if anything happened to one of us as we snaked our way along the steep descent, the other would still have supplies.

Then, as I neared the bottom, I noticed both of them had stopped alongside the river. They stared up into an ancient dead fir tree that had grown stunted in rocky ground, with two twin trunks splitting from a

single base about eight feet up, the tops of each long since broken off, one at fifteen feet and the other a little higher.

I reined up behind them and followed their eyes. There I saw a well-worn felt hat tied down tight over a tattered black coat and a pair of ragged wool trousers, and all wedged between the trunks with a lot of feathers and the rear end rattles of sidewinders hanging in front. Then I realized that bones were inside the clothes. I could see the lower part of a skull under the hat and a shinbone stuck out from one torn pant leg. I started to shake. This had been a person, and whatever happened hadn't been pleasant.

"It's Raushes' brother isn't it?" I asked to no one in particular.

"Likely," said Bird.

"How did he . . ." I mumbled, unable to finish.

"Injuns," Bird answered. "They caught him then tied him up there. The snake rattles kept the buzzards off. That way he'd die real slow after they'd had their fun."

"Fun?" I moaned, not understanding Bird's sarcasm at all.

Anderson dropped to the ground. "Let's give him a proper burial," he suggested. Bird went with him but I couldn't bring myself to help with such a gruesome task. Still, I aimed to do my share so I pulled out a pick and shovel and began to dig. When we were done Anderson quoted some bible passages from memory and said a short prayer.

I wanted to get away from the gravesite as quick as I could. The whole thing had my mind bouncing around like a kid's rubber ball. I didn't know what the Indians had done to Raushes' brother exactly, but it had to be downright horrible and I felt sure now that Stoddard had seen the whole thing, but here we were right on top of the place where he'd found those huge nuggets and I was determined to get what we came for.

So right off I rode toward the gravel bar I'd seen from above. After pulling the packs from both mules I left them to water in the river and walked over toward a likely looking spot and sank my shovel into the sand, slopped it into my gold pan and squatted at the edge of the river and began to wash out all the lighter sand and dirt and pick out the rocks with my hands. It didn't take that long until I realized I had gotten rid of everything but the gold and I still had a whole pan brimming with stuff, all of it gold.

"Anderson," I screamed. "Look here!"

He was beside me in no time. "My God," he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it. Most men feel real good to find an ounce of color in their

pan. You must have nine or ten here. That's a hundred and fifty dollars at least, in one shovel full of ore." Then he turned and pointed to the gold for the benefit of Bird who'd just rushed up beside us. "Take a gander at this, Bird!" he crowed.

A look I knew well swept instantly across Bird's face, just like I'd seen in so many men when they got that first sight of pure gold that came from the bare earth around them and the idea instantly started to percolate inside their head about how much more gold could be buried in the gravel of the very bar where they stood. It's called gold fever and like all the others that glint of gold gleamed bright in Bird's eyes, eyes that grew as big as the very pan they stared into. He'd had caught the fever all right, hooked like a trout in a mountain stream.

We started panning with the single-minded zeal that the fever metes out in large doses to its victims, and in what seemed like no time Bird yelled out, "Here they are, Stoddard's nuggets. Look at 'em! Look at 'em!"

Both Anderson and I dropped our shovels to rush over by Bird. He'd only run a splash of water across his ore, enough to clean the dust away, and the whole pan gleamed of gold in huge lumps just like the ones Stoddard flashed that day in Nevada City.

I pulled one out and held in front of my eyes, lost in its special lure, my heart pounding like a racehorse. "That pan full must weigh five pounds," I said.

"More," added Anderson. "Stoddard was right. This place is loaded with gold."

"Just in case the Indians didn't get him, shouldn't we put a quarter of what we find aside for Stoddard?" I said. "We wouldn't be here except that he told us about this." It came over me quick. My mother had called it the goodness of my soul.

Bird and Anderson both nodded. "Done," said Anderson."There's plenty here for everyone. We'll save a share for him until we know for sure."

We worked the bar all summer, and though a lot more men showed up, many who were with Raush, we never said a word about finding the body, or let on that this was the spot Stoddard had found and that there was no lake of gold. Then, that fall, we loaded our mules with all we'd mined and made our way down the North Feather River to where it joined the Yuba. There we came to a new town, Marysville, growing rapidly by supplying miners in places just like where we'd been and so we decided to stay.

The three of us, with Stoddard as a silent partner, built a wildly profitable business bringing up mining supplies on a steamer then hauling them by mule train to the remote camps strewn along the Yuba and Feather rivers. And now, after these three years, here was Stoddard, ranting on madly about his lake of gold until even the drunkest of his listeners left, and he began to mutter much as he had the last time I'd seen him.

"Stoddard," I called. "I'm Micah Poole. Don't you remember me?"

He gazed back through unfocused eyes, clothes in rags, hair and beard unkempt and littered with the straw he must've slept in last night. "I've got nuggets," he mumbled and frantically searched through the pockets of a well-worn frock coat.

"Are you hungry," I continued, knowing he must be.

His head bobbed up and his eyes finally found me, but he said nothing.

"My wife is an excellent cook and you're more than welcome," I added.

Then he shook his head, almost in fear, "No, no, I can't. I'm not dressed—"

"You're fine I'm sure. Michelle would love to see you."

"Michelle Reynard?" he blurted, sounding as sober as a judge.

"Well, yes, before we were married, she's Michelle Poole now."

"A beautiful woman! It would an honor, sir," he said and began to straighten his hair. "Have we met before?" he suddenly asked of me.

"Come along, Stoddard. We have a lot to talk about." I replied then walked off toward my home. He followed like a puppy, appearing by any measure as the most down and out man in California, while, in truth, he was now among the richest.

An old, all too familiar voice haranguing a small knot of drunken miners outside a riverside grog shop caught my ear as I hurried back to my home. I'd long thought him dead, and he looked near to it, beard wild and gray, eyes sunk deep inside a face with cheeks as bilious as any corpse. Busy men rushed past him without a glance but I stopped, just as I had three years ago. Today, here at the junction of the Yuba and Feather Rivers, Marysville had boomed as a supply center for the gold mines upstream, and I'd become an important part of that growth, all because of Stoddard.

After mining along the American River near Greenwood Creek that first winter, and doing quite well until our claim finally played out, Anderson and I had opted to move north in hopes of finding an even

more productive spot. We'd heard rumors of big strikes near the Yuba River; so in late May we'd arrived in Nevada City, just another gold boom mushroom town called Deer Creek Diggings in those days. I'd left Caldwell's Store heading for the Bella Union where a French lady was supposedly dealing twenty-one when I first saw him. He stood out front, a smattering of drunken miners around him much like today, except back then Stoddard had fire in his eyes, grit in his voice, and one of the biggest nuggets I'd ever seen in his hand.

"My name's Stoddard and this is what I found. Look at it," he cried, shaking the gold high overhead. "It's big and coarse, not smooth and small like the gold you mine downstream. Most men think that means it comes from closer to the source, closer to the mother lode. There's a lake full of nuggets just like this one high up in the mountains and who knows what else is there, but I need help to get it out. Injuns jumped us just after we found these nuggets. We were forced to run for our lives and I haven't seen my partner since. I think they might've killed him. I need twenty-five good men who can shoot straight and aren't afraid of a scrap. Who here is ready to go? Step up."

"I'll go." It was Anderson, my close companion for the past year. He took a step forward into the circle of men then noticed me. "Come on Micah," he pled. "This is just what we're looking for, our big chance to make enough to get a good start in life."

"But it sounds so risky," I replied, my mind stuck on Stoddard's dead partner.

"Yeah, but is it any more risky than the dangerous trip we made together last summer, all the way from St. Joseph across plains, mountains and deserts just to get here?" he pointed out with a bit of heat in his normally well tempered voice.

"We didn't have a shooting fight with Indians then," I replied with my own fire.

Stoddard stepped right into our little dust up. "It ain't for sure we'll have a set-to with Injuns. The ones I saw could've been a hunting party. They weren't likely to live near the lake so I reckon they're long gone from there, but it's always best to be safe."

Anderson grinned at me. "See Micah, it's not so scary now is it?" he said in that cocky way he had.

I shrugged, knowing Anderson had won me over again, but still unsure of the size of the mess I was about to walk into. “Okay, I’ll go, but only because you talked me into it,” I countered; remembering the many things Anderson had convinced me to do since we’d been together. He’d been right more often than not.

As the other men moseyed off—either they already had a good paying claim or were far wiser than I—Stoddard stuck his nugget back into a leather bag. “Come inside,” he offered. “Let’s have a drink and I’ll give you the details. We leave in two days.”

Inside the saloon I saw her at once, sitting near the back playing cards with eight or nine miners. She was lovely, and the first woman I’d seen in months. I barely listened to Stoddard as he recited chapter and verse the details of our trip. When he was done I found a seat at her table. I lost a hundred dollars that night. Folks might think that a lot but I never minded one bit. Here men often lost ten times that at the turn of a card. And even though she barely spoke to me, just being around a woman was worth every cent.

The next two days were busy. On Saturday Anderson went with me to buy two stout mules with packsaddles from a man on Brushy Creek to add to the two we’d come here with. We spent the rest of the day getting four months worth of food and our mining gear ready to go. Then on Sunday, while Anderson helped Stoddard recruit more men for our daring adventure, I rode to Selby Flat where I’d heard of a man willing to sell a new Colt revolver at a reasonable price. The idea of a fracas with a party of wild Indians still had me inordinately disconcerted and the pistol was a big step up from my one shot rifle.

And in spite of a planned early start in the morning, I couldn’t resist the urge to see Madame Reynard one last time before we left for Stoddard’s mysterious lake. Like before she looked as winsome as anyone I’d ever seen, her face flush and full with lips red like a ripe cherry, and her hair, soft and buff as a young spring fawn, draped about her slender neck in tight coils. I sat across the table from her and quickly lost fifty dollars while beguiled by the sparkle of the lamplight reflected in her deep blue eyes.

Then she stood and, looking directly at me, said in her thickly accented English, “It is hot here. I need air,” and calmly sauntered across the room with every man’s gaze following her, leaving me feeling uncomfortable, unsure if there was some special meaning in her look.

It seemed impossible that a woman so pleasing could have any particular regard for me, but without her here I also had no interest in gambling and, with a long, hard day likely in store for me tomorrow, I knew it was best to return to camp. I gathered the remnants of my funds and walked outside into the night. Once there I looked around for the Madame but since I didn't see her anywhere I went on to my horse.

"You are going with Monsieur Stoddard tomorrow, oui?"

It was her. I spun to the sound of the voice just as she stepped from the shadows, a look on her face that I could interpret in no other way than concern, but concern for what, for who? "Yes, how did you know?" I replied, honestly at a loss.

"One hears things in the Bella Union, mon ami. But you must be careful. There is a man, Monsieur Raush, who has pledged to follow you and take your gold for himself."

"Raush," I exclaimed. "I've never heard of him."

She stepped closer and I felt her hand on my arm. "He is a very big man and a very bad man, très mal. He has many others with him. He will kill you all if he must," she whispered, her mouth close to my face.

Once again my poor mind couldn't grasp the right words, but without a warning she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me quickly full on the mouth. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she breathed as she pulled away. "Find your gold then look for me when you return, s'il vous plaît." With that she disappeared into the darkness, leaving me still bewildered and unable to believe what had just happened.

Riding back to our camp along Deer Creek on that warm, moonlit night, my blood turned chill more than once at an unexplained sound from the woods, or a shadow that loomed threateningly over the trail. Madame Reynard had left me perplexed and ill at ease in no small way with her tale of Raush and his threats to kill us all for the gold that Stoddard would lead us to. But even more unsettling was why she'd done it, and the taste of her lips that lingered still on mine.

Her soft voice flowed again through my clouded mind. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she'd said, but I'd hardly spoken twenty words to her. How did she know my name? Few people here did. And then I'd let her run away without even asking her full name in return. Whatever caused such a lapse in my well-learned manners was beyond my reasoning at the moment.

"Look for me when you return," she'd said next. No matter which way I turned the words over in my head it all came out the same. She cared about me somehow. Why I couldn't fathom but the kiss seemed the proof of the pudding. Women don't do things like that for no reason, or are such things different in France? I had no idea. The only girl I'd ever kissed was Betsy Pike and that only one short buss before I left for California.

Then there were the Indians who'd probably killed Stoddard's partner. Maybe it was a hunting party that they'd happened to stumble across, but that was no guarantee that we wouldn't run afoul of another group along our way. Nearly every week on the trail to California there came a rumor of Indians killing white men, but I had personally seen no sign of any serious trouble. Still, deadly incidents happened, and all too often.

I knew little of Indians, and that mostly from the wild tales told on the trip west. We'd seen Pawnee riding in the distance as we crossed the prairie to Fort Kearny. Soon after fording the South Platte a whole party of Sioux, men, women and children, passed right in front of us. And near Fort Bridger Shoshone came into our camp wanting to trade. They were a pathetic, lice infested lot but seemed harmless enough.

I tied Buddy, my young chestnut, to a long tether in the grassy meadow behind our camp, then pulled out the new Colt revolver from my saddlebags and stuck it into my waistband. I was a fair shot with a rifle, but had had little use for a handgun on my family's farm in Kentucky. Yet knowing I had a new repeating pistol so close at hand gave me some small comfort against the host of demons so recently rising around me.

The fire burned low in our camp and I was disappointed to find Anderson tucked into his bedroll. I'd thought of nothing better than to talk with him about the events of tonight. Ten years my senior and married to a woman in Pennsylvania that he adored and spoke of constantly, I hoped he would have some soothing words for my troubled spirit. But not wishing to disturb my only true friend in California, I pulled off my boots, and crawled under my blanket as quietly as I could, making sure the Colt would be easy for me to get to, just in case.

Then Anderson rose on his elbow. "You've been at the Bella Union with Michelle Reynard again, haven't you?" he asked with a chuckle to his voice.

"Yes, I—"

"How much did you lose this time?" he demanded, still with a smile to his tone.

"Not so much," I mumbled, "but how do you know her first name?" I inquired with a lot more mettle, knowing Anderson to be dead set against gambling. He hoarded every ounce of gold he found and sent most of his money home to his wife.

"She asked about you today, while you were at Selby Flat. I think she's sweet on you, Micah."

I could tell from his manner he was teasing me about her now, and enjoying himself a great deal at my expense, but I needed some answers. "She warned me about a man named Raush who plans to follow us and take the gold we find at Stoddard's lake. Out of the blue she kissed me and afterwards told me to look for her when I get back. Then she ran off into the shadows." I said, all the while wondering if I would ever make it back here from wherever it was we were going.

"She kissed you, did she? I was right. She has set her cap for you, you Romeo," he laughed openly, enjoying his joke.

"I'm no Romeo!" I retorted, only knowing the meaning of the word because he'd used it to tease me about Betsy Pike when I'd told him about her one night along the trail. "But what about Raush," I asked. "He could be more dangerous than the Indians."

Anderson turned serious. "He could be. I saw him today too. He made quite a rhubarb when Stoddard told him we had as many men as we needed, threatened to follow us, and, yeah, even kill us if he didn't get his way. But he was drinking heavy. The truth is we'll likely slip out tomorrow before he sobers up. I'd worry more about the Indians than Raush."

"Well, if you say so," I muttered, unconvinced.

"You bet I say so. And when we get back here this fall, pack mules loaded with nuggets like the ones Stoddard has in his poke, you find that French gal and marry her. She's a catch. Her husband got killed a while back by a road agent who stole his gold. It left that lady in a whale of a pickle but she's done right well for herself it seems."

In spite of his teasing, Anderson's reaction to Madame Reynard and his suggestion that I marry her after we return from out trip did ease my mind a good deal, although the idea of wedding a woman I'd just met seemed too farfetched for my taste. Yet I knew that if I lived long enough I had to see her again, no matter what I had to do to find her. But it was the living long enough part that sat hard in my gut, twisting my insides into

tight knots. The dual threat of unknown Indians and the all too real Raush wore deep across the grain of my better judgment.

"I still think this trip is risky, Anderson. First it was just Indians. Now there's Raush. Maybe we'd be best to stay here. Men are finding gold everywhere. Just tonight I heard more than a little talk about big finds on Rock Creek. Let Stoddard have his lake full of nuggets. Let Raush go with him," I implored.

"Micah, if you want to stay here and woo the French lady then you go right ahead. Lord knows you're at that age when a woman tends to settle heavy on a man's mind, and I'll grant there's a wagon load of danger in Stoddard's plan, but a man has to take some risks in life if he's going to make something special for himself. This is one of those things that could pay off beyond anything we've ever imagined. Now, you're as level headed as any young man I've ever met, and you've grown as close to me as a brother, but you need to make your own decision about going."

As was his habit, Anderson had hit the core of my dilemma dead on, and moreover he'd trusted me to decide for myself, like he usually did. He was more a brother to me than my own flesh and blood who had never treated me with the respect Anderson does. I'm the youngest and Jacob is about Anderson's age. After our Pa died he'd run the farm with an iron fist, never once leaving me any say in what happened there, and because of his bullheadedness I'd left for California without his blessing. But I couldn't imagine parting with Anderson just yet, not after all we'd been through together.

"I feel the same about you, Anderson, and I can think of nothing I'd like less than our splitting up." I said without reservation. "But this venture with Stoddard has me as skittish as a raccoon that my old blue tick hound, Babe, ran up the elm tree beside our house, and it isn't just the Indians and Raush, it's Stoddard. I mean, what do we really know about him? Is he telling the truth? He could have gotten those nuggets anywhere."

"It's a good point, Micah. I believe his story about finding that gold in the lake," he said. "But in all truth, Raush has been rattling at my predilections more than I wanted to let on to you. I got a sense Stoddard knew him somehow, that there was bad blood between them. But when I asked Stoddard about it he denied knowing the guy. How about we meet up in the morning like we planned. If Raush is there causing trouble we'll back

out of this trip. But if everything looks good, then we go. Sound fair to you?"

"Well, I guess I'm willing to go that far anyhow," I agreed, mostly because the idea of saying a final farewell to Anderson right now seemed a whole passel less appealing than the more distant and uncertain danger from Indians or Raush.

"Fine," Anderson declared. "Now let's get some rest. Lord knows we'll need it. Good night." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

"Good night," I echoed and curled up under my own bedroll, but sleep came slow. Yet when it did, in colors more vivid than any provided by nature, I watched an unfolding tableau as my mind dove deep into the many and various plots and ploys a band of angry Indians would use to protect their land. Then the brightness paled, just as colors do after sundown, and I probed the dark shadows of subterfuge and skullduggery that Raush might ply to wrest our hard earned gold from us after we'd beaten back the savage attack of the red men.

All too soon I woke to the sounds of Anderson working over an early morning campfire, coffee brewing over the flame with leftover beans and bacon warming nearby.

"Morning," I said, then flipped back my blanket and sat up.

"Breakfast will be ready in few minutes," he said in the down to earth manner he started each day with.

I picked up my bedroll, and walked to the meadow where I saddled Buddy and loaded the mules. By the time I returned Anderson had a plate of food and a cup of coffee waiting for me. I ate quickly and soon we were riding up to Caldwell's Store. There I counted ten men waiting, none seemed like they might be Raush. But I looked over to Anderson and, understanding my trepidation well, he shook his head no. It was a good sign. Maybe all my fretting had been for nothing.

Stoddard arrived before we'd had a chance to greet the others in the party and with a hard look around he asked, "Any more men coming?" When no one spoke up he added, "Let's go then," and without further ado struck out toward the Yuba River.

Anderson and I waited for everyone else to leave town just in case Raush would show up late, but when he didn't Anderson turned to me. "Do we go?" he asked.

I shrugged, still ill at ease about it all. “I guess so,” I said. We had made our deal last night, if Raush wasn’t around causing trouble we would go, and I wasn’t about to break my word to a friend. “I thought there would be more men here though,” I went on.

“It just means more gold for us,” Anderson asserted and then led our four mules northward. I followed, head swiveling constantly to the rear, right hand on the handle of my new Colt revolver, nerves ragged. Raush could show up at any time.

Just north of Selby Flat we came to Rock Creek, and though no one was mining where we crossed men were hard at work both upstream and down and the place had all the signs of productive gold country. Again I had to wonder why we were chasing Stoddard’s dream of a golden lake when we could find all a man would ever need right here. And yet I’d worked in the gold fields long enough to know how fickle a miners fate can be. One claim along a stream like this can hold pockets worth thousands of dollars while just a few feet away another plot can be close to worthless. Still, the men who worked hard and kept at it almost always made money while those who lazed the day away then gambled late into the night most often didn’t.

We came to the South Yuba a little after midday and nooned across the river from a large group mining along Illinois Bar. The break gave me a chance to get acquainted with the men that would be my companions for the near future. There were three eager, friendly brothers fresh down the Siskiyou Trail from Oregon named Carl, Thomas, and the youngest, Zeke, who was about my age. And so too was Lem, who’d mined Deer Creek last winter with his father, Jedidiah, and done pretty well, according to Lem.

Four southerners, Ike, Jake, Luke and Harry, were all business. They called themselves the Natchez Mining Company, and had traveled by steamship to Panama then crossed the jungle before taking another steamer to San Francisco. They’d gotten to the mines early last summer and then worked the rich placers around Hangtown for almost a year. None of these men had gotten wind of Raush’s threats and I wondered if there were a dozen more miners somewhere who had heard them and then decided not to show up.

But the most peculiar guy in this whole impromptu expedition looked more like the mountain men around Fort Bridger than any miner in California. He gave his name simply as Bird and carried a rifle with

a bore as big any I'd ever seen. He called it a bear gun and that's about all the tight lipped Bird bothered to disclose before he walked off to the riverbank alone.

Stoddard roused us from our rest much sooner and with a sense of urgency far more pressing than I thought necessary. His face taut, eyes darting repeatedly to our back trail, he badgered men to mount up and cross the river with wild waves of his arms and language strong enough to bring a blush to the cheeks of a lumberjack. But if others in the group felt as I did they hid it well. The Oregon brothers and Lem splashed into the water laughing and joking as if this was a simple summer outing. Bird had already crossed and I caught sight of him through the trees as he climbed the ridge.

I took the mules from Anderson. He'd put up with them all morning and deserved a break. We crossed the South Yuba together then Anderson dropped back behind our mule string much like I had this morning. Wary that Raush would soon show up, I'd kept a close eye to our rear all along the way, and now I noticed Anderson spent as much time looking over his shoulder as I did. He worried about Raush too.

Soon we were enveloped in a deep forest of sugar pine with trunks as a large as twenty-five feet around. I thought of the sawmill not many miles from my home in Kentucky and how just a few of these monstrous trees could keep it in timber for a year. In this one stand of pines alone there must be enough wood to build a thousand towns each a thousand times as big as Nevada City. The wealth of California lay not only in its gold, it seemed.

One of the new mules we'd picked up Saturday caused me no end of bother and I'd fallen behind the rest of the group. But I had no trouble following their track; eleven horses and twenty-one mules leave a clear trail along the forest floor. Near sundown I came to a small creek running southwest down from the ridge, I stopped to let the animals drink their fill of the cool, clean water. Anderson rode up from behind me.

"Any sign of Raush," I asked as he jumped to the ground and led his pinto to the creek.

"I saw no indication of Raush or anybody else following us," he said and then pointed upstream. "But he sure looks interested in something down our back trail."

I turned to look and there, atop a large rocky prominence above us, sat Bird on his mustang, peering into the valley we'd left just hours earlier.

"Yeah, he seems real engrossed in something," I agreed. "He's a strange one. He's the only man here who only brought one mule, and I'd bet everything we found last winter that he's never washed out a single pan of gold in his whole life."

"If you'd been more interested in what Stoddard said and less in what Madame Reynard looked like that night in the Bella Union you might remember how we were told that Bird was trapper who worked around here for years and he's supposed to help Stoddard find this lake we're going to," Anderson said in the condescending tone he always used when I'd not been paying attention to business like he thought I should. And he was right.

"Do you think he's looking back at Raush?" I wondered.

"Why don't you ride up and ask him. I'll take care of the mules. They don't seem to cause me as much trouble as they do you anyhow," he said.

"But you had them all morning," I protested, always one to pull my fair share.

"Go on now. We'll both rest easier if you know what's happening down in the valley."

I grinned. "Thanks Anderson," I said sincerely, then hopped on Buddy and sped up the hill. Near the top of the outcrop Bird's mule stood at the forest's edge contentedly chomping at the lush saw grass that grew there. I saw no sign of a pick or shovel handle sticking out anywhere from the pack, it seemed like Bird didn't have any plans to mine.

He sat there on top of his horse as still as the statue in front of our county court house back home. He didn't move a muscle, not even a twitch, as Buddy's iron shoes clattered across the rock to his rear. And when I stopped beside him he didn't turn to me, but instead calmly raised his big bore bear gun to point down the hill to where a thin blue ribbon of the South Yuba slashed across the dark green tops of sugar pine. "That what you come up here to see?" he asked.

Far below, in the middle of the stream, I saw a man on horseback, looking no bigger than an ant, headed this way. And as he passed from view behind the treetops another man, this one leading a mule, rode into the river, and then another, and after him still more until I had counted fifteen men and maybe twice as many mules, and I knew others had

crossed before I got here. If it was a mining party it was awfully big and very well supplied. "Is it Raush?" I asked.

"Like as not," Bird said with a voice as smooth as a traveling tent preacher, and completely lacking the faintest tinge of fear.

"How many did you see," I asked as my hand instinctively caressed my Colt.

"Four dozen, maybe more," he said then turned to me. "You scared, boy?"

I looked deep into his cold gray eyes and knew he could read me like a book. "I guess I'm a little on edge," I muttered. It was all I could force myself to admit to.

"If that's Raush you'd damn well better be more than a little on edge. The man's more dangerous than a mad dog," he asserted, still without a hint of fear about him. Then, as he calmly turned and rode away, I broke out in an icy, bone shivering sweat.

After an hour of hard riding we passed the last miners working the river below. That night we made a cold camp with no fire and only leftover beans and biscuits to eat. Well before sunup we were on our way again and by midmorning we'd come to the southern edge of a huge valley covered with sagebrush, dotted with bright, sweet scented wildflowers and ringed by snow capped peaks that loomed thousands of feet above us. Except for the marshes fed by melt water from the winter snows, the whole place resembled the high deserts Anderson and I had crossed on the way to California.

Again we stayed in the saddle until the last of the daylight had faded, but as we prepared for another cold camp all of us noticed a red glow that spread wide across the horizon from somewhere along our back trail.

"Campfires," said Bird. "Looks like a whole army's behind us, don't it?"

"Mount up," yelled Stoddard. "It's Raush. We gotta ride all night."

"No!" countered Anderson. "We're all dog tired. We need rest."

Stoddard started in again. "But Raush—"

"Raush ain't gonna catch us just yet," Bird interjected as calm as ever. "I got a little trick in store for him, if you fellers can stand more hard mountain ridin', but it'll save us three, maybe four days at least."

Bird's idea cheered us all and well before the next sunrise we rode out of our camp heading slightly east of due north so we would give the impression that we were going to follow the valley as far as the flat land would take us. Then, when we came to a marshy area fed by snow run off flowing from a gap in the mountains, we turned and rode northwest through the

stream, thereby leaving no tracks for Raush and his followers to find. But to add to his ruse, Bird took all our mules with him and continued on in the same direction we'd been going. He seemed sure there would be yet another stream coming in from the west that he could take so as to rendezvous with us later.

And sure as shooting by midday he'd caught us. Together we climbed steadily up a ravine that drained the melt water of two peaks, one to our right and the other to our left, the flanks of both covered with the same sugar pine and red fir we'd seen all along the way. There was no trail and our progress was slower than it had been.

That night we all camped together in a narrow canyon sheltered from the view of the valley. Somehow, while he led our mules off in the wrong direction, Bird had managed to bag two prairie hens and we enjoyed a hot meal of fresh meat for the first time in days. Our spirits were high, even Stoddard seemed to think that Raush and the men with him might have been fooled by Bird's clever ploy.

We started out again just after sunup and soon crossed a flat saddle on the high pass we traveled and began to descend. By mid afternoon we came to another valley, long and narrow and vastly smaller than the first, but covered in the same sagebrush and wildflowers and fed by a meandering stream that often jumped its banks and flooded the ground around it.

Stoddard, his two mules in tow, rode up beside me as I led our string of four along easily. The animals walked willingly now, like they were grateful for the flat, soft earth of the valley after the hard rock of the mountains we'd just been through. But Stoddard seemed unusually nervous and continually looked around in all directions.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Stoddard?" I asked.

"It's the Injuns," he asserted, fear in his voice. "They're out there watching us."

"Have you seen them," I wondered as my hand grabbed the handle of my Colt.

"No, you never see 'em, not till it's too late," he claimed. "But they're out there."

Anderson rode up beside me. It was plain he'd heard what we were talking about. "The Indians here in California are pretty friendly, Stoddard. If we stay peaceable we shouldn't have any trouble with them," he divulged.

"They killed my partner," Stoddard responded. "Never gave him a chance."

"Did he shoot first?" Anderson inquired and I knew it was a good question.

Stoddard's head jerked around, his eyes pinched. He was still edgy and ill at ease. "They jumped him, sudden like. They didn't have no guns," he said, and then swept his arm across the ridges that rose on both sides of us. "They could be watching us from anywhere out there, we got to keep a sharp eye out, all of us," he urged.

"I'll keep looking, don't worry," I promised, just as scared of Indians as he was.

"See to it," he declared then yanked on the reins to his mules and loped off toward Bird who rode alone in front of everyone.

When Stoddard had gotten out of earshot I turned to Anderson. "Is he right about the Indians?" I asked.

Anderson smiled reassuringly. "I don't know if he's right or not, but I think our biggest concern if we do meet Indians is that Stoddard just might do something dumb, like shoot at them. Maybe we should keep an eye on him," he said.

"Do you think Stoddard's partner shot first?" I mused.

"I wouldn't doubt it," he answered.

The rest of the afternoon my head swiveled from side to side just like Stoddard's had, searching the mountainsides for any sign of an Indian. At dusk we camped in a small copse of oak trees and I kept my Colt revolver ready, just in case they snuck up on us in the twilight. Then, when I bedded down, I carefully placed the pistol under the saddle that I used as a pillow where I knew I could get to it quickly if I needed to.

Still, the idea that Indians could be anywhere around us had me so fretful that I couldn't sleep. Eventually, perhaps in an effort to escape my fears, my mind returned to the Bella Union and I could see again the soft curls of Michelle Reynard's hair as it bounced about her neck while she passed out cards at the gaming table. The red glow from the lanterns brought a warm, comfortable hue to her soft skin and cast a dazzling fire into her beautiful blue eyes.

I could even see her long, thin fingers as she shuffled the cards then dealt one to each player in turn, and still hear her voice, so heavily accented yet incredibly lyrical, as she asked the simple questions of a twenty-one dealer to the players. And I'll never forget her cozy, almost gleeful smile as she raked in her winnings at the end of each play.

Somewhere amidst my musings I must have drifted into sleep for the next thing I remember was a loud voice that woke me to the grunts of men scuffling. Immediately I grabbed my Colt and rolled out from under my blankets and hid behind a tree. The Indians were here, I was sure. Then a light blazed into the moonless night. Someone had lit a twig from the embers of the fire. I could see Stoddard's face in the glow.

"Yeah, this is him. Get your rope ready, Grimes," a man ordered in a rough bass voice. I didn't recognize it but it wasn't an Indian, that's for sure, so it must be Raush. My hands were shaking. I knew if I tried to shoot I couldn't hit anyone.

Then somebody threw a rope over a limb of the oak tree I hid behind and I could see shadowy figures coming closer. One was a big man who pushed Stoddard toward me while holding a pistol to his head. The same man who'd thrown the rope put a noose over Stoddard's head. They were going to hang Stoddard right here, right now and right in front of me. Where were Anderson and Bird, I wondered? Were they all right?

"There's an empty bed roll here, Raush," the one called Grimes said in a shrill, nasal kind of voice and I knew he was talking about my blankets.

"Get him," the low voice of Raush ordered.

Grimes would find me soon. Then they would hang Stoddard. I knew I couldn't let that happen. Raush was only five feet away, tightening the rope around Stoddard's neck. I stepped out from behind the tree and cocked the Colt. "Let him go, Raush, or I'll shoot," I yelled in the bravest tone I could muster.

"What?" he barked. "Who the hell are you?"

"Just let Stoddard go. I mean it," I ordered.

"Hah," he laughed. "It's the boy," he said to Grimes and then looked to me. "You got the guts to pull that trigger, boy? You brave enough to kill a man in cold blood?"

"You're planning on killing Stoddard aren't you?" I yelled back.

"He killed my brother!" Raush bellowed.

"He says Indians killed your brother," I retorted.

"He's a damn liar!" A burning rage spewed from the big man's mouth.

Then I felt cold steel against my temple, and heard the incredibly loud click of another Colt cocking close by my ear. It was Grimes. Somehow he'd managed to sneak up beside me without me having any idea he was coming.

"Put the gun down, boy," he said in his reedy, whiney voice.

"No! If you shoot me I'll still shoot Raush," I cried, and regretted it at once.

A wave of terror washed over me and I was ready to fall to my knees and beg Grimes for mercy when I heard another gun hammer clicking loud and sounding all too familiar. "Ever seen what a big bore bear gun'll do to a man's head, Grimes?" said Bird, who must've had the drop on Grimes, and so welcome relief flooded back into my heart.

But then came another loud, big bore bear gun hammer click, "But, mon ami, you know well what such a gun will do, oui?" And the dread washed over me again. Someone had a gun trained on Bird, I was sure, someone who had an accent like Michelle Reynard, and it bothered me no end that anyone whose voice reminded me so much of her could be threatening my friend Bird, and then, I guess, me too.

"Frenchy Chabot, as I live a breathe," Bird said, still sounding as calm as he always did. "I thought the Piutes south of the Truckee did you in two years ago."

"Mon Dieu, they came very close, monsieur, but Chabot, he knows the trick with the melt water too," Frenchy Chabot said with a smug chuckle.

"That's too bad," Bird groused. "I should've known Raush would dig up a skunk like you."

"It is too bad for you, mon ami," Frenchy went on.

"Maybe not, my friend." It was Anderson and he'd stressed the words my friend real loud just as his own Colt revolver cocked.

Then he added, "I take it you're the last of this little party of murdering swine, Frenchy, and that makes me the only man here without a gun aimed at his head. Am I right, Raush?" Anderson yelled out the last few words.

Then came a silence that seemed to go on forever.

"I ain't saying," Raush finally growled.

"Oh, so you're not saying, Raush," Anderson reflected. "How about you, Frenchy? Are you the last one of this little party of pigs?" There was an edge in his tone that I hadn't heard before, a fierceness he'd never shown in the year we'd been together.

"Mon Dieu," was all Frenchy could say.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. There's only the three of you. It seems we have situation here, gentlemen." Anderson continued. "Well, I got nothing to worry about, so how about I just shoot you, Frenchy?"

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed.

I'd never heard Anderson talk like he just had. Sure that he'd lost his mind and that the fat would soon hit the fire, I thought about Michelle Reynard once more, convinced I'd never see her again. The hand that held my Colt shook harder than ever.

Then Raush yelled out. "I don't care what ya do to the damn Frenchman. I paid him to find my brother's killer and he's done it. Now I'm gonna hang Stoddard,"

"And all those men following you will be real happy that you killed the only man here who knows where the lake of gold is, right Raush?" Anderson replied.

"They can find their own gold," Raush hollered back.

"Maybe they will," Anderson agreed. "But maybe some of them might be mad enough at you to string you up beside Stoddard. What do you think, Frenchy?" Anderson asked and at once I realized his plan. Maybe I would see Michelle one more time after all.

"Mon ami," said the Frenchman quietly, like he was talking directly to Anderson. "I think I will shoot Raush myself, s'il vous plait."

"Oh yeah, Frenchy, you go ahead. Shoot away," Anderson sang out, loud.

"I'll still kill the boy," yelled Grimes and pushed the pistol hard up against my temple. My newfound hope instantly drained away.

"Before I blow your fat head into little tiny pieces, Grimes," Bird chirped in. "What axe you got to grind here?"

"It's family," answered Grimes. "Raush is my cousin."

"Wait up!" barked Raush suddenly. "Don't nobody shoot. How about we sit tight till sunup. Then we can settle this right."

"What do you think about that, Stoddard?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, anything, anything, just don't let him hang me," Stoddard whimpered. He sounded like a young schoolboy who'd been pounded on by the class bully.

"All right, Raush," Anderson hollered out. "Let Stoddard go. We won't shoot."

Raush looked around warily, but pulled the noose from Stoddard's neck then gave him a hard shove toward me. Stoddard tumbled to his hands and knees and started blubbering like a two-year-old baby that hadn't been fed all day.

"There's your killer," Raush growled. "Grimes, you and Frenchy get over here."

I felt the hard steel of Grimes' Colt leave my temple. "Be careful, boy. I still got my eye on you," he whispered in my ear before he slithered away.

"Frenchy, you comin'?" Raush snarled.

"I stay here, s'il vous plait," Frenchy said real calm like.

"To hell with ya," Raush snapped back. "We'll string you up too. Come on, Grimes." And both men disappeared into the darkness.

In spite of my own fear I ran the few feet to Stoddard and knelt in front of him. His eyes were wild and unfocused, spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He mumbled over and over again, "Don't let him hang me, mama. I'm a good boy. I am. Don't let him hang me." And for the second time on this journey I felt pity for Stoddard.

"Sacrebleu," whispered Frenchy and I realized he stood beside me. I looked up into a round, frowning face with a bushy moustache that drooped below the chin. "This Stoddard, he knows. There are more of the Grimeses," Frenchy held up four fingers, "and more of the Raushes," three fingers now. "They will be here after the sunrise."

"No," I blurted. "I won't let that happen. I can't." I turned back to Stoddard. "Can you ride?" I asked in a soft voice.

"I can ride, Mama," he said. "I can ride real good."

Oh, Lord, I thought, he's lost his mind but he still deserved a chance at least. I found his horse and in no time had him saddled and ready. Then I filled the saddlebags with as much food as I could cram into them and led the horse back to Stoddard.

Anderson grabbed my arm. "But the lake, Micah?" he whispered.

"I can't let him hang," I protested

Then in a hushed, confident tone Bird told Anderson, "We'll find the gold."

I pulled my arm free. "Here's your horse, sir," I said to Stoddard, and helped him into the saddle.

The panic flashed in his eyes again. "But the Injuns are out there," he cried.

"Don't worry about the Indians," I said, thinking fast. "They're on our side. They like you but they don't like Raush and Grimes. Just remember not to shoot at them."

"I won't shoot at anybody, mama, I promise," he muttered.

Then Bird walked up and pointed into the distance. "Do ya see the bright star just above that dark mountain peak?" he asked and Stoddard nodded. "Just ride towards it till ya get to the river then turn downstream.

You'll be fine." And he whacked the horse's rump so hard that Stoddard near tumbled off as he galloped into the night.

"It'll be light soon enough. Best we get an early start," Bird said as he tossed a pile of kindling onto the smoldering embers of our campfire and stuck a large pot of leftover beans close by to warm. The small fingers of flame quickly grew bright.

"I hear horses coming," I announced, pointing to the direction we'd come from.

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed. "Raush has heard Monsieur Stoddard leave, I think. We'd best stay out of the light. He will shoot if he can."

"Good thinking, Frenchy," Bird said and we all moved away from the fire.

I hid behind the same oak tree as before and watched as Raush slowed from a gallop to a walk along the dim shadows across from the flames.

"Frenchy," he yelled. "Was that Stoddard who rode outta here?"

"That was Monsieur Bird, mon ami," Frenchy called back, lying through his teeth.

"Like hell!" Raush roared. "Come on Grimes, let's ride," he yelled back and spurred his mount just as Grimes rode up. In no time they'd disappeared into the dark.

After a quick meal of leftover beans, and in the dim twilight before the sun rose over the mountains, we also rode out of camp, following the prints of three horses pressed deep into the soft earth. Not long afterwards we heard a gunshot from somewhere ahead of us, then came frightened shouts and another shot. Soon terrible screams began, chilling my blood to the very bone. But I couldn't tell who it was. None of us could.

Then Frenchy stopped. "Mes amis," he began with a somber look on his face. "I think maybe the Indians have killed Raush and Stoddard. So I am safe now. I will go back and tell the men behind you that Stoddard is dead. They will not follow you then."

Bird nodded. "Much obliged," was all he said as Frenchy turned and rode off.

Soon more tracks came from the west. Bird said they were from unshod Indian ponies. It looked like they followed the same path as had Stoddard, Raush and Grimes, but there were so many that they covered the marks of the shod horses. Then the prints got all muddled together like everyone had stopped and milled around some. There was a lot of blood on the ground, and two sets of tracks led off, one to the west and the other on up

the valley in the direction we were going, like the Indians had split up. We all figured that somebody had given up the ghost here, but had no idea who.

We'd all heard the terrible screams earlier this morning, and now we were sure some Indians were ahead of us so my hand never got far from the handle of my Colt and my head whirled constantly from side to side. No wild, savage Indian would sneak up on me, not if I could help it. Yet Bird and Anderson rode along as cool as could be, totally unruffled by what I knew to be our impending doom. By late afternoon the soft ground gave way to hard rock again and the tracks vanished.

Soon we rode northwest atop a deep, steep chasm thick with red fir, with a river at the bottom that ran a calm deep blue in some spots but mostly roared along spewing white foam across the many rocks in its path. The country here struck me as even more rugged than what we'd encountered around Downieville, and we were certainly much farther from any hint of civilization. Yet, in spite of keeping as close an eye out as I could, I'd still seen no sign of Indians, Raush, or Stoddard.

After two more days we came to a narrow valley, a half a mile long by thirty paces wide, at the bottom of a gorge hemmed in by near perpendicular hills thick with fir where the river plunged past a bar of gravel that even from the height at which we rode seemed to sparkle with the luster of gold. Unable to believe my eyes I stopped and stared. But I'd mined gold for a whole year now and never had any mining site I'd ever seen shown as many signs of wealth as this one, in spite of it sitting so far down the bluff.

The others had ridden on, like they hadn't noticed. "Anderson, Bird," I cried. "There's gold down there. I'm sure."

They stopped and looked into the gorge. Suddenly Bird grinned like he'd just gotten a plate of the best beefsteak in California cooked by the prettiest girl around. "This might be the spot Stoddard found, son," he said more excited than he'd ever been.

"But this isn't a lake, sir," I replied.

"Naw," he said. "Stoddard lied about the lake. He had to say something to throw folks off his trail."

Then Anderson added, "I think you're right, Micah. It sure looks like there's gold in that gravel. Why don't we find out?"

Leading his mule and the two Stoddard left with us, Bird began to work his way down the cliff face to the river. I followed Anderson, each of us with two mules, something we'd decided to do because of the incident with Lem

and Jedidiah. This way, if anything happened to one of us as we snaked our way along the steep descent, the other would still have supplies.

Then, as I neared the bottom, I noticed both of them had stopped alongside the river. They stared up into an ancient dead fir tree that had grown stunted in rocky ground, with two twin trunks splitting from a single base about eight feet up, the tops of each long since broken off, one at fifteen feet and the other a little higher.

I reined up behind them and followed their eyes. There I saw a well-worn felt hat tied down tight over a tattered black coat and a pair of ragged wool trousers, and all wedged between the trunks with a lot of feathers and the rear end rattles of sidewinders hanging in front. Then I realized that bones were inside the clothes. I could see the lower part of a skull under the hat and a shinbone stuck out from one torn pant leg. I started to shake. This had been a person, and whatever happened hadn't been pleasant.

"It's Raushes' brother isn't it?" I asked to no one in particular.

"Likely," said Bird.

"How did he . . . ." I mumbled, unable to finish.

"Injuns," Bird answered. "They caught him then tied him up there. The snake rattles kept the buzzards off. That way he'd die real slow after they'd had their fun."

"Fun?" I moaned, not understanding Bird's sarcasm at all.

Anderson dropped to the ground. "Let's give him a proper burial," he suggested. Bird went with him but I couldn't bring myself to help with such a gruesome task. Still, I aimed to do my share so I pulled out a pick and shovel and began to dig. When we were done Anderson quoted some bible passages from memory and said a short prayer.

I wanted to get away from the gravesite as quick as I could. The whole thing had my mind bouncing around like a kid's rubber ball. I didn't know what the Indians had done to Raushes' brother exactly, but it had to be downright horrible and I felt sure now that Stoddard had seen the whole thing, but here we were right on top of the place where he'd found those huge nuggets and I was determined to get what we came for.

So right off I rode toward the gravel bar I'd seen from above. After pulling the packs from both mules I left them to water in the river and walked over toward a likely looking spot and sank my shovel into the sand, slopped it into my gold pan and squatted at the edge of the river and began

to wash out all the lighter sand and dirt and pick out the rocks with my hands. It didn't take that long until I realized I had gotten rid of everything but the gold and I still had a whole pan brimming with stuff, all of it gold.

"Anderson," I screamed. "Look here!"

He was beside me in no time. "My God," he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it. Most men feel real good to find an ounce of color in their pan. You must have nine or ten here. That's a hundred and fifty dollars at least, in one shovel full of ore." Then he turned and pointed to the gold for the benefit of Bird who'd just rushed up beside us. "Take a gander at this, Bird!" he crowed.

A look I knew well swept instantly across Bird's face, just like I'd seen in so many men when they got that first sight of pure gold that came from the bare earth around them and the idea instantly started to percolate inside their head about how much more gold could be buried in the gravel of the very bar where they stood. It's called gold fever and like all the others that glint of gold gleamed bright in Bird's eyes, eyes that grew as big as the very pan they stared into. He'd had caught the fever all right, hooked like a trout in a mountain stream.

We started panning with the single-minded zeal that the fever metes out in large doses to its victims, and in what seemed like no time Bird yelled out, "Here they are, Stoddard's nuggets. Look at 'em! Look at 'em!"

Both Anderson and I dropped our shovels to rush over by Bird. He'd only run a splash of water across his ore, enough to clean the dust away, and the whole pan gleamed of gold in huge lumps just like the ones Stoddard flashed that day in Nevada City.

I pulled one out and held in front of my eyes, lost in its special lure, my heart pounding like a racehorse. "That pan full must weigh five pounds," I said.

"More," added Anderson. "Stoddard was right. This place is loaded with gold."

"Just in case the Indians didn't get him, shouldn't we put a quarter of what we find aside for Stoddard?" I said. "We wouldn't be here except that he told us about this." It came over me quick. My mother had called it the goodness of my soul.

Bird and Anderson both nodded. "Done," said Anderson."There's plenty here for everyone. We'll save a share for him until we know for sure."

We worked the bar all summer, and though a lot more men showed up,

many who were with Raush, we never said a word about finding the body, or let on that this was the spot Stoddard had found and that there was no lake of gold. Then, that fall, we loaded our mules with all we'd mined and made our way down the North Feather River to where it joined the Yuba. There we came to a new town, Marysville, growing rapidly by supplying miners in places just like where we'd been and so we decided to stay.

The three of us, with Stoddard as a silent partner, built a wildly profitable business bringing up mining supplies on a steamer then hauling them by mule train to the remote camps strewn along the Yuba and Feather rivers. And now, after these three years, here was Stoddard, ranting on madly about his lake of gold until even the drunkest of his listeners left, and he began to mutter much as he had the last time I'd seen him.

"Stoddard," I called. "I'm Micah Poole. Don't you remember me?"

He gazed back through unfocused eyes, clothes in rags, hair and beard unkempt and littered with the straw he must've slept in last night. "I've got nuggets," he mumbled and frantically searched through the pockets of a well-worn frock coat.

"Are you hungry," I continued, knowing he must be.

His head bobbed up and his eyes finally found me, but he said nothing.

"My wife is an excellent cook and you're more than welcome," I added.

Then he shook his head, almost in fear, "No, no, I can't. I'm not dressed—"

"You're fine I'm sure. Michelle would love to see you."

"Michelle Reynard?" he blurted, sounding as sober as a judge.

"Well, yes, before we were married, she's Michelle Poole now."

"A beautiful woman! It would be an honor, sir," he said and began to straighten his hair. "Have we met before?" he suddenly asked of me.

"Come along, Stoddard. We have a lot to talk about." I replied then walked off toward my home. He followed like a puppy, appearing by any measure as the most down and out man in California, while, in truth, he was now among the richest.

◆ The End ◆

About John Putnam

John came west as a young man and settled in Berkeley where he graduated from the University of California. He still lives and writes there and often gives a talk on the California gold rush to the gang at the Freight and Salvage.

John spent a lot of time digging into that gold rush too and many of his stories take place back then. His characters are so real they'll jump right off the page and talk to you; his villains have hearts as cold as midnight and his heroes almost always do the right thing in the end.

He's working up quite a reputation for his knowledge of that era too. His blog, My Gold Rush Tales, attracted the interest of some TV folks and he appeared in a segment for the Travel Channel about Henry Meiggs, the man who built San Francisco's famous Fisherman's Wharf.

John's first novel, *Hangtown Creek*, is a story of adventure, romance, and coming of age in the early days of the gold rush. His more recent title, *Into the Face of the Devil*, moves between Hangtown and the sawmill where James Marshall first found gold, and pits a young man in love for the first time against a killer so evil he could pass for Satan.

Visit John's website at JohnRosePutnam.com or his blog at MyGoldRushTales.com for more information.

Somebody's Darling

by Jeff Richards

Walker Thomas was fourteen when his father left for the war. Walker hitched up the horses and took him to the depot in the city ten miles north.

"Dad," he said as he looked at the train huffing like an old codger up a hill to the station. "Why can't I go with you?"

"I told you a thousand times you need to tend the farm," he said, patting Walker on the shoulder "Take care of your Ma and sister."

"I don't want to take care of that brat, Lisa."

"I don't care what you want, son. You have your duty like I have mine."

He watched his father climb in the train and wave from the window as it chugged off, blowing steam. It was heading west, a peculiar direction since the enemy was to the south. Walker found out later that the train stopped at Cairo. The soldiers boarded steamboats that took them upriver to Paducah, Kentucky where his father stayed, according to the letters, forever. Then one day, his father marched out of town, up one hill and down another to where the soldiers tangled up in an altercation that ended with his dad shot in the arm. They hauled him to the hospital in Paducah. They fished out the bullet. He developed gangrene. They amputated. A year later he was back home, but he wasn't the same cocksure dad who left.

"I seen your cousin," he said as they sat on the front porch looking at a field Walker had planted in corn. The sprouts barely peeked out of the ground. His father shook some tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. Tamped it down. Lit it. "We were in the fight together. Close quarters. I saw him for the shortest second staring at me in disbelief, his saber drawn. Could have sliced me in half. But he turned away. Went to hacking at the other bluecoats."

His father stood up from the rocking chair. Paced to the end of the porch to where he could see the apple orchard. Walker had spent a good bit of the winter up in the trees, trimming off the branches so there'd be enough room for the fruit to grow fat when the summer came. "You done a good job. I'm proud of you," said his father, pointing the stem of his pipe at the trees. "That'll be a good crop come fall."

He laughed. "You ever hear of a one-armed farmer? How in tarnation am I going to climb up those trees and saw away at the branches without killing myself?"

"You'll find a way."

"Why thank you, son. I suppose I will." He shook his head. Laughed again. "All this responsibility made a man out of you. Don't know what it's done to me."

Walker guessed at what his dad meant, and he thought about it and the funny coincidence of his cousin, Raymond Morgan. When his dad was off to war, he used to roam down to the river below the preacher's house. Stare at the water as it flowed past him carrying whatever fell into it: a stray leaf; a branch of a tree; an old shoe; a wagon wheel; even a cow who'd strayed out too far. He rescued the cow. Once he even rescued a raccoon and nearly got scratched to death. But mostly he'd sit there and watch the stray debris slide by downstream and imagined it went all the way to Paducah and that his dad would be standing by the dock looking down and see the same debris as it flowed on by to the Mississippi.

One day he was sitting by the water thinking that maybe he'd put a message in a bottle when he heard a voice yelling at him from across the river.

"Hey there, Yankee boy. How do I look?"

Walker jumped to his feet. Scrambled up the hill because he knew what kind of species inhabited Kentucky, but at the last minute he turned and saw who it was. Ray, standing on the opposite bank of the river in full Rebel regalia, head tilted back, laughing.

Walker wandered back down to the bank, hands in pocket, and yelled, "I know who you are. My cousin, Raymond Morgan."

"The very same," said Ray, waving his hand. "Come on over."

"What do you think, I'm stupid? You think I'm gonna rot in Sesech jail?"

"You're not gonna rot anywhere, son. I want to talk. I'm about to head off to war."

"What do I care? You're the enemy."

Ray was about to turn away exasperated when Walker changed his mind, found a raft he knew was hidden in the reeds, and poled across.

"Guess blood is thicker than water," said Ray as he tied up the raft. He looked every part the officer he was. A first lieutenant—Walker could tell by the two gold bars on the sleeve of his gray jacket. Two rows of gold buttons down the front of the jacket and a gold sash wrapped around the middle. His pants were blue. Gold stripes down the side. He wore a gold kepi hat.

"You look mighty fine," said Walker, as he sat down on the stump of a tree. "But you're fighting on the wrong side."

"I guess that's a matter of opinion." Ray leaned up against a tree a few feet away. He shook his head. "You sure have grown up, Walker. Talking back to me and all. Couldn't get a peep out of you in the old days."

The old days was five years ago when the preacher moved into the house on the cliff and started to stealing slaves from across the river and getting everybody riled at each other. Back then, Walker was in awe of his cousin who was seven years older and a daredevil. He had a way with horses. Walker had seen Ray jump from one horse to another at a full gallop. He'd seen him stand up on a horse's bare back like in the circus.

Ride sideways. Backwards. Jump from one side of the horse to the other hitting the ground at full speed. But most all he'd seen him at the racetrack at the county fair. He won every year. He even went across the river and won, embarrassing everyone on the north side of the river. Couldn't even beat a ragged old farmer boy. Back then Raymond Morgan didn't pay much attention to his haberdashery.

The two of them stared at each other for the longest time like they were sworn enemies who didn't know how to talk. "What ever happened to your cousin, Eliot?" asked Raymond, finally.

"He's your cousin, too," said Walker, picking up a pebble and tossing it in the water. "He went off to Baptist seminary up near Columbus."

"I'm glad for that," said Ray, "means none of our slaves will go missing when I'm off to war." Eliot had helped out the preacher. "How's Lisa? I used to carry her around in my arms when she was a baby."

"The other day when I wasn't looking, she unlatched the gate to the chicken coop and scared out all the chickens so I had to spend half the day running all over tarnation to gather them up."

"Turned into a real spitfire," Ray laughed.

They went through the whole family and then went onto Ray's and when they were finished, they both sighed as if they just finished reciting the begats in the Bible and felt weighed down by the generations that preceded them.

"I wouldn't have no regrets if it wasn't for you fellows across the river. My relatives," said Raymond. He was wiping at his face with the sleeve of his military jacket, his eyes glistening. "I'd go away to war with a clean conscience. But I got to forget that."

He sauntered over to Walker who stood up from the stump. They shook hands.

"I got to forget that," he repeated, "and remember only my sworn duty."

He turned on his heel, marched through the clearing, his sword clinking at his side, into the thick woods until he disappeared. It was the last time Walker saw him until a year later on a battlefield somewhere in Tennessee.

It took Walker a long time to decide to join up even though he felt a yearning to go. First he helped out his daddy. They designed a plough he could grab with one hand and use his hips to maneuver well enough to draw a straight furrow. He was slower at picking the crops so he had Ma and Lisa to help out. The women milked the cows and Walker taught Lisa how to care for the chickens, his job since he was five years old.

The apples were more difficult since there were more of them. They were the cash crop of the farm. In the fall, they stored the apples in a cool place until there was enough volume picked to haul to market in the nearby town where the train depot was located. This took heavy lifting, which his dad was not capable of all by himself and he wasn't capable of digging holes to plant the trees that had been germinating since spring.

The idea was to keep ahead of the trees that were dying off and, more important, increase the volume, because it was a business and the nature of business, according to his dad, was to grow.

After much thought, his dad decided to hire one of the Morris kids. Normally you wouldn't hire a free Negro for a job a white man could do. But given that most of the white men were off to war and that he was a veteran who sacrificed an arm, the townspeople weren't too upset.

From then on things were easy on the farm so that freed up Walker to think about the second thing that bothered him, duty. He had heard that

word used twice, once by his father and once by his cousin. Yet their duty couldn't be the same because they were fighting for the opposite sides. It took Eliot Thomas on vacation from the seminary to clear things up.

"Are you going to fight in the war?" he asked Eliot who was dressed up in black like a funeral director.

"No, I won't fight. I may join as a chaplain," he said. It was Saturday. Market day. They were sitting on a bench in the town square watching the crowd. "Then again I might not join. I have a duty to a higher power."

Just like that, Walker understood. His dad had a duty to fight for the North. Ray Morgan had a duty to fight for the South. Eliot Thomas had a duty to fight for God and that meant not to fight at all because it said in the Bible, "Thou shalt not kill." That means that duty doesn't fall on you like a brick but that you got to think about it and come up with a decision that suits you. And it better be the right decision and that confused him until he thought about the final thing that bothered him, guilt.

There was a big battle down south and within a few weeks the bodies started to come in, at least the few that were recovered by relatives. One of those dead was Robert Clinch, a boy his age. He didn't like the kid. He was one of the school bullies but he went to the funeral and the whole time he felt this burning shame. Especially when he went up to Robert's parents to tell them how sorry he was but couldn't get the words out. They gave him these blank looks like they were staring through his skin to the other side. Like he was invisible. He ran off down the road past the preacher's house to the river. He looked across to the Kentucky side and thought about his kin, Raymond Morgan. How he didn't hesitate to sign up. How his own father didn't hesitate. How four other boys his age went? and one of them come back dead. How can he not do the same?

He tried to reason this out, but somehow his thoughts were muddled, got mixed up with Eliot Thomas and the Bible so maybe he should have waited longer, but when he saw the poster that the recruiter was up at Dover Canal to fill in the missing ranks for the 80th Ohio Volunteers, he went there and signed up and that's how he reached the battle and found his cousin facing him on the opposite side of the field.

He didn't see him all at once. He saw the graybacks march out of the woods and line up behind a stone fence. Their officers paced up and down the ranks nervously. Then they lined up the artillery in a neat row. And

behind the artillery, deep in the woods, Walker spied horsemen. Cavalry. He sat there behind his own stone fence across the field with his comrades, wondering what his officers were thinking. He turned to the fellow next to him who was chewing a plug of tobacco.

"Why didn't we attack the Secech when they was in disarray?" asked Walker, leaning close to the old, grizzled soldier who looked twice his dad's age. "We could've sent them skedaddling back where they come from."

"We're as snug as a bug, boy. No reason to tire ourselves running across that field dodging bullets," he laughed bitterly, spitting out tobacco juice. Some of it dribbled down a crease in his chin.

Walker looked back across the field. Some of the horseman emerged from the woods. One, a general Walker surmised from the graybeard and star on his slouch hat, dismounted. The officers gathered around him. They pointed across the field at the Yankee line. Pulled out a map. Walker shivered even though it was a warm spring morning. There was a visible nervousness in the air.

A gentle zephyr was blowing in his face carrying the sweet perfume of the apple blossoms from the orchard to his left. It was quiet. Only the occasional crunch of wagon wheels against rock, the clink of metal against metal, a soldier throwing taunts here and there. Walker thought he heard the lazy drone of the bees as they darted from one blossom to another in the orchard and to the field dotted with blue and yellow wildflowers.

A small bird flew across his line of sight flowing up and down with the wind currents. Landed in a scrub oak tree in the middle of the field and started to sing. He recognized the voice, a mocking bird. He heard it outside the window of his bedroom every morning when he woke up and felt this yearning for home. As a matter of fact he'd rather be anywhere—chopping wood, cleaning manure out of the barn, chasing a chicken with a hatchet—then where he was now feeling more like the chicken, the hatchet about to slice his scrawny neck in two. He'd been marching for weeks.

Heard gunshots far off. The clash of cannons. Bugles blow a charge. The rattle of muffled drums. But never had he been this close to an actual altercation. This is what they called "seeing the elephant" and he didn't like it.

He looked at the rock-strewn field. Not the field to plant a crop. A pasture. They had pasture like this on the other side of his orchard. So it was no problem to imagine the Reb farmer on the far side of the hill

huddling in the basement of his house with his family like his father would be huddling with Lisa and Ma if the Sesech crossed the river. For a moment, he felt sorry for this fellow. He wondered if he had slaves. He hadn't seen one, nor any other darkies for miles. This land seemed poor. Ragged, almost mountain land. He saw the peaks, a blue haze in the distance. Last night when he didn't know the mountains were there—they took up their positions after dark—he asked the grizzled veteran what all that light was hanging up in the middle of the air.

"Why those are fireflies," said the vet, spitting a long line of tobacco juice in the fire. He winked at the other soldiers. "They grow 'em big down here."

One of the soldiers, who was heating a tin of pokeweed tea not two inches from where the juice sizzled in the coals, said, "Why don't you hush up, Zeb. Those are campfires up side of a hill. Probably Reb, if I don't miss my guess."

"But there's thousands of them."

Walker Thomas was shivering at the thought. Tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers, ten per fire on average, screaming like devils as they barreled across the field, battle flags aflutter, until his position's overrun and one of the butternuts runs him clean through so he's like a butterfly mounted on a display board, can't even sit up to die.

He was trying to purge this thought from his brain when he heard the sound of a cowbell. He looked up over the stone fence and saw the heifer meandering leisurely down the field towards the apple orchard, turning its head first to the right, at the Confederate line of battle then to the left, at the Federal. That's when Walker Thomas saw a Confederate Cavalry lieutenant jump over the stone fence on a dun-colored Arabian and gallop straight towards his line. He pulled up at the last moment, yanked off his kepi with a flourish. Bowed to the Yankees. His blue eyes sparkled. He smiled blissfully. Walker stood up.

"Is that you, cousin?" he gasped. "Is that you, Raymond Morgan?"

The Confederate lieutenant stared straight at Walker. The smile slide off his face. His eyes seemed full of sadness for a moment. Then he snapped his head away with conscious effort. Donned his gold kepi, pulled back on the reins. The horse reared up and galloped down the line towards the errant cow. He was down there a long time. Invisible to Walker because he was too close to the Yankee line. But he could hear the cheers coming

from his Confederate brothers that was picked up on the Federal side. Everyone was cheering like this was some kind of game. Like they were back at the racetrack in Kentucky and all bets were on Raymond who was nosing out his closest competitor as they headed towards the finish line. Walker was still on his feet but so were the soldiers next to him, cheering, looking down the line. Walker felt the pride swell up in his chest. He leaned towards the grizzled veteran, "That's my cousin Raymond Morgan from the other side of the river in Kentucky," he said. "Don't he have grit?"

"Grit ain't the word for him," answered the vet, shaking his head. "Glory hound is."

And just as he said that a shot rang out. Then another. The cheering stopped followed by a silence broken only by the mockingbird still perched on the scrub oak tree singing like the world wasn't altered.

Walker heard the bell ringing and saw the cow, head raised to the sky, mooing for all it was worth. Following close behind was the dun Arabian. Riderless. Walker hoped that Raymond had fallen from his horse. That he was wounded only and his comrades dragged him back to the line and he was taken to a sawbones though a sawbones could kill you faster than a bullet. But he was wrong. The cow slowed to a walk before he came up the line to Walker. The Arabian galloped past and Walker saw that somehow in falling, Raymond's boot tangled up in the stirrup and that he was dragged along the ground beside his mount. It was hard to tell if he was dead or alive until finally Raymond's head smacked a sharp rock, spraying a fountain of blood in the air.

Walker sunk to his knees behind the stone fence. He wanted to cry but he was supposed to be a soldier.

The grizzled vet kneeled down beside him. Put his hand on Walker's shoulder. "Hey, son, sorry about your cousin. But I won't take back what I said. He was a glory hound. All them Rebs are. Brave, but glory hounds."

"He could ride like the wind."

"I seen that," he spat another stream of juice, a tiny dribble landing on the toe of Walker's boot.

Walker looked up when he heard the cowbell again. A couple of soldiers grabbed the cow by the neck and rustled it through an opening in the stone fence to the rear of the Yankee line. Across the field, a Rebel officer held tightly to the reins of the spooked Arabian, a lone boot still

in the stirrup. He was following two of his buddies who were carrying Raymond's rag doll body through the lines. That's when the artillery barrage commenced. Walker buried himself behind the stone fence. He resisted an urge to run which would have been impossible anyway since there were other soldiers behind him. The space was so tight, it was hard to breathe. But the barrage only lasted a moment and then ears ringing like he came from under a church bell, he poked his head up and saw exactly what he imagined some time before.

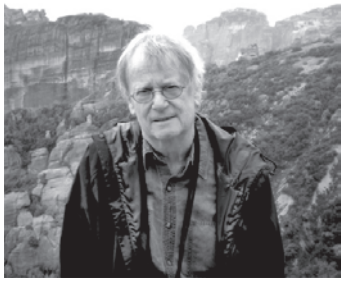
Tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers, it seemed to him, screaming like devils as they barreled across the field, battle flags aflutter only they hadn't overrun his position yet. Walker felt a hand on his shoulder and the calm voice of his sergeant ordering them to hold their fire. He focused on the voice, all the other things that got him here in the first place like duty, shame, love of family and country seemed to recede like the waves from the ocean shore. All, that is, except for the sad look in Raymond Morgan's eyes, the same look he imagined in his own eyes. It was a chink in his armor. He better not hold to it. Better to put on a brave face like his Kentucky cousin.

So when the order came from the sergeant to fire, Walker Thomas fired and out in the field amongst the thinning ranks of the charging Confederates, flags still aflutter, somebody's darling dropped to the ground.

◆ The End ◆

About Jeff Richards

Jeff Richards's story is based loosely on family history during the Civil War era. It is one of 16 pieces that comprise Richards's *Open Country*, a novel in stories about the Civil War, five of which have appeared in Gargoyle, Grey Sparrow, Frontier Tales, and Filtered Through Time (a Civil War anthology). His other fiction, essays, and cowboy poetry have appeared in *New South, Pinch, Southern Humanities Review*, and *Weber Studies*. He lives in Takoma Park, Maryland with his wife and two dogs, Angel and Billy Bones.



Cottonwood Death

By Mark Hinton

The boy was standing with his head down looking in the creek. He wasn't looking up at the tree line when the riders came dropping out of the hills. By the time he noticed them, they were working across the meadow towards him. They came in a line. The rider in front wore a tan duster and black Stetson and rode a big blue roan. The second rider was wearing a gray hat and duster and was riding a small appaloosa. The rider in the back wasn't wearing a hat. His hair was long and brown and blew out behind him. He wore a brown duster and rode a pinto that that was almost as big as the roan. Other riders were making their way down where the first three had descended.

When the first man got to the boy he stopped the roan and sat looking down at the boy. The roan tried to step closer to the creek for a drink but the man stopped it. It was a big horse. But the man was bigger.

The boy lifted his hand up to shade his eyes as he looked up at the rider who was hard to see because his back was toward the sun. The boy said nothing. The man whose eyes were hidden in the shade of his hat turned and watched the two nearest riders catch up. When he turned, the boy could see a scar running down his unshaved cheek. When the others got to where the boy was standing they stopped their horses, too. One horse and one rider on both sides of the big blue roan.

"That's a nice horse, mister," the boy said.

The man on the roan reached into his duster and pulled out a thin cigar. He put it in his mouth. He didn't light it. He just sat there looking at the boy.

"It's good fishin' here. Usually when I come I bring my pole. You get

some nice brookies in here." He gave up looking at the man on the roan and turned his attention to the man without a hat. He wasn't looking at the boy though. He was looking thorough his duster for something.

The boy looked over at the man on the appaloosa. The man was holding a walnut handled .44. It was pointed at the boy. The boy opened his mouth to say something. Whatever he was about to say was lost in the roar of the pistol going off. The boy's arms flew wide open and he tumbled over backwards into the creek.

The man without a hat brought a match out of a pocket deep in his duster and handed it to the man on the roan. The man on the roan took the match, scratched it on his belt buckle and lit his cigar with it. When the cigar was lit he flipped the match towards the creek. It landed in the water next to the boy. The man on the appaloosa opened his pistol, pocketed the spent casing, and put a new shell from his belt into it. He put the .44 back into his holster.

The big man on the blue roan spurred his mount forward into the creek. If the horse was bothered about stepping over the lifeless body of the boy, it gave no indication. When the horse had gotten upstream of the boy the man stopped and let the horse drink. He sat looking behind him at the line of men coming down the ridge and through the trees. There were six of them. They brought their horses up to the creek and let them drink.

When the horses had drunk their fill, the riders turned downstream and up the gentle bank on the opposite side. There was a small road, wheel ruts really, that ran on that side of the creek underneath the cottonwoods. The ruts came through trees and around a bend and ended where the men sat on their horses. The man on the roan looked back over his shoulder at the ridge they had just come down. The sky was dark in that direction.

"Storm might be comin'. Let's get to town before it begins," he said. He spurred his roan and the riders started down the road.

ft

Tom Stewart was walking between his small barn and the corral where he kept his team of mules when he saw the line of riders come out of the canyon and hit the main road to town. They were riding fast. He was surprised to see riders coming out of the canyon because he had been

working along the creek and the creek road most of the day and had not seen anyone but the Kavanaugh boy go up that direction that day.

When they hit the main road they turned south, away from Tom Stewart's place towards town. From where Stewart was standing to the crossroads was a good quarter mile, but he knew he did not recognize any of the men or their mounts.

The road to Cottonwood turned south and dropped deeper into the valley. At the speed they were going the horses and riders were soon gone. Stewart stood looking at the faint trail of dust hanging above the road. After awhile he turned his head towards the creek and the canyon. Above the ridge line the Pintlers rose high and jagged against the darkening sky.

He unbuttoned his shirt pocket and pulled out a watch. He opened it, looked at it, then turned back toward the road. He closed the watch, put it back in his pocket and started towards the corral. He took just a few steps than stopped. He rubbed the back of his neck, looked back over his shoulder at the barn, and then looked back toward the road. The dust still hung in the air. It had been a long, dry summer.

Stewart had been waiting for the Kavanaugh boy all afternoon. He was going to give him a ride to town. He had business with boy's father and had a couple of errands in town.

He headed toward the barn. If he was going to town he wanted the beat the storm that looked like it was coming in over the peaks.

ft

Pat O'Reilly had just finished loading his wagon at Kavanaugh's General Mercantile when he heard the sound of horses. A group of men were coming across the bridge in a hurry . . . yelling. The noise grew louder as they got closer. Jack Kavanaugh and his wife Katie stepped out of the store and came and stood next to O'Reilly.

As the riders got closer O'Reilly and the Kavanaughs could hear what the riders were yelling. "Help! Help!" At the sound of the commotion the few other buildings that made up the little town of Cottonwood began to empty. Children running barefoot, men without hats, women walking as quickly as their skirts would allow started gathering around the three mounted men.

One rider without a hat began to shout, "The priest! Where's the priest?" As he was calling, the door to last building on the street opened up. A man in a black cassock came running up the street. His head was bare. He was thirtyish with short red hair and sunburned skin.

"I'm Father Sullivan. What's the problem?" he asked as he came to a stop in front of the big pinto.

"You're the problem, Irish." The man on the pinto said pulling out a gun and pointing it at the priest. The two other men pulled their guns, too. Other riders were now coming hard down the road and across the bridge.

One of the women in the crowd screamed. The man without a hat turned his mount toward her and fired in one movement. The bullet hit her just above her nose and hit a man standing behind her in the shoulder exiting out the back of her head. They both went down.

Before they hit the ground, the other men on the horses started firing, too.

ft

When Stewart came out of the cottonwoods into the meadow, he was riding a big dun and trailing a smaller pinto. He saw the boy right away, he was laying on the edge of the stream, his feet were in the sand but his shoulders and head in the water. Stewart dropped off the dun and ran to the boy, even though he knew it was too late. He pulled the boy out of the water and the sand up onto the clean grass. Above the boy's left eye was an angry hole. Most of the back of his head was gone. Stewart stood for a while looking down at the boy. He went back to the pinto and brought it over to where the boy was lying. He took off the boy's oversized coat and covered his head and shoulders. Then picked the boy up in his arms and carried him toward the pinto. The pinto shied back so Stewart had to try a couple of times to get the boy's body draped over the saddle. When the boy was over the saddle Stewart tied him on and began leading the pinto back through the stream towards the dun.

ft

The road into Cottonwood came out of the sage brush hills in a long,

straight line until it reached the little bridge that crossed the cottonwooded creek that gave the town it's name. From the top of the hill, Stewart looked down on what was left of the town. A few of the bigger structures, the general store, the O'Brien house, and the church still burned. Smoke and the smell of smoke hung over the little valley. Even upwind where Stewart was, the smell was strong. He rode with his Colt in his right hand.

By the time he got to the bridge he could see the bodies laying in the middle of the street, in front of buildings, across the boardwalk. Men, women, children, horses, and even dogs lay where they fell. Moving down the street the smell of smoke was strong. But not strong enough to cover the smell of death. The pinto began pulling at its lead. Stewart got down, took the boy off the horse and laid the body gently down in the street next to the body of his mother. He untied the lead that held the small pinto. Once free it turned and ran back up the street and over the bridge. The dun stayed where its reins were dropped, trembling but not moving.

Stewart moved among the bodies. Looking for signs of life. He moved slowly. Looking at the bodies of children who had had parts of the faces blasted away. Mothers killed holding their dead and dying infants. Men shot in the back.

A dog was laying next to a little boy. The boy was missing part of his arm and nearly all of the right side of his face. The dog had been gut shot and had died slowly next to the boy.

Stewart moved down the street toward the church. As he got closer the bodies were fewer. When he got to the church he stopped. On the lawn in front of the smoldering ruins of the little church was a rough-made cross of fence posts and barbed wire. The lifeless body of the priest was tied to the cross with wire, a bullet hole in his head. His pants were off and someone had cut off his manhood. It was nailed onto the cross above his head with a rough painted sign that said, "Death to Papists"

It took him hours to carry all the bodies up to the graveyard that was on the hill above town. He found an overturned oxcart that he turned right-side up and hooked to the horses. He stacked the broken bodies like cordwood but it still took three trips. At first he tried digging graves, but the ground was hard and the bodies too numerous. Finally he took the cart down and filled it with wood that had not burned. He found kerosene in a root cellar behind one of the smoldering houses. He stacked three

loads of wood over the bodies and doused everything with all the kerosene he could find. It was full dark by the time he lit the pyre.

He rode back to his place. The wind had shifted direction and he rode downwind of town and the pyre that flamed like a beacon in the night. He didn't look back but the smell rode with him. When he got to his place, he took off all his clothes out in the yard and took a bath in the stock tank next to the barn. When he was clean he went up to the little house and got dressed.

It took him the rest of the night to pack the horses and supplies. The sun was just coming up over the hills when he swung up onto the dun. The pinto and the mules he had turned out into the pasture. He did not know how long he would be gone, but the meadow was big and there was plenty of water. He had packed his gear onto a blue roan and brought an appaloosa as a spare.

He rode back through town and picked up the trail. As best as he could figure there were nine to twelve riders and about two dozen horses, they hadn't killed many horses. They had taken the best with them.

They were moving fast. He tried not to think of the head start they had on him. He knew that for awhile they would be moving as quickly as they could. But as the miles passed, they would begin to relax the pace. The trail was easy to follow because they were following the road that headed towards the Yellowstone. About mid-morning he came across where they had camped the night. The coals were long cool.

Late in the afternoon he came to where they had stopped for coffee and something to eat. The coals where still a little warm. They had slowed their pace.

A mile from where he found the coals the trail split. Most of the horses kept west along the Yellowstone road. But seven riders turned north and towards the mountains. He left the road and followed the tracks up into hills.

ft

They were not even trying to hide the fire. He had seen glimpses of it dancing and glittering in the night for last hour that he had been working his way through the trees up to the edge of the big box canyon where they had made camp. He had left his horses hidden in some thick firs next to

the creek that the riders had been following all day. He had brought with him two pistols, a couple canteens, and his buffalo gun. His pockets were filled with shells.

He had been moving as silently as he could and it had taken him a long time to get where he could see the camp and the canyon. For the last half hour he had heard their voices growing louder as he got closer and closer. Now that he was close enough to see into the camp, he could see that they were drinking and making so much noise that he could probably have ridden to where he was with cowbells on and they still would not have noticed.

He counted six men sitting around the fire passing around a bottle, and he counted seven horses staked up about seventy-five feet away along the little creek. He could not find the seventh rider. He wondered if he was guarding the horses.

Stewart started working his way around toward the horses, scanning the trees for the guard. He moved as slowly as possible from tree to tree and shadow to shadow. Just before he got to the horses he looked again towards the men and the fire. He was above the camp a little and looking at it from a different angle. It took him awhile to understand what he was looking at, but when he did, he knew that there was no guard at the horses.

Lying just at the edge of the firelight was the still and nude form of a girl. She was laying on her side and in the firelight and the light of the moon she looked very white and very dead, her blank eyes staring out from beneath a big hole in her forehead.

He unpicketed the horses. One of them nickered quietly but when he looked towards the fire he knew that no one had heard anything over the laughter and the loud voices.

It was like shooting fish in a barrel. They were night-blind from fire and three sheets to the wind. His first shot with the big buffalo gun took the head a man who was in the middle of some song that only he knew the words of.

Stewart dropped the big rifle and ran toward camp firing as he moved. Two of the men managed to get shots off but they were shooting blindly and drunkly into the dark.

When he got to the fire he moved among the wounded, shooting each one in the head, until only one was left alive. He was a big man with a dirty duster who had been shot in his big belly. He was laying on his side, breathing hard through clenched teeth.

Stewart rolled him over with his foot. He had gone back into the night and gotten the buffalo gun and reloaded it. He pointed at the man's forehead.

"I came across a prospector up above Bannock once. Someone had robbed him, staked him to the ground and shot him in the scrotum with a buffalo gun. It had taken the prospector a couple of days to die. The last thing he saw was a cy'ote eating his manhood," Stewart said moving the barrel of the gun slowly down until it was pointed between the man's legs.

"Now, you are gut-shot so you might not last the whole three days . . . ." Stewart smiled slowly, "But then again the coyote's probably won't take three days to find you here neither. There is a lot of meat to draw their attention . . . ."

The man's eyes were huge.

Stewart continued. "The way I see it you got two choices, a bullet in the head or a bullet between your legs. Either one," he said raising his eyes toward where the girl lay, "is better than you deserve."

"What do you want . . . " the man hissed between his clenched teeth.

When the man had told him what he wanted to know, Stewart turned and started to walk away.

"You said you would kill me," the man said, grunting as he tried turn onto his side.

"So I did," Stewart said, turning. He put the gun down and picked up a rock that was next to the fire and started back towards the man, "but a man like you ain't worth the price of a bullet."

ft

He left the men lying where they had fallen. But he buried the girl as best he could under some firs far enough from the creek that spring runoff would not disturb where she lay. When he dropped the last stone on her grave he took his hat off and stood for awhile with his head down. He lifted his head and put his hat back on. He followed the creek back to his horses, saddled up, and followed his own trail back to the road and where the riders had split.

He was dead tired but the road was straight and wide and he knew where the three men were headed, so he dozed in the saddle and let the horse carry him along the wide, flat road toward Helena.

ft

He rode up to the building and dismounted. He had boarded the other two horses at a livery on the edge of town. He thought he might have a hard time finding the building but it had been easy to find. The Masonic Temple is always easy to find. When Bannock had been the territorial capital, the Masonic Temple had been above the school. Here in the more prosperous and stable state capital it was a big stone building along Last Chance Gulch.

No one asked him for a sign or anything when he went in. He knew they wouldn't. The temple in Helena was as much supper club and social club as anything else. A place for the rich and powerful to meet and socialize.

At the first floor bar, he found out that the men he wanted were in a meeting up on the second floor. If the bartender who had gave him the information gave any thought to the long duster he was wearing or the stiff way he was walking, he gave no indication.

When he got to the door, he unbuttoned the duster and untied the double-barreled 12-gauge he had bought yesterday. He opened the door and walked in.

Four men were sitting at a table. There were papers in front of them and it was obvious that they were talking about whatever was in them. They all stopped talking and had their eyes leveled at the shotgun pointed at them.

Stewart had been in Helena for three days. Two of the men he wanted were sitting at the table. The third, Johnson, was in a latrine behind his house four blocks away. His face had been beaten with the stock of the shotgun so bad that even his wife would not recognize him when she found him the next morning, lying on his back in the muck beneath the latrine

"Who's armed? he asked. They all shook their heads.

"Jack White and Henry Stone" he said. Two men pointed and two just sat and looked at him.

"You two, stand up slowly and go to that far wall and sit down on the floor . . . on your hands with your back to me. I got no business with you that I know of. I got two barrels though and they will tear the hell out of you

if you don't do exactly what I say." Both barrels stayed on White and Stone.

When the two men were on the floor, Stewart looked at White and Stone. The Kavanaugh boy would hardly have recognized the two men that killed him, except for the scar. They were clean and dressed in the fashion of prosperous businessmen. Stewart did not know what they looked like on the day they killed the Kavanaugh boy and the townspeople and priest of Cottonwood, but he knew what they looked like now. Arrogant and angry.

"What is the meaning of this, sir" said the biggest of the two who had a scar running down his cheek.

"Cottonwood, Montana." Stewart said. The expression on the big man with the scar did not change. But the other man grew notably paler.

"What about it?" said the big man.

"Five days ago nine men rode into the town of Cottonwood and killed every man, woman, and child in town but one. The girl they did not kill there they took with them. Six men took her into the mountains and raped and killed her there. Three rode to Helena."

As Stewart spoke the smaller of the two men got paler and paler and slumped back in his chair. The big man with the scar finally began to sweat. Stewart continued.

"I followed the six men and the girl up into the Big Belts. I was too late to save the girl but I gave her a decent burial. The men I left for the coyotes and the buzzards."

"The other three I followed into Helena. One of those three men is dead." Stewart said, looking at the big man with the scar. "He died this afternoon. I killed him. He told me the same story as I heard from one of the men in the Big Belts. But he knew more details."

The smaller man had his head in his hands and he was crying softly. The big man with the scar was sweating profusely.

"Nobody will believe your story," he said.

"I don't care what others believe. I believe it." Stewart said raising the shotgun.

"Are you a papist?" the big man asked, "An Irishman?"

"My wife was." Stewart said looking down the barrel at the two men. "When she died I figgered I had no more use for religion."

"You think you're some kind of avenging angel?" the big man said

getting angry. “You think you’re going to Catholic heaven?” he asked his eyes shining and bright.

“I think I’m going to hell just like you, Reverend Stone. But you’re going there first,” Stewart said, smiling. Then he pulled the trigger.

◆ The End ◆

About Mark Hinton

Mark Hinton grew up in California, Western Washington, and Montana. He has published poetry and short stories. His blog ClimbingSky.com focuses on books, poetry, art, and sports. He lives and works in Minnesota.

Renegade

By Gary Ives

The two orphans left behind after Slap Stone shot dead their father, the Rev. Tobias Jarvis, in front of the Badger Creek Indian Agency were called Sally and Ruth. Later Ruth came to be called Tishi by her Sioux relatives, tishi being their word for mockingbird. This was due to her innate ability to mimic sounds. Her stepmother sometimes watched her flap her arms as if she were imitating a grouse or prairie chicken, and sometimes at night the little girl would scrunch up on her hands and knees, rocking her head back a forth like a buffalo. She had difficulty learning words and as she grew it became clear to Amos and Keya Merriweather, her adoptive parents, that her view of the world was peculiar. She was loath to speak, became easily fixated on objects and would stare at rock or a tree for long periods of time. The little girl showed no affection either toward people or dogs or horses, and Amos, who believed the girl's natural father to have been crazy, reckoned the girl to be slow of wit. However Keya believed her to share spirits of wild animals, a special and a good thing, a kind of magic.

Sally easily folded into the new family and was happily accepted by Molly, the Merriweather girl, as a sister. Initially Keya insisted that the girls include Ruth in all their chores and play, however Ruth's silence and her staring at objects isolated her in a solitary world.

At the end the summer, the Hunkpapa band chief Crow Face, at his woman Nani-Tak's bidding, asked Amos to allow Tishi to live among the Hunkpapa, adding that her sister Sally was welcome too. However by her own request Sally would live with Amos, Keya and Molly.

Although Sally chose to live at the Badger Creek Station, she and her stepmother spent summers at the Hunkpapa camp. All three girls quickly became fluent in Siouan. As adopted granddaughters to the Hunkpapa band's chief, the white girls were accepted as equals by the adults of the band. Foreigners were not uncommon as captive slaves or adoptees. Keya, the girls' stepmother and adopted daughter of Crow Face, had herself been a Cheyenne captive from the age of five. The familiarity and even tolerance of strangers by adults did not, however, reach down to their children. Initially the Hunkpapa children saw the white girls as foreign, despite the girls' Siouan language, dress, and custom. They looked different. Hunkpapa boys tended to ignore them because they were, after all, girls, but the Hunkpapa girls initially fought or engaged in trickery and name calling.

In time Molly and Sally toughened up, fought, returned the name calling and eventually integrated with other girls of the band, making friendships, but not Tishi, strange little Tishi, who cared not for others preferring things to people and solitude to company. It was Crow Face's woman Nani-Tak who took Tishi under her wing and became the first of only a few people to establish a rapport with this strange person.

Once the placement of the two orphaned girls was decided, Amos dug two fresh graves at the Badger Creek Station beside the Jarvis graves. In these he laid bones from a small antelope. Crude wooden crosses bore the penciled inscriptions "Dau. Sally 6 and Ruth 5 died of fever. RIP." Sally's place was with them, Keya and Molly. Ruth's with Nani-Tak and the Hunkpapa, of this he was certain. No one would take these girls from their rightful places which circumstances had so forcefully ordained. In his semiannual report, Amos falsely noted the deaths of the two girls and included a penned letter for the bureau to forward "To Jarvis Relatives." In this he set down his version of the four Jarvis's deaths. The family's movables in the unfinished cabin were available to any legitimate claimant.

Of great concern was Sally's understanding. She had grown close to the Merriweathers and especially to Molly. But at six years old awareness of the tragedy attending her father was likely fixed in her memory. She never spoke of her parents and avoided the area of the graves and had no inkling that one of the graves purported to be hers. Would she at some future time reject the frontier? Keya said that, in time, the memories of

her parents would become fog and dissolve. Such had been the case with her own captivity at five years old. She and Tishi had been adopted by kind, accepting families. Still, the worry that a settler could assume that she was in fact a Jarvis troubled Amos, as did the idea that some white would identify Ruth among the Hunkpapa.

On the frontier, a Sioux wife was commonplace. A man needed the comfort of a woman and children and if a white man was willing to acknowledge his half-breeds then his neighbors were usually inclined to accept them too. But this was the only recognition of acceptable miscegenation. Any white man, woman, or child who had lived among Indians bore eternally a stigma of the savage. Especially women. A woman freed from Indian captivity was an anathema to a white community. From the earliest days of confrontation between whites and Indians these "freed" women often chose to flee the hypocrisy of the white world, returning to their former tribes.

Similarly, half-breeds and freed captive children seldom integrated successfully into the white man's world. The idea that a white Christian child would be voluntarily handed over to heathens was unthinkable. And that the district Indian Agent would engage in such a travesty was beyond imagination. The imbalance of these two worlds generated untold misery. Amos had seen it before during the war. Whites who had given sustenance or comfort to those bands of roaming, homeless and starving Negroes had been shunned by neighbors as traitors to the cause. These so-called civilized men treated their animals better than people and out here it was the same damned hateful way, in his opinion. And despite his strong bias toward the redskins, he was the best Indian agent on the frontier. In the earliest days of his commission as he'd thought, "By God they made the wrong man Indian Agent, and I'm sure glad it's me."

The years of his commission had seen no organized resistance within his district, only seven murders and the lowest incidence of crime on the frontier. Most settlers in the 850 square miles of the Badger Creek District felt reasonably secure from Indian attack. Pioneers heading west across the district passed unmolested. Amos Merriweather's insistence on fairness in justice and trade, his friendship with the whiskey and rifle trading Pierre Pardieu, and his kinship with the Hunkpapa band of Sioux had kept this peace.

Deliverance of the strange little Jarvis girl to the Hunkpapa however, broached a vulnerability. Despite all goodness, and reason, and despite the clear realization that Tishi's place was with Nani-Tak and Crow Face, the white community would never tolerate any Christian girl's place among godless savages.

When beings encounter one another for the first time they use their eyes and their ears and their sense of smell to sort and place one another in their respective worlds; perception is mostly physical. However, sometimes a special aura envelops an initial encounter and the beings are able to feel the spirit as well as the body of one another. This happens more often between a man and his horse but sometimes between two people. So it was with Nani-Tak and Tishi. That invisible nimbus of understanding enshrouded those two and a strong knot of understanding and affection immediately bound them together. For Nani-Tak , who had seen sixty winters, Tishi arrived as a blessing. The old woman's sight had dimmed but the strength of her inner vision remained and in this child she sensed the agency for continuance of The Spirit.

Increasingly Whites had been like grasshoppers coming across the plains and she knew there was no stopping them and that they would destroy The People by force, by magic, or change. This white girl was surety and perhaps hope that there were whites who were also endowed with vision and understanding. Little Tishi perceived those unseen entities that decided the fates of people, animals, and all things. Nani-Tak would guide her, teach her to listen to wind and clouds, to feel the urges of the earth and waters, to appreciate the commonality of The People with all things. It was already within the child, she need only be led gently to learn to draw from the cosmic font of wonder. Nightly the child slept curled snugly against Nani-Tak and daily trotted by her side through daily chores of gathering, cleaning, and cooking. While Tishi seldom chose to speak, she became a marvelous listener, enthralled by Nani-Tak's endless stories and explanations of the world's doings. Early one morning the two encountered three wolves feasting on the carcass of an elk calf.

"You see, the three wolves look at us. Now the black one looks at you Tishi. Can you hear him?"

"He thinks 'She is white.' I think to him 'I only look white.' He fears whites."

"He is wise to fear them."

"Am I still white, Nani-Tak ?"

"Yes, but only a little."

"Is black wolf true, am I too much white?"

"The answer is both yes and no. Only your skin and hair are too white. That is all black wolf sees. Because the rest of you escapes this whiteness is how you come to hear this wolf. In time you will hear many animals, but also trees, rocks, and even the wind. But some white will always be in you."

Later, walnut husks would darken the child's skin and hair and the tiny image of a bird, her totem, tattooed between her left eye and ear rendered her Indian to most eyes, white and Indian. And as her superficial whiteness dissipated, the little girl's perceptions sharpened. Something within her compelled her to imitate living creatures. After hearing it sung two or three times she could accurately duplicate any birdsong. This had earned her the name Tishi, and the totem Little Mockingbird. She also mimicked with her body the motions of deer, elk, beaver, and jackrabbits. She could call across a meadow clearly as a coyote, wolf, raven, hawk or owl. Once while gathering firewood with several women in a copse of oaks she was seen by the others from afar standing still staring down at her feet. When the women called to her she did not respond and when they went to her they were astonished to see two rattlesnakes silently coiled before her.

"Come away, Tishi, come away slow," they whispered to her.

"They are asleep, they dream now," she replied as she turned and joined the others, leaving the snakes motionless where they lay. At times she would sit silent and still staring at a distant point for as long as an hour without moving. At other times she flapped her arms like wings while staring at the fire or some object close by, cooing or uttering a low whistle sound and sometimes drooling, proof to Nani-Tak of her link to the spirit world. These incidents, her ability to mimic, and her peculiarities added to her a special status among her band of Hunkpapa. Old Mishtana, the shaman, took notice, and with Nani-Tak endeavored to ensure the little girl was present at all sings, blessings, and dances.

The fall powwow in August of 1875 was dismal. For the second year there had been no treaty rations nor had Amos received his pay for the past two years. The Panic that had begun back East two years before had quickly blanketed every state and territory. Pardieu confided to Amos that the Sioux to the west had negotiated large purchases of rifles from other

Canadian traders. “Over dar all de brave talk to make war. Beeg trouble she’s come over dar soon. Now dar’s beaucoup talk of steenkin’ railroad come t’ru.”

The chiefs were reluctant to speak openly but a palpable anxiety had descended over the plains. Amos and Pardieu mulled over how the fears had steadily mounted since the terrible massacre at Marias where soldiers had killed nearly two hundred Blackfeet. General Custer had passed through Badger Creek Station the year before with a cavalry troop headed west to protect a Northern Railroad survey crew. The Sioux would never allow the railroad to cross their territory. But the absolute worst was the news of a gold discovery at Paha Sapa.

“Nothin’ will stop ’em now, Pardieu. The handwriting is on the wall, mon ami.”

At the powwow’s final big dance Tishi huddled wrapped in a blanket alongside Nani-Tak with a buffalo robe across their laps and feet. The drums and flute fascinated the girl who began a fierce rocking motion from side to side. Nani-Tak placed her hand on the child’s shoulder to calm her but the little body resisted. Soon little Tishi’s eyes glazed then rolled upward and she commenced to sing “ama, ama, ama, ama” to the rhythm of the music. Nani-Tak shifted her arm and placed it around the girl’s waist as she followed the trance. This went on for a long time, until at last the dance ended. Then Tishi’s eyes closed as she slipped quickly into deep sleep.

In the morning Nani-Tak and Crow Face were awakened by Tishi’s little voice speaking in English above the patter of rain on the teepee. Staring up through the smoke hole at the gray skies they listened to the unusual voice of the little girl who seldom spoke now making such strange speech in commanding tones, emphasizing phrases and words by increased force and volume. When at last the girl fell silent, Nani-Tak pulled her close and asked the meaning of the strange speech. “My white mother, Nani-Tak, spirit of my white mother talked to me. Oh, Nani-Tak and Crow Face, I am afraid. She says very bad things are sure to pass here. She tells me we should all of us, Hunkpapa, Daddy Amos, Keya, EVERYONE, all of us must go from this place north some place called Can-da-da.”

This was the first of several visions Tishi would relate to Nani-Tak , each foretelling of some unnamed ominous tragedy to be avoided only

by moving north. Mishtana the shaman urged Crow Face to consider the warnings seriously for he, like Nani-Tak believed Tishi's link to the spirit world to be fortuitous. With the troubles to the west a sense of urgency had pervaded the band of Hunkpapa. They were sure that "Can-da-da" must be Canada to the north. But Crow Face staunchly refused to consider wintering in Canada. "All the signs show this will be a winter of very deep cold. We will go south and east to our safe winter camp. Canada we will reconsider in the spring."

Crow Face was reluctant to discuss this with Amos said to Keya, "In her vision the spirit always tells little Tishi, that you, Amos, and the girls, all of you must come along with us to Canada. Talk to Amos. Make him understand that in the spring we may strike north for new hunting grounds. We must do this. Pardieu says the whites in Canada are like the whites here but they do not have killing blue coat soldiers. No one wishes to be killed by the white men or whatever great sickness that is coming. If Amos will not listen, leave him and come with us."

Now a strange thing happened. When Amos Merriweather and his family returned to Badger Creek Station from the powwow at Elk Creek they encountered a man camped on the porch of the station.

"You Captain Merriweather, sir?"

"I'm Amos Merriweather, late of the U. S. Army, yes sir."

"My name is Louis Ford, Captain Merriweather. I been deputized by the Sheriff of Stone County, Missouri to fetch two little girls, the Jarvis girls, back to Missouri. Are them the Jarvis girls there? Hey, honey? Sally? Ruth?"

"No sir. Keya take the girls inside. No, Mr. Ford, the Jarvis girls are dead, dead of fever, Come along with me, sir, I'll take you to their graves. I'm afraid you've come a long way for nothing. All this was reported two years ago."

"Well, sir, a Mr. Jensen, homesteader hereabouts, has wrote a letter claims them girls ain't dead but is been taken—one by you, the other by Injuns. I have already spoke with him and his missus. Him and his missus says they's ready to swear to it in a court of law."

"Then Mr. Jensen is either a liar or crazy."

"Them girls I jist seen look 'bout the right age. Let's see Sally would be nine or ten years old and Ruth 'bout eight."

"Those are our girls."

"Then you won't mind if I question the girls.

As they entered the station, Keya speaking Siouan quietly told the girls that the stranger was a skinwalker, come to trick Sally and Ruth into going away. Her best protection would be to tell the man that Keya was her mother and to make no mention of Ruth.

After a very brief interview with the girls. Ford faced Amos Merriweather and said, "Well sir, somebody's sure 'nuf lyin'. On one side I got the word of the United States Marshal and Indian Agent, his wife, and two little girls and I seen two graves. On the other hand is the letter and the word of that square head been livin' out here. Captain Merriweather, you got any reason could explain why this Swede would wanna stir up this hornet's nest . . . write that letter, tell tales?"

"Well could be that him and Jarvis did not get on very well. He's still sore at me about the Jarvis' moveables. He claimed Jarvis had welched on a deal they'd made. Jensen helped Jarvis roof his cabin and he figured Jarvis to sell him an ox as part of the deal, but when the roof was up Jarvis said no mention had ever been made of the ox. They both come to me. There was nothing I could do. Far as the movables are concerned they belong to any heirs."

"What was the outcome?"

"Someone stole Jarvis's ox one night. A band of Crow come through here about that time and I reckon it could have been them; poor devils looked half starved. Then after Mrs. Jarvis died and Mr. Jarvis was shot dead, Jensen and his missus tried to claim the two little girls like chattel. I wasn't haven' any of it. Those poor little girls were bad sick and staying with us while I was trying to locate any relatives back East. He put up an ornery fuss and after the girls died he claimed he was owed the Jarvis wagon and movables. I had to order him off the station, Mr. Ford. Jensen is the only white man ever ordered off the station. He's a sore head and a drunk. I don't reckon he told you any of that, did he?"

Amos, like most folks, often lied. A lie told to evade a responsibility or for some gain or edge always unsettled him, but these lies, heaped on the deputy sheriff from Missouri, were thrilling and made him feel good inside like a successful bluff at poker.

"No sir. And that 'bout settles this shit. I'd be obliged if you could write it up mentionin' my interview with you so's I can get my pay for this damned wild goose chase. "

The deputy spit tobacco juice expertly over the rail of the porch onto a grasshopper. " I got half a mind to ride over and kick that Swede's ass."

"Now don't go doin' that. I don't need any more trouble. You stay the night, have supper with us, Mr. Ford. You can sleep in the Jarvis cabin down the hill; I'll have your statement ready when you ride in the morning."

The next morning, as Amos saw Louis Ford off, Keya rode her pony south to the Hunkpapa encampment to warn Nani-Tak and Crow Face to hide Tishi in case the skinwalker should appear.

At the Sioux camp, news of Tishi's vision permeated all talk. Some were ready to head north to Canada immediately, but Crow Face's will prevailed—the band would winter at the place they called Elk Valley to the south then move to Canada when the spring melt began. Crow Face did send his son Spotted Turtle north with instructions to winter with the trader Pardieu and to scout for a safe summer camp site.

That winter, Mishtana, shaman for the Hunkpapa band, recorded two visions of Tishi on the buffalo skin that served as the band's chronicle. A depiction of a small bird with an outstretched wing pointing north to a plain of elk and buffalo, while behind, to the south, blue coats with rifles, and prairie fires. Rather than black, the figures were done in blue dye, signifying a vision. Later that winter, Tishi would endure several more powerful trances. The second vision in blue depicted Sioux riders overwhelming dismounted blue-coated soldiers.

At Badger Creek Station, the incident with Louis Ford had moved Amos Merriweather. While he had fended off the attempt to take the girls, he felt insecure. "What's next," he wondered. '74 and '75 had seen a marked increase in traffic at Badger Creek. Three army units had passed through headed into the Dakotas. Two Army topographic units and a small detachment of Custer's Seventh Cavalry had penetrated Sioux lands supposedly protected by treaty. Now in 1875 with news of the gold strike at Paha Sapa, a flood of prospectors and spoilers looking to get rich quick would tramp through bringing nothing but trouble.

Amos knew the good days at Badger Creek were behind. The deleterious effects of the Panic had stopped the flow of all treaty goods. In the past two years Amos had received one single bank draft for $100 to cover expenses of the station and not one penny in salary. His heart told him that Crow Face and Keya's advice to go north to Canada was the right thing to do for

his family, for indeed his family was Keya, the girls and the Hunkpapa band. He couldn't imagine a life in St. Louis or any city for that matter, and each year's facing of problems as Indian Agent had turned him further and further from the injustices and betrayals of his government and even his race. Yes, he'd gladly strike north but he lacked funds.

The dream that evolved was to homestead somewhere near the Hunkpapa summer camp, to farm, keep livestock, and to hunt and fish while watching the girls grow, hopefully with two or three brothers beside them and far away from the whining, hateful settlers, away from the unenforceable rules transmitted without end from Washington. Away from the fictional semi-annual report he compiled for Washington. Away from being asked to solve the greed-driven problems of lesser men. Away from the responsibility of judging or punishing anyone. He would need funds, however, and he had no money nor prospects.

Pardieu introduced the idea. "Look, my good friend Amos, all dis weel soon be turn to shit, eh? Now dose Lakota Sioux plenty mad an' dares two, three 'undred young braves only ting stop dem to make war rat now dey got no rifle, no cartridge. Las' two year Sioux, Crow, Cheyenne buy all de gun available. You wan' buy rifle across de border in Canada now cost tree times more dan two years ago. Merriweather, eef you can find rifles, we can quick be rich men. Eef you can buy for 'tirty dollar, we can sell for 'undred, eh?"

The thought soon consumed Amos Merriweather and for weeks he turned various schemes in his head. Shipments of rifles for the army came through Badger Creek Station, sometimes two or three wagons of weapons and ammunition.

"Pierre, upposing' I can get rifles, how in God's name can we turn 'em into cash? Tell me that, will you?"

"Eef you secure rifles I promise I can dispose of dem in no more dan one week. Ever' mont', de gold mined at Paha Sapa day ship de smelted ingots east with army escort. I tell Dakota, I tell Lakota. I tell Ogalala, Hunkpapa, Cheyenne . . . all Indian nations. Maybe Crazy Horse he attack, get de gold for us, so we give to heem rifles and cartridges.

Later Amos would show Pardieu the letter he'd crafted. "Pierre—this is one huge lie, but if it works we just might make this happen."

CONFIDENTIAL AND PERSONAL

From: Capt. Amos Merriweather, Ret. Superintendent, Indian Agency, Badger Creek, Dakota Territory
To the Hon. Senator XXXX, Washington, D.C.

My Dear Senator:

You may be aware that this station has failed to receive funding, salary, or annual treaty provisions and rations for two years. The Department of the Interior has announced that the moratorium is likely to continue for some time. I am sure you are also aware of the unrest among the various and several Indian nations, particularly in the Dakota Territory. Another winter without the promised treaty provisions will assuredly lead to violence. Should violence occur within the Badger Creek reserve, a situation similar to or worse than the 1862 Wisconsin uprising is a very liable threat. I have a proposal which if effected will restore the peaceful and cooperative association between the United States and the Indian nations here. This plan must needs be unconventional, secret, and must bypass bureaucratic morass. We cannot afford even one day's delay.

The newly formed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police with nearly 300 recruits training at Ft. Macleod, Alberta needs rifles. Hudson's Bay Company representatives have ventured to supply Badger Creek with blankets, beans, corn flour, salt pork, salt horse, coffee, various smalls and trade goods in numbers far exceeding three years quantity of treaty goods and rations, this in exchange for 144 Winchester Model 1873 rifles and 25,000 cartridges. If Model 1873s are unavailable, Model 1866 will suffice. The rifles must be of the repeating lever action design. The gist of this irregular three-way negotiation is this: RCMP gets badly needed rifles without the four to five year delay dealing with the crown; Hudson's Bay receives the exclusive government contract to supply the RCMP; Badger Creek receives promised treaty provisions to distribute, thereby assuaging the various Indian nations.

Hudson's Bay representatives demand complete secrecy in this matter and will deny involvement if challenged by American or English

authorities. I propose that the rifles be shipped to this station from the Springfield armory. This will appear normal as three such shipments have recently passed through this station en route to Army units further west. Hudson's Bay will ensure safe transport from Badger Creek to Fort Maleod. I have heard from reliable Army sources that the Springfield Armory desperately wishes to clear much of its present stock in anticipation of the new Remingtons. I strongly urge you to employ all resources within your power to propel this into motion. Viewed amid the larger frame of events, this is a small action, but an action with the capacity and potential to prevent widespread violence and bloodshed.

I thank you, sir for your help and understanding is this urgent matter. May God bless and protect you.

I remain your humble, ob't svt
Amos Merriweather, Capt. Ret."

ft

As the unpaid, unfunded Indian Agent holding one of the vital points of the Western Frontier, his irregular request was pushed through secretly by the same congressman, now United States senator, who had appointed Merriweather to his post as Indian Agent. He received no word from the senator, however in May 1876 an Army escort delivered 144 Winchester model 1866 rifles and 25,000 cartridges to the station.

In early June, an Army escort of six soldiers guarding the Paha Sapa gold shipment was ambushed near Carrick Flats. All soldiers were killed; the shipment of seventy-five gold ingots went missing.

On 25 June at the Little Big Horn River in eastern Montana Territory a large force of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho well armed with repeating rifles attacked and defeated a U. S. Army cavalry unit, killing 255, including General George Armstrong Custer. Two weeks later the Badger Creek Indian Agency was burned to the ground at night. The Indian Agent Captain Amos Merriweather and his family presumably taken prisoner by the raiding band of Sioux warriors, was never found.

◆ The End ◆

About Gary Ives

As a boy Gary Ives wanted to grow up to become an Indian or a cowboy, but it didn't work out that way. Instead he ended up in the Navy for twenty some years. "If you can't be an Indian or a cowboy, being a Navy Chief is as good as it gets," he claims. After the Navy he taught high school in Pensacola then retired to the Ozarks where he lives with his wife and two big dogs. When he isn't trying to grow apples he writes.

Bud Clayton

by Myles Culbertson

Tough . . . that is always the first term that comes to mind whenever I think of Bud Clayton.

Even in his later days the man's stature and demeanor testified of a life lived in a world intolerant of fear or weakness. Bud's countenance revealed a seasoning gained in the transition from territorial frontier to modern industrial society. His inscrutable expression was at once fierce and pleasant, impermeable as a canyon's rock face. His piercing stare could end a fight before it started.

He was my great uncle, whose wife Bess was W.O. Culbertson's sister. Strikingly beautiful, she was Bud's softening complement. I knew the two of them when I was a child. In those days Bud was a police chief and later a judge in Tucumcari, New Mexico, but he had been a cowboy much of his life, working for some of the major cattle ranches around the turn of the century, including the 3 million acre XIT. A notorious bronc rider, it is said he offered a standing bet that he could put silver dollars in both stirrups under his boots, ride any bucking horse till it quit, and the dollars would still be there. Bud rode in some of the biggest rodeos of the day, like Cheyenne and Pendleton, but he was always more at home on the big outfits, not in the rodeo arenas.

In the days entering the 20th century, New Mexico was, like much of the West, riding the wave of a changing agricultural economy. Demand for more and better beef to nourish the nation's explosive industrial growth caused capital to roll into the West, establishing vast ranching empires with large herds of improved quality "one iron" cattle. The area below the

northeastern New Mexico caprock was choice cow country, sought after by cattlemen and entrepreneurs. Some of the outfits, like the Bell Ranch, were here to stay, creating their own chapters in the history of the state and the business. Others were temporary, filling immediate demand and moving on to other enterprise or to oblivion. All were big, and all needed crews of expert men to care for their investments and get the cattle to market.

Part of that cow country is where the Pecos and Gallinas rivers join. Born in the same range of mountains, the two waterways are cousins of sorts, finding their own separate ways out of the Sangre de Cristos, pursuing tortuous pathways to the low country. The two find each other below the great escarpment in a hilly plain of abundant grass and scattered prickly pear, chollas, and junipers. Occasional palmillas, slender-spined cousin of the yucca, stand guard over the slopes and river breaks where the rivers join forces.

Before the speculators and land traders opened the way for cattlemen and their financiers, Spanish settlers had made an uneasy life here in the confluence of Apache and Comanche domains. They called the area "La Junta." It was destined to become a world of cowboys, tough and adventurous, making their mark over the next century in this region of mesas, creeks, springs, grass and cattle. For a while it was Bud Clayton's world.

A few miles north and west of the Junta, the thousand foot high Apache Mesa rises, the western anchor of the caprock escarpment reaching across northeastern New Mexico. Near the mouth of a canyon that cuts through the convergence of that high escarpment and the lesser Chupainas Mesa to its south, a little rock ranch house and barn called Chupainas Camp had been built back in the 1870s. Bud Clayton spent the summer of 1912 there alone, breaking horses for the HOW outfit, a Texas-based cattle company running on the surrounding ranchland. The way he described it, there was a large round corral where he would rope an untouched bronc, wrestle a saddle onto him, and step aboard. The corral gate was rigged so that when the latch was pulled it would slowly swing out, opening under its own weight. The horse would throw his fit, and when bucking turned to running, and Bud thought he had him kind of handled, he would pull the gate latch as they ran past, making one more circle inside the pen. The gate would creak open and out the hole they would go, breaking into the wide open. By the time horse and rider made it back home, the pony was

on his way to becoming an esteemed tool for a cowboy. Bud broke 20 horses that one summer at Chupainas.

Some time previous, the Red River Cattle Company—owner of the famed Bell Ranch—held the lease on a large parcel of the same country. Bud was a Bell cowboy in those days, and the outfit sent him with a number of other Bell hands there to look after the cattle and fend off any rustlers. The cowboys called it the Philippines, because the ranch was so far west from the Bell headquarters. The Gorras Blancas (White Caps), a violent frontier vigilante group, were raising hell in the area, running off cattle and cutting fences in the name of disputed property claims and hatred for these new stewards of the land. Bud spoke only a couple of times of an incident when a Bell cowboy came upon a whitecap cutting the Bell drift fence, and of an ensuing battle that ended with smoke rising from the barrel of a six-gun and a whitecap dead on the ground. He never admitted who the cowboy was.

For a time during that first decade of the century, Bud Clayton was breaking horses upstream from the Junta for the Conchas Ranch, a sizeable operation that lay under the caprock, eastward from the Gallinas River. It was a broken grama grass and cactus country, spotted with areas of dense juniper and pinon-covered canyons. One of the Conchas neighbors was Chaperito, a small community land grant anchored on the banks of the Gallinas River, its village perched on a rock bluff at the edge of the passing waters, its farmland and pastures sprawling out around the village.

Bud had a helper, a Spanish youth, helping ride the horses he was starting. Bud would typically start a horse and get a few days on him, and then turn the horse over to the boy and start another. In the doing, he took a liking to the kid and had become something of a mentor, making a pretty good horseman and cowboy out of him. The boy called his taciturn companion "Señor Bud", even though there weren't that many years between them. So it was one summer day as Bud and his young sidekick were prowling the river breaks near the Chaperito grant. He and the boy were riding their broncs along a rocky ridge in sight of the village. Bud hadn't been away from the cow camp for a long time and had a bulge of letters, written over the past few weeks, in his chaps pocket. There was a post office in Chaperito, so Bud handed a dollar to the kid and sent him to the village with the letters. "I'll ride this rough country out. You lope down

to the post office and mail these for me, and then you can ride out the river bottom. We'll meet back up where the Indio draw comes in."

The boy reined his horse off the little rock bluff and headed toward Chaperito, a couple of miles away. Approaching the little rock and adobe village from the southeast, he could see the emerald strips of farmland touching the river beyond the one-story houses and steepled church that surrounded a broad dirt street. The only commercial establishment fronted on the street, a stone and plaster building that housed the store, post office and saloon, all in one room. As he entered the village, a few of the citizens gave notice to the kid who was riding a pretty good saddle on a better than usual horse and whose clothes and hat betrayed some influence of the gringo cowboys of the big ranch. Though native to the culture, he felt like a stranger in this village, known for decades as being close-knit and hostile toward outsiders. Forty years earlier the citizens were more likely to choose friendship with the dangerous Comanche than with the gringo ranchers in the area or the soldiers of the fort at nearby Hatch's Ranch.

He pulled up his horse in front of the post office and dismounted, tentatively stepping onto the porch and entering the store. Across the room from the entry was a cage-fronted counter that served as the post office. On the boy's left was a counter behind which shelves were stacked with a number of canned foods, bolts of cloth, household items, lamps, and the like. Also there was an open-fronted cabinet with a few bottles of whiskey on display; below that, several bins containing flour, beans, rice, and other foodstuffs. A small square table was near the window on the other side of the room, where three men were quietly slurring some sort of argument. They glared from under their battered hats at this trespasser.

No one was behind the postal teller cage, so the kid asked the room's only occupants who he could see about buying stamps and depositing the bundle of letters. With sudden curiosity one of the men inquired how he was to buy the stamps. The boy pulled the dollar from his pocket and once again solicited their help. The man took interest. A thin smile cutting his face, the man rose from his chair, grabbing the dollar from the boy's hand and sitting back down. The boy gestured after him, protesting the seizure. The man stood back up, gripping the boy's shirt and, with his other fist, knocked him to the floor and started kicking him in the side. As he tried to stand, the man grabbed his belt and shirt, kicked the door open, and

pitched the boy out on to the ground at his shying horse's front feet. He could hear laughter inside as he struggled to his feet, untied his horse, and slowly swung his leg over in the saddle. Jaw pounding and ears ringing, he turned the pony for the edge of the village. He stood up in his stirrups with a painful wince and hit a long trot for the river, one silver dollar lighter and full of dread about what Bud was going to say.

The sun was high as the kid prowled the river, hastily looking through the cattle that had come down to water and shaded up to wait out the afternoon. The movement of the horse helped loosen the stunned muscles in his side. He was in a hurry, hating the burden of undelivered bad news. Whatever trouble he was going to be in with Señor Bud, he wanted to get it over with and done.

He picked his way past a rugged cut where the creek came through to an open grassy flat. Far ahead, he spotted Bud peering upstream from where the little draw known as the Indio Arroyo joined the Gallinas. He was sitting relaxed in the saddle, his crossed forearms resting on the saddlehorn and his hackamore bronc standing half asleep in the warm noon sun. The colt threw his head up and pricked his ears toward the approaching horse and rider, but Bud had already been watching them a good while.

As the boy kicked into a lope across the grassy flat, Bud observed how the agile blood-bay moved and changed leads, dodging the cholla and prickly pear along the way. "That's gonna make a good pony," he thought, as the young rider and his mount crouched to a stop next to Bud.

"How's the river look?" Bud asked.

"Pretty good. The cattle are already watered out—en repecho. Señor Bud, I have to tell you something." The boy's nervous angstwas obvious. So was the bruise on the side of his face. Bud squinted slightly, more curious than alarmed. "I took your letters, but some men were there. One of them knocked me down—cabrones! He took your dollar."

"Where's the letters?" Bud asked.

"Here." The boy pulled the paper bundle from inside his shirt.

Eyes squinting, now with resolve, "Well", said Bud reflectively, "I'll take care of it."

"I'm sorry, Señor Bud, I should have fought."

"It's OK. I'll take care of it. My pony's spent. Let's trade and you can go on back to the camp with him. Take it easy with him and let him blow. Do the chores when you get there. I'll see you by dark."

The two cowboys pulled their saddles off and exchanged ponies. Mounted again, the kid turned toward the cow camp several miles east. Bud hit a long trot back upstream toward the little village.

The hardness on Bud Clayton's face would have inspired repentance from anyone who laid eyes on him as he entered the village. His little cowhorse hit a slow trotting cadence up the wide dirt street toward the post office. Several yards behind horse and rider, a rocky bluff, some 20 feet high, overlooked the river. The loose dust of the street in front of the post office boiled up around the horse's black pasterns as he shuffled to a stop. Bud threw the bridle reins over the hitching rail and stepped up on the porch. He entered the doorway and noticed three men huddled around a table with a half-empty whiskey bottle perched between them.

They glared drunkenly at this gringo stranger. He paid no attention to them until he was in the middle of the room, in front of the postal counter. The men had gone back to their whiskey-laden debate when Bud turned around with a cold look in his eye, pulling his .45 Colt from its holster. Pointing it above his head, he pulled the trigger. As the bullet passed through the stamped tin ceiling, the explosion rocked the local drunks back in wide-eyed shock, one falling out of his chair, knocking the whiskey bottle to the floor. Fine dirt fell through gaps between the ceiling and wall onto the store's proprietor who had jumped behind his counter.

"I want the son-of-a-bitch that took that dollar!" Bud declared, bringing his six-shooter around toward the table with slow deliberation.

One of the men scrambled for the door, not even touching the porch as he left the building and ran headlong into the dirt street, the tied horse spooking and jumping aside. Bud stepped out the door and watched the man scamper away, looking over his shoulder like he knew he was about to be shot. His eyes were locked on Bud all the way down the street, the fear on his face almost cartoonish. The last thing Bud saw was the man's bulging eyes, pumping elbows, and flying knees as he suddenly dropped out of sight.

Curious at the outcome, Bud stepped on his bronc and cantered over to the Gallinas bank below the rocky bluff where the fleeing drunk disappeared. There he was, on the ground, half in and half out of the shallow river water. He wasn't moving, but he didn't look dead. Bud dismounted and leaned over the prostrate form at his feet. The former bully groaned and tried to sit up. It looked like he might have a broken

arm. Bud figured the care side of this event would need to rest with the locals, so he simply fished around in the man's pockets until he found the dollar, or at least a dollar to replace the purloined one. He mounted back up and, before turning away, calmly advised the vanquished one, "Don't take what isn't yours—and don't do that to my friends."

The little horse wheeled on his cue and started back up the trail around the bluff and onto the street. The thief's compadres were standing wide-eyed out front of the store poised for an escape from this gringo horseman from hell. As he rode toward the store, they scurried far around him in the direction of the rocky bluff to find their friend. The little horse balked as he approached the building, not sure what next might charge out that door. Bud stepped off and once again entered the post office. He set his wad of letters and the dollar on the counter in front of the terrified postmaster, and politely waited for change. When the transaction was completed he sauntered out the door into the afternoon sunlight. Drawing up the reins to mount his pony, he looked across the village and down the dusty thoroughfare. Nobody was in sight, other than the two local toughs slinking away toward the river. Bud swung his leg over the bronc and pointed him eastward, leaving the village behind, all business for the day completed.

As he rode away Bud's mind turned to the important things. The incident was put away, unimportant history, as he considered work to be done over the next few days. He still had some horses to get started. If it wasn't plumb dark when he got back to camp, he would run 'em in. He and the boy would get an early start in the morning. The warm late afternoon was turning pleasant as their shadow reached out ahead of them onto the trail. He smiled as he noticed the bay bronc hitting a nice little running walk, a gait not many horses can pick up. "Some day," Bud Clayton mused, "I'll do other things, maybe . . . some other day."

◆ The End ◆

About Myles Culbertson

In his varied career, Myles Culbertson has been involved in trade, border economic and technological development, regulation and law enforcement, border security, and management of specialized projects for both industry and government, often spanning the US/Mexico border. He has received the New Mexico State University's Research Achievement Award and currently heads up Myles Culbertson Partners. He writes of the land he lives and grew up in.

Daughter of the Pioneers

by Edward Massey

"Hey, watch out, there."

The first words Deputy Mark Willford Simms spoke to Elizabeth Pike froze her in the middle of the street, aware of a large and loud young man running toward her. She later claimed to be unaware of the boxy vehicle bearing down.

Swinging his left arm around her waist, he scooped her up and planted her on the wooden sidewalk. Maybe she went limp in his arm, maybe he didn't need to continue holding her. That debate delighted the six children they had over the next twenty years.

"Horseless wagons take some getting used to," he said.

If she had fainted, he had her awake now, what with that loud voice.

An abrupt move held her out at arm's length, big hands held her tightly above each elbow. She felt them pressing into the sides of her breasts. She started to wonder if he might be holding her a moment too long. As if by telepathy, he dropped his hands.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I don't believe we've met," he said. He touched his hat.

The thought troubled him some. The sheriff told him one of a deputy's first jobs was to know everyone in the county. That didn't seem too much to ask in a county of 5,000 souls. He could have worked harder to know this wisp of a thing, barely more than smoke floating down the street.

He knew her father, and her grandfather, Trail Captain Pike. He even knew her mother had been a Rawlings. In a community of Pioneers, lineage was pretty well known. The Rawlings family was one of the last to come across the prairies pushing a handcart.

The Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company had been set up soon after the Saints arrived in the valley to make loans to assist the settlers make their trek across the plains. About a third of those loans were repaid in full. Mostly not very much or nothing got paid. Some people considered they were doing the Church a favor, not vice versa, and just plain took advantage. Deputy Simms's grandpa wasn't among them; no Simms took nothing. He wasn't going to be accused of depleting the resources of anyone, let alone the Church.

Churches grow from the poor up; believers and converts arise from those who have little to leave and less to protect. Even among that saintly group the Rawlings family had been pretty poor. Organized into handcart companies, poor immigrants walked the 1,300 miles from Iowa City to their new homes in the mountains of Zion.

A handcart company underway spread a trail of porters a mile across the plains pulling carts surrounded by a moving stream of women and children. Sized half to a third of normal wagons, some of the handcarts had axles stronger than hickory. Little differences, like a handcart with an axle of iron, meant the family was more likely to survive. Two able-bodied men could make fifteen miles a day hauling five hundred pounds on dry, flat land. What easy progress there was barely made up for the steep rocky slopes and the deep mud wallows, even with women and children pushing to help the men dragging.

In 1856, the Rawlings family stuffed everything they owned into the narrow five foot long box and embarked with the last handcart company ever to attempt the journey west. The company of a thousand emigrants pulled their carts to the shouts of the Church leaders and floundered in heavy Wyoming snows. The leaders pulled and pushed alongside the emigrants and with each new obstacle yelled louder.

"Trial is a virtue."

"Tribulation builds your testimony."

Simple. Simple minded. Yet, under the pressure of poverty and an uncertain grasp on survival, the words took on a chemistry that dissolved them in the blood and they became the blood—the beliefs that were passed on from generation to generation.

The strong pulled. The sick rode.

"Trial is a virtue."

"Tribulation builds your testimony."

Calls to action became the character of a people.

Only darkness could quench the leadership's commitment to progress. Every muscle screamed for rest. Sleep was no friend. Each morning brought a burial service for souls left behind and prayed over. Come the May thaw, graves in ground frozen hard yielded up their bodies to feed the animals and birds who lived in those high plateaus.

James Pike, a young man with trail experience placed in charge of the English, Scots, and Irish company of Saints, was smitten by one of the thousand settlers put in his charge, a little girl, age four. Every night she set out the moment they made camp to search the plain for buffalo chips. She returned after dark dragging behind her the bag of fuel for the fire, so heavy she could not carry it. She had been introduced the first day to the Captain and told he was important to their survival. She determined that she should present these common droppings made precious by their purpose directly to the Captain.

Trail Captain James Pike admired and loved this determined little Sarah Ann Rawlings who became the wife of his son.

Now, fifty-two years later, Deputy Mark Willford Simms had scooped up the daughter of that little girl. He waited for her to answer him, thinking she was a tiny thing, about five-three and slender, but not too thin, noticing her full figure announced its presence under the long print dress she wore.

"Yes, sir, we have met. You were at my high school graduation."

He missed the meaning in her act of correcting him; all he could see was that it made her seem the more pretty and willowy.

She stepped back down into the wide street. A speck in the center of the grid of long blocks, eight to a mile, and wide streets intersecting at right angles, Elizabeth Pike hardly took up any space.

The Deputy felt the entire street fill with her presence.

Damn, it was hard to look at her and at the street at the same time.

He remembered the graduation in his catalog of assignments. He remembered all his assignments. How could this wisp of a spirit who rooted him in the mud of Main Street today have made no impression on him that night? On Elizabeth Pike's big day no more than a dozen students might have graduated from the high school the county had built up on the hill.

He wondered if he should say something. Be careful. Best say nothing.

She had the damnedest way of looking straight at him. Her light hair was blowing and she made no move to pat it in place. He took her hand and guided her over to the opposite sidewalk, assisting her in the step up. She let her hand remain in his. Standing on the wooden sidewalk, she only had to look up the slightest bit to make her eyes even with his. She held him with the look.

"That don't count, I was working," he said.

"Yes," she said with a laugh, "that makes me all the more invisible doesn't it."

"I'd call it good judgment," he said. "And I had a good lookout for you today, wouldn't you say?"

She blushed, "Oh, oh, Mr. ahh, what do I call you? Mr. Deputy?"

He dropped her hand and took off his hat.

"I didn't mean nothing by that," he said.

"Too bad," she said.

Now he had made it worse.

"You can call me Willford," was all he could muster in the effort to get out of his fix.

Elizabeth—Liberty—the name her grandfather gave her when he saw her run free, smitten every bit as he was with her mother, became Ebby when her little sister turned it into Libby before she gave that loving start one final twist to set a new name for life.

Ebby knew what she wanted in marriage and she knew she wanted not to marry before she was ready. Her Bishop had already invited her twice to his office to discuss her prospects, secretly to inquire if there was any problem.

Prospects abound was how she told him there was no need for a meeting. Bookkeeping at the Bullock's Mercantile Store was an important, time consuming responsibility. She had no time to meet boys; how could she have time for the meeting with the Bishop?

Ebby Pike had no doubt where her life was headed. The mother who picked up buffalo chips insisted her daughter graduate high school. For her Elizabeth, and for the four sisters coming behind her, she knew just how silly it was to make a fuss because a woman had not married before she was nineteen. Let the town whisper.

Ebby described herself as practical as salt. She agreed with her mother,

the pioneer woman whose cheerful industry snagged a future husband at the age of four. All girls should get a high school education to raise a family. Now Ebby was ready.

She knew the bookkeeping job was right for her. Her first job, candling eggs, required only that she get up at five in the morning, be there when the fresh eggs were brought in, stand all day picking up four eggs at a time, and hold them in front of the candle to peer through the translucent shell to discover blood and half-formed chicks. Back breaking work, totally lacking in responsibility, over at the end of the day. Bookkeeping was just about the opposite. Count and write things down and keep track. Always too much to do today. No time to finish tomorrow what you could not complete today. Everything had to be finished today. To finish today meant more than hours and output. It meant she had to make decisions. Elizabeth Pike loved it.

Bookkeeping had brought her to be crossing the street to take the day's deposit to the bank. She claimed never to know what impelled her to step into the street when that horseless wagon and Willford, called Mark Willford by everybody in town, showed up at the same time.

That same day she stayed late to count. Nothing would do but a new inventory ledger. With the early evening already dark, she stood behind the counter placing numbers on the bolts of cloth when the front door rattled.

"You. What you doin' in there?" came the voice through the door, clear and loud, easy enough to hear—and to recognize—through the drafty openings surrounding the glass door.

She picked up her lamp and walked to the front door.

"Who are you?" She faced the door as she spoke from her position behind the counter. She might as well let him know she did not like the interruption. "And why are you making such a racket?"

"Deputy Simms," he said. "I check this door every night."

She stepped around the counter and opened the door.

"You do not."

"Oh, the little Pike girl," he said.

She admired the true surprise in his voice.

"Yes, I am the bookkeeper here, but then you wouldn't know that would you?"

"Are you fixin' to work this late every night?"

"I can't say. This is not late."

"It's dark," he said.

"It is dark because it is winter." The process of telling him the obvious, practical facts of life, a process that would last a lifetime had begun.

"Well," he said, his loud voice even louder by not knowing what he was trying to say, "I come by here every night. Just after dark." He stopped. He thought a moment. "Dark's earlier in winter, so I come by twice."

Courtship in a hard place.

◆ The End ◆

About Edward Massey

Edward was born to his love of the West, and it grew. Raised in rural Utah, his forty-one year adventure of great schools, wonderful travel, and creative opportunities (even owning a Minor League baseball team) took precedence over writing—except for talking about writing.

One day, his wife-to-be gave him a bound volume of blank pages and said "put up or shut up." Since 2001, several of his short stories have been published, as well as two novels, *Telluride Promise,* and in May 2014, *Every Soul is Free: Book One in the High Mountain Sheriff Series* with Pen-L Publishing. Edward was a quarter-finalist in the 2010 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards, and has published several short stories.

Currently at work his third novel, Edward's writing explores the struggles people encounter in staying true to themselves and their ideals. He shines a light on the hard decisions made every day, the hardest of which is to keep going. He writes of the glory in facing reality, real stories about real working people for real reading people. He and Anne live in Connecticut where he writes every day. He'll never move back West, but that is all right. He never left.

Visit Edward's website and his blog at EdwardMasseyBooks.com.

A Woman's Work

by Laura K. Johnson

He rode in from the East.

With his hat lowered and his body slumped on his horse, he looked like a puppet, his head bobbing haphazardly on his shoulders. We watched him from the frozen mud packed road, three people familiar with his evil black heart.

If there was a way, I swear I would have stopped myself from looking at him straight on. But there was no help for it. His entire being nearly pulled my eyeballs out of their sockets. It was like he carried a divining rod made of his bones and aimed it right at me.

My imagination went wild with the fear of him. I stood next to my mother holding her hand tightly. Dread, hot and angry fell across my shoulders and I broke out in a sweat despite the coolness of the day.

"Walter, Walter, let go."

She pushed at my arm but I couldn't seem to release my hold on her. She anchored me to the world of the living. If I let go of her I was doomed.

The man's horse slowed in front of the saloon and he slid from the saddle. He stumbled inside and the swinging doors broke the spell I was under. I let go of my mother's hand and backed away from her.

"Walter," she whispered, her voice filled with concern, "are you all right?"

I nodded my head and turned away, forcing myself to look in the direction he had gone. I kept thinking that he was going to come marching out of those doors as mean and strong as ever.

But he didn't.

I felt my body tense as the rage rumbled to the surface and, despite the

icy coldness of the day, my blood began to boil. How dare he come back here? How dare he return, dead or alive, to force his family to relive the horror of his existence.

I saw the fear on my mother's face and I recognized the telltale signs of her carefully controlled panic. I hated him for it. I hated him enough to want him dead, to want to be the one who killed him.

For a brief moment I felt a sense of power surge through me and I wondered how it would feel to kill a man.

ft

Evil rode in from the East.

His body bent over his horse, beat and broken, a fact not lost on those of us who knew his meanness firsthand. He was folded nearly in two, a human accordion without the ability to emit sound.

As I watched his misshapen body lumber up the road on the back of his horse, I realized there was nothing he could do to us anymore. Any hold that he had over the town, over my family was ended, over and done with by the grace of God and the hand of the person who had been brave enough to put him down.

I turned to my daughter, Lilly, and smiled—a real smile. For the first time in her young life there would be no worry over her future. There would be no fear that this monster might take her from me in the middle of the night.

She was barely seven years old and had yet to enjoy the freedom of her childhood. I kept her that close.

My son stood next to me, his fear palpable in the hotness of his breath. He had known too much of his father's temper, his childhood all but over, he had lived in constant misery.

When the man slid from his horse and made his way into the saloon my heart stopped. I had been so sure that he was dead. He gave every appearance of being a dead man. Yet dead men didn't get off their horses and walk into saloons.

I looked at my children. My son, so gentle and smart but too serious for one so young. And my daughter, beautiful and sweet—but too soon they would be victims.

We stood there, our feet sinking further into the mud, our breath sending tiny clouds into the air. Despite the cold, despite the fear, we held our ground.

If nothing else we could do that.

Until he knocked us down.

ft

He rode into town with barely a breath left in his body.

No one knew how he had survived the attack that had so obviously mutilated him. But I knew that it was his meanness, his hatred and cruel nature that gave him the strength to live.

I watched, nearly hypnotized with disbelief as he fell into the saloon. Despite my initial surprise at the sight of him, I couldn't help but smile as I watched him struggle up the one step to the boardwalk. The swinging door hit his back as he fell inside.

He was broken.

Even though he was still alive, still mean and brutal, he was broken. And I had done that. With all that he had taught me through his fists and his drunken assaults, I had gathered the strength and the knowledge to give him a taste of his own poison.

I watched his children as they clung to each other, adrift in a sea of mud and fear. His son and daughter were the most innocent victims of his wickedness.

I, on the other hand, understood cruel men. I had grown up with them, my father, my brothers and, later, my husband. I knew what drove them to terrorize and bully. They were monsters, to be sure, but they were childish monsters. Hidden inside them there was always a weak spot, a place where their own fear lived.

And I had finally found his.

I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for him to realize that he had been beaten. I gave him time for one drink then I slowly crossed the street and headed toward the saloon.

The weight of the gun beat against my thigh and I tasted vengeance, felt it singing in my blood.

His little girl watched me from her place next to her brother. Our eyes

met and she smiled at me. We had a moment of connection. She knew me and she knew what I was about. Our unspoken link to each other gave me courage. It made me happy to know that someone else would feel the triumph of what was about to happen.

I pushed open the door of the dim, dirty saloon and stepped inside. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I searched the bar for his wicked, black soul. He stood at the far end of the long wooden counter, his body leaning heavily on it. I could hear his ragged breathing in the empty room.

It felt bittersweet, this final moment as I drew the gun free from the folds of my skirt and aimed. Even as I pulled the trigger I felt a huge relief sweep over me.

Finally, it was done.

ft

The sheriff walked toward us, his long strides and large smile in contradiction to the seriousness of the moment.

I clutched the hands of my children, my heart pounding heavily in my chest. They had heard the gunshot and the resulting backlash as a few men overwhelmed the shooter, dragging her toward the jail as if she were the one who had committed the crime.

Neither of them said a word as the sheriff approached us.

Over the years I had begged this same man for help, I had come into this town so battered and bruised that no one, not even Doc, would look me in the eye. My husband's death was a blessing to more than just me.

The sheriff held out my husband's saddlebags and looked at my children sympathetically. Finally he looked at me and I saw nothing but relief on his face.

He quickly apologized for our loss and wished us well. As he turned away I asked him who had shot my husband. I had a right to know.

In the cold light of the winter afternoon he shook his head solemnly. The shooter had gotten away. There were only two men in the saloon at the time, both drunk and slippery-handed. She had managed to escape their grip just as the sheriff had arrived.

He looked at me hard as if he were trying to recollect something. I took my husband's belongings and thanked him under my breath.

The question of whether or not to go after her hung between us and I decided not to help him ask it. We both knew that she had done the only thing that could have been done. Besides, a hearty storm was brewing and she'd probably end up dying from exposure. Why should he waste the manpower on a mere woman?

I turned to head back home, the children so close to me I nearly tripped over them. I gave the saddlebags to Walter then reached over to pull Lilly's shawl tighter around her shoulders.

The clouds were opening up and large heavy snowflakes fell from the sky. Walter went to the side of the road and opened the bag cautiously. I imagine he half expected a rattler to rush out at him. The sound of coins clinking as they fell to the ground at his feet stopped us all.

I looked down into the pale, white face of my son and saw him smile. He picked up the coins and dropped them into my upturned hands. There was enough to keep us for quite some time.

The three of us stood there, reveling in this sudden turn our lives had taken. We were free. Finally and thankfully free of the brutality that had haunted our lives.

Walter gathered up the money and held the saddlebag close to his chest. He came to stand next to me and I felt a calmness wash over me.

I took Lilly's hand and we headed for home.

ft

On the day of my father's funeral, a light breeze drifted up from the South. It made the cold day a little warmer as the weak winter sun tried to shine its own warmth into our blood.

The three of us stood, vigilant and solemn at his grave as the minister finished his brief sermon.

A rider approached from the East sitting tall and commanding in the saddle. We watched, cautious and somewhat tender from recent events. My mother squeezed my hand and stepped away from the grave.

As the stranger came closer I could see the mass of long dark hair beneath the hat. Cautiously at first, my mother moved away from us. She shielded her eyes as she went to meet the newcomer. And then, as if freed from the chains that held her, she broke into a run.

She yelled into the wind and flung her arms wide. The woman slid from the horse and ran to her. They embraced, two dark heads leaning in toward each other. My sister's own dark little head cocked to one side and she looked up at me.

"Who is that?" she asked.

I grinned at the sheer boldness of what I was seeing.

It was my mother's sister, my mother's twin sister. I watched in awe as my aunt stepped back from her sister's embrace and pulled a gun from beneath her skirt. The two women turned and walked back toward us, smiling and talking, their words blown away by the wind.

The minister had left as soon as he'd seen the rider approaching. He wasn't a man who stuck around for trouble. He had said goodbye to my sister and me, his hands held out to collect the coins he'd been promised.

My mother stepped away from her sister's embrace and knelt at my father's uncovered grave. She dropped the gun into the cold, wet earth. It landed near his hip with a quiet thud.

She turned to me and nodded. I picked up the shovel and began to cover up any evidence of this cruel man's life and death. As we walked back to the house, a thunder strike broke the silence of the still air.

And I heard my mother's laughter for the first time in my life.

◆ The End ◆

About Laura K. Johnson

Laura lives in Minnesota where the landscape inspires her writing every day. She has published short stories in *Country Magazine* and *Our Iowa Magazine*. She has recently taken an interest in writing about strong female characters in the Western genre.

While living in Iowa, Texas and Minnesota, she and her husband have seen much of the Midwest and Western states on their annual summer motorcycle trips, where she gets great ideas while riding down back roads and two lane highways with her best friend and biggest fan.

Laura looks forward to having a novel-length book published soon and to be able to say that it all started with her exposure at Frontier Tales.

Wild Horse Spring

by Steve Smith

From his saddle Dick Brassell gazed down at the churned up dirt and scattered clods of manure at the edge of the shallow pool. While Stoney drank, Brassell studied the hoof depressions. Maybe a day old, they spoke of a sizeable herd of unshod horses whose trail led upslope from the pool, then between sandstone outcroppings and on to higher ground to the north.

"Wild ones, Stoney," he said in a hoarse whisper. "A lot of 'em. We come to the right place."

Stoney's hooves stirred the tamped earth, releasing the aroma of stale urine. His head came up, his muzzle dripping. He snorted to clear his nose of trail dust. He flung his head with each fresh scent of so many horses and dug at the soil with his right forefoot.

Brassell felt tremors of excitement ripple along Stoney's sides.

"Smell 'em, do you, Boy? They's here not so long ago."

Bracing himself, he gave the reins a flick and gripped the saddle horn with both hands as Stoney thrust upward toward the cottonwood stand along the rim of the pool. Through bleared eyes he evaluated the site. Scattered clumps of grass for Stoney and enough dry wood for a fire if he wanted to prolong things. It had good shade and a level spot with high sandstone formation rising behind. No one could sneak up on him here. Not that he expected it; Harrelson was as dead as you could get, back in the canyon where he'd found his first color.

He guided Stoney toward the cottonwoods. The horse plodded through the mushy sand and into the shade where he stopped without signal. Brassell rose in the stirrups, took his weight on his left leg and slowly lifted

his right leg over Stoney's rump. His vision blurred. When the streaks of red faded he eased himself to the ground.

At his protracted groan Stoney looked along his flank, his tail twitching. Brassell tilted over, propping himself with his hands on his knees, and waited for it to pass. When he recovered he slowly set about untying the saddle.

"Won't be long, Stoney. You'll be with your own kind runnin' free."

Only one of Harrelson's shots had hit home, fired as he was falling, and more by reflex than anything. But it was enough. A spasm of pain washed over him and everything greyed out, leaving only the memory of the morning.

Harrelson must have seen him leave the assayer's office in Carlin and smelled pickings. Tracked Brassell to his find in the foothills of the Tuscaroras and crept up on him as he was digging out a promising crevice. While Brassell was shoveling paydirt on an elk skin travois for Stoney to drag to a nearby creek for panning, Harrelson came half-walking, half-sliding down the shaley slope up on his right. Brassell had glanced up sharply, then relaxed, his instinctive suspicions eased somewhat by Harrelson's grin and noisy entrance. Then he saw the pistol swing up.

He flinched in surprise as the first shot went wide and high. Dropping his shovel, he groped for his holstered Colt .44, thumbed back the hammer as another shot missed on his left side. The misses made Harrelson jittery. Swearing, he steadied his pistol in a two-hand grip. Brassell clamped down on his own tension, pointed and felt the gun buck. His shot struck Harrelson high in the chest and flung him backwards an instant before his third and last shot.

Brassell felt the punch in his left side and knew he was in a fix. The bullet struck the descending edge of his lowest rib and plowed downward through his guts. He bent over to his left side and pointed his Colt shakily at the sprawled body.

Harrelson lay still. He was likely dead and Brassell knew he might soon follow. A bullet glancing off bone would do more damage than one boring through tissue unchanged.

He dragged himself to within twenty feet of the body. Harrelson's eyes were open and unseeing. "You worthless thievin' sonofabitch," said Brassell.

He cocked his revolver, his right hand jittering. His first shot hit high on Harrelson's right arm, making the arm flop palm up. The next shot

hit the shale under Harrelson's hip, nudging him. Tiny rivulets of fire streaked down Brassell's sides. He sighed heavily, jammed his pistol at his holster twice before getting it seated.

A massive sense of vanquishment pressed down upon him. His body suddenly seemed twice as heavy. "Damn," he murmured, shaking his head wearily. He turned and shuffled down the hillside to his camp, pressing his left hand against his leaking wound.

Stoney threw his head uneasily as he limped toward him, the scent of blood sharp in Stoney's flared nostrils.

"Easy boy," Brassell said. He approached Stoney, trying to appear steady. It wouldn't do to have his conveyance run off in fright. But Stoney was disciplined and held his place. Brassell gave the horse a reassuring pat. "Good boy, Stoney. Good boy."

He led Stoney to his bunk site, turning him broadside to his saddle. "Okay, Stoney, still, boy."

As he bent over the earth wheeled. He clamped his hands to his knees and breathed as deeply as the pain permitted. When his vision began to clear he grasped the saddle horn in his left hand and the rear end of the saddle in his right.

He rose, ignoring the pain clutching his guts and used the momentum to heave the saddle up onto Stoney's back. He blacked out momentarily, then came to feeling the saddle sliding back towards him. He got his shoulder under it and without waiting for his head to clear, pushed it into position with his right hand.

After much exertion, all the while feeling blood stream down his side, pool at his belt and begin to grow sticky, he got the saddle cinched. He flung his saddlebag up behind the cantle and looped the drawstring of his leather grub bag around the saddle horn. His bunkroll, rifle no longer concerned him.

He led Stoney over to a boulder and situated him left side to. "Sorry, boy, but we're gonna have to do without your blanket."

He kneeled atop the boulder, struggled erect, and placing his left foot in the stirrup, slowly swung his right leg over Stoney's rump. The movement ignited a fresh attack. He groaned softly. It felt as if something had burrowed into his insides and was trying to gnaw its way out. He eased into the saddle.

"Okay, boy," he rubbed Stoney's neck. "Nice and Easy."

He swung Stoney's head back down the trail from his digs. At the base of the foothills where the trail forked north, he stopped.

Carlin was thirty miles away. At Stoney's slow plod, the only rate he could endure, it might take six hours. He doubted he could survive the ordeal. Two hours away was Wild Horse Spring. The decision made itself. He turned Stoney south.

The fog lifted from his sight and he shook himself. That trip to this place had been the longest two hours of his life. He had tried standing in the stirrups but the jarring of Stoney's gait on his wound was no better than sitting. Knowing that it was a watering site for a herd of wild horses had helped him endure. He didn't want Stoney ridden by someone he couldn't choose for him.

Now he dropped the saddlebags along with his grub bag at the base of a nearby cottonwood, then uncinched the saddle and shoved it over Stoney's far side. He gently tugged the bridle rig free and dropped it by the saddle. After massaging Stoney's back where the saddle had chafed, he rubbed his face against Stoney's flat cheek and the mottled pink of his velvet muzzle. Stoney nickered softly.

From his saddlebag Brassell scooped up a handful of sweetened oats. He held it to Stoney's muzzle, feeling the familiar touch of the rubbery lips, coarse teeth and muscular tongue. His eyes blurred. He blinked several times to clear them.

After clearing his throat, he said, "Stoney, we got to part company now. You're startin' a new life. There's no one to tie a saddle to your back. You're free now, old friend. Go find your own kind."

He stepped back and gave Stoney's rump a sharp slap. Stoney gave a start, the skin over his back quivering briefly. He looked back at Brassell in question.

"Go on, now. Get goin'." He raised his arm high. Stoney lurched forward a step, still uncertain. He lifted a forefoot in question.

Brassell realized that it was unnatural for Stoney to stray. They had been together for almost three years and the good-natured horse followed him even without him holding the reins. He bent for a small, sharp-edged rock, ignoring the stab in his gut.

"Stoney," he snapped, stepping back a step. "Git!"

The rock hit Stoney's left rump, its impact stirring a sympathetic pang in Brassell. Never before had he hit Stoney with anything.

The horse shied, then trotted a distance away looking back at him. Brassell saw betrayal in the look and groaned. Growling to distract himself from weakening, he picked up another rock and held it poised. Stoney trotted around a cottonwood and along the edge of the pool, keeping an eye on Brassell. He moved steadily away now but still eyed him as if waiting for him to relent from this odd behavior.

Brassell brandished the rock. "You git now, dammit. You get up in those hills and find those wild ones and don't you come back here, you understand? You and me's done! So git!"

He threw the rock, wincing immediately, and watched it sail over Stoney's twitching rump. The horse galloped through the shallow water at the pool's edge and ascended the churned up slope onto a low bluff bordered by sandstone ridges. There he stamped his right hoof several times, flung his mane and gave a soft whinny. At a vagrant scent he cleared his nostrils vigorously. He paused for a moment as if weighing his choices, then shoved his forequarters away from the pool and the life he was accustomed to, and galloped off.

Brassell thought Stoney's eyes had rolled one last time in his direction. But he was gone and Brassell was both relieved and bereft. Stoney had been his closest friend for the past three years, welcoming Brassell's affectionate nuzzlings and nickering softly through their nightly conversations as if responding to his words.

His eyes stung. Wiping with his shirtsleeves, Brassell limped over to the cottonwood. He nudged the grub bag close by the saddlebags, eased himself down in stages and leaned his back against the tree and waited. When an attack didn't come he withdrew his writing kit from the saddlebag and wrote:

> *stranger, if you find enough of me to bury please do that, accept my goods as pay. i got no relatives in this country so there's no one to tell. my name is dick brassell in case anyone questions your rights to my stuff. just show them this letter. up a canyon about six miles north is a dead man called harelson. he tried to steal my claim but i got in one good shot. leave him for the coyotes. there is good color there if you're a mind to prospect.*
>
> d brassell

if my horse stony comes back looking for me, give him a good home. he was a good friend to me. he is a dapple grey and of a sweet nature.

He folded the note and put it inside the saddlebag. Removing his hat, he swept back his sweaty hair, then went rigid for a moment. When he could breathe again he loosened the drawstring on his grub bag and took everything out. The canned peaches he put aside, knowing the acid would aggravate his insides.

He set his canteen by his leg and peeled back the waxed paper from the bread and sliced beef rolled together and bit off a chunk, knowing it would take a while to reach his wounded parts. He savored the taste of his meal, now and then washing a dry lump down with a sip of water.

He missed Stoney's warm and companionable presence. He had never met a human he liked half so well, or for whom he felt such complete trust. He hoped Stoney would have the good sense to stay away from people. With a twinge of concern he imagined Stoney wandering back, then figured that the horse would forget him in a matter of hours once he began to forage for himself. He would lapse into the natural freedom that had been tamed out of him years before. But he would have to fight for his place in the wild herd. The leader would challenge him and he'd take a few bruises before his natural instincts kicked in and he fought back. Maybe the iron on his hooves would help.

He wondered if the shoes would present a problem for Stoney as they began to wear or if he threw one. A limping animal couldn't stay up with a roving herd. But since he was unable to remove them, Stoney would just have to make do. He wasn't sure now he'd done the horse a favor.

It occurred to him then that by his being here the wild horses would be forced to find their water somewhere else. His human smell, not to mention the stink of death rising up from where he'd lie, would surely keep them away. He wondered if he ought not to walk off as far as he could so as not to make this oasis unusable for the creatures hereabout.

Fire seared his insides and he went rigid until it peaked and began to subside. He realized that he didn't have the sand for even a short venture into the shadeless oven of the desert. He was low on courage right now. The horses would have to find a new place to water.

As the pain abated he said, "That was a bad one, Bud. Reckon we can handle a few more of them so long as they don't get no worse."

All the same, he thought, we better have Doctor Colt available. Good thing he makes house calls. He withdrew his pistol from its holster and laid it in his lap.

His eyes scanned the shimmering surface of the water and found the quivering bulge that showed the pool was spring fed. The breeze stirred a patch of grass nearby and cooled the sweat under his shirt. The waxy, heart-shaped cottonwood leaves above him shone a brilliant green that filtered most of the sun rays.

A flycatcher that had been keeping up a persistent song stopped whistling and dove low from its branch and flew into a bush across the shallow pool. Just as quickly a falcon swooped past and started a slow climb up to height again.

Talons suddenly reached inside, gripped his viscera and pulled them apart. He gasped, leaning sideways away from the pain and stayed that way for more than a minute, panting shallowly and growing desperate for oxygen. The pain slowly subsided. When he could breathe again, he murmured, "Hope it don't get no worse."

He wondered if he shouldn't have tried to reach Carlin. What's a few hours of sheer hell if there's sweet life at the end of it.

Yeah, he answered, but you ain't fixable. All they could do for you is give you something to knock you out. That ain't no way to go. Not in some stranger's bed.

A breeze trailed across his face like a woman's touch. He blinked away his tears and leaned his head back against the tree. As he gazed up into the boughs he was aware that everything about him seemed vivid and peaceful. The rippling pool. The cottonwood branches swaying gently. The drifting clouds. Even the gnat crawling over the veins in his left hand. Peace stole inside him. The anxious push that had animated his thoughts and movements all these years had drained out of him. All that remained was a resonance within of this quiet place where the natural world seemed in slow, deliberate contemplation of itself as it probably had for ages. It was a delicious sensation, like the times when he lay quietly beside a rippling brook chewing on a weed stem or leaning against a shady

sycamore basking in a caressing breeze. Such moments gave him a brief rare savor of life's inherent sweetness, until Stoney's big head playfully nudged him from his repose.

"The sweet sting of mortality," an English poet had named this sensation. At this thought the brevity of his prospects drew a curtain of gray over his mind, kindling a pang of loss within.

He immediately whistled up Stoney to come for a muzzle rub and a handful of oats. He liked to hold the oats tight to his chest until Stoney nudged his hand with his great head, whereupon he surrendered them. It was a teasing game they both enjoyed. Then he remembered that Stoney was on the trail of his own kind. He took another breath, a full one that didn't bring on pain, and sank into a weary doze.

He awoke with twisting cramps, startled to find the pistol cocked and jammed against his right temple. His lower jaw shuddered from a sudden chill. Beads of sweat started from his forehead. He steeled himself, his breathing taut and controlled.

Sighing, he let the pistol drop to his thighs. Despite his relief, he knew he was only prolonging the inevitable. But while the pain was tolerable he knew he couldn't make an end to it. The pain would decide for him.

His head dipped. He cleared it with a shake. The constant gnaw inside was eating up his energy and making him dopey. Afraid to take a deep breath for fear of reawakening the wolf in his vitals, he wondered dimly if he could resist another onslaught like the last. It was the worst pain he'd ever known.

He squinted up at the sky, thick with brushstroke clouds. "Might have a pretty sunset in a while," he said. "Let's stick around for that."

He closed his eyes. Then the thought struck him that it was past Stoney's feeding time. "Sorry, boy," he mumbled. "Take care of you in the mornin', firs' thing." His head tilted back against the tree and he dozed fitfully.

Stoney kept after the strong sweat and urine smell of the other horses, cropping grass from dry clumps along the way. His head turned now and then to listen. Back there was comfort and ease and familiar man smells that once kept him tethered. These were now but fading memories as the exciting scent of his own kind tugged him forward up the sloping ground past a line of trees whose acrid scent all but obliterated the other smells. He picked up his pace to a canter.

A dull report came from behind and below him. Stoney knew the sound. He stopped and swung his head for a look behind him, but saw nothing on his trail. The sound didn't come again and Stoney knew that something which once held him was there no longer and he was free to follow the sweet aromas that tugged at him.

He cantered on in the growing dusk.

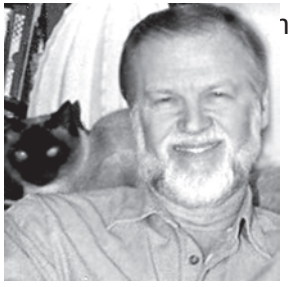
◆ The End ◆

About Steve Smith

After a hilarious two-year hitch in the Army, most of it spent in a band in Germany, Steve Smith brought his young Danish wife, Birthe, back to his hometown of El Paso, Texas. The following spring the pair hitchhiked to southern Florida for Smith's try at breaking into professional baseball within the Chicago White Sox farm system, which didn't pan out. They made their way to Michigan where they spent the next forty years raising a family while he polished innumerable drafts of his Army memoirs, and along the way taught himself how to write. The kids now grown up, he and his wife split amicably, and with his new wife, Peggy, Smith left the cold and humidity of Grand Rapids and returned to the desert that he loved. They now live on a four-acre "ranchette" south of Tucson with a dog, five cats, open skies and mountains on all sides, while welcoming visits by such native citizens as coyotes, vinegarones and gopher snakes. When not serving as entertainment director for his kitties, Smith reads thrillers and anything dealing with WWII and American history.

Smith's first two published stories were Westerns. Besides the above story, the second is titled "The Gringo" and can be found at TheWesternOnline.com/TheGringo.html.

Like many indie writers, Smith has discovered that his best bet for publication and developing a readership lies in going it alone, both for his stories, which range from sci/fi, fantasy and the purely wacky, to satire and drama; for his two-volume comical Army memoir; and for a quirky novel on a marriage gone south, whose jovially engaging theme is the appreciation of women and womanhood to a degree just shy of veneration. Current works include a novella on AI, and a projected series of mysteries



ıe town with low self-esteem.

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Close Shave

by Alex Artukovich

It was the biggest news story ever to shake the budding cattle town of Redbone, Kansas. The headlines were so gripping that they couldn't contain themselves to the dusty outskirts of the West, and within days every Eastern newspaper in America printed their own version of the now legendary "Barber Shop Killing."

The incident took place on a balmy mid-June day, 1874. Earl Butterfield had just swept the wooden walkway in front of his seven-year-old barber shop. He pushed the last bit of dirt back onto the town's main street, where it had originated, and approvingly surveyed his shop.

It wasn't much, only three paces wide and six paces long, sharing walls with the gunsmith and the general store, but it was his, and he was proud. He was now in the prestigious class of small business owners. If he and his wife had stayed in Independence, he'd probably still be working for others, but he was his own boss now. He ran the shop as he pleased. And since it was his shop and nobody else's, he was more than happy to keep it looking nice.

Earl slid an apple box next to his barber pole, stepped up onto it, and shined the pole as well as he could. He was a short, stubby man, so he couldn't reach the top of the six-foot without the assistance of the makeshift step. He stepped down and caught his reflection in the glass pane of the shop, causing him to wipe off the dust that clung to his vest. It was a red vest with tiny a white pattern. Beneath the vest was a finely pressed white button-up shirt with silver cufflinks on each wrist. Around his neck was a solid red bowtie.

He smoothed his hair, which was parted straight down the middle and combed back on the sides. Above his lip was a thick, perfectly groomed moustache that curled towards his nose like breaking waves.

Earl heard a loud giddy-up call, and watched as a red and yellow Wells Fargo stagecoach rumbled past his shop, carrying mail and passengers to their particular destinations. As the stagecoach rolled by, a poster kicked up from the ground and landed at Earl's feet.

It was a familiar poster that sent a shiver down Earl's spine. He picked up the yellowed sheet and briefly glanced only at it—a short peek was all his nerves could allow. Although he could talk endlessly about the man pictured on the poster, he couldn't look at him long. The mere sight of him shook Earl to his core.

It was the eyes that spooked him. They bespoke a cruel carelessness and an alarming hatred for humanity. His smile, although handsomely formed, was devilishly smug. It was the smile of a killer who knew he would never get caught. He was too careful and cunning, and chose his companions too wisely to ever be captured by the authorities.

Below the picture was the man's name printed in gigantic bold letters: SAM "WIDOW MAKER" CARSON.

The nickname, "Widow Maker," was aptly dubbed, as he had already created eight widows by gunning down innocent ranch hands that were doing nothing more than watching their cattle. Sam Carson was a cattle rustler, one of the most ruthless and sneaky thieves in all of Kansas. Together with his little brother, Kid Carson, they had stolen more livestock than any pair in the west.

Above the photo were huge bold letters: WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE—FOR CATTLE RUSTLING AND MURDER.

Cattle rustling came before murder because it was an even bigger offense in those parts. Many a poacher had been hung without even the whisper of a trial. Still, Sam Carson's reputation as a cold-blooded murderer wasn't forgotten, earning him the moniker, "Widow Maker."

At the bottom of the poster was an offer of a five thousand dollar reward. So high was the prize that Earl was tempted to strap on a gun and go bounty hunting—if he wasn't afraid of guns, outlaws, horseback riding, and moonless nights. And any fool knew that hunting for Sam "Widow Maker" Carson was hunting for certain death. He was more accurate with

a six shooter than any outlaw in the West. Even skilled marksmen using long barrel rifles couldn't match Sam Carson with a pistol.

What was missing from the wanted poster was any mention of Kid Carson. He was in the photograph with his brother Sam, but he himself wasn't wanted. This was because Kid Carson was already dead. He died from a gunshot wound to his stomach. There was a great deal of speculation on who shot the infamous bandit, leading to his slow, seven day deterioration and eventual death. Some said it was Sam, for he was crazy and callous enough to do just about anything, even kill his own brother. But others said that was impossible, the only human being beside himself Sam had any feeling for was Kid.

Earl knew the truth. He and much of Redbone knew who really shot Kid Carson. It wasn't Sam. It was Redbone's very own pocket watch maker. But not all of Redbone believed it. Many doubted that their simple little watchmaker could gun down one of the West's most dangerous criminals.

Earl, who believed much of what he heard, was certain the watchmaker shot Kid Carson. Ike Fulsome, who was there when it happened, told Earl the whole story and he believed every word of it. Still, some said Ike was a liar who would say anything for attention. Earl defended Ike, and stood by the story, retelling it to whoever sat in his barber chair, adding a few embellishments, of course.

Earl spotted a lone nail sticking out of a nearby post. He took the wanted poster he had been viewing and drove it over the nail, putting the poster back on display. Having completed his civic duty for the day, he returned to his little barber shop.

Across the street a man stepped out of a wooden office. He had a fatherly face and light blue eyes. Atop his head was an aged bowler hat. In his solid-colored vest was a silver pocket watch. The pocket watch was by far the nicest thing he owned. His boots were caked in dirt, his high-waisted pioneer pants had patches, and his gun holster belonged in an antique museum. The gun itself was a worn, rarely fired, Colt peacemaker. He'd left his raggedy frock coat behind today, as the weather was warm enough to go without. On his chest was a simple tin star with the word "Sheriff" emblazed on it.

Although he was the town's sheriff, he didn't look anything like a lawman. His eyes were too kind and his smile too warm. Nothing about

him would strike fear in the criminal element. But to the surprise of many, he was a good sheriff.

As the sheriff walked the dirt covered street, something disconcerting caught his glance He approached a rickety hitching post and let out a groan. He had fixed the post not more than ten days ago and it was already going to pieces. He filed the task in his brain, under the long list of repairs he needed to attend to. Street repair was by far his biggest time consumer, followed closely by hauling away drunks before they hurt themselves or others.

Rarely did things get too wild in town, and in the three years he had been sheriff, only once did he fire his pistol. However, that one shot from his old peacemaker was enough to bring a dark storm Redbone's way.

A woman wearing an ankle-length dress with frilly shoulders left the telegraph office too rapidly, causing the screen door to smack loudly against the wall. The sound resembled a gunshot and it made the sheriff nearly jump out of his skin. Once he realized where the noise had originated, his nerves calmed. He held his hand to his heart and felt the fast beating slowly subside to a normal rate.

He had been on edge ever since the incident. It had him looking over his shoulder everywhere he went. Whenever he sat down in a crowded room he always insisted that his back be against the wall. His gun, which he once rarely kept loaded, was now loaded at all times. He even went so far as to sleep with it under his pillow.

He never used to be this paranoid. Before the incident he was far from high-strung. He would walk the streets always feeling secure. Most of the citizens were honest, amiable people who never stirred up much trouble. The outsiders could get a little rambunctious at times, but never to the point where the sheriff felt scared. But he was scared now. He wouldn't be human if he wasn't.

After the sheriff had calmed himself, he entered the barber shop. Earl greeted the sheriff with a pleasant grin.

"Howdy, Earl," the sheriff said.

"Howdy, Sheriff Waters, Ya here for a cut?"

"You bet," the sheriff said as he unbuckled his gun belt.

The interior of the barber shop wasn't much. In the far end was a fat iron furnace. Along the wall was a wooden bench for waiting customers.

On another wall was a chalk board listing the going rates: HAIRCUT & SHAVE—25 CENTS / SHINE—5 CENTS / SHAMPOO—5 CENTS / TONIC—20 CENTS

The barber chair sat in the center of the room. The back, seat, and arm rest were all padded. The rest of the contraption was a mix of wood and metal. On the plank floor beside the barber chair was a shiny mud jug, for the customers who wanted somewhere to spit their tobacco.

On a side wall, aligned with the barber chair, was an oval mirror. Below the mirror were counter space and miniature drawers where Earl kept his instruments: shaving cream, shampoos, and tonics. Beside the mirror, hung from a ring on the wall, was a strop, with leather on one side and cloth on the other, for aligning and sharpening his straight razors.

Sheriff Waters hung his gun belt and bowler hat on a nearby coat rack and sat in the barber chair. Earl aired open a barber cape and draped it over the sheriff. The cloth was solid white and covered the sheriff from his neck to his shins.

The sheriff leaned back in the chair and tried to relax. Earl took out his pocket watch and displayed it to the sheriff.

"Stopped workin'," he said.

The sheriff examined the watch with a keen eye. "It probably just needs a new spring. I'll take it back to the office and have it fixed by Monday."

"How much?"

The sheriff mulled it over a moment. "About two bucks."

Earl nodded in consent. He and the other citizens found it quite handy to have a sheriff who also made and repaired pocket watches. In all honesty, the citizens thought he resembled a watchmaker more than a sheriff. Yet he was good at both professions.

Before Sheriff Waters could say no, Earl lathered up his shampoo bar and plopped a mountain of suds onto his scalp. This cost a little extra of course.

Earl finished washing the shampoo out of the sheriff's hair and grabbed for a bottle of tonic.

"Wait," the sheriff commanded. "Put the tonic back, I don't want any."

"But this is Tiger Lily," Earl replied. "All natural, comes straight from France."

"I don't care where it came from. For twenty cents a pop, you can leave it on the counter. You already got me for shampoo, let's leave it at that."

Earl begrudgingly returned the hair tonic and picked up the scissors. He evaluated the sheriff's hair for a moment and then began clipping. As he trimmed the sheriff's thin brown hair he remained silent. The sheriff noticed and curiously studied him.

"You're unusually quiet," the sheriff commented. "No gossip? No interesting rumors?"

"No," Earl disingenuously said. "Nothin' much to gab about."

"Oh," the sheriff said with a knowing nod. "The gossip must be about me then."

Earl hid his guilty face behind the sheriff's head.

"Something about a brother heading this way for revenge," Sheriff Waters continued. "I suppose that would make for good gossip."

"I don't believe much in gossip and rumors," Earl virtuously replied.

This was the funniest thing Sheriff Waters had heard all day. Earl's stock and trade were rumors. He heard and spread every local rumor imaginable. In a small town like Redbone, it was expected that the barber be the official collector and distributor of rumors, gossip, and hearsay.

Although it was only a rumor, the sheriff was still shaken up by it. He wanted a run-in with Sam "Widow Maker" Carson about as much as a run-in with a mad bull.

He didn't know it was Kid Carson when he shot him. But if he had it to do all over again, he probably would have done the same thing. It was a matter of self defense, and upholding his duty as sheriff.

It had been just before midnight when the incident happened. The sheriff was seated in his rocking chair outside his office. He gently swayed the chair back and forth and looked up at the multitude of stars. Occasionally he would hear loud yelling and laughter coming from the saloon, but nothing raucous enough to stir him from his chair. Once in a while a saloon patron would stumble out of the bar, but if the man was steady enough to stay on his own two feet and didn't whip up too much noise, the sheriff let him be.

A young man, dressed in a flashy cowboy shirt with silver spurs on his boots, wobbled out of the bar. He admiringly held up a gold pocket watch and laughed. Then he descended the two steps leading to the street without much attention. His black leather boots missed the steps completely and he tumbled to the ground. The young man let out the loudest, most vile curses imaginable.

Sheriff Waters let out a sigh and got up from his rocking chair. He approached the young man as he was getting up and tried to give him a hand. The young man roughly pushed the sheriff away, telling him he could get up on his own.

The sheriff apologetically raised his hands and allowed the young man to stand himself up. At first glance, he seemed to be a bit of a runt, but he had such power and strength behind his shove that the sheriff reconsidered his initial evaluation.

The young man had a fair face with cocky, beady little eyes. Every move he made exuded arrogance. It was hard for the sheriff to believe that somebody who was slurring and stumbling all over themselves could be so bigheaded.

The sheriff asked the temperamental little cuss where he was heading. The young man said it was none of his damn business.

"Well, the only reason I ask," the sheriff considerately began, "is that you seem a little imbibed and maybe I could assist you to where you need to go."

The young man found the sheriff's concern to be quite amusing and openly laughed in his face. "Push off, law dawg. I ain't needin' any of yer assistance."

As the young man mocked his offer, the sheriff noticed that the gold pocket watch in the young man's possession looked familiar. He had tinkered with the timepiece a number of times and would recognize it anywhere. It was Ike Fulsome's, without a doubt. Just as the sheriff realized this, he noticed Ike's plump head, nervously peering over the swinging saloon doors.

"Ike," the sheriff called, "could you come out here a second?"

Ike reluctantly pushed the saloon doors open and hesitantly approached. His big eyes were racked with fear. He could look at the sheriff but he dared not gaze at the young man. It took the young man a second to recognize Ike, and when he did he glared venomously at him.

"Why does this man have your watch?" the sheriff curiously asked.

"It's not my watch," Ike hastily answered. "It's his."

The young man nodded in agreement.

"Ike," the sheriff began, "I've worked on your watch half a dozen times. I know it's yours. Why does this man have it?"

"I gave it to him as . . . he took a moment to think, "as . . . a gift."

The sheriff didn't like anything he was hearing out of either man.

Something was going on and unfortunately it was his duty to get to the bottom of it. With a shrug, the sheriff asked Ike why the stranger deserved such an extravagant gift.

"He said it looked better on him," Ike replied, "and I agreed."

By this time the young man was annoyed with the conversation and his impatience led him to remove his gun, which was concealed inside his duster overcoat. When Sheriff Waters turned back to the young man, the end of a nickel plated Remington pistol was staring him in the face. Before the sheriff even had time to gasp, the young man pulled the trigger.

Ike covered his eyes in horror. The sheriff tightened his body and clenched his teeth. But no bullet came out. Instead a click from the hammer was all that was heard. The young man confusedly looked down and checked the gun's cylinder. It was empty. He cursed his absent mindedness.

The sheriff panted in terror, still in shock from his near death experience. Ike went frozen. His brain told him to flee but his legs wouldn't respond.

The young man casually told the sheriff to remain where he was and he approached his horse. With a quivering hand the sheriff drew his Colt peacemaker and in an unsteady voice commanded the scoundrel to halt. He scoffed and continued to wobble toward his horse. He approached the mare and reached inside his saddle bag for some cartridges.

The sheriff begged him to drop his weapon but the disobedient young cuss simply ignored him. Instead, he found some bullets and began loading his pistol.

The sheriff gave a last warning but the young man continued to load his pistol. Fearing for his own and Ike's life, the sheriff pulled the trigger. His target buckled in pain. He held the reddening side of his stomach and scornfully leered at the sheriff. With all his might he pulled himself onto his horse and rapidly rode away.

"Oh, my god!" Ike exclaimed. "You just shot Kid Carson!"

It took the sheriff a moment to register the infamous name. When he did, he closed his eyes in horror. He had just shot the brother of one the meanest outlaws in the West. Life expectancy for Sheriff Waters had just dropped to zero.

When word got around that Kid Carson died a week later, Waters really knew he was in for it. He considered leaving town and many of the concerned citizens urged him to do so. But something inside him wouldn't let him

leave. So he remained in Redbone, constantly jumpy, endlessly paranoid. Death was coming for him, and it would come when he least expected.

This was why Earl didn't feel much like gossiping. He knew the rumors would scare an already frightened man, so he cut the sheriff's hair in silence. When he was finished trimming, he picked up the cup with shaving soap and swiftly dabbed inside. He got the brush nice and creamy, reclined the barber chair back as far as it would go, and lathered his customer's face. The sheriff kept his chin tilted and his eyes closed. Rarely did he open them, not until Earl announced that he was finished.

Earl took out the straight razor, or more commonly called the cutthroat razor by his patrons, and adeptly scraped it back and forth on the strop, getting it as sharp as possible. With skilled carefulness, Earl began shaving the sheriff's face.

Suddenly his door began to quietly open. The first thing that appeared around the door was a shiny, nickel plated Remington revolver. Earl gazed in shock as the door opened wider and Sam "Widow Maker" Carson silently slipped into his barber shop. He hadn't any boots on as he wanted his arrival to be a noiseless one. His gun was pointed directly at Earl's head and his finger was pressed to his lips as a silent command to be quiet.

Not wanting to arouse the murderous outlaw's wrath, Earl submissively complied. He held his hands up and Sam tiptoed closer. Sam gestured for the razor and Earl quickly handed it over.

"Earl," the sheriff asked curiously, "where did you go?"

Sam signaled Earl to respond. "Just gettin' another razor," Earl improvised. "This one ain't cuttin' right."

With a point, Sam motioned Earl to quietly stand in the corner. Trembling with fright, Earl did as he was commanded. He shuddered at the thought of the grisly murder he was about to behold. With any luck, his death would be less gruesome.

Sam admired the glistening steel razor he now held in his hand. The razor was tilted slightly and the sunlight coming through the window bounced off the blade and cast an ominous glow on his bloodthirsty face.

With frightening gentleness, Sam softly placed his fingertips along the top of the sheriff's head to keep it steady. The sheriff's expression didn't at all change. He trustfully kept his eyes closed, believing the fingertips he now felt were merely Earl's.

Earl painfully watched as Sam slowly brought the straight razor to Sheriff Waters' throat. A smug, twisted smile formed on Sam's face. Earl held his breath and winced in ghastly anticipation. The blade was only inches from the sheriff's neck. Sam's eyes gleamed with murderous longing.

To Earl's surprise, the razor didn't strike the sheriff's throat but slowly ascended to his cheek. Lightly, and with a deft hand, Sam brought the razor to the surface of the sheriff's skin. With perverse tenderness Sam dragged the razor downward, taking off only hair and shaving cream. He dipped the razor into a water bowl, cleaning the blade. He returned it to the sheriff's cheek. With another careful stroke he removed a second strip of hair and shaving cream.

As Sam performed this remarkably close shave, Earl's stomach twisted in horrified knots. With every slow scrape of the blade, his heart leapt to his throat and his knees buckled.

With the same gut-wrenching slowness, Sam brought the razor below the sheriff's chin and across his Adam's apple. Earl touched his own throat and swallowed hard.

Sam rinsed the blade and returned it to the sheriff's throat. This time as he brought the razor down, he pushed the tip of the blade inward, ever so slightly. Earl tensely wrung his hands. Sheriff Waters winced but didn't open his eyes.

"Easy, Earl," the sheriff casually said.

Sam watched with titillating satisfaction as a trickle of blood ran down the sheriff's throat. Sam calmly rinsed the razor and shaved the final bit of hair from the sheriff's neck. He dipped the blade for the last time, positioned himself directly behind the sheriff, and held the razor again to his throat.

"All done sheriff," Sam whispered.

Sheriff Waters' eyes sprung open. The sight he beheld in the mirror of Sam "Widow Maker" Carson holding a cutthroat razor half an inch from his neck caused his whole body to jerk in fright. Sam's muscles tightened as he held the sheriff to the chair.

"I wouldn't move much if I were you, Sheriff," Sam warned. "Not with this here razor held so closely to yer neck!"

Sheriff Waters stopped squirming and stayed as still as his quivering body would allow. Sam playfully tapped the sheriff's throat with the blade. The sheriff stared at Sam with desperate eyes.

"It was in self-defense," the sheriff whispered.

"Oh," Sam said. "Well, that's a pity, cause, I really don't care."

Sam's grip on the razor tightened and Waters braced himself for the final blow. Earl bit down on his knuckle and whimpered in horror.

The razor suddenly pulled away from the sheriff's neck. Sam laughed in amusement.

"I'm not gonna cut yer throat," Sam confessed. "I might cut chubby's throat," he said, pointing the razor to Earl. The barber immediately broke down in sobs. "But you get something different," Sam announced. He waved his nickel-plated Remington in the air. "See this? This was Kid's gun."

Sheriff Waters immediately recognized the pistol. It was the gun that nearly blew his face clean off on that fateful night.

Sam delicately stroked the Sheriff's cheek with the end of the revolver. "Seein' as he didn't get a chance to use it on you, like he was supposed to, I thought it'd be fittin' if we used it now."

Sam spun the barber chair so he and the sheriff were face to face. As he did so, something in the oval mirror caught his eye. Sam was always a keen observer of his surroundings, this was the main reason he was never bested. He could pick up on nearly everything around him and use it to his advantage, allowing him to get the slip on others and never allowing others to get the slip on him. So it was only natural for him to notice this irregularity behind him, and give pause to register its meaning.

What Sam saw in the oval mirror was the sheriff's gun belt hung on the coat hanger. What gave him reason to pause was that there wasn't any gun inside the holster. Suddenly a clicking sound was heard. Then a loud bang filled the little barber shop.

Sam flew backwards and crashed into the wall. He clutched the gaping bullet hole in his chest and collapsed to the floor.

The white barber cape covering the sheriff was sprayed in Sam's blood. In the center of the barber cape was a small hole. Gun smoke wafted through it.

Luckily for the sheriff, he had taken out his old peacemaker before he sat in the barber chair and laid it on his lap. He did this so inconspicuously that Earl hadn't even noticed. And when Earl covered the sheriff with a barber cape, the pistol underneath stayed covered. Sam didn't realize the sheriff was armed until it was too late.

The sheriff wasn't expecting Sam. It was sheer paranoia that prompted him to keep his gun. Even when he was doing something as simple as getting a haircut, he wasn't going to be unarmed, not with a killer like Sam "Widow Maker" Carson after his blood.

Although the sheriff would like to believe it was something more intuitive and cunning on his part that led to the defeat of Sam Carson, he knew it wasn't. It was nothing more than excessive paranoia mixed with a little luck, and that's what he told people.

Nevertheless, Sheriff Waters became an instant, nationwide celebrity. The newspapers ran story after story about the "Barber Shop Killing," where a simple town sheriff bested the deadliest gun in the West. Since the sheriff refused to pose for any pictures, Earl gladly stepped in. The most famous picture taken was of Earl standing in his barber shop, holding up the blood-stained barber cape with a small bullet hole in the center, and grinning from ear to ear.

Although the five thousand dollar reward went to Sheriff Waters, Earl prospered immensely from the Outlaw's slaying. Overnight, his quaint little shop turned into the biggest tourist attraction of the West. Everybody wanted to visit his business and sit in the very barber chair where Sheriff Waters gunned down Sam "Widow Maker" Carson.

Earl was happy to oblige every sightseer, at a modest fee of course. To enter the barber shop was twenty-five cents. To sit in the barber chair was two dollars. To sit in the barber chair and get a haircut by the very barber who witnessed the whole shooting was ten dollars. For months the tiny shop had people lined up around the corner and it wasn't long before Earl was a wealthy man.

Sheriff Waters enjoyed the attention much less. After the shooting, he found it impossible to perform his duties as sheriff. Every other second somebody came up to him asking for his autograph, shaking his hand, touching his gun, or begging him to say "Put 'em up!" Eventually he thought it best for Redbone if he turned in his star and let somebody who wasn't quite so famous sheriff the town.

No longer sheriff, the famed lawman didn't see the point in staying in Redbone. The whole reason he took on the job was because it was there he believed one man could make a difference. But now he was making too much of a difference, turning his beloved town into a circus. So he

fled the sparse outpost of the West for the densely populated cities of the East. With the five thousand dollar reward money, he purchased a small two-story building in the center of Boston, turned the top floor into an apartment and the bottom floor into a pocket watch store.

Occasionally, a visiting customer would ask if he was the legendary sheriff who killed both Kid Carson and Sam Carson. With a modest shrug he would confess that he was. Then the customer would take a hard look at the simple pocket watch maker, gaze into his easy eyes, and laugh at such a preposterous notion.

◆ The End ◆

About Alex Artukovich

Alex Artukovich received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film and Television from Chapman University in California. He resides and writes in Los Angeles. His short stories have appeared in *Writers Weekly, Midwest Literary Magazine, Amarillo Bay*, and *Fiction on the Web*.

Kings Over Jacks

by Samuel Engelman

Although the dark wood of ceiling looked quite familiar, for a while I did not realize where I was when I awoke from the dream. After a moment, however, the whiskey from the night before began to dissipate and the familiarity of the room returned. I was in Gum Pond, no, that is what they called it before the war, now it was known as Tupelo. This was my home here on the outskirts of what they dub Appalachia, though I barely recognized the town I had left all those years ago.

I had recently returned to the region for the first time since 1865, and was still acclimating to my old homeland. So far, it was a pleasant homecoming and I had enjoyed the company of Cecilia, my current bedmate, for around a month. Looking around the room, I noticed all manner of comforts and convenience; an ornate mirror reflected everything an individual could wish for, including the large bed with its thick blankets. I grinned at the thought of all those bitterly cold nights I had spent out west, with nothing for warmth but a small fire and a saddle blanket.

"I dreamt about a man I killed a couple years back, up in Ogallala." I spoke the sentence quietly, hoping she was still asleep or would ignore the comment. I do not know why I decided to confide this in her. Cecilia was consumptive, sickly, pale, and had a scar above her left breast. She had once been quite beautiful, I guessed, but the three decades she had lived had not been kind to her. She would probably be dead in a few years, either from the tuberculosis or her addiction to opium.

However, none of these things bothered me much. It was her occupation that did not sit well with me. This did not make much sense in itself, for it

was her profession which had brought us together in the first place. Her fierce green eyes and long wild red hair had won me over the moment I saw her.

I could not tell Cecilia that I loved her. She would not understand it if I did; after all, I had only known her for one month, and even at that only twenty or thirty minutes at a time. She was not even privy to my real name; I was calling myself Murphy these days and had built a fearful reputation around the name. No one had been fool enough to question my identity as of yet.

Tonight was the first night I had stayed with her, and only because she had finished off a bottle of laudanum and passed out shortly after I had paid for the services. It did not feel right to leave her naked and vulnerable. I did love Cecilia, and, truth be told, I had not anyone else to confide in. A man like me did not have the convenience of many friends, and throughout my life I had learned to find lovers where I could. The women were all different, depending on which region of the country I happened to find myself in, but they were also all the same from the Rio Grande to Montana. The way I saw it, women were like horses; they all had their little quirks but most were comparable to one another. Cecilia was akin to the tall grey mare I used to ride called "Belle." She was special enough to put a name to, and her company was pleasant enough to warrant my affection.

"What was that darlin'? A dream?" Cecilia yawned sleepily but rolled over and gave me a large smile, brushing her long red curls away from her green eyes. Abruptly, the door knob turned and, though the door was locked, the intruder persisted. He knocked and called through the door.

"Cecilia?" His voice was low and gruff. "What's this with the locked door? Let me in."

"I'll bring your money after awhile Henry," Cecilia rose and slowly pulled a white nightgown over her thin body. "I'm busy at the moment."

Perhaps she had forgotten to pay to balance for her room.

"I don't care who you got in there, I want the money now."

"I told you . . . after awhile Henry, I don't have it yet." She frowned at me and shook her head.

"I'll kick it down!" The voiced rose a great deal and the man knocked again, harder. I stood up and crossed the room, picking up a little wad of greenbacks on the way. Yanking the door open, I locked eyes with

the heavyset man on the other side. He outweighed me by an easy fifty pounds and had a German automatic stuffed in the front of his pants. I, on the other hand, was stark naked, but the moment he saw who I was the color in his face drained a bit and he stepped backward. I tossed the cash on the ground at his feet and pulled the door shut behind me. Making my way back to the bed, I sat down near Cecilia with a smile. Sensing I would expect something in return for my good deed, she pulled down the shoulders of her nightgown.

"It's alright, Cecilia." I stopped her and slid the garment back to its original place, before lying down beside her.

"Thank you . . . ." She was quiet for a long moment before speaking. "Tell me about the dream."

"Well, it's really more of a memory to me . . . a number of years back when I was up in Ogallala." I looked to her, and her green eyes prompted me to go on. I decided to do something I had never done before. I recounted the story to her in full detail.

"Back then I was riding under an alias. I called myself Warren to avoid the men from the papers and other enemies I had, but the rumor in Ogallala started floating around that I wasn't who I said I was, and a couple people had already figured out my actual identity." Looking past Cecilia, my glance set on the window looking out onto the street. Outside, the wooden rooftops were blanketed with snow, and flakes were still floating from the sky slowly. Twisting and turning they made their way downward. "It was snowing that day too, I remember. The day was very much like today." My lips were moving and telling the story, but my mind was not a part of their actions. It wandered its way back to the memory, and there it remained while my mouth told the tale.

My right index finger pulled the card across the table towards me, and my face remained like stone when I turned it over, although inside my heart beat faster. The King of Spades grinned at me when I slipped it into place among the other five cards in my hand. I would not say it was my lucky card, I did not believe in luck, but ole King David sure as hell had won me some money over the years since my overdue retirement. I say overdue not because I was old, but instead because I was tired—tired of the endless tracking and riding, the near-misses that left bullet holes in my duster, but most of all, I was tired of fighting. My particular expertise had

run its course anyway, and I had nothing to show for it but the loathing of these newly arrived "civilized" settlers. I had cleared this dangerous and untamed land for them, and now men like me were the only thing which did not belong in the "New West."

Outside the saloon it was blowing snow. A flake swirled for a moment, caught by the wind, but then reserved itself to drift slowly in the air, back and forth in the still street. A perfect day for a friendly poker game, and the five of us around the table were drinking, laughing, and enjoying the warmth inside.

When I looked up from my ally, the King, I was greeted by another friendly face. The boy across from me was grinning from one side to the other as he looked up from his own hand. He had already bet all of his money and I had called, so all that was left was the show.

"Full house." The boy leaned back with an attempted nonchalant motion, tossing the cards onto the table before me. One of his three Jacks slid until it hit my left hand which was still resting calmly on the table. Brushing his Jack of Hearts toward the center of the table, I prepared to show my own hand. He did not give me a chance, however, and reached for the cash on the table. Now usually a man could get a well-deserved licking for what the boy had just done, but I understood that he was just a little deep in his cups, so I went easy on him. I cleared my throat and placed my cards one after the other on the table. First one four, then the other, then the King of Hearts, followed by the King of Clubs. I then held the King of Spades between two fingers and tossed it softly toward him; it spun end over end until it struck off of his chest and landed on the table. The card looked up from the table; with his sword in hand and his stoic face, the King seemed to stir something deep inside the boy. His enormous smile faded into a foul grimace and he stood up, abruptly sending his chair skidding into a wall. "Can't be . . . you cheated!"

When his hand moved for the gun, everyone else at the table jumped and fell and ran backward. In the panic, the table was flung over. Chips, coins, drinks, greenbacks, and cards exploded into the air; like multicolored butterflies, the debris from the table drifted and hung suspended in air as if gravity was having no effect in that moment. Much like the snow beyond the walls of the tavern, the items from the table began to fall slowly.

Before me stood the boy; the whiskey-fueled accusation was just an

excuse. I knew his story without ever knowing him. As a child he had learned to respect his mother, and avoid his father's wrath. He had not been very good at the latter, and had often gotten himself into trouble, receiving lickings for his disobedience. It became a family story, the boy's mischievous behavior, but they blamed his father, for the child was reminiscent of him. I saw him as a young boy, reading dime novels by candlelight, turning page after page with a smile. I saw him a little older, in awe over gun tricks he saw at a traveling "wild-West show." Perhaps he had watched Buffalo Bill or Seth Clover shoot. His mother always warned him that they were just performers, and "gunslingers" were of the worst sort. Of course, she was right by my own reckoning. Secretly though, the boy collected pictures of gunfighters, and spent cartridges from his father's revolver. He kept them in a cigar box under his bed, hidden from his mother, father, and older sisters. I saw him older still, leaving home and imagining greatness as he practiced twirling his father's revolver, which was gifted to him for his journey away from home. He was headed to Ogallala to follow his eldest sister; her letters to the family had painted an exciting picture of the town. This time last year he was punching cattle to market, just finishing up the drive. The same was his story today. He was just another reckless kid out in the world, looking for fame any way he could find it.

The papers would have a heyday with this. My alias of "Warren" would never hold up after a shooting. I could already see the headlines that would run the following day. "Ex-Pinkerton gone rogue! Wallace guns down boy in Ogallala," they would read. True or not, that would be the fact of the matter. It would be yet another black mark on my already tarnished reputation. People would probably say that I had provoked him, that I had initiated the fight. Even some of the witnesses, I am certain, would remember the incident differently than I, but such was usually the story.

The cards and money were falling slowly, twisting and turning like wounded fowl freshly hit by a scattergun. The boy's hand was still reaching for the pistol at his hip, and my eyes were watching the scene in brilliant color and clarity. He was dressed very plainly, in patchy pants and a stained off-white shirt, topped by a hand-me-down bowler hat that used to be black, but now was closer to brown, stained by the Nebraska dirt. Short red curls of hair peeked out from under the hat. His green eyes

were wide with a mixture of excitement and fear, and the mustache he was attempting to grow had collected a few beads of sweat from his face. His mouth was half-open, as if he was trying to think of something to say, and his gun was secured with a well-used belt. The pistol hung high on his right hip, loosely clutched by the holster.

The moment the boy's fingers closed around the revolver, he turned from boy to man. The cards began to descend more rapidly.

It was a Remington 1875, not well kept, with specks of rust peppering the cylinder and barrel. It clung for a moment on the holster, which was not made for that particular revolver, but finally freed itself from the shabby leather and the man began to raise the gun. It was level with his navel, and his thumb had begun to cock the hammer back, when I finally reacted. The fluttering cards were falling at full speed now, as gravity and time had again made themselves apparent. In a smooth fraction of a second my fingers closed around the nickel-plated Schofield on my own hip, I cleared leather, cocked the hammer, leveled the gun, and squeezed. Smoke and flame belched out from the muzzle and sent a .45 slug tearing through the falling debris that still hung in the air between me and the man.

The projectile instantaneously planted itself squarely into his chest. There was no blood for a moment, only a burnt black hole which appeared directly left of the man's breastbone. He stumbled backward and sat again in the chair he had been sitting in only a few moments before. Dark blood climbed out, expanding in all directions from the bullet's entry, then moved down the belly, covering the front of his tight shirt. His half-cocked revolver slid from his dying hand and fell to the floor as he opened and closed his mouth slowly, attempting to breathe or speak or cry, I would never know which.

The smell of gunpowder brought back darkened memories of others I had killed—rustlers, thieves, killers, and a handful of foolish young men like the one dying in front of me. The fools were all the same; the only difference was their respective faces. I remembered every last one, and though I did not regret most, there were a few I did. I regretted this one already.

With a last effort, the man pushed himself up in the chair and toppled over backward, finally coming to rest face down on the newly crimson floor. I never even caught his name. Never even a "hello" or a handshake, but as I watched the man exhale his last breath, I realized I knew him in a way no one else ever had. A way no one else ever would.

As I re-holstered my Schofield, I could not help but notice the last of the cards touching down softly to the ground in front of me. My eyes immediately set on the King of Spades which was resting only one step in front of me. I took the step, kneeled to the ground, picked up the card with my thumb and finger. Beneath it was another card, which was face down. It was not luck, I do not believe in luck. Nor was it chance, which is as fleeting and frivolous as the former. However, I knew what the other card was, even before I picked it up with my trembling fingers. The young man's Jack of Hearts, his losing card, looked at me with dead, inanimate eyes. It haunted me for a moment before I dropped it back to the floor.

I had killed yet another man, the youngest so far. I had done it with so little effort that it had frightened me. Without a hint of hesitation I had pulled the trigger yet again. I thought I should have let him kill me, after the fact. The new world did not need a man like me in it, and as long as I was around there would be more men who would try me. More boys who would become men for only seconds, just long enough to die. As for God, I prayed he would go on and take me. God does not take sides often in these sorts of matters; if he did I would have died years ago. However, just once, I wanted him to take an adversary's side against me. I prayed he would send that one man, that angel of death, to out-gun me. I felt only death would lift the burden of remorse from my shoulders.

With my story recounted, my eyes came back to focus and I gave Cecilia a look. I did not know what I expected her to say; maybe I did not expect anything but to see those green eyes, red hair, and smile. She pulled herself in, close to me, tears running down her face.

"I remember Ogallala," she said. I had never held a woman who was crying before, and I knew not what to say to her. I decided that I should just hold her after a brief moment of hesitation. I could never describe the feeling of my heart as I held Cecilia just then. I did not know what emotion my face was displaying as we lay there, but the emotion in my heart was love. It was something foreign and half-remembered. It was something exciting that I did not know still existed within me. I just held her tightly for a while, hard against my chest, until finally my eyes closed and I drifted away into another dream.

I saw Cecilia's green eyes and her red hair, but now it was her lying dead on the floor of the Ogallala saloon. When I reached down to lift the King of

Spades from the floor, instead I found a Queen—the Queen of Hearts, with her pleasant smile and a flower in hand, gazing at me. Underneath the Queen was the King of Spades, face down. As I held the two cards together in my hand, the realization struck me. The reason for Cecilia's tears was so stark, so exposed, I could not believe I had missed the resemblance all this time. Her lovely red hair, her piercing green eyes . . . .

They said I never felt the knife blade plunge into my heart. They were wrong. I felt it like fire and ice; it punctured deeply through the organ I had only recently learned to use. It was not luck; I do not subscribe to chance. I never woke, my prayer finally answered.

◆ The End ◆

About Samuel Engelman

Born on a cattle ranch in the Oklahoma Panhandle, Samuel Engelman grew up immersed in Western culture and custom. His youth was filled with cowboying and ranchwork in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, and his literary diet consisted of everything from Louis L'Amour, Jeff Shaara, and Tom Clancy, to Tolkien, Orwell, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Edgar Allan Poe.

To dull the pain of endless college hours spent reading and researching dry nonfiction historical volumes, Sam started writing western fiction during his time at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. He completed a degree in History/Political Science, and went to work in the oilfield after college.

After publishing a few western short stories, including "Kings over Jacks," he moved on to longer works and different genres. He published a novella entitled *The Believers* in the summer of 2013 and finally published his first full-length novel, *Yesterday's Dead: The Flight of The Mourning Dove*, in the spring of 2014. These latest works stray away from the western genre where he had his beginning and explore the worlds of apocalyptic and dystopian fiction. Though he has branched out into these new genres, his western roots and style can easily be seen bleeding through the pages of his newest book, and because of this he lends a unique voice to a genre where few western authors have had the inclination to venture.

His novel is available on Amazon in Kindle or paperback, and he runs a fanpage on Facebook for his series titled *Yesterday's Dead*.

Currently, he resides with his wife in North Texas where he works as a sales representative in the oilfield, and is working fervently on the next novel in his new series.

The Short Life of a Galvanized Yankee: A Tale of Desertion

by Gary Ives

Hark! Call to Arms. Amnesty for Former Rebels now incarcerated who are Qualified and Approved for Service and who Swear the Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America. One Year Enlistment in the Union Army. Full Pardon Granted upon Acceptance! Serve the Union!

Could anything be worse than this? It was his eighteenth birthday and Sandy Immelman sat on a bench outside the Provost's office waiting to be interviewed by the recruiting sergeant. What was there to lose? There was nothing back home. Hell, he didn't give a shit about the damned war. He'd volunteered to escape the drudgery of his father's savage temper and misery of working for the old man at his sawmill.

And now there was the matter of desertion. The men who were the shit heel officers now would be the shit heel judges and lawmen back home once the war was over and he would have to bear the stigma of desertion. He had not had a decent meal in over a year. Days spent popping lice between his thumb nails, waiting for thin rations of watery soup and weevily hard tack while he stood guard over his blanket made signing up for one year in the Yankee army out West as welcome as a band of angels.

The recruiting sergeant relit his cigar, then continued the interview. "Mr. Immelman, after you enlisted in the Arkansas Volunteers you were at the siege of Vicksburg and the surrender. The Union granted amnesty to everyone at Vicksburg. So how did you come to end up here at Rock Island prison?

Immelman spoke slow and quiet. "That's right, sir. The whole bunch of us started marching down to Vicksburg day after we enlisted. See, it wasn't that we was beat down, not from fighting, no. Fact of the matter is, sir, I've yet to see a fight, just the siege. No sir, it was lack of rations whipped us. By the time of the surrender all of us was just skin and bones; wasn't a dog nor cat left in Vicksburg and I dare say nary a rat nor mouse. Then instead of feeding and transporting 30,000 prisoners of war, General Grant reckoned the smartest thing was to have each rebel soldier sign a pledge guaranteeing not to fight no more against the Union. You're right, sir, it was a general amnesty for all of us.

"Our officers told us, 'Sign the damn papers and let us be gone out of here.' Took two weeks to get all them signatures and for them two weeks we ate good Yankee rations, hard tack, salt pork and real coffee. Then when the papers was finally signed and collected we was ordered to stack arms. The Yanks give each man a half loaf and one ration of salt pork and sent us on our way as merry as can be. Maybe a feller had to be there to believe it. It was almost friendly.

"Our old units formed up and our officers began marching us east. We was headed some to Mobile, some to Biloxi. But then, like fleas hoppin' off a dead cat, fellers commenced to fall out and I mean right off. We hadn't marched three miles when one of my mess mates, Jonas Switt from Ireland, he breaks off to relieve hisself in the bushes, never to be seen no more, then another boy named Billy Dew did the same thing, and that very same idea, it come upon the ranks like a thick fog, it did.

"Pretty soon our captain halts us and he give it to us straight that any attempt to desert would be fatal. General Grant had allowed the officers to keep their side arms and horses. Holding up his pistol he says, 'Don't make me bloody my saber should I run short of bullets!' Maybe all the piss and vinegar was gone out of us troops but the officers was still very much for the cause and hell bent to get us back into the fray, to hell with the pledge papers. However, they had scarce means of halting the columns to pursue the hundreds—maybe thousands—of deserters.

"Me, I took French Leave the second night, as soon as dark fell, walking west most of the night. I was gonna work my way back to the river, find a way downstream to the Gulf and then Mexico or maybe crew on some foreign ship. I slept under a blanket of sweet smelling red cedar shavings

at a sawmill. In the morning a negro seen me crossing a cotton patch to get to a thicket of cypress and he commenced to hollerin' his fool head off. I figured he was yellin' for the Home Guard but within an hour of leaving that sawmill I was took prisoner by the Yanks.

"I don't mind telling you, sir, there was a bevy of us, hundreds and hundreds of us from Vicksburg who had deserted only to be captured and throwed in the Yank stockade and kept there the rest of the year. Then in the middle of winter they trundled us up river here to Rock Island. God awful place it is too. I reckon you know."

The recruiter came to the point. "Well soldier, you've read the bulletin and you know that President Lincoln has extended this offer of complete amnesty in exchange for a one year enlistment in the Union Army. You former rebs will be assigned to Western units. You will not fight in the South. Sign up, soldier, and you could be dressed in blue in the barracks tomorrow night with a full tobacco pouch and beer in your belly. You've read the bulletin. Swearing in will be in the morning."

The next afternoon with 126 other volunteers Immelman became a Galvanized Yankee and swore allegiance to the Union and to the President and the officers appointed over him, enlisting for a term of one year in Company B, Third U.S. Volunteer Infantry.

Immelman's friend Ben McGrath said, "I was so damned low I could reach up and touch bottom. Hell, I'd have signed up for a bar of soap and a plug of 'baccy."

Their clothes were burned and their heads shaved as part of the delousing regimen before they were issued new woolen uniforms and boots.

A week later their captain spoke to the officers and sergeants of Company B, Third U.S. Volunteer Infantry. "We board the train in the morning. At Saint Louis we'll take on commissary stores, weapons, and ammunition. We'll be drawing 150 percent rations with a wagon with two teams of mules. The Rock has left these men puny, and I want some meat on their bones, so quartermaster, you'll issue one and a half rations per man, per day until otherwise instructed.

"We'll detrain at St. Joseph. The overland march to Fort. Kearny will be off the trail so as to season up these reb troops. Our mission in the Nebraska Territory will be to protect the mail routes and keep those routes and telegraph lines open. The Cheyenne are tough—mighty tough—so you will drill, drill, drill your troops.

"Now you know and I know that these rebs have enlisted to get the hell off Rock Island. Can't say as I blame 'em. Try to understand their situation. I don't know how many are going to try to make a run for it, but sure as shit it is going to happen and when it does we've got to make an example of every deserter. That means you are to use any force available to halt a deserter. Tell your sergeants and corporals to shoot if they have to. We'll court martial any bastard brought in. It's war time. Punishment will be swift and severe. Let's hope it doesn't become a problem."

In the cattle cars, it remained quiet, save for the rhythm of the wheels against the rails. Each man mulled over his situation. Tobacco smoke and sweat permeated an air filled with guilt. Enlisting in the Union Army was an anathema back home in a land that was being crushed. Atlanta and Richmond were lost, and still Lee would not give in. The Union had tried to negotiate prisoner exchanges but every time the talks had ended with the Confederates walking away from the table while tens of thousands languished in the hell holes like Saint Albans and Rock Island, not to mention the poor blue-bellies starving to death in the Southern camps.

So stupid, so insane. Just about every rebel prisoner at Rock Island now regarded the war as a miserable and tragic folly. Only a very small clutch of die-hards held on to the initial fervor of the secession. Lee had even turned down a three-hour truce for both sides to recover their wounded, leaving hundreds dying just yards away from relief. And rumors held that the Yanks would make the South pay dearly for the massacre of negro soldiers at Fort Pillow and would be in no hurry to release prisoners come the end of the war. It might be years before their release. The North would use prisoners as pawns to squeeze the South and exact further punishment. Loyalty to the South? Over half the men in the new B Company had deserted their units. Therefore home was not an option for most. And Lincoln's amnesty offer came ever so welcome. Could anything be worse than the hell that was Rock Island prison camp with the gangs, the lice, the filth and hunger? Amnesty after the war, full rations, boots, a clean uniform, order and service in the West—the idea was like manna from heaven. Even before the war the West had held wonder and allure for men all over the world. Vast tracts of land were there for the asking and fortunes waiting to be made. This was the West. There was nothing in the South. The West offered a new start, and hope.

At Saint Joe the troops detrained and made camp beside the depot for one night to begin the two-hundred-mile overland march to Fort Kearny the next morning. Marching off the trail, the captain's mind was to coalesce and harden his company. Full rations and constant discipline on the march could lift the dreariness of defeat, capture, and imprisonment and could hopefully restore his men. How the shift in allegiance affected them he had no notion as yet, but was mindful and would observe. He had instructed the lieutenant and the sergeants that he wanted every man treated as a soldier—firm and fair but also to be mindful that these men had been weakened by imprisonment and, aside from any attempted desertions, to be judicious in punishments on the trek. "We're leaving St. Joe with prisoners. When we get to Fort Kearny I want soldiers."

The first deserter was a Choctaw from Mississippi named Long Charley. Long Charley was gone ere Company B heard reveille at Saint Joe. Vanished. The Captain filed a Report of Desertion with the U. S. Marshal before the march began. A returned deserter earned a fifty dollar bounty. Each of the three privates who had shared the tent with Long Charley got three lashes in front of the Company "for complicity."

Somewhere near Marysville Trading Post two men slipped out of ranks as the company forded a stream. When they failed to show up for muster, a search party was dispatched, but was unable to pick up their tracks. The column continued without them the next day. That afternoon two Kiowa scouts rode alongside the column, the captured deserters in tow. One had been bound by the ankles and was dragged along, the other bound by his wrists ran until he fell. From the saddle the scout snapped a bullwhip until he was on his feet to repeat the run and stumble. The man who had been dragged died before sundown, and the other faced court martial by lantern light, lying on a cot before the captain's tent. Next morning the troops were formed up to witness his execution. The poor man was too weak from the dragging ordeal to stand and had to be carried and set on a camp stool to be shot. The color sergeant read the article and stepped aside then signaled the drummer who began a tattoo. The man, Willoughby, hung his head, chin touching his chest. He wept and then puked into his lap as the color sergeant slipped a feed sack over his head. The impact of the ball knocked him backwards where he lay twitching and moaning for less than a minute.

Immelman recoiled. The circumstances of his enlistment in the Union army with its full rations and good boots had softened his opinion of the former enemy. The captain seemed decent enough and no one had mistreated Immelman as yet. However the execution weighed heavily. He saw the captain's predicament, but Immelman knew desertion.

Halfway to Fort Kearny the company encamped for a week of drills—close order drills, marching, lines of skirmish drills, bayonet drills and weapons training. Everything Yankee was better, their gear, their food, their discipline. Ammunition seemed unlimited and the sergeants pushed and pushed not only marksmanship but care of weapons down to the minutest detail. Immelman wondered how the South had held on as long as it had.

On the Sunday before the last leg of the march to Fort Kearny resumed, two beef critters were slaughtered and the men given an afternoon of rest.

That afternoon B Company had its first contact with the Cheyenne. Three braves rode into the camp at a slow trot, halting where Immelman was turning beef on spits. The Kiowa scouts were sent for to parlay with the Cheyenne who asked for beef and coffee. Immelman watched. There were no smiles or gestures of gratitude. The three mounted braves scanned the camp, sneering quietly. The corporal came and passed a sack, the same sack that had covered Willoughby's head, now with a pound of coffee and some flour, to a brave who handed it to the Indian on his right and dismounted pointing at a spit of roasting beef.

"It ain't even cooked yet. Tell 'em that, it ain't ready," Immelman said.

Even before the Kiowa had translated, the brave snatched the spit with ten pounds of dripping roast, mounted his pony, and the three trotted slowly out of camp.

"Hey you, come back here with my spit, damn you!"

Later Immelman described the event to his mess mates hunkered down around joints of the beef. "Just as proud as peacocks they was. That Injun slipped down off his pony smooth as silk he did, walked over, looked me right in the eye then lifted the spit, the one holdin' the biggest roast, and before you knowed it he was back on that little mount with the three of 'em ridin' real slow, not a fare-thee-well or a kiss my ass, or fuck you. Proud ain't the word for it, no sir."

"What kind of rifles did they have?"

"Nothin' bad, just one old-timey muzzle loader, stock was held together with cord. Others had bows and mean lookin' clubs."

"Well," said McGrath, "if that's what they got to fight us with, we might be in good stead and them little horses wasn't nothin', jist ponies. Piss poor horseflesh if you ask me. Jeb Stuart, he'd eat ponies like them for breakfast."

The opinion of Cheyenne horses abruptly changed two days later when a war party of thirty attacked a detail of twelve men assigned to cut wood as the company made camp by a stream. The mounted attack was superbly coordinated with a center line of ten flanked by right and left echelons of ten each swooping down on the work detail armed only with axes and hatchets. Two axe-wielding soldiers were taken down with nine-foot lances, and three more downed by arrows and war clubs, the Cheyenne archers in motion shooting from under their horses' necks. The killing and crippling of the initial attack panicked the others who made a run for camp about 200 yards away across a small stream.

The attackers' left and right flanks joined the center line of skirmish between the stream and the soldiers who were cut off though in full view of the camp. The braves pressed the attack again with lances and arrows. The screams of the men had alarmed the camp and men soldiers rushed in every direction in a confusion to get to their stacked arms and ammunition pouches.

Only the captain, the lieutenant, and the Kiowa scouts had horses and while the officers mounted quickly, the superior number of the attackers forestalled any counterattack. From their mounts they called orders to the sergeants to form a line of battle and to advance. But the minutes it took to organize the attack defeated its purpose and six of their own lay dead and six wounded without a shot fired. Before retreating the warriors wheeled into two perfect circles, the outer rotating clockwise, the inner circle counterclockwise around the fallen soldiers as smooth as a wagon wheels, the warriors waving their weapons and whooping war cries. The circles then broke into three units which fanned northward across the plain at a gallop, issuing an occasional war whoop and completely ignoring the firing of rifles from camp. No soldier there had ever seen such dazzling horsemanship.

That night pickets were doubled. Immelman, with mess-mates McGrath and Warton, watched the burial detail. None of fallen had less than three arrows, with seven in poor Horton, the corporal in charge of the detail. The graves were dug shallow then covered with stones from the stream

bed. No ceremony, no words, no wooden crosses, no Bible readings, just sweat and dirt and fear to attend the leaving of this world. By morning two of the wounded had died and another two graves were hastily dug. The two Kiowa scouts were gone.

"Them Cheyenne rode like they was part of them ponies. Jumpin' Jesus, I never seen nothing like it," McGrath said. "There was this mighty big exhibition at the Jackson camp just before we marched down to Vicksburg. Stuart's cavalry was ridin' high. They'd captured a shit load of Yankee horses and everything was roses. They was 300 of Jeb's finest mounted on the very best horseflesh. I mean the best. They drug artillery pieces and did fence jumpin' and charges and half a dozen quick change formations but nuthin' they did touched what them savages did on those little horses yesterday. My God, how are we supposed to fight that? How come they're sending infantry out here when it's clear as crystal what they need is cavalry? Sergeant says them Cheyenne is the finest horsemen ever there was and they have thousands of ponies. Thousands! Do you hear me?"

Immelman replied that the Union army wouldn't have sent them if there wasn't a good plan. "Look what they're doin' to the South. You think these savages stand a chance, McGrath? Your Injun pony gonna leap over palisade? Huh? And if must needs be they just might send Sherman or Sheridan out here. Then what? Huh?"

"All's I'm sayin' is anyone gits stuck out on the prairie like those poor darlin's, and get rode down on like they was, they're done for. Done for, damnit! Maybe if we had Henrys or Navy Colts we'd stand a chance, but shit, the time you take to reload . . . ."

"You worry too much, Ben."

"And you love your damned blue-bellies too much, Sandy. They're assholes, you ain't learned that yet? Just 'cause they got vittles don't mean you gotta love 'em, boy. They sure as shit ain't gonna shower no love on us. You forget what they did to Willoughby? And you like bein' called 'Galvanized Yankee?' Huh? That fall sweet on your ears?"

That night a full moon shone over the thirty-two tents. No one slept easy. The doubled-up pickets stayed alert. Immelman dreamed. He and McGrath had the last picket duty on the stream side of camp and stayed together, pacing the perimeter, watching and listening for sign, and in this dream they met by a willow thicket to share a smoke an hour before

sunup. Before the match used to light the cheroot hit the ground, each man had been grabbed from behind. A blade plunged deep into Immelman's kidney as McGrath's throat was slashed clean through to his backbone. Immelman's attacker finished him off by plunging the spit taken with the haunch of beef the day before into his eye. This dream put him in a state of fear he could not shake.

Daily, the men of the Company saw mounted Indians on the horizon, always at a slow trot. The soldiers marched, shouldered arms with fixed bayonets. Pickets were kept doubled and the men slept with their rifles. One day's march from Fort Kearny, an escort sent from the fort met the company with the news of Lee's surrender. A buzz went through the ranks immediately. Any disappointment with the news of the surrender among the former Confederates was mitigated by the sight of the Fort and the assurance of safety.

The men of Company B remained in tents. At the post, Galvanized Yankees faced strong resentment from the post cadre, many of whom had transferred West after Gettysburg and The Wilderness. Out of ranks they were snubbed by the regulars and called "Johnny Reb" or "Galavanizers."

Once settled into post life, the captain had pitched in with the regulars, allowing Company B to live in tents and to pull the worst duties: digging latrines, hauling water, and standing night watches while the regulars lived in barracks and escorted wagon trains and mail coaches to Dodge or Fort Pierre. Immelman's single thread of consolation was McGrath. Now, like him, Immelman had come to despise Yankees.

In the spring, the company was assigned to cut wood to construct barracks before winter. The trees to be felled were on an island in the Platte. Immelman and McGrath worked a drag chain hauling trimmed logs to a saw mill which had been set up on the island. With the two mules, it was tough work in the heat. One afternoon the left mule stepped on a blind rattler stretched across the path shedding its skin. The snake, pinned to the ground by the mule's hoof, struck several times putting the mule out of com-mission. This invoked the wrath of the corporal, a regular, in charge of the detail.

"If you was leadin' them mules proper instead of stragglin' behind, Jenny wouldn't never have stepped on that damned snake. It's your fault McGrath, and yours too Immelman, you goddamned worthless Galvanizers."

McGrath and Immelman were charged with dereliction, fined two

months pay, and transferred to the trimming crew working from morning to sunset with axes and hatchets. During a lunch break on a particularly hot day McGrath allowed how he didn't know if he could take much more of this shit. Immelman agreed and soon the cork popped from the bottle of the idea that had played upon both men's minds for weeks.

"I am ever so ready to say my farewells to this shit hole, Immelman. Might just as well be a pair of mules ourselves the way a man gets treated here. Why they ain't a spark of kindness within a hunnert miles of this place."

"I think that's the worse part, Ben, all the sweet has run out of life. Ain't nuthin left but the sours. I can't remember the last time I seen a feller smile. And don't anybody laugh lessen' he's drunk. I want to see a pretty woman. I want to see children playin' and I'd give a half dollar to hear a baby cry. I wanna hear 'please' and 'thank you' and 'howdy-do.' I wanna hear a piano or a banjo with people singing of an evening. I swear I hate it, hate it near as bad as The Rock and a damned site more than Vicksburg. A man needs some kindness in his world, dammit. That's all I want, a little kindness. Let's cut, Ben, you and me, let's cut. I been thinkin' about it ever since the punishment. Let's cut, cut out of this hell hole. I say cut Ben, do you hear?"

"I'd be lyin' if I told you I hadn't been thinking the same, probably longer than you. But I tell you what's got me flummoxed is the goddamn Cheyenne. Immelman, I am scairt to death of them devils. And there ain't no way out of Nebraska Territory that don't cross a hundred hunnert miles of Cheyenne."

"Ben, I been thinking that we could latch ourselves to one of these wagon trains headin' to Oregon or California. You got any idea how we could git in with one of them wagon masters?"

An excitement infused McGrath's speech. "Lemme think it over. Lemme think. We can cipher this out, boy. I know we can."

Dozens of wagon trains stopped at Fort Kearny each month. Some were trains that had formed up in Missouri or Kentucky or Indiana and others were lone wagons that had collected together on the trail for protection that numbers afforded. Approaching wagon masters at the fort was too risky. Wagoneers could peach on them, and once the two failed to show up at muster, patrols would be sent to search for them and they knew from past desertions that the search of wagons for deserters was the first

evolution of the patrols. So the two planned to trek overland twenty-five or thirty miles west before approaching the wagon trail.

"We'll only move at night; I reckon we can do at least ten miles a night, don't you? Them injuns sleep at nighttime just like us. As long as we stay off the trail and are careful about our tracks we can do it, Sandy, I know we can."

On the dark of the moon the two slipped from their tent with bed rolls, a compass, canteens, their haversacks crammed with food and forty-four dollars between the two. Leaving the post was effortless. They stayed on the main trail where their tracks would be mingled with the daily traffic. At Three Mile Creek they departed the road and headed midstream to the north for a mile. Leaving the stream around midnight they carefully brushed away their prints and continued north across the plain. They knew the patrol would push west to intercept and search wagons. Just before dawn broke they bedded down in a coulee. At dusk the next day they went over the plan.

"We'll keep northwest for a couple of hours, then about midnight we'll swing back southwest and pick up the wagon trail in a couple of days."

An hour into the trek, thunder sounded to the north, the wind picked up and soon the two were facing into sheets of cold rain and hail.

"If we left any tracks at all they's gone by now, partner. This'll draw the patrols back to the post."

"McGrath, this is crazy," Immelman shouted, "we got to find us somewheres to hole up till this storm passes."

Flashes of lightning lit the prairie every few seconds. Now the men felt very small and miserable and the natural urge for shelter dominated, but there was no safe refuge. Soon the pair crouched beneath a dead Osage orange tree under their wet blankets. Before sunup, the storm eased into a steady rain and they rose and slogged west hoping to find shelter. Trying to ford a rain-swollen ravine, McGrath lost his footing and was swept fifty yards downstream, his bedroll, canteen, and compass lost. Their rations were soaked, the hard tack now a white mush at the bottom of the haversacks. By noon the rain ceased and the exhausted pair slept naked on the wet ground, their clothes and the one remaining blanket spread out to dry.

McGrath woke Immelman just before dark. "We gotta git goin', boy. I

figure we can start south now." However no north star shone through the cloud cover and the pair's third night trek became aimless. Immelman had taken a chill from the drenching and now was plagued every few minutes by a fit of shaking.

"I can't get warm. We gonna have to build us a fire, else I'm afraid I ain't gonna make it."

"No, damnit, Sandy. No fire. Them red devils can smell smoke for fifty miles. Here, wrap the blanket 'round you. Come on boy, you can do this, soldier."

"Please, Ben, just a little fire," he begged.

"I couldn't make a fire noways. There ain't tinder, not a dry twig on this whole damned prairie."

An hour before dawn Immelman sunk to his knees. "I can't go on no more, McGrath. I just can't." A fit of shivers hit him and he went into a coughing fit.

"All right, all right, Sandy. We'll bunk down here but no fire." The two huddled under the army blanket.

"Stop yer coughing, Sandy. Shush. I heard somethin'."

"What? Is it a coyote? Some critter?"

"Hush! It's a horse. I heard a horse nicker."

It was Six Rabbits's turn to watch the horses that night. The first coughs he heard he thought had come from one of the teepees. But when the ponies became nervous and began shifting he sprang to his feet and sniffed the air. Then he heard the soft whispers somewhere to the left of the hobbled ponies. He eased around the horses and made the outline of the soldier's blanket.

Two minutes later half a dozen heavy war clubs pounded down upon the pair over and over again breaking arms, hands, ribs, and heads. The moaning bodies were dragged thirty yards to the center of the Cheyenne encampment and bound.

In the morning Immelman awoke. He forced his swollen eyes open. He lay facing McGrath's hands. All the fingers had been cut off and only thumbs remained. Now a fat squaw cleaved McGrath's face in two with a tomahawk. Six Rabbits was awarded the privilege of scalping Immelman. Only thirteen years old, he'd never scalped before and lacked the finesse of a warrior. Immelman's short hair from the delousing at Rock Island

gave poor purchase to the boy. With his father's black obsidian knife he began the cut too far forward and allowed the razor sharp knife to find its own path. Soon the left upper half of Immelman's face and forehead were peeled back and taken with the scalp. Immelman screamed. When Horse With Wings commented that the exposed eyeball in its socket along with the screeching put him in mind of a great white owl everyone laughed then left to break camp. Immelman was an hour dying.

◆ The End ◆

About Gary Ives

See page 92.

Heaven

by Kenneth Newton

July 2, 1863, near Hunterstown, Southeastern Pennsylvania

Bo had gone down at a full gallop, no doubt shot, and Custer remembered flying over the big bay's head and landing so hard it knocked the wind out of him. When he could breathe again he stood up, and that was when he saw the rebel cavalryman, his mount motionless as he aimed his picked-up Spencer carbine at Custer from less than ten yards away. Custer could see the carbine bounce as the Confederate tried to control his breathing, and he was reaching for his revolver when smoke and flame erupted from the Spencer. The last thing he remembered was an instant of searing pain in his chest, and now someone was helping him to his feet.

Once the general was upright, the lieutenant found Custer's hat and brought it to him, knocking off the dust on his thigh. "We need to get going, General."

Custer looked around, and realized he was still right where he had most recently been, on the road between Hunterstown and Gettysburg, in Pennsylvania. It was still hot, but it was a peaceful summer day, not at all as he remembered it, with the screeching artillery shells, rattling sabers, and musket fire, and the men and horses screaming at the top of their lungs. He slapped at the dirt on his black velvet tunic as he turned to the lieutenant. He couldn't come up with a name. "And where is it we need to get going to, Lieutenant . . . ."

"Brewster, sir." The lieutenant saluted, and Custer returned it. "David Brewster, and we need to go to Hunterstown. A farm house near there, actually. It's only about two miles." He held out the hat.

Custer took his hat and put it on. "You have the advantage of me, Lieutenant Brewster. You seem to know what's happening here, and all I know is, I was most likely shot to death on this spot, and yet here I am, alive." He put two fingers to his jugular. "I can feel my heart beating. How can that be?"

Lt. Brewster shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not at liberty to discuss it. I'm sure everything will be made clear to you at the farm house. And we really should be on our way." He turned and headed up the road.

Custer hesitated, and then hurried to catch up. "I expect they've killed you, as well." When Brewster didn't answer, he said, "Suppose I was to order you to tell me what the hell is going on."

"That order wouldn't apply here."

"I see." They walked perhaps three hundred yards in silence, until Custer could feel blisters forming on both heels. "You know, Brewster," he said, "I don't think I've walked two miles in riding boots since the academy. If you could scare us up a couple of horses, I wouldn't ask how you knew where to find them."

Brewster glanced at Custer, smiled briefly, and replied, "I would if I could, General, but there aren't any horses here."

Custer shook his head in disgust. "Good god, what kind of place is this?" He paused a moment and went on. "That's a rhetorical question, of course. Listen, Brewster, I apologize for not remembering your name. A brigade commander should know his officers."

"Think nothing of it, General. There are a lot of lieutenants to keep track of, and I only recently joined the Michigan Brigade."

Custer had to laugh at that. "Well, Pleasonton only gave me the damned brigade on the 28th. I have been a Brigadier General of Volunteers for all of four days, and now I am killed, and with one of our own carbines, to boot." His mood changed abruptly. "Libbie," he whispered.

Lt. Brewster looked at Custer just as a tear started down his cheek, which the general quickly brushed away. "Sir?"

"Libbie," Custer repeated. "I shall never marry my sweet girl, after all. I haven't even written her about my promotion. This news will be terribly difficult for her to bear."

They walked in silence for some time, and then Lt. Brewster said, "There are some Confederates where we're going . . . "

Custer felt for weapons and found his revolver holster and saber scabbard empty.

" . . . but they are no danger to you."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, and in due time they stood in front of a modest whitewashed house some 100 feet off the road, with outbuildings, a barn, a chicken coop, and a corral out back, but not a living creature in sight. Lt. Brewster mounted the porch, pulled open the squeaking screen door, and gestured Custer inside. "After you, General."

Custer removed his hat and stepped through the door into the middle of an argument—several of them, actually, as there were five spirited quarrels underway in all areas of the front room. Each debating society consisted of one Union officer and two or more Confederates, and the universal subject of their disagreement, if he was hearing them correctly, seemed to be cavalry tactics. Custer recognized two classmates from the academy, one in blue, the other in gray, and approached their group.

"Your Kilpatrick, or KillCavalry, as even his own men deem him," sneered the rebel major, "will sacrifice a hundred men for five feet of ground!"

"Well, by God," replied the U.S. captain, "the only way to win a war is to fight it, and Kilpatrick will fight, much to the dismay of your sorry lot of feather-hatted dandies!"

"Yes, and when he runs out of any of your dear boys to fight with, what then? And we are the dandies? Don't forget our old pal, your peacock of a boy general, with his black velvet suit and red scarves!"

"Bob, Charlie," Custer said. "What's all the shouting about?" They ignored him and continued to harangue one another. "Boys, you both learned how to horse soldier at the same place, right? It's me, Armstrong, old Abe's boy general." Still they paid him no mind.

"They can neither see nor hear you, General." A stone fireplace commanded the north wall. The dining table had been set in front of it to serve as a desk, and behind the table stood the staff sergeant who had spoken. When Custer turned to him, the sergeant straightened and saluted.

Custer returned the salute as he crossed the room. "One thing I've learned since West Point: If you want to know what the hell is going on in this man's army, you need to talk to a sergeant. So, sergeant, what the hell is going on?"

"Sgt. Peters, at your service, General. Please have a seat."

"I don't mind if I do. My dogs are barking. And I'll trouble you for a glass of water, if I may."

Both men sat down. "I have whiskey," said the sergeant.

"I'm not much of a drinker. Water will be fine."

"I have only whiskey." The sergeant poured Custer a drink, and offered him the tumbler.

Custer took the glass and looked around the room. "Normally, when we commandeer a private residence, particularly on loyal Union soil, we try to respect the sensibilities of the owner. I'm surprised the lady of the house doesn't box these loud fellows' ears and require them to behave like gentlemen." He raised the glass. "To your health, Sgt. Peters." Custer took a tentative sip, then drained the glass. The amber liquid burned his dry throat, but did little to soothe it. He shuddered as he set down the glass.

"Oh, there are no women here, General."

"More's the pity. Well, start talking, Peters, before that whiskey hits me and I can no longer comprehend the Queen's English."

"Long story short, there's been a mistake. You shouldn't be here, and I've prepared the paperwork to send you back. It only requires your signature." Sgt. Peters retrieved a document from a black leather portfolio.

"A mistake, you say?"

"Yes, but perhaps accident is a better word. In the fog of war, it happens. Lt. Brewster did his best to prevent it." Brewster approached the table and snapped to attention.

"Brewster was charged with keeping me safe?" Custer turned to the lieutenant. "So, Brewster, where were you when you were supposed to be looking out for me? Up in a hay loft with some yellow haired Dutch girl?" Brewster didn't so much as blink. "Oh, for God's sake, at ease, Lieutenant. The good sergeant is about to fix your faux pas, if I'm understanding these proceedings correctly." Brewster remained at attention.

Sgt. Peters cleared his throat and went on. "Usually we just let it go. Most men, truth be told, lead rather mundane lives, and the precise timing of their coming and going is of little consequence." He slid the document across the table. "Others have, shall we say, a date with destiny that must be respected."

The writing on the paper read, I, George Armstrong Custer, do hereby voluntarily request transfer to Hunterstown, Penn., 2nd July, 1863, 1637

hours. Immediately underneath this sentence was a line for his signature. At the bottom of the sheet, near the left margin, was written, 25th June, 1876.

Custer looked up from the paper. "I may have graduated at the bottom of my class, but I can put two and two together."

Sgt. Peters nodded. "Don't let that trouble you. Once you're back, for the most part it will be as if you were never here. You may recall snippets now and again, but that's all, and the longer you're back, the less you will remember. That date won't mean anything to you."

Custer nodded. "Well, I'm pretty damn sure this rebellion won't last another thirteen years."

"Oh, no," replied the sergeant. "Another place, and another adversary—you've got more soldiering to do after this war, General."

"Well, sergeant, that's good to know, as soldiering is what I want to do. And you can bet your boots I'll go down fighting."

"I have no doubt of that, sir."

Custer sighed. "But in the end I will spend eternity in the dreary company of arrogant southerners."

"Perhaps not arrogant southerners; these things tend to be, for want of a better word, situational. But there's no need to worry about that now."

He dipped a pen and offered it to Custer, who took it and signed G. A. Custer. He put down the pen and raised himself out of the dining chair. "Come on Brewster, and I expect you to be more diligent in your guardian angel duties this go 'round." He looked around the room but Brewster was gone, as were the several groups of antagonistic cavalrymen.

Sgt. Peters stood up. "Lt. Brewster won't be going back, General, only you."

"The hell you say. I like him, even if he did get me killed. I don't suppose there are any strings I could pull . . . here." The sergeant made no reply, which wasn't necessary, as Custer already knew the answer to that question. He picked up the crystal whiskey decanter. "You know something, Sergeant? I haven't had a drink in over a year. I should be feeling that three fingers of liquor I tossed down, but I'm not."

"Well, the truth is, it's only water that tastes like whiskey."

Custer shook his head. "Let's see, now," he said. "Endless arguments with belligerent traitors," he turned to look the sergeant in the eye, "or whomever; no requirement for somebody like Brewster to obey the orders of a superior; the drinking water tastes like whiskey; and there are no

horses, no guns, and no women." He returned the decanter to the table. "This isn't heaven, is it?"

"There are worse places than this," said Sgt. Peters.

"Well, never mind. Is it back the way I came in, or duck out the kitchen door, or what?"

"The front door always for you, General." The sergeant offered his hand, which Custer took, and then he saluted.

Custer returned the salute. "Thank you for your assistance, sergeant."

Lt. Brewster was on the porch, holding the screen door open. He let it snap shut after Custer walked out of the house. "Goodbye, General," he said. "I regret having put you through this."

"Forget it, Brewster. I'd take you with me if I could, but that apparently is not in the cards."

"No, it wouldn't be, but I appreciate the thought."

"I hope you'll be all right."

"I'll be fine."

Custer looked down the road and heaved a sigh. "It looks like two more miles on Shank's mare for me. But I've forgotten my hat." He opened the screen and observed Sgt. Peters, his portfolio tucked under his arm, conversing quietly with a Union private.

Both men turned to look at him. "Second thoughts, General?" asked the sergeant.

"No, no," Custer replied, pointing. "My hat."

The private picked it up and carried it across the room with a smile. "Here you are, sir."

"Thank you, trooper." Custer turned around and beheld the glorious sight of Brewster standing in the yard, holding the reins of a big bay gelding. The horse pricked its ears and nickered at the sight of him. "Bo, you big beautiful son-of-a-bitch! And looking fit as a fiddle." Custer patted the horse on the neck and tousled his mane until the horse threw its head in protest.

"No more walking for you today, General."

"And thank God for that."

Brewster handed Custer a canteen, and offered Bo an apple in the palm of his hand. Bo accepted the apple, but Custer said, "No, thanks. What are you feeding him?"

"It's just an apple," Brewster replied, "and that's water."

Custer un-stoppered the canteen, sniffed it, and took a long drink. "And fine water it is." He knocked the stopper back in and hung the canteen on his saddle. "I don't imagine old Bo has a snowball's chance of getting a do over."

Brewster scratched the horse's muzzle as the big war horse searched his person for another apple. "I wouldn't think so. But he looks like he's ready to run one last time."

"He always was." Custer took the reins and hoisted himself into the saddle. He looked to his revolver and saber, and wasn't surprised to see that they had been returned. "So long, Brewster." He took the lieutenant's hand and held it for a while. "It's back to the fog of war for me."

"And I hope you will marry your Libbie."

Custer paused and smiled at the thought. "By God, Brewster, I intend to, whether her damned old daddy likes it or not."

Lt. Brewster snapped to attention and saluted. "Godspeed, General."

Custer returned the salute and turned Bo up the road at a trot for a minute or two. He was about to give him the spur when Bo volunteered into a lope. Soon enough Custer could hear the pop of the revolvers, the boom of the rifles, the distant roar of the artillery, and the screeching, thundering shells. He could see the smoke and dust rising up ahead as out of the din came the yelling of the men, the whinnying of the horses, and the clanking of steel. Bo laid back his ears and took off, galloping with a will. Custer drew his saber, and rounding a bend in the road, he found himself right in the middle of the fight.

Bo went down at a full gallop, no doubt shot, and Custer flew over the big bay's head, landing so hard it knocked the wind out of him. When he could breathe again he stood up, and that was when he saw the rebel cavalryman, his mount motionless as he aimed his picked-up Spencer carbine at Custer from less than ten yards away. Custer could see the carbine bounce as the Confederate tried to control his breathing, and he was reaching for his revolver when he heard a gunshot close behind him, and watched as the rebel jerked the trigger and tumbled from the saddle. His shot flew wide.

The private who had saved him dismounted and held his horse with one hand while retrieving Custer's hat with the other. He knocked off the dust on his thigh and said, "We need to get going, General."

Custer took his hat and looked for Bo, who was down and still. He ran

after the rebel's horse. It reared and ran away, but in the process of trying to catch it he nearly stumbled over the body of a fallen junior officer. Custer dropped to one knee beside the body. Brewster looked peaceful enough, and Custer hoped his death hadn't been a hard one.

"Come on, General!"

"He was a good man, Brewster was." Bullets hissed their way through the hot air, and dug up the earth around them.

"I'm sure he was, sir, though I can't say I knew him. Let's go!"

Custer's brow furrowed. "I didn't know him either. Yet I do. His name was David. I suppose he must have lived a mundane life. No Dutch girl in the hay loft for poor Brewster."

A shell exploded perilously near them, and the private nearly lost his horse as it threw its head and shied away from the blast. Fifty yards down the road, four Confederates dismounted. One held the horses as the other three knelt and aimed their carbines. The private flinched as a bullet passed within inches of his head. "General, we're sitting ducks in this road. He's finished, but you've got more fighting to do."

Custer stood up and put on his hat as he trotted toward the private's horse. "Yes, and quite a bit of it, according to some rear echelon clerk with whom I once spoke." The private swung into the saddle and kicked his foot out of a stirrup. "It seems I have a date with destiny as well," Custer went on, "though I don't recall when it will be."

The private reached down and steadied the stirrup for Custer, then extended his arm. "That wouldn't be very sporting, would it, General?"

Custer looked up into the smiling face of the private. "No, I'd say not. Where do I know you from, trooper?"

The trooper winced and ducked as another bullet barely missed. "I don't believe we've been introduced." He and the general grasped each other's forearm, and he hauled Custer up behind him.

Custer wrapped his arms around the trooper and grabbed two fists full of tunic. "And I don't believe that was the question," he said. "Get us out of here, wolverine!"

June 25, 1876, Little Bighorn River Valley, Southeastern Montana Territory

At 3:30 in the afternoon, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, clad in buckskins and astride his favorite horse, Dandy, rode up a grassy slope

with his scouts. From the crest of the ridge he beheld for the first time the largest Indian encampment anyone had ever seen on the northern plains, or would ever see again. As he had known they would, the women and children had begun to strike the tepees and flee the village to the north and west in the wake of Major Reno's attack, but they hadn't gotten far. He needed only to head them off and round them up, and the warriors would lay down their arms.

He turned in the saddle, took off his wide brimmed gray hat, and waved it in the air. "Hoorah, boys!" he called to the troops in the column behind him. "We've caught them napping!"

The men of the 7th Cavalry cheered in response. One grizzled corporal quietly sat his McClellan saddle in a pensive mood, his hands crossed on the pommel. It had been a long and difficult thirteen years. But his work was nearly done.

◆ The End ◆

About Kenneth Newton

Western Writers of America member Kenneth Newton is becoming quite popular among Frontier Tales readers. He has published six stories in in the ezone and his *Apache Gold* and *The Stock Detective* appeared in Volumes I and II of *The Best of Frontier Tales*, respectively.

He is a student of the Civil War and the westward expansion, and these interests color much of his fiction. Heaven, which earned his inclusion in Volume III, is a "what if" story centered on George Armstrong Custer. What if Custer had been killed during the Civil War? What about his history-making date with destiny on June 25, 1876? Or, as Duke Pennell wrote in his introduction to the story, What if one of your guardian angels turns out to be your worst enemy? You're going to have to read the story to find out.

Newton's post-Civil War novel, *Passing Through Kansas*, is available at Amazon.com in all formats. The former newspaper columnist lives in Ridgecrest, California with his artist wife Debbie, a cat named Kringle, and three desert tortoises, Monet, Remy, and Twazzle.

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Wanderlust

by P. Garrett Weiler

Vern Harmon's pipe had been carved from blood-red soapstone by a Missouri River Mandan. To Beth it was a menacing totem. When spring squabbled with winter on the Cumberland Plateau she'd wait for the siren winds. It was then that her husband would take the pipe from its beaded case. He'd just sit quietly and study the pipe, his eyes distant and vacant.

Her restless sleep had been disturbed last night when he'd slipped from the Skinners Creek cabin. Loons called mournfully, and soon the wind had brought her the wild odor of his hoarded kinnikinnick tobacco. She'd stared up into the darkness as the winds whispered darkly that they'd come for him yet again, and that this time they'd not be denied.

In the morning, Beth stepped from the cabin and strode towards the creek for water. Large hazel eyes softened a determined line of mouth. A tall, full-bodied woman, the bend of her leg and spring of knee revealed a step accustomed to the faint paths of rough valley and rocky slope. She was a hill woman. She might stumble on Mount Pleasant's boardwalk, yet she could unerringly follow the trails of her mountain home, or step along briskly with Vern on a hunt in the Kentucky hills.

The crippled old hound that had followed Vern home from Mount Pleasant watched her passage with a flicker of watery eyes. It snuffled at an early fly near its nose then went back to sleep. Black and white speckled chickens cackled and flapped down from saplings where dark-green spring buds swelled. Freshness rich with a moist scent of verdant newness had settled along the creek. Young ducks quarreled in the deep eddy downstream where fat trout would laze in slow green depths through

summer. Tethered in tall grass along the creek, two bays perked their ears forward and nickered hopefully at her.

The bright morning should have brought happiness and contentment, but instead Beth felt threatened. The wind came with a fitful rush. It tugged at her hair, taunting and mocking.

She knelt at the creek and plunged the bucket into its iciness, then rose, lifting the heavy pail easily. A figure stood in the path.

"Cain McToon!" she gasped. "You surely gave me a start."

He'd simply materialized, as though swept up from some secret place by the wind and dropped over the valley to float silently down like a brown and withered autumn leaf. The wind, its task completed, swirled happily around him.

For a long moment he just stood there, silent and grey-bearded. He leaned casually on a long rifle propped butt-down. Smoky eyes studied her from beneath flaring eyebrows. A chill fluttered up her spine. Then he turned without a word and walked off towards the cabin.

Vern stood in the doorway. A broad smile of welcome for the old trapper creased the lines of his weathered face. He reached to take the bucket from Beth and stood aside to let McToon enter.

"Well, I'll be dogged, Cain. For sure you're a sight. Spring must be close to stir you out of hibernation." McToon nimbly dodged a playful kick aimed at his rump.

"Ain't so sure about that, Harmon. This child felt right poorly crossin' your freezin' creek just now. Or else I just ain't thawed out from them beaver ponds we used to wade."

The deep voice was edged with a muted raspiness that put an edge on Beth's nerves. She managed a smile, though, and pushed back errant strands of hair while setting a steaming mug of coffee in front of him.

"This'll take the chill off," she said. "You'll stay to breakfast won't you?"

He looked up at her, a cold light in his eyes. She felt it seek out and find the hidden worry and resentment his presence brought. A thin smile touched the corners of his mouth. "Obliged," he said.

Beth busied herself at the big stone fireplace, determined not to let the old man make what had already begun as a bad day even worse. Bacon sizzled and spat next to a half-dozen sputtering eggs in a smoke-blackened skillet.

"Now, ain't this here prime fixin's?" Vern asked McToon and leaned back in his chair. "This here's the way to live, Cain . . . roof over your head, dry floor for your feet of a mornin', good woman fussin' over a hot meal. Better'n wet snow down your back, the coffee made from week-old leavin's and punier than some pilgrim's shootin' eye. Pemmican froze so hard a body can't even chop it with a hatchet . . . moccasins half gone, and what's left wet clean through and lookin' to be a sorry supper that night."

McToon slurped his coffee and looked around the rough-hewn room with scant regard. "Well now, reckon what you say's right enough, least for some."

"Know it for certain," Vern said. "Took me ten years out there before I saw the best of havin' a wife and a settled home."

McToon's eyes steadied on Vern. "Well, this child's had his fill of your civ'lization. I come close to starvin' this winter for some true meat." His eyes narrowed. "I'm up for headin' back."

Beth cracked the sudden stillness with another egg, then carefully picked white bits of shell from the skillet. Outside, the wind exulted.

Vern slowly lowered his coffee mug. "For the mountains? You're headin' back to the mountains?"

"New mountains, hoss," McToon answered. "I run into ole Bob Grant over to Lexington the other day. You recollect Bob don't you . . . spent a season with him and some others up on the Siskidee? Well, he tole me about these here mountains down south of our ole stompin' grounds . . . over southwest of Santa Fe, he claims. Good trappin', says he, up on some river called the Gilly or Heely or some such with a Mex name."

Neither of them noticed her quietly set plates on the table. Careful not to make a sound that would intrude on these moments filled with peril, she took her place. She fought an urge to look at Vern, afraid to see again the distant look that in the past glazed his eyes when he thought she wasn't looking.

"New country . . ." he whispered to himself, then seemed to shake the thought away. A hollow laugh rumbled in his chest. He cast a furtive look at her and reached over to lift a hand from her lap. He squeezed it in his rough paw. "Them days is gone and done for good, Cain . . . gone and done I say. You and me saw the beaver go, even from way up in the back country. Buffalo's goin' now, and who'd a thought that would ever be?

People movin' out there by the wagon load, like they owned it all. Injuns pullin' out, or just givin' up all together, except for a few of the old fighters, the Bad Hearts.

"Always some feller around to say it ain't so. Your new country will be the same too, Cain, someday after it's been tamed. We both saw it all comin' three seasons ago when we come back here to the States. The old days is gone, hoss . . . or quick dyin' out."

McToon snorted. His tone sharpened. "They can't ruin the whole country, Harmon . . . not the whole blasted and total-for-all country." He slapped the scrubbed table. A fork clattered to the floor. After a quiet moment, McToon said, "I'll be needin' the Hawken worked over." He nodded at the rifle he'd leaned in a corner. "Take care of it for me?"

"You betcha, pard. Gunsmith I was in the mountains, and can still turn a bore with the best of 'em."

After eating, they went out. She heard the whoosh-sah-whoosh of the bellows heating Vern's forge. Hammer rang on steel and a file rasped. What was McToon saying, now that he had Vern alone?

She felt so helpless and alone now. For the first time in her life she was pitted against a rival that had dug itself into another soul.

As the sun touched shadowed hills westward she heated water in a porcelain basin and sat it outside along with a slab of lye soap. Soon she'd hear him washing for supper. His voice would be pleasant and deep in tuneless humming, then sputtering as he rinsed his face. Then he'd step into the cabin and look around with pride.

He'd built it himself while they lived in a lean-to. It had been good to lie down at night on fragrant cedar boughs with the wet, rich smell of clean earth all around. It was even better after the cabin was finished. Often, when she first awoke on some cold morning, she'd sift slowly through memories of their life together, sampling the best and most cherished. Then, with a squeal and a rush, she'd hurl herself at his broad back as he bent to the morning fire and bite through his man-smell of sun and linseed and old work sweat, dust and leather, exulting with his laughter at the new day to be shared.

Steps at the door interrupted her reveries. She turned to greet him with a smile. It froze in place when she saw McToon. Vern followed him in.

"I twisted Cain's arm to stay the night," he said and sniffed the air.

"What's for supper, darlin'?"

She forced a smile. "Ain't much, but you're welcome of course, Cain."

McToon glanced at her and a subtle expression flickered across his face, a vague blend of scorn and satisfaction. Anger, sudden and hot, spoke words in her ear that she must not speak.

McToon scraped a chair up to the table. "I hear tell them 'Paches out where I'm headin' is some true whoopin' hoss Injuns," he said. "A man would need a good pardner to watch the back trail." He swabbed a crust of thick bread around in his gravy, then leaned closer to Vern.

"'Member the prairie, Vern?" he asked. "Far as a body could see the grass was . . . belly up to a tall mule, wavin' and whisperin' soft-like in the wind." His bony fingers moved as though casting a spell.

Vern's eyes narrowed as McToon continued. "And the wind always a-soughin' gentle like. Or maybe a-howlin' and a-screechin' with the first cold of winter comin' down from the north. What was it the Injuns called winter?" He cocked his head and squinted at Vern.

"Ghost face," Vern answered distantly, eyes now narrowed and shadowed.

"That's it, hoss. Ghost face. And do you 'member how alone a body felt out there on that big open? Made no difference who you was with, you just kind of went to lookin' in on yourself to maybe find some grain of comfort to guard against all that emptiness."

The old trapper crooned on. "And them mountains, Vern . . . oh, them mountains. 'Member, hoss? The Lakotahs called 'em the Backbone of the World, and they's that for sure, runnin' 'cross them plains like the spine of some giant just a-waitin' to come alive. Made a man step kind of quiet and careful sometimes. 'Member that high park up on the Yellerstone we found, just you and me? Deer and elk and bear, even some buffalo. And beaver! Lord, didn't we make 'em come though! And the buffalo down on the Laramie Plains in the fall? Measured 'em by the mile. 'Member how we'd all sit 'round a good fire of an evenin', cold and dryin' out after wadin' the ponds all day? 'Course we kept the fire low," he chuckled, "'cause of the damned Blackfeet."

Beth watched as Vern touched his leg where an arrow had found its mark long ago. Even she felt the touch of McToon's spell.

"We'd maybe have ourselves some hump meat a-simmerin' and sputterin' in all that lonesomeness," he droned on. "It was like we hadn't

a single care in the whole world. And we didn't, neither! Even the nations got to be a part of it all, like the grizzlies and mountain cats."

She was suddenly on her feet, McToon's mood broken by her chair rattling backwards to the floor. "Damn your eyes to hell," she shouted at McToon, her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, voice edged with some cold menace. "I won't stand for you tryin' . . . tryin' to—"

"Beth, darlin' —" Vern stammered, eyes wide.

"Don't you see what he's tryin' to do? Don't you even care?" Her voice trembled, her eyes blazed, and she took a step towards McToon and snapped at him. "What right do you have tryin' to steal my man away? Get out of my house and don't never come back!"

Vern touched her shoulder lightly. "This is my house, too," he said. "And Cain's a friend."

"No need for that, ol' hoss," McToon muttered. He rose slowly, took up his rifle, and padded from the cabin.

Later that night, while she lay motionless, Vern rose silently from their tense bed. She heard him rustling in the fireplace for an ember, then lay awake in the empty darkness and smelled the aroma of the Indian pipe. Loons called mournfully in the night as she recalled the spell of McToon's words. For the first time she'd gotten a glimpse of that far away world Vern had loved, still loved surely, but how much?

Hours of tossing and turning brought no sleep. Finally she rose and picked her way through the dark cabin. He was gone from the bench outside. Even the smell of the pipe had drifted off into the night.

First light brought him back, along with a slow drizzle of cold rain.

"Mornin'," she said.

"Mornin'," he responded stiffly.

For the rest of the day they suffered while the foolish pride that wouldn't let them talk burned itself out. By evening some of the tension had eased enough for her to sit next to him at the table with her head on his shoulder.

"You really miss the mountains, don't you?"

"Now, Beth," he scolded lightly.

She wouldn't let herself nag and pester him, nor try to force from him words she longed to hear, that his love was stronger than his wanderlust. She sat quietly as he took her face in his hands.

"Have I ever said a word about goin' back?" he asked. "A body'd be a fool to give you up, along with all we've built here. Choice land . . . plenty of smithin' for me . . . and give it up for cold, heat, starvin', dyin' of thirst, hunted and ambushed by Injuns? And all for what? Once a year gettin' together with a pack of half-wild, evil-smellin' renegades for a hoo-rah, then back out to freeze, starve and hide another year through?" He gathered a shuddering breath. "Ha! Not for this hoss, and thank you kindly ma'am."

He'd pulled off his boots and she noticed a hole in the toe of one sock. She went to her darning basket while a thought flowered in her mind. Damp wood popped in the fireplace. While her needle and thimble clicked she nurtured the thought, turned it one way and another with careful scrutiny.

Vern put more wood on the fire. "Did I tell you that ol' man Ellis is movin' out to the Oregon country? Said he was plumb fed up with how fenced in it's getting' around here. Imagine . . . an ol' bird like that wantin' to pick up and start fresh somewheres else."

"Sounds like lots of folks is headin' west don't it?" she asked.

"Well, I suppose there ain't no need talkin' 'bout it," he answered.

Carefully, slowly, needing time to think, she put the needle and yarn into the basket.

"Vern . . . dearest Vern," she began, "I've never for one second tried to hold you to this place. Have I?"

"Easy enough for some folks to just pick up and leave . . . like Cain." She could tell that he was more thinking out loud than responding to her. "I just can't go traipsin' off again like I ain't got no ties."

"Vern, I won't be a stone around my husband's neck," she persisted.

"A body just can't pick up and go, leavin' his woman to fend for herself," he insisted.

She reached out and turned his face to hers. "You can't . . . we can't go on this way." Hot tears welled. "I'd a hundred times over rather lose you than see you gutted like this."

His eyes focused steady and sharp on her. "But I love you, Beth"

A breathless puff of vagrant wind chugged down the chimney with the smell of wild growing things in its voice. It came again, stronger now, shuffling restlessly under the eaves with some declaration. A flight of

wild geese soared overhead, the whistle of their wings distant, then lost in the night.

Beth listened closely.

Vern went to stand in the doorway, head bent, shoulders sagging. She went to him and his arms came around her. How much a part of him the smell of wood smoke and clean open air was.

"You never badgered me, Beth darlin', but you stopped me just the same." His voice was husky now. "Three years ago I woke up one mornin' on the Popo Agee and felt somethin' was missin'. It was peculiar, 'cause 'til then I'd never wanted anything more than I had." He brushed hair back from her forehead. "But somethin' was just missin'." He sighed deeply. "Then I found you." He held her at arm's length. "But this thing in me ain't never goin' to let up naggin', Beth, and I just don't know what to do."

She leaned back in his arms, tilted her head to one side, and smiled up at him.

ft

Skinner's Creek chuckled over polished stones, and the baby ducks gabbled in their deep pool. Tracks of a wagon went away from the clearing, pointed westward into the forest. No one was there to hear the last call of a loon in morning's first light.

Even the wind had gone elsewhere.

◆ The End ◆

About P. Garrett Weiler

Just your average guy, but one who can't stop writing (yes, he's tried), Weiler has been at it a long time. He is retired, after cutting a not-so-wide path through the computer industry, of which he says, "Oh well, it paid the bills." Home is the Pacific Northwest, where you know it's summer when the rain gets warmer. He hopes that anyone reading his work is both pleased with it and maybe even stirred up some too.

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From the Editor

This selection of "Best of" stories are from the third year of Frontier Tales. What started as a way to let frustrated, wanna-be writers have a place to see their work in print has grown. We still have the greenhorns, but we've gotten some powerful talent in these pages as well. Published authors, many of them published lots of times, and even few Spur Award winners have sent in tales for your entertainment. Some writers, published for the first time on the website, have gone on to publish books—thanks in part, they say, to the start they got at this humble site.

So, writers, the competition is picking up. Put out the best work you can, and make your fellow writers work just a little harder—everyone benefits.

I look forward each month to reading the Tales while I prepare them for the website. The variety of characters and circumstances is rich. The generosity of the writers, to share their Tales for nothing but the good feeling of entertaining a fellow Western-lover, is commendable.

And you readers . . . make sure you let these writers know what you think about their stories. Tell 'em what you like, so they'll make sure you get more of that good stuff!

So keep on writing, reading and voting. Tell your friends about us, and maybe buy a paperback or eBook collection of the "Best of" anthology now and then. Writers write so readers will read. Both of you are required.

Thanks, and Happy Trails to you!

Duke

Frontier Tales eMagazine

It takes days out of each month to put together Frontier Tales. Why spend the time? Because it's fun, of course, but it serves an important purpose, too: adding to the short list of venues where Western short story writers can find an avid audience. Look at your local bookstore and see how many Western books are on the shelves. To paraphrase the Marine Corps, we're the few, the stubborn, the Western Lovers!

Frontier Tales has been the place you could come for free Western entertainment. We started out with just two stories per month, but now we're publishing five tales each month, almost a novella's length. Apparently, you like it . . . over 1,000 of you join us in a month and your numbers keep growing!

Over 200 stories have now seen the light of day and a lot of writers, new as well as veterans, have gotten exposure they wouldn't have otherwise found. Several of them have told me that Frontier Tales has made the difference in their writing careers. I'll confess, that makes me proud.

Frontier Tales has received a wonderful reception and reaches viewers from around the world, with readership almost doubling every year. If you're a writer, apprentice or old hand, consider sending us your polished Western frontier prose. Who knows? It might very well be your first step toward a new career!

The Best of Frontier Tales Anthology, Volumes 1 and 2 featured the stories from the first two years that were voted Favorite of the Month. These are the third year's Best. I hope you enjoy them!

Get the complete set of *The Best of Frontier Tales,*
available in softcover and ebook.
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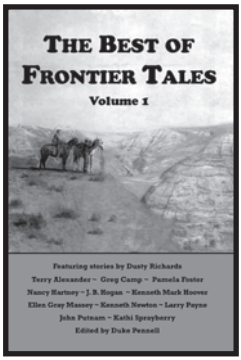

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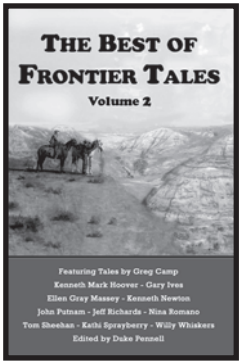

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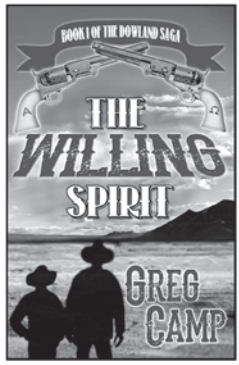

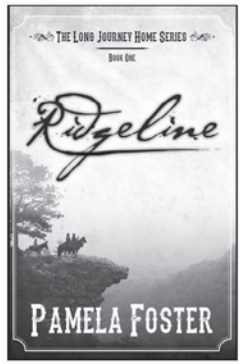

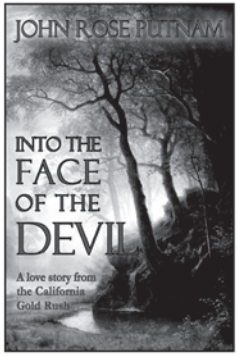

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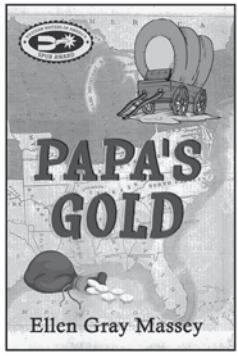

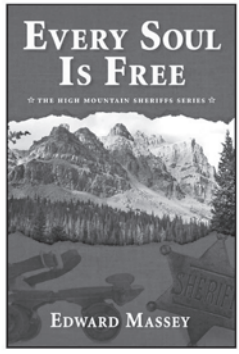

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