

PRIMER FOR BOOK VIII

DURBAN'S PEACE

Despite the rout of Price's Missouri raid, with its failure to capture a major town, and dashing desperate Confederate hopes for a Copperhead President in the forthcoming November election, the war still raged. Although it was more one sided than before, with Sherman's force of 62,000 men marching relentlessly towards the sea, leaving a barren, charred swath 300 miles long and 60 wide in its wake; sacking every major city in its path. It was bitterly delivered retribution, and persistently foolhardy for the South to prolong its fight, but continue to wage a war of defiance it would; town by town, city by city. Soon all laid waste by cannon and artillery, hell and brimstone, lead and steel, mile upon mile of devastation. West of the Mississippi, however, people began to see signs of a fragile peace. Folks found time to mend the damage wrought by Price; they fixed fences, gathered what was left of their cattle, and rebuilt their wooden towns as best and as quickly as they could. People had not forgotten on which side lay their allegiances, but most were tired of war and found themselves resigned to peaceable means in order to survive. Winter was soon approaching and whatever food remained needed gathering after four armies had waged war and looted their backyards. Most of the bluecoats had left to finish the war in the east. Many would die there. All that were left were various contingents of militia volunteers needed to prosecute the Indian Wars, and they soon went north or west. North by the Missouri to fight the Sioux, or west via the prairie, from where many had arrived, to fight the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Civilians were arriving again too, now that fighting had ceased and calmed the Mississippi waterways; eastern people, newly minted Americans from Europe, war weary soldiers from either side, and the eager, ordinary citizens. The hopefuls looking for something better than they'd had thus far; better land, better jobs, better climate, and for some a better religion, or at least the freedom to pursue it. Moreover, seeking peace to do as they chose. But despite the signs of peace, after years of internecine strife, peace was something destined to be hard to find in some of the untamed lands west of the great watery divide, especially with a few hardened Missourians certain the war was not yet lost.

..... pp. 1 - 8

BLOODY LAWRENCE

Since Lawrence was a town predominantly founded by Free-State settlers, it became pivotal in the regional political conflict after pro-slavery southerners sacked the town in 1856. As usual, violence began as a small incident, with a county sheriff being wounded while trying to arrest a Free-State supporter in Lawrence, then with the sheriff being chased from town. The incident quickly grew out of proportion when the sheriff returned to Lawrence with 800 pro-slavery southerners to destroy Lawrence's hotel and newspaper. The hotel was seen as a fortress by the attackers, and was proved to be when 50 cannon shots failed to make a dent in its walls. One man died in the sacking, from falling masonry. From that incident on, however, Bleeding Kansas was to earn its reputation, with violent reprisals wreaking havoc on each side for every action. Seven years later, in 1863, Quantrill and his guerillas revisited Lawrence to inflict a much more serious loss of life; killing 164 civilians, again in retaliation for things done against their families by Union troops and Redlegs. Lawrence being the main headquarters for the Redlegs, who were patrolling the border country trying to quell all support for the South. Some groups, however, were doing far more than patrolling; killing a man for a horse was not uncommon. Hence the reprisals continued unabated until the Union finally ridded Missouri and Kansas of all Southern military incursions. But even then, they continued in the guise of robbery.

..... pp. 9 - 29

AMNESTY

Many of Price's men had scattered to the wind after being roundly beaten at Mine Creek, with hundreds of others deserting before then. The remnants of Price's main force managed to escape through Kansas to Indian Territory, with Texas their final destination. The men who had scattered beforehand, with little inclination any longer to fight for what they admitted was a cause lost, roamed Missouri and Kansas unattached to any regular military group. These smaller bands, numbering a hundred to a thousand men, still had to contend with a

relentless Union force tracking them down, which proved a risky endeavor for both blue and gray. Once caught and herded to a corral, however, the problem was what to do with these southern soldiers, because feeding Union troops in Missouri was a trick in itself. Feeding prisoners was an unnecessary hindrance to that trick. To ease the situation of both capture and care, General Pleasanton eventually agreed to a plan of amnesty if these free roaming bands turned themselves in, and then agreed to parole them so long as they agreed to leave the theater of operations, which amounted to Missouri, Kansas and everything south and east. Most of these parolees went to the other two cardinals; north and west. Many thousands heading up the Missouri to Fort Benton, in what was now, since May 26th, 1864, Montana Territory, in the hopes of finding wealth in a land brimming with precious metals, and which was already home to many old southern secessionists. But before then, these scattered untrusting men, many who'd known little but war, had to be found and persuaded to turn themselves in to a Union Army. The trust for which, after three years of war, was not readily forthcoming.

..... pp. 30 - 45

REDLEGS

The endless tit-for-tat reprisals along the Missouri-Kansas border country, which eventually kicked off the Civil War, produced an increasingly bitter and brutal breed of men. Since the first little skirmish, when it's debatable if anyone even died, to the unpardonable barbarism inflicted onto unarmed civilians, ordinary men traveled a long bloodied road and lost their sense of humanity. Bushwhackers turned increasingly violent and vengeful, seeking out abolitionists for particular brutality and frequently crossing the Kansas border to settle scores inflicted on them by their opposites; Jayhawkers. In turn, Jayhawkers oversaw martial law along the Kansas border and evicted both abolitionists and pro-slavery southerners from their homes. But it was another independent organization, never to be mustered to regular service, which earned special infamy; groups of hardened men particularly proficient in weaponry were recruited to patrol all the border counties now empty of people. To set them apart from the other irregulars they wore red leggings, similar to those worn by artillerymen. Some of these bands quickly turned into robbing, murderous thugs, not caring from who they stole, who they killed or why. Others, however, say that they were just robbers and thugs wearing leggings to give them unfettered access across the country under the guise of being Redlegs, and that they bore no allegiance to either side while using the subterfuge to plunder wherever and whenever they liked. Without records of service, there is little evidence to suggest that this is true or false. What is certain, however, is that the discussion would continue raging a century and a half later. Proving that feelings would run hard on both sides long after the violence had ended.

..... 46 - 57

MONTANA TERRITORY

Nineteen Sixty-Four was much like any ordinary year for most of the people either trying to stay alive in an increasingly brutal war or eking out a meager living on questionable land. Only later would this year be remembered for its many events, mostly in conjunction to the war, except for those living on a previously unrecognized expanse of mountainous land nestled between the dusty Dakota prairies and the mountains, rivers and flats of Idaho Territory. In only a few years this piece of land had been transformed from one where mountaineers wrestled with grizzlies and Indians, to one to which hopeful white men of every persuasion arrived seeking wealth, and felt safe enough doing so to bring along their womenfolk. Barely twenty years previous, the trails that steered these hopeful hordes to the mountainous west had only been used by generations of Indians seeking buffalo. It was certainly a shock for the Indians, but it was a bigger shock for the land about to be grazed, cut down and dug up like never before. Those fortunate Scottish trappers were the last white men to see this magnificent land as it was; pristine, unspoiled, free of greed and free of the white man's law, for until now nature had been the only law. In April, politicians at the nation's capital had decreed to place upon coinage the lofty words, "In God We Trust." To many of the Scottish trappers still living, broken in retirement, and being mostly pagan in their religious appreciation of a land on which they had traveled, it was seen as an arrogant religious indulgence. Yet a few trappers thought these loud talking politicians with not a lot to do must have visited Montana at some point, for only a wondrous God could have created such remarkable terrain. Such land with only Indians and game for company was truly a religion in itself. As the Crow had long known, it was the most beautiful country in the world. And as all Indian tribes knew, their land was at the center of the universe.

HIGH PLAINS

The High Plains, on the western side of the larger Great Plains, stretch from the Dakotas all the way south to Indian Territory and Texas. They constitute a long gradual slope to the continent’s backbone, the Rockies, with the land rising from 1,200 feet in the east to 7,800 feet in the west. Arid, cold and windy in winter the plains create a chill that penetrates the thickest of felts. Riding into that westerly wind on a horse, mile after mile, was bone chilling and numbing during the winter months. A man’s eyes watered and his brain felt as if itself would freeze, much like suffering a migraine while sitting on a block of ice. A hundred thousand people went across this land on their way to the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush, both in summer heat and winter cold. Many thousands of them would return home broke, leaving their belongings to rot on the trails and seeking revenge against those men who told of untold easy riches. Soon a stagecoach would ply mail to Denver over the plains, carrying passengers and small cargoes, following a major route west along the Smoky River. Like all western trails it had first been used as an Indian trail, mostly by Cheyenne and Arapaho hunting during the buffalo migrations. The land was unforgiving to those unprepared for it, and Dog Soldiers who lived and hunted there were just as unforgiving to those trusting their luck to travel it. To the bands of militant Indians, in the midst of war in summer 1864, it was the old tale of accusations; promises and treaties broken, battling not only white soldiers protecting emigrants, but also their elders, who they watched sign away their heritage. But Confederates, too, had been infiltrating Indian camps and trying to persuade Indians to the rebel cause, with promises of land, guns and food once the war was won if they helped attack Union forts along the Arkansas. This desperate Southern attempt to entice Indians to their cause only further stoked a simmering fire of distrust between whites and peaceable Indians, and provided a staunchly Union territory with even more reason to herd Indians onto reservations, or do what Minnesota had been doing to the Sioux since 1862 in Dakota; exterminating them.

A STAIN UPON THE LAND

The Laramie Treaty of 1851 was designed to safeguard emigrant travel over the Great Plains, thus also over the High Plains and everything between the Arkansas and the Missouri River to the north. The many Indian tribes living on these lands were originally promised an annual annuity of \$50,000 for 50 years, which was instead ratified by the Senate for 10 years, which all tribes except the Crow agreed. Access onto these lands was agreed to be for travel only, but in reality politicians and white men knew that this agreement was temporary and would never last. Seven years later, in 1858, the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush cast aside all the Laramie Treaty had agreed. With thousands of miners settling on tribal lands, and with the U.S. Government unprepared to limit westward expansion, indeed aiding it, for which it had long wanted, another Indian war was looming. To avert the emerging Indian war, and to keep the miners safe while they dug for treasure, and as a white war seemed imminent in the east, what better way than another promise of treaty; this time the Treaty of Fort Wise, in 1861. Some Indians’ contention with this treaty was not just against the whites, but also against the minority of Indian elders who’d signed onto it, because this new treaty forced the Indians onto a tract of land a fraction of that guaranteed them at Laramie. Land bordering the Arkansas River and stretching from northern New Mexico to an obscure place near Big Sandy Creek. It was to be another unsung piece of land that would be forever remember in infamy for all that occurred there, due to a brutal ‘civilizing mission’ by a former Methodist pastor called Chivington.

REVENGE

Twenty miles west of Fort Wise were the burned remains of Bent’s Fort, along the old Santa Fe Trail and site of two Indian treaties; 1835 and 1840, which enabled peaceful trading between whites and the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho and their longtime traditional enemies, the Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache. On arriving to the Arkansas River to trap, having failed to get a job with the American Fur Company on the Green River, William Bent saved two Cheyenne from the Comanche, standing him in good stead for his future. He later sealed his kinship with the Cheyenne by living much like an Indian and marrying Owl Woman. After the successful 1840 treaty with the Plains Apache, allowing Bent to trade over the bordering Arkansas River and south to New Mexico, Bent’s success was in maintaining peace between the tribes and the white men, even

though Bent's Fort was used as a military staging post, both for the Mexican-American War and Fremont's expedition to wrestle away California from Mexico. Kit Carson frequented the fort. Indeed, he helped build it after Bent hired his old guide and friend as a hunter, being the sole trading post in the region owned by a white man. A militaristic band of Cheyenne vehemently opposed to the new emigrant arrivals were the Hotamétaneo'o, or Dog Soldiers. After a cholera epidemic in 1849, this band essentially split away from the tribe, cleaving it from the Cheyenne Council's Forty-Four chiefs and beginning a long running war with encroaching white settlers. After peaceful trade dwindled, and thinking the army's offer to purchase his fort insulting, Bent razed his fort, but built another twenty miles east four years later, which was purchased by the army and renamed Fort Wise. William Bent's half-Cheyenne sons, Charles and George, were living in the Cheyenne camp during the Sand Creek Massacre. Chivington forced Bent's other son, Robert, to guide his force to the camp. After escaping the massacre George joined the Cheyenne and Arapaho going north. Robert later joined Silas Soule to testify against Chivington in federal court. To the Dog Soldiers among the caravan heading north to the Powder River, revenge was better served at the sharp end, having lost confidence in all the white man's law. Sand Creek proved that white men could never be held accountable, even for murder. Silas Soule also paid the ultimate price for speaking out against the massacre. Again, no one was held responsible.

..... pp. 98 – 108

PARTNERS OF CONVENIENCE

Chivington's massacre at Sand Creek had succeeded in killing or running off most of the peaceful Cheyenne chiefs who had long tried to coexist with the white settlers. In a stroke the massacre had vindicated everything the Dog Soldiers had been saying for years, but there was little left of the traditional hierarchy and the surviving Indians sought refuge from wherever they could. Traveling east to the Smoky River and then north to the Black Hills and the Powder River, waging war along the way and for many years afterwards, or traveling south and settling in Indian Territory. A few survivors, having lost contact with the larger caravans, traveled on alone, a dangerous undertaking regardless of the approaching winter. They traveled with whatever they had left, which was often little more than blankets and the buffalo robes on their backs. Scavenging for food as best they could after leaving behind all winter supplies at the camp, many not even possessing a pony or mule to carry the wounded. Finding someone willing to provide comfort and safety surely a miracle in a land where every white man seemed bent on eradicating Indians from the world. Though some found friends in unfamiliar places, for among men's misery, with a Cheyenne war being compounded by an eastern war, there still existed a semblance of humanity in an inhospitable West.

..... 109 – 120

DECEMBER MOON

For a brief period the West situated central and east of the Rocky Mountains enjoyed relative peace. That sliver of land, reaching from the new territory of Montana south to New Mexico, was a place where Indians had long been pushed, and yet despite being shuffled from their historical lands and shoved against the mountains and other longstanding native tribes, each tried to get along with one another. Even when white men began emerging across the plains a fragile peace ensued. Though it all came to an abrupt end when gold was discovered in 'them thar hills,' and hordes of white men arrived to dig up Indian lands for a nugget of metal. Then, when the eastern war became desperate in its last year, with Confederates sending renegades west to steal Colorado gold for their cause, murdering innocents as they'd done before in Missouri, and then blaming Indians, all hell was about to be let loose. The pieces were in place for the final battles of a long protracted war that began in Virginia two and a half centuries ago; in the 1610 Anglo-Powhatan Wars. The Indian had long learned that all land, in truth, and by force, belonged to the government of the white man, which had the power to promise it away and take it back whenever a need arose—as Sand Creek had proved. Indians possessed neither the paper nor rights to the land in government eyes, nor did they possess the force to keep it. The only thing that remained for many Indians was to die trying, and for many it was better that, than not trying at all. The fight was not the beginning, that had begun in 1610, nor was it even the end, but it was certainly the beginning of the final struggle. The moon that shone so brightly at the end of this year gave Indians hope that the final chapter of their tale was yet to be written.

..... pp. 121 – 140

DURBAN'S PEACE

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE THE CALLOUSED HEARTS OF MEN BEFORE THE SCARS OF HATRED AND CRUELTY SHALL BE REMOVED.

– Clarence Darrow

AT THE FINISH OF THE BLOODY CAVALRY BATTLE at Mine Creek, after seeing a young butternut boy felled like timber, having only seconds before been forced to kill his father, was the final straw for Bill in a war he'd never wanted to join. While holding no aversion to killing those who would do him or his family harm, as he had proved more than once, this was men stubbornly defiant, fighting on for a flawed, outdated ideology, one long won by the North's uncompromising superiority in blood and steel. The soldiers still fighting on the crimson fields were but tools of an unquenchable, irrepressible industry. The combatants having learned that war was easier when devoid of rational feelings, leaving unfettered hatred to occupy all thoughts and space between those in woolen Prussian blue and those cottoned in sun-bleached butternut gray. No longer did chivalry offer a gentlemanly hand for conduct or concern for a soldier wearing a different cloth; worn conceivably by a neighbor, a relative, a near cousin, perhaps. God forbid, even a brother. No matter, also, that each were Americans. Many having come to forge a new, better nation to free themselves from beliefs in kingdoms and religions—reasons for which Europeans could no longer count their dead after centuries fighting for or against one tyrannical leader after another. Three years of internecine war had bred a brutal bloody breed; hardening the hearts of men, lessening guilt, deafening ears to grief and deadening all sense of sorrow.

Bill knew that if he didn't take this opportunity to muster out, as was his agreement with Thornton the past November, he would likely also find himself embroiled in the east, as many of the soldiers around him would, and inevitably knew he would evolve more like them from necessity; cold, callous and unfeeling. Very possibly like young Billy, enjoying the war, having been in it for too long and not knowing or remembering anything different. Once that point was reached, how was it even possible to return to normality after being personally involved with so much brutality? That was not a frame of mind he wanted to be indebted to. He was on the sharp edge of that possibility, however, and well understood that seeing a poor young rebel boy killed before him was one of life's opportunities to either care, and feel badly about the incident, or mentally protect himself from guilt and not give a damn. Bill had chosen to give a damn. But he was more fortunate than most in that he still had the option and the wherewithal; many no longer had the capacity to care, and were just the fleshy parts of a great industrial machine marching towards victory, and be damned what happened to victor or vanquished. A deep-seated hatred was everywhere: in the men's tired eyes, on the torn sleeves of their blooded uniforms, but mostly in the thrashing, hurtling steel of the machine's weaponry, which was getting more brutally efficient every day. The troops were fighting with relish, as before, but time had ravaged their sense of mercy, even their sense of decency. And God help mankind should it ever lose either.

So the war would go on for most, but not for Bill. He took his opportunity to muster out of the colors on reaching Westport. His first stop was to post a letter to Montana, informing Elizabeth of his intention to first ride west and then north along the mountains. But written as if a dispatch, without the romantic inclusion that women expect; a mistake often made and more than equally rebuffed. Bill's next stop was to inform administrators of his decision, officially. He then met the unreserved disgust of his present commanding officer.

"Not willing to see it through, Durban?" The braid asked.

"I've seen enough of it through, Colonel. I think I've done my share of fighting." Bill said.

"No one's arguing with your soldiering abilities, Durban, just your commitment." The colonel said.

"I was committed till spring originally. September at most. It's near November. I've fulfilled my agreement and more, though less than some, perhaps. But this war is close to being done, except for the killing to come, which is getting a tad one-sided if the last battle is a judge." Bill said, glancing down at a small piece of paper being unconsciously shuffled around the colonel's desk, as if dodging the thumping stamp of officialdom that would seal a man's discharge.

"It's true. Sherman will have Georgia soon, Sheridan will take Virginia, and Hood will likely see Tennessee. There'll be no winter break in battles this year. December will be another bloody month. But we could still use soldiers of your ability, Durban." The colonel said. "It's men like you who keep my casualties to a minimum."

"Not sure I much agree with your appreciation of 'minimum,' Colonel, I've seen many men not leave the field. But that's largely subjective I suppose, depending on your rank. As for my soldiering; you've enough soldiers with the ability to fight. They've had plenty of practice by now. In fact, I think some have even started to enjoy it. And I'd rather not become one of them. So if it's all the same to you, Colonel, I'll thank you to stamp that paper and let me head on home... West, to Idaho Territory... Or Montana, as I've heard it now called. I have a son waiting there, even a fiancée if I recall."

"If you recall? Damn Sergeant, you don't know?" The Colonel asked, with enough incredulity on display to satisfy a woman.

"Well, yes Colonel, a fiancée, I think. It was complicated, sir. She had my head in knots." Bill explained.

"Ah, indeed, they have that knack." The Colonel said, smiling.

"They sure have a lot of knacks." Bill said. "It's difficult to keep up with all the workings inside those heads. But I'd like to see them again, no matter the consequences for tardiness on my part."

"Well, Sergeant, I wish you the best. In truth, I'm envious. My father was killed at Pea Ridge. A brother at Pittsburg Landing... Or Shiloh, as he'd have known it. My poor mother passed soon after, of a broken heart some say on seeing her whole family split by war. I doubt the old family farm is even still there. Most likely burned to cinders, scarred and looted. So there's little left for me any longer, but for the army." The colonel said.

"A career it'll be then, Colonel?" Bill asked sincerely, realizing his fortune compared to many men he'd fought alongside, including this melancholy colonel who'd lost close to everything in life, even much of the pleasure for living.

"A career? Yes, most likely. I would enjoy going west, I think. A quiet little post somewhere south of the mountains, maybe." The colonel said, looking out the window to see if it was already there.

"If it's any consolation, Colonel, I've heard it said you've been a fine officer to serve under." Bill said. "An inspiration, some say."

The colonel heard the words but his mind was still somewhere distant and didn't respond right away, giving his mind time to come back to the present. "An inspiration, you say?" The Colonel asked, a bit stunned by the compliment after sending so many boys to battle to see so few return. "I think it'd be a mistake to suggest I inspire my troops, Sergeant. They are endowed of inspiration enough by themselves. Only by fortune of position, such that it is, I have but mirrored their example and turned their actions to words. They are the lions; I am but the supportive roar. Never could I have wished for better men to lead, but I have longed for an end to it all too. I've seen one boy after another killed obeying orders I gave. I carry guilt that I can remember most of their names, having written their families, but can no longer recall their faces. The faces now seem to merge into one."

Bill saw he had hit an emotional nerve. It was usual for officers to hide their thoughts, though Bill wondered how many thought the same as this colonel; struggling with his own battle for sending boys to certain death. "I wish you good fortune, sir. Wherever life takes you. Protect your flanks in the meantime and maybe we'll run into each other someday. Up in the mountains, perhaps? If so, I'd enjoy buying you a drink, sir." Bill said honestly, feeling bad for the man.

"I would enjoy that immensely, Sergeant." The colonel said, a smile cracking his face, knowing Bill wouldn't suggest such an offer lightly. He pressed the seal into the ink and said, "Off you go now, Sergeant... Mr. Durban," bringing his hand down hard to stamp the seal. "Take any two horses you need from the corral and I'll send you on your travels." The colonel said, grasping Bill's outstretched, friendly hand tightly, before watching Bill duck through the door.

The reminted civilian strode out to the courtyard, happy to be finally free of the army. He looked up to see the flag flapping in the breeze overhead, quietly wondering how much blood it had cost to save it, when a yell caught his attention. "Hey Montana! Sergeant!"

Bill turned and saw Jeremiah striding across the courtyard, his heavy Sharp's resting easily in the crook of an arm.

"Heading out?" Jeremiah asked.

"Yup. Back north, I guess. Up to the Deer Lodge."

"Boat to Fort Benton?" Jeremiah asked.

"No, not much one for boats. Think I'll just ride overland west and then head north by the mountains. Taking it slow and easy."

"Need a good horse?" Jeremiah asked.

"Colonel said to take two from the corral."

"Did he now. You must have impressed him. Don't choose any Union branded horse, though, there's some nasty people out there, renegades mostly, treating everyone as deserters these days."

"Point taken." Bill said.

"Say, I've got a mount for you. Come with me." Jeremiah said, leading Bill away.

Jeremiah steered Bill towards the stables, where only officer's mounts were usually liveried, being the pick of all the army had.

"I'm supposed to take two from the corral." Bill said, guessing where they were heading. "Not steal one from a braid."

"Hell, there's a horse stabled there no damn officer is going to be riding anytime soon." Jeremiah said, motioning Bill towards the stables. "You might as well get use from the brute."

On entry, Bill looked up and down the stalls and soon noticed the beast. Bill was taken with her immediately, standing nearly two hands above the others. A fine big piece of horse flesh.

“You’ve noticed her already, then?” Jeremiah said, smiling. “As soon as I saw her, I thought of you.”

“She’s a beast.” Bill said, allowing the big girl to sniff the palm of his hand before stroking her long, thickly muscled, mottled gray neck. Instead of the usual long white blaze her head had a smoky appearance, strangely brown in places as though she’d held her head over a smoky fire, and when the sun shone through the cracks in the boards she appeared almost blue. An old and rather ugly white scar ran down behind her hip joint. It had healed up and didn’t seem to bother her, but it provided a distinctive brand all of her own. Many horses never survived such a wound; being often short of food their own battalions might have cooked her. Despite her strange coloring she was a pretty thing, but held a sad look in her eyes as though she had seen too much misery in this short life of hers.

“I was going to keep her for myself, but she’d be wasted where I’m heading.” Jeremiah said. “Figured you could take her away from this nonsense; find her some little peace. Looks like she’s earned it. All these dumb brutes have endured more misery than most of their riders, without ever understanding why.”

“You sure? Who’d she belong to?” Bill asked.

“She was a Confederate horse. I was canny when I knocked the braid off her back, didn’t want to hurt this beauty. Was thinking of myself at the time, though, but then one of our own cavalry majors took a fancy to her during the battle. She didn’t do him much good either, stuck him too high above the fighting, too much of a target. A Reb sharpshooter knocked him off as neatly as I’d knocked off her original owner. So I figured I’d be an even bigger target on her back and immediately thought of you instead... If you’re leaving that is.” Jeremiah said. “Wouldn’t want you riding her off into battle either. I think she’s been bad luck for everyone who’s ever ridden her.”

“She’s a stout one. What can I do for you?” Bill asked.

“You just get her somewhere safe and take good care of her. If at some point I meet up with you, we can discuss it.” Jeremiah said. “She might be a lucky horse for someone away from the battlefield. It’d only be fair. A bit on the pretty side, perhaps, but the scar gives her some credentials... Her bona fides.”

“Damn Jeremiah, it’s a deal.” Bill said. “I don’t think I’ve ever had such a good deal in my life.” Bill said, realizing he’d found some good friends in this war. “Can’t say anyone ever gave me such a fine horse before. Indeed, gave me any horse.”

“About time someone did, then, Bill.” Jeremiah said, smiling. “You go and find your home and have a good life. You’ve done your bit. I won’t be long after you... Heading west, also.”

“Damn. Thanks Jeremiah. I mean it. That’s twice you’ve done good for me in two days. It means a lot.” Bill said, trying not to get emotional as he remembered hearing that Jeremiah had shot a Reb off his horse just as the Reb was about to slash Bill with his sabre. Jeremiah hadn’t mentioned it, one of the troopers in his command had. Jeremiah still hadn’t mentioned it. He’d just been doing his job as he saw it and had forgotten all about it.

“Each of us came to do a job, Bill, for whatever reason brought us. Some just lived long enough to do it. So I guess we’re the lucky ones.” Jeremiah said. “Some boys never even got a chance to fire off their powder.”

“That’s a fact.” Bill said, his mind seeing cloudy images of men falling in cordwood rows clad

in neat blue uniforms, used but once for the journey to battle.

“Best not dwell. Best walk away from misery.” Jeremiah said, seeing a post-battle stare glazing over Bill’s eyes.

“Surely,” Bill said. “Thanks again, Jeremiah.”

“Travel safe. I’ll see you in the mountains, Montana.” Jeremiah said, grasping Bill’s hand before turning to walk away, and placing his Sharp’s back into the crook of his arm.

Bill stood, watching the man leave, his large strides seemingly pushing the earth around beneath him. Jeremiah did not look back.

In a flurry of movement, men mounted horses and galloped off through the gates, their accoutrements clanking, hooves thumping; sounds of pandemonium in preparation for another battle. But once the dust settled, a strange peace engulfed Bill as if cocooned in the eye of a storm. Nothing but quiet. He waited, expecting the silence to be ruined by the hurricane of cannon. But there was nothing, just the dusty snorting of a few lame horses remaining in the stables.

Is this what peace was like? Bill wondered, casually glancing up to the clouds to determine their direction. What a deafening, lonely silence. It was wonderful. Even the heavens seemed in agreement, with high wispy clouds meandering across a sparkling sky, dragging a day of clear weather over the prairie behind them.

BLOODY LAWRENCE

KILL EVERY MAN BIG ENOUGH TO CARRY A GUN.

– William C. Quantrill

THE CONGREGATING MASS ON THE MUDDY BANKS of the Missouri was not something Bill had readily wanted to see. It was as if all these civilians had been on Price's tail and were just now waiting for the right man to arrive to order their 'Wagons Roll.' The Overland and Oregon trails were now wider, more deeply ingrained into the nation's fertile and scrub lands, and reached out to the southwest, west and northwest, each connecting to lesser known tracks and cutoffs along the way. Though some of the cutoffs were not always quicker, only seemingly so, but with so much hope resting on a dangerous journey, and the ultimate arrival, such shortcuts as only a crow could appreciate were often taken in times of desperation to end a journey sooner. Sometimes fulfilling a journey's end unknown in a land unknown, by hands unknown.

When Bill rode to the riverbank on his big prominent mare, anxious people stared as though he was the wagon master for whom they'd all been waiting. A group of farmers approached to question him on the best way forward. Dozens of hopeful faces looking on.

"Hell, just follow the damn tracks, the land's full of 'em. Keep the warmth on your back in the morning and on your face into the evening. When you catch sight of the Rockies in the distance, that's when you ask which trail. You can't go far wrong till then."

"You heading west, mister?" One young mother asked.

"Yes, ma'am. But I'm going alone, straight west." Bill said.

"Could you not guide us part of the way, mister?"

"I could guide you across right into trouble. From now on, I prefer to be responsible for no man but myself." Bill said, lifting his hand to touch his hat before turning away his horse.

But the woman grabbed the bit and held it tight, looking up at Bill with pleading fiery eyes. "Have you no care, mister, no charity? We've been waiting weeks on these banks for a guide." She said.

"Then waiting longer might just keep you alive a little longer. I cannot guarantee your safety in my company and would rather not try." Bill said, snapping the reins for the horse to break free of her grasp. "Sometimes you just have to do things on your own, without begging help from others. Also, there was a major battle here only last week. You people weren't here then, I doubt. And I'll bet none of you have helped bury the dead since you've been here neither."

The mare's big smoky head jerked back a little before nudging the woman away with its soft nose. Without Bill needing to give his horse another command she began turning before walking away, his auxiliary, packed tight with supplies, following behind at the end of a shortened rope.

"Damned Yankee scum!" A woman's voice yelled behind him.

Bill tugged on the auxiliary's rope and it farted long and loudly as it trotted a few paces to catch them. Presenting the vocal woman with a more appropriate rebuttal than Bill could ever have done.

He wasn't proud of it, but Bill's demeanor had worn decidedly thin and now reflected that of the terrain around him. It was harsh, mirroring the harshness and brutality inflicted on this land by Rebel Bushwhackers and Union Jayhawkers. Everywhere Bill looked there was destruction, a landscape devoid of structures; houses and barns razed to ashes. Mans' only surviving shapes the strangely statuesque remains of stone chimneys dotting the landscape as if tombstones to the wanton destruction reaped upon the land and those who'd once lived there, as if the land itself was to blame. In the misty morning these dark, looming tombstones made for an eerie ride. They were numerous and yet completely veiled in midst, before emerging as if ghostly behemoths near the trail. Then rising from the ashes to stare down everyone who dared to ride by. It was not much different to walking through a decaying old cemetery; with the weighty guilt of seeing untidy graves gnawing away at present mans' consciousness. Even trees sprouting through the mist seemed to bow in homage to these forlorn monuments of war. It was difficult not to imagine the misery that had been inflicted on all these people, of either side, for the red-legged Jayhawkers who had wreaked this destruction under the auspices of General Fremont's martial law had long spurned any adherence to military discipline, or even of partisanship if a man did not, or could not, afford to pay his tax for security, and thence had their buildings burned and lands seized in consequence. It was said that the abolitionist Doc. Jennison, leader of these Redlegs—liars, robbers and murderous thugs for the most part—was the most efficient recruiter the Confederate cause could have wished for on the border of western Missouri and Kansas. The charred remains of chimneys were quickly labeled Jennison's Tombstones. The land on which his infamy reigned: The Burnt District.

But hell, if that bitter woman thought that calling Bill a Yankee was an insult she was badly mistaken. Bill'd had nothing to do with the destruction of the countryside. That had all been local Redlegs, following the relentless, bloody, tit-for-tat, escalation of vengeance that had for years become commonplace along the Kansas-Missouri border. But Bill suspected he was also likely run into a few southern sympathizers along the way, and if they thought him a Yankee too, he'd have to be careful. Here, though, he was happy to let his horse do the arguing with some timely flatulence and desired nothing than to distance himself from the desperate, wretched throngs of people and whatever remained of a fractured civilization. If, in all honesty, that's what they could still call it.

Within an hour Bill was away from the town, distanced from a cemetery of chimneys and heading straight west with a dull autumn sun high overhead, or as high overhead as it was ever going to get in November. A trail had long been grooved into the Kansas soil, and occasionally there was even a newly planted road marking. But not a soul was about, neither on the trail, not in the adjacent fields, nor in the remains of settlements along the way. Most of the fence lines were in disrepair, now just blackened skeletal sticks rotting on the ground. The pretty hewn logs of once proud cabins were rotting too; dark, near charcoal black, brittle and decayed, with no animals of any kind in sight. Bill wondered if the people waiting for a wagon master had once tried to live on farms such as these. Leaving them behind, empty, uncared for, unwanted, even unsold, until the next pioneering family trundled by behind footsore oxen, finding brief fortune during a wet season and thinking the soil worthy enough to stay. Just as many had done, before realizing the season was a fluke designed to entice desperate families to farm a fool's errand.

For November the weather was positively balmy. It provided a pleasant change to heat and dust, cold and rain. His big gray walked at a steady pace, her gait long and smooth, with the hair

of her dark mane catching a prairie breeze every now and again to switch sides. The shorter, stouter auxiliary had to repeatedly trot a few paces to keep up, but didn't seem bothered. It was as though they were all appreciative of the peace and quiet around them. Not fully aware of its meaning, perhaps, but understanding of its value.

Bill traveled about twenty miles each day, riding for five to six hours and taking long breaks to rest and water his horses. He was in no hurry; winter would be there whenever he arrived no matter his speed of travel. He'd wait to see how winter progressed and stop at a small town if needed. Towns were popping up almost daily along the way, hopeful of business from emigrants, cattle drives, and even more hopeful of being on the route of a railroad they wished to be coming someday. The East already had scores of them. It was only a matter of time before rails bridged the Mississippi. Indeed, Brigham Young was convinced that Salt Lake City was perfectly situated, and soon to be reaping rewards for such a great feat of engineering. But politicians had not been so quick to forget or forgive the Utah War, nor the massacre at Mountain Meadows against unarmed emigrants but seven years before, and didn't dissuade Young and his Mormons from believing the railroad would be in their future. It wasn't. Such lofty thoughts in Zion were presumptuous, and failed to appreciate complex topography and the all-important job of the routing teams; surveyors, engineers and, of course, the chief engineer of the Union Pacific, General Dodge, who favored a northerly route around the lake away from Salt Lake City—to Brigham Young's contempt. Yet Dodge received political backing to support his decision. The Union Pacific would lessen Brigham Young's anger with cheaper tickets to immigrants traveling from Council Bluffs to the new Zion, and free tickets to anyone who agreed to help build the railroad spur Young desperately needed to strengthen his colony of believers.

On days when the terrain was easier Bill might manage thirty miles. On other days perhaps only fifteen if he found suitable grass and water for his horses. It was pointless pushing past good pasture if he was going to get there at all. It was these issues that he knew he would have had to argue with the emigrants on the wagon train; all overeager to get where they needed quickly, no matter what, and with many of them foreign and ignorant of the countryside and its dangers. It was true that patience was a virtue, especially here on the prairie when one day was just like the rest: the slowly plodding oxen, heads sunk low, swaying from side to side with each lethargic step; the unwavering monotony as scores of iron-rimmed wheels rumbled over rocks and hard-pack, kicking up clouds of dust. The monotony only broken by the oft-hard graft needed to shovel away a riverbank in preparation for crossing thrashing water, or unload another overburdened wagon before prying its sunken wheels from a muddy rut. Also the endless prairie angst, the utter exhaustion of boredom and effort in just continuing, the forlorn desperation and futile depths of despair that whittled friendships and cleaved apart families. It was not uncommon for melancholia to force a person to suddenly squat and remain behind completely alone, forgotten until too late, often on purpose, sometimes by sheer traveling weariness. Neither was it unknown for exhaustion to cause a man to fall asleep while trudging alongside a wagon, to fall behind step by weary step, or veering off regardless of destination, then unable to catch up for lack of water and the onset of dehydration, fatal, with no burial, no wooden marker. It was a long way to travel to become coyote bait.

It was these responsibilities Bill did not want. He'd already had too many men killed alongside him and didn't need more deaths to his name. There had never been a moment when he thought himself good at his job. He never wanted or asked for credit and never got it. A very

high price had been paid by many of those around him and he blamed himself for some; for not thinking quickly enough or appreciating every option. It never occurred to Bill that the enemy might have had more than a little to do with it, and that war was a mystery, a game of chance where men's lives hung by a thread.

Lawrence was in the distance, the yellow lights of lanterns just visible as the sun dipped below the dusty Kansas horizon. The name was familiar to him, as it was to all Americans, possibly Europeans too, being central to the bloody misery known as Bleeding Kansas. Bill stared at the signpost for while and pondered whether to stay or go around. His horses were tired and in need of rest the same as he, so he forked left towards the sad town, hoping things had improved since having the brand of infamy burned across its brow. Perhaps it was even a duty that he should see it. People were sure to ask when they learned he had traveled this way. Besides, it was now part of the Nation's history. Good and bad both needed an accounting.

The nearer he got the further away it seemed to be, with the surrounding land appearing mostly flat, but with some low rolling hills and a rocky outcrop. A portion of the better part of town had been built atop one such rise, and the distant lanterns had led Bill to misjudge its proximity. But perhaps it was just the sun appearing to slide along the rolling horizon as it again peeked around one of the low hills, glistening the bend of the Kansas River.

A ferry awaited him on the riverbank.

"Saw you approaching. Figured you wouldn't want to swim, so came across before I turned in for the night." The ferryman said.

"Not in November I wouldn't. Thanks kindly for the courtesy. Not much traffic I'm guessing?" Bill said.

"Not a lot, no. Expecting a train with lumber and supplies any day now, though. Haven't seen it have you?"

"Haven't seen a soul since I left Westport." Bill said.

"Ah, well, thought you might be a scout with the train. Never mind, I'll get you across." The ferryman said.

"Sorry to disappoint." Bill said. "I'm sure they'll be along. The steamers have only just begun moving civilian cargo up the Missouri again after Price's raid. The Union was using all the boats."

"Figured as much." The ferryman said...and then, "Say, you..." before stopping himself.

Bill was expecting some questions but none were forthcoming, which was fine with him, the less said the better off he'd be. Maybe these people had learned the hard way that it was unwise to ask too many questions of strangers, not knowing the color for which they fought. It would only create unnecessary problems.

"Weather going to shift, d'you think?" Bill asked, sensing that silence might denote guilt of some kind, and appear almost as risky as a careless question.

"A day or two, most likely." The ferryman said, hauling on the wet rope, his forearms like sinewy ropes themselves, and letting the slack end fall back gently into the water. He made it look easy.

"Warm for the time of year, though?" Bill asked.

"I suppose. But not too unusual for these parts." The man said, nearing the bank and leaning backwards to haul extra hard to match the floating raft with the ramp. "There we be, safe and sound ashore again. That's two bits." The ferryman said, holding out a hand while subtly examining the type, cloth and color of Bill's clothes.

"Thanks kindly. Appreciate you staying up." Bill said.

"Business is kinda slow. Gotta earn it when I can. That's what me missus says anyhow. Now, when that lumber train arrives, I'll be busy for two days straight." He said, wiping his wet hands on his shirt, clearly happier to have figured Bill had been on the right side.

"Should keep the missus happy, then." Bill said.

"Hah! Yes it should, shouldn't it. We'll see, though. But I sure do hope it'll keep her off my back for a while."

"Hotel near?" Bill asked, not wanting to get into a discussion of someone else's wife for fear of the conversation turning on its heel.

"Straight down the street. Past that burned out warehouse you can see, and then on the right. Can't miss it." The man said.

"Thanks. Hope that train arrives soon." Bill said.

"It will or it won't." The ferryman said, bending to secure the raft for the night. "Not much I can do about it either way."

Bill walked his two horses down the middle of the quiet street, careful to steer them around the rockier ground so as not to start clinking stones with the horses' hooves. He'd been in the saddle for so long he couldn't bear mounting again with his britches drenched in sweat and chilled after crossing the river. The ease and comfort in walking also gave him time to look about, see what had happened to this town and determine how the people were trying to rebuild, not only the homes and businesses but their beliefs also. The latter harder and likely to take far more time than rebuilding with a little fresh hewn lumber. That bitterness was not visibly apparent right away, but it could certainly be sensed. Bill hoped it was not a latent bitterness waiting to erupt to blood spilling again, because the town had clearly seen its share of misery. The ruined buildings telling of a grizzly tale, standing empty and neglected along the main street.

A pall of stale burned wood hung heavy over this part of town. The dampness of the morning dew, and the dryness of an afternoon sun, left the charcoal remains akin to glistening black rocks, as if the wood itself had petrified. In other areas thick, black, coal-like dust whipped up into eddies on the hint of a breeze. A cat sat guarding its hunting ground, content on what had once been a window ledge, its bright orange coat camouflaged under a dusting of ash. Footsteps in the crusty remains of the dirt floor still lingered long afterwards. It was as if this building was being left on purpose, to remind people of the cost of fighting, as if a ransacked medieval cathedral, with its once lofty beams now bowed, beaten to despair.

However awful was their destruction, Jennison's Tombstones were still monuments to ruins having being cleansed from the land. Here, the empty discarded buildings seemed more depressing than statues of stone, even more macabre, as though the ruins were not yet grieved and certainly not yet buried. The rattling glassless frame of a window proved neglect and there were scores of them.

Bill gave the building one last glance and walked towards a sign for 'Hotel.' He tied his horses outside temporarily and went inside.

"Room for the night?" Bill asked.

"Pick any room you'd like. Though I'd suggest one at the back, overlooking the river." The owner said, peering over the spectacles perched on the end of his nose.

"I'll take one at the back then." Bill said, picking up the pencil to sign the register. "Chance of dinner? After I see to the horses."

“Across the street... Mrs. Booth’s. She’ll see you fed. Nothing special mind you, but she’s known for portioning well, Mr...” The man said, turning the book to see the name. “...Durban.”

“Thanks. I’ll give her a visit. A big meal is what I need. Livery down the street? Didn’t see one coming the other way.”

“Fifty yards further, to the left. The livery at the other end was burned down, owner killed, no one’s thought of taking it over. Not yet anyway. Not until all this trouble ends.” The man said.

“Must have ended, though.” Bill said.

“You’d think. But that sort of hatred lingers. As do those who live on it to carry on with their murdering ways. Only last week we found another homesteader’s body down by the river.”

“I see.” Bill said. “Somewhere I should stay away from in town, then?” Bill asked.

“Nowhere specific. Be smart what you say and who you say it to. Keep your business your own and don’t ask questions.”

“Makes sense. I haven’t the inclination to be sociable anyhow.”

“It’s best. Sad, but it’s for the best these days,” he said, putting his register beneath the desk and straightening himself. “Anything more I can do for you in the meantime, Mr. Durban?”

“Nope, thanks. I’ll just take care of my horses, have something to eat and turn in, I guess.” Bill said, half wishing he hadn’t set foot this side of the river just yet.

“Goodnight then. We’ll have coffee on the stove over there in the morning.” The man said, pointing to the corner. “Not going to leave us too early, I’m guessing?”

“Six, most likely.” Bill said.

“Just fine, Mr. Durban. Coffee will be going by then. See you at six,” he said, walking back to wherever he’d stepped out from.

The livery was as empty as the street, except for two branded horses that were well past their life expectancy by the look of them. An older man came from behind a pile of loose straw, put his braces over his shoulders and tried to kick a cat out of his way, but was too slow and missed.

“Two, overnight.” Bill said.

“Two stalls nearest.” The man said, motioning with his head.

“Oats now and again early?” Bill asked.

“Surely. I’ll get the lad to brush ‘em down for yer too.”

“Appreciate it.” Bill said, watching the man study each horse to determine if they had a brand, and from which side of the fight.

“Nice one this one.” The man said, holding the big gray by her ears. “Where’d you come by her?”

“Westport” Bill said.

“Army horse is she?” The man asked, too inquisitively. Clearly he’d not received the memorandum about privacy and questions.

“I guess she was, most likely. What horse isn’t these days?” Bill said. “There’s branded horses all over the country.”

“Got no brand on her, though.” The man said, suspiciously.

“No, just that scar.” Bill said, hoping the man hadn’t seen the horse before and didn’t know the previous owner.

“A southern horse, perhaps. Too pretty for a northern nag?”

“Is that right?” Bill said flatly, without concern. Not wishing to get himself into another equine discussion on the merits of southern horses. He’d heard it a dozen times already.

“No matter.” The man said, sensing it best to leave the subject alone. “Same price either way.”

Something that Jeremiah said came immediately to Bill’s mind: “Bad luck for everyone who’s ever ridden her.”

Bill hoped that was not true in this instance. But it was perhaps the price of riding a horse that stuck out in a crowd. Because every gray horse he’d ever known seemed to be a horse that at least one person knew. And that scar did give her a distinctive appearance.

“She’s a pretty gray, I guess.” Bill said. “Unusual but common, as folks like to say.”

“Pretty, sure, except for that scar. Most army horses wouldn’t have been kept around after a wound like that. Not worth the effort of caring for them.” The man said.

“Perhaps she never was an army mount. Or are you telling me you know something different about her?” Bill said, putting the man on the spot and looking right into his eyes to catch hint of a lie.

The man turned around immediately. He quickly realized he’d overstepped his bounds and was now the one being studied. But his movement told Bill all he needed to know. There was far too much inquisitiveness for there to be any real honesty.

“I’ll pick them up at nine o’clock.” Bill said, taking his personal belongings and scabbard, having decided to pick up his horses at six o’clock. He dropped half a dollar in the pan on his way out. “If the lad grooms well, there’s another quarter for him come morning.”

“I’ll see he does a good job.” The man said, picking up the fork to drop hay into the crib, and sensing that their conversation hadn’t gone particularly well for him.

Bill took his stuff back to his room before going to dinner. He placed his Henry behind the chest of draws and put his bright new Smith & Wesson inside his belt, covered with his jacket. He hadn’t replaced the powder in his Colts for a few days and didn’t want to chance them. He’d hoped to not need them again quite so soon. It was with a level of despair of humanity that he felt the need to carry his revolver to dinner. Maybe he should have just taken the damned boat instead, he thought, as he strode over the darkened street with not a lamp shining bright enough to avoid the piles of manure that hadn’t yet been kicked about by horses.

Before entering Mrs. Booth’s Bill stopped to check the soles of his boots. Seeing them clean, he pushed open the door and found a packed room. Yet there was complete silence within, except for the noise of utensils on plates being scraped spotless.

Bill looked for an open chair, saw none and waited patiently by the door, while everyone glanced over forkfuls at the stranger. Bill took no heed and waited, not wanting to meet glances with anyone lest his mere presence cause offense. Folks were sometimes strange in strange places, so it was better to be invited than push himself to a table by pressuring impatience.

“Chair here, mister.” A little voice said from the corner.

Bill looked over and saw a lady getting up from her table. She was gathering her coat with some difficulty so Bill held it up.

“Not hurrying you ma’am, I hope.” Bill asked.

“No, not in the least. I’m done and off home.” The neat little lady said. “Enjoy your meal. I’d suggest getting the roast rather than the mashed potatoes.”

“Thanks ma’am, I shall do that. Are you okay walking home in the dark, ma’am?” Bill asked.

"I was born here young man. I think I can manage." She said.

"I didn't mean..." Bill started.

"I know you didn't. I'm fine, really. Eat!" The lady said.

Bill sat down, relieved, and waited for Mrs. Booth to appear. Within a minute she brought a plateful of food, no questions asked. It was filled to brimming with beef and potatoes. Mashed potatoes.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am." Bill said, looking at the plateful.

"You're welcome. Hope you have a fine appetite." Mrs. Booth said quickly, before walking away, not waiting for a response.

The room's eyes had since left Bill and were all back looking at their plates. The scraping never abated and Bill began to do exactly the same. He soon understood why the neat little lady suggested he choose roast potatoes. The mashed were okay but lumpy and overly salty, a trick to hiding their bitterness from being in the wet ground too long, much like the army cooks had served up when in a hurry. Nevertheless, Bill didn't much take time to care, he devoured the lot just as everyone else was doing. Only looking up every once in a while to subtly see what types of people were in the room.

"Pie?" Mrs. Booth asked, seeing Bill's empty plate.

"Surely ma'am. That was wonderful." Bill said.

She plopped the plate down without a word. No appreciation for the compliment and went immediately to the next customer.

"She's a busy lass is our Mrs. Booth." An older man at the next table said. "Always rushing about she is."

"Would seem so," said Bill. "Busy place, to be sure."

"Every night but Monday." The man said, taking his last bite of pie and wiping the remnants of food from a long beard.

Bill smiled, not wanting to get into a conversation that would be overheard by every ear in the room. He'd long known there was always one in a group who wanted to talk. One who would latch onto someone, usually a perfect stranger, and talk their ear off. He tried to ignore the gentleman the same as he would a stray dog, for fear it would follow him forever, after doing the courtesy of tossing it a bone. Bill wasn't about to tempt a bit of conversation no matter how rude it seemed. It was just best that way in these parts.

When Bill left the dining room he felt a distinct chill in the air. The weather was either turning or maybe something more ominous was happening in the town. There were people about, to be sure, a few here and there, but appearances gave it a ghost town feel. The overhanging pall he'd felt closer to the ruined warehouse seemed to have expanded. Bill looked about him but couldn't put his finger on it. Perhaps it was the same in all towns that had succumbed to the war. Bill walked across to the hotel and went straight to his room, checking his Henry before dropping off to sleep on the springy bed, his Smith & Wesson in the holster hanging on the bedpost.

The room was chilled with no one else staying in the hotel and there not being need to stoke the stove all night. When Bill awoke around three o'clock he put his bedroll over the top of the blanket and curled up again. He hadn't realized he'd gotten suddenly cold only because an outside door was opened, sending the prairie wind blowing up the stairs to flicker the flame of the lamp in the hallway.

A creak in the floorboards awakened Bill immediately. Though it was too late, the foot was already the dangerous side of the door. An unusually strong grip stopped Bill reaching for his revolver and another hand held a revolver to his face. "What the..." Bill started.

"Calm down Mr. Durban. We just want to ask some questions is all." A voice said from across the room. Another man. It was just as well Bill hadn't managed to reach his revolver, because he hadn't seen the third man in the shadows of the room.

"In the middle of the damned night?!" Bill exclaimed.

"Sometimes better for everyone. You too." The shadowed man said, holstering his revolver to lean against a chair.

"Explain. Who the hell are you?" Bill demanded.

"I'll answer your questions if you tell us how you came to be riding that fine looking horse of yours." The man said. "Seems like it belonged to a good friend of ours not so very long ago."

"It's a battle horse. Lost its previous owner." Bill said.

"What battle, where?"

"Mine Creek, I guess they're calling it. South of Westport, last week or more." Bill said.

"You kill its rider?"

"Hell, no. She was rounded up and corralled like all the other loose mounts running scared afterwards." Bill said, wondering if he could break himself free. "Now who the hell are you people?"

"Did you see who was riding it? See him get killed?"

"No, first time I saw her was at the livery a few days later. Just needed a horse to get me home. She was given me 'cos no one else seemed to care much for her. Folks say she's an unlucky horse." Bill said, realizing now that folks were probably right.

"So if you got her after the battle, you must've been soldiering in Union colors?" The man asked. "Otherwise you'd be in Indian Territory about now, running down to Texas."

There it was, the ultimate question. The question no one here wanted to ask for fear of dealing with someone on the opposite side of their beliefs. Though more to the point, it was the one damned question no one in their right mind wanted to answer. Not in this town. Not with its history.

"Well, guess there you have it. My mustering papers are in my jacket pocket if you must know." Bill said, motioning to the chair in another corner of the room.

The man walked to the chair, picked up Bill's jacket and rifled through the pockets, finally plucking out a crumpled piece of paper.

"Second Colorado, it says here. That your regiment?"

"Temporarily, I suppose you could say. I was never specifically assigned a regiment. Was just in the right place at the wrong time, I guess." Bill said, wondering if that was the right answer.

"Name someone in the Colorado." The man demanded.

"Johnston. Big fella... with a Sharp's." Bill said. "Had a band of rough men along with him."

"You rode with him?" The man asked, in doubt.

"No. Johnston didn't really ride with anyone, if truth be told. His job was as a sharpshooter, and ours to protect him. Hell, it was Johnston who gave me that gray that's so damned interesting to you all of a sudden." Bill said, looking straight ahead as his eyes became more accustomed to shapes in the shadow. "I'm beginning to wish I hadn't taken the damned thing."

“It’s a fine horse.” The man said, seemingly satisfied with Bill’s answers. “A little unlucky perhaps, but a fine horse nonetheless.”

“Okay, now I’ve answered your questions in the middle of the night, answer mine. Who the hell are you people?” Bill said.

“I’m Silas Soule. Be satisfied that these are friends of mine. We can’t be too careful around here, even now.” Silas said.

“You have me at a slight disadvantage.” Bill said, his hands still being held tightly by a man with unusual strength.

“Let him loose.” Silas ordered.

“What’s all the interest in this damned horse?” Bill asked.

“It belonged to a friend of ours not long ago. That friend went missing... Also not long ago. He was supposed to be guiding a black family through these parts, but we never saw him again. And never saw the family that was supposed to be with him either.” Silas said.

“You helping blacks get to the north, still? Is that necessary?”

“Hell, yes, it’s necessary. It’s even worse than before. Blind vengeance means that black folk unable to escape on their own are being slaughtered out of hand. That, or starving to death because there’s nothing for them to do, all the plantations have been looted and burned by one side or the other.”

“What d’you call this group?” Bill asked, knowing he’d heard the name, but forgetting.

“Underground Railroad.” Silas said.

“Didn’t realize it came this far west.” Bill said. “Kind of out of the way isn’t it?”

“It mostly started around here, that’s the whole point. Though it was supposed to be out of the way, but it didn’t much work out like that. You must’ve seen the destruction around here.” Silas said. “Lawrence was the center of this fight long before the war began.”

“Hard to miss.” Bill said.

“Quantrill killed 200 men, women and boys. Burned a quarter of the town to the ground and stole all the townsfolk’s money. That was just August last year.” Silas said, spitting out the words to show his contempt for men like Quantrill.

“Heard about it. Real bad deal.” Bill said, not mentioning his own experience with some Confederate Bushwhackers.

“Hell, my family and others founded this town. Ten years ago to the month, November 1854. Look at it now. You’re damn right it was a bad deal.” Silas said. “We’ve lost businesses and the people to run them. Others have since left. Our only chance now is to get the state university located here, otherwise this town’ll die.”

“So you fellas are what they used to call Jayhawkers, then?” Bill asked. “Before the war ‘n all.”

“I suppose.” Silas said. “Someone had to stand up against those damned Reb Bushwhackers.”

“Performed adequately, so I’m told.” Bill said.

“There’s some who wouldn’t agree. Not least those who lived through Quantrill’s murdering foray into town last year.” Silas said. “There are a few who see us as just being like Redlegs, who are now mostly just another bunch of thugs thanks to recruiting the criminal types, those being too good with guns. Everyone knows Quantrill’s raid was in direct retaliation for what the Redlegs did to his family. It’s complicated. No one really knows whose behind the color.”

“Where were you when all this happened?” Bill asked.

“In New Mexico, in the Colorado. First Colorado.” Silas said.

“Of the Glorieta battle? That Colorado?” Bill asked.

“Glorieta Pass, along with Chivington, yes, that’s us. But now we’re back in Colorado. Indian trouble there now too.” Silas said.

“Heard Chivington made a name for himself there. Forced the Texans to retreat, even though they’d won the battle.” Bill asked.

“That’d be one version, I guess, and one he’s happy to tell, the dyspeptic sonofabitch. Another is that if he’d organized his men to reinforce and engage in the real battle, we might not have lost it to begin with, and would have gotten hold of the Confederate supply train anyhow. Instead, by sheer accident, he rode into the Texans’ rear, found their supply train and sought himself instant glory for destroying it. But by ignoring all the rifle and cannon fire from the main force he managed to get more troopers killed.”

“Not keen on the man, then?” Bill asked.

“You picked up on that, eh? Hell, if he hadn’t been persuaded otherwise, he would also have executed his prisoners. He’s reckless with his own men’s lives and brutal with his enemy’s. Even some of his own officers are worried about what he’d do if they offend him. He’d have done well in Missouri, for sure, having little concern for a man’s guilt or innocence.” Silas continued. “I’m not eager to serve under that sonofabitch again. Not that I have a choice. He’s a braid with aspirations in politics and needs to get himself noticed. It’s a dangerous brew for anyone riding with him... Or against him.”

“He’s not heading east, then, being such a hero?” Bill asked.

“I heard he got orders to go east, but his politics’ll keep him in Colorado. He needs to kill Indians to gain notoriety, get votes. And do it in view of Colorado voters.” Silas said. “You wait and see.”

“Just here visiting, then? On leave perhaps?” Bill asked, relaxed again after having his sleep rudely interrupted and trying to change the subject, which was getting heated.

“Could say that, I had a month’s leave. Have to be back for the third week. Say, we never did ask where you intended going. Since you came from Westport you’re likely heading west?” Silas asked.

“It was my intention before getting involved in your Lawrence politics. Had thought about going around it originally. Beginning to wish that I had.” Bill said.

“Don’t hold it against the town, nor us, if you can forgive the intrusion.” Silas said, moving forward. “You’d have done the same if the situation was reversed.” Silas said, holding out his hand.

“Not sure that I would. Don’t seem to have a demeanor for it. More than likely get myself shot.” Bill said, shaking Silas’s hand and taking a moment to study the stern looking face it belonged to.

Silas was short but thick, much like a wrestler would be, with strong solid hands that showed confidence, and with a visible outer stubborn determination, evoking to everyone the conviction that he considered himself always to be in the right. In most cases he was, but being in an army full of defensive incompetents, his demeanor tended not to suit quick promotion.

“You can be thankful for that, then. At least we didn’t shoot at you. Not this time.” Silas said, to smiles all round but not even the semblance of a smile from him.

“Well, this pleasant little gathering has been very entertaining. But I don’t want to outstay my welcome in your nice little town, so I guess I should get going. I told the inquisition at the livery that I’d pick up my horses at nine o’clock.” Bill said.

“But it’s not even five?” Silas said, straight faced.

“That’s the point.” Bill said, smiling, thinking that he was close to cracking a smile across Silas’s stern face. But didn’t.

“I see. Well you don’t worry about old Livery Joe. He was the one who told us of that horse of yours.” Silas said, finally allowing a crinkle next to his eyes.

“That explains some of it. Nonetheless, I might just as well get going. I’m hardly likely to sleep much more now anyway.” Bill said.

“Stay a while. You in a hurry to get somewhere?” Silas said.

“Only to the mountains.” Bill said. “I was in no hurry earlier... no. But recent company has convinced me otherwise.”

“Aw, com’on, don’t do that. Allow us to show you some good old fashioned Lawrence hospitality; come on down for some coffee, fetch your gear and we’ll take a ride home for breakfast. How ’bout it?” Silas asked. “Folks’s homestead is only a short trip south aways. Then you can ride out whenever you like, give me time to explain things. Might be of interest to you. Keep you safer on your travels, anyway, especially if you’re riding the High Plains.”

“All right, you’ve talked me into it, dammit. Give me a minute and I’ll be down.” Bill said, seeing Silas wasn’t the type to let it go. “Do me a favor, though, one of you fetch my horses will yer?”

“I’ll fetch ‘em.” One of Silas’s men said.

“Thanks Frank.” Silas said, loudly. “Just fetch them to the front and go on home when you’re done. Thanks for your help tonight.”

“Surely, Mr. Soule.” The man said, opening the door slightly. Then adding: “Any damn friend of Johnston is a friend of mine, Mr. Durban. You take care of yourself out there.”

“Sure as hell will try.” Bill said, watching the man leave. “Nice fella... Strong damn fella.” Bill said, rubbing his wrist.

“Ay, he’d be the town blacksmith.” Silas said. “Got a grip like a vise and a head like an anvil.”

“Figures.” Bill said. “I’ll bet he don’t say too much either.”

“Nope. How’d you know?” Silas asked.

“A wild guess.” Bill said, remembering his old town blacksmith as deaf as a post from bashing on his anvil all day, but with hands as tough as the scalding iron he hammered. No one ever quibbled with him even though he was a quiet, mild mannered type, able to easily get on with horses more than people.

AMNESTY

A NATION CAN SURVIVE ITS FOOLS, AND EVEN THE AMBITIOUS. BUT IT CANNOT SURVIVE TREASON FROM WITHIN. AN ENEMY AT THE GATES IS LESS FORMIDABLE, FOR HE IS KNOWN AND CARRIES HIS BANNER OPENLY. BUT THE TRAITOR MOVES AMONGST THOSE WITHIN THE GATE FREELY, HIS SLY WHISPERS RUSTLING THROUGH ALL THE ALLEYS, HEARD IN THE VERY HALLS OF GOVERNMENT ITSELF. FOR THE TRAITOR APPEARS NOT A TRAITOR; HE SPEAKS IN ACCENTS FAMILIAR TO HIS VICTIMS, AND HE WEARS THEIR FACE AND THEIR ARGUMENTS, HE APPEALS TO THE BASENESS THAT LIES DEEP IN THE HEARTS OF ALL MEN. HE ROTS THE SOUL OF A NATION, HE WORKS SECRETLY AND UNKNOWN IN THE NIGHT TO UNDERMINE THE PILLARS OF THE CITY, HE INFECTS THE BODY POLITIC SO THAT IT CAN NO LONGER RESIST. A MURDERER IS LESS TO FEAR.

– Marcus Tullius Cicero

C OAL CREEK WAS AN HOUR'S RIDE SOUTH FROM Lawrence, same as to Baldwin, Palmyra Township, where many folks in Kansas claim the first battle of the Civil War actually occurred; at the Battle of Black Jack, in retaliation for the sacking of Lawrence by a group of pro-slavery southerners a month before, in May 1856. But as Civil War casualties rose to numbers that horrified the public, both North and South, this little skirmish would have been historical insignificant but for the participation of one man: anti-slavery's prominent abolitionist, John Brown.

"Lawrence has sure seen a share of misery." Bill said, after Silas had finished giving Bill a local history lesson.

"The East has been in the war since '61. We've been fighting it here since '54." Silas said, surveying his beloved countryside. "Look at this land... It's God's country. Or would be if selfish men would allow other men the freedom to farm it unrestrained by politics and only hindered by God and weather."

At that time in the morning it did seem peaceful. A fluffy mist gripped the lush lowlands with a few rolling hills and trees poking through a covering of light grey. There was complete silence except for each of the horses chewing their bits. Not even a bird was seen, and once manicured pastures were only thinly grazed by cattle, the tall spindly grasses long headed-out to seed. Smoke rose high to the air from a few remaining settler cabins, perforating the mist before flattening and drifting away on a lofty breeze, adding a comforting smell of wood smoke to the damp morning haze.

"It's pleasant." Bill said. "No mountains to obscure the view."

"You Westerners and your mountains. This land is where your food is grown. What good are your mountains now they've all been trapped out." Silas said.

"Thar's gold in them thar hills." Bill joked.

"There's gold down here too. It's in the soil, in the air and in the water. When folks come back here to farm, these fields will be rich with crops, the hills filled with fattening cattle." Silas said.

"And you'll be living here then? Or still in the cavalry chasing Indians?" Bill asked.

“Oh, I’ll come back sometimes. But for now a job needs to get done and I’ve got to do my share, because folks’ll remember the shirkers.” Silas said. “And this land ain’t been good on shirkers.

“There’s shirkers and there’re people who’ve done their share and just had enough.” Bill said.

“How d’you tell them apart?” Silas asked.

“You’ll see it in their eyes.” Bill said, plainly.

“Doesn’t much seem fair, though, having some men fight more than others, or not at all.” Silas said.

“Not for me to say.” Bill said. “Seems as if when this nightmare is over we should wipe the slate clean. Start over.”

“Not likely to happen, Bill. Not around here, anyway. There’s too much hatred and folks will want retribution.” Silas said.

“I hope you’re wrong, Silas. It don’t say much for the common man.” Bill said.

“I have no confidence left in the common man.” Silas said. “I’m surprised you still do too, after what you’ve seen of this war.”

“Yeah, perhaps me neither.” Bill said, resigning himself to the obvious after remembering what he’d seen this past year. “Delusion is just the result of seeing too much bullcrap.”

“Bill, I swear, this is a depressing subject. How about we warm up these beasts for the next two miles.” Silas said, holding his hands forward to give his horse its head before kicking it wildly.

Bill followed on, careful not to get too close to the mud being flung up by Silas’s short-bellied horse, but not passing it either, for he didn’t know which way to go on a road with many forks.

When they reached a long straight track, with a pretty house at the far end, Bill released the tension on his reins and the gray mare unleashed an extra horse from within. It was the first time Bill had let her run, and boy she flew! He leant forward slightly, his weight up in the stirrups, feeling the brutish surge of power beneath him. There was hardly a movement in the saddle; he could have sat stiff, upright and rigid like a Mexican Lancer. The last thing Silas saw was a white scar go past him with ease, before getting plastered by clods of dirt being kicked up by the mare’s heavy hooves.

“Bill! I swear you were holding her back all the way. Thought I had you well beat till that gate.” Silas said. “She’s sure got a turn of speed to her.”

“First time I’ve asked her of it.” Bill said, leaning down to pat the brute’s thick neck. “Was a surprise to me too.”

“I don’t suppose you’d want to part with her?” Silas asked.

“Can’t do that, she’s not really mine, after all. Just keeping her safe for a friend.” Bill said before dismounting and going to her head to give her another pat.

“Jeremiah?” Silas said, looking down.

“You know his real name?” Bill asked, looking up from beneath his hat and through the steam from two sweaty beasts.

“Most folks do. His nom de guerre only exists to satisfy army paperwork.” Silas said. “There’s still a warrant on his real name.”

“Figures.” Bill said. “Our agreement was that he could have her back anytime he wanted. And I wouldn’t have the heart not to have her if he ever showed up.”

“Honest man, Bill.” Silas said.

“The man saved my life.” Bill said plainly, remembering a fog-filled moment in the battle when he sensed something but had been too preoccupied to look. “I owe him more than a horse.”

“I suspect there’s others who’ve saved your life too, Bill. And times you’ve saved theirs as well.” Silas said.

“True, most likely. But this is the one I know about.” Bill said.

“Well, as I see it, we can only hold ourselves true to our own honesty. If we can’t do that, we’ll lose far more than respect.” Silas said. “Have you ever been in a questionable fight?”

“All those damn battles were questionable, if truth is told.” Bill said. “But do I regret anything I did, or didn’t do? Can’t really say, I guess. Sure, I lost men with me, and might have made a different decision in hindsight. But another decision might have gotten others killed too. We can question ourselves to misery if we so choose.”

“Think yourself lucky.” Silas said, talking from experience. “In this army there’re some reckless officers who continue to get their men killed for little more than satisfying ego. And then there’s the others with the devil’s hatred inside ‘em, thriving on the brutality.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. Guess I’ve been more fortunate than most. Though there was one fresh-minted officer in the Wilderness whose battalion paid a fearful price for his misplaced bravado, but that was a close quarters butcher’s pit for many poor men. Grant and Meade threw away much of their finest cavalry on the very first day, and in desperation used trained artillerymen as infantry.”

“I’ve seen some awful instances too, and I swear, if I ever see the likes again, I shan’t be able to let it go.” Silas said. “Hell, there’s war and there’s cruelty. There’s no reason the two have to go hand in hand,” he said, leading his horse toward the stables. “But enough of army talk, let’s go to the kitchen and find us some breakfast. Get some bacon grease on those sad bones of yours.”

Mrs. Soule arrived on the front porch to study the man her son had brought home. She had never doubted Silas’s judge of character but initial impressions were everything, especially in times as these.

“I suppose you’ve brought this gentleman home for breakfast, Silas?” Mrs. Soule asked.

“Good morning, mother. This is Mr. Durban.” Silas said.

“Nice to meet you ma’am.” Bill said.

“You too, Mr. Durban. Silas doesn’t invite many people home these days. It’ll be nice to have some new company for breakfast.”

“Appreciate the hospitality, ma’am, but call me Bill, please.”

“Surely, Bill.” Mrs. Soule said, not providing another name for herself. “Com’on in. Wipe your boots, you two. Stove’s hot, so sit down and I’ll bring along some coffee.”

“Pleasant house.” Bill said, looking around.

“It is. Father built it in ’55. We’ve been lucky in that we’re off the beaten path a mile or two. Twice we’ve heard the men going to sack Lawrence, the last time by Quantrill himself. Both times they were either too tired to mess with the surrounding towns or in too much of a hurry to escape.” Silas said.

“It’s a brutal landscape, to be sure. The scars are everywhere.”

“It’ll mend, given time.” Mrs. Soule said, bringing coffee.

“But how much time, mother?” Silas asked. “We’ve been doing this for ten years. There’s no knowing that even with the war over it’ll stop. There’s been too much blood spilled from both sides, and too much hatred still seething in these parts.”

“The amnesty’ll help. Already the Bushwhackers are leaving.”

“Only those along for the ride, and perhaps those with nothing to keep them here any longer. But the hard-bitten ones won’t leave anytime soon. They and what’s left of their kin live hereabouts, all over the border country.” Silas said. “Many will steal for the rest of their lives. It’s been in their blood far too long and they won’t want to learn anything different. In all likelihood, they’ll think the people will owe them a favor, and they’ll demand it of them. It might not be treasonous against the state, but it’ll be treasonous to the people they live amongst; hiding in plain sight, talking the same arguments, all as they go about their plunderin’ ways.”

“An amnesty can’t hurt. Not all will be so wickedly inclined.” Mrs. Soule said. “It’ll give many folks a second chance. A chance for peace for those just caught on the wrong side.”

“Amnesty will just bolster their behavior. It will be accepted as a weakness, something to take advantage of. With war’s end they’ll keep fighting for their own treacherous reasons while everyone else only seeks peace. And people will be fooled as they hope for peace, ignorantly giving these men succor while they plunder out of sight.”

“It surely can’t last forever, Silas.” Mrs. Soule said, seeking an end to a topic that had dominated house conversation for years, and looked to Bill for help: “So where is it you’re heading, Bill?”

“The mountains first ma’am, then along to Montana Territory. I have boy waiting for me... And a fiancée too, if truth be told.”

“You have a boy but only a fiancée?” A pious mother asked.

“My wife died, ma’am, two years past. Elizabeth, my fiancée, is looking after my boy for now.” Bill explained.

“I should have thought before speaking. I’m sorry if my words caused offense. Here,” she said, bringing a plateful of ham and eggs. “This’ll give you a good filling start to your journey.”

“It’s fine, ma’am, really. No offense taken, and thank you, this is a feast in itself.” Bill said, looking down at a heap of food such as he’d not seen since Mrs. Katie’s breakfast in the Deer Lodge.

“Mother likes to feed up her family.” Silas said.

“It’s a wonder you’re not twice the size, Silas. Must be all that dry desert riding the army has you doing out west.” Bill said.

“Talking of which...” Silas said, having been meaning to bring up the subject. “How ‘bout I keep you company till the mountains? I have to ride back in a day or two anyway.”

“I didn’t intend hurrying. My leg slows me down these days.” Bill said. “Wouldn’t want to hold you back.”

“In that case, let’s leave tomorrow. It’ll give us an extra day or two. Best not to be traveling alone. On this side the Bushwhackers are the risk. Further west it’ll be the Cheyenne and Arapaho.” Silas said. “It’ll make mother happy... For me to have company.”

“That’s fine with me. Company will be good.” Bill said, before scooping up some escaping yolk with a thick slice of ham. He hadn’t eaten this well in months. “This is a delicious breakfast indeed, Mrs. Soule. Thank you very much!”

“Well, guess I should get to baking this afternoon, then, so you two can have some fresh biscuits for your journey.” Mrs. Soule said, having perked up, knowing that her son would not be riding alone.

After breakfast Silas showed Bill more of the local countryside, riding to the site of what Kansans thought the first skirmish of the war. No one really knew how many casualties there’d

been in that little engagement, but that wasn't the point. To Kansans, the point was that it'd been fought in Kansas. Locals took some strange pride in the notion, even though hundreds of thousands had since died on battlefields in the East, largely due to the furor that had begun along the Kansas-Missouri border. That, and because not one single desk-bound politician had the political clout or the will to halt it there.

"Say, I need to reload my revolvers before we ride tomorrow." Bill said, looking for somewhere to shoot off the old powder.

"We'll need to be careful." Silas said. "There are still bands of renegades roaming here, a thousand men strong some of them, and many more smaller groups just looking for trouble."

"So somewhere out of earshot, then?" Bill said.

"I know the place." Silas said, steering his horse away from the main trail. "We'll be safe from everyone there."

"What about this amnesty I've heard about?" Bill asked, seeing a rock formation in the near distance.

"Would you show up and hand over all your guns to strangers? Especially Johnny Reb?" Silas asked.

"Nope, guess I wouldn't. Not without seeing results, and not without hearing of others' experiences." Bill said. "All trust was lost between those two sides long ago."

"Many rebs have heard stories of their wounded and prisoners being executed on the battlefield. Even if mostly untrue, it instills a distrust from which it's hard to recover." Silas said, dismounting.

"The hard part'd be handing in your guns. I'd find that notion a mite hard to stomach." Bill said, knowing he'd be dead already but for the guns about his body. "Most of these men are intent on going up to the mountains, to the new gold fields. There's a whole bunch of unhappy Indians before they reach 'em, and in territories where guns ain't no luxury. This the place?" Bill said, seeing Silas pull up.

"Behind those rocks. I used to come here as a kid. No one else can hear the shooting." Silas said, pointing to a rough trail between two large boulders. "There'll likely still be something laying about to shoot at. Like these..." Silas said, bending to pick up a couple of old kerosene cans.

"They'll do." Bill said.

Once Silas had walked away a few paces Bill emptied one of his revolvers, making the can dance across the dust. Silas glanced back and looked at the can, riddled with five new holes, and wondering where the hell Bill had learned to shoot like that.

"Hell if I'd ride west without carrying a revolver." Silas said, patting his holstered army sidearm. "In some places even a company of cavalry ain't enough. Though perhaps only half a company if they could shoot like that."

"I'm not much worried about traveling alone. I've done that in Sioux territory. It's alright if you stay awake, keep smart and don't cut corners." Bill said, pulling his other revolver. "But they need to respect a man's weapons, and his ability to use them."

Bill put another five bullets through the second can in nearly as many seconds, sending it scuttling over the dirt. He even surprised himself. It was clear the war had afforded Bill plenty of practice.

"It's true, a man can hide better in most terrain if he's careful. And I imagine that big brute of yours could outrun almost anything, given enough warning. It'd be safer for everyone." Silas said,

seeing Bill handle his pistols as though they were an extension of his hand. "Yup, safer for everyone, letting you ride away." Silas said again.

"A good horse has saved me more often than a long rifle, that's for sure." Bill said, remembering his old farm horse and patting his new mare's neck. "I think she'll do fine for me, this one. She's got a hidden spirit locked away somewhere. The problem riding a gray is that everyone thinks they recognize you, mostly for being someone you're not. I guess that's when one of these comes in."

"You know what they say about riding in pairs, Bill?"

"Yup, I only have to outrun you on the slower horse." Bill said, remembering the joke Jack Baptiste always enjoyed, and wondering what happened to the old goat. "Just a year ago I rode across Dakota with an old time trapper who laughed along the trail on that joke. It kept him happy, it did, even though he was forever trying to whip a thoroughbred out of his poor old mule."

"Mules are tough, hardy creatures. Tougher than horses in the hills." Silas said. "They pull our caissons where horses never could."

"That's as maybe. But they sure ain't quick enough across open prairie, especially not when being chased by a hundred angry Sioux. Baptiste's mule was roasted on an Sioux spit that evening." Bill said, retrieving his big Dragoon, almost half as big again as his other two.

The thundering bullets tore chunks through the kerosene cans. Five shots, slower than the others, but making bigger, uglier holes.

"I like shooting this one!" Bill said. "Gives me a good swift kick in the arm. Reminds me of what shooting is all about."

"With looking at you shooting, I'd say you already know what it's all about. I'd also say you've had plenty of practice." Silas said. "I'm sure glad you're traveling on my side."

"It just came to me, I guess. Never really understood why. Just woke up one day and realized it had arrived." Bill said, walking back to their horses. "Guess the war removed the last imperfections. Sad indictment to war, though, if this is all I got out of it."

"If you're questioning yourself, you've got more than most out of it." Silas said, still awed by the shooting lesson.

The conversations continued much in the same vein all day and into the afternoon. As the men became more comfortable with each other they began exchanging stories of their time in the war, as only soldiers could. They each listened and learned new tactics from the other, depending on the terrain. Bill had gained his experience with Indians before fighting white men. Silas was doing it in reverse, and that was often the greater risk. Soldiers had the tendency to become complacent when the foe never changed. It was as if each side knew each other's tactics so well no one was any longer surprised. Hence the growing parade of black mourning vestments on city streets and casualty lists filling pages in the nation's newspapers, the results of eastern fields and shattered forests being fertilized by blood. Indians were more unpredictable, however; always trying to gauge the best tactics, willing to change a plan mid-battle, even leaving the field if necessary if they determined the fight was not going well. For any officer leading a white man's army under such a notion would first need a superior braid to relinquish all precedence for his ego. Many Civil War veterans, having fought their white foes on eastern fields in neat, tidy formations, would ultimately see their death served at the hands of bands of 'uneducated savages.' It was that which would not only shock city dwellers reading newspapers but stun the white European race. It was as if these many breeds of uneducated Indians inherently knew that the best method to not get killed in a fight was not to be a

target. Who knew? Because for centuries Europeans had been doing the exact opposite. Indeed, it was deemed cowardly for a white European soldier to duck and not march upright and rigid while facing a leaden onslaught, even knowing it was just the vanity of officers that demanded such ill-placed heroism. Idiocy that stated it better to die than be called a coward. Better yet, for thousands to die than a stubborn ego earn the title of blunderer.

It was this fact of Indian warfare that Bill was trying to explain to Silas: that large formations of mounted infantry could quite easily be decimated by a lesser number of Indians adept at using terrain to better effect and hitting and running at will. The trick was to always take the fight to the enemy, to grasp the initiative; though a difficult if not impossible task in a guerilla war. Yet being flexible enough to alter plans in midst of a battle if necessary, to maintain the impetus, keep up pressure and maintain security, was the one thing so often forgotten by ambitious West Point graduates finding themselves in a desert, oft-without sufficient supplies and without ready access to food or water. Morale is always quick to flounder in such situations if training has not prepared the soldiers to accept conditions of stark privation; the primary purpose of military training.

Indians could survive for weeks on desert morsels, whereas a white man needed constant feeding. Therein lay the army's greatest weakness if wagons could not meet predetermined destinations to keep the men adequately resupplied, thus allowing climate, terrain and disease to be more unforgiving foes. To western desert Indians this was a long-lived fundamental truth. They'd survived in a brutal climate for generations and knew the limits it put on man and beast. They saw most white men as being too full of themselves and their abilities while in the perceived safety of numbers; allowing for excessive foolhardiness in an over-exuberant, over-confident belief in their ability to conquer everything around them, even terrain—until they slowly crinkled under a scorching sun and withered in the heat of the desert sand to die. Stark evidence that was oft-repeated, proving that because Indians were perceived as only being savages, the better armed white men had already ignored their own cardinal, long-held military doctrine; underestimating not only their enemy but also the hostile terrain on which the enemy sought to bring the battle. Thus forfeiting what they should have learned at West Point, from Napoleon:

The most important qualification of a soldier is fortitude under fatigue and privation. Courage is only second; hardship, poverty and want are the best school for a soldier.

The Indian warrior had these qualifications in spades.

The army had a lot of high fliers, of that there was little doubt. And, like Icarus, many failed to acknowledge their limitations, such as the wax leaving the wings and an inability to hold it all together. Confusing skill for luck but courted and allowed to advance through the ranks anyway, until scraping the barrel for skill and finding it empty. Icarus killed himself for lack of understanding. Braids killed untold thousands for hubris and their desire to appear superior.

“Are you at ease with yourself about the war?” Silas asked.

“As much as a man can be, I guess.” Bill said.

“Changes a man, though. Makes him old before his time.”

“It's a cheap price for killing men.” Bill said.

“I often think how it'll be going back to civilian life.” Silas said. “Finding a woman who'll understand us after what we've seen and done. It'll be hard.”

“Finding the right woman is always a trick.” Bill said, glimpsing a pretty face in his thoughts. “And there’s no one forcing you to talk about the war if you think it’ll hinder your courtship.”

“I hope you’re right. There doesn’t seem much point in living otherwise. Not without a family.” Silas said. “Say... What keeps you going, Bill?”

“Curiosity.” Bill said, then continuing after watching Silas think hard about it: “I’ll give you my two cents worth, Silas. I never told a soul, but I always used to think dying was the hardest part of life. I was always worried about it until I saw death all around me. Now I understand that living is the harder part, and each day only seems to get harder. But d’you know what? When I was a kid growing up on the farm, my mother always reminded me living was never meant to be easy. I remember her words each time one of those black days grabs me. Even though those days stretch to a week sometimes, her words still help me get through it: ‘No one said life was going to be easy, Billy.’”

“Smart woman.” Silas said. “Mine has said the same.”

“She was. She lived through different times. Harder times, for the most part. It was how folks were raised back then, I guess. You take the gloom and put it into perspective with the good, and enjoy each in its turn, because it’s all experience. And when you’re close to end of your days, those experiences are all you have left.”

“You think these times aren’t tough?” Silas asked.

“Curiosity has the effect of making life harder, but a whole lot more interesting too.” Bill said.

“What if you’re not that curious?” Silas asked.

“I have a good horse beneath me. My folks could barely afford an ox for the fields. I have a rifle that’s not shy of rain and can shoot sixteen bullets. A deer, if I see one, doesn’t stand a chance. So I can eat easier and better than my folks ever could without the farm to support them. It might not seem like it right now, but life is better, and it will only continue to get better.” Bill said.

“For the ones still alive at the end of it, maybe.” Silas said.

“Good point.” Bill said, knowing Silas to be correct. “I suppose the purpose now, with the end in sight, is to stay alive long enough to see it. There are many worn out regiments coming to the end of their service. I can’t see them looking for too much trouble if they can help it in their last few weeks of army life.”

“It would be a concern, for sure.” Silas said. “Not that it really matters when you die in war, I guess, you’re just as dead. Only that dying a few weeks before the end would be a bitter pill for a family to endure after three years of waiting.” Then, after a moment, Silas said: “Curiosity, you say. Yes, I like that. Curiosity and the endless hope for something better. Something over the next hill, perhaps.”

That’s why you’re heading west, is it not?” Bill asked.

“Suppose it is, and to get away from war in the east.” Silas said.

“Be careful there, though, Silas. The braids who never earned eastern glory will likely kill more of their own out west.” Bill said.

“How’s that?” Silas asked.

“Many of those officers only found fame thanks to the enemy’s incompetence, not by anything they purposely did of brilliance. The Indians will not be so forgiving. Leadership incompetence does not often occur in their culture for a good reason: they have no West Point officer class, no single leader to make the ultimate decision. There is no hierarchy.” Bill said. “They each plan and fight as equals. Wartime officers have no appreciation of that concept, neither the fortune that

furnished them with promotion. The generals in charge of the army today are all that's left after the good officers have been killed; died as lieutenants, captains and majors at the head of their men, where they belonged, leaving the chaff to flourish and revel in the glory earned by others. Each of those young officers emerging from West Point will have an axe to grind for missing his chance for glory too, and will need to make names for themselves. They'll see the Indian wars in the west as their only opportunity for promotion. Many'll think it'll be easy, fighting against Indians. It won't be. And then, in desperation, they'll do some stupid things and escalate the problem to really rile up the tribes."

"You seriously believe that Indians will defeat a Union force on the field?" Silas asked.

"That you even question the notion proves my point." Bill said, as if having a premonition of Fetterman's foolishness two year later.

"How's that?" Silas asked.

"It's an easy thing to attack poorly armed Indian villages, full of nothing but old men, women and children mostly... Hell, I've seen it." Bill said, remembering the stink of roasting bodies as though the stench was forever stuck in his nostrils. "Pushed too far, once these Indians get their hackles up, to where all tribes will unite to fight as one, and at a place and time of their choosing, you'll need to forget all those European tactics the army taught you, and learn something different damned quick."

"I'll keep it in mind." Silas said. "But where'd you see an army raid a peaceful Indian village?"

"Battle of Whitestone Hill, I think they're calling it, in Dakota, under General Sully. He attacked unarmed Sioux in their wintering forage camp, slaughtered women and children. It was mass murder, not a battle." Bill said. "Their braves had left the village beforehand, expecting soldiers to have more honor than to attack their unarmed women and children. They were sorely mistaken."

"I swear!" Silas said. "I hadn't heard."

"No, I expect they'll keep it quiet, keep saying it was a battle. Honorable one too, no doubt." Bill said, remembering the horrible morning when smoldering corpses made his horse fear for what lay ahead. "There was no battle there, just exhausted, frightened young troopers shooting at shadows during the night. But for sure there'll be many more battles because of it. The territory will ignite in fury, unleashing a hurricane. The neighboring tribes will agree a truce, if only for survival, and they'll wait for the moment to outnumber the army somewhere of their choosing. They'll have rifles too. Guns of all types will flood into the west, leftover from the east, and sold by men unconcerned of the consequence. None of it's a mystery. Blind people can see it coming. Yet politicians will call it a surprise."

Thinking on it, Silas fell into silence. He was a hard man, with an inner toughness preserved by a rugged shell, but it hid a capacity for intelligence. He was also exceptionally hard on himself; always expecting others to have the same inherent characteristics and being disappointed in himself for not better explaining things when others didn't comprehend his meaning. And because others didn't possess his same inner confidence there were some things in life he couldn't stomach, and would never allow to be forgotten; criminal slaughter for one. Perhaps living near Lawrence had prepared him for man's propensity for wanton killing, or perhaps he just never had it in him to begin with. Either way, Captain Silas Soule prayed never to be in a position to see such slaughter, and certainly hoped never to be in a situation where he'd be forced to be a party to it. Yet with a hope so profound it was just a matter of time before a cruel life would mock him for holding such desires.