



Western Stories
James Buttinger

Published: 2010

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): "Western" "short stories" "short short stories"

Body Count

One Comanche sits to the left of a dead body, another to the right. The corpse is wrapped in hide and does not smell. A dying fire burns in front of the three of them. The two Comanche have missed the count on the reservation in the valley below. They are waiting for the sun to rise.

The Comanche who sits to the left of the dead body is young. He works two pieces of wood with a knife. The Comanche who sits to the right of the dead body is old and simple. He stares past the valley below and out into the night.

There is quiet except for knife slicing wood and the pop of dying embers.

"Syoma, are you asleep?" says the young whittler.

The old Comanche does not reply. He begins to rock side-to-side.

"Syoma, if you were not feeble-minded you could tell us a story and hasten the rise of the sun."

Syoma says nothing. He continues to rock. The stars seem to sparkle on the breastplate that hangs below the whiteness of his neck. There is no moon. Now Syoma begins to make simple sounds.

There is a rustling in the tree line behind the two Comanche and the dead body. A coyote mourns.

"What does the coyote tell you tonight, Syoma?"

No reply.

The young Comanche shivers.

"Well, Syoma, soon even the coyote will know."

The young Comanche stands up. He bends over and crosses the two pieces of wood he has worked with his knife onto where the hands of the dead body may be clasped under the shroud of hide.

"Syoma, the fire is almost out. I am cold. I cannot wait for the sun to rise into your eyes."

Syoma stops his rocking. He lifts his head toward the stars.

The young Comanche wipes the blood from his knife onto the shroud that covers the dead body and walks into the woods.

Horse Stealers

Yergo was glad he had gone off the trail. His hiding place had not been disturbed. The ride from Wichita Indian Agency to Darlington Indian Agency was two days and one skin of mescal was already empty. He was just now coming up on Binger Station: well short of halfway. Maybe the old woman would have some mescal for him, or at least some corn liquor: she usually did.

And, Lydia would be there.

Yergo was also glad they gave him a good mount to ride this time. The roan was tall, with full chest and strong legs. Not like the ponies when he rode against Black Kettle and for Mackenzie. They were good ponies and a Penatekas Comanche knows how to ride: especially in battle. But, Yergo was young then. Besides, now he rode for the Agency. He should have a big, fine horse to go with his blue britches held up by the red suspenders; his big revolver holstered in the bandoleer across his chest. At that moment, Yergo pushed down on his stirrups and took a long pull from the second skin of mescal.

"Where are the hounds?" he said, to no one in particular.

When he crested the hill Binger Station looked deserted. The hounds usually came out to greet him. They liked to nip at the hooves of the horse. Were they in the kennels? Yergo turned in the saddle and let the breeze cross his face: he was upwind. If they were in the darkened boxes they would be going crazy with the smell right now.

"Jumpers" said Yergo, again, to no one in particular. "They must have come for the hounds because there are jumpers."

That meant Lydia would be alone.

The old woman always went with the hounds. Yergo smiled. He took another long pull from the skin of mescal and headed the big roan toward the stable shed but stopped short. Another horse was in the stable. Not a pony. A big sorrel still in saddle: cavalry saddle and trappings.

Yergo wiped his sleeve across his mouth and dismounted. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth again and stuffed a plug of tobacco into his cheek, chewed hard and spit three times. Yergo left his mount saddled and tied to the post inside the stable shed. He dusted off his blue pants and rearranged his red suspenders and bandoleer. He checked his revolver: clean and loaded. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve once more, spit and walked to the door of the station and knocked hard.

No answer.

He was about to knock again when Lydia opened the door: but only a little crack.

"Yergo, we didn't hear you."

She laughed and looked over her shoulder back into the main room of the way station.

"What do you want Yergo?"

"To come in, of course."

"Of course, come in."

Two men sat playing dominoes at the far corner of the long table. Neither man was dressed in cavalry uniform but rather the muslin

trousers and pullovers of reservation field hands. Neither man looked up when Yergo entered. Lydia left Yergo standing at the door and sat down next to the man sitting at the head of the far end of the long table. He seemed to be winning; his column on the tally sheet had the most crosses. Lydia giggled when he scored ten.

"Let me mark," she said.

She wound her long tresses around her finger and made a cross in his column.

Yergo sat at the foot end of the long table.

"I am Yergo, Comanche scout of the 10th Cavalry."

Neither man looked up.

"Nada, nada."

The man losing had no play and drew from the bone yard.

"Nada. Nada."

This time he drew and placed a bone and smiled.

"Cinco."

The winning man laughed and put his arm around the shoulders of Lydia and let his fingertips brush her left breast. She giggled.

"Cinco, diez, quince."

Lydia put another cross and a mark in his column and pressed her body closer to his.

Yergo pulled his revolver from the bandoleer and slammed the piece on the table. The man losing at dominoes looked up but not right away.

"I know you," said Yergo to the man "you are Kalish."

"You must be mistaken, hombre."

"No, I am correct. You are Kalish, the horse stealer. You are Kawahadas Comanche. I am Yergo, Penatekas. You came through the Wichita agency. I was there that day. I put you into the count."

Kalish stared at Yergo but did not reply. Yergo sat up straighter in his chair and stared back. After a few moments he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and looked away and toward Lydia.

"I am hungry; and thirsty."

The man winning at dominoes looked at Yergo for the first time, then to Kalish, then to Lydia.

"I am hungry and thirsty. Go. Make us some food."

Both he and Yergo watched Lydia sway her hips into the cooking room. Kalish watched Yergo.

"Girl, water for me and my friend here but I think Yergo, the Penatekas Comanche scout of the 10th Cavalry who counts his own people into the reservation would like mescal. Eh, Yergo?"

“What is your name” said Yergo, “I do not know you.”

The man looked to his friend and smiled, then looked back to Yergo.

“You can call me Merik, the horse stealer.”

“Well, Merik, I am Yergo and I cut off the ears of three at the camp of Black Kettle. I am good with a knife.”

Yergo turned his head toward the cooking room:

“I was Comanche scout for the 10th Cavalry at Black Kettle and for Mackenzie I cut off the ears of four Mimbre Apaches at Palo Duro.”

“You are too young for Black Kettle and they were our own Comanche brethren at Palo Duro,” said Merik in a measured manner but loud enough to be heard by Lydia in the cooking room.

Merik and Kalish went back to their game of dominoes.

Lydia returned and set the long table with two sets of tin plates and tin cups at each end. She brought in salt pork, boiled but cold potatoes and some tomatoes and sat next to Yergo on his end of the long table. Yergo felt her breath on the back of his neck when she poured his mescal from a large pitcher.

Kalish and Merik spoke quietly between themselves while they all ate. Every now and then they would laugh. Yergo strained to hear and when he could, he could not understand their dialect mixed with Spanish. He became angry that he was not included in their conversation and he drank more mescal. Now he could feel the heat coming from the body of Lydia sitting next to him. Each time her legs brushed against his under the table he was glad the old woman and the hounds were gone but he became more and more angry at Kalish and Merik for being at the other end of the long table.

“You know Lydia, they hang horse stealers,” he said.

He picked up his revolver from the table and spun the chamber then slammed the heavy Navy Colt back down. Kalish and Merik continued the low talk between them. Lydia giggled and began to clean the table.

When she returned from the cooking room she had a long red scarf in her hands. Kalish took a guitar from the rafters over the long table and began to strum. Merik stood up and began a dance with Lydia, slow at first and then faster and faster as Kalish strummed out the tempo. Lydia spun in tight little circles while Merik wound and unwound her bodice in the long red scarf.

Yergo drank more mescal.

He looked at the bodice of Lydia, bound and unbound by the long red scarf and wiped his sleeve across his mouth with each drink of mescal.

Finally, Merik wrapped the red scarf loosely around the throat of Lydia and pulled her gently to him, her back to his front. He whispered softly into her ear but loud enough for Kalish and Yergo to hear:

"I will find where your mother has hidden her gold coins from her trade with the army. Then I will cut her throat and cut your throat and burn this place down. I will steal more horses and sell them in the Oregon Territories."

"Will the night air be cool in the Oregon Territories?" she asked.

Merik said nothing. He let go of the red scarf and sat down at his end of the table and put his head in his hands.

"Time for me to go," said Kalish.

Yergo put his revolver in his hand at his side and followed Kalish. Night had come but there was enough light for Yergo to watch Kalish. He did not want Kalish to steal his horse. He would shoot him dead and cut off his ear if he tried. Kalish walked the big sorrel with the cavalry saddle and trappings out of the stable shed, ignoring the roan of Yergo. Kalish did not tip his straw hat to Yergo but just rode over the hill and into the night.

Yergo realized that he had left his roan saddled and took saddle and trappings off of the sweating beast. He tried to feed, water and brush the roan but gave up. When he returned to the main room of the station building, Lydia and Merik were wrapped in a blanket together on the floor in front of the hearth. Yergo sat back down at his end of the long table and poured mescal from the pitcher directly down his throat. His eyes smarted from the burn of the liquor so much that moisture from his left eye ran down his cheek onto his lips. The moisture tasted of salt. Yergo put his arms on the table and put his head down on them.

When Yergo awoke, the sun was coming through the windows. Lydia was yawning and stretching by herself on the top of the blanket. She scooped her breasts back into her bodice but only after Yergo had had a good look.

"Yergo, I will make you some coffee. You slept late."

Yergo held his head between his hands.

"Is the old woman here?"

"No. She is still away with the hounds."

Yergo heard the sounds of a horse outside. He stumbled toward the door but Lydia got there before he did.

"My horse."

"She is gone, Yergo."

"Get out of my way."

"Here, Yergo, for you."

Lydia pulled her bodice down and pressed her bare breasts against him. Yergo pushed Lydia aside and threw the door open.

Merik tipped his hat to Yergo as he rode off on the roan.

Yergo ran just two steps into the dust that Merik and his mount left and stood and watched them disappear over the hill. The dust settled around him. When he walked back into the way station, Lydia was dancing in little circles with the red scarf around her bodice. Yergo grabbed the red scarf and roughly pulled both ends around her neck. He kissed her cheeks repeatedly and pressed his lips hard against hers as she struggled against him.

Yergo sat at the top of the hill. He watched the red of the sunset join the red glow of the flames from the Binger station house. He listened to the yelps and screams of the hounds. After a long while, he stood and picked up the heavy bag next to him and said, to no one in particular:

"Now, I, Yergo, Penatekas Comanche will steal a horse."

Killing

Slade aligned the front and rear sights of the Sharps .50 caliber on the kill spot of the beast furthest downwind from the herd. He pressed his right thumb hard against his cheekbone, took a breath, eased the trigger to the set point, let out half the breath and squeezed the trigger.

BOOM.

The kick of the weapon rippled through his prone body to his boots, toes dug into the dirt, and reflected back up his thighs settling into his green groins. Through the smoke that burned his nostrils he saw the beast fall to her front knees then topple over: dead before she hit the grass. Five more booms exploded in sequence to his left and five more bison went down. The last bison mortally wounded but not dead, tried mightily to stay upright but eventually toppled over with grunts and hollow moaning, moaning like death laid eggs in her wound.

The gunners in his line reloaded and waited for Slade to fire. Again, he picked the bison furthest downwind.

BOOM.

Again, she was dead before she toppled over.

Slade sensed the veer of the wind on his cheeks and the way the wind carried away the cotton wool from the spent cartridge; he knew he would have to get his line of gunners up and moving to a new position back and to their left, after the sixth shooter let go.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Slade did not want to take his concentration away from the herd; in the distance the inner rings had not smelled the gangrene of their fallen.

"Damn it, Kid", he whispered to himself, "shoot."

Nothing.

"Damn it."

Slade wacked the man on his left, the vaquero, and gave him the move sign. When the vaquero wacked the man to his left, Slade slipped his left arm out of the sling of the Sharps, grabbed his cartridge bag and slithered through the grass back and to his left until he felt he could come up to a running crouch. He could feel gunner three peel off after the vaquero.

BOOM.

The crumble of a bison going down but the moaning of dying instead of the stillness of death.

"Damn, Kid, too late, we are already moving," seethed Slade over his right shoulder.

Slade kept low and kept moving but without knowing if the late shot had spooked the herd or killed some one in another line of gunners. He had to be looking for a spot to string out his gunners without losing the spacing between the line of shooters moving to his left front and the line of gunners coming up on his right rear.

"Spokes of a wheel boys. All you got to do is picture spokes of a wagon wheel. Each line of six gunners is a spoke. The herd is the hub. When the wind veers we got to move back and to the left. When the wind backs, we got to move up and to the right. You want our smell and the smell of the killing to be downwind of them."

Slade had given them the speech the night before they turned in and again this morning before they started out.

"Listen boys, I take the first shot, the beast furthest downwind. Then gunner number two next to me takes the furthest downwind, then the gunner next to him, gunner number three..."

"How do I get told to shoot?" asked gunner number six, a boy of maybe eighteen, if that.

"You do not get told. You shoot in a cadence..."

Slade was going to say "In a cadence, like as if you was marching" but did not; no way the Kid had ever served.

"And if I sense the wind change, I will move us like the spoke of a wheel but only after gunner six has shot, or, I figure his Sharps has jammed up or his cartridge has misfired. In any case, once I start to move, no one shoots seeing as how you may spook the herd or plug some one in the nearest line making their move."

That's when the number six gunner, "the Kid" least that is what he said he wanted to be called, piped up:

"If I got a shot, I'm taking it."

"No you ain't, boy."

"Kid, call me Kid. My old man, I mean the Colonel said we ain't got but maybe another couple of days of killing before the weather turns and turns bad."

"Kid. Now you listen. All of you listen. Once I start moving, no one shoots. No one", said Slade.

The Kid was right about the one thing, and Slade knew it; they needed to wipe out the herd, especially all of the breeders, and soon. Any

seasoned bison hunter knew that the sweat of snow was coming. The whole idea was to kill the herd; then the Comanche would have to come in to the agencies and get into the count: or starve. Slade didn't much care one way or the other, counted in or starved; with the herds almost done, he'd have to find some other killing to do; maybe Apache in the Arizona territories.

For Slade, killing had been pretty much what he'd been doing since he was younger than even the Kid. First, the Missouri slave runners, then the Rebs, then anyone who got in his way when he was raiding across the Rio Grande.

For a time he killed Comanche. Now he was killing the beast and had been for the last few seasons. When the Kid had spoken back to him he pretty much wanted to walk over to his bed roll, take out his Navy Colt revolver with the oxide of nickel and crystal handle, and kill the Kid: right there, right then and be done with him. The only thing that stopped him was the thought of the rope; he'd gone to sleep thinking he probably should have done it and then just mounted up and headed out for the Arizona territories to kill Apache.

Slade and his gunners sat in a group of silence around the corner of their fire after the day of killing. They ate beef jerky and hard tack and cleaned their rifles and pistols and sharpened their knives. Slade and the four seasoned bison hunters shared water from a skin. The Kid drank whiskey from a flask with ornamental designs. The boy brought out a white sheet to sit on. The Kid was correct, they needed the fire for warmth; the freeze had started. They didn't need the fire for light; there was an arc of fires on the near horizon from the piles of burning bison.

With the frost already upon them, the skimmers were told to take the hides they already had and clear out to the forts along the Arkansas River; wherever they thought they could get their best price. With the cold settling in, the army teamsters were ordered by Lt. Colonel Niell, Commander of the 6th Cavalry, to stack the beasts, douse them in kerosene so they would burn fast, and prepare a frail of lime and arsenic bells to dump on the bones and flutes when the fires were just smoke; the Comanche were not to get anything useful off of the carcasses. Slade and the others could hear the mules being whipped to drive the coffins on wheels into position. They could hear the bellowing of the wounded but fallen bison: wounds burning like suns when the teamsters slammed the meat hooks into the thighs of the beasts to drag them into the piles.

"Hombres," said the vaquero.

He looked into each of their eyes as they sat in shooting sequence from Slade to the Kid.

"Back in Spain, the country of my blood, small, thin, and young but very brave men, matadors, fight the bull. Animals as big as these bison."

"So I've heard," said Slade.

Four others murmured in assent. The Kid kind of smirked.

"Go on," said Slade.

"They enter a ring of sand, the corrida. At five in the afternoon.

"At five in the afternoon? How can they be sure of the time?" said the Kid, the smirk still on his face.

"Exactly at five in the afternoon. In the shade of the afternoon."

"And then?"

"In the older times, a rejoneo, a daring horseman, horse and man unprotected, a horseman as good as any Comanche, fights the bull to the death from his mount with a short spear. Now, the horsemen, horses and men protected by padded armor, are sent out to enrage the bull with their spears, drawing first blood from the beast."

"What then?"

"Then the small, thin and young, but very brave man... "

"Why always young?" asked the Kid.

The vaquero ignored the Kid and looked one-by-one into the eyes of the others; the four nodded in a knowing manner. The vaquero continued:

"The small, thin and young, but very brave man challenges the bull to make passes at him, with only the capote de brega, a red cloth, between the horns of the charging bull and eternity."

"And?"

"When the crowd has been pleased by several daring passes, each pass closer and closer, and the bull begins to drop his head further and further, the matador reveals a sword of the finest Toledo steel to the corrida. Then the matador must decide... "

"The moment of truth."

The vaquero looked into the eyes of each of the others, including the Kid. He held the palm of his hand up, signaling to them to hold that image of the moment of truth while he bent over and lighted a cheroot from the embers of the fire. He took three long drags:

"Yes. The moment of truth. The matador must decide: does the drop of the head mean this bull is ready for the kill? Or, will the bull be alone with a high heart. The matador drops his capote and stands completely in front of the bull. He lifts the sword and drives the blade into the kill

spot behind the lowered head of the bull. If he has decided correctly, and if his passes took the breath from the crowd, if the crowd was breaking the windows as we say, they wave their white handkerchiefs in appreciation of both bull and matador; the president of the corrida grants the matador one ear, even two ears, and, if the fight defied death: the tail."

"What if this matador hombre guesses wrong?" said the Kid.

"Like I have been saying, these men are small, thin, very brave: and young."

"What of the bull?" asked the Kid.

The others left the Kid questioning as they put their clean Sharps bison rifles into the canvas slides and they holstered their clean revolvers. One by one they wiped their sharpened knives on the white sheet that the boy had brought. One, or perhaps two, lit up a cheroot as they unrolled their bedrolls.

"What? What?" said the Kid.

The vaquero relit his cheroot in the dying embers of their fire and stood up from his crouch. He looked at the Kid then pointed east to the far horizon where the dawn would bring the iridescent agony of death, and death alone.

The Bull of the Quarrel is Rising

The old man, at the table in the corner in the dark, stopped, cup at his chin: he felt death coming to the tavern. The liquor burned his black lips. The young guitar player continued to pound out cante jondo to move the bare feet of a young woman in the center of the room. Her eyes were dark. Her fruit was ripe as black olives. Her hands were thick and cracked with salt and dried blood from working the spice-plants. She moved with an animal fever to the pounding of the cante.

The old man sipped, listened again, and then just drank down the mescal in one swallow.

The guitar player stopped. Now he heard the riders coming to the tavern, heard the hard, heavy pounding of horses. Two? Maybe three? No. Four. Four Kawahada raiders on black horses coming to the tavern out of the full, red moon, coming to the tavern across the salt marshes, the salt marshes where the wide river meets the sea.

The young woman stopped her dance. She looked at the young guitar player. He was clutching his guitar tight to his chest, death in his pale face. Then she looked off and cocked her dog head. Now she heard the four horsemen coming to the tavern.

"Go, go now, they have found you, leave your guitar and get up and go." she said.

"They will take you," he said.

"They will kill you," she said.

The old man, at the table in the corner in the dark, moved out of the shadows. He pulled the guitar from the hands of the young man.

"Leave." he said, and he pushed death to the door of the tavern.

The cathedral faces the old tavern, baked white from the heat and crumbling for some time now. The government building houses the local police and the federales. The museum, with an odd display of local crafts and artifacts from the South, and Comanche scalps from the North, completes the square.

Dark, barren and field-hardened women sit on the hot, bleached stone of the cathedral steps. In the tongue of their mothers they implore the childless families leaving the mass to buy black olives and spices. Small groups of old, broken men take their places on the benches of the plaza. They play at dominoes and boast of the days of the raids.

Inside the cathedral, a woman, breasts of black melons dressed in deep silk, rocks on her knees to the rainfall of rosaries. Old widows whisper their prayers.

Knives flashed, always knives, the way was always knives. Juan Antonio knew the reason but he did not know the raiders. He knew the reason why he was riding the cross of fire on the highway to death. What did they say before they killed him, before his dead body rolled down the hill into the lilies?

“Three Kawahadas are dead, and now two fronterizos.”

Four raiders mounted their horses and charged up the gully slope, knives magnificent with stranger-blood. The bitter green morning light profiled them against the ridge, four black angels of death riding their maddened horses.

The priest and the federales found Juan Antonio el de Montilla, dried blood a pomegranate on his breast. They dragged him like a snake up the slope and through the olive grove to the two old women. One sobbed and fainted; the other crossed herself and prayed with hysterical whispers for an end to the same old business.

Waiting for the boat of the smuggler to take me away, there is little cover tonight on the end of the molo to protect me from the Northwest wind and sea. I hunch down among the rocks. For just a moment, I see the hundred faces of the moon reflected in the cold, green apple cupped in my hands. The flood tide and the wind blown breakers cover more and more of the spit of land connecting the molo to the shore. My little spot is becoming an island. My heart is already alone in the infinity of betrayal.

Running at night, hiding in the overgrown brush during the day, eating bad oranges and green apples, I am exhausted. A moon ago, in the garden next to the church, the raiders came to me with their proposition. What could I do? I ask you now, what could I do? I was just one to their four. I knew I could not stay, that I would have to run, and run far if I gave them what they wanted. I ask you again, how could I not give them who they wanted? There were four of them. And they were willing to pay in Spanish coins.

The young guitar player rode his black pony inland toward the old city, distant and alone. He knew he would never make it. Death rode out of a full, red moon. He would take the low plains and ride his black pony over the winds. His horse was brave; his saddlebags were full of black olives. He knew the road well but the road was long and death was looking for him before he got to the old city. Death was looking for him

before the walls of the old city. The city was distant, he was alone and no dawn was coming. Death would be his song.

Into the night the Comanche raiders rode, past the fig trees and North, into the deepening night. Thighs bloody, hair flying, black angels of vengeance: their prize, ripe as black olives.

Running

Fort Concho

Bonner looked into the mirror and past himself. The yellow light of the kerosene lantern highlighted the color of her hair, hair flipped down over her bowed head as she brushed out the kinks of the afternoon. She sat on the edge of the bed, knees apart, and elbows on them, head down between them, counting the brush strokes:

“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, sies, siete, ocho, nueve, diez. Uno, dos...”

Bonner pulled his suspenders up and over his flannel underwear and turned away from the image of himself in the mirror:

“Maria, tell Maggie out at the house you got this copy of *The Book* from me. Any of your sisters at the house that have been there awhile can help you with your readings. Maggie knows I will be back in about a moon or so but just tell her anyway for me. Here, give the reading at the red ribbon marker a try, just a few verses.

“Verso Uno... one: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Verso two: He make... maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside still waters. Verso tres: He res... res... restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of right... right... I cannot say that word... for his names sake. Verso cuatro: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.”

“Good, Maria. Very, very good.”

The girl gave Bonner a kiss on the cheek. Her hands held something behind her back. She smiled and giggled.

“What?”

She blushed as she presented him with a red woolen knit scarf.

“Maria, thank you. The sisters are teaching you a lot of things. Good. Thank you.”

Maria settled into the bed and pulled a white woolen railroad blanket up to her chin. Bonner put his Navy Colt revolver into the inner pocket of his fur-collared coat, wrapped the red woolen knit scarf around his neck and adjusted his fur cap. He headed into the cold wind down to the stables of Fort Concho.

“Here you go, Mr. Bonner, your sorrel saddled up, your black in trail trappings and two Army mules full loaded up with rations for a couple of months on the scout trail. You be careful now, those Comanche are raiding again South down San Antonio way. We expect some bad storms beside the cold. You take care Mr. Bonner.”

Bonner flipped a coin to old Coot. He mounted up and headed out of the gates of the Fort Concho stable. Coot was speaking for the tattletale ears of the other stable hands. The mules were loaded up but a few leagues North, toward the ruins of Fort Chadbourne, Bonner would dump enough hard tack, beef jerky, maize and millet to make room for something shiny and heavy. On his rides around the triangle, Bonner counted on his cavalry scout issue .50 caliber Spencer carbine for food: and killing before he got killed.

About two hours South of Fort Concho, Bonner swung off the main trail to San Antonio; the moon was new and Mars headed toward Venus: he had not been followed. He made a wide arc to the West of Fort Concho and headed toward the ruins of Fort Chadbourne, fifteen leagues mas o menos North North East of Fort Concho. The North star told Bonner direction; the way the little bear played around the pole star told him time: a vaquero who had served on a ship at sea taught him the stars.

Bonner made half the way to the ruins of Fort Chadbourne before dawn: on schedule. He holed up during the day. The ground was frozen; no drifter headed to Fort Concho would see clouds of dust. Bonner hid out in the trees and brush of the ridgelines overlooking the Colorado. He unsaddled and rubbed down the sorrel. The mules were light loaded; he left them in trappings after he brushed and fed them. He apologized to the black for putting her in saddle; if he had to make a break, he would ride hard. Deep sleep did not come. The cold air was still.

Ruins of Fort Chadbourne

At dusk, Bonner mounted the black and led the mules and the sorrel out of the hiding spot. He worked down the ridge and forged the cold Colorado at a different spot from his previous trips through the triangle. More people were coming into the territories from the East; traveling unnoticed was harder. There was still and dark when he approached the rendezvous at the ruins of Fort Chadbourne. He checked his Navy Colt revolver in the pocket of his fur-collared coat: clean and loaded.

When Bonner made out the silhouette of the rubble of the old tower he lit a match to a hand torch. He waved once, twice, three times in an arc and held the torch straight up. A torchbearer on the rubble of the old tower waved back once, twice, three times and moved the torch straight down. Bonner flicked the torch out of his hand to the right and reined the black hard left. He pulled the Spencer out of the saddle sleeve, levered in a cartridge and dropped his body half out of the saddle behind the neck of the horse. Bonner saw the yellow-orange flash a split

second before he heard the crack of a carbine. The black took a shot in her rump but did not go down.

"Good girl." he whispered into the ear of the mare.

Bonner zigzagged the horse and avoided two more shots. He had the advantage, the crumbling tower was in front of the dawn; the shooter stood up on the top of the crumbling tower and was in silhouette.

"Fool."

Bonner came up full on his mount. She steadied down. Bonner pushed down on his stirrups. He aligned his front and rear sights on the silhouette, took a breath and let out half. Another shot whizzed past; the black mare stayed solid. Bonner squeezed the trigger. The first flash of morning sun broke into the exploding head of the shooter.

Bonner kept a zigzag approach to the ruins of the fort. He dismounted at the crumbled tower. He shifted his Spencer into his left hand and took his revolver out of the pocket of his fur-collared coat; he kept the Navy Colt low and wide of his hip. Bonner worked his way through the ruins of the fort; there was only one shooter.

When he came back to the crumbled tower he saw three dead; next to the decapitated shooter, he identified the bodies of Merle Higgins and Billy July. Merle Higgins was hog-tied, sliced by a knife and burned by a cigar all over his naked and blue body. Billy July was shot once through the head: quick and dead.

"Merle, you figured he killed Billy right straight; he was going to kill you anyway. You saved me by telling him torch down not up. Lord, Merle, you were a bastard but you saved my life."

The two bags of Spanish doubloons Bonner had come for sat still between Merle and Billy:

"Why did not this man, dressed like a dirt farmer, just kill them both straight out and take this small fortune; more than he and his children after him could ever make plowing the earth?"

Bonner tended to the bullet wound on the rump of his black mare.

He picked papers out of the pockets of the dead shooter:

"Martin Pauley. Who is Martin Pauley?"

Bonner did not bury the three men together. He burned the body of Merle Higgins with lye he found in the kitchen of the old fort: Billy July was a gun for hire; Merle Higgins was the richest man in Texas and the head of the syndicate that ran the triangle. Merle Higgins would be missed: searchers would ride.

Bonner found the horses of Merle Higgins and Billy July in a gully not far from the ruins of the fort. He rode back a ways toward Fort Concho

and gave the two animals a rump-smack; they might find their way back home: he should have killed them.

With the doubloons split between the two mules, Bonner mounted the sorrel and headed back North East toward Cache Creek waypoint not wondering how old Sol Clinton and Colonel Charlie MacCory, partners of Merle Higgins in the syndicate, would handle what the searchers might find.

Bonner rode his sorrel mare. His black mare was weakened from her wound; his progress to Cache Creek slowed. He wanted to ride only at night but hiding during the day was not easy in the flat terrain of washes, scrub and the occasional stand of trees. When there were miles of nothing he kept moving in the daylight but off of the trails. He mixed a walk and a rhythmic trot with a dismounted lead and rest for water and light feed. Sleep was in the saddle.

Waypoints at Cache Creek

After five days Bonner was within reach of the Cache Creek waypoints. There were no physical remains of the trading posts of Warren, Chonteau and Coffee; lodges, stables, saloons, and general stores were gone. All that was left were meeting spots known to Bonner and those who came to trade: moveable feasts of Spanish doubloons and repeating rifles. Before Warren, Chonteau and Coffee, the French supplied firearms to the Comanche to kill the English, sometimes the Spanish and the Mexicans. When the Texans took the land from Mexico, Chonteau supplied both sides. For four years, with doubloons from the syndicate, Pierre Chonteau “no relation, Monsieur” supplied weapons to Comanche to kill Texans and to Texans to kill Comanche:

“Bonner, you bring gold coins of the syndicate to me. I sell you repeating rifles and ammunition. I do not care who the bullets from the rifles kill. Do you care what you run and why?” Eh, Mon ami?”

Bonner hobbled the horses and mules and put the bags of gold coins under cover of snow. He left his Spencer carbine in the saddle sleeve and drew his Navy Colt revolver from the pocket of his fur-collared coat. Revolver in hand, down and away from his side, he made a large circle and came up on the camp opposite of the expected direction. He dropped to a crouch at a spot with a rise behind him to hide his silhouette; the rising sun would be in their eyes not his. He waited out the rest of the night.

Dawn. He made out the small figure of Pierre encamped in a hollow and sensed another presence: a big man in a crouch peered into the night becoming day. Bonner lined up the sights of his revolver on the bulk of

the big man. His back to Bonner, without turning, the big man slowly raised his hands:

"Pierre, he is here," said the man in dialect.

The Frenchman turned over in his sleeping bag and rubbed his eyes:

"Bonner? Eh? Yes, Monsieur Bonner, for sure.

"Pierre."

"Do. Come. This is Ochra. Ochra, Monsieur Bonner."

Bonner stood and walked into the campsite, revolver still in his right hand and away from his side. He did not shake hands with Pierre. Ochra did not offer a hand; he stood to full height.

"What kind of a horse could mount him?" Bonner said to himself.

"Mon ami, Ochra is here for both of our protection. My dear Ochra, take a lesson from Monsieur Bonner on the art of sneaking up, eh?"

Ochra pointed to a .30 caliber Winchester repeating rifle at his feet. Bonner put his Navy revolver into the pocket of his fur-collared coat. Ochra took the Winchester and climbed up to a lookout. Bonner went for the mules, mounts and doubloons.

"Four boxes, each with six Winchesters, broken down; split between two mules about one hundred and twenty five pounds each mule. Cartridges, enough for thirty magazines each rifle. At one hundred and fifty grains per cartridge, fifteen rounds per magazine, another one hundred and twenty five pounds each mule. A proper load for a mule on trail in the coming sleet and snows, eh?"

Bonner looked at the weather in the Western sky and saw twelve hard days on the trail to the Llano Estacado and another three into the valleys and canyons of the Sangre de Cristo.

Bonner and Ochra loaded the mules. Pierre counted the gold coins.

Bonner and Ochra broke ice on the creek to free up the canoe. Ochra put the canoe, loaded with provisions, up and over his head in one motion for the portage to the running Brazos river; Pierre tagged along: a fop with a bag of Spanish gold swinging from each hand.

Ruta a el Llano Estacado

Bonner pulled up his fur collar; red woolen scarf covered his nose and mouth, flaps of his fur hat covered his ears. Needles of sleet drilled into the exposed skin around his eyes. He dismounted and tied the sorrel mare on a long lead behind one mule and the wounded black mare behind the other.

Bonner walked ahead, a y-shaped lead to the mules behind him, the horses behind them. Head down against the razors of the wind, one foot in front of the other, his body bent at a steep angle against the gale. He

fell face first into the ice-covered ground. Blood flowed from his nose and pooled into his scarf. He choked to catch his breath. He got to his feet but was pulled back down; the blood red scarf flash froze to the ice.

Prone, in a daze, Bonner lost consciousness for a few seconds, a few minutes or perhaps longer. He pulled himself up. Chunks of fur, wool and skin were left on the frozen ground. He started a zigzag pattern, walking off of the direct wind to the left one hundred paces, to the right one hundred paces. He fixed blankets over the heads of the animals; the horses and one mule balked, the other mule seemed relieved and was willing to follow blind.

Bonner put the hooded mule in lead and strung the other animals behind. He walked for two, maybe three or even four hours; he lost track of time and his sense of place. The storm worsened. The animals could not take more. He stopped and put their hindquarters to the howl of the wind. The sleet turned into shotgun blasts of hail. He covered as much of the skin of the animals as he could with blankets. Bonner stayed upright and fit into their movements as best as he could to shelter himself.

The wind slowed. The sleet and hail turned into snow. Snow in large flakes. Flakes a flurry of white. Bonner did not go forward into the white. He checked the salve he had put on the delicate tissues around the eyes, nose, mouth and genitals of all four animals and was satisfied they each had come through the worst. He checked the gunshot wound on the flank of the black mare. His stitches held but the potion he had applied to ward off infection had not worked: the wound was infected. Bonner knew what he had to do to the black mare and do now. He put the barrel of his Navy revolver at the kill spot and cocked the hammer.

"Girl, you know this is best."

He did what he should not have done: he looked into her eyes.

"Tomorrow. We can wait until tomorrow. In the morning, girl."

Bonner built up a wall of snow around the four animals and himself. The snow continued to pile up. He gave the animals feed and water and a light brushing under their blankets. He ate beef jerky and hard tack and sipped water. He built up a bed of snow and rolled himself in with two layers of blankets.

Bonner dreamed in white, the color of death. Death of frogs with the renegade kids of the orphanage. Death of slaves he had run back to their masters in Missouri. Death of Yankees he had killed up and down the Mississippi. Death of Mexicans he had killed for Texas Rangers. Death of Comanche he had killed scouting for Mackenzie and Neill. Death of

white men he had killed to take their money and their women. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death in deep white.

"Friend. Friend. She is dead. We ask your permission to take her, for the orphan children. Friend, are you alive?"

Bonner opened his eyes and saw the white angel of death.

"Friend. Friend. She is dead now. Can we take her for the orphans?"

Death with white hair, white beard, white robes.

"Friend. Friend. Are you awake? We need food for the little ones. Can we take her? She is dead."

Bonner awoke to a world of white under a clear sky and a sun just up; he saw a man covered in snow.

"Friend, do you speak English? Spanish?"

"Yes. Yes. Si. Both. Who is dead? Where is she dead?"

"Friend, your mare. Your black mare. She is dead."

Bonner stood up and brushed off the snow that covered him. He looked to where the man pointed. His black mare was death white, covered in snow. She had gone down, knees apart, head bowed down between them.

"Friend. We could hear you come in last night. With the morning light I entered your camp."

"What children, Padre?"

"Not Padre. One of the Friends."

"What children, Friend?"

"Friend. Yonder. Not far. In our camp. Six Comanche brethren: one old man, one old woman, and four children. We, like you, were caught by the storm. The children have not eaten. We would like your mare. For them. Come. Come. Look for yourself, Friend."

Had Bonner walked through the white snow to the camp of the Friends he would have seen one old Comanche man left alive by his own, the cavalry, or maybe just killers, alive not out of sympathy but because he was a waste of bullets or the effort to slit his throat. He would have seen an old and barren Comanche woman with hands cracked with dried blood from years of hiding and tanning on the plains and working the fields on the reservation, alive for the same reason as the old man. He would have seen four Comanche children, one or maybe two white at birth, bellies swollen, cheeks and eyes sunk from starvation: the Quaker would have ransomed the four children.

"No. No need for me to see, Friend. The mare, I cannot, I... "

"Be on your way, Friend. We will wait until you are over the near horizon and with the snows before we... "

The Quaker put his hands on the shoulders of Bonner and turned to walk back to his camp.

"Friend, you carry death, death in your saddle bags. Friend, choose life, choose life over death."

The Quaker did not look back toward Bonner.

Valleys of the Sangre de Cristo

Bonner, spread eagle on the cold, rock precipice, looked through his long glass:

"Two Mimbres Apache, one Comanchero, two Kawahada Comanche, six horses and a girl. That will work."

The Mimbres passed a leaky drinking skin between them. One licked the leak while the other drank from the opening. The Comanchero sucked on a dead cheroot. The Kawahada sat cross-legged and surveyed the top of the canyon wall. A medicine buckle secured the belt around the hide fur coat of the girl. Her features were white. Her skin was hard with months, perhaps years on the trail, traded among Comanche, Apache, Comanchero, Mexicans and Texans. She was sixteen or eighteen but could be twenty, or more: age got lost on the trail.

Bonner slid back slowly from the edge of the outcropping. He crawled on his belly further back from the edge. When he was out of sight of the group in the canyon below, he removed the white canvas wrapped around the brass long glass and collapsed the piece. He ran at a half crouch for almost a mile through the snow back to where his sorrel mare and the mules were hobbled.

"OK. Time to deal."

Bonner made his descent down the switchbacks and rode five miles through the ice pack. He made a looping maneuver that would have him approach the entrance to the canyon out of the shadows of the morning sun and in clear view of the Comanchero at lookout. The Comanchero stood and aimed a rusted Henry rifle.

"Alto! Alto!"

Bonner reined in the sorrel; the trailing mules stopped in turn.

"Alto! Que tal, tio?"

"Hola."

"Lo siento. You must go back."

"Porque?"

"There is no Eldorado, hombre. No gold. Prospector, go back."

"Soy hombre del negocio."

"What kind of business, hombre? Como se llama? Your name, your name, hombre."

"Winchester."

"Ah. Senor Winchester. Momento. Momento."

The Comanchero slipped over the icy rocks like a drunken man and out of sight. About a half of an hour later, he reappeared with a Mimbre holding an old Spencer rifle in the crook of his arm and a Kawahada with no apparent weapon. The other Kawahada would be with the girl and the horses to trade. If things went bad, Bonner would shoot the unarmed Kawahada first, the Comanchero in the back, dismount and shoot the Mimbre on the run. The other Mimbre would be drunk with his shots from ambush on the canyon rim. The Kawahada with the girl would slit her throat and disappear into the shadows of the valleys of the Sangre de Cristo.

"Hombre, cuantos?"

"Que? Cuantos?"

The Comanchero laughed:

"Senor Winchester. We figure by the load on your mules you have at least twelve or you would not have made the triangle in this weather. So, hombre, one horse for six."

"A pony for six?"

"No, amigo, no. Sixteen hands. Maybe seventeen. Cavalry horses. A bay among them. The Colonel himself would like a seventeen hand bay."

"Cuatro. Four. Four for each horse. Cavalry horses."

The Comanchero looked at the Mimbre and the Kawahada and laughed again:

"Then you would like more than one horse."

"Then you would like more than four of what I have for you."

The Comanchero slapped the Mimbre on the back:

"Come forward with your mules, Senor Winchester."

They sat around a fire tended by the girl. The two Mimbre and the Comanchero smoked and drank corn liquor from skins replenished from time-to-time by the girl: she drew from a large pottery jug. The two Kawahada served themselves with water from a small vase set between them. Bonner drank nothing. The haggling went back and forth with the Comanchero laughing and Bonner saying only enough.

"Senor Winchester, why are you not afraid we will slit your throat and take everything on those mules?"

"You would not be able to trade with me the next trip, the next or the one after that."

"Claro. Claro. Drink?"

"No."

"So, we are agreed. Six cavalry horses for twenty four Winchester rifles, each with fifteen magazines; two hundred and twenty five rounds each rifle."

"I want the girl."

"But, she has been with... Si, si, the triangle is a long ride and in this weather. Si, si, we can all go for a walk, while you... "

Bonner looked at the Kawahada:

"I want to take the girl with me."

"Oh, hombre, I see. Well, well, Hombre del Negocio... "

"No. No negotiation. One offer."

"Speak." said the Comanchero with a half laugh.

"An additional fifteen magazines each rifle. Double."

Bonner held his stare on the Kawahada as he spoke.

The Comanchero stopped smiling, ignored the Mimbres and looked to the two Kawahada Comanche.

"Haa." said the nearest Kawahada.

"Haa." said the other.

The Kawahada stood up and unloaded the bundles from the mules. The Mimbres and the Comanchero brought out the six cavalry-sized horses. Bonner took the girl by the hand and turned his back on the rest. He did not have to help her up on his sorrel. She mounted the mare and led the six cavalry-sized horses out of the snows of the canyon floor. The Kawahada left the unloaded mules to Bonner who took the beasts in lead and walked them out of the canyon after the girl.

Somewhere

"Now, Mrs. Pauley, are you sure?"

"Are you telling me after all of this talk, you want more money?"

"No. No. Ma'am. The money is right."

"Then what are you asking? What are you asking me?"

"I am asking if you are sure you want this killing done."

"Yes. Yes, I am sure. He brings them in for sin. Sin! For those troopers, those filthy troopers. Sin, mind you. He brings them in for sin!"

"OK. OK, then. My scout tells me he is about two days ride out."

"Here."

"No, Mrs. Pauley, you keep the money until I come and tell you the killing is done."

Mrs. Martin Pauley grabbed the ends of her dark red knitted wrap close around her shoulders and watched Slade leave the café.

With the Sisters of Fort Concho

"Now, sisters, gather 'round. Bonner may bring a new sister for us in a couple of days. Maria, you are the newest sister in our house so you will share a bed with the new sister."

"Yes, Sister Maggie."

"The other sisters can answer your questions on how to make her comfortable and how to instruct her. Each has done the job you are being asked to do."

Yes, Sister."

"Use the Spanish Bible. She may know some Spanish. Apache and Comanche usually do. Psalms and the Book of Proverbs are particularly comforting."

"Yes, they are a comfort to me and those we serve, Sister."

"Now, Maria, see that she tends to her money. All of you: tend to your money. The way of the money makes us different than the others; the money is your money. He sees to that."

The sisters murmured to each other knowingly and nodded in assent.

"OK, sisters, the sun is setting. Time to get the house ready for the night."

The Waxing Crescent Moon

Slade spread himself out prone in the snow under a white woolen railroad blanket. He was behind a low ridge. A few hundred yards off to the right was a man mounted on a large bay leading two mules. Maybe a hundred yards behind the man was a girl up on a sorrel leading five cavalry-sized horses. The rifle of Slade was wrapped in white canvas, only the end of the barrel and the sights were uncovered. Slade aligned the front and rear sights of the Sharps .50 caliber on the back of the man. He pressed his right thumb hard against his cheekbone, took a breath, eased the trigger to the set point, let out half the breath, took his finger off of the trigger and let out the rest of the breath. Slade turned his head and spit and spit again into the snow:

"Another time, slave runner. Another time."

Slade aligned the front and rear sights of the Sharps .50 caliber on the chest of the girl, just above the medicine buckle that kept the belt tight around her hide fur coat. He pressed his right thumb hard against his cheekbone, took a breath, eased the trigger to the set point, let out half the breath and squeezed the trigger.

In the dark of the Western sky the razor of the waxing crescent moon spilled the blood of Venus onto Mars.

Mafia Western

"Stay down Kid."

The Kid did not stay down: he bull rushed. Jed Patrick stepped aside in the pase natural of the matador and cracked the barrel of his Pinkerton issue .45 caliber Colt pocket revolver across the skull of the Kid.

"Stay down Kid."

The Kid stayed down.

Jed Patrick wiped blood from the short barrel and put the Colt into his shoulder holster; he motioned to the deputy to haul the Kid to the jailhouse to sober up.

Jed Patrick spilled the lifeblood of his mother onto dirty sheets when he was born into the world as Abraham Mortkowicz in a house of ill repute on the corner of South Halstead and Bunker streets on the Near West Side of Chicago. He slept on a sawdust floor breathing in the smell of blood in the butcher shop of his "uncle" and grew up in the streets getting bloody noses. He started giving bloody noses for Irish Patrick, the head of the West Side Joint. Patrick wisely told him to ditch Abe Mortkowicz "for Jed Something" on his Pinkerton application and strongly advised him to take an assignment with the detective agency:

"On the rails, boy... "

And far from the prominent banker Abe had just dumped into the Chicago River at the behest of a Ward Heeler lately fallen out of favor with the bosses: after first draining the blood of the banker from a meat hook. Unfortunately, while both Irish Patrick and Abe knew how to bribe a copper, neither understood the long arm of the lines of the telegraph system.

Jed Patrick left the Kid to the deputy and walked cater-corner in no great hurry across Rusk and 5th streets in Fort Worth, Texas to Café Sylvia: he was late for his meeting with another set of bosses.

Colonel Thomas Neill of the 6th Cavalry and Colonel Charlie MacCory of the Texas Rangers were in the midst of a full-scale war between the settlers and the Comanche, a war of increasing brutality; no longer were young women and children on both sides being abducted, they were being raped, mutilated and murdered. With the bison hunters ranged further North in the Territories and winter still some months away, the Colonels could not count on starving the Comanche into submission.

Perhaps with the carnage of that war as a blind, old man Sol Clinton, owner of the Double S ranch, the biggest in those parts and backed by the syndicate, and young Peter Menard, the owner of the upstart C-Bar-A ranch, backed by the Texas Pacific railroad, appeared to have started their own range war over grazing and water rights: cattle drovers from both spreads were being murdered in line shacks, at water wells and out rounding up strays.

The Colonels, their hands full, were less than enthusiastic about getting involved. Folks of Fort Worth even assumed, at first, that the Colonels were behind the killings: the men of the Double S and C-Bar-A were hardened to violence by the War Between the States, raiding across the Rio Grande or killing Comanche; when they came in off of a cattle drove they tore up Fort Worth, raping, mutilating and murdering. About all the Colonels and the other police authorities had been able to do was confine the lawlessness to a chunk of Fort Worth called A Half Acre of Hell off of Main and up Rusk Street. When the authorities could make a case against a drover, the money and influence of old Sol Clinton and young Peter Menard would, more often than not, get the case thrown out of court.

On Whitsunday, three months earlier, the Colonels had brought old Sol Clinton and young Peter Menard together in Café Sylvia and advised them that the killings of their range war had to stop. Both men claimed no responsibility for the killings: each blamed the other. Their denials ended up in a near fistfight as they lunged across the table, the one in the corner by the front window. The Colonels were unable to keep the two apart. Sylvia herself had to settle things down:

“More coffee gentlemen?”

The two ranchers apologized to her and grudgingly told the Colonels they would check with their drovers to find out what they could about the killings.

The killings did not stop; they increased in frequency and cruelty with some of the men being butchered like cows at the slaughterhouse. Cattle drovers from both the Double S and the C-Bar-A were now being killed in numbers greater than the number of Comanche dead in their war with the settlers.

When Jed Patrick entered Café Sylvia, the Colonels had old Sol Clinton and young Peter Menard around the table again, the one in the corner by the front window. The Colonels had presented the two ranch owners with a list of the names of the drovers murdered over the last few

months and had said enough was enough and demanded an honest accounting:

"This one we killed."

"This was ours."

"This was nothing to do with us."

"Nor with us."

"More coffee gentlemen?"

The four around the table came to the understanding that almost two thirds of the killings could not be attributed to the owner of the Double S or the owner of the C-Bar-A. Either a third group was involved:

"The Comanche?"

"No, they do not kill this way."

Or, a lone assassin, carrying out a vendetta.

"Who?"

"We brought in Jed here, sit down boy... "

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Sylvia!"

"We brought in Jed here... "

"Thank you, Sylvia."

My pleasure, Jed."

"Jed here to figure out who... "

Sugar, boy?"

"No thanks, Colonel."

"And why... "

"Yes, why... "

"The Colonel and I do not care why... "

"Just bring the panther back to Fort Worth, boy... "

"So, give him the list... "

"The list, Jed. Take this here list, boy... "

"This list of Double S and C-Bar-A drovers murdered... "

"More coffee, Jed?"

"Yes, please. Thank you, Sylvia."

The Colonels cleared out, Colonel Neill back to his fort protected by cannon and cavalry and Colonel MacCory back to his barracks protected by Rangers and their sawed-off, double-barreled shotguns.

A fortnight later, old Sol Clinton was shot dead in his bed: one round between the eyes.

His wife and only son, his only daughter and her much older husband, and the wealthy and connected of Fort Worth attended the funeral. Peter Menard attended surrounded by six of his best gunmen. The Colonels sent their regards. Jed Patrick was not invited.

At the funeral, the realization came first to the widow of old Sol Clinton. At the reception, in the grand hall of the Hotel El Paso at the corner of 4th and Main, around plates of Gulf shrimp and oysters on the half-shell, pairs and then small groups of women nodded in assent with the name of the assassin. A man who had kept the drunks and ruffians of their town confined to The Acre. A man who had protected their property by putting bank robbers and train robbers into the territorial prison. A man who knew, but could not bring to justice, the person who raped, mutilated and murdered the prostitute known only as Sally. A man not among them on that day, nor any day, when the swells of Fort Worth gathered: the Pinkerton Agent Jed Patrick.

“Why?”

Was not the question on the unpainted lips of those women of Fort Worth in their mourning dresses of imported black silk. They all presumed why he had carried out these executions in such a cold, cruel and calculating manner:

There was, needless to say, a woman involved.

When Jed Patrick had first arrived in Fort Worth, he met up with the daughter of old Sol Clinton when she happened into Café Sylvia, away from her part of town, to stay warm while her coachman repaired a broken harness. Perhaps his dark eyes excited her with that sense of danger from which she had been shielded. Perhaps her gentle innocence warmed his heart, a heart cold with the name of the person who had raped, murdered and nailed to the door of an outhouse in The Acre a prostitute with only a first name.

Old Sol Clinton warned Jed Patrick off his daughter; first with stern words and then with a series of beatings administered by the foreman of the Double S—and six of his cattle drovers. After the third such beating, or maybe the fourth, the only daughter of old Sol Clinton was convinced to accept the proposal of marriage of a man who was more than twice her age: who also happened to be the money behind the holding company that owned The National Bank of Fort Worth, the Bank of the City of Chicago and several other banks west of the Mississippi River.

The widow of old Sol Clinton told her only son on the night of the funeral that now he had to be a man; that his childish ways of beating up whores in The Acre were over. She told him to sober up. She told him:

“Avenge the death of your father.”

Chastened, the son of old Sol Clinton took to following Jed Patrick around Fort Worth, especially around The Acre, figuring out a way to get the jump on him. He followed Jed Patrick around for days.

“Get on with it son.”

“Yes, Mum. Tonight, Mum. Tonight.”

That night, her window open in her in-town suite on the top floor of the Hotel El Paso, the widow of old Sol Clinton, dressed in her mourning nightgown of imported black silk, heard the gun shot; had she not hated Catholics as much as she hated Jews and Negroes she would have crossed herself as she smiled. She waited for the return of her son: he did not.

She got herself out of bed and walked down the back stairs of the Hotel El Paso and one block up and one block over to discover her son flat on his back at 5th and Rusk streets by the doorway to the rooms of Jed Patrick. The eyes of her son were open in dead surprise at the hole between them made by the .45 caliber short barrel Pinkerton issue Colt. The widow of old Sol Clinton hiked up the skirts of her mourning nightgown of imported black silk, grabbed under the arms of her dead son and dragged him to the back stairs of the Hotel El Paso. She hauled him up those back stairs to her in-town suite on the top floor, stopping at every landing to smooth back her nickel grey hair. She undressed him, put him in his nightclothes and tucked him into his bed: she did not close his dead eyes.

Later that morning, she put out her silver, china and crystal and invited her women friends in to view and lament yet another murder by:

“The cowardly heathen born of the filthy loins of a Chicago whore. Excuse my tongue ladies.”

“No need to apologize.”

“More tea?”

Days turned into weeks and the snows of winter turned into the warm rush of an early spring wind. Jed Patrick was half dozing away a country breakfast on the porch of Café Sylvia in the rocking chair made by one of her bygone suitors. A block up Rusk street, by the stable, the Kid and some of the boys from the Double S were hootin’ and hollerin’, drunk as skunks. The Kid drew his Colt .45 caliber long barrel revolver, the one

with the oxide of nickel and crystal handle, and fired off all six rounds into the air: Bang. Bang. BOOM. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

When Sylvia came out onto the porch into the warm morning breeze to see what the shooting was about, she clutched her hands to her heart but would not look away from what the Sharps .50 caliber bison rifle had done to the back of the head of the man in the rocking chair; the man who had brought fear into the hearts and death to the souls of some of the most hardened men in Texas: the man who had avenged the rape, mutilation and murder of a prostitute named just Sally.

Raid on a Café

A woman stops rocking in a chair on the porch of a café. She tightens her right hand on the stock of a Remington sawed-off, double-barreled coach gun resting coldly between her loins. Silently, slowly, she cocks the hammer on the left barrel with the thumb of her left hand. She pauses. She looks up and down the darkened street: no movement. She cocks the hammer on the right barrel of the shotgun: slowly, silently. A white woolen railroad blanket covers her up to the pale of her long, thin neck. She blends into the snowdrifts piled up along her side of the street. The night air is cold and still. Cold shadows of a waxing crescent moon darken the other side of the street: the raiders will make their approach out of those shadows.

Early winter snows caught them by surprise: drovers, cavalry, railroad men and Comanche. The drovers, who ask for second helpings of her beef stew, tell her how they have to put down the emaciated and sick cattle. The cavalymen, who eat her cherry pie with their fingers, tell her how they burn those carcasses to drive the Comanche into the count at the Agency. The railroad workers, who suck cups of her steaming coffee through sugar cubes held between lips cracked with dried blood, tell her how now even the Comanche bucks follow the squaws and children, picking through the garbage trails left by the railroad chuck wagons.

At the edge of the porch of the café, a tin plate simmers with Navy beans, mashed into a thick stock of beef. The aroma wafts into the still and cold night air. Two blocks up the street, in and out of the shadows of the moon, she senses movement: a single raider creeps in low against the boardwalk.

“A feeble one, they send a feeble one in first.”

Covered in a coat of yellow-grey fur, the raider moves silently, slowly; the new fallen snow pads his movement. He stops at the cross street and cocks his dog head, to the left, to the right, to the left; he makes his way across and back into the shadows of the moon.

The feeble one is now just across the street from her. He takes two steps into the street and stops, still in the shadows. He remains motionless for minutes. He takes two more steps. Belly low to the ground, he advances. The yellow-grey of his fur coat blends into the moonlit snow. Luminescent eyes focus on her; his nose points toward the steaming gruel. When he reaches the end of the porch, his body quivers. He buries his nose into the gruel and laps up the warm mush with his tongue. The

slurping of the simple one does not distract her: if the other two raiders can surprise her, they will take her from behind and slash her pale throat.

“That is how they kill.”

The other two raiders approach from the opposite end of the street. They leave the shadows of the moon, creeping low, almost on their starved bellies. Slowly, silently, she slips the barrels of the sawed-off coach gun between the folds of the white woolen railroad blanket. The lead raider senses the danger and leaps to his left in an attempt to get back into the shadows. The blast from the right barrel of the sawed-off shotgun catches him full: his blood splatters black onto the night snow. The second raider freezes. Perhaps with an instinct for honor, he comes up to full height and accepts his fate. The blast from the left barrel of the sawed-off shotgun rips the coat of yellow-grey fur from his bones.

“Fools.”

The feeble one ignores the fate of his fellow raiders. He continues to lap up the gruel of bean in beef stock. When the tin plate is licked clean, he makes his way back up the street and into the shadows of the moon.

The Contract

Chicago Herald American
Wife of Banker Smashes Window
Temperance Crowd Cheers
August 17, 1878

Mrs. Calvin Wheeler, Grand Matron of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union Chicago Chapter, and wife of the prominent Chicago banker, was taken into custody by police after throwing a brick through the window of the Carpathian Saloon at 327 W. Division while ladies of The Union cheered her on with shouts of "Take the Pledge" and "Leave it in the Levee". A small group of women, led by one known only as Ruth, screamed back at the Union crowd "Martha take care of your own house." Police formed a line between the two groups of women and eventually had to take Mrs. Wheeler into custody "for her own safety" commented the arresting patrolman. Mrs. Wheeler was released without charge from the 11th Street station into the custody of her husband who sent the family carriage.

"I told you I never liked him, he was, too..."

"We agreed on him, we agreed on all three of them, to represent our, our..."

"Our, interests."

"Yes, our interests. We all agreed our interests were too much of a temptation for only one."

"Or, even two."

"Correct. Even two. We all agreed we needed three. Three would be a balance."

"A trinity."

"If you must."

"Three, and those three... "

"I cautioned that he was the weak one... "

"How can you say that, you never met him?"

"We never met any of them."

"The reports. We had the reports from... "

"The reports."

"And the latest report?"

"The latest report is that now there are just two."

"The weak one was... "

"What do we do?"

The three men stopped their conversation, not because of any care that what they were saying would be compromised in the open air café of the Plaza Mayor of The Capital City, but to consider the young one, fresh from the spice fields, in the shapeless sackcloth who brought them their glasses of early evening sherry. One of the men, the one with the El Greco affectation, worked his fingers below the table as he pondered how he might tighten the laces in each hook as he bound her in a corset of black silk with busques of whalebone. The fat man to his left sniffed, not the sherry but at the very idea that she would even think to ask for something from his purse after he had had her; she would simply submit to the differences between his station in life and hers. The third man snorted his disappointment when up close the shapeless sack revealed just enough to confirm to him the feminine form.

Each of the men sipped at their sherry; El Greco licked his lips and played with his fingers under the table; the corpulent one patted his fat purse in his belly pocket; the third man perhaps thought wistfully of his days at university or maybe of his last night in the dungeons below Calle Toledo. The three men sat at their usual table, the one under the awning with the emblem of The Day of the Owl; they sat and drank and drank and sat into the feminine breathing of the night.

“Now we have just two. Two to... “

“Two to protect our interests...”

“Agreed. We must continue to protect our interests...”

“Yes. Certainly. Even with just two...”

“Even the Blessed Virgin would agree we need to protect our own interests...”

“Especially the way The Crown is pissing away the interests of The Empire...”

“The Empire?”

“Folly.”

“The three men laughed, hearty, knowing laughs, and nodded in assent around the table.

“While the Crown spends the gold we do not have, El Duque is pissing his pants over the Marquis and his *progresistas*...”

“And La Boca del Raton and the *apostolicos*. My pardon padre...”

“Not required. And what of the anarchists?”

They all laughed.

“Should we be laughing? He is pissing the pants we paid for my friends!”

The corpulent man pounded his fist on the table at his own humor. El Greco made a set of horns with his hands and mounted them on the head of the third man.

“Bring these to the Marques, Saint Francesca, and send... “

“Send your patron the Marchioness to us... “

The three men laughed and drank and drank and laughed but perhaps the third man, who drank the most, did not laugh as much as the other two.

Fort Worth Daily Gazette

Comanche Killing

Indian Policeman Praised

September 4, 1878

Albert St. John, his Christian name, was shot dead in the Alexander Post Office by the Comanche Indian Policeman Thomas R. Knight. St. John was seen leaving a café with a Navy Colt revolver in his belt, a violation of the rules of the Indian Territories. St. John entered the post office followed by Officer Knight. Upon being told to relinquish his weapon, a scuffle ensued and St. John was shot dead. J.A. Brooks and Henry Potts, Texas Rangers, accompanied Officer Knight to the doors of the Post Office but did not interfere in the Indian matter.

Fort Worth Lone Star Bulletin

Cold Blooded Murder!

Passerby Claims

September 6, 1878

A citizen, who asked not to be identified, claims he heard Indian Policeman Thomas R. Knight argue with Albert St. John, a Comanche, over a Navy Colt revolver prior to the shooting in the Alexander Post Office that left St. John dead. Reportedly, St. John and a female companion were playing dominoes in the window table of a café when Knight walked in and sat next to them. “Knight kept telling St. John how the Navy Colt looked so clean. Then he demanded St. John sell him the piece.” The citizen went on to say heated words were exchanged between the two until the proprietress of the café told the two Comanche to take their argument elsewhere. Texas Ranger Colonel Charlie MacCory dismissed claims that St. John was shot in the back by both Knight and Ranger J.A. Brooks. Ranger Brooks and Ranger Henry Potts were reported to be at the scene of the shooting.

The man with the big purse around his fat belly did not look at her. He flicked his fingers at the young woman, with the bruise on her left cheekbone, when she served them their evening sherry.

"Just leave the bottle and bring two more then go away and leave us alone."

He did not look at her when she returned with the two bottles but handed her a small stack of coins and flicked his fingers.

"Go."

"So."

"Now we have just one to protect our interests... "

"The Colonel... "

"Yes, the Colonel... "

"My reports say... "

"Your reports, your reports... "

"My reports say our position becomes more difficult. They say... "

"More difficult?"

"A considered choice of words."

"More difficult. My reports say there seems to be a man, a man who... "

"One man?"

"Just one."

"Then why are we... "

"My reports say he has gone into business for himself. He has... "

"His business interferes with our interests?"

"Oh, yes."

"Kill him."

"We have asked the Colonel... "

"Asked? Asked? Tell. Tell. Tell the Colonel to kill this man. Tell your Colonel... "

"Our Colonel."

The three men stopped talking and drank their evening sherry. They did not look at each other but rather out into the din of the Plaza Mayor. A small plate of slices of hams, sausages and cheeses of the regions remained untouched in the center of the table. The cheese wept with the tears of the virgin. The young woman with the bruised left cheek came out to the tables and chairs and lighted the candles. She returned to the shadows but only after nodding her head in an almost imperceptible manner toward the back of the seated man with the fat purse and even fatter belly.

"The man in question went into battle with the Colonel."

"Ah."

"What?"

"He is one of those men?"

"Yes."

"What? What? What men?"

"What our Patron Saint Francesca... "

"Do not refer to me that way anymore. I no longer find the contradiction humorous."

"As you please. We all knew that the three men with whom we entrusted our interests were men of significance but, because of their age, men no longer capable of the rigors required to do the daily things that needed to be done to maintain our interests."

"You recall now?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. But what, what does that have to do with, with... I want this man, whatever kind of man he is, I want this man killed. If the Colonel cannot do this, then... "

"If we three agree... "

"Agree that the facts show this man is undermining our interests... "

"Kill him. Kill him!"

"There is a man... "

"Another man?"

"Go on."

"There is another man with whom our intermediary can make contact."

"Without a conflict of loyalty testing the Colonel?"

"Yes."

"A man who kills... "

"Then do so. Do so! I want this killing done!"

The three men drank and sat and sat and drank their bottles of sherry. Sometime after midnight, the three men went their separate ways: El Greco walked to his rooms overlooking the market in the Plaza San Miguel, he worked his fingers in the pockets of his pants in anticipation; the fat man waddled to the traversia that leads to Calle Arenal where he intended to hire a hansom that might take him to his wife and children in their apartments overlooking El Parque del Buen Retiro; the third man strolled the short stroll down the hill from the cafes of the Plaza Mayor to the dungeons of earthly delights in the caves below Calle Toledo.

While El Greco corseted a young woman in black silk and whale bone and the third man sated his appetites with the satyrs, the fat man was sprawled on his back in an alley off of the traversia, choking to death

from the bloody mess of his manhood sliced off and stuffed into his mouth and held there by a boy of about sixteen named Rincon, a common enough name. Another lad, slightly older but much shorter, and named, appropriately, Cortado, sat on the belly of the fat man and merrily counted the coins in the fatter purse. The two young boys talked and laughed and laughed and talked in a dialect of the South.

Chicago Tribune
Saloon Keeper Slain
No Motive No Suspects
September 4, 1878

Mrs. Margaret Wagner was shot dead in the doorway to her saloon Carpathian at 327 W. Division two nights ago. Two bullets from a small caliber pistol pierced her heart killing her instantly. "Maggie was a peach," sobbed a woman who asked to not be identified. "She was always there for us working girls," commented a woman known only as Ruth. Police have no idea of motive and no leads on a suspect. Mrs. Wagner lived alone above her establishment. Her body remains unclaimed at the Cook County morgue.

Chicago Herald American
"Coppers Murdered Our Friend!"
Levee Beat Cops
September 6, 1878

"They were bragging about shooting poor Maggie—while drinking her whisky!" claims a woman who asked not to be named for fear for her life. The woman says the two patrolmen made their boasts while downing shots of whisky at the very bar rail owned by poor Margaret "Maggie" Wagner, the woman brutally gunned down in front of her own saloon at 327 W. Division. Eleventh Street Police Lieutenant Timothy O'Brien denied police involvement in the heinous crime saying the accusation was "Trash. You know where that woman works." The two patrolmen in question reportedly walk the Levee District beat.

"We killed the wrong man."
"We? We did not kill anyone."

The two men sat at their regular evening table in the Plaza Mayor. As was their recent custom, they instructed the young woman in the sack-cloth, not so fresh from working the spice fields, to pour a glass of sherry for their permanently departed colleague. They raised their glasses in a solemn toast to the empty chair and the full glass:

"Pronouns. In any case, mistaken identity, the wrong man was killed."

"He was an officer of the law?"

"Yes. And no. He was a private agent."

"Our problem of the interloper still exists?"

"Again, yes and no."

"Which?"

"Let me see if I can explain."

"Do."

"For some years now, we have known, at least you and I have known... "

A nod to the empty chair.

"We have known that, given the course of events here in The Capital City and across The Empire, we were engaged in a rear guard action, as a soldier might say... "

"That does not mean we give up our interests and... "

"No. Of course not. Here is my meaning. We accumulate our treasure based upon the misery and misfortunes of others. We... "

"That is not altogether true. We trade in horses and beefs. Fine animals. We introduced them; do not forget. We... "

"My dear Francis. I do not diminish that part of our interests. But, you must agree we gain the vast amount of our treasure from the markets we create for, let me say, how can I say... "

"The ways of the flesh."

"Precisely. The ways of the flesh: whisky, wagers and women. In the seven good years what we provide is purchased. In the seven bad years even more is purchased; in times of famine, pestilence, war and civil unrest, men are absolved from the norms of social control: family men, church going men, even gentlemen do things that they would never consider doing in the Peaceable Kingdom."

"We have had this conversation before. How does this relate to whether or not the one who is trespassing on these interests of ours, this man we have failed to kill, may or may not still be a problem?"

"You come from the plains and spice fields of the South."

"Yes."

"And I?"

"You come from the ocean swept rocks of the North. Your point?"

"Where have we both decided to seek our fortunes and... satisfy our pleasures?"

"Eh?"

"Where are we?"

"In The City."

"The City."

"Ah. I am beginning to see... "

The two men sipped their sherry and sat back in their chairs and took in the anticipation mounting in the din of the Plaza Mayor as the small hours after midnight approached.

La Prensa de Madrid

Bravura Performance

Lotta Leaves Them Laughing and Loving

September 4, 1878

Lotta Crabtree, the Siren of San Francisco, was a comic splendor as Dulcinea in an open-air performance of Act 3 Scene 2 of the Ballet staging of Don Quijote, our great national treasure by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. The Imperial School of the Ballet Russe stepped to the choreography of Marius Petipa accompanied by the symphony orchestra Del Gran Teatre del Liceu de Barcelona playing the music of Ludwig Minkus. Lanterns of the orient lit the barge floated on the new lagoon in El Parque del Buen Retiro. Fireworks preceded a grand procession along the gas lighted boulevard to the Royal reception at El Palacio de Cristal in El Parque.

La Boca del Raton de Madrid

The Rat Speaks!

Whispers from El Palacio de Cristal

September 5, 1878

Our good Catholic country has been made to endure many forms of lascivious behavior since the time of the Little Corporal and his brother Pepe Botella. But even our own Saint Francesca of Assisi and his late night romps with his cavorting companions into the caves of Calle de Toledo cannot compare with the vile nature of what your Boca del Raton observed; with only you in mind, my faithful readers, could I make myself endure the scene. In the hours of the devil at El Palacio del Cristal in El Parque del Buen Retiro, Lotta the Lewd bared her essentials under the eager hands of the Marchioness of Montelo in a dance of the fans for the leering eyes of our very own Duque Primero; and to the eternal mortification of the Marquis who could only cross himself at this altar to Lucifer. Your dear Boca asks: "Did a doe present you with the set of horns this time my dear Marquis?"

"I thought *you* had him killed?"

"That offends me."

"In what way?"

"That you would think I would have him molested in that manner."

Pause.

"Ah, I see. No. No my dear Francis. No. To each man his own pleasures. After all I... "

"Why then? Why did you think that I had him killed?"

"The fact that he was cheating us out of our shares."

"He was?"

"Oh, my dear, dear Francis. You must pay more attention to your purse."

Pause.

"I thought *you* killed him."

"Me?"

"You have never shied away from killing. I recall... "

"Those days are beyond me."

"So you had this done? Because he was poaching our shares? Why the castration, the ultimate cruelty?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"No to what?"

"No, I did not kill him. Nor did I have him killed."

"Then who?"

"Who knows?"

Chicago Tribune

Singular Tragedy

Sad Result of Target Practice

Immigrants Tote Guns

September 15, 1878

The death of Mrs. Margaret Wagner almost a fortnight ago at the Café Carpathian has been assigned as an accidental shooting. Two police officers whose names are being withheld by the Commissioner have been suspended pending further resolution. Reportedly, the two patrolmen were engaged in "necessary target practice" in a vacant lot across the street from the establishment. "A singular tragedy" commented 11th Street Police Lieutenant Timothy O'Brien. "Our heart goes out to her family." The Lieutenant went on to explain that increased gun violence

in the city by the many newly arrived immigrants has made proficiency with firearms a priority for police officers.

Chicago Herald Tribune

Advertisements

Help Wanted

September 22, 1878

WANTED!

Bartenders! Barmaids!

Good pay! Tips!

Apply in person at Irish Patrick's Saloon

327 W. Division

From the same author on Feedbooks

City Stories (2010)

Short shorts and short stories from the cities of America around fin de siecle. Stories: Twilight. Fantail Share. Knocking. Killing. Mannequins. Press.



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind