

Ghost Dancer

1. *The Dead Indian*

The last century had just turned, or was about to turn, I can't remember, and Zachariah Parkinson called me to his office. The Old Man and I had served together in the War, and he got to witness my habit of not dying during a skirmish in the Wilderness. After that, I kept an eye on him, and when he established his "security service," employing mostly old soldiers and head breakers like myself, I signed on.

I had changed my name after the war, taking advantage of the confusion to craft a new identity for myself. I signed on as Samuel Drew, but he recognized me right off, even though he didn't show a sign of it. Just pointed me out to one of his assistants and had me ushered into his office.

We had a good relationship. I kept his secrets, he kept mine, and no one who mattered had to die before they were ready. Parkinson Security was mostly in the business of strike-breaking at this time, and I had a feeling he wanted to go over the mine job we'd just finished in West Virginia, so I brought my notes on that one. It had started clean, but there was something funny going on, and the strikers had ordnance that no one making two dollars a week for lying on his belly should have. We lost a few men; they lost more. The miners went back to work and the casualties on our side were taken care of, but I knew I'd have to do some explaining.

He directed me to a chair and offered me a cigar. I knew something other than the mine job was up, because he never offered his cigars to anyone unless he had something on his mind and wanted to share the burden. He bragged about the sweat shop that made them and how they always sent a boy over with a fresh box for him once a week. Then he trailed off.

He regarded me through the smoke.

"This is a mug's game, Samuel," he said. He waved a tired hand at the sheaf of notes in my lap. "That mess just highlights it." I stayed quiet. Sometimes, staying quiet is best, because defending yourself causes more trouble than just letting people talk themselves out.

"I read your reports." He fiddled with some papers on his desk. "You knew something was wrong, but didn't have the means or authority to figure out what, and good men died. On both sides. Morgan bought the mine for a song right after you left. Between the lost production and our expanded fee, the previous owner went broke."

He cast a rheumy eye up at me across the desk. "What if Morgan was in on it from the beginning? Suppose he had an eye for that mine, and he figured the best way to get it was to stir up trouble?" I shrugged, wondering where this would lead.

"We go in—I *send* you in—to situations like this to fix trouble, and we never know how it will come out. I don't like it."

He tossed a stack of papers across the desk. I saw that one of them said *Strand* on the mast and had "London" printed in the bar. "You know what's in these?" he asked. I shrugged again. "There are stories in there, by a fellow named Doyle. Now, I know they're just fiction and all, but he makes a pretty good point about some things. See, the fellow in these stories, he digs around things before he gets himself too deep, so he knows what's what."

He leaned back as if he'd made some great point that I would have grasped if I'd been a smarter man. "That's what we need to do," he said.

"All right," I answered, not willing to commit myself to anything.

"I'm glad you agree. I have another job for you, a clean up in a mining town out west. The mine itself is running fine, but there are some...unsavory elements in the town that refuse to be dislodged. I'll send a crew out in a few days, but before they get there, I want you on site to snoop around and work out the best way to move them on. If this works, you'll be the first detective of our private investigations branch."

We sat in his office for another hour or so discussing the job. Elias Houghton, the client, had never intended to be a miner. He'd headed west after the war driving a merchant's cart bought with a Union check for a couple of dead brothers, and figured to make a fair living supplying miners with the necessities. By 1870, he found himself a wealthy shopkeeper with his own freight line and a healthy interest in the Jubilation Mine, a silver and copper producing dig in the side of a nearby mountain. By the time the lode had started to peter out in 1890, Houghton had already made other plans. He'd heard of the success of the Hot Springs in Arkansas, and Jubilation was close enough to the railroads in Denver to attract the same kind of trade.

Unfortunately, remote mining towns like Jubilation had always been a magnet for rough characters. Bandits, saddle-tramps and other miscreants tended to use the town as a sort of well-appointed hide-out, passing through or laying up as they wished. Previously, old Elias had turned a blind eye to that sort of behavior; they didn't do much damage, and some of them settled in to work the mine or contract as shotgun riders on the freight line. Elias's plans for a resort, however, changed all that. Rich Easterners and Californians wouldn't come to get their cure if they new Jesse Coulter was drinking in the saloon and waiting for their stage to start them home.

Elias hired a sheriff. The sheriff hired himself a few deputies, and they began to push against the less savory elements in town. The less-savories pushed back. A man named Hob Rider, a shotgun man that might have been sheriff had he not been crazy, organized a loose band of miners, teamsters and others with the notion of taking away Elias's town. With the Federals low on strength due to the Spanish War, Elias wired his old friend Zachariah with a business proposition: part ownership of the mine and resort in exchange for resolving the problem. The Old Man agreed. Then he sent for me.

I never liked cigarettes. If you're used to the richness of a pipe or cigar, there's just something wrong about the taste of the paper, the dryness of the tobacco, that you will always notice. Papers and a pouch will always travel better than either cigars or pipes, though, so I was stuck for it. I was never good at rolling, and the train's rattling meant more tobacco ended up on the floor than in the paper. I lit it then had to blow it out like an incense stick. Damn it.

We were ten hours out of Denver, if I'd read the schedule right. We'd been rolling for two days, and the floor of my cabin was littered with butts and matches because none of the porters would enter my room. The conductor had surprised me during his ticket walk and had been greeted by the wrong end of my musket as a reward. I tried to make nice about it, but he took it personally, and I'd been shunned by the railway staff.

The musket's a custom job, a variation on a squirrel gun, only it's got a shortened barrel and a pistol grip so I can keep it in my long-coat. Most cities and a lot of towns don't allow people to carry guns on the street, but a fellow in my profession can't walk around naked. I kept a couple of pistols and a Springfield trapdoor in my bags, and I've got my old leaf blade. Through fifteen wars, two revolutions, and a short stint at privateering, it's been my weapon of last resort. It's not as long as some swords, but it's sturdier than most. And it was my Da's.

I stubbed out the cigarette and tried to find a comfortable position for sleep. Travel and sleep don't seem to work for the tall and the large. When you're both, it's just a nightmare. In the old days, it had just been sea travel that was problematic; coaches and the first trains used to put up in towns and stations for the night, and their passengers would stay in whatever accommodations the locals provided. Gas lights and the Pullman sleeper changed all that. Now the train could go all night with a light to tell the engineer what was ahead, and folks could catch a few winks in the few hours between jarring halts at the whistle-stops. Unless they were tall. Or big. Or both, like me.

The Old Man had arranged to have horses waiting for me in Denver. Houghton had offered to send one of his carts, but Zachariah knew I preferred to be able to make my own way out of a situation. Anyway, we both figured there wouldn't be a lot of investigation going on if I showed up in a company wagon. I unfolded the map, and finally dozed off while studying it for the hundredth time.

The road up to Jubilation was fairly smooth and easy going for a mining path. That fit with the information we had about Houghton's plans for the town. He'd probably had crews out after every rain storm shoveling gravel and pounding out the ruts. That made the tree across the road doubly suspicious.

I stopped back around a bend from the road block where I could barely see the tip of the tree. I guessed I had maybe fifty feet of good ground between a full view of the detour and the tree itself, maybe less if the fellows who made it had the brains not to use it as their primary defense. I eyed the rocks on my side of the bend. No good way up or down here, but ridges usually have a steep side and a nice side. I loosened the travel straps on my weapons and dismounted. If I was in for a fight, I didn't want to have to fight my ride as well.

Slowly, I led the horses around the bend, my eyes scanning the whole scene for any sign of movement. I'd been wrong about the ridge; this one was just as difficult on both sides, but I knew folks for whom neither side was a lot of trouble. The tree lay all the way across the road with just a walking path near the drop-off on the left. It was big enough and out of place enough to keep drawing my eyes back to it. I didn't trust it at all; in the same situation, I'd use something like that to distract folks and sneak up behind them.

That's why I wasn't surprised when I heard a voice quietly mutter, "Turn around slowly, and go home, Stranger."

I slowly raised my arms over my head and turned around. I found myself facing a Red Indian who was pointing a Winchester at my belly. Small and rangy, he wore a grubby white shirt; his tattered canvas pants hung from threadbare suspenders. An old cowboy hat engulfed his head. The whole outfit seemed improperly fit, except the

moccasins on his feet; they were precisely fit, and seemed to have been very well cared-for. His eyes stared out at me from under the hat, pleading for me to do as he asked.

“Afraid I can’t do that, friend,” I answered. “I’m paid to do a job. Sorry.”

“So’m I,” he said. “Mr. Rider’s giving me five dollars to make sure you don’t get to Jubilation. It’d be easier on both of us if you just went back down the mountain.”

I lowered my arms slowly while I talked, just gauging how serious he was about that rifle. “You’d be better off taking your five dollars and your own advice, son. There’s no way this can end good for you if you don’t.”

For a while we just stood and stared at each other. He was sweating from more than the heat, so I just turned around slowly and started walking back up the road toward the detour. “Don’t make me shoot you!” he shouted at my back.

I ignored him and kept walking. Then I heard the gunshot. I felt the bullet push against my shoulder like an impatient horse, then dig in and through, searingly hot. The kid probably meant it to be a warning shot, but his aim was off.

If you’ve never been shot, there’s no way to describe the amount and types of pain involved. It tears; it aches. Mostly, it burns; bullets leave a gun hot and get hotter from air friction as they travel. I knew my right arm would be useless for a while.

The horses were good horses; they barely even started at the gunshot, and didn’t even blink as I cursed and reined them in. I released the tethers with my left hand and dropped it into the big pocket in my coat. There’s a secret slit at the top of the pocket that allows me access to my musket. As I slowly turned back to the boy, I slipped the hammers back on both barrels.

“Immortal” is a funny word. If you look at it in parts, it just means “not dying”, and that pretty much describes everyone who doesn’t have six feet of soil over them. Even looking at it the way most people think of it, it can mean a lot of things. I’ve seen people who can take hits that would leave a normal man as a red spot on the ground. I knew a fellow whose body healed almost instantly but his pain never went away. For me, the word mostly means that I don’t have to die if I don’t want to. As long as I have time to think about it, I get to live. I suppose I can be killed, but it takes a lot to do it. In the Wilderness, I’d caught a good piece of an artillery blast, and the shrapnel included a three-inch tree branch that had found its way through my belly. If it had been a little higher or a little bigger, I may have died right then.

So you can understand that I took the boy more seriously when I turned around. I kept my hand in my pocket on the trigger of the musket. “That was a mistake, son,” I said. “I’ll let you get away with it, just this once.” I wanted to give him another chance to back down. It’s been my experience that people who point guns will either kill you or they won’t. Even if the back shot had been aimed at me, it spoke to his intention.

He stood with his jaw set, his rifle aimed at the center of my chest. “Go home, Stranger.”

“No.”

He set the hammer on the rifle, and as he was drawing it back to aim I realized he was going to shoot me for real after all. I tipped up the musket, and two identical red blooms appeared on his shirt as scrapshot tore into him from both barrels. His eyes opened wide in surprise as the force of the shot shoved him back.

The thin but sharp mountain sun was baking the main street in golden heat as I finally entered town with the dead Indian laid across my saddle. The coach road I'd followed up continued west past a strip of old storefronts. To my right, a road with strips on either side strolled off, I assumed, to the mine. The Sheriff's office stood on the near corner with windows facing all three directions. I stopped in there first and told the sheriff my story. He was a big man, maybe six foot, but broader than me with the calloused knuckles of a practiced headbreaker and a laconic way of speaking. The wound in my shoulder, still weeping blood slowly through the field dressing, convinced him that the killing was in self-defense, and he decided not to hold me. I asked him if the town had an undertaker.

Following his directions, I found the place. I had passed it on the way in, but hadn't recognized it in a casual glance because none of the usual paraphernalia of the trade crowded the yard. I walked in and laid out twenty dollars. "There's a dead Indian in the Sherriff's office," I said. "You make sure he gets dressed and sent on properly."

He looked at me as if I was crazy for a minute then shrugged and wrote down the instructions. When I stepped out, I was greeted by a small crowd of men. "We hear you killed the half-breed down on the trail," their leader said. My hand slid down to the musket handle.

"Self-defense," I answered. "You lot friends of his?"

"Something like that." He was a fairly big man, maybe five-ten, with broad shoulders and a mean glint in his eye. He was dressed something better than the fellows behind him in a square-cut riding coat, black woolen pants and a clean white linen shirt. His buddies were all in duck trousers and old work shirts of varying color.

"I'm gonna guess and say you're Hob Rider. If you're worried about your five dollars, go see the Sherriff, and I figger he'll be glad to give it back to you once you explain how the Indian got it." He looked like he might take a shot at me, so I tilted the musket up enough that he and his buddies could see it poking up my coat. "I don't want trouble. I'm just here to do a job, and the less trouble I have doing it, the happier we'll all be."

His eyes hardened as he mulled that over. "You figgerin' you can take us all on?"

"Nope. But I'm thinkin' if I have to try, you'll be the first one with daylight where his ribcage used to be."

He glared for a few seconds more then he burst out with a great guffaw. "I like you! We're gonna get along just fine!" He turned back through the crowd of men behind him, still laughing, and they followed him.

On the way to the hotel, I heard chanting. I looked up and saw an old Indian standing outside the jail in some kind of trance, shaking a medicine bag. Nobody else seemed to notice him, so I figured it was a funeral ritual, and kept on my way.

The hotel had a saloon on the ground floor, so I decided to stop and have myself a little drink before checking in. Mining towns in the old days were famous for their whiskey in the same way that Robespierre was famous for his public relations. None of 'em were made properly with barley, and most of them had a little "help" from a pine tree or a snake oil bottle. This stuff was no better or worse than it had to be. The fellow behind the bar pulled me a beer from a little brewery down in Golden, though, and it wasn't bad.

By the time the sun started setting into the mountains, the bad whiskey and good beer had me nicely buzzed, and I decided to go ahead and check in. A message was waiting for me at the lobby desk inviting me to meet old Houghton for dinner at his house on the edge of town. Pulling my watch out of my pocket, I realized I didn't have time to change out of my traveling clothes. I laid a silver dollar on the desk, told the concierge to send my bags up to my room, and left.

I could hear the old medicine man still going at his ritual as I hurried down the street from the hotel. The town more or less stopped for a hundred yards or so just past the hotel's north wall, but the raised wooden sidewalk continued beside the mine road across a small meadow to Houghton's house. An old cabin had been integrated into the front of the house.

I pulled the bell and, a minute later, the door was opened by a little Mexican girl who could have passed for white with the right clothes. She stared up at me with huge brown eyes for a few seconds before a young Mexican woman—her mother, I assumed—joined her. She gave the girl a few sharp orders in Spanish then turned to me as the little girl ran off. She was small, with a delicate bosom and a thin waist leading down to hips that flared just enough to prove she had given birth to the girl. Raven-black hair with bluish highlights framed giant brown eyes and a proud nose. She was the sort of woman for whom smart men do stupid things.

"You are Mister Drew, yes?" I nodded. "Mister Houghton is expecting you in the drawing room." While I stood in the old cabin and let her take my riding coat off of me, Houghton showed up in the door to the main house. He was a short, broad man, taller than the girl only by nature of his position on the landing, with a physique that made it obvious that what had once been hard muscle was turning to fat under the weight of age and a sedentary lifestyle, but made it impossible to tell to what degree.

"Took you long enough," he said. "Where's the rest of your crew? You leave them in the hotel?" Surprised by the weight of the coat, the woman turned it around and goggled at the musket and sword hanging inside a moment before she gave a resigned shrug and hung the whole rig on a railway spike stuck in the cabin wall.

"I'm it, for now," I answered as the girl nodded to both of us, and glided back through the door toward the kitchen, ensuring as she did that she was out of his eye-line before rising to stand slightly taller than him on the landing.

"What? I told Zach I needed a crew to clean up my town. One man can't do it alone, or I'd have done it myself."

"I can wire for more, if they're needed," I assured him. We stared at each other across the cabin for a few minutes, before I broke the tension. "This your original cabin?"

"Second, actually," he said, seeming glad of the distraction. "The first one collapsed during a blizzard. Flat roof. Before that I lived in my wagon." He looked around him with love. "When I built the big house, I just couldn't bear to lose this one. Funny how sometimes we fall in love with a place."

"Your wife and daughter are lovely," I ventured.

He coughed a short laugh. "Elizabeth is no blood of mine, and Maria ain't my wife. Her husband had an accident in the mine a few months back. Got knocked down a shaft by a wild cart. I took Maria and the girl in after that. Thomas had been a good man, even stood by me during the strike. It was a shame to lose him." He looked down

and away with what could have been sorrow, but seemed a little like remorse. When he looked back up, he said, “We may as well have dinner. She gets room and board and a bit to put aside for her daughter, but that don’t stop her nagging like a woman, and she’s been working on this meal since noon.”

Over dinner, Houghton gave me the information he thought I needed on the town. It wasn’t a lot different than what I’d gotten from the paperwork the Old Man had given me, except this was more colored by Houghton’s personal opinions. There were a few eye-openers, though. For one thing, Houghton wasn’t exaggerating when he called Jubilation “his town”; he owned all the land and all the rocks under it for miles around. At least he’d had the good taste to name the town after the nearby spring and not after himself like Pullman did out in Illinois.

Eventually, over cigars in the library, the conversation turned to my plans for completing the job. I told him that I’d have to hunt around a few days and get a good feeling for the situation before I acted.

“That ain’t no good!” he shouted. “Hob Rider is the key to this. You take him out and the rest o’ them’ll fall right back in line or light out like they should.” There was no changing his mind. Rider was his nemesis and nothing I said could convince him otherwise. The more I suggested less violent options the angrier and louder he became, until, by the end, he was just spewing an unbroken string of expletives at me.

I finally ended it with a noncommittal noise that could have been “Okay,” or could have been “Thanks for the meal” but wasn’t “No” enough to start him up again. I said good-bye to him and made my duty to the woman, then walked back toward the hotel in the dark.

Mountains are darker at night than any other place in the world. More than that, they’re cold. I hadn’t noticed the thin air in the heat of the day, but, now that the sun was gone, the cold air crept into my whole body, especially my shoulder. It was that cold, and maybe the imported whiskey the old man had shared with me in the smoking room, that allowed Hob Rider to sneak up behind me. “Put your hands straight out where I can see ‘em,” he said suddenly in my ear.

I did as he asked and felt him relieve me of my musket and feel around for whatever else I might be hiding under my coat. When he found my sword, he said, “What’s this?”

“It was my dad’s,” I answered truthfully. “I keep it with me to remember him.”

He considered taking it, too, then shrugged. “Don’t suppose it’ll do you much good against a Colt.” I heard him take a step back. “Okay, you can turn around, now. But keep your hands where I can see ‘em, and no sudden moves.”

I turned and we stood the looking each other up and down. “I suppose you got this all figured out, don’t ya?” he finally said. When I didn’t answer, he continued, “Whatever the old man in there told you, it’s only half the truth if that much.”

“Okay.”

“He likes to make like how he got where he is and where he wants this town to go is all sunshine and rock candy, but it ain’t.”

I nodded. “Yeah, err, you think I can put my arms down now? Your Indian put a hole in my right shoulder and it’s singing to me in a way that makes it hard to hear what you have to say.”

He studied me for a while. "Yeah, all right," he answered. "You seem okay for a skull-cracker." He hefted my musket. "I'll hold onto this until we're done here, though, if that's all right with you?" I shrugged.

"You're the one with the heavy iron. It's your show."

"Yeah, sorry about that." He slowly holstered his pistol, keeping his eyes on me to ensure I wouldn't suddenly try to jump him. I was too curious to bother. "Listen, Drew," I wondered how he knew my name, "I know you were hired by the old man, but you seem like a right kinda fellow. There's more here than you think, and you should know all you're getting into before you do. You come by my saloon in the morning. I got some people you need to meet."

"You mean the one in the hotel?" I hadn't seen another saloon in town, and doubted that the town could support more than one.

He snorted. "Nah. Other end of town. It's less a hotel than a hospitality organization. You just come by in the morning." He backed away a few steps. "I'm gonna lay your musket down here. Do me a favor and don't shoot me when you pick it up." He laid down the musket and strolled silently off in the direction of town. I picked it up, and looked around for him for a bit, then continued to the hotel.

I asked the night clerk at the hotel when the post office would open to send telegraphs, and he told me that it would be around sunrise. I scratched down a note for the Old Man and handed it to him with a ten dollar gold coin. "You have that wired to Philadelphia as soon as you get off here," I said. "Keep the change."

He looked bemusedly at the note. "Two inc, one cas. Cloudy. Need more?" he read. I nodded.

"That's the message." I didn't tell him that it was a simple shorthand that the Old Man and I used to share during our war days. Essentially, the note told him that I'd had two incidents and there had been one casualty. Then it went on to explain that the situation was less simple than we'd been led to believe, and I needed more information. But there was no reason for the clerk to know that.

I went up to my room, and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

2. *Surprises*

I was awakened by a row outside my room. Finally it settled down, and I heard the day clerk from yesterday knock and say "Mr. Drew? Are you in?"

"Yeah?"

"The Sheriff would like to speak with you, please."

I rose out of bed. "Lemme put my pants on." The door burst open and the sheriff shouldered past the clerk. I stood there holding my pants. "Or not."

The sheriff shuffled over to the window and muttered, "Couldn't take the chance you wouldn't try to skip out." He looked out the window to the rocky back yard below and nodded.

"Why not?"

"Hob Rider is dead."

That set me back. "Really?"

"Shot through the heart some time last night."

I saw what he was getting at. "Well, it wasn't me. He was plenty alive when I talked to him."

“Well I don’t suppose you mind if I check that out to make sure it’s true?”

“Suit yourself.”

He asked, “Do you have any weapons?” meaning he wanted to know where I kept them.

“Two pistols in the bag at your feet. The rifle you can see. Musket and sword in my coat.” He bent to the bag. “While you got that open, you want to toss me a clean pair of pants? I wore these on the train and all day yesterday, and they’re getting a little ripe.” He tossed me the pants, and I put them on. I walked over to the nearby wardrobe.

He stood up, holding his gun on me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I pulled the wardrobe door open wide so he could see inside it. “Getting a clean shirt. I wish I had a bath, but a change of clothes’ll have to do.”

He sniffed the barrels of my pistols, rubbed a rag on their ends then rotated the chambers. He followed a similar routine with the Springfield, flipping open the breachlock and running a finger along the cleaning rod. He inspected them all closely, again. “These pistols are just old officers’ guns from the war, but this rifle...” he trailed off.

“It’s made special for the cavalry.” Noticing the question in his eyes, I continued, “I have friends.”

He nodded, as if that answered any lingering questions then stood up, bringing my gunbelt and rifle scabbard with him. “You seem clean enough, but I’d like you to come with me down to the office just the same.”

“Fair enough,” I answered. “I guess Rider wasn’t killed with anything like my shotgun, since you’ve already seen what it does on that Indian yesterday.”

He gave me a strange look. “Yeah, funny thing about that.” When I cocked my head, he just said, “I’ll tell you at the office.”

“You want to carry my coat, or do you trust me?” I asked. He nodded at the coat and I put it on. We walked together down the street to the jail, and he waved me in ahead of him. Hob Rider’s body was lying in a jail cell on one of the cots. The Indian was nowhere to be seen. “I guess the undertaker already took care of him?”

“Yeah, that’s the funny thing,” he answered laconically. “Turns out you didn’t kill him as dead as you thought.” I raised an eyebrow at him. He poured us each a glass of the garbage-can whiskey from the hotel and went on. “Round about sunset, ol’ Rufus—that’s the undertaker—sends his boy over here to tell us he can’t get to our Indian until this morning and could we keep him safe until then. I saw no harm in it since it’s not likely we’d see too much trouble from one dead Indian, but I left a deputy here over night just in case someone tried something stupid with the corpse.” He caught my look and explained, “There’s been trouble around here with Indians, and some of it recent enough that folks don’t forget.” He shrugged. “Like desecrating a man’s body will bring back lost kin...” He sat down wearily and shook his head.

After a few minutes he looked up again. “Anyway, about midnight or so, my deputy hears a moaning from the cell with the Indian in it. He looks, and the boy’s tossing and turning like he’s in a bad dream. He stopped after a while and just slept. He was right as rain this morning when I came in.”

“Are you telling me that kid took both barrels of my musket yesterday and strolled out of here like nobody’s business this morning?”

He nodded. "I guess the shot didn't go too deep," he said, "and what we saw was just flesh wounds." I didn't argue. I knew what I'd seen and I knew what my musket could do at that range, but there was no point antagonizing the sheriff.

He poured us each another glass. "Now, here's where we have a problem."

I took my glass back. "How so?"

He took a while to answer. "I know you didn't kill Rider, and you know it, but I got a town full of people willing to swear on a stack of bibles that you were brought here special for that very purpose."

"Who'd tie their horse to that load of twaddle?" I asked.

"Maria Gladstone, for one. As soon as word spread that Rider was dead, she came down here and told me that you'd spent dinner up at old man Houghton's house discussing that very thing."

I snorted derisively. "Maybe he was. I wasn't sent here to do any killing, just to solve a problem." I told him about my night with Houghton, and my discussion with Rider on my way home. He sat thoughtfully. "You mind if I look at the body?" I asked.

He started out of his contemplation. "Why?"

"I've seen my share of dead men. There's a lot you can learn about how they died from looking at 'em the right way." He shrugged and led me to the cell, then opened it for me.

Rider had been shot in the back, from close range. I could tell that immediately. The bullet had exploded out of the front of his chest carrying a lot of his rib cage with it. I turned him so I could look at the entry wound and raised my eyebrows in surprise.

I turned to the Sheriff. "I have safe money you're looking for a woman," I said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Look at these wounds. Bullet went more or less straight in and through. Another man would have to shoot up from the hip or down from the shoulder to hit the same spot." He didn't answer, but I could see him working it out in his mind.

"Never thought of it that way."

"She knew him, too, and he wasn't afraid of her," I continued. "See these powder marks on the shirt? How many folks'd turn their backs on an armed person standing that close?"

"Well, maybe she snuck up on him."

"Rider didn't strike me as the sort of man that made it easy to get that close to his back."

"Nah, he wasn't..."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

He hesitated. "Hmm...It's plain enough I can't hold you. Not even on a pretense. But keeping you around with the town convinced you did it..."

"I can't leave, just yet. I still have a job to do."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that."

"Listen, I can take care of myself. You let me nose around this a bit in the course of my other business, and I'll feed back to you what I come up with. It's pretty plain most of them have you pegged as Houghton's man.

"I ain't Houghton's anything. Houghton created the position sure enough, but I won the job fair and square in the election. I may not be able to say the same about some of the boys..."

I reminded him that common knowledge and the facts don't always meet face to face.

"All right," he relented. "You see what you can come up with. I'll be doing my bit."

From the sheriff's door, I could see the saloon Rider had told me about, and remembered his request that I go meet a few people. I doubted that I'd get a warm welcome there, though, until the sheriff had time to spread around that I had definitely not done the killing, so I decided to cross the street to the livery and ride my horse out to the mine. I planned to stop by the spot where Rider had talked to me, and maybe poke around where the sheriff said they'd found his body.

I rode slowly through town. Conversations stopped and heads turned as I passed nearby; I was used to that, due to my size, but it struck me that I wasn't much taller than their sheriff. I realized it may take longer than I'd expected to shake off the rumor that I'd killed Rider.

There was something wrong here, and I struggled to put my finger on it. The townspeople themselves were no different than the people in a thousand villages. They tended more to lightness of hair and skin than I suppose was the average, but there was nothing really remarkable about them. The men all stood between five-six and five nine with the women about a head shorter. On a hunch, I stopped by the post office and sent another wire to the Old Man requesting any information he could dig up on Rider and Thomas Gladstone.

It had to be the way they were looking at me. There was burning resentment in those eyes. Hatred barely held in check. This didn't click with what I'd been told about Rider. If he'd been the strongarm man Houghton had made him out to be, these folks'd be dancing on his grave; maybe ten years or a generation later the kids would make a hero out of him because they don't remember how it was, but this soon nobody looks the way these people did at the man they thought had brought him down.

The more I thought about it, the less anything that had happened made sense. The half-breed kid hadn't wanted to kill me anymore than I'd wanted to kill him. He'd just told me to go back down the mountain. In fact, twice the day before Rider or his men had got the drop on me, and both times they'd just wanted to talk. That didn't jibe with the blood-simple shotgun rider in the portfolio.

It was with these thoughts turning in my head that I rode slowly down the mine road. A little past Houghton's house the road curved to the left and climbed the ridge up to the mine. To my right I could hear the babbling of Jubilation Creek, and I wondered where the townspeople got their water if the mine was upstream. Most of these mines had smelting plants right on them, and they fouled any water they touched.

I had almost mounted the rise to the mine when I noticed a footpath leading away and down to the creek. I dismounted and led my horse down the path. I stopped at the forest break and looked around. I stood at the top of a steep slope that led down to the creekbed. Side-along paths had been carved in both directions by the diligent feet of working men. Below me, nearly a hundred men were engaged in various methods of prospecting in the sandy creekbed. Some were panning; a few had gathered into groups and were working simple sluices. They were ragged, and most of them looked hopeless. Mexicans for the most part, I could tell from the blackness of their hair and their loose

clothes, but there were enough down-and-out white men, and I even noticed a few Chinamen who'd managed to ignore the coolie laws in the area.

I gave myself a few minutes to decide who would be easiest to talk to and wouldn't try to shoot me for something I hadn't done. I picked an old Mex working the far end of the field, and, tying my horse to a tree, carefully worked my way down the path toward him. As I walked downstream, keeping the ridge close on my right, I felt rather than saw men's heads turn in my direction. Whispered conversations started in English and Spanish.

I took a seat on a loose rock and watched him work while I decided what to say and how to say it. He swished his pan, studied it, swished it again, then pulled a pebble out and dropped it into a small bucket at his side. He swished some more, and found one or two more pebbles, then scooped up more dirt from shore and dipped the pan back into the water. "Any luck?" I asked him.

"Just copper today," he said without stopping.

"Looks like that'd be a lot to carry down the mountain for its value."

"Señor Houghton give us pennies in exchange. Un decimo by weight. Same for silver, but with dollars." He pulled a pebble out, looked at it closely, then sent it sailing across the creekbed. "Was better when Senior Tomás was alive. He gave half."

I raised an eyebrow. "Houghton let Gladstone set prices for loose copper? He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who lets his employees have that much rope."

The old man laughed bitterly and dumped his pan again. "Señor Tomás didn't work for Señor Houghton. They were partners." He stepped in front of me. "Mister Tomás knew the mountain and the metal. But he also knew men." He thumped his chest. "In here." He turned back to his work. "When the Union came and convinced the young men to strike, Señor Houghton hired Mr. Decker to make them work again, but Señor Tomás told Mister Decker only to hit people who wanted to hurt other people. And, when it was over, Señor Tomás let everyone back with no hard feelings.

"But then he fell, and..." He shrugged. "Some say he was pushed."

"Do you think he was pushed?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. Only Mister Tomás and the man who maybe pushed him know." He swished his pan and studied it. "But soon after, Mister Hob was seen around with Maria. Too soon, some say." We sank into silence, then. He returned to his work, and I just sat there thinking about what he'd told me.

Finally, I rose and handed him a silver dollar. "Thanks, Señor," I said. "You've given me a lot to think about."

"I didn't give you nothing. Just told you what everyone else knows," he demurred. But he kept the dollar.

I didn't quite make it to the trail back up before I was surrounded. Five or ten of the down-and-outers were standing around me and making an angry noise. The rest of the prospectors were all still working away, but throwing furtive glances at the gathering. I started to slide my left hand into my pocket, but hands grabbed me by both arms and held them tight.

One of them, a fat fellow of about five-eight leaned right into my face. His clothes were worn, but not so badly as the rest of the drifters in the area, and his skin was lighter and less exposed-looking. I couldn't help noticing that his friends were the same, as if someone had dressed them up to look like prospectors. "I hear you're the fellow that

shot Hob Rider in the back,” he said too loudly for just my benefit. He stepped back a bit and took a few test swings with a stick he was carrying; it looked like a pickaxe handle, but it had never seen a head. Not the iron kind, anyway.

“You heard wrong, friend,” I replied. “The Sheriff cleared me himself this morning.”

He jabbed me hard in the gut with the round end of the stick he was carrying. “Shut up, you,” he whispered hoarsely in my ear, then loudly again, “We all know whose man the Sheriff is. Just like we know whose man you are.” He stepped back a little, to let a couple of the others in: a little fellow with the potato face of a Polack and a slightly taller one with a German jaw and a French nose. “We’re gonna send him a message about how he runs this town.” He was putting on a show, but for the life of me I couldn’t figure out why. Then his buddies started working me. The Pole went for my gut and pounded it pretty good, while his friend hung back and messed up my face. The rest of the crowd just made get ‘em noises, and, every now and then, shouted inappropriate remarks about worker solidarity.

I sagged, my weight pulling down the fellows who held my arms. Now, all four of them were raining down blows on my head and back. “Your boss’ll know we mean business, now,” the fat man said, pulling his buddies off me. I was barely conscious, and I was pretty sure I was bleeding internally. “We’re gonna do you like you done ol’ Hob,” he announced.

I looked up at him through a swelling eye. “You think so, do ye?” I asked, just as the butt of his stick came across my face.

3. *Two Dead Men*

I heard voices and fire. The voices were whispering, so I tried to focus on them and get some idea what was going on before opening my eyes, but I must have shifted or changed my attitude somehow, because they stopped abruptly. I felt a face move in close to mine, and hazarded a glance though one puffy eye.

“You’re a very hard man to kill,” the Indian kid I’d shot said to me.

“Look who’s talking,” I croaked. Just that little bit made my jaw and my chest sing to me.

“Wet powder,” he lied. “Your shot just hurt me.” I tried to roll my eyes at him, but went swimmy from it. “Your Mexican friend had quite a time pulling you out of the creek,” he said, changing the subject. “Even then, he was sure they’d roughed you up too much to be saved. So he sent his grandson to get me.”

“Why?” I managed.

“You know all us Injuns got our ways,” he countered. When I didn’t respond, he said, “He knew I owed you for bringing me up off the mountain. Figured I’d see to it you got a proper burial if you didn’t make it.”

“How long?”

“How long what? How long have you been out? A day, maybe a day and a half. I’m not sure when you got worked over. I didn’t get here until last night.”

I nodded, or thought I did. The next time my eyes opened, the sun was up. I could breathe a little easier, and my guts didn’t feel so much like pureed beets, but my throat was dry, and the light stung my eyes.

The Indian kid was there. “Hang on,” he said. A minute later, he was tipping a canteen into my mouth. The water stung the cuts on my lips, but it cooled my throat. He sat back and looked at me. “You feeling better, dead man?”

“A little,” I responded. “Where am I?”

He snorted. “This place doesn’t have a name. Just a little village down the mountain that the Mexes built when the whites in Jubilation decided they wanted a cleaner town.” I pondered the meaning in his words while he pondered me.

“What’s your story, Samuel Drew?” He asked, finally. “How does a man take the beating you took and wake up two days later?”

“Like you said, I’m very hard to kill. The whole story would take longer than either of us has got. Just chalk it up to “Us Micks got our ways”.” Now it was my turn. “What’s your story? That wet-powder gag may work for the punters, but you know and I know that you were sucking daylight through both sides when I brought you into town.”

He looked at me for a while like I’d caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. “That’s...it’s...well, I suppose I’m being punished,” he finally said.

“What’d you do?”

“My actions caused the deaths of over 150 of my people.” When I didn’t comment, he went on. “We were at Wounded Knee Creek, and we were supposed to be handing over our weapons so the soldiers could march us back to the reservation without worry. A few of us had pistols that we had hidden before because Yellow Bird, the medicine man, had told us he had an idea. My Grandfather had told me not to trust Yellow Bird, had said that Yellow Bird’s magic was a perversion of the Ghost Dance. We had argued, and my grandfather said that any Lakota that died because of my foolishness was my responsibility, and he would see that I paid for each one with my own life. I didn’t listen.

“Any way, Yellow Bird started doing the Ghost Dance, and he was reminding us that ghost shirts are bullet proof. None of us believed him, not really. But then, Black Coyote starts arguing with the soldiers because they won’t give him a fair price for his rifle, and they ganged up on him to take it away, and the ones of us that had our hidden guns reacted, and shot the soldiers attacking Black Coyote. The other soldiers opened fire with their guns and the cannons they had on the hill. And I died. We died.

“I awoke in the cold of a blizzard with my grandfather’s voice singing in my ear. “your life is no longer yours,” he sang, “You must live for those who died for you.” I could still feel the ache and sting of the bullets that tore me apart, and knew that Grandfather had cursed me to live and die until each life had been lived.

“I tried killing myself, but when I did I was brought back, and I knew that life hadn’t counted. So, now, I live as I must. I have died only once more before you killed me. A bear attacked me near the Stinking Waters to the north.

“And that is my story, Samuel Drew.” He thrust out his chin defiantly.

“You got a name, kid?”

“What do you care? I’m just a half-breed Indian.”

“Yeah, and I’m just a Mick, and our host is just a Mex. You got a name?”

“Light Horse.”

“My name’s Conal. Samuel Drew is just something I’ve been going by for the past couple years. You’ll have to learn to do that. Names stick with people, sometimes more than faces.

“And you also have to learn to move on. You can’t just keep dying and coming back to life and then hanging around. People aren’t stupid. They’ll make up a lot of reasons and rationales that’ll help you stay under cover, but you have to meet them half way.

“And, no. You don’t want a lot of people finding out about you. Only a very few can be trusted with something like that. A lot’ll try to burn the devil out of you, and believe me, you wouldn’t like that at all. If it’s a choice, I’d rather be shot.” He was looking defiant, so I switched oars. I pointed at the pile of my clothing.

“If the press gang didn’t get it, there should be a book and a charcoal in the inside pocket of my coat. Get ‘em for me, please.” He did. I wrote a little on a blank page, tore it out and folded it, then wrote on a second page. I handed him the pages. “This first one is a message for a friend of mine in California. He’ll get you set up. My credit’s good at the post office, so they’ll let you send it when you show them this second one, which also allows you to pick up any telegrams I’ve received. I’m expecting at least one, so when you send the thing to my friend, you bring the telegram back to me. And find out who has my sword.” He looked for a minute like he was going to rebel, but then he nodded, pocketed the notes, and left. I relaxed back into the cot.

Light Horse brought two surprises back for me when he returned from town. I was up and about, cleaning up the old man’s camp. He had a bucket of clear white rocks and pebbles, and near it, a small tin of inexpertly-cut stones that might have looked like gems to someone else. I was feeling better, maybe still not up to fighting weight, but, the way I planned to play this, I didn’t expect a lot of fighting.

One surprise was Mazie with my horses. She was a Texan, tall for a woman and pear-shaped, with the hardened pan-face of a woman who’d seen a lot of the trail. “I gave Roscoe twenty dollars each for these horses,” she said, dismounting. “I wouldn’t have done if the half-breed here hadn’t told me the way it is. Still, I expect some return on my investment.”

She sat down and told me what she wanted in return for her largesse. We haggled a little, and on the way, she gave me a good insight into what had happened while I was out. Roscoe was the fat man in charge of the gang that had roughed me up. He’d lost his share of my money at the poker tables after paying a week ahead for a room and was looking to pawn my horses for more fun money. He’d hung onto my pistols, but someone else had got my musket and rifle when they split up my stuff. Mazie didn’t know anything about my sword; she said Roscoe had something bundled in a blanket in his room, and that might be it.

Houghton had used my beating and apparent disappearance as an excuse to call in a crew to “bring the law back to Jubilation.” They might have been state police or militia, but Mazie doubted it. “They got a hard look. Rangers are the toughest state coppers out there,” she explained, “but none of them look as ready to kill as these fellas.” Anyway, they all had badges and claimed some authority, so Decker had backed off of them and let them work.

Light Horse’s other surprise was a package that had come for me by post rider that morning. The Old Man had come through with my request for information, and his plan to make the company about more than strike-busting seemed to have expanded beyond sending one head breaker to a Colorado mining town. I leafed through the pages

of reports, scanning them for anything I could use, almost forgetting my two “house guests”. When Light Horse cleared his throat, I looked up. “Did either of you know about this?” I asked, showing them a few of the pages. Mazie shook her head. Light Horse admitted that he couldn’t read, and I told him what was on the pages.

A plan started to form in my mind.

Mazie’s Saloon, the saloon at the end of the road that Rider had said was his, smelled of sandalwood and toast, providing an atmosphere that was at once exotic and domestic. We’d been let in the back by one of the kitchen girls, a doe-eyed little redhead that reminded me of my own wife and daughter. The kitchen was staffed entirely by young women and girls, some as young as fourteen, but all looking well-fed and more or less happy, even if most of them seemed to bear scars of past abuse. A skinny, Chinese grandmother stood her ground near a pass-window, and ordered the girls around with loving imperiousness.

Through the part-open door, I could see that the bar and dining room were staffed by more women, older than the kitchen help, some just a little, some a lot. All of them showed signs of wear, but none of them had that haunted look you’d expect in a cathouse. All of this confirmed what Mazie had told me that afternoon.

Rider had found Mazie running a kitchen out of a tent when Jubilation was starting to make the jump from mining camp to mining town, and half the buildings on the muddy main track were still made of canvas. He’d invested his income from shotgun riding and a little he had from “back home” and bought the lot on which the current Mazie’s now stood. At first it had just been a bar and kitchen, but Rider kept building on until it became the present saloon and hotel. Staff had been easy to acquire. Rider had a habit of picking up strays.

He came by it honestly. Hobart Rider had lived a remarkably hard life for someone lucky enough to be born on one of the few still-operating Texas cattle ranches at the end of the War. His father had avoided Union trouble by selling his cattle south to Mexico during the war, and had avoided Southern trouble by greasing the right palms, but neither of those had saved him from being shot in the back by a couple of saddle-tramps looking for “mavericks” on posted land.

Rider had been in Arkansas at that time, attending a school for boys the Methodists had set up in Toad Suck. That was where he had met Thomas Gladstone. The two became inseparable friends. Until Rider got the letter from his mother about his father’s death.

The letter came late, and there wasn’t a lot that Rider could do at that point any way. If the foreman was surly toward his boss’s widow, he was certainly not going to take orders from a fifteen-year-old boy. Within a year, they were in danger of losing the whole works to debt, bad management, and squatters.

Enter Elian Galvez. He owned the next ranch over; he had, in fact, helped Rider’s father set up the Mexican sales, and his bloodline stretched back to the original Spanish grants. He got the bunkhouse back in shape then helped arrange things so the range would continue. One thing led to another, and soon, Hob’s mother had become Mrs. Elian Galvez, and the two ranches were merged into one.

Rider didn’t mind. He was able to return to school, and even followed his friend Thomas east. Gladstone earned a degree in mine engineering from MIT, while Rider

read the law down-river at Harvard. For the second time, life interrupted his plans. The details were thin—bandits maybe, or Comanche—something had come down on that ranch like the wrath of God. All the men were dead, as were Rider's mother and the wife of the foreman. Six other women—four of them wives of now-dead hands—had gone missing. Hob's six-year-old half-sister had miraculously survived and escaped abduction.

Once again, Rider returned to Texas to pick up the mantle of a man. He sold the ranch, partly because he couldn't bear to stay there, and partly because he couldn't get hands. The place was cursed, they said. He used most of the proceeds to buy his sister a seat in a convent school on Galveston Island, and spent a lot of time working odd jobs to keep her there. He stayed in touch with his friend Gladstone, and eventually followed him to this silver mine just west of Denver, where he became majority holder of a hotel, saloon, and halfway house for women in distress.

All of the women here were rescued in one way or another by Rider and Mazie. Some widows, some orphans, others what might be called "desert roses"; they all had stories to tell, most of them sad, some appalling. They cooked and cleaned, and got a warm place to sleep and a decent wage for it. Neither Rider nor Mazie ever asked any of them to "entertain the guests", but some of them did anyway, because it was the only thing they were good at, and it allowed them to contribute to the group, but Rider always made sure nobody made his girls do anything they didn't want to do. At least, not in that way.

The ladies silently directed the Indian and me up the stairs to the right room. We'd worked out beforehand how it was going to happen. I counted three on my hand, then shouldered the door open. Roscoe was on the bed trying to manhandle a mulatto girl out of her clothes and under his fat body. The tray of food she'd brought up lay scattered over the floor. When we barged in he turned half around, and the girl—too young to even know what men had under their belts, much less what they did with it—scuttled to the far side of the bed.

As intended, my size, and the fact that I wasn't as dead as he'd hoped, grabbed the fat bastard's attention. Light Horse quickly and silently slipped behind him. As he rose to confront me, he found himself held back by his hair as the Indian yanked his head back to expose his throat. He glared at me, and tried to glare at Light Horse behind him.

Ignoring him, I quickly searched the room and found my sword, one of my pistols, and a box of passable cigars. I slipped my sword into its place in my long coat, and checked the pistol. It had been fired and not cleaned; that explained why he'd hung onto it. Probably ran his own pistols into the ground without a lick of care. I opened the cigar box. Helping myself, I said, "I don't suppose you mind, since you bought these with my money."

He looked like he was close to trying something so I nipped that in the bud. Pointing the pistol at him, I said, "What you feel against your neck is an 1802 trade knife. I'm guessing it's been in my friend's tribe since it was first acquired from Lewis and Clark during their expedition. They take care of their tools; you gotta give 'em that." I cocked the hammer on my pistol.

"Now, my gun hasn't had nearly the same amount of care as that knife, especially lately. Still, I bet it'd be a race as to whether I could put a bullet in your skull before he slit your fat neck. Whattaya say, Horse? On three?"

Light Horse laughed evilly behind Roscoe's ear. "You'd lose, white eye. No contest."

There was fear in Roscoe's eyes, now. "It ain't me you want," he gibbered. "It's Houghton. He paid the lot of us to rough you up or send you packing. Said he knew what was good for this town and you weren't it. He said to send you out of town floating on Jubilation Creek."

I cocked my head at him. "You can't tell me anything I don't already know. All I wanted here was this." I showed him my sword.

I lit the cigar. "You do present a problem, though." He stared at me wild-eyed. "Killing you here, like this...that'd be murder, and neither of us are the murdering kind." I un-cocked the gun and got ready to put it away. "But I'd hate to leave you behind all angry and humiliated and looking for revenge." I cocked the gun again and pressed it to his forehead. He started crying.

"Why don't we tie him up and let Mazie and the girls deal with him?" Light Horse offered. We pulled a chair away from the writing table in the corner and sat him down in it. While Light Horse tied his hands behind his back I took the gun over to the girl and wrapped her hands around the handle.

"If he moves or tries to escape," I told her, "you just go ahead and shoot him." She nodded numbly.

We left the room and weren't five steps away when we heard the gun go off. Rushing back in we saw the girl still sitting at the far end of the bed, holding a smoking gun. Roscoe's chair had been knocked over by the force of the bullet, and he had a nasty looking, but shallow wound in his thigh where the bullet had cut across its top.

We sat him back up and looked him over. "Wow," said Light Horse, "I bet that hurts. Don't you think that hurts Irish?"

"Nah, I've had worse." I bent down to inspect it more closely, and suddenly Roscoe screamed like a man who has a lit cigar shoved into a fresh wound. "My mistake. I guess it hurts a lot."

We stood for a minute, discussing what to do with our prisoner. Our original plan had been to isolate and take down the rowdies that had given me the beating, leaving them bound up in Roscoe's room until we were ready to take them to the sheriff, but our erstwhile guard's enthusiasm for keeping Roscoe subdued left me with misgivings. We were arguing over whether leaving an attempted rapist bound and gagged in a room with his intended victim amounted to murder or justice when we heard a shout and gunfire through the window.

Light Horse edged over and looked out. "Something's happening," he said, revealing a lifelong habit of stating the obvious.

"Yeah?" I replied, trying to keep the irony out of my voice. "What?"

"Dunno. Bunch of roughnecks on horses in front of the jail. Looks like one of them has Gladstone's woman."

"Damn it." Wordlessly, we decided to go scrap the plan and just go see what we could do with the mess in the street. As we were leaving, I turned to the girl. "Do not shoot him again unless you're absolutely sure your life is in danger."

"Or you really want to," the Indian added, helpfully.

"Nice," I said to him. We stepped through the door, and heard another gunshot almost immediately after the door was closed. I glared at Light Horse. He shrugged.

We made our way down the stairs and through the common room. The saloon staff and ladies crowded the windows. Mazie caught my eye as Horse and I passed through to the doors, and stepped toward the back.

We paused a moment on the porch to take in the situation. Sheriff Decker had come out of his office with his two deputies, and was discussing something with the leader of the riders. I handed the packet of intel to the Indian and nodded him in Decker's direction. He'd have an easier time slipping through the crowd unnoticed than I would.

I started working my way around the fringes of the other side, trying to size up the crowd and the situation. I had just about decided on a strategy when I noticed one of the riders was the little Polack that had worked my stomach a few days earlier. His back was to me, since he was facing the main action at the jail, so I had little trouble sneaking up on him. As I approached, I noted that my Springfield was in his saddle-holster.

In one smooth move I pulled him backwards off his horse and slid the rifle out of the saddle. As soon as he hit the ground, I gave his face Queen Mab's blessing with the butt of the gun. I doubt that I knocked him out, but he was smart enough to pretend I did, so I left him there and wormed my way closer to the main action while his horse skittered in the opposite direction.

Decker was faced off against the leader of the roughnecks, his two deputies standing behind and on either side of him. Maria Gladstone was gagged, bound hand and foot, and tossed over the back of a pack horse. He was talking, and I strained to hear.

"...care what you think you know. We don't string people up in this town without a full investigation and a reasonable trial. You give me your evidence, and if I think it flies, I'll hold her until the circuit judge comes 'round in a couple of weeks."

"I got what everyone's got, Sheriff. She shot Hob Rider in the back. That headbreaker from back east said his wounds had to come from a woman. She probably hired the guys that killed him, too."

I'd gotten close enough to make my presence known, and before Decker could respond, I shouted, "That load of twaddle would be a lot easier to swallow if you didn't have my musket in your saddle." This got the reaction I wanted; both men turned suddenly at my voice. Light Horse got to the Sheriff at the same time, and I continued, so he'd have time to at least skim the summary page.

"By the way, next time you kill a man, you probably want to make sure he's actually dead before you have a party in his memory." Decker looked up from the pages he'd been scanning, and looked closely at the leader's saddle.

"He's got a point," the Sheriff drawled. "How did you come by the musket? It's a custom job, and I've only seen one like it before."

That ruffled the gang leader's feathers a bit, but he made a rapid recovery. "Don't matter what you think of me," he said. "I got a witness seen her havin' a lover's quarrel with Rider just before the shootin'."

"I doubt it," I said, "unless it's one of your saddle-tramps with a cooked-up story." That set him back, and I had the feeling that was exactly what his "witness" was, so I pressed my advantage. "Why don't you show us this witness so the Sheriff can judge for himself if anyone really saw anything, and what it was they saw."

"I saw the quarrel," boomed a voice from just up the main street. The crowd parted to admit Houghton. "The night he died, Hob Rider came to my back door, and this

woman let him in. She thought I was asleep, but I'd gotten up to get a glass of milk to settle my stomach. She chided him for not killing you on the road, and he said he never had a good opportunity. Then she said they'd never be married until they could find a way to get rid of me so she could have the mine.

"He said he'd done enough killing for her and wasn't her husband's stake in the mine enough? She said some things in Spanish, then she called him some more things in English, and he slapped her. He left, and she slipped out after him shortly there-after.

"Now, I believe I've shown myself to be a man of high enough character that my own eyes will not be questioned in this."

"I have some questions, just the same," I said. "For one thing, you say Rider didn't have a chance to kill me?"

"Yes."

"Hob Rider got the drop on me that night. He could have killed me seven ways and hid my body anywhere along the road between your house and town. He didn't. All he wanted was to talk."

"Well, I just say that's what he told the Gladstone woman."

"Fair enough, but that brings up another point."

"What's that?"

"Well, you say that they planned to kill you, then get married?"

"Yes," he said. "I heard them with my own ears."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes. She wouldn't marry him until he had ensured she would own the whole town and the mine, both her husband's share and mine."

"You're lying."

He puffed up like one of those little dogs rich women have. "How dare you?"

"Maria Gladstone was Hob Rider's sister. She couldn't marry him even if she was sick enough to want to."

"That's absurd!" He puffed.

"I've got signed birth documents showing that Maria Galvez shares a mother with Hob Rider," Sheriff Decker chimed in, "and a Texas wedding license for Thomas Gladstone and Maria Galvez."

The crowd had grown larger than could be accounted for by the townsfolk and the roughnecks alone. I recognized a few faces as those of the down-and-outers from the stream.

Houghton's face was red with rage. "Those can be faked!" He turned to the gang leader. "You have your orders! Execute this woman, and kill anyone who tries to stop you!"

"On whose authority?" the Sheriff demanded.

"On mine!" Houghton shouted. "This is *my town*, Sheriff, and don't you ever forget it."

"No it isn't."

He rounded on me. "*What?*"

"You never owned more than half of the mine," I said, "less, if I read the company documents right, and all you ever owned of the town was your own house and the hotel. Tom Gladstone owned the rest of the mine, and Hob Rider owned the rest of the town."

He glared at me in impotent rage as I continued. “Here’s the way I have it figured. You killed Tom Gladstone—or had him killed, since you don’t like to get your hands dirty. Somehow you arranged custodial care of Mrs. Gladstone and her daughter, probably convinced her she didn’t want to raise her little girl in Hob Rider’s saloon.

“So now, you controlled the mine, but you didn’t control any of the land around it, and that didn’t sit well with you. You wanted to smelt your ore on-site, because that’s where the money is, especially when that vein of quartz showed up. Quartz usually means gold around here, but gold needs to be purified before it’s really worth its weight. Hob Rider owned the land, and he wouldn’t sell you the lots you needed to build your smelter. Hob wanted Jubilation to grow into a real town, which was starting to happen, and poisoning the creek with mercury from the smelting process would be the death of that.

“You wired your old friend, Zach Parkinson, and sold him a bill of goods about Rider being a headbreaker whose britches had got too big for him, and the Old Man sent me. I was supposed to ride into town with a crew and stir up a mess. Rider and most of his supporters would be “accidentally” killed in the outcome.

“But it didn’t work out the way you wanted, did it? The Old Man had been burned on too many put-up jobs like this one, and sent me out alone to sniff out the territory, first. When you found out that I had no intention of killing Rider, you sneaked out of your house. I imagine you planned to shoot me in the back and pin it on Rider, but then you saw our confrontation, and waited it out, hoping one of us would walk away dead.

“When that didn’t happen, you decided to just do the job yourself. I’m guessing you confronted him first, because I don’t think you have the skills to sneak up on him. At some point he just decided to walk away. That’s when you shot him.”

“You said yourself that he was shot by a woman.”

“No, I said he was shot by someone small—probably a woman—based on the path the bullet took through his chest. I never said it had to be a woman.

“You’re a small man, Houghton, in a lot of ways. But the most important is that you’re short. Almost as short as Maria, there.”

“You think you’re so smart. All right, fine. You got it mostly right. I had Roscoe kill Gladstone and shove him down that ventilation shaft. With Gladstone dead, it was easy to take control. Rider was too busy with his whorehouse to see what most of the town really thought of him. And, yes, I snuck out that night with every intention of killing you. I’d already spread enough rumors that no one would doubt that Rider had done you the way everyone expected you to do him. But you’re wrong about the confrontation. I wasn’t going to kill him. I wanted to give him one last chance to see things my way, but he was stubborn. Worse than that, he laughed at me! No one laughs at me! He laughed at me and turned around to walk away as if I was some worthless Spic! *That’s* when I shot him.”

Decker moved to take him into custody, but Houghton backed away.

“Not so fast, *Sheriff*,” his tone made the title an insult. “This is still my town, and more importantly, these are still my men.” He indicated the roughnecks. There were maybe twenty of them on horseback, and a dozen or so on foot. “Don’t forget that you’re outnumbered.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” said a voice at my side, and I noticed Mazie standing next to me with a few of the women from the saloon, all armed to the teeth.

“The woman is right, I think,” said another voice, this one near the Sheriff, and I noticed the old Mex surrounded by the prospectors from the stream, mostly armed with shovels, but nearly forty strong.

Light Horse chose that moment to slide Maria Gladstone off the horse where she was bound. The gang leader drew his pistol and turned toward him, but Decker put a round into his shoulder before he could even get his gun free. A few of his men drew their weapons, but stopped when they looked around at the angry crowd that had them hemmed in. Houghton turned tail and started running up the road. A loud “*thump!*” sounded, and he collapsed. The old Mex had brained him with a rock.

The rest was a clean-up operation. Horse cut the ropes that bound Mrs. Gladstone, and he and Mazie helped her into the saloon to recover. With the prospectors’ assistance, Decker and his men disarmed the roughnecks, and escorted them into the jail along with their wounded leader and the unconscious Houghton. I stuck around long enough to make sure that Decker, Maria, and Mazie would be able to settle things back down, and rode my horse back down to Denver to catch a train back home. I’d already wired my preliminary report back to the Old Man, along with a promissory note from Maria for the balance of our fee. I knew he’d want to debrief me in person, anyway, and wasn’t looking forward to it.

The Indian rode to Denver with me. On the platform, I handed him an envelope, a few bills, and a train ticket. “You ride this train all the way to San Francisco,” I told him. “You go to this address (I pointed to the envelope) and give this to the man there. His name is Herman Mercur, and he owns a stage company. He’ll probably put you to work riding shotgun, but he’ll take care of you and help you get along.” He nodded, and stuck out his hand for a shake. I shook it and grasped his shoulder. “And try not to die,” I added. “At least not too much.”