

A CLASSIC TALE OF BLOOD DEBTS AND BULLETS
FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELMORE LEONARD

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USA Today



Gunsights

**ELMORE
LEONARD**

Gunsights

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The gentleman from *Harper's Weekly*, who didn't know mesquite beans from goat shit, looked up from his reference collection of back issues and said, "I've got it!" Very pleased with himself. "We'll call this affair...are you ready? The Early-Moon Feud."

The news reporters in the Gold Dollar shrugged and thought some more, though most of them went on calling it the Rincon Mountains War, which seemed to have enough ring to it.

Somebody said, "What's the matter with the Sweetmary War?" Sweetmary being the name of the mining town where all the gawkers and news reporters had gathered to watch the show. The man from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* wanted to call it the Last of The Great Indian Wars. Or—he also mentioned to see how it would sound—the Great Apache Uprising of 1893. Or the Bloody Apache Uprising, etc.

The man from the St. Louis newspaper was reminded that, first, it wasn't an uprising and, second, there weren't just Apache Indians up in the mountains; there were also some niggers. The man from St. Louis, being funny, said, "Well, what if we call it the Last of the Great Indian-Nigger Wars?" A man from Florence said, "Well, you have got the chili-pickers in it also. What about them?" Yes, there were some Mexican settlers too, who had been farming up there a hundred years; they were also involved.

What it was, it was a land war.

The LaSalle Mining Company of New Jersey wanted the land. And the Indians from the White Tanks agency, the colored and the Mexicans—all of them actually living up there—wanted it also.

Dana Moon was the Indian Agent at White Tanks, originally established as a reservation for Warm Springs Apaches, or Mimbrenos, and a few Lipan and Tonto-Mojave family groups. The agency was located sixteen miles north of Sweetmary and about the same distance west of the San Pedro River. The reservation land was not in dispute. The problem was, many of Moon's Apaches had wandered away from White Tanks—a bleak, young-desert area—to set up rancherías in the mountains. No one, until now, had complained about it.

Brendan Early worked for LaSalle Mining, sort of, with the title Coordinating Manager, Southwest Region, and was living in Sweetmary at the time.

It was said that he and Dana Moon had been up and down the trail together, had shared dry camps and hot corners, and that was why the *Harper's Weekly* man wanted to call it the Early-Moon Feud; which, as you see, had nothing to do with the heavens or astrology.

Nor was there any personal bitterness between them. The question was: What would happen to their bond of friendship, which had tied them together as though on two ends of a short riata, one not venturing too far without running into the other? Would their friendship endure? Or would they now,

holding to opposite principles, cut the riata clean and try to kill one another?

Bringing the land question down to personalities, it presented these two as the star attractions: two well-known, soon-to-be-legendary figures about to butt heads. It brought the crowds to Sweetmary to fill up both hotels, the Congress and the Alamosa, a dozen boarding houses, the seven restaurants and thirteen saloons in town. For several weeks this throng swelled the normal population of about four hundred souls, which included the locals, those engaged in commerce, nearby farmers and ranchers and the miners at the Sweetmary Works. Now there were curiosity seekers, gawkers, from all over the Territory and parts of New Mexico.

(Not here yet were the hundred or more gunmen eventually hired by the company to “protect its leases” and quartered at the mine works. These men were paid, it was said, twenty dollars a week.)

There were newspaper representatives from the *Phoenix Republican*, *Phoenix Gazette*, *Yuma Sentinel*, *Safford Arizonian*, *Tucson Star*, *Florence Enterprise*, *Prescott Courier*, *Cococino Sun*, *Clifton Copper Era*, *Graham County Bulletin*, *Tombstone Prospector*, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, *Chicago Times* and the *New York Tribune*.

Harper's Weekly had hired the renowned photographer C.S. Fly of Tombstone to cover the war with his camera, the way he had pictorially recorded Crook's campaign against Geronimo and his renegade Apaches.

C.S. Fly set up a studio on LaSalle Street and there presented “showings” of many of his celebrated photographs of Indians, hangings, memorial parades and well-known personages, including Geronimo, former president Garfield and several of Brendan Early and Dana Moon. The two photos that were perhaps best known showed them at Fort Huachuca, June 16, 1887, with a prisoner they had brought in that day.

There they were, six years ago:

Brendan Early, in his hip-cocked cavalry pose. First Lieutenant of the 10th at Huachuca but wearing civilian dress, a very tight-fitting light-colored suit of clothes; bare-headed to show his brown wavy hair; a silky-looking kerchief at his throat; a matched pair of Smith and Wesson .44 Russians, butt-forward in Army holsters, each with the flap cut off; cavalry boots wiped clean for the pose; Brendan holding his Spencer carbine like a walking cane, palm resting on the upraised barrel. He seems to be trying to look down his nose like an Eastern dandy while suppressing a grin that shows clearly in his eyes.

In contrast:

Dana Moon with his dark, drooping mustache that makes him appear sad; hat brim straight and low over his eyes, a bulge in his bony countenance indicating the ever-present plug of tobacco; dark suit of clothes and a polka-dot neckerchief. Dana's .44 Colt's revolver is in a shoulder rig, a glint of it showing. He grips a Big-fifty Sharps in one hand, a sawed-off 12-gauge Greener in the other. All those guns for a man who looks so mild, so solemn.

Between the two:

Half a head shorter is a one-eyed Mimbrenño Apache named Loco. What a funny-looking little man, huh? ~~Black eyepatch, black stringy hair hanging from the bandana covering his head, he looks like a pirate of some kind, wearing an old dirty suit-coat and a loincloth.~~ But don't laugh at him. Loco has killed many people and went to Washington to meet Grover Cleveland when times were better.

The caption beneath the photo, which appeared that year in *Harper's Weekly*, reads:

Lt. Brendan Early Loco Dana Moon

Two Famous Heroes of the West with a Captive

Red Devil

There was also a photo of the Two Famous Heroes standing on either side of an attractive fair-haired young lady in a torn and dirty cotton dress; she is wearing a man's shirt over her quite filthy attire, the shirt unbuttoned, hanging free. The young lady does not seem happy to be posing for her picture that day at Fort Huachuca. She looks as though she might walk up to the camera and kick it over.

The caption beneath this one reads:

Lt. Brendan Early Katherine McKean Dana Moon

Following Her Ordeal, Katy McKean

Gratefully Thanks Her Rescuers

In the *Harper's Weekly* article there was mention of a 10th Cavalry sergeant by the name of Bo Catlett, a Negro. Though he did not appear in either of the photographs, Sergeant Catlett had accompanied the Two Famous Heroes in their quest to apprehend the Apache warchief, Loco, and shared credit for bringing him in and rescuing the McKean girl. In the article, Sergeant Catlett was asked where he had gotten the name Bo. "I believe it short for 'Boy', suh," was his reply.

Not many days before the photographs were taken by C.S. Fly, the five principals involved—Early, Moon, the McKean girl, Loco and Bo Catlett—were down in Old Mexico taking part in an adventure that would dramatically change their lives and, subsequently, lead to the Big Shootout known by most as The Rincon Mountain War.

St. Helen and Points South: June, 1887

Dana Moon had come down from Whiteriver to guide for Lieutenant Early and his company of 10th Cavalry out of Huachuca. They met at St. Helen, a stage stop on the Hatch & Hodges Central Mail Section route, where the “massacre” had taken place: the massacre being one dead swamper, shot several times and his head shoved into his bucket of axel grease; the driver of the stage, his shotgun rider and one passenger, a Mr. R. Holmes of St. David. Four were dead; two passengers caught in the gun-fire and wounded superficially; and one passenger abducted, Miss Katherine McKean of Benson on her way home from visiting kin in Tucson.

Loco was recognized as the leader of the raiding party (How many one-eyed Apaches were there between San Carlos and Fort Huachuca?) and was last seen trailing due south toward the Whetstone Mountains, though more likely was heading for the San Pedro and open country: Loco, the McKean girl and about twenty others in the band that had jumped the reservation a few days before.

“Or about ten,” Dana Moon said. “Those people”—meaning Apaches—“can cause you to piss your britches and see double.”

Brendan Early, in his dusty blues, looked at the situation, staring south into the sun haze and heard waves, looking at nothing. But Brendan Early was in charge here and had to give a command.

What did they have? In the past month close to 150 Warm Springs people had jumped the San Carlos reservation, women and children as well as bucks, and made a beeline down the San Pedro Valley to Old Mexico and the fortress heights of the Sierra Madres. Loco's bunch was the rear guard, gathering fresh mounts and firearms along the way. Maybe Bren Early's troopers could ride like wild men a day and a night, killing some horses and maybe, just maybe, cut Loco off at the crossing.

Or, a lieutenant in the U.S. Cavalry might ride through the scrub and say, “What border?” even after ten years on frontier station, cross leisurely with extra mounts and do the job.

Dana Moon—sent down here by Al Sieber, Chief of Scouts at San Carlos—waited, not giving the lieutenant any help. He sat his chestnut gelding, looking down from there with the tobacco wad in his jaw. He didn't spit; he didn't do a thing.

While Lieutenant Early was thinking, Then what? Track the renegades, run'em to ground? Except his troop of U.S. Cavalry would be an invading army, wouldn't it? having crossed an international boundary contrary to treaty agreement and the mutual respect of foreign soil, customs, emigration, all that bullshit.

“Lord Jehovah protect us from dumb-ass officialdom,” said the lieutenant out loud to no one in particular.

All soil west of the Pecos looked the same to Bren Early—born and raised in Monroe, Michigan (adopted home of George Armstrong Custer), before matriculating at West Point, somehow getting through, one hundred seventy-ninth in a class of one ninety-two—and there was no glory standing around a wagon yard watching civilians bleed.

Dana Moon read sign—grain shucks in horse shit, and could tell you where the rider had come from and how long ago—and sometimes he could read Bren Early's mind. He said, “You're gonna hurt your head thinking. You want to do it, I'll take you four and a half days' ride southeast, yes, across the line toward Morelos, and on the sixth day Loco and his fellas will ride up to our camp. But not with all your troopers. You and me and Bo Catlett to handle the cavvy if he wants to come, six mounts on the string, grain and water. If you don't want to do it I think I'll quit government work; I'm tired looking over the fence and watching dust settle.”

“On the sixth day,” Bren Early said, nodding. “And on the seventh day we'll rest, huh?”

He bought the tight-fitting suit of clothes off the St. Helen station agent for seven dollars, and for three more got Bo Catlett a coat, vest and derby hat. Hey, boy, they were going to Old Mexico like three dude tourists:

Rode southeast and crossed into Sonora at dusk, guided by the faint lights of a border town, against the full-dark moonside of the sky.

2

Dana Moon's plan: ride straight for a well he knew would be on Loco's route; get down there in the neighborhood, scout the rascal and his band to make sure they were coming; then, when they arrived, parley with the thirsty renegades, keeping their guns between the Apaches and a drink of water. Talk them out of the McKean girl first—if she was still alive—then talk about the weather or whatever they wanted, gradually getting the discussion around to a return trip to San Carlos for everybody, all expenses paid.

Or commence firing when they draw within range, Bren Early thought, seeing it written up as a major skirmish or, better yet, the Battle of...whatever the name of this rancho used to be, sitting in the scrub oak foothills: three weathered adobes in a row like a small garrison, mesquite-pole out-building, and corral, part of an adobe wall enclosing the yard.

Out fifty yards of worn-out pasture was a wind-mill rigged to a stock tank of scummy water. From the end house or the wall, three men could cover the tank and a thirsty traveler would have to get permission to drink if the three men didn't want him to.

The Battle of Rancho Diablo. Give it a hellfire exciting name. Who'd know the difference?

On the sixth day Dana Moon rode in from his early-morning scout, field glasses hanging on his chest. He said, “What ever happens the way you expect it to?” He did spit right then.

Bren Early saw it. He said. “Duty at Huachuca.”

“They split up,” Dana Moon told him and Bo Catlett. “It looks to be Loco and the young lady coming ahead. They’ll be here by noon, the ones with the herd maybe an hour behind. And some more dust coming out of the west.”

“Federales,” Bo Catlett said.

“Not enough of ‘em,” Moon said. “Some other party; maybe eight or ten.”

They brought the spare horses and feed into the middle adobe, three saddled horses into the building closest to the stock-tank end of the yard, and went inside to wait.

Hoofprints out there meant nothing; people came through here all times of the year travelling between Morelos and Bavispe and points beyond, this being the gateway to the Sierra Madres.

Still, when Loco came, leading the second horse and rider they took to be the girl, he hung back 300 yards—the horses straining toward the smell of water—and began to circle as he approached the rancho again, coming around through the pasture now, keeping the wall between him and the adobes.

“We’ll have to wing him,” Bren Early said, flat against the wall with his Spencer, next to a front window.

Moon watched through the slit opening in the wooden door. He said to Bo Catlett, “Mount up.”

Bo Catlett did and had to remain hunched over in the McClellan, his derby hat grazing the low roof.

“That one-eyed Indian is a little speck of a target, isn’t he?” Bren Early said.

“Tired and thirsty,” Moon said. “I’m going out.” He looked up at Bo Catlett. “He flushes when he sees me, run him down. There won’t be any need to shoot.”

Bren Early, dropping the stock of his Spencer to the dirt floor, said, “Shit. And parley awhile.” He didn’t like it; then thought of something and squinted out past the window frame again.

“I wonder what that girl looks like,” he said. “I wonder what the one-eyed son of a bitch’s been doing to her.”

Moon said, “Probably looks at her and thinks the same thing you would.” He glanced up to see Bo Catlett showing his yellow-white teeth, grinning at him, and Moon thought of his mother telling him a long time ago why colored people had good, strong teeth: because they ate cold leftovers in the kitchen and couldn’t afford to buy candy and things that weren’t good for you.

Outside, Moon raised his arm. He saw Loco stop about a hundred yards off: the Apache deciding how much he wanted water or if he could win a race if he turned and ran. He saw the roan horse behind coming up next to Loco—yes, blond hair stirring, the McKean girl. Then saw something he didn’t expect: the girl twisting in her saddle and shoving the Apache hard with both hands, sending him off his horse to land hard and lie there a moment while the girl reached to unhitch the lead line for the Indian’s saddle: and now she was kicking her roan out of there, not bothering to look back as Moon

Indian's saddle, and now she was kicking her foot out of there, not bothering to look back as Moon yelled at her, "Wait!...Hey, come on back!" Then turning, getting out of the way as he called to Bo, "Get her!"

Bo Catlett came out of the door chute, chin pressed into the horse's mane, rose up in the yard and pressed down again as the horse cleared the four-foot adobe wall—Loco standing now, watching for a moment, then gathering his reins and coming on, not interested in the two horses racing across the pasture toward a haze of mountains.

3

They sat inside the doorway of the house with no furniture: Dana Moon and Loco with cups of sweet black coffee, the square of outside light between them on the earth floor. Bren Early came over from the fireplace where the coffee pot sat on a sheet of tin over the smoldering mesquite sticks. He stood looking out the window that was behind the Apache.

Loco said in Spanish, "Tell him I don't like him there."

Moon looked up at Bren. "He asks you to join us."

"Tell him he smells."

Moon motioned to him. "Come on, be sociable." To Loco he said in Spanish, "So, here we are."

Squatting down, Bren Early said, "Ask him, for Christ sake, what he did to the girl."

The Apache's one eye shifted. "Did to her? Did what?" he said in English.

"Is she all right?" asked Moon.

"She needs to be beaten," the Apache said. "Maybe cut off the end of her nose."

"Jesus Christ," Bren Early said. He got up and stepped to the window again.

"He speaks of Hey-soo Cristo." The Apache paused and said, using Spanish again, "What is the matter he can't sit down?"

"He wants to do battle," Moon said.

The Apache stretched open his one eye, raising his brow as if to shrug. "Wouldn't it be good if you could have what we want? I take all the mountains sunrise of the river San Pedro. You take all your people and go back to Washington"—pronouncing it Wasi-tona—"be by your big chief, Grover Cleveland. Man, he was very fat, do you know it?"

"He eats good," Moon said.

"Yes, but he gave us nothing. We sat in a room in chairs. He didn't seem to know why we were there."

"You liked Washington?" asked Moon.

“Good water there,” Loco said, “but no country or mountains that I saw. Now they are sending our people to Fort Sill in Oklahoma. Is it like Washington?”

“I don't know,” Moon said. “*He* served there one time,” looking up at Bren Early.

“I believe it,” the Apache said.

“It's like San Carlos, but with more people and houses.”

“With mountains?”

“I don't think so,” Moon said. “I've never been there. I've never been to Washington either. I've been to Sonora...Santa Fe, in the New Mexico Territory.”

“The buildings in Washington are white,” Loco said. “There are men made of iron on horses also made of iron. Many buildings and good water. You should go there and live if that's what your people like.”

“I like mountains, as you do,” Moon said. “I was born here, up on Oak Creek. I want to stay here the same as you do. But there's a difference. They say, ‘Put Loco and his people on the train to Fort Sill.’ I can say, ‘Put him on yourself, I won't do it.’ And somebody puts you on the train. It's too bad, but what can I do about it?”

“Jesus Christ,” Bren Early said, listening to them talking so seriously and understanding the drift but not the essence of what they were saying and feeling.

Moon raised his eyes. “We're looking at the situation.”

Bren Early made a gun out of his right index finger, aimed it at the back of Loco's head and said “Pow. That's how you solve it. You two're chatting—last week he shot four people dead. So we send him to Oklahoma for a vacation.”

“It's the high part of his life to raid and steal horses, since the first Spaniard came up this valley,” Moon said. “What else does he know? What's right and what's wrong on his side of the fence?”

“My life is to meet the hostile enemy and destroy him,” Bren said. “That's what I know.”

“Listen to yourself,” Moon said. “You want a war, go find one.” He began gathering Spanish words again and said to Loco, “When your men arrive, tell them to get all of your people here in the mountains and bring them back to San Carlos. You go with us. It's the way it has to be for right now.”

“Maybe it won't be so easy,” Loco said. “There are others coming too.”

Yes, the dust from the west, eight or ten riders. “Who are they?” Moon asked.

Loco touched the dirty red pirate bandana covering his head. “The ones who take hair.”

“You're sure of it?”

“If they're not of you, or not the soldiers of Mexico, who are they?” the Apache said.

4

Bo Catlett came back with Katy McKean, the girl eyeing them with suspicion as she rode into the yard, sitting her roan like they'd have to pull her off it. Then sitting up there feeling left out, because they didn't have time for her those first moments. Bo Catlett began telling them about the riders coming. He said it looked like they had scattered the Indian herd and the two sides had exchanged gunfire, Bo Catlett hearing the reports in the distance. Now some of them for sure, if not all, were coming this way and it wouldn't be too long before they'd see the dust.

Bren Early studied the girl as he listened, thinking to himself, My, my, my, the poor sweet young thing all dirty and tattered, like the savages had rolled her on the ground and torn at her dress to get it off.

He said, “Miss,” helping her down, taking her by the arm, “come on inside out of the hot sun.” She pulled her arm away, giving him a mean look, and Bren said, “What're you mad at *me* for? I just want to give you some coffee.”

“I ain't going in there with him,” the McKean girl said, looking at Loco standing in the doorway. “Less you want to loan me one of your guns.”

“Don't worry,” Bren said. “He gets familiar with you again, I'll make the little heathen marry you. But how are you, all things being equal?”

The girl said, “What do you mean *again*?”

“I was just teasing,” Bren said, “showing you there's nothing to worry about.”

“He tried things,” the McKean girl said. “I hit him in his good eye and kicked him up under his skirt where it'd do the most good. But I ain't going in that room with him. I still got his smell in my nose.”

Dana Moon took her gently by the arm. She looked at him but didn't resist as he said in his quiet tone, “You been through something, lady, I know; and we're going to watch over you.”

“Thank you,” the girl said, subdued.

“But you got to do what I tell you for the time being, you understand? You can kick and scream when you get home, but right now try and act nice.”

5

Who were they? was the question: Watching from the windows as they had waited for the Indian, Moon and Bren Early with their glasses on the riders raising dust across the old pasture.

“Seven, eight,” Bren Early said. “Like cowpunchers heading for town.”

“Starting to hang back, sniff the air,” Dana Moon said. What did those people out there know, looking this way? First, trailing Apaches with a horse herd and a white woman. Then, seeing a man in a derby hat riding off with her. They would have to be confused.

“They traded shots,” Bren Early said and paused, thinking, Then what? “If they wanted the horses, why didn't they take 'em?”

Which was about where Moon was in his own mind. “Say they did, and left somebody with the herd. How many you count, Bo?”

“Ten,” Bo Catlett said. “Coulda been another one.”

“And they saw you for sure.”

“Couldn't miss us—time I got the lady turned around.”

“They're cowhands,” the McKean girl said, with that edge to her tone again, not feeling very rescued crowded into this adobe room with four men and animals. She had moved up by Moon's window and stood close to him, seeing the hard bump in his jaw, wondering if he would ever spit; then she would look over at Bren Early, maybe admiring his long wavy hair, or the tight, shrunk-looking suit molded to his tall frame. Squinting out the window, she said, “You can tell by the look of them, the way they ride.”

Still, the McKean girl had to admit—without saying it aloud—it was a bunch of riders for not having any cows, and moving south at that, not like they were heading home from a drive.

“There was a man used to sell us beef at San Carlos,” Moon said. “I believe the name was Sundeen.” Still watching through his glasses, seeing the riders at four hundred yards now, spreading out more as they came at a choppy walk, not a sound from them yet.

“I used to know him,” the McKean girl said, a little surprised.

Maybe they didn't hear her. Bo Catlett said, “The same man supplied meat to Huachuca. Look in his war-bag you see a running iron, it's Phil Sundeen. Used to bring his beef in vented every which way; cows look like somebody was learning to write on 'em.”

Moon said, “If I remember—hired vaqueros he paid twenty a month and feed. And we see some Mexican hats, don't we?”

“Which one's Sundeen?” Bren Early asked.

As Moon studied the bunch through his glasses, the McKean girl, squinting, said, “That stringy one on the sorrel—I bet he's got a hatband made of silver conchas.”

“Something there's catching the light,” Moon said.

“And forty-fours in crossed belts with silver buckles?”

“You got him,” Moon said.

“Don't anybody listen to me,” the McKean girl said. “I used to know him when his dad was still running things, before they sent Phil Sundeen to Yuma prison.”

“That's the one,” Moon said. “You knew him, huh?”

“I was *acquainted* with him,” the McKean girl said. “I wasn't to have nothing to do with him and that was fine with me. He was cheeky, loud and had ugly ways about him.”

Bren Early said, “What was he in prison for?”

“As this colored man said, for using his running iron freely,” the McKean girl answered. “It might be he run a herd down here to the Mexicans. On the way home he sees One-Eye here and decides to go for the bounty trade. Ask the Indian. He wouldn't have given himself up otherwise, would he?”

The men in the adobe room looked at this girl who seemed to know what she was talking about. How old? Still in her twenties, a healthy-looking girl, though dirty and sunburned at the moment. Yes, she knew a few hard facts of life.

Bren Early, leaning against the wall by his window, looked from the girl to Loco. “You must be worth plenty, all these people coming to see you.”

“Make 'em bid high,” the McKean girl said, “and look at the scrip before you hand him over, or that son of a bitch Sundeen will try and cheat you.”

The men in the room had to look at that girl again.

Moon saw the waiting expression in Loco's eye and said, “He ain't going with them, he's going home.”

“I know he's going home,” Bren Early said. “I didn't come six days for the ride.”

“If it means an argument, what difference does it make who takes him?” the McKean girl asked. She was serious.

Bren Early said, “Because he belongs to me, that's why.”

And Moon said to her, going over to his horse, “I'll try and explain it to you sometime.”

Bren Early was watching the riders, two hundred yards now, still coming spread out. “We got blind sides in here,” he said. “Let's get out to the wall.”

Moon was bringing a spare revolver out of his saddle bag, a Smith & Wesson .38 double-action model. He said, “You don't mean everybody.”

Bren Early looked at him. “I'm referring to you and me only. Shouldn't that do the job?”

Moon pulled his sawed-off Greener from inside his blanket roll. Coming back to the window he handed the .38 to the McKean girl, saying, “You don't have to cock it. iust keep nulling on the trigger.”

the way it works. But let me tell you something.” Moon paused, looking at the Apache only a few feet away. “He's with us, you understand? He's ours. Nobody else's.” Moon looked at Bo Catlett then and said, “Bo, give him his gun. Soon as it's over, take it back.”

Walking out to the adobe wall, carrying their firearms, they watched the riders coming on, the riders looking this way but cutting an angle toward the stock tank.

“We'll let 'em water,” Bren Early said.

“You give 'em too much they'll camp there,” Moon said.

“We got no choice but have a talk first, do we?”

“No,” Moon said.

“So they'll water and stretch first, take a pee and look the situation over. I hope they don't use dirty language and offend the girl's ears.”

“Don't worry about *her*,” Moon said.

He laid his Greener on the chest-high crumbling wall, leaned the Sharps against it, cocked, in front of him, loosened the Colt's in his shoulder rig, then decided to take his coat off: folded it neatly and laid it on the wall a few feet away.

“They're watching us,” he said.

“I hope so,” Bren Early said.

Bren had leaned his Spencer against the adobe wall. Now he drew his big .44 S & W Russians, broke each one open to slide a bullet into the empty sixth chamber and reholstered his guns.

Sundeen's bunch was at the stock tank now, fifty yards off, stepping down from the saddles.

Bren Early said, “At Chancellorsville, a Major Peter Keenan took his Eighth Pennsylvania Cavalry, four hundred men and—buying time for the artillery to set up—charged them full against ten thousand Confederate infantry. Talk about odds.”

Moon turned his head a little. “What happened to 'em?”

“They all got killed.”

6

The Mexican in the straw Chihuahua hat who came over to talk looked at first like he was out for a stroll, squinting up at the sky and off at the haze of mountains, inspecting a cholla bush, looking everywhere but at Moon and Early until he was about thirty feet from the adobe wall, then giving the a surprised look: like, what're you doing here?

The riders back of him. small figures. stood around while their horses watered in the corrugated

tank and in the slough that had formed from seepage. One of the figures—it looked to be Sundeen—had his peter out and was taking a leak facing this way: telling them what he thought of the situation.

The Mexican touched his hat, loosening it and setting it again. Even with the revolver on his leg and the cartridge belt across his chest he seemed friendly standing there.

He said, “Good afternoon. How are you today?”

Moon and Bren Early watched him, Bren murmuring, “Jesus Christ,” under his breath.

“It's good to reach water on a hot day,” the Mexican said. “Have you been here very long?”

Moon and Bren Early seemed patient, waiting for him to get to it.

“We looking for friends of ours,” the Mexican said. “We wonder if you see anybody ride by here the past hour.”

Bren Early said, “Haven't seen a soul.”

The Mexican took time to look past them and study the adobes, seeing the white smoke rising from the first chimney and vanishing in the glare.

“Where your horses?”

“Out of the sun,” Bren Early said.

“You good to them,” the Mexican said. “What else you got in there?”

“Troop of cavalry,” Bren Early said and called out, “Sergeant!”

Bo Catlett, with a Spencer, appeared in the door-way of the first adobe, calling back, “Suh!”

The Mexican began to shake his head very slowly. “You got the Uninah States Army in there? Man, I like to see that.” His gaze returned to Bren Early and Moon. “Soldiers...but you don't have no uniforms on.” He paused. “You don't want nobody to know you here, huh? Listen, we won't tell nobody.”

“You don't know what you've seen what you haven't seen,” Bren Early said. “Leave it at that.”

The Mexican said, “You don't want to invite me in there?”

Moon drew his Colt from the shoulder rig and put it on the Mexican. “You got a count of three to move out of here,” he said. “One...two...three—”

Espere,” the Mexican said. “Wait. It's all right with me.” He began to back away, his gaze holding on Moon's revolver. “You don't want to be friends, all right, maybe some other time. Good afternoon to you.”

The Mexican, whose name was Ruben Vega, forty-four years of age, something like seven to ten years older than the two men at the wall, said to himself, Never again. Going there like that and acting a fool. Good afternoon. How are you today? They knew, those two. They knew what was going on and weren't buying any of that foolish shit today. Never again, Ruben Vega said to himself again, walking back to the stock tank...Sundeen waiting for him.

Sundeen with his eyes creased in the sun glare, pulling the funneled brim of his hat down lower.

“He was bluffing you. Don't you know when a man's bluffing?” Like the joke was on Ruben Vega and Sundeen had seen through it right away.

“Sometimes I don't see the bluff if the man's good at it,” Ruben Vega said. “These two mean it. Why is it worth it to them?, I don't know. But they mean it.”

“Eight to three,” Sundeen said. “What difference is it what they mean?, the Indian's ours.”

“I don't know,” Ruben Vega said, shaking his head. “You better talk to them yourself.”

Sundeen wasn't listening now. He was squinting past the Mexican and touching his two-week's growth of beard, fondling it, caressing himself, as he studied the pair of figures at the wall. One of them had yelled, “Sergeant,” and the booger had stuck his head out. Soldiers—chased after the Apache and now had him in there. That part was clear enough. The girl, she must be in there, too. But eight guns against three was what it came to. So what was the problem? Ask for the Apache. Ask at gunpoint if need be. Those people would have no choice but to hand him over and be happy to do it.

He said to the Mexican, “Send two around back to make 'em nervous. The rest of us'll walk in.” The Mexican didn't say anything and Sundeen looked at him. “What's the matter?”

“It isn't the way to do it.”

Sundeen looked at the Mexican's old-leather face, at the thick, tobacco-stained mustache covering his mouth and the tiny blood lines in his tired-looking eyes.

“You're getting old, you know it?”

“I think that's it,” Ruben Vega said. “I'm getting old because I'm still alive.”

Sundeen wanted to push him and say, Goddamn it, quit kicking dirt and come on; there's nothing to this. But he knew Ruben Vega pretty well. He paid him fifty dollars a month because Ruben Vega was good with men, even white men, and was one trail-wise first-class segundo to have riding point with a herd of rustled stock, or tracking after a loose Apache with a Mexican price on his head. Like the one-eyed Mimbres, Loco: 2,000 pesos, dead or alive.

When Ruben Vega spoke, Sundeen generally paid attention. But this time—Ruben had been bluffed out, was all, and was trying to save his face, sound wise, like he knew something as fact; whereas it was just an off-day for him and his back ached or his piles were bothering him.

Sundeen looked over at his riders, part of them hunkered down in the stingy shade of the stock tank: four Americans and two skinny Mexicans with their heavy criss-crossed gunbelts. He said to Ruben Vega, "I'll show you how white men do it," grinning a little. "I'll send your two boys around back where it's safe, and march in with the rest of these ugly bronc stompers myself."

"I'll watch you," Ruben Vega said.

Sundeen looked over at the riders again, saying, "Who wants to earn a month's wages this fine afternoon?"

8

"Now we're getting to it," Bren Early said, seeing the five men assembling, starting to come out from the tank, spreading out in a line. "I don't see a rifle amongst them; so they intend to come close, don't they?" And told himself not to talk so much, or else Dana would think he was nervous.

"The other two," Dana Moon said. "Leaving or what?"

Two with Mexican hats, mounted, were moving away from the tank, off to the right, heading out into the scrub.

"Do we want them behind us?"

Uh-unh," Bren Early said. He picked up his Spencer as Moon hefted his Sharps, watching the two Mexican riders swinging wide, going out to nearly two hundred yards as they began to circle at a gallop.

"The horses first," said Moon, "if that's agreeable."

"I suppose," the cavalryman answered, "but it's a shame."

"If they keep coming, you finish it. I'll tend to the others."

Moon stole a look at the five on foot coming out from the tank, taking their time, one remaining back there with the horses.

He said, "When you're ready."

They pressed Spencer and Sharps to their shoulders and almost instantly the hard, heavy reports came BAM-BAM in the stillness and the two running horses two hundred yards out stumbled and went down with their riders in sudden burts of dust, the tiny figures flying, tumbling.

Moon turned his empty Sharps on the line of five, saw them stop dead.

Bren Early called, "Sergeant!"

Moon didn't look around. He heard off behind him, "Suh!" And Bren Early calmly, "Two on the flank. Keep 'em there. They move, shoot 'em." And the black voice saying, "Suh!" and that was done.

The five had broken line and were looking out that way, losing some of their starch maybe. But the one with crossed gunbelts and silver buckles was saying something, getting them back in business and they were coming again, the line of men about fifteen feet wide—Sundeen in the middle—every one of them shaggy and scruffy, rannies with hard squints trying to look mean, and they did.

The last exchange made between Moon and Bren Early was Moon saying, “If it comes to it, work from the ends,” and Bren Early saying, “And meet at the silver buckles.”

Now the floor was Sundeen's, bringing his line to a halt at a distance Moon's eyes measured as a long stride short of forty feet. A good working range: close enough for a sawed-off, far enough you'd have to aim a revolver if you had nerve enough to take the time. Who were these brush poppers? Were they any good? Moon and Bren Early were about to find out.

Sundeen said to the two at the wall, “Are you nervous or something? We come to talk to you is all.”

He waited a moment, but they didn't say anything. Then looked off into the distance at the two dead horses and the riders stranded out there before bringing his gaze back to the wall.

“Like shooting a buck, that range. I guess you've done it in your time. But here looking at it close to earth is different, huh? You see what you got on your hands? Now then,” Sundeen said, “you also got that red nigger in there by the name of Loco we want you to hand over to us. Do you see a reason to discuss it any?”

“He's mine,” Bren Early said. “He goes home with me.”

“Oh, are you the gent in charge?” asked Sundeen. “Then tell me something. What difference does it make who takes this Indin, long as we rid the earth of him?”

“I was sent to get him,” Bren Early said, “and I did.”

“A long piece from home without your uniform on, soldier boy. I bet you shouldn't even be 'cross the border here. What I'm saying, it looks like I got more right to the red nigger than you have. I got the law on my side.”

“But I've got the Indian,” Bren Early said. “What remains is how dearly you want to pay for him.”

“Turn it around,” Sundeen said. “Why would you put up your life to keep him? I'm gonna ride on with him, one way or the other.”

Moon said then, “You ever mount up again you'll do it bleeding to death.”

Sundeen shook his head. What was the matter with these two?—and had to make himself calm down. He said, “Listen to us grown men arguing over a little one-eyed Indin.”

“What's he worth,” asked Moon, “couple thousand pesos?”

“Sure, there's something in it, or we wouldn't be talking,” Sundeen answered. “But you can't have him in and collect the bounty. not if you're U.S. Army. They find out back home. they'll cut your

buttons off, won't they? Drum you out. It may be duty with you, if you say it is; but it's pure business with me. Way to make a living." Sundeen paused. He said then, "It gives me an idea. What we might do is divvy him up. You give me his hair and his eye patch, something to identify him to the Mex gover'nment, and you take the rest of him back where you came from. And if that ain't a deal I never heard one."

Sundeen glanced both ways at the pair of riders on either side of him, then looked at the two behind the low wall again, pleased with himself, his display of wisdom and generosity.

Bren Early did stop and think a moment. Yes, if they'd had to shoot the Indian they'd be bringing him back dead anyway. But how would they explain his tonsured head, the scalplock ripped from his skull? Then realized, No, that wasn't the point at all. It was a question of principle, beyond reason or even good sense. A question of standing at the drawn line and never backing off.

Bren Early said to Moon, but for all to hear, "Do you want to tell him to stick it in his horse, or should I?"

Sundeen was a grunt away from giving in to his violent nature; but knew his men had to look at him or hear him and all of them pull at the same time to do the job right. Put the two off guard and then hit. It wasn't gong the way he thought it would—that goddamn Ruben Vega telling him, knowing something. With the hook still in his belly but holding on to good judgment, Sundeen said, "I'm gonn go talk to my partner a minute. See if we can think of a way to satisfy us."

Moon and Bren Early watched him turn away from them, his rannies looking at him like, What's going on? Sundeen dropping a word as he glanced left and right, all of them moving off now.

Bren said, "He's used to having his way."

Moon said, "But he didn't come prepared, did he?"

"I'll give them three more steps," Bren said and pulled his matched Smith & Wesson .44s. Moon drew his Colt's, gathered the sawed-off Greener from the wall in his left hand.

Three more strides—that was it.

The five came around with weapons in their hands, Sundeen hollering something, and his two men on the ends fell dead in the first sudden explosion from the wall, before they were full around, Bren Early and Moon with revolvers extended, aiming, firing at the scattering, snap-shooting line, Bren holding both the big .44 Russians out in front of him and moving his head right and left to look down the barrels and fire; Moon holding the Greener low against its hard buck and letting go a Double-O charge at a half-kneeling figure and seeing the man's arms fly up with the big-bore report, swinging the Greener on Sundeen and raking his boots with a charge as Sundeen stumbled and Bren Early fired, shooting his hat off, firing again and seeing the man let go of his revolvers and grab his face with both hands as he sank to the ground.

They went over the wall and walked out to where the five lay without moving.

"Four dead," Bren Early said.

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