

TEXAS PAST

A novel of the Old West

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Texas Past

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Contents

CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	9
CHAPTER 3	16
CHAPTER 4	30
CHAPTER 5	39
CHAPTER 6	49
CHAPTER 7	58
CHAPTER 8	67
CHAPTER 9	80
CHAPTER 10	95
CHAPTER 11	108
CHAPTER 12	121
CHAPTER 13	135
CHAPTER 14	150
CHAPTER 15	162
CHAPTER 16	180
CHAPTER 17	190

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by

Voyle A. Glover

*Brevia Publishing Company • Merrillville, IN
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CHAPTER 1

I've seen some big men in my day, but the man I was looking at was one of the biggest I ever laid eyes on. I had to squint on account of the bright sun as I looked up at him. He sat his saddle with one leg thrown across the big Montana, silver-wrapped, six-inch saddle horn, leaning forward slightly, with his hands folded on top of one knee. He had a bushy, coal-black mustache hanging down the corners of his mouth, and one of them long, twisted cigars sticking out of one side of his face. A dark grey *Mex'* sombrero rested on the back of his head. It gave shade to all his head and half his body. I don't recollect ever seeing a hat that big before.

He was wearing a pair of bandoliers, which isn't much else but a couple cartridge belts slung over the chest. His were crossed over each shoulder, and around his waist he had belted a pair of guns that looked expensive. The handles were white with some speckles of silver on them. But, it was his eyes that made me feel kind of weak and puny. They were black as a 'Pache buck and real shiny, like they were made out of glass; and just now, they were boring a hole right through me. He was just about the toughest, meanest-looking man I ever come on.

I stood there on the porch looking up at him and feeling foolish, with a trickle of bean juice from a tortilla running down the corner of my mouth. The kid that had run inside just a minute earlier and told me a *senor* outside wanted to buy my riding horse, edged past me and moved out of the way to one side. I had told the kid to inform the *senor* that I wasn't

2 Texas Past

interested. Right after the kid ran outside, I heard a shot and heard a cry of pain from my horse. I ran out just in time to see my horse fall to his knees and then tumble over.

Since I was just south of the border, I wasn't anxious to have trouble. They can make it awful tough on a *gringo* in these parts, and all I wanted to do was make a little deal on a pair of wild horses I had caught, eat some good *Mex'* food, and ride out. I didn't want trouble, especially with a man who looked to be about twice my size and a whole lot meaner. I reckon if he'd gone about it right, I'd have sold him the horse if I'd seen it was going to bring this kind of trouble. It was a little mustang I'd picked up wild and we'd only been together a couple months. We'd taken a real likin' to each other.

But, he'd gone and made it impossible for me to side-step him. I didn't feel up to him, but I knew when it was over, he'd be wishing he'd went and stole a horse somewhere instead of shooting mine.

I stayed in the shade of the porch and said, "Reckon you bought my horse, mister." I moved the tortilla to my left hand, took another bite, then wiped my right hand on the front of my shirt. I didn't want any slippery fingers if I had to reach for my gun.

He showed me a lot of white teeth and said real friendly, "*Senor*, when Hernandez Vaca asked to buy your horse it was alive." He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I do not want to buy your horse, now. It is dead." He gave a funny little frown, like he was some kind of actor on a stage and was trying to show some kind of sympathy.

If I had been in Texas, there wouldn't have been any patience in me at all because we got a way of dealing with these kind of men, and mostly it's sudden. The Mexican soldiers can get pretty rough on Americans over here who shoot their citizens, so I wasn't anxious to spend a good part of my days in a Mexican jail. I forced myself to be polite.

With my teeth showing through a smile, I replied, "Mister Vaca, I ain't too sure why you shot my horse but I'm willing to let things lay, long as you pay me for that horse. I reckon you owe me one hundred dollars,

‘Merican.” I took another bite of my tortilla. My eyes never left his, and I found myself getting a familiar feeling deep down inside. I didn’t like that feeling, but it always came on me when there was danger. It’s like everything around me slowed down, and inside, my gut always goes hollow. It was like I’d never eaten three of those tortillas.

He was grinning now, and I could see he was enjoying this. He wasn’t going to let things lay. I expect he was a man used to having his way in life and probably, was one of those men who enjoyed killing. I’ve met a few now and again. They all got a certain way about them. I saw it in this one’s eyes and in his face. He had it in his mind to kill me and take my horses.

He pushed his sombrero forward and it covered his forehead and put shade over his eyes. Then, he swung his leg back in place and sat up straight in the saddle. The grin left his face, and all the mean in that big man came out in his eyes and on his face. His voice took on a husky tone and he said, “*Gringo*, I suggest you finish your meal and leave. If you need a horse to replace the one that died on you, I will sell you a nice one.”

He pointed across the street at my two horses that I’d shut up in a little corral. “Take your pick, *gringo*. You may have either one for three hundred of your *gringo* pesos. They are fresh from eating the beautiful *Tejas* grass.” The mocking tone of his voice was matched by his eyes. He was enjoying this, supremely confident that he’d cornered a *gringo* grub-line rider.

I wiped the bean juice off my mouth with the back of my left sleeve and said, “I kind of like the horse you’re riding. I think I’ll take your horse and maybe fifty dollars for my troubles.” All the polite had dropped out of my voice and I wasn’t smiling any more, either. I had my thumb hung in my belt right near my Colt.

He dropped his pretending and said, “*Senor*, perhaps you shall die today and not see your *Tejas* again, eh?”

I’d been raised in some hard country, and had ridden with some of the hardest men that ever sat a saddle. And some I’d ridden with were mean men. They loved to kill. I don’t know if it was from the power they

4 *Texas Past*

felt from being able to take the life of another human being, or the pleasure they got in watching someone weaker than them beg for his life. But, I knew I was looking at one of those kind of men. His streak of mean ran deep, and it was obvious he'd played this game before. The man was a killer and he was set on murdering me.

I waited there in the shade for him to move.

He was an explosion of dark movement as he drew. I give him credit that he was maybe the fastest I ever saw before. Not the smartest. Just the fastest. I couldn't see his eyes real good because he'd shifted in the saddle, and the shade from his sombrero hid them, but I reckon they were wide with surprise when my shot slapped him hard in the center of his chest. His gun was just clearing its holster. He fell backwards, then jerked forward, trying to line up his gun on me.

Maybe my second shot wasn't necessary, but I was raised some different than most folk. My pa always told me that when a man is shot and is as good as dead, that's when he's most dangerous. That's when you don't expect a man to shoot you, when he's supposed to be dead. My second shot threw him sideways and out of the saddle.

I moved back against the wall and stood there for a long moment, not looking at anything in particular, waiting for any sounds that might mean an attack from a partner of his or from someone in the town. I didn't hear a thing and not a soul moved. It wasn't like that in Texas. There, soon as the shooting stops, there's a whole passel of kids and folks all wanting to get a good look-see at the dead man. I reckon maybe these folks were different that way.

I moved out into the street and stood over the body. I gave him a quick glance, still wary, looking around the place, and not trusting that he was alone. He was sprawled out on his back, a gun still in one hand, his eyes staring empty at the blistering hot sun. It wasn't pretty, but then I never saw a dead man that didn't make my stomach get tight.

I stepped back, turned slowly in a circle, looking around for any signs of friends. As loud as I could, I yelled, "Hey! If any *amigos* of this

Senor Vaca are around, then come on out! We'll go ahead and take care of our fight now, like a man's supposed to do." I didn't want anyone sneaking along on my trail.

An old man came out of the *cantina* where I had been eating. He was the man who'd been setting way off to one side giving orders to the women where I'd ordered my food. He held up a hand, palm facing me, and with a head shaking like a man does when he says "no," said with a big smile on his face: "*Senor*, this one has no friends." Then, the old man walked over and spat right smack into that dead man's face.

He looked at me and with a look of complete disgust on his face said, "That is what we think of Hernandez Vaca!"

I smiled at him and asked, "Who is he?"

"He was a thief, a *bandito*. Vaca would come into our village, force us to feed him, force our women to drink and laugh with him, would humiliate them, and their husbands and children, and then would ride off and never pay for what he took." The old man spoke with a rasp and his hatred of this Vaca was plain.

"Why didn't the village just up and shoot him?"

He looked at me like I was a crazy man, then said, "Shoot him? Vaca? *Senor*, there is not a man within a hundred miles who would have ever dared to try and shoot this one. We all thought he was protected by *El Diablo*, the devil. Vaca has had many fights, and has slain many good men."

He paused, looked me up and down careful, then added, "You do not look to be what you are, *senor*."

I laughed at that. I've been told that before, and maybe for different reasons. I grinned at him and asked, "Just what do I look like?"

He said, "You have the look of a brave man, but a brave man who knows when to be a coward. You do not have the look of one who rushed into danger as you did."

Well, it was a pretty smooth way of telling me he thought I was a mite foolish. Brave, but foolish. But that man didn't grow up with his pa

6 *Texas Past*

knocking him in the head every time he did or said something foolish. Pa had his own ideas about what was foolish, and for me to let that Vaca shoot my horse and then sell me back one of my own horses while he stole the other would have been plumb foolish to his way of thinking. Pa would have crawled out of his grave and whopped me alongside the head if I'd let that man do me like he wanted. My pa wasn't an educated man, but he was the smartest man I ever knew, and he taught me all about good and bad, and about how to handle folks that try to ride over the top of you. Sometimes a man has to fight, Pa always said, and sometimes a man has to run. I've run a time or two, walked away more times than that, and now and then, I've stayed to fight.

I had my first taste of that when I was just a kid, right after Ma died and I left home for Texas. I had a run-in with a man who tried to choke me to death in a little town along the way to Texas. I cut him with my knife and he nearly died. I came near to hanging over that, but I never have let a man ride roughshod over me. There were a few that had tried, and them that tried were either dead or tired of trying.

I walked back to the dead man and dug into his pockets. He had a little leather pouch and it was heavy with coin. I cut it free and opened it. I calculated there was most of seven hundred dollars worth of gold coins in the pouch. That Vaca must have been doing pretty good at his robbing and killing. I took out a few gold coins, stuck them in my vest and jerked the pouch shut. Then I stripped him of his guns. I tried the action on them, but they just didn't feel right to me. I stuck his guns in my saddle bags. I knew I could sell them over in Texas. I'd have taken his boots, only they were way too big.

But, his sombrero was a perfect fit. I sailed my tattered Stetson across the street. Some kid would likely snatch that up. Wearing that sombrero was like wearing the top of a cook wagon. Wasn't much else but me and shade under that thing, though it was a mite too heavy. Figured I'd get used to it, and if I didn't, I'd trade it off somewhere when I got back to Texas.

I cleared my voice and yelled, "Hey! All you come on out here! I got something for you!"

No one moved, so I asked the old man why they wouldn't come out. He said, "They are frightened of you. You have slain the *amigo* of *Diablo*, so they think you may be a better *amigo* of him than was *Vaca*."

I laughed. I suppose I never thought of myself as a bad man, but these were superstitious folk, and I could see the old man's point. I said, "And what about you? Do you think that?"

He smiled for the first time and said, "No. I think you are just a man. A *ver'* dangerous man, but *jus'* a man. There *es* more of good in you, *senor*, than there was evil in *Vaca*."

I asked, "Will you call the people? I want you and your people to have *Vaca*'s money. I already took out what he owed me."

He called them in their own tongue, and they came out real slow, each wanting the other to be just a step or two ahead, just in case I was the friend of the devil.

I took out the sack of coins and began counting. I announced the figure to the people and had the old man repeat it in their tongue. Then, I told them that I wanted them to share it all. He explained what I said and I saw some of them get real excited and begin to talk at each other, hands waving around and their faces all screwed up with excitement. Then, I told them that the old man would distribute it to them because that money would have to be broken down at a bank somewhere so everyone could get his share.

After the old man told them that, I dropped the sack into his hands, picked up the reins of that black and swung into the saddle. That *Mex'* saddle felt pretty good, so I just left it on, but as soon as I got to Texas, I'd sell it and get another one. I knew the one I'd get, too. It was in the livery, was used, but was the most comfortable saddle I'd ever straddled. I had borrowed it once on a horse I'd rented there. The *Mex'* saddle was too heavy, and I never was one for fancy things on a saddle, especially a saddle that glistens. Such things get a man killed, and the extra weight on a horse

8 Texas Past

on a long trail will make for a much slower trip. I swung back to the ground, walked over to my dead horse, stripped off the saddle and carried it over to the little corral. I got it on one of my horses, cinched it tight, then led them both back, and got the old man to get their attention again.

I pointed to the horses and said, "Here's two fine horses, one with a saddle. Make a fine pair for somebody. I'll take two hundred-fifty dollars for the pair, and I'll throw in the saddle, free!"

I think there was one or two in that crowd that understood 'Merican, because they didn't even wait for that old man to explain what I said. Two young men in sandals come up to the old man and talked at him for a little. The old man turned to me and said, "They say that for two hundred pesos, they will buy your horses."

I agreed, took the money from the old man, swung back into the saddle and left. I guess some would call me a fool for not taking all that coin because there wasn't a soul who could have stopped me, but Pa would have been mighty upset to see his boy turn out greedy, and I reckon Ma would have cried. Those people had more a claim on that coin than I did. That crook had stole their food, their women, their time, and I reckon their manhood.

As I rode out of that little village, I saw a couple little brown-skinned kids jerking the pants off Vaca's body. Another was already setting in the street and shoving his feet into Vaca's boots. I had to stop and tell him to take off his sandals. He didn't understand at first because I could only tell him "no," and then point to his sandals, but pretty soon he got the idea. He gave me a grin, shucked those sandals and shoved his feet into the boots.

In a few hours I was near the border.

Texas was looking real good.

CHAPTER 2

I made it back across the border in a day, and in another day I was home in Keyhole, Texas. It was a tiny, dried up town that served about five ranches nearby and wasn't much more than a bunch of claptrap shacks that let the dust blow through. Nothing ever stayed long in Keyhole, not even the dogs, and I found out my time had come to an end when I got back.

I had a job as a kind of marshal there. I got fourteen dollars a month, a room to sleep in, which I had to give up if I arrested anyone, and meals provided. It wasn't much, but there wasn't much trouble, either. I never had any mean kind of trouble, just some rowdy cowboys now and then. It gave me a lot of free time, and I used it to find wild horses which I'd sell to local ranchers, and if they were all full up, to anyone I could find. This last time, I couldn't find nary a soul who'd even look at my mustangs, so that's why I'd ended up south of the border. There were a couple ranches I'd sold to down there in the past, and if I couldn't have sold them in the towns along the way, I'd have sold them to one of the ranchers.

I put away my horse and walked to my room. A few minutes later, a knock sounded and Williams, the mayor and owner of the only store in town, walked in. I gave him a friendly howdy and noticed he didn't look right at me in the eye like a man should. He was a man with something on his mind.

He fidgeted with his apron, then said, "Luke, I've some bad news for you."

10 *Texas Past*

“Spit it out, Williams.” I hate to fool around with folks who can’t speak their minds right out. I’ve got no patience with them.

He sighed, then said, “Luke, I’ve been elected to tell you that we don’t need you any more.”

I grinned at him. “You mean you’re all getting wise to the fact that there’s not much need for a lawman, here?”

He blushed, then said, “Luke, I like you. I wish you could stay, but they won’t listen to me.”

“What’s the problem, then?”

“Luke, you remember that cowboy you had to knock down and throw in the horse trough a couple weeks ago?”

I remembered that one. He’d been kind of rowdy, and I’d have let him go on, except he got to shooting his gun and I was afraid he might hit someone. I nodded.

He said, “Well, that was the ramrod for the Bar-T. That’s the spread run by...”

“I know who it’s run by. Russ Meyers isn’t exactly a stranger to me, Williams.”

“Yeah. Well, Meyers came into town a day after you went across the border and told the town that unless they got rid of you, that he and his riders wouldn’t be coming here anymore, and instead, they would ride the extra ten miles to Red Bluff.” He cleared his throat and continued, “The town figures it can’t afford the loss, Luke.”

I walked to the back room, threw my few rags into my bag and slung it across my shoulders. I stopped as I passed Williams and said, “It’s been nice knowing you all.” I left and went over to the saloon and got Brady, the barkeep, to pay me off. It was only seven dollars, but we fussed some because I’d figured it out to be nine dollars. But, I gave in finally because he got to throwing numbers at me called fractions, and I couldn’t argue those kind of numbers with him.

I knew I’d been there too long. Some of them hadn’t wanted me in the first place on account of my being handy with a gun, but they’d give in

when a scare had gone around on account of some *Mex'* raiders nearby.

I had run the job for nearly a year, and had a little trouble from Meyers in the beginning, but after I run a *hardcase* out of town, things quieted down and Meyers quit pushing at me. But, I guess he was just waiting for a good excuse to run me off. I had given some thought to leaving before because the job had got to be pretty dull, and the pay wasn't as much as I could get riding herd, but I'd kept putting it out of my mind. This had been a job where I could take off just about any time I wanted, as long as things were quiet.

I headed for a ranch over near the Brazos, the Slash-Bar outfit. I'd met a few of that bunch once while selling horses in a town near there, and they seemed to be a good bunch. The owner, a man called Blackjack Reston, was the owner, and he was supposed to be a real tough *hombre*, but fair as any man. I know being black or white didn't matter much to him because I'd seen two black cowboys, and one or two *injun* cowboys in his bunch. I knew he took on men with a past because one of his riders who bought a horse from me was Tyler Coom, the Kansas City gunman. Being handy with a gun didn't matter to Reston. Only question with him was whether a man could chase cows out of the brush.

It took me a couple days to locate the ranch. I'd have made it there sooner, only some kid give me a bum steer on where it was at. I don't know if he was just mixed up or if he did it on purpose, but it cost me a half a day's ride. I pulled into the ranch in the late afternoon when everyone was eating, and I guess my temper was wearing just a little thin. I was still aggravated at that kid.

The cook saw me walk in and slung another tin plate out onto the table. I sat down with a nod at everyone, and in a minute he was slopping beans out onto my plate. I reached out, took a big hunk of cornbread to go with it and got to wondering if this was the daily fare. I been on a ranch once where the only thing we ever got was beans, biscuits, and now and then some beef. I already had my share of those kinds of meals. I was grateful for this meal, but I wasn't too fond of beans. Not steady, anyway. Me and beans

12 *Texas Past*

could part company and I'd never miss them.

One of the men spoke to me in between mouthfuls. He asked, "Looking for work?"

I nodded, and he said, "Ain't none to be had around here. We got all the drifters we want on this ranch. Eat up and ride out."

I asked, "You the boss, here?"

One man cut in, "Latimer's a boss alright. He bosses his old lady—when she lets him!"

They all got a good laugh out of that, and I watched the red come up from his neck. He jerked a bite out of a piece of cornbread, and suddenly, I had the feeling he was wishing I was the one who'd joshed him. I saw right off that he was just one of those kind of men who wants to be taken serious all the time, only everyone knows him and they always do the opposite of what he wants. He glared at the other man and then looked back to me.

"I ain't no boss, but I'm telling what he'd tell you." He took another big bite off that chunk of cornbread he was holding, and I think he was wishing it was me he was taking a bite out of.

I smiled at him and said, "Reckon I'll do my asking anyhow."

One huge black man sitting way to the rear said, "Aw, don't let Latimer bother you none. Boss was talking about getting some new riders on just the other day. If you can set a saddle and sling a rope, he'll hire you."

Latimer got red in the face again and stood up. He moved away from the bench and walked to where this man was sitting. The other man looked up to him and said, "Now Latimer, I done whupped you once. I can do it twice if you've a mind for it."

That cook come in with a big stick and whacked it on the table. It startled most all of us, and he said loudly, "Ain't no fighting done at my table! You boys take your troubles outside."

Latimer glared some more, this time at the cook, because I think he was ready to take advantage of that black cowboy, only maybe he was remembering some things about that whuppin' he'd gotten. Then, he glared

at me and as he walked back, he said, "I'll take care of you later."

I figured things was done with and went back to chewing that cornbread and beans, but Latimer had a different idea. Some men are like that. They got to try you, and got to see what their position is going to be in the grub line.

He was silent for a few minutes, but he kept looking up from his beans and glaring at me. I could see it working in him. Finally, he glared at me and said, "You best be riding cowboy." He chewed some more on his beans, then, with a gruff, angry tone added, "Now! You've had enough to eat."

I kept on chewing and ignored him. He leaned forward and his breath like to have chased me from the table. It smelled like he had a wad of 'chaw' in his mouth, mingled with cornbread. It was awful, and I waved a hand in front of my nose and made a face.

I leaned back, trying to get away from his breath, and he said, "You ain't off this ranch in one more minute, they're gonna carry you off!"

I looked down the table at the others and asked, "He try this with every new man?" No one answered. They were all curious, I knew, about how I'd handle him. I'd sat in on a few incidents just like this, only with me one of the bunch watching while one of the boys tried to rawhide a new rider. Now, it was my turn.

I shrugged my shoulders, stood, and moved back from the table. I said, "Looks like I got to finish this meal later." I walked to the door, stopped, turned back and said to Latimer, "Soon as I beat some manners into you!"

He blinked a time or two like he didn't believe what he was hearing, then shoved himself away from the table and stomped to the door. I got out in front of the corral and waited. He moved up slow to me, fists held up and kind of out in front, like I saw a real boxer do once. I wondered if maybe I hadn't got mixed up with more than I could handle. The room had emptied behind him, with most staying on the porch in the shade, some still holding their tin plates and eating. They were enjoying this.

14 *Texas Past*

We circled, careful of each other. I was thinking of how I hated to move around much just after a meal, more than I was thinking of how to punch on that man. Probably, I should have been paying more attention, because suddenly, he threw a couple of wicked punches at me and caught me with both of them, one in the chest and the other on the right side of the jaw. I woke up a second or two later in the dust staring at the cloudless, Texas-blue sky. I rolled over and was coming up when he got me another good one, only I saved it from being as bad as it could have been by falling with the punch. It was one of those punches a man swings from behind his back, and if I hadn't fell with it some, I'd have went all the way down and for certain, out.

I come out of the dirt mad, now. I had a mouth full of dust, and he had hurt me, plus he'd spoiled my supper. I felt blood splashing down from my nose and hoped he hadn't broken my nose. It had been broken three times already.

I wiped at it with my sleeve and moved slowly towards the man. He was enjoying himself, feeling certain he'd put enough hurt and fear in me to win the fight. Funny thing about me, though. I'm not much in a fight unless I'm good and riled. I've lost a couple fights on account of that, and almost lost this one before I even threw a punch because of it.

But, I was mad, now. I came at him, ducked as he threw a right fist over my head, then I straightened and slammed him hard in the gut twice, backed off, then leaned one into his face as hard as I could. He squalled loud like a steer being branded and ended with a roar of pain. He staggered back holding his face, blood spurting from his nose and from between his fingers.

I moved in and hammered two hard ones to his gut, and slammed him with a left that caught him flush on the jaw. He toppled like a big tree that met a saw, landing hard on his back. He rolled over moaning, then struggled to get to his knees. I had to admire him. I never had a man get up from a punch like that. It was my best shot, and he wasn't out.

I was all set to level him with another punch as he got up, when this

powerful, booming voice sounded, "Let him go! He's beaten."

I turned towards the sound, and this short, barrel of a man came walking down the steps of the house. He had one of those calf-skin vests, all white and brown, and was bareheaded. The top of his head was slick and shiny, like a brown rock that's seen a million winds and an ocean of rain.

He walked up to me and stuck out his hand, "I'm Blackjack Reston." He gave me a long hard look deep in the eyes, then glanced at the man I'd licked, then back to me.

I took his hand. "Luke Adams, sir, and looking for a job."

He looked over at Latimer and said, "Good! I can use a couple good riders. You handle cows before?" He stepped back and looked me over again.

"Yes sir. I worked cows at a couple places, and even went on a drive or two. Once to Kansas, once to Colorado. Me and cows ain't exactly strangers."

He laughed and said, "Have Slim get you a couple horses. I'll put you in the book. You'll draw thirty a month and all the beans you can eat, plus all the horseflesh you can use up." He paused, looked over to Latimer and called out: "Latimer! You're done. I won't have a man working for me who picks fights and then can't win them!"

Reston turned back to me and said, "My ramrod is 'Red' Conners. He'll be in late, so he'll give you your orders in the morning." He glared at everyone a few seconds, then turned and stomped back into the house.

I got along with all those men. There were a couple who would get *proddy* now and then, but it usually had to do with being tired, or it being early in the morning. There wasn't a mean man in that bunch after Latimer left. And old man Reston never fussed with us much and left most of the bossing to Red, who was the best ramrod I ever rode for.

I probably would have been happy enough to stay at that ranch for a longer time than I did, only some trouble came up. It was shooting trouble and it even got the Texas Rangers after me. Worse than that, it put a shadow on my trail that followed me, and when it found me, brought death.

CHAPTER 3

I had worked there a couple years when I had some bad trouble. Up to then, about all I had was a couple fights, one was sort of friendly, and the other more a shoving match, with neither one of us wanting to expend the energy on a fight. Mostly, life was riding, chasing mossy backs, and eating hardtack that was flavored with crunchy beans, and now and then, some beef.

My bad trouble came about on a bright, eye-squinting Texas day. The boss gave out orders as usual that morning. Me, and a black rider named Spoon, called that because of a big spoon he always carried in his pocket, were to go up to the north section and chase some strays down towards the ranch. It was going to be a two or three day job, and Spoon wasn't too keen on spending that much time with me, even though we got along all right. I think it had to do with my cooking, which was just a shade better than his, which is to say, it was terrible.

Spoon had sworn he'd never eat my cooking again after the time my stew turned his spoon black. I never figured for sure what done his spoon that way, unless it was those hot peppers I threw in. I do remember neither of us could eat much of it because it was too hot, and they hurt my stomach. I swore off hot peppers after that.

As we rode out, Spoon was grumbling and I was whistling, because I liked getting away from everyone else for awhile, even if it was chasing

old mossy-backs through sagebrush and thorns sharp enough to slit a good pair of chaps, or your horse's leg, if you weren't careful. It was hard, but a cowboy was on his own, never hearing a boss yell at him, no branding or fence jobs, and none of the ordinary kind of work.

We got to this little line shack in the early afternoon, riding slow and remembering the times we'd been this way before. Spoon hobbled the horses, slipped off the saddles, then gave them a quick rub-down while I scrounged around for some wood for a fire. Then, Spoon led the other two horses we'd brought for changes into a small corral. We planned to give our mounts a blow, then, that late afternoon, ride on over to get a quick count of cows and maybe move them down closer to us. That's all we'd do for this day.

We both sat up against the side of the shack where it was shaded, because the insides of that place was like an oven. We hadn't rested there more than two snorts of a tired horse when we spotted three riders coming our way. They were coming at a kind of lope, not in a hurry, but headed our way for certain. I noticed them fan out slightly as they spotted us. They also slowed to a walk.

I stood, and so did Spoon. I could tell he was nervous because he kept wiping his hands on his pants. I didn't let on, but I was some worried, too. It's not often a body will see another rider this far out, let alone three of them, and when you do, the chances are good they're hard riders looking back on their trail for a lawman or a posse.

Spoon asked, "What they want, Luke? What you think they want?" I could feel the fear rising in him and his voice was pitched a little higher than usual.

The leader, the one riding out front and looking like he belonged there, walked his sorrel over to us and swung out of the saddle. He moved careful, and his step was soft, not even making the leather creak. That man had some cat in him for sure. I glanced at his gun holster, which was not ordinary. It was well-worn, but with the kind of wear that comes from practice—lots of it.

18 *Texas Past*

I knew he was more than just good with his gun. He had the look. The grips on the big forty-five Colt was black, and it looked like a well-used tool. Lot of cowboys have guns, but most don't use them. They carry them for snakes and coyotes and such. His hung at his side at just the right distance, and I could tell from the way he carried himself, he was ready.

The other two sat still in the saddle, spread out just a little. I wasn't scared, but my gut was tight, and I was primed. Pa always said that a man who didn't smile when he came onto you was one to watch close. Not one of these riders had a smile or even a howdy— just some hard stares.

The Cat Foot man spoke up: "We got word you boys been moving some beef now and then that don't belong to you." He pushed his hat back a little and I could see enough hard in that man's eyes to know he was ready to do us harm. He was just waiting like a cat watches a bird.

I think they all thought we were going to try and talk about it and explain how they had the wrong men and such, but I been raised different than most folk. That man had accused us of rustling, and there's just one thing they do to rustlers in Texas and that is string them up high, unless they can shoot them first. Beside that, I knew that a couple of rag-tag punchers' word was worth about as much as a spent bullet three feet in front of a deer.

It's easy to criticize what I did next, because I'll admit I was awful sudden, but these were hard times and those was hard men, and they were set to hang us both or shoot us. Only thing, they figured on taking a couple of riders who could sling rope. They weren't ready for somebody who growed up slinging a gun. Shuckin' a gun was something I'd done most every day of my life since I was a *yonker*, when my Pa stuck his old forty-four down the front of my pants and said it was mine to carry when we were on the trail.

I didn't waste words with denying his charge. One minute I'm standing polite and the next, I had my Colt shucked and lined up on Cat Foot with the hammer eared back. Surprise washed over their faces. I'd shucked that gun pretty fast, and I could see they were doing some re-thinking about who I was.

I'd worked on jerking my gun out every day of my life when I was just a kid in Kentucky. My Pa used to make me carry my gun shoved down the front of my pants, and I had to get that big gun shucked sudden-like in order to hit them rabbits and squirrels. He reckoned that having to hunt like that would help me learn to shuck a gun sudden. It did.

Cat Foot, he didn't move, but he just watched me with them green eyes. He was hard, that man, and not scared a bit.

I looked him square in his green eyes and said, "Boys, I'm not real certain where you got your information, but whoever gave it to you almost got some of you dead. I never rustled a cow in my life and neither has my friend, here." I smiled, showing my teeth, because I wanted to let them riders know I didn't hold a grudge against them.

One rider, a kid of maybe twenty, with a squinty way of looking, spoke up and said, "You ain't but one and your partner there don't even count. You're all alone, mister." He smiled, squinted at me and added, "We got you."

I took the smile out of my eyes and off my face. "Kid, in ordinary times I'd just take one of your ears off, but I'm peaceful and I'm letting it slide. But if you get any ideas, you'll be leavin' your saddle backwards."

I moved to the side where I could get a good view of the kid, where his horse's head was not in my way, then I added, "Kid, don't think I can't be pushed into a war, here." I paused a long moment, looking directly at him, then said softly, "Might be I'll miss and take more than your ear off, though."

The kid looked at the man on his right, then to the Cat Foot man, then back to me. He wanted someone else to take it up, but nobody said a word.

Then, the Cat Foot man held up his hand and said gently, "Back off, Ben. The man's holding all the aces, and this man isn't one to push. Take my word on it. He doesn't need the other one for help, here."

I put my smile back on and said, "Glad you see it my way. I don't want no war." I moved to one side, my gun not wavering off the man with

20 *Texas Past*

the green eyes, then added, “We ride for Blackjack Reston. Have for years, and we’re chasin’ strays down. You can check it out. You got the wrong boys.”

Cat Foot sighed, gave an angry glance at the kid called Ben, then said, “We don’t want a war, either. I’m thinking we were a bit sudden, here. One of us had a bad idea.” He was staring hard at the man called Ben as he spoke.

I saw him relaxed around his eyes watched as the tension left him. He fiddled some with the bridle on his horse’s head and said, “We’re trailin’ a couple riders. We’ll get some water and keep lookin’, if it’s all the same with you.”

What happened next was pure foolishness on my part. I got taken with that Cat Foot man, got to liking him. And, when he eased off, I did the same. So, in spite of my instincts, I slid my Colt back in the holster at my belly.

My pa would have reminded me right then, if he was alive, about the time we met a she-bear and her cubs on a morning trail back in Kentucky. We was both some surprised, and Pa and me just stared at that old bear while she reared up and stared right back. Pa didn’t make any move with the rifle, just held it pointing her way like it was when we come on her. She stared a long minute, then jumped off into the bushes and was gone. I was all for following, but Pa took me by the shoulder and said, “Son, when you meet up with a mean critter, if you can have peace, have it. Don’t be laying aside your gun to have it, but don’t be chasing after trouble either.”

Well, I didn’t chase this trouble, but I did lay aside my gun, and I never should have done that. I knew the Cat Foot man didn’t want a fight. He was like that she-bear, not scared, but wise enough to know when to move off the trail. That kid though, he was like a dog when you take away a piece of meat he’s about to sink his teeth into.

He just went mean all of a sudden.

Even though I’d put away my Colt, I was still watching close. Hadn’t been that I was still watching, I might have missed the kid’s move because

he drew his gun without me seeing it. All I caught was his wild eyes and the twitch of his right shoulder, and I dove for the dirt, yelling for Spoon to do the same as me. That kid got a shot off, but it went into the dirt right beside his own horse because my shot took him clean out of the saddle backwards, just like I promised. I heard him scream and heard him hit the ground with a heavy thud. He made no sound after that.

Cat Foot put a shot that clipped the top out of my ear, only I didn't know that until later. I put two shots his way quick, rolled fast and put one at the other rider. I heard the soft chunk as it smacked into the rider, and he grabbed for the saddle horn, but missed and piled into the dirt. It didn't kill him though, because he was laying there yelling that he was hit. I was rolling in the dirt again even before he hit the ground and was about to line up on Cat Foot when I heard him yell for me to hold up.

I got out of the dirt and edged over toward the shack, my gun still out and pointed towards the Cat Foot man. Spoon was on his back with a big smear of blood all over his chest, and that Cat Foot man was holding onto his saddle with one hand and wincing with pain. He still had his gun lined up on me, and I saw the dark stain all over his pant leg. Spoon had put one in him and he'd put one in Spoon.

Cat Foot called out, "No more, cowboy! No more war." He holstered his gun to show he was for peace, and I slid mine back into the holster, but still keeping an eye out. There was no way he was going to get that gun lined on me before I got one in him. I'm not bragging. I just know what I can do with a gun, and it was just him and me, now.

I watched him limp over to the rider who yelling about being hit, then I went over to Spoon. He was crying, and I got to admit I was kind of ashamed at him because I was raised different, I guess. I suppose I shouldn't have held it against Spoon, because he was dying and he knew it.

His eyes rolled up, focused on me, then tears began running over. I looked away, because like I said, I was raised different and it made me ashamed. He said, "Luke, I ain't ready to die." He choked some, then in a voice that would have broke his mama's heart said,, "God, you ain't gonna

22 Texas Past

let me die out here, is you?"

I tried hard to comfort Spoon, but I never was very good with words in such cases. I did say a prayer for him and he calmed some after that.

Spoon talked about being bad and about doing some things he wished he hadn't done in his life, and he said he wished he'd stayed on the Jesus road. I talked to him some about Jesus, remembering some of the things my Ma used to tell me. That gave him comfort, I could tell.

I stopped, and he said, "More, Luke. Tell me more. Tell me about Jesus."

I told him how the Good Book said he was going to be going with Jesus. My ma used to make me go to church with her, and though it never really took with me, she was a Bible quoting woman. I wished now I'd remembered some of those verses she used to quote at me. I told him a few stories I remembered, like the one about Samsom and a couple others, though I probably didn't get them right. I was quiet for a long time and he looked up at me with them deep, dark eyes full of pain and said, "Go on, Luke. Tell me more." His voice got down to a whisper.

I told him about the time Jesus got beat up by a bunch of men like the ones who had shot him, and how Jesus had come down and died to take care of all the bad we'd done; and I told him how a sinner had to quit his hard living and had to pray to get into heaven. At that, he wanted me to pray with him, but I didn't know what to say. Then, I remembered the story about the crook that died with Jesus, so I told him that story, and how the crook went to heaven even though he was a bad man, too, like me and Spoon, and all he done was ask polite to be remembered. He really liked that story and asked me to tell it to him again.

Spoon told me he used to read the Good Book, and once, when he was a young man, declared that he was going to be a preachin' man, but soon after that he'd had gotten away from God and the church, and got to drinking and running with some bad company. I told him he was about to get into some real good company. He smiled at that, then died. I laid him back against the side of the shack. It had taken him about fifteen minutes

to die.

I stood, then walked over to Cat Foot and his partner. I was sad, but I was also mad. I stopped and just stood there, looking at the two of them. Cat Foot stood there easy, waiting to see which way the wind blew. The other man laid there moaning some, the scared showing all over his face.

I said, "We both lost a partner and I'm for letting things lay as they are." I know if it hadn't been for Cat Foot talking peace before that kid started shooting, I'd have started the war all over. But, we both knew the kid had set off the war and that neither of us had really wanted it to happen.

Cat Foot look at me and said, "I owe you this much, mister." He jerked a knot tighter in the neckerchief he'd wrapped around his leg, then continued, "You shot the son of Amos Briner. Now, even though it was the kid's idea to come up here and it was his fault for startin' the ball, you best be ridin' because Amos Briner will take this hard." He winced as he shifted his weight, then added, "He'll hunt you." He paused a long moment, then added, "He'll hunt you hard and when he gets you, he'll hang you."

He wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his shirt sleeve, put the hat back on and said, "Amos has some riders on the payroll that are snake-mean and sleep with their guns. Fact is, some of them have seen the insides of 'dobe walls with bars on the windows for being too handy with their gun. They'll be the ones after you."

I had to ask him, "What about you? You gonna be riding after me, too?"

He gave that hard smile of his and said, "No. I'm certain my days of riding for Amos Briner is over. I let his kid die and didn't bring back the one that did it. Amos will never forgive that." He looked at his partner and added, "Only reason I'm ridin' back is to bring Tuck and the boy home and tell him what happened. I'll leave after that."

"Will you tell him how it happened? Tell him I never wanted to kill anyone?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'll tell him exactly how it happened, but knowing Amos, truth won't much matter. Ben never could do wrong in the old man's

24 *Texas Past*

eyes, and Amos couldn't see the side of the kid you and me saw today."

They rode out and I stood there looking down at Spoon for a long time, thinking about things. Finally, I went in the shack, threw a couple cans of beans in a sack, filled my canteen, and made some coffee. I gave serious thought to riding over to Briner's spread and facing up to it, but I gave up on that thought. I've known too many men like Briner. They're tough and hard like the land they fight every day of their life. He'd likely have me hanged on the spot and never give one minutes listen to my side of it.

In fact, likely it wouldn't matter to him that his kid was wrong. Probably, that was why the kid was mean. His pa never took him to task for his wrongs like mine done. Pa whipped me more times that I care to recall, and my ma was no piker when it come to handing out *lickins* either. My pa once told me that if I ever went bad and they set out to hang me for my crimes, he wouldn't come and watch, but he wouldn't be there to stop it, either. I don't think Amos Briner saw things like my pa did.

After I buried Spoon, I left a note to the boss explaining things, then I stocked up and made ready for my long ride out of Texas. I figured that once I got to the New Mexico Territory, I would be safe. I took my horse and one of the horses Spoon and I had brought with us. I didn't figure the boss would hold it against me on account of what had been done and because of wages I was due. In an hour, I was five miles from the line shack and in four days, I was near the Canadian River.

I was resting up in some hills when I spied some riders coming slow. I've been trailed three times in my life, and this looked to be the hardest run of them all because the riders in this bunch weren't ordinary. This bunch was good at trailing, and it seemed that they might have an *injun* with them because I never met a white man could track like they were doing me. I'd taken real care to cover my trail. No ordinary rider was going to track me this quick, I knew. I figured the tracker to either be an *injun* or someone who used to scout for the army. Whoever it was, he was good.

I wondered if they talked with the farmer I got some water and milk from a couple days ago. Texas is one dry place in the summer and I had no choice but to get something wet in me. It was mighty sweet milk, that water was cool, and the biscuits that were thrown in were tasty, but it looked like it was going to cost me more than the dollar I'd given.

After another day of riding, I knew it was going to be impossible to shake those riders. There was seven of them, and one was riding without a saddle, so my guess about the *injun* was true. Also, they were trailing a nice string of remounts along behind. They'd come for a long trail and they weren't likely to have to turn back on account of tired horse flesh.

I began planning for my war ground right then. Pa always told me that if I had to get in a war, that I should do as best I could to get on grounds that was good for me and bad for the other side. So, I scouted for good ground. I also began to rest my mount, walking alongside him part of the time. I shucked my boots and tugged a pair of store shoes from my saddle bags. I'd gotten those a few years back and always carried them for walking. They were soft on the feet and had a good feel to them.

In a couple of days, I found some ground that was favorable to my side. There was a tumble of boulders large enough to give shade and to hide a couple horses in, and just right to make my ambush. Them boulders were sprawled around like God took a handful and just tossed them at that spot, letting them fall whichever way they wanted. It gave shade around, with grass for the horses, and there was water in a couple places. I knew they'd follow me in here and I hoped they'd make camp here because of the water. It was a likely spot for a camp, and I'd have made one myself, but I was afraid of the scout coming up on me there.

That *injun* would surely know about the water, but just in case, I made a couple little mistakes so they'd be sure and spot my trail. It wasn't the kind of mistake most men would make. That tracker would get suspicious if I started leaving clear sign when before, I'd been making it hard. So, once I scraped my horse's dung off the ground and hid it under a bush just like I'd done all the time I'd been running, but I left a little trace of it that most

men would miss. I knew that *injun* would spot it, though.

I also made sure that I slopped some water around on the ground as I wiped my horse's nostrils out. That was mighty cooling for any horse, and mine appreciated it. The water would evaporate, but it'd leave the dirt looking different, and that *injun* tracker wouldn't miss it. Later, I urinated on the side of the trail and made sure I splashed around some on a bush. He'd notice the dust missing off that bush.

I rested a couple hours, then I rode out of that bunch of rocks on a dead run, like I was scared. They'd think I spotted them and was in too big a hurry to worry about my trail. Then, getting back in control, I walked both horses over some rocks in one place. You get a tracker with savvy, and if you throw a change at him, he'll suspect something right off. If you had been hiding your trail good, then you start making it easy, that tracker is going to know something isn't right. I wanted that *injun* to think I rode through that bunch of rocks, got some water, headed out scared, then got a hold of myself and went back to hiding my trail. He'd spot the long stride and the deep prints of the run and figure I was scared.

I was counting on that.

After most of three miles, I circled wide and headed back, aiming to come back into those rocks from the south side. I wanted to be on the far side of where that bunch rode in. I figured them to be a few hours or less behind. If I was lucky, they'd reach this spot late in the day, but if they came through here early in the day, I'd just have to let them pass and try for another ambush, unless they decided to camp early in the day.

It was late that afternoon when they come riding in, moving slow, that *injun* way out front, leaning over now and then as he eye-balled my trail. He was skinny, but the meat that was showing was all tough. That man could have tracked me down on foot. I got a lot of respect for what those *injun* trackers can do.

I eased back into the rocks, because I got this feeling in me that one of the riders, especially that *injun*, might sense that I was there looking at them. I've done felt too many looks, and I just got to figure some folks can

feel it like I can, especially if I'm all primed for trouble. Time to watch a man is when he's not expecting trouble, when he's relaxed and off-guard. Then, you got a good chance he won't sense you. But, there's a lot of men who couldn't tell you were looking at them if you were breathing on their neck. These riders weren't like that. They had that look about them that said they were ready, had been hunted and they been hunting, too. I would take no chances with men like that.

All the riders pulled up and began walking the horses, except the *injun*. I heard him trot off and I knew he'd be following the trail on out for a mile or two, satisfying himself that I was gone. The rest began slipping off the saddles and making camp. That *injun* must have told them of the water, because they got to looking around for it. I got worried that they'd stumble on me by accident, but as luck would have it the *injun* came riding back and told them where to look.

They settled down in various spots, talking soft, and now and then some cussing would cause their voice to get louder. I figured that was for me and what they were having to go through chasing me across half of Texas.

The sun finally dropped out of the sky and cool settled in the rocks. Mighty strange how it can be so hot and then get so cold in just a short time. I just laid back in them rocks enjoying the cool, because that sun had dried me out real bad.

I waited until long into the night, way after all those rider except one, had settled in their bed rolls. Only one I had some worries over was the *injun*. That one looked more and more to me like part mountain lion, and I was going to have to move real quiet to keep him from getting my wind.

When I finally stirred, it was with some slow, careful movements. What I had in mind was to slow them riders up some. There was no way I was going to take them all out, but I'd make them a whole lot more careful on my trail. They'd learn what it meant to hunt Luke Adams.

I crawled on my belly down next to the camp, trying to look like a rock, or a dark shadow. I got to admit, it was a help having a skin that was

burnt by that Texas sun to a deep brown. I looked almost the same as a shadow does. A body would have had to have looked close and hard to have spotted me.

I went in among the horses easy, not spooking a one, rubbing a nose here and there, never standing up all the way. On each horse's back, right where the saddle would sit, I made a careful, shallow slit in the skin with my knife. I always keep my knife honed sharp as any razor, so them horses didn't do more than wiggle their skin, like if a horsefly would bite them. It wouldn't take too much sweating and rubbing to work those slits open wide and make a sore. It was a low down, mean thing to do, I know, but when a body's in a war, there's just one rule: *win it*.

What I had to do next was almost as hard, because I never, in my born days, least until then, had shot at a man from ambush, and worse, in his bedroll. It went against the grain, and maybe Pa didn't squirm none in his grave, because he'd understand, but I know Ma rolled over a time or two. It had to be done, though, especially to that *injun*. I had to take him out. They could get more horses from a ranch, but good trackers like that *injun* would be hard to come by.

I aimed my rifle low because there was no sense in killing that tracker. I held no grudge against him. He was just doing what he was paid to do. Likely, he wasn't getting more than a cow for his family for all his trouble. Whatever he was getting, I knew it wasn't worth what I was about to give him.

The shot split open the night and busted that camp fast. I saw the *injun* roll toward cover, holding onto his leg where I'd popped him. Most men would have squalled like a calf at branding, but he never whimpered or made a sound. The others were jumping and hollering so much you'd have thought they were the ones hit. Bodies were diving for cover and rolling in the dirt. I never heard such carrying on since Pa tried to clobber a weasel after our chickens.

I got in a couple more shots, missing one rolling blanket, then I hit someone running and he squealed like a scalded dog, fell across the

campfire and began rolling. He wouldn't die, but he wouldn't be riding soon, either. The others just fell into the night, and suddenly, it was as quiet as a Texas rain in the summer.

I slid off the rock I was on and made it back to my horses. It was no place to be hanging around. In minutes, I was traveling away into the night, and I figured it would be a couple hours, maybe even daybreak, before they were able to decide I wasn't around no more. By then, I would be long gone. They might trail me, but no sore-backed horse was going to catch this rider. They might not be scared of me, but I had their respect, now. And, they'd be sore-footed by the time they got back home.