

BRANDED

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The rider above the town of Taos wasn't sure if he preferred the wind blowing or not. For two weeks, he'd been riding into the face of it. He had breathed wind-blown dust through a neckerchief that usually contributed more to the problem than it helped. Then three days ago, the wind had stopped. The resulting stillness and blistering heat put him in mind of three Hebrew children in an old story about a furnace. Altogether, he was undecided which particular torment he'd rather the central Texas plains inflict upon him. Brad Shannon rarely made his mind up quickly.

Truth to tell, he was a little slow about everything. A methodical man, he preferred to collect as much information as possible before taking any action. He correctly reasoned that the more he knew, the less effort would be required once he got around to doing. His great passion in life was reading and many a pack horse suffered for his pleasure. He carried guns for protection, but practiced only enough to hit large objects at short distances. Even then, success depended largely on whether the targets were stationary. Had his parents not come west in his youth, he would have doubtless earned a distinguished career in one of the great eastern centers of learning. As it was, in this land of hardy men who sought conquests and contests, he was an anomaly. Yet, few things ever surprised him. As others learned by bitter experience, he learned by the inflated tales of their adventures. What he heard, after making minor mental adjustments for accuracy, he remembered.

He remembered a great deal about Ace. The letter had thrown his mind back to his youth. His blood had run warmer then. Fate and circumstance bring odd companions together. He, Ace Hider, and Jim McIntre had been as strange a group as they come. They were a plodding thinker; a devil may care gambler, and a quiet philosopher who truly loved to fight. As they grew to manhood in the same basin, Brad planned their excursions. He tried in vain to keep them from situations where Ace's recklessness required Jim to extricate them with guns, fists, or preferably both.

Time and opportunity had kept them apart for many years. Till Ace, gambling at mining, made a strike too large for one man to work. He wrote to ask if maybe old friendships could be rekindled. Coincidentally, could he get organizational skills and firepower added to his new venture? He was betting it would take both to get and keep his golden treasure from the earth. On the heels of that letter, Brad packed his choicest reading materials and a few provisions. Wealth was the surest way he knew to a life of leisure and intellectual contemplation.

Journey nearly complete, Brad leisurely contemplated Taos. It was much larger than he had expected. It was not a boom town, erected and abandoned by the discovery of gold here or elsewhere. It occupied a strategic location where several springs flowed year round. A great deal of traffic and commerce converged there. One of the few places where grain could be grown as well as hay, the area supported abundant horses and cattle. Holding pens on one side of town held stock till it could be shipped by rail. A natural stopping place for travelers, Taos boasted several hotels. An adobe fort and garrison buildings sat on high ground to the east.

The low hills through which the road ran were busy just then. On the far side of town, a stage rolled in at a leisurely pace. On his side of the town, just a short ride away, a group of riders were dismounted and standing in discussion. All told, it seemed like as fine a town as he had just left. It might even house some of the few cultural pleasures a man could expect this far west.

He did not expect what he found as he drew near the dismounted group. The mass of men shifted as they turned toward him. A chill ran through him. A body lay to the side of the road below an overhang of rock. It was clad in a gold colored shirt Brad had ample cause to remember. He had owned it till he foolishly engaged in a little poker game with Ace one night. Losing everything he owned at the time put a little strain on their friendship. The gracious winner had replaced the shirt with a worn out flannel version from his saddlebags. There was no question now. Luck had finally deserted the shirt's current owner.

A bitter taste was in his mouth and a sense of futility was upon him. Nonetheless, Brad spurred his horse to meet the men drawing aside as though to let him pass.

Passing the body, he pulled to a stop and dismounted. A tall, dour man with a star stepped forward. Brad was informed any reason he might have to stop lay ahead in the town, but not there. The letter in Brad's pocket served to introduce and identify him. An apologetic town marshal introduced himself as well as the others in the group. Most were townsmen, called to help transport the body or called by curiosity. The last man introduced was Prentiss. He was an ore assayer for a local mining concern. He was of special interest to Brad, since he was the last to see Ace alive. He claimed to have shot the dead man in the back, not less than an hour before.

His story was pretty straightforward. After hearing for some time about Ace's claim, he agreed to look it over. He would give the best estimate he could on the relative worth of the holding. He also meant to instruct Ace on proper procedures for crudely refining ore before bringing it in. After a somewhat discouraging discussion at the claim, he and Ace had been returning to town. A canteen jostled loose from Prentiss's saddlebag and landed below the granite outcropping. Riding behind him, Ace dismounted and stooped to pick up the canteen. He failed to notice a mountain lion crouched on the log across a crevice above. Firing in haste with his 44 Colt, the assayer missed his first shot. The ricochet hit Ace in the back, killing him.

Hearing him cry out, Prentiss also missed his second try. He shot high as the lion leapt away. Claw marks on the bark of the log visibly verified the size of the predator. Two empty shells still lay on the ground. A fresh scar on the rock showed where the first shot struck. The slug had gone through Ace and had been located. It was so smashed, the caliber could not even be determined. Other travelers heard the shots and hastened to the scene. But it was obvious any cause for haste had long since vanished.

There was a great deal of sympathy in the eyes watching Brad. Few escaped the many goodbyes made necessary by frontier life. Yet, fate was obviously taking a direct hand when one traveled so far to be thwarted by mere minutes in obtaining of a goal. Somewhat overwhelmed, Brad struggled to comprehend the enormity of his loss. He stared at the claw marks high above, already filled with dust. He reflected on the transient nature of life and the ultimate end of it.

The men watched silently as he quietly swept bits of rock and metal from Ace's back. It was all he could do for a friend at that point. Blinking back tears, he finally asked the marshal where an inexpensive room could be rented till the funeral. And where might a general store be found to buy supplies for his return? He had nothing now to do and no one to visit.

The lawman was surprised. What would he do with his half of the claim? Just yesterday, it had been decided at the courthouse in his name, Ace's, and a gentleman by the name of Jim McIntre. Jim was expected to arrive any time by coach.

It was hard to tell who was more surprised by the announcement. Prentiss grew suddenly still. He was sure no mention of that arrangement had entered any of his discussions with Ace. How had it come to the attention of the lawman?

Meeting Ace outside the courthouse, the marshal had jokingly wondered aloud. Hadn't Ace had enough of appearing before judges trying to reform him? Somewhat incensed, the newly prosperous gambler declared he was just squaring up old debts. He then displayed the paperwork on the transfer of ownership. He said something about Brad being a good friend, even giving him the very shirt off his back. Then he rode away laughing.

Devoid of laughter, the funeral was held the next day. There were precious few attendees. Jim had come in and he and Brad enjoyed a rather somber reunion. The marshal was the only other man present besides grave diggers and a preacher hired to say a few words. Since Ace never darkened the doors of the church, the preacher did well despite his limitations.

Only after Ace was properly interred, did two old friends consider their newly acquired claim. A standing offer was made by Prentiss to show them its location when they were ready. He would even buy them out for a modest sum, if they wished to wind up business and leave for home. First though, Brad had some things to do.

As was his custom, Brad had been thinking. While waiting for Jim to arrive, he played every detail of his arrival out in his mind. What if he had not camped the day before, but had pushed on into town? Would Ace still be alive? He contemplated the irony of Ace ending in such a peculiar way. So many opportunities were passed by folks with a good reason to kill him, but instead let him be. Still pondering, Brad passed time with a little shopping and a few inquiries.

He found a needed craftsman by asking at the blacksmith shop. The former smith retired to make jewelry sold to passing travelers. He was puzzled, but agreed to make matching silver pistol grips for Brad's guns. He would make them with a raised "C" set in the face of each. He was more surprised when Brad H. Shannon signed for their receipt. Well, it wasn't any of his business what name a man went by. Too much curiosity could lead to lead poisoning.

Brad's second stop was the armory of the garrison. Here, the walnut grips were removed from his matching 45's and replaced with the silver grips. He also purchased a box of 44 cartridges. At the general store, he bought rope and a small quantity of morphine. Then suitably equipped, he rejoined Jim. They arranged a late afternoon visit with Prentiss at the claim.

At first sight, the opinion of the assayer seemed correct. The claim hardly seemed worth the effort of digging. There were scattered tools on the site, all heavily rusted. Several hours of digging netted only a small amount of color in two pieces of ore. Brad spent so long preparing a small meal, sundown caught them on site and camp was made. Brad carefully dished up a meal for each man and they turned in. Long after the others fell asleep, Brad sat listening to their breathing. He prepared for the next day before he too slept.

That next day dawned bright and incredibly hot. For the first time in many years, the assayer slept later than the sunrise. Neither he nor Jim had any real interest in breakfast. Brad still insisted on preparing a hearty meal before breaking camp. Consequently, it was well into midmorning before they began the trip. The early afternoon sun had them fairly well baked when they sought shade. They stopped across from the very overhang that had proved fatal to their third, now silent partner. Both of his companions shook of their lethargy when Brad dismounted to walk below the bluff.

Whatever he was doing, he began strangely. Removing everything from his pockets, he set the items in a small depression on a sunlit boulder. Almost as an afterthought, he also untied his guns. He removed them from the holsters and laid them with his other possessions. Building a loop from his saddle rope, he walked back and forth, measuring the overhang from all sides. The assayer allowed as to the possibility of sunstroke affecting Brad's mind. Jim just smiled and agreed everyone was peculiar in some way. He allowed that Brad might have more problems than most.

After some time passed, the object of their musings started to work. He began casting a loop toward the small tree upon which the great cat had perched. Jim moved out to join him, leaving the assayer behind.

As Brad cast into the heavens, he began to ponder certain things out loud. He wondered how tools that cut daily in the sand of a working claim could be rusty. He marveled how a ricocheting bullet could go through a man. Then, after that man fell, bits of bullet and rock could land on top of the body. He was by no means an avid climber. But he sure wanted a good look at fresh claw marks in a log filled with road dust in minutes after days without wind. He was intrigued by so many things. The roar of the gun firing repeatedly behind him didn't surprise him at all.

Now the same could not be said of Prentiss. His intended targets turned to him, friendly as anyone still alive could be. Brad confessed he had a small inkling things might turn out that way. That was why a small amount of morphine had been added to the assayer's food the evening before. It helped a man sleep who would otherwise have protested having shells in his guns replaced by blanks. At this point, his patient explanation was rudely interrupted by his audience. Prentiss made a desperate lunge for Brad's guns still lying on the blazing hot rock.

At this point, the story passes into one of the legends for which the west is famous. In other words, it stretched out a bit over time. Some swear the killer's scream could be heard all over the town. Others claim folks came from all over the region to see the hanging body with initials blistered in the palms of the hands. All agreed with Brad Shannon on his handling the killer that way.

You have to understand. When a man prefers books to gunplay, it's just not wise to brand another

man as a back shooting coward.

Not if you can persuade them to do it themselves.