

As a fortunate bank of cloud drifted overhead, the desert sun stopped pounding the riders long enough for the sweat to start soaking through their shirts, rather than drying up right off the skin. Their horses plodded through the scrub of the gentle mountain path, changing order depending on which mount had more energy at the moment. The woman in the middle reached into her shirtfront and pulled out something that shone gold and hung on the end of chain. To her left a stocky man in a black shirt adjusted a shotgun in its saddle-holster, and then pulled out a water skin for a swallow. To her right a tallish man stood in the stirrups and adjusted a bundle at the back of his saddle that appeared to be a silvery gray under the red mountain dust. He sat gingerly and spoke to his companions.

“Never thought I would be the one to say this, but; I think I’ve had enough of the saddle for a while.”

The woman muttered under her breath without looking up. “You and me both.”

The other man lowered the skin. “C’mon, Jack. Louise and I might need to sleep in a bed occasionally like normal folk, but we’re not Calvary.”

“EX-Calvary, Noah,” said Jack, “And even Southern horse-boys have their limits. Right Lou?”

Louise continued to examine the medallion in her hand.

“Lou?”

Louise DeWitt brushed black hair out of her face as she looked up. She smiled at Jack.

“Right.”

Jack Roberts pulled his hat low as the sun burned through the clouds above. “I’m going a head a piece. Town should be close.”

The ex-Confederate States of America cavalryman clucked his tongue and leaned forward in his saddle. His dappled mount immediately broke into a trot and soon disappeared around a curve in the mountain ahead. Louise went back to studying the gold in her hand as Noah shook out his legs one at a time. He noticed her distraction and shook his head.

She sure was a pretty thing. Shame she’s so melancholy. Except with Jack; he had to admit that. Of course that whole situation is a rain barrel full of rattlers waiting for a fool to stick his head in.

Jack could use a good woman to calm him down; just not this one. Louise is not only a half-breed; she’s also a widow. And instead of being a calming influence on him, he stirs her fire. He wondered what she was like when she was married.

Her husband, William DeWitt, was a good man, as he heard tell. Noah Barnes never could understand why he would marry a half-breed like Louise; there was probably some flaw in his character that lead him to it. But the way he heard the story from Jack he was a fair man and an excellent Sheriff for Twin Forks, and the townspeople knew it. He served them a good five years when the three men before him didn't last one year all together. The townsfolk wanted to honor him, and presented him with a gold Sheriff's star Yuletide, two years past. The disk in the middle was stamped with a shield and each star point with a letter; S E R V O. Noah had had to explain to Jack that was Latin for 'to protect.'

But even the best men are mortal; the good Lord planned it that way. Bill did a stagecoach company a favor and rode shotgun on a trip that'd been ambushed twice before. Third time too; only this time they killed the coachman and Bill.

Last month Noah and Jack had to pull Louise off a bounty that was "Wanted Alive." Unfortunately for the bounty and their purses, they were slower than her knife. She had spotted Bill's gold star around the rustler's neck, only the points had been broken off. She replaced the leather cord with a nice gold chain and took the disk with no apologies, but Noah knew she was kicking herself for killing the outlaw before she could question him.

As the pair rounded the path they came found Jack waiting for them in the shade of a scrub tree.

"I found a short path down. Should be there by nightfall."

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In the pitch of night the travelers were glad of the glowing windows of what they took to be a saloon. Windy Gulch wasn't much of a proper town; at least that's what Jack said as the sun was setting and they still couldn't find the road leading in. Noah was too tired to grin as they started to pass scattered buildings and finally under a tired wooden arch that he assumed would read "Windy Gulch" by light of day. Jack was only three hours off, after all, and the promise of a tight glass of whiskey was hogging all of Noah's attention.

Louise nudged Jack and pointed to the right, to the shadow between two buildings. They watched as two figures held a fierce, whispered discussion. The voices raised as things seemed to get physical. Noah finally noticed the pair as their voices reached the middle of the road.

"Silas Freeman, you better not go back there! Don't you worry bout your pay, we got enough to make it couple'a days."

"No! Last time I'm gonna say it, woman! Nobody gonna cheat me! I put in a days work like them others, I get a days pay, just like a white man!"

“SHHH! Stop your fool mouth!”

The voices dropped back to urgent whisperings as the trio approached the saloon. Noah hawked and spat to one side.

“Sounds like they need some animal control in this town.”

Louise and Jack regarded him coolly, but like him they were too exhausted to bother with unnecessary chatter.

After tying up their mounts and shouldering their saddlebags, the trio climbed the steps to the two-story building and approached the sound of laughter and the smell of liquor. Noah paused to regard the sign near the door.

“Debbie’s Saloon and Boarding House. Well, Debbie, I hope you’ve stocked your bar tonight!”

The large room had a high ceiling complete with a wagon-wheel chandelier filled with lit candles. Three tables each had three or four sweaty men, either gulping beers or playing cards or both. A longish bar ran the length of the room on the left, and a narrow stair made its way to the second floor on the right.

The bar was empty except for the man who stood behind it, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood, his back reflected in the large mirror on the wall. He was leaning over the bar and having a conversation with one of the tables that seemed to involve a farmer and his passel of healthy daughters. When the barkeep noticed one of the three newcomers was a woman he had the decency to look embarrassed, although his grin didn’t completely vanish.

Each of the travelers took a stool at the bar and laid their belongs on the floor. Noah carefully rested his shotgun point down, with the butt leaning against the bar near his knee. Jack did the same with his rifle, and then nodded in the barkeep’s direction and said “Whisky.” Louise aped him. Noah smiled and asked, “You Debbie?”

The splinter stopped roaming the man’s mouth. “Funny,” he said in a tone that suggested the opposite.

Jack turned from watching the room to make excuses. “Never mind ol’ Noah. Just give him a bottle of whiskey and he’ll behave. By the way, you have room upstairs?”

The barkeep looked at Jack and then let his gaze travel on to Louise as he placed three glasses on the bar and picked up a bottle. His grin returned. “You three sharin’?”

Louise’s eyes hardened as Jack opened his mouth. Before his hot reply could find air, the room fell silent behind them except for a lone voice raised to carry.

“Git your black self out of here, Silas!”

The bounty hunters all turned to put a face to the outraged whisper from earlier. They were a bit surprised to see a small man swaying in the doorway; from the venom they had heard they expected someone powerful. Silas was shorter than Louise, looked to be middle aged and balding. He looked tired. Tired and drunk. Noah turned back to the barkeep and lifted the bottle from his hand with a nod.

Silas took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“Jonathan Banks, you owe me my pay, and I ain’t leavin till I get it.”

A few rather large cowboys stood, chairs scrapping backwards on the hard floor. A big man with salt and pepper mustache laid down his hand of cards and spoke again.

“I’m gittin tired of threats, boy. I hired you on at a dollar, and that’s what I paid you.”

Silas staggered forward another step and raised a hand to point at a lousy-looking fellow at the back table.

“I did the same work as Duck-Dog, and you paid him five. You Banks Boys are filthy cheats, and you owe me four dollars!”

The trio at the bar took a look at the one called Duck-Dog, and then back to the confrontation heating up at the front of the saloon. Louise looked back and squinted her eyes.

As Silas named the Banks Boys cheats it became clear to Jack and Noah that more than half of the men at the tables looked related. The larger, more muscle-y half. The half that now advanced on the comparatively tiny man in the doorway and lifted him off his feet, pulling him towards Jonathan Banks, who stood to glower at Silas.

“Why you think I have to explain myself to the likes of you is beyond me. I pay who I want what I want, and if I’m a cheat then yer’ lilly-white. I think you need a lesson in manners.”

Jack looked at his partners. “I think we ought’a help the man.”

Noah set down his glass, the dregs starting to slide toward the bottom, and poured himself another libation.

“You’re just looking for trouble, like you always do. Sound’s like that boy is the one askin’ for trouble.”

Jack gave him a stare. “It’s a dozen to one, Noah. What’s your Good Book say about that?”

As he slipped off his stool Louise said, "I'm with you, Jack, " and followed suit. Noah leaned over the bar and brought the glass to his lips, muttering. "Never said I wasn't going to help." He looked up into the mirror and noticed that while Louise did follow Jack, she soon veered deeper into the saloon. Jack approached the knot of men holding Silas dangling over the floor. A few solid blows landed in Silas' midsection, and the knot spread out as he spewed his liquid dinner at their feet.

Jonathan Banks noticed Jack's approach and turned to him, holding up his hand.

"No need for you to get involved, stranger."

Jack stopped before he ran into the open hand before him. He nodded to the retching Silas.

"I heard the story, and if what you say is truth, I think he's learned his lesson. No need to kill a man over four dollars. I say everyone just walks away before things turn ugly; end peaceable-like."

Jonathan Banks looked Jack up and down. He lowered his hand.

A scream tore through the room, causing everyone to jump. The weasel-like Duck-Dog had both hands hovering around his left shoulder, into which Louise had half buried her knife with her right hand. Her left hand clawed at his neck and then came free with a bit of gold on a leather thong, which she snapped off viciously.

"Where did you get this, you stinking hog-tail?" she yelled, inches from his face.

Silas chose this moment to settle his stomach and reached up between the legs of the nearest Banks Boy and squeezed. The holler this produced just about drowned out Duck-Dog's screaming. Two more Boys started to kick Silas, and Jack hesitated between going to see what the hell Lou was about and stopping Silas' murder. The decision was made for him when two more Boys figured him for trouble and bore him to the ground.

"Damnation!"

Noah spun on his stool and kicked up the barrel of his shotgun, moving towards the struggling Jack. A sudden movement towards the back caused him to spin just in time to see Louise go down under a chair wielded by a bearded man wearing a torn derby. A single shot from the hip took the man out from under his hat, which fluttered to the floor. When he saw Louise stumble to her feet he moved back towards Jack.

Silas seemed to have found his resolve, as he was on his feet now and trading blows with Jonathan Banks himself. On the floor were no less than four men, and Jack wasn't one of them. He was hoisting a man by the collar and belt into an attacker as Noah turned back.

The barkeep picked up Noah's near-empty whiskey bottle and cocked his arm back for a throw. Louise shook her head clear and saw her knife heading for the door in the shoulder of her prey. She drew her Colt Frontier six shooter and sighted on his back just as the whiskey bottle left the barkeeps hand. In a heartbeat she changed targets and pulled the trigger. The bottle exploded right over Duck-Dog's head, showering him, the bar, and Noah with glass. The sound and the glass shower caused Noah to spin around. He brought his shotgun up with the momentum and slammed the barrel into the back of Duck-Dog's head, causing him to cartwheel over and sprawl face-up on the floor.

Louise pointed her pistol at the barkeep and shouted one word; "Down!" He complied.

Noah turned again back to the fray and caught a few more forms running for the door. Silas was no longer on his feet, but neither was Jonathan Banks. In fact, the only two left standing were Jack and quite possibly the largest man Noah had ever seen. They were circling each other warily, and from the way the big guy was matching Jack feint for feint, the ol' "Southern horse-boy" was in trouble.

Louise was already on her target, checking him over. Noah approached the last of the Banks Boys.

"Easy, big fella. Yer Boys are all done for the night. Why don't..."

Jack's dancing partner swept around with a leg-sized arm and knocked the street-cannon right out of Noah's grasp. Faster than fast, Noah was picked up and tossed the length of the room, ending up with a crash against the lone support pole. He shook his head and rolled to one side, groaning at the sharpness of the pain in his back. A crash and thump a moment later announced Jack's arrival at the same spot.

Jack looked up from his slump. "Gimme a hand up, Preacher."

Noah stood up and offered a hand. He could see Big Banks readying for a charge. "You ready to move, Jack?"

Jack took his hand and pulled himself up as their opponent bore down on them. "M'always ready."

Noah and Jack dove in opposite directions just as the last Banks Boy came crashing into their midst. He swung his arms wide to catch them, not realizing his peril. With an incredible crack, he slammed his head into the support post, which splintered and groaned.

Jack stood up and dusted himself off, looking around at the bodies on the floor. A few were starting to moan and shift where they lay. Noah stepped over the brained lummo between them. He lifted a hand and brushed dirt from Jack's shoulder. They regarded each other for a moment, and then went to see what Louise was about.

She was slumped against the bar, in-between two of the stools, staring at the dead cattle-poke at her feet. In her hand she clutched both the gold disk and the necklace she claimed from Duck-Dog. Noah noticed movement from behind the bar and moved to take a look. Jack crouched down next to her.

“Lou?”

She looked up and then away. “He’s dead. Skull caved in. I’ve got nothing. I checked him out. No way of knowing if he was one of them, or if he found this, or what.”

She held up the leather thong. Dangling from it was a triangular point of gold. Jack could just make out a bold ‘V’ stamped on it.

The bartender hit the floor next to them.

“Hey, I bet Debbie here can tell us about this fella.” Noah crouched down to join his partners.

Louise’s eyes found their fire as she uncoiled next to the barkeep. She reached past him and yanked her knife out of the corpse and brought it level to his face. Jack spoke quickly, as much to keep her in check as anything.

“Spill it, barkeep. Who is this bastard? One of the Banks Boys?”

“Debbie” licked his lips and answered. He kept his eyes on the knife, however. “No. He’s a hired hand. I don’t know his real name. They call ‘im Duck-Dog, cause he likes the rain and he’ll mount anything that moves. Least-ways, that’s what he told me.”

“Ducks hate rain,” interrupted Noah. Jack looked up at him. He folded his arms. “Well, they do.”

Louise flicked the knife. “I hope you know where he got the gold.”

“I know!” hurried the barkeep, “I know, he bragged about it. Says he won it off some desperado in a faro game. In Mexico...Red Flats I think the name of the place was. Least-ways, that’s what Duck told me.”

Louise grabbed a handful of the barkeep’s shirt and yanked him closer to the knife. “If you’re lying, pig, I’ll cut...”

Jack put a hand on her shoulder. He spoke gently. “Louise. Let him go, Louise.”

The widow dropped her handful of barkeep and stood. She sheathed her knife, picked up her saddlebags, and headed for the door. Jack picked up his bags and rifle and headed for Silas, who was trying to stand. He helped him up and guided him towards the door.

“Come on, son. Best you get home quick. And listen, I bet your woman’d rather have you than those four dollars. You reckon?”

Noah ignored the groan in his knees as he stood. He, too, grabbed up his saddlebags. He slung them over his shotgun, and laid that against his shoulder. With his free hand he reached behind the bar and gathered up a fresh bottle of whisky. He took a look at the man on the floor and hoped he was praying to God for the strength to change his ways; he came mighty close to breathing brimstone and sulfur tonight. Noah headed after his partners. He paused in the doorway long enough to remark:

“Sorry, Debbie, but looks like we won’t need that room. Seems we’re headed south of the border.”

Editor comments

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