

The Last Campfire

by Jeffrey Miller

The bearded old man, raised his weary body from the bedroll he had slept on last night and slowly stood up. Bones creaked as he worked the stiffness out of his joints, the pain and memory of endless days and nights riding the range from one dusty town to another; old wounds that never had the time to heal properly.

He moved to the campfire and stirred the embers before he threw on a few sticks. His weathered-worn face glowed orange as he knelt over the fire and balanced the metal coffee pot on three stones.

Beyond the campfire, darkness was split by a thin band of light toward the east; the mountains that hemmed in around him silhouetted as morning came purple and scarlet. The far off cry and yelp from a coyote rode the cool breeze that came down from the mountains and into the valley.

The man turned when he heard the sound of the coyote and the snap of a branch; another animal nearby. Instinct made him reach for a weapon no longer carried at his side. He brought his gunless hand down and turned back to the fire. Still smooth, he thought. His legs and back might have gone out on him, but he could still draw just as fast as he had when he had been the terror of the land.

He savored the warmth of the fire and looked into the pan of leftover beans. It had been a month since he had come out here; one month longer than he thought he had and miraculously his provisions had held out.

He could have gone out in a blaze of glory years ago when such an ending would have suited the legend and the myths.

Instead, he played his cards wisely, chose his battles carefully, and took care of enemies before they became enemies. No one was going to take out an old man he thought on the streets of some dusty town. No one was going to creep into a hotel room late at night and put a pillow over his face to muffle the sound of a Colt to the head. He had been beyond and above the law. There would be no hangman's noose for him in the public square where men cheered and the ladies cried.

The man slowly chewed a spoonful of beans and washed them down with the bitter coffee. The beans just filled space; made him crave for a proper meal, a thick, juicy steak, potatoes, corn on the cob, biscuits dripping with butter—the kind served on fancy chinaware, on a table with linen. A place like Delmonico's in Dodge City or Julian's in Abilene. Maybe one day he would be able to walk into one of those places again without having to look over his shoulder every time someone walked in.

The sun would be high and hot soon and he would have to make another decision and chart another course before another ghost from his past caught up with him.

He wondered how the man, whose boots he saw sticking out from underneath the poncho, had been able to track him down. Last night the man had wandered into his camp and said he had gotten lost.

“I had been working on this drive from the Red River,” the man said slow and deliberate, as he stared into the fire, careful to make eye contact. “There was a storm and I got cut off. I still think I'm a day or two behind.”

The old man had said nothing; only nodded and spooned some beans onto a plate for the man. He got a good look at boots that

looked too clean and a face too pale to have been on any cattle drive.

“Much obliged,” the younger man had said.

The old man waited until the younger man had finished his beans and they shared a plug of tobacco before he slit his throat. No one should have to die on an empty stomach.

Tonight, when he made his campfire he wouldn't be so inconspicuous. Hopefully, he would get his killing done earlier—one less soul to torment him.

