





Lando

Lando C. Lando

LANDO

Louis L'Amour

BANTAM BOOKS

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THEIR STORY IS the story of the American frontier, an unforgettable chronicle of the men and women who tamed a wilderness and built a nation with their dreams and their courage.

Created by master storyteller Louis L'Amour, the Sackett saga brings to life the spirit and adventures of generations of pioneers. Fiercely independent and determined to face any and all challenges, they discovered their destiny in settling a great and wild land.

Each Sackett novel is a complete, exciting historical adventure. Read as a group, they tell the thrilling epic tale of a country unlike any the world has ever known. And no one writes more powerfully about the frontier than Louis L'Amour, who has walked and ridden down the same trails as the Sackett family he has immortalized. The Sackett novels represent L'Amour at his very best and are one of the greatest achievements of a truly legendary career.

To

~~Ted McNulty~~

miner, bronc-rider, friend

THE SACKETTS

Sackett's Land

To the Far Blue Mountains

The Warrior's Path

Jubal Sackett

Ride the River

The Daybreakers

The Courting of Griselda

(from the collection End of the Drive)

Lando

Sackett

Booty for a Badman

(from the collection War Party)

Mojave Crossing

The Sackett Brand

The Sky-Liners

The Lonely Men

Mustang Man

Galloway

Treasure Mountain

Ride the Dark Trail

Lonely on the Mountain

WE SACKETTS WERE a mountain folk who ran long on boy children and gun-shooting, but many of us were traveled men. And that was why I envied the Tinker.

When first I caught sight of him he was so far off I couldn't make him out, so I taken my rifle and hunkered down behind the woodpile, all set to get in the first shot if it proved to be a Higgins.

Soon as I realized who it was, I turned again to tightening my mill, for I was fresh out of meal and feeling hunger.

Everybody in the mountains knew the Tinker. He was a wandering man who tinkered with everything that needed fixing. He could repair a clock, sharpen a saw, make a wagon wheel, or shoe a horse.

Fact was, he could do almost anything a body could think of that needed doing, and he wandered up and down the mountains from Virginia to Georgia just a-fixing and a-doing. Along with it, he was a pack peddler.

He carried a pack would have put a crick in a squaw's back, and when he fetched up to my cabin he slung it down and squatted on his heels beside it.

"If you reckoned I was a Higgins," he said, "you can put it out of mind. Your Cousin Tyrel cut his notch for the last Higgins months ago. You Sacketts done cleaned them out."

"Not this Sackett. I never shot 'ary a Higgins, although that's not to say I wouldn't had they come at me."

"Tyrel, him an' Orrin, they taken out for the western lands. Looks to me like you're to be the last of the Sacketts of Tennessee."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," said I, a-working at my mill. "I've given thought to the western lands myself, for a man might work his life away in these mountains, and nothing to show for it in the end."

The Tinker, he just sat there, not saying aye, yes, or no, but I could see he had something on his mind, and given time would have his say.

"You're the one has the good life," I said. "Always a-coming and a-going along the mountains and down to the Settlements."

There was a yearning in me to be off the mountain, for I'd lived too long in the high-up hills knowing every twisty creek to its farthest reaches, and every lightning-struck tree for miles.

Other than my cabin, the only places I knew were the meetinghouse down to the Crossing where the folks went of a Sunday, and the schoolhouse at Clinch's Creek where we went of a Saturday for the dancing and the fighting.

"Tinker," I said, "I've been biding my time until you came along, for come sunup it is in my mind to walk away from the mountains to the western lands."

Filling the mill's hopper, I gave the handles a testing turn, then added, "If you've a mind to, I'd like you to come with me."

Now, the Tinker was a solitary man. A long-jawed man, dark as any Indian, but of a different cast somehow, and he'd an odd look to his yellow eyes. Some said he hailed from foreign lands, but I knew nothing of that, nor ought of the ways of foreign folk, but the Tinker knew things a body could scarcely ken, and held a canny knowledge of uncanny things.

Beside a fire of an evening his fingers worked a magic with rope or yarn, charming queer decorative things that women took fancy to, but the likes of which none of us had ever seen.

"I have given it thought, Lando," he answered me, "but I am a lone man with no liking for company."

"So it is with me. But now it is in my mind to go to the western lands and there become rich with the things of this earth. You have the knack for the doing of things, and I have a knack for trade, and

together we might do much that neither could do alone.”

“Aye...you have a knack for trade, all right. A time or two you even had the better of me.”—

A time or two he said? *Every* time. And well he knew it, too, but it was not in me to bring that up.

“Except for one thing,” I said. “You never would trade me a Tinker’s knife.”

He took out his pipe and settled to smoke, and I knew it was coming, this thing he had on his mind.

“You have enemies. Is that why you have chosen to leave at this time?”

It ired me that he should think so, but I held my peace, and when I spoke at last, my voice was mild.

“Will Caffrey and his son? They have reason to fear me, and not I to fear them. It was my father’s mistake to leave me with Will Caffrey to be reared by him, but pa was not himself from the grief that was on him, and in no condition for straight thinking.”

“Caffrey had a good name then,” the Tinker said, “although a hard-fisted man and close with money. Only since he became a rich man has he become overbearing.”

“And it was the gold I claimed from him at Meeting that made him rich, and none of his earnings. He had it from my father to pay for my keep and education.”

“You put your mark upon his son.”

“He asked it of me. He came at me, a-swinging of his fists.”

When I had emptied the meal from the hopper, I tightened the mill and filled the hopper again, for such a mill as that of mine could grind only to a certain coarseness on the first grinding, and then the mill must be tightened and the meal reground before it was fit for the baking or for gruel.

“They are saying how you faced Will Caffrey at Meeting, and him a deacon of the church and all, and demanded he return the money your father left with him, and all the interest he had from its use.”

“They tell how he flustered and would give you the lie, but all knew how five years ago you ran from his farm and have lived alone in this cabin since, and how, suddenly, after your father left Will Caffrey had money with which to buy farms and cattle.

“You’ll not be forgiven this side of the grave, not by Will Caffrey. He is a proud man and you have shamed him at Meeting.”

“The money is rightfully mine, Tinker. When he decided my father would not return, he took me from school and put me to work in the fields, and sent his son to school in my place.”

The mill was ready, and again I ground my meal, the noise allowing for no talk, but when I emptied the hopper I said, “If it is enemies I have, it is the Caffreys. I know of no others.”

He shot me a curious glance, which puzzled me with its content. “Not three tall, mustached men with dark hair and long faces? Three tall men as alike as peas in a pod...named Kurbishaw?”

“It was my mother’s name.”

“They are riding to kill you.”

“You saw them where?”

“In the Cherokee towns. They asked questions there.”

“The Indians are my friends. They will tell them nothing.”

“When last I saw them they had old Midah Wolf and were buying him drink.”

Midah was an old man with a love for the bottle and a memory of youth that only drink could bring back. When drunk, he was enemy to no man and would surely talk. He would be sorry after, but that would be of no help.

“The Kurbishaws are my mother’s folk. They will surely be coming for other reasons.”

“I have heard them say, ‘We have killed the wolf, now we shall kill the whelp.’”

They had killed the wolf? If by that they meant my father, I did not believe them. My father might have many faults, but lack of shrewdness was not one of them. As I grew older I had remembered his actions around our mountain cabin, and now I knew that he had been aware of danger, that he had

lived no moment without that awareness.

Yet he had not returned...had they killed him, indeed?

"I have only my father's worn-out rifle," I said, "and a dislike for shooting men I do not know, no have I any appetite for violence."

The Tinker glanced at me shrewdly, and I wondered what went on behind those yellow eyes. Was he my friend, in truth? Had I learned this doubt of people? Was it acquired by brief but hard experience?

"If they find their way to the Crossing, Caffrey will be quick to tell them where you are." The Tinker turned his yellow eyes straight at me. "Did you never wonder why your pa came to this lonely place with his bride? There's a story told in the lowland towns."

"There was trouble when he married ma. Her family objected to him."

"Objected is a mild word. They objected so much they hired a man to kill him when his brother-in-law decided against trying it. Your pa killed the man and then lit out for the hills so he would not have to kill her brothers and have their blood between them.

"Or so the story is told. Yet there is a whisper of something else, of something beyond pride of family. There is a tale that they hated your father for a reason before he even met your mother."

We Sacketts had come early to the mountains. Welsh folk we were, Welsh and Irish, and my family had come to America one hundred and fifty years before the Colonies fought for the independence. A relative of mine had been killed in the fierce fighting in North Carolina in the revolution that failed.

We settled on the frontier, as it then was, along the flanks of the Blue Ridge and Smoky mountains, and there we made ourselves part of the rocky hills and the forests. Pa was the first of our family to run off to the lowlands and return with a bride.

The Kurbishaws made much of themselves and cut a wide swath among the lowland folk, looking down their long noses at us who lived in the hills.

We Sacketts set store by kinfolk, but we never held up our family with pride. A mill grinds no corn with water that is past. Come trouble, we Sacketts stand shoulder to shoulder as long as need be, but we made no talk of ancestors, nor how high they stood in the community.

Yet it was no wonder that pa took the eye of the lowland girls, for he was a fine, upstanding man with a colorful way about him, and he cut quite a dash in the lowland towns.

He rode a fine black gelding, his pockets filled with gold washed from a creek the Cherokee showed him, and he dressed with an elegance and a taste for fine tailoring. There was gold from another source, too, and as a child I saw those hoarded coins a time or two.

My father showed me one of them and I loved the dull reflection of the nighttime firelight upon it. "There is more where that came from, laddie, more indeed. One day we shall gather it, you and I."

"Let it lie," ma said. "The earth is a fit place for it."

Such times pa would flash her that bright, quick smile of his and show her that hard light in his black eyes. "I might have told them where it was, had they acted differently about us," he would say "but if they have it now it shall cost them blood."

How long since I had thought of that story? How long since I had even seen that gold until pa brought it out to turn over to Caffrey for my education and keep?

Her brothers had planned for ma to marry wealth and power, and when she ran off with pa they were furious, and challenged him. He refused them, and as he refused them he held two finely wrought pistols in his hands.

"You do not wish to fight me," he said, and tossed a bottle into the air. With one pistol he smashed the bottle, and with the second he hit a falling fragment. It was after that they hired a man to kill him.

Pa and ma would have lived their lives among the lowland folk had the Kurbishaws let them be.

but they used their wealth and power to hound them out of Virginia and the Carolinas, until finally they took refuge in the mountain cabin among the peaks, which pa built with his own hands.——

The cabin was a fair, kind place among the rocks and trees, with a cold spring at the back and a good fishing stream not a hundred yards off. And happily they lived there until ma died.

“If you stay here,” the Tinker went on, “they will kill you. You have but the one barrel of your old rifle and they are three armed men, and skilled at killing.”

“They are my uncles, after all.”

“They are your enemies, and you are not your father. These men are fighters, and you are not.”

My head came up angrily, for he spoke against my pride. “I can fight!”

Impatience was in his voice and attitude when he answered. “You have fought against boys and clumsy men. That is not fighting. Fighting is a skill to be learned. I saw you whip the three Lindsays, boys, but any man with skill could have whipped you easily.”

“There were three of them.”

The Tinker knocked the ash from his pipe. “Lando, you are strong, one of the strongest men I know, and surprising quick, but neither of these things makes you a fighter. Fighting is a craft, and must be learned and practiced. Until you know how to fight with your head as well as with heart and muscle, you are no fighting man.”

“And I suppose you know this craft?”

I spoke contemptuously, for the idea of the Tinker as a fighting man seemed to me laughable. He was long and thin, with nothing much to him.

“I know a dozen kinds. How to fight with the fists, the open hand, and Japanese- as well as Cornish-style wrestling. If we travel together, I will teach you.”

Teach *me*? I bit my tongue on angry words, for my pride was sore hurt that he took me so lightly. Had I not, when only a boy, whipped Duncan Caffrey, and him two years older and twenty pounds heavier? And since then I’d whipped eight or nine more, men and boys; and at Clinch’s Creek was not cock of the walk? And he spoke of teaching *me*!

Opening his pack, the Tinker brought out a packet of coffee, for he carried real coffee and not the dried beans and chicory we mountain folk used. Without moving from where he was, he reached over and brought together chips, bark, and bits of twigs left from my wood-cutting and of them he made a fire.

He was a man who disliked the inside of places, craving the freeness of the open air about him. Some said it was because he must have been locked up once upon a time, but I paid no mind to gossip.

While he started the fire and put water on to boil, I went to a haunch of venison hanging in the shed and cut a healthy bait of it into thick slices for roasting at the fire. Then I returned to grind more meal.

Such mills as mine were scarce, and the corn I ground would be the last, for I planned to trade the mill for whatever it would bring as I passed out of the country.

If it was true the Kurbishaws sought to kill me they could find me here, for mountains are never so big that a man is not known.

But the thought of leaving this place brought a twinge of regret, for all the memories of ma and pa concerned this place. Yonder was the first tree I’d climbed, and how high the lowest branch had seemed then! And nearby was the spring from which I proudly carried the first bucket of water I could hold clear of the ground.

No man cuts himself free of old ties without regret; even scenes of hardship and sadness possess the warmth of familiarity, and within each of us there is a love for the known. How many times planting had my shovel turned this dark earth! How many times had I leaned against that tree, marveled at the cunning with which pa had fitted the logs of our house, or put all the cabinets together

with wooden pins!

The Tinker filled my plate and cup. "We shall talk of fighting another time."

Suddenly my quieter mood was gone and irritation came flooding back. No man wishes to be lightly taken, and I was young and strong, and filled with the pride of victories won.

"Talk of it now," I said belligerently, "and if you want to try me on, you've no cause to wait."

"You talk the fool!" he said impatiently. "I am your friend, and I doubt if you have another. Wait and when you have taken your whipping, come to me and I will show you how it should be done."

Putting down the coffee cup, I got to my feet. "Show me," I said, "if you think you can."

With a pained expression on his lean, dark face he got slowly to his feet. "This may save you a beating, or I'd have no part of it. So come at me if you will."

He stood with his arms dangling, and suddenly I thought what a fool I was to force such a fight on a friend; but then my pride took command and my fingers clenched into a fist and I swung at him.

End it with a blow, I thought, and save him a bad beating. That was in my mind when I swung. Suddenly long fingers caught my wrist with a strength I'd never have believed, and the next thing I knew I was flying through the air, to land with a thump on the hard ground. It fairly knocked the wind from me, and the nonsense from my brain as well; but then I saw him standing a few feet away regarding me coolly.

Anger surged through me and I lunged up from the ground, prepared for that throw he had used upon me. This time I struck the ground even harder—he had thrown me in another way, and suddenly and violently that I had no idea how it was done.

There was some sense in me after all, for I looked up at him and grinned. "At least you know a few tricks. Are these what you would show me?"

"These, and more," he said. "Now drink your coffee. It grows cold."

My anger was gone, and my good sense warned me that had he been my enemy I should now have been crippled or dead. For once down, he could put the boots to me and kick in my ribs, crush my chest or crush my skull. In such fighting there is no sportsmanship, for it is no game but is in dead earnest, and men fight to win.

"Have you heard of Jem Mace?" he asked me.

"No."

"He was the world champion prize fighter, an Englishman and a gypsy. He whipped the best of them, and he was not a large man, but he was among the first to apply science to the art of fighting. He taught me boxing and I have sparred with him many times.

"Footwork is not mere dancing about. By footwork you can shift a man out of position to strike you effectively, and still leave yourself in position to strike him. By learning to duck and slip punches you can work close to a man and still keep your hands free for punching. Certain blows automatically create openings for the blows to follow."

He refilled his cup. "A man who travels alone must look out for himself."

"You have your knives."

"Aye, but a hand properly used can be as dangerous as a knife." He was silent for a moment, and then added, "And a man is not lynched for what he does with his hands."

We both were still, letting the campfire warm our memories. What memories the Tinker had, what strange thoughts might come into his head, and of what strange things he had seen, I knew nothing, but my own memories went back to the day pa left me with Will Caffrey.

Three heavy sacks of gold he passed over to Caffrey that day, and then he said, "This is my son, whom I have spoken. Care for him well, and every third coin is your own."

"You'll be leaving now?"

"Yes...to wander is a means to forgetting, and we were very close, my wife and I." He put his hand

on my shoulder. "I'll come back, son. Do you be a good boy now."

~~Pa advised Caffrey to send me to the best schools and treat me well, and in due time he would return.~~

For the first year I was treated well enough, yet long before the change came I had seen shadows of it. Often at night I would hear Mrs. Caffrey complaining of the extra burden I was, and how much the money would mean to them if they had not to think of me. And Caffrey would speculate aloud on how much interest the money would bring, and what could be bought of lands and cattle with such an amount of gold.

Her words bothered me more than his, for I sensed an evil in her that was not in him. He was a greedy, selfish man, close with money and hardfisted as well as self-righteous; but as for her—I think she would have murdered me. Indeed, I think it was in her mind to do so.

Caffrey had a reputation for honesty, but many a man with such a reputation simply has not been found out or tested, and for Will Caffrey the test of those bags of gold was too much for his principles to bear. The year after pa had gone they took me from school—their own son continued—and they put me to work with the field hands. Eleven years old I was then, and no place to go, nor anyone to turn to.

The day came when Duncan struck me.

Contemptuous of me he was, taking that from his parents' treatment of me, and he often sneered and cursed at me, but when he struck me we had at it, knuckle and skull.

It was even-up fighting until I realized all his blows were struck at my face, so I scrooched down as he rushed at me and struck him a mighty blow in the belly.

It taken his wind. He let go a grunt and his mouth dropped open, so I spread wide my legs and let go at his chin.

With his mouth open and jaw slack, a girl might have broken his jaw, and I did, for I was a naturally strong boy who had worked hard and done much running and climbing in the forest.

He fell back against the woodpile where I had been working, his face all white and strangely looking, but my blood was up and I swung a final fist against his nose, which broke, streaming blood over his lips and chin.

The door slammed and his ma and pa were coming at me, Will Caffrey with his cane lifted, and her with her fingers spread like claws.

I taken out.

So far as I could see, nothing was keeping me, and by the time I stopped running I was far off in the piney woods and nighttime a-coming on.

By that time I was twelve years old and knew only the mountains. The towns I feared, so it never occurred to me to leave all I had known behind.

The one place I knew was the cabin, and there I had known happiness, so I turned up through the woods, hunting the way.

It was thirty-odd miles of rough mountain and forest, and I slept three nights before I got there, the first nights I ever spent in the forest alone.

When at last I came to the cabin I was a tuckered-out boy.

If they ever came seeking me, I never knew. They might have come before I got back, or after when I was off a-hunting. More than likely they were pleased to be free of me, for now they had the gold.

Five years I lived there alone.

That isn't to say I didn't see anybody in all that time. Long before ma died I used to go hunting with the Cherokee boys, and I could use a bow and arrow or set a snare as good as the best of them. These were wild Cherokees who took to the mountains when the government moved the Indians west.

Pa had been friendly with them, and they liked me. Whenever I was over that way I was sure of

meal, and many a time during that first year I made it a point.

~~Whilst working with Caffrey I had done most of the kitchen-garden planting, and there was seed~~ the house. The Cherokees were planting Indians, so I got more seed from them, and I spaded up garden space and planted melons, corn, potatoes, and suchlike. For the rest, I hunted the woods for game berries, nuts, and roots.

It would be a lie to say I was brave, for of a night I was a scared boy, and more than once I cried myself to sleep, remembering ma and wishing pa would come home.

Those first years it was only the thought of pa coming back that kept me going. Caffrey had been sure pa was dead and had never left off telling me so, although why he should be so sure I never knew. It wasn't until I was past fifteen that I really gave up hope. In my thinking mind I was sure after that that he would not come back, but my ears pricked every time I heard a horse on the trail.

Travel was no kind thing those days, what with killers along the Natchez Trace and the Wilderness Road, Bald Knobbers, and varmints generally. Many a man who set out from home never got back and who was to say what became of him?

First off, I swapped some dress goods ma had in her trunk for a buckskin hunting shirt and leggings; and after I had trapped, I traded my muskrat and red-fox skins with the Cherokees for things I needed. The cornmill was there, and after my first harvest I always had corn.

My fourteenth birthday came along and ma wasn't there to bake me a cake like she'd done, so I fried myself up a batch of turkey eggs. And that was a big day, because just shy of noon when I was fixing to set up to table, the Tinker came along the trail.

It was the first time I'd seen him, although I'd heard tell of him. He sat up to table with me and told me the news of the Settlements. After that he always stopped by.

The Tinker hadn't very much to say that first time, but he did a sight of looking and seeing. So I showed him around, proud of the cabin pa had built and the way he'd used water from the creek to irrigate the fields when they needed water—although rain usually took care of that.

The Tinker noticed everything, but it wasn't until a long time after, that some of his questions started coming back to mind to puzzle me. Especially, about the gold.

Once he asked me if I had any gold money...said he could get a lot for gold.

So I told him about all our gold going to Will Caffrey, and he got me to draw him a picture of what those gold pieces looked like.

"Your pa," he said, "must have been a traveled man."

"Sacketts haven't taken much to travel," I said, "although we hear tell that a long time ago, before they came over to the Colonies, some of them were sailors."

"Like your pa," he said.

"Pa? If he was a sailor he never said anything about it to me. Nor did ma ever speak of it."

He looked at a knot I had made in a piece of rope. "Good tight knot. Your pa teach you that?"

"Sure—that's a bowline. He taught me to tie knots before he taught me letters. Two half-hitches, bowline, bowline-on-a-bight, sheep's bend—all manner of knots."

"Sailor knots," the Tinker said.

"I wouldn't know. I expect a good knot is useful to a lot of folks beside sailors."

ASIDE FROM THE cornmill and ma's trunk filled with fixings, there wasn't much left at the cabin beside pa's worn-out Ballard rifle and the garden tools. In the trunk was ma's keepsake box. It was four inches deep, four inches wide and eight inches long, and was made of teakwood. Inside she kept family papers and a few odds and ends of value to her.

The Ballard was old, and no gun to be taking to the western lands, so I figured to swap it off when I did the mill, or at the first good chance. If I was going to meet up with Bald Knobbers or with the Indians I would need a new, reliable gun.

Now the Tinker, he sat there smoking, and finally as the fire died down he said, "Daylight be a right for you?"

It was all right, so come daylight we taken off down the mountain for the last time.

One time, there on the trail, I stopped and looked back. There was a mist around the peaks, and the one that marked the cabin was hidden. The cabin was up there in those trees. I reckoned never to see it again, or ma's grave, out where pa dug it under the big pine.

A lot of me was staying behind, but I guess pa left a lot up there, too.

And then we rounded the last bend in the trail and my mountain was hidden from sight. Before we lay the Crossing, and I had seen the last of the place where I was born.

Chapter 2

WE FETCHED UP to the Crossing in a light spatter of rain, and I made a dicker with the storekeeper, swapping my cornmill for a one-eyed, spavined mare.

It was in my mind to become rich in the western lands, but a body does not become rich tomorrow without starting today, so I taken my mare to a meadow and staked her out on good grass. A man who wants to become rich had better start thinking of increase, and that mare could have a colt.

The Tinker was disgusted with me. "You bragged you'd a mind for swapping, but what can a man do with a one-eyed, spavined mare?"

Me, I just grinned at him. Two years now I'd had it in my mind to own that little mare. "Did you ever hear of the Highland Bay?"

"She was the talk of the mountains before she broke a leg and they had to shoot her."

"Seven or eight years ago the Highland Bay ran the legs off everything in these parts, and won many a race in the lowlands, too."

"I recall."

"Well, when I was working in the fields for Caffrey, the Highland Bay was running loose in the next pasture. A little scrub stallion tore down the fence and got to her."

"And you think this no-'count little mare is their get?"

"I know it. Fact is, I lent a hand at her birthing. Old Heywood, he who owned the Highland Bay, he was so mad he gave the colt to a field hand."

There was a thoughtful look in the Tinker's eyes. "So you have a one-eyed, spavined mare out of the Highland Bay by a scrub stallion. Now where are you?"

"I hear tell those Mexicans and Indians out west hold strong to racing. I figure to get me a mule that will outrun any horse they've got."

"Out of that mare?" he scoffed.

"Her get," I said. "She can have a colt, and sired by the right jack stud I reckon to turn up a fast mule."

We sat there on the bank watching that little mare feed on green meadow grass, and after a bit, I said to the Tinker, "When a man owes me, one way or another I figure to collect. Do you know where Caffrey keeps his prize jack?"

He didn't answer, but after a bit he said, "Nobody ever races a mule."

"Tinker, where there's something will run, there's somebody will bet on it. Why, right in these mountains you could get a bet on a fast cow, and many a mule is faster than a horse, although might few people believe it. The way I see it, the fewer folk who believe a mule can run, the better."

Caffrey's jackass could kill a man or a stallion, and had sired some of the best mules ever set foot on. Before dark we were hidden in a clump of dogwood and willow right up against the Caffrey pasture fence.

The wind was across the pasture and from time to time the jack could catch scent of my mare, and while he couldn't quite locate her, he was stomping around in there, tossing his head and looking.

"Two things," I said, "had to work right for me to leave this here country—the timing had to be right: You had to come up the trail, and that mare of mine had to be ready. And this here jack will work the charm."

"You're smarter than I thought," he said, and then we sat quiet, slapping mosquitoes and waiting until it was full dark. Crickets sang in the brush, and there was a pleasant smell of fresh-mown hay.

Watching the lights of that big white house Caffrey had built just two years ago, I got to thinking how elegant it must be behind those curtains. Would I ever live in a house like that? And have folks talk about who loved me? Or would I always be a-setting out in the dark, looking on?

Caffrey had done well with pa's money. He had it at a time when gold had great value, he'd bought

with a shrewd eye there at the war's last years. He was one of the richest men around.

When I called on him at Meeting to return the money I had no hope I would get it, but I wanted put it square before the community that he had wrongfully used money with which he had been trusted. I'd no money nor witnesses to open an action for recovery...but almost everybody around had wondered where he got that gold money.

He had talked large of running for office, but I felt a man who would be dishonest with a boy was no man to trust with government. It always seemed to me that a man who would betray the trust of his fellow citizens is the lowest of all, and I wanted no such man as Will Caffrey to have that chance. When I called upon him at Meeting I had my plans made to leave the mountains, for now he would not rest until he had me jailed or done away with.

Right now I was risking everything, for if I was caught I would be in real trouble.

Slapping at a mosquito, I swore softly and the Tinker commented, "It's the salt. They like the salt in your blood. On jungle rivers mosquitoes will swarm around a white man before going near a native because a white man uses more salt."

"You've been to the jungle?"

"I've heard tell," he said.

That was the Tinker's way. He would not speak of himself. Right then he was probably smiling at me in the dark, but all I could see was the glint of those gold earrings. Only man I ever did see who wore earrings.

His being there worried me some. He was an outlander, and Tinker or not, mountain folks are suspicious of outlanders. The Tinker was a needful man in the mountains, but folks had never rightly accepted him...so why had he come away with me?

When the barnyard noises ceased—the sounds of milking and doors slamming—we went up to the white rails of that fence and I taken a pick-head from my gear and pried loose that rail. That one, and the next.

The mare went into that pasture like she knew what she was there for, and against the sky we saw the jack's head come up and we heard him blow. Then we heard the preen and prance of his hoofs and he came toward the mare.

We waited under the dogwood, neither of us of a mind to get shot in another man's pasture. We were half dozing and a couple of hours had gone by. Even the mosquitoes were tiring.

Of a sudden the Tinker put a hand to my arm. "Somebody coming," he said, and I caught the flicker of the shine on a blade in his hand.

We listened...horses coming. Two, maybe three. The first voice we heard was Duncan Caffrey's.

"We've got to have a good horse or two in those races out west," he was saying. "The Bishop wouldn't like it if he lost money. The Bishop is touchy about money."

They had drawn up right beside the grove where we were hidden.

The older man spoke. "Now tell me about that gold. You say your pa had it from a man named Sackett? Where's that man now?"

"He left out of here. Pa thinks he's dead."

The Tinker cupped his hands to my ear. "Let's get out of this."

The trouble was that my mare was out in that pasture and I didn't want to leave her. No more did I want to leave off listening to that talk.

"You go ahead," I whispered. "I'll catch up or meet you at the crossing of the Tombigbee."

He hoisted his pack, then took up mine. How he disappeared so quick with those packs, I'll never guess. And at the time I thought nothing of his taking up my pack, for I'd have trouble getting it and the mare both out of there.

"What difference does it make?" Dun Caffrey sounded impatient. "He's nobody."

“You got it to learn,” the other man said irritably. “You’re a damn’ fool, Dun. Falcon Sackett is one of the most dangerous men on earth, and to hear the Bishop talk about it, he’s almighty important. So much so the Bishop has spent years hunting down every piece of that Spanish gold to find him.”

“But he’s dead!”

“You seen the body? Nothing else would convince the Bishop. I ain’t so sure he’d even believe then.”

“Are you goin’ to talk all night about a dead man? Let’s go get the horses,” and they moved on.

It was no use waiting any longer. If I was going to get away from here it had to be now. Stepping through the opening, I started out into that pasture after my mare and not feeling any too good about it, either. Jacks are a mean lot. If I was caught in the middle of this pasture by either the stud or the owner I might be lucky to get out alive.

It was almighty dark, and every step or two I’d hold up to listen. Once I thought I heard hoof-beats off to my left; but listening, I heard nothing more. Back behind me I heard rustling in the brush.

Suddenly, something nudged my elbow and there was my mare. All day I’d been feeding her bits of a carrot or some turnips, so she found me her ownself. More than likely it was the first time anybody’d ever fussed over her.

Hoisting myself to her back, I turned her toward that opening in the fence.

The Bishop had been mentioned, and he was a known man. River-boat gambler, river pirate, and bad actor generally, he was one of the top men at Natchez-under-the-Hill, and one of the most feared men along the river.

“Whoever went in there,” somebody said, “is still there.”

A light glowed close to the ground as he spoke, then vanished.

Didn’t seem no call to be wasting around, so I booted the mare in the ribs and she jumped like a deer and hit the ground running—and brother, she had plenty of scat.

She went through that fence opening and when a man reared up almost in front of her she hit him with her shoulder, knocking him rump over teakettle into the brush. The other man jumped to grab me and I stiff-legged him in the belly and heard the *ooof* as his breath left him. He went back and down out of sight, and the mare and me, we dusted around that clump of brush and off down the pike.

There was no need to meet the Tinker at the crossing of the Tombigbee, for I came up to him just as false dawn was spreading a lemon-yellow across the gray sky. He had stopped alongside the road and put both packs down. It looked to me like he was about to open mine when I came up to him.

“You got the wrong pack there,” I said.

He turned sharp around, braced for trouble. He’d been so busy he’d not heard the mare coming and that soft dust. When he saw it was me he eased up and let go his hold on my pack.

“I was looking for the coffee,” he said. “I thought you put it in your pack last night.”

I didn’t believe he thought anything of the kind, but I was not going to argue with him. Only started me thinking and trying to add together two and two, which is not always as easy as it seems.

“Take it from me,” I advised, “and let’s get back off the trail before we coffee-up. We may be sought after.”

He pointed ahead. “There’s an old trace runs up over the hills yonder. I was only down this way once, but I traveled it for a day or so.”

TWO DAYS LATER I swapped my old Ballard for a two-wheeled cart. The Ballard wasn't much of a gun but I knew it so well I could make it shoot, and I let a farmer see me bark a squirrel with it. Now barking a squirrel is a neat trick, but most mountain boys could do it. A squirrel has little meat and so's not to spoil any of it you don't shoot the squirrel, you shoot the branch he's setting on or on close by. It knocks him out of the tree, stuns him, and sometimes kills him with flying chips.

"You've a straight-shootin' gun," this farmer said to me. "Would you be of a mind to swap?"

We settled down to dicker. He was a whittler and a spitter, but I was natural-born to patience, so I waited him out. He was bound and determined to make a trade, and few folks came that way. The beat-up old cart hadn't been used in years, but the Tinker and me, we could fix it up. From now on we'd be in the flat-lands where it would be handy.

Between story-telling and talk of the Settlements, we dickered. We dickered again over hominigrits and sidemeat for supper, and we dickered at breakfast, but about that time I got awful busy making up my pack, talking to the Tinker and the like, and he began to think he'd lost me.

Upshot of it was, I let him have that Ballard and I taken the cart, three bushels of mighty fine apples, a worn-out scythe, and a couple of freshly tanned hides. The Tinker and me turned to and tightened the iron rims and the spokes, and loaded our gear.

It took two weeks of walking to reach the river, but by that time we had done a sight of swapping.

The little mare was looking good. Our daily marches were not long and the load she carried most of the way was light. We babied her along on carrots, turnips, slices of watermelon, and greens from along the road, and she fattened up on it.

We saw no sign of the three Kurbishaws, but they were never out of mind.

All the time I kept trying to dicker the Tinker out of one of his knives. He carried a dozen in his pack, and two belted at his waist. A third was slung down the back of his neck under his collar. They were perfectly balanced and the steel tempered to a hardness you wouldn't believe. We both shaved with them, they were that good. In the mountains a man would trade most anything for a Tinker-made knife.

Walking along like that, neither of us much to talk, I had time to think, and I remembered back to the Tinker asking about that gold. A man has a right to be interested in gold, but why that gold in particular? And Spanish gold, they said.

Why was the Tinker starting to open my pack? If he had found what he wanted, would he have made sure I didn't come up to him at the Tombigbee or anywhere?

Was it something about that gold that started the Kurbishaws after me?

I had no gold, and never had had any. So what did I have that they might want?

Nothing.

Nothing, unless maybe there was something in ma's keepsake box. The first time I was alone I went through that stuff of ma's again. I never had really looked at it—mostly, I kept it because it was all I had of hers.

All I had else was some worn-out clothes, some Indian blankets, and a couple of extra shirts.

Like I've said, walking gives a man time to think, and a couple of things began to fit. Pa had never spent any of that gold that I could recall, but after Caffrey got it, some was spent. Not much right first—he was afraid of pa coming back. And it was not long after Caffrey started to spend it that the Tinker showed up.

Not right away...it must have taken him some time to find out where that gold came from.

The Tinker was not a sociable man, but he had made a point of being my friend. He had spent time with me, and I believed he was really my friend, but I now believed he had some other interest in the gold.

That night we reached the Mississippi and the ferry. We were avoiding main-traveled roads, and the ferry we came up to was operated by a sour, evil-smelling old man who peered suspiciously at us. We dickered with him until he agreed to take us across for a bushel of apples.

He stared at our packs as if he was trying to see right through them, but mostly he looked at Tinker's knives. Neither of us had any other kind of a weapon, except that I carried a long stick to chase off mean dogs, of which we'd met a-plenty.

"Country's full of movers," the ferryman said. "Where nought you folks be goin'?"

"Where folks don't ask questions," I told him.

He threw me a mean look. "Doubtless you've reason," he said. "We git lots of 'em don't want questions asked."

"Tinker, did you ever operate a ferry?"

"Not that I recall."

"I've got a feeling there's going to be a job open around here—unless somebody can swim with a knot on his head."

The ferryman shut up, but when we made shore near a cluster of miserable-looking shacks I thought I saw him make a signal to some rough-looking men loitering on the bank.

"Trouble," I said, low-voiced, to the Tinker.

A bearded man with a bottle in his hand, his pants held up by a piece of rope, started toward us. Several others followed.

The bearded man was big, and he was wearing a pistol, as were some of the others.

My walking staff was a handy weapon, if need be. A Welshman in the mountains had taught me the art of stick fighting, and I was ready.

The bearded man stopped in our path as we drove off the ferry. He glanced from the Tinker to me, and it was obvious that neither of us had a gun.

Four men behind him...a dirty, boozing lot, but armed and confident. My mouth was dry and my belly felt empty.

"Stoppin' around?"

"Passin' through," I said.

One end of my stick rested on my boot toe, ready to flip and thrust. A stick fighter never swings a wide blow—he thrusts or strikes with the end, and for the belly, the throat, or the eyes.

"Have a drink!" The big man thrust the bottle at the Tinker.

"Never touch it," the Tinker replied.

Two of the other men were closing in on me, about as close as I could afford for them to get.

"You'll drink and like it!" The big man suddenly swung with the bottle, but he was too slow. The Tinker's hand shot out, flicking this way and that as though brushing the big man with his fingers. The big man's hands went to his eyes, but the big man screamed and staggered back, his face streaming blood.

Even as he lifted the bottle, the two men nearest me jumped to get close. My stick barely had room, but the end caught the nearest man in the throat and he fell back gasping horribly. As he did so, without withdrawing the stick I struck sidewise with it, not a hard blow, but the other man threw up an arm to block it and staggered. Instantly I jerked back the stick, which was all of five feet long and broomhandle size, and grasping it with both hands, struck him in the face with the end of it.

The fight was over. The Tinker glanced at the other two men, who were withdrawing. Then he coolly leaned over and thrust the blade into the turf near the road to cleanse it of blood.

Three men were down and the fight gone out of the others, and it hadn't been twenty seconds since they stopped us. No doubt they'd robbed many a traveler at this point and believed us easily handled.

We paid them no more mind, starting off up the rise toward the high ground back of the river. And that big man was dead. From time to time I'd seen fighting done, but not a man killed before, and

seemed there ought to be more to it. One moment he was coming at us blustering and confident, and the next he was dying in the trail mud.

We did not stop that night, but went on, wanting distance between us and trouble. West and south we kept on going, through sunlight and rain, the Tinker plying his trade, and me swapping here and there.

The mare was filling out, carrying her colt, and I was in fine shape.

Down at Jefferson in Texas, we laid in supplies. We walked out of town before we made camp, and we were just setting up to eat when we heard horses soft-footing it along the trail.

Turning to warn the Tinker, I saw him standing outside the firelight, a blade in his hand.

Me, I held to my place at the fire, letting them think me alone.

The riders stopped out beyond the firelight and a voice called out, not loud, "Hello, the fire! Can we come in?"

"If you're friendly, you're welcome. Coffee's on."

Those days nobody rode right up to a fire or a house. It was customary to stop off a bit and call—it was also a whole lot safer.

There were three of them, one about my own age, the other two a mite older. They were roughly dressed, like men who were living out in the brush, and they were heavily armed. These men, by the look of them, were on the dodge.

"Light and set. We're peaceful folk."

They sat their horses, their eyes missing nothing, noting the Tinker there, knife in hand.

"You with the knife." The speaker was a handsome big man with a shock of dark, untrimmed hair. "You wishin' trouble?"

"Fixed for it. Not hunting it."

The big man swung down, keeping his horse between himself and the fire. "You look like movers," he said pleasantly. "I was a mover one time...moved to Texas from Tennessee." He gestured to the others. "These here are gen-u-ine Texans."

He hunkered down beside the fire as the others dismounted, and I passed him the coffee pot. He was wearing more pistols than I ever did see, most men being content with one. He had two belted on in holsters and a third shoved down in his waistband. Unless I was mistaken, he had another, small one in his coat pocket.

Loading a cap-and-ball pistol took time, so a man apt to need a lot of shooting often took packing more than one gun. There was an outlaw up Missouri way who sometimes carried as many as six when on a raid. Others carried interchangeable cylinders so they could flip out an empty and replace it with a loaded one.

When the Tinker walked up to the fire they saw the other knives.

"You don't carry a pistol?"

"I can use these faster than any man can use a gun."

The youngest of them laughed. "You're saying that to the wrong man. Cullen here, he's learned to draw and fire in the same instant."

The Tinker glanced at the big man. "Are you Cullen Baker?"

"That I am." He indicated the quiet-seeming man beside him. "This here's Bob Lee, and that's Bill Longley."

"I'm the Tinker, and this here is Orlando Sackett."

"You're dark enough for an Indian," Cullen Baker said to the Tinker, "but you don't shape up to be one."

"I am a gypsy," Tinker said, and I looked around, surprised. I'd heard tell of gypsies, but never figured to know one. They were said to be a canny folk, wanderers and tinkerers, and he was all

that.

Cullen Baker and his friends were hungry, but they were also tired, and nigh to falling asleep while they ate.

"If you boys want to sleep," I said, "you just have at it. The Tinker and me will stand watch."

"You're borrowing trouble just to feed us," Bob Lee said. "We've stood out against the Carpetbagger law, so Governor Davis' police are out after us."

"We're outcasts," Baker said.

"My people have been outcasts as long as the memory of man," the Tinker said.

"No Sackett," I said, "so far as I know, was ever an outlaw or an outcast. On the other hand, I know Sackett ever turned a man from his fire. You're welcome to stop with us."

When they had stripped the gear from their horses the other two went back into the brush to sleep, avoiding the fire; but Cullen Baker lingered, drinking coffee.

"What started you west?" he asked.

"Why," I told him, "it was one of those old-timey gospel-shouters set me to considering it. He preached lively against sin. He was a stomper and a shouter, but a breast-beater and a whisperer, too."

"When he got right down to calling them to the Lord, he whispered and he pleaded, and right there he lost me. Seems if the Lord really wants a man it doesn't need all that fuss to get him worked up on it. If a man isn't ready for the Lord, then the Lord isn't ready for him, and it's a straight-forward proposition between man and God without any wringing of the hands or hell-fire shouting."

"When that preacher started his Bible-shouting and talking large about the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, I was mighty taken with him. He seemed more familiar with the sins of those foreign places than he did with those of Richmond or Atlanta, but mostly he was set against movers."

"Sinful folk, he said, and the Lord intended folks to stay to home, till the earth, and come to church of a Sunday. By moving, they set their feet on unrighteous paths."

"Fact was, he talked so much about sin that I got right interested, and figured to look into it. A man ought to know enough to make a choice; and pa, he always advised me to look to both sides of a proposition."

"Back in the hills mighty few folks ever got right down to bed-rock sinning. Here and there a booby drank too much 'shine and took to fighting, but rarely did he covet his neighbor's wife up to doin' anything about it, because his neighbor had a squirrel rifle."

"That parson ranted and raved about painted women, but when I looked around at Meeting House Square, it seemed to me a touch of paint here and there might brighten things up. He talked about the silks and satins of sin until he had me fairly a-sweating to see some of that there. Silks and satins can be mighty exciting to a man accustomed to homespun and calico. So it came on me to travel."

Baker cupped his hands around the bottom of his coffee cup, and taken his time with that coffee. So I asked him about that fast draw I'd heard them speak about.

"Studied it out by my ownself," he said. "Trouble is apt to come on a man sudden-like, and he needs a weapon quick to his hand. When Mr. Sam Colt invented his revolving pistol he done us all a favor."

"Best way is just to draw and fire. Don't aim...point your gun like you'd point your finger. You need practice to be good, and I worked on it eight or nine months before I had to use it. The less shooting you've done before, the better. Then you have to break the habit of aiming."

"It stands to reason. Just like you point your finger. How many times have you heard about some female woman grabbing up a pistol—something she maybe never had in her hands before—and plumb mad, she starts shooting and blasts some man into doll rags. Nobody ever taught her to shoot—she just pointed at what she was mad at and started blazing away."

He reached inside his shirt and fetched out a gun. "This I taken from a man who was troubling n

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