

The Meeting

Sound travels far in cold night air. Caleb raised himself on one elbow and looked over to where he had hobbled the appaloosa. They were in the lee of an escarpment, at the edge of a small stand of aspen. He could just make out the horse in the moonlight, ears pricked towards the open pasture that led down to the river. Caleb rolled away from the sun-warmed rock at his back, gathering his bedroll and rifle in one smooth movement. Resting a calming arm over Caesar's neck, he scanned the river bank. Coyote's had yipped at sun down – perhaps they were hunting now, or maybe there were wolves... Then it came again, this time unmistakable: the chink of shod hooves against stone. He could see nothing as scudding clouds fractured the moonlight.

Caleb gently untethered Caesar; with minimal noise he moved deeper into the grove of trees, and slipped the fancy Spanish harness and finely tooled saddle onto his horse. As he bent to tighten the girth the night air quivered to a new sound. High pitched and wavering, it echoed along the valley and rebounded from the mountain crags. It came again, lower and drawn out this time. He felt a tremor ripple along Caesar's flanks. The horse remained still, facing towards the river. Rubbing Caesar's nose, he tried again to pierce the dark and locate the source of the sound. Then Caesar's head jerked up as they both started at the sound of a man's deep throated laugh – much closer now. He was about to leap into the saddle, man and horse thoroughly spooked, when the wavering notes started again, this time in quick succession. Caleb almost laughed aloud: dang it, someone was playing a fiddle! An' if that weren't enough, he thought he recognised the melody – something about tying knots in the devil's tail*. The jaunty tune tripped along and then stopped; again there came the man's deep guttural laugh.

'I ain't no injun, mister. So why don't yer come outta that grove and show yerself?'

'You friendly?' Caleb called back, hefting the rifle in one hand.

'Ain't got no reason to be otherwise. And you?'

'Yep, I'm friendly. I'm coming out – where are you?'

The man's laugh echoed through the valley: 'Follow the fiddle, son.'

Caleb did as the man had instructed and found himself descending a bank where the river had once flowed. It created a shallow dip which was dead ground for anyone looking out from the trees. He chided himself for making an elementary mistake. He saw the two grey mules first, and then the shadow-shape of the man seated against the bank. Caleb drew Caesar up, placing the horse so he faced down towards the river and side on to the man, so the rifle in Caleb's right hand was hidden from view. The fiddling stopped.

'How'd you know I was up there?' Caleb jerked his head in the direction of the cliff face.

'Maybe I just sensed it. You ain't very trusting, are you, son? I'm guessing there's a rifle a-danglin' from yer working hand.'

Caleb ignored the challenge. Something was making his gut real tight.

'I see two mules – you alone?'

'One to ride, one fer to carry packs. I'm gonna light a fire an' git me a coffee. You gonna sit in that fancy saddle of yours all night or are you gonna be sociable and set a while?'

Still Caleb didn't move. The man lay down the fiddle and busied himself with the fire. As the brushwood began to take Caleb could see a rugged, bearded face, straggling grey hair, worn buckskins.

'Mountain man?'

'Some. Depends where I fetch up. Did me some prospecting, but that's a fool's errand. Did me some cow punchin' when I was younger. Trapping is good hereabouts.'

As he spoke he began the familiar routine of shaking coffee into a small tin pot, adding water and deftly balancing the pot on the fire. Caleb swung down from the appaloosa and squatted down, the rifle by his side. The man's movements were stiff and deliberate.

'The names Caleb. You?'

'Sure is a fine harness you have there, son. You be careful, else someone might try to take those silvery gee-gaws off it.'

'That wouldn't be friendly, now would it?'

'Nope, it surely wouldn't. There's some folks will take the clothes from yer back, and some will give you the clothes from their backs, ain't no telling sometimes.'

The moon was now bright, casting everything in silver light or deep, black shadow. 'You don't find leather tooled on a saddle like that in these parts,' the old timer continued. 'Come by it in Denver, maybe?' Caleb sensed an accusation in the tone of voice.

'That saddle 'n me are one, mister. You might say I've grown into it over the years. Ain't no one gonna leave me afoot and take it. Some have crossed my path and thought about it, but I kinda dissuaded them. So if'n your thinking of helping yourself, our peaceable conversation needs to end - now.'

The man threw back his head and laughed: 'Don't get riled, son. What would an old man like me need a saddle like that fer? I don't hold with bein' avaricious – that's surely a grievous sin. An' I ain't young enough to fight off them's that is.' He paused, watching Caleb. 'I come across a man in Laredo who tools leather like that. Puts an eagle on the back of the cantle.'

'Who are you, and how did you know I was resting up there?'

The man nodded: 'There's enough moonlight tonight to catch a glint from them spanish coins as you harnessed the horse, so I knowed someone was up there.' He added

more wood to the fire. 'Good horse flesh. When playing hard to get it's good to have a fast horse.' He looked straight at Caleb and held his gaze.

'I ain't on the run if that's what you're meanin'. Thought I'd see if there's any bronco busting to be done up Cheyenne way.'

'Ahh. Guess yer takin' the scenic route, huh? I always say when in doubt, let your horse do the thinking.'

'Look, mister, what I'm doing and where I'm going ain't anyone's business but my own.' Caleb was getting tired of this cat and mouse game.

The man laughed: 'No offence meant, son. This country is mighty big enough for everyone. Coffee's pert near ready.' He poured the contents of the pot into two tin mugs and held out one for Caleb. The little finger of his right hand was missing. Caleb stared at the hand, then slowly took the mug. The knot in his gut had tightened again. He took a mouthful of the hot bitter liquid, watching the man's face as he did so.

They sat in silence, savouring the warmth of the coffee and the fire. Finally, Caleb gave a small sigh: 'Where'd you say you went prospecting?'

'I didn't say.'

'Look, mister, you know my name and where I'm heading and you seem strangely familiar with my saddle. It's about time you gave me some straight answers.'

The man fussed with the fire, as though giving himself time to decide what to say.

'I go by the name of Rusty – it were a nickname they gave me when I was prospecting. Stupidest thing I ever done – and I done plenty of dumb-ass things in my time.'

Caleb let the words hang in the still air for a spell.

'I got me this gut feeling that you were prospecting down Lake Valley in Sierra County. Am I right?'

The man scratched his beard before replying softly: 'Could be.'

'Yeah. So I reckon your real name is Robert Diggs. An' I remember that fiddle tune and that saying 'bout letting your horse do the thinking. Am I on the right trail?'

The man didn't look up, merely nodded.

'Why didn't you return, Pa? Ma would have taken you back.'

He let out a long breath: 'I reckoned I'd done enough damage, takin' all our savings to buy that useless claim. Anyhows, your Ma and Sandy Sam were mighty friendly – I didn't want to stand in their way. Sandy could hold his drink better'n me, and I reckon'd he'd see her right.'

‘Yep, he did. Taught me to ride and was always there when Ma needed something fixin’. He was a good man - passed on two years ago. He gave me this saddle and harness for my sixteenth birthday.’

‘I know – I told him to.’

‘Dang it, Pa, I always thought I would punch you in the jaw for leaving us, if’n I ever met you. How did you know it was me?’

The old man had been staring into the fire. Now he lifted rheumy eyes to Caleb: ‘When I saw you astride the appaloosa – you’re the spit image of your Ma. I’m glad of that. The saddle and harness confirmed it. You’re a fine looking man, Caleb Diggs.’

Sue Fairclough©2019

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTYDxvmdMI>