

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In respect to the sensibilities of modern times, the Ysabel Kid's horse is named 'Thunder' in this story, rather than the less appropriate name used in the original paperbacks. We have, however, retained J.T.'s preference for not repeating the insalubrious language used by certain men of the time.

Though the limitations of format prevent us from providing the usual footnotes, we should like to direct readers intrigued by Dusty Fog's previous encounter with an extra-terrestrial woman to *The Floating Outfit #21: THE FAST GUN*, by J.T. Edson, available in e-book format on Amazon Kindle.

The 13th Doctor is presented here on a journey without her Companions. I felt that the presence of those characters in addition to the Floating Outfit would over-complicate the story and did not feel comfortable writing their dialogue. No commentary on the virtues of any of the Companions is intended by this omission.

The not-quite kidnap of Betty Hardin
A story of J.T. Edson's Floating Outfit and the 13th Doctor
By T.R. Peers with apologies to all concerned where appropriate.

I: Whoever they are, they say they've got Betty!

Had a man who had not previously heard of General Jackson Baines Hardin laid eyes upon him as his own scanned the rumpled sheet of paper, they would have needed no explanation as to how he had come by the nickname 'Ole Devil'. They would not have needed to study the now-greying hair, curled into its distinctive points, nor the angular and saturnine features. One look at the baleful expression on his face and the glower of his cold black eyes would have told such a man all he needed to know, and should that glare fall upon him he would most likely swiftly 'get religion'.

The three younger men in the General's study had no cause to fear the wrath of the principal of the Hardin, Fog and Blaze clan, and yet all three regarded his reaction to the letter with grave concern. As members of the O.D. Connected Ranch's legendary 'Floating Outfit', it would fall to them to attend to any concerns the General might raise- and from the look of things, such concerns were dire indeed.

It would have cheered all four men to know that in one regard, their fears were unfounded! But they had not yet had the opportunity to come by that knowledge!

The foremost of the three would not have seemed so to our less-than-knowledgeable observer. Though his range-style clothing was of fine cut and expensive make, he wore it in such a way as to contrive to make it look like another man's cast-offs. Neither did his diminutive stature suggest a man of power or distinction. Only his finely-made gun-belt, and the obviously well-maintained pair of Colt Civilian Model P revolvers that rode butt-forward within it, gave any hint as to the calibre of man who nervously awaited the General's pronouncement. Seeing Ole Devil come to the end of a short, but obviously unpleasant read, he spoke softly.

“Is it bad, sir?”

“Bad' doesn't begin to cover it, Dusty.” growled Ole Devil, his fury roused to such an extent that it seemed he might attempt to lever himself from the wheelchair to which he had been confined many years ago. “Whoever they are, they say they've got Betty!”

This news provoked startled oaths from all three of the younger men. As Captain Dusty Fog, late of

the Confederate Army and now top hand of the ranch, twisted his black J.B. Stetson hat in consternation, his taller companion bounded to his feet and swept the offending paper from the desk to read it for himself.

That such an act elected no cry of condemnation spoke to the seriousness with which the terrible news was regarded!

The man whose eyes now scanned the paper stood well over six feet in height, and had the build and general handsome good looks of a rangeland Hercules. Much like Dusty Fog- a man for whom he was frequently, and often advantageously mistaken- Mark Counter wore fine ranch-style clothing, but in his case in a manner that suggested he had been born in it. Nor were his own guns, a pair of Colt Cavalry Peacemakers, carried in a fashion that suggested anything other than the greatest possible skill in their use.

Their usually-comforting presence brought no solace in light of the words roughly scrawled on the page!

Alone of the three, the third, and youngest member of the Floating Outfit present showed no outward reaction beyond his initial exclamation. Dressed head-to-toe in black, with Indian-dark features that were the picture of youthful innocence, Loncsey Dalton Ysabel sat with a blank expression that a man might mistake for indifference. Such a man would have to have no knowledge of the war-face of the *Pehnane* dog-soldier, and would also need to ignore the cold, killing fury that glittered in his red-hazel eyes. Though the ancient Dragoon Colt the man known as the Ysabel Kid carried was a weapon with which he claimed mere proficiency, his skill with the clip-pointed James Black bowie knife that he fingered was known to all but the most foolishly ignorant. The same could be said for the Winchester Model of 1873 rifle propped next to his seat.

“She rode out to hunt only this morning.” pointed out the Kid, seeking to fill the silence with words. “You-all want that I should go cut for sign, Dusty?”

Mastering himself, and fighting down the cold, unfamiliar knot of true fear in his gut, Dusty shook his head. “Not yet, Lon. What do they want, Mark?”

The blond giant tossed the paper down on the desk in disgust. “What do owlhoots and loafers always want? Money- two thousand dollars of it, delivered to a cabin a half-day's ride from here. I can send word to my Pappy, sir, he can help us cover it if needs be.”

Ole Devil shook his head firmly, having regained some measure of composure. “No, Mark, I'll not trouble Rance with this. I'll be hell-damned before I'll pay one red cent of ransom money, and you know Betty would horse-whip you for even thinking of doing it. Dusty, I want you to call in every hand we have's not needed for the next drive to help with finding my grand-daughter. Loncsey, Betty went out to the north field this morning with her dogs to help track a cougar'd been bothering the herd. Head up there and see what you can find.”

“Yo!” said the Kid, giving the traditional cavalryman's response and leaping to his feet with an alacrity that would have seemed incredible from his prior posture.

However, the General's orders were never to be carried out!

At that moment the door to the General's study opened, causing all three men capable of doing so to whirl and reach for weapons, Ole Devil having given strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed. Though advancing in age, the General's Oriental man-servant, Tommy Okasi, would not

lightly have ignored those orders.

Therefore an intruder must have subdued him!
Such an intruder must only have malevolent intentions!

The fastest of the three, though only by a hair, Dusty Fog had a gun in each hand before the door had finished opening. For once in his life, his superlative reflexes left him ill-equipped to deal with the sight that met his eyes, and it was Mark Counter who was first to return his Peacemakers to leather and bound forwards with a roar of delight. Had President Rutherford B. Hayes chosen to make an unannounced visit, he could not have received a warmer welcome than did the surprised newcomer, who found herself swept up into the air.

For that newcomer was none other than Betty Hardin!

A wave of palpable relief swept through the room, bringing the merest flicker of a smile to even the General's stern countenance. And yet, once all concerned had expressed their pleasure at the safe return of Betty Hardin to her grandfather's ranch, there remained a mystery to address.

"I'm afraid I have no idea what this letter could mean." said Betty, having read the offending article for herself, her pretty face wrinkled with confusion. "I rode out this morning and helped Red Blaze and Billy Jack with that cougar, which took most of the day, and then I came back here. I wondered why Tommy gave me such a strange look when he told me I'd better come straight in to see you."

"Still, all's well as ends well." said Mark with a smile. "Dusty, we'd best go and make ready for tomorrow's drive, now that we know Betty's safe- even if she could do with a wash."

"I've been on horse-back almost all day, you bow-legged lout!" snapped Betty in mock anger. "You chase a cougar all over the all-fired place and see how sweet your sweat is when you come to the end of it!"

Mark grinned, and held up his hands in surrender, but the air of levity was swiftly dispelled by Ole Devil.

"No. This isn't over yet. Dusty, Mark, Lon, I want you to head out to the cabin in the letter and see what you can find."

"Sir?" said Mark in confusion. "Surely it was just a joke, or somebody trying to trick the money out of us?"

"Jasper'd try that sort of thing'd have to be tolerable foolish." mused Dusty, running his hand through his blond hair thoughtfully. "They'd have to know we'd cotton to their bluff before they could cash in their winnings."

Ole Devil nodded. "Yes, that's how I'd call it. I'd lay you good odds that even if it's not Betty, there's a pack of *hombres* somewhere near that cabin with a girl in their clutches that they *think* is her. I'll be God-damned if I'll let that sort of man do to her what you know they'll do when they find out their ace is a joker."

2: *Who am I, exactly?*

Sitting trussed-up like a Thanksgiving turkey against the wheel of her own wagon, Annie Delaney considered that life in the West was so far not living up to its thrilling reputation. At nineteen years

of age, possessed of an ample figure and an attractive, if not exactly pretty, countenance, she had expected to meet with no particular difficulty in finding a suitable husband with whom to settle down and begin a comfortable new life, even with the impediment of her widowed father who had insisted on accompanying her. In truth, both the financial support of Abraham Delaney and his ability in driving the two-horse wagon they had hired for the final leg of their journey had proved invaluable, even if, in the grand tradition of the teenager, she could not admit it. That the word itself would not enter general usage for some decades was neither here nor there.

Her father, clad only in his long-johns and boots, was even now fulfilling a useful purpose, in that the gang of hard-cases that had held up their wagon were directing most of their ill-tempered abuse at him, rather than at her. Never ones to do any more work than was strictly necessary, the unshaven, trail-lean men had set the elder Delaney to every chore a camp might offer except those that might have taken him from their sight. The bacon and beans they had devoured had been the work of his hands- and had been taken from his supplies- as had the coffee they slurped. Here and there about the camp bed-rolls were strewn, with little regard for defence or order, and near each lay a saddle casually tossed down with even less consideration for how it lay. Though it was beyond Annie's meagre experience to appreciate, such a lack of care for an essential tool of a rider's trade spoke of men of the most dissolute and neglectful sort.

Not that there were no other clues!

Everything about the six-strong gang, from their stained and rumpled clothes to the foul-smelling and cheap tobacco they smoked, warned Annie that here were men with whom it would be most unwise to form even the briefest of acquaintances. This fact seemed to have completely eluded her companion, who the bandits had secured to the wheel next to her own. Indeed, the woman whose credentials had identified her as 'Betty Hardin' seemed almost never to stop talking, until the leader of the gang had threatened to shoot her.

Even a relative newcomer to the West like Annie had heard of the legendary Hardin, Fog and Blaze clan and the O.D. Connected ranch, and when they had come across the travel-stained woman by the side of the trail it had come as something of a shock to learn of her identity. Her horse, 'Betty' had claimed, had fallen prey to a wild beast and she was in need of a lift to the next town. Even in such dire straits the woman's modesty had been surprising, and when Abraham had read the short letter she presented that identified her as the grand-daughter of General Hardin she had seemed genuinely unaware of her own importance.

The men who had overtaken their wagon some hours later had shown no such reticence!

Even now, tied up as she was in a similar manner to Annie, Betty Hardin- for such the young woman still believed her companion to be- had an air of complete indifference to her predicament. She was older than the settler, perhaps in her early thirties, and had blonde hair cut in a short bob that failed to reach her shoulders and framed an open, friendly-looking face. Stranger than her hairstyle, however, was the cut and style of her clothes. A dark, close-fitting shirt with a multi-coloured band across it was matched with high-waisted blue pants that were seemingly supported only by a pair of braces. Over these outlandish garments lay a long, grey coat, which like the rest of the clothes was made of a material Annie could not easily identify. Overall it was a garb that seemed perfectly calculated to attract as much attention as possible, even as it contrived to conceal the womanly attributes of she who wore it.

Having finally lapsed into silence on being given a closer view of the barrels of a loaded twelve-gauge shotgun than any sane man or woman could possibly desire, Betty had waited for a few minutes before leaning towards Annie as best she could and whispering a question that briefly

scattered the girl's already strained wits.

“So, Annie, er.. who exactly am I?”

After a long pause, Annie gathered enough reason to respond, albeit not in a manner that was particularly helpful to her inquisitor.

“What? What do you mean, who are you?”

The blonde woman flashed a bright smile that seemed entirely inappropriate for the circumstances. “It's just that... well, that paper I showed your Dad? It might have told him a bit of a fib. Bit of a whopper, actually. Huge stonking-great lie, probably. Anyway, the important thing is that I'm not really 'Betty Hardin', but this lot might get a bit annoyed if they find that out, yeah?”

Annie's mind reeled. The paper had 'told a lie?' Even allowing that it was some kind of forgery- right down to the General's signature- the implications of the woman's claim were terrifying. For now, believing that she must be a friend of Betty Hardin- and therefore, of *her* friends, the hard-cases had left her largely alone. To demand money for the safe return of a Hardin was one thing, but to lay hands upon a girl of their acquaintance- especially to take advantage of her womanhood- would be quite another. It was conceivable that on 'Betty's' safe return, the O.D. Connected crew might consider the matter closed, but a man who crossed that particular Rubicon would swiftly find that even Rome would not be far enough away to flee to escape fatal vengeance of the most terrible sort.

Should the lie be exposed, that scant protection would swiftly be stripped away!

Worse yet, as the younger and more attractive woman present, Annie's defilement would be the most immediate!

Such a fate was to be avoided at all cost!

Swiftly, with a speed and brevity made essential by the circumstances, Annie told 'Betty' all she could about the woman she was supposed to be. Sheltered as she was from the public eye by the rest of the clan, Betty Hardin was not as well-known as the members of the Floating Outfit, and there was little the girl could relate regarding her appearance or manner. This omission caused Annie comparatively little concern, given that the gang seemed every bit as ignorant as to Betty's true virtues as she was. Most importantly, she made sure 'Betty' understood that she was the granddaughter of a Confederate war-hero, one who had survived the War Between the States with his honour and reputation largely intact and had garnered respect from peers both friend and foe. Then, of course, there was the well-known friendship between her and Dusty Fog, the blond giant famed for his skill with both guns and fists both during the War as a cavalry commander, and after it as a rancher and cattleman. Though both his description and his exploits had been exaggerated in the telling by excitable journalists and newspaper-men, they painted a vivid enough picture.

“Brilliant..” breathed 'Betty' when Annie had finished. “He sounds like a proper cowboy! I mean that in a good way, not a build-a-dodgy-conservatory way.” She made a sour face. “I bet he likes guns, though. Big men and their big guns, always stamping about.. shooting at things.”

Not knowing why, Annie was struck by the desire to defend her countryman from someone she was rapidly beginning to suspect was nothing of the sort. “Captain Fog is a hero! Why, I'll bet he's on his way to rescue us right now and-”

“For your sake, little bird, you'd best get to praying he doesn't get it in his head to try.” snarled the leader of the gang, a hatchet-faced tough called Henry Holt who had passed close enough to hear

Annie's last remark but had fortunately missed the earlier, and for his purposes much more important, part of the conversation. "Happen he does, the boys and I'll send him back to Ole Devil in a pine box."

"You wouldn't dare!" snapped Annie, her fear momentarily forgotten in the heat of her anger.

"I would and I will!" laughed the gang leader, who wore a brace of tied-down Army Colts that were perhaps the only possession he cared about and kept clean. "That cabin we told them to deliver the ransom money to? I've got a couple of boys watching it with Sharps rifles trained on the only door. As soon as Fog and his friends arrive to deliver their dues they'll put windows in their damn skulls."

3: Let's see how well they handle Cuchilo on his own turf!

Dusty Fog passed his field-glasses to Mark, who lay next to him in the concealment of a small copse of trees. "How do you call it?"

Mark Counter grunted. "Same's you, I reckon. It's a trap as sure's I ever saw one."

"Huh-huh." replied Dusty. "Where d'you think they are?"

"Was it me," replied his companion, "I'd have a man covering the door with a long-rifle, and another hidden inside with a scattergun. The man outside takes his shot when someone's about to open the door, and if they try to duck inside his pard makes wolf-bait out of them."

Dusy Fog nodded. "Sounds about right, but I'll lay you a dollar there's no man in the cabin, much's there should be. Sort of jasper tries to make a living out of ransoming women's not got the *cojones* to stand guard in a cabin with only one way out. Was it someone like Clay Allison or Wes Hardin, maybe, but not this outfit."

Mark spat in his hand and shook Dusty's. "I'll take that bet, though I reckon you're right. Hell's fire, though, d'you think this's the first time these jaspers have run this shell-game?"

"We'll see soon enough." said Dusty. "Right now, let's see how well they handle *Cuchilo* on his own turf!"

Some distance away, nestled in the welcoming cover of a sturdy rock, Walt Gilt squinted through the ladder-sight of his Sharps Model of 1859 rifle. A native of Maine, he had served as one of the famed "Berdan's Sharpshooters" during the War, and had claimed more than one Confederate officer before the conflict had ended. Finding post-war military life not to his liking, he had taken his papers and his precious rifle- the latter without the permission of the Regimental Quartermaster- and gone to seek his fortune in the Southern States. That the men who now frequently fell under his sights were no longer his enemies in war did not concern him unduly.

Even so, the skills of a sharpshooter found little legitimate use outside of the military, and a career as a peace officer held similarly little appeal to a man who lacked the imagination to play both sides of the law against the middle. So Gilt, along with his crony and fellow veteran Bill Wyke, had fallen into banditry almost by accident. Simply picking off lone travellers on the road and stealing their belongings had sustained the pair for a while, but eventually they had seen the wisdom of riding with a larger gang, which for one thing involved considerably less risk or effort on their part. Holt's Hell-raisers, as Henry Holt liked to call them, had proved a lucrative wagon to hitch themselves to for now. And perhaps, should their standing in the gang rise high enough, Holt might have an 'accident' one day that would allow them further advancement.

With a rifle accurate at over a thousand feet, such an event would not prove hard to arrange!

At present, though, it was Holt's play to call, and for that all Walt Gilt needed to do was wait for someone to arrive at the cabin. If they were carrying the money, he was simply to watch and make sure the delivery of the ransom was smoothly completed and the courier had left. If they were not..

He truly hoped that the O.D. Connected were stupid enough to try something. Even a man who had been discharged for years would impress a lot of powerful people if he were the one to bring down Captain Dustine Edward Marsden Fog and his outfit. Such a feat would be worth more than two thousand dollars to the right patron. More than one rich and powerful family had suffered humiliating losses at the hands of Company 'D' of the Texas Light Cavalry and its resourceful young Captain.

Darkness was closing in, and he gave a quiet sigh of relief as a lantern was turned on in the cabin. A moment later, the silhouette of Bill Wyke appeared briefly in the doorway before vanishing into the gloom. Should anyone open the door now, they would be perfectly framed by the light for at least a second- ample time for a marksman of Gilt's calibre to see to it that the trespasser would not witness another dawn. Bill would be back at their fox-hole in a few minutes, and then the two veterans would sleep in shifts, ensuring that death would only be an instant away for any caller to the cabin. That that caller might possibly be an innocent traveller in search of shelter for the night was another thing Walt Gilt cared little for.

In terms of accuracy with a rifle, it might well have been said that Walt Gilt and Bill Wyke could be considered on par with, if not superior to, the man known as *Cuchilo*. Indeed, while the Winchester Model of 1873 was a fine rifle, and the prestigious 'One of a Thousand' version carried by the Ysabel Kid was even more so, the Sharps had it beaten for accuracy and extreme range by a wide margin.

But it was not with a rifle that *Cuchilo* was armed!

Not for nothing was Loncy Dalton Ysabel known to the Comanche as *Cuchilo*, The Knife. Even amongst that fierce breed, there were reckoned few more deadly with a blade than he. Worse for the Union veterans, he had been trained almost from birth in the arts of silent movement and reading sign, and in neither did he acknowledge an equal. So it was that the first thing Walt Gilt knew of his enemy's presence was a firm grip from behind and the kiss of cold steel across his throat. In the brief moment before the final darkness claimed him, Gilt's ears caught the faintest of words.

"Ah-he!"

A few minutes later, as Mark and Dusty approached the small cabin, the Kid emerged from the shadows carrying two Sharps rifles.

"Two of em, eh?" said Mark, quietly. "Looks like you called it right, Dusty."

"I'll not take the pot yet." replied Dusty Fog. "Not until we're certain I'm not going to cash in my chips when I go through that door."

Silently, having handed one of his trophies to Mark but retained the other, the Kid stole up to the closed door. With equal quiet, he reached up to the latch and released it from the side, before crouching down and pushing the door open the rest of the way with the empty rifle. No roar of gunfire or hail of buckshot answered the movement, even when the Kid tested the waters still more

daringly with his hat on the end of the weapon.

With a nod to Dusty, Mark drew his right hand gun and came up to the door, making more noise than the Kid but not enough to alert anyone who might still lie in wait. Seeing that his friend was in position, he flung himself forward across the threshold, dropping into a prone shooting position even as Dusty waited with his own drawn weapons to cover him. Neither precaution achieved more than adding more dirt to Mark's expensive Levi pants, but there was no word of complaint from any man present. All three knew well that the moment a man ceased to take such measures, he placed his life in the hands of Fate- and all had played enough games of chance to know that She was not to be relied upon.

“Think you can track them from here, Lon?” asked Dusty. There was no immediate response, and it struck the Rio Hondo gun-wizard that his friend had not spoken a word since his mission into the darkness. “Lon?”

“Yeah, reckon I can.” replied the Kid, finally. “But first, dog-my-cats if there isn't something you-all need to see.”

4: No man alive could have done this!

Though the night had fully fallen as the Kid led the way to the low hill that they had identified, by virtue of its elevation and position directly facing the door, as the most likely spot for a sharpshooter, none of the three experienced any great difficulty in finding their footing. The darkness was lit by moon and stars, and all three men had cultivated superlative night vision over the course of their careers.

This same vision was soon the cause for profound regret!

“Found the first up there.” said the Kid, pointing to the rock behind which the still corpse of Walt Gilt lay. “Counted coup on him, and set out to look for his pard. Figured he'd be on his way up after he'd set the light.”

Dusty nodded. “Sure. Reckon they'd keep watch in shifts. Where'd you find the other one?”

“Here.” said the Kid quietly, stepping over to what looked in the gloom like a small stone. “And here. And over there. And all the way over there. Found the rifle in that little bitty tree.”

“Huh?” said Mark, leaning closer to the 'stone' to take a better look. “Hell's fire!”

Before setting out on their journey, the men of the Floating Outfit had had time only for the merest bite of supper. With a woman's life on the line, there had been little appetite for even Betty Hardin's famous cooking. As a man of some size, Mark Counter's stomach had been voicing its objections to such neglectful treatment for some time that night, but at that moment he had cause to be grateful for his empty gut. Nevertheless, he dropped to his knees retching at the grisly sight before him. The severed, dismembered and partially-chewed remains of Bill Wyke- though no man still alive present knew that name or would ever learn it- lay strewn across an area of some two-hundred square feet.

Once all involved had regained some measure of composure, the Kid voiced the thought that was in all three heads. “I may only be a lil' old half-smart Indian boy, but I reckon no man alive could've done this.”

“A critter, then?” said Mark. “Perhaps a bear?”

“Rifle was cold when I found it.” said the Kid. “Blood was still fresh and warm, and I didn't hear so much as a peep or a squeak whilst I was handing the other one his needings. I've never seen the bear'd take a man silent and kill him without man or beast making a sound. This here is some bad medicine.”

“A witch-woman, maybe?” said Mark, still guessing.

The Kid shrugged. “Maybe. I don't remember Raccoon-Talker ever telling a tale of this sort of medicine, though, and I'd be tolerable likely to had she told it.”

“Can you follow its sign, Lon?” asked Dusty, quietly. “I don't like the thought of something that could do this roaming so close to the O.D. Connected.”

“I don't much cotton to the idea of finding it.” admitted Mark.

“Me neither.” said the Kid, “But I'm less taken with the notion of it finding us. Tracks're fresh enough- whatever it is, it's quiet but it's got no trail-sense. But Dusty, that ain't the worst of it.”

Dusty Fog nodded. Whilst not even half the tracker that the Kid was, he could read sign clearly enough to see what was worrying him. The tracks of the thing that had killed the sharpshooter followed those of its victim for a way, but then led back down towards the cabin.

And back in the direction of the tracks that led to it!
At the far end of those tracks must lay the camp of the kidnapers!

5: Find them, or die in their place!

Henry Holt, for all of his success as leader of a gang of ne'er-do-wells, could not be counted as an intelligent man. As was often the case with men of little ability- particularly those possessing an expensive education- he attributed his lack of progression in life to the failings of others and his own inexplicable ill-fortune. Accordingly, when a chill caused him to wake to find that the camp-fire had burned out, it did not occur to him that the responsibility of charging a man with tending it should have fallen to him.

So furious was he at the error that it was several long minutes before he noticed a far worse event!

Having kicked his Mexican right-hand man, Guido, awake to re-light the fire- such a chore being beneath the leader of the Hell-raisers- Henry turned to berate Abraham Delaney for allowing it to grow cold. That he, Henry Holt, had personally ordered the elder Delaney securely tied to a wagon-wheel to prevent his escape- rendering him incapable of fire-tending duties in the process- was a detail the bandit simply ignored.

The sight that met his eyes could not be similarly disregarded!
Of all three prisoners there was no sign!
This trio included the lucrative Betty Hardin!

To give him his due, Henry Holt had survived as long as he had by being swift and savage to react in a crisis. Within mere seconds, by shouts, blows and threats, all six members of the gang were roused and armed. Guido, his Green River knife in hand, poked around the site of the escape dolefully.

“Well?” snapped Holt, his limited patience exhausted.

“There're no tracks.” said the Mexican, sheathing his blade with an air of finality. “Not even *Cabrigo* could have stolen them away from here without leaving some sign.”

“Well they're gone, you mother-something fool!” growled the bandit leader. “Hell's fire- the hosses!”

A moment of terrible consternation seized the gang. Had the Ysabel Kid somehow invaded their camp to free their prisoners, it was quite possible that he had loosed their horses. Just as their saddles were in poor condition, none of the Hell-raisers rode a horse he had come by fairly, and none had bothered to train their mount to stand when ground-hitched. Nor had they hobbled the horses, relying simply on tying them to trees or to whatever other fastness could be found.

If the horses had gone, escape from the vengeful men of the O.D. Connected would be all but impossible!

Worse, survival itself would be by no means a sinecure!

“Hosses're still here!” called the man who had been sent to check. Henry Holt's relief soon turned to cold fury.

“Hardin and the others can't've got far!” he snarled. “Find them, or die in their place!”

At that moment, the Hell-raisers' evening progressed rapidly from bad to worse!

“Ho the camp!” came a cry from the darkness. “Mind if we stop by your fire?”

Such a request for hospitality was no uncommon thing on the range, and to refuse it would attract the exact wrong kind of attention. And yet, for Henry Holt and his gang, the timing could scarcely have been worse. Weapons were swiftly returned to leather- or placed in convenient places of concealment- as Henry responded.

“C-come ahead!”

The three riders that emerged from the night might as well have been War, Famine and Pestilence, for one look told Henry Holt that Death rode with them. Dressed all in black, cradling his Winchester with easy confidence, and mounted on a huge white stallion with a reputation almost as savage as its master's, the Ysabel Kid needed no introduction. Nor did the blond giant who rode across from him. Though the sputtering firelight made the details hard to discern, the paired guns, blond hair and massive stature could belong to none other than Dusty Fog.

The third man who rode between the famous pair was smaller in size, though well-dressed and armed as if trying to emulate the larger. The fine paint stallion he was mounted on was worthy of more attention, and Holt wondered if perhaps Fog had a son who rode with him. If so, he thought, licking his lips nervously, the youngster might present an exploitable weakness.

There was one other factor in the Hell-raisers' favour. Though *Cabrigo*- the Mexican name for the Kid that meant literally 'little he-goat'- was armed, the other two riders had their weapons in leather. Most of the bandits, conversely, stood with hands already on or near their guns. Such an advantage- as well as six guns against three- might just be enough, especially if the boy was as inexperienced as he looked.

Before Henry could put his thoughts into action, the man he had taken to be Dusty Fog reached behind him to retrieve a bundle, which he tossed without ceremony into the firelight.

“Evening, friend.” said the tall cowhand, in a conversational tone. “Found these out on the range. Lon allows they might belong to you.”

The bandit leader stared at the bundle, which had broken open to reveal the two Sharps rifles. Any thought of talking his way out of trouble fled from his mind, replaced by the last, desperate recourse of the cornered owlhoot.

“Get them!”

As he snarled the words and clawed at his right-hand gun, Henry returned his gaze to the three riders. His plan to shoot down the Kid whilst his compatriots were unarmed died an abrupt death.

“*Hombre*,” said the small man, coldly, “that'd be a tolerable *bad* idea.”

As he stared Death in the face, Henry Holt saw that he had made an error of judgement!

The small man was no longer so small!

In fact, at that moment he seemed to be the singular *biggest* man the bandit had ever clapped eyes on!

Henry's error, however, did not stop there. In counting the weapons arrayed against his gang, he had considered that no man, much less a man still on horse-back, could draw two guns faster than a man already armed could aim one.

In this, he was once again terribly wrong!

Staring into the barrels of no less than *five* guns, the bandit chief at least had the sense to yell 'calf-ropes'. Carefully, making sure the movement could not be misconstrued, he took his hand away from the butt of his gun. The rest of the gang similarly were wise enough to follow his example.

All but two!

Stan Whitman and Rocky Gale had been at the far side of the camp when the O.D. Connected had rode in, distant enough that they considered themselves concealed by the darkness. Whitman, lean, ill-favoured and possessed of a cowardly disposition at the best of times, had been checking on the horses and now considered them to be close enough to make escape an option. As he backed quietly towards the nearest mount- neither knowing nor caring if it was his own- he noticed the truculent Gale taking his own measures.

Measures Stan Whitman considered deeply ill-advised!

In this, he was the only Hell-raiser to call a play correctly!

Thinking that he, too, was shrouded by darkness, Rocky Gale swiftly raised his brass-framed Winchester Model of 1866 to his shoulder. Like Henry Holt, he considered the small man in the centre of the O.D. Connected formation to be the weak link, and acted accordingly. But Rocky Gale was no tactician, and not even the thinker that his leader was.

Rocky Gale was at heart a bully!

And a bully must always target the weak!

So it was that rather than take aim at the Ysabel Kid, Gale unknowingly laid his sights for Dusty Fog himself. The movement caused firelight to glint from the frame of his rifle the merest fraction of a second before his finger squeezed the trigger.

That fraction was all the Kid needed!

His night-vision being better even than that of his companions, the Ysabel Kid had seen both Stan Whitman's retreat and Rocky Gale taking aim. With no time to shout a warning, he shot in the only way he could in the circumstances- to kill.

For once, Fortune favoured a Hell-raiser!

Though a crack-shot with the Winchester, the Kid knew that the moment it would take to lay his sights on the owlhoot's head would be a moment too long. So rather than attempt to furnish the man's skull with a window that would not greatly improve its value, he fired instead at where he guessed his heart might lay.

Speed of aim and darkness conspired to make the bullet fly wide!
Yet still it found a welcoming berth in the chest of Rocky Gale!

Forty grains of prime black powder propelling a two-hundred grain .44 bullet made a mighty convincing argument against the owlhoot remaining upright and breathing, and Gale yielded rapidly to its force. Tumbling backwards, his own rifle fired once, hopelessly wide, doing little more than to startle the unsaddled horse Stan Whitman had just liberated from its hitch. Desperately, the other man flung himself onto the animal's bare back, clinging on for dear life as the panicked creature fled.

This was far from the only reaction the shooting provoked!
The other was a reaction even years of experience in gun-play could not help Dusty Fog to predict!

Keeping a careful eye on the other members of the gang as they laid aside their guns, the Rio Hondo gun-wizard caught sight of a flicker of movement from the covered wagon at the edge of the camp. He shifted his aim to cover it, but was still startled when the canvas cover was thrown back and a blonde head emerged bearing an expression of extreme displeasure.

“Oi! Stop shooting people!”

Being better travelled than Annie Delaney, and having made a far wider circle of friends and acquaintances, Dusty Fog was able to recognise the woman's voice as bearing the accent of a native of Great Britain, though he would have struggled to place her origin in Yorkshire as one of her countrymen might have. It was her actions, however, and not her voice, that raised both mystification and consternation in equal measure. Heedless of the guns levelled in her direction, and of the downcast bandits surrounding her, the woman strode purposefully towards the fallen man as if she were the Queen of England rather than a recently-rescued prisoner.

Her rescue seemed destined to be short-lived!

Armed as he was with a shotgun and Green River knife, Guido the Mexican scout had not troubled himself to attempt to resist the O.D. Connected. The gun was unloaded and would have proved too slow to bring into operation, and no sane man faced *Cabrillo* with a blade unless he were tired of living. But as 'Betty Hardin' passed within a foot of him without even seeming to notice that he was there, he decided now was the ideal time to take cards.

For those cards seemed to him to present an extremely strong hand!

Seizing the woman in a strong grip with his left hand, Guido flourished the knife with the right. By the gesture he hoped to freeze her into immobility through terror, whilst at the same time showing his deadly intentions to the men who had taken control of the camp.

“Drop 'em!” snarled the Mexican. “Empty your hands, or Ole Devil'll have one less for Thanksgiving this year!”

Before anyone could comply, the woman showed that her own hand was stronger than Guido could possibly have anticipated!

In fact, it seemed she must hold a flush against his pair!

Dusty Fog was one of the few men in the West to have gained some level of mastery of the art of *karate*, taught by Tommy Okasi to both him and the real Betty Hardin. He knew many techniques for the subdual of an armed opponent, as well as various throws and painful holds that could be employed to reverse the advantage of a man who believed himself to be in a superior position. And yet even he had never seen a man struck insensible by the touch of a single finger!

“Sorry!” gasped the woman apologetically as the Mexican collapsed in a heap. “But I'm trying to save your friend's life here! Hey, you!” She snapped the last words at a bandit standing nearby. “What's your name?”

“Er, I'm...” said the young man, gaping in surprise.

“Never mind, I'm going to call you Terry. Go and find me some water, Terry- no, whisky'll be better. You've got whiskey, yeah?” She stared around the camp challengingly. “Come on, come on, you're cowboys, you've got to have some whiskey somewhere!”

“We.. we've got some hooch, ma'am.” stammered the man who had become Terry, a name he would bear until his death in Minnesota some thirty years later. “You want's I should get it for you?”

“You're wasting your time!” snapped Henry Holt, trying to regain some semblance of control over his men. “He's cashed in for sure!”

“I'll decide that, Mr?” began the woman, causing Holt to supply his name hurriedly before he received a new one. “Henry, eh? You're in charge of this lot?”

“Reckon that might be us, ma'am.” said Dusty Fog quietly, making the merest of gestures with his guns.

“I'll get around to you, Mr Big Hero Captain Fog!” snapped the woman. “Right now, I've got more important things to worry about than your ego, *capiche*? Oh no, wait, that's Italian mobsters, isn't it? Just... I don't know, get off your horse and drink your milk, or something. Unless you've got some bandages.”

“That,” observed the Kid, as the blonde knelt down by the still form of the man he had shot, “is one tolerable strange woman.”

“Huh-huh!” grunted Dusty Fog. Something in the stranger's manner reminded him of someone else he had met several years previously, though in most respects the two were nothing alike. “Lon,

gather up their guns and blades. Mark- you still got that field medical kit Doc Leroy gave you? Happen the lady might have need of it.”

“Yo!” said Mark Counter, sliding off his horse and opening the saddle-bag. “You-all have any idea who she is?”

“Not a one.” admitted Dusty Fog. “But I aim to find out.”

6: *The Hypo-critical oath*

Annie Delaney still found it difficult to understand exactly what had happened. Some parts of the evening's events were fairly clear- once the bandits had fallen asleep, 'Betty' had somehow slipped out of her bonds and freed the girl and her father. Instead of running away, however, the woman had silently bade them hide in the covered wagon. Perhaps she had known that rescue was close at hand and had intended simply to deprive the Hell-raisers of convenient hostages, or perhaps she had had some more detailed plan, but if so events had conspired to make it unnecessary.

What happened after the rescue had thrown the girl into the utmost confusion! She had expected, once the legendary Dusty Fog had defeated their captors, that most of them would be dead and they would be on their way. She had *not* expected a man of Captain Fog's gunsmoke-wreathed reputation to leave all but one of the bandits alive, and she had *certainly* not expected Betty to try to save the life of the only owlhoot to take lead.

She had expected even less for the woman's efforts to be successful!

So it was that they came to be sitting around the fire of the bandit camp, whilst Rocky Gale lay, wounded but alive, in the wagon, tended by the young man now known as Terry. The rest of the gang- Henry Holt, Guido and a New Yorker called Hank Drebin- were tied to the wheels of the vehicle in a manner far more secure than they could have imagined possible with mere rope. Professing his gratitude for the rescue, Abraham Delaney had brewed up the last of the coffee.

“I still reckon that was a waste of good hooch.” complained the Kid, nodding towards the wagon with a sour look in his face.

“Oh, I bet you do!” snapped 'Betty'. “But I've always found that shooting and killing just makes bad situations worse, and I'm not going to let a man die just so you can have a drink, yeah?”

“Happen you might be right about that, ma'am.” said Dusty Fog, quietly. “But the thing with shooting a man is that sometimes you have to do it to live to *see* things get worse.”

The woman stared at him incredulously. “Do you really think that? Do you really think there's ever a good reason to kill somebody in cold blood?”

Dusty looked at her sadly. “No ma'am. I've never killed a man as didn't draw down on me or mine first, nor thrown lead when it wasn't likely to be thrown back. And from what I've seen, when the shooting stops it takes men with the courage to talk peace to stop it from starting again.” He looked down at his gun-belt. “But comes to it, these here guns and the ones I had before them've saved my life more times'n I can count. So far, you've not even done it the once.”

“Hey, give me time!” said the woman, finally smiling. “The night's still young!”

“Ma'am?” said Mark, finally daring to broach the subject that all three of the party had been

pondering. "How is it that these owlhoots thought you were Betty?"

"She's got a letter from General Hardin!" said Annie, excitedly. Having got over her initial disappointment at learning that the big man was not, in fact, Dusty Fog, she had begun to appraise Mark Counter on his own merits and found them very much to her liking.

"Well, not really, no." said the woman, fishing out a piece of paper. "Look, it's.. er.. trick paper. It shows people what I need them to see, see?"

Mark's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Er, no ma'am. Right now, it's just blank."

"Well, of course it is!" laughed the woman. "I don't need to convince you three big heroes to help me, do I?"

There was one question, of course, which no Texan of good upbringing- or indeed, not even many of a most insalubrious nature- would ask, even though it burned in everyone sitting at the fire. Not knowing how impolite it was considered in the Lone Star State, it fell to Annie Delaney to do so.

"So if you're not Betty Hardin," she said, innocently, "who are you?"

There was a long pause, during which the Texans regarded the girl with cold eyes that gradually warmed as the men realised that Annie was a newcomer with much to learn about local customs. Finally, the blonde woman seemed to reach a decision.

"I'm The Doctor." she said.

"Shuckens, a for-real medical doctor?" said the Kid. "I ain't never heard of a lady doctor before."

"Tell that to Cousin Betty next time she's fixing your hurts." pointed out Dusty Fog.

"Yeah, but she's not got a.. what is it that Doc Leroy said he'd admire to get, an M.D?" objected Mark.

"Neither has Doc, yet." Dusty replied. "The Doctor is good enough for me, ma'am, even if it might be a summer name."

"Is that why you don't cotton to killing folk?" asked the Kid, fascinated by such an outlandish viewpoint. "Like that hyper-critical oaf Doc talks about?"

"Hippocratic Oath, Lon." corrected Dusty. "And 'do no harm' never stopped Doc Leroy filling his hands when the chips were down."

"More like hypocritical, then." said the Doctor with a sigh. "But I suppose you can't play cowboys and Indians without six-guns and bows, can you? And for your information, I happen to be a qualified medical doctor. Or I will be. Well yes, I am, even if it was in eighteen-eighty-something. Ooh, this gets confusing sometimes!"

"*You're* confused?" said Mark Counter with a grin. "I'd have to ride a long way to even get that far right now."

"Even so." said Dusty Fog. "I reckon you're not from around these parts, Doctor. In fact, I'd wager you're from a lot further away than England."

“Am I?” said the Doctor, smiling again.

“Reckon so. I'd give a man good odds you're here on account of what we found on the trail when we were coming to see what game these jaspers were playing.” said Dusty.

“Dusty?” said Mark, worriedly. “I don't think a lady needs to hear about-”

“A *lady* might not,” said the Doctor, now fixing Dusty with a level gaze, “but I think *I* probably need to, yeah?”

After Annie Delaney had been despatched, pouting, to see if Terry needed any assistance caring for Rocky Gale, the Kid described the scene of the second sharpshooter's death in as much detail as he could. The Doctor, for all of her squeamishness regarding the taking of life, listened with keen interest and asked several searching questions. The last was the most unusual.

“So was anything... well, missing?”

“Like what, ma'am?” said the Kid.

“Er.. bits?” said the Doctor, slightly evasively. “You know.. anatomical.. things?”

“Eh?” said the Kid, frowning.

“Body parts, Lon.” said Dusty.

“Well why didn't she *say* that, then?” groused the Kid. “This little old half-smart Injun doesn't know all them high-falutin' words. I think we found two legs, two arms, a head and a body, ma'am. That about cover it?”

“What about his.. er.. man bits?” said the Doctor, showing the only sign of discomfort she had displayed that evening. “Er.. his *cojones*?”

Mark Counter had taken a large swig of lukewarm coffee, and was forced to spit it into the fire. “What? What sort of a question is that?”

“A right smart one, if we're talking medicine.” said the Kid, looking at the Doctor with new respect. “I didn't think to look, ma'am, more fool me. His heart was still in its place, so were his eyes and tongue, and you could make medicine with any of them, but I don't remember seeing.. those.”

The Doctor was silent for a moment, and when she spoke, she seemed suddenly older than before. In fact, she seemed to be older than anyone Dusty Fog had even met, and sadder.

“It's a Kallistan War-Thresher.” she said. “A relic of the Time War. I hunted down most of them when I was... well, before I was who I am now, but someone got hold of one of them that I must have missed and set it loose on a colony on... um, far away from here. I managed to scramble the targetting when it made a chrono-jump and it ended up here. They're like fleas, you see, they make quick, little jumps through time. Usually little. I sort of.. burned it out making it jump too far so now it's stuck here. But it's still in attack/ reproduce mode, so we need to stop it before it's too late.”

The three Texans exchanged a worried glance. “Did that make sense to anyone else?” asked Mark.

The Kid settled onto his back and laid his hat over his eyes. "I'm going to go to sleep, see if she's still here when I wakes up."

"I got one part." said Dusty. "Reproduce. That why she needs.. what she took, ma'am?"

"Top of the class!" said the Doctor, her youthful exuberance instantly restored. "How did you guess it was a she?"

"Like I said, on account of what it took and from who." said Dusty. "That, and the females of most critters're usually the biggest and most dangerous ones. Excepting people, of course."

"Don't tell Calam or Belle that." said Mark with a grin. "They might take it personal."

"*Anyway,*" said the Doctor, eager to change the subject back to the matter at hand, "Like I said, she's in attack/ reproduce mode. She needs to harvest male genetic material to splice with her own DNA and create more like her. Once she's got enough, she'll go and hide somewhere to lay a clutch of nanopods to hatch a new brood of adorable little cybernetically-enhanced murder-machines. It's a really efficient way to kill everyone on a planet, if that's your thing."

Dusty frowned, doing his best to keep up. "She's going to.. lay eggs?"

The Doctor nodded. "Pretty much, yeah. And they'll hatch and mature really, really fast. But she needs more genetic material to do it, and she'll tend to pick on isolated males first, so it's *really* important that no-one goes off alone."

"That's a tolerable shame." said the Kid, from beneath his hat. "On account of how when we first rolled in, one of those jaspers lit a shuck out of here like the Devil after a yearling."

"What?" gasped the Doctor, leaping to her feet. "We need to get after him, quick!"

She turned, already running towards the horses which stood, reins trailing on the ground, some thirty feet away. "Someone's going to need to give me a lift. I'll hop on the white one. I like white ones. Horses, that is."

There was a moment of terrible, frozen horror as the O.D. Connected men realised that the Doctor was about to attempt to mount the Kid's horse. 'Thunder' was known almost as far and wide as the Kid himself as a wild and untameable killer of men, but with one crucial difference.

The Ysabel Kid would not kill or even strike a woman except in the most dire of circumstances! His horse made no such distinction!

To his credit, the Kid moved as fast as any human being had ever moved in a desperate attempt to avert disaster. It was still nowhere near fast enough, but the impossibility of success did not for one moment prevent him from making the effort. As it was, his clutching hand closed on empty air some feet short of the Doctor's coat-tails.

And then, incredibly, the blonde woman stopped in front of the snorting horse, hands on hips, and gave a gasp of exasperation.

"Well, *really*. I've never heard such language! Especially not from a horse!"

"What?" gaped the Kid.

“He said if I tried to ride him, he'd.. well, I'm not going to repeat that. You are a very mean-tempered horse!” She said the last to the stallion's face, well within reach of the hooves which had ended the life of more than one unwary horse-thief. “Yes, I *will* go and ride another one, thank you very much!”

She turned back to the Floating Outfit, who were stood with looks of slack-jawed amazement on their faces. “He says I should ride with you, Mark. Apparently Dusty's horse is almost as bad as he is, only sneakier.”

“He is at that, ma'am.” said Dusty, shaking his head in amused bewilderment.

“But.. how did you..?” asked the Kid, staring at his horse in surprise.

“Oh, I speak horse.” said the Doctor, walking over to Mark's horse whilst giving the others a wide berth. “Don't you?”

“Only a mite.” admitted Dusty Fog. “But it's got me by up until now.”

7: *Stan Whitman's last ride*

Less than a mile from the camp, Stan Whitman was having cause to regret his course of action. For one thing, the horse he had selected by sheer random chance was the *palomino* of the Mexican, Guido, and was possessed of an independent spirit and *brillo escondido* not uncommon amongst those of its breed. This would ordinarily have been an advantage, if not for his complete lack of harness, saddle, spurs or bit. As it was, remaining on the fleeing beast's back had proven too much of a challenge for his mediocre horsemanship- though in fairness such a task would have challenged the skills of the most intrepid Comanche horse-thief- and he had soon found himself unceremoniously deposited on the ground.

He had been fortunate to land without breaking his neck!
His fortune was not to last!

Sitting on his bruised rump under the stars, hatless and unarmed, Whitman knew his predicament was extreme. His best bet at liberty would be to put as much distance as possible between himself and the camp, but his best bet at survival would be to return there and throw himself upon the mercy of the Hell-raisers' conquerors. These two were by their very nature mutually exclusive.

Given the choice, Whitman chose survival!
Even this was by no means a sinecure!

Disorientated by his tumbling fall from the horse, Stan Whitman was unsure of in which direction the camp from which he had recently fled lay. So it was with great relief that he suddenly heard the sound of steady hoof-beats approaching from the distance. Forcing himself to stand, he swiftly checked himself for any bulge or loose flap of clothing that might suggest even the merest hint that he was armed. In his precarious position, it was beyond vital to present no conceivable threat to his potential rescuers.

He had just begun to perceive the shapes of riders in the gloom when he died!

Approaching the grisly scene at a fast trot- for even riders of great skill dared travel no faster in darkness- the men of the Floating Outfit could only gasp in horror as Stan Whitman was flung

bodily into the air by no obvious agency. His lack of complaint would have been inexplicable had the first act of his murderer not been to separate his head from its accustomed berth upon his shoulders.

The look of pleading terror upon the face of that head would stay with all who witnessed it until the end of their lives!

That time seemed like it might not be long in the coming!

“Where is it?” cried Mark Counter in confusion, staring at the blurred space that it seemed the beast must occupy.

“It's got a perception filter!” shouted the Doctor from behind him. “Your mind won't let you see it!”

Dusty Fog's hands flickered to his holsters, and his guns seemed to appear in them. Though the gunman could not see his target, he could see the rapidly-disintegrating remains of the bandit and could judge roughly where his killer must be.

It would have to be enough!

Firing as rapidly as he could without fanning the hammers- an action that would require two hands for one gun and removed all but the vaguest accuracy- Dusty sent lead hurtling at where he thought his target must lie. A mere moment later the guns of Mark Counter and the Kid joined the fusillade, the latter working the lever of his rifle as fast as he ever had in his life. Some of the bullets flew wide. Others- and no man present would later care to guess whose- struck the flesh of Stan Whitman, though that unfortunate was in no condition to make complaint.

Yet enough hit home to have ended the life of any creature known to live on this Earth!
But their target was no such creature!

Even coming as close to panic-shooting as he could ever remember in his life, Dusty Fog was counting down his rounds. So when the hammer of his right gun fell on the last round he ceased firing with his left. If eleven rounds had been insufficient, a twelfth was unlikely to change matters.

The last bullet was intended for a final act of mercy, should it be required!

When the clouds of powder-smoke cleared and the roaring of guns subsided, the creature was nowhere to be seen. Warily, Mark Counter holstered his Peacemakers and slid his rifle from its boot. Following his example, but in reverse, the Ysabel Kid drew his Dragoon.

“Did we get it?” asked the Kid, into the sudden silence.

“I reckon not.” said Dusty. “Only blood hereabouts seems to be from that jasper she took, and where we hit her I only saw sparks.”

The Doctor gave a snort, having taken her fingers out of her ears where she had jammed them against the din. “Duh. These things are meant to slaughter people armed with sonic disruptors, high-yield plasma casters and quark/ gluon lasers. You're not going to hurt her by throwing little lead balls, are you?”

Mark twisted in the saddle to stare at her. “Then why didn't you say something, ma'am?”

The Doctor shrugged. “Would you have listened if I had? I told you, guns aren't the answer, but now

you've seen it for yourself.”

“I can't gainsay it.” admitted Dusty. “But happen as that's the case, why didn't she finish us?”

“Maybe it knew we couldn't hurt it.” said the Kid, sourly. “Which same is a sore blow to my Injun pride, but one I'll wear gladly, comes to it.”

“Neither could that poor man.” said the Doctor, slipping down from the back of Mark's horse and producing a small device that buzzed like a *cicada*. “That didn't stop her. Oh! *Oooh!* Eyup, it looks like all your shooting did something after all.”

“Ma'am?” said Dusty, deciding not to push the issue.

“She was already damaged from the overload I forced the last time I caught up with her.” said the Doctor, looking at the device before giving it a flick that caused the pitch of its chirp to change slightly. “If I'm reading this right, the strain of staying hidden with all those bullets bouncing off her has put the perception filter on the fritz. We should be able to see her next time, but I'd better warn you, she might look a bit.. *weird.*”

“Now that's a tolerable comforting thought.” said the Kid, dryly. “And here I was thinking we wouldn't be able to tell her from little ole' Annie.”

“It's the thought of meeting her again that I don't much cotton to.” admitted Mark Counter. “We threw enough lead this time to send Santa Anna scurrying back to Mexico City. Happen we don't lay a better hand next round, she's going to take the pot.”

“We'll have until morning, at least.” said the Doctor, putting away the device. “She needs time to process the material she's harvested. But she won't go far, not with so many young, strong men nearby to choose from.”

“That helps a little.” said Dusty. “But ma'am, you're the only one knows a preacher's damn about this thing. Mark's got a right good point- 'less we can come by a way to stop it, the smart play is to fold. No man ever won a cent in a rigged game, and this critter's dealing marked cards from the bottom of the deck.”

The Doctor nodded. “Yeah, I see what you mean, and by the way you lot are really, *really* obsessed with poker. My sonic's almost managed to hack her override codes, but I need to get close to her for about... oooh, thirty seconds to finish the job. Oh yeah, and that needs to be thirty seconds when I can concentrate, not thirty seconds when I'm having my legs chewed off.”

“I could follow her sign.” said the Kid with an uncharacteristic air of reluctance. “Maybe we could sneak up on her and hand her her needings 'fore she noticed us.”

The Doctor shook her head. “No good, sorry. For one thing the War-Thresher has really, really good senses, great hearing and really, *really* good night vision, and for another-” she took out the device again which immediately began its chirping, “sort of *noisy*. Sonic screwdriver. It's in the name, yeah?”

“Tolerable good night-vision, you said, ma'am?” said Dusty, thoughtfully. “And tolerable keen ears?”

The Doctor nodded. “She can see in pitch dark like it's a summer's day and hear a Toxlanian Gnat

sneeze from three miles away.” She gave an exasperated sigh at the blank expressions. “That’s something *really* quiet, yeah?”

“I’ve got me a notion.” said Dusty. “But we’d best take a greaser standoff for now back to the camp, ‘case she comes back before I can stack the deck.”

“*Really* weirdly obsessed with poker.” muttered the Doctor, as she clambered back onto Mark’s horse.

8: *The Irresistible Mark Counter*

By dawn, reinforcements had arrived at the former bandit camp. Red Blaze and Billy Jack, accompanied by a score of hands who had been gathered for the delayed cattle drive, had ridden in just as the sky began to lighten, sent by Ole Devil to check on the Floating Outfit’s progress.

“Hoo-ee!” exclaimed Red, once Dusty had brought him up to speed. “That’s one hum-dinger of a story, Cousin Dusty!”

“Sounds to me like we’re all dead men.” grouched Billy Jack. “Red, comes to it I want you to have my horse. She’s not worth a damn, but she’s still too good for you.”

“You’ll be fine, Billy Jack.” said Dusty, ignoring his former Sergeant’s customary pessimism. “On account of you and Red taking charge here. There’s three men need a Christian burial and a whole heap of eager hands here just waiting to ride the blister-end of shovels to do it. Lon’ll tell you where to find the bodies. Once that’s done, take these jaspers and the Delaneys to town safe and see what the local law wants to do with ‘Holt’s Hell-raisers’.”

“Yo!” responded Billy Jack.

“Captain Fog?” put in Annie Delaney. “Must you hand poor Terry over? He was kind to me, and only fell in with these other men because his elder brother made him do it.”

“If that’s true, ma’am, then Sheriff Hondo’ll most likely let him off with a few days in pokey.” said Mark Counter reassuringly. “None of these jaspers did us any harm, not that we gave them the chance to.”

“I’m surprised you were so merciful.” said the Doctor as the bandits were formed into a burial party. “Some of those men would have shot you if they thought they could.”

“Yes ma’am.” said Dusty. “But they didn’t. I know of good hands who took the wrong road once in their lives but got back on the trail. Some are the better for it. Happen a man doesn’t allow others to make mistakes, he’d better hope he never makes one himself, and I never met the man could say *that*.”

“Hmm.” said the Doctor, cocking her head to one side and eyeing Dusty thoughtfully. “You’re a more complicated man than I thought, Captain Fog.”

“My friends just call me ‘Dusty’, ma’am.” said the gunman. “Which same I’d admire to think we were.”

The Ysabel Kid arrived, fresh from showing Red Blaze where the sharpshooter’s remains were to be found. “We ready, Dusty? Got those damn fool rounds loaded?”

Dusty nodded. "Yeah, Lon. Mark, Doc- let's ride."

The Doctor grinned. "Oooh, I got a cowboy name!"

"Don't get too taken with it, ma'am." warned the Kid. "It's a loaner from a good man."

They rode out towards the scene of the previous night's encounter, the Doctor now riding a spare horse from the ranch's *remuda*. She proved to be a surprisingly adept horseman, though she refused to use spur, bit or whip. Once there, the Kid followed the creature's tracks until Dusty judged that they had reached a safe distance from where the burial party would soon be working.

The next part of the plan called for the utmost in trust and courage!
These were qualities Mark Counter possessed in abundance!

Dismounting and leaving his horse's reins to trail on the ground, Mark Counter drew his Peacemakers and in an act almost without precedent passed both to the Ysabel Kid once the latter was similarly afoot.

"Still don't see why I can't use my ole' Dragoon." grumbled the Kid, holding one gun in his right hand having stuck the other through his waist-band.

"That thumb-buster?" said Mark Counter, knowing that the Kid's badinage was intended to distract him from his impending peril. "I'll not trust my hide to an iron you can only fire once a week."

"Shuckens," protested the Kid as Mark advanced to his fate, "you can fire it *twice* happen you picks a week with two Sundays in it."

With deep trepidation but firm resolve, Dusty Fog watched as his friend walked ahead. Even he, a man famed for his skill with a gun in each hand, was on this occasion armed only with one in his right.

The reason for this was the unusual ammunition that gun carried!
It was ammunition never before put to the purpose for which it would now be used!

Having taken his station, and checked that the Doctor, her so-called Sonic Screwdriver in hand, was ready in position some feet behind him, Mark Counter showed all who cared listen the first reason why he had been chosen as the bait in Dusty's trap. Filling his prodigious lungs with all the air they could possibly hold, he cut loose with the loudest rebel yell heard since the War Between the States.

"Yeeeeeeahhhh! Texas Light!"

The cry would have carried for miles across the range, were it necessary. It rebounded from hills, rocks and trees and startled birds to flight and cattle to their heels. More, though, it stood as testament that here was a man among men, the finest example of the Yellow Rose of Texas as might be found in this county or any other.

It was an irresistible invitation to the predator Mark Counter sought to attract!
Within moments, that invitation was eagerly accepted!

The sound that heralded the creature's approach- this too having been previously masked by whatever arcane mechanism the primitive barrage of lead had disrupted- was for all the world like

that of a steam engine. For all that, the being that appeared on the horizon was more like a huge metal cougar. It came on with terrifying speed, armoured head to foot with overlapping plates of silvered metal that bore only the merest marks to suggest where bullets had struck home. Its four eyes glowed hotter than the fire-box of the most hard-pressed locomotive, and both its gaping, fang-lined maw and evilly-clawed limbs promised death of the most sudden and painful sort should they seize their victim.

Such was Mark Counter's stature that all four eyes were fixed solely on him!
This second of his virtues was followed swiftly by an exhibition of a third!

It was a matter of some debate amongst those who knew them as to which of Mark and Dusty was the better horseman. Both men, however, possessed the instinctive agility and exceptional reflexes required to safely weather being thrown from a truculent horse and evade the retribution it might attempt to extract with flailing hooves. Even so, Mark was forced to call upon all his courage and skill as the charging beast struck at him.

Struck, and missed!

Granted, the dodge lacked the elegance that might have been displayed by a Spanish *Matador* in similar peril, and indeed had such a worthy been present Rance Counter's eldest would gladly have deferred to him. But in effectiveness, it was unequalled. Mark threw himself aside at the last possible moment, contriving to land in a roll that brought him swiftly to his feet. Realising that it had failed in its initial assault, the creature dug its claws into the soft earth and came to an abrupt halt, meaning to turn and renew its attack.

That turn was fated never to be completed!

Raising their guns- or in the Kid's case, the first of those he had borrowed from Mark- the other two members of the Floating Outfit opened fire. At such close range neither would have needed to take careful aim, and even the Kid would have felt confident in firing by instinctive alignment with his unfamiliar weapon. But the nature of their ammunition made even this much accuracy unnecessary.

Each cartridge was loaded with almost twice the usual amount of powder!
But not a one of them also contained a bullet!

Their charge held back by nothing more than a small wax pellet, the overcharged blanks could still have been deadly at point-blank range. But it was not lethality for which Dusty Fog had tailored them. Rather, it was nothing less than sheer sound-and-fury. The terrible cacophony and awesome flash of detonation was near-overwhelming for Mark, who dropped to the ground with his hands over his ears.

To the keen senses of the predator the effect was far more pronounced!
So much so that it was rendered temporarily insensible!

Holding their guns in one hand, Dusty and the Kid contrived to use the heels of the others to slam back the hammers of the weapons as quickly as possible. Known as 'fanning the hammer' the technique produced a lamentable lack of accuracy but an unparalleled rate-of-fire that would not be bettered until the advent of fully automatic pistols. When their guns clicked empty- Dusty's some moments before the Kid's, due to the latter's comparative lack of expertise- each man simply leathered it and repeated the action with the other gun, the Kid drawing the second Peacemaker from his waist-band whilst Dusty merely shot with his left hand whilst working the hammer with his right. Meanwhile, despite wincing at the barrage, the Doctor ran forwards with her device, its

buzzing completely inaudible against the din.

“Almost got it!” she shouted into the moment between shots. “Just a few more- whoops!”

Despite being totally blinded and half-stunned, the creature retained enough sense of its predicament to swipe a long-taloned paw at the Doctor, who hopped back out of reach with an almost manic grin. “Bad kitty! Well, bad cybernetic killing machine, anyway.”

Seconds ticked away as the blonde worked, standing as close as she dared to the thrashing beast-which, thought Dusty Fog, was tolerable *too* close. But just as he would not have accepted advice on how to break in a truculent horse from a big-city banker, he would not offer it on a matter in which he had no knowledge. Even so, there was something about the Doctor's manner that unnerved him. During his military career he had served with several men who did not react to danger in the manner of a normal soldier. Rather than shy away from risk and peril, they actively sought it out, seeming to relish in the thrill of coming within inches of death.

Some would call such men courageous!

Others would call them insane!

Seeing the look upon the Doctor's face, Dusty found himself unable to judge which she might be!

Sane or not, though, it seemed the strange woman had been successful. With a final shudder and spasm of limbs that came within inches of eviscerating the Doctor, the creature collapsed onto its belly, the fire in its eyes fading.

“Is she.. dead?” asked Mark Counter, dusting himself down.

“Dead? I blooming well hope not!” said the Doctor. “Help me roll her over, quick!”

“Huh?” blinked Mark, but something in the woman's tone brooked no disagreement. Indeed, from the way all three men leapt to obey the command might as well have been given by 'Stonewall' Jackson himself. Swiftly, giving all due respect and a wide berth to the thing's claws, which were sharp enough to present a lethal danger even when inert, they turned it onto its back. If any of the three had expected the creature's underbelly to present a weakness it seemed they would be disappointed, for the armour continued with no apparent join or seam.

And yet exposing such a weakness was exactly the Doctor's intention!

Swiftly, her fingers stabbed out at apparently featureless metal, causing a protrusion no more than two inches square to emerge from the surface. This shape was decorated with a grid of twisted, evil-looking symbols, the sight of which caused the woman to issue an annoyed grunt.

“Typical! It's only a Mark 6!”

Her attitude was one of irritation rather than concern, and Dusty felt safe enough to venture a question. “Is that bad, ma'am?”

“Bad?” laughed the Doctor. “Not really. It just means I wasted *three weeks* on Chiropteras IV getting hold of the access codes for the Mark 7.” Her fingers flashed across the panel, pressing the first four symbols in succession. “Bit of a Friday-job, the security on the Mark 6. They set all the combinations to 1-2-3-4 and hardly anyone ever bothers to change them. Ah, that's got it!”

With a hiss of escaping air and a gout of milky-white fluid, the creature's belly split down the

middle, exposing a fat, fleshy sac. “Quick!” said the Doctor, turning to the Kid. “Hand me your knife!”

There were few demands a man, or even woman, could make of the Ysabel Kid that could possibly be worse received, and Dusty knew that even the Doctor's affability and gender would be unlikely to swing the argument. “Ma'am?” he said, before the Kid could refuse, “If there's something wants cutting, Lon's the man to do it.”

The Doctor looked from one man to the other and made a visible decision to make a tactical retreat. “All right, all right! Just stop mucking about and cut this open- carefully! Don't damage what's inside!”

Biting down the retort that not only was he not 'mucking about', he wouldn't know how to even if the urge should take him, the Kid did as he was bid. Proving the truth of Dusty's word with an expert, clean cut, he hopped back with a started oath as a limp, but undeniably human, arm flopped out of the incision.

“There she is!” announced the Doctor, happily. She reached for the wrist of the arm, feeling its pulse, and then turned to Mark. “Oh yeah, little thing- your clothes are probably going to get a bit messed up. Sorry!”

In this, the Doctor made the mistake made by many before her of thinking Mark Counter to be the sort of man whose pride in his appearance outweighed other concerns. Not offended in the least by the error, the cowhand squatted down next to the Doctor and nodded. “*Muy bueno*, ma'am. What's the chore?”

“Oh! Er, well, in a moment I'm going to get this girl out of here, and then I need you to pick her up and run away as fast as you can, yeah?”

“Why?” said Dusty, voicing the question that entered all three heads. “What's going to happen?”

The Doctor shrugged, producing her buzzing device again and thrusting it into the sac. “Maybe nothing. But probably, about thirty seconds after I disconnect her, the combat-shell will self-destruct. We'll know for sure because-”

With a torrent of the white fluid and a tangle of loose, limp limbs, the metal shell suddenly surrendered its prisoner to the custody of the O.D. Connected. Almost immediately, the eyes of the beast lit up red and the whole began to emit a strident, repetitive sound that increased rapidly in both pitch and volume.

“-it'll do that.” finished the Doctor, bundling the woman's body into Mark's arms. “Now when I say run, run-RUN!”

Following the instinct of cow-hands everywhere when forced to the retreat, the Floating Outfit took to their heels and headed straight for their horses. Clicking his tongue, the Kid summoned his horse to his side and leapt on to it, reaching down to pluck Mark's burden from him. The rest of them had just reached their own mounts when an ear-splitting detonation shook the ground beneath their hurrying feet, seeming to possess no less force than the firing of a border-fort's magazine. As much veterans of gun-play as their masters, the horses stood firm, though the Doctor's shied a little until she took its rein and whispered urgently to it. They looked back to see only a smoking crater, above which small fragments of metal pattered down.

“Hoo-eee!” exclaimed Mark Counter. “That was a tolerable furious critter!”

The Ysabel Kid, meanwhile, was doing his level best to keep his charge secure on the back of his horse, despite her body being slippery with the pale liquid and clad only in the very briefest of underclothes. No small amount of it had coated his back, and more still clung to Mark's clothing. “Hell's fire! What in tarnation is this stuff?”

“Oh, just amniotic fluid, nothing to worry about.” said the Doctor, airily. “I mean, sure, it's all sticky and white and goopy and after an hour or two it'll probably smell really, *really* horrible, but it's basically harmless.”

“Don't worry, Lon.” said Mark with a chuckle. “Reckon we're both about due a bath anyway, though I fear to guess what Betty'll say happen she sees us like this.”

“Who is she, ma'am?” asked Dusty, quietly. “Was it her killed those men? Happen it was, there's a reckoning to be had.”

“Her?” said the Doctor. “Oh no, she didn't do it. She was only there as part of the harvesting system for the human genetic material. Oh, that and the Thresher might have been using a bit of her brain for extra processing. Oh yeah, and it used her digestive system to generate power. But she won't have known anything about it. Mind you, she'll have some pretty strange dreams for a while after this once I get her home.”

9: Homecomings.

Two days after the strange events surrounding Betty Hardin's supposed 'kidnapping', Dusty Fog ate a late supper on the veranda of the O.D. Connected Ranch. The woman that the Doctor had rescued had been entrusted to the gentle care of Betty Hardin and Tommy Okasi, and now slept in a guest bedroom. She had been washed and dressed more appropriately, but had neither spoken nor eaten, accepting only water. The Doctor had warned that this was likely to be the case until her constitution had adapted back to being free of the metal shell that had both imprisoned and sustained her.

For her own part, the blonde had picked a fresh horse and swiftly departed after paying brief compliments to her 'fellow' Betty and Ole Devil. The General, in particular, had reacted oddly stiffly to her presence and had explained why to Dusty after she left, promising to return with transport for the girl.

“She reminds me of several stories I've heard, Dusty.” the General had said by way of some explanation. “Both before and during the War- tales of a mysterious visitor who knew things no man could, and took charge of men who he'd no right to. But those stories all tell of a man- a man who was sometimes no friend to the Southron cause.”

“I don't think she cares much for causes, Sir.” Dusty had replied. “In fact, happen she arrived during a shooting war she'd most likely just shout at everyone to stop it.”

The General had just nodded. “I'll tell you this, Dusty. She may look like an innocent lamb, but those are a wolf's eyes. She's seen war, all right, and war from both sides of the victory.”

Dusty had thought on those words, and found them to ring true. General Jackson Baines Hardin was known as an excellent judge of character and had not lost his sense with his mobility. Night was falling, and with the re-arranged drive set to begin at dawn most of the hands had turned in. He was

about to follow when he heard a curious sound. It was perhaps that of something heavy being dragged across rough ground, or the flat of a knife being drawn across a piano string. He was on his feet, guns in hand, when the source of the sound became clear as something appeared in front of the ranch. Seeming to fade in and out of his vision, but becoming clearer by the moment, the shape finally resolved into a large, blue box, possessing panels that resembled windows and topped, incongruously, by a flashing lantern. A sign on the top of the box proclaimed "POLICE, PUBLIC CALL BOX", suggesting that some form of peace officer might be involved.

No lawman of Dusty's experience possessed any such thing!
Nor could he fathom how it might have seemingly appeared from thin air!

Holstering his left gun, Dusty took the precaution of pinching himself, in case he had dozed off on the chair and were dreaming. The test proved negative, but before he could take further measures the door set into the box swung open, and a procession of three figures emerged.

Each was if anything more surprising than the last!

First came the Doctor, a wide grin of satisfaction on her face. "Smashed it! On only the third try, too!"

She patted the side of the box affectionately as a man might the flank of a well-behaved horse. Dusty was too surprised by the second and third figures to emerge from the doorway to make any reply. Next to appear, in quick succession, were an attractive woman with striking, intelligent features and red hair, and a horse. Both were instantly recognisable to Dusty, the former being Belle Boyd, known- though rarely by sight- as the Rebel Spy, and the latter being the Doctor's borrowed mount.

"Oh, hello Dusty!" said the Doctor, as if there were nothing at all strange about the circumstances. "I've come to take Hedelana home."

"Yes ma'am." said Dusty, making the only guess possible as to who she meant. "She's asleep inside the house, but-"

"Not now, she isn't." chuckled Belle. "You were right, Doctor."

Dusty turned to see that the rescued woman had appeared on the threshold, dressed only in the long nightgown Betty had given her. The Rebel Spy hurried forward to take her by the arm, handing the horse's reins to Dusty.

"It's the sound, you see." said the Doctor. "I've helped her people enough times that they've come to recognise it. I told Belle that she'd hear it and come out."

"You know Belle, ma'am?" said Dusty, deciding to stick to simple topics of conversation.

The Doctor nodded. "We met yesterday. When I got back to where I'd left the TARDIS she was trying to pick the lock."

"I'd been trying on-and-off for a dad-blasted week!" said Belle with mock irritation. "That lock is a tolerable hell-spawn, it keeps letting you think its opening and then it doesn't."

"She does that." admitted the Doctor. "Anyway I felt a bit sorry for her, so I let her see what was inside and gave her a lift. Brought your horse back, too, just like I promised, yeah?"

Dusty was still looking at the horse, and at the box which it appeared to have come out of. His keen mind was trying to imagine the scene within and come up with any scenario in which all three would comfortably fit, and failing badly. Seeing the look on his face, Belle whispered to him as she passed.

“I know, it's strange, Dusty. It's bigger on the inside than the outside!”

She carried on past him to the doorway and entered, and Dusty caught a glimpse of a room within that was considerably larger than the General's study. He blinked, and rubbed his tired eyes.

“Don't worry, you're not dreaming.” chuckled the Doctor. “Mind you, nobody's going to believe you if you tell them what happened.”

“Happen you're right about that, ma'am.” agreed Dusty. “You have time for some chow?”

The Doctor shook her head. “Not really. I've got to get Belle to Washington by tomorrow morning. Actually that's not quite true, I could leave here next week and still get her there in time, but doing that sort of thing tends to sort of... muck things up, yeah? Best not.”

His sense of any understanding of the situation having yelled 'calf rope' some time ago, Dusty merely nodded. Nevertheless, there was something he had to know. “Yes, ma'am. But can I ask you a question?”

“You just did.” laughed the Doctor. “Sorry, that joke's probably older than me. I can't tell you who's going to win the super-bowl or what companies to buy stocks in, or anything like that, though. That sort of thing's just as bad as cheating to hang about here would be, yeah? Still, you can *ask*.”

Dusty nodded, though he had no idea what a 'super-bowl' might be. “Do you happen to know of a woman called Vaza?”

The Doctor cocked her head to one side. “Er.. no. Don't think so. I mean, I've met a lot of people- lots and *lots*- but I don't remember that name in particular. Why do you ask? She doesn't sound like she'd be.. from around here.”

“She wasn't.” said Dusty, and quickly recounted the tale of his meeting with the woman Vaza and her companions, who had left him healed from a bullet-wound in the head and seemingly disappeared into thin air.

“I wondered if I'd dreamt it all.” he said. “But now, meeting you and seeing this.. contraption I'm not so sure. I'd just admire to know if she was all right- the last I remember seeing of her, she was hurt at least as bad as me.”

The Doctor looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, I know of quite a few species who like to visit Earth from time-to-time, so it's certainly possible that they were from... somewhere else. You'd be amazed how many different species look enough like humans to get away with it, you're like the vanilla of bio-templates. Anyway, a people advanced enough to do what they did should've had no trouble healing themselves, so I'm sure Vaza's fine- and don't worry, if there're any other aliens out there trying to make trouble, I'll know. And I always stop them. You hear that?” she suddenly shouted into the night sky. “I'll know! And I'll stop you!”

There was no response, other than the neighing of disturbed horses and some sounds from within

the house that suggested several of the occupants had been stirred from their beds by the sudden outburst. "Whoops! Sorry, flair for the dramatic, sometimes gets me in a bit of trouble. Best be off, thanks for everything, brought your horse back, bye!"

She hurried back through the door of the box, and Dusty watched as it began to fade away, accompanied by the same sound as before. Just as it completely disappeared, Mark Counter and the Kid arrived on the veranda behind him, the former wearing only his levis and the latter fully-dressed, as if he had slept that way. Both were, of course, armed.

"Dusty!" said Mark. "What in tarnation-?"

Dusty Fog gestured to the horse. "Doc swung by to bring the horse back and take our guest home. Get back to bed, both of you, we've a drive tomorrow."

Exchanging a confused glance, the two men reluctantly did as they were bid, doing their best to explain to the others stirring in the house that there was no cause for concern. Dusty took the horse over to the stable and saw to it, making sure it was fed, watered and comfortable before turning in himself. He stepped back outside, and looked up at the star-filled sky.

Yes, the world was full of many things a man could never hope to understand. But he was content to live his own life and ride his own range, and no man could ask for more than that.