

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## The Man in the Black Hat

From where the boy's wagon was parked, Laramie Peak, which from every other perspective appeared in some degree or another triangular, had a rounded aspect suggesting the crown of a tall, black hat. The wagon stood braced on the summit of a low hill rising from a rolling plain dotted with pale stones and dark clumps of dwarf pine stunted by the thin soil and twisted by the unobstructed wind, with a view extending fully 360 degrees around the distant horizon within whose circle Old Man Redmond's cattle grazed with their heads pointing all in the same direction. On one side of the bunk wagon was a buckboard filled with hay to which a trailing snub rope was tied by one end, on the other, a stack of split pine and cedar wood with a bright-edged ax leaning against it and surrounded by a ring of fresh yellow woodchips. A path, scarcely more than a scratch on the unimpressible ground, wound out of nowhere from the direction of Laramie Peak, uphill between the rocks to the door of the wagon and past it, headed down again into a green swale where a scattering of the brilliant tiny prairie flowers was already fading.

Iron hooves rang out in the trail as the boy rode up to the buckboard where he dismounted, attached the snap end of the rope to the halter, pulled down the saddle and double blankets, and threw them into the wagon box with the hay. Then he went on to the bunkwagon and pushed in the door, for which there was no key and probably never had been any. He removed his soiled, clay-colored Stetson with the hawk feather stuck into the band and the two bullet holes through the crown and dropped it on the bedroll spread on the bunk bed extending the width of the wagon below the slot window cut into the rear wall. Finally, he reached the whiskey bottle from the cupboard above the bed, unscrewed the top, and took a long drink. "I wish to hell I had me a dog, anyways," the boy said aloud. He had come up short five more animals today, two cow-calf pairs and a yearling heifer.

Over the past three-and-a-half weeks, more than a half-dozen cattle had vanished from the herd, always, so far as the

boy could ascertain, overnight. The evening following the first disappearance, he'd taken his horse, bedroll, and rifle and spent the night a couple of miles out from camp at the periphery of the herd, riding among the silent animals until past midnight and sleeping out on the ground with the hobbled horse close by him. Five days later, when Old Man Redmond drove out from McFadden to resupply the camp, the boy had told him about the missing cattle. He'd figured the rancher would be mad as hell, but instead, something strange had happened. Redmond had gone pale under his 60-odd-year-old tan. Then, in a voice unlike his natural one and shaking his withered arm in the boy's face, he'd given him a warning: "Forget about them cows now, if you know what's good for you." Finally, he'd dumped the supplies on the ground beside the foldaway steps at the front of the wagon and driven away in his beat-up Model A Ford pickup without saying another word, never stopping among the herd to have a look around for himself. The boy watched the truck disappear out of sight among the rocks and small trees. Then he shook his head, took a pinch of chew from the tin in his shirt pocket, and sat in the open door of the wagon, looking away across the prairie toward the black high-crowned bulk of Laramie Peak. "First I ever knew of a cattleman telling his rider to just forget about the damn cows," he told the horse, standing with its eyes shut and one hoof lifted alongside the buckboard.

Not a week later he was missing two more animals, and when, a couple of days after that, the range detective hired by the Grange rode into camp, he'd told him about it, ignoring Old Man Redmond's order, or advice—whichever it was. The boy had done this for two reasons. One, he felt his job demanded it. Two, Redmond was known to be ailing from a wasting disease the doctors seemed unable to cure and was not expected to live many years more. Aside from the shabby house and tilting outbuildings, plus the relatively little land he held in McFadden, the only property his daughter Andrea stood to inherit from her widowed father were the whiteface



cattle the boy had made a living herding the past two summers. Andrea Redmond was 15 years old, a year younger than himself, and very pretty, dark-haired with a high complexion and straight nose like an Indian (though her mother had been a white woman), green eyes with gold lights in them, and a figure like a drawing in the Ladies' Hosiery section of the Sears & Roebuck catalogue. Old Man Redmond, he felt, had no more use for him than he had for anyone else—he was widely suspected of having killed a man, some said an Indian, a dozen or so years before—but dead men aren't consulted in their daughter's choice of a husband. Thus the boy had no intention to let the Redmond herd waste down to nothing, along with its owner, at the hands of the kind of two-bit rustlers that still existed in the country. Just three nights after his conversation with the range detective, he received the first visit from the midnight horsebacker.

He was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of hooves, which he took at first for the horse having untied itself from the snubbing rope. From the position of the moon, which was approaching the full, he judged the time at around one o'clock. The sound persisted, and he recognized it now for the guided purposeful gait of a horse under saddle coming along the trail toward camp, its hooves ringing out on the hard clay. Instantly, the boy rolled in the sleeping sack to grab the .30-30 lying on the floor beside the bunk bed. Then he sat up on the bed, with his legs still inside the bag and the rifle cocked, staring through the slotted window and listening as the hoof-falls drew closer until they seemed to be just beyond the door. "Why don't the horse nicker?" he wondered, thinking of the mare snubbed close to the buckboard not 20 feet away. The hooves quit, and the

following silence to him was more profound than the moonlight that seemed its visual manifestation. Then, through the window, a hat appeared, tall, high-crowned, and very black in the moonlight, nothing of a face apparent beneath it but just the dark shadow cast by the forward brim. The hat vanished past the window as quickly as it had appeared there, and instantly afterward a series of sharp raps sounded against the unlocked door of the wagon: one, two, three.

The boy brought the gun up to his shoulder and inserted his finger inside the trigger guard. In the half-dark, he could not see to align the steel sights, but at such range—he told himself—close aim was unnecessary. The knocking—measured, insistent, commanding—came again, and the boy thought to pull the trigger, but did not. Instead, he remained as he was, half in and half out of the bedroll, holding the gun leveled at the door and keeping his eyes on the little window. After an hour or more, he withdrew his legs from the sack and, with the gun still grasped in his right hand and moving as quietly as he could, fixed an iron crowbar against the door. Useless as a doorbar, it would serve at least to waken him if an intruder attempted to break in. Then he returned to the bunk bed and lay in the sleeping sack with the gun across his chest until first light showed through the windows, and the boy fell asleep at last.

In the morning, he searched for tracks outside the wagon and found none, excepting those made by the mare whose double-ought shoes left a faint but distinctive print in the nearly imprintable clay. The boy made himself a breakfast of coffee, pancakes, and bacon cut thick with the bristles left in the rind. Then he saddled up and rode out for a look at the cows, which had drawn together in a drainage where a thread of water still ran after the droughty spring. He didn't need to count them all to tell the cow with the spotted rump and her calf were gone from the herd, but he went ahead and finished anyway.

Leaving the cattle to mill along the banks of the wash, the boy put his spurs to the mare and went loping off across country in the opposite direction from camp. After he'd ridden ten or twelve miles, he came to a narrow canyon thickly wooded in the bottom, where he tied up in a grove of cottonwood trees and climbed up out of the canyon to the washboard road going on to McFadden.

He hitched a ride into town with an out-of-work oilpatch roughneck from Casper, got out in front of the saloon, and walked around to the pool hall in back. Mike Simpson was in the middle of a game when the boy showed up, but he apologized to his partner and racked his stick when he learned what was wanted of him. Though two years older and a man already, Mike had been his best friend going on three years now. The two drove together in Mike's Chevy coupe as far as the canyon, where the boy untied the mare and rode hell-bent-for-leather across country, beating the Chevy into camp by nearly a quarter of an hour.

By the time he'd got the cattle together again, it was early evening and time for supper. The boy sliced salt pork into a pan of beans and put the coffeepot on, while Mike looked to the weapons. Besides the .30-30, they had Mike's 12-gauge Remington shotgun, plus plenty of ammunition for both guns. They ate without finding much to say to each other and sat afterward outside the wagon to smoke as the prairie swales filled with shadow and the stars pointed between the gleaming crowns of thunderheads dissipating in an ultraviolet sky. "From here, the Peak looks just exactly like somebody's old black Stetson," Mike observed.

Around ten, they set the crowbar against the door, extinguished the kerosene lantern, and turned in, the boy on the bunk bed, Mike taking the cot kept on hand to offer company. He lay down with the shotgun alongside him and went out like a light, as though expecting to sleep straight through till morning. The boy lay for a while after that, listening to the snoring and trying to keep awake, before he, too, fell asleep.

Then he was awake, all at once and all over, gazing at the oblong of moon-chalked sky and hearing the steady deliberate hoofbeat in the trail. The boy slipped like a snake from the bag, took Mike by the shoulder, and shook him gently awake, ready to cover his mouth with his hand if need be. "He's coming!" he said in a fierce whisper. "Don't shoot less'n he comes at us through the door!"

They sat together at the edge of the bunk bed, holding the guns on the door and listening to the hoof-falls approach the wagon. The sound quit suddenly and was followed by a silence unbroken by the creak of leather at the dismount. "There it is!" Mike hissed, and, in the instant, the boy saw it too, the tall black hat

in silhouette against the pale sky at the horizon, pale as the face that belonged beneath the hat but wasn't. The hat disappeared from the window as suddenly as it had come, and right away the knocking started: Three hard, spaced raps that struck the boy as being as much of a communication as they were a request.

Mike fired with both barrels, the muzzle flashes illuminating the room like lightning as the Number 8 shot ripped through the door panels, letting in tears and splinters of moonshine from the night outside. Numbed by the crashing shots, their nostrils pricking from the scent of cordite, the two of them sat frozen on the bed.

"You killed him," the boy, speaking in a dull voice, said finally.

"I never heard him holler." Mike's voice, though stronger, was shaky.

"It ain't no way you could've missed. Better go see how bad hurt he is."

"In the morning I will. I ain't opening that door to Jesus Christ Himself before sunup. If he's still alive . . . well, we'll just have to see, then."

In the morning, they opened the shattered door to find nothing; no body, blood, nor tracks, human or animal. Mike refused the boy's offer of breakfast and left at once for town in the Chevy with his gun. The boy stayed on the range until late September, but the man in the black hat did not visit the camp again and the herd remained intact except for several calves killed by coyotes. By fall, Old Man Redmond's wasting disease was much worse; he died the following January, called by the Sioux Indians the Moon of Frost in the Lodge. Six months after Old Man Redmond's death, the boy and Andrea were married and moved out from town with the cattle into a cabin they built at the edge of the pine woods in the shadow of Laramie Peak. The boy told the story of the man in the black hat to no one except for his wife, but he thought about it off and on, for years to come. After that, he didn't think about it at all anymore. <C>

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