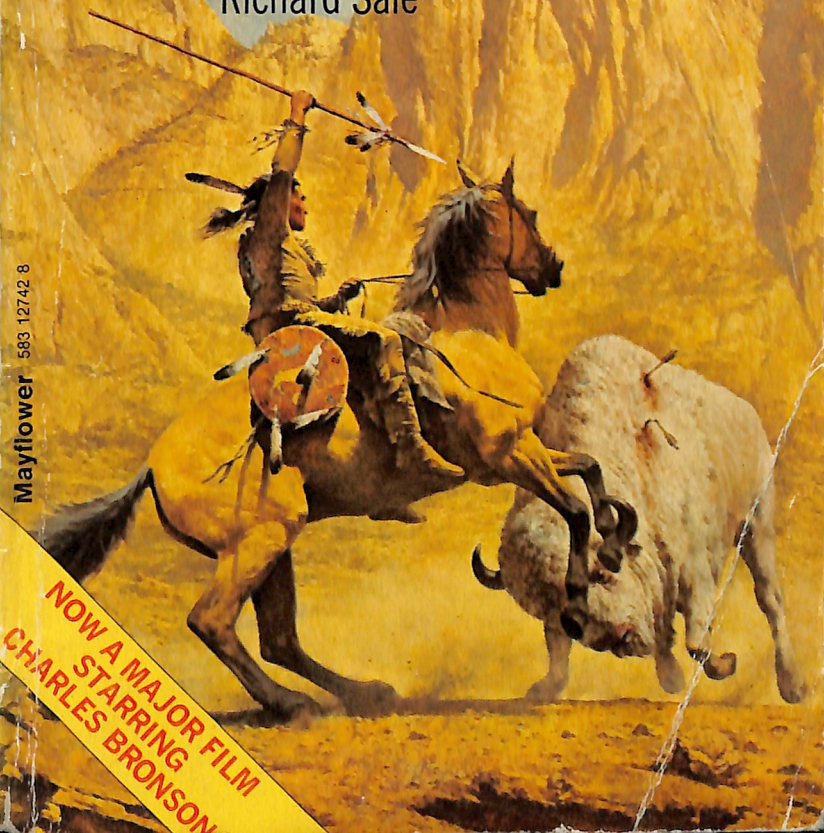


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Richard Sale

# The White Buffalo

Mayflower

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Special thanks to Mari Sandoz and Richard O'Connor, who  
saved me a long and twisted trail on the way back.

— R. S.

for  
IRMA FOSTER SALE  
Who is worth more than a  
thousand ponies

Most of this story is fact. As for the rest – who will ever know? The two hunters – red and white – who lived it have long since lost their shadows and gone to earth in that never-land known as the Old West, where legend was truer than truth.

– R. S.



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A white buffalo – so great a rarity that even the Great Spirit must have been surprised when one was born.

– E. DOUGLAS BRANCH  
*The Hunting of the Buffalo*

ONE

# White Man



All of this happened a long time ago, in September of 'seventy-four.

The Powder River country had always been sudden, but usually the Sioux summer lingered into early autumn, giving the wild tribes fair weather for the last buffalo hunt before winter forced the herds south. Not so this year. At or about midnight of the thirteenth a howling williwaw swept out of the north and blew parts of Montana down the Bozeman Trail, clear to the ponderosas of the Black Hills. It was the worst storm in many years. It quickly churned Wyoming Territory into a cold mire, turning the Bozeman into a perilous washboard, whipped by wild winds, heavy with Canadian cold.

It was no good night to be wayfaring, but James Butler Otis – not his real name – did not mind at all. The din and dangers of the storm would serve to keep both him and the stage driver awake, a necessity in both cases.

Earlier, before the cowed cedars bent half double and .50 caliber hailstones rattled on the roof like spent buckshot, James Otis had been compelled to loose his own brand of lightning. He had sensed the Bozeman Bonebreaker (which bruised travelers called the ramshackle Concord) drawing to a halt. When it stopped, Otis peered out cautiously and found the six mules indolently grazing on the sparse grama grass, which meant that the driver, Abel Pinkney, had passed out. Normally it was safer to give the mules their head. They knew the trail better and they were sober. But grazing in Oglala land, even in the dead of night, was a good way to hang your hair on a Lacota lance.

Annoyed at the driver's carelessness, James Otis had unthonged the side flap and leaned out, unholstering one of the two revolvers from his sash. He reached high, laying the barrel close to Mr. Pinkney's right ear, and fired an echoing blast.

Mr. Pinkney sobered sharply as he tugged the traces taut to restrain the terrified animals, which had no taste for thunderclaps. He cursed them savagely, threatening them with the same wrath which was slashing down around them. He leaned his right foot heavily on the rusty brake, locking the rear wheels to slow the critters as they careened down the gullies, after which he fought the reins brutally to keep them from galloping up the steep knolls. He knew they would drop dead if given a free hand. He wanted them to have something left, a fourth wind to get them to their destination, a new settlement called Fetterman.

James Otis – he had borrowed the alias surname from his paternal grandfather – sat alert in the yawning coach, relieved that the rugged passage had prevented him from sleeping. He could no longer afford to risk a dream. He straddled the rear seats on the flint-hard cushions opposite the other two passengers, a man and a woman.

The man had introduced himself as Winfred Coxy back in the ticket office when they all bought passage. Otis had loathed him instantly. An obvious pimp and panderer, red-nosed and arrogant, he was plump of belly and foxy of eye. Gaudily clad in a black checked suit that was too busy to show the stains which soiled it, he drank and stank of pilgrim whiskey.

The woman's name was Cassie Ollinger. She had long ago sold her modest graces for golden laces; even as a scarlet sister she was all used up. In the lightning flares, he could see her rheumy nose glowing from ardent spirits. She snored in a drunken coma despite the pummeling of the Bone-breaker. Her sodden body was caged in a satin Black Crook gown, but she had had to unhook it around her breasts so that the eased stays would leave her room to breathe.

Otis dismissed her from his thoughts and wondered if the groaning white-oak frames of the stage were going to stand the roughing.

It was hard to believe that the Bozeman had once been a gentle buffalo road which the vast herds had cut during their migrations. But the years had raked it into a rugged hellway – the traffic of Indian travaux, of Army ambulances, of plow-

men's Conestogas, of hide hunters' bull wains. It was a far cry from the shortcut that Jack Bozeman had discovered in 'sixty-two. But one thing had remained the same. It had never been made safe.

Bozeman had proven that himself by leaving his scalp with the Blackfeet, some miles north. And had not Red Cloud slaughtered an entire United States force here and burned its forts in 'sixty-seven?

Even on this brawling September night the word was bad : Crazy Horse was carrying the war pipe to the *Ocheti Shakowan*, the Seven Council Fires of the Lacotas. To Spotted Tail of the Brulés. To Sitting Bull of the Uncpapas. (And even to Two Moon of the Northern Cheyennes.) It would not be a pretty spring.

This storm is God's benison, Otis thought, clinging to his strap while replying 'What's that?' to Coxy's shouted attempt at conversation.

'I said, "Do you think them bastard redbellies'll draw chips in the game tonight?"'

Otis shook his head during a flash and looked away from this unpleasant brassbinder with his whiskey stink. Infernal fool, didn't he know anything? No sane Indian would be 'out' in such weather. The Oglala Arabs put sacred store in such totems as thunder and lightning. They would be huddled in their leather lodges, around a small, snug fire, making medicine to the elements and chanting to the Great Spirit to destroy the white ones and keep safe this last heartland of the Sioux.

'Bugger this October weather in September!' Coxy suddenly bawled as he tried to bring his bottle of ruckus juice to his lips, only to have a hard bounce spill a splash on his dirty lapel. 'Son-of-a-bitch it to Hell-and-back on a round trip!'

'You have a wicked mouth,' James Otis said in a lull.

Coxy gaped in astonishment. 'What?'

'There is a lady at hand.'

'You mean *her*?'

'Any more hard tongue and you will have to deal with me,' Otis said.

Coxy quickly swigged a heady draft of his spirits and as he felt the heat course through him, he flashed Otis a smile of contempt in the safe darkness. This meat was tender from horn to hocks; no easier mark had presented itself in many a long week. Nor was Coxy impressed by the glitter of the two butt-facing revolvers. All these easterners were heavy with weapons when they crossed the wide Missouri, but the most they ever hit on a clumsy draw was their own boot. As far back as the ticket cage, Coxy had informed Cassie Ollinger that he intended to waylay Mr. Otis. That was just after Otis had paid his fare with a pair of double eagles, real Carson City Liberty heads. It had been a time since Coxy had seen gold coins in Cheyenne.

'He'll be easy pickings,' Coxy had told Cassie. 'He has the look of wherewithal and he creaks like a new saddle.'

'He has the look of a cheap funeral,' Cassie said wisely.

'Fish in a barrel, Miss Cassie. We wait till he's snoozing, and I slip him the toothpick, swipe the money belt and pitch him out in redbird country.'

Otis, a handsome man, wore a flat, wide-brimmed black sombrero, black frock coat, its tails agleam with satin; gaily flowered brocade vest and broad gun-filled scarlet sash around his lean belly. He was solidly broad-shouldered though slim-hipped, his skin fair, his jaw firm, his nose aquiline. The only oddities were the thick blue-tinted sun goggles he wore in daylight hours and the paler hue of his upper lip where he had shaved off his blond mustaches.

'My apologies, Mr. Otis,' Coxy said through his never-ceasing smile.

James Otis said nothing.

'I'd admire for you to pop a cork with me,' Coxy asked, extending his bottle, shaped like a log cabin. 'Just a nip of tonic to keep off the chill.'

Otis flipped a hand in rejection when lightning next flared.

'Just trying to be friendly,' Coxy said, and smiled hostilely through another mouthful. Then he stowed the bottle and leaned back to sleep it off, the smile fading swiftly. There was still plenty of storm and time. He would pick his fuss with Mr. Otis later. He wondered how much gold the green-

horn had aboard. He hoped enough so that he and Cassie could enjoy a breakfast and bottle before she laid out to work.

James Otis clung to his strap and watched Coxy carefully while the stage thudded and clattered incessantly. But at least the nerve-wracking squeak of the leather thorough-braces had vanished, soaked into silence as the rain drenched the straps.

James Otis sprang out of sleep to the sound of gunfire and the smell of smoke.

(The white buffalo had come again!)

He looked down and found his hands full of pistols. They were beautiful guns, brightly silver-plated, with exquisite hand-carved ivory handles. They were Army Colts, Model 1860, customized from the old cap-and-ball cylinder to accept the new metallic center-fire Winchester .44-caliber cartridge. They had also been transformed into self-cockers. The weapons had been presented to him by the Vice President of the United States, back when he was just plain Senator Henry Wilson.

After an empty moment, James Otis realized that he had not fired the guns, nor was it gunsmoke that tickled his nose. It was brimstone that reeked in the night, and the blast had been from a blinding bolt which split a cottonwood fifty feet away from the coach, the poor mules skittering madly away from the tingle of the close electricity and earsplitting thunder.

Nevertheless, the Colts should not have been in his hands, the hammers kinked, the barrels leveled, the triggers tight under his forefingers. He found his jaws locked, sensed his eyes open-shutter wide in the darkness, found his face adrip with cold rain and hot sweat. He was awed that he could have dropped off in such a storm and clatter, but indeed he had, and the guns in his hands – not the first time – had proved that it was dangerous to sleep.

As it surely was, for when another flash weirdly whitened the interior, he discovered Mr. Coxy halfway across the narrow aisle, frozen in his tracks, left hand hanging to the roof

ribs to steady himself, right hand gripping an Arkansas hog-sticker nine inches long, held in palm for an undercut slip-in. In the brief brightness, Otis caught Coxy's eyes, bulging in terror, unmoving in their moment of truth.

'Let it go,' Otis said.

Coxy could not hear him over the wind roar, but the slight movement of the left gun barrel was eloquent. The knife fell to the oaken puncheons, where the glittering blade thrilled briefly.

Up on the box Mr. Pinkney had finally jaw-broken the mules to a trot as the stage mounted another of the unending rises and slowed before going over the rim for the slithery downhill run.

'Out,' Otis said.

Winfred Coxy was quite prepared to be shot dead at being caught in the act, but he quickly babbled in childish terror at the idea of being set afoot in Red Cloud's big open. Not that he was completely unarmed. In his vest pocket he carried the Tramp's Terror—a four-barrel Sharps pepperbox Model 1859. It was a stingy little gun that housed four .22-caliber rimfire shorts, not exactly the sort of bullet you would use on an Indian or a grizzly bear. It was a chippy's weapon, which he had taken from Cassie Ollinger, who was inclined to get reckless with it when Under the Influence. He wished emptily he had used it on Otis instead of the knife.

Using the heel of his black calfskin boot, James Otis unlatched the left door and when the gale whipped it open, he used his right toe to lift Coxy cleanly out into the hostile night. Coxy's scream was barely hearable as he dove headlong into the muck. By then the Concord had topped the ridge and was coasting over, gaining speed perilously as Mr. Pinkney vainly tried to fetch up the mules and recapture the merry jingle of the trace chains as they slackened.

'*Amba washtay*,' Otis said in the Sioux tongue. 'Goodbye.'

There had been no compassion in his setting Coxy out instead of shooting him, only a sense of neatness.

Coxy was just as dead either way. If he survived the night, some Indian would sight him in the clearing of the storm

and would play away the day with him until he would be glad to go down with the sun.

But Otis felt certain that Coxy would be cold meat long before that. A city mongrel, he would seek stupid shelter under the biggest conifers, where lightning would quickly curl his toes. (Forty-eight hours later on the return trip from Fetterman to Cheyenne, Mr. Pinkney found Coxy black and stiff against a split pine, charred so well done that even the buzzards had left him in one piece.)

James Otis dexterously restored his revolvers to his sash and leaned back, not even breathless. After a thoughtful moment he removed both guns and stowed them deep in the carpetbag beside him. He did this out of regard for the woman across the aisle from him. His nightmare had become dangerous.

\* \* \*

Ten days earlier James Otis had lolled on a bench under a gas lamp in Market Square, Kansas City, gloomily wondering up his future.

At thirty-seven he was far too old to be a living gunfighter and much too young to be suffering the cruel rheumatism which infected his old wounds: the bullet holes in each shoulder, the livid scar on his left arm from the cinnamon bear he had fought in Raton Pass, the horrid cavity in his right hip where he had taken the full bite of a Cheyenne war lance. Much too young for this fading eyesight which hung constant mists over his world. 'Deep Serene,' one doctor had called it, a form of amaurosis which decayed the optic nerve. But most doctors were agreed that it was gonorrheal ophthalmia, about which they could do nothing. It was ironic to be blighted by the complaint which made boys men. No Indian fighter was worth his salt until he had caught his first 'cold-in-the-pants'. It made Otis bitter as buffalo gall to have to wear the blue-tinted sun goggles which prevented normal daylight from glaring him blind. Certainly a hazard to a man who dealt in split seconds.

He sat the bench wearily, wondering how it had all happened so fast, all in the year of 'seventy-three, a rotten year

all around. The Great Panic had ridden like a pale horse over the eastern seaboard and broken the spine of the money marts. Up in the Dakotas the Northern Pacific had stopped dead-in-tracks at a camp of hovels called Bismarck (and would not lay another inch of rail until 'seventy-eight!). Otis found himself money-bound, and joined up with Buffalo Bill Cody to 'tread the boards'. They were blood brothers. To this day Friend Cody still cherished the Cheyenne lance which Otis gave him after it had nearly slaughtered him.

They went east to appear in a ridiculous melodrama by Ned Buntline called *Scouts of the Prairie* and from the beginning, though the show itself was a success, it had proved a calamity to Otis. He found himself lampooning his own name and his own gun-won fame, then gambling away his wages and swilling whiskey to wipe out his acute humiliation.

But here too, on Market Square, the world had changed. Times were hard and hard money was tight. There was little to be borrowed and no friends to borrow it from. His total roll was \$526, a scant stake to a man who more than once had bet ten times the sum on one card at faro.

His dodgy eyesight daunted him from taking up marshaling again, and even so, the law had come to Kansas along with the railroads. He was too old to snake-whip six spirited steeds and a stagecoach down to Kit Carson's Santa Fe as he had done in his salad days. As for hunting the buffalo, that was all but gone up. Where prime bull hides had once sold as high as sixteen dollars a pelt, they went begging now at eighty cents (two bits for a buff calf's skin!), and that atop the plain fact that the herds were scarce as teeth in a sage hen. The great brown ocean would nevermore lap the coasts of Kansas. What was left of the southern herd had vanished below the Republican River into Comanche country. The Indian treaties gainsaid any white man from hunting down there and if you tried it you were in double jeopardy as much from the bluecoats as from Chief Quannah Parker's red hairhunters.

That left him but one thing to do. The question was where?

The answer arrived quietly on the squeaky wheels of a small handcart, tugged by an earnest lad of twelve years. The cart appeared to be filled with bound newspapers, but in the flickering light of the gas lamps and with his dimming sight, Otis could not be sure. 'Rein up, hoss,' he said pleasantly. 'What freight are you hauling there?'

'The Chicago papers,' said the lad. 'Just picked them off the Flier from the north.'

'Pass me one.'

The lad said firmly, 'Ain't allowed to sell none. They belong to the hotel.'

'I expect so,' Otis said. 'But which hotel?'

'The Commonwealth.'

'Keen,' Otis said. 'Then you bear no onus, because I happen to be lodging at the Commonwealth, so you may hand over my copy to me here and now.'

It was a bald-faced lie; he happened to be living free at a brass-knuckle brothel with Madame Hazel, an aging friend from Abilene days. But he flipped the young man a dime-sized golden dollar in penance, and the cart noised away over the rumbly cobbles.

The newspaper, unfolded, turned out to be the August 27 edition of the Chicago *Daily Inter-Ocean*. The print was so large he did not even need the blue goggles.

## GOLD!

CUSTER LOCATES TREASURE  
IN BLACK HILLS!

\*

Grass Root Nuggets Under  
Horses' Hoofs; Wild Excite-  
ment Among The Troops!

\*

THE NEW LAND OF PROMISE!

\*

Prepare for Lively Times!

He folded the newspaper carefully under his arm and then strode off across the square for the Gothic depot of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, his bootheels clacking cheerfully.

At the rococo railroad station, he plunked down \$173 in paper, keeping his gold lucre secure in his money belt. The paper paid for first-class passage on the Kaypee to Jim Denver's town, from where a Union Pacific shuttle would whisk him speedily up to Cheyenne in Wyoming Territory. Otis hummed some bars from 'All so Fair', a gay little tune which his beldame at the sporting house had recently fancied, and awaited his tickets.

'And the name, sir?' asked the clerk, who had not yet recognized him, being head-down with his tasks.

It occurred to Otis in that instant that his real name had become his enemy.

'Otis,' he said promptly. 'James B. Otis,' and while the clerk busied about, he removed his sombrero and with one hand scooped up the length of his curly blond hair and piled it atop his head. Then he donned his hat and his blue sun goggles. By the time the ticket was ready, the clerk never did recognize him.

At midnight, with his extensive wardrobe and his rifles packed tidily in a huge turtle-backed trunk, he boarded the Smoky Hill Limited and was rattling on his way, little knowing that Custer's grandiose claims of a new bonanza in the Black Hills had been based on perhaps five dollars' worth of tiny placer flakes.

Not that it would have mattered. Otis had no intention of becoming a pick-and-shovel miner. He was no dream-filled nugget digger. He was a professor of the picture cards, an avocation which required clean fingernails. He had always found it easier to mine gold at a poker table or by banking faro.

\* \* \*

James Otis relaxed in the warm comfort of the Palace Sleeping Car. He leaned close to the window of his section, watching the sweeping span of central Kansas flowing by like a great river, recalling wilder days when he had galloped this grassy reach on Black Nell, pursuing and being pursued by bloodthirsty Cheyennes. A shallow ravine whipped past, the rails skirting its maw, and Otis remembered when he and

Jack Harvey were scouting for Hancock's force in 'sixty-seven.

That had been a lucky scratch. He and Harvey penned in a blind ravine by thirty redskins and escaping alive only because of the desperate charge they made, two against thirty, their reins in their teeth, their hands barking twin revolvers, until eighteen of the Indians were dead and the rest skedaddling in blind panic at the medicine of the short guns.

The timetable said they would reach Abilene in the morning. He wondered how much it had changed. He had heard tales of giant sunflowers growing in the streets now that the rambunctious Texas blowhards no longer used Abilene as the railhead for their longhorned beef.

The steam cars clacked noisily through the darkness on the humming rails at a swift twenty-two miles per hour. Soon the monotony of the rail breaks lulled him to repose. He slipped out of his coat, eased off his sixty-dollar French calfskin boots and stretched out on his berth. But he was careful to keep both Colts close by each hand. Times had not changed that much, and men never would.

The haunting began.

He saw a starless sky, a reach of billowing prairie glowing white under a sea of snow. The plain swept away, treeless and vast. No living thing moved upon it, not even a medicine wolf to kyoodle to the invisible moon. No living thing except himself, alone in this deathful land, as he squatted down beside a fire of blue flames, without warmth or life.

Then, far off, a green fetch-flame glowed and the mischief loomed. He watched it enlarge, in his nightmare's eye, saw its cloven hoofs, bloody eyes and fiery horns. As it grew, white fog spurted from its pink muzzle, the ghastly eyes seeping scarlet, the flame of the horns dancing weirdly over the heavily matted boss.

When ashen moonlight fell upon the nightmare, Otis suddenly realized that his angel of death was that rarest of creatures, an albino buffalo. It looked to weigh more than two thousand pounds and its great pale hump rose seven feet

high, towering over his own head by a full foot.

He eased his sash up on his hips, flexed his cold fingers and faced the beast.

It seemed an eon that they stared at each other.

Then the snow broke, squealed and boomed like cannon fire as the buffalo charged, its white beard lowering, its hog tail rising, its horns pointing straight forward, the tremendous weight smashing the snow crusts to powder.

Otis reached for his pistols, knowing in his soul that they would not be there in his sash.

Next morning, by the time the locomotive piped its single long signal for 'down brakes' and slowed into the depot at Abilene, Conductor Charles Bixby had recovered some of his normal good nature. The night before, he had lost both humor and manners in panicked dudgeon when the passenger in Lower Ten fired two .44 caliber bullets into the berth of Upper Ten. By the grace of Jehovah, nobody was occupying the upper berth at the time or he would have gone up for sure.

James Otis had had a hard time convincing Mr. Bixby that the shooting had transpired in a nightmare and not in an alcoholic stupor. For although the guns in his dream had not been in his sash, they had certainly appeared in his hands in reality when he fired at the phantom.

It was only when Mr. Bixby suddenly recognized his passenger, the long blond hair having fallen to Otis' shoulders, that his spleen softened, and mild dread ate at him. Nobody talked that way to this man and lived to brag about it. The conductor was grateful that Mr. Otis had not taken umbrage.

'Abilene,' he called now to James Otis as the rail clicks lengthened. But instead of waking Otis, he found the passenger fully dressed, his pale hair once more tucked up under the crown of the black sombrero as he donned the dark blue spectacles.

Otis stepped out into the aisle and carefully checked the loads of his pistols – five in each gun, one empty chamber under each hammer – then slid them into his sash. 'I regret that flummery last night.'

Conductor Bixby hastily waved off the apology, wary of the silver-plated Colts.

When the Limited finally jolted to a halt, Otis snaked cautiously out onto the car platform and scanned the depot. Though three years had passed since he had turned in his badge and trained east to Kansas City, there were still men like Ben Thompson who would gully-jump him, knowing he was in town.

But he saw no hostiles. Only the yawning baggage handlers and a couple of eager passengers heading west, leaving Abilene's dying to the harsh yellow paint of the morning sun. Over on Hell Street – which Texas Street had been dubbed without brag – he made out the old Bull Head Saloon, with starving curs foraging savagely in front of it. The camp was ghosting, no doubt of it. Otis was not unhappy. He had few fond memories of this cruel cowtown.

He sidled down the car steps to the windswept boards of the platform, having spied a youthful old friend, Peter Cuxton, lolling against the ticket office, the bright star on his chest glinting in the sunlight as he hawkeyed the train for tin horns and other pariahs. In former times Cuxton had been a temporary deputy of James Otis', farther west in Hays City, a brash blond bean pole with more nerve than brains. He seemed settled down now, with cheerful meat on his long bones, his lankiness relaxed. He wore no gunbelt and showed no weapon. Otis waved. Marshal Cuxton ran to join him in the whistling wind.

*'By God, Bill!'* shaking hands.

*'The name is James B. Otis, Marshal.'*

*'You staying?'*

*'Passing.'*

*'Nothing to stay for,'* Cuxton said. *'Abilene, she's gone boneyard. No more beef and no more buff.'*

*'Not worth a pistol?'*

*'Oh, I'm still packing an iron,'* Cuxton said, reaching to his right hip pocket, where a Peacemaker snuggled in a leather lining. But when he saw Otis' body tauten, he did not skin it but merely turned to show its cedar hogleg sticking out.

'All gone up, is she?'

'I told you. Nothing but what the bonepickers cart in off the old hunting grounds. You'll see when your train hauls out. Buff bones, racked twelve feet high and twelve feet wide and more'n half a mile long.'

James Otis looked blank. 'For what?'

'Fertilizer plants in the East buying 'em for phosphates, whatever they be, and sugar refineries using 'em for carbon. Buff bones burn real fine. By God, Bill, do you know —'

*'James Otis.'*

'So. Do you know the Santa Fe shipped three million tons last year and they're rolling double that much this year so far? At nine dollars a ton, that's plenty spondulix! But all to the railroad, none to the town.'

'Six million tons of bones.' Otis shook his head, appalled at the weight of death to which he too had once contributed. 'That's a heap of carrion.'

The marshal nodded and shrugged. 'Buff've cut their last blaze in Kansas.'

'Where have they gone?'

Young Cuxton turned his sunburnt face south, staring into the powdery-blue prairie haze. 'To hell,' he said. 'Or maybe the Staked Plains. It's the same thing.... Did you hear about Prairie-Dog Dave Morrow?'

'I've been over the Mississippi for a spell.'

'Threw a white buff with one shot, way to hell-and-gone down on the Cimarron. The only white spike of the southern herd. The last spook of all the humpbacks in all the west.'

Otis felt his heart pump faster. 'The very last?'

'All gone up forever and a day,' Cuxton said.

'Passing times,' Otis said, trying to control the flush of elation that was racing in his blood.

'Sold the skin to Rath and Wright for fifteen hundred dollars gold.'

'A lucky scratch,' Otis said. He winced at the close scream of the locomotive's whistle, warning of departure. Down the track Conductor Bixby called out, 'Board!'

James Otis shook Cuxton's hand with rare warmth. 'I expect I won't be seeing you this side of again, Pete.'

'Where you heading – California?'

'That's the ticket,' Otis said, and swung easily aboard. There would be tongue wagging about his stop-over. He preferred that his trackers – if any – cut a false trail rather than dog him to Cheyenne and up the Bozeman into the Indian keeps.

He sat comfortably in the Palace car and watched Abilene wiped from his life forever. He felt alive again.

But it bothered him that Marshal Cuxton had recognized him so easily. Next morning he shaved off the blond mustaches he had worn for the last seventeen years, and nicked himself twice in the bargain.

Two shots cracked across the reach of dirty daybreak ahead of the Concord, stirring James Otis instantly from his dour reverie.

'Winchester,' he said aloud. The shots had been two seconds apart, too close for a single-shot breechloader, just about perfect for a lever-action.

He hastily disgorged his pistols from the carpetbag beside him and sashed them, noting that the gunfire had not disturbed Cassie Ollinger, whose snoring continued sonorously, she having curled across the seat which Mr. Coxy had recently vacated.

The weather had changed, Otis realized, when he heard the greaseless screaming of the rear axles. At the peak of the storm, their nerve-edging noise had been damped by the bark-peeling winds, which now passed on. The slashing rain turned to heavy snow; the temperature dropped sharply. All this within a brief hour, so Otis' timepiece said. When he unthonged a side flap and peered out, he was taken aback at the thickness of the fall. He felt the stagecoach slowing, the trace chains singing.

Up on the box Mr. Pinkney bawled at the mules, 'Whoa-up, you shit-head shadbellies!' The iron brakes grabbed the rear wheels, and the coach slewed.

Otis thrust his head out into the snow and called, 'Mr. Pinkney?'

Abel Pinkney's dismal face peered down from above, half

hidden behind the lace of snowfall. 'Jest hold your water, sonny.'

'What is it?'

'Coupla nags,' Mr. Pinkney said. 'Right there, a gray willow tail. Chonder, a roan grass belly. See 'em?'

'I do.' The saddled mounts were barely visible. They were both skittish, both nuzzling each other to share their fears. They were riderless. Otis watched Mr. Pinkney climb down to the wet earth, now stiffening under the swift freeze.

'This is not salubrious ground,' Otis said, watching the brow of the piney hill off to their right side.

'You jest grab that roan,' Mr. Pinkney said, annoyed. 'Hitch 'im off on the boot.'

While Otis did so reluctantly, Mr. Pinkney ran down the gray gelding. When both mounts were secured, Mr. Pinkney scaled the box once more and browbeat the mules forward. 'Gee, you dumb-brain crowbaits, gee!' Smelling the wood fires of Fetterman a mile distant, they lit out wearily, only to be jawed down fifty yards farther on, the coach slewing once more as it wheel-locked.

Otis thrust his head out into the snow, feeling the cold nip at his ears. 'Mr. Pinkney?'

'Coupla stiffs,' the driver called down hoarsely. 'Lend me a hand with 'im!'

There was a tingling at the nape of Otis' neck, to which he had long ago learned to kowtow. 'Best leave them till sun-up.'

'Wolves.'

'These men did not die of time,' Otis said. 'There is a backshooter atop that slope for certain.'

'Now don't go peein' your pantaloons.' Mr. Pinkney hocked with veteran contempt. 'I'm shaman o' this shivaree, so jest do like I'm tellin'.'

Otis sighed. He climbed into the snow, watching the hill, squinting. He was surprised at how well his fading eyesight functioned in the half-light, but it was not all that good. The top of the rise was just a welter of stones and pines. He allowed the Indian would be sighting from behind one of the small rock cairns, an old Lacota ruse.

'*Hohe*,' he murmured, using the Sioux word for the Assiniboin tribe. The word had come to mean 'enemy'.

Mr. Pinkney's bushy brows shot up. 'Wherever did a pork eater like you hear that?'

Otis ignored him and moved toward the bodies, always watching the hill. Corner-eyeing, he saw that the dead men had a wonderful symmetry. Both had been shot through the left shoulder aback, the bullets having gone through, smashing the hearts. Both had landed on right shoulder and rolled onto the spine. Both bodies were in a straight line neat as needlework. The snow was covering their clothes and mittens. But the naked faces, still warm, melted what flakes fell there.

Mr. Pinkney struck a match. Under its yellow glare, both men were brown-eyed, staring sightlessly into the dark sky.

*'Blow that out!'*

'This one is Poke Hensley,' Mr. Pinkney said, blowing. 'T'other is Jim Baker. Pard. They own a gold hole chonder. I 'xpect they figgered to work the mine even in the blow. They was deep 'nuff inside for shelter.'

'I was wondering why they were astir so early of a day,' Otis said, watching the hill.

'Gold makes a good rooster,' Mr. Pinkney said.

The tingling at Otis' neck sharpened. He hooked Hensley's body under the knees while Mr. Pinkney grappled with the shoulders. Hensley was all soft rubber; it was not child's play getting him to the coach. They managed to thrust half of him inside, the top half, and then Mr. Pinkney skidded around to the other side of the coach and hauled in the rest without dignity, letting the legs flop.

Otis watched the hill.

In all his lifetime his instinct had never betrayed him. He trusted it totally because it had saved his hide more times than thrice.

'You worry too goddam much,' Mr. Pinkney chided Otis, watching his taut profile. 'That backshooter is gone by now.'

'No,' Otis said.

'Yah!' Mr. Pinkney spat. 'Take Jim's boots afore you scare the shits outa me.'

'You are a sunny fool,' Otis said softly.

'I 'xpect so. But grab his legs anyhow and let's get poor Jim inside afore he catches his death o' cold.'

They had just reached the coach when Otis heard the blue whistler whirr past his left ear; he sensed the splintering of the coach body behind him; he saw the orange bark of the rifle on the rise through the dancing snow.

Hooking his left arm around Baker's slithery knees, Otis jerked his right-hand Colt quicker than a firefly's lightning and laid off five ear-cracking shots at the spot in the dark where he had seen the rifle flame. The explosions shook Mr. Pinkney's calm. He dropped Baker's head in blind panic. The corpse flopped to the snow, dragging Otis down with it. He let the knees go and skinned out his left revolver, doglegging the hammer. But he did not fire.

The black-eared mules had started to stampede at the roar of Otis' pistol, but the fact they were on a rise with the rear wheels brake locked, slowed them until Mr. Pinkney could bellow terror back into them and hold them stiff-legged.

There were no more shots. The faint crisping of the snow-fall filled the silence.

Mr. Pinkney said hoarsely, 'Think you got 'im?'

'That would be a lucky scratch.'

'Mighta.'

'No.'

'At least you sprinkled some pepper on 'im.' Mr. Pinkney drew in a ragged breath. 'Jesus' sakes! If you ain't Old Lightnin'! He had us like flies on the stick paper!'

'He's gone,' Otis said. The hairs on his neck lay flat again.

'Mr. Otis, you ain't no greenhorn.'

Otis reloaded five cartridges into his pistol and volunteered no reply.

'All the time myself thinkin' you didn' know B from bull-shit.' Mr. Pinkney pulled at his chin hair in shame, the snow on it melting under his tepid mitten.

'Let us tote Mr. Baker to his rest,' Otis said uneasily, not wanting the driver to get curious.

When they had stacked Baker's body in the coach atop

Hensley's, James Otis found the hole where the bullet had passed through the coach. It had mushroomed, tearing out a long splinter over the seat where Cassie Ollinger had stretched out, knees tucked up, backside raised high, her head resting on her cupped hands.

'This lady has gone to glory,' Otis said.

'Nah!' Mr. Pinkney said, destined to be wrong. 'She's jest sleepin' out her clear water.'

'With her eyes wide open?' Her snoring had ceased too. But Otis could find no wound. He checked the bullet angle. It was ominous. He displayed it to the driver.

'I'll be dogged!' Mr. Pinkney said in awe. 'Slug hit her in the behind.'

He climbed back atop the Concord, released the brakes and black-snaked the mules onward.

Inside, Otis stepped over the bodies to his seat, puzzled. What was picking at him sharply was how any sane redskin would be foraying in such vile weather, on a lone and vicious warpath.

It did not even make Sioux sense.

'There she squats like a nine-teat sow!' Mr. Pinkney belowed, pleased nonetheless by the safe sight of the settlement. 'Fetterman, *Me-tropolis* of the Bozeman!'

The streaming mules finally topped the last rise and turned off the main trail, which led on to a remote and dreary fort of like name. The snow had stopped suddenly not five minutes before. Good traveling weather was beginning to show overhead, the clouds wiping away the sooty overcast, startling patches of blue sky breaking through the tatters. A true dawn was finally rising in the east behind them as the mules took a breather by the sodden watch fires which guarded the throat of the long draw that ran down to the town.

Otis had donned his sun goggles against the daybreak glare. Everything looked blue to him, the snow as well as the sky.

There, indeed, lay Fetterman, neat as Grandma's crazy quilt, under the thin pelt of fallen snow. But Otis' practiced

eyes turned gray from blue as he measured the camp hard-headedly. No hell-bent honky-tonk, not even a prairie dog village, Fetterman was more like a wolfer's roost in the untamed wilderness.

Even the name was a flummox. James Otis marveled at the penchant of the United States Army for dubbing its outposts after the men who had caused its worst disasters. Captain William J. Fetterman was a fire-eater who had often made his brag, 'Give me eighty men and I will ride through the whole Sioux Nation!' Just before Christmas of 'sixty-six, he got his eighty men and rode his high horse into Crazy Horse's ambush. It took only forty minutes for the scalp-hunters to wipe out the entire command and feed the eagles.

Otis saw that the pioneers of this camp had chosen their site well. Fetterman lay in a gulch, long and narrow, that ran half a mile gently downhill into a soft blind canyon. The one broadway ended at a treeless mountain which was meadowed with buffalo grasses. It rose sharply into the northwest, studded with dark mine mouths and bright yellow tailings. Close to one adit, he could vaguely discern a small graveyard, built precariously on the slope of the hill and ringed with a lacework of empty whiskey barrels.

It is well placed, Otis thought again. The Sioux could not attack in force over and down the mountain. They would have to come through the narrow gap at the top of the gulch, up there where the passage could be easily defended. The two watch fires at the gullet showed that courageous and responsible men did the tending all the night long. True, in such tempests as last night, no fires could survive the downpour. The logs were half charred and thinly covered with the morning snow. But in normal weather the watch fires would make a surprise attack too costly for the Indians to pay. Redskins hated war without advantage. Their widows wailed too, and performed stricken acts like cutting hair, slashing limbs and chopping off fingers. Squaws knew grief.

James Otis could not repress the curl of his lips in repugnance. He hated Indians. Vermin-ridden lampoons of Man. He felt his stomach tighten unpleasantly. He rubbed the

shiny hip scar, then relaxed, glad to be distracted by the settlement.

The largest of the edifices was the Frozen Dog Saloon. (Mr. Pinkney could not explain away the odd name.) Its false front had plainly been shipped up to Fetterman from Cheyenne by bull wain and freight wagon and then re-assembled here on the Broadway, not its first resurrection. It was as transient as the many railheads of the Union Pacific. Otherwise, the building was recent, a whitewashed shebang, long and barnlike, constructed of palisaded pine logs implanted on end in the hostile earth, the interior chinked with mashed slivers of shredded cottonwood, the exterior mud-filled and sun-dried.

Down the street stood the relay station of the Cheyenne & Black Hills Stage Line, consisting of a barn with an empty corral, backed up by a purloined UP boxcar, without wheels and with the railroad's totem overprinted with the initials 'C&BHL.' Beside it rose a combination of assay office and mortician's parlor ('Undertaking - Newest Methods'), beyond a large canvas tent with a sign projecting in front: 'Elite Bakery.' Across the street lay a well-built sutler's store ('J. Gaston - Groceries, Liquor, Hardwares, Signs Painted').

So the avenue went, hovel and tent and crude shack, zagging down either side until the eye fell on a small neat building, not too barnlike. Across its front, which obviously had been transported to the Bozeman, was a large hand-painted sign: 'MRS. SCHERMERHORN'S HOTEL. Washing Taken In.' It boasted trim clapboard sides, and the porch was decorated overelegantly with wooden lace which had been fashioned by some bandsaw artist.

James Otis noted Mrs. Schermerhorn's keenly. The building did not seem big enough for a doxy house and the fact that bawds seldom took in laundry as an avocation confirmed the hotel's legitimacy. Also, it was farthest down the Broadway from the Frozen Dog. Otis instantly decided to lodge there, remote as he could get from the dangerous scimmages of the saloon.

\* \* \*

The sleepy young hostler at the Cheyenne & Black Hills relay depot had already unhitched the mules to run them back to their shelter by the time James Otis descended from the box which he had shared with Mr. Pinkney for the final mile, there being little legbail inside the coach amidst the lively bodies.

‘The horses?’

‘We’ll keep ’em in fodder till we sell ’em for the wid-ders,’ Mr. Pinkney said.

‘I may want to buy that gelding.’

Mr. Pinkney pointed up the Broadway. ‘You jest take it up with Mr. Moyer when you feel free – rememberin’ he’s crook’d as a wolf’s leg.’

Before James Otis could respond, a sockdolager of a stench blew down on the easterly wind and overpowered them, a smell so putrid it turned their stomachs. They faced bravely into the wind to fathom the cause.

A rude hearse had appeared on the Broadway, waddling down toward the dismal cemetery on the mountainside. It was a simple two-wheeled Red River cart, shaky and squeaky, hauled by an old swaybacked nag. The driver was a huge black man, his clothes in tatters as he shivered in the wind. Beside him sat the mortician, a lugubrious short-faced gentleman wearing a dented stovepipe hat and sporting a nose which was not only plum red from the frost but more so from countless barrels of rotgut diligently imbibed over two score years.

Mr. Pinkney said to Otis: ‘Ben Briggs, the burier. The nigger is Jacob.’

Two cadavers jiggled gruesomely in the cart, their faces hidden under gunnysacks. Dark blood soaked their chests and had stiffened in the cold. One corpse was stolen bootless, leaving only filthy gray socks on the feet; the other was shod in ragged Comanche moccasins, the rawhide soles showing holes.

‘Whoa up, Ben!’ Mr. Pinkney yelled.

The black man reined in the swayback while Mr. Briggs solemnly reeled in perilous inebriation, his eyes red-veined. ‘Good mornin’, Abel,’ he said, hiccuping noisily.

'Jesus' sakes!' Mr. Pinkney covered his nose with a blue bandana that did not smell as bad as the hearse. 'Them stiffs stink high enough to gut a dead hog! How long they been spoilt?'

'Three hours.'

'They sure as hell liquefied fast!'

'Hide hunters,' Mr. Briggs said, as if that explained everything. It was an old rule of thumb that you could smell an Indian half a mile off if you were downwind, but you could smell a buffalo man for a rank two miles in any direction, wind or no wind. At such times, even the polecats hid out. Indians only stank of rancid bear grease, but buff men reeked of dead blood, rotten hump fat, unwiped anuses, rotting teeth, stiffened pee stains and a long-time lack of bath. Soap was not a weapon in a hide hunter's arsenal.

'And not a penny in the poke,' Mr. Briggs said dolefully.

'Since when did your great Jesus heart give out to free plantin'?' Mr. Pinkney had long since lost any belief in the Streets of Glory.

'Sockfoot there had him an old Remington rollin' block fifty-eight that ain't worth a tiddley-de-dee turd, but his Smith and Wesson short gun looks near new. Oughta be worth somethin'.'

Mr. Pinkney nodded. 'Who beefed 'em?'

'Each t'other,' Mr. Briggs replied scantily. Under their hard eyes, he expanded somewhat. 'They was arguin' who'd kilt th' most buffs – and after they blowharded three quarts of Old Crow, they got to jerkin' their pieces.'

James Otis was disturbed. 'What are buff runners doing up in this Godforsake?'

'Where else?' Mr. Briggs gave Otis time to consider the thought while he plucked a damaged pint of whiskey from an inner pocket.

'The Sioux don't diddle with firewater,' he said. 'Did I catch your handle?'

'You were saying about the Sioux being Friends of Temperance.' Otis' voice had gone slight, taking on cool impatience with this smug tosspot.

'It's for a fact.' Mr. Briggs belched. 'The Sioux seen what

happened to the Kaws and the Omahas when they got their barrel of O-Be-Joyful. Next thing, they were killin' their own herds to trade robes to the whiskey men, wipin' out their own larder for red-eye.'

'The Sioux!' Otis said, hard.

Mr. Briggs nodded, then pulled out his bottle again. 'Sit-  
tin' Bull and Red Cloud and Spotted Tail and the other shamans of the Uncpapas and the Oglalas and the Brulés, they put a hard kibosh on booze. So they didn't kill their buff 'ceptin' for eatin'. The north herd is hid up there in the wilds, and that herd, Mr. Otis, is under the eagle eye of the redbirds. They'll send up any paleface who comes hump-huntin' and they'll put under any Crows or Snakes who dare ride into Lacota land. Only 'Rapahos and the Cheyennes can pull a bowstring east of the Big Horns, being Sioux pards. Mark my words, the last stand of the buffalo is *now*, 'twixt here and the Yellowstone.'

Otis nodded.

'There's even prate of a white spike ghostin' down on the south leg of the Black Hills.'

'*Impossible!*' Otis said too sharply. He took an apologetic breath. 'The last white buffalo was dropped on the Cimarron last summer by Prairie-Dog Dave.'

'Amen,' said Mr. Briggs, grabbing back his hospitable bottle before Mr. Pinkney made it glass.

Otis looked unhappy.

'Well, anyway, Ben' – Mr. Pinkney bloomed in sudden health – 'when you get clear o' sendin' them smellers to the Great Mystery, I got three more stiffs in the coach. One female – prob'ly for free – and Poke Hensley and Jim Baker. They can pay their freight.'

'Them as had the glory hole?'

'Them.'

'What happened?'

'Some fun-lovin' Sioux bastid holed 'em both, a piece of a mile back. Woulda put us under too if this here macaroni hadn't let off five faster'n spit.'

'I'll pick 'em up later,' Mr. Briggs said, brightening at the traffic, then creaking his wagon on to the lonely graveyard,

the black man beside him silently and sadly shivering.

Mr. Pinkney suddenly snapped his fingers. They made no sound through his wool mittens. 'Jesus' sakes!'

'Something?' Otis asked.

'A one-eyed geezer in a tippy tent down the line paid me ten dollars gold to steal ev'ry stray cat in Cheyenne and haul 'em back dead or alive. They're surely froze by now after that blow.' He winked. 'Easiest money I ever stole.'

Otis said, 'Does this one-eyed man sport a glass eye?'

'He does that. Makes you more'n a mite uneasy the way it slides off and away while he's starin' at you.' Mr. Pinkney raised the lid of the box and lifted out a large sack, expecting it to be dead weight. Instead the movement incited a screeching, spitting and howling and the sack came alive with violent bulges. 'Dognition! I clean forgot these critters got nine lives.' He climbed down from the box and carried the host of hissing cats into the wheel-barren boxcar.

A host of ripe dunghills studded the long street, fouling the crisp morning air. Mrs. Schermerhorn's boardinghouse lay just beyond the third heap near a grisly wallow wherein reposed the rotting body of a skunk bear, its devilish head half blasted off by a bigbore shotgun. A rat pack squealed and fed on the greening carcass. They did not scatter when James Otis paused. The bolder ones wheeled and fanged to protect their meat. He stepped around the rats and went up the rough stone path to Mrs. Schermerhorn's refuge.

As he reached it Mrs. Schermerhorn opened the windowless door and called, 'Pronto, pilgrim! Show a lively boot!' She had watched his approach from the parlor window.

Otis was astonished at the sight of her, having expected to confront some craggy-faced virago with more gall than grace. Instead he found her tall and pretty, with pale-brown hair piled atop her head in Boston style. But she wore a tell-tale black satin Mother Hubbard, belted at the waist with a tasseled golden cord. All fillies of joy affected the same costume upon retirement, a sedate cry from the spangled tights, red velvet gowns and Black Crook bustles of the trade.

Her slanting green eyes were candid yet full of mischief.

Her mouth was broad and sensuous yet wry and honest. There was a bold promise in the tilt of her breasts. As she bounced back into the house, her full hips moved lustily. She could not have been more than thirty years old, and looked less.

Otis started to doff his black sombrero but thought better of it. He said grandly, 'My compliments, madam.' But she waved off the flattery and beckoned him to follow. Watching her movements, he suddenly realized that he knew her, and well.

'Warm your behind at the stove,' she said as they stepped into the parlor. 'It'll be cold again soon enough.'

Only eight by ten feet, there was not enough room to spank a puppy, but it was heated by a glowing potbelly which made it warm as blood and snug as a wolf's cave. One of the house's two windows lighted it only dimly, but the coal-oil lamp brightened the gloom. The rude planked floor was mostly hidden under a cocoa-brown buffalo robe, the pelage thin and scraggly, which made common sense. Nobody used a good robe for bootheels. In the center of the room sat a hardwood table, covered with a tatted throw which had lost its whiteness through sun-fade. A comfortable rocking chair sat beside it. Three small crudely made sitting chairs filled the corners, facing a heavy tufted black sofa, the gash in its back showing it to be stuffed with odoriferous buffalo wool. Mrs. Schermerhorn perched in the rocker.

Otis raised his coattails and let the potbelly warm his buttocks. He had lost all feeling there since the cold snap on the trail. As his rump began to tingle, he caught the powerful scent of freshly pulverized coffee beans wafting through the house as someone in the kitchen spun a grinder. Mrs. Schermerhorn noticed his thin nostrils flaring.

She said, 'Arbuckle Triple-X, and strong enough to float a Colt.' She smiled handsomely. 'Wolfish?'

'Purely gut,' Otis said, famished indeed.

'You'll have your coffee first,' she said. 'Then I'll have Ada frizzle you a hump steak in the round with Blue Hen tomatoes. I'm Mrs. Schermerhorn.'

'James B. Otis and forever in your debt,' bowing too falsely.

'Never mind the fancies.' She studied him like a three-card draw. 'You have a look—' She frowned it off. 'Omaha?' 'Kansas City.'

'How did you leave Cheyenne?'

'Aroar,' Otis said. 'Every crook and capper fixing to cut a trail this way.'

She snorted. 'Too soon. A year too soon in these open times . . . Oh, the damn gold is there in the Black Hills. A heap of it. But the redbellies ain't about to strike up the band and open the ball. No, sir — *Otis*, you said? — them Bad-Faces are downright stingy about it. Only thing they'll give away is a bloody nightcap to any damn fool who goes tapping rock in their piney hills. And maybe his privates for supper, *without* a tin of Blue Hen.'

James Otis smiled. 'Even so, madam, I'm afraid that not even the redskins will be able to beaver-dam this flood.'

'Maybe, after the army moves in.' She shrugged. 'Till then, they're plenty good widow-makers. As for you, pilgrim, all I can offer is hot grub for two dollars. This house is full, no open seat.' She crossed her legs with wonderful ease. 'Blackleg?'

Otis said solemnly, 'I *have* been known to wager a few plum pits.'

She stared at him in surprise, then burst into laughter at having been duped by his citified garb. Any white-shirt wayfarer who knew that ancient Oglala squaws used plum pits for money in their never-ending gambling games was far from tenderfoot. Mrs. Schermerhorn thought about this after her laughter had got scant, and sprang up, letting the rocker teeter by itself. She reached over and boldly plucked the blue goggles from Otis' eyes.

'Dog me!' she cried.

Otis said, 'Poker Jenny, I believe?'

'*Bill?*'

'James Butler Otis, Jen.'

She peeled off his sombrero and watched the long blond ringlets cascade to his shoulders. Then she fisted a telling

punch into his left arm. 'Damn you! You four-flushed me!' 'I couldn't help it for watching your play.'

'No wonder I couldn't read your hand!' She was nicely outraged. 'The Bill I know would've been holding a pair of jacks with an ace kicker and drawing down two cards before he ever cleared the stirrups. He'd've been asking after a parlor house to romp in before he ever looked for a bed to *sleep* in!'

'Passing times,' Otis said.

Mrs. Schermerhorn threw her arms around him, bussing his wide lips with her broad mouth, and grinding his big body with stirring gusto. He stood firm for a moment, then grew firmer.

She felt it and raised slanting eyes to his. 'I always could get you mounted fast, couldn't I?'

'Such talk!' Otis said as he backed off from her. 'And you'd best call me Jim.'

'What's wrong with Bill?'

'He's no longer a friend of mine.'

'Jim, then, if you say so. I'd've figgered you to be boot-buried in some marble garden by now.'

He could not contain the shadow that darkened his face.

'I didn't mean it the way it came out.' She quickly knocked wood on the little table. Otis took the same precaution.

'Not you, cat eyes,' she said. 'You'll die barefoot in bed from old age or overloving.' She hugged an arm around him and tugged him from the potbelly onto the sofa's lap. 'You heard about Lucas Schermerhorn and me hitching up?'

Otis snorted, 'Not that he was worth a Mexican dollar.' Her green eyes took no offense. 'Heard about the wedding when I stopped over in Cheyenne. Same time as I also heard you were a widow. I figured crooked poker finally put Lucas under a stone.'

Jenny said sharply, 'I was dealing.'

'That's not what I meant. Lucas never played the cards you dealt him. He always played the pat hand he had tucked in his hat. Who else was in the pot?'

'That bastard Holliday, up from Denver and on the prowl.

Plus Hoodoo Brown from Green River. And that crazy son of a bitch Off-Wheeler Harlin —'

'Hard cases.' Otis couched respectfully. 'I'm that surprised they didn't cut off his oysters, make him eat spurs and hang him from his own saddle. Who plugged him?'

Tears moistened her eyes. 'Never no mind.' She tried to brush them away, but they suddenly spated. Otis moved in embarrassment.

'There, there,' he finally said, patting her wet hand. 'For a fact, Jen, you could never have thrown a card in the whole territory again if anyone had thought you were in on it with him.'

Jenny nodded, still softly crying. 'He never felt a thing. Better than if those rosebuds had got to him. He just put his head on the table and paddled over to the other side of the crick.'

'He was damned lucky,' Otis said.

The buffalo steak was rump, not hump, and tougher than the old bull it had been butchered from. It took an hour's chewing to down it, but Otis, gassy from hungerment, did not begrudge the time. The ripe meat gave him quick strength to cope with Miss Jenny, who abruptly removed him to her boudoir, where she firmly planted him in her warm bed, where they made honest love for several hours, deep in the goose-feather mattress.

'My wicked cat eyes —'

'Why do you call me that?'

'Ain't you ever seen them wild eyes in a looking glass when you're loving it up or when you're hitching on your pistols for a showdown shindy?'

'Eyewash!' he said sharply.

'Gospel. Lucas used to say you was like a tawny old fly-bit lion, a high lonesome painter come down from the eagle peaks to have a look-see at all the other critters on the flat, never trusting a soul, your tail curled tight against a bush-whack. And all the time them cat eyes, purely gimlets, seeing everything and everybody and being mad at the whole damned world.'

'Squaw talk!' he snapped angrily. 'I am a man of comity. I am a man of peace.'

'Comity?' She sat back and hooted. 'Oh, but surely you are. The most polite, the most civil shootist who ever blew out a man's brains.'

Otis reared. 'I have always dodged a fight.'

'Oh, come off the high horse,' Jenny said flatly. 'You and your airs and your honor. Just how many souls have you put in a box?'

'Upwards of fifty,' Otis said with flinty dignity. 'And every damned one of them deserved it, most of them being redskins.'

Poker Jenny shuddered. 'My God, if it was me, I'd never sleep again.'

He was puzzled. 'Ghosts, you mean?' A haunting had paled her face. 'Would you have the spooks if you gunned down a slaverling mongrel with the hydrophobia?'

'But I keep seeing Lucas — I see his left eye begging me not to shoot — tears coming out of it until they changed to blood —'

'This does no good,' Otis said heavily. 'Lucas cut his own notch. But not even Lucas has a ghost. There are no such things as ghosts.'

But when he turned to look at her, she was no longer there.

Instead a snowfield stretched down into a gulch, studded with dwarf pines. He found himself squatting on a rise, behind a drift, in a ring of spindly cedars. The cold which pervaded him was sharp and painful; his breath quickly spewed crystals which teemed like starlit tinsel.

In horrid fascination he watched the snow below him churn and roil and out of it, inevitably, the buffalo appeared, whiter than whalebone, its seven-foot hump rising high from its icy mausoleum. The bloody eyes glowed and a fiery halo danced daintily across the hairy skull between the two scarlet horns.

Then the beast ghosted up the slope at him in full charge, the horns lowered to gut out his intestines.

He did not reach for his short guns, knowing they would not be in his holsters. Instead, he raised his hands in supplication to the black sky, and Jehovah's grace thrust Old Ginger into them. She was a 'Texas Fifty', a beautiful Sharps buffalo rifle, which he had seldom used. Her caliber was .50-130 and she sported a long blue octagonal barrel with unerring sights. Weighing eighteen and a half pounds, she was not to be fired offhand except in the direst of straits.

These were dire enough, but he did not hurry. Pure elation swamped him and he wept wonderful tears for his salvation; they streamed down his serene cheeks and splattered over the rifle as he used his left knee for a rest stick and lay the long barrel lightly thereon.

'Come arunning, hell's spawn,' he said calmly. 'Your checks are down - not mine . . .'

Old Ginger had never failed him, nor was she about to do so now. His percussion caps were fresh; he dabbed one neatly over the nipple. No trouble there. As for ammunition - ever since one soul-shaking misfire six years previous - he had always made his own. His patch paper was perfect for a bullet seat. The powder charge of 130 grains had been finicky-measured. Which was just as well, since the buffalo was presenting him only with a head-on shot.

Those who had stalked the humpbacked beef knew that the common Winchester .44 cartridge did not always have the muscle to penetrate the thick skull of a grown bull. The leaden bullet would often flatten and splatter when hitting the boss between the eyes. You would have a 'pop shot', a sledge blow which would stun the spike and knock him stiff-legged. But in a moment he would be on the charge again. The Winchester cartridge would only kill surely if aimed behind the shoulder or at the neck.

He sighted the Sharps carefully as the range closed to point-blank, and easily squeezed the hair trigger. The cap busted with a flashing snap. But the rifle failed to fire.

With the fetid breath of the buffalo reaching out for him, he stared at Old Ginger in childish amazement. He brushed the remnants of the cap off the nipple and stared emptily at the touchhole. In this frigid weather his happy tears had

frozen inside the touchhole. There was no way the cap could dart down its tiny tongue of flame and ignite the powder charge.

He rose to his feet, seizing the barrel of the gun to wield it as a club. There was not even time for a prayer as he skidded awkwardly and then plunged down, wincing at the slash of the snow upon his face.

James Otis struggled to rise, pawing the crystals away from his frostbitten cheeks, only to open his eyes and find himself in the gloomy bedroom where he and Poker Jenny had so lately mingled.

His weakened eyes blinked and tried to make sense. It took a long moment before he knew that the day had decayed into night, that the shadow was Poker Jenny's, cast there by the yellow glare of a coal-oil lamp, and that the snow on his face was icy water, flung at him from the jelly jar which she still held in her trembling hand.

*'DearmotherofGod!'* she kept saying over and over.

'Stop that!' Otis said.

In her silence he felt weary from the weight of his own sweat. The feather mattress which encased his body was drenched. He reached over and turned up the wick on the lamp, the glass chimney burning his fingers. As the room brightened he saw her staring at him in bald terror. She was dressed demurely in her best black dress, shawled, wearing an old-fashioned black poke bonnet tied under her chin.

'It is all right now,' he said, ashamed to have put such fear in her eyes. She quivered at the foot of the bed, trying to slow her breathing but not yet daring to make a move.

Otis wiped the water from his face. 'You might have booted me awake. You didn't have to drown me.'

'I didn't have the gumption!'

'Bushwa!'

'Dear God, no! You were having some wild kind of death fit.'

He smiled thinly at her. 'Just a bad dream.'

'I never want to see a worse one.'

'What is the hour?'

'Thereabouts seven.'

'Why, I've been sleeping the day away!'

'You were done in,' Poker Jenny said. 'I left you to rest and worked my chores. Then I went down to Sunday meeting. Afterwards I went up to the stage line to have your baggage sent over. Then I knew why you were so all-fired tired. That yahoo Abel Pinkney told me about your trip.'

'It was not a dull ride.'

'I meant Poke Hensley and Jim Baker.'

'They drew bad cards.'

'What I'm saying is, they both lived here. In Number Five down the hallway. So I put your trunk in there. It's your room now. You sure you're all right?'

'I could use some coffee.'

Poker Jenny rose too quickly. 'We'll have it in the parlor soon as you're dressed.' She rushed out, ostensibly to give him privacy, but still shaken.

Otis opened his carpetbag and took out his razor and soap and shaved with cold water. He mused in irony at how quickly Jenny had turned him out of bed.

Not that he minded having his own room. He could only have stayed with her as a stopgap. It was not his way to share lodgings. He did not trust any man or woman when he slept. It was a helpless time, an unarmed time, a time to take no chances.

Usually he chair-locked his door and then spread crumpled newspapers all over the floor. They were as noisy as a startled goose if a hostile foot crushed them in the dark. He even tried carpet tacks spread around his bed, until he himself stumbled over to the commode one night after nature's call and picked up a painful clump of them in his own feet. He hated windows, but if he was saddled with one, he would hang three empty tins above the sash, so that if any bushwhacker raised the window, there would be a clanking symphony. Followed by the roar of his Colts.

When he was full-garbed, he stared at the bed and shivered, thanking God the guns had not been handy when he fell into the nightmare. Poker Jenny would surely have made business brisk for Mr. Briggs.

Nevertheless he now extracted the pistols from the carpet-bag, checked the loads and slipped them butt-facing into his red sash.

As he left to join her, he glanced at himself in her long mirror with its baroque distortions, saw his own eyes brighter than tin and was shocked at the autumn in his face. He suddenly was no longer sure that there were no such things as ghosts.

Over fresh coffee in the parlor James Otis could see that his relationship with Poker Jenny had died. She smiled wanly and pretended to relax, but she could not hide her pallor.

'What brings you up to this neck?' she asked, wary.

'Gold.'

'You're no Big-Horner, cat eyes.'

'Men with gold like to gamble,' he observed. 'And there are those who do not gamble smart.'

'So.' She nodded, eyeing him carefully. From now on she would always be waiting for his next fit. 'You have a stake?'

'Not so big as a cabbage, but 'twill serve, with some luck.' He gulped on the hot coffee. 'Did I hear Ada mention the rats?'

'She's scared. Damned rats are getting bold. I wish you'd shotgun 'em for me.'

'I'll do better than that,' he said. 'Charlie Zane has got a sack of cats shipped up from Cheyenne. Let me pick you a pair, one, a fighting grimalkin, the other a nasty stud tom. That way you can raise your own ratters.'

'How much?'

'Fifty apiece, knowing Charlie.'

'Worth it.' She peeled up her drear black skirt and unstockinged a small purse from which she plucked five double-eagles, the gold glittering dully in the lamplight.

'Allow me to buy them for you,' Otis said with a notion of gallantry.

'You'll need all your roll if your cards go green.' She passed the money over to him. 'And now I'd better show you your room.'

He felt sad at how much she wanted to be shed of him. 'No need, Jen. Number Five you said? I'll have a peep myself.'

'Take a match. The lamp is on the table to the right of the door.'

Otis rose quickly and went down the hall, regretting her uneasiness. He opened Number Five and poked into the darkness. He flared a match, lifted off the chimney and lit the wick, replacing the chimney as he turned to see his den.

The white buffalo charged from the darkness, out of the shadows, looming large, its bloody eyes glistening, its long white beard dangling, its horns afire with lamplight.

He could not stop the wail that rose from his gut as he flicked a lightning draw and double-actioned his right-hand Colt. Both bullets struck the buffalo in its left eye while smoke billowed heavily around the room, blinding him.

In the after-silence he could hear the tinkling of broken glass. As the gunsmoke lifted, the buffalo's head dropped to the floor with a thud. He stared at it stupidly.

When he turned, damning himself and the world, Poker Jenny, Ada and a couple of bearded boarders were at the door, all apanic at the explosions within the small hotel.

'Get 'em outa here!' Otis snarled, sashing the pistol.

Poker Jenny waved the others away. But he knew he could never reassure her now. She thought he was insane.

'My eyes,' he said. 'Not too good.'

She was speechless.

The head of the white buffalo lay on the floor, amidst the broken glass of the false pink eye which he had shot out.

'Where in Hades did *that* come from?'

When she could catch a breath, 'Cody.'

He said impatiently, 'Get ahold of yourself and make sense.'

'Cody!' she insisted.

He sat her down in the one rude chair. She was close to fainting. He said, 'Friend Cody?'

She nodded automatically, unable to stop staring at him.

'It doesn't hitch.'

'When Cody was shooting meat for the Kaypee,' she said,

'the railroad thought it was a good stunt to give away buff heads. You recall?'

Slowly Otis did. An advertising wile of the Kansas Pacific, it had been very successful. With Buffalo Bill killing more than four thousand buffaloes, there were plenty of heads to make gifts for eastern nabobs. The head of the buffalo was the only part that couldn't be used. (Except by Indians. They used everything, no waste at all.) So the Kaypee donated mounted heads to any and all dignitaries who might abet the road.

'Lucas laid his hands on one.'

'The Kaypee never gave away a white spike,' Otis said meanly. 'Too damned valuable.'

'Surely not. But Lucas had his painted and put in pink glass eyes. He figured to sell the piece for a barrel of money to some dude in a ratcatcher suit who was on the scout for souvenirs. You can see it ain't real. The horns are black - not red.'

Otis was miserable. 'I'll have it mended for you. Charlie Zane may have an extra eyeball.'

'The devil with it,' she said sharply. 'I never want to see it again.' She started weeping and ran down the hallway. He heard her door slam.

After a while he lagged over to the bed and sat down. He peered at the buffalo, whose lone pink eye fixed upon him in glazed hatred.

'Well now, hell's spawn,' Otis said quietly, 'if the time is come for neck or nothing, then you have found your man. . . .'

TWO

# Red Man



It stood nine feet high, taller than a warrior's upraised hand, a simple death scaffold. It consisted of four lodgepoles impaled shallowly in the earth, each foot anchored within a cairn of rough stones. Atop the poles, there were woven cross-boughs to make a cradle, thonged firmly and securely to the uprights. The scaffold had been erected with more care than those for great chiefs who had gone-to-Father, as if to hold a mighty spirit.

But all it held was a small bundle, wrapped tenderly within a red blanket, a tiny piece of Lacota death, aged two years. How proud her father, Worm, had been of her when he proclaimed, 'This one shall be holy! *Ishna waken!* All will reverence her. And she shall be called They-Are-Afraid-of-Her.'

But now her name could never be spoken again.

The scaffold loomed atop a gentle mesa at the fork where the White Horse River pointed its feelers north toward the green darkness of the mysterious Pa Sappa. The burial site had been well chosen. It was ringed with a lush shinnery of silver-leafed quaking aspen, which chattered sweetly over the little squaw by daylight and whispered soft, safe things to her in the night while her spirit trembled on its journey to the Other World.

She had been so alone these two weeks since her cruel death from the white man's coughing-sickness, alone with the throating wolves that scented her flesh and came to gnash her bones, foiled only by the stoutness of her bier; alone under the brittle stars which lighted her trek without feeling; alone in the terrible storm with lightning scorching her tall sentinels and thunder rattling her rude catafalque. So awfully alone until Worm finally found her. He climbed atop the scaffold to hold her withered remnant in his savage arms, while he covered them both with a buffalo robe to hide their faces from the anger of the Great Spirit.

She did not hear his keening.

Worm was not his own name. It was an alias which belonged to his father, who had dubbed him with it when he saw the quick spate in his son's eyes. It was unthinkable that under his true name he – a war chief of the Oglalas – could show any grief to his own people. Hate for the hairy mouths was the only emotion allowed a leader of the Hunkpatila clan.

Some weeks earlier, while James Otis frittered time on a bench in Kansas City, wondering up his future, Worm lay belly-flat on a high pinnacle and looked down to see his own waning.

On the mossy side of the Black Hills the land stretched away without peak or mesa for seventy miles, empty as a dry sky, incensed with sage, patchy with crimped buffalo grass, spiked with sharp green cacti, yet always an ocean of sullen sand.

Except for Paha Mato – Bear Butte.

The rugged outcrop erupted from the prairie like an angry blister, gigantic, solitary. It cast its morning shadow toward Wyoming, and its evening shadow into the Belle Fourche River. It loomed twelve hundred feet high, scantily studded with pindling yellow pine and gnarled red cedar.

On August 14, Worm and his barrel-bodied friend He-Dog reposed on a rocky outcrop near the crown of the butte and stared down across the hoarfrost alkali at the inevitable armies of George Custer.

They came from the south, trickling out of the defiles of the Black Hills on their return march to Fort Abraham Lincoln. Custer had already ravened the sacred sites, ostensibly discovered a few dollars' worth of pinhead gold at French Creek (just enough to incite a rush), despoiled the Wanagi Yata – the place of souls – and staked an invidious claim to this center of the entire Lacota hoop.

From their cliff-high vantage Worm and He-Dog watched the juggernaut as it undulated through the buffalo gates in a single line more than two miles long. The tarpaulin-topped

bull wains and ambulances took on the appearance of a monstrous milk-snake.

He-Dog counted the soldiers. His glittering black eyes were flinty as he made ten fingers four times and threw them aside. '*Opawinge dopa!*'

Worm shook his head sharply. It was a bad guess. Not four hundred Long Knives but more like *opawinge wick-semna* – a thousand. (A sharp estimation, since there were exactly 948 bluecoats at that moment, not counting the horde of bullwhackers and mule skinners, plus 60 Arikara scouts.) Ten troops of the Seventh Cavalry formed into three battalions, two riding the point, one bringing up the stragglers in the rear. In between, the host of vehicles, and the Walk-a-Heaps, the dreaded doughboys: Company G, Seventeenth Infantry, of the Grand River Agency, and Company I, Twentieth Infantry, brought down from Fort Pembina to accompany the expedition.

Worm was chary of infantry. Since the Walk-a-Heaps could not flee like the cavalry, they always dug in and breast-worked so that every minor skirmish became a last stand. That was a cruel kind of war. His people had no heart for facing entrenched infantry.

Nor did they have heart to face the 'bang-bang' wagon gun which rumbled at the head of the column, a three-inch Rodman artillery piece which made one explosion when it fired and another when its canister shell burst, scattering 148 minié balls like bees swarming. It was a coward's weapon, as were the trio of .45-caliber Gatling guns which trundled heavily behind it, each hauled by a span of condemned cavalry horses. Worm looked at the Gatlings with a stony heart. He hated the medicine gun. It was a wasp-stung grizzly, killing anything in its path, not only the fighting warriors but the terrified women and children, as well as the helpless old ones, and the dogs and ponies. It had no honor.

He would have been surprised to learn that Pahaska felt the same way. Custer found no avenue of glory in the Gatling. A butcher's machine, it would not allow for the counting of coups in eyeball combat. (Two years hence, the Gen-

eral would sorely need the Gatling he had declined in his haste to reach the Little Big Horn.)

While Worm and He-Dog kept vigil, Waziah, giant of the north wind, went about his work. He blew buffeting gusts across Bear Butte, etching designs in the silt-strewn rock and raising smoke down on the flat where the mules and horses kicked up the dust. Two miles off, Custer's command suddenly wheeled into bivouac after a wearying march of twenty-six miles.

Worm watched the mule skimmers forming their defensive squares of wagons, saw the hinnies and horses being hobbled for grazing, swallowed gall at the sight of hundreds of soldiers moving about the encampment, thick as ants on a dead ox.

'Is there no end to them?' Worm said grimly.

He-Dog said, 'Friend, you think their medicine is stronger than ours?'

Worm shot his golden eyes square into He-Dog's huge face. 'Heyah!'

He-Dog was compelled to blink under Worm's glare. 'Friend, you say no. But did they not send the spotted stink to the Blackfeet? Where are the Blackfeet now? Gone like a quick little shadow in the twilight. Did they not seed their filth in the Omaha women? Where are the Omahas now? Gone like the swift bright flash of the firefly. Did they not poison the hearts of the Mandans with their medicine water? Where are the Mandans now? Gone like a buffalo's breath in a winter's dawn.'

Worm said, 'We will not be thrown away.'

'The white man binds up our land with his iron trail,' He-Dog said. 'He digs up the bones of our fathers, seeking the yellow stones, and Maka, the Earth, bleeds. With his walking plow, he turns upside down the green grass of our hills. He takes his axe to our forests to build his forts. He burns our lodges and fills his graves with our dead. His whispering wire ambushes us at every turn. We are Day. He is Night. Truly the white man loves destruction. And yet you say his medicine is not stronger than ours?'

'No!' Worm said. 'For I have seen *Tatonka Wakan*.'

He-Dog's mouth fell agape in honest astonishment, and he hastily covered it with an open hand. 'Truly, friend?'

'Truly,' Worm said. '*I have seen the white buffalo.*'

Nightfall slowly disclosed the rising of the night sun in the southwest, hovering low over the curve of earth which was Colorado. Only a half-melon this night, its glow was sharply heightened by the reflection of the alkali, the land turning soft and silvery, except for the monstrous shadow which Bear Butte cast northeast, rhumb on Custer's path to Bismarck.

'Let us gallop in the shade of *hanhepi-wi*,' Worm said as they surefooted down the old rocks, carefully circling the heavy musk scent of a ten-button rattlesnake on his nocturnal prowl. They had pin-picketed their mounts in a shallow dingle on the far side of the Butte. The ponies were safe, four in all. Each man owned two, work horse and war horse.

Worm's pinto was called Chikala, which meant 'little', an obvious joke since Chikala was a magnificent yellow buckskin, hands higher than the average mustang. Worm had long ago stolen him from the Crows when the stallion was a spindly colt and had raised him in strict, often cruel, discipline. Chikala was trained completely to hand signals and birdcalls.

The war horse, however, was a true terror – a feral split-eared buffalo pony, vicious as a wolverine. Though a beautiful piebald with a hide of brown and white splashes, he hated everything, particularly the sweat stink of the whites, and would attack savagely at sight or scent. So he had been dubbed Sicha, which meant 'very bad'. Only Worm could control the beast.

Both his horses whickered quietly when they caught Worm's scent. They were weary of waiting, anxious to be gone for the gallop. Sicha was in vile temper. His body had been enspoiled with buffalo intestine, bloated with fresh water (a wise precaution in such arid country), and since his tail had not been tied up for war, he knew there would be no battle; it made him dance in angry frustration. Worm calmed him with the whiskey jack's chittering, took his

bridle in hand, mounted big Chikala from the right side and away they loped, riding down the Butte's shadow close to the moonlight on the western perimeter.

He-Dog followed closely, kneeing his own black and white pinto and roughly leading his nervous hunter. He had hoped that Worm would speak again of the white buffalo, but it was not a thing you could press. There was holiness in it. Among the Oglalas it was well known that Worm was a strange man, gifted with kinship to the Great Mystery. The tale would be told in good time.

In the soft night, they scared up a bat-eared kit-fox and whiddled through many ghosting coyotes as they ran the course. That was a strange thing: Coyotes owned the plains around Pa Sappa; yet their tribe was not to be found in the Hills. There the yellow-eyed timber wolves held sway, lords of the dark forests.

They rode easily, changing mounts to share the burden, and when the eastern sky glowed, they had put twenty miles between themselves and the Americans.

With flint and steel, the Oglalas fired the prairie and watched the roaring flames race down toward Pahaska, glutting the sky far and wide as the fire spread voraciously. 'It is well done,' Worm said. '*Hecheto welo!*'

He was right. The conflagration would crackle its way across Dakota, blackening the land down to the soldiers and for forty miles on either side of them. Longhair would not find feed for his animals for many long days.

As the two friends rode into Wyoming Territory (which the Americans called the Big Horn country, having borrowed the name from a valley in Pennsylvania), the signs continued ominously. By then it was the Moon of Black Calves – September – when the spring buffalo calves changed their birthcoat of light-red wool, for the mature dark browns and blacks. At a timbered dell on the breaks of the Little Powder River, they made camp and rigged the ponies for grazing.

He-Dog scanned the place with sharp, quick eyes. He soon located a ruptured sweat lodge on an open rise above the thin river. 'Friend, someone else has built an *onikare* before

us. Someone else has used this ground. There are ashes of a cook fire hidden under those stones. There are pony droppings beyond those two pines by that swale.'

'It was I.'

'You have been here before?'

Worm said, 'It was from here I rode to Bear Butte. It was here I saw the white buffalo.'

He-Dog's face fell in sharp disappointment, and he was glad that Worm had turned away to disrobe and did not see it. So, He-Dog thought heavily, it is to be a vision. Not a living white buffalo. Only a ghostly piece of medicine.

Anyone could see that no buffalo had passed this way. There were no tracks, no sign of droppings. The skin of the yellow-bark cottonwoods was untouched. A buffalo could not withstand the temptation to sharpen his horns and rub off his lice on a rough-barked tree. Even the whites had learned that down on the Holy Road (which they called the Oregon Trail). When Western Union raised their trees to carry the singing wire, they soon found the buffalo knocking them down by unceasing scratching. So the whites drove spikes into the low sections of the poles to stab the great beasts – and were astonished to discover that the bulls liked the spikes even better than the bark. It had been a poser until they found a more simple answer: extermination.

Worm had pulled out of his white ram-skin shirt and was kicking off his dark blue leggins. After that he purified his body with a savage scouring of sage, then waded into the stream, hand-scooping water over himself in the way of the silvertip grizzly.

This rill of the Little Powder was only fetlock-deep. The long, dry summer had choked many of the springs which fed it, leaving little more than a wet-weather brook. Even when Worm sloshed to midstream the water failed to rise above his knees.

He-Dog puzzled at his friend. It was a wonderment how such a young man – Worm had seen only thirty-two winters – could hold the fighting Oglalas in such awe. He was not tall, no higher than the saddle on Chikala's broad back, perhaps five feet eight inches. His slight body, lithe and taut,

was like that of a youth who had yet to count first coup. In truth Worm did not even *look* like an Indian and certainly not like a warrior chieftain. His skin was paler than the speckled stones under the running waters. His face was thin and morose, broken only by a bold white scar on the sinister side of his nose where a jealous bullet had once smashed him. The melancholy eyes were more golden than the bright hide of his yellow pony. His hair was pale brown, like a whiteskin's, curly as buffalo wool except where it was braided with beaver fur into waist-long pigtails. Many of the French traders had thought him to be a breed, but he was not. He was a full-blood Oglala but an off-horse.

Yet this dour man was the *hocoka* – the very center – of the Lacota war with the Americans. His deep passions could even make the blood of ancient chiefs run boyhood-hot again. There was sacred flame in him.

When Worm finished bathing in the heavy shade of the streamside cottonwoods, he waded out to the pebbled banks of the Little Powder. He-Dog, watching, suddenly gasped and an unearthly tingle shook his spine. For when Worm stepped from shadow into light, the westering sun struck across the water beads on his body. The sunrays were as yellow as old buffalo tallow and they fired the beads into a living shield of a thousand topazes.

Unaware, Worm stretched his glittering arms to the twilight sky, and in the eerie backlight a misty halo encompassed him until he seemed like a golden ghost.

He-Dog gaped and quickly covered his open mouth, for this thing he was seeing, this golden ghost, had once been the very essence of Worm's coming-to-manhood in his medicine dream of long ago, 'fifty-four, the Year-of-the-Killing-of-Scattering-Bear down on the Holy Road.

Both of them had been striplings of twelve then, no longer boys and not yet braves. They had been lodged in the Brulé encampment, visiting with Scattering-Bear, when a brash lieutenant named Grattan invaded the circles of tepees to punish a starving Minneconjou who had slain a half-dead Mormon milch cow.

According to the treaty of 'fifty-one the whites had ap-

pointed Scattering-Bear Great Chief of all the Lacotas, an authority he neither wanted nor sought. It was pure buncombe, since there was no single chief of the Seven Tribes. Everybody knew that except the vainglorious whites. Even so, the Lacotas accepted Scattering-Bear as a paper chief, if only to keep the Handshake whole.

Without palaver Lieutenant Grattan's two howitzers roared, Scattering-Bear fell mortally wounded, and in blood-thirsty revenge the Brulés swarmed over the soldiers like lice over a buffalo hunter. Not a single bluecoat survived.

On that bad day Worm became a mortal enemy of the pale world. Grattan's vicious hypocrisy, his sotted brutality and his cold contempt turned Worm's face forever from white friendship. He fled to the dismal bluffs above the Platte. Heartsick, emotionally ravaged, he built himself a sweat lodge of willow reeds and retired into it to touch the hand of Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit. For three days and nights he fasted and sweated until he collapsed.

Then the magic began.

Over the bluffs, out of the bleak, stormswept sky, a golden ghost appeared, galloping the high thunder. This warrior from the Other World sat astride a wild golden horse, wrapped in a swirling golden haze, and neither bullets, arrows nor lances could harm his topaze body. Worm saw the red-backed hawk which sat on the warrior's head, saw the vivid lightning streak on the golden cheek, saw the red hailstones painted all over the transparent body, saw the storm-splashed raindrops sparkling on the pelt of the medicine horse. And lastly he watched, gander-eyed, as the golden ghost reached out toward him with a coup stick whittled from chain lightning and rebaptized him with a tremendous crack of thunder and a touch of the fiery wand.

When he regained consciousness, thirsty, half-starved, and still breathing the brimstone which reeked in the air around his sweat lodge, he knew he had seen the face of his own future. In the twinkling of an eye he put childish things aside; all sweet tokens of innocence passed over into yesteryear.

From that moment he knew he was a Chosen One.

They sat before a thrifty fire and gnawed roasted antelope short ribs, which they carefully tossed overshoulder into the breaks behind them for their brother-wolves. The fire was safe enough; this was not quick country. Too far east for the raiding Crows, too far south for the scalp-hunting Assiniboin.

Worm gently pulled his rifle to him. He peeled off the buckskin scabbard and held the Yellow Boy firmly as he cleaned it, his eyes faraway with dreaming. This brass lever-action weapon, which B. Tyler Henry had invented for Winchester and which had revolutionized war in the Dakota country, was one of his few pieces of personal property. With one cartridge in the chamber, and fifteen more in the tube under the octagonal barrel, it could fire sixteen times, almost with the rapidity of a Gatling.

He would long remember where and when he acquired it, at the Battle-of-the-Hundred-Slain, which the whiteskins called the Fetterman Massacre (and insisted that only eighty-one had died in the snow). The stick count did not matter. The important thing was that none of the whites survived, not even the lone dog who had marched with them.

Oh, how cold it had been! *Lela oosni!* What the whites called zero. Cold enough to make one's breath congeal and freeze smokily. Cold enough to hide all war paint under the cover of blankets and robes.

History had since given Red Cloud credit for that terrible coup-count, but the Oglalas knew that Red Cloud had been absent from the slaughter.

It was young Worm – only twenty-four – who played the war chief at Fort Phil Kearney, performing miraculous feats of valor, decoying Fetterman with a fleeing handful of riders, limping his horse as if it had been shot, tempting the soldiers to overtake him while they fired their heavy Springfield at him alone.

There had been two civilians among the soldiers with new Henry rifles, who made a stand on the Bozeman behind a covering boulder. They did ghastly execution. Sixty-five

great gouts of guts and blood stained the snow in front of their rock before they were finally overwhelmed and their lair was piled with their own empty brass hulls. Worm led the final charge, and when the two went under, he was the first to snatch up one of the new repeaters from Isaac Fisher's hands, not even pausing to count coup.

Worm fondled the rifle now, gently polishing the brass receiver, noting the initials 'I.F.', which Isaac Fisher had carefully etched there years before. This white man would not leave Worm's mind, because – when all the enemy had been wiped out and the battle cries stilled – Fisher twitched as a brave scalped him. Instantly the Lacotas pin-cushioned him with a cloud of arrows. Worm later counted 105 feathers growing in that mortal garden. It was a sight not easily forgotten.

The whites had made better guns since the Henry. The one they called the Winchester '73, for instance, which had much heavier power. Whereas the Henry rimfired a .44-caliber bullet with only twenty-eight grains of powder, the Winchester '73 center-fired a new cartridge, a .44-caliber slug which was punched along by forty grains of powder, a much deadlier charge, for downing bear or bison.

But Worm nurtured too many memories in the Henry. He would not change over, despite the constant opportunities. He had seen that his Yellow Boy killed white men easily. That was all he would ever ask of it.

Worm was growing sleepy when he glanced up at the brightness of the Wanagi Tacaku, the Spirit Path (which the whites called the Milky Way). That was when the firefly flicked its tiny light.

Instantly a grackle-black cloud blotted out the stars, the moon and the earth. All the sounds of the night were garroted by a terrible silence. He found himself thrust back into time, one moon past, kneeling again within the willow-reeded walls of the sweat lodge he had built. It was like any other, half a circle high and a full circle wide, with a bleached buffalo skull out in front of it, facing Huntka, God of the east.

Everything was as it had been before. He was lifting up his pipe and praying :

‘Behold me, behold me, Other-World One!  
With a sacred voice I call you.  
Come smoke the holy pipe, Grandfather.  
Give me a sign to save the Nation.  
With a sacred breath I ask this, Giver-of-Life.  
Show me a sign for my people.  
Help me to make the Hoop whole again.  
My voice is on the smoke.’

A sinister wind whistled eerily through the willow reeds, and an unnatural chill filled the stifling lodge. The coals still sizzled with thick steam from the waters he had poured over their incandescence; yet there was ice in the air. His heart paused as he listened in awe to the Voice which spoke from the living stones before him.

‘I am done with signs,’ the Giver said. ‘I have spent all signs on you, worthless Lacotas. Generations past I created you and gave you this beautiful Maka, this Earth filled with deer and antelope and buffalo.

‘I borned you as men, but now you cower like whipped dogs. You have let these white savages steal your country, your honor and your lives. Did I not give you stone knives for cutting skins? Why then do you need the barbarians’ steel? Did I not give you sticks to make fire? Why then do you need the barbarians’ flint? Did I not give you snow-water springs for your thirst? Why then do you need the barbarians’ medicine juice that drives men crazy? Did I not give you the buffalo for your robes? Why then do you need the barbarians’ blankets? Did I not give you reeds for arrows and trees for bows? Why then do you need the barbarians’ shooters? You have become lower than the maggot. You have forgotten the Winter-of-the-Killing-of-the Crows.’

Worm shivered. That had been the year the whites called ‘fifty-eight, when the Seven Council Fires met in mass on the toes of Bear Butte, thousands and thousands of proud

Lacotas, against whom no invader, white or red, could have stood.

The Giver said, 'You hide your head in your cheek like the chipmunk stows his pine nuts. You hide your heart in Mother Earth like the squirrel hides his acorns. You are afraid.'

'I am only one twig.'

'Twigs make branches, and branches make the Sacred Tree, which defies even time!'

'Take pity on me, Tunkashila, and give me a sign,' Worm begged.

The Giver said, 'You have broken the Hoop. You have stained your birthright. Yet I will send you a sign. *But you will not like it!* I will test you one last time. These are my words.'

Worm did not, indeed, like it. The stones ceased sizzling. A dismal darkness rained over him. He stared through the low crawl-hole which was the door to the sweat lodge. Something strange was happening outside. The bleached buffalo skull was being reborn.

He rubbed his eyes to lose the dream, but it was not a dream. The buffalo skull turned to face him, and the last two glowing coals of the friendly fire glared at him in loathing as they became the eyes of the skull, both dripping bright blood.

The skull drifted up from the earth and said, 'Come out of your bristles, little porcupine. The Giver once sent my tribe to feed your nation, but now I will kill you unless you can stop me.'

The skull hooked the willow reeds savagely with its sharp horns and smashed the *onikare* down around Worm's head.

When Worm opened his golden eyes again, he was in a different place, a world of night where the sky held no stars, no moon, no afterglow, no Spirit Path. Heaven had turned black, and this strange land had turned white.

The air was dank with decay and so cold that his every breath crackled into blue crystals. Worm's face was rigid as whinstone, but within him, his belly slushed sickeningly. He stood on a stark plain crusted with a sweeping sheet of dead

snow. The plain was studded with misshapen drifts, ghostly against the raven sky.

Nothing grew here, neither cottonwood nor spruce. Nothing smelled here, no scent of sage nor cedar. Nothing lived here, the vast snowfield untrammelled by man or beast, by track of cat or cloven hoofprint. The land was without a soul. It was nowhere, what the whites called Hell.

Worm was shaken to find himself naked, without even a clout to hide his cold-shriveled privates. Then he realized he was not even painted for war. The red hailstones were missing from his lean body, a magic medicine he always wore in battle. Nor did he have weapons. His hands were cold and empty, no gleaming brass of his Yellow Boy filling them, no heft of Green River knife at his waist.

'Grandfather, have mercy on this warrior!' he cried silently. 'Let me have arms!'

He heard a sound beside him on the snow as the Giver dropped a beautiful deer-bone bow and a long broad-headed hunting arrow beside him. Before he could lean over to snatch them up, another sight seized his eyes.

Far off, the snow began to boil, but it did not melt. It churned like the waters of the hot geysers in the weird country of the Tetons where the falls of the Yellowstone plunged down over twenty-seven hundred feet on the river's turbulent run northeast to join the Missouri in Montana.

Soon, where the snow contorted, a fox fire glowed green and the *wanagi* - ghost - appeared appallingly.

Worm began to sing his death song.

The snow grew a white buffalo more quickly than the spring chinooks grew scarlet vetches. It bloomed fantastically from under the crust, a spike of enormous bulk and power, with a white hump that loomed high as a sleet-capped peak in the Shining Mountains.

Like the bleached skull at the sweat lodge, this bull's eyes glistened with red blood. Its horns were afire with vermilion flames that danced eerily over the pink muzzle. A long saliva sagged from its devil's beard as the monstrosity pawed the snow and thundered a bellow which shook the earth: '*Wahi!* I come!'

'*Witko kaga!*' Worm shouted emptily. 'Crazy demon! Come then! You are only a buffalo! I have hunted you before! Come then, *wanagi*, and see which one will fall! It is a good day to die!'

The white buffalo dropped his head, lowering the fiery horns, and charged.

Worm reached down and grabbed up the bow and the single arrow. It would be a very difficult shot, because the white buffalo was coming head on, and that meant Worm had to bury his shaft past the lowered skull, into the tough neck and down into the huge heart.

He started to slot the arrow and take aim, and his heart died like the air of this dead world. The frozen snow had crammed into the arrow's notch and was tamped there solidly. The arrow had no slot.

He did not panic. He had loosed more than one broken-notched broadhead in battle's heat with killing effect. He gripped the frozen slot tightly between two fingers, pressing it hard against his thumb cushion on the other side of the bowstring. He pulled back powerfully, knowing the bone bow would take much strength to flex it.

But the bow did not bend at all.

Worm had heard tell of the whites' myth that Indians were afraid of the dark and would never fight at night. Before the advent of the rifle, there had been a simple reason why night was a dangerous time for combat with bows. The drooping temperature gave birth to dew, and the bowstring, imbibing the dew, lost the tensity to fly an arrow.

Now this had happened to him. The sinew had been wetted into a useless length of elastic gut.

With the steamy breath of the white giant upon him, Worm took the arrow in his right hand, holding it like a dagger, and swung the bone bow with his left hand, hoping to strike the spike across its bloody eyes, forcing it to swerve so that he might leap in for one deadly thrust at the lung cavity.

It was bad luck that the bull swerved into him instead of away, and hooked him head over heels across the biting

snow. The last thing he heard was the voice of *heecha*, the owl, announcing the coming of *yunke-lo*.

Worm awakened, gasping for breath. He clawed at his cheeks but found no Other-World snow there. With rude common sense He-Dog had tossed dawn-cold water from the Little Powder over his head.

'You called *me* clown?' He-Dog said with irony. Worm struggled to slow his breathing. 'What has happened to the great buffalo hunter of the Hunkpatilas? If I had not awakened you, friend, *pte* would have killed you.' He loosed a rumbling chuckle. 'Next time you dream, you better take me along to protect you.'

'It was not all a dream.'

'That is squaw talk.' He-Dog swept the campsite with a broad hand. 'No buffalo has walked this place.'

*Heeche* hooted dismally again from the green depths of a distant pine tree. Instantly Worm looked toward the east. A rusty smear foretold the rising of Father Sun. 'Something bad has happened.'

'Very bad!' He-Dog said acidly. 'Your yelling has scared off all the game and told our enemies where we are.'

'Did you not hear the owl?'

'He was only piping his song.'

'*Heeche* does not flute at daybreak unless there is an evil.'

The derision in He-Dog's eyes vanished; he turned and stared warily at the brightening sky. It was truly said. The owl was a wise bird; he did not greet the dawn unless *yunke-lo* had stolen into an Oglala tepee. 'We must get back to our people.'

Worm ignored him to make a fervent prayer to the four gods of the earth, to Waziah, White God of the north, to Huntka of the reddening east, to Wickmunke, Rainbow God in the gentle south, and lastly to the fearsome Thunderbird in the dark west. Then he arose. His medicine bag was tied on the end of his left braid and in the bag there was a small blue stone – not turquoise – which he had long before found at the place where he had had the medicine dream of the

golden ghost on the scarps above the Platte River. He reverently touched it now.

'The white buffalo came again.'

'*Ey-hee!*' He-Dog said wearily. 'It was only your dream.'

'Let me show you a thing.'

Worm trotted away to the breaks above the river, and He-Dog was compelled to follow him, foot-dragging in petulant annoyance. They climbed up to the banks where the old sweat-lodge swayed crookedly on its broken reeds, trembling in the morning breeze. Worm pointed down at the bleached buffalo skull which still sat before the crawl hole, facing east.

'Here is where *pte* attacked the *onikare*.'

He-Dog looked at the earth around the broken reeds. There were no tracks visible except Worm's own moccasin prints, and very few of these, since Worm had seen fit to walk in his previous marks. It was a wise precaution. It hid your habits from your enemies.

'No buffalo sign here,' He-Dog grunted.

'I have said it. Only the skull attacked.'

'You know that cannot be.'

'*Wayo kapi*.' Worm's thin face was sharp as an arrow-head. 'It is the truth.'

Worm led He-Dog inland, away from the river's coolness, and as he trotted he told all that had happened in the nightmare. He-Dog was impressed. 'At least your buffalo was not crazy meat. It is true that if we light up the Seven Fires, we can rub out the *wasichu* from our land. When we get back we will call a council and have the Crawler carry the war pipe to the other Lacotas as well as the Cheyennes.'

They reached a broad, treeless plateau, and a hush fell between them. The gray sage was sparse here. The earth was gritty as sand, and had drifted against the outcrop as the muddy waters of the Elk River drifted against the midstream rocks.

Worm pointed down. '*Pte-ska*,' he whispered. 'The Holy One.'

At first, in the dirty dawnlight, there was little to see because nothing had contrast yet. But when He-Dog kneeled

peering closely, a strong chill tingled down his broad back.

Deeply imprinted in the soft sand was the huge outline of a cloven hoof. As Worm had said, it was at least a month old. The overtrack of a horned lizard had streaked across it two weeks before. The passing feet of *tonkalla*, the mouse, had broken down one rim of the mark three weeks before.

As He-Dog raised his eyes slowly to follow the spoor, Father Sun edged over the lip of the horizon, and in a trice, everything cast a shadow.

On the sand, invisible until the sunlight swept across them, the tracks of the white buffalo sprang into birth, each hoofmark looming like a small canyon, casting its own blue umbra halfway across the bottom of its own ravine.

'How can it be?' He-Dog asked, struggling with the unreality. He remembered something. 'In your dream, you said the buffalo walked on snow.'

'Hin! Yes!'

'Then how could he have left his foot in the earth?'

Worm brought his hands together flatly in front of them and then spread them wide, slowly raising them high until they met again, the sign for 'heap'. 'He was a giant, as high as Touch-the-Cloud.' Their friend Touch-the-Cloud was a young chief of the Minneconjou and stood seven feet tall. 'He was more heavy than the whiteskin's wagon guns.'

'It is a hard thing to believe,' He-Dog said, believing nonetheless.

'Ghosts do not make tracks.'

'But real buffaloes do not make this kind of track,' He-Dog said harshly. He rose, shaking his big head, and followed the trail carefully. Four yards farther, the prints vanished. The spoor of other animals was plainly visible. But no cloven hoofs existed beyond that point.

He-Dog howled in frustration. 'Where did he go?'

Worm could only shrug.

'But this cannot be! The trail started out of no place and it has gone to no place! A bull buffalo does not just walk on the air.' He glanced at the shale outcrop, still thirty feet away. 'He cannot leap out of his tracks and off the trail like the long-eared snow rabbit who sleeps with his eyes open.'

'It is a mystery,' Worm said.

'It is crazy!' He-Dog bellowed. There was true dread in his black eyes, and his jaw had begun to hang loosely agape as he panted.

'Perhaps Waziah wiped out the trail with the blowing of sand across it,' Worm said, not believing the logical explanation.

He-Dog shuddered hard, as if shaking off a wandering scorpion. 'Let us leave this unholy place. I do not like what I have seen, and I have seen much to wonder about for many winters. *Hoppo!*'

They scurried back to the dead fire and erased the signs of their visit, after which they saddled the ponies and splashed across the Little Powder. They headed west-southwest for the Bozeman Trail, toward the stream known as Crazy Woman Creek at the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains. As they left, *heecha* hooted his final bode.

The land was alive with sign. The weather sparkled with light and shadow, prosperous clouds running before the brisk wind, the oaks rustling off the gold and russet leaves of autumn. Across the gaudy yellow hills of the Bozeman, they found the spoor of whiteskin gold seekers, heading north up the trail, defying Red Cloud's Treaty of 'sixty-eight, which forbade these lands to white men.

'They are only a day away!' He-Dog said lasciviously. 'Let us kill them!'

*'Heyoka!'*

'Why do you call me clown?'

'How quickly you forget *heecha*.'

'Goddam!' He-Dog grunted in white-tongue, shame-faced. To cover his discomfort, he peered off at Cloud Peak, some fifty miles away. High in the Big Horns, with an elevation of more than thirteen thousand feet, its crown was still capped with the silent snows of the previous winter. It was seldom ever bald. 'Two sleeps off,' He-Dog said meekly.

Worm nodded, forgiving him.

No danger loomed this day, no sign of circling ravens or golden eagles who follow hunters with a famished eye. Once,

they saw a flight of whooping cranes beating a lofty trail on their migration south from the cold muskeg of the White Grandmother's country.

They made He-Dog think of *heecha*. 'Tell me, friend, how is it with the owl? How does he know these strange things before they happen?'

'He is a wise bird, like the crane,' Worm said. 'The Great Mystery talks with him.'

'How can you tell?'

'Because it is given to me.'

'How does Sitting Bull of the Uncpapas know these things? And Ice of the Shyelas?'

'It is given to them and they listen.'

'*Huhn*,' He-Dog mewled, then used a feral cry he only uttered when killing or counting coup. He wrung his heavy hands in frustration. 'You have given me no answer at all.'

Worm said patiently, 'Do you not remember the story of *tonkalla* and the medicine wolf? . . . *Tonkalla* was busy gnawing awns from grain in the meadow when the coyote came to warn him. "Brother Mouse, have heed! There is a buffalo herd coming and one may step on you." And *tonkalla* replied, "Don't be foolish, Brother *Shunka*, there are no such things as buffaloes." He said it just before one killed him. Because his vision was so small, a buffalo was nothing to him but a dark thundercloud. So it is with you.'

'Dreamers!' He-Dog yelped sharply, even angrily. He had never understood the mouse story of his childhood. He wanted a flat reply, no sacred pipe-offering incantation. Something real, no eerie prayers to the Sky-God. Buffalo never spoke to him. They bellowed and charged. He had never met a tree that made palaver. They just squeaked and groaned and dropped their leaves in the Month-of-Changing-Seasons. The birds did not bring him telltales, unless you counted their droppings, which they were wont to send him without warning and without caution. He seethed at such ridiculous mysteries and rode long miles in lip-sucking silence.

Worm felt sorry for He-Dog, but he had spoken all that words could explain. As they loped through copses of rest-

less willow and quaking asp, feeling in the blue air the sharp fang of winter's coming, he watched He-Dog sulking childishly. They did not talk.

Worm shrugged it away. He knew that *heecha* did not speak crookedly. The owl's warning could not be ignored. Once before he had turned away from *heecha*'s hoot, and terrible things had happened. He rubbed the shiny scar on the left side of his nose, recalling his own foolishness.

... The evil had begun in the Winter-of-Plenty-Buffaloes (what the whites called 'sixty-one, when the Abolition War began). The young Hunkpatilas were no longer braves now but full-grown warriors, having taken the warpath against the Absarokas and the Shoshonis. Some had brought back bloody scalps, some only the wealth of stolen ponies, but all were in manhood where marriage was the next danger to be faced.

Unlike He-Dog, No-Water, Little-Big-Man and his other young cohorts, Worm refused to play the moonling for the nubile maidens who cast saucy eyes at him. He did not pelt them with pebbles while they bathed in the river; he never picked the sweet wild plums to lay at their tepee crawl holes; he never came calling with a red blanket to wrap around some pretty girl (while an Old One crow-eyed them sharply for any sign of misbehavior).

The Hunkpatilas understood that Worm was a strange one, a lone hawk, wont to fly to Pa Sappa, to meditate in the mountains and reach out for the answer to the Great Mystery. It was a sorry loss to many maidens, because already his name was much and there was great honor in him.

All of this changed in a flash when Black-Buffalo-Woman came of age.

Certainly, she was the most beautiful of all the Oglala maidens. Her ebony eyes were as soft as a young doe's; her body rippled with the grace of *tatoke*, the pronghorn; her mouth gleamed bright as the reddening cherries of July.

But she was also the niece of Red Cloud and she – *ishna tinza!* – had power.

For years Worm had barely noticed her ripening. After all, she was the sister of his blood friend He-Dog, and in younger years such noisy kin could be as pesky as buffalo punkies. So when her ambitious father threw open the skins of his lodge on this night and told the Crier to announce that it was time for her to leave his lodge, Worm was not only stunned by her sudden grace but instantly smitten. Nor was he the only one.

She sat on wolfskins inside the tepee, dressed in heavily fringed white buckskin, looking like a red-winged snowbird with vermilion painted across her high cheekbones. But Woman's Dress warned nastily, 'She is a Bad Face. Her hand is itchy. Have heed, young men.'

It seemed to Worm, in his lovesick imagination, that her lithe body reached out toward *him*. And why not? At eighteen winters he had counted more coups than many old chiefs held when they went-to-Father.

Yet, she seemed to find No-Water fair too. This did not make Worm happy. No-Water was not a friend of his. Despite the ever-present smile, Worm had always found him to be an *unktomi* – a trickster. (It was Sitting Bull's favorite word for the whites.) No-Water's eyes were much too close together, they glittered like a snake's, and there was treachery in them.

Days later, the blow fell heavily.

'Harden your spirit, my son,' Worm's father said gently. 'Black-Buffalo-Woman has become the wife of No-Water.'

That was the beginning. The near-tragic end came years later, when the whites' War-Between-the-Brothers ended. By then, having borne three of No-Water's children and weary of his two hearts, she sought Worm, who had not lost his love of her. They decided to run away.

Among the Oglalas it was a wife's right to do such a thing. True, she could no longer join the dance of the Only Ones, but that was the sole penalty. If no other man was involved, her father had to return the bounty her husband had paid for her. If a swain like Worm was involved, it became his responsibility to repay No-Water with enough horses and goods to allay the loss. Once she left the lodge, adultery was

not involved. The Lacotas regarded adultery with hard eyes.

So they rode out, openly, toward the Dakota country where Bad-Heart-Bull was camped near Rawhide Buttes. Everybody saw them go, after Black-Buffalo-Woman had farmed her children out to relatives. That should have been the end of it.

It wasn't. No-Water's heart was bad. He tracked them to Bad-Heart-Bull's camp, where old friends like Little-Big-Man, a stubby, rotund warrior, and huge Small-Shield made them welcome.

In the quiet dawn, while they slept in their buffalo robes, No-Water arrived with a borrowed six-shooter. Worm had stirred awake, hearing *heechea* hooting at the daybreak. 'Silly bird,' he said happily. 'This day you speak foolishly.'

That was when No-Water burst into their lodge and cried, 'My friend, I have come to kill you!'

Worm sprang erect, drawing his Green River blade, but Little-Big-Man, horrified at the idea of murder among the Oglalas, an unthinkable crime, grabbed Worm's knife wrist just as No-Water fired.

The bullet smashed Worm in the face, knocking him head over heels. No-Water vanished into the sandy plains of the barren land north of Pa Sappa and went into lonely hiding.

For a full moon the shadow of *yunke-lo* lay across Worm. He lived at the end of his fingernails, minute to minute, day by day. But at last, painfully, he became whole again, to find the brief romance was over. Black-Buffalo-Woman had returned to her family. And Worm, his twisted face seething in outrage at a crime the Oglalas loathed, took an oath that he would track down No-Water and pay in kind.

As it happened in the days to come, fickle Time flipped the coin exactly the opposite way.

They had located the Hunkpatila encampment the evening previous, watching the blue haze hanging under a mountain saddle some twenty miles away. A paper-collar soldier would not have seen the difference between the normal twilight haze and the thicker hue of the camp's cook fires at that

distance, but to Worm and He-Dog it was as plain as an elk's hoofprint.

This overcast morning, as they approached the village, the owl hooted his forlorn warning as before on the Little Powder. Both men were grim.

The campsite was well chosen, lying along the headwaters of the Crazy Woman's north fork, dead below the ancient scree which had spilled down from the foggy heights of the southern Big Horns. Cloud Peak, their landmark, was completely hidden above them, as was Father Sun.

The village was silent. No kin came to meet them. No wary lookout spotted them riding boldly in.

'Sicha,' He-Dog growled. 'Nutskawehoo! Soldiers have come here.'

'No,' Worm said.

He made sign toward the pony herds that were milling restlessly in a grassy park on the fringe of the village, wriggling like maggots on putrid meat. If the Long Knives had raided with their two-bang wagon guns and glittering 'corn-cutters', there would have been no herd. Horses were the first war prizes the Americans destroyed, having heard that 'an Injun afoot ain't no Injun a-tall', an often-true homily of Old Jim Bridger's.

Worm and He-Dog spooked through the gray mists and quickly came upon the circles of tepees which sat like giant pine cones along the banks of the Crazy Woman. Each man's eyes scanned in dread, seeking out his own lodge to see if *yunke-lo* had been his unwelcome guest. But it was Worm who gasped sharply and reined up Chikala.

He-Dog said in a croak, '*Peta chante*, friend. My heart is a stone for you.' He tugged his rope bridle and turned his piebald away toward his own lodge, leaving Worm alone.

The mists cleared but seemed to take the air away with them. He could not force a breath into his lungs. He looked nakedly at his tepee, saw the two spruce boughs crossed over the closed crawl hole. He shuddered and slid to earth, where his uncle, Lazy-Hawk, took the reins and led Chikala and Sichá away.

Worm's wife, Black-Shawl, stood before the tepee. She

was torn, like the ragged prey of some demon-eagle, her arms talon-ripped, caked with blackening blood; her legs still oozing fresh gore from the terrible slashes on her shins. Her long black hair had been cut to the closeness of her neck. Her buckskin dress and blanket were in tattered fringes, her plain face a mask of ashes and cuts. There was no feeling left in her; her eyes were unblinking. She stood like a dead thing, ravaged by her own grief-stricken knife hand in the way of the Hunkpatilas.

Worm wished he could have spared her compassion, but there was none in him, only a terrible hollowness. They had only been married four years, with none of the fire of his lust for Black-Buffalo-Woman so many years before. Black-Shawl was a good woman. She had been a quiet wife and a faithful mother to the Little One, the missing one, They-Are-Afraid-of-Her, their little girl of only two winters, she with the bright eyes of the porcupine, the raucous laughter of the magpie, the high mischief of the pack rat; she who had not yet known the wonders of the earth and the beauties of the night sky. And now, never would.

‘Do not speak her name,’ Black-Shawl warned him.

He said, ‘*Kte*? She is dead?’

‘She is gone-to-Father,’ said Black-Shawl. ‘The whites’ coughing sickness took her in the darkness.’

Worm shrieked, shaking his Yellow Boy wildly over his head, and for a long time that was all he remembered. When he came around, his mouth was filled with earth, for in his seizure he had bitten into the dust like a gut-shot animal.

Opening his eyes, he found himself lying on a buffalo robe, beside a friendly fire within his father’s lodge. He was still clinging to his Henry rifle as if it were his dead daughter and he was sobbing, childlike, in the way of the rabbit after the rattle-tailed *sosho* has mortally fanged it. Tears teemed down over his cheeks, cutting crooked trails through the soil that had been rubbed on them when he groveled in his fit.

The wrinkled face of his father had seen seventy-eight winters on this grim morning and it looked at him now with much pity, the old eyes wise with time. Father and son were alone. The women sat outside the tepee, keening wildly. But

inside, only the busy fire made small talk as its burning twigs crackled cheerfully.

'I have taken away your name this day,' his father said. 'It is not good that a war chief's eyes should make water and it is not fit that the people should see their leader weeping like a woman. You must be brave, Curly. It is not a time for foolish acts. Therefore I have given you my own name until your weakness has passed under. You shall be called Worm because I am an old man and it does not matter if I am weak or my name is weak. It is only important that your true name stay whole. I shall hide it safely from you until your heart is strong again and you are fit to carry it.'

'As you say,' Worm agreed. '*Le pila mita*, my father. Thank you.'

'You must eat some *papa*,' said the old man, reaching for a parfleche of buffalo meat.

'There is no wolf in my stomach.'

His father laid the meat aside. For a time they sat in silence. The old man stuffed kinnikinnick in his pipe and lighted up without the usual ceremony. Worm stared into the flames. The silence stretched until the bow must break.

Worm finally asked, 'Where?'

It was easier to speak in sign, since the ails of the mourners outside the lodge skins all but drowned them out. Worm hated the custom of lament even though they were doing this for him in courtesy. So he gave eyes to his father's silent signs and tried to blot out the caterwauls.

'*Hecheto welo*,' his father said in sign. 'It was well done. All of this happened more than a moon ago. We wrapped her in a red blanket and sewed her in well. Then we covered her with the palest robe of the village. We carried her a long way off, hoping we would meet you on the trail, but that did not come to be. At last we found a good place for her scaffold.'

The old man sucked once on his catlinite pipe. Worm waited with the patience one reserved for the Elders.

'Where the Tashunka-ska-wakpa meets Chankpe-opi-wacca-pella, we found an enchanted mesa.' (The whites would have said that the mesa was at the fork of the

White Horse River and Wounded Knee Creek.)

Worm said, aloud, 'There is a soldiers' town near the White Horse called Fort Robinson.'

His father said, in sign, 'No, my little warrior, she is nowhere near the *wasichu*. She is on a rise southeast of the buffalo gate to the Black Hills, with tall pines and white asp to watch over her scaffold, and steep trails to keep enemies from the climb so they cannot find her and disturb her journey.'

Worm uttered a savage scream, reached into the fire and crushed a red-hot coal in the palm of his right hand. The sting faded before the ache in his soul. He rose abruptly. 'I must go to the Little One, my father.'

'*Heyah!*' his father said in sign.

'She is all alone. It is a long trail on the Spirit Path to the Other World and she was always afraid of *heecha's* darkness.'

'*Heyah,*' said his father's sign again.

'There is the smell of rain on the wind. The trees say that Wakinyan Tanka, the Thunderbird, is making up a great storm. I cannot leave her alone out there.'

'No!' his father said firmly in sign, casting a hand aside in the negative gesture. 'You have been long gone on the war-path, Curly. Your mother wishes to lay her eyes on you for a little longer than the arrow's flight. Your wife needs the touch of your hand. I say that you will stay here awhile and rest until your heart is good again, so that you can wear your own name once more. Then you may leave.'

Worm said in sign, 'You have spoken, my father. . . .'

But long before midnight when the storm covered the bright stars of the Wanagi Tacaku with black clouds, he was gone like a phantom, leaving no trail to follow. Not even his friend He-Dog, nor his uncle, Lazy-Hawk, could find a single sign to spoor him. It was the first time in his life that he had ever disobeyed his father.

Old Worm instantly forgave him. 'His heart is heavy,' he told the clan in a flat voice that said he would brook no chatter about his son's vanishment.

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In his thirty-two years Worm had never seen such anger in the Great Spirit.

The thunderbirds had loomed out of the gloomy west to flail their bony black wings over the mountains of Montana, grinding the lofty peaks into muddy muck and then spewing the filth across the land, from the red waters of the Tongue River down to Pa-Sappa. They screamed in earsplitting din, smothering the country in a solid sheet of waterfall in which one gasped to breathe.

The night was more day than dark as the white lightning strode the hilltops on its mile-high spider legs, burning up the lofty pines and striking down the scrub cedar that had dared to live that tall.

Worm rode the middle of the slopes, below the lightning bolts but high enough to avoid the wild waters that dry brooks had suddenly become.

Once, in a marshy green park, a bowl among the rain-swept hills, he saw a small herd of buffalo, huddled together, facing the weather as brave buffalo always did. The herd rumbled like the thunder as it circled itself incessantly, trying to keep warm. Their friction raised a blue halo over their humps, laced with crackling sparks, which sometimes flickered into pale flame. Then the aura sucked down a lightning finger into the heart of the herd.

Still they did not stampede. The slain remained on the sodden grass. The survivors staggered to their feet unsteadily and faced the tempest staunchly once more, grunting and bellowing furiously.

Some of their anger snaked into Worm's heart; his blood began to heat. He thought of the Little One, They-Are-Afraid-of-Her, and the terrible things that had happened to her while he was off on the scout. His father had told him the details, how she sickened with a hot head and wet nose; how she had coughed without being able to draw a breath, a cough that whooped like a hatcheting warrior and drew blood-flecked foam to her little mouth; how, at last, the cough had been buried in the slushing of her lungs as they filled with her own water and drowned her (what the whites called pneumonia).

Sonabich! he thought in white tongue. What savages these *wasichu* were! An awful people who beat their children, who stole twice what they needed, yet let their blood brothers starve to death. Creatures who let their hair grow across their face like animals; whose bitter stench and lack of bath announced their comings and goings! Walking beasts, without mercy, who killed for pleasure, never understanding the meaning of the world around them. Brutes who lived in square houses, never seeing that Father Sun was round, that Mother Earth was a great circle, that the ends of the world had no ends but were rounded into the round Spirit Sky of the Other World. Everything was a roundness. There was nothing but disorder in squareness, only sickness and death. Any brave knew that. Tepees were built in roundness and placed in circles so that all could be in harmony with Wakan Tanka.

Even in death these pagans (had they not hanged their God on a tree and pierced him with lance and thorns?) were as gluttonous as the skunk bear. They did not even give their clay back to Maka, which they had ravaged during their lifetime. Instead they hid their dead in boxes so that the bodies could never help the grass to grow nor feed the living plants and trees.

Sonabich!

His blood was boiling now, and since the storm had forced him to follow the Thieves' Road (which the whites called the Bozeman Trail), he finally saw the place called Fetterman as it squatted in a flare of lightning across the Shell River.

Before the dawn, Waziah stole the storm from the Thunderbirds, chased the winds away and froze the rain. It began to snow heavily and the silence, after the hubbub of the night, was ghostly.

Soon he came to the long gulch where the whites had made their hovel of huts. He grunted, remembering that cold day when he had seen the soldier Fetterman die near Peno Creek. Fetterman and the other white-eyed officer putting their revolvers to each other's head, counting to three, and blowing each other's brains out rather than let

the Lacotas count coup. Indians never touched the scalp of the self-destroyed. Such a thing was cursed, as was Fetterman himself, who would wander the Other World forever without his own soul.

The watch fires at the mouth of the gulch that led down into the settlement were not afire. The rain had throttled them. The wood was cold; the snow clung to the charred logs without melting. Then – *Hou*, what good luck! – two riders came up the Broadway and headed south down the Thieves' Road.

Keeping above them on the ridge but behind the crown so that they could not spy him, Worm paralleled them, chittering in the eagle's growl to tell Sicha there was battle at hand. The war horse stepped along briskly behind Chikala.

A mile from the settlement, Worm tied off the ponies on the east side of the ridge, plucked his Yellow Boy from its wet scabbard and crawled up to the spine, taking cover behind the bleeding bark of a pitch pine.

It was almost too easy. These crazy white men even carried an oil lantern to show themselves to him in the white darkness. They were the first of the town to break a trail in the snow, which already lay as thick as a finger on the ground.

They soon reached him and were passing. One wore a scarlet capote with a wolf-fur hood, the other a short buffalo coat with the curly hair turned inside. They were both young men, both bearded, and looked so much alike he could not have told the difference between them if he had met them in future. But they had no future.

He aimed down through the falling snow and shot the first one through the left shoulder. Before the man could tumble, Worm switched to the lantern holder and bulleted him in the same spot. Both men melted off into the snow; the horses, a beautiful gray and a fifteen-hand-high roan, neighed in fear and skambled down the road apiece south.

The men were stone dead, Worm knew that. He was wondering whether or not to steal the horseflesh or shoot it, when the firecracker poppings of a bullwhip's whang tips reached his keen ears, followed by the eerie squealing of

ungreased axles. He could not see it yet, but he realized that a stagecoach was approaching. The oil lantern which the second corpse had carried had vanished into the snow, its garish amber light flickering out when it overturned.

Still the night was not totally black. Like the dry alkali on a moonless night, the snowflakes reflected whatever stray light filtered through the tattered storm clouds above.

He made out the black bulk of the stage as it swallowed a rise and then halted, south of him, to retrieve the horses. They were whinnying in terror but quickly stilled. Soon the fustigator cracked again, he heard the frustrated bray of a mule, and the coach creaked toward him.

Below him on the road, the coach slewed to a stop. Worm could hear the trace chains jingling, then the voices of men speaking white tongue. It was very dim and he could not make them out against the body of the coach. He would have to aim at the sound of them.

Abruptly a yellow light flared down on the road. Worm's knife-sharp face puttied in astonishment. He lowered the Henry rifle, swindled by the sight below him.

One of the whites had actually struck and lit a match! He was an old man, hairy-faced and red-nosed, encased in yellow fishskins, cursing as he bent over the two bodies. It was such a foolish act, it made Worm suspicious. He warily looked over his shoulder to make sure no *wasichu* had either backtracked or flanked him. But only the ponies stood there, unruffled, watching him sharply.

It was like a human sacrifice. He still could not believe it. Then he became aware that the second man had emerged from the coach.

This strange white gave him pause. A tall man, clothed in jet black, his coat open, the butts of two revolvers glinting at his red sash in the buttercup glow of the match, this one was such as Worm had seldom seen, clean-shaven, with no sign of bestial hair on his strong face. Moreover, this tall man stood straight, without fear, and flint-eyed the rise. Worm had the weird feeling that he was looking into the face of death. Not once did the tall man spare a glance for the bodies. He kept watching up through the snow, right into

Worm's face, half hidden behind the pitch pine. Yet surely, he cannot see me! Worm thought.

The old man blew out the match, and the blackness rubbed out everybody.

Worm's inner mystery whispered, 'Begone from this place! You will find more vengeance later. But do not make war with that stranger!'

In the darkness he heard the coach door bang against the tonneau as the whites struggled to put one of the corpses onto the rear seat. It hardened his heart. Carefully he caressed the kinked hammer and waited for the next sound that might give him an aiming point. Almost immediately the door of the coach squealed open again for the second carcass and when its handle struck the side panels with a hollow clunk, he squeezed off a shot to the right of it, the rifle barking nastily.

His world instantly exploded. Panic and pain seized him. A jagged slab of the pitch pine's bark struck him a savage slash across the forehead, having been torn loose from the tree by a ricochet through its soft rind. A hornet stung the lobe of his left ear, sharp as frostbite. Two more bullets zipped by, seeking him out, and the last one thwucked solidly into the pine tree.

He remembered later, when he was safe, how the road below him had lighted up like an orange sun, and although he had distinctly heard five separate explosions, they were so close together, their flames had so tightly knitted, they seemed like the single flash of a gigantic firefly. Vaguely he recalled glimpsing No-Hair-Face's cat eyes staring up at him, firing through the falling snow. *Ey-hee*, but this was magic! And No-Hair-Face was a cursed *kaga*! A demon!

All of this he recalled later, when his heart had stopped wallowing, when the blood from the wound on his earlobe had congealed, when he was a cold mile away from the ambush, riding Chikala hard and tugging a reluctant Sicha. Worm was glad he had been alone, not with He-Dog or his other friends, for it was the first time in his life that he had ever known true fear.

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Worm felt forlorn as his ponies stumbled across the white desolation. Never had the land seemed so lonely, so empty of living things. There were no signs in the snow, nothing stirred out there beyond the Cheyenne River.

A dread grew in him about this strange white who could see in the dark and even behind trees. Worm knew that he had never before smelled *yunke-lo's* breath so closely, not even when No-Water shot him in the face. There had been firelight then and No-Water standing only a man's length away could hardly have missed. But No-Hair-Face had reached out for him in the darkness with a vengeance that would not stop even now.

Slowly he recalled another white like No-Hair-Face, a yellow-haired killer with blond mustaches who had ridden the scout for the whiteskin general called Hancock in his treacherous campaign against the Lacotas and the Shyelas in 'sixty-seven. Worm had never seen this yellowhair, but the man was legend at the council fires. It was he who had killed Zheulee, the Whistler. Zheulee had been the peace chief of the Oglalas, for which many a hotblood warrior despised him. Zheulee had always said, 'We must bend with the wind or break. We must walk the white man's road or be slain.' Yet when poor Zheulee visited the white encampment to bring his medicine of peace, the cat-eyed yellow-hair with the blond mustaches coolly shot him, over the eyes, knocking him out of his saddle, then took his hair where he lay. The braves with Zheulee turned and fled, living to tell the tale of this yellowhair who threw flame and bullets faster than falling rain.

Could No-Hair-Face be the same man?

*Huhn!* Worm grunted. A name drifted back to him. White names were hard to understand, much less remember. He thought deeply. Was it Hehcoc? *Hehcoc! Hin!* That was it! That was Yellowhair! The Lacotas called him Okute. The Shooter. Was it the same man?

Gradually the ghostly dream of Hehcoc faded from his fears and with the old flakes whirling off the drifts into his half-buried face, he visioned the white buffalo again and

again, for now there was snow on Maka's breasts and perhaps the time had come.

Late in the afternoon Worm saw Pa Sappa's heights to the northeast as he reached the White Horse River below the Pte-ta-Tiopya, the ancient buffalo gate into the Black Hills. Miles off, he discovered a hunting party of four horsemen. He levered his Henry and approached them cautiously until he recognized the gaudy buffalo-hide shield of his friend Little-Big-Man. He raised the rifle in the air and wasted a bullet on the sky as he yelled, '*Hou, cola!*'

But as he galloped toward the little band, one of the hunters split off and headed away fast, his horse's hoofs raising clouts of packed snow high in the air as he punished his pinto with a wrist quirt. The brave was so hidden in robe and blanket, Worm could not make out who it was. He learned soon enough when he reached Little-Big-Man and the other two, who turned out to be his friends Small-Shield and the treetop-tall Minneconjou, Touch-the-Cloud.

'*Hou, cola!*' Little-Big-Man bellowed as if much voice would keep him warm.

'Hello, friend!' Worm replied with unnatural heartiness, eased at the breaking of his solitude. He gave Touch-the-Cloud particularly the hard double handshake of blood brothers and though his thin face did not betray it, his heart was full.

Little-Big-Man waved his rifle off toward the vanishing horseman, who was becoming vague amid his snow-smoke. 'He is with us. I claim his friendship. We will have no blood for blood this day.'

Now Worm understood. The runaway was No-Water, putting quick miles between them in case Worm's heart was too bitter for custom.

'You have said it,' he told Little-Big-Man reluctantly. The elation of the meeting was suddenly gone. He watched No-Water's cloud growing smaller. His mouth was dry with hatred.

Touch-the-Cloud looked enormous on his little pinto, as if his long legs would drag in the snow. 'Have you come

hunting him too, Curly?' he asked, using the childhood name.

Worm did not understand.

'The white buffalo,' Touch-the-Cloud said.

Worm covered his mouth in awe. 'No!'

'*Hin!* Our war wolves spied him crossing Wounded Knee Creek and brought us the word. We were visiting with Red Cloud on the reservation. So we came hunting the Holy One. There is much sign, plenty good sign!'

'The white buffalo is here?'

'The first *pte-ska* in many summers,' said Small-Shield. 'And I have never seen one.'

'Join us,' Little-Big-Man said. 'You are welcome.'

'*Heyah.*' Worm drew erect. 'I seek the bones of my daughter.'

It was the first they knew of his tragedy. They respected it in silence. Brief signs were exchanged, signs of goodbye, *amba washtay*, and then all the stolid faces turned to their trails, Worm southeast toward the White Horse River, the others northwest toward the snow-studded dark-green mountains of Pa Sappa and the trail of the great white spike.

The weather did not hold. Next day the Thunderbirds beat out a fresh rage of heavy rains which washed away the fallen snow and mired the earth. It was in this stormy thaw that Worm found his daughter's scaffold.

He stood before it while lightning burst around the little mesa and he was grateful for the rain, which hid his weeping. *Waugh!* he thought, spirit-spent. Truly his heart had fallen on rocky ground. Truly, evil times had counted coup on him. He had lost his courage to No-Hair-Face, he had lost his honor to No-Water, and lastly, he had lost his love to his Little One. How much more could be borne?

The sight of her toys hanging from the sturdy scaffold stabbed him with an anguish he could not contain. He shrieked to the winds and the sky and beat his chest with heavy fists, coughing and choking in the paroxysm of his sorrow. Her baby rattle of antelope hoofs, strung on rawhide, clacked cheerfully against the uprights, sounding as if They-

Are-Afraid-of-Her was still playing with it. An antelope bladder, which he himself had filled with pebbles, clacked brightly as the winds swung it to and fro. Her painted willow hoop, which hung over an upright, was whirling gaily as if she were hitting it with a stick, the capricious gale enjoying its spinning.

But the worst pangs came when he climbed atop the scaffold to hold her rotting body in his arms. There, under the outer buffalo robe, he found her deerskin doll, with its big bead eyes and smiling bead mouth, lying against its cradle board, which was decorated the same way as the doll's clothes, with the same designs Black-Shawl's family had always used, passing them down through the generations, designs being one of the few personal inheritances allowed by the Oglalas.

He sobbed himself into exhaustion, holding her, hiding them both from the storm. He remained on the scaffold for two days and nights without food or water and his dreams grew terrible.

On the third dim dawn, sick at heart and weak of body, he prayed. How could he help the Little One? How could he prevent this horrid trail of tears that she would always walk? For in dying of the whites' coughing sickness, it meant that the Little One would forever be corrupt in the Other World, forever in agony, forever coughing in suffocation, forever destroyed instead of being the happy child she should have been. '*Giver of life,*' he beseeched feverishly, '*show me a sign for the Little One!*'

The earth trembled as Wakan Tanka instantly replied to him. The scaffold began to sway to and fro like a giant swing. There was a rumbling in the ground, and a heavy snorting of a living beast. Worm raised his head from beneath the buffalo robe he shared with his dead daughter.

The rain had long ago changed to heavy snow. The whole world around him was white, the aspens, the pines, the earth. Beneath him, rubbing itself against the uprights of the scaffold, stood a white buffalo, steaming heavily in the frigid dawn.

'*Huhn!*' Worm shrieked. He seized the Henry rifle, which

lay beside him atop the scaffold, and rolled over to his other side.

The bull buffalo, startled by the quick presence of an enemy above him, leaped backward a few feet, stared in bug-eyed astonishment and then began to run to the downhill slope.

Worm fired one bullet into the buff's neck, dropping it heavily. Then he fired two more, one into the ear, the other into the lungs, exposed as the buff raised its free legs stiffly in its death throes.

Worm's elation died quickly. The shock of the buffalo's fall disclosed a brown pelage under a heavy coat of snow. He could see the snout now, black as a raven, not pink. The open-dead eyes were dark brown, not blood red. It was not a white buffalo, only a snow-covered one.

Still, the Great Spirit had spoken.

If he could bring They-Are-Afraid-of-Her the pelt of the white buffalo, she would be healed of the whites' curses and could be gone-to-Father in a whole body.

'*Le pila mita*,' Worm said to the Giver. 'Thank you.'

After he had skinned out the dead bull and stowed fresh meat in the parfleches on Sicha's gaudy back, he cut off the head of the buffalo and placed it at her feet below the scaffold, facing east, since his father had not been able to do this sacred thing.

Then he rested one more day and ate ravenously to put strength back into his body.

That night, when the snow stopped, he mounted Chikala and rode north into the arcane reaches of Pa Sappa, to the hidden dales and dank ravines and secret places that he, of all the Oglalas, knew best.

'*Wahi!*' he called to his prey, somewhere up there in the wilderness. 'I am coming.'



THREE

# The Hunting



When Otis edged open the crude door of the Frozen Dog, high on Fetterman's Broadway, he was struck heavily by an overpowering stench which made him recoil sharply. The sound and smell of more than two hundred stinkards, belching or breaking wind, was like a blast from an open-hearth oven. He struggled to hold the door ajar and his gorge down, praying the gusting winds might freshen the air. But even this act of self-preservation was lopped when a dozen bel-lows commented on his being barn-born.

There was an old saw that said, 'Leopards can't change their spots, and polecats can't change their phew.' God knows it was true this night. Every skunk in the territory had been tamped into the tippie house and each one had a musk hideously different from his brother's. Otis could only feel that he had ridden into a three-month-old Cheyenne camp. The Boston Indian-lovers might eulogize the Noble Redskin, and faraway historians might theorize on why the Red Heathens were nomads, but then they had never tried to breathe in an Indian camp about to migrate. The reason the redskins wandered was that they had no choice. After three months, there was such a pileup of bleached bones and rotten meat, plus the urine and droppings of fifteen hundred savages, indiscriminately scattered around and about, they *had* to move or die of the odoriferous air.

Otis had seen many things, from the bowsprits of the clipper ships on South Street in Gotham to the Mississippi's birthplace in Minnesota, where he had skipped across the brook which would become the Father of Rivers, but he had never seen anything like this.

He plunged into the dancers, all tipsy males embracing each other in crapulous affection while they cartwheeled perilously over the slippery floor. The Frozen Dog was long and thin, like most of these shebangs, with a primitive bar

coursing along the left wall of palisades. At the end of the narrow building a settlement of games and tables sprouted. Otis noted there were no rear nor side doors. One way in and one way out. There were no windows, either, a circumstance to which he did not object. Windows were the back-shooter's best friend.

Down at the end of the room two blankets hung over one corner. Shuffling lines of horny rascals poised in front of them. Somewhere behind the blankets a pimp – complete with ten-gauge shotgun – was announcing the terms. 'One gold eagle per minute, gents, ten bucks for sixty seconds, but no hurry, gents, ride the hoss as long as you can pay or it's a cheap funeral at sunup!'

The blankets meant there were only two cows to service the entire herd. Even while he watched, one of them came up for air (and a beer glass of bourbon).

When he reached the bar James Otis was frosty with disgust. The bar itself was a row of whiskey barrels forty feet long with rough planks nailed atop them to serve as the buffet. No mirror gleamed behind the bar, only crude shelves on which the booze sat against the whitewashed cottonwoods that passed for a wall (on which Charlie Zane had hung a poster advertising his cats).

The elder barkeep seemed familiar, an Irishman of fifty years with a face and belly round as a buffalo's hump. Completely hairless, his pate glistened brightly under the lamp-light. His eyes were Dublin blue but sharp as a black-legged ferret's. Otis thought, Kansas. Some cowtown in Kansas. Was the handle Brady?

It was indeed. Earlier, when Otis had first put foot inside this charnel house, the younger tapster had spied him across the room and being fooled by the stranger's shining black buffalo coat, he had announced to Mr. Brady, 'Watch me hoorah this greenhorn.'

Brady spent a piercing look and said, 'Don't try it on. You might end up charging Hell with only a mouthful of spit.'

The kid waved away the advice. 'You just watch me get the bulge on that dude,' he said gleefully. He was a pig-

faced youth of twenty-three, a sometime cowboy who had jumped his outfit in Cheyenne and bindled his way to Fetterman, hoping to strike it rich. He was the ugliest drifter Brady had ever laid eyes on, a broken-nosed cross-eyed misfit, usually drunk, always penniless. Brady had felt rare compassion for him and had given him the job for booze and board. But he knew that Waco was innately cruel without innate courage.

Otis rapped on the oaken plank for a spell before he could draw attention. Finally, 'You there, hoss!'

'You talking to me, Greeny?' Waco sassed him.

Otis repressed a sigh and cooled his bile. 'I'll pay you a dollar to keep this coat safe from claimjumpers.'

'No room back here, Greeny,' Waco fleered, his crooked teeth speckled with brown cavities. 'And since we're all out of sasparilla, you won't be staying that long anyhow.'

Otis glanced off at the Irishman, who declined to meet his eyes. 'What's your name?'

'Pudding and tame,' Waco said. 'Or maybe I forgot it. Or maybe I don't have one.'

'That's probably because you come from a country where you didn't know who your father was. Texas likely.'

Waco was stung. 'Louisville, Kentucky!' He made a fist. 'And you better mizzle, Greeny, before I sprinkle some pepper on you!'

'I'll just call you fart face for short,' Otis said after making certain neither of the strumpets could overhear him.

The young man was shocked into a gaping silence, paling first, then going beet red with humiliation.

'Are you dressed for it?' Otis asked.

'For what?'

'When you start out insulting a man, you'd best buckle on something iron that shoots.' His coat was open, his thumbs hooked over the brim of his red sash.

Waco began to shake like a lamb's tail.

'Come on now!' Otis said. 'Either straddle my blind or throw in your cards.'

'McCall.'

'Say again?'

'I said my name's Jack McCall. Only around here most call me Waco.'

'You carrying the peace pipe?'

The cross-eyed youth sidled to and fro like a courting sage-cock. 'Hell, tenderfoot, I was only pulling your pinfeathers.'

'The only thing tender about me is my temper.' Otis threw over a hand to shake. 'James B. Otis.' McCall's hand was soft as a skinned snake and without grip.

'Let's have the coat, Mr. Otis, *and* the Liberty head.'

Otis passed him both pieces and while the youth stowed them, Mr. Brady finally sauntered down to exchange eyes. 'Well, well, Mr. - *Otis, you said?* - welcome to Fetterman.'

'How far were you going to let it go?' Otis asked, his voice hard.

'Not much more. He needed the stomping.' McCall had returned by then, but Brady shooed him off. 'Tend the other end, kid. And be sure they buy your thumb.' The youth slew-footed off to the far length of the bar, throwing back black looks. 'He's wishing he had the sand to draw on you.'

'The line is long,' Otis said wisely. '*You* see that he don't. As for me, a smile of mule skinner, Mr. - Brady?'

'Good memory. Tim Brady.'

'Hays City? Ellsworth?'

'Abilene. I was drumming whiskey then.'

Brady slopped the mule skinner together, a half-breed concoction of young whiskey and blackberry brandy. The idea was for the blackberry to kill the taste of raw red-eye, which was rifer in the boondocks than Old Crow or Hofstetter's Bitters. The whiskey was eighty proof, the brandy ninety. It was a drink guaranteed to inhibit cowardice and encourage stupidity.

'Water on the side?'

'Barefoot'll do.' Otis noticed that Brady had made himself a nip. They raised glasses and tinkled them. 'The Union forever!' Otis said, knowing it was a toast that could hot-head any stray Texan.

'The Republic!' Brady said, and they both downed the shot. 'Were you in the late scrimmage, Mr. Otis?'

'Brigade scout with Frémont's Army of the Southwest,' Otis said with pride. 'My folks were always Free-Soilers.'

'The Iron Brigade, Fourth Wisconsin.' Pride also crackled in the Irishman's voice. 'I was one of the damned fools who captured the rebel General Archer. I beat the Jasus out of him.' He coughed and fondly patted his paunch. 'I was in fighting fettle then.'

They had another beaker. 'What do you think of my palace?' Brady asked.

James Otis made a face as if he had just broken a tooth.

Brady grinned. 'I was an early bird here. I won a big stake down in Cheyenne and decided to bandy-dicker rotgut by the glass instead of the barrel. Figured the Army'd break into the Black Hills sooner than later despite the Injun treaties. I hit it right.'

'Well, Mr. Brady,' Otis said carefully, 'I have put many an elbow on many a bar, but this is the most fly-blown —'

Brady waved it off. 'What the hell, Mr. Otis, there ain't any demand yet from the carriage trade.' He brayed like a mule.

'Are your games on the square?'

'Crooked as a pig's tail. What's your pleasure?'

'Faro bank.'

'If you want to play, you tell Johnny Varnes, the case-keeper, to give me a high sign. I'll see that Johnny gives you an honest deck in an honest cage. But remember, I'll be losing wherewithal.'

Otis smiled. 'Taken kindly.'

As Otis stretched and looked around, Brady said, 'You looking for anyone in particular?'

'The cat seller,' Otis said, pointing at the sign on the back wall of the bar. It was a rude, hand-printed poster which read:

20 CATS FOR SALE  
\$100 PER  
Genuwine Ratters  
See Charlie Zane in the  
Sibley Tent on Lower Broadway

The '20' had been crossed out and replaced with a '16.'

Brady said, peering over the bibulous faces of the disporters, 'I think he's in Miss Freida's hutch getting his apple polished. He's got plenty to spend.' The Irishman indicated the profit which the poster already displayed, some four hundred dollars. 'Said he was rich and gonna take his time for once!'

'Never knew Charlie to womanize except when he was rattling coins,' Otis said. 'They always take it right away from him.'

'Even a polar bear raises hell on the equator,' Brady said.

Otis moved down from the end of the bar, past the sweating music makers, into the casino area of the Frozen Dog. Miss Freida apparently was the ghastly termagant he had first noticed, for she was back now in her cote plying her craft. Deep in the northwest corner, beyond the poker players, and next to the faro lookout's high chair, James Otis found a nook to his liking. It put the side of one wall on his right shoulder, the other on his left. Not even a shrewmouse could have ambushed him there.

For a while he watched the faro game closeby. The players were being swindled openly. It was incredible how the house could cheat in such a simple game. The dealer used a crooked box, called a screw cage. With a secret button, he could narrow or widen the pull slot so that either one *or two* cards could be slipped out. This required a snaky deck. Usually the faces of the high cards had been sandpapered, of the low cards, the backs. A little pressure and the high card would stick to the back of the low one and both would pass as a single turn. It all depended on where the money was bet. If on high to win, then a low card showed as winner. Or the other way around. Of course the draw could never come out evenly at twenty turns if you pulled such a sandy. Therefore a shill would yell for a fresh deck before the last three turns.

Otis chuckled at Brady's shrewdness in forewarning him of the double deal. Otherwise there would have been quick mortality at the table. Otis hated sharking.

After a while he saw Charlie Zane stagger out of the Miss Freida's crib, looking sated and a little drunk. Charlie was carrying a half-empty bottle of busthead, while he fumbled with the buttons of his fly.

Charlie Zane was not a big man. He had a slight figure, stood five seven on his bootheels and sported a shock of bushy white hair atop his long, ravined face. But there was always an ominously cheerful twinkle in his one good eye, which regarded the world with amusement. He had little weight on him; even at age fifty-five, his body was wiry. He was carrying a dirty ram-skin jacket and his gun belt on one arm as he struggled to slip his galluses back over his shoulders before his pantaloons sagged into danger. Doing so, he caught a winking glimpse of Otis. He hesitated cautiously while his mind identified the face without its familiar yellow mustaches. He ran his tongue out across his lips. It was an ever shocking sight to see the tongue slip through the slot of his upper lip, which was sharply arrow-split and, though healed, had never joined up.

Otis met his eyes and openly crossed his fingers over his mouth, an old signal among saddlemates who often changed their names during their meanderings, whether on the owl hoot or just for privacy. Charlie wandered over, loose as sand, but Otis' practiced eye noted that Charlie still walked like a Cheyenne Indian, high on the balls of his feet with his toes turned inward. A real souse could not have managed it.

'All curried and tamed, old-timer?' Otis asked.

Charlie Zane halted, his good eye staring at Otis, his glass one watching the faro game while he swayed in weaving drunkenness.

'Do I know you, sir?'

'James B. Otis,' Otis replied, without extending a hand. 'Maybe you could lend me a foot-up. Have a sit and hit her a few.'

Charlie Zane slid onto the crude stool beside the rough table and sucked some liquor from his brown bottle.

'I'm looking for a slop-lipped goose hisser named Charlie Zane,' Otis said.

'A princely fellow!' Charlie hiccuped.

'Actually Zane isn't even a real name. He changed his real name when he sloped out of Ohio, leaving behind a nagging wife and a parcel of debts. He is wanted - no price - for armed robbery in Kansas and Colorado.'

Charlie said with drunken dignity, 'I have heard tell the Colorado warrant has withered on the vine of time.'

'Maybeso,' Otis said. 'But to go on, this bilker took the name Zane from his home town of Zanesville, Ohio. Nobody knows his real moniker except maybe Wild Bill Hickok.'

'That seems sensible to me.'

'He is as tall as a fry-size tadpole,' Otis said, 'and wears a snow mane which got that way because he is scared of redskins. He has been known to wet his pantaloons at a Kiowa war whoop.'

'He would not be the first,' Charlie Zane said. 'I have heard it tittle-tattled that even the fearless Wild Bill visited with the town laundress after an Injman meet.'

'I have heard that it was secesh artillery did the job,' Otis said, smiling faintly. 'How many cats you got left?'

Charlie grinned, showing his lone gold tooth dead in the center of his mouth between two chipped ones. 'Twelve at last count. Or maybe a baker's dozen.'

'I'll take the best bitch and tom.'

'You gonna start a cat ranch, sonny?'

'For a friend of mine. You might know her. Poker Jenny Schermerhorn.'

Charlie spat through his lip slit with force. 'She is a hard woman.'

'Only with light-fingered sluffers.'

Charlie shrugged. 'The deal is gold, five double eagles in hand or on any bar.'

'The deal is as follows,' Otis said flatly. 'Split-Lip is to take the spondulix out of all the grubstakes I made him, and from all the poker checks he swiped from my winning pots. And if he finds that don't soap his saddle, I will be happy to hector him from soda to hock.'

Charlie threw up both hands. 'He'll go for it. It's fair as a kicked-in rib.' He passed over the brown bottle to seal the

deal. Revolted, Otis tipped up and drank a healthy swallow anyway to show good faith. Then he coughed violently, making a face that would have cowed a curly wolf. It was the worst of nectars, pure Pilgrim whiskey, the sort of poison the Indian traders brewed for redskins. There was bona fide insanity in it, plus stinging tangs from red peppers, rattlesnake heads and Battle-Axe twist tobacco. 'How can you drink that wallow water?'

'It's cheaper,' Charlie said sensibly.

'But you've got plenty of money.'

'For how long? It took me a heap of time to get used to this horse piss. If I changed over to the good stuff now, what'd happen when I went bust again?'

'Buncombe!' Otis said, gritting his teeth at the illogical logic. 'And fix your damned eye! It's wandering all over your face like a Jew pedlar!'

Charlie Zane laughed. Despite the trench-lined roughness of his face, his voice had a golden warmth. He looked around casually, saw that the eager eavesdroppers had lolled back into pip-squeaking their poker hands, no longer piqued by the meeting. Sassily he made passes like a professional magician and lifted his glass eye plop out of its socket. The bright blue iris stared at Otis sightlessly until Charlie pulled an overused blue kerchief from his buckskins and meticulously wiped the orb until it sparkled. He held it high for all to see.

'Those were the hair-shirt days of yore, eh, hoss?' he said to Otis. 'You recollect them?'

Otis could not repress a shiver. *Who could ever forget them?*

Sand Creek lay on the eastern fringe of Colorado Territory, a bleak and hell-born badland, completely hostile to life. Not a single tree grew here; there was no soft whispering of sweet cedar to the ear, no bracing scent of yew or juniper to freshen the nose.

On September 18 of 'sixty-eight, Sand Creek was even more hostile than usual. So James Butler Otis found it as he perched atop the flat pate of a one-hundred-foot mesa on the water's edge, with thirty-three men behind him, and looked

down into the feathers, fuss and war paint of three hundred howling Cheyenne warriors. A two-eyed Charlie Zane had been with him that day, his trusted lieutenant. The other thirty-two men had all been recruited from the surrounding hills and valleys, some ranchmen, some landloupers, some honyockers trying to make farms from this rude earth.

Not that you could blame the Tsistsistas – the Humans, as the Cheyennes called themselves – for their fury. Not over three miles northwest at Horseshoe Bend lay a barren, bloody ground where, four years previous, a sadistic Methodist preacher named Colonel John Chivington had slaughtered four hundred lodges of Black Kettle's people *after* Black Kettle had journeyed to Jim Denver's town, pleading for peace.

No, you couldn't blame them for blackening up their faces and turning this desert into white-knuckle country. For even after the Cheyenne dead were strewn like spring seeds along the banks of the Creek, Chivington and his men had not stopped their senseless malice. They carved off the breasts and privates of the squaws and carried them intact to Denver to exhibit to a gleeful populace. That was a big enough burr to plant under anybody's rump, much less a Cheyenne buck with his ingrained sense of justice.

The sun hung yellow at 3 P.M. when the hunters found themselves the hunted. The Cheyennes charged from both sides of the feet of the little rise.

'Goddam Chivington!' Charlie Zane said, panting as he fought to reload.

'Don't blame the preacher!' Otis said icily. 'These scurvy scuttlers'd be drooling to hang our wigs on a lance even if they had just shaken hands with us in a peace powwow!' He did not believe in red honesty, since no Indian he had ever met had survived long enough to offer it.

It was plain to the Cheyennes that this was no wild-firing cavalry patrol they were attacking. They withdrew from the field, leaving their dead and wounded on the slopes of the mesa, waiting till nightfall to recover the fallen.

'They'll overrun us for certain at sunup,' Charlie Zane said. 'Why don't we skeedaddle?'

'They'll have their wolves posted. No chance for this many to slip through. But a single man might make it. If nobody coppers the bet, I'll make the ride to Gomerville on Black Nell.'

Nobody coppered the bet. Everybody was secretly elated that he had neither volunteered nor been shamed into it. There was nothing out there in the Cheyenne feathery but death.

Black Nell was such a horse as had not ever been before or would be ever again. She greased through the Cheyenne perimeter like an ebon ghost, raising only one watchful warrior, who quickly died. (Worm had captured her in the Great War and found her so intelligent, she had been child's play to train, more like a mastiff than a horse.)

Otis could mobilize only twenty men in the little town the Gomers had settled, but they had to do. 'Come on, boys!' he said grimly. 'This is a ride for life.'

Fortunately, Providence joined the score of foolhards as the twenty-first rider. On the nineteenth of September of 'sixty-eight the sun rose at 5:48 A.M., a half-hour too early for them to have reached the besieged mesa. But a gloomy overcast held back the daybreak even though the sun kept its schedule and they arrived while the Cheyennes still slept, all three hundred save the few lookouts at the watch fires.

They hit the pony herd first, screaming and shrieking like the cats of Kilkenny, waving blankets, some die-hard Texans yipping the Rebel Yell, and one still-beardless veteran of the Army of Northern Virginia blowing charge on a battered brass bugle. The wild-eyed pintos exploded southward across the wastes, the frantic herders unable to contain them.

Since it was a tactic the Cheyennes always used themselves, the Indians were the first to recognize the futility of fighting. They burst out of their tepees, some naked, some clouted, all sleepy-eyed. They scattered easterly along the bend of the Big Sandy. A few dog soldiers took a stand under the breaks of the river and dropped their red blankets, indicating they would stay until dead, which was exactly what happened to them.

But before they perished one of them took along Charlie Zane's left eye.

When Charlie and the men on the mesa heard the attack, they instantly mounted the unwounded stock and rode down the hill hard, joining the fight. One of the dog soldiers at the river loosed a lazy arrow that caught Charlie plumb. Fortunately he was half drunk, having sucked on his jug of divinity all night long. He was so outraged that the feathers of the arrow got in the sight line of his good eye as he shot down the Indians that he pulled the arrow out rudely. It took the eye with it. Any other man would have fainted from agony, but between his rage and his inebriation, Charlie just flung it into the last-gaspers by the river before they were gut-shot. But fleeing warriors saw the gest and were impressed with its raw courage. Thereafter, among the Tsistsistas, Charlie Zane was known as Ochinee - One-Eye.

Otis had been gossiping with Charlie Zane while Charlie fitted his glass eye back into its socket, chewing leather about yesterdays and old friends. Charlie said, 'So Billy Boy is become a thespian?'

Otis waved off the idea. 'Next to myself and Texas Jack Omohundro - he was in the show too - Friend Cody is the worst actor God ever borned! When we opened the thing at Niblo's Gardens back in Gotham, the newspapers allowed that the great Booth wouldn't be in any trouble until some merciful surgeons lopped off Billy's hands. There weren't any pockets in his buckskins and poor Cody plainly did not know what to do with his biscuit hooks. One newspaper said that if Billy ever emoted in a birch grove, there'd be a heap of firewood for winter.'

'And you was worse?'

'Don't be knavish.'

Charlie Zane's gold tooth gleamed. 'So you just loved it back in the States.'

Otis said, 'Everything east of the Allegheny River should be declared a national cemetery. Not to gainsay Friend Cody's success. He likes the whole foofaraw and it's my feel-

ing he'll give her a go. There's plenty spondulix and a heap of society ladies.'

Charlie grinned lustily. 'Billy always did have a grape eye for the squaws. Amen to him. What about you?'

Otis turned aside to watch the faro bank.

'You figuring to take up marshaling in this one-dog camp?'

'I'll never wear the tin again,' Otis said, watching the game.

'Don't tell me you're out on a rubberneck sight-see in this shitepoke gully!'

'Just following Custer's gold and chasing luck,' still watching the game.

'You wouldn't go stretching the blanket with this child, would you? I've seen you gallop forty miles for the pure pleasure of telling a lie, Cap, but why to me? I declare if you ain't hurt my feelings.'

Otis did not take his eyes off the faro bank.

'I *know* why you're here in Fetterman.' Charlie Zane swigged noisily on his odious brown bottle. 'You're on the scout for the white buffalo.'

'Take a hitch!' Otis said sharply as he lolloped to his feet and strode quickly to the faro table.

The felttop was covered with bets, even after the tenth turn. One drunken miner had just placed three hundred dollars in gold on the king to win. Before the dealer, Johnny Varnes, could draw off the last card and begin a new turn, Otis clinked down two hundred in coin from the gold in his money belt and said, 'The king coppered.'

Varnes placed an octagonal copper slug atop Otis' pile and looked glum.

What had happened was this. Instead of signaling Brady for a square deal (which, in honesty, would have been a gamble), Otis had chosen to wager on a sure thing. To copper the king meant that he had bet the king to lose. The dealer's problem was plain: If the king won, the pie-eyed miner would be three hundred richer. If the king lost, Otis would collect two hundred, but the House would still pick

up one hundred. The issue was not long in doubt. The king lost.

Otis went back to his table, perched himself snugly against the walls and stowed his money, Varnes looking after him hostilely.

'Chicken feed,' Charlie Zane said, a little balmy now from his booze. 'The buff's pelt will bring two thousand gold – maybe more, since it's the last of the white spikes.' His glass eye, constricted by the excitement in his eye muscles, wandered off waywardly. 'You let me throw in with you, we split even-Stephen and I'll use the cat pelt to grub-stake an outfit for the hunt.'

'Old-timer,' said Otis, 'Prairie-Dog Dave put the last white buff in a hole down on the Cimmaron in June.'

'I know that.' Charlie sucked air raucously through his split lip. 'Saw Dave in July. Had to go down to Dodge for a bad tooth. He got fifteen hundred gold for that hide! And that reminds me – you ever read what the General wrote about you?'

'Custer?'

'Nobody else. It was in an old *Galaxy* magazine of 'seventy-one. All about his life on the plains. This part told about the campaign against the Cheyennes. I snatched it for you. It's in my plunder down at my tent.'

'What'd he say about me?'

'Well now, he wasn't about to cornhole a shootist like you, was he? Said as how you was noble, prettier 'n a paint pony, a sure-shot plunker and *also* very tenderhearted. *Allowed* as you always paid for the funerals of the rascals you shot down.' Charlie smiled broadly in makeshift innocence.

'Old man, if you put upon me, I'll tip you back on your saddle sores.'

They fell silent for a few moments while Charlie drained the last of his nectar and threw the bottle in a filth-festooned corner. The faro lookout frowned at him. 'I was brought up bad,' Charlie said to Otis with an inane grin.

Otis leaned back, his gimlet eyes half closed, and tried not to think of his recurring nightmares. Remotely he almost

wished there *were* one white buffalo left so that he could face it and be done with this haunting, which kept eroding his manhood.

'They only thought Dave Morrow's buff was the last one,' Charlie Zane said in surprising sobriety. He leaned close to keep the secret. 'You realize, child, that out of sixty million buffalo that once roamed the domains of Uncle Sam, there's never been more than one 'bino in five million?'

'Oh, come on,' Otis scoffed.

'No more than that. Prairie-Dog Dave's was the twelfth ever heard of and that includes the hide calendars of all the fighting tribes. You're talking to a hoss who has read them calendars. Recall, child, that what they saw and what they killed are two differences. Twelve, say I. And the thirteenth, the last of the white spikes, he's down there, waiting for myself and you. There'll be a whopper price on his red-spike head, Cap. The last one of eternity in the whole wide West!'

Otis started to cuss, then slipped off into '*Ohunko kapi!*'

'You speak pretty good Sioux,' Charlie noted. 'But it ain't no fairy tale.'

'Loose enough,' Otis said. 'I heard it from an undertaker named Briggs, who was so jug-bitten he didn't even need embalming. You'll give me more than that.'

'An eyewitness?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'Which eye you saw him with.'

Charlie Zane spat through his split lip and tugged at his whiskey-sodden beard.

'I was down in Dodge in early July,' he said, 'but the end of July found myself up at Fort McPherson on the Platte. I was on my way to old Laramie, but the commander at McPherson allowed he needed me to scout for a train of bluecoat pork eaters who were delivering Government Issue to the Injian reservations in Nebraska.'

'*Gammon!*' said Otis. 'Uncle Sam does not issue the beef-and-blanket ration to the redskins during the buffalo season. The Government Issue goes to the tribes —'

'— in November and December if the supplies ever get

sent to the Injians at all,' Charlie Zane said. 'But this was a false trail, Cap! First place, where are the buff? Up in the Red Coats' country or down in the Staked Plains. Second place, that beef issue'd look pretty good to the Sioux if buff were scarce, har? Third place, it'd keep the Brulés and the Bad-Faces squatting right back on their reservations while the Boy-General invaded the Black Hills, har?'

'By Heaven!' Otis breathed. 'And it worked!'

'Slick as a salamander in a bucket of axle grease,' Charlie said. 'The only shot fired on that whole parade was when one of Custer's own soldiers killed another in a hothead duel.'

'How do you know this so soon?'

'Because, Cap, after myself delivered the beef to Spotted Tail and Red Cloud and their hellions, I headed west across Wounded Knee Creek where it meets the White Horse River, and who do I run into, come moonlight one night, but Custer's own scout.'

'Lonesome Charlie Reynolds.'

'He was heading for Fort Laramie with the big news of the gold findings. We swapped some news neither here nor especially there, and I decided to head for this roost.'

'About the white buff,' said Otis.

'When I was making medicine with the Injians, I began to hear prattle about a Wakan Tanka, which is a Holy Bull, which can only be a *pte ska* or 'bino spike. The word was soft as smoke, but the braves couldn't hide their excitement. Some scout had spotted a white spike above Wounded Knee Creek, way west of the old buffalo gate to the Black Hills. Now, since I'd just left Dodge where Prairie-Dog Dave told me about skinning the last one ever, this was like a gold strike! I unwaxed my ears and I jiggled my eyes open for sign and lickety-split it turned into more than just gabble. So I figured, on my way here to Fetterman, I might take a scout for the critter.'

'Hang it up,' Otis said. 'We've got company.'

A devil's sextet was slipping in through the door, all of them half frozen. They brought with them a stink which first drenched, then drowned all the other stench in the dank

saloon. They were led by a thin, cadaverous bean pole, six feet five inches in height, with the pepper-bearded face of a fierce Christ and the blazing blue eyes of Old Scratch himself. Everything about this man was *long*. Only his mouth was brief, sharp as a skinning knife. He was fifty years old.

The others were anonymous behind their half-hidden faces, with the exception of the youngest, a sprag of no more than eighteen, huddled in a shoddy mackinaw, shivering boldly, showing only an adolescent stubble of blond hair on his receding chin. He looked innocent, but when he opened his coat, a blue-steel revolver gleamed in a snug holster, just to the left of his belly button. It clung there in the ominous cant of the practicing pistoleer.

The nondescripts bellied up to the bar and began an old ritual. They threw open their robes and raised their grimy buckskin shirts, feverishly hunting for 'secesh crawlies'. Last man to plunk a live louse on the planking had to stand for the drinks. While they fiddled under their arms and in their navels for scuttling prey, the cadaverous man said flatly, 'Two stiff horns o' gin, barkeep! And none o' that pigpee you spigot to these swill-bellies!'

Brady looked unhappy. Tiny needles began to hem the lining of his stomach. 'I don't make the fizz,' he said quietly. 'I only sell it, the best I can get.'

'*Course* you do.' The sarcasm was alkaline.

'We're a far piece from Cheyenne station up here. Supplies don't come through regular. The only gin I got left is two jugs of Old Tom Cat.'

'That'll have to do.'

'Five dollars a bottle.'

The blue eyes blazed again. 'Are you insinuat<sup>i</sup>n' that we're short shirks in this camp?'

The tiny needles quickly became porcupine quills. 'Not at all,' Brady said. 'Just quoting the tariff.' He turned away from their stink to McCall down the bar. 'Waco, bring me those last bottles of Old Tom Cat.'

'Pronto, Mr. Brady.'

There was a sharp stir among the buffalo men. They stared cautiously at the Irishman as one stares at a dead

body, then smiled secretly at the cadaverous man, who murmured, 'Brady, is it?'

'Brady it is,' Brady said, watching Kid Jelly rest the heel of his right hand atop the butt of his Navy Colt .36 cap-and-ball revolver. His heart sickened. He flicked eyes down the length of the saloon to James Otis at the back wall, but Otis was chin to chin with Split-Lip Charlie and paying no heed. Then he stared at the bright Damascus-steel shotgun which hung behind the bar, just above his knees. He cursed himself for having placed it too low.

'There was a defalcatin' son of a bitch down in the Nations,' said the cadaverous man. 'I been lookin' for that crossbiter for two years. This whiskey-waterin' bastor was drummin' ruckus juice at Fort Sill and there'bouts. And it seems like he vended six barrels o' cutthroat to Chief Mo-Wi and his Quahadi Comanches, just 'bout the time myself and my boys was out on the prairie huntin' buff. After Mo-Wi and his featherheads got lubricitied, they made a little war and rubbed out half my outfit.'

'Hell of a thing,' said Brady, sweating.

'No relation to you, Brady?'

'No, *sir*, Mr. —?'

'Kileen,' said the cadaverous man.

Sweet Jasus! Brady breathed silently. 'Whistling Jack Kileen?'

'You've heard o' me.'

'Everybody's heard of Whistling Jack,' Kid Jelly said proudly, his doting brown eyes resting softly on Kileen's saber-face with the warmth of a lover. Yet the Kid was right. Everybody had indeed heard of Whistling Jack Kileen and almost none of it was good. He was infamous myth from Palo Duro Canyon in Texas to the Battle of Beecher Island, where, it was rumored, he had fired the fatal bullet into the gut of the Cheyenne war chieftain, Roman Nose. He had been where things happened and he was legended to be more bloodthirsty than the cruelest of Satank's cruel Kiowas. There were witnesses alive who had seen him roast a screaming Comanche warrior to well done; others who had watched him skin alive a stoic Arapaho brave; still others who had

heaved their hump meat when he sliced an Indian trader into three hundred separate pieces before death's mercy, because the trader had sold a repeating rifle to the Cheyenne train-wrecker, Turkey-Foot. He was a great Orion from the trapping days of the mountain men at Fort Hall right down to the present slaughter of the buffalo. He had been first to use his piercing whistle on antelope. The pronghorn, though a timid, speedy animal, had an insatiable curiosity. If you whistled, it would pause for one second to see what the sound was before bounding away. The split second was all Whistling Jack needed to pack home meat. There were soldiers of the command at Fort Dodge, Kansas, who could swear they had seen him drop a redskin with a two-ounce slug from his Sharps rifle at a measured distance of 1710 yards, just 150 feet less than a mile.

Tim Brady was sopping wet with fear but trying not to show it. 'Look here, Kileen,' he said gruffly, 'Brady is a name common as henshit in the old country. I'm not your Brady. I never even been in the Nations.' He was lying with whole heart, without valor and with a quivering white liver. 'I'm just a poor damn harp out from the States to make my roll. I never been near Indians and I've got no hanker to *get* near the heathens. And to show you good faith, the gin is on the house.'

One of the grimy buff-skinners (Brady recognized him as Gyp Hatton) cock-crowed with delight. 'Now that's mighty generous, Jack.'

'Too goddam generous,' Kileen said with a cold smile.

'Make yourselves t'home,' Brady said broadly, his breath still tight, his smile hurting.

'As to that, we shall see,' Kileen said. The hunters grabbed their bottles and glasses and found themselves a rough table, which was vacated instantly at their approach.

Tim Brady scurried down the long bar and snaked through the dancers to the faro bank, pausing to whisper hastily to Johnny Varnes. Then he moved to the lookout with the cradled shotgun and spat some order to him. The lookout peered across the narrow room, tensing. Finally

Brady headed for James Otis' nook, where he pulled up a stool without invitation. He was ashen.

'I seen snowdrops duskier than your phiz,' Charlie Zane said.

Brady fisted in desperation, emitting an uncontrolled grunt as he took a short breath. 'Mr. Otis, I will personally pay you a thousand gold if you will back me in any play that is made here tonight.'

'And if none is made?'

'Five hundred stays yours nonetheless.'

Otis glanced across the room, eyes squinting behind the blue glasses. 'Who are they?'

Brady said, without turning, 'The long man is Whistling Jack Kileen.'

Otis perked up, interested. 'The old buffalo hunter? I'll be! Why, he's the greatest hide man there ever was next to Wright Moaar. I believe Moaar's last overall count of dead buff was twenty thousand skins plus. But Kileen, he must have rubbed out damned close to that.' Otis shook his head. 'What's he doing in Fetterman?'

Charlie Zane said pointedly, '*I was telling you.*'

Brady said, 'I've met the one-handed man before. Gyp Hatton. Used to scout out of Fort Riley back a ways.'

Charlie said, 'Gyp drank himself out of the Army. He lost that hand making a point. He was arguing, with his left meat hook over the barrels of his shotgun, which happened to be cocked. Made his point, but both barrels blew his mitt off at the wrist. He ain't much.'

Brady said, 'The youngster they called Kid Jelly. A grease spot. I heard of him down in Cheyenne. Real handle is Jellicoe. He is an edgy one.'

Otis smiled wearily. 'They all are.'

'The old-timer is Ben Corbett,' Charlie Zane volunteered after a one-eyed survey. 'He's about done for. Kileen probably uses him as the cook and driver of the outfit. But he was a good man with a Hawken time when. The blueshirt is Dave Pliley. He scouted for Forsyth at the Beecher Island scrimmage. He's the fellow who squeaked out through the Cheyennes and brought Carpenter's black cavalry to the

rescue. He's been low on luck and down to skinning. Eagle Beak is a Chisholm drifter from Texas, name of Pugh, which sure enough fits him. A mite too touchy, considering his talent with a gun, but they always are, har'?

'They always are,' Otis said.

'Well, Mr. Otis?' Brady's voice had become a hoarse prayer.

Otis said, 'It's not my fight.'

Only terror could have levered Brady into his next play. 'It damned well might be if Kileen knew who you were.'

'Meaning what?' Charlie Zane said, seeing Otis' face go rigid. 'What kind of tattle is that?'

'I'm talking about Ellis County, Kansas,' Brady replied desperately. 'I'm talking about Hays City! New Year's Eve of 'sixty-nine! I'm talking about Custer's brother, and three privates of the Seventh Cavalry.'

'What's he jawboning about?' Charlie asked.

'The night Tom Custer tried to murder me,' Otis said. He glanced up at Brady. 'You were there?'

Brady nodded grimly.

Charlie said, 'I always knew you and Tom got along like a pair of scratch cats. He was green-eyed about you 'cause the General thought you was Jesus-in-buckskins. But I never heard this tattle.'

Otis sighed. 'You know Tom, always hothead, always sotted. One night he breezed into Hays, shooting out the windows, and I had to buffalo him like a common lush.'

Charlie chuckled. 'I'd like to have seen you pistol-whip that son of a bitch!'

'It didn't turn out so funny,' Brady said.

Otis stared at the sweating Irishman. 'No, it didn't. New Year's Eve, Captain Tom rode in with three piffled soldiers from the Seventh. They back-jumped me and took my guns. They were primed with Cincinnati Gold and hot to turn off my lights. Everybody hit the floor. Including you, Mr. Brady. Everybody except the barkeep, Paddy Welch. He tossed me a forty-four and after I caught it, it made lots of smoke.'

Brady gasped, 'He killed the three soldiers in their tracks.'

And Tom Custer took off for Fort Hays like a jackrabbit!’

‘Then what the hell are you prating about?’ Charlie asked, puzzled.

‘One of those soldiers was John Kileen, Junior. He was eighteen years old when you plugged him. For five years the old man has been seeking you out. Everyplace he goes he picks up a kid of eighteen or so – like Kid Jelly over there – hoping to tree you and have the kid put you in a hole.’

Otis smiled.

‘And now he’s here! So it’s as much to your account as mine to back me up if that crazy bastard deals a hand.’

Otis said, ‘I don’t see it that way.’

Brady’s mouth dropped.

‘Friend Brady, you are the only man here who has recognized myself,’ Otis said mildly. ‘So Mr. Kileen will pick no fuss with me unless you tell him who I really am. And you would not do a thing like that, being a square shooter.’

Brady wilted under the piercing stare of Otis’ hard eyes. He sat there, agape, his threat of blackmail gone up, and he racked his brain for another card to play. At last, defeated and angry, he leaped up and stalked off, throwing back a malevolent glare.

Otis said, ‘Better dress, old-timer.’

Charlie Zane slipped easily into his dirty buckskin shirt. He took his looped gun belt, slipped his left arm through it and then dropped it over his head. The movement was unostentatious, as compared with standing and belting up. It laid the holster squarely on his chest, with the walnut butt of his single action Dragoon .44 cap-and-ball easily reachable. ‘Think the Irishman’ll orate?’

‘Like Henry Clay!’ Otis replied calmly. He slipped his hands back into his sash, tipped back his stool and laid his shoulders gently on the palisaded walls. ‘He’ll send a jug to their table, using that crock-head McCall as the blind.’

Charlie leaned back and shoved his boots out in front of him, his one eye darting everywhere like the fleet cowbirds that deloused the fur of a buffalo’s hump in the bug season. ‘I was telling you about the white buffalo.’

‘Never mind that now,’ Otis said. ‘You better slip a sixth

biscuit in the oven under your hammer.'

'Can't do that. This is a cap-and-ball piece.'

Otis said, irked, 'Why don't you acquire yourself a modern pistol?'

'Not till this cutter starts shooting crooked. Me oh my, what a worrisome woe you have become! About the ghost – you ever been up in the Elk Mountains?'

'Nobody has and come out with his hair on,' Otis said. 'You mean the southwestern skirt of the Black Hills? That's virgin country.'

'No more,' Charlie said. 'After I delivered the Government Issue at the Spotted Tail reservation, I took a short-cut through the Elks on the way to Fetterman, hoping maybe I might make a dollar by running into the 'bino.'

'This isn't whiskey brag?'

'Straight tongue, sonny. On the third day I walked my mules into this swale, see? And there I found me a dead Brulé Injia and a dead pony. Not only was they dead; that pony was stew meat, and that poor Injia was nothing but cranberry jelly. And all around them was these footprints – buff prints – bigger'n pie plates.' Charlie shuddered. 'You listening to me?'

Otis said, 'What bothers me is that faro lookout. He's waving that scatter-gun like a flag. If he ever lets loose, he'll sweep us out along with the hide men.'

'His handle's Aaron Pratt.'

'Mr. Pratt!' Otis called carefully. 'Mind where you're pointing!'

Aaron Pratt said 'Oh' silently and shifted the muzzle of his weapon but not far enough off.

'So there myself was standing in this blood pit,' Charlie continued, 'with my stomach getting tender, when all of a sudden I heard this rumble that turned into a roar and when I looked up, I was staring right at his ugly face – not fifty feet above me on a ledge – a snow mountain of a bull buff – red-eyed and rowdy and just waiting to hook my belly and stomp me into a piece of sheet iron. Scared, Cap? myself like to shat my breeches! It took ten minutes to get me and my mules off that mountain down to the flat and we never

stopped running till we crossed the Platte and reached Fetterman.'

'A killer buff,' Otis remarked.

'The biggest and the meanest this child will ever see this side of hell,' Charlie said, still awed.

Otis said, 'Brace yourself, old-timer. We are about to be bushwhacked.'

Later, when the echo of gunfire had faded and a heavy silence hung unnaturally over Mr. Brady's joyless pothouse, James Otis reflected on an odd paradox. He did this while automatically unlevering the locking arm of his right-hand derringer and breaking the barrels away from the hammer - 'tipping to load,' as the saying went.

'You all right, old-timer?' he asked.

'I think my left eyebrow is charred off,' said Charlie Zane without sparing him a glance. 'Otherwise right as rain, but the ball may not be over.'

'It's over,' Otis said.

The paradox was simply that because of the lethal nature of firearms in the hands of shoot masters, gunfights were always as brief as the twinkling of an eye. Yet the memory of them lingered in slow, lugubrious detail.

It had begun with the japing, as it always did. Kid Jelly rose from the gang around Kileen across the long room and jingling a handful of five-dollar gold pieces, made his way to the faro bank, choosing an intricate path which forced him to pass by the table where Otis lolled. Kid Jelly took pains to trip carefully over Charlie Zane's mud hooks but not so hard that he did not recover instantly, taut as a bow-string.

'Goddam you, you old harelip!' Kid Jelly said angrily. But his voice was high and juvenile and lacked the threat he intended it to have. 'Keep your shitty boots outa my way less you want t'be buried in them, hear me?'

Charlie Zane kept his only eye on Kileen's bunch and did not spare the young man even a flickering glance. 'Run your stink along, sonny,' he said, nose scrunching. 'Didn't your ma teach you that a mouth wasn't made for breaking wind?'

Kid Jelly dropped jaw, astonished at Charlie's boldness. 'Maybe you'd like to learn me yourself.'

'Matter of fact, I did have the benison of an upper school teaching back in the States,' Charlie remarked. 'So I'll tell you this, sonny. You are skinny-dipping in quicksand,' never looking at him.

Kid Jelly jingled his coins nervously, cast a glance toward Kileen, where he saw the stakeout was not quite ready, and shuffled over to the faro table.

Meanwhile, Charlie Zane was astir.

'What's up, old-timer?'

'That Texas fellow, Wes Pugh. He's skedaddling off there to flank us. I'd best move closer to the wall by you to give you a field of fire just in case.'

Kid Jelly took little time to lose his stake at the faro bank. That was evident in the contemptuous smile on Johnny Varnes' face as he raked in the coins. Jelly lurched from the table, his lower lip in a dark sulk. The liquor he had imbibed had short-fused his adolescent temper. He skulked there briefly, fishing a jackknife from his pocket and pretending to pare his ragged fingernails. The gesture reminded James Otis of an old Baptist adage: 'Cut your nails on Sunday and you'll ride the devil for a week.' Today happened to be the Sabbath.

Charlie Zane remarked, 'Eagle Beak has found a mark he likes. Come to the ball, Cap. It's jiggers.'

Otis already knew that. He had seen all the telltales, those familiar harbingers of shoot-out: the Kid's soft brown eyes jellying rapidly; the mule set of his jaws; an easing of his testicles away from an irksome seam in his buckskin pantaloons; the sudden sweat which glossied his torpid face; the heavily casual glances at Kileen and Pugh, the unhitching of the leather thong from the hammer of his pistol; the easing of the weapon against its leather hold; the inevitable flexing of fingers; and finally the abnormal inspiring of deep breaths into his slight chest.

Kid Jelly began his crablike shuffling stalk toward the table where Otis sat, leaning casually back against the reassuring embrace of the palisaded-pine walls. The youngster

did not spare him a look, still pretending that Charlie Zane was his meat. Kid Jelly was young enough to be valiant and ginned enough to be rash. Otis did not doubt that he had killed men before; his loose wrists proved that. Yet he lacked the one requisite that could save him: *time*.

Time was everything now. For over twenty long years of time, practicing diligently from one to three long hours a day, James Otis had trained his body to his pistols. His Colt .44 revolvers weighed two pounds thirteen ounces each when loaded with five cartridges. They required constant drawing, constant flexing of his forearm muscles, constant measuring of triangle between his eyes, his guns and his target to make his shooting perfect. Thousands of cockings, thousands of firings, a small fortune spent for ammunition and powder, shot away on bottles, telegraph poles, grackles and wolves, before pinpoint accuracy became as natural to him as his next breath. And then the gradations of such skill: the Remington double-barreled derringers in his sash weighed much less than the big Army Colts. Loaded, they each balanced out at nine ounces, more than two pounds lighter than the revolvers.

When Kid Jelly reached the table, he took his stance and yelled at Charlie Zane puerilely, 'Make your play, you glass-eyed gasbag!' and even though Charlie never turned to look at him, he went to skinning his piece.

Otis was already drawing his Remington short guns, having cocked them as he unsashed, but he spent a blink of eye to kill Aaron Pratt before he shot Kid Jelly. It was Pratt who had really haunted him. At the sound of the Kid's challenge, Pratt had thrown that cocked twelve-gauge cannon flat down on Jelly. Otis could not have that. There was no time to wound Pratt, no choice but to hit him square with the soft-nosed punch of the .41-caliber slug, knocking him backward off the lookout chair and forcing the shotgun barrels up into the air as they roared thunderously.

The whole movement ticked Kid Jelly from his single intent and though he had cleared leather, cocking his Navy revolver with the crook of his thumb, he wasted that mortal moment. Otis spent the second chamber of his right-hand

derringer the instant he came off Pratt, and when Kid Jelly loosed one fiery shot, his spark was already out, while his .36-caliber bullet thudded into the back wall to one side of Otis' right ear.

Meanwhile, there was sawdust dribbling down like dry snow where the shotgun pellets had ripped the pine timbers of the ceiling into shreds. There were spouts of bright blood hanging like red mist in the air where Pratt had sat, the derringer's bullet having ripped out the entire left side of his throat and slashed his jugular vein wide open. The faro bank was a scarlet pond, and Johnny Varnes looked as be-daubed as a Sioux warrior.

Kid Jelly made no sign nor movement except to look faintly surprised and breath-stopped. He buckled his knees to sag heavily onto the sawdust, then fell off his face. The bullet which killed him had taken out his two front teeth before it blew off the back of his head. His brains mingled in the sawdust with the tobacco dollops.

While Otis nervelessly laid the muzzle of the left-hand derringer on Whistling Jack Kileen's bunch, to cover them, Charlie Zane triggered his Dragoon against Pugh's draw.

The .48 Colt Dragoon was a leaden weapon, weighing an ounce over four pounds. Charlie had not even attempted to jerk it against Wes Pugh but had thumbed and fired it from its holster, the heavy ball whistling through the holster's open toe and walloping Pugh in the belly. Pugh dropped under the billowing gunsmoke and screamed there in agony, unable to move from such a paralyzing smash in the solar plexus. He had cleared his holster with his gun but failed to fire it. It dropped to the floor, hammer-cocked, but did not explode.

That was when Otis said, 'You all right, old-timer?'

Charlie Zane had laid his face too close to his Dragoon. When he fired it off his chest, near his left cheek, the bushy white brow over his glass eye had been singed cleanly off by the backflash at the cylinder.

'It's over,' Otis said. 'They've got nary a trick left.'

Charlie heaved a tremulous sigh. 'Nonetheless, Cap, it's time we joined the Ishmaelites. What happened to Pratt?'

'He's for a wooden suit,' Otis said, having reloaded the righthand derringer. 'I regret that flummox, but I warned him.' He arose. 'Cover me, old-timer.'

The Frozen Dog looked eerily empty. The orgiastic cackles of the antique harridans had silenced. Not a soul could be found standing in the entire length of the smoke-filled saloon, now astink with the acrid bite of burnt powder mingling with the hempen smell of cheap General Arthur seegars. Pugh had stopped screaming, gone unconscious, but was still writhing and biting at the filthy sawdust in an unknowing paroxysm of pure pain. He did not last long.

James Otis strode to Whistling Jack Kileen's table, where the hide hunter sat, while his remaining three toadies rose, back tracked and dangled their shaky hands away from the butts of their six-shooters. Charlie leveled the big Dragoon with a steady hand ready to burn the four remaining biscuits.

'Are you satisfied, Kileen?' Otis said calmly. 'Or do you want more? If you'd like to feed the salamanders in the City Foursquare, jerk your piece and shake out your loads.' Otis stowed the derringers into his sash to give Kileen a square chance.

Kileen was cool as snow. 'It's your night, Hickok,' he said tugging his pepper-beard. 'Some other time.'

The name Hickok was instantly hoarsed around the room, rippling down through the casino in fear, awe and admiration.

James Butler Otis was finished — no doubt of that in these parts. James Butler Hickok sighed unhappily, having enjoyed the anonymity of Otis while it lasted. He nodded at Charlie. They both headed for the door.

Tim Brady skidded over to intercept them. He was pale and sweaty. 'Gents, I sure as hell hope you don't think I had anything to do with that.'

Hickok fixed cold eyes on him. 'You peached, you son of a bitch.'

'I swear by sweet Jasus —'

'I've got a coat at that bar,' Hickok said. 'And when you

pick it up, keep clear of that ten-gauge you've got cached behind the whiskey barrels.'

Brady waved wet hands at such an accusation. 'Waco!' he called huskily to McCall. 'Bring Mr. Hickok's coat arunning! I give you my word, Mr. Hickok, Kileen must've recognized you. I had no part in it, I swear to you. Take a friendly drink with me while we patch up this fuss —'

McCall arrived breathlessly with the buffalo coat. Hickok snatched it from him, then probed deep into Brady's larcenous Irish eyes. He said, 'Take care, Mr. Brady. The next time I see you will be the last.'

The Frozen Dog was quiet, just the lowered voices buzzing curiously. Brady stood frozen and made no further entreaty, young McCall shuffling beside him in odd envy. Hickok wheeled and pushed out into the night, Charlie following, still covering their retreat with the ponderous Colt Dragoon as the door swung closed.

The slaughter had taken less than four minutes.

\* \* \*

Worm watched the skeleton legs of his daughter's lonely scaffold fade back into the starlit darkness as he rode the night, fiendly galloping over the thin layers of snow on the windswept rises or plunging belly-deep into the sudden drifts which Waziah's winds had lofted into the washouts.

Chikala and Sicha were stouthearted ponies, but no animals could have withstood such a cruel passage. At dawn they were both blown out and refused to be wrist-quirted a foot farther, their withers lathered white, their flanks heaving like a bellows. Worm had to halt and breathe them before he jaded them to death. There was little humanity in this, only that no place existed on this barren plateau where he could steal fresh mounts. He was proud of his pintos, but he felt none of the whites' sentimentality for dumb beasts. Necessity forced him to let them graze unhobbled, pawing the snow coat with trembling legs for the sparse grama grass hidden below, the snow slaking their thirst as their heads hung knee-low.

He took short sleeps and found that a mysterious thing

had happened to him. For the first time in six weeks his doings were dreamless. The nightmare of the white buffalo had vanished. He no longer awakened shrieking, with his tripe held fast in the fist of fear. It was a very good thing.

Two days later he reached the gateway past the Bad Lands where Charlie Zane had intercepted Custer's scout a month earlier. The weather abruptly softened. A strong thaw watered away the thinner snows, leaving only the misshapen lumps of dwarfed drifts. In the white clay across the Cheyenne River, he came upon signs of Little-Big-Man's hunting party.

He read the leavings with care. They said that the wintry weather had stopped his brother Lacotas. The signs were plain. They had camped here for two days and three nights. Then a single brave had deserted the party and ridden southeast, pointing his pony toward Red Cloud's Agency down on the coasts of Nebraska. Worm grunted '*Huhn!*' in sharp anger. Oh, how he would have liked to take up this trail, to stalk No-Water and slay him eye to eye!

But Worm had no time for vengeance, not while his little girl still trembled on the Spirit Path, unhealed by the medicine of the Holy Bull's white robe.

He read the ground again. After No-Water had fled, the others – Little-Big-Man, Touch-the-Cloud and Small-Shield – had loped northward, through the gateway to the Black Hills, straight into the heart of the mountains.

Worm grunted again, well pleased that they had followed the wrong blaze. But then, unlike himself, they did not know their prey. Unlike himself, they had never seen this *ptewan* in their visions.

Worm had little time nor materials to construct an *onikare* for a sweat, but nonetheless his singing heart told him he must seek a sign. He peeled down to his moccasins and breechclout, found sage in his war bag to scrub himself in the simple rite of purification and while the weary ponies again regained their strength, he stood unmoving, facing the dark mountains, and prayed fervently, forgoing food and water. He was prepared to poise this way for two days in self-denial. But at eventide a red-backed hawk appeared in the

bruised sky and circled him intimately three times in gliding silence. At last the hawk soared off into the darkening northwest and flew on an unwavering straight line for as long as Worm's eyes could follow it.

*Hou!* This was big medicine indeed! The red-backed hawk was his own sacred totem. He wore one in his hair for protection whenever he was on the warpath. His golden ghost, which had appeared to him in his coming-to-manhood medicine down on the Shell River, had worn such a hawk. And here, in answer to his silent prayers, the Other-World One had sent it back to him to guide him on his way.

There was nothing more to be learned. The red-backed hawk had told him everything:

The white buffalo was magical and would have to be hunted magically. This was no ordinary plains animal to be driven into a spike-lined corral, a *piskin*, there to be slaughtered by lance. This was no ordinary humpback that he could stampede off the edge of a precipice to a falling death. This scarlet-horned spike was a spirit, a *wanagi*, the spawn of a dawn-bred species of bison which obeyed none of the natural rules of the great errant herds. Truly this bone-white beast was an enchantment who could not be mortally shafted from Sicha's back with flights of arrows from a bow. Nor could such a Wise One be stalked from under the cover of a wolf-skin, with a rifle.

The hawk had pointed the way: this white buffalo was the grandfather of all buffaloes. He had been born beneath the ever roiling surface of the Medicine Waters far up in the Grandmother's country, beyond the hunting grounds of the Blackfeet and the Assiniboin.

Grandfather-of-Buffaloes was about eight years old — Worm recalled from the details of his nightmare — a tremendous bull of much wisdom. This was apparent in his having grown into full maturity, his beautiful pelt unmarred by a single scar from arrow or bullet. Most albinos died young because of their perilous lack of camouflage. Wherever he roamed the white buffalo caught all enemy eyes. He could not blend into the tanbark hue when danger threatened. He could not marry into the pines and cedars of

a dark forest. He could not melt into the brown mud of a wallow on the open prairie. He could not hide invisibly against the fresh green blades of the rolling grasslands in spring, nor disappear into the yolk-colored plains of autumn.

Snow was his only armor.

The *wanagi*, to reach this venerable age, would live his life in the high places where frost clung to the stony minarets. He would move northward in the hot summer, keeping to the mountains where the snows still clung and come south with the gaggles of geese when Waziah's breath bit sharply, rusting the great oaks, glazing the sluggardly streams with an ice skin and warning the silvertip *mato* to seek a warm cave for his winter's hibernation.

That was why Grandfather-of-Buffaloes was here now, below the mystic peak called Inyan Kara, a holy alp where Worm often sought solitude to dream his dreams and try to touch the meaning of his strange life. He was not that different from the white *wanagi*, he realized.

No, Grandfather-of-Buffaloes would not seek safety in the Black Hills. The white buffalo would seek the unexplored and untrod vaults and lofty parapets of Paha Hehaka – the Elk Mountains – to the west, to winter there on the remote and perilous heights, hidden from the hunter's eyes, herding his few cows with him, defying nature's laws.

Here was another mystery for the whites, Worm thought cheerfully. He knew the Americans felt a strange madness when they encountered mysteries. They would not rest until they had solved them, and in trying to do so, they always created more mysteries than the one they had tried to answer. The *wasichu* were crazy people.

Well then, if it was true that the buffalo existed by grazing, and if it was true that the Grandfather-of-Buffaloes would live above the timberline, how could he survive without grass? And if it was true that the humpbacks seldom browsed, and if there were no shrubs or trees above the timberline, how could he last without his fescues and drop-seeds? And if it was true that the buffaloes never climbed mountains but took only the placid paths through the low hills, then why had his bones been found atop the Inyan

Kara, which was far more than a mile high?

Mysteries, Worm thought, did not require solving. *They were to be believed.* Nothing more. Sooner or later even the pagan whites would come to understand that mysteries were the voice of the Great Spirit, and only He needed to know the answers.

As for survival in the skylands, if a buffalo broke the herd law and climbed mountains like the bighorn ram, then he would also break the law of his feeding habits. Instead of grazing with the herd by day, he would graze alone by night, easing down from the peaks to the bluejoint grass and tender shrubs below timberline, filling his four stomachs to rumbling flatulence, and then returning to his fortress in the clouds before Anpetu-Wi rose again in the east. There was little mystery in this.

Worm walked his horses through the chilling night toward the Elk Mountains. He remembered from his nightmares where he would meet the ghostly buffalo – a small snow-covered park under the shadow of sheer cliffs. He remembered also that he would be armed only with a snow-notched arrow and a worthless bone bow. The battle would be hand to horn. 'Oh, Grandfather-of-Buffaloes!' he prayed silently to the night sky, thinking of his little girl crossing the bridge of stars above, 'we will soon meet in war and one of us will surely fall, but it will be a good day to die. Oh, Pte-Tunkaschila, do not forget that if I kill you and receive your Holy Robe I will return it to the four winds and Wakan Tanka, and you will be reborn from under the Medicine Waters, for nothing is ever lost. So give yourself to me for the little one so that she may be cleansed. I have said it.'

He listened in the darkness for a denial from the knowing owl, but there was none, only the sly yelping of the coyote far off. He was content.

By next nooning, he had ascended far up the long saddles of the Elk Mountains into the same unspoiled hunting grounds which Charlie Zane had marveled at. He felt a tremendous elation at the utter loneliness of the forest. Though it was crisscrossed with animal tracks, he found no

sign of man. Rain, snow and time had obliterated Charlie Zane's sign and everything was fresh again. Worm felt free for the first time since he had heard the sinister song of *heechea* that dawn on the banks of the Little Powder.

He rode all day. Late in the overcast dusk, he reached the gloomy swale where the meatless bones of the dead Indian and his pinto lay. They gleamed gruesomely in the half-light, the carrion beetles and maggots having done their work well. Wolves had scattered the skeletons widely and even now there were *shunkahas* gnashing on the dried remnants. They tucked tails and skulked away at the sight of his Henry rifle. He did not waste ammunition on them.

Worm read the whole story quickly, without even dismounting. The dead Indian was a Brulé from Spotted Tail's Agency. His rawhide shield told Worm it was Wanbli-Luta, a young brave of fierce courage. They had raided the Crows together in hot blood more than once. He said solemnly, 'Friend Red-Eagle, forgive me, if I do not give you burial, but my time runs short. When the hunt is done, if all has gone well, I will return and wrap your bones for the Old Ones. *Amba washtay.*'

He moved quickly away from the lingering miasma of corruption, into the cleaner scent of the piney darkness. The ponies were stiff-leggedly nervous, particularly the split-eared war horse. Sicha's eyes showed white as he fitfully flicked them up at the cliffs above, snorting and grunting. He had surely smelled buffalo on the frisky downdrafts and was warning Worm to strip the gear off his back and tie up his tail for war. 'Heyah,' Worm said flatly, since he had not seen the war horse in his nightmare. 'You will not fight this one, Sicha. This one I will fight alone.' Besides, it was not time for the combat. The ground was bare of snow, the chinooks having melted it all away.

He snaked his mounts cautiously until the night sun rose. In its soft glow he came upon a small stonehenge, an irregular circle of tilted granite stones, five to six feet high, surrounding a pebbled amphitheater some forty feet long shaped like an eagle's egg. The stones were not connected, but the gaps between them were so narrow, Worm could

barely skin his gaunt ponies through. The white spirit of his dream was much too massive to charge through these thin passes in a night attack. It was a fine little fort. After he watered the ponies and fed them, he bedded down for the night.

Worm awakened frequently, hearing the piglike grunting and the noisy mawing of buffalo somewhere above him in the dark. He watched Sichu nervously snorting at the sound. Then there was the muttering of thunder to the north, but no storm came in. Herds on the plains below? he wondered. Or just the great white one on the rocks above? *Wahi*, Pte-Tunkaschila, I will come soon enough! He went back to sleep and no dreams haunted him.

The dawn was white; not snow but a cottony mist which hung over the high ground. Worm came awake sharply. He knew he was no longer alone. He had heard small stones skidding aimlessly down the mountainsides and the hollow clop of hoof. Yet there was no scent of buffalo in the air.

He embraced his Henry rifle and waited.

Soon the warmth of the rising sun began to burn through. The mists retreated slowly to the tops of the dewy pinnacles. He watched up toward the northeast where he suspected the white buffalo's aerie to be located. Without warning, the ugly whine of a bullet played a tune as it ricocheted off the tip of the granite monolith which shielded him. The cracking report echoed an instant later.

Worm ducked instinctively, jarred by the sound. It was no buffalo that had treed him. The rising scud slowly disclosed a curving slope which ringed his rocky fortress halfway around and rose ominously above it for two hundred feet. The center of the slope was two hundred yards away, but it seemed much closer than that. Over its rim loomed a hunting party of fifteen Crow Indians, who halted boldly on the rimrock, floridly painted for war. They were staring right down his throat.

Worm was astonished that the Crows would have ventured so far from their own hunting grounds. Only the bait of the white buffalo could have enticed them so deeply into

Lacota lands. Nevertheless he answered their challenge like a true Oglala chief. He bird-zitted at his pintos and hand-twisted them to the stony floor so that no stray bullets could drop them.

When they were safe and cross-hobbled, he threw off his blanket and his shirt, dashed into the center of his redoubt, where there was no cover of any kind, and shouted war obscenities at his old enemies, even pulling up his breech-clout to expose his privates to them, the ultimate insult by an Oglala soldier.

As the Crows began to shoot at him, Worm regained the safety of his tilted turrets. Before he returned their fire, he ran to Sicha and plucked his war bag from the gear on the buff pony's back. He did not take the time to blacken his face with war paints. But he did pin his red-backed hawk atop his head beside the lone feather of his chieftainship. His only other gesture was to feel the blue medicine stone which dangled beneath his left earlobe.

Then he made his fight.

\* \* \*

James Butler Hickok awakened abruptly at the sharp echo of the Crows' first shot. He was astonished to find that he had slept soundly, without the usual nightmare visitation of the white buffalo. It had been many weeks since he had passed such a peaceful night, broken now by gunfire.

He sat up and found that Charlie Zane was already alerted, peering over the top of the treeless hogback on which they had pitched their camp the night before. Charlie had built up a rock cairn on the mountain's spine in the manner of Sioux lookouts. He was watching through its chinks now in rident excitement.

Hickok asked, '*Kileen?*'

'Naw, Cap,' Charlie replied cheerfully. 'Just an Injian holus-bolus, but it's a daisy! We 'pear to have settled down right on the muzzle.' He waved to the left. 'Absarokees over there, all ahorse on our own mountaintop, maybe a baker's dozen or so. Down below there in that rock garden is one flea-bit Sioux egg-sucker trying hard to keep his hair. *Listen*

*to that red nigger take on!* He's calling them Crows dung-faces and shitepokes and some things even *I* never heard before. Take a peep, Cap.'

By then Hickok had checked their stock to make certain his horses were not panicked at the sound of gunfire. The animals were still picketed and stolid enough. He scrambled to the rim of the arête, peeled off his black sombrero and took in the sight.

Charlie chortled, 'Look at that Sioux proud-belly giv'em his hardihood! And now he's waving his pizzle at 'em. That's *real* nose-thumbing, Cap! I swear, that bumptious redskin is as high and mighty as the woon of Burma.'

'Fifteen Crows,' Hickok said grimly.

'On the same ridge as us. Might have been a mite skittery if we'd run into each other. *Look at that little Injian!* He's madder than a wet mouse and he don't scare worth a hiccup!' Charlie Zane pulled out his telescope while Hickok stared at the unequal battle, admiring the way the Sioux warrior fired and took cover while the Crows poured a withering but wasteful hail down on his head. The combatants were hazy to Hickok, soft and unfocused. His eyes could no longer sharpen at the distances involved. He could distinguish Worm's dodging figure in the stony redan, but details were vague, like the mists that still clung to the hills around them.

It was the same with the Crow braves. He could make out the bulk of their bodies astride their mounts, but that was about all of it.

Charlie Zane said suddenly, looking through his telescope, 'By glory, I know that Crow buck in the five-feather bonnet! That's Basuk Ose!'

Hickok said, 'I don't savvy Absaroka.'

'*Basuk* means something like "in front" and *Ose* means "one" or "first".' Charlie translated. 'The whites call him Goes-Ahead. He's a young war chief of the Bird People. I met up with him when we scouted for the Hayden Survey the summer o' 'seventy-one in Yellowstone Park. He wasn't a bad sort of Injian.'

Hickok reached. 'Let me have that scope.'

He scanned the area hastily. The battleground was shaped like a split shot-glass with a sloping rim. He and Charlie held the high lip to the west. From their position the rim slid down in a semicircle, dropping a hundred feet or so. In the middle of the semicircle on the north side stood the Crows, seventy to two hundred yards away. On the easterly end of the half-circle but two hundred feet down on the side of the mountain was the single Sioux.

Hickok focused on the lone Indian, caught the sharp picture of a slight, half-starved, sad-faced warrior.

He pivoted the glass up to the five-feathered bonnet to catch the face of Basuk Ose, Goes-Ahead. It was known that the Crows were the most winsome of all the Plains Arabs, and Goes-Ahead was no exception. He was tall and straight, with a magnificent chest and the face of a dusky Apollo. There was something noble about him, sitting there on his piebald atop the sloping ridge and making haughty sign to the spindly Sioux warrior.

Hickok lowered the glass, lips curling.

Charlie said, 'Goes-Ahead had lots o' pluck up on the Fire Hole River in Bridger's geyser country.'

'Your Crow brother,' Hickok said thinly, 'is a yellowback cur.'

Charlie's face dropped shapelessly in astonishment. 'What snake stung *you*, Cap?'

'If your Crow brother wasn't gritless, he'd call that trapped Sioux for a face-out, man to man, and shoo these other rascals on their way.'

'You've got a point,' Charlie said, watching Worm's savage defense below. 'On t'other hand, that red peacock ain't exactly easy meat. Myself'd think twice before taking him on personal. *Will you listen to him cuss!*' And then as an afterthought: 'Goes-Ahead didn't share my blanket, Cap, so you don't have to go gallynipping me just cause the odds are fifteen to one.'

'Fifteen to three,' Hickok said. While Charlie Zane puzzled, he slid down the slope to the saddles. He pulled his Sharps out of his tack, along with some shells, then jerked Charlie's Winchester from its scabbard and returned to the

crown of the rise. He passed over the Sharps and kept Charlie's Winchester.

*'You're going to take a hand?'*

'Old man,' Hickok replied, 'when they kill that redskin there'll be only us, which will make the odds fifteen to two. While that Sioux saucebox is alive, the odds are fifteen to three, and it's come time to better them.'

'But the Crows are whites' friends!'

'I've smoked no pipe with them,' Hickok said flatly. 'You set Old Ginger's sights at two hundred yards and take their ears off. My eyes aren't what they used to be – not to be bandied, mind you! – so I'll use the Winchester to pluck the feathers on my left. You shoot across the rimrock to the long side. If you're not sure of the man, kill the horse. I wish that Sioux'd do likewise. He's firing uphill through fog and that's no easy mark.'

Worm had just thought the same thing. It was almost as if he had heard Hickok. He dropped the horse on the eastern side of the ridge. The pony tumbled headlong over the rim and down the slope, snapping its neck noisily. The Crow warrior had been unprepared for the tumble and fell off ahead of the pony; he was smashed in the first roll-over. Fifteen hundred pounds of horse broke him in agony. Worm, having a closer target now, holed him through the belly.

'Good work!' Hickok said on the high ground.

Charlie said, 'I thought you hated Injians!'

'I am about to prove that.' Hickok wet a forefinger and held it up to the wind, 'tossing the feather', as the saying went. The morning breeze came from the north, which would carry his gunsmoke off to his right. Therefore he picked his targets from the middle of the rim to the left, so that when he fired, his gunsmoke would not hide the next target from him. Haste was necessary here.

He chose a Crow warrior who was the farthest visible in his sight range and started levering the Winchester. He kept shifting the barking rifle to the left, picking them off. He was shooting for the man, not the horse. He quickly emptied four saddles, and the riderless ponies panicked down the back of the ridge on the softer slopes and vanished.

All of this was so swift, Charlie Zane only had time to get off one blast with the big Sharps, but it was a splendid tag. His lone eye was still keen. He aimed at the farthestmost Crow warrior, the one just above the Sioux's fort, who was giving the Indian the most trouble.

The heavy Sharps roared, its thunder hollering through the canyons in a rolling echo that diminished but never seemed to cease. The .50-caliber bullet of soft lead weighed two ounces and when it smacked the Crow warrior in the chest, it flattened to the size of a small saucer. It tunneled through, tearing out the brave's heart, dorsal ribs and spine, leaving a dinner-plate hole. The Crow instantly became bloody trash as he tumbled downslope past Worm's fort. The odds had swiftly become nine to three.

Worm was momentarily nonplussed. Hickok's Winchester had told him nothing since the Crows had lever-action weapons too and the rifles' reports all sounded the same. But at the thunder of the Sharps he realized that whites were in the fight. *Wasichu witko!* Crazy Whites, fighting with him! That had never happened before: it was a witless thing. He knew they were whites even though he had not yet seen them, far across the valley on the other side of the ridge. Sharps rifles were not easily looted from the dead, because they were always carried by the buffalo hunters, who were impossible to kill. Furthermore, no Indian could have made such a breathless shot with a Sharps even if he had one, for the simple reason that .50-130 ammunition was rare and costly and not to be wasted in practice shots. Without practice, no man could heart-shoot a foe at two hundred yards in high mists.

No, they were surely whites. By why were they supporting *him*? Were not the Bird People friends of the whites? Had not the Crow chief, Plenty-Coups, gone over to the *wasichu* long before? Here was a mystery; he did not explore it.

Up to then, he had felt quite safe and strong in his redoubt.

On the high ground, Hickok managed to punch another Crow brave out of the saddle before the left line of

four remaining Indians wheeled their mounts and plunged down on the north side of the slope out of sight.

'You might have got off another shot,' he said testily, keeping count of the odds: eight to three.

'Brass hull swole in the barrel,' said Charlie blandly. 'Had to ramrod it out. But don't you fret, Cap. I'll cut another twig for you.'

On Worm's side the remaining four Crows, aware now of the cross fire, wheeled their piebalds and galloped out of sight down the outer slope. But not before Worm got off two snap shots. He slapped the bullets into the rumps of two ponies to hurry them along.

'You didn't plug Goes-Ahead, did you, Cap?' Charlie said, bedding the eighteen-pound Sharps barrel on a rock rest, ready to sweep the rim top when a featherhead showed.

'Not yet.'

'Preciate it if you'd let the bugger skeedaddle. After all, I did share the same kettle with him once.'

Hickok snorted in derision.

A Crow pate showed above the rim, slowly and carefully, no more forehead than down to the black eyes peering over, trying to locate the enemy.

Charlie said, 'Go to Jesus, child.' He took a short breath, held it and squeezed.

No Indians could stand up to this kind of decimation. Hickok heard the clatter of the remaining horses skidding down the rock slope on the north side. 'I'll mosey to flank them,' he said.

He dropped below the hogback and scrambled around to the Crows' side of the ridge. When he got there he saw them far below, seven survivors racing for the northwest led by Goes-Ahead, trying to escape from this hecatomb. (They would never set foot in the Black Hills again.)

'Peel your eye!' Charlie Zane shouted.

Hickok looked off to his right, to the other end of the Crow perimeter. The lone Lacota warrior had had the same idea; he too had flanked the enemy. They stared at each other. Worm was hazy in Hickok's vision, but he could see

the Indian lifting the Henry high over his head with both hands, a peace sign.

Hickok did the same.

Worm lowered the Henry, muzzle facing behind him, and made sign: 'Hello, Yellowhair. My heart thanks you.'

Hickok uncocked the Winchester and leaned it against his thigh as he made two-handed sign: 'Hello, friend! Come to our council. We will make good medicine together.'

Worm said in sign: 'It cannot be done. The day sun is climbing high. I must travel long way to my lodges.' He pointed south in a flat lie. 'Goodbye, Yellowhair.'

Charlie Zane had been reading the signs too while he hurriedly reloaded the Sharps rifle. He called, 'Want I should splat him, Cap?'

'He's a nervy rooster,' Hickok said with a faint smile. 'The fact is, I admire his comportance. So show some comity and put down that piece.' As Charlie lowered the muzzle of the Old Ginger, Hickok flipped a hand in an insouciant farewell, and turned away, to walk toward his place on the ridge.

Charlie said, his one eye cold on Worm, 'You must be wearing hard bark to turn your back on that cat skinner, Cap.'

'Brave men don't backshoot,' Hickok said. 'And he's all sand.'

Worm, meanwhile, had waved too and turned. He was faintly disturbed. The face of the white off in the thin mist had kindled a memory in his mind of the man who had nearly killed him in the snowstorm outside Fetterman. Was he the same?

Having no answer, Worm kept the Split-Lip in the periphery of his vision as he returned to his stone fort. But he was not worried. While it was true that all whites were treacherous, the best of riflemen could not fire accurately across two hundred yards of open valley without tucking a cheek to the stock and taking aim. If he saw Split-Lip try that, Worm would have a moment to flatten himself out of harm's way. But his instinct told him these whites were too courageous to resort to such chicanery. They had just fought

a deadly battle as comrades. For this moment they were *colapi*, friends.

Back in the stone fort, Worm unhobbled his pintos and unhurriedly went on his way, boomeranging on the same path that had led him hence. Nor did he spare his dangerous allies a parting glance.

Charlie didn't like it much. 'That's it? You're letting him ride out to yell jiggers and raise troops?'

Hickok shook his head. 'You're prattling like a farmer. That's the last thing he'll do.'

'You say.'

'It's against tribal law to hunt the buffalo alone, you know that. In these times, with the wild meat in short supply, any humpback beef is the tribe's, not one greedy hunter's. If the *arkecitas* – the Sioux soldiers – caught our friend at the game, they'd bow-whip him for it.'

'Even so,' said Charlie, looking south where Worm had already vanished, 'if he's hunting the ghost, he won't find him on that road.'

Hickok chuckled. 'He lied like a whiskey trader. His pointing south was just a primrose path. No, old-timer, *we'll* cut our trail north to northeast in the high places and I'll bet my whole poke *we'll* meet up again with yon Indian.'

'That means another ballbuster! You should've let me hole him.'

'In which case,' said Hickok, 'we'd never find out.'

'Find out what?'

'Whether our Sioux friend knows something about the white buffalo that we don't.'

Actually, James Butler Hickok was not a complicated man.

His family had migrated to La Salle County in northern Illinois in 'thirty-six, when that place was still bloody ground. Not three years previous, this territory had seen the horrors of the fierce Black Hawk War. Here the fields were still being fertilized with the scalps and carrion of the Sauk and Fox warriors who had fallen before the power of white musketry. (Here, a twenty-three-year-old captain of volun-

teers named Abe Lincoln had massacred mosquitoes if not Indians.) Hickok's father would still turn up arrowheads, stone tomahawks and corroding rifles when he plowed his acres. This was James Butler's birthplace, where the defeated Sauks still cried, '*Nesso chemokemons!* Kill the whites!' During his early adolescence his mother, Polly, would admonish his noise at bedtime with 'Be quiet or Black Hawk will get you!' Indians became his natural foe.

Young Hickok loved the countryside. He raced across the prairies and haunted the game-ridden fringes of Little Vermilion Creek, where the family house stood. He was an ardent hunter and trapper, filling the cook pots with small game and birds, while garnering furs to shuttle gig. He loved the loneliness, the solitude of the true hunter; loved the God-fresh smell of the apple-green hills. But he hated the louse-infested Sauks, pitiful in their poverty, withering in their disgrace, with nothing about them to remind him that they too were human.

At twelve he swapped peltries for a secondhand Colt percussion revolver and a good used rifle. Soon after, he became the finest sharpshooter in the county.

His father, William Alonzo Hickok, was a stern Vermonter who operated the general store in Troy Grove on the ground floor of a tavern called the Green Mountain House. He was also a deacon of the church and piously imperious. Many were the edicts and fiats enforcing the Golden Rule, often accompanied by the welt-raising slap of a hard hand on a soft backside. It was Hickok's first taste of bullyboyism, and though perforce acceptable from his parent, it still built a sharp resentment to overbearance, particularly when practiced by his tyrannical schoolmaster. Mr. Jasper was a blue-nosed pettifogger who whistled a hickory stick like a cavalry saber when his charges did not hop to their marks. The result was that Hickok received a fairly good education, considering the rudeness of his prairie school, but rankled with a burning detestation of all bullies.

When William Alonzo died in 'fifty-two, young Hickok was compelled to help support the family. He was eighteen when he went to work as a teamster for the Illinois &

Michigan Canal Company. He was big for his age, but the teamsters were bigger, a roisterous, rough-barked herd of foul-mouthed ruffians who toiled hard, drank heavily and fought dirty.

That was when Charlie Hudson played the harrier, mistaking Hickok's quiet nature and isolation as signs of cowardice. He found out otherwise when Hickok swiftly pummeled him into the filthy waters of the canal and left him for drowned. Young Hickok instantly struck toward Rock Island, expecting the law's hounds on his heels.

When he reached the Mississippi and then worked his way downriver to St. Louis, he was still on the dodge. He hastily changed his handle. He had always coveted his father's name, William. But more to the point, his older brother, Lorenzo, had been tagged with the nickname Billy while wagon-training to California two years before. So he assumed the title of Bill Hickok, reckoning that if some local lawman tripped him, he could always pose as his brother Lorenzo.

After the redubbing, he quickly skittered into the wild west of his boyhood hero, Kit Carson. The redoubtable Kit had always been his grail. It seemed as if each year of Hickok's young life had been marked with an act of greatness by the famous Mountain Man. As a toddler of three Hickok had heard of Carson's conquest of the Crow nation on the plains of what was now Wyoming. When he was four the fearsome saga of Kit's unarmed battle with the two grizzly bears became the thrilling yarn around the potbellied stove in his father's store. At five came the momentous news of Kit's victorious battle with the Blackfeet high in Colorado.

When he could read, at seven, he would snip Carson stories from the infrequent journals that fell into his hands. But when he reached eleven and Kit had guided Frémont across the Shining Mountains to Sutter's Fort, Hickok was ecstatic when he procured Frémont's official report on the expedition to the Government. He dog-eared and dirty-thumbed it at every mention of Kit, rapt in the unending feats of his Quixote.

When Hickok was twelve Kit defeated the Mexicans at the Battle of San Pascual, which led to the bloodless capture of San Diego, California. The dust from that scrap had hardly settled when Kit squashed the dreaded Apaches down in Arizona, cowed the warlike Cheyennes up in Dakota and was made Indian Agent for the southwest territory by President Pierce.

Finally, in 'fifty-eight, Hickok's hero worship bore fruit. He had tried to emulate Kit Carson in every respect. Carson was the finest marksman of the frontier; he was trying to be the same. Carson had been characterized as 'dead square, dead honest and a dead shot'. He determined to be likewise known. At twenty-one he was desperate to meet his idol, so when he got the chance to drive stages down to Santa Fe, New Mexico, from Independence, Missouri, he snatched at the opportunity.

Providence smiled on him. Instead of being on a buffalo hunt, or Rocky Mountain-scouting-with-Frémont or off fighting the Utes and Arapahos, Kit Carson happened to be weeding his farm near Taos, where he warmly accepted young Hickok as his newest old friend. Hickok was utterly thrilled. He had expected far too much from this quiet, sandy-haired little plainsman. Yet he was not disappointed.

The visit with Carson sharpened his feud with bullyism the following year when he arrived in Leavenworth, Kansas, to sign on with Russell, Majors & Waddell, the transcontinental freight shippers. Here, one lazy afternoon, he found a brace of tough teamsters harassing a thirteen-year-old boy. He rose up from his shady napping ground beneath a Concord coach and firmly told the thugs to leave off. They argued the point. He waded into them and knocked them both senseless in a bare-hand grapple, which earned him the lifelong friendship of the boy who would soon enough become Buffalo Bill Cody.

In the same vein General Custer would write of him, '... many are the personal quarrels and disturbances which he has checked among his comrades by his simple announcement that "this has gone far enough", if need be followed by the ominous warning that when persisted or

renewed, the quarreller "must settle it with me."'

His friend Henry Stanley had never carried heavier weapons than a pocketknife, a pencil and a note pad while trooping with Hancock in the Cheyenne campaign. So when a bully laden with Taos Lightning began to harass the journalist at Fort Harker, he received short shrift. To quote Stanley: '... an insult that was speedily avenged by "Wild Bill", who seized the fellow with long nervous hands, and flung him across a billiard table.' After which, to insure the warning, Hickok told the brute their next trial would be presided over by Judge Colt.

Still, Kit Carson was not finished with him. In 'sixty-four, while John Brown's war raged between the states and while Captain Hickok was distinguishing himself as a Union spy, scout and cavalryman Colonel Carson lived his finest hour. Among the awesome defiles of Canyon de Chelly, in the heart of the southwestern Indian country, with a force numbering less than seven hundred bluecoats and Pueblo Indian scouts, Kit met and defeated more than ten thousand Navajo warriors, thus cutting down the flower of the Navajo nation. It was an incredible triumph which would never be repeated by anyone, but in true humility Carson deplored the cruelty of his own feat.

Finally, on the day following Hickok's thirty-first birthday, May 28 of 'sixty-eight, Brigadier General Kit Carson crossed over his last mountain, cut his last blaze and passed on his torch.

Hickok caught it. He was on duty at the time as a scout with the Fifth Cavalry at Fort Lyon, Colorado. In empty sadness and with sharp personal loss, he accepted the mantle, swearing to himself that he would never dishonor it, as long as he lived.

On the evening following the massacre of the luckless Crows, Hickok and Charlie Zane reached the lofty garrets of the Elk Mountains scouting for level ground to make camp. In the eerie gloaming, they suddenly realized that they stood in almost absolute silence, broken only by the rock-needle organ pipes as the north wind squealed through

the rocks, a sibilance that seemed to be increasing in intensity like the warning whistle of a startled marmot. Something uncanny existed up here in the thin air; even the animals could sense it. The bright zitting of the birds had faded away in the forest below them. Here on the parapets, no trees survived except the dwarfed and twisted spruces that had found precarious rootholds in the rocky crevices. Only the predatory owl roosted in the rugged conifers, to hoot gloomily at the overcast sunset.

'Snow in the air,' said Hickok.

Charlie said sourly, 'It don't exactly chirp *my* cricket.'

'Snow was in my nightmare. It means we're getting closer.'

Charlie said, 'All I know is we're in Injian country, bare-assed in the open, with an overhead that looks like the droppings of a potbelly stove, and tonight within spitting distance.'

All around the bluffs in a sinister circle the ugly sky was studded with sooty boulders, looming lower every minute as the wind pushed them out of Saskatchewan, fattening and dirtying them as they scudded.

'Old Wakan Tanka is cooking up a son of a bitch stew for us,' Charlie said. He scowled back at the sky. 'We'd best soon find us a stone tepee.'

Hickok appeared not to listen. He stared off to the northeast in a sightless way, sniffing the wind.

Charlie added, 'We lost our shadows some time back and it'll soon be dark enough for a wolf to take his own leg for a tree.'

The mules had joined Hickok now, flickering their ears sharply and smelling the air.

'Cap?' Charlie pleaded.

Hickok waved northeast. 'What do you see over there, old-timer?'

'High rocks and trouble if we don't settle in someplace!' Charlie's voice was losing patience.

'Can't you smell him?' Hickok whispered. 'He's on the wind, Charlie. Buffalo on the wind. It's the white ghost up

there ahead of us. Take a sharp look – my eyes aren't up to it.'

Charlie peered northeast. 'Like I said, the devil's own mishmash.'

'Use the spyglass!'

Charlie Zane would have argued the delay if Nicodemus and Jenny hadn't begun to tremble at the invisible presence in the air. He grumpily dismounted and found the telescope in the war bag on Jenny's back. He took a steady perch and swept the northeast. Hickok, meanwhile, held the reins of the mules as well as his roan mare, while he jerked his right-hand revolver in a cavalry draw and let off an echoing blast from the Colt.

After he momentarily twitched at the shot, Charlie Zane said breathlessly, 'B'God Almighty!'

Not half a mile ahead of them, up on the next tier of ledges, the rocks of the mountain began to wallow like a small landslide and a feral bellow reached them on the wind. It was an outraged challenge, which set the horses and the mules whirling in panic. The gray and the roan had plainly never been trained as buff hunters. They were openly hysterical.

'He's there, old-timer?'

'He sure as hell is!' Charlie gasped, the telescope trembling to the rhythm of his hands as his old terror returned. 'B'God, but he is there, bigger'n Beelzebub and begging for a shindy.'

He passed over the glass at Hickok's silent request, spotting the place on the cliffside where the brown cows rumbled ahead of the roaring behemoth. Hickok focused on the site until the white buffalo came into his vision sharp as needle-point. He gasped at the immensity of the bull. Charlie had hardly exaggerated the ferocity of the beast or the magnificence of his tremendous strength as he charged his cows ahead, aiming straight into a rugged cliff-wall. 'Mark the place well,' Hickok said, watching the insanity. It seemed as if the white spike were creating mass genocide up there on the shelf. Surely there was nothing in front of the small herd but a lethal wall of sheer rock. But then the wind teared

Hickok's eyes, forcing him to blink flittingly, and when he refocused on the herd, they had vanished.

Hickok was agawp. 'By Heaven!' He turned to Charlie, whose jaw hung low too. 'Did you see that? *Make tracks!*'

The shadowless dusk quickly hid the precipice rims and canyon depths, making the climb to the ledge heart-stopping, but their luck ran good and they finally clattered up safely to the rocky park on the aerie. All around them buffalo droppings were scattered, some not more than an hour old. Hickok halted before the murky depths of a yawning cavern.

'Home sweet home,' he said cheerfully.

Charlie Zane stared at the cavern without stomach for it. The mouth was seven feet high, the width less. They would have to bridle the stock through by tugging the horses' heads down, but that presented no problem. For the white buffalo, however, it had obviously been a tight squeak. Hickok was amazed at the animal's courage - having braved such an unknown hole in time past. Meanwhile he hastily dismounted, calling 'Mind the stock!'

Charlie Zane said sourly, 'They got no place to go. And neither do we.'

In the ashen afterglow, Hickok hastily jerked a tomahawk from his war bag atop the roan mare's back and chopped down a lone spruce which reared to the lee side of the ominous cave. He dragged it to the mouth, avoiding the buff dabs but pleased when he saw older dried dung as well as the fresh. They would not lack fire fuel.

Then the black night flowed over them.

'Cap?' Charlie's voice was shaky.

'Bring me a parfleche of buff tallow,' Hickok said sharply. 'And shake a leg!'

He was trimming down one of the branches of the spruce, tying its needles in a clump around one end with a thong of rawhide which he had ripped from his jacket.

Charlie Zane slid out of the saddle and when he hit ground, blasphemies burst in the dark like fireless sparks. He had stepped flat into a slapjack of fresh dab. His ire faded quickly in fear as he felt his way around Nicodemus'

off side, to find Jenny's reins, which he had previously looped around the pommel. He steered by these, tracing down them to her bit; then he sidled along her flank until he reached her back packs. Everything was raven black. He held up a hand to his face and could not see it. In the utter opacity he finger-explored the packs, finding many parfleches and tasting his way through them until he located the leather sack of buffalo fat. He was nonplussed by the incredible difficulty of determining varied tastes in the dark, as he tongued through *wasna*, *papa*, bacon and raw elk meat before he smacked the tallow. Charlie pulled it from the pack and turned, shivering in the rat-toothed wind. 'Bill?'

Hickok, still wrapping pine-bough ends around the top of his rude torch stick, grunted, 'Over here.'

'Over the Hades *where*?' Charlie bawled. 'It's so tar thick up here I couldn't find my own pizzle if I had to make water – which I do. I'm just as liable to walk right off this cliff.'

In the rising wind, Hickok cupped his hands when he struck a match and quickly ignited a few needle clumps of the spruce branches he had laid aside. They crackled wildly in the gusts and gave Charlie Zane a glare-lit path across the wide ledge to the cave mouth, the flames casting uncanny shadows around their nerve-wracking roost. The spruce needles burnt out rapidly but gave Hickok enough time to laden his makeshift torch with a thick layer of the buffalo tallow. 'That should do it.'

They hunkered down for a few minutes before he scratched another match. Charlie said, 'You really going in that hole of Calcut?'

'That's our lodge for the night.'

'Cap, you ain't seen what this hell-horn can do. He can stomp a jug of gooseberry jelly into an Iron Horse! He's a pile driver with a phiz that'd scare bullets. But most of all, he's a killer!'

Hickok struck a match and lighted the tallow at the end of his torch stick. It blazed brightly, not burning too fast. He rose. 'I'm going in for a scout.'

Charlie was openly shaking. 'For the love o' God, child, have a care.'

Hickok patted him on the shoulder, as a father would a timid son. 'Me oh my,' he said gently. 'Who's become the most worrisome woe now?'

Holding the torch in front of him as it raised thick smoke, Hickok strode through the craggy portal.

The air in the cavern was rank with buffalo smell; yet Hickok knew the bull was gone. He knew it not so much because this cave had never appeared in his nightmare, as from his extraordinary instinct for lurking peril. He trusted the blessed sense that raised the hairs on his nape and warned him of the future.

He stood in honest wonderment, holding the smoky torch high, wide-eyed at the twisted devil's-den in which he stood.

This Triassic lair had been formed millions of years before; it was as ancient as the sacred Black Hills themselves, born in the violent churning and massive upthrusting of a dawn day, before dinosaurs first trembled the land or conifers raised their high heads.

For a moment Hickok thrilled at the thought that he might be the first living man ever to have trod these granite floors. But then he realized broadly that much earlier men than he must once have sought the safety of the haven. (Paleontologists were establishing that fact this very year.)

The cavern warped and writhed wherever he looked, a maze of huge boulders strewn indiscriminately, some making corrals, some natural redoubts. Little level space showed itself, perhaps a twelve-foot circle. Daggers of feldspar jutted threateningly from the rough overhead. The walls were pocked with gapes and slits, but all were too narrow to admit a man. Or a buffalo. Despite its mystery the place gave Hickok a sense of security.

He found a rude arch, eight feet in breadth, which opened into the cavern's unseeable extension. The droppings on the rough floor showed this to be the path the buffalo had followed. When Hickok stood there, the night wind touched him with cold freshness, telling him that the cavern was not

endless and that there was a navigable hatch on the northern face. No buffalo would have ventured into such a maze without an exit. No buffalo would stumble, sightless, in this rocky wilderness without knowing where he was going. Come daylight, Hickok knew, he would see the bright glow of northern light filtering in somewhere beyond the archway. The buffaloes had traveled this passage only in daylight, when they could see where they were heading.

Hickok threaded his way back to the entrance, knowing Charlie Zane would be sweating out the vigil. He poked outside the stone entrance with the torch. Charlie looked stricken in the xanthic glow.

Hickok said, 'The buff is gone.'

He locked the torch in a crevice while Charlie led the mules and horses into the shelter. They were reluctant, particularly the mules, and Charlie had to give Nicodemus a jab or two with his buff skinner before the mule ducked in.

'Herd 'em into that boulder corral,' said Hickok, indicating. 'We can rope 'em there for safekeeping. I'll build us a fire plum center of that archway. It'll keep anything from coming back through it.'

Charlie said gloomily, 'That white devil was hatched in hell. I don't reckon he's afraid of brimstone.'

'Squaw talk.' Hickok axed the remaining spruce boughs and piled them and after they were hotly aflame, he built a tier of dried buffalo chips atop. Whites tended to make big fires, which wasted fuel and forced retreat from their heat. The Sioux, on the other hand, built small fires, perfect for cooking and easy to huddle around for warmth. Hickok's fire was Indian.

They fed and watered the mounts after rubbing them down and then slipped simple nooses over their necks, tying each off to rock projections. This restraint kept the animals from wandering into danger. Charlie Zane's lariats were made of plaited buffalo hair, Hickok's the more simple braided rawhide. For some quirky reason, Belle, the roan mare, kept nibbling at the rawhide. He had to backhand her several times to make her desist.

Their dinner was sumptuous, after the privations of the

weather-ridden trail. First, wild onions sautéed in buffalo fat; then the rich juice used to fry five-pound hump steaks, both larded with middlings of bacon. A tin of Blue Hen tomatoes was dumped atop the steaks, which were quickly devoured. Afterward, sated, they munched on dried apples and drank thick, overboiled coffee. The repast instantly dozed them both, the bitter coffee notwithstanding.

'I figured we'd fort up back here,' Hickok said, standing in the center of a natural bastion, entirely surrounded by fallen rubble that made the hollow a stronghold against animals or savages. 'Just enough legroom to lay out two blankets.'

'Do we spell each other?'

'Not necessary,' Hickok said. 'I'll build up the fire before we tuck in. Whoever splits an eye before sunup, feeds the kitty.'

'That'll be you for sure,' Charlie said, wayworn.

The sunless dawn came up screaming. It was a hideous sound, piercing and agonized, intermingling with a bestial roaring that quickly faded. But the tortured, heartbreaking whickering persisted.

Hickok snapped out of his dreamless sleep, springing to his feet like a frightened pronghorn. He slapped his red sash to feel the weight of his short guns, then peered through the murky darkness of the cavern. It was still dim inside, but his damaged eyes could finally make out faint daylight at the portal.

Charlie Zane groaned awake, flicking around frantically, trying to remember where he was and what was happening. 'Cap, what in Hades —?'

'Check the stock!'

Hickok vaulted out of their sanctuary over the perimeter of rocks. The fire in the archway had died, but he saw there were no tracks through it, nothing had passed that way. He ran to the portal. Beyond the rough framework of the entrance, he found the source of the screaming.

Belle, the roan mare, was floundering out there, butchered wide open from bowel to breast, innards adangle. She was

dying in twisting, violent pain. He quickly plucked his right-hand revolver and shot her between the eyes.

Her screams stopped. The echo of the howling wind rushed in to fill the vacuum. Behind him in the dark, Hickok heard Charlie's bellow, 'The roan is gone!'

'All gone,' he called back, and raced out onto the open ledge.

It was still only half-light out there, and bitterly cold, with reeling columns of snow flurries gnat-stinging his taut face, no true fall yet. The ledge was carpeted with blood. He skipped across the grisly tarns to the rim of the ledge and looked down. Nothing loomed below. He noticed now there was a thin trail that circled behind the cave in which they had camped. The rugged pathway coiled in a winding route that was steep, hazardous and long compared to the cutoff through the cave.

The white buffalo had come and gone, had flanked them around the mountain on the eastern side, had challenged their usurpation of his lair and had slaughtered the harmless mare.

Charlie Zane filled the mouth of the cave. 'She chomped through the rawhide,' he said. 'Got herself unnecked.' He shuddered at the horrid sight of her remains. 'Got herself killed too.'

Hickok was not thinking cleanly. The barbaric sacrifice boiled his blood. He had forgotten his own admonition to young Wyatt Earp in 'seventy-one: 'Never hurry, youngster. *Never fire in anger.* Anger's what kills you. Let the other fellow feel hot....' He swept past Charlie Zane, shouting curses, and dashed into the cavern again. At the archway, he could see the brighter dawn on the north face as he had expected. He wended recklessly through the short canyon of rocks, hoping to intercept the white buffalo, which was on the longer trail around. But when he emerged through the northern gate, there was no sign of the beast. 'You unholy devil's dung!' he shrieked into the teeth of the wind, climbing the only track he could locate.

On this northern side the mountain opened up to wide, spacious ledges with sparse boulders. Hatless, robeless,

gloveless, Hickok canted up the rocky ford in the cold, his anger blinding him completely. He scampered recklessly, twin Colts in his hands while he blasphemed fervently for one shot at the roan's assassin. The snow flurries danced across his eyes as the day glared white. He traveled a long foot – some two hundred yards – before he gave ear to Charlie Zane's howling down below him at the cave's north portal. When he glanced back he could barely make Charlie out. Charlie was holding the Sharps high in one hand and running in a small circle. It was a Sioux danger signal, usually made on horseback.

Instinctively Hickok took cover behind the lone boulder near him; it was barely large enough to shield his body as he hunkered down on his heels. It was good luck that he did. The bright lead of a ponderous buffalo slug splattered atop the boulder where his head had just been. Its fragments whizzed and zinged away into the surrounding bluffs.

Hickok remained squatted, feeling empty. His chest heaved in the thin air of these heights while he tried to understand. Then it came to him: 'Kileen!'

Instead of the white buffalo, it was he who had become the quarry.

\* \* \*

Worm had seen it all. He had glimpsed the white buffalo for the first time, was awed by the huge beast as it rumbled to the north and vanished into one of the time-chiseled dugways. He thought of pursuing the bull but decided not to, since this was not in his prophecy. It did not matter. He knew they would meet later; the Great Spirit had promised it.

So he watched Yellowhair scrambling like a crazy wolf after the humpback, running a wild trail without a hat or a robe, brashly waving two revolvers.

Worm was as surprised as Yellowhair by the echoing explosion of the far off buffalo gun that pinned Yellowhair behind a rock. The man who had fired it was quarter of a mile from Yellowhair, in the bluffs above him. This white stood up openly, unafraid of Yellowhair's short guns at such

a distance. Worm recognized the gaunt shooter. He was a *wasichu pte* – a buffalo hunter – almost as tall as Touch-the-Cloud. He was a madman known to the Oglalas as *Kaga*, the demon (The whites called him Kileen.)

Two other hunters were with him. Worm easily spotted their nests as the black-powder gunsmoke bloomed thickly before being ripped to ribbons by Waziah's snowy breath. They were sidling along the hogback, coming toward Yellowhair's vulnerable rear to flank him while the *kaga* rooted him.

Treachery and stealth were good medicine in the war arsenal of the Oglalas, and Worm was compelled to admire the guile of the ambushers. *Hecheto welo!* They had done it well!

He could see Split-Lip still in the mouth of the cave, holding the heavy Sharps but unable to shoot at anything or anybody without getting himself killed. Yellowhair was directly beneath Worm, clinging miserably to the lone boulder, his hands turning blue in the cold, the snow whitening his head.

Worm shrugged. Yellowhair was doomed. It was only a question of time. The buffalo hunters knew they had only to finish him before the snow thickened and gave him cover to retreat.

Worm himself was perched atop the rimrock but on the eastern side. He was stretched prone, wrapped snugly in a buffalo robe, as he viewed the closing trap through the chinks of a small stone cairn he had built on the arête.

After the flight of the Bird-People the day before, Worm had wasted none of the time the whites had bought him. He had expected to withstand a siege of days by the Crows. Instead the intervention of the whites had lopped the battle to the time it took Father Sun to move his shadow from one lodgepole to the next (what the whites called twenty minutes). After that he had struck south to prove his lie, but as soon as he had cleared the sights of Split-Lip's rifle, he veered into the first pass which led east.

It was a rugged slash, not a pass, strewn with knife-sharp rocks. No white eye would have chanced it and no Ameri-

can horses would have climbed it. But Worm knew that his ponies were surefooted and courageous. He walked them through the unpassable chasm and emerged high up on Huntka's eastern slopes. After that he had traveled back north.

He had seen Split-Lip and Yellowhair the night before struggling toward the cavern. He had made his own camp above them beyond the hogback. At dawn he had heard the fearsome destruction of the roan mare by *pte-wakan*. But by the time he took a sight, the white buffalo was gone. Worm had broken camp and trailed after him without pursuit. There was no point in haste. Wakinyan Tanka was flying over the clouds, and while the Thunderbird ruled the sky, the land would soon be fisted in white frost – *cahotska*. This was a real storm brewing. Even the white buffalo would have to seek shelter before the flakes stopped falling.

That was when Yellowhair ran from the cavern.

*Ay-hee!* Worm sighed, watching from his cairn. Murder among the Lacotas was all but a capital offense. Yet the whites loved killing one another. Who was he to take a hand? They had overrun the Elks, which was Lacota, and they had alerted his white buffalo to flight. Truly the whites were a weird race. Better to let them shoot each other and wipe the wind clean of their stink.

Yet his eyes were troubled and his heart was sore.

Worm's simple mind began to fragment. First, he became aware of how similar this ambush was to the one in which the Absarokas had tried to entrap him. A lone warrior, surrounded by backshooters. Had that not been his fate?

Secondly, he was angered by the *kaga* and the other two whites. He had always hated the buffalo hunters, who were stripping the Niobrara plains and the Tongue River hills of the Oglalas' larder. They killed buffalo indiscriminately, not for food, not for lodge skins, now not even for the pelts. It was as if the White Grandfather had ordered all the *tatonkas* turned into carcasses, to foul the prairie and desecrate Mother Earth, knowing that when the buffalo was gone, the Indian would starve.

Courage was his third consideration. Below him hung

Yellowhair, trapped like a drowning beaver; yet there was no *kokipa* – no fear – in him, no quarter to be given, nothing but a warrior's valor. Yellowhair was not like these white-livered coyotes, slinking for advantage but avoiding all the dangers of war like young squaws. If this was a blood feud, why did not the *kaga* fight Yellowhair hand-to-hand and let the other rabbits go their way? That would be an honorable fight, not a cowardly noosing.

Through the chinks, he saw the hairy-faced old man – the one the *kaga* had called Ben – crabbing along the spine of the hogback. He moved in plain sight behind Yellowhair, searching for a rest from which he could shoot into Yellowhair's naked back. *Heyah*, Worm thought, I cannot have this. He had no liking of Yellowhair; indeed, the day might be nigh when he would kill Yellowhair himself. But it would be head-on, honorably, not like a rattle-tailed *sosho* in the dark.

Lastly, there was the onus. Worm had often heard the whites' canard: the 'Indian giver'. It was myth, of course, born of the beggarly coffee-coolers who hung around Fort Laramie, pleading for *pejula sappa* – coffee – and tree juice – *chun-hunpi* – as the whites' sugar was known. The whites said a Lacota made presents only to get something he wanted and if it was not forthcoming, he snatched his presents back. This was two-tongue palaver. Among the bug-infested cowards around the forts, it might be truth, but among the noble tribes, there was no personal ownership of anything but the most intimate items: weapons, wives, dreams and ponies. Riches were shared, food was communal, no man nor woman nor child went hungry in a Hunkpatila encampment while there was a single antelope rib left to split. He was no Indian giver. He owed something to Yellowhair and he wished to be rid of the debt.

Worm found a large stone. He peered over the hogback and saw Hairy-Face Ben checking his rifle before aiming. Worm threw the stone down at Yellowhair's position but at such an angle that its clacking racket seemed to emanate from where the man Ben stood, seventy-five feet above and behind Yellowhair.

At the first hollow crack of stone on stone, Hickok whirled, still behind his boulder, found Ben Corbett on the rim of the mountain, and double-actioned his right-hand Colt. The snow muffled the reports. He instantly turned to face his other enemies, without even making sure he had hit his man.

Worm covered his open mouth with his hand in an instant gesture of amazement. The first bullet hit Hairy-Face Ben in the chest and an artery pumped a long squirt of blood out of his dead heart. The second bullet hit him high above the eyes. Hairy-Face was wearing strange headgear, a black upside-down pot (what the whites called a derby), and it was snugged on with a tattered shawl under his chin, covering his big ears against the nip, and knotted on top. The whiplash of the bullet's blow snapped it clear and Worm watched the wind cartwheel it high over the dead valley to the east. It spun for a long time; Worm never saw it land. When he turned back Hairy-Face had pitched and rolled down the rocky slope to within ten feet of Yellowhair, who did not even spare him a glance.

*Dho!* That was shooting! Worm himself was an excellent marksman with the Henry and good enough with the old .44 Army Colt in his belt, but he had never shot like this man. Surely Yellowhair was the white gunman who had seen in the dark and through trees outside Fetterman and had ripped a bloody gash into Worm's left earlobe.

Then the voice of the *kaga* came bickering raucously across the snow like an irate blackbird, '*Gyp! Gyp! Did Ben drop the bastor?*'

The man Gyp, who had only one hand, replied thinly, '*Ben's gone to Hell!*' after which the *kaga* blued the air with vile curses.

Worm hurried while the snow flurries were still thin. He raced down the east slope to his ponies and picketed them. He left his buffalo coat on Chikala. From Sicha's back he chose his weapons – his buffalo-bone bow, dry and snug in its scabbard, and six warheaded arrows plucked from his otter-skin quiver. Lastly he pulled an eight-foot wolfskin from the packs, then scurried away, keeping below the hog-

back and heading for the voice of Gyp the One-Hand.

Hickok still seethed. He loved horses, and the recurring horror of the roan mare's agonies set him afire. Hating the white buffalo so violently, he had all but ignored his own predicament. Now it occurred to him that he was drifting up the Kiraruta (a Pawnee word that meant, literally, Shit Creek), an actual rill of the Republican River, where the bison once gathered hugely, the result being that their dropped dung had finally choked the running waters.

He realized that he had failed to prank out in proper garb and that the damp cold of the dawn was settling into his bones. He slipped his guns into the top of his boots, using them as jackleg holsters; he unwrapped his red silk sash and tied it under his chin and over his dome to cover his ears against the cold. He thrust his hands into his armpits to keep them warm for gun work. He was not worried, just fretful. True, he had both lost his temper and imperiled his safety by rushing in pursuit of the blood-eyed ghost, but no man could have foreseen a bushwhack from a quarter of a mile distance.

Four hundred and forty yards was a far piece – even for guesswork shooting with his Colts. At the same time, it was fish in a barrel for a twin-trigger buffalo gun. Kileen was using a .45-caliber Sharps, loading 120 grains of black powder and firing a 550-grain bullet. With the Sharps's accurate sights, Whistling Jack could split a pumpkin at that distance without even allowing for windage.

On the other hand, Hickok's friend Time was with him. He might freeze his buttocks while spending a goose-pimpled morning hunkering at his boulder and peeling an eye over his shoulder for an enfilade. But sooner or later the storm would arrive to blind the best of sharpshooters and he would meander down to Charlie Zane and enjoy the comfort of the cavern. Then Kileen and his spoilsmongers would be up the Kiraruta, isolated in the open with a blizzard for a blanket.

Around the edge of his rock, Hickok could see as far northwest as the weather allowed. Five miles away the tur-

bulent wall of the storm was sweeping toward him, buffeted along by the twenty-mile wind, thick as bean soup as it blotted out everything behind itself.

Kileen too watched the advancing snow. He cursed it bitterly. Now he could only hope for Gyp Hatton to flank Hickok. He himself began to dodge down from his aerie, skipping from rock to rock with wily caution. The closer he approached, the more perilous. He knew that Hickok could be magical with the .44 revolvers.

'Gyp! Gyp!' Kileen bellowed. 'We're getting short in this camp. Make your move!'

Hickok heard this and crooked his neck sharply over his right shoulder, casting for the ambush, but he could not locate Gyp Hatton.

Without warning, there was a wild shriek, almost like a paean of elation, even though it was a death song. From the cavern mouth, Charlie Zane saw Gyp Hatton leap to his feet high above Hickok and hang there as if on a hook.

Charlie swept the barrel of Hickok's Sharps across Gyp's chest to pull the trigger.

Gyp tumbled down, throwing his rifle away involuntarily, and instantly Charlie knew that – whether or not he had hit the one-handed man – Gyp was already clay. Charlie could not understand it.

Hickok did. Gyp's carcass slid down the hillside on its back, undulating over the rough surface as it slewed, and came to rest fifty feet above him. There was no bullet hole in Gyp's chest. Charlie had missed. But two Sioux hunting arrows were pin-cushioned there, the shafts unbroken by the rugged sleigh ride. 'By Heaven!' Hickok breathed, pleased. 'The Red Dandy has joined the brigade!'

His hard head instantly cooled his delight. Perhaps the Indian was not allied with him in friendship. He might be hunting the other white men too. Hickok squinted, wishing desperately for his quondam eyesight.

Kileen misinterpreted Charlie Zane's gunfire. It was downwind; it might have come from anywhere, misdirected by the gale. 'Gyp, did you get the bastor?'

While he awaited an answer, he caught a side glance of a

huge 160-pound wolf off to his left, huddling in the rocks, hawking him balefully. He began to swing the rifle over for a bead, but the beast just ducked into cover, as a wolf usually did at the sight of a weapon. Kileen was a keen huntsman; he realized it was strange for a grown lobo to be trailing this high in the alps. Game was too scarce up here. But it was not impossible that the wolf had been hornswoggled to the heights by the rank trail of the white buffalo. Perhaps it was a good omen. He decided to let the wolf be. The wolf might become his best tracker once this Hickok lick was over.

When Kileen heeled back to cover Hickok's rock below him, he had a fleeting vision out of the corner of his left eye, a sense of the wolf being transformed, the pelt lifting off a man – a redskin – as the Indian built a ladder of broad-headed war shafts into the snow-flecked sky. Good Lacota bowmen could thrill arrows as swiftly as any white gunhand with a single-action Colt revolver could cock and fire his piece. Worm was a superb fletcher. His arrows took flight perfectly, their slender two-inch iron points glistening in the ashy gloom like shiny grasshoppers. Each point had twin barbs, wicked little hooks, to prevent the arrow's withdrawal. The points were honed sharp enough to split hairs.

If mortality had not been involved, Whistling Jack Kileen would have been fascinated by Worm's dexterity. Worm was thirty yards away; yet by the time the first shaft was homing, the fourth was on the fly. He was aiming in deflection dead across the breath of the wintry wind, which was now howling. He seemed to shoot northeast into the Montana reaches, but when the gale spun the eagle feathers at the arrows' notches, it brusquely altered their path and orbited them in a great half-circle, dropping them ominously as they came.

Kileen was barely able to duck under the first arrow, but when he threw up his left arm to ward off the second, it took him under the armpit and half-shafted itself into his terrified heart. In the snow flurries the remaining arrows were difficult to detect, but they thwucked in, the third striking him through the jaws and the last stabbing through his

scrawny neck. By then Kileen was already dead, though the neck-piercing bled thickly with the last throbs of his heart. Worm's war cry followed the arrows on the wind: '*Hoka-hey!*' And afterward, tardily, '*Huhn!*', his kill cry.

Hickok's instinct told him the ambush was over, confirmed when the Indian hollered down at him, '*Hou cola!*' He smiled faintly and poked his snow-tipped head above his boulder. On the crest he saw the spindly Sioux in Kileen's nest heaving Whistling Jack's cadaverous body over the edge. It tumbled lifelessly down the spiny slope.

'*Kte kaga!*' the Indian called. 'The demon is dead.'

Hickok rose to his feet, stiff from squatting. He stood empty-handed, his pistols still barreled inside his boot tops. He roared: 'Hello, friend! *Ho-washtay!* That is good news!' Actually *ho-washtay* meant that Worm's voice was pretty, but it translated the same way. '*Pila mita!* My thanks to you!' He stopped speaking, and his hands danced the ballet of sign language: 'Truly we have become brothers. We have suckled at the same mother,' touching two fingers of his right hand to his lips. 'All that is mine I share with you.'

Worm was not so eager for the friendship. His sign said, 'What are you whites doing in this country? This is Pa Sappa, the land of the Lacotas. This hill belongs to me.'

This is no time for the truth, Hickok thought, but his hands flicked. 'It is as you say. We are breaking the treaty. But it is only because we are lost. The storms have turned us around.'

'Where do you go?' Worm asked in sign.

'We are travelling to the White Grandfather's fort up on the *Minne sosa*.'

Since Fort Abraham Lincoln lay to the northeast opposite dismal Bismarck on the banks of the Muddy Waters (as the Lacotas called the wild Missouri), Hickok's reply might have been true. While Worm ruminated, Hickok hastily distracted him from further doubts by asking in sign, 'What is my brother doing alone on this dangerous road?'

Worm bristled. He did not like being reminded of the Crow attack. 'I hunt the buffalo.'

'The great white one?'

'You have said it,' still in sign.

Hickok's hands were fascinating to watch, but Charlie Zane did not much like what they were saying: 'You will not find the humpback this day. The Thunderbird eats up the sky, and plenty storm comes.'

'That is true,' Worm signified with dignity.

Hickok stopped his signs and called in Lacota, 'There will be heap snow – *cahotska sota* – and soon it will be plenty cold – *lela oosni!* It is no time for a brave man to hunt such a monster alone. Come to my cave, my brother, and let us council together. We will make good medicine. Trust me, my brother. *Chante zunta!* My heart is honest. *Owatamla!* My tongue is straight! My tepee is yours. The robe is spread. The pipe is lit. These are my words.'

For a moment there was only the voice of the wind as Worm stood small on the heights. The snow had started rubbing him out, the wind wailing hauntingly. Finally his voice came through the thickening fall.

'*Wahi, cola!* I am coming, friend!'

Hickok waved at him, then turned his back and picked his way carefully to the cavern mouth where Charlie Zane stood, cradling the big Sharps and grinning lasciviously. He spent an obscene wink while brushing the snow off Hickok's wide shoulders. 'Mighty slick, Cap.'

Hickok stared at him askance.

'How you suckered him,' Charlie explained. 'You speak damn good Sioux for a prune picker. I'll hang here to cut him if he shows at this gap. You take the south hole in case the cricket jumps that way.'

Hickok's face was already scarlet from his exile in the cold, but his blue eyes were transmogrified into the color of a leaden bullet as he gripped Charlie's shirt in the rigid vise of his right fist and whispered, 'Old man, if you touch one hair of that Abrigoin's bonnet, you will have to answer to me.'

Charlie Zane's good eye widened in awe, the glass one

remaining serene. 'Did that snow ossify your brains?'

'I gave him my word.'

'Your word to an Injian? Come on, Cap, that's shoveling fleas in a barnyard.' He recoiled from the choler which darkened Hickok's face. 'Your word is your bond, I know that. But to an Injian?'

'By Heaven, you are a real knave!' Hickok said, and released him. 'Have you forgotten this fellow just saved my life?'

'Eyewash!' Charlie snapped. 'I could've sent Whistling Jack to hell on a shutter.'

Hickok said, his dander easing as he smiled faintly, 'But I might've caught my death of cold waiting on you.'

\* \* \*

'Hou!'

The Sioux greeting drifted cautiously through the faint tympani of falling snowflakes, beyond the south portal of the cave.

Hickok stepped out the cave mouth into the storm. The snow was dense, crisping audibly in the lee where the wind's howling did not damp the sound. The Indian emerged from the opacity like a white apparition, his inverted black buffalo-robe flake-drenched, leading his two weary ponies, both openly wincing from the storm's bite. The wind had a knife edge. It cut through Hickok's heavy buckskins as if they were only hen skin.

He held up both hands, showing them empty, and said warmly, '*Washtay, cola!*'

Worm's hands were empty too, but he did not need to make empty gestures. His left hand held the bridles of his pintos; his right swept openly from his heart to Hickok. '*Washtay, cola!*'

Hickok gestured toward the mounts, as if to assist with them, but Worm said, '*Heyah! Wasichu kokipapi tashunke!*' Literally translated, it said, 'Bad medicine afraid horse,' but what it actually meant was, 'My horses are afraid of the white man.' The Lacotas spoke in whole ideas, and usually the phrases had to be read from the end back to the begin-

ning, a disconcert for the avid linguist. Nor had there been any Sioux glossary for the old whiskey traders to consult. The language had been passed along mouth to ear and had acquired all the accents and additions of the men who spoke it. If a warrior had a lisp or a stutter or a harelip, his words would acquire a new sound, and this would be accepted as readily as the pure tongue.

Hickok signaled his understanding and led the way into the cave. The warmth struck the Indian like an embrace; the wary ponies lifted their heads to feel the rising heat. They were relieved to be out of Waziah's cruel gnarrings.

Worm stared boldly into Charlie Zane's grim face across the cave, aware of the hostility but showing no concern. '*Hou, wasichu!*' he said, omitting '*cola*'.

'Howdy, Red John,' Charlie said, then winced under the gray sting of Hickok's quick glance.

The mules broke the tension. Nicodemus scented the Indian ponies and began a horrendous braying that echoed in the cavern like the trumpeting of an insane elk; he set Jenny and the gray willow tail snorting and neighing, which startled the pintos into fearsome whickers that forced Worm to announce, '*Wanichi!*', meaning simply, '*No good!*'

Hickok agreed and having lighted his buff-tallow torch, guided Worm into the north den of the cave. The ponies quieted when out of sight of the whiteskin mounts. The torch cast a buttery flickering, broken only by the white glare at the north portal, where the wind was kicking up a snow-drift. The draft was heavy; they would have to close off that mouth later, Hickok decided. He waited while the Indian scouted the rocky lair and selected a sensible stable for his animals, noosing them both off on solid projections. They eased somewhat but still showed the whites of their wild eyes as they regarded Hickok aggressively.

Hickok made sign: 'Good horses.'

Worm replied in sign, 'If this one (Sicha) had his tail tied up for war, he would attack you like a true Oglala.'

Hickok signaled, 'This day I would be his friend. We will wear no paint here.'

'You have said it,' Worm signaled back. 'I believe the words of a brave man.'

'And I believe the same of you. Do you wish help to unpack your mounts?'

'No.'

'When you are finished, come to the fire and drink some black medicine with white tree juice.'

'*Dho!* Good!' Orally.

Hickok watched the Indian strip off the buffalo robe and shake down the snow. Worm laid it over the rocks, the hairy side out. He straightened up and drew a scarlet blanket around his shoulders. He was haggardly slight but dangerously lithe. His face, though hatchet-thin, wore no ferocity; it was an unfeeling mask. He looked to be a stripling, as young as Bill Cody (who was nine years Hickok's junior.) Actually he was thirty-two against Hickok's thirty-seven. Somehow, Hickok could not control a natural paternal impulse. He strode to the Indian and offered his hands, crossed over each other in the double handshake of war brothers.

Worm stared down, not accepting immediately. His sharp eyes, brassy in the firelight of the torch, examined Hickok's face. 'Are you the *wasichu* we Oglala call Okute? Are you the murderer named Hehcoc?'

Knowing a lie would be mirrored in his eyes, Hickok replied, 'The Shyela call me Pahaska.'

'Longhair.'

'You have said it.'

'But you are surely not the Son-of-the-Morning-Star.' The Cheyenne had named General Custer grandiloquently after the slaughter of Black Kettle's encampment at the Ouachita in 'sixty-eight, on a frigid November morning when the planet Venus rose to brighten the dawn as Custer's Seventh butchered the Cheyennes to the lilting melody of 'Garry Owen'.

'*Heyah,*' Hickok said. 'No.'

'And you are not the *wasichu* called Coh-dee who slays the buffalo for the Iron Road, for I have seen him with my own eyes and he is *hunkaschila* - a young man.'

'My people call me James Otis,' Hickok said, relieved to retreat into his old alias.

'Longhair,' said the Indian, and he accepted the double handshake without enthusiasm. Hickok was surprised to find his grip soft and womanly, without the bone-crushing brag of ever-blow bullies.

'Come when you are ready,' Hickok said, and removed into the other den of the cavern, where Charlie Zane was fiddling sulkily with the sizzling fire.

Soon, Worm appeared in his red blanket, holding a heavy rifle in his crossed arms.

'*Hou!*' Hickok said.

'*Hou!*' Worm said. He thrust out the rifle with both hands. It was Whistling Jack Kileen's .45-120 Sharps and it was in superb condition, oiled and unscratched, gleaming in their firelight. 'I saw that Longhair does not own a buffalo gun. This one belonged to the *kaga*. I have two others from the Hairy-Face and the One-Hand. So take it; this gun is yours.'

'*Pila mita*, my thanks,' Hickok said. 'But the long gun that my friend was shooting belongs to me. It is he who does not own one.'

Worm strode instantly to Charlie Zane, who stood apart, trying to smother his bluster. Worm gave him the gun. When Charlie felt the weight of the beautiful rifle in his hands, his frozen heart thawed into bubbling suet. 'Dognition!' he murmured, almost inaudibly. 'If that ain't something!' Sudden embarrassment fidgeted him. 'Look here, *hunkaschila*, I don't have anything good enough to give you in a swap.'

Worm said, 'You have given me shelter. You offer me food.'

'Yes, but that ain't exactly foofaraw,' Charlie said, mostly to Hickok. 'Rein up, sonny! Here's a proper geegaw!'

He reached into his boot and pulled out his buffalo skinning-knife. He had owned it less than three weeks, having purchased it at the mercantile in Fetterman. The steel said it had been made in Solingen, Germany. It was a thing of glittering beauty, a curving blade over ten inches long, the

entire bottom-side sword-sharp, with half the arced top side keen as a razor. Charlie was very fond of the awesome blade; therefore it was a true gift.

Worm had never seen such a modern knife, a knife with a white bone handle brass-studded over the steel. He could see that it was a skinner, since there was no finger guard to sudden-stop the hands from slipping down over the sharp edges when striking the bones of an enemy. 'I will use this to skin the white buffalo,' Worm said piously, holding it high.

'Uh-huh,' Charlie said significantly, casting a dubious glance at Hickok. 'What's your handle, sonny?'

Worm said, '*Nadonaissieux mieyebo.*'

Charlie translated, 'I am Little Snake.'

'I don't think so,' Hickok said in English. '*Nadonaissieux* is a French translation of a Chippewa word. The Chippewa had two great enemies – the Iroquois in the east, who were called Big Snakes, and the Dakotas in the west, who were called Little Snakes. But *Nadonaissieux* is too general. I don't think he means exactly that.' He turned to Worm, who had stowed the glittering buffalo-skinner under his red blanket. In sign: 'You are a little snake?'

'I am called that,' Worm said in sign. He made a snake sign and reduced it to something infinitely tiny.

'A worm!' Hickok said. 'His name is Worm!'

'*Hin!*' Worm said, elated. He had so heard the whites refer to his father at Fort Laramie. 'Worm *micaje.*' He approached Charlie and offered a warm handshake in gratitude for the skinner. 'How are you called, *tunkaschila?*'

('Grandfather?' Charlie exploded. 'Damn if I'm going to swallow that!')

Hickok said, 'The Shyela named him Ochinee.'

Worm's face showed emotion; his golden eyes widened in awe. 'One-Eye?'

'Yes.'

'The great warrior of Horsefoot Bend?', meaning Sand Creek, Colorado.

Charlie wiggled at the flattery. 'You might say I had my innings.'

'You are the *wasichu* who was arrowed in the eye by a Shyela dog soldier? The white scout who plucked out the arrow and his eye with his own hand and threw it into the face of his enemy before he slew him? But I have heard this story around the council fires from the mouth of the Shyela chief Two-Moon himself. This is a great honor for me,' Worm continued. 'Among the Turkey-Feather People, there is even a dog-soldier society which has banded together to kill you and take your white-haired scalp, because the warrior who counts that coup will stand highest in the council of brave men in the Other World. Not even among the Lacotas has there ever been such courage as yours.'

'Thanks,' Charlie said drily. There was no threat in Worm's tale, only honor. Still, it did not make Charlie comfortable. The Cheyennes wanted him as badly as the Sioux wanted Okute, the Shooter. He said, 'This white hair is enchanted. There is magic in it. I own many years, and yet no warrior has ever touched it. Not even time has been able to take it from me. When I cross over the Spirit Path, I will still carry it with me.'

Worm nodded in awe. It made sense. He had seen many *peslas* among the whites, baldheaded men whose scalps were worth nothing. Then, without warning, he straightened haughtily. His eyes punished Charlie and his accusing finger was rigid. 'You speak crookedly. You are not One-Eye!'

As Charlie stiffened, Hickok said, 'He thinks your glass eye is real.'

'Watch!' Charlie said grandly.

Worm waited, but he made it no secret that his right hand sat on the butt of his .44-caliber Colt percussion revolver, which hung in his belt.

Charlie crooked a forefinger, made several prestidigitating passes with it and then hooked it into his left socket. With a triumphant bellow, he plucked the glass brutally from the socket and poised it aloft like an evil eye, the colorful blue iris pointed dead into Worm's appalled face. 'Who says I am not Ochinee? Who says I am not the great shaman of the whites?'

('I may air my paunch,' Hickok remarked in disgust.)

Charlie flipped up his Bowie knife from the worn scabbard on his right hip and after stabbing the glass eye without effect, he sawed it heavily to show it was impervious to mortality.

Worm had watched in frank stupefaction. Of all the Sioux, he had always been the most remote from the whites. Not since the Grattan fight with Scattering Bear down on the Shell River had he ever had civil traffic with the *wasichu*. He knew the whites made strong magic. He knew the medicine of the whispering spirit called Western Union. He had watched the invasion of the Noise Wagons on the Iron Road. Even now, in his hands, he held the whites' iron knife and the whites' iron gun. Strong magic indeed! He could not make iron. If the whites had not invented barrel hoops, he would still be using sharp stones for his arrowheads. He could not make brass hulls to hold the gunpowder that fired his bullets. He could not even make the gunpowder. Nor an iron pot or spider. Truly he was like a bird with a broken wing.

But this act that Charlie Zane had performed was the most ghastly mystery of all. For many years the Lacotas had scalped and mutilated the bodies of fallen whites, not in a cruel lust for blood vengeance – as the whites thought – but simply to make certain that in the Other World the whites would be unable to fight again and violate the happy hunting grounds of the One-Above.

But if the *wasichu* could renew their bodies as Charlie Zane had just done, without the enchantment of the white buffalo, then everything had been for naught. Heaven would become Hell. It would mean the God of the whites was the true Spirit and that his Wanekia, Jesus, had truly remade himself and risen from the dead.

Hickok saw that all this humbug was about to shatter the primitive mind of his Oglala friend. It was this very effect he had been wary of during Charlie's melodrama. He wanted no frustrated madman on his hands.

'There is no magic,' he said, snatching the eye from Charlie's hand.

Worm was sharply startled and shrank back, but Hickok's

snap move had broken the spell of the Indian's horrid fascination.

'This geegaw is a joke,' Hickok said strongly. 'It cannot see, it cannot feel, it is not real. It is only glass like any other big bead.'

He thrust the eye into Worm's unready hand. After a moment of revulsion the Indian began to recognize it as a piece of fakery. A rueful grimace warped his thin lips. He quickly handed the eye back.

'My friend is a *heyoka*, a clown,' Hickok said severely.

'But your heart is honest,' Worm said quietly. 'I have heard that there are good whites, and you are one of them, Longhair, and I am sorry that the Bad Ones who are the strongest and therefore chiefs have ruined your race.' Hickok abided the arrogant compliment with an abrasive glance at Charlie as he returned the eye. Charlie wiped it off with his grimy blue neckerchief and popped it back into its socket.

Worm was still awed at the transformation. 'But is he truly One-Eye?'

'He is truly Ochinee,' Hickok said flatly.

\* \* \*

The snowstorm screamed through the day in such wildness as Hickok had never heard, the wind shrieking like a living beast, until many of the cavern's portals were plugged up. Even then Waziah found slits and slashes in the faces of the mountain where he sang his songs dismally down through the rock, sometimes in high threnody, other times in growling threat. Yet, huddled around the prosperous flames, the three men felt safe and secure.

Earlier, before he had joined them to present the Sharps rifle, Worm had taken the precaution of half-blocking the north entrance with a wall of heavy stones. He had raised the bulwark to four feet, half the height of the yawning portal, but it effectively kept the snow from drifting in and damped the nasty bite of the wind.

When Hickok saw the barricade he was amused. 'That is a good thing, Worm. I must do it on the other side. But surely

you do not think that those stones will keep out the white buffalo?’

‘It is not for the buffalo,’ Worm said, indulging Hickok’s ignorance. ‘By now *pte-wakan* has found his own hole to hide in, for he is a wise and holy bull. This wall is for the wolves. They do not plan ahead and in this storm they will seek any shelter when they are freezing or when they are starving and smell our cook pots.’

Hickok said, ‘You think the wolf cannot climb over these stones?’

‘He will not,’ Worm said. ‘I have made my water upon them. I have told Brother Shunkaha that this cave is mine. You must do the same to the other crawl hole.’

Hickok was surprised; he had never heard of such a tactic. ‘The wolves I’ve killed would not have turned tail at a sprinkle of pee.’

‘It is the way of the wolf,’ Worm said simply. ‘It is how he marks off his hunting grounds. He wishes his sign to be respected and he respects the sign of others. The wolf himself taught this to me.’

‘The pickaninny’s speaking straight tongue,’ Charlie Zane chimed in. ‘But this is mighty cloudy country for wolves to be on the howl.’

‘Not with all that fresh meat outside,’ Hickok said.

‘Hell and scissors, Cap, no self-respecting lobo would suicide himself on hide-hunter steaks.’

Hickok said, ‘There is the roan mare.’ He decided to take Worm’s advice. He rose and walked to the lee portal of the cavern on the south, modestly turned his back and emptied his bladder on the rocks, spraying as high as possible.

‘Good!’ Worm grunted, and went back to chomping on his hump meat.

The spirit of easy amity which pervaded the haven was due largely to Charlie. After his miserable failure at bullying, he had become deeply shamefaced. Also, his gratitude to Worm for the gift of the Sharps buffalo gun knew no bounds. He had wriggled like a suckling puppy, then grabbed the coffeepot to fill with fresh snow and announced, ‘I am going to cook us up a peawarmer of a breakfast – buff

steaks and slapjacks – and when it comes to belly cheating, I shine. My biscuits are so light, the skeeters steal 'em, and myself feeling as merry as a heifer in the high rye, I'll even rassle up a dried-apple pie!

Worm had made sign that he would roast his own meat. He spitted his hump steak on the point of his new skinning knife and barely singed it before devouring it hungrily. Charlie was nonplussed by how much beef the slight Indian stowed away before wiping his greasy hands on his hair and face.

'That poor child ain't et since his last meal.'

As the day passed they used some of the time to build a wall at the south door, Charlie thoroughly anti-wolfing the structure. The cave – with the wind blocked off and the draft diminished – became a fine lodge.

'Not the worst roost I've nested in,' said Charlie. 'Though every home should have a cat. What surprises me is that the Injian don't smell half bad. He looks to be cleaner than most.'

'You're probably tickling *his* nose,' Hickok shrugged. 'And you're not exactly a balsam pillow to mine either.'

'None of your jaw,' Charlie grinned. 'I haven't caught you skinny-dipping in the balm of Columby for many a long day.'

As the storm howled, and after he had cleaned up the skillet and tins, Charlie retired to his blanket to sleep off his grub. Hickok and Worm sat at the fire, smoking the Bird's-Eye that Charlie had managed to donate without any Indian begging.

'Longhair, why are the whites in my land?'

'I have said it. We are lost—'

'I mean all whites,' Worm said plainly.

'Should Worm speak of these dangerous things on this day?'

Worm stared impudently into Hickok's blue eyes. 'Surely my friend Longhair is not afraid of truth.'

'Truth wears many faces,' Hickok said neatly. 'There is

red truth and there is white truth and I am not sure that they can be braided into one rope.' He paused. '*But your friend Longhair is afraid of nothing.*' There was little brag in it.

Worm smiled thinly. 'That is a good answer, but it is smoke.' He was enjoying Hickok's uneasiness. As for himself, he was utterly relaxed and he knew that these two whites could not understand this. He had presented them with another mystery and this delighted him. How could they know that the One-Above had shown him in a vision that he would live to meet the white buffalo in combat? Therefore it was impossible that anything untoward could happen to him before that awesome grapple. Ergo he knew the whites could not betray him, but he also knew that they were not certain that he would not jump them. It warmed his heart to see them thus disadvantaged.

He said, 'We did not ask white men to come here. The Great Spirit gave us this country as a home. You had yours. We did not interfere with you. The Great Spirit gave us plenty of land to live on, and buffalo, deer, antelope and other game. But you have come here; you are taking my land from me; you are killing off my game and so it is hard for me to live. Now you tell us to work for a living, but the Great Spirit did not make us to work but to live by hunting. You white men can work if you want to. We do not interfere with you. You say, "Why do you not become civilized?" *We do not want your civilization!* We would live as our fathers did and their fathers before them.'

Hickok's face went frosty and he was glad that Charlie Zane was sawing wood noisily in his blanket roll and had not heard. Hickok did not want this confrontation and he was uneasy wondering why Worm was forcing his hand. If Worm had been any other sassy redskin with more mouth than mind, Hickok would have figured that the Indian had feather-headed platoons joining him shortly. But since this could not be so, Hickok realized that he was talking to a true chief. Worm was youthful, but he spoke with the authority of a commander of the armies. Caution was advisable and yet boldness seemed the better weapon. 'Now then,

young Worm,' Hickok said, 'you have proven my words. You have spoken red truth.'

'Tell me then white truth, Longhair.'

Hickok nodded. 'In the first place, *Wakan Tanka* did not give you this place. He birthed your people in the land of many waters, what is called *Minne-sota*. And there the Ojibway and the Chippewas and the Assiniboin warred you out of it and forced you west into these plains.'

'The whites too,' Worm said grimly.

'The whites too. They drove the Dakotas out of *Minne-sota*. So then the Dakotas became the Lacotas and they stormed these lands by force. You took them from the Shyela, from the Absarokas, from the Kaws, from the Arikaras, from the Omahas, from the Pawnees, the Shoshonis and the Otoes. These sacred hills belonged to others and you wrested them away with knife, lance, arrow and war club.'

Worm's eyes iced, the gold cheapening to the hue of bright brimstone. 'That was war. It was honorable.'

'And now the whites make war on you. What is the difference?'

'The whites have no honor,' Worm said sharply. 'That is the difference. The white does not know when he is beaten. He returns to steal and kill. He loves destruction. Where the white man walks, death flowers like the vetches.'

'It is a thing called progress.'

'It is a thing called greed,' Worm said. 'The white has the belly of a wolverine. It is never filled. My great friend of the Uncpapas, Tatonka Iyotake —'

(Sitting Bull, by Heaven! Hickok thought.)

'— has said this: "What treaty that the white man ever made with us have they kept?"'

'That is well said,' Hickok murmured, ashamed.

'When Tatonka Iyotake was a boy the Lacotas owned the world. The sun rose and set on their land. They sent ten thousand men to battle. Yet where are those warriors today? Who slew them? Where are our lands? Who owns them? What white man can say I ever stole his land or his money? What white woman, however lonely, was ever captured or insulted by me?'

'Never you, perhaps,' Hickok said. 'But there were rapists. Not all Indians are good Indians.'

'Nor are all whites like you.'

'That is true,' Hickok said. 'There is good and bad in all the clans and races.'

Worm said flatly, 'But the whites let the Bad Ones run them. We do not do that.'

Hickok was silent, wondering how U. S. Grant would have replied.

Worm rose higher in his dudgeon. 'What law have I broken? Loving my own lands? Am I evil because my skin is red? Is it wicked that I was born where my father was born? Is it a bad thing that I would die for my people and my country?'

'You are a child of calamity' was all Hickok could think of against the pungency.

'This very earth where we now huddle, safe from Waziah's snows, is sacred ground. It was made from the dust and blood of my ancestors.' Worm folded his arms, indicating he was finished. 'That, in the end, is the truth.'

'It is still red truth,' Hickok said. 'But it is not the real truth, which is neither noble nor honorable but only a harsh reality.'

'Speak this true truth then,' Worm said.

Hickok sighed. What could he tell this earnest young cut-throat? Up to now he had belonged to Uncle Billy Sherman's school for treatment of the Indians: extermination. It had seemed the only practical way to open up the land; certainly the only straight tongue that these hard-shell murderers could understand. Shoot them, hang them, gut them, starve them. Soon enough, with their diminishing birth rate, the problem would be finished. God knows he hated them enough to aid in the task. He recalled the miserable Sauks and the more miserable Foxes back in Troy Grove. What kind of country would Illinois have been if left to their heathen rituals and sadistic tortures? He could not understand how Great Jehovah had ever created such manlike

monstrosities, and his father had never been able to explain the anachronism.

Yet his friend Henry Stanley (who had lately ventured into darkest Africa and found the unlost missionary Livingstone) had expressed a more compassionate point of view, traces of which had pervaded him and still remained. Stanley had pointed out that even without the rapine by the whites, the Indian vitality was ebbing, and that sooner or later, because of their constant interbreeding, their feudal orgies, their bloody intertribal vengeance and their bitter interfamily vendettas, they would vanish from the earth. The wild freedom these banditti savored had taught them elemental survival but not the art of longevity. The primitive mind, lusting for revenge, had made the ritual of a noble warrior's death more important than his life. They were diminished in a cul-de-sac of their own design.

How could he tell Worm (as Stanley had told him) that the Indians themselves had killed twenty times more Indians than the whites' whiskey or disease or avarice. You could not blame it all on Christopher Columbus because he had set foot upon a beach in a New World.

Stanley urged the confinement of the Red Men to reservations. There, he reasoned, the race would either perish or abound, depending on its ability to adjust to a civilized life.

(‘Savages have the minds of children and the passions of brutes,’ Stanley had said, ‘and to place breechloaders in their hands is as cruel an act as to put razors in the hands of infants.... When they exchanged the flintlock or single-shot rifle for the fifteen-shot Winchester, anyone who reasoned might have perceived that their annihilation was not far off.’)

Worm waited on his answer.

Gammon! Hickok thought grimly. The problem was more profound than all this trish-trash morality. The plain truth, the unvarnished truth, was that nothing could stop progress, because progress was the Manifest Destiny of the white race to pursue a westward course of empire. Why? Because the whites did not worship Almighty God half as much as they idolized the Almighty Dollar. That was the rowel that

blooded bellies – gold, silver, and land. It did not matter whose you stole.

Worm patiently waited and Charlie Zane snored louder than the wind.

‘When Sitting Bull was a boy,’ Hickok said, ‘the Sioux could throw ten times one hundred times ten into the battle.’ His voice had suddenly gone mordacious. ‘Today that cannot be done. Today it is the whites’ turn. Those you have seen on these plains are like a handful of beads. For every white you kill, there are a thousand more to take his place. They are like the sands of the great sea. They outnumber the spring blades of grama grass. They are more than the buffalo in the days when he smothered the earth with his great herds. There is no way to stand against the whites; their seed is strong, their weapons are terrible. *They have the power!* They will sweep across the Yellowstone and the Tongue and the Big Horn, crossing the Shining Mountains with their steam wagons until the streams and the plains and mountains are all white-land from Huntka’s sunrise to the western ocean. You will bend to the long knives or you will be broken! You will live as they say or you will die on their bayonets.’

Worm silently finished his smoke. There was no anger in him, only a smoldering ember from an ashen fire; a gloomy vision of the end of the free days – the awful thing he had dreaded. Had it come? ‘If such is the true truth,’ he said simply, ‘then I will sing my death song. I was born an Indian, but *Wakan Tanka* did not make me a reservation Indian. I will die fighting the whites; but in the end, I will win, because I will die free of them.’

‘I will not have your death.’

‘Why not? You are white.’

‘You are my brother first,’ Hickok said, stirred by his own sincerity and the celerity with which he had become fond of this candid young valiant.

‘*Pila mita,*’ Worm said. ‘My thanks.’ He tried to hide it, but his golden eyes had softened; his heart was touched. ‘I promise you, Longhair. Between us there shall be no war.’

‘You have spoken.’

Early in the afternoon, as the day darkened, Hickok found Worm at the portal of the north den, his buffalo robe wrapped around him as he stared into the face of the rage, the snow lashing at his face.

Worm barely seemed to notice him. He did not move as the flakes nicked into his brooding eyes. Thoughts of the lonely scaffold above Wounded Knee Creek were racing through his mind. Hickok, with a sense of intrusion, turned away, but Worm stopped him: ‘The thunderbirds will soon fly west again.’

‘How long till the snow stops?’

‘When the stars climb high.’

Force of habit compelled Hickok to pull out his time-piece to check the hour – 3:30 P.M. The glint of silver caught Worm’s eye. ‘Is that a wag-on-the-wall?’ using the Indian expression for the pendulum clocks with which the ingenious Yankee pedlars had surfeited the settlements. He held a hand out, curious.

Without caution Hickok passed the turnip over to him, remembering too late the inscription on the back. It was a coin-silver casing with a quarter-carat ruby set in the tip of the winding stem. On the back was inscribed: *J. B. Hickok from His Friends, Oct. 26, 1871*. Centered in this inscription was a six-pointed star with the title: *Marshal Abilene Kansas*.

Worm examined the watch keenly.

Hickok held his breath, feeling that he was a dead herring, muddled by his own carelessness. Somehow – he could not explain it – the brief friendship with the young chief had become deeply important to him. And now, if Worm could read at all, he would quickly realize that Longhair was no noble white brave but the cold-blooded killer of Zheulee. The Sioux eagle might very well seek to blood his pinions.

There was no pleasure in Worm’s face. He listened to the ticking of the piece against his ear and then handed it back, shrugging. ‘It is a foolish thing,’ he said. ‘It tells only what I already know.’

'It's true that Father Sun can give you the time of day,' said Hickok, thanking God that Worm was illiterate. 'And in the dark the night sun points the hours. But in a sky of snow like today, what time is it?'

Worm made the sign for *Wi* (Sun), the index finger and thumb joined to make a circle, raised it to zenith and then waned it three hours west. Hickok nodded, impressed. Time was an instinct with these people. The Indians had no schedule to keep; most of their lives were spent in fly-bitten indolence except when hunting or at war. They ate when hungry and slept when bored. Having no ambitions, they slept a great deal, leaving the hard labor to the wives, whom the toil made ancient long before their years.

Hickok noticed that the wind had dwindled to a dolorous moan. The big flakes changed into a steady fall of fine crystals. Worm remained at the gap above the stone wall he had built and looked moodily toward the northwest.

'My brother is sad,' said Hickok. 'His heart is far away.' No answer. 'Does he miss his own tepee and his own people?' No answer. Hickok took the silent nudge and left him, aware now that it was grief, not homesickness, that ate at the Oglala.

Jim Bridger, who knew the elements better than the wild geese, once said that plains weather was as cantankerous as a drunken Indian. As twilight deepened over the Elk Mountains, bringing the sudden death of the north wind, the silence palled eerily, as if they were suspended within the eye of a cyclone. But it was no cyclone. An hour later, the wind returned, but it had doglegged around to the southeast and it wafted the heavy dry heat of the Nebraskan sand hills up to them, instantly turning the snow into gurgling rain.

They had gluttoned their suppers and after Charlie Zane had grunted through a laborious bowel movement somewhere back in the labyrinths of the cave, he snaked into his bedroll, as usual, to savor the weight of the hump meat in his belly and to rest from the rigors of wolfing it. 'You'll get nothing from the Injian,' he told Hickok. 'He is more hem than haw.'

Nonetheless, Hickok welcomed the chance to be alone with Worm again. There was no way to touch taproots in the Oglala while Charlie chattered aimlessly, hopping hither and yon in the yarning like a buckeye cricket. Now, in the stillness of the night with the raucous downpour slopping at the cavern ports, the fire seemed deeply private; they sat before it, sucking their pipes and staring into the flickering buffalo-chips.

Worm's face was placid, but he could not hide the utter sadness in his eyes, pale brown now in the firelit dimness. Hickok wondered how to open Worm up without blowing like a calloused lout. His instinct told him what had happened to the Indian, but it was a taboo subject among the Sioux. Finally, in some desperation, he decided to dance on the quicksand.

'My brother,' he said solemnly in Lacota, 'my heart is heavy for you. It bleeds as if a lance had spitted it.'

Worm looked at him in astonishment.

'My spirit speaks to me – it says you lost a loved one a short time ago. I do not know whether it was your wife or a son or a daughter' – Hickok noted the sharp wincing at 'daughter' but continued – 'but whichever it was, I am cast down to the earth for I feel the presence of *yunke-lo* all around us.'

'I am a Hunkpatila of the split-off Oglalas,' Worm said quietly. 'We do not ever speak of the Lost Ones.'

'It is the same with the Shyela,' Hickok said piously and not without hypocrisy. 'But I am white and what I say will not hurt your loved one.'

'Those are your words,' Worm said carefully.

Hickok nodded. He peered into the flames. 'Now I see it all.' He hated plying this thimblery, but it was a crow line to the Indian's superstitions. 'Your little girl has gone to the scaffold. Even now her blaze crosses over the Spirit Path to the Other Land.'

There was no doubt of Worm's naive stupefaction in the blanching of his cheeks. 'Are you a shaman among the whites?'

'No. But they say I am a strange one.'

Worm nodded, still awed. The same had been said of him among the Oglalas. 'How could you know this?'

'Visions are given to me.'

Worm could hear the echo of his own words to He-Dog when they had camped above the thin waters of the Little Powder. Then he had been the teacher. Was he now the learner?

'It is true,' he said. '*Wayo kapi.*' He turned away so that Longhair could not see the glistening of his eyes. He fought hard to keep the wretched misery out of his heart. It was hard to throttle. His worst enemy had never been so difficult to slay. 'She had seen only two winters.'

Hickok sighed, truly touched. 'Your only one?'

'Yes. The white coughing-sickness took her.'

'You cannot blame everything on the whites. The coughing sickness lies hidden in all of us like a button-tail snake waiting to strike when we are wet and cold and hungry,' Hickok said quietly. 'It is not easy for the little ones to hold life in these cruel winters.'

'But it was easier before the whites came.'

'It does not matter,' Hickok said noncommittally, cognizant that the Oglala was more hard-shell than a Baptist deacon. 'Whatever has been, now is – whether white or red or the will of the One-Above. Nothing will bring the little *ishna* back to your arms.'

Worm said sharply, 'But I cannot let her go to the Wanagi Yata – the place of souls – the way she died. She would be forever in the agony of the sickness.'

'Ah!' Hickok said breathlessly. 'That is why you hunt the white buffalo!' He was surprised at how easy it had been for him to cut the center of the bull's-eye, but his feelings were instantly mixed. Worm's grief was infectious. Though Hickok had never married, Hickok had often imagined how it would be: a warm and loving helpmeet who would bear him a beautiful little girl, her seraphic face framed in long blond curls to enhance her great blue eyes. (They-Are-Afraid-of-Her had had raven black hair, braided to her waist, and her dark-brown eyes had twinkled with the sass of the impudent jay.) Hell and scissors, it was all rotten!

Hickok said silently. What kind of Christian God or Indian Great Spirit could devour the innocent so calmly without reason or conscience? Religion was bullshit! he thought savagely, in rare invective.

But now he had a problem. Both Worm and he were in pursuit of the white buffalo. Yet the spike had only one robe, one healing pelt that would cleanse the little red maiden of her mortal rot and lay immortality upon her, or one lucrative pelt that would bring him a gourd of gold pieces to guard the halls of fame and honor against the specter of poverty.

There was no doubt that of the two quests for the white buffalo, the Indian's was the noblest, an unselfish act of filial love, beside which the skinking avarice of the whites faded into vileness. For them the dead buffalo would only mean money for gaming and red-eyed cock crowing. For the little squaw it would mean Heaven.

Hickok thrust the painful dilemma away from himself. He was worrying about maybes in a wild country where tomorrow was often an illusion. Now was perilous enough without stewing over the dawns to come.

'I would hunt the white buffalo beside my brother,' Hickok said.

'Why?' The question flared in silent sign.

This child is no man's fool, Hickok thought, but he said, 'Because One-Eye and Longhair travel the same road that Worm will take. It would be better for your hunting if we stayed together. There would be less chance of scaring off the white one.'

Hickok found himself transfixed by the face of a sphinx. Worm said coldly, 'You do not have snowshoes. You could not keep pace.'

For a moment Hickok was stumped, but the sound of the downpour rescued him: 'The rain will wash away the snow. By morning it will be less than two hands deep. Traveling will be easy.'

Worm was deaf to him. He cleaned his pipe and stowed it carefully under the red blanket that cased him. He plucked a cedar stem and poked the fire until bright sparks

flew up from the gray embers. '*Le mita pte,*' he grunted. His voice had an ominous tone. 'This buffalo is mine.'

'I did not say otherwise. . . .'

When the long silence became ponderous, Worm said, 'Longhair, what game do you play? Are you trying to trick me? Is there treachery in your heart?'

Hickok's stomach writhed. 'I do not like your words.'

Worm sucked a deep breath. 'I have a friend, Touch-the-Cloud of the Minneconjous, who has told me that the robe of a white buffalo is very dear among the whites. He has said that the whites would give *maza yotzi sota* – plenty gold – for such a robe.'

'That is true.' Hickok felt helpless.

'You would steal the white buffalo from the Little One?'

'God no!' He felt miserable.

'Two tongues speak here.'

'Listen to me, young Worm. You are galloping up a blind canyon. There are other answers. Honorable answers. Suppose you are killed by this monster? To whom would he then belong?'

It was a solid question. Worm pondered its logic for many minutes, then shrugged. 'He would belong to the next hunter. He would belong to the one who slew him.'

'Then where is the treachery?'

'There is none.'

'So!'

'But where is the handshake? Where is the brotherhood?' Worm tilted his thin face wisely. 'You cannot understand. You are white.'

'Say red words then.'

'Among the Hunkpatilas, I have a blood brother. His name is He-Dog,' Worm said. 'If he saw me rubbed out by the white buffalo, he would slay Wakan Tonka with his bare hands in my name for he is a powerful and fearless warrior. But he would never sell the robe although it might bring him one hundred ponies. He would skin out the buffalo and carry the robe a long way off to where the White Horse River meets Wounded Knee Creek. And there

he would wrap the Little One in the Holy Pelt and she would be purified.'

Hickok's heart was seized by a wracking frustration, akin to swimming in the quicksands of the Trembling Lands, or dying of thirst in the Saints' Great Salt Lake. He was reminded of an old adage the Fort Hall beaver trappers used to bandy when they were shuttlelegging for young squaws among the Crows and Shoshonis. There was the problem of puberty. 'A gal is like a potato,' ran the saw. 'Old enough when she's big enough.'

Honor was something akin. Someone planted a seed of truth in your soil and it grew into a Carson honesty, until finally, when it was ripe enough, it became a treasure called Integrity. That was the trail that the Oglala was drawing out for him. This waspy little pagan was unknowingly more Christian than Hickok's pious father had knowingly been.

Hickok sweated. 'I am not alone. There is One-Eye.'

Only the fire crackled a reply.

Finally, 'I will make medicine with him and perhaps he will understand about the Holy Bull.'

Worm's face strained wearily. 'Each of us must walk in his own *moksins*. You are a free man. One-Eye is a free man. You will both travel whichever road you choose and you will hunt whatever game you wish.'

'I would rather hunt with you,' Hickok said.

'Longhair' - Worm's voice was soft - 'this many days ago' - he raised both hands and spread his fingers indicating the number ten - 'were you not on the wagon coach traveling to the white lodges called Fetterman?'

Hickok nodded, puzzled.

'I too was there,' Worm said.

By Heaven! 'You were the *okute* on the ridge!'

'There was blood in my eyes that night.' Worm seemed remote. 'My heart was bad. For every white I killed, the steps of the Little One would be lighter in her journey across the bridge of stars. That dawn I tried to down you. That dawn you tried to down me.' Ruefully, he displayed the faint scab on the lobe of his left ear. 'That dawn I saw

only a white enemy. That dawn, you saw only an Indian *hohe*.'

I didn't see a damned thing, Hickok thought emptily. The lobe wound had been a lucky scratch indeed!

'We were foes then,' Worm said.

'Time when,' Hickok said in sign.

'*Le mita cola*, now you are my friend,' Worm said.

Hickok said, 'For all tomorrows.'

Worm nodded. 'Then you will understand. Your heart will not be sore when I say this: *I hunt the white buffalo alone*.'

Hickok blinked through his sharp disappointment. The Oglala had simply refused to be gulled. Worm rose, tightened his red blanket around himself as he murmured '*Washtay cola*' with an odd finality, and retreated to his sleeping quarters in the northern den of the big cavern.

Hoary September had reached the autumn of its days; Hickok visioned a calendar in his mind and counted out the date. He was mildly amazed at how quickly time had ridden the high roads. Only yesterday he had lolled morosely on the Market Square bench in K.C., waiting for fate to deal him a hand. Only yesterday he had chewed leather with Marshal Cluxton in Abilene's wasteland. He could barely recall Cheyenne from his short stopover. The pesthole called Fetterman was already an unreal fantasy, Poker Jenny only a misting dream. The fracas at the Frozen Dog remained sharp and vivid in recollection, as did the Janus masks of its proprietors, Tim Brady and Johnny Varnes. His seventh sense warned him that he had not seen the last of those larrikins. Yet the battle with the Absarokas had faded like the fog in which he had fought it.

The only truth etched in his mind was Worm. The Oglala blotted out everything else, despite the brevity of their odd friendship. This Indian's reality could not be denied; he and the white buffalo had become the hoop of Hickok's full meaning. He would have given a fat poke to know who this little warrior really was. If Worm held *tinza*, the red power, the total balance of war in the Tetons might be seesawed

back from pillage to palaver. He made resolution to solve the puzzle come sunup.

The night dragged interminably, Hickok's tense stomach developing a hard ache. To ease it he braved a pull or two from Charlie Zane's stinking medicine jug. The gulps took plenty of sand. Charlie might have bragged that his nectar was tender Old Crow, but in truth it was the rawest green squeezings from the Wasatch cornfields, the Mormons' Valley Tan Schnapps, guaranteed to 'stir the divinities' but with little assurance it would not make a man puke.

Hickok grimaced as it cut its fiery path to his belly; he barely kept it down. Very soon, however, his gut was softened, along with his restlessness. It had been a long time, he thought, since he had gone on a swigging 'hoot 'n' holler.' It raised Bill Cody in his mind. By Heaven but they had been ossified hooligans together, raising such shenanigans that the U.S. Army had finally been forced to separate them into different commands.

Hickok slept fitfully, the driving rain irking him. He fancied he could hear other sounds, even over Charlie's stentorian snore, but always the rain sloshed them so that he could not be sure. Once, hearing Worm's ponies both whickering, he rose to investigate. But the fire had burned low, both dens were dark and he did not dare light a tallow torch lest the Indian be alarmed.

Near dawn the old wound in Hickok's right hip began to pain sharply, as it inevitably did in wet weather. There was nothing to do about it, nor could he stem the memories it sent back through the rainswept night.

He would never have suffered that grievous slash if he had not behaved like a pudding-footed farmboy. The battleground had been only a stone's throw from the mesa at Sand Creek, where Charlie had lost his eye two years earlier. Hickok, with dispatches for Fort Lyon, Colorado Territory, in March of 'sixty-nine, had camped alone on the bed of Big Sandy Creek, where he lit a fire and roasted a buffalo steak, contemptuous of danger.

Seven painted Cheyenne savages, with bitter memories of Chivington's massacre, challenged his comfort, and their

charge nearly killed him. Although he finally rubbed them all out, the quarters had become too close. The last war-lance spitted him in the hip with force, plunged deep into the bone and clung there.

In utter agony, Hickok still had the muscle to pull out the spear, but he would not relinquish it, and when he rode into Fort Lyon, almost unconscious from loss of blood, his fist was still wrapped around the bloody shaft. Buffalo Bill happened to be at the fort to greet him and helped stem the blood flow, a fair enough reason for Hickok to gift him with the Shyela broadhead.

The ugly wound would not heal; it continued to sup-purate from a bad infection. Discouraged, Hickok decided to return to his home, the first time he had visited Troy Grove since he had ridden out on the dodge after walloping Charlie Hudson into the canal.

There, in April, he became an invalid, his mother, Polly, and his sisters, Celinda and Lydia, nursing him with loving hands, which did not, however, heal the poison in the hip-bone. Finally they brought in the family medico, Dr. Thomas, who skillfully cleansed the awesome hole (Hickok refused to take chloroform; like a true pistoleer he had no intention of lying helpless under its fumes). After that the Cheyenne vengeance knitted perfectly.

Good health instantly made him bored with his home, his family and bucolic Troy Grove. A month later, May, he was in Chicago, visiting friends. By June he was at Hays City, Kansas, guiding a passel of eastern dudes on the first tourist trip into the 'Wild West', for which he received not only five hundred dollars but the beautiful .44 pistols that Senator Henry Wilson, of Massachusetts, had had specially fashioned for him at the Colt arsenal.

Listening now to the sorrowful rain in the cold cavern, Hickok mused ruefully that it was time to get in touch with his family again. He had not been much of a loving brother, though he adored his sisters, and he had been far from a loyal son, though he idolized his mother. But they would not see him again. He would never return to Troy Grove.

\* \* \*

Toward 4 A.M. the rain stopped and Hickok dropped soundly asleep, dreamless except for one brief fantasy about the white buffalo. He imagined himself and Charlie Zane trailing north, looking for blaze of the spike when Charlie suddenly bared that inane gold-toothed grin of his and remarked, 'You're looking backside-to, Cap.'

When he turned, peering down their own broken trail, there was the devil's spawn, sure enough, patiently haunting *them*. He wondered if the dream was a bode, but by then the mouth-watering fumes of frying bacon goaded him awake.

'That you, Cap?' Charlie rasped from the fire. 'Howde-do! Snow's stopped. Rain's stopped. And your little Sioux brother was holding aces behind his knee.'

Hickok did not quite hear; a yawn had momentarily deafened him. 'You said?'

'Worm.'

'What about him?'

'The Abrigoin has seen fit to ride off on the scout without cutting our throats, which was mighty white of the red ragamuffin.'

'Hell and scissors!' Hickok snarled, hastily diving his feet into his black boots. 'Shake a leg with the grub, old-timer. We've got to follow his sign.'

Charlie chuckled drily.

'What's not funny?' Hickok asked carefully.

'I'll say one thing for Mr. Worm. He ain't no sugarplum. He must've rid off right in the face of that Niagara of falls. That rain was wetter 'n' wider than the Big Muddy and just as nasty. But it didn't hobble him, not that Red John.'

Hickok instantly turned toward the northern den.

'Wasting time,' said Charlie. 'He didn't leave even a mouse dab to point the way. That's why he ate the storm, Cap. He knew them raindrops'd wipe out every smidge of trail.' As Hickok ducked into the other cave, he added, 'Don't take *my* word for it,' sourly.

From the portal the sleek snows stretched out into the mountains, wearing a treacherous glaze of frozen sleet; there was no track of the wild pintos. A white sun glared off the

pale overcast and glittery ice and inflicted pain on Hickok's sensitive eyes. He fumbled for his blue spectacles, hastily hooking them over his ears but not before the headache began. He saw that the rain had sparsed the snow level to a mere foot. It could be walked, by horse and man, though not without the peril of an ice slide down a steep slope. Still, it was not all that bad, depending on which path you chose.

He wondered which Worm had opted for – a climb to the forbidding turrets, a crawl along the middle spines or a pung ride downslope toward the rolling snowfields.

'That depends,' Charlie Zane said, having joined him and seen the cocking of his head.

'On what?'

'On the white humpback.'

Hickok studied the Shining Mountains, wincing at the hurt in his eyes. 'What do you think?'

'I think we'd best down that rusty bacon before some wolf pack jumps it. The yellow eyes might be on the prowl again.'

They returned to the fire and devoured the frizzled bacon, along with muddy coffee and leaden sourdough. Despite Charlie's claim that the mosquitoes flew off with his biscuits, a spit cat would have teetered under their weight. While Charlie was camp cook, dessert was always dyspepsia, but nobody objected unless he hankered for the chore.

'About the Injian,' said Charlie after a long, cheerful belch. 'He skittered high. Injians hate the bottom lands. Injians like to be looking down your throat, not up your asshole. The jigaboo is loping the high line where he can peg an eye over all creation.'

'And the white spike?'

Charlie shrugged. 'That's a different beaver.'

Hickok sagged into quick melancholia. He had been so close, *so close*. . . . To what? He puzzled over it but could not put it into words; yet he knew that something noble had slipped through his fingers like dew-smoke at daybreak. Not the white buffalo. It was a heap bigger thing than the buff. It was something of value, something that might have created a true and realistic peace with the Teton Sioux – some kind

of live-and-let-live treaty based on mutual trust. A matter of national significance which – in his random life – he had never touched before.

Not that he pretended to be a statesman. Perish the thought! His character, unfortunately, registered his politics in the 'Or Else' party. Diplomacy was not a trump in his deck of cards. His tact rarely went beyond a hair-trigger draw. He was a man of honor, certainly. But not a moralist. A shootist had no time for morality. Measuring moralities in the human mind might take as long as two seconds, whereas an amoral bullet could cover the same distance in one. A living gunfighter simply could not afford that extra second to see what was right and what was wrong. Wiser to pull first and ask questions later.

He scanned the skyline for some sight of Worm; there was none. Hickok's whole scheme had gone up. His eyes were sandy, his innards heavy with pain; he had to stifle an unreasoning, brittle anger at Worm for having ridden off on the lone trail.

Plaintively he asked, 'Is there an answer, Charlie?'

Charlie, ignorant of his turmoil, placidly replied, 'That depends on the question, Cap.'

They picked their road meticulously along the Elk middle spines toward the frostier side of the range, under a stark canopy of cobalt sky. No eagles winged, no hawks nor grackles flapped up from the snow-tipped forests or down from the ancient crags.

The Oglala had left them no blaze. Like the ghost buffalo, he had vanished in the white wilderness. There was no spoor at all, not even rabbit tracks, to footpad the patina of frost.

Since Hickok's eyes suffered in the brilliant glare, he had to depend on Charlie Zane's lone orb for the faraway spotting. Late in the day, using the spyglass, Charlie grunted and pointed at a blue shadow moving slowly across the snowfields three thousand feet below them in Wyoming Territory.

'Buffalo?' Hickok said.

‘Wapiti,’ said Charlie. ‘And with enough antlers to hang up fifteen bonnets.’

The elk was the only living thing they saw that frigid day as the ice glaze sparkled firmly atop the rain-washed snow. After night fell they hawkeyed the granite battlements for the reflection of a cook fire against the seamed rock walls. But Worm was too trail-wise for such a tenderfoot slip. The only light they saw was the cold glow of the half-moon, which finally had risen without a shawl of storm nimbi.

That night the owl failed to hoot.

The twenty-ninth of September dawned sharp and clean, with unlimited visibility on all rims of the horizon. Hickok rolled out of his bedspread with a sense of excitement. The glare had not awakened him; rather the smell of buff on the morning breeze, sharp and rank. It wafted up from the forests below them, caught by the northwesterly zephyr. The hairs on Hickok’s nape had risen, as if aware of the impend.

‘By Heaven, old-timer!’ he said excitedly. ‘This may be the day!’

Charlie was sizzling a steak breakfast over a small fire, using dry chips he had carried with them from the cavern. He did not spare Hickok a glance but motioned to the northern heights with his dripping spatula. ‘In more ways than one.’

Three miles off, above them, a smoke column rose boldly from the heights, holding together solidly until the upper winds ripped it. ‘Your Hottentot is making medicine,’ Charlie said. ‘I hope it’s not war talk.’

‘You can’t read it?’

‘Oh, a mite. He’s blabbermouthing – telling everybody about his buff.’

‘But why, if he wants to hunt alone?’

‘I don’t like the answers to that one.’

Hickok stepped out in front of the frying pan to avoid its smothering odors. He looked down into the green pineries, sniffing gently. There it was again!

‘Yep!’ Charlie nodded. ‘Old Split-Foot’s in the glen. I expect that’s why Worm is burning green wood. I just hope

that redhorn buff stays below till we stow this grub. I hate to be horned on an empty belly.'

Hickok squatted beside Charlie at the fire, his nape hairs still erect, a sense of excitement coolly racing through his blood. 'Old-timer, about this animal, we've been going at it all wrong.'

Charlie hawked and spat. 'What's right?'

'You said this devil was a killer.'

'*And* a hunter. He tracks good as ever I did.' Charlie shook his head in awe. 'Now figure it, Cap. The poor damned Injian who got skewered back in August when I first eyeballed the buff – he was just looking for a trail, just riding for sign, mind you, when Old Scratch got a whiff of *him*. Did the buff charge head-to-head on? Not that poker tail! He flanked and come up from the pony's rump, and that poor red rooster was cold meat before you could put a plate on the table.'

'That's exactly what I mean,' Hickok said. 'We're downwind, trying to find his chips. The buff is ahead of us, and the snow has turned the forests white, so that he can melt in down there. He's left the high ground and gone into the woods. He's foraging with his cows and moving northwest, you agree?'

'Sure as Christmas.'

'Well, don't you see?'

'Damned well, for a one-eyed man! But I don't savvy your point – if you have one.'

'We've been hunting him instead of letting him hunt us.'

Charlie made a sour face, forked both the charred hump steaks from the greasy skillet and slapped them onto the nicked tin plates. 'You want to steal a march on the critter and lay upwind for him to sniff us out?'

'That's the ticket!'

'You sure know how to give a man loose bowels while he's trying to sit tight and salivate.'

Hickok started to argue his meaning, but Charlie silenced him with a wave of meat-laden fork, indicating that he would not discuss it until the food was downed. They gulped in silence, watching Worm's signals. By the time the repast

was over, the smoke had vanished. 'Mighty long-winded for an Injian,' Charlie commented sourly. 'He probably asked Red Cloud to send artillery.'

Hickok chuckled. 'Nobody's out there after this foul weather.'

'You say,' Charlie clucked. 'But I never met a feather-head who wasn't chock-a-block full of surprises and I'm going to figure that Friend Worm is of the ilk. More coffee?'

'By Heaven, no!'

'All right, Cap,' Charlie said, 'then let's talk straight tongue. Because after that smoke we're moving fast or clearing out. If we don't raise that buffalo by tomorrow night, you and this child are going to hightail for Cheyenne quicker than a goose-shit!'

'That touchy, you reckon?'

'Only the spondulix has kept me from running my mules for sweet Gilead! I haven't buttoned my trapdoor since we left the cave.'

'Charlie —'

'Never mind glozing over it, Cap. This has become mighty sudden country. The sooner we drop that white buff and make tracks out of Sioux-land, the sooner I start living to a ripe old age again.'

Hickok nodded; he knew Charlie was not jesting. The hairs on his own neck stood stiff, not about to settle down. It was in the air, all around them. 'Let's mount up.'

'First I want to tell you the nature of the beast,' Charlie said.

Hickok snorted. 'I'm not exactly a tenderfoot czar on his first chase,' referring to the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia, whom Billy Cody had guided across the Colorado Plains on a grand bison hunt in 'seventy-two.

'No, but you've listened to a lot of flapdoodle about Mr. Buffalo and I just want to tell you now that it is purely chicken-shit.' Hickok relaxed; there would be no reining Charlie until his chatterbox broke down.

'First, the dudes'll swear that buff can't see worth a blind mole. Not true. Buff can see for more than half-mile well enough to tell whether a horse has a man up or not. I've

watched it with my own peeper. And as for the white devil, he's got an eagle's eyes. Don't you forget it.'

Hickok smiled, nodding. He felt as if he were back in school with Mr. Jasper waving the hickory stick at his backside.

'And don't let those shaggy ears hoodwink you, Cap. They can hear a flea fart from five hundred feet off. Buffalo's got the keenest hearing on all the plains, including my Missouri canaries. He can ear-spot you from near a mile.' Charlie clanged the tin plates as he stowed them in the pack on Jenny's laden back. 'That white rowdy has already heard these tins. But he don't understand them. They're new to him. But he knows they're up here and from now on he'll be peeling a blood-red eye asswards, understand?'

'Yes, professor,' Hickok said wryly.

'Not funny,' Charlie warned him. 'We haven't talked about his smeller. That buff has a nose that can reach up to Montana and catch a grasshopper's dab-drop. For a fact, he can pin your taint on the wind from five miles off. His sniffer is what keeps him alive; he depends on it more than all the other weapons.'

'I know.'

'But this you may not know. *This* white spike is like some hocus-pocus critter. He is different. If he was following our sweat, you'd 'xpect him to come at us from behind. But his mind is devilish. When he puts you in sight, he'll flank; he'll hobble around the barn; and when he hits us, it'll be from t'other side - where we aren't looking.'

'Like an Indian,' Hickok said wisely. 'In which case, with my poor sight, I'll do the looking back and you'll hang that eye of yours on the future.'

They struck out northwest, moving fast.

When daybreak made his high tor sun-bright, Worm looked down upon the whites through slitted eyes, his jaw hard. He double-cocked his Sharps and held it tensely until he realized that the range was too long even for the far-reaching buffalo gun. He had spent a restless night, fearing white treachery. As soon as he knew they could see it, he

made smoke to them (and not to Red Cloud with a non-existent artillery). It did not occur to him that Longhair could not read such sign. Longhair was so intimate with Lacota customs, Worm allowed that his friend stowed smoke among his many tongues.

The day before, Worm had outdistanced the whites by long miles. He had confined his stalking to the misty pinnacles of the Paha Hehaka, and when dusk had bruised the sky, he spied the white buffalo nudging his small herd into the dark forest below. Worm instantly made a fireless camp on the summit, from which he could pinpoint any movement of the massive animal.

Then, to his dismay, Longhair and Ochinee appeared, along the middle saddle of the mountain. They made their camp not half a mile from where the white buffalo had horned his cows into the greenery. Sonabich! Worm thought in white tongue, they had betrayed him! They too had spooed the Holy Bull! It was plain now that they had every intention of stealing the white pelt from the Little One! His heart was bad at such perfidy. He wished the whites had not camped downwind, so that the spike could scent them and turn about and slaughter them.

Yet, when they made no move to seek the buffalo's tracks and when they pitched their tent in so open and dangerous a spot, he slowly realized that perhaps they did not know of the buffalo's closeness. Only fools would have bivouacked so innocently in the presence of *pte*, and these whites were not fools.

Now, watching them cooking breakfast without apparent fear of ambush, Worm was certain they were truly unaware of the bull. But to make sure their hearts were honest, he had lighted his fire of green spruces and blanketed a flat message to Longhair: '*Le mita pte!* This buffalo is mine!'

The whites observed the smoke but made no return sign. They sat at their chip blaze and stolidly ate breakfast.

Surely by now Longhair had explained to One-Eye about the little girl whose corpse lay scaffolded above Wounded Knee Creek. Surely One-Eye would agree that the sacred

pelt belonged to the Lost One. Even whites could not exist with hearts of stone.

He fingered the heavy Sharps, loath to rifle these two *colapi*. But he swore that if they made a single move toward the pineries, he would slope to a closer range and shoot them.

When they finally struck camp and trotted quickly away along the northwest fingers, slowly easing downhill toward the crystal-coated plains that stretched to the Yellowstone, his anger ebbed. He was wrong. They had been true friends, after all.

He uncocked the buffalo gun and, hawkeying the forests below, descended with Chikala and Sicha, carefully seeking the arena of his nightmare, where he would come to grips with the elusive buffalo.

But a strange thing happened later, when the sun was six lodgepoles past high noon, about 2 P.M. From his sleety aerie Worm saw the white buffalo's five brown cows trot from the shadow of the woods and lope across a wide mesa, some two miles away. He did not see the white buffalo at first, because the *pte* had melted into the white of the snow. When he finally made out a moving gray shadow on the ice glaze, Worm realized what terrible mischief was afoot. The deadly humpback had picked up Longhair's scent riding Waziah's breath and was cutting the trail of his unwary quarry.

Worm would have fired a gun to warn Longhair of the peril, but by then the whites had vanished down the mountainside into the shadowed canyons.

He wrist-quirted his pintos cruelly, skittering them after the buffalo in high hazard, while he hoped earnestly there was still time to intercept the beast.

All afternoon Hickok had watched the speckled sky thickening into pewtered cirrocumulus harbingers of heavy weather, and since his head was on a hinge, he was the first to notice the redback hawk which drifted down out of the easterly Black Hills, circling over them ominously.

The last time Hickok saw a redback hawk was when this bird's mummified skin adorned Worm's head as a war

bonnet during the fire fight with the Crows.

This bird hovered in a tight circle above them, not zitting for food as hawks usually did but screaming at them in feral warning. It continued to cry for a full minute before peeling out of its orbit and heading west into the coppery muck of the setting sun.

'Something's up his craw,' Charlie said shakily.

'Mine too,' said Hickok. 'This land seems familiar.'

'Well, grab your last look right now,' Charlie said. 'It's going to go dark right quick and we'd best make us a safe camp pronto.'

'There'll be some moonlight.'

'More like spook light with that dusty overcast,' Charlie said edgily. 'And like as not, right now that moloch is up our ass. No time for cheap poker, Cap. We've got to throw ourselves a decent hand.' He spent many a glance behind them as well as ahead.

'Just a leg more.'

They eased down through a twisting dingle, not much larger than a storm gutter, and moved out into less sloping country, ringed by cliffs but not blind-ended.

Hickok gasped, 'Whoa up!'

Charlie jawed his mules harshly. 'What's on the plate, Cap?'

'By Heaven, *this is it!*' In his excitement Hickok's voice screeched, and in the dusk it was answered by an owl in a nearby pine tree.

'This is *what*? We're wasting daylight!'

Hickok's blue eyes were wide in awe and wonder as he peeled a long look across the panorama that had unfolded before them. He pointed silently, but his hand was trembling like a wind-whipped aspen.

'Love o' Jesus, Cap!' Charlie barked, watching the back-trail and listening in dread for the roar of the follower.

*Off to the left of the shallow gulch, studded with dwarf pines there was a huge drift in a motte of spindly cedars. The sky had all but blackened, with the faint outline of a ghostly moon ringed behind the gloom. There was barely enough glow to reflect on the snow. The ice shimmered*

weirdly with a sheen that bloomed and waned as the upper scud thinned and thickened.

'This is Armageddon,' Hickok said. He sounded almost pious. 'This is the place I saw in the nightmare.'

'Honest Injian?' Charlie Zane's voice had a tremor as he shook his head in flabbergast. 'Well, I'll be a Dutchman! I've known a heap of hokum and humbug, but here is the first time this child ever saw such a trapping come to pass for true.' He shivered.

'We'll fort up behind the drift,' Hickok said. 'There are canyon walls behind us, and the pines will keep Old Scratch from a sneaking side attack.'

Charlie goaded Nicodemus and Jenny toward the piney redoubt, saying, 'Let's get you settled down, you crock-headed crowbaits. You may hate this night most of all the nights you ever brayed.'

As they plodded, Hickok remarked, 'You were dead right about the buff, old-timer. We know that the devil kin is coming from behind us.' Then he pointed at a huge black rock ahead of them, not far down the gulch. 'Yet in the dream he charged me from there, clean around the barn.'

'Let's get the hell out of this open grave.' Charlie was leery of the flat. His muscles clenched his anus so tightly, it began to ache.

Hickok's cough was ragged in the sudden iciness that descended on them, pervading their bones. He wrapped his arms around his body for warmth, but nothing helped. The night had turned as cold as his dreams. He could sense a germ of terror trying to infect him as he wondered how much more of the nightmare might come true. None of it intrigued him any more.

But finally his basic nature took the reins. He hated fear more than he hated the unknown, so he swallowed it down in one noisy gulp and said, without emotion, 'Hell or Heaven, old-timer. If this is the night I was born for, so be it.'

'Amen,' Charlie whispered with the same reverence he had long ago used in an oaken church pew back in Zanesville, Ohio.

\* \* \*

Worm had watched the day sun dropping beyond the far-off Big Horn Mountains as the clouds began to pock the sky, but before sunset he managed to overtake the white buffalo and press on ahead, riding the ridges above the small herd until he had put two desperate miles between them.

Worm thought that perhaps the buff might choose to track him instead of Longhair, since his own scent was now fresher on the wind.

At dusk he found himself spooring the broken ice-crust that his white trail mates had cut as they rode northwest. He followed their trail carefully.

As he skidded through the narrow gate into the cliff-corralled gulch, Worm's blood began to tingle. He had never before set foot in this strange reach of the Paha Hehaka. Yet, like Hickok, he had a sense of familiarity with the place. It puzzled him. But when the dank day-sun slipped away and he saw the fringes of the night sun looming and vanishing behind the filthy clouds, the answer struck him sharply.

This dreary swale with its stunted trees had been in his vision, the same battlefield he had evoked in his sweat lodge down on the banks of the Little Powder River.

During the momentary moonlight patches, he could see the whites' trail continuing into the swale. They had gone down into the small canyon deeper than he intended to. He would stay on the high side and be first to challenge *pte-ska*. He wanted the ownership of the white robe to be undoubted.

Knowing that the buffalo was coming up fast on his own track, Worm drove his ponies into a ring of stout young cedars, where he not only tied them off but cross-hobbled them, back leg to front leg. Valiant Sichu would break any bond to join the fight, and since that could not be, he rigged the pinto for a safe tumble in case he tried to charge.

Down the gulch, in the core of the snowy field, Worm heard the voices of Longhair and Ochinee, very faintly, carried by Waziah's dying winds. It was a very good sign that *Wakan Tanka* had placed them a quarter of a mile away. It solved all his problems.

He took his deer-bone bow, not bothering even to string it. He selected a perfect arrow and carefully broke off the

two wooden legs that formed the notch : thus it had been in the vision; thus it would be in truth. Then, with his Colt revolver still tucked inside the beaded belt of his navy leggings, he plucked the big white wolfskin from the war bag atop Sicha's flicking back skin and vanished into the snow-field.

But the white buffalo did not charge.

Hickok chattered and shivered in the long darkness. The hours snailed cruelly, the mercury having dropped so sharply that the black air crackled with each smoky breath. The unflagging tensity became tedious. His mind began to wander far from the confrontation. He imagined he could hear his mother, Polly, humming a homely melody to his little sister Celinda while breast-feeding her. Later, his mortal duel with Dave McCandles loomed nastily, every detail sparkling clear of that hot morning at Rock Creek Station, Nebraska in 'sixty-one. It was a fight he was not proud of; not that he regretted having pistoled McCandles to death; only that he had been daunted into the fight. (He had sworn then never to be afraid of anything again.)

'You awake, Cap? Love o' Jesus, keep your eyes open!'

A wave of hand reassured Charlie Zane, who squatted behind him, fifty feet away, out of the arena. Charlie was guarding the mules and horses, which were palisaded in the piney woods. But here another piece of Hickok's bode had come true. The buffalo-chip fire which Charlie kept fed was burning blue in the intense cold, just as it had in the dream.

He had taken all precautions. In the vision, when the buff ran him down, there had been no pistols in his sash. This time they were fully loaded – six cartridges in each cylinder – nestling in the pockets of his clumsy black buffalo coat, which he had donned against the cold. His soft buckskin gloves caressed them even now as he shriveled in the cold.

In the vision, when he had attempted to drop the buffalo with Old Ginger (his 'Texas Fifty' Sharps), he had discovered to his dismay that his own happy tears had dammed the touch-hole so that the cap could not fire the gunpowder. *Not this time!* He had cleaned the weapon, newly primed

it, applied a fresh cap to the nipple and then thrust the heavy rifle, stock down, into the snow beside him where the briefest reach would put the wood against his cheek. He had precocked the double triggers; the time of aiming and firing would be about two to three seconds.

By Heaven, it was cold! Nor was he at all sure it was only the temperature. Apprehension was not a fuel to warm the soul.

'Maybe that red-horned bag of tricks has flimflammed us,' Charlie called hollowly. 'Maybe he's passed the ante for a different game.'

'No,' said Hickok. 'He is here.'

'What makes you so sure?'

Hickok was silent. How could you explain away the erect hairs on the nape of your neck? He kept flexing his hands; he could not let them stiffen. He had a sense of his feet freezing, even in their heavy Ute moccasins and double wool socks. It was becoming difficult to wriggle the toes.

A sharp squeak of snow sounded behind him. He whirled, drawing his right-hand gun, but it was only Charlie with a steaming tin of black coffee. 'Easy, child.' Hickok accepted it thankfully and sipped while Charlie stumbled back to keep the small fire alive. 'Keep those peepers peeled, Cap! An ounce of ready is worth a barrel of hap!'

*Maybe.* But Hickok was no man to spit at luck.

Not all the foresight in the world could save you if your luck grew rusty. He fervently hoped he had not squandered his share.

'Cap - look at that wolf - big as a cow!'

Hickok spied the lobo in a passing fleck of moonlight. The animal was grotesque.

Charlie said, 'Want I should splat him?'

'It's the Indian,' Hickok said. 'And even if it wasn't, your blast would warn the buff.'

'You sure it's Red John?'

'Just aim your Sharps. Don't shoot.'

Charlie threw up the barrel of his Sharps and instantly Worm shot erect heaving back the wolfskin and shouting, '*Hao! Hou colapi skal!*'

Hickok unlimbered and made friendly sign. Charlie, chuckling madly, lowered the rifle muzzle and also made friendly sign by raising the Sharps over his head. He was tickled at having duped the Oglala. He said, 'Not only that, but Mr. Lo's in the wrong county for this buff.'

'Time will tell,' Hickok said uneasily, and hunkered down again, thumbing Charlie back to the fire. He watched Worm – some thousand feet off – re-cover himself with the wolf-skin to kneel again in the snow. And so they poised for another interminable half-hour.

At last the veil of clouds tattered and a dead moon dawned over the dark swale. Instantly it became the Fourth of July instead of the thirtieth of September; a booming of cannon and the snapping of firecrackers erupted as the ice glaze exploded under the smashing weight of the great white buffalo, which emerged out of the snow behind the black rock and charged up the shallow gulch.

Hickok, seated low on his snow-packed footstool, gasped in rare awe; the vengeful humpback looked mammoth as it bore down to stomp him. Moonlight, garish after the dreary overcast, danced like St. Elmo's fire across the scarlet horns. The night sky became cluttered with snow as the galloping split-hoofs kicked clouts into the air. Hickok watched the pig tail skyrocket up, stiff as a flagpole. He was flabbergasted by the tremendous speed of the behemoth. How anything that huge could move so fast was astonishing. The gap closed in two blinks of his startled eyes.

Miraculously the swale transformed from an icehouse to an oast. Hickok's blood suddenly ran hot; sweat freshets poured from his armpits, the buffalo coat hanging like a leaden caul over his body. He sprang up, throwing it off his back to give himself mobility, not feeling the weather-bite at all. Fascinated by the incredible power of the buffalo, he never removed his eyes from the lowered horns or the red snout as he reached easily for Old Ginger. He hefted the frigid stock to his flushed cheek, sighted cleanly between the rabid eyes and fired.

Nothing happened. There was no sound but the crushed

squeal of packed snow under the thundering hoofs. In maniacal disbelief Hickok gaped down at his rifle, saw his mistake and struggled to keep his gorge down. In his attempt at readiness he had planted the rifle stock so deep in the snow that the triggers had been buried too. Now a pad of snow nestled between both triggers and the trigger guard, and in the bitter frost they had turned to iron ice. The triggers could not be tripped.

He switched the Sharps to his left hand as the buffalo brute shot breath clouds at him, akin to the smoke of an artillery piece. In pure instinct his hand whipped to his sash to jerk his right-hand Colt.

But this draw was never made. His old sidekick, Time, turned out to be a fair weather friend. Both his deadly short guns were remote, in the pockets of the buffalo coat. His sash was empty of weapons.

The ticking moments allowed no last grabs at the tossed coat. The thing he had dreaded the most was in his lap. As in his vision he seized the Sharps with both hands and walloped the heavy barrel at the head of the white buffalo. He heard it clatter on a horn as the buffalo slashed away from him. He skidded in the slippery snow and all but sledged beneath the devil hooves.

As he toppled he heard Charlie Zane yelling wildly and he could make out the screaming whickers of the horses and the raucous braying of the mules. Faraway, Worm was shouting, '*Hoppo! Hoppo!*'

Then, like the wind, the white buffalo was gone, still sweeping up the gulch inexorably and pointing now for the lonely Oglala.

Dazed and shaken, Hickok pulled himself to his haunches and vomited his coffee to one side. 'I'm aces,' he said to Charlie Zane, who mushed up, so appalled he had forgotten his new buffalo gun; he slopped back to the fire, retrieved it and returned to Hickok, who was pointing grimly up the gulch. 'He's for Worm! That damned devil's-spawn has staked out Worm! He's gone to rub out the Indian!'

He staggered to his feet and raced, swaying, after the buffalo in a mindless attack, ignoring Charlie's screeches to

stop. He was halfway to the Oglala's fighting ground before he realized he was empty-handed. It did not discourage him. He skinned his Bowie knife from its rawhide scabbard on his right hip and continued to push his half-mad pursuit.

For thirty seconds Worm's whole world was shattered. Nothing happened in the manner of his presentiment. There had been no whites in his bode, no attack on Longhair. In his vision it had been a simple duel between the white buffalo and himself. How could all these other things have come to pass?

But after the spike spilled Longhair and continued his chase up the gulch, the scene began to look more familiar. Worm stood and dropped the wolfskin from him to entice the *Pte-Wakan* his way; the bull responded savagely. On the path, there was a slight dip on the hill. The buffalo, approaching him, chose this wallow, wherein he disappeared momentarily. When he rose from it, mounting the next rise, the scene was identical with the nightmare. The buff seemed as if he were emerging from the depths of the snow itself.

Worm placed himself squarely in the eyes of the juggernaut, remembering what would happen next. He had not bothered to string the bow because the sinew was already stiff with frost. He intended to play out exactly what he had seen in the foretell, he would strike the buffalo across the skull with his bow; the beast would veer into him and knock him down.

Here, however, he planned a change of tactics. When the buffalo hooked into him, the dream would die and reality begin. He would leap on its back and use the lone war arrow as a lance. It would take heart and luck. The ice-skin was slippery as bear grease.

'*Hoppo, Tatonka Wakan!*' he screamed at the speeding ghost. 'Here I wait for you, *wanagi!* One of us will surely fall! But it is a good day to die! *Come!*'

The buffalo needed no goad. He caught Worm in his sights, poked his tail, lowered the hooked horns and plunged dead at Worm's belly.

It went as had been prophesied in the sacred smoke of

the sweat lodge on the Little Powder. Worm stepped aside, disturbed by the unexpected sight of Longhair floundering through the snow to help him. As the buff's charge brushed him, Worm counted coup on the beast with the bow above the eyes, a stinging blow which brought a roar from the angry mouth with its curtains of dripping saliva. The horns hooked at his midriff, but he dove over them onto the rank white back and with a massive effort nailed home the war arrow.

It was impossible to maintain a toehold. As he was flung off he saw the white pelt vermillioned now with blood from the wound, but he was dismayed to find that instead of penetrating into the heart, he had spitted the towering hump of the animal, a mass of fat and meat without any vital organs.

By then he had plummeted off the mountain of buff into the snow, but here he was unlucky. The right hind hoof struck him a glancing blow on the side of his head and changed his snowy world into a black pit.

The arrow, nonetheless, still stuck feather deep in the hump of the white buffalo, agonizing and angering him as he vanished among the weird drifts at the mouth of the gulch, his horrid roaring slowly diminishing until all was still again.

By the time Hickok reached the Oglala, he was panting like an old hound in the heat of August. The high altitude and the struggle across the ice cap had sapped him. Though he was breathless, his body heat had waned and the chill had begun to tingle his flesh.

Worm lay still, the moonlight on his hatchet face. Its glow lighted the white scar on the left side of his nose, the old bullet wound which No-Water had inflicted on him that ill-omened dawn near Rawhide Buttes. Hickok could see the speckles of black powder still stippled in the skin around the scar. A very close shot indeed. Worm would wear those embedded powder burns to his scaffold.

Hickok grabbed a fistful of snow after chopping through the ice with his Bowie. He found the livid welt on the sinister temple and applied the snow there. Worm had been twitching in his coma, but the hand-rubbed flakes stirred

him. He opened his golden eyes and looked into Hickok's rutted face.

'*Hou, cola,*' he whispered. '*Pila mita.*'

'You are stay-still,' said Hickok, still gasping.

'*Kte pte?*' (Is the buffalo dead?)

'*Heyah,*' Hickok said. He chuckled sardonically. 'Afraid not, Worm. That hell's breed has sent us both up and is gone across the Jordan.' He made sign for 'Buff has run far away.'

'That cannot be,' Worm cried, struggling to his haunches, shivering. Hickok threw the wolfskin around the Oglala's slight shoulders. 'The One-Above promised me this bull for the Little One!'

Hickok spread his gloved palms helplessly, plopping wearily to the ice on his backside.

'He will come again!' Worm said fervently. 'He is not done with me! Which way did he go?'

Hickok pointed a listless finger up the gulch. It was good luck that he did. Suddenly he was wildly electrified. 'Almighty God!' he bellowed, flipping to his knees.

By then Charlie Zane had fired a warning shot to alert them. Now he began to bombard the *wanagi* from long range, raising fountains of ice and snow as his two-ounce bullets ricocheted around them.

The white buffalo came back like a silent wind, not a sound to betray him until he thundered downhill, the ice snapping once more as he bore down on them, fifty feet away, unconquerable, unstoppable, pure power on the kill. Worm and Hickok fought to their feet. Worm teetered crazily, still dizzied by the head blow, but as he dropped the wolfskin, Hickok saw the Colt revolver in the beaded belt at Worm's waist. He seized it, cocking it with his thumb cushion but taking an instant to check it.

The piece was an old Army cap-and-ball percussion revolver, rusty with time and misuse. (He was not aware that it had been first owned by a cavalryman named Billy Adams, who had been slain on the Yellowstone by a clan kin of Worm's. His name was Hump. In 'seventy, during a mortal battle with the Snake Indians, Hump passed

along the weapon to Worm before he died. Worm had since cherished it in memory of his friend.) God only knew, Hickok thought, how Worm had loaded this antique. Indians were miserly with their gunpowder, trickling just enough into the cylinder to kill a man, but the same charge might tickle a bear. Hickok had no idea how efficiently Worm had tamped in the lead balls and covered the whole with bear grease to prevent a side flash from firing all chambers at once. But it was far too late for such caution. Hickok threw down on the buffalo, now but fifteen feet off, and snapped off a single shot.

The lead ball struck the giant plum center above the scarlet eyes but below the scarlet horns, a wisp of the woolen hair smoking into ashes from the friction. Yet the mild recoil told Hickok that the charge had been too stingy.

The buffalo dropped to his crumpled forelegs and skidded toward them, still upright, like a sled. The impetus finally died and the bull rolled over five feet away from their naked perimeter.

But Hickok, noting the faint breath-smoke and the twitching of the stiff legs as the humpback lay on its side, knew instantly the creature was far from dead. The leaden bullet had failed to penetrate the heavy boss. It was a 'pop' shot, a stunner, the kind of wound that looked fatal but was only a temporary knockdown. Many greenhorn hunters had been killed by such a shot. They had gone to the wounded buff and been horned mortally when he regained consciousness and hooked their guts out.

Hickok ran to the fallen animal. He had a sense of Worm staggering after him. Somewhere he could hear Charlie Zane *ki-yi-yi-ing* a paean of victory, not realizing the true plight.

His hazard had been right. As Hickok reached the white buffalo, the legs jerked and it fought to get up. Buffalo always rose to their front feet first, ready for the fray, not like the whites' cattle, which rose hindfirst. The humpback had reached the height of his forelegs when Hickok arrived at his side. Even in that stance the animal was as tall as he. Its angry eyes pegged him, the great head hooked at him, but

Hickok ducked behind the head, jammed the Colt into the left ear and fired.

The white buffalo fell heavily on its side but still spewing smoke from its pink snout.

Hickok saw Worm diving onto the carcass, carrying the Bowie knife, which Hickok had dropped. Worm thrust the long blade into the throat and jugular of the *wanagi*, hilt deep. His knife hand was drenched in torrents of bright hot gore, which steamed from the gash. Yet there were still faint puffs of smoke at the bleeding nose. Hickok fronted the beast and looked down into the glassy eyes. They glared at him, still filled with loathing. He shot out the left one offhand.

The white giant trembled ecstatically for a few seconds, then went limp, the snout smoke vanishing, with only the massive body emitting pale mists in the frigid moonlight, and the last of the white buffaloes began its spirit journey to the northern medicine waters of the Great Slave Lake, there to be reborn in a time to come.

The muzzled blast of Hickok's ear shot had set the woollen fringes of the skull afire. He clenched out the erratic flickers with a fistful of snow, averse to letting a perfect headskin be ruined.

Worm pulled himself to his knees, staring at the muzzle of the *wanagi* in pure joy. He did not have enough strength left to shout his kill cry, '*Huhn!*' so Hickok did it for him and when the wild echo faded off the canyon walls, they both knew that the long nightmare was forever over.

Hickok's long hands began to shake, not in the trembling of wracked nerves but in a spasm of a peculiar joy, of the wonder of having shared a feat of true courage. He watched Worm, who was delirious with happiness as he stomped through the ice crust in a victory dance, chanting a prayer of gratitude to the One-Above. It had been a good day to die, yes, but it was now a great day to be living!

Hickok too was proud and pleased. When the Oglala ran to him with extended hands for the double shake, it was hard for him not to embrace Worm to his chest. Worm shouted, 'Oh Longhair, my friend, truly we have suckled at

the same mother! Truly we are brothers, born from the same belly! Oh, *Pahaska le mita cola*, all is well with the Little One! I shall tell her of her friend Longhair, who helped me bring her the long peace of the Holy Robe.'

Hickok could not help himself. He wept. '*Hin*, yes!' he said, choked. 'And say to her that her friend *Pahaska* wishes her Godspeed on her journey across the Spirit Path.'

Worm returned Hickok's Bowie knife and unsheathed his glittery new skinner. He flung himself prone atop the huge belly of the dead buffalo and hugged the carrion in affection before he made his first slashes at the throat to decapitate the spike.

Charlie Zane finally arrived, carrying his Sharps rifle. He watched the half-dazed Indian sawing at the neck and snorted in derision. 'Who killed this humpback anyway?'

'Cahoots,' Hickok said.

Charlie hawkeyed him, not much liking the implication. He rounded the hillock of cooling meat, examining the wounds. The broad neck was shawled in heart's blood. The singed ear showed some charring but otherwise small damage. The bullet hole in the left eye was oozing a little blood.

Hickok said, 'You can see he did the braver share.' He held up the superannuated cap-and-ball Colt. 'Even this was his.'

Charlie backed off. 'You getting notions, Cap?'

Hickok had dreaded this moment; now he hated it.

Charlie said, 'We'd best get it over with. He'll never even know what hit him.' He started to swing up the Sharps' heavy barrel, but Hickok laid the weight of the revolver atop it, the hammer still unkinked. 'I think not, old-timer.'

'Have you lost your brains?'

They measured each other for a long minute.

'The robe is Worm's,' Hickok said finally.

'*God damn you, Hickok!*'

Worm wheeled at the sound of 'Hickok' and eyed both of them warily. He saw the hate in Ochinee's eye. He saw his own gun in Longhair's fist, pointed at Ochinee's midriff. It was enough. He went back to his skinning.

Charlie howled, 'Damn you and your red rooster! You

can't throw away the pelt on a maggot-meal papoose! I won't stand still for it, Cap! By God but I won't!

'There is nothing you can do about it.'

'There damned well is!' Charlie said, moving a hand toward his big Dragoon pistol, but Hickok cocked Worm's weapon, the clicks ominously noisy.

Charlie glared in disbelief.

'Sorry, old-timer.'

'Are you now.' It was not a question.

'Straight tongue.'

'You'd put me under for that jigaboo? You'd turn my lights out for a dead squaw?'

'Forget the spondulix, old-timer. I'll make it up to you when we reach Cheyenne.'

Charlie's gun hand hovered perilously at his belt. 'So you went and got yourself some red religion, Cap?'

'You might say.' Hickok stowed Worm's gun in his sash. 'It's the only Christian thing to do.'

'Don't Holy-Roller me with that preacher guff.'

'I'd have done the same for your little sprag back in Buck-eye.'

'You're just full of sweet charity this fine day,' Charlie said bitterly. He wheeled at Worm, hawked and laid snuff-spittle on the snow, then heaved away the beautiful buffalo gun Worm had given him. It stuck in the snow barrel-first, like a Sioux lance. 'You can tell your blood brother to shove it up his red asshole – stockside-first!'

'Charlie – on my word – I promise —'

'Not me you don't,' Charlie said in a dead voice. 'We're quits. Burn those beans in your frying pan!'

He stalked off, back to the flicker of pale blue light that was their campfire, where his Winchester was scabbarded. Hickok called sharply, 'Nothing happens to the Indian, old-timer. Remember that.'

'Don't go scaring me, Cap,' Charlie replied. 'I only got one pair of clean drawers left.' After that he just crunched away.

Buffalo skinning was hard, filthy work, and with the icy night congealing the carcass, Hickok reckoned the task al-

most impossible for any man, Indian or white. But Worm explained to him that the opposite was true. In the thick heat of summer, when the corpses bloated to their limit, the hide became like sheet iron. But in frosty temperatures the brittle skin opened swiftly to the blade, and the thick layer of tallow underneath was as easy to cut as pumpkin pie.

By dawn's light, less than three hours later, Worm had incised the belly from gullet to scrotum, and the inside of the legs to within eight inches of each hoof, paring the pelt off the humpback until only that part which lay beneath him was unflayed.

To manage this last chore – since neither Charlie Zane's mules nor Hickok's gray willow tail would have had the courage for the job – Worm used Sicha as his lever power. The split-eared buff-pinto had no fear whatsoever of the white spike and when he was roped to the rigid outstretched legs of the body, he angrily dug his unshod hooves into the snow and easily tipped the body to its other side, from where it was child's play for Worm to cut off the rest of the robe.

In his exertions the Oglala ignored the bitter temperature, but Hickok could not. He was chilled through, so he stumbled back through the snow to camp, to retrieve his buffalo coat and his weapons and to placate Charlie Zane.

But when he reached the burnt-out chips, he found that Charlie had packed up Nicodemus and Jenny and headed out the other end of the gulch, angrily tossing half the food supplies in the snow. Even Charlie's glass eye would be ablaze, Hickok guessed, but it did not fret him. He would make it up to Ochinee time on.

When daybreak paled the gulch, Hickok was just as glad that Charlie had left.

Worm had finished flaying the dead buff and he and Hickok were folding the great robe into eight sections for stowage on Sicha's back, both of them enjoying the heat of the new sun, when, abruptly, the thaw was blocked off by three long shadows.

When Hickok looked up he found them at the mouth of the shallow gulch, silent, grim Magi who loped their piebald

ponies down across the ice cap to within fifty feet, the same distance at which a pack of lemon-eyed wolves had taken up in the dark.

Like the gaunt wolves, the three Indians regarded him obscenely. Hickok removed his buckskin gloves and warmed the stocks of the Colt .44 revolvers in his coat pockets, while Worm, in high excitement, greeted the three strangers warmly. The thirteen wolves ignored the Indians; they kept treeing the knoll of meat, waiting boldly for the men to move away from it.

'These are my friends,' Worm told Hickok, waving toward the hostiles. 'That is Little-Big-Man and there is Touch-the-Cloud of the Minneconjous, and that one is Small-Shield of the Hunkpatilas.'

Hickok grunted unpleasantly. Little-Big-Man had a face like a melon, but his black eyes were glittering with lust. Touch-the-Cloud cast the tallest shadow of them all, looming loftily atop his little pony. Small-Shield had already cradled his rifle with the barrel pointing Hickok's way.

'They saw my smoke,' Worm said. 'The same smoke I raised to you yesterday. And so they came to see my white buffalo.'

'Uh-huh,' Hickok said carefully, facing them.

'They want to know what you were doing here in the land of the Lacotas and why I have not slain you. They are very keen to kill you. But I told them you are my white brother. They will not harm you.'

'That was good of you,' Hickok said grimly. 'But perhaps I should tell them too.'

'If my brother wishes.'

'Say to these noble fellows that your friend Pahaska does not die so easy.'

Worm shouted the message in Lacota. It did not sit well with the three warriors.

Hickok continued, 'Tell them to watch your brother-wolves.'

Worm told them.

When their eyes had shifted and when he was sure of his audience (*Scouts of the Prairie* had taught him this much

during his disastrous tour with Buffalo Bill), Hickok smoothly pulled his right-hand Colt and blasted at the semi-circle of wolves with careful, murderous speed, each bullet tripping over the shadow of the one before it. Hickok usually left an unloaded chamber under the hammers of his guns, but in preparation for the meet with the white spike, he had loaded the cylinders fully with six fresh cartridges, all hand-loaded with flash powder by himself. ('When I pull, I must be sure,' he had once told Charlie Zane.)

Six lobos took the impacts, leaped high in the air and twisted down dead. Hickok meanwhile had drawn his left gun and tossed it into his right hand in a gunman's trick called the border shift, at the same moment dropping his empty pistol back into his right pocket.

He fired three more times and killed three more wolves, leaving a slim quartet of live ones, which howled in quick reaction and scattered sprawling across the ice cap, wildly trying to escape the holocaust. They quickly became black dots. Hickok saved the last three slugs of his left-hand gun for the three visitors, just in case. But it was an unnecessary precaution.

The Sioux made huge open mouths and then covered them with a flat hand, in the normal gesture of amazement among the Red Men. False friendly smiles wiped out their enmity as they clucked like pullets, but their respect was sincere.

Finally, as the sun began to slop the ice cap, Worm took Hickok aside, away from his cohorts. 'Okute,' he said.

Hickok sighed. 'You heard Ochinee.'

'Hin, yes. You are Hehcoc, the one we call the Shooter. It was you who killed Zheulee the Peacemaker.'

'Yes,' Hickok said. 'I am sorry about that. It was another time when I was young and headstrong.'

'It was a bad thing,' Worm said.

'It is done,' Hickok said. 'It cannot be undone.'

Worm shook his head. 'I will not tell these others. But Pahaska, though you and I are brothers, we must never meet again. Hear me, *le mita cola*, these are my words. We must never cross paths in the tomorrow. For if we do I will see

only a white enemy and you will see only a red *hohe*. And we will both solve the Great Mystery.'

Hickok sighed. He was unhappy. 'You have spoken,' he said. He held out his hands for the last double shake and when it was done, he murmured, '*Amba washtay*, young Worm. Goodbye.'

Worm nodded and added, '*Ohinyan*, Longhair.' *Ohinyan* was a Sioux word meaning 'forever'.

All of this happened a long time ago, in September of 'seventy-four, but it did not all end then. The coming of October brought a beautiful Indian summer, which wiped away the snow and held the Thunderbirds captive in the west. Hickok enjoyed bright, soft days on his long ride back to Fort Laramie and thence to Cheyenne. He did not hurry. The big skull of the white buffalo, along with the head skin on the haunches of Dandy, did not make for speed. The skull was bulky and awkward behind the saddle. But in nine days he had raised the hovels of Cheyenne city and had ensconced himself in the Gold Room on Railroad Street, where his turtle-back trunk, shipped by Poker Jenny and delivered by Abel Pinkney's stage, awaited him.

His luck ran rich. He did not have to look for a souvenir-hunting tenderfoot to sell the white buffalo's skull. Mr. Bowlby, the proprietor of the Gold Room, with a good instinct for history, paid two thousand in gold to hang the scarlet-horned head high over the luxurious bar of his establishment, where it could always be pointed out to the flood of incoming yahoos as the last of the great white spikes.

Hickok deposited half the grubstake Charlie had posted, along with Charlie's half of the winnings, at the Gold Room bar, but Charlie Zane never claimed the prize.

In due time Hickok learned that Split-Lip had moved on to the gentler climes of California, leaving him alone.

But Hickok was used to that.

Worm worked his way back across the Paha Hehaka in the company of his friends. But after he crossed the Cheyenne River, he broke with them and continued alone. He

reached the scaffold of his daughter one week after the death of the white buffalo. She had not been disturbed.

With loving hands he sewed her small body into the safe cavern of the Holy Robe, and he spent one last night with her, watching her spirit twinkling across the startling sky, and knew that now all was well with her.

Then he rode hard for the northwest, back to his people. He found the Hunkpatilas encamped on the southernmost finger of the Tongue River.

They were all happy to see him alive. Black Shawl, his wife, had tempered her grief at the loss of the Little One. His friend He-Dog could not wait to hear of his coups. But most of all, his father reached out for him and hugged him into the arcane shelter of a tepee.

'Before you speak,' the old man said, 'I must know if your heart is strong and your tears are dead.'

'I am well again, my father,' Worm said. 'And the Little One has gone to the Other-World healed and whole.'

'Good! Good!' the old man said. 'Then this day I will take back my name. You need it no longer. You are a war chief, the leader of our people. These are my words. I give you now your own name. From this day forward, you will again be called Crazy Horse.'

'*Le mita pila, Tunkaschila,*' Crazy Horse said. 'Thank you, my father.'

The legends began.

## Notes of Interest

WYATT EARP. Though he led as pistoliferous a life as Wild Bill Hickok, 'young' Wyatt Earp lived until January 13, 1929, and when he died quietly in Los Angeles of natural causes – after the hundreds of bullets fired at him – he was just two months short of eighty-one years old. He must have taken the advice on shoot-out very seriously.

GOLD. Gold and silver had been unearthed in the Black Hills early in the nineteenth century, and the indefatigable missionary Father Jean De Smet had cautioned the Sioux against disclosing that their sacred ground held ore lest the white influx sweep the Indians out. The deadwood gulch that Charlie Zane stumbled into was not the Deadwood of later infamy but rather the area known today as Lead (pronounced leed), where over \$20 million in gold has been mined. The operation is still going on.

HE-DOG. This famous warrior, lifelong brother-friend of Crazy Horse, lived to a ripe old age. Mari Sandoz last saw him in 1931 during a thunder shower, which he pretended she had brought to his dry lands. He was blind then and died shortly after, not on the warpath but of natural causes.

CAPTURE OF GENERAL ARCHER. The 'other fool' was Private Patrick Maloney of the Iron Brigade. He did not have Tim Brady's luck. He was killed on the evening of the same day the Confederates stormed Seminary Ridge from three sides.

LONESOME CHARLIE REYNOLDS. In her less-than-factual

tome *Boots and Saddles*, Libbie Custer wrote that Lonesome Charlie rode more than 150 miles, barely escaping death from Indians or from thirst and surviving many other perils. Actually, Lonesome Charlie made the ninety-mile ride in four nights, without incident, and delivered his dispatches. Mrs. Custer's exaggerations undoubtedly were affected by his heroic death with her famous husband on the Little Big Horn. She fails to mention that Charlie warned General Custer that if they went into the Indian encampment, they would never come out.

**BUFFALO.** The Plains buffalo is a sub-species called *Bison bison bison*, whereas the Wood Buffalo is called *Bison bison athabasca*. The Wood Buffalo is a much larger animal than the humpback of Indian fame, sometimes reaching 2500 pounds and with the agility of a billy goat. The frontiersmen called this type Mountain Buff.

**BASUK OSE.** Goes-Ahead lived a charmed life. He became one of Custer's scouts at the Little Big Horn but having been dismissed from duty not fifteen minutes before the General rode down into the hell of feathers, he thus evaded the last stand. In 1926 he attended the semi-centennial of the battle, though old and ailing. A Hollywood actor was also there, William S. Hart, the cowboy star. When the old Sioux chiefs saw him, they were stunned and named him honorary Crazy Horse. Since Crazy Horse never had a photograph taken, Hart's appearance is as close a physical likeness as we shall ever get.

**BLACK HAWK.** Dr. James Turner used a hog-scalding pot to boil the flesh off Black Hawk's bones. It was the doctor's intent to stitch the skeleton together and then make a gruesome eastern tour in quest of easy pelf. He escaped across the Iowa border, but Governor Robert Lucas reached out and brought the bones back. They were stored near the Geological and History Institute, which subsequently burned down in 1853, finally putting Black Hawk beyond the reach of the whites he hated.

**KIT CARSON.** Hickok's worship of Carson was in the mold. Kit himself idolized Daniel Boone as his boyhood hero and made every attempt to emulate him as a trail-blazer and Indian fighter.

**CARSON'S DEATH.** Kit Carson's wife of twenty-five years had passed away in April. There is no doubt that his grief brought on the heart attacks that contributed to his own death a month later. Legend has it that Kit sat up and ordered a last buffalo steak, devoured it and then died. Actually he had barely regained consciousness the night before and died in a coma before dawn of the following day.

**TOM CUSTER.** Though General Custer had recommended his brother Tom for the two Congressional Medals of Honor, the awards often rankled the General and he would write to Libbie, 'Tom was wearing his baubles as usual. . . .' The war seemed to have made Tom Custer a mean man. His treatment of Rain-in-the-Face was wicked and when Rain escaped, he swore he would someday eat Tom Custer's heart. Mrs. Custer felt that that is what happened at the Little Big Horn. Tom was thoroughly gutted and terribly mutilated. But since only a cursory examination was made of his body, we shall never know whether or not Rain-in-the-Face made good his threat. But he was there!

**HICKOK'S WATCH.** It is still in existence today, according to Joseph G. Rosa in *The Gunfighter – Man or Myth*. It belongs to Lou R. Mahnic of La Salle, Illinois. It is a coin-silver key-winder and was manufactured by the Western Watch Company of Chicago.

**HICKOK'S DEATH.** Most people are aware of Hickok's backshooting by young McCall on August 2, 1876, but few know that Tim Brady and Johnny Varnes paid McCall \$200 for the killing. They feared Hickok would become marshal of Deadwood and institute law and order.



## A Sioux Glossary

(Although I have instantly translated any Lacota used in the body of the novel to spare the reader any unnecessary references, the following glossary is for those buffs who may be interested in this fascinating language. The words and phrases were discovered while researching the novel, and I give you no guarantees of accuracy, my own or that of the oracles from the past!)

*A-ah!* Watch out!

*agli* to return

*aguiapi* browned meat or food

*ahoappa* wheat

*ahunka* coyote or dog

*amba* goodbye

*anapo* the dawn

*anho* to count coup

*arkecita* soldier, meaning warrior of a society

*Assiniboin* a Minnesota tribe, enemies of the Sioux

*ate* father

*awi* they

*blotan hunka* chiefs, war leaders

*Brule* Burnt Thigh

*cahotska* white frost

*cetan* hawk

*cha* without

*Chaka dee Wakpa* the Powder River

*chante* heart

*chikala* little, small

*chun* tree

*chun-humpi-ska* tree juice, white (sugar)

*Chun-wachi-kyapi* to make the wood dance (to play)

*cola* friend (*colapi* friends)

*Dho!* (exclamation) Golly!

Gee! Good!

*dopa* four

*esnella* a loner

*Eta-ma Gozua* Rain-in-the-Face

*ey-hee!* alas!

*hanhepi-wi* night sun, moon  
*hao* hello  
*He Wonjetah* One Horn  
*Hecheto aloe* It is finished  
*Hecheto welo* It is done  
     well; it is good  
*Hee-ay-hee-ee!* a call to the  
     Great Spirit  
*heecha* owl  
*hehaka* elk  
*heyah* no  
*heyoka* clown  
*hin* yes  
*hohe* enemy  
*hoka-key* war cry  
*Hoppo* Let us go  
*hou* hello  
*huhn* kill cry  
*hunkaschila* young man  
*Huntka* God of the East

*iglsks* family unit  
*iku* chin  
*inipi* sweet breath  
*ishta* she, female, girl (also  
     *ishna*)  
*Itazipco* Sans Arc or No  
     Bows  
*iyotake* sitting

*kaga* demon  
*kangi* crow  
*Kanta-sa-wi* August, as in  
     Month-of-Plums  
*kapi* story  
*Katiyimo* enchanted mesa  
*kiksuyapi* don't forget, re-  
     member  
*kikukanpi* makes room  
*kin* this

*kokipa* fear (*kokipapi* fears)  
*kola, kolapi* friend (same as  
     *cola, colapi*)  
*kte* dead, killed  
*kuwapi* is chased by

*le mita* mine  
*le mita cola* my friend  
*le mita pila* my thanks  
*leksi* uncle  
*lela* very  
*lela oosni* very cold  
*lowan* to sing  
*luta* red

*ma* mother  
*mahpyua* cloud  
*Mahpyua Luta* Red Cloud  
*Maka* Earth  
*maka mani* to walk on foot  
*Maka Sichu* Bad Lands  
*mani* walking  
*mato* bear  
*maya owicha paka* fate; he  
     who pushes you off the cliff  
*maza* metal  
*maza canku* iron  
*maza chante* armour (metal  
     heart)  
*maza ska* silver, white metal  
*Micaje* My name is  
*Mieyebo* I am  
*minne* water  
*minne sosa* muddy waters  
*minne sota* many waters  
*Minne-to-wakpa* Bluewater  
     Creek  
*minne-wakan* holy water  
     (also whiskey)  
*Minneconjou* Water people  
*mita* mine

*Mita kuye ayasin* We are  
relatives  
*moksins* moccasins

*na* and  
*nacacijin* loyal, faithful  
*nacha* great, noble  
*Nadonnaissious* the Sioux;  
little snake  
*Nahan rci ni wayon heon* I  
am still alive  
*najin* standing  
*nakun* known  
*napin* necklace  
*Natan uskay!* Attackers are  
coming!  
*niyaha* feather  
*nunpi* two

*O-oona-gazee* sheltered mesa  
*Ocastonka* His name is  
everywhere  
*ocheti* seven  
*Ohan!* Wear this!  
*ohinyan* forever  
*ohitika* brave, courageous  
*ohunko* false, untrue  
*okute* shooter  
*onikare* sweat lodge  
*Onshincl-a-ya!* Pity me!  
*Oo-oohey* It is time  
*Oohenopa* the Two-Kettles  
*oosni* cold  
*opawinge* one hundred  
*opiaon* smoke vent  
*optate* to choose  
*owa* wound  
*owa sicha* bad wound  
*owanka* floor  
*owatamla* straight tongue

*owotonna* honest, straight  
*ozuye* warrior

*Pa Sappa* the Black Hills  
*paha* butte, mountain  
*pahaska* longhair  
*palamo* thanks  
*papa* pemmican, dried buf-  
falo meat  
*pecokan sunpi* scalp lock  
*pejula* medicine  
*pejula sappa* coffee, black  
medicine  
*pejula wacasa* medicine man  
*pesla* bald  
*peta* stone  
*peyoke* peyotl  
*peytah watah* steamboat  
*pila mita* my thanks  
*piskin* corral  
*pte* buffalo  
*Pte-ta-Tiyopa* Buffalo Gate  
*ptecila* small buffalo

*santee* among the leaves  
*sappa* black  
*schila* old  
*shakowan* council fires  
*sheo* sage hen  
*shinte* tail (also *sinte*)  
*Shinte Galeska* spotted Tail  
*shunkaha* wolf  
*Shunke Canku* Iron Horse  
*shunke-kan* pinto  
*sicha* bad  
*siha* foot  
*Siha Sappa* Blackfoot  
*Siha sicha* bad foot  
*sisseton* prairie marshes  
*ska* white  
*slol yapi* the people

*sni* negative, not  
*sosa* muddy  
*sosho* snake  
*sota* many

*ta* to sing  
*tahuhaupi* wings  
*tahunsa* cousin  
*taku-skan* spirit, living force  
*tanka* big, great  
*tashina* robe  
*tashina pte* buffalo robe  
*tashunke* horse  
*Tashunke-Witke* Crazy Horse  
*tasina* shawl, blanket  
*tatoke* antelope  
*tatonka* buff, bull  
*Tatonka Iyotake* Sitting Bull  
*te-wichakte* murderer  
*teosh palay* clans, tribes  
*Teton* land without trees  
*tinza* power, strength  
*To* Blue  
*Tok-kahin-hypi-ya* Enemy-Runs-Him  
*tonkalla* mouse  
*tokalu* fox  
*tonka* bull  
*tunkaschila* grandfather  
*tunkayatakapaka* ancient rocks  
*tunkes* hot stones

*unchi* grandmother  
*unktomi* trickster  
*Unshimalam ye oyate* Have mercy on me  
*Unshinclu ya* Pity me

*Wa-sna-win* Storm Woman  
*wacca-pella* stream

*Wachin-ksapa ya!* Listen to me!  
*wachpanne* poor, needy  
*wacikun* white man  
*wacikun wacca pella* white man's creek  
*wagachun* cotton woods, rustling trees  
*Wahi* I come, I am coming  
*Wakan* Holy  
*Wakan Tanka* Great Spirit  
*Wakan Tonka* Holy Bull  
*wakikunza* camp leader  
*wakina* thunder  
*Wakinyan Tanka* Thunder-bird  
*Wakon-ya* springs, where water is born  
*Wamanuncha* Prince of Thieves, esp. Custer  
*wana* one  
*wanagi* ghost, spirit  
*Wanagi Tacaku* Spirit Path  
*Wanagi Yata* Place of Souls  
*wanbli* eagle  
*Wanbli-Galeska* Spotted Eagle  
*Wanbli-Luta* Red Eagle  
*Wanekia* life giver, esp. Jesus  
*wanichi!* no good!  
*waniyetula* winter  
*washtay, washte* good  
*washtay!* greetings  
*wasichu* white man, bad medicine  
*wasin* here  
*wasna* pemmican  
*waugh!* woe!, alas!  
*wayo* true  
*Waziah* Giant God of the North  
*wi* sun

*wicasha* big man, a VIP  
*Wicha-Nupa* Two Bodies  
*wichashita* chief  
*Wickmunke* Rainbow God,  
also a trap  
*wicksemna* ten  
*winkte* homosexual  
*wish-ton-wish* prairie dog  
*witke* crazy (also *witko*)

*wonumayin* mistake  
*woya* story  
*yamina* three  
*yata* place  
*yunke-lo* death  
*zunta* honest  
*zuya* warpath



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