



FOLLOW THE STONE

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JOHN LOCKE

NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

FOLLOW THE STONE

(an Emmett Love Western – Volume 1)

by
John Locke



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FOLLOW THE STONE

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“When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

—*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

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FOLLOW THE STONE

I HELD THE reins low while we walked, so Major could stretch his neck and toss his head if it pleased him. We'd done thirty miles over steep Ozark trails, and he was gettin' pissed. He'd earned his sorghum hours ago and knew it. But I was determined to camp on the banks of the Gasconade, and we were eight miles shy.

I rubbed Major's neck. "Soon," I said.

He blew a loud snort, which I won't bother translatin'.

It was late September, 1860, and we were north of Devils Rock, Missouri, where the air's cool in the nostril this time of year, and scented with honeysuckle. A stand of short leaf pine lined the right side of the trail and ran deep as the eye could see. Limestone cliffs and mud bluffs dotted with pin dogwood towered above us on the left. A soft breeze pushed us eastward, mile after weary mile.

It was nearin' dusk when I saw the five small stones on the path.

I pulled back on the reins and slid off Major's back and tied him to a pine bough. He took the opportunity to chew what grass he could pull from the pine needles.

Shrug had arranged the stones as he always did, North, South, East and West, with the fifth stone pointin' in the direction he was headin'. I was annoyed to see the fifth stone at the north-west point. Shrug knew I loved fishin' the Gasconade, and since he, too, had a passion for Nade perch, I was perplexed he would knowin'ly head the wrong way. But Shrug was the best scout in the territory, always had a reason for his actions, so I quietly cursed and climbed back on my horse and followed the stone.

Ten minutes into the ride we hit a clearin', where I found a circle of stones that ringed a single footprint, the cause of our detour.

It was a woman's shoe print.

I was so stunned I nearly fell off my horse.

I looked around. It was so crazy uncommon to find a woman's shoe print in this part of the wilderness, I wondered if perhaps Shrug had played a trick on me. I climbed off Major's back and knelt down beside the shoe print and studied it carefully while thinkin' *a talkin' horse, a tree that lays eggs, a flyin' pig—would make more sense*. And yet...

It was real.

I looked around again, this time for a stone that'd show me where he went. There was none. I'm no skilled tracker, but I managed to follow the lady's shoe prints to the edge of the forest. I had no idea how old the prints were, but I figured 'em fresh, or Shrug wouldn't a' changed course. Maybe he'd find her and bring her back alive. More likely, he'd find evidence she'd been carried off by a pack of wolves or a bear.

But Shrug didn't intend us to follow him into the forest, or he'd a' left a fifth stone.

Which he didn't.

"No fish for dinner," I hollered to Major. "Let's make camp."

I ain't ashamed to admit I talk to my horse more than I should. But we been together a long time and Major's good company. I got a witchy friend, Rose, who travels with me from time to time. It's her opinion that Major can follow the spirit of my words, and I 'spect she's right.

I took a bowl from my kit and poured some water in it and let Major drink it dry. I was about
pour some more when, from deep in the woods, I heard a woman scream.

2.

THE FIRST SCREAM was followed by a second, then the screamin' stopped. I added water to Major's bowl, and watched him drink.

"Well, she just saw Shrug, or whatever it is he's savin' her from," I said. "Which means she's still alive. Or was, 'til that last scream."

When Major finished drinkin' his fill, I tied him to a saplin' and removed my kit, blankets, and saddle from his back. Then I gathered some rocks and arranged 'em to hold a coffee pot and fryin' pan, and put some wood between 'em, and enough kindlin' to get things goin'. The first match worked, so I filled the coffee pot with water from a canteen and put it on my rock stove. Then I pulled my rifle from the scabbard and headed out to see if I could scare up a rabbit or two.

I couldn't.

I only tried for twenty minutes, and wouldn't a' given up so soon had I not heard Major's whinnin'. I headed back to camp and was dumbfounded to see a tangle-haired woman spoonin' something I took to be coffee, into my pot. She hadn't seen or heard me yet.

I froze where I stood among the poplars, then ducked down and surveyed the scene.

She was alone, busyin' herself with the coffee. I wondered if she'd gone through my things to get it, then realized from the smell it was her coffee. Probably got it from the huge carpetbag sittin' on the ground, left of the fire. While I didn't sense danger, I also never had a lone woman walk into my camp before, so I whistled the song a wood warbler makes, and got a similar response from a half mile away. The response had come from Shrug, which meant everything was as okay as it was likely to get. I stood and made some noise as I walked into camp, so as not to spook her.

"Where's the food?" she said, lookin' up from the coffee pot.

I had to stop where I stood a minute, caught up in her eyes. They were cornflower blue, a color I'd never seen in a person's eyes before. She wiped her hands on her skirt, then tried to smooth her hair, gave up, and waited for me to respond.

I said, "Excuse me?"

"Wayne said you were bringing food."

"What? Who?"

"Are you daft? He didn't tell me you were daft."

Her eyes had me transfixed. It felt like she was borin' holes into my soul. She had the kind of eyes that could shame a man quickly, and get him to church when he'd rather be drinkin'. I forced my gaze lower. She had tiny, precise feet, somethin' I'd noticed from the tracks.

"Ma'am," I said, "If you're talkin' about Shrug, well, he don't speak."

"Shrug? Is that his surname?"

I wondered if I might be dealin' with a crazy woman. I guess she caught the look of concern on my mind, for she eyed me carefully, and crept slowly toward her carpetbag. Probably had a gun in there she couldn't shoot.

"Who are you, sir? Please, identify yourself at once."

"I'm Emmett Love."

She stopped tryin' to get to her bag and looked confused a moment, then said, "Are there more of you?"

than two of you?"

~~"Two of me?"~~

She seemed exasperated, and began speakin' deliberately, as if to a child. "No, Emmett. Are there more than two of you men up here on the mountain?"

I removed my hat and ran my fingers through my hair while tryin' to cipher what she was askin'.

I said, "It's a big mountain, and I don't know how many men might be on it. But in this area, for as I know, it's just you and me and Shrug."

She frowned, and shook her head.

"You must have heard me scream," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, and a fine scream it was. By the second one, I had you pinpointed."

"You did."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And yet you moved not a muscle to come to my aid."

"No, ma'am."

"And why is that?"

"Well, if Shrug needed my help, he would a' whistled."

"Whistled."

"Yes, ma'am."

She gave me a look that might have had disgust in it. "So you're neither hunter nor hero. Are you a coward, then?"

I felt a burn creep up the back of my neck.

"A coward?" I scowled and put my hat back on, tired of her disrespect.

"That's right," she said. "After all, I need to know what type of person I'm dining with. Perhaps you're just lazy."

I'd never known a proper woman to have such a sharp tongue. I doubted she had a husband. If she did, he probably cut her loose. I shook my head and spoke in my strictest voice.

"I cut my huntin' short on account of my horse."

She looked at Major. "How so?"

"He announced you were enterin' camp."

"I see," she said with a smart tone. "Your horse talks, but your friend does not."

I sighed. This tenderfoot was lucky to be alive. I knew seasoned trappers who couldn't survive a Ozark night. Forgettin' that, her insultin' nature alone could get her killed by any number of men I know and admire. I worked to keep the anger outta my voice, but I'm sure some leaked out anyway.

"Ma'am, checkin' on my horse don't mean I can't hunt. And trustin' my friend's ability to handle trouble don't make me a coward, nor lazy."

We gave each other stern looks until I wondered if Shrug would care if I put a bullet through one of her hands, to soften her temperament. If I shot the fleshy web between her thumb and forefinger, she'd heal in a week or two. As a bonus, there'd always be a circle scar to keep her reminded.

Abruptly, she said, "Perhaps you're right. After all, I'm the outsider here. I shouldn't rush to judge. I've had a harrowing time, and I'm new to your ways. Forgive me, please." She approached me, extending her hand. "I'm Phoebe Thayer, of the Philadelphia Thayers."

I hesitated briefly, then wiped my hand on my shirt and took hers and shook it while thinkin' how close she'd come to losin' the use of it. But then, standin' a mere two feet from her, close enough to smell her scent, I began to think less about her hard words and more about her soft physical features.

She sensed the change in my mood, and pulled away, sayin', "I noticed your friend had neither horse nor gun."

"Shrug can't ride a horse, and don't need a gun."

“How can a man survive in the wilderness without a mount and gun?”

“Shrug ain’t a normal man. On certain terrain he can move faster than a horse. On the plains, he still plenty swift.”

“Well, how does he protect himself?”

“He’s an uncommon rock thrower.”

“A rock thrower,” she repeated.

“Yes, ma’am. He’s got some sharp ones he throws vertical.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I’ve seen Shrug slice a man’s ears clean off with nothin’ more than two sharp rocks flung from short distance.”

“That’s preposterous!”

I removed my hat and gestured at the pot. “Is that sissy coffee any good?”

“I’m known for my coffee.”

“You pourin’?”

She smiled. It was a small smile, but a pleasant one, just the same.

“You haven’t asked how I came to be here or where I’m headed,” she said.

“I tend not to ask people much, nor ask much of ’em.”

I fetched my cup from my kit and let her pour some coffee into it. Up close I could see that her face, though smudged with grime, was smooth, and her features delicate and fine. Like all women, she had on twice the clothes she needed, and the parts of ’em I could see were covered in dirt and mud.

“How long were you in the cave?” I said.

She appraised me with what appeared to be a new respect. “Who said anything about being in cave?”

I pointed. “Your clothes.”

She looked down at her dress and frowned, as though this were the first she’d thought to look at it.

“I thought you didn’t ask people much.”

“I generally don’t. But you seemed to leave the door open on it. I marvel you’re alive.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman?”

“Well, there’s that.”

“And what, you think all women are helpless?”

“Don’t matter what I think, it’s what them bears and wolves think. A woman’s scent is one they’re not apt to associate with danger. It’s a scent they’ll pick up on and follow.”

She considered my words. “You put that very delicately, for a Western man.”

I waited.

“I was in the cave for one night.” she said. “And a terrible night it was. I heard wolves howling. And they were getting closer. Had Wayne not come to my rescue, I fear I would have perished.”

I nodded. Then said, “Who’s Wayne?”

Phoebe looked at me as though I were feeble-minded. About that time Shrug slipped into camp with three rabbits hangin’ from his belt.

Phoebe’s face lit up. She said, “Wayne! Thank the dear Lord you’ve come back, and with food no less.”

She looked at me and my rifle. “He killed three rabbits without a gun!”

Implyin’ I hadn’t killed any with one.

I said, “Your screamin’ probably scared them his way.”

Shrug smiled.

I looked at him. “Wayne?” I said.

Shrug shrugged.

PHOEBE CHATTERED AT us while me and Shrug skinned the rabbits. More than once we exchanged glances about it, but I let her ramble on, hopin' she'd be talked out by dinner. While Shrug cut the meat, I got the fryin' pan on the fire and put some sowbelly in it 'til a fine layer of fat coated the bottom. Then Shrug placed the rabbit pieces in the pan, and I fussed with 'em some, enjoyin' the sizzlin' sounds and heavenly scent that only pan fried rabbit can produce. By the time I got the rabbit crisp on both sides, we'd forgotten all about the perch I originally planned to cook.

When the rabbit was right, we divvied it up and Shrug put his part in his pocket and scampered outta camp like he always did. I kept the rest in the fryin' pan, removed it from the fire, and placed it on the ground between Phoebe and me.

Phoebe seemed upset that Shrug had left without speakin'.

She looked at me. "Where's he going?"

"He's standin' guard."

"Where?"

I gestured broadly. "Everywhere."

"Well, where will he sleep?"

"Shrug don't sleep."

"Well, of course he sleeps! Everyone sleeps."

I stared at her face, tryin' to figure her out. Most people, when you answer their questions, don't contradict you afterward. Phoebe seemed not to need me participatin' in our conversations.

"He talks, too," she added.

"Uh huh."

She frowned. "You act as though you don't believe me."

I sighed, and pushed our rabbit around in the pan 'til the pieces were cool enough to handle. I tasted some.

"That's damn good rabbit!" I said, with great enthusiasm.

She launched her hand toward my face to give me a hard slap. But my reflexes are even sharper than her tongue, and I caught her wrist long before her hand made contact.

"Let go of me!" she cried.

I wasn't sure I should. But there was a mess of rabbit in the pan with my name on it.

"Fine," I said. "But don't try to hit me again."

"I can't abide cursing," she said.

"Well, you better learn to, 'less you're headin' back east."

She sat and pouted awhile, but then the smell of dinner got to her and she tried some.

"This is outstanding!" she said brightly, despite her mood.

In my experience, fried rabbit will bring folks together, even enemies.

"You're coffee's good, too," I said.

We chewed our rabbit.

"How long have you and Wayne been traveling together?" Phoebe asked.

"Maybe two years."

“And in all that time you’ve never heard him speak?”

“Nope.”

“That seems inconceivable.” She said. Then softened her tone. “I can’t imagine what you must think of me, coming in here, barking at you like an angry dog. I seem to have lost my manners.”

“You been through a lot.”

“Yes.”

We ate in silence ’til we finished. Then we shared the rest of her coffee. By and by she said, “What’s wrong with him?”

“Shrug? What do you mean?”

“He looks like a haystack made out of bones.”

“He’s more sideways than upright,” I agreed.

“His body is all scrunched up like an elderly man with a severe hunchback,” she said. “He seems unable to walk upright, though he moves faster and quieter than any human I’ve ever witnessed.”

I nodded.

“But he moves more like a sand crab than a man,” Phoebe said.

“That’s a good way to describe it,” I said. “And it’s true that when scamperin’, Shrug covers a lot of ground.”

“Do other people call him Shrug?”

“Some. But he’s got lots of names.”

“Such as?”

“Well, to me he’s Shrug, and you call him Wayne. And Indians around here call him *Weeshack*.”

“Weeshack?”

“Means Grasshopper.”

“Well, that seems disrespectful.”

“Oh no, ma’am. Shrug is highly respected by the Indians. They tend to keep a wide berth when he’s in the area.”

She nodded, thoughtfully.

“What happened to him?” she said. “Do you know?”

I sat quiet a minute. Then said, “A cowboy told me Shrug got flattened in a stampede as a child and kept growin’ sideways afterward.”

“Did you ask him about it?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“If Shrug wanted me to know, he’d a’said somethin’, or signed it out. But I believe it. If there’s one thing that rattles Shrug to this day, it’s a stampede.”

“You’ve been in one?”

“About four months ago, along the Arkansas River.”

“Buffalo?”

“Nope.”

“Wild horses?”

“Nope.”

“Well, what type of stampede was it?” she said.

“Snappin’ turtles.”

“What? There’s no such thing as a turtle stampede!”

“Tell that to Wayne.”

She shook her head. “Speaking of Wayne...”

“Yes?”

“How can you sit there and tell me you didn’t know he could speak?”

~~“It never come up.”~~

She showed a look of disbelief. “How is that possible?”

“Shrug keeps to himself. We been together two years, but I only see him a few minutes a week, most.”

The dyin’ fire cast a glow on Phoebe’s face, then a shadow.

She said, “If I live to be a thousand, I’ll never understand pioneer men.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “You won’t live that long. Not out west.”

4.

“I INTENDED TO ride the trains from Philadelphia to Wichita,” Phoebe said, next mornin’, whi washin’ her face with canteen water.

“Only the train don’t go beyond Rolla,” I said.

“My parents were grievously misinformed at the train station in Philly. Is it true that Wichita four hundred miles?”

“From Rolla? It’s all of that.”

Phoebe said, “I searched the entire city of Rolla to see if anyone was planning a trip.”

“And naturally they weren’t. So what, you planned to walk all the way to Wichita?”

“Of course not. I was told if I could get to Waynesville, I could catch a stage coach to Springfield. And another from there to Wichita.”

“No stage has ever stopped in Waynesville that I know of,” I said. “And the one they did have to Springfield went broke last month.”

She frowned.

I said, “What’s in Wichita that’s so important?”

“My husband.”

I looked at her left hand.

“You ain’t wearin’ a ring,” I said.

“It’s an arranged marriage.”

“You’re a mail order bride?”

“That’s a harsh way to put it,” she said. “Mr. Pickett and I have corresponded for six months. We’ve exchanged photographs. He’s a widower with a wonderful ranch, and a comfortable house.”

“He sent you a photograph?”

“Yes, of course.”

“How you know it’s him in the picture?”

“He’s been vouched for by no less than the Wichita Justice of the Peace.”

I figured the Wichita Justice of the Peace could be bought for ten grains of gold, but I didn’t tell her that. Hell, if she was bent on marryin’ a stranger, whoever Mr. Pickett was, he’d probably do. Not, Phoebe wouldn’t face any shortage of marriage proposals in Wichita. Men outnumber women twenty to one there, and though sharp-tongued, she was as comely as any I’d seen.

“You set out on foot for Waynesville by yourself?”

“The man at the train station told me it wasn’t far.”

“When we get to Rolla, I want you to point out the man who told you that.”

“I’m not going back to Rolla,” Phoebe said.

“The hell you ain’t,” I said, catching her wrist in mid-slap.

“Let go of me!”

“You’re gonna have to stop tryin’ to hit people.”

“You’re going to have to stop cursing.”

I gave her a hard look, then shook my head. Lord, she was pretty. “Okay,” I said.

“Okay?”

“Hit me.”

“What?”

“Hit me five times now, and I’ll owe you five curses.”

“You can’t pay for curses in advance.”

“Ma’am, five curses could fly out of my mouth in the same sentence.”

“Why, that’s a terrible thing to have to admit!”

“Maybe,” I said. “But that don’t make it less true.” Then I said, “Me and Shrug are headin’ Rolla this mornin’, and ought to be there by noon. On Wednesday we’re escortin’ some women from Rolla to Dodge City, by way of Springfield. Sorry to say, we hadn’t planned on stoppin’ in Wichita this trip, but Newton’s only twenty miles away.”

“Wait—you’re actually going through Newton? Mr. Pickett’s ranch is just a few miles north of there.”

“Well, that makes sense. Newton’s hopin’ for a rail spur, and land’s a bargain there, compared to Wichita. Anyway, you’re more than welcome to ride with us,” I said. “For a fee.”

“How much?”

I thought a minute. Helpless as she was, I would’ve taken her for free, just to keep some crooked scoundrel from takin’ advantage of her. But it’d be improper to make that type of offer. Phoebe had no horse, and probably couldn’t shoot a gun. Eighty was a fair price. But she might say no to that much money. And she was powerful pretty.

“Twenty dollars, gold,” I said.

“Mr. Pickett will pay the fee.”

“And if he don’t?”

She fell silent. Probably worrying Mr. Pickett might not be all she hoped.

“Ma’am...”

“Please. Call me Phoebe.”

“Phoebe, if he don’t pay the fee, I won’t worry about it. I’d be honored to take you to Newton to meet your mail-order husband. And if he ain’t the man you want, I’ll take you to Wichita.”

“And if things don’t work out for me there?”

“Well, me and Shrug’ll be comin’ back through Wichita two weeks later, and we’ll take you to Rolla and get you on a train back to Philadelphia.”

Phoebe’s mouth curled into a warm smile. Her cornflower blue eyes sparkled and danced and the look she gave me was as welcome as a dry log on a winter fire. I bit the inside of my lip while thinking Mr. Pickett a lucky man.

“Mr. Love,” she said.

“Call me Emmett.”

“Emmett, I’m going to say yes to your generous offer.”

I nodded. “Okay, then.”

We gathered up our gear and I leaned over and interlocked my fingers to give her a leg up on Major’s back. She placed her tiny foot in my hands, and said, “Four hundred miles is a long journey.”

“Yes ma’am, it is. And a dangerous one, too.”

“It will probably be very difficult for you to refrain from using profanity,” she said.

I chuckled. “S’pect you’re right about that.”

She hauled off and slapped the shit out of me, five times.

WITH ITS TREE-lined streets and mountain views, Rolla, Missouri, was one of the prettier towns I had seen east of the Colorado territory. Compared to Newton, Kansas, where Phoebe was headed, it was more like the Garden of Eden. When I walked into town leadin' Major behind me, Phoebe in the saddle, the first building we came upon that I hadn't seen before was the new court house.

"Well, I guess that ends the battle," I said.

"What battle?" Phoebe asked.

"They've been fightin' with Dillon to see which town would be named the County Seat. This new court house ought to wrap things up."

We stopped long enough for me to strap on my gun belt. Then we started movin' again, toward Miss Patty's Boardin' House.

"Where's Wayne?"

"Shrug don't enter towns much."

"Why not?"

"People laugh and point at him."

"That's abominable. He saved my life."

"He saved lots of lives, but folks don't know it to look at him."

We passed the train station.

Phoebe said, "How did such a small town manage to get train service?"

"A railroad contractor name of Bishop moved here. Had he moved to Cherryville, they'd a' got the rails. Rolla's little, but it's pretty, don't you think?"

"I haven't got eyes for it. My experience here was quite unpleasant."

"Well, maybe it'll grow on you this time."

"I doubt it."

"You know much about the place?"

"No. And don't care to."

"Rolla's only been a town for two years," I said. "It's named for Raleigh, North Carolina. Ever been there?"

"No."

"When the locals held a vote to name the town, a bunch from Raleigh said they could get families to move here if they named it Raleigh. They won the vote, but the folks here pronounced it Rolla, and that's how it's been ever since."

"I wonder why you think I care," she said.

"It'd be like if you move to Newton and everyone there calls you Feeba."

"That's absurd. I wouldn't stand for it."

"Not much you could do about it, I s'pect."

I tied Major to the rail in front of Miss Patty's, and Phoebe slid off the saddle.

"I'm glad you did that," I said.

"What, dismounted?"

"Yup."

“Why?”

~~“Well, to tell the truth, I wasn’t quite sure how to help you down. I never seen anyone ride side saddle before. Makes for a comfortable ride, I s’pect, if a woman’s bottom is narrow enough to fit.”~~

“Mr. Love, I suggest you keep such thoughts about women’s bottoms to yourself.”

“Well, it’s a compliment, really, to have such a nice one.”

“Am I to expect similar comments from the men in Kansas? Or is just your mouth that’s as free as a soldier’s latrine?”

I smiled. “I s’pect most Kansas men should know a fine rear end when they see one. Whether they’ll comment on it as honestly as me is another issue.”

“That’s enough!” she said, though I could swear she seemed about to smile while sayin’ it.

“Emmett?”

I turned to see Hollis Ford walkin’ toward us, Hollis bein’ Sheriff of Phelps County.

I said, “Hollis.”

Hollis wore his gun belt low, his holster tied to his leg with a rawhide strap.

“You puttin’ together another haul?” he said.

“I plan to.”

“There’s been a few askin’ about you. Two or three at Shingle’s, a few more at Lick and Casey’s.”

“I’ll speak to ’em. Any mail orders?”

Hollis looked at Phoebe. “Looks like you found the one I know about. She goin’ with you?”

“She is.”

Hollis was quiet a moment. “I see you’re heeled.”

“Thought it wise.”

“There’s no trouble here that I know about.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Hollis went quiet again, content to stare at me. I stared back. Then he said, “When you plan to head out?”

Thing is, I don’t like folks to know when I’m leavin’ a place. As a known gun hand, I sometimes ruffle feathers in the towns I visit, and them that know when I’m leavin’ might set out to bushwhack me.

“Wednesday, after breakfast,” I said, knowin’ it weren’t true.

“Around nine?”

“Probably closer to ten.”

“I’ll spread the word.”

“I’d be obliged,” I said.

He gave me a long, slow look, then tipped his hat to Phoebe, and said, “Ma’am.”

Phoebe nodded, and Hollis turned and walked away.

6.

THE TALL, LANKY kid had on a silly lookin' hat.

"You Emmett Love?" he said.

"I am."

"You can't have our whores," he said.

He must a'been waitin' for me to show up, since I'd only got ten feet inside Shingle's Dance Hall before he stepped in front of me.

"You can keep all them that want to stay," I said.

"They *all* wanna stay."

A few locals edged around us, close enough to hear, but far enough so they could jump out the way if bullets started flyin'.

I said, "Wanna bet?"

"Huh?"

"I bet you five dollars at least two whores will want to come with me."

He stiffened. "Guess we'll never know, will we?"

"Not 'til I ask 'em," I said.

He gave me a squint-eyed look and said, "I heard you're the best rifleman in Missouri. That true?"

"Probably."

"Better than Vince Tuttle?"

"I don't know Mr. Tuttle."

"Well, Vince Tuttle can shoot the hair off a gnat's ass."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

I nodded. "Well then, yeah, I'm better than Vince Tuttle."

"You don't know the man, how can you say that?"

"Vince may be hittin' gnat hair, but trust me, he's shootin' at gnat. If I'm shootin' gnat, there'll be gnat for supper."

There was chucklin' all around us, and the tall, lanky kid's face turned red. He said, "Even if you're the best rifleman in all creation it don't matter."

"It don't?"

"Nope."

"Why's that?"

He pointed at the six gun in my holster and smiled. "'Cause you ain't carryin' one."

"Well, it's hard to swing a rifle around a bar and shoot all three of you at the same time."

"What three?"

"You, the guy sittin' at the table with the pocket watch in front of him, and the guy hidin' upstairs, behind me."

"You can't even *see* him!"

"Don't need to, son. This is what I do."

He puffed his chest up a bit. "It's what *I* do, too. And anyways, I don't need my cousins to back my play if it's just you 'n me with hand guns."

"Been practicin', have you?"

"I have."

"Around the farm?"

His face reddened again.

"Ain't no shame in that," I said. "Every great shootist I ever met started on a farm or ran a shootin' fruit, vegetables, cans, and varmints."

He nodded.

I said, "You hittin' most of them apples and squashes you set on your fence post?"

"I hit all of 'em," he said, proudly. "Ever' time. And from different range."

"You pretty fast?" I said.

He smiled. "You can try me, you want."

"How much they payin' you here?"

"That's none a' your business."

"Reason I ask, if you're *really* good with a hand gun, I might have a use for you."

He seemed surprised. "You'd take me with you?"

"Far as Springfield, anyway."

He looked around. Then, in a quiet voice he said, "How much you payin'?"

"You got a good horse?"

"Damn good horse."

"Any good with a rifle?"

He paused. "Not like you."

"You own one?"

He looked down. "Naw."

I nodded. "That's okay. Ten dollars."

"Ten dollars for two days work?"

"That's right. Ever been to Springfield?"

"Naw."

"It's a big town. Lotta bars. Bouncin' pays a dollar a day, free room and board. Wanna make more, try minin' in Colorado, or pannin' gold out west."

"What about hired gun work?"

"No offense, son, but you're not ready."

"You ain't seen me slap leather."

"True. But we been standin' here almost five minutes and you still ain't seen the derringer in my left hand."

He looked at the gun, but didn't twitch 'til I cocked it. A light bead of sweat formed on his upper lip.

"What kind of pansy-assed shootist carries a derringer?" he said.

"A live one."

He swallowed before speakin'. But he did speak.

"You know the job you was talkin' about just now?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll take it."

I nodded. "Good choice. What's your name, son?"

"Ira Glass."

"I'll be in touch, then, Mr. Glass."

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