

Apache Medicine

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KLEECAN WAS THREE hours out of Cibicu, almost halfway to the Mescalero camp at Chevelon Creek, when he met the Apache.

Ordinarily he welcomed company, for the life of a cavalry scout is lonely enough without the added routine of riding from camp to camp to count reservation heads, and that day the sky was a dismal gray-green to the north, dark and depressing. It made the semidesert surroundings stand out in vivid contrast—the alkali stretches a garish white between low, bleak hills and ghostly, dust-covered mesquite clumps. It was a composite of gray and bright white and dead green that formed a coldness, a penetrating chill that was premature for so early in September, and more than anything else, it made a man feel utterly alone.

But even with the loneliness on him, Kleecan did not welcome the company he saw on the trail ahead. For he had recognized the Apache.

It was Juan Pony. And Juan had been drinking mescal.

There wasn't a man in the vicinity of San Carlos who would have blamed Kleecan for not wanting to meet an Apache under such conditions—and especially this one. Juan Pony had a reputation for meanness, and he did everything in his power to keep the reputation alive.

And because he was the son of Pondichay, chief of the Chevelon Creek Mescaleros, other Apaches kept out of his way and white men had to use special handling, for Pondichay had a reputation too.

Less than two years before, he had cut a path of fire and blood from Chihuahua to the Little Colorado, and it had taken seven troops of cavalry to subdue thirty-four braves. Twenty-eight civilians and thirteen troopers had been killed during the campaign. Pondichay had lost two men. He was not to be taken lightly; yet the Bureau had merely snatched his carbine from him and given him a few sterile acres of sand along the Chevelon. Then the Bureau gave the carbine to Kleecan and turned its back, lest Kleecan had to use it to crush the hostile's skull. Pondichay was hungry for war, and he loved his son more than anything on the Apache earth. The least excuse would send Pondichay back on the warpath. That was why men kept out of the way of Juan Pony. But Kleecan had a job to do. He dropped his left elbow to feel the bulge of the handgun under his coat as he reined in before Juan Pony, who had turned his sorrel sideways, blocking the narrow trail.

THE SCOUT could have easily gone around, for the sandy ground was flat on both sides of the trail, but Kleecan had a certain standing to think of. When a man scouts for the cavalry and keeps track of reservation Apaches, he's boss, and he never lets the Apache forget it. Juan Pony had a poor memory, but he had to be reminded with a smile—for his father was still Pondichay.

The scout nodded his head. „Salmann, Juan.“

Juan Pony shifted his position on the saddle blanket to show full face, but he ignored the scout's greeting of friend. Instead, he swung an old Burnside .54 carbine in the scout's direction, aimlessly but with the hint of a threat, and mumbled some words of Mescalero through tight lips. His sharp-featured face was drawn, and his eyes bloodshot, but through his drunkenness it was plain to see what was in his soul. An Apache does not sip mescal like a gentleman. Nor does it have the same effect.

Kleecan caught one of the mumbled words and it was not complimentary. He said, „Juan, you be a good boy and go home. You go on home and I won't report you for tippin' at the mescal.“

The Apache nudged the sorrel with his right heel and the horse moved forward and to the side until the naked knee of the Apache was touching the top of the scout's calf-high boot. They were close, two feet separating their faces, and the scout could smell the foulness of the Apache. Rancid body odor and the sour smell of mescal—the result of a three-day binge.

Kleecan wanted to back away, but he sat motionless, his eyes fixed on the Apache's face, his own dark and impassive in the shadow of the narrow-brimmed hat. Kleecan had been smelling mescal and tizwin on the foul breaths of Apaches for almost fifteen years, and it occurred to him that it never did get any sweeter. He noticed a gleam of saliva at the corner of Juan Pony's mouth

and he unconsciously passed a knuckle along the bottom of his heavy dragoon mustache.

He said, „I'll ride along with you, Juan. I'm goin' up to Chevelon to see your daddy.“ Juan Pony did not answer, but continued to stare at him, his eyes tightening into slits. He leaned closer to the scout until his face and coarse, loose-hanging hair were less than a foot from the scout's. Then Juan Pony cleared his throat and spat, full into the dark face beneath the narrow brim, and with it he sneered the word „Coche!“ with all the hate in his savage soul.

In the desolate country north of San Carlos, when a man meets a drunken Apache and the Apache spits in his face, he does one of two things: smiles, or shoots him.

KLEECAN SMILED. Because he was looking into the future. But with the smile there was a gnawing in his belly, a gnawing and a revulsion and a bitter urge rising within him that he could not stem by simply gritting his teeth. And though he was looking into the future and seeing Pondichay, fifteen years of dealing with the Apache his own way overruled five seconds of logic, and his hand formed a fist and he drove it into the sneering face of Juan Pony.

The Apache went backward off the sorrel, still clutching the carbine, and was out of sight the few seconds it took Kleecan's arm to rise and swing down against the rump of the sorrel. The horse bolted off to the side of the trail with the slap to reveal the Apache pushing himself up with one hand, raising the Burnside with the other. Instinct told Kleecan to draw the handgun, but the ugly, omnipotent face of Pondichay was there again and he flung himself from the saddle in one motion to land heavily on the rising form of Juan Pony. The Apache went backward, landing hard on his back, but his legs were doubled against his body and as he hit, one moccasin shot up between the scout's legs and kicked savagely. Kleecan's fingers were at the Apache's throat, but the fingers stiffened and spread and he imagined a fire cutting through his body, pushing him away from the Indian. He was on his feet for a moment and then sickness rose from his stomach and almost gagged him so that he fell to his knees and doubled up, holding an arm close to his stomach. Juan Pony twisted his mouth into a smile in his drunkenness and raised the Burnside .54. It would tear a large hole in the white scout. He smiled and began to aim.

His cheek was against the smooth stock when he heard the explosion, and he looked up in surprise, for he was certain he had not yet fired. Then he saw the revolving pistol in the outstretched arm in front of him. Juan Pony had underestimated. It was the last thing he saw in his natural life.

It was said of Kleecan that he never let go. That after he was dead he would still take the time to get the man who had killed him, for Kleecan was not expected to die in bed. He dropped the pistol and rolled to his side with his knees almost touching his chest. The pain cut like a saber and with it was the feeling of sickness. But after a few minutes the saliva eased down from his throat and the sharp pain began to turn to a stiffness. He got to his feet slowly and took the first few steps as if he were walking over broken bottles without boots, but he looked at Juan Pony and the glance snatched him back to reality. And he looked with a grim, troubled face, for he knew what the death of the son of an Apache war chief could mean.

The sky was darker, still gray-green but darker, when Kleecan returned to his mare. He saw the storm approaching and the trouble-look seemed to lift

slightly from his dark face. The rain would come and wash away the sign. But it would not wash away the urge for revenge in Pondichay, for the old chief was certain to find the body of his son, buried shallow beneath the rocks and brush off-trail. Pondichay would have no sign to explain to him how it had happened, but that would not hold his hand from its work of vengeance. A revenge on any and all that he chanced to meet. As soon as he discovered the bones of his son.

The scout had one leg up in a stirrup when he saw the small beaded deerskin bag in the road. A leather thong attached to it had been broken, and he realized he had ripped it from the Apache's throat when he had been kicked backward. He picked it up and looked the hundred-odd feet to the mesquite clump where he had buried Juan Pony. He hesitated only for a moment and then stuffed the bag into a side coat pocket. He rode off to the east, leading Juan Pony's sorrel. When he had gone almost three miles, he released the horse with a slap on the rump and set off at a gallop, still toward the east.

He pushed his mount hard, for he wanted to reach the Hatch & Hodges Station at Cottonwood Creek before the rain came. Overhead, the sky was becoming blacker.

AT A QUARTER to four Kleecan stopped at the edge of the mesa. In front of him the ground dropped gradually a thousand yards or more to the adobe stagecoach station at Cottonwood Creek. He watched a Hatch & Hodges Concord start to roll, the greasers jump to the sides, and he could faintly hear the shouts of the driver as he reined with one hand and threw gravel at the lead horses with the other. Within a hundred feet the momentum was up and the Concord streaked past the low adobe wall that ringed the station house on four sides. The yells grew fainter and the dust trail stretched and puffed and soon the coach passed from view, following a bend in the Cottonwood, and all that was left was the cylinder of dust that rolled on to the north into the approaching blackness.

Somewhere in the stillness there was the cold-throated howl of a dog coyote. It complemented the dreary blackness pressing from the north like a soul in hell's despair. Kleecan stiffened in the saddle and started to the south into a yellowness that was sun-glare and hazy reflection from the northern storm, and with it the deathlike stillness.

Then his eye caught motion. It was a speck, a blur against the yellowgray, and he knew it to be the dust raised from fast-moving horses.

Probably four miles off. Three, four horses. It was hard to tell in the haze. When he reached the bottom of the grade he could no longer see the dust, but he was sure the riders had been heading for the Hatch & Hodges Station. Art McLverty, the station agent, came out of the doorway and stood under the front ramada, scratching a massive stomach. His stubby fingers clawed at a soiled expanse of blue-striped shirt, collarless, the neckband frayed, framing a lobster-red neck and above it an even deeper red, puffy face. Kleecan called it the map of Ireland because he had heard the expression somewhere and knew McLverty thought of it as a compliment.

McLverty sucked in his stomach and yelled in no particular direction, „Roberto! Aqui muy pronto!“

And almost at once a small Mexican boy was in front of the mount, taking the reins from Kleecan.

The station agent led the way through the doorway and then to the right to the small mahogany bar that crossed one side of the narrow room. On the opposite side of the doorway was the long plank table and eight cane-bottomed Douglas chairs where the stage passengers ate, and between bar and table, against the back wall, was the rolltop desk where McLeverty kept his accounts and schedules. Bare, cold to the eye, grimy from sand blowing through the open doorway, it was where Kleecan went for a drink when he had the time.

He leaned on the bar and took off his hat, rubbing the back of his hand over eyes and forehead. Thin, dark hair was smeared against the whiteness of a receding hairline, but an inch above the eyes the face turned tan and weather-beaten and the dragoon mustache, waxed at the tips, accentuated a face that could look ferocious as well as kindly.

With his hat on, straight over his eyes, the brim cut a shadow of hardness over his face and Kleecan looked stern and cold. Without the hat he looked kindly because the creases at the corners of his eyes cut a perpetual smile in his light blue eyes. He dropped the hat back onto his head, loosely.

„Oh, guess I'll have mescal, Art.“ He said it slowly, as if after deliberation, though he drank mescal every time he came here.

The station agent reached for the bottle of pale liquid and set it in front of Kleecan, then picked up a thick tumbler and passed it against his shirt before placing it next to the bottle. McLeverty looked as if he was memorizing a speech. He was about to say something, but Kleecan had started to talk.

„If you'd slice up a hen and drop her into the mescal when it's brewin', you'd get a little tone to it. Damn white stuff looks like water.“

He was pouring as he spoke. He cleared his throat and drank down half a tumblerful.

„I don't make it, I only sell it.“ McLeverty said it hurriedly. He was almost puffing, so anxious to tell something he knew. „Listen, Kleecan. Didn't you hear the news—no, I know you didn't...“ And then he blurted it out: „The paymaster got robbed and killed this morning! Indians!“ He had said it. Now he relaxed.

KLEECAN HADN'T looked up. He poured another drink. „I'm not kiddin' with you, Art. You ought to watch the Mexes make it. Throw a few pieces of raw chicken in it and your mescal'll turn kind of a yellow. Makes it look like it's got some body.“

„Damn it, Kleecan! I said the paymaster got robbed! The paywagon burned and the paymaster, Major Ulrich, and four of the guards shot and scalped as bald as you please. Passengers going up to Holbrook were all talking about it. They said a cavalry patrol'd stopped them on the road from Apache and told them and then asked them if they'd seen anything. And they were all scared to hell 'cause the cavalry lieutenant told them he was sure it was Juan Pony and some Mescaleros, 'cause no one's seen Juan in almost a week. Damn butchers are probably all up in the hills now.“

Kleecan took another drink before looking at the Irishman. „What happened to the other two guards? They always ride at least six.“

„They think they were carried away by the 'Paches. What else you think! They weren't around!“

„Art, there're only two things wrong with your story,“ he said. „Number one: Mescaleros don't scalp. You been out here long enough to know that. And it wouldn't be Yavapais, Maricopas, or Pimas, 'cause they've been farmin' so long

their boys don't know what a scalp knife looks like—and an Arapaho hasn't been down this far in ten years.

„Number two: Just a little more than three hours ago I shot Juan Pony as dead as you can get. And he was too full of mescal to have taken any paymaster.“ Kleecan pushed away from the bar and did a half kneebend. „Damn Indian like to ruined me for life.“

McLeverty didn't know what to say. He stood behind the bar with his mouth slightly open and watched his story break up into little pieces.

The scout couldn't help smiling. When news reaches a man in a lonely corner like the Cottonwood station, he will tell it to himself over and over, savoring it, waiting, his jaw aching to tell it to the next man that comes in from an even farther corner. He was a little bit sorry he had spoiled the news-breaking for McLeverty.

Kleecan said, „Tell you what, Art. I'll bet you five to three dollars that there weren't any Indians around and that those two missin' guards are in on the deal.“

As he spoke his gaze drifted along the front wall and then stopped at the wide window. There was the flat whiteness, the darkness above it, then in the distance the dust cloud. A few moments later he made out three horsemen. His eyes narrowed from habit, years of squinting into the distance, and he judged that two of the riders could be wearing cavalry blue.

„Get the Army up this way much, Art?“

McLeverty followed the scout's gaze out the window. He squinted for a long time, then his eyes became wider as the riders drew closer, and next they were bulging, for McLeverty seldom enough got a troop of cavalry on patrol up this way—let alone two troopers and a civilian—and it was easy to see he was thinking of what Kleecan had said about the other two guards being a part of the holdup.

And Kleecan was thinking of the same thing. He had been making conversation before. Now he wasn't sure. He told himself it was just the timing that made him think that way.

McLeverty couldn't turn his eyes from the window. He just stared.

Finally he said, „God, do you suppose those three—“

„Four,“ Kleecan said. „I'll add another dollar that there're four of them.“

TWO TROOPERS and a civilian, dressed for riding, came into the room slowly and glanced around before walking over to the bar. But even in their slight hesitancy they had smiled. They stood at the bar brushing trail dust from their coats, still smiling, and talked about the coming rain and the dark sky, and they offered to buy the station agent and the scout a drink. Kleecan didn't speak because he was trying to picture the happy world these men were living in. It wasn't cynicism. It was just that men didn't ride into an out-of-the-way stage station covered with the grime of hours on horseback and then suddenly react with a brotherlylove spirit that belonged to Christmas Eve. A saddle doesn't treat a man that way.

McLeverty was pushing the bottle across the bar to the three men when the back door opened and the fourth one entered. Like the other civilian his coat was open and a pistol hung at his side. McLeverty looked at the man and then to Kleecan and in the look there was a mixture of suspicion, respect, and fear.

The fourth man saw the suspicion.

„Wanted to use your backhouse,“ he explained. „Afore I came in and had to go right out again,“ and he ended the words with a meaningless laugh.

He joined the others at the bar and stood next to Kleecan, who lounged against the bar with his back half turned to the four men. The fourth one slapped the two troopers on the shoulders and told them to pour a drink. The troopers were younger than the two civilians. Big, rawboned men, they wore their uniforms slovenly and didn't seem to care. The man who had come in the back way did most of the talking and most of the drinking.

They had been at the bar for almost fifteen minutes when the lull finally came. They had been talking continually during that time. Talking about uninteresting things in loud voices. There were a few words, then prolonged laughter, and after that silence. The four men lifted their glasses to their lips. It was a way of filling the lull while they thought of something else.

Kleecan turned his head slightly in their direction. „Hear about the paymaster gettin' held up?“ When he said it four drinks were still mouth high. There was the clatter of a shot glass hitting the bar. And the strangled coughing as a drink caught halfway down a throat, and the continued coughing as the liquor hung there and burned. But after the coughing there was silence. Kleecan wasn't paying any attention to them.

The fourth man had his coat open and his right hand was on the pistol butt at his hip. The two troopers glanced at each other and then at Kleecan, who had turned his head in their direction, but they dropped the glance to somewhere in front of them. Only the other civilian was completely composed. He hadn't moved a muscle. He was about Kleecan's age, older than the other three, and wore long dragoon mustaches similar to the scout's.

He looked at Kleecan. „No, mister. Tell us about it. Happen near here?“ The man's voice was even, and carried a note of curiosity.

„Happened south of Fort Apache,“ Kleecan said. „That right, Art?“

McLeverty said, „That's right. The major was coming up from Fort Thomas when these—uh—Indians jumped the train and took five scalps and the pay.“

„You don't say,“ the civilian said. „We've just come from Fort McDowell. Left yesterday and been riding ever since. That's why we haven't heard anything, I guess.“ He smiled, but not with nervousness.

Kleecan didn't smile. He nodded to the troopers. „You soldiers from Whipple?“

„Yes, they're both from Whipple Barracks.“ The civilian answered before either trooper could say anything. „You see, my partner and I are to join the survey party on the upper Chevelon, and these two gentlemen“—he pointed to the two troopers with a sweep of his arm—„are our guides.“

„You could use another guide,“ Kleecan said. „You're fifteen miles east of Chevelon.“

The civilian looked dumbfounded. He pushed his hat back from his forehead. „No! Why I thought it was due north of here!“ There was surprise in his voice. „Well, it's a good thing we stopped in here,“ he said.

„You say we have to go back fifteen miles?“

Kleecan didn't answer. He was staring at the troopers, looking at the regiment number on their collars. And as he looked he couldn't help the feeling that was coming over him. „I didn't know the Fifth was over at McDowell,“ he said.

The civilian shrugged his shoulders. „You know how the Army moves regiments around.“

„I ought to,“ Kleecan said slowly. „I guide for them.“

The silence was heavy in the narrow room. Heavy and oppressing, and because no one spoke the silence acted to strip naked the thoughts of the two men who stood at the bar staring into each other's eyes. The civilian knew his pretense was at an end and he shrugged his shoulders again, but looked in Kleecan's face.

Kleecan stared back at him, and all of a sudden there was a godawful hate in him and he wanted to yell something, swear, and go for his gun—because the Fifth was at Fort Thomas, and the paywagon guards would be men of the Fifth, but they wouldn't wear their forage caps like that, not without the slant across an eye that meant Manassas and Antietam and a thousand miles of blood-red plains between the Rosebud and the Gila, and there was no survey party on the upper Chevelon for he had taken it out ten days before, and two men didn't go into Mescalero country to survey with two others who pretended to be troopers—not without equipment.

The civilian said, matter-of-factly, „What are you going to do about it?“

Kleecan stood motionless and knew he couldn't do anything about it. But he felt the hot anger drain from his face and he was glad of that, for then he wouldn't move rashly. Four to one wasn't gambling odds.

„Well, if you don't know, I'll tell you,“ the civilian said. „You're going to get on your horse and start guiding, and you're going to guide us over the best trail right out of Arizona, and you'll ride with that feeling that the least little move you make out of line will be your last. If we go, you go, and you don't look like a martyr to me.“

THE RAIN CONTINUED to drizzle in the early dusk. They rode single file along the narrow trail that followed the bend of the lower Chevelon, and they rode in silence, each man with his own thoughts. Kleecan was soaked to the skin. One of the troopers had taken his poncho and now rode huddled, his chin bent into the folds of the collar, his body dry. When it had started to grow dark, Kleecan thought they would stop and find some kind of shelter for the night. He had even suggested it, but the outlaw leader had only laughed and said, „Travel when it's raining and there isn't any sign. You ought to know that, Indian scout. We'll keep on long as the rain lasts, even if we ride all night.“ That had been almost two hours before.

And it was then that the idea had been born. Even if we ride all night.

He had had two hours to think it out clearly.

When they came to the Chevelon ford it was almost dark. Kleecan dismounted and walked to the bank of the running creek that was now almost waist deep from the continuous rain. The outlaw leader dismounted with him, but the others stayed on their horses, back under the bow of a cottonwood. From there the two men at the creek bank were only dim shadows. And that was what Kleecan was counting on. He looked at the creek and then to the outlaw and nodded his head, but as he turned to go back to his horse his foot slipped on the loose, sandy bank, throwing him off balance and hard against the outlaw. The man pushed Kleecan aside violently and drew his gun in a clean motion, but not before Kleecan's hand had found the side pocket of his coat.

„Don't do that again. We don't need you that bad.“

„The darkness is makin' you spooky. I slipped on the bank.“

Nothing more was said.

They made the crossing without mishap and picked up the trail again on the other side. In the darkness they made their way haltingly, brushing sharp chaparral and ducking suddenly as the blackness of a tree limb loomed in front of their faces. Kleecan rode silently and gave no warning call when an obstruction came in the trail, then smiled when he'd hear the curse from one of the outlaws whose face had been swatted by a soaked tree branch. The rain continued to drizzle and they rode on. They were a good two miles from the creek ford when Kleecan called back, „Trail goes left.“ Then he kicked the mare hard and swerved her to the left to follow the sharp turn in the trail.

The outlaws were taken by surprise momentarily. Their heads were down, shielding their faces from the stinging drizzle, but they heard Kleecan's mare break into a gallop, and in a body they spurred their own horses, bunching in confusion at the trail bend, then singling out to kick their mounts into a gallop up a sharp, widening rise. The trail dipped again suddenly and the outlaw chief, in the lead, reined in with a jolting motion, swinging an arm over his head. In the dimness he saw heavy, bulky shapes all around him, round and massive. The outlaws instinctively brought their mounts in close together and looked about, squinting into the darkness. Then one of the outlaws made a noise like a deep sigh. It was a moan and an exclamation. Somebody said, „Oh, God!“ and another man cursed, but it sounded like a prayer, for there was a plea in it. On the outer rim they saw the hazy shapes of the wickiups and on four sides of them they looked down into the faces of Mescalero Apaches.

Kleecan had led them into the middle of Pondichay's rancheria.

The scout still sat his mare, but he was beyond the circle of Apaches.

Next to him stood Pondichay, old and somber, too polite to ask outright the meaning of the sudden intrusion. Kleecan greeted him in Mescalero and continued to speak in that tongue, but he kept his eyes on the outlaw chief as he spoke.

For Kleecan told the old chief many things. He told him what a great warrior he was and recounted many of Pondichay's deeds, but slowly his voice saddened and finally he told him how sad he had been to hear of Juan Pony. The old Apache looked up, but Kleecan continued. And he told him that Juan Pony had been murdered. He told him that he had worked great medicine and was able to bring right to this camp the murderers of Juan Pony. His voice became cold and he told him how the murderers had committed the greatest sacrilege of all by taking Juan's hoddentin sack, which held the sacred pollen to ward off evil. And he told Pondichay that if he did not believe him, why not look in the chief murderer's pocket and see if the medicine bag was not still there—for it is said that an Apache warrior parts with his hoddentin bag only when he is dead.

Kleecan wheeled his horse around. He had made his offering to the gods of destruction.

