

# Caprock Rancher

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When I rode up to the buffalo wallow, Pa was lying there with his leg broke and his horse gone.

Out there on the prairie there wasn't much to make splints with, and Pa was bad hurt. It had seemed to me the most important things for a man to know was how to ride a horse and use a gun, but now neither one was going to do much good.

Earlier in the day Pa and me had had a mean argument, and it wasn't the first. Here I was, man-grown and seventeen, and Pa still after me about the company I kept. He was forever harping on Doc Sites and Kid Reese and their like... said they were no-goods. As if he was one to talk, a man who'd never had money nor schooling, nor any better than a worn-out coat on his back. Anyway, Doc and Kid Reese weren't about to be farmers or starving on a short-grass cow ranch.

Pa, he'd been at me again because I'd be dogged if I was going to waste my life away on what little we could make, and told him so... then I rode off to be an

outlaw. For the first two miles I was good and mad, and for the third mile I was growling some, but I'd made most of ten miles before my good sense got the better of me and I started back to help Pa. He had a far piece to go, and he was a lone man packing twenty thousand dollars through some mighty rough country.

It was midafternoon of a mighty hot day when I came up to that buffalo wallow, and Pa had been lying there four, five hours. His canteen had been on his saddle and the horse had taken off, so I got down and gave him a swallow or two from mine.

All that argument was forgotten. Times like that a man is best off doing one thing at a time and not worrying around too much.

„Thanks, boy.“ Pa returned the canteen to me. „Looks like I played hob.“

„That gray never did have a lick of sense,“ I said, and then I told it to him. „You got a busted leg, but your jaw's in good shape. So you set back an' argue with me whilst I set that bone.“

„You just forget about me. All that money is in those saddlebags, and less than a third of it ours. You forget me and hunt down that horse.“

That twenty thousand dollars was from a steer herd we'd taken to Kansas and sold, and folks back home were a-sweating until we got back with the money. Cash money was hard to come by those times, and most of this would go to mighty poor folks who hadn't seen a hard dollar since who flung the chunk.

„You got a broke leg. We'll take care of that first.“

Nothing was growing around but short grass and some knee-high mesquite, but I got Pa's leg set and cut mesquite with my bowie and splinted up best I knew how. All that time he set there a-looking at me with pain in his eyes and never let out a whimper, but the sweat stood out on both our faces, you can bet.

If you were ever seventeen years old and standing in a buffalo wallow one hundred and fifty miles from home, and your pa with a broke leg, you know how I felt. And only one horse between us.

With my help he got straddle of that horse and we started off with two things in mind. To get to a creek where there was water, and to find that fool horse.

Judging by the tracks, that gray had taken off like wolves was after him, but after half a mile he began to slow up and look back expecting to be chased. Then on, he got the smell of water and just sort of ambled, taking a bite of grass or mesquite beans now and again. Pa, he sat up in the leather and never said I, yes, or no. This time it was up to me and both of us knew it.

The sun was beyond the hill and color was in the evening sky when we saw those other tracks. They came in from the southeast and they were the tracks of three shod horses... and they caught Pa's horse.

This was just across the border from Indian Territory and while honest men crossed it, aside from the Indians, few honest men lived there. To be a Deputy U.S. Marshal in Indian Territory was like standing yourself up in the business end of a shooting gallery. Every outlaw in the country spent time there, and we knew if those had been good men who caught up Pa's horse, or even a decent kind of outlaw, they'd backtrack to find the rider. In those years folks were helpful to one another, and to be afoot in a country like that was about the worst that could happen. It left a man with mighty few possibilities.

These men had caught up Pa's horse and checked the saddlebags, and they didn't come looking for Pa.

„Son“—Pa could read those tracks as well as me—„don't you get any notions. You ain't about to go up against three men, not with me in this condition.“

„Ain't nothing to worry about. Those boys are friends of mine. One of them is Kid Reese and another is Doc Sites. Why, I'd know those horse tracks if I saw them in Gilead. This time of night they won't go far and we'll have your horse and money in no time.“

Pa, he just sat up there on my horse and he said nothing at all for a while, and then he said, „Ed, you reckon those boys would give back twenty thousand dollars?“

It gave me an uneasy feeling, him saying that. Pa set no store by either of them, but they were good boys. Free and easy, that's sure, but they were friends of mine. When Pa and me moved into that Texas country they'd let me take up with them. We-all were usually up to no good, but that was what you'd expect from three youngsters caught somewheres between being boys and being men. It's true we were always talking of standing up a stagecoach or robbing a bank, but that was mostly talk. Taking money from a friend... well, they weren't that kind.

It was not much of a creek. Stars were in the sky when we fetched up to it, and it wasn't more than two, three feet wide and maybe four, five inches deep, but it was wet water, lined with willows and cottonwoods and grass aplenty. When I helped Pa off the horse, I bedded him down and filled the canteen for him.

„You set quiet,“ I said, „I'll go fetch your horse.“

„Don't be a fool, Edwin,“ Pa said. „You say those boys are your friends, but there's a sight of money in those saddlebags... not many who value friendship that high.“

Pa never called me Edwin unless he was downright serious. That money was important for reasons beyond what it could buy. Pa was always holding on about the value of a good name, and for the first time I was faced up to what it could mean. Pa was a respected man, but if we showed up without that money a lot of folks were going to remember that I'd been swaggering it around town with Doc Sites, Kid Reese, and that outfit. Some of them were going to say things about us losing the money, and Pa would take the blame as well as me.

We Tuckers never had much but an honest reputation. We were never able to get ahead. A while back we lived in Missouri, and that was the year Pa had his first good crop, and the year the grasshoppers ate him out. Two years of bad drought followed and we lost the place. We settled in Texas then and worked like dogs, and when we got our first trail herd together the Comanches came down and burned us out in the light of the moon. They burned us out, drove off our cows, and killed Uncle Bud.

They killed Uncle Bud and they'd taken his scalp. Pa, he rode after them but he never got back with any cows. Somewhere along the way he found Bud's scalp, which we buried out where the body was.

This herd we had just sold in Kansas was our first since then, and the first thing Pa had to show for twenty years of hard work... and the first many of our neighbors had to show. If we'd got through to the ranch with that money we'd have had an edge on the future.

I guess it was my fault. While we were separated that morning the gray shied and threw him, and had I been where I should have been I'd have dropped a loop over that gray's neck and he wouldn't have gone anywhere at all. It was lucky I'd quit sulking and started back; I'd been mad but I wasn't ready to strike on my own yet. I was figuring on hooking up with Kid Reese and Doc before I did anything permanent.

Those boys were friends of mine, but something was gnawing at me. What were they doing away off up here at a time like this?

Leaving Pa alongside the creek with his pistol to hand, I mounted up and started along the creek in the direction those tracks had taken. About a half mile from where I'd left Pa, I smelled smoke.

They were camped on a grassy bench alongside the creek and under some big old cottonwoods. They had a fire going and I could see the firelight on their faces, and hear the murmur of voices. There was a third man at the fire whom I had never seen before, but I knew who he was from his description. It was Bob Heseltine.

How many stories had they told me about the doings of Bob Heseltine? To those boys he was big as all outdoors, and according to them he was the best rider, the best shot, and the most fearless man who ever came down the pike. Bob Heseltine, they told me confidentially, had held up the Garston Bank... he had killed Sheriff Baker in a stand-up gun battle, and he had backed down two—not one but two—Texas Rangers. And all they could talk about was all they were going to do when Bob Heseltine got back. And here he was.

He was a mite shorter than me but wide in the shoulder, the hide of his face like tanned leather. He had deep-set blue eyes and he wore two guns tied down and sized up like a mighty mean man. Why, I'd heard more stories about him than about Clay Allison or Jim Courtright or Wild Bill Hickok.

Pa's horse was there and still saddled, but the saddlebags lay on the ground near the fire and they had the money out on a blanket where they could count it. They were going to be disappointed when they found that was our money, and belonging to folks back home. It isn't often a man finds twenty thousand dollars riding around on a lost horse.

„Hi!“

They were all so set on that money that when I hailed them they came up with their guns drawn. They stood there blinking their eyes at me like owls in a hailstorm.

„It's all right, Bob,“ Reese said. „This here is Ed Tucker, the one we were tellin' of. Ed, what in blazes are you doin' out here?“

„I see you found Pa's horse,“ I said, „and our money.“

Doc's lips sort of thinned down and Heseltine's head turned real slow to look at me again. Kid Reese, he looked everywhere but at me. Right then I began to wonder about those boys.

Firelight flickered on their faces, on the flanks of the horses, on the gold and silver spread on the blanket, and off their rifle barrels, setting against their saddles. It was so quiet a body could hear the cottonwood leaves brushing their pale green palms one agin the other, and out there beyond the light the creek water chuckled and whispered around rocks or something in the stream.

„I'm afraid you've got this all wrong, boy," Heseltine said. „I don't know you and I don't know whose horse this is. We found this money, and finders is keepers.“

„Now wait a minute... Doc here, he knows Pa's horse. So does Reese. They saw it many times down Texas way.“

Heseltine turned his head to look at them. „Is that true? Do you know this horse?“

Doc Sites looked at the ground and he looked away at the creek and he shook his head. Kid Reese, he said, „It don't look like any horse I ever saw before, Bob. It's just a lost horse, that's all.“

Seemed like a long time I sat there, looking at the firelight on that money. I'd never seen that much money before but it didn't look like money to me, it looked like Pa sweating over his fields back in Missouri, and like all the work we'd done, by day and night, rounding up those cattle and putting brands on them. It looked like all those folks around us who shared the drive with us... that money was there for them.

„Stop your foolin'," I said, „Pa's back in the brush with a broke leg, broke when this horse threwed him. I got to get back there with this horse and that money.“

„You can have the horse. Take it an' welcome," Heseltine said quietly, „but the money stays here, and you're leavin' unless you want to try to do something about it...“

All three of them were facing me now, and Heseltine was all squared around to make his fight. Doc had a rifle in his hand and Kid Reese stood there with his thumbs in his belt, just a-grinning at me. They would do whatever Bob Heseltine had said, and he'd told me what to do.

„I figured we were friends.“ It sounded mighty weak and they could see I was backing down. The three of them stood there looking at me and making me feel mighty small.

„We could take him in with us," Sites said, „he's a good kid. He'll do what you tell him, Bob.“

That made me kind of mad. Here I'd been ready to ride off and leave Pa, and they expected me to do what somebody told me.

„Half the money is mine," Heseltine said. „If you boys want to split your half with him, to hell with you. He's your friend.“

A stick fell into the fire and sparks lifted into the night. Bob Heseltine was looking straight at me, and I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking he could kill me and wondering if he should.

Pa, he used to tell me when a man is holding the wrong cards he shouldn't try to buck the game. It's better to throw in your hand and wait on another deal.

Only thing that had me worried was whether I could get out of there alive.

„Looks like you got me euchred," I said then, and I started backing to my horse. There was a minute or two when it looked like Heseltine might shoot, but he just looked at me and turned away.

Kid Reese whispered, „You ain't gonna let him go? He'll have the law on us.“

„For what?" Heseltine asked. „For finding money?“

Time to time, riding alone and thinking like a body does, I'd imagined myself in positions like this, and each time I'd known what to do. Right off I told them, and then I shot it out with them and always came off a winner. It beats all what a

man's imagination will do for him, and how different it is when he faces up to something like that. Right then I felt mighty puny... backed down by those three, and me in the right.

Going back down the trail I kept telling myself I'd have shot it out if it hadn't been for Pa, but deep down I wasn't so sure. If I was killed, Pa would be left to die. Maybe I was thinking of that and maybe I was just scared.

Yet I couldn't recall being exactly scared... only that I was in the middle of something I'd be better out of.

Pa was sitting up with his back to a tree when I rode up. He had the coffeepot on, for that had been among the stuff I left beside him when I shucked my gear at the camp. Pa was sitting up but he looked poorly. His face was gray and tight-drawn.

„Three of them?“ He studied the situation awhile. „That's our money, boy. We were trusted with it.“

We drank our coffee, and neither of us talked much, but it gave me time to sort of get things settled down inside me. A man doesn't always know what to do when things happen quick-like and when for the first time he's faced up with gun trouble and no way accustomed to it. But this was showing me a few things and one of them was that Pa had been right about Doc and Reese.

When it came right down to it those two shaped up like a couple of two-by-twice tinhorns. Neither of them had nerve enough to talk up to Bob Heseltine... but neither had I.

„I got to go back,“ I said, „I got to go back and make my fight. Else I'll always think I was scared.“

„You and me, Ed,“ Pa said, „we've had our troubles but you never showed anything but sand. There's scared smart and then there's scared stupid. I think that you did the right thing.“ Pa reached for a stick lying among the branches of a fallen tree, and he had out his bowie. „We're going back, boy, but we're going together.“

We'd taken our time. Pa had a pipe after his coffee and while he smoked he worked on a crutch. My mouth was all dry inside and my stomach was queasy, but once we decided to go back I felt a whole lot better. It was like I'd left something unfinished back there that just had to be done.

And I kept thinking of Sites, not willing to face up to it, and Reese, who was supposed to be my friend, wanting to kill me.

„You did right, Ed,“ Pa told me, speaking around his pipe stem. „You did the smart thing. They will think you were scared off.“

„That Heseltine... they say he's killed a dozen men. He's robbed banks and he's got a mean reputation.“

„I like to see a mean man,“ Pa said. „Most of them don't cut much figger.“

Pa had finished working out his crutch. It wasn't much, just a forked stick trimmed down a mite so he could use the fork to hold under his armpit. I helped him to the horse, and once he got a foot in the stirrup and a hand on the horn he was in that saddle. Meanwhile I smothered our fire. Nobody wants to turn fire loose in grass or timber unless he's a fool.

„A bank robber don't shape up to me,“ Pa said. „When he goes into a bank with a gun, he don't figure to get shot at. If he expected it he'd never take the first step. He threatens men with folks depending on them and steals money he's too lazy to work for.

„The James boys swaggered it mighty big until a bunch of home folks up at Northfield shot their ears off, and the Dalton gang got the same thing in Coffeyville. The McCarty boys tried it in Colorado, and all those bold outlaws were shot down by a few quiet men who left their glass-polishing or law books to do it.“

Well, all those outlaws had seemed mighty exciting until Pa put it thataway, but what he said was true. Pa was a little man himself, only weighed a hundred and thirty pounds, though he had the strongest hands I ever did see. Strong hands from plowing, shoeing horses, and wrassling steers.

Close to midnight we fetched up to their fire.

„Help me down, Ed,“ Pa said, whispering. „I want to be on the ground.“

We walked up to the fire, our boots making small sounds in the grass. Pa was carrying my Colt in his right hand, and I carried a shell under the hammer of my Henry rifle. Those boys weren't much account at keeping watch; they were setting around a blanket playing cards for our money.

„You boys are wasting time,“ Pa told them. „You're playing with money that don't belong to you.“

Pa had that crutch under his left shoulder, but he held that Colt in one big hand and it pointed like a finger at Heseltine.

„Hear you're a killing man,“ Pa said to him, „but you size up to me like a no-account, yellow-bellied loafer.“

„You got the drop,“ Heseltine said. „You got a loud mouth when you got the drop.“

„The drop? You figure we're in some kind of dime novel? Ed, you keep an eye on those others. If either of them make a move, shoot both of them and after they're laying on the ground, shoot them again!“

Deliberately Pa lowered the muzzle until it pointed into the grass beside his foot. „Now, Ed tells me you're a fast hand with a gun,“ Pa said, and he limped forward three steps, his eyes locked on Heseltine's, „but I think you're a back-shooting tinhorn.“

Heseltine looked at Pa standing there on one leg and a crutch, and he looked at that old pistol. He looked at Pa again and he drew a long breath and held it. Then he let his breath go and stood there with his hands hanging.

„Nobody's got the drop now, Heseltine.“ Pa spoke quietly but his pale eyes blazed in the firelight. „I'm not going back without that money. And if you try to stop me either you're gonna die or both of us are gonna die!“

Sweat was all over Bob Heseltine's face, and it was a cool evening. He wanted to go for his gun the worst way, but he had another want that beat that one all hollow. He wanted to live.

Kid Reese and Doc Sites stood there looking at the big man and they couldn't believe it, and I'm sure I couldn't. A body didn't need to read minds to guess what they were thinking, because here was a poor old gray-haired caprock rancher on one leg with his gun muzzle down calling the bluff of a gunman said to be among

the fastest—although, come to think of it, I never heard it said by anyone but Doc or Reese.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Pa standing there; for a little man he looked mighty big, and I suddenly found myself thinking about how it was that my pa had come back with Uncle Bud's scalp. No Comanche warrior ever left a trophy like that beside the trail. Surely no Comanche warrior would ever let a trophy like that go without a fight to the death. It seemed all Bob Heseltine had to do to die was lay hand on his guns.

Pa's pistol swung up. „You had your chance. Now unbuckle your gun belt and step back.“

Heseltine did what he was told and I went forward and gathered his guns. Then I picked up all that money and stuffed it in the saddlebags, and I went through their pockets checking for more.

„Time you learned a lesson, Edwin,“ Pa said to me. „Time you learned that it's what's inside a man that matters, not how fast he can draw a gun.“

Pa backed off a few careful steps and without looking at me, he said, „Ed, you and him are going to fight. He needs a whoppin' and you're going to give it to him, do you hear?“

Pa gestured with the Colt. „You others stay out of this... it's a fair fight, between the two of them.“

Well, I looked over at Heseltine; he was six or seven years older than me an' he outweighed me by more than a few pounds. I thought of that story where he killed the sheriff, and then I remembered that he'd just backed down to a crippled-up old man who'd been armed with little more than a fiery force of will and my old Colt.

I put down my gun.

Heseltine took off his calfskin jacket and spat on his hands, looking over at me. „Why, you weak-kneed little whelp, I'll—!“

Another thing Pa taught me: If you're going to fight... fight. Talk about it after.

Lifting my left fist I fetched him a clout in the mouth with my right, and right then I saw that a mean man could bleed.

He came at me swinging with both hands. He was strong, and he figured to put the sign on me. He moved well, better than me, but he hadn't put in all those years of hard work that I had.

He walloped me alongside the jaw and it shook me some, but not like I figured it would. He hit me again and I saw a kind of surprised look come into his eyes, and I knew he'd hit me as hard as he could so I fetched him right where he'd been putting all that whiskey. He grunted, and I spread out my legs and began whopping him with both fists... and in that regard I take after Pa. I've got big hands.

He went down to his knees and I picked him up by the collar and looked him over to find a place that wasn't bloody where I could fetch him again, but the fight was all out of him and Pa said, „Let him go, Ed. Just drop him.“

Seemed like he would go down easier if I fetched him a clout and I did, and then I walked back to get my gun, blowing on my sore fists.

Pa looked over at Doc Sites and Kid Reese who were staring at Heseltine like it was a bad dream. „You two can keep your guns,“ he said. „This is Indian country, and I just hope you come after us.“



„Whatever you do,“ he added, „don’t ever come back home. There will be too many who’d like a shot at you.“

Neither of us felt like camping that night with home so far away, so we rode on with the north star behind us. Pa’s leg must have been giving him what for, but he was in a good mood, and my fists were sore and my knuckles split, but I felt like riding on through the night.

„You know, Pa, Carlson’s been wanting to sell out. He’s got water and about three hundred head, and with what we’ve got we could buy him out and have margin to work on. I figure we could swing it.“

„Together, we could,“ Pa said.

We rode south, taking our time, under a Comanche moon.

