

Red Hell Hits Canyon Diablo

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Chapter 1

Canyon Diablo.

THEY CALLED IT Canyon Diablo, but for no apparent reason. Like everything else it had advantages and disadvantages, good points and bad ones, depending on the time of the day, the season of the year, or who happened to be occupying the canyon at a given time. At this particular time, two hundred feet up the south wall, a solitary disadvantage stood motionless on the narrow ledge, watching the small group of riders on the open plain approach the dark defile that led into the canyon. A dozen feet above his head the rock sloped back abruptly straightening into the flat tableland. Directly below, the wall extended in a sheer drop to the canyon mouth; but a few yards to his right the canyon wall buckled with loose rock and thorn brush, sloping gradually out into the open plain.

A fifty caliber buffalo rifle rested on a waist-high boulder in front of him, pointed in the general direction of the riders. His gaze followed the same line, his face motionless, though the sand-specked hot wind nudged shoulder-length, jet-black hair and forced his eyelids to lower slightly, so that he watched with eyes that were slits against the glare.

Eyes that were small, black, bullet-like... staring at the riders with a cold-steel hate. It is easy for a Chiricahua Apache to hate. It is doubly so when his vision is filled with the sight of blanco horse soldiers.

Lieutenant Gordon Towner reined in his patrol at the signal from the rider fifty yards ahead. Matt Cline, the civilian scout, wheeled his pony and rode back to the officer and six men.

„Did you see him, Lieutenant?“

„Did I see whom?“

Matt Cline's jaw bulged, a wad of tobacco accentuating his creased, ruddy face, and the short brim of his hat was low on his forehead casting a shadow to the tips of his straggly, black mustache. His lips were parted slightly by the tobacco bulge of his jaw and barely moved when he spoke.

He pointed ahead to the mouth of the canyon three hundred yards away, and then his arm swept up to the top of the south wall. Pointing up, his lean, heavily veined arm stretched from the sleeve of red flannel underwear. He wore no shirt. His suspenders crossed the sweat-stained, colorless undershirt and attached to dark serge trousers that tucked into high, dust-caked boots. Across his lap he held a Remington-Heppburn.

„See that ledge runnin' along near the top of the wall? Well, not a minute ago one of our little friends was up there.“ The scout ended with a stream of tobacco juice spurting into the white dust.

The lieutenant pulled the brim of his floppy, gray field hat closer to his eyes and squinted ahead to the canyon entrance. A hundred things raced through his mind, and every one of them was a question. It was his patrol and he was

supposed to have the answers. That's why he had a commission. But the face bore a puzzled expression. It was young, and lobster-red, and told openly that he was new to frontier station, though he had learned all the answers at the Point. You hesitate when it's your command, your responsibility. When a dirty old man in an undershirt is studying you to see what you've got, waiting to pick you apart. And if he finds the wrong thing, the buzzards do the rest of the picking.

„Mr. Cline, the primary objective of this patrol is to locate and bring in Trooper Byerlein. If in the process we come across hostiles, it is also the duty of this patrol to scout them and deal with them using the best means at hand. I would judge that there is a rancheria somewhere in that canyon. I don't think their band could be very large, for I know of no Indians at San Carlos that are unaccounted for. Now that we've found one, or possibly a band, we'll have to act quickly before they get away.“

„You got it wrong there, Lieutenant,“ the scout said. „We didn't find him. That Indian found us.“

„Perhaps I'm wrong, but I'd observe him to be a lookout. Now he's obviously fled after being seen.“

„Only thing wrong with that, Lieutenant, is that you don't observe an Apache when he's on lookout. I don't know what your experience is, but I hear this is your first patrol out of Fort Thomas. You might as well learn right now that when you spot an Apache like that, it's because he wants you to see him. Right now there could be a dozen of'em hidin' on that rocky grade goin' up to the ledge. If we was to ride to the mouth we'd see him again just a little way further on. Then you'd go further and you'd see him again. Until he led you to the right spot. There'd be a lot of shots and you'd go back to Thomas draped over your horse facedown. If there's anybody left to lead the horse.“

And so they learned. The lieutenant faced the scout, but was silent.

It wasn't the best thing to have been said in front of his men. Above all, they had to have confidence in him. He waited until he felt the heat of embarrassment drain from his face.

„What do you suggest, then?“

Matt Cline shifted his chew to the other cheek. „Well, it looks like Byerlein's tracks go into the canyon, which means they prob'ly got him. It's one thing trackin' a deserter, but it's another goin' into an Apache rancheria to get him. If he's there he's either dead or half dead, so there's no worry there anymore.“ He pointed to a splash of green that crept between low hills to the north of where they were standing.

„I think we'd better wait and move over to those pines until Sinsonte shows up. He'll cut our sign over to there without any trouble. Maybe he'll know just what we're up against.“

FROM THE EDGE of the pines they watched the canyon entrance across the empty stretch of desert, and the shadowy defile that slashed into the mountainside had eight different meanings. But it flicked through everyone's mind that it was a place where you could die while never seeing what did it. Six enlisted troopers prayed to six interpretations of God that the young lieutenant wasn't a glory seeker... at least not on this patrol. So the men sprawled in sand and grass, their bodies relaxed—though it's a singular type of relaxation only a little more than a mile from the Apache. Eyes are ever watchful. The lieutenant

and Cline sat a little apart from the men. Towner pulled at the sparse tufts of grass nervously, looking around in every direction, but mostly toward the canyon. „How do you know you can trust Sinsonte?“ It was more than just making conversation. „He’s an Apache just like the rest of them. How do you know he isn’t eating with that band of hostiles right now?“

„Well, for one thing, army chow’s spoiled him,“ the scout answered.

„He probably wouldn’t even touch mescal anymore if somebody baked it for him. I been scoutin’ with him goin’ on five years now and I don’t have any reason not to trust him. The day he turn around and lets go with his Sharps at me, why, then I’ll quit trustin’ him.“

Cline smiled at his joke. „Course he ain’t always been a scout. He was with Cochise ten years ago, shootin’ all the whites he could, long as he needed a pony or a few extra rounds, but that was just somethin’ in his past. To an Apache, what you did a long time ago hasn’t got much bearin’ on what you happen to be doin’ at the present. And I don’t think he got along too well with Cochise, though he was with him since Apache Pass. ‘Course, he won’t come right out and tell you. See, Sinsonte is a White Mountain Apache, and for some reason—buried somewhere in his past—he’s got a full-fledged hate for Chiricahuas. That, along with army rations, is why he’s the best tracker at Fort Thomas.“

„Uh-huh,“ Towner grunted. „So you think the hostiles in the canyon are Chiricahuas.“ It was half question, half statement of fact. The words of a brand-new lieutenant, willing to learn, but wishing he could have picked his own instructor.

Cline said, „I don’t see how they could be anythin’ else. If they’re all accounted for on the reservation, then they must be ones that come up from across the border. When we was roundin’ up the bands to bring them to San Carlos and Fort Apache, a bunch of’em slipped through the net and streaked south for the Sierra Madres, and nobody could dig’em out of those hills. Now, every once in a while, bands of’em come raidin’ back into Arizona for horses and shells. They’re carryin’ on a little war with the Mexicans and have to keep their supplies up.

„Everybody’d just as soon they never come back. They got some good leaders... Chatto, Nachez, old Nana and Loco. And now I hear about an upstart medicine man who’s gainin’ influence. Name’s Geronimo. I’d bet the bucks over in that canyon are part of that band.“

An hour after sundown, Lieutenant Towner was still sitting at the edge of the pines, repeatedly shifting from one position to another on the sandy ground. Pine-tree shadows striped his soft face and made his eyes seem to shine. They were open wide. It was a long way from Springfield, Mass. A few yards out in the desert there was a muffled scraping sound, and he jumped to his feet, tugging at his holstered revolving pistol. By the time he had gotten it out, Sinsonte was standing next to him.

Matt Cline came up from somewhere behind him.

„Did you find’em?“

Sinsonte stood in front of his pony holding the hackamore close under the animal’s head, while the other hand still covered the nostrils. A man can be shot even when approaching a friendly camp.

„I find, nantan.“ Sinsonte, a little man even for an Apache, stood with narrow, hunched shoulders. He was perhaps fifty years and his eyes were

beginning to be rivered with tiny red lines, but in them still was a fire, a fire that belonged to a younger man. Besides the calico red band holding his hair in place, he wore only high Apache moccasins with turned-up toes and a white cotton breechclout. A uniform jacket was lashed in his bedroll for more peaceful days.

The two scouts crouched together at the edge of the desert for a long time, drawing obscure lines in the sand and conversing in a mixture of Apache and Spanish with only an occasional English word. For a few minutes the lieutenant leaned over their map of sand, trying to recognize a mark or hear even a part of their conversation that was understandable. Finally he turned away in disgust.

„Sergeant Lonnigan!“ The old sergeant rose from the circle of enlisted men. „Issue half rations all around. No fire. Therefore no coffee.“

It felt good to bark an order.

Dammit, he was still in command!

„Yes, sir!“ Lonnigan snapped his reply. Thirty years in the army.

Seven years longer than the shavetail had even existed. But Lonnigan was used to young second lieutenants. He had served under many. He remembered one who was now a general. He remembered two during the march to the sea, and at Shiloh—they were both colonels. And he remembered dozens of others who were dead. For some reason he liked this new Lieutenant Towner, even if he was too straight out of the manual and didn't know much about Apaches. He remembered a time not too long ago when he himself had never heard the name Apache.

You learned. And there are little humps of ground out behind the commissary building at Thomas to testify for those who didn't.

IN A LITTLE WHILE Cline went over to the lieutenant.

„Sinsonte found them. Chiricahuas. He was only a few dozen yards from that lookout who tried to lure us in, and he followed him. When the lookout saw the lure wouldn't work, he headed straight for the camp to talk it over with the rest of'em. About fourteen, fifteen. Sinsonte says from Nachez's band, but they're here with a subchief by the name of Lacayuelo... and mister, he's really a bad one. He's even hard in the eyes of most of the Apaches, and that's sayin' somethin'. I'd guess the rest of'em are bad actors just like he is.“

„Did he see Byerlein?“

„Yeah, but he was layin' on the ground in the middle of'em, so Sinsonte don't know if'n he's alive or dead. I'd say he's half of either one.“

The lieutenant looked out through the dingy grayness of the moonbathed desert to the black slash that was Canyon Diablo, reflecting on what he had been told. It made it no easier for him, but he turned to the scout abruptly.

„Mr. Cline, if Sinsonte can sneak up on a band of hostiles without being detected, then he can lead this patrol in. Perhaps not to their camp, but at least to a favorable position from which we can make contact without being at a disadvantage. An ever present obligation to prevent the hostiles from committing further depredations in the Territory cannot be turned aside or put off. My duty is before me, Mr. Cline, and will be carried out whether you object or not.“ He paused to give emphasis to his words. „So we're going to get them.“

„I don't object, mister. You're the boss. I knew ever since this afternoon that you'd be wantin' to go in, so Sinsonte and I just did a little figurin' and I think we got an answer.“

„How to get in?“

„Yeah,“ the scout replied. „Sinsonte’s leavin’ now to snake acrost that open stretch. In about four hours the moon’ll be down low enough for the rest of us to get acrost. We leave the horses here. And I say take all the men along, no horse guard left behind, ‘cause we’ll need all the carbines we got. ‘Course that’s up to you. The idea is to angle from here so as to land us on the north side of the mountain, three miles up from the entrance we saw this afternoon. On the north it slopes up pretty gradual, and there’s a trail that winds about halfway up and then cuts down into rocky country and on into the center of the canyon. The trail in’s a fair hard one to find, but Sinsonte’s goin’ to meet us where it starts. He’s out layin’ the carpet now.“

Chapter 2

The White Flag.

THE MOON CLAIMED it was near three o’clock when Cline halted the seven cavalymen on a broad ledge halfway up the mountain slope. It had been hours since anyone had spoken. Neither the tedious climb nor the circumstance allowed for talk. Only once a teeth-clenched curse followed a misstep, and Towner turned long enough to glare at the trooper and curse him out with his eyes. Now could be heard the heavy breathing as each man stretched his neck to gulp the cool mountain air. Below them the desert rolled dimly for miles, and in the distance was a darker shadow. The clump of pines they had left hours before. From the ledge where they stood, a narrow defile slashed into the mountainside, its rock-wall sides rising over a hundred feet. The trail twisted from view thirty-odd yards ahead.

Cline said, „You never see the end of this one until you’re there. She bends around so much.“

Towner studied the approach. „You followed it before?“

„A few years back, but I don’t look forward to walkin’ down that aisle not knowin’ who I’m goin’ to meet.“ He looked around restlessly. „It beats me where Sinsonte is. If he don’t show in ten minutes, we’ll have to go on. This ain’t no place to be perched when the sun comes out.“

By five, the small band had threaded deep into the defile. Sinsonte had not come. The narrow passage had widened considerably, but it was a slow, exerting grind over the sharp rock and through the biting chaparral clumps that dotted the way. Towner had ordered absolute silence, but the order could not mute the metallic scrape of issue boots on hard rock or the rattle of stones kicked along the pathway. They kept their lips sealed and bit off the urge to curse out the army, the Apache, the sun-bleached country and Lieutenant Towner. They were experienced men, combining one hundred and sixteen years of active service, and they knew what it was to walk up to an enemy.

Walking slowly. How to march without speaking, without thinking, the vigilance being inbred. Many soldiers experienced it, but you had to fight Apaches to really know what it meant. Walking down a narrow trail in the heart of a Chiricahua stronghold, a soldier will even smile at the thought of the arid,

glaring, baked-sand parade at Fort Thomas. There is a feeling of security there, though you wouldn't go so far as to call it home.

And Gordon Towner had his thoughts. Did Cook say anything about a similar circumstance? It was true, he was afraid, but more of doing the wrong thing, giving the wrong command, than of the Indians. A twenty-three-year-old boy from Springfield, leading his first command against an enemy, Chiricahua Apaches. A command that consisted of a sergeant, five privates and a grizzly old scout who would have to learn more respect for an officer of the United States Army.

The single file column stopped abruptly at the sign of Matt Cline's arm raised above his head. The trail narrowed again to less than ten feet across, and the path was partially blocked by clumps of thick bushes; but it was evident that they were near the end of the passage.

Cline was moving ahead to scout the brush when the low moan of a single Apache voice reached them. The scout stopped dead and the voice went on in a broken-tongue chant, groans mixed with the chopped Apache words. He listened for a minute and recognized the death chant and went on, knowing what to expect.

Towner watched him approach the thick bushes and then stop and look to the right. He took a step toward the wall where a pile of loose boulders jutted out into the path, but stopped long enough to wave the others ahead. Behind the jutting rocks, in a shallow niche in the wall, Sinsonte sat propped against the wall mumbling the death chant through lips smeared with blood. At first glance, it looked as if his whole face had been lacerated, but in another second Towner saw that all the blood poured from his eyes, or where his eyes had been. He moved his legs stretched out in front of him and the feet wobbled loosely, turning too far to the sides, uncontrolled, the way they will when the tendons have been slashed. Sinsonte would never follow another sign.

Cline lifted his revolving pistol and placed it in the old Indian's hand, but he turned quickly to Towner who was looking the other way, swallowing hard to keep down the bile that was rising in his stomach.

„Come on, we got to get out of here.“ He was about to say more but his sentence was cut short by the singing ricochet of a bullet over their heads.

„They're behind us!“ Lonnigan shouted and turned bringing his carbine up.

„Hold your fire, Sergeant! Everybody up!“ Towner had his handgun out and waved the men ahead with it. He waited until they had all followed Cline through the bushes, and then sprinted after them.

They scrambled over the rocks into the boulder-strewn clearing, glancing uncertainly at the four canyon walls that seemed to stretch to the sky, offering no avenue of escape. From somewhere to the left a volley of shots split the stillness scattering the soldiers behind the handiest bits of cover. Low clumps of mesquite dotted the clearing, but offered no permanent protection to the troopers.

Matt Cline took a snap shot at a mound of rock and brush fifty yards away over which a thin wisp of smoke was rising, then shouted to the lieutenant to spread the men out and follow him. It took him only a few seconds to grasp the situation and decide what course to take. There was only one choice. With the men behind him, Cline raced for a small clump of trees that grew out from between the rocks at the base of the right side of the box canyon, directly across from where the shots were coming.

Their backs were to the Indians firing from the well-concealed places along the left wall, but they ran well spread out, dodging and ducking, continually changing course to offer as difficult a target as possible. The firing was intense during the fifteen or twenty seconds it took them to reach the trees, but then died off abruptly as the last man vaulted the natural rock barrier and dropped among the trees. Not a hit. It was always a consoling thought that the Apaches never had bullets enough to waste on practice.

THEY TOOK CROUCHED positions five to ten feet apart behind the natural barricade of rocks and trees, pointing their carbines out between the rocks. And they waited. At their backs, the jagged canyon wall, veined with crevices and ledges, loomed skyward.

The lieutenant searched the cliff with his gaze, but could see the top in only one place through the dense trees. Apaches could get up there, but they wouldn't see anyone to fire on. No, the danger was ahead, among the rocks not three hundred yards away—and you couldn't see it. But he was satisfied with his position. It was small, right under the wall and not more than thirty yards wide. It wasn't a position you could hold forever, not without food and water. Still, the young officer was satisfied. There was no place the scout could lead them.

He nudged Cline. „Do you think they'll try to run over us?“ He spoke in a low voice, as if afraid the Indians would overhear.

Cline shifted his chew, looking out over the clearing. He only occasionally glanced at the lieutenant. „Mister, I've known Apaches all my life—I even lived with them when I was a boy—but don't ask me what I think they'll do. Nobody knows what an Apache's goin' to do until it's done. I don't think even the Apache himself knows. But,“ the scout reflected, „I know they ain't goin' to come whoopin' across that open space if it means some of'em gettin' killed. He's a heller, but he don't stick his neck out.“

„Lieutenant!“

Towner and the scout crouched low and crawled to the trooper who had called.

„I think they're comin'. I seen somethin' move,“ the trooper said, pointing. „About twenty feet from the other side.“

The scout squinted hard through the low branches. „Hell, yeah, they're comin'! Look!“

An Apache showed himself for a split second, disappearing into a shallow gully near the spot where the trooper had pointed. Cline threw up the Remington-Hepburn at the same time and fired, the bullet kicking up sand where the Indian had disappeared. „You got to shoot fast or there's nothin' to shoot at.“ The last word was on his lips when he threw the piece up again and fired.

„Damn, they move fast!“

Individually, then, the soldiers began firing at the darting, crawling, shadowy figures that never remained in sight more than a few seconds.

They fired slowly, taking their time, with a patience that started for some of them at the first Bull Run. They knew what they were doing.

They knew how to make each shot mean something.

From the opposite ridge came a heavy fire, continuing for almost a minute, keeping the soldiers crouching low behind their defenses.

„Keep shooting, dammit!“ Towner screamed down the line. „They’re moving up under fire cover!“

He turned to his own position in time to see the blur of a painted face and a red calico band loom in front of him not twenty feet away.

The Apache was screaming, coming straight on, bringing a Sharps to his shoulder when Towner raised his handgun and fired. The face disappeared in a crimson flash, and for a split second a picture of Sinsonte passed through his mind. He stared between the rocks where the painted face had been. He saw it still. Gordon Towner had killed his first man... and sometimes it will do something to you.

Cline called over, „Good shootin‘, mister.“ But Towner didn’t hear.

He was squeezing off on another creeping shadow. He had been baptized.

They were firing continuously now, seeing more Apaches than there actually were. Every few minutes someone would yell, „I got one!“ but most of their bullets whined harmlessly off the rocks and into the brush and sand. On to the middle of the day the cavalymen pecked away in this fashion, firing sporadically at every cover that might conceal an Indian.

They were holding their own, successfully keeping the hostiles at bay, whittling down their number, except for one disastrous occurrence. An Apache who had crawled unbelievably close, was shot through the side as he dove for a cover, but the bullet did not stop him. He leaped to his feet and goaded himself on with a frenzied scream that brought him to the top of the barricade. If he was going to die, he didn’t intend to die alone. It all happened in a few seconds. Private Huber jumped up just as the Indian fired his heavy buffalo gun from the waist, and the ball caught the trooper square in the throat. At least four shots ripped through the Indian’s body as he swung the heavy rifle like a club and smashed it against the side of a head. He teetered for a moment and then fell forward, still clutching the Sharps, onto the lifeless bodies of Privates Huber and Martz.

And when a man says one cavalryman is worth ten Apaches, he is a fool. It is certain he was not at Canyon Diablo that July day in ‘78.

SHORTLY AFTER NOON the firing slackened gradually and finally died out altogether. Not an Apache was in sight. They were certain that at least two or three were still out in the middle somewhere, but if they were, the devil himself was hiding them. A hot breeze sang through the canyon, shifting the sand and stirring the mesquite clumps. The movement of the wind was all the more eerie contrasted with the dead stillness of the canyon. There was not a human sound. The sun struck fiercely into the boxed area, the shimmering heat waves mixing with the sand-specked breeze to form a gritty element that you could almost stick with a bayonet. It was hot, blistering hot, and the lack of water made it all the worse. That, and the overpressing reality that out there, somewhere, were Apaches, Chiricahua Apaches with the smell of blood in their nostrils. It set a stage of silence and tortuous, eye-strained waiting.

Towner and Cline squatted next to the two heaps of stones that covered the dead cavalymen. Since burying Huber and Martz they had spoken less and less. It was getting late in the afternoon. The silence and back-breaking vigilance clung all the heavier, daring conversation or a moment of relaxation. But Towner was getting tired.

„If we ever get out of here I'll send back for them to be buried at Thomas," he said.

„I don't think they'd care one way the other now," the scout replied. „I know I wouldn't. What difference does it make if... Well, I'll be damned! Look at that!"

Matt Cline jumped up and pointed with his carbine toward the other side of the canyon. A white flag waved a few times above the grayness of rock, then an Indian stepped cautiously into the open carrying the flag tied to the end of an antiquated Springfield.

As he advanced, five Apaches jumped down from low ledges along the wall, and as they walked slowly toward Towner's position, three more Apaches appeared as if out of nowhere to join them. They had been hiding in the open area since giving up the sneak attack hours before. As the soldiers watched them advance, they wondered how the devil they could have missed seeing the three hiding right out in the open. Towner wondered if it wasn't just an excuse to gather up the warriors who had been stranded. Matt Cline wondered if the Springfield that bore the white flag was loaded.

The nine Apaches were still a few dozen yards away. Matt Cline leaned toward the lieutenant.

„I figure they're out of bullets or they wouldn't be playin' games. I'd say they want to get close, catch us off guard and finish the job with knives. If they had shells they could sit back there for a week and wait for us to come out in the open or die of starvation. It's gotta be a trick. Whatever you do, for God's sake don't trust'em!"

Towner held his revolving pistol at his side. „Which one's Lacayuelo?"

„That little one with the cavalry jacket on, next to the one carryin' the flag."

A few feet from the defense line the Apaches stopped and Lacayuelo came on alone. His brown chest and stomach showed through the opening of the filthy, buttonless jacket. An empty cartridge belt crossed his chest and left shoulder. And an inane grin showed protruding teeth, forming a parallel with a smear of yellow paint that extended from ear to ear across the bridge of his nose. Like the others of his band he wore Apache moccasins that reached to his knees; but unlike the others whose only covering were light breechclouts, he wore ragged, gray trousers that tucked into his moccasins. His headband, holding back shoulder-length black hair, had once been a bright red, but now was a grease-stained, colorless rag. Three of the others wore small bush clumps attached to their headbands. At two hundred yards you wouldn't see them. Lacayuelo began gesturing and speaking rapidly in the choppy, sound-picture Apache tongue. Matt Cline listened without interrupting, until he was finished, and then turned to the lieutenant.

„To make it short, he says there's no reason why we can't all be friends. He says just give him and his warriors some shells so they can hunt and keep from going hungry, and everybody'll be happy. He says he can't understand why we attacked him and his peaceful huntin' party."

Towner stared at the Apache. He took his campaign hat off and shook his head. „Does this animal understand English?"

„Enough to get by, but it would take him till Christmas to tell you anything."

The lieutenant continued to stare at Lacayuelo and his eyes narrowed. „Tell him he can go to hell with his hunting. He and his party are under arrest. Tell him he's going back to San Carlos to stand trial for murder."

Cline passed it on to the Chiricahua subchief who grinned and replied in only a few words.

„He says you can't arrest him, because he's here under the protection of a white flag. He says you have too much honor to disregard his sign of truce. He's a sly old devil, throwin' it back in your lap.“

„Ask him what he's done with Byerlein.“

The scout turned from the Indian after a minute. „He says he doesn't know what you're talkin' about. He says we're the first blancos he's seen in two months.“

„He does, does he.“ Towner had not taken his eyes from the subchief since he stepped forward. Now, still looking full into his face, he raised his revolving pistol and pulled back the hammer. „Tell Lacayuelo that white flag or no white flag, I'll shoot his damn eyes out if he doesn't start talking about Byerlein.“

Cline hesitated. „Mister, he's got more men than we have.“

„He's got more men without bullets. Tell him!“

Cline passed it on and the words made the Apache lurch forward a half a step, but he looked into the muzzle of Towner's gun and stopped dead. He studied the young lieutenant, looking him up and down, taking his own good time; and finally must have decided that the blanco wasn't joking, for all at once a broad grin creased his evil, sun-scarred face and he was as friendly as could be. He jabbered to Cline for almost two minutes and then turned abruptly and walked away. The other Apaches followed.

„Where the devil are they going?“

Cline said, „He says he sees you're a friend of the Apache, so he's invitin' us to his rancheria for some refreshments. We're supposed to follow. He's thinkin' of somethin'. I say stay here.“

Towner only glanced at him. „When you're in command, Mr. Cline, you can say that. Lonnigan! Spread out behind me. Mr. Cline, you'll walk at my side.“

Five cavalymen and a civilian scout walked slowly across the canyon floor, following the Indians by fifty yards. The sun had begun to drop behind the western canyon wall so that half of the boxed area was in shadow. Towner and the rest strode from the dark into the light and followed the Indians to the other side, then through a narrow defile into a side canyon. They walked into this new clearing where four wickiups stood and a dozen or so ponies were tethered on the other side of the canyon meadow. And they approached the Apaches with almost a swagger, a show of indifference, for they were cavalymen of the „5th“ ... though they had only nine bullets between them.

Chapter 3

Tizwin.

FOR AN APACHE rancheria, this one was comparatively clean, but it only testified that the Indians had not been there very long. The four wickiups were in a semicircle, and two cook fires, close together, were in the center of the half-moon area. Lacayuelo and his warriors sat in an irregular circle between the wickiups and the dead cook fires. He rose to one knee as they approached and beckoned them to join the circle; but Towner stopped the group on the opposite

side of the cook fires and watched the Indians pass from one to the next a bulging water bag made from horse intestines.

Towner turned his head slightly. „What are they drinking?“

„Tizwin, most likely,“ Cline said. „Or mescal.“ He watched the Indians drink. „I wouldn't put any pesos on it bein' water.“

„What the devil's tizwin?“

„Apache corn beer. Knock you back to the States if you drink enough. Makes a worse Indian out of a bad one. I don't know what it'll do to a hardcase like Lacayuelo. He wants us to join'em.“

„Corn beer, eh,“ the lieutenant muttered, almost to himself. And he had a most uncommon look in his eyes.

Sometimes it seems as if certain men are set aside to do great things while others have to play the role of the fool or the coward, predestined from all eternity. But if you look close into every case, and that means everybody in the world, you'll see a time, a circumstance where a judgment has to be made that either makes or breaks the man. Sometimes luck helps. But it happens often in the army—especially on frontier station—and it was happening now to young Gordon Towner. Fortunately, he knew it. And wasn't afraid to push his luck.

„Mr. Cline, tell the filthy scoundrel that we'll be only too happy to join his soiree.“ And then to Lonigan, „Sergeant, turn your bully boys loose. They can drink all they want—long as it's more than the Indians.“

They sat where they had stood, on the other side of the ashes of the cook fires, ten to fifteen feet from the Apaches. Lacayuelo sent the water bag over to them—it turned out to be tizwin—but gestured and argued loudly for almost an hour for the blancos to join his circle. He was drinking all the time, like everyone else, and finally gave up his pleading when he saw that it was no use. The fly would not venture into the web. Perhaps he felt that ten feet wasn't far anyway.

The soldiers raised their baked-clay cups drink for drink with the Indians, carbines or handguns across laps, eyes ever watchful over the cup brims. It was a strange setting: the savage and the soldier, mortal enemies, drinking tizwin together, each watching for the false move. But the strangest sight was Gordon Towner. He was at least two cupfuls ahead of everyone else. He repeatedly drank down the warm liquid with one toss and raised his empty cup as a sign for more. He drank without speaking, never taking his eyes off the Apache subchief. Lacayuelo met the blanco chief's gaze and felt more than distrust. There was a challenge also. And he would try to drink his tizwin as rapidly.

Cline looked at the lieutenant anxiously. The scout was beginning to feel his drinks, and he'd had tizwin before.

„Mister, you'd better take it easy. This stuff'll do somethin' to you.“

Towner sat erect with his legs crossed. „Mr. Cline, I may be young, but a long time ago my father taught me to drink like a gentleman. If I didn't think I could out-drink these creatures, I'd resign my commission.“

„That's the trouble, they don't drink like gentlemen.“

The lieutenant reached for the water bag again. „Play the game, Mr. Cline. Play the game.“ And oddly enough the words gave the scout confidence.

It was shortly after this that one of the Apaches screamed and leaped to his feet, drawing a knife from his breechclout. Five white men dropped their cups and raised pieces in one motion to cover the Apache who was about to leap over the mound of ashes. The sixth was doing quite another thing. He was laughing,

and loud enough to make the Indian stop his motion in midair, so that one of his moccasins came down in the middle of the cook fire, the soft ashes puffing in a cloud of gray smoke. He jerked his foot up instinctively, but too quickly, so that he was thrown off balance back among the other Chiricahuas. Towner laughed all the louder.

Then he stopped abruptly and eyed the subchief coldly. He spoke slowly, carefully, to make certain the old Indian would understand.

„Lacayuelo, why do you bring boys to do the work of men? I have heard many tales of how brave the Apache warriors are, but now I see that these tales must surely be false. For what I have seen of the Apache makes me believe that he is an old woman or a very little boy. You do not sit like men of dignity and calmly drink your tizwin. You scream and jump and would commit murder if you had the chance. That is because your hearts are black. You do not have the hearts of true braves. I have come the distance of twenty sunsets to see the Apache because I have heard so many tales of wonder and bravery. And now I see that he cannot even drink a few cups of tizwin without turning into the desert dog. Surely this is not something a man can be proud of.“ He glanced at the scout. „Tell these other beasts what I said. I think Lacayuelo understood. Look at his face.“

LACAYUELO LISTENED again as Cline repeated the words, and his face grew darker. As he rose to speak, his eyes were bleary from the tizwin, but he controlled his voice well, speaking slowly so that his thick tongue would not jumble the words.

„The mejor speaks as man much wiser than his years would have him be. You are young and I start to grow old and I can see what you are doing. Your words have stabbed our hearts. You tell us we are not men. I tell you, I know what you are doing. Still, we will sit and drink tizwin and by'n by I show you Chiricahua is more man than a blanco.“ He spoke gravely, solemnly. „You have called us many names. Now I will show you they are not true. Now you must show me that you are a man, or I shall call you not only woman and little boy, but dead fool!“

The men understood now, fully. It was a contest. They were pitting their ability to drink against the Apaches'. They understood well what would happen to the loser. And they understood that they relied completely on the young Lieutenant Towner to keep the Indians drinking.

Occasionally, a man would laugh to himself, How the devil did I get into this! But it was a hollow laugh. For the most part there was silence, a deathlike silence, for that's what was in the air. It stretched from one line of men over to the other and it held them transfixed. This was the most serious drinking any trooper had ever done—and it went on and on, into the dusk.

The Indians were becoming dim outlines in the grayness when Towner ordered the fire. Lonigan worked cautiously, facing the Indians, though his feet were very unsteady. He cursed with a thick tongue the matches that kept going out in his fumbling fingers, but soon he had a good fire going. Across the flames, Towner watched the shadows dance on the faces of the Apaches. In the orange light they were fierce, grotesque, black smudges hiding eyes filmed and bulging with hate; but he noticed other things too. Eyes that closed, opened, then closed again for a longer time. A head would nod. Soon one of the Apaches, without a sound, fell back and lay motionless.

Within the next two hours, three more Indians slumped into unconsciousness. But not without continued prompting from the lieutenant. He drank his cupfuls down without hesitation, and when an Indian faltered for a minute, or would spill the liquid in his drunkenness, Towner was alert to sneer and goad him on to more.

Lacayuelo watched his strength melt away with the hot liquid, but he was powerless to do anything. At one time he began a chant, a song telling of all his warrior deeds; but the blanco chief howled with laughter. And when the Apache staggered to his feet to cross the fire, the lieutenant stopped laughing and stared at him silently. It was a look of contempt. A look that said, I told you you were not a man. And Lacayuelo fell back to show this insolent muchacho what a man really was. But it was becoming more difficult each hour.

The end was near. Lacayuelo knew it. His eyes moved up and down the line of his warriors. Only two were in sitting positions, but their heads drooped chin to chest. Neither had taken a drink in almost an hour. He looked across the dying fire. The scout lay belly-down on the hard ground, his arms outstretched unnaturally pointing in the direction of the three troopers, motionless on their backs. But the sergeant was still awake; head hanging, but awake. He would move slowly, the Indian thought. And the blanco chief still faced across the fire, his hat brim low masking his eyes. He could be asleep...

The Indian swayed as he rose to his feet, leaned too far forward and fell to his hands and knees, tripping over the extended foot of one of the prostrate warriors. His head was clear, he could think, but his body would not react with the same accord. He stumbled as he rose again, this time shattering the pottery cup against a rock.

He looked quickly to the blanco chief. The form danced and swayed before his blurred vision, but that part which was the head did not move. The eyes still cloaked by the hat brim.

But now there was another motion. He stumbled forward kicking dirt into the dying fire and then stopped dead, swaying on feet spread slightly apart. He squinted hard to make the blanco chief stop swinging back and forth, and as the film fell away and the rotating motion slowed, he saw the revolving pistol pointed at his eyes. And through the piercing ring in his ears he heard the hammer click into cock position. It was all over. Towner watched the old Indian sink to his knees slowly and then fall forward, rolling onto his side. He had the urge to pull the trigger, even though it was not necessary, even though it was all over. From across the glowing pile of ashes there was neither the sign of motion nor the hint of it.

He nudged Lonigan who lifted his head momentarily, grunted, and then eased his thick body slowly backward until he was lying down.

Like the others, he was past caring. Towner stumbled as he crossed the fire, his feet moving as if iron fetters were attached, but he shuffled on until he stood before Lacayuelo. He looked up and down the line of prostrate forms that revolved slowly on the ground, and then back at the subchief, shaking his head and blinking his eyes. All through the night his willpower had been using brute force to goad his body on, lashing the sinking feeling away with, Show the savages! Now it was over, and he could feel himself being drawn into the black nothingness of utter exhaustion. But there was one thing more to be done.

He bent over the still form of Lacayuelo and looked at his clothing closely, at the filthy jacket and ragged pants. Then the issue belt caught his eye. It was

polished, gleaming. He unbuckled it and drew it off. The first thing he saw was the name on the inside—Byerlein. That was all.

He drew his arm back and brought the barrel of the revolving pistol down upon the Indian's skull. And as he staggered down the line of unconscious figures, he brought the weapon down again and again against the heads of the Apaches. When it was finished, he felt better.

IT WAS FORTY miles back to Thomas. Forty blistering, dry miles through the furnace that was central Arizona. Miles that cramped legs and jolted heads already racked by the aftereffects of Apache corn beer.

And there were nine Chiricahua hostiles who had to be watched, watched with a sharp eye; though their feet were lashed beneath pony bellies and their skulls throbbed with a brutal pain.

Just before sunset, the riders, caked with alkali dust and heads bowed, rode across the parade at Fort Thomas. Colonel Darck stepped to the front of the ramada before his quarters to receive the lieutenant who had wheeled off toward him.

„You lost some men, Lieutenant.“ The colonel volunteered only this observation. It could mean anything. His opinion would come later when Towner made his official report. This meeting was simply a courtesy. „You look all in, Mr. Towner. Not used to the weather yet, eh? What do you say to a whiskey before cleaning up?“

The colonel spoke about it for years after. Of course he was polite about it, but it was the idea. The young lieutenant was the only officer Darck ever knew to refuse a whiskey punch after finishing a blistering four-day patrol.

