

The Big Hunt

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IT WAS A SHARPS .50, heavy and cumbrous, but he was lying at full length downwind of the herd behind the rise with the long barrel resting on the hump of the crest so that the gun would be less tiring to fire.

He counted close to fifty buffalo scattered over the grass patches, and his front sight roamed over the herd as he waited. A bull, its fresh winter hide glossy in the morning sun, strayed leisurely from the others, following thick patches of gamma grass. The Sharps swung slowly after the animal. And when the bull moved directly toward the rise, the heavy rifle dipped over the crest so that the sight was just off the right shoulder. The young man, who was still not much more than a boy, studied the animal with mounting excitement.

„Come on, granddaddy ... a little closer,“ Will Gordon whispered.

The rifle stock felt comfortable against his cheek, and even the strong smell of oiled metal was good. „Walk up and take it like a man, you ugly monster, you dumb, shaggy, ugly hulk of a monster. Look at that fresh gamma right in front of you...”

The massive head came up sleepily, as if it had heard the hunter, and the bull moved toward the rise. It was less than eighty yards away, nosing the grass tufts, when the Sharps thudded heavily in the crisp morning air.

The herd lifted from grazing, shaggy heads turning lazily toward the bull sagging to its knees, but as it slumped to the ground the heads lowered unconcernedly. Only a few of the buffalo paused to sniff the breeze. A calf bawled, sounding nooooo in the open-plain stillness. Will Gordon had reloaded the Sharps, and he pushed it out in front of him as another buffalo lumbered over to the fallen bull, sniffing at the blood, nuzzling the bloodstained hide: and, when the head came up, nose quivering with scent, the boy squeezed the trigger. The animal stumbled a few yards before easing its great weight to the ground.

Don't let them smell blood, he said to himself. They smell blood and they're gone.

He fired six rounds then, reloading the Sharps each time, though a loaded Remington rolling-block lay next to him. He fired with little hesitation, going to his side, ejecting, taking a cartridge from the loose pile at his elbow, inserting it in the open breech. He fired without squinting, calmly, killing a buffalo with each shot. Two of the animals lumbered on a short distance after being hit, glassy eyed, stunned by the shock of the heavy bullet. The others dropped to the earth where they stood.

Sitting up now, he pulled a square of cloth from his coat pocket, opened his canteen, and poured water into the cloth, squeezing it so that it would become saturated. He worked the wet cloth through the eye of his cleaning rod, then inserted it slowly into the barrel of the Sharps, hearing a sizzle as it passed through the hot metal tube. He was new to the buffalo fields, but he had learned how an overheated gun barrel could put a man out of business. He had made sure of many things before leaving Leverette with just a two-man outfit.

Pulling the rod from the barrel, he watched an old cow sniffing at one of the fallen bulls. Get that one quick ... or you'll lose a herd!

He dropped the Sharps, took the Remington, and fired at the buffalo from a sitting position. Then he reloaded both rifles, but fired the Remington a half-dozen more rounds while the Sharps cooled. Twice he had to hit with another shot to kill, and he told himself to take more time. Perspiration beaded his face, even in the crisp fall air, and burned powder was heavy in his nostrils, but he kept firing at the same methodical pace, because it could not last much longer, and there was not time to cool the barrels properly. He had killed close to twenty when the blood smell became too strong.

The buffalo made rumbling noises in the thickness of their throats and now three and four at a time would crowd toward those on the ground, sniffing, pawing nervously.

A bull bellowed, and the boy fired again. The herd bunched, bumping each other, bellowing, shaking their clumsy heads at the blood smell. Then the leader broke suddenly, and what was left of the herd was off, from stand to dead run, in one moment of panic, driven mad by the scent of death.

The boy fired into the dust cloud that rose behind them, but they were out of range before he could reload again.

It's better to wave them off carefully with a blanket after killing all you can skin, the boy thought to himself. But this had worked out all right. Sometimes it didn't, though. Sometimes they stampeded right at the hunter.

He rose stiffly, rubbing his shoulder, and moved back down the rise to his picketed horse. His shoulder ached from the buck of the heavy rifles, but he felt good. Lying back there on the plain was close to seventy or eighty dollars he'd split with Leo Cleary ... soon as they'd been skinned and handed over to the hide buyers. Hell, this was easy. He lifted his hat, and the wind was cold on his sweat-dampened forehead.

He breathed in the air, feeling an exhilaration, and the ache in his shoulder didn't matter one bit.

Wait until he rode into Leverette with a wagon full of hides, he thought. He'd watch close, pretending he didn't care, and he'd see if anybody laughed at him then.

HE WAS MOUNTING when he heard the wagon creaking in the distance, and he smiled when Leo Cleary's voice drifted up the gradual rise, swearing at the team. He waited in the saddle, and swung down as the four horses and the canvas-topped wagon came up to him.

„Leo, I didn't even have to come wake you up.“ Will Gordon smiled up at the old man on the box, and the smile eased the tight lines of his face. It was a face that seemed used to frowning, watching life turn out all wrong, a sensitive boyish face, but the set of his jaw was a man's ... or that of a boy who thought like a man. There were few people he showed his smile to other than Leo Cleary.

„That cheap store whiskey you brought run out,“ Leo Cleary said. His face was beard stubbled, and the skin hung loosely seamed beneath tired eyes.

„I thought you quit,“ the boy said. His smile faded.

„I have now.“

„Leo, we got us a lot of money lying over that rise.“

„And a lot of work...“ He looked back into the wagon, yawning.

„We got near a full load we could take in ... and rest up. You shooters think all the work's in knocking 'em down.“

„Don't I help with the skinning?“

Cleary's weathered face wrinkled into a slow smile. „That's just the old man in me coming out,“ he said. „You set the pace, Will. All I hope is roaming hide buyers don't come along ... you'll be wanting to stay out till April.“ He shook his head. „That's a mountain of back-breaking hours just to prove a point.“

„You think it's worth it or not?“ the boy said angrily.

Cleary just smiled. „Your dad would have liked to seen this,“ he said.

„Come on, let's get those hides.“

Skinning buffalo was filthy, back-straining work. Most hunters wouldn't stoop to it. It was for men hired as skinners and cooks, men who stayed by the wagons until the shooting was done.

During their four weeks on the range the boy did his share of the work, and now he and Leo Cleary went about it with little conversation.

Will Gordon was not above helping with the butchering, with hides going for four dollars each in Leverette, three dollars if a buyer picked them up on the range.

The more hides skinned, the bigger the profit. That was elementary.

Let the professional hunters keep their pride and their hands clean while they sat around in the afternoon filling up on scootawaboo. Let them pay heavy for extra help just because skinning was beneath them.

That was their business.

In Leverette, when the professional hunters laughed at them, it didn't bother Leo Cleary. Maybe they'd get hides, maybe they wouldn't.

Either way it didn't matter much. When he thought about it, Leo Cleary believed the boy just wanted to prove a point—that a two-man outfit could make money—attributing it to his Scotch stubbornness.

The idea had been Will's dad's—when he was sober. The old man had almost proved it himself.

But whenever anyone laughed, the boy would feel that the laughter was not meant for him but for his father.

Leo Cleary went to work with a frown on his grizzled face, wetting his dry lips disgustedly. He squatted up close to the nearest buffalo and with his skinning knife slit the belly from neck to tail. He slashed the skin down the inside of each leg, then carved a strip from around the massive neck, his long knife biting at the tough hide close to the head. Then he rose, rubbing the back of his knife hand across his forehead.

„Yo! Will...“ he called out.

The boy came over then, leading his horse and holding a coiled riata in his free hand. One end was secured to the saddle horn. He bunched the buffalo's heavy neck skin, wrapping the free end of line around it, knotting it.

He led the horse out the whole length of the rope, then mounted, his heels squeezing flanks as soon as he was in the saddle.

„Yiiiiiii!“ He screamed in the horse's ear and swatted the rump with his hat. The mount bolted.

The hide held, stretching, then jerked from the carcass, coming with a quick sucking, sliding gasp.

They kept at it through most of the afternoon, sweating over the carcasses, both of them skinning, and butchering some meat for their own use. It was still too early in the year, too warm, to butcher hindquarters for the meat buyers. Later, when the snows came and the meat would keep, they would do this.

They took the fresh hides back to their base camp and staked them out, stretching the skins tightly, flesh side up. The flat ground around the wagon and cook fire was covered with staked-out hides, taken the previous day. In the morning they would gather the hides and bind them in packs and store the packs in the wagon. The boy thought there would be maybe two more days of hunting here before they would have to move the camp.

For the second time that day he stood stretching, rubbing a stiffness in his body, but feeling satisfied. He smiled, and even Leo Cleary wasn't watching him to see it. At dusk they saw the string of wagons out on the plain, a black line creeping toward them against the sunlight dying on the horizon.

„Hide buyers, most likely,“ Leo Cleary said. He sounded disappointed, for it could mean they would not return to Leverette for another month.

The boy said, „Maybe a big hunting outfit.“

„Not at this time of day,“ the old man said. „They'd still have their hides drying.“ He motioned to the creek back of their camp. „Whoever it is, they want water.“

Two riders leading the five Conestogas spurred suddenly as they neared the camp and rode in ahead of the six-team wagons. The boy watched them intently. When they were almost to the camp circle, he recognized them and swore under his breath, though he suddenly felt self-conscious.

The Foss brothers, Clyde and Wylie, swung down stiff legged, not waiting for an invitation, and arched the stiffness from their backs.

Without a greeting Clyde Foss's eyes roamed leisurely over the staked out hides, estimating the number as he scratched at his beard stubble.

He grinned slowly, looking at his brother.

„They must a used rocks ... ain't more than forty hides here.“

Leo Cleary said, „Hello, Clyde ... Wylie,“ and watched the surprise come over them with recognition.

Clyde said, „Damn, Leo, I didn't see you were here. Who's that with you?“

„Matt Gordon's boy,“ Leo Cleary answered. „We're hunting together this season.“

„Just the two of you?“ Wylie asked with surprise. He was a few years older than Clyde, calmer, but looked to be his twin. They were both of them lanky, thin through face and body, but heavy boned.

Leo Cleary said, „I thought it was common talk in Leverette about us being out.“

„We made up over to Caldwell this year,“ Clyde said. He looked about the camp again, amused. „Who does the shooting?“

„I do.“ The boy took a step toward Clyde Foss. His voice was cold, distant. He was thinking of another time four years before when his dad had introduced him to the Foss brothers, the day Matt Gordon contracted with them to pick up his hides.

„And I do skinning,“ the boy added. It was like *What are you going to do about it!* the way he said it.

Clyde laughed again. Wylie just grinned.

„So you're Matt Gordon's boy,“ Wylie Foss said.

„We met once before.“

„We did?“

„In Leverette, four years ago.“ The boy made himself say it naturally.

„A month before you met my dad in the field and paid him for his hides with whiskey instead of cash ... the day before he was trampled into the ground...“

THE FOSS BROTHERS met his stare, and suddenly the amusement was gone from their eyes. Clyde no longer laughed, and Wylie's mouth tightened. Clyde stared at the boy and said, „If you meant anything by that, you better watch your mouth.“

Wylie said, „We can't stop buffalo from stampedin'.“ Clyde grinned now.

„Maybe he's drunk ... maybe he favors his pa.“

„Take it any way you want,“ the boy said. He stood firmly with his fists clenched. „You knew better than to give him whiskey. You took advantage of him.“

Wylie looked up at the rumbling sound of the wagon string coming in, the ponderous creaking of wooden frames, iron-rimmed tires grating, and the never-changing off-key leathery rattle of the traces, then the sound of reins flicking horse hide and the indistinguishable growls of the teamsters.

Wylie moved toward the wagons in the dimness and shouted to the first one, „Ed ... water down!“ pointing toward the creek.

„You bedding here?“ Leo Cleary asked after him.

„Just water.“

„Moving all night?“

„We're meeting a party on the Salt Fork ... they ain't going to stay there forever.“ Wylie Foss walked after the wagons leading away their horses. Clyde paid little attention to the wagons, only glancing in that direction as they swung toward the stream. Stoop shouldered, his hand curling the brim of his sweat-stained hat, his eyes roamed lazily over the drying hides. He rolled a cigarette, taking his time, failing to offer tobacco to the boy.

„I guess we got room for your hides,“ he said finally.

„I'm not selling.“

„We'll load soon as we water ... even take the fresh ones.“

„I said I'm not selling.“

„Maybe I'm not asking.“

„There's nothing making me sell if I don't want to!“

The slow smile formed on Clyde's mouth. „You're a mean little fella, aren't you?“

Clyde Foss dropped the cigarette stub and turned a boot on it.

„There's a bottle in my saddle pouch.“ He nodded to Leo Cleary, who was standing off from them. „Help yourself, Leo.“

The old man hesitated.

„I said help yourself.“

Leo Cleary moved off toward the stream.

„Now, Mr. Gordon ... how many hides you say were still dryin'?“

„None for you.“

„Forty ... forty-five?“

„You heard what I said.“ He was standing close to Clyde Foss, watching his face. He saw the jaw muscles tighten and sensed Clyde's shift of weight. He tried to turn, bringing up his shoulder, but it came with pain-stabbing suddenness. Clyde's fist smashed against his cheek, and he stumbled off balance.

„Forty?“

Clyde's left hand followed around with weight behind it, scraping his temple, staggering him.

„Forty-five?“

He waded after the boy then, clubbing at his face and body, knocking his guard aside to land his fists, until the boy was backed against his wagon. Then Clyde stopped as the boy fell into the wheel spokes, gasping, and slumped to the ground.

Clyde stood over the boy and nudged him with his boot. „Did I hear forty or forty-five?“ he said dryly. And when the boy made no answer—

„Well, it don't matter.“

He heard the wagons coming up from the creek. Wylie was leading the horses. „Boy went to sleep on us, Wylie.“ He grinned. „He said don't disturb him, just take the skins and leave the payment with Leo.“ He laughed then. And later, when the wagons pulled out, he was laughing again.

Once he heard voices, a man swearing, a never-ending soft thudding against the ground, noises above him in the wagon. But these passed, and there was nothing.

He woke again, briefly, a piercing ringing in his ears, and his face throbbed violently though the pain seemed to be out from him and not within, as if his face were bloated and would soon burst. He tried to open his mouth, but a weight held his jaws tight. Then wagons moving ... the sound of traces ... laughter.

It was still dark when he opened his eyes. The noises had stopped. Something cool was on his face. He felt it with his hand—a damp cloth. He sat up, taking it from his face, working his jaw slowly.

The man was a blur at first ... something reflecting in his hand.

Then it was Leo Cleary, and the something in his hand was a half-empty whiskey bottle.

„There wasn't anything I could do, Will.“

„How long they been gone?“

„Near an hour. They took all of them, even the ones staked out.“ He said, „Will, there wasn't anything I could do...“

„I know,“ the boy said.

„They paid for the hides with whiskey.“ The boy looked at him, surprised. He had not expected them to pay anything. But now he saw how this would appeal to Clyde's sense of humor, using the same way the hide buyer had paid his dad four years before.

„That part of it, Leo?“ The boy nodded to the whiskey bottle in the old man's hand.

„No, they put three five-gallon barrels in the wagon. Remember ... Clyde give me this.“

The boy was silent. Finally he said, „Don't touch those barrels, Leo.“

He sat up the remainder of the night, listening to his thoughts. He had been afraid when Clyde Foss was bullying him, and he was still afraid. But now the fear was mixed with anger, because his body ached and he could feel the loose teeth on one side of his mouth when he tightened his jaw, and taste the blood dry on his lips and most of all because Clyde Foss had taken a month's work, four hundred and eighty hides, and left three barrels of whiskey.

Sometimes the fear was stronger than the anger. The plain was silent and in its darkness there was nothing to hold to. He did not bother Leo Cleary. He talked to himself and listened to the throb in his temples and left Leo alone with the little whiskey he still had. He wanted to cry, but he could not because he had given up the privilege by becoming a man, even though he was still a boy. He was acutely aware of this, and when the urge to cry welled in him he would tighten his nerves and call himself names until the urge passed.

Sometimes the anger was stronger than the fear, and he would think of killing Clyde Foss. Toward morning both the fear and the anger lessened, and many of the things he had thought of during the night he did not now remember. He was sure of only one thing: He was going to get his hides back. A way to do it would come to him. He still had his Sharps.

He shook Leo Cleary awake and told him to hitch the wagon.

„Where we going?“ The old man was still dazed, from sleep and whiskey.

„Hunting, Leo. Down on the Salt Fork.“

HUNTING WAS GOOD in the Nations. The herds would come down from Canada and the Dakotas and winter along the Cimarron and the Salt and even down to the Canadian. Here the herds were big, two and three hundred grazing together, and sometimes you could look over the flat plains and see thousands. A big outfit with a good hunter could average over eighty hides a day. But, because there were so many hunters, the herds kept on the move.

In the evening they saw the first of the buffalo camps. Distant lights in the dimness, then lanterns and cook fires as they drew closer in a dusk turning to night, and the sounds of men drifted out to them on the silent plain.

The hunters and skimmers were crouched around a poker game on a blanket, a lantern above them on a crate. They paid little heed to the old man and the boy, letting them prepare their supper on the lowburning cook fire and after, when the boy stood over them and asked questions, they answered him shortly. The game was for high stakes, and there was a pot building. No, they hadn't seen the Foss brothers, and if they had, they wouldn't trade with them anyway. They were taking their skins to Caldwell for top dollar.

They moved on, keeping well off from the flickering line of lights.

Will Gordon would go in alone as they neared the camps, and, if there were five wagons in the camp, he'd approach cautiously until he could make out the men at the fire.

From camp to camp it was the same story. Most of the hunters had not seen the Fosses; a few had, earlier in the day, but they could be anywhere now. Until finally, very late, they talked to a man who had sold to the Foss brothers that morning.

„They even took some fresh hides,“ he told them.

„Still heading west?“ The boy kept his voice even, though he felt the excitement inside of him.

„Part of them,“ the hunter said. „Wylie went back to Caldwell with three wagons, but Clyde shoved on to meet another party up the Salt. See, Wylie'll come back with empty wagons, and by that time the hunters'll have caught up with Clyde. You ought to find him up a ways. We'll all be up there soon ... that's where the big herds are heading.“

They moved on all night, spelling each other on the wagon box.

Leo grumbled and said they were crazy. The boy said little because he was thinking of the big herds. And he was thinking of Clyde Foss with all those hides he had to dry ... and the plan was forming in his mind.

Leo Cleary watched from the pines, seeing nothing, thinking of the boy who was out somewhere in the darkness, though most of the time he thought of whiskey, barrels of it that they had been hauling for two days and now into the second night.

The boy was a fool. The camp they had seen at sundown was probably just another hunter. They all staked hides at one time or another. Seeing him sneaking up in the dark they could take him for a Kiowa and cut him in two with a buffalo gun. And even if it did turn out to be Clyde Foss, then what?

Later, the boy walked in out of the darkness and pushed the pine branches aside and was standing next to the old man.

„It's Clyde, Leo.“

The old man said nothing.

„He's got two men with him.“

„So ... what are you going to do now?“ the old man said.

„Hunt," the boy said. He went to his saddlebag and drew a cap-and-ball revolver and loaded it before bedding for the night.

In the morning he took his rifles and led his horse along the base of the ridge, through the pines that were dense here, but scattered higher up the slope. He would look out over the flat plain to the south and see the small squares of canvas, very white in the brilliant sunlight. Ahead, to the west, the ridge dropped off into a narrow valley with timbered hills on the other side.

The boy's eyes searched the plain, roaming to the white squares, Clyde's wagons, but he went on without hesitating until he reached the sloping finish of the ridge. Then he moved up the valley until the plain widened again, and then he stopped to wait. He was prepared to wait for days if necessary, until the right time.

From high up on the slope above, Leo Cleary watched him.

Through the morning the old man's eyes would drift from the boy and then off to the left, far out on the plain to the two wagons and the ribbon of river behind them. He tried to relate the boy and the wagons in some way, but he could not.

After a while he saw buffalo. A few straggling off toward the wagons, but even more on the other side of the valley where the plain widened again and the grass was higher, green-brown in the sun.

Toward noon the buffalo increased, and he remembered the hunters saying how the herds were moving west. By that time there were hundreds, perhaps a thousand, scattered over the grass, out a mile or so from the boy who seemed to be concentrating on them.

Maybe he really is going hunting, Leo Cleary thought. Maybe he's starting all over again. But I wish I had me a drink. The boy's downwind now, he thought, lifting his head to feel the breeze on his face. He could edge up and take a hundred of them if he did it right. What's he waiting for! Hell, if he wants to start all over, it's all right with me. I'll stay out with him. At that moment he was thinking of the three barrels of whiskey.

„Go out and get 'em, Will," he urged the boy aloud, though he would not be heard. „The wind won't keep forever!"

Surprised, then, he saw the boy move out from the brush clumps leading his horse, mount, and lope off in a direction out and away from the herd.

„You can't hunt buffalo from a saddle ... they'll run as soon as they smell horse! What the hell's the matter with him!"

HE WATCHED the boy, growing smaller with distance, move out past the herd. Then suddenly the horse wheeled, and it was going at a dead run toward the herd. A yell drifted up to the ridge and then a heavy rifle shot followed by two reports that were weaker. Horse and rider cut into the herd, and the buffalo broke in confusion.

They ran crazily, bellowing, bunching in panic to escape the horse and man smell and the screaming that suddenly hit them with the wind.

A herd of buffalo will run for hours if the panic stabs them sharp enough, and they will stay together, bunching their thunder, tons of bulk, massive bellowing heads, horns, and thrashing hooves. Nothing will stop them.

Some go down, and the herd passes over, beating them into the ground.

They ran directly away from the smell and the noises that were now far behind, downwind they came and in less than a minute were thundering

through the short valley. Dust rose after them, billowing up to the old man, who covered his mouth, coughing, watching the rumbling dark mass erupt from the valley out onto the plain. They moved in an unwavering line toward the Salt Fork, rolling over everything, before swerving at the river—even the two canvas squares that had been brilliant white in the morning sun. And soon they were only a deep hum in the distance.

Will Gordon was out on the flats, approaching the place where the wagons had stood, riding slowly now in the settling dust. But the dust was still in the air, heavy enough to make Leo Cleary sneeze as he brought the wagon out from the pines toward the river.

He saw the hide buyers' wagons smashed to scrap wood and shredded canvas dragged among the strewn buffalo hides. Many of the bales were still intact, spilling from the wagon wrecks; some were buried under the debris.

Three men stood waist deep in the shallows of the river, and beyond them, upstream, were the horses they had saved. Some had not been cut from the pickets in time, and they lay shapeless in blood at one end of the camp.

Will Gordon stood on the bank with the revolving pistol cocked, pointed at Clyde Foss. He glanced aside as the old man brought up the team.

„He wants to sell back, Leo. How much, you think?“

The old man only looked at him, because he could not speak.

„I think two barrels of whiskey,“ Will Gordon said. He stepped suddenly into the water and brought the long pistol barrel sweeping against Clyde's head, cutting the temple.

„Two barrels?“

Clyde Foss staggered and came to his feet slowly.

„Come here, Clyde.“ The boy leveled the pistol at him and waited as Clyde Foss came hesitantly out of the water, hunching his shoulders.

The boy swung the pistol back, and, as Clyde ducked, he brought his left fist up, smashing hard against the man's jaw.

„Or three barrels?“

The hide buyer floundered in the shallow water, then crawled to the bank, and lay on his stomach, gasping for breath.

„We'll give him three, Leo. Since he's been nice about it.“

Later, after Clyde and his two men had loaded their wagon with four hundred and eighty hides, the old man and the boy rode off through the valley to the great plain.

Once the old man said, „Where we going now, Will?“

And when the boy said, „We're still going hunting, Leo,“ the old man shrugged wearily and just nodded his head.

