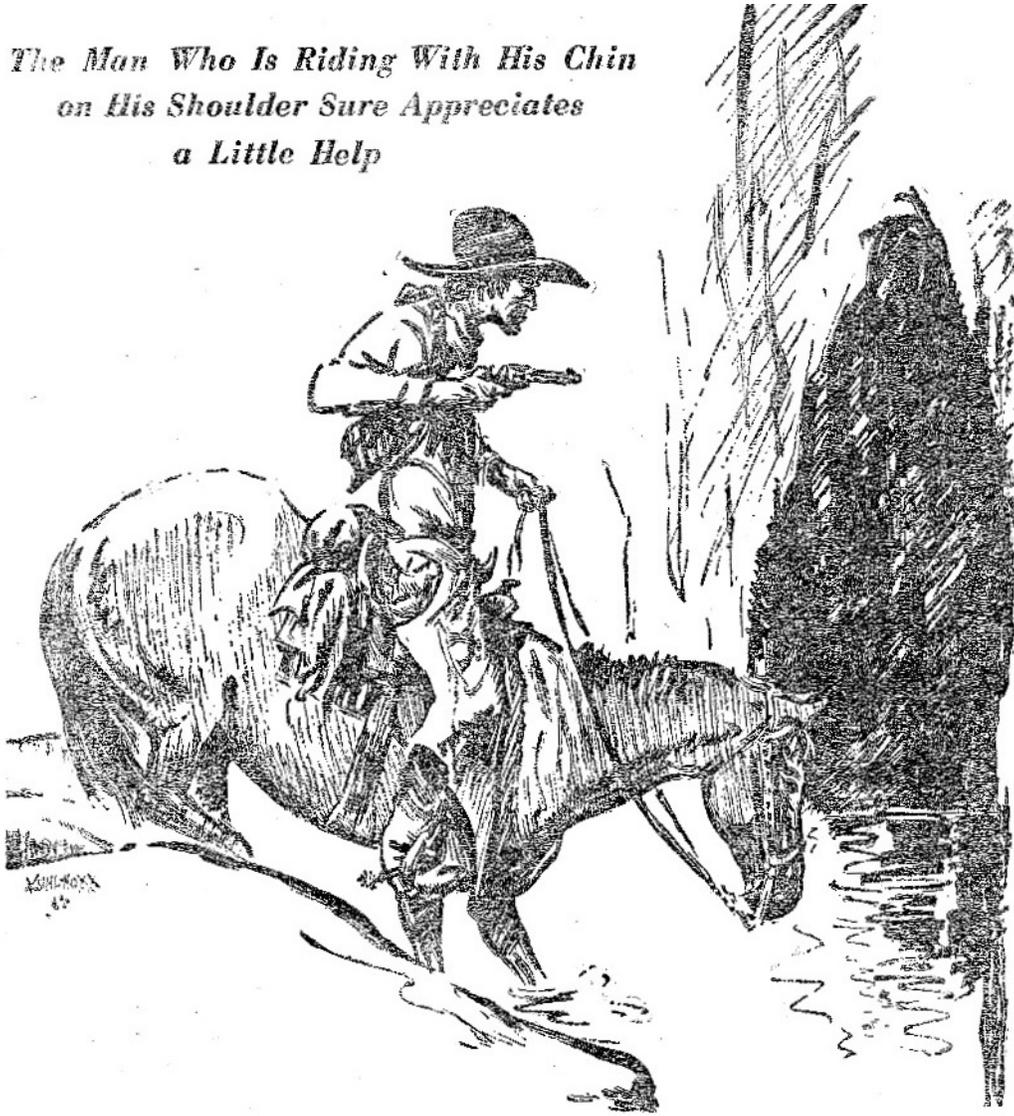


*The Man Who Is Riding With His Chin
on His Shoulder Sure Appreciates
a Little Help*



A GUNMAN'S GRATITUDE

By CADDO CAMERON

THE more a man has got, the less he appreciates what he gets. Take me, for example. When I've got good reason to believe that there ain't no reward notices with my brands and marks a-hangin' in courthouses, postoffices, stage stations and trading posts here and yander over the West, I sorta take it for granted that I can go and come as I please and when some fella invites me to put up my horse and

have chuck and spread my blankets on his floor or in his spare bunk, I don't appreciate it like I'd ought to because that's what everybody does in this country; but just let me make myself short some place so that I have to ride day and night with my chin on my shoulder a-watchin' the dust of the law fog my back trail, with maybe a leg-weary horse under me and bullet holes in me, then somebody takes me in and hides me and my horse

and sets the law off on a cold scent and looks after me until I'm able to ride again—what I mean, I *do* appreciate that. And I don't never forget it, either.

A few years back, over in The Choctaw Nation close to the Arkansaw line, George Smith and his wife taken me in thataway. Ever since then I've been lookin' for a chance to pay back at least part of what I owe to that Indian and his Choctaw wife, and when my chance finally did come it was mighty nigh too big for me.

It happens like this.

I have a little shootin' scrape with Pawnee Ike near Muskogee over in The Creek Nation and he comes out second best. Of course, everybody knows that Ike is a genuine badman, but I ain't got no idea that he was what you might call the bodyguard for the liquor business up and down that part of The Nations until a fella comes and asks me to take Ike's place and do the killin' for the boss whisky peddlers whenever any serious killin' is needed, which is right frequent it seems. Naturally, I tell him to go to hell. A few innocent words like that can cause a man a heap of misery. In no time at all I'm gettin' shot at from ambush and knifed at in the dark, and I leave out from that country in a mile-high cloud of dust with a pack of wolves on my trail.

I travel too daggoned fast and Old Yaller, my dun packhorse, goes lame on me when we're gettin' close to the Fort Townson Road. It ain't more'n fifteen mile up this road to George Smith's place, but I won't go there for fear of carryin' war to George and Tama, his wife, so I put up at Blaney's Tavern and stage station and figure to keep my mouth shut and stay here until my horse is able to hit the trail again. Reckon the wolves got lost somewheres back in this rough country,

for I've been here a week without a sign of trouble.

Not many people know me over here. It's hard for me to get lost in a crowd, though, bein' six and a half foot tall with a hawk face and long black hair, so I pass myself off as an Osage a-headin' north to his reservation after visitin' some Chicasaw friends down on the Washita. The Osages breed tall men and these folks take me at my word.

IT'S an hour or so after noon one hot day and I'm a-settin' on the tavern porch. Six, seven other men are out here, too, smokin' and talkin', but I ain't sayin' nothin' and they don't pay me no mind, figurin' I'm an Indian and not much on the talk nohow. One of 'em has just got back from the Creek Country. .

I pick up my ears, when he asks, "Any of you fellas know Pawnee Ike?"

Most of the men know him or have heard of him, and one declares, "Sure I know that breed killer. He's bad."

"Was bad," says the first fella. "Pawnee Ike is a plumb good citizen now."

Everybody wants to know bow come.

"Pawnee tangled with a road agent in a blind pig over to Muskogee," was the answer, "and when the smoke lifted they was a-carryin' Pawnee out feet foremost, huntin' a patch of soft ground."

"Who is this road agent?"

"Fella they call 'Mistah Gunman'."

I'm rollin' me a smoke and don't look up. Seems like they've all heard of me, but none of 'em know me.

A wiry little old-timer who looks like he might be a native of these mountains or from just across the line in Arkansaw, goes on to say, "What I mean, boys—I'd shore hate to be in this here Mistah Gunman's boots. Pawnee Ike had

connections and they're worse than Pawnee was."

They fire questions at him, but the old boy closes up tighter'n a terrapin. "I done talked too much already. Some connections stretch from here to yander and 'taint far to either place from where I set."

Now, what's he drivin' at? What does he know about Pawnee Ike's connections? Do they stretch away out here to the Arkansaw line? Wish I could talk to the old-timer, but I dassn't. They change the subject. The killin' of a Territory badman ain't good for a long talk. There's too many of 'em gettin' killed and waitin' to be. Reckon I'm on this waitin' list. Every gunslinger is due to get his'n sooner or later.

From the tavern porch on the ridge I can see up and down the Old Fort Towson Road a pretty far piece. It's a busy trail and has been since away back in the early 1800s. Freighters, movers, stage coaches and riders goin' in both directions, but the movers are mostly a-headin' south towards Texas and free or cheap land. Men are ridin' both north and south. Some of 'em come open and swing down at the rack to visit for a spell. Others ride in one stirrup like they've got used to watchin' their back trail. They ride with their hats pulled low and they keep on a-ridin'. Puts me in mind of the way I ride a good part of the time.

After a while a cloud of dust tops a rise north of here, starts down the rise and splits into two clouds close together. The dust is comin' mighty fast. Nobody else seems to notice it. Reckon they ain't got no reason to be suspicious of fast-movin' dust. But I have. I watch that dust. Pretty soon I can see what's makin' it—one rider followed by two. They're pourin' in the leather and a-feedin' the iron. The fella in the lead is layin' flat on his horse's neck

and he's a-losin' ground. They'll run onto him right about here.

Well, it don't noways concern me. I'm an Indian. I mind my own business and ain't no hand to talk.

The lead horse in this race is willin', but he ain't got the speed. A short distance from the tavern the two riders split and catch the third between them. The big man on the nigh side reaches out and lifts him bodily from his saddle. He comes up a-fightin' and squawllin' like a wildcat and I get a good look at him. He's a ganglin' kid—maybe thirteen, fourteen!

The two riders slide to a stop in a cloud of dust and jump down. The one on the off side is middle-sized and every bit as dark I am. Holdin' onto the kid, the big fella is cussin' and slappin' him around and the boy is fightin' back the best he can, but about all he can do is to claw and beat at the man's arm. I forget myself complete. I'm on my feet a-headin' that way before I know it. There's a clatterin' of chairs and boot heels on the porch behind me.

The two are still at it and the boy ain't hart none when I get there. I tell the big cuss, "Need any help, Mistah? Strikes me that you've tied onto more'n you're man enough to handle."

He's got a square face and sandy hair and he looks mighty nigh as big as a buffalo to me. Hangin' onto the boy's arm, he growls at me plumb ferocious, "Give me any more of your lip, High Pockets, and I'll tie onto you!"

This jasper sure rubs me wrong. I haul off with my left hand and slap him alongside the head so daggoned hard it makes my own teeth chatter. He lets go of the boy quick. Damned if he don't make a pass at his holster!

I dassn't bust my hands on his big jaw. May need these hands for serious gunplay before I get to my hideout over in

Arkansaw. So I beef him cold with the barrel of my six-shooter. He grunts like a shot hog, wilts and piles up in his tracks. Didn't waste any time in makin' my draw, for he's got a pardner, and my left-hand gun is out a split second before I hit him with my right. But his pardner just stands there with arms folded innocent and peaceable. Can't blame him much. At least three men behind me have got him covered!

The boy is a-gawkin' up at me. "Golly!" he cries out. "*You're Mister Gunman!*"

That does it. The men behind me cuss surprised-like and gather closer, plumb curious. Nothin' else to do, so I grin down at the kid, and say, "You're dead right. Bud. That's what most folks call me." Then I glance around at the others, and go on, "Hope you don't hold it against me for makin' out to be an Osage, fellas. I've got pretty good reasons for huntin' cover."

The old-timer speaks up, "Hell, no! Many's the time I've been ashamed to admit I'm a white man."

The kid asks, "Don't you know me, Mister Gunman?"

I look close at him. "I've shore seen you somewheres, but can't recollect when. Maybe it was a long time back and you've growed some."

"That's it. I'm Billy Smith—George Smith's boy."

"Shore!" I put out my hand and he shakes right big. "How's your dad and mom?"

"Mom, she's fine. But, Dad, he—" Billy sorta chokes up. I look at the big fella's pardner. He drops his eyes.

"Shore!" I put out my hand and he shakes. "Tell us all about it while we're waitin' for this here sleepin' buffler to wake up and do a little talkin'."

Billy Smith gets started and goes so fast his words run together. "An hour

before sundown two days ago Dad left home on Old Nell to go to our big meadow to look at the cattle and he ain't come home. Soon's it was light next mornin' Mom and me went lookin' for him and we found where he had met up with four other riders and they had argued a while and then he rode off with them and I tracked 'em away up Coon Canyon and lost them when they took the creek and I know Old Nell's hoofprints and I'll swear that she was bein' led, and I betcha they held up Dad and taken him with 'em. Mom sent me here today to see can we get some help to look for Dad."

This Choctaw boy talks English like a white kid, but I'll gamble that he can track like an Indian. "Strikes me that you've done a mighty fine job, Billy," I tell him and some of the others say the same thing. "How come you to tangle with these jaspers and who are they?"

He points to the one on his feet. "That's Tom Watkins and this big man is Sandy Storms. I met 'em on the road about ten mile this side of home and Sandy wanted to know where I was goin' and I told him a and he said I'd better go home and behave myself and I said I was goin' to get help to look for my dad and he took a holt of my reins and I grabbed my six-shooter and he taken it away from me and I bit his hand and my Tanglefoot pony got the jump on 'em and they chased me all the way here."

He reaches down quick to the big cuss and pulls an old cap-and-ball pistol out from underneath his shirt. "See! Here's my six-shooter."

I nod, and say, "Yep, and it sounds like you're a-talkin' might straight, Billy."

Turnin' to Tom Watkins, I ask him short, "Got anything to say, Mistah?"

He shakes his head. "The kid bit Sandy's hand, then Sandy taken out after him. That's all there was to it."

"Like hell it is!" I snap, "These Smiths are my friends and I owe them a plenty. Why did you try to keep the boy from comin' for help?"

This Watkins is a cool customer. "That was Sandy's idea. Ask him."

"Uh-huh, I'll do that when he wakes up. Looks like he's a-fixin' to now."

Sandy Storms groans and rolls over and gets to all-fours with his big head lollin' from side to side like a bull buff'ler with a lung shot. Then he sets down and rubs the place on his jaw where my gun barrel busted him. While he's gettin' his senses back I pick up his hat and put it on his head just for cussedness. This skypiece looks like he'd been diggin' a well—red mud and water marks dried on the top of its brim and peak of its crown. I glance at Tom Watkins' hat. It's marked the same way. Strikes me this is sorta curious, but I scarcely give it a second thought now.

The big fella is plenty tough. He's on his feet in no time. Trouble is what he mostly wants now, but he tries to do a little thinkin' before he starts it. "I'm shore I'd ought to know you, High Pockets, but my head ain't workin' right. Who in hell are you, anyhow?"

"Lots of folks call me 'Slim.' "

His partner speaks up, "Slim Gunman."

Sandy's eyes open a little, then narrow, and he growls, "Well, Mistah Gunman, you're away off'n your home range. Better get to hell out of this country quick. That's all I've got to say to you."

I shake my head. "No it ain't, Storms. You've still got to tell me why you tried to keep the kid from comin' for help to find his dad. Talk!"

"Damned if I will!"

I happen to know that almost any gunfighter would rather get shot than to be buffaloeed with a six-shooter. "If that's how you feel about it, I'll have to beat you

up with a gun barrel until you change your mind," I tell him quiet. "Grab iron, Storms!"

My Colt is lifted to strike before he makes a move, then he backs off a quick step and folds his arms. This big fella ain't no fool. His head is a-workin' now and what I see in his face tells me that he's got somethin' up his sleeve and no tellin' what it is. He's plenty slippery and a bigger man than I thought he was. Wouldn't surprise me if he's *somebody* in his own business, whatever that is.

"No call for you to get red-eyed, Gunman," says Sandy. "I don't mind tellin' you that George Smith has done me dirt and I'll do anything I can to get square. That's why I tried to stop his kid."

That *could* be the truth. I nod and grunt, and motion to the boy. "Come along, Billy. Leave your pony at the rack and I'll buy you a sody pop."

Watkins and Storms ride off. The other men come into the tavern with me and the kid, everybody talkin' at once. Here in The Nations you can't buy anything but soft drink legal, but the old-timer takes care of that.

"Boys," he declares, "I ain't never been I able to understand how any country can stay as green as this'n and still be so damned dry. A fella has to carry his own pre-cyppy-tation with him, I aim to buy Mistah Gunman a drink. Got somethin' in my valise that ain't fit for nothin' but drinkin'. Don't you-all run off while I go and get it."

"Run off—hell!" drawls a thirsty-lookin' fella from Texas. "You couldn't run me off with dogs."

EVERYBODY is riled a plenty, for they all like George Smith. The men here want to organize a posse right away and they make me feel mighty good by askin' me to lead them, but this ain't no

job for a posse. A thousand men couldn't comb this rough country to do any good. This is a one-man job—my job.

I ride home with Billy to the double log house where I once put in thirty days a-fightin' for my life and would've lost if it hadn't been for George and Tama Smith. George is one full-blood who likes to work with his hands. He's farmin' a nice parcel of tribal land in a creek bottom and he runs cattle on the free range hereabouts. The Fort Towson Road cuts through his place and he has dug out a fine spring in a draw about three miles from the house and fixed a good campground for freighters and movers who want to throw off there. This camp is known from Fort Smith to Red River and George was smart to build it. Freighters who stop here buy most of the farm stuff he has to sell and it ain't nothin' unusual to see one of their big wagons loaded to the top of its sideboards with the fine apples he raises, or piled high with the hay he cuts and bales in his meadows.

Before light next mornin' Billy rides up Coon Canyon with me to where his dad and the others taken to the creek, then I try to send the kid back, but he won't go until I convince him that somebody has got to stand guard over his mother because there's plenty trouble in the wind. I feel certain the boy will get home all right. Nevertheless, I set my blue horse there in the timber, roll a smoke and listen until the sound of Billy is lost in the early mornin' voice of these wild Kiamichi Mountains—night prowlers goin' to bed, dry roamers a-gettin' up. Likewise, I do some powerful hard thinkin'.

It ain't reasonable to believe that George's trouble is in any way hooked up with my quarrel with the whiskey peddlers, but, when Sandy Storms found out who I was the look on his face told me that he certainly knew somethin' about it. Besides, I'll gamble that he's mixed up in

the disappearance of George Smith. Him sayin' that he's got a feud with George holds water all right, though, because the men at the tavern said he and Bob Watkins had worked for Smith off and on until George finally fired 'em for keeps. Nobody seems to know what these two rannies do for a livin', but everybody allows they live good. The more I think about it the more I'm convinced that they tried to stop the boy from goin' for help so as to gain time to finish somethin' that they or somebody else had started. Maybe I'm just imagin' things, though. Reckon the best way to make certain is to use myself as bait and ride their trail alone into the mountains like I'm about to do and see whether I can't catch onto somethin'. It's a fool play, I'll admit, but George and Tama I made a fool play when they taken me in that time.

Soon as it's light enough to read sign I walk my horse up Coon Canyon on the left bank of the creek hopin' to find where George and the four riders left the water. Lucky for me it hasn't rained in the last three days. Coon Creek is like many another stream in the Kiamichis—clear and swift with mostly rock and gravel bottom, and a man can lose his trail in there if his horse will swim against the current in deep pools that are scattered along. The walls of the canyon are steep, but broken by draws through which deer and cattle come down to water. I work my way slow up stream, studyin' every inch of both banks where horses could get out of the water without findin' a damned thing until the sun is up and goin' good. I'm plumb disgusted and I feelin' low by the time I finally run onto somethin'.

I've halted on a ledge at the lower end of a long pool that looks like swimmin' water. The creek makes a sharp S-bend here t and has cut back under my rock no tellin' how far. Glancin' down into the

clear water I catch sight of somethin' that has lodged under there. . . . A dead horse! I hit the ground quick and kneel down to look. There's at least ten foot of water here, the current is strong and the horse has been carried back to where all I can see is its light bay hindquarters and black tail. I've got to get a good look at this horse. Ahead a few yards is a thicket big enough to cover Old Blue, so I lead him in there and strip to my hide. Maybe this is foolish, but Coon Creek is mighty mean where it bores under that rock and I don't want to be weighted down by clothes. I'd rather get shot than to drown.

On the ledge, takin' a long breath before I dive, I'm in plain sight from the walls of the canyon and sure feel naked. The water is cold, but I'm more comfortable when it closes over me. The current whips me back under the rock in no time, but it's almost like day down here until you get into the deep shadows and I'm able to look the horse over fast. It was shot in the forehead, ain't been here more'n a couple days and is still packin' its riggin'. The brand high on its neck is an iron that I don't know. Can't learn a thing from the saddle for it's like a hundred others I've seen, and I'm gettin' powerful short of breath when I happen to take a second look at the front and flank cinches. I'd *ought* to know those cinches. That time when I was laid up at his house, *I made them for George Smith!*

WITH hardly a particle of breath left in me, I fight my way back against the current to where I can come out from underneath the rock and bob up for air. Stayed under so long my head is a-roarin' like a stampede. Hanging onto the rock with my back to the east wall of the canyon, I gulp air and get ready to go down again and hunt the dark places to learn whether George himself is under the

ledge. Don't think he is. I figure that when they came to this deep pool his horse wouldn't swim it, even against the weakest part of the current along the east bank, so they shot the mare and taken George with 'em. But I'd like to make certain. The stampede inside my skull has gone to millin' now and I can hear some. When I'm about ready to go—a bullet splatters on the rock a foot above my head, a rifle cracks somewhere behind me!

I duck and jerk around. Smoke at the lip of the canyon wall up there. I dive quick. Like a fool I forget to take a deep breath, so it's the end of me if the current carries me under the rock. There's a narrow break in the ledge a few yards down. I recollect havin' to ride around it and now swim towards it, fightin' the cussed current to stay out of the shadows on my right. Comin' up at this break, I'm hidden from the man with the rifle until he moves down the creek. Naturally, he'll figure I swam with the current, but maybe I can climb the eight-foot rock and get to the brush before he spots me again. A little log and some trash have drifted into the break. I reach for the log and go to draw myself up. A rusty, black-and-green snake slaps at me, misses my face by inches, so close I've looked right down his throat. An infernal cotton-mouth moccasin!

Better to be shot than bitten by that thing away out here. I throw myself backward without thinkin' and land with a splash so far out I'm clear of the rock. I fill my lungs with air and go under. A bullet spangs the water where I went down and the shock makes his lead ricochet. Don't try to tell me that a man can't sweat under water. I'm a-sweatin' to beat hell now. My breath is runnin' low and I ain't got much time to think things over. As I recollect it, this west bank can be seen from the east side for quite a ways down. The only place where I can get out is through that break in

the ledge and I'll have to do it before the rifleman moves to where he can get a shot at me. He's got some rough goin' on top of the canyon wall and maybe I can make it. Damn that snake! It's him or me now. If I know moccasins—he won't run, and I can't.

I come up at the break in the rock. The butt of the log ain't more'n a foot from my face, for I've gone in as close as I can on account of the rifle. Can't see the snake, but he's somewhere up there under the far side a-layin' for me. Movin' mighty careful but fast, I get a toe-hold in the rock and brace myself against a shoulder that jutts out so as to give me one hand free, then pull down a little stick-out of the driftwood. I scrape it along the top of the log. Up comes that snake's head. He's closer now. I'll swear I smell the thing. It stinks like a turtle pond in a swamp. It strikes, throwin' a third of its length across the log. Maybe I've drawn a six-shooter faster than I hit that snake with my stick, but I doubt it. Before it can draw back to strike again its spine is broken where it's draped across the log. But the infernal thing goes to strikin' crazy every which way with the twelve inches of its body that ain't paralyzed, *and it's a-slidin' down the log onto me!*

Again I throw myself back into the water, but not so far out this time. The snake drops into the creek a yard from my face, but I dassn't move back. Crippled, it can't swim to do any good, but it's still a-strikin' crazy. I tread water and beat it with my stick like we're both crazy. The moccasin floats away.

Half a minute later I climb to the top of the ledge and dive for the bushes. A second before I reach cover a bullet burns a welt across my back and a rifle barks from the wall of the canyon. I take a chance on givin' him time for another shot—stop, stiffen, throw up an arm, then

fall head foremost into the brush. Layin' flat there, I shake the bushes. Two more bullets cut leaves and twigs inches above me. Somebody aims to get me good. Wormin' my way to Old Blue over in the little thicket, I climb into my clothes quick and jerk my rifle from its saddle-scabbard. With that cuss on the canyon wall I can't go no farther in my hunt for George Smith.

Movin' inches at a time, I work my way to the fringe of the brush. Across the creek the bluff rises to a hundred feet and seventy-five of that is almost straight up, scrubby bushes and weeds on top. Pretty soon my man shows himself. Evidently he thinks he got me, for he comes to the brink of the cliff with his rifle and looks hard at the brush where I fell. It ain't far over there. I draw a bead on his right knees and let him have it. With the crack of my rifle that leg is jerked from under him and I think for a second that he'll roll over the cliff, but he catches himself in the nick of time. His rifle clatters on the rocks below. Now, I can go and hunt George Smith.

THE deep pool follows this sharp S-bend. Just around the shoulder of the cliff on the far side an underground stream has bored a tunnel down to Coon Creek and the pool is shallow over there. I stop and look hard at the mouth of that tunnel. Its roof is high enough to accommodate a man on a horse and judgin' by the ripple on the main stream, there ain't much water comin' down from above. On my way up canyon again, I keep thinkin' about that tunnel.

For a solid mile after leavin' the pool I search every foot of both banks in the hopes of findin' where the four riders left the creek. Nary a trace of them. Of course, they might've got away on one of the cow paths where stock comes down to water, but I've been trailin' ever since I was a shirt-tailed kid and my Osage friends

swear they learned me all they know about it, so I'll gamble that those riders are still in the creek if they came this far. Meantime, no tellin' what has happened or is happenin' to George Smith. I've got to get somewhere and do somethin'.

I halt and look back, thinkin' damned I hard. . . . All of a sudden I remember the dried mud and red water spots Sandy Storms and Tom Watkins had on their hats. In my day I've hid out in a few caves. Down in this rainy country their walls and roofs are muddy and they all drip water!

I can't hardly wait to get back to the pool. We cross the creek in shallow water a short distance above it, wade down stream to the tunnel mouth and Old Blue don't so much as wet my saddle skirts at any point on the way. My horse stops there, looks up the throat of that block hole, snorts soft, then rolls an eye at me.

"Maybe we're damned fools, fella," I tell him soft, "but if you're game to take a chance on it, I am. Go ahead to where it's good and dark, then we'll wait a few minutes for our eyes to get used to it."

Now, Old Blue is amighty fine night horse or I wouldn't be ridin' him. He goes on, a-walkin' cautious in shallow water with solid rock bottom, and when we round a turn to where it's pitch black I rein in. We stand here maybe ten minutes. I'm commencin' to make out a few things and know that his eyes are pickin' up a heap more'n mine, so we go on. This hole is fairly straight and nowhere do we have to squeeze through, though I have to duck off and on and once in a while my shoulder or stirrup brushes a wall. Why don't I get down and lead my horse? If there's any sudden drop-offs in here he'll see them a damned sight quicker'n I could. There's a pretty good updraft. The wind whispers along the slimy walls and drippin' roof loud enough to be heard above the

splashin' of Blue's feet. Wish that wind could talk. Maybe it would tell me where it's a-headin' and what I'll run into when we get there, if we ever do.

It's gettin' darker right along, if there *is* such a thing as thicker dark. It stands to reason that I'm a heap safer in this hole than I was a-ridin' the creek bank in broad daylight with a rifle throwin' lead at me, but I don't *feel* safer. It's cool, but sweat is a-crawlin' down my ribs and legs. Maybe it's the dark—a darkness so heavy it presses against you from all sides and makes it sorta hard for a fella to take a good breath.

There really ain't nothin' to be afraid of in this hole. If anybody was comin' from either direction I'd hear 'em. The truth is, *I'd give anything to hear somebody!*

I can see a little, too, or imagine I can. Ain't bumped my head only a few times. Maybe a little light gets trapped in the water and is carried down here—that is, if this water comes from where there *is* any light. *Maybe it don't!* Maybe we'll keep on a-walkin' deeper and deeper into the earth until the very weight of this darkness wears us out, and we fall down and die in here. Old Blue is feelin' the strain of it, too. He ain't done nothin' to get heated up, but when I put my hand on his neck it's wet with sweat. He's a smart horse. He's got imagination. He's afraid, too, but he just keeps on a-ploddin' into deeper darkness—into nowhere. I'd ought to have as much nerve as a horse, but I ain't. I'm scared. I'd turn back if I wasn't ashamed to act the coward before my horse.

After a while Old Blue begins to slow down, walks slower and slower until he stops. I can't see or hear a damned thing, but I won't tell him to go on. Hell, no! Then it dawns on me that the darkness has thinned out a little. Just ahead is a lump of black a-hangin' from the roof. That's a

rock I'll have to duck. We're gettin' some light, all right. Blue has stopped to listen and let his eyes change.

Pretty soon my horse steps out again, faster now. It gets lighter and I see his ears and they're cocked straight ahead and his nostrils are flared, then he speeds up and would've struck a jiggle through the shallow water if I hadn't held him down. He's mighty glad to get out of this hole and so am I. Roundin' a turn in the tunnel we meet full daylight comin' to us through a screen of bushes and I walk Blue right up to them, then get down to take a look outside.

This tunnel ends at a little pond in a small sag chock full of willows and switch canes. A spring is boilin' out of the bank near by and I realize that we've waded its branch all the way up from Coon Creek no tellin' how far. I squirm to the top of the sag where I can see over the bushes. The country around here is mostly level and covered by heavy timber. Thick brush hides this spring and the mouth of the tunnel complete. There's an animal path comin' down to the pool. By studyin' the willows and canes I see where horses have gone into the tunnel and come out of it. This is the best hideout and that damned hole is the best get-away I've ever seen, bar none includin' my place over in the breaks of the North Canadian.

Figurin' that I've struck a hot scent, I move fast now and scout the path through the timber afoot. Deer and cattle have fouled the sign bad, but I do find several sets of shod hoofprints that were made by ridden horses and they ain't over two three days old. These horses were headin' away from the spring, so I get Old Blue and we take their trail. Two miles farther along we come to where the pines are tall and there ain't much undergrowth. Yonder is a big log house! I take my little spyglass and look the place over good. One thing I

notice particular—the house is more like a fort to fight from than a place to live in. Beyond it is a stable and some out-buildin's. Behind the stable is a more or less open pasture and I count twelve mules in there, some hobbled. Three horses under saddle are staked on grass near the house. Nary a man in sight.

Comin' from this direction I'll be spotted long before I can get to the house in daylight, and I won't wait until night. Maybe they've got George Smith in there. So I back off into the timber and ride a half-circle around the place and go in under cover of what looks like a powerful big smokehouse. Leavin' Blue in a clump of bushes, I take it afoot from tree to tree. Pretty soon I reach the smokehouse, thankin' my lucky stars that nobody saw me or let on if they did. A. look through the logs where chinkin' is gone treats me to a big surprise. This ain't a smokehouse. It's a still-house!

The still is the biggest one I've ever seen and it's built different, too. But about all I know about stills is that I ain't got no use for the men who make bad whiskey to sell to Indians. Most redmen just naturally can't handle the stuff and it ruins them complete. Movin' to the corner of the still-house, I stop here to listen. It ain't over thirty feet to the main house and the wooden shutters on its windows are open, no glass. Sounds to me like men are eatin' in there—the tinkle of a dish, a laugh, and a man says, "Sandy, gimme a helpin' of that hog bosom."

NOW, I ain't no glutton for trouble and do a little fast thinkin'. There's anyhow three men in there, maybe more, but I've got a good chance to catch them by surprise because they'll figure their guard on the creek will warn 'em in time if anybody is comin'. Near as I can tell, this place is too far away for them to have

heard the shootin'. Likewise, if I was in their boots I'd gamble that no stranger would ever follow them into the tunnel even if he did find it. So I try my guns in their leather, then make a quick run to the back of the house and slide along to the nearest window. One of its shutters ain't all the way open. Lookin' through the crack between the shutter and frame I can see half the big kitchen.

Three men are at a table eatin'. Facin' me on the other side are Tom Watkins and a long-gearred redhead that I recollect seein' in Muskogee, and there ain't no mistakin' Sandy Storms' broad back on this side. I duck and move under the window. Now I can see the other end of the kitchen and there sets George Smith! He's tied hand and foot in a chair. At first I can't hardly recognize the wiry little Indian, he's beat up so bad. His thin face is swelled to half again its size, his head is slumped forward until his chin is on his chest, his scalp has been cut in places and his coarse black hair is matted with blood. I'm wonderin' whether maybe George ain't dead.

Then Sandy Storms growls out, "We got mighty good grub, George. You'll die pretty soon if you don't get somethin' to eat and drink. Better talk and save yourself a lot of trouble."

George Smith lifts his head like it's powerful heavy. His eyes are swelled almost shut, but they glitter through their puffed lids. He can't hardly talk, either, but there's poison in what he says, "Go to hell, you big son-of-a-dog!"

Sandy Storms chuckles. "This here spring water is so damned cold it makes my teeth ache. Must come from an ice-house somewheres under ground."

George's head slumps forward again. It may be all of three days since he had a drop to drink or a bit to eat. For maybe thirty seconds I stand there and look at the

man who taken me in when I was bleedin' to death and saved my life, then risked his own freedom by lyin' to the law so as to keep them from catchin' and hangin' me. I don't know what this is all about—don't know what Storms is tryin' to make him tell—*don't give a damn!*

The table is right in front of the open rack door, so close I can stand on the threshold and reach it with my long leg. I move cautious to the door. One quick step carries me inside. The three men have their hands on top of the table. I give it a kick that topples it onto Watkins and the redhead, dishes, coffeepot and everything, Sandy Storms jumps up, grabbin' at his holster. I knock him down with the barrel of my six-shooter. This all happens in seconds. They're caught absolutely flat-footed, but Watkins and the redhead go for their guns as they're fallin' backwards. What I mean—they're plenty fast. If the table hadn't blocked his draw, Tom Watkins would've got me. We fire almost together. His bullet whips my hat away. The redhead's arm is caught by the leg of Tom's chair.

"Drop it!" I bark. "Quick!"

I sure feel mean as hell and maybe I look it. There ain't nothin' else for the redhead to do nohow, so he drops his gun and gets his hands in sight with the table on top of him. Storms is hunkered down to the floor, groggy for a minute. Watkins is knocked out by a bullet high in his chest. I hurry and get their pistols and toss 'em into the yard, then go and cut George loose.

"Did Storms beat you up like this?"

"Yes, Slim," he mumbles. "Storms."

There's a sound on the hard clay floor behind me. I whirl. It's Sandy Storms comin' on tip-toe. I forgot his knife. He's a-chargin' me with a ten-inch bowie knife in his hand, murder in his big face. Either he figures I won't shoot him because he

ain't got a gun, or he's so crazy mad he don't give a damn. Anyhow, a pistol-whippin' ain't pretty to watch or pleasant to talk about. When it's all over I've got several bad slashes, but none serious. Sandy Storms is beat up until he's down a-howlin' for help and I leave him in worse shape than George ever was.

WHILE we're ridin' away from there, Smith tells me a lot of things that I don't know and never even suspicioned. In the whiskey business Sandy Storms is a top dog and the four men who chased me from Muskogee are workin' for him. The redhead is one of 'em, the rifleman on the creek another'n and two more are off in the mountains somewhere a-huntin' me now. He was bound and determined to get me.

By some kind of a secret process this big still and the man who owns and runs it turn out the best whiskey made in The Territory. The still is so well hid the law ain't never found it. Everything is packed

in and out on mules and there's two ways to go—by tunnel, or over the trail we're a-ridin' now. The liquor is moved out of the country and distributed to peddlers by freighters who carry it in barrels under loads of supplies, and in jugs inside bales of hay.

For a long time Storms has been tryin' to find the still and that's how come he and Watkins used to work for George. When Smith found out that they were hooked up with the liquor business he fired 'em, but Sandy had already stumbled onto the tunnel and still. Somehow or other Storms got the idea that George was hired by the owner of the outfit and knew how to make this good whiskey, so the big devil tried to beat and starve Smith into givin' away the secret.

When I shake hands with Billy and Tama Smith this evenin' and tell her I can't stay for supper, I'm a disappointed man and plumb bitter towards the world in general. For you see, *the owner of that damned still is George Smith!*