

DEAR MR. HOLMES

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Dear Mr. Holmes,

This is my third crack at writing this letter, and by God I'm going to get through it this time come Hell or high water. If Gabriel himself were to come down and blow on his bugle before I'm done, I'd just turn around and tell him, "Hold your horn, Gabe, I'm writing a letter to Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

Part of my difficulty with this chore is that my book learning amounts to five years in a country school and two years clerking for a granary in Peabody, Kansas. And my brother Gustav's got four years less on the schooling and not a day wielding a clerk's pencil, yet *he's* trying to tell *me* how to write this letter.

Somehow I doubt if you're looking over that Watson fellow's shoulder when he's trying to write about you. But my brother is not a refined gentleman like yourself. So if you notice any bloodstains on the paper as you read this, you'll know he stuck his big nose in one time too many and I had to give it a good punch.

Now I've read about your way with "deductions," so perhaps I don't need to introduce myself before I get to the nub of the matter. I can just see you taking one good whiff of this letter and saying to yourself, "This was sent by a cowboy—one who needed a good bath!" And you would be right. My name is Otto Amlingmeyer, I am what they call a "cowboy" working the Old Western Trail from Texas to Montana and, yes, I suppose I could use a good dunking—but not until I've written "And that's how it all happened, I swear on my dust-covered soul. Sincerely, O.A. Amlingmeyer."

You being an uncommonly educated fellow and all, you surely don't put any stock in those dime novels about cowboy life. The way they tell it, your average drover spends his days fighting off fifty Comanche braves with one hand and untying a beautiful gal from the railroad tracks with the other, all the while with a lit stick of dynamite clenched in his teeth, pearl-handled six-guns in his holster and a horse that dances the Texas two-step every time he whistles "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain." Sure, we have plenty of adventures when we're on the trail, as long as your idea of an "adventure" is pulling a steer out of a sinkhole or throwing rocks at coyotes so they won't sneak into camp at night and eat your boots.

But on our latest cattle drive, my brother and I finally have had a genuine dime novel-type adventure. And we only lived to tell about it because of you.

"Ahhh!" I can hear you say. "At last! The point!"

You'll have to excuse me. I'm used to yarning around a campfire, where the idea is to keep your lips flapping as long as possible so as to better distract your pals from how cold, tired and miserable they are. If I try to write this letter that way, they'll have to cut

down all the trees in Kansas just to make enough paper for me to get the job done. So I'd better just get to it.

Gustav and I first became acquainted with you and your reputation as a puzzle-breaker about three months ago. He and I had just made the trip down to Brownsville, Texas, to meet up with an old compadre of ours by the name of Charlie Higgebottom. Charlie was fixed to be caporal of a big drive—three thousand Mexican longhorns headed up through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming to the Blackfeet Agency up around Billings, Montana. That's as long as the Big Trail ever gets, so Charlie needed the best cow and horse men he could lay hands on. Charlie's been on enough drives with us to know that we can both handle cattle, so naturally he sent word that we should come along.

Now to Charlie and most of the other bull nurses we know, Gustav and I aren't "the Amlingmeyer brothers." I guess that just doesn't slide off the tongue easy as it should. So instead we're "Big Red" and "Old Red," or just "the Reds," on account of our strawberry-red heads of hair. I'm Big Red for reasons a deep thinker such as yourself can surely work out. But my brother's Old Red not so much for his age (though at twenty-six he is a bit long in the tooth for a cowpuncher) as much as for his personality. Gustav's never cottoned much to japes or tomfoolery. He's a quiet fellow, always looking serious and a little down in the mouth—what you might call morose, like a dog you just kicked off the foot of your bed.

So to move along in the direction of that *point* I should be steering towards, maybe three days into this latest drive, when most of the hands were circled up around the fire after getting the herd bedded down for the night, Charlie pulled something out of his

saddlebag and gave it to me. It was one of those story magazines, though not one I'd ever laid eyes on before.

"I've been holding onto this for eight weeks," Charlie said. "Found it on a bench at the railroad station in San Antonio and figured it was the hand of fate. I had to hold onto it till I saw the Reds again."

I didn't know what he was working his jaw about until I opened it up and started flipping through the pages. About half-way through the magazine, I came across a story you know well—"The Red-Headed League."

The title alone got a chuckle out of me. I read it out loud for Gustav (who can't tell his As from his Zs or anything in between), but he just grunted. The boys around the fire got a fine laugh from it though, and they called out for me to read the whole story. Now along the trail I've got a reputation for oratory and poetry reciting and song singing and such, being under-blessed on modesty and powerful over-blessed on lung power. So I grabbed a lantern off the commissary and cleared my throat and gave the fellows a regular night at the theatre.

Well, you'll have to tell that Dr. Watson he's a top-rail yarn spinner. The boys ate it up like it was hot doughnuts on Christmas morning. They were hooting and joshing me and Gustav fierce when they heard that burro milk about the locoed American tycoon giving away money to redheads. Not a one of them figured out it was just a bad man's scheme, and when you caught the rascal red-handed (so to speak) trying to dig his way into a bank they cheered and clapped like you were right there with us doing back-flips.

Now usually the flannelmouthed whopper-swapping you'll hear around a cowboy campfire puts my brother straight to sleep. And for a minute or two I thought "The Red-

Headed League” would be just another lullabye as far as he was concerned. But when I got to the part where you told that pawnbroker everything there was to know about himself—where he’d been and what he’d done and who he was, just from looking at him—Gustav perked up right smart. His eyes got all wide in a way I’d never seen, picking up the light from the fire and glowing like the big eyes of a hoot owl. But though he was staring straight at me, I knew he didn’t see me or the campfire or the boys gathered around it. What he saw was you and Dr. Watson and that pawnbroker and everything else in the story. When I finished he even applauded along with the rest of the boys, which was peculiar indeed since a show of enthusiasm from Gustav is about as common as a six-legged mule or an honest bartender.

That dreamy-like look stayed on Old Red’s face all the next day. And when we were gathered around the fire that night, he asked me to read the story again. Well, I rarely turn down an opportunity to practice my elocution, so I pulled out that magazine and gave it my all. As you might imagine, the fellows didn’t get quite so worked up about it the second time, though they did give it a good listen. Gustav, on the other hand, was mesmerized. The next night, he asked me to read it *again*, but (no offense now) the boys wouldn’t stand for it. They got to stretching the blanket about ornery beeves they’d seen—a puncher by the name of Tornado Monroe even claimed a steer pulled a knife on him once—and Gustav got up and wandered away, as he will when the proceedings are not to his interest and he’s not ready to sleep.

Now when you’re working a herd all day long, you don’t have time to work your gums at anybody who doesn’t have hooves, which is why I hadn’t had a chance to ask my brother why “The Red-Headed League” had him all google-eyed. So after listening to a

few more whoppers from the boys, I got up and went looking for him. I found him out by the picket line, where we had our night horses hobbled. He was staring up at the black night sky like a coyote getting ready to let loose with a yodel.

“They’re called stars,” I said. “Don’t worry—they ain’t going to fall on you.”

Of course, that didn’t even get a smile out of Old Red, though sometimes I can get him tickled if no one’s around.

“What are you out here pondering on, old-timer?”

He just shrugged, looking kind of embarrassed.

“Now come on, brother. You know you can unshuck your lips with me. That magazine story has got a fierce grip on your head, hasn’t it?”

He nodded slowly, real thoughtful-like. “Yup, I s’pose it has,” he said, speaking just as slowly. “It’s that Holmes feller. His whole way of lookin’ at things.”

“What about it?”

“Well, you know I like a man can think straight. And he seems to be the straightest thinker I ever heard of.”

“So you admire the man.”

“More than that. Hearin’ about him makes me wonder. You know . . . well, you know about my schoolin’ . . .”

Gustav got to looking all bashful again. He can be a mite prickly about his lack of letters. It’s always seemed to sting him that our dear old mama had him working the fields while the younger kids got to go to school.

“I know,” I said.

“Well, the thing about it is, he don’t need no book-learnin’ to do what he does. He didn’t catch them bank-robbin’ snakes with some trick he learned at a university. He caught ’em cuz he knows how to *look* at things. Look and really see ’em.”

I shrugged. “I guess you’re right. So?”

“So, seems any man could do the same, he put his mind to it.”

Now I’m ashamed to admit I laughed when I saw what he was driving at.

“I know you’re sharper than you look, big brother, but I don’t think you could beat this Sherlock Holmes in any war of wits.”

Gustav gave me his best scowl—the one that makes a rabid badger look downright friendly by comparison.

“I don’t aim to beat him,” he said. “I just think he’s worth studyin’ on, that’s all. Seems like he don’t do nothin’ but sit around and cogitate and *whammy*—things happen. Whereas fellers like you and me and the boys back there, we never think at all, just *do*, and we don’t get no whammy at all.”

“Cowpunchin’ ain’t a thinker’s game.”

“Don’t I know it.”

The bitterness in his voice put a little cramp in my grin. I knew he longed for better things than riding herd on someone else’s cattle. And part of the reason he couldn’t get those things was because he’d always had younger brothers and sisters to look out for. Now most of them were dead or married off, and only one was left for him to nursemaid—the baby of the family, Yours Truly.

Looked at a certain way, I owed him everything I had, right down to the boots on my big feet. So who was I to poke fun?

“Tell you what, brother. Tomorrow night I’ll borrow the lantern off the chuck wagon and you and I can come out here and visit with Mr. Sherlock Holmes again.”

That got me a glimpse of that rarest of prairie critters, the Gustav Amlingmeyer Smile. I went back to the fire after that. He and I had second watch that night, which meant we’d be back up on our mounts by two o’clock in the morning. I wouldn’t have time for forty winks, but I could still catch me maybe eighteen if I turned in right quick. I left Gustav there by the horses, looking up at the sky like he’d never seen it before. I found him there still when I came back a few hours later.

Over the next three weeks, I read him “The Red-Headed League” a dozen more times. I finally stopped when I noticed his lips forming the words before I could speak them.

“You’ve got this thing memorized!” I said.

“Only the important bits.”

“Well then, you don’t need to hear ’em anymore.”

After that, we took a little holiday from Dr. Watson’s story. Truth to tell, I’d become mighty sick of it myself, fine though it is. Reading it over and over was like having steak for dinner every night. Sooner or later, a man’s going to pine for a plate of beans.

So for the next few weeks, there was no more talk of Sherlock Holmes—though every so often I would see Gustav’s mouth working as he rode along, and at times it seemed like he couldn’t keep his mind on his steers. That won my brother some jibes from the other fellows, who joshed him that he was going soft in the head in his old age. I knew what he was thinking on, of course, but I kept that to myself.

By this point we'd crossed the Red River and were deep into Indian territory. Now no matter what you may read over there in England, we don't have big Indian wars like we used to. That was all ironed out not too long after Custer and his boys got themselves turned into pincushions. But cowboys have still got to watch their backsides on Indian land—especially when there's Comanches and Kiowas on the prowl. They might not steal many scalps these days, but they do surely love to steal cattle.

Charlie Higgebottom doubled up the night watch the day we got across the Red River, so there were four of us out under the moon at all times while the rest of the outfit slept. Now "the rest of the outfit" amounted to just eight men, not counting Charlie and our cook, Greasy Pete Tregaskis. We weren't overstocked for hands, since delivering beeves to an Indian agency, as we were doing, is not the most profitable drive a fellow can undertake. So we were all of us a little droopy in the saddle, overworked and dying of thirst for a good night's sleep. Sometimes a nightmare would make me jump, and I'd wake to find myself on my horse, on watch.

That's just what happened this one particular night, except it wasn't any nightmare that woke me up. It was gunshots. And if that hadn't been enough to snap me out of the land of Nod, the stampede would have done just as well, for you can't go firing off a six-shooter at night without spooking the herd something fierce. When they get spooked, they run. And when they run, we have to ride after them.

The chase took hours. I spent most of that time trying not to end up something sticky on the bottom of a thousand steers' hooves. This was only my third drive, you see, so I didn't have the stampede-breaking know-how of a Gustav or a Charlie Higgebottom. I spurred up toward the front just once, to make sure my brother wasn't already worm bait

a few miles back. There he and Charlie were, riding right alongside the lead steers, trying to convince them the world wouldn't come to an end if they stopped running. That would be a difficult thing to do, I knew, since cows are second only to rocks as the dumbest things God ever created. So I left them to it, dropping back where it was safer and I could do more good, along the right flank with a couple of the other punchers trying to keep our big herd from turning into five hundred little herds.

When it was all over, the steers dropped down to the ground to take a much-needed nap. Pretty soon they were snoring under the early-morning sun like nothing ever happened. Cowboys aren't as lucky in such matters as cows, however. There's no rest for us after a stampede peters out. You've got to fan out and round up the strays. I was fixing to bear down on couple of loose steers when Gustav and Charlie rode up, both of them looking like they had a mouthful of something a dog wouldn't eat.

"Did you see what started all this?" Charlie snapped at me.

"Well, it's good to see y'all, too. Your concern for my well-being has me just about all teared up," I said. "And no, I didn't see what started this. I just heard someone set his gun a-goin' and before I knew it I was up to my neck in beef."

"How about Billy and Peanuts?" Gustav asked. "You seen 'em?"

"No. I haven't seen 'em since"

And then I realized why Charlie and Gustav looked so riled. Billy and Peanuts—alias Bill Brown and Conrad Emicholz—were the two fellows out on watch the same time as Gustav and me.

"Nobody else has seen 'em?"

Charlie shook his head. Gustav sighed.

“I’ll go back and look for them,” my brother said. He nodded at me. “Mind if I take him with me?”

Charlie looked thoughtful for a moment. “Yup, maybe you better.” And he wheeled his horse and rode off after those longhorns I’d been aiming at.

“So, little brother . . . I’m glad to see you didn’t get yourself killed last night,” Gustav said.

“Well, that just about sums up my feelings upon seeing you,” I said.

Gustav nodded. “Alright then.” That’s about as sentimental as he ever gets. “Let’s go get us some fresh horses.”

Once we had our new mounts, we headed back down the trail, Gustav riding the eastern side, me riding the western side. We saw a few strays, but no Billy and no Peanuts. A couple miles back we ran into the commissary hurrying to catch up with the herd. We asked Greasy Pete, our outfit’s biscuit rustler, if he’d seen the boys. He hadn’t. Before we rode on, Gustav asked if he could get a shovel and a scattergun out of the wagon.

“You expectin’ to use those?” asked Greasy Pete.

“Wouldn’t ask for ’em if I didn’t,” Gustav said.

This shovel and shotgun talk was making me jumpy as a jackrabbit, but I tried not to let on. I never could hide a thing from my brother though. When Greasy Pete pulled out the scattergun for him, Gustav handed it over to me. He knew I’d take comfort from a piece of heavy artillery across my saddle.

About a half-hour after we left the chuck wagon, we found ourselves back where it all started—the spot where we’d had the herd bedded down for the night. The trail was

plain as can be, being a quarter mile wide and flat as a river bed. There was some brush and trees on the western side, more brush and a small rocky bluff on the eastern side.

“I was round about here, up toward the point, when those shots went off,” Gustav said. “How about you?”

“I’m not sure. It was mighty dark,” I said, not adding that it was so dark because I had my eyes closed at the time. “I think I must’ve been up toward the point, too. Seemed like pretty near the whole herd tried to plow me under once they got to runnin’.”

Gustav took his horse to a slow trot. He was headed for the rocks to the east. That made sense to me. It was the best place around for jumping a man. I followed, my palms slicking up the shotgun with sweat.

As we rounded the bluff, I caught sight of something red pressed up against the gray rock. It looked to be a man. I stopped my horse and brought up the shotgun.

“Gustav,” I said.

“I see him,” my brother said. “Hey, Peanuts! I sure hope that’s you!”

There was no answer—no sound, no movement, nothing. Gustav unholstered his six-gun and fired off a shot into the sky. The red shape was as still as the rock around it. Gustav climbed down off his horse.

“Come on,” he said.

I dismounted and followed. I kept the shotgun leveled at the quiet fellow, though with the buzzing of flies growing louder as we approached I didn’t much expect him to kick up any kind of fuss.

It was Peanuts alright. He was in the same red calico shirt he’d been wearing the past two months. The red was darker now though—soaked through with blood from his open

belly and mangled scalp and empty eye-sockets. He was propped up against the rock like he'd just leaned back to enjoy a little siesta in the shade. Billy was next to him, barked up just as bad.

I did some colorful cursing of the Kiowas, the Comanches, the Apaches and every other tribe under the skies. Gustav took it all more calm-like, which is his way when faced with the alarming or the unpleasant.

"Well," he said, "now we know why the buzzards couldn't lead us straight to 'em. If the boys had been left out under the sun, they'd be just about picked clean by now." He kicked a clod of chewed-up sod thrown up by the stampede. "Or they would've been churned into butter by all those hooves."

I turned, still cursing like thunder, and went to get back on my horse.

"What do you think you're doin'?" Gustav called after me.

"I'm gonna track down those murderin' sons of bitches and give 'em a taste of what they gave Billy and Peanuts. What do *you* think *you're* doin'?"

"I'm buryin' the boys and then I'm headed back up to join the outfit. And that's what you're going to do, too. That's what *I* think."

"But—"

"As long as you're headed over there, you may as well grab the shovel off my horse and get to usin' it. I think this is as good a place as any to lay the boys down."

I did as I was told, though I cursed and kicked about it. As I got to work piling up dirt Gustav showed me the lay of things.

"Whoever did this has got a six-hour jump on us at least, little brother. They'll have some of our cattle with 'em for sure, and that'll slow 'em down. But it would still take us

hours to track 'em and catch up. And then what? It's you and me and two exhausted horses against Lord only knows how many men. Nope. The only thing to do is give these two a proper burial and then go tell Charlie what happened."

I couldn't argue with the wisdom of it, but it didn't sit right, I can tell you that. I tried to work my anger into my shoveling, and I sure gave that ground a good beating. While I was digging, Gustav was hunched over the bodies, looking them over as casual as he would a couple of ponies he was thinking about buying. He even handled them, leaning them forward so he could see their backs.

"Why are you pawin' over them like that?" I finally asked him.

"Well," Gustav said, kind of reluctant-like, "just between you and me and the boys here, I'm wonderin' what Mr. Sherlock Holmes would make of all this."

That put a twig up my snoot, I confess. I hadn't known Billy and Peanuts very long, had never worked a drive with them before, but they were comrades just the same and it seemed disrespectful to be thinking about some magazine story when they hadn't even been planted yet.

"That Holmes feller might be a sharp tack on paper, but he ain't no Indian fighter," I said.

"You see, the thing is though, whoever barked these heads cut 'em up bad. Their scalps must've come off in four, five pieces. And—"

"Now ain't that a scandal?" I cut in, snorting like a steer with a knot in his tail. "The Kiowas ain't gettin' enough practice with their scalpin'! I guess you better just write yourself a letter of complaint to the Bureau of Indian Affairs."

Gustav shot a sour glare my way, then went back to inspecting the bodies and the ground around them. I plunged the shovel back into the earth, and neither one of us said a thing until it came time to settle the boys into the shallow little hole they were going to share for the rest of forever.

Seeing as how I'd just about broken my back digging, I made Gustav do the dragging. He rolled Peanuts into the earth first, then went back for Billy. When we had the boys curled up together, we piled on a load of rocks so the coyotes wouldn't get at them. We didn't throw around any words of consecration, each of us still being vexed with the other and just Christian enough to know that men who hadn't been inside a church in 10 years don't have any business playing preacher.

Before we headed out to hook up with the outfit again, Gustav had us do a little ride south. We'd barely gone a hundred feet when we came to a fresh trail pushing east through the brush.

"You still wanna go get yourself killed, you just ride that trail good and hard," Gustav said to me.

Our little brotherly spats tend to live and die within the span of an hour. I'm just not good at grudge-holding. So I was ready to patch things up by now.

"So what do you figure happened, big brother?" I asked.

"I'm still figurin'," Gustav said warily.

"Well, here's how I see it. A few wild bucks—renegades—they jumped Billy and Peanuts, cut out some cattle, then fired off a few shots to get a stampede goin'. They knew that'd scatter the rest of us while they skeedaddled."

Gustav nodded slowly. "Makes sense."

“Sure it does. What other way would you reckon it?”

Instead of answering, Gustav pointed at the trail we’d just come across and asked a question of his own.

“What does that look like to you? Maybe a dozen head? Four or five horses?”

I’m not as good with trails as my brother. I can read English. He can read hoofprints. So it was best just to agree.

“That seems about right,” I said. “So?”

Gustav just shook his head sadly, like he was puzzled how such a feather-brain came to be a blood relation. He turned his horse and kicked him into a gallop. I followed, and we were too busy riding to have any parlay until we caught up with the herd a few hours later.

Charlie and the rest of the boys had finished rounding up strays and were doing a count—a mighty big undertaking when you’ve got three thousand animals to throw a number on. We reported what we’d found, and everybody put together the same story I had. Naturally, there was some talk about hunting down the dirty redskins who’d cut up Billy and Peanuts, but Charlie put a bullet through that notion pretty fast. Dodge City was two weeks north of us. When we went in for supplies there, we’d spread word of what had happened, but that was all that could be done. We’d lost only fifteen head to the raiders and the stampede, leaving three thousand steers to look after and just ten cowpunchers left to do it.

“If it were up to me, I’d let all you Indian fighters go get yourself bushwacked,” Charlie said. “But it’s not up to me. It’s up to our employer, the Lone Star Land and

Cattle Company Incorporated. And we know what they want: They want the job done. That's what we're here for and that's what we're gonna do. Any arguments?"

There weren't any, but there was more than a little grumbling. My brother kept out of it, though. He was even more tight-lipped than usual. He didn't open his mouth unless it was to stick some beans and bacon in it at supper time. His eyes had gone kind of faraway and unfocused, like he didn't notice me, the boys, the cattle, the horse underneath his rump, nothing.

"Why's Old Red gone so quiet on us again?" Greasy Pete asked me the day after we buried Billy and Peanuts. "Did one of them Comanches cut out his tongue?"

All I could do was shrug. That very morning I'd asked Gustav what had him all hushed up and the only thing he'd say was, "I'm tryin' to introspect."

The next day, we *all* had something new to think on. Gustav and I were riding point up at the front of the herd, him on the right side, me on the left, both of us just behind Charlie, who as trail boss was usually a quick trot ahead leading the way. We were just loping along casual as can be, sloping low in our saddles, dreaming of rocking chairs and feather beds, when a sound bounced out of the air up ahead and straightened out our spines. It was a gunshot, not too far away by the sound of it. I turned to look at Gustav, and he was already yipping his horse into a gallop. I did likewise.

"What do you think?" Charlie asked once we'd come pounding to a halt next to him.

"Came from that washout up ahead there," Gustav said, pointing at something that didn't look like anything more than a streak of brown in the grass. But my brother's got eyes and ears as sharp as a razor blade, so I didn't doubt he was right.

Neither did Charlie. He pulled out his forty-five. “Alright, Old Red. You and me’ll ride on into it and see what we see. Big Red, you stay up top and hug the edge. Not too tight, though. If this is some kinda ambush, you’ll be our ace in the hole.”

“Or you’ll be mine,” I said, drawing out my own six-shooter. “Kinda depends on who gets ambushed where, don’t it?”

“Only one way to find out,” Gustav said, and on those cheerful words of parting we rode rode off.

There was a washout up ahead, just like my brother said. I waited a minute while he and Charlie worked their horses down into the dried-out creek bed, then I wheeled my mount to the west and trotted off. I stayed just close enough to the washout to follow the sound of hooves and the cloud of dust they kicked up.

After maybe five minutes of riding, the dust cloud stopped and drifted apart on the breeze as the hoof beats came to a halt. I stopped, too, and heard words bounce up out of the gully.

“Easy there, mister,” I heard Gustav say. “No need to go pullin’ out any hardware.”

I knew my brother wasn’t really talking to whoever was down there with him and Charlie. He was talking to me, telling me what he saw. I slipped off my horse quiet as can be and slinked over to the washout’s edge. Down below, just a few feet away, was a man standing next to a prone pinto. The dirt around the horse’s head was black-red with blood. A saddle sat on the ground near the man’s feet. He had a gun in his hand, and it was all set to go off in the general direction of my brother’s belly.

“Who’re you?” the man growled.

“Us? Oh, we’re nobody. Just some drovers movin’ through with some cattle,” my brother said from up on his horse, sounding as cool as lemonade with ice. “Me and Charlie here—oh, my name’s Gustav Amlingmeyer, by the by—we’re headed up to Billings from Brownsville. Been out on the trail nearly two months. And how about yourself? Where you headed?”

Of course, this was uncommonly chatty for my brother. But he wasn’t being sociable. He was giving me time to angle around behind the hombre with the gun.

“If you don’t know, then it ain’t none of your concern,” the man said to my brother. The gun barrel wasn’t angling down a hair. “Now why don’t you two just get offa them horses.”

Charlie and Gustav looked at each other, and Gustav gave a nod. “Alright,” he said. “We’ll come on down. Won’t we, little brother?”

Well, you couldn’t ask for a plainer signal than that. I jumped, landing next to the man like a bag of hammers. I only got one hand on him though, and he spun out of my grasp, off balance. But he looked a little dazed, and I managed to get my feet planted before he could bring his shooting iron back into the game. I threw a fist at him, and though it only seemed to graze his chin his head snapped back and his eyelids fluttered and his knees gave out from under him. He dropped the six-shooter and toppled backwards into the dirt next to the dead horse.

The stranger stayed down for a minute or two. By the time he sat up, shaking his head and rubbing his jaw, I had his own gun pointed at him.

“Hold on there, friend,” he said. “Let’s talk this over.”

“Oh, I’m your friend, am I?” I said. “You sure are sociable now that the bullets are pointed in your direction.”

“I didn’t mean no offense before.” He looked over my shoulder and tried an unconvincing smile on Gustav and Charlie, who had dismounted and stepped over for a closer look at our prisoner. “Y’all spooked me, that’s all. I just got myself out of a mighty tough scrape and I didn’t fancy the notion of another one so soon.”

“What kinda scrape?” Charlie asked.

“The red-skinned kind,” the man said. “I was headed up to Wichita and I ran into a war party. They—”

“War party?” Charlie broke in. “What kind? Kiowa? Comanche?”

“I didn’t stop to ask. The way they lit out after me, I just figured they were the scalpin’ kind.”

Charlie and Gustav exchanged a glance. Charlie looked worried. My brother—well, he did a good job of not looking one thing or another.

“Go on,” my brother said to the man. “What happened?”

“Well, they chased me half the night, poppin’ off shots every time they got within a quarter mile of me. They finally dropped away somewhere, but I wasn’t takin’ any chances. I reckoned this here arroyo was as good a place as any to hole up. Only I slipped off to sleep while I was waitin’ for my last stand. When I woke up, I noticed that ol’ Jimmy over there had picked up a bullet. You know how a good horse is. He can go for miles without lettin’ on he’s about to die. Well, he was sufferin’ pretty bad, so I did the only thing I could do. The next thing I know, I’ve got men ridin’ at me and fallin’ out of

the sky on me and throwin' punches at me. Is it any wonder a feller would get a little jumpy?"

"Not at all, not at all," Charlie said. He reached out and offered the man his hand.

"No hard feelings, I hope. My name's Charlie Higgebottom."

The man gave Charlie's hand a shake, then let Charlie help him to his feet. "I'm Joe," he said. "Joe Sweet." He turned to face me. "And you're the feller with the big fist."

I grinned and nodded. "Sorry about that. Otto Amlingmeyer's the name, but the boys call me Big Red."

"I can't imagine why," Sweet joked as we shook hands.

While Sweet and Charlie and I were getting chummy, my brother had wandered over to Sweet's horse. He was giving the animal a sour look, like he expected it to hop up and start calling him names.

"Oh, that's Old Red, Otto's brother," Charlie said when Sweet turned toward Gustav. "Don't worry about the introductions. You won't hear five more words out of him the whole time you know him."

"Well, it's nice to meet you anyhow, Old Red," Sweet said.

My brother just looked up and grunted.

Charlie chuckled. "See? What'd I tell you?"

"So what'd you boys say you were doin' out here?" Sweet sucked a lungful of air through his nostrils. "Shoot. That's right. It's a wonder I didn't notice it before. There's a herd headed this way, ain't there?"

“Yes, sir. Three thousand head.” Charlie proceeded to tell Sweet all about our drive, right up to and including what had happened to Billy and Peanuts. “You wouldn’t be a cowpuncher, would you? We’re a few hands down and we’ve got a long way to go.”

“Well, I’ve roped me a few steers over the years,” Sweet said. “Even worked a drive up to Cheyenne once. I’d be happy to ride with you for a spell.”

“Good!” Charlie clapped Sweet on the back. “So here I am a foreman who needs himself a cowboy, and right here in the middle of nowhere I meet up with a cowboy who needs himself a horse. I guess I’m one lucky son of a bitch today.”

Sweet grinned again. “That’s what people always say after they meet me.”

That got a good laugh out of me and Charlie, but my brother didn’t even crack a smile. “Tell you what, Mr. Sweet,” Gustav said once the guffaws had petered out. “You take my mount there and let Charlie show you what’s what. My brother can grab me another horse from the remuda and ride it up here. I’ll use your saddle for now and give it back to you tonight.”

Sweet’s grin slid off his face like eggs off a greasy frying pan. “Thank you for the offer, but I’d rather be the one to wait. I’m a touch particular about my saddles. The wrong one’ll kink up my back somethin’ awful.”

“Oh, got yourself a special make, do you?” Gustav said. He crouched down next to the saddle lying in the dirt beside the horse. “Just looks like a regular California to me.” He stretched out a hand toward the saddle bags. “Maybe it’s these—”

“Get your paws away from there,” Sweet snapped, taking a few quick steps toward my brother.

Gustav stood and turned to face him. “Somethin’ the matter, Mr. Sweet? You still seem a mite jumpy.”

It seemed to be a good thing Sweet’s gun was in my hand instead of his. And if looks could kill, as they say, Sweet wouldn’t have needed a shooting iron at all. But after staring death at my brother for a few seconds, Sweet relaxed with a shrug and a none-too-powerful smile.

“Awwww, you’re right. Just look at me. Those braves gave me a permanent case of the jitters. Sorry. Didn’t mean to jump ya’ like that.”

Gustav acknowledged the apology with a nod.

“All the same,” Sweet continued, “I’d prefer it if people didn’t handle my gear. I’m just . . . well, I’d prefer it. You know.”

I did know. When it comes to superstitions, cowboys have got everybody beat but gypsies and Irishmen. I’ve never met an Irish gypsy cowboy, but I bet he wouldn’t be able to pull himself out of his bedroll in the morning for all the bad omens he’d see in the wrinkles of his blanket. If this Sweet fellow got spooked when folks touched his saddle, well, that wasn’t so strange. I myself get the sweats whenever I see a white dog or a man in yellow trousers. Don’t ask me why, for I don’t know. Whatever the reason, it reminds me to be tolerant of other men’s hoodoos.

“Don’t fret about a thing, Joe,” I said to Sweet. “You just wait here and I’ll rustle you up a fine cow-pony in no time. That alright by you, boss?”

“Sure,” Charlie said. “We’ve jawed long enough. It’s time to see whether my new hand can keep his britches on the backside of a horse.”

That brought three smiles out to shine on the world. But one of us didn't seem to be in a smiling mood. I'm sure a blue-ribbon deducer like yourself doesn't have to be told who that was.

Sweet made himself useful right quick. Charlie had him ride swing on the left side of the herd, not far behind me, so I got a chance to see if the man was as good as his mustard. He was. He cut in stragglers before they got five steps from the herd. And he did it easy, without getting too spicy about it in that way that can rile a steer up. It wasn't like he was stopping a stampede barefoot and blindfolded, but he was making my job easier, and the jobs of the flank riders and drag riders behind us. So that meant Sweet was hunky-dory as far as that half of the outfit was concerned.

After we had the herd bedded down for the night, Charlie introduced Sweet to the rest of the boys. Everyone huzzahed him for showing up just when we needed the help, japing about how he was "sweet" to ride with us to Dodge.

"Nothin' sweet about it," Sweet joked back. "For one thing, I ain't got a horse." He reached up, removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "And for another thing, I like my scalp where it is."

"You've kinda grown attached to it, huh?" called out Tornado Monroe, who earned his handle by being the biggest blowhard on the prairie.

That drew out a few chuckles, but poor Peanuts and Billy were still too fresh in the ground for anyone to laugh much. An awkward silence followed. As so often happened when Tornado met a moment of quiet, he endeavored to put an end to it as quickly as possible.

“‘Joe Sweet.’ Hmmm,” he said. “That sounds kinda familiar now I think about it. Any reason I oughta know that name?”

The friendly expression on Sweet’s face suddenly pulled up lame. “No reason,” he said.

“But I do swear I’ve heard that name somewhere before,” Tornado said, not noticing the change in Sweet’s disposition. “Where’d you say you was from?”

Sweet suddenly stopped worrying about living up to his name. “Is this fat-mouthed toad accusing me of something,” he snarled.

Every man in camp turned to stone.

“Well, is he?” I’d given Sweet his gun back earlier that day, and he looked mad enough to use it if Tornado so much as blinked.

You never know which way Tornado’s going to spin, but this time he chose to go easy.

“I didn’t mean nothin’,” he said.

Charlie stepped up now, trying out a friendly grin that was meant to calm Sweet down. He put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “No need for a fuss. Far as we’re concerned, you’re—”

Sweet shrugged away Charlie’s hand. “Nobody lays hold of me. Me or my gear either one. You all understand that?”

Nobody said if they did or didn’t. They just watched quietly as Sweet grabbed up his saddle and stomped off. When he was far enough away, one of the boys let out a low whistle.

“Feller’s sure got a temper on him, don’t he?” Greasy Pete said.

There were murmurs of agreement, and though Sweet came over to the fire later that night and tried to make nice, everyone was wary around him after that. We all fell into the habit of watching him out of the corners of our eyes. It was like having your sister marry a rattlesnake. He was one of us now, but we couldn't stop wondering who he was going to sink his teeth into next.

We were a mighty sulky bunch around the fire that night. Only one hand looked anything but glum. And it was the very fellow who usually went slinking off by himself the first chance he got.

Gustav was watching Sweet like the man was a fireworks display, looking a little amazed and a little amused. When I asked him why he seemed so perked up for once, all he'd say was, "As Mr. Holmes might say, we've got ourselves a real three-piper here."

Frankly, I couldn't make heads nor tails out of that, and a part of me worried that my brother had finally rounded the bend from "peculiar" to flat-out "loco."

Over the next few days, though, it was Sweet who had us all truly worried. The man's temper flared up every time the outfit gathered together. Somebody was always standing too close to his saddle or asking the wrong question or just remarking that the sky surely was blue in the wrong tone of voice. It got so bad that a few of the boys went to Charlie and asked him to just give Sweet a horse and tell him to clear out. Charlie shook his head.

"We've still got pretty near two weeks on the trail before we reach Dodge," he said. "I need all the hands I can get, even if one of 'em is touched in the head."

So all of us had to keep right on tiptoeing around Sweet like he was a hornet's nest under a hat. But the more we bent over backwards not to stir him up, the louder he buzzed.

“What're you lookin' at?” he'd say. Or “You got somethin' you wanna ask me?” Or, more often than anything else, “One step closer to my gear and I'll shot your foot off.”

As Sweet grew more and more ornery, my brother grew more and more excited, almost tickled even. Oh, he hid it from everybody else, but I could see it in his eyes every time Sweet fired off his temper. He insisted on being mysterious about it all though, and eventually I decided to save my stomach the irritation and avoid talking to Sweet and Gustav both.

Sweet had been kicking at us for five days before we finally found the burr under his saddle. We were just finishing up supper when Tornado piped up with, “Don't throw out the whistle berries yet, Pete. We got us some company.”

All the boys sat up straight and followed Tornado's gaze out toward the east, and lo and behold there was a rider heading in for camp. We gave him a few friendly yahoos, and he took off his hat and yahoosed us right back. A visitor on the trail is usually a welcome thing indeed, for it breaks up the monotony, offers an opportunity to become acquainted with the latest events of the day and gives a man a chance to trot out all his favorite jokes, stories and songs . . . the ones his compadres grew sick of long ago. Since our only other caller in weeks had been less than a rousing success—that caller being Sweet—everyone was looking forward to doing some *real* socializing.

Everyone, that is, except for Sweet himself. There were no yahoos from him, and as the stranger rode up and dismounted Sweet pierced the man with that cactus-prickle stare of his.

“Hello there, fellers,” the stranger said. “Mind if I hitch up my horse and join you?”

“Go right ahead,” Charlie said. “Fix yourself up with a plate off the commissary there and come grab some beans.”

“Thank you.” The man wrapped his reins around a wagon wheel and pulled a plate out of the chuck box. “My name’s Les Pryor.” He started toward the fire, a friendly smile on his dirt-covered face. “I’m—” The plate slipped through his fingers, and the smile followed it toward the ground.

His gaze was stuck on one man—Joe Sweet.

In the instant it took us to realize something was wrong, Pryor had already filled his hand with a gun. “Nobody move,” he said.

Charlie being the trail boss, we all left it to him to ask the obvious question.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doin’?” he said.

“My job.” Pryor reached up and gave his chest a couple of swats. Prairie dust billowed off the front of his shirt, and something pinned there took to shining in the firelight. It was a badge.

“George Sweetman,” Pryor said, aiming the words straight at Sweet, “you’re under arrest.”

Sweet muttered a curse that would make a bear blush.

“No use complain’ about it, Sweetman,” the lawman said. “It’s the rope for you for sure this time.”

The rest of us looked back and forth between the two men, so slackjawed we couldn't form words. A dime novel was suddenly playing out right in our midst, and we were filled with awe. True to form, it was Tornado who was able to get his mouth working first.

"We don't know this feller," he said to Pryor. "He just joined up with us a few days ago."

"That's right," Charlie added. "His horse was dead. He said he'd run across a war party. A few of my men lost their scalps about a week back, so we let him ride with us."

Pryor flicked a skeptical look in Charlie's direction. "You the leader of this outfit?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You got any papers to back that up?"

"I sure do. They're in that saddlebag right over there." Charlie pointed at his saddle. It was sitting just a few paces from the fire.

"Alright. Go get 'em. But if there's anything in there other than travelin' papers . . ."

Charlie got up and started moving slowly toward his gear, his hands spread out before him. "Don't worry about that. We'll get this all sorted out right quick."

A few moments later, Pryor was flipping through the papers as best he could one-handed. The other hand still had a gun in it. And it was still pointed in our general direction.

"What's your name?" Pryor asked.

"Charlie Higgebottom."

"Who do you work for?"

"The Lone Star Land and Cattle Company Incorporated."

“And where are you headed?”

“Montana. The Blackfeet reservation up on the Yellowstone.”

Pryor handed the papers back to Charlie, favoring him with a grin. “Well, looks like I owe you gents an apology.”

The whole outfit heaved such a big sigh of relief it’s a wonder we didn’t blow out the fire.

“No need for apologies,” Charlie said. “Just tell us what’s goin’ on here.”

“First things first. Would one of you fellers mind holdin’ a gun on that coyote over there?”

Seeing as how he meant Sweet, there were plenty of enthusiastic volunteers. Pryor holstered his gun.

“Mind if I borrow me some rope?” he asked Charlie.

“Now hold on, sheriff . . . or deputy or whatever you are,” Charlie said. “Sweet there might not be the most easygoin’ feller I’ve run across, but he’s part of my outfit now, and I personally don’t know that he’s committed any crime.”

“Oh, he has. Just about every one you could think of,” Pryor said. “And his name’s ‘Sweetman,’ not ‘Sweet.’ George Sweetman.”

Sweet finally spoke up for himself then. “My name’s Joe Sweet, I swear it. I’m not some outlaw. This feller’s crazy.”

“Well,” Pryor said. But before he could get out another word, a different voice spoke up.

“Look in the man’s saddlebags.”

We all turned toward Gustav. He was sitting a short hop away from the fire, leaning back against his saddle. His face was serious, but his eyes had a little chuckle in them.

“Sweet’s saddlebags. Why don’t we see what’s in ’em.”

Tornado clapped his hands. “That’s right! He was always so damned tetchy about them bags. Must be somethin’ in ’em!”

There was a little stampede to Sweet’s gear, but Tornado ended up at the front of the herd. “Well, lookee here,” he said, pulling out a handful of yellow papers.

One of the them was a handbill. Tornado held it up for all to see. The word “WANTED” was printed across the top. Underneath was a drawing of a rat-faced man with dark eyes and a bushy mustache.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this was our pal Joe Sweet,” Tornado said.

“Except the poster here says his name is George Sweetman.”

“Awww, it couldn’t be Joe anyhow,” one of the other boys added with a grin, “seein’ as how this Sweetman’s wanted for cattle rustlin’, horse thievin’, robbery and murder. Why, our sweet Joe would never get mixed up in such goings-on! Ain’t that right, Sweetie?”

A thunderclap of guffaws rolled out across the plains, and the boys began passing the other papers around and reading them aloud. You might have heard that some frontier outlaws are so stuck on themselves they save their “clippings.” Well, I can tell you now that it’s true. The saddlebag was stuffed with stories torn out of newspapers, each of them recounting the misdeeds of one George Sweetman.

We all knew we’d be talking this one up around many a campfire in the years ahead, so we were making the most of it, giggling and firing off japes and jabs at “Sweetie” as

Charlie brought Pryor the rope he'd asked for. The only one who didn't get any digs in was my brother, who was still leaning back against his saddle, watching us caper around like kids.

"I hate to tell you this, Mr. Pryor," Tornado said, "but there ain't a sturdy branch within twenty miles of here."

"No need for a tree," Pryor said. He led Sweetman over to the wagon, sat him down and proceeded to tie him to the same wheel he'd hitched his horse to. Sweetman cursed under his breath the whole time but didn't kick up any real trouble.

"Well, if you ain't gonna stretch his neck, what're you gonna do?" I asked.

"I'm takin' him in," Pryor said. "And you're all gonna help me."

That ended the party straight away.

"What are you talkin' about?" Charlie asked, though the sudden chill in his voice said he already knew the answer.

"I'm talkin' about deputizing all you fellers. I'm based out of Vinson, and my posse packed it in three days ago. If I'm gonna get him back to town I'm gonna need help."

"Vinson?" Charlie shook his head. "That's south of here, friend. Three or four days south. We're headed north."

"I know that. But look . . . we had a whole posse out after Sweetman and his gang a few days back. He was ridin' with five, six other men at the time. I don't know where they got to, but if I try to take him in alone—"

"Oh, don't worry about them, lawman," Sweetman broke in, smiling for the first time since Pryor rode into camp. "They up and left me after your posse put a bullet in my

horse. They're probably half-way to Mexico by now. You won't get any trouble out of those boys."

The words seemed right enough, but the smile undercut them somehow. Sweetman looked like a spider trying to coax a fly into a kiss.

"We're cowhands, not gunmen," Charlie said to Pryor. "We've got a herd to look after. That's our job. We can't help you do yours. I'm sorry."

Pryor eyed Charlie scornfully, then looked past him at the rest of the outfit. "There's a reward," he said. "I'll give a share to every man who comes with me."

Tornado held up the handbill with Sweetman's face on it. "It says five hundred dollars here. Divide that up and you ain't got enough for a haircut."

"That poster's a month old," Pryor said. "Sweetman here's caused so much trouble along the Old Western Trail the Kansas Cattlemen's Association threw in another two thousand last week."

Sweetman grinned, looking pleased that his worth had increased five times. Tornado whistled. The rest of the men mumbled at each other, all of them saying more or less the same thing: "That's a lot of cash."

Charlie could sense that the outfit was pulling away from him. "Now, fellers, think about this. Vinson's gotta be a hundred miles out of our way. We can't just—"

"You say you'll cut up the reward equal? One share for every man?" Tornado asked Pryor.

Pryor shrugged. "Why not? If I try to collect the whole kit and caboodle myself, I'll just end up with a bullet in my back. But with you boys behind me—"

“Won’t be none of my boys behind you, Pryor,” Charlie growled, squinting and digging in his heels and straightening up his spine and generally trying to look like the kind of trail boss a man doesn’t argue with.

Tornado wasn’t spooked. “Oh, shut your trap, Charlie,” he said. “I say we help the man.”

“We can’t.”

“Says who?”

“Says *me*!”

“Well, I don’t give a damn!”

And the shouting match got going full steam. There was no way Charlie could win, him being outnumbered something like ten to one, but he gave it a good try nonetheless, screaming out insults until his face was red as an Apache’s. I noticed in a sort of a back-of-the-mind way that my brother wasn’t jumping in on Charlie’s behalf, but I was too busy shouting my way into the debate to wonder where he stood on things. Pryor got into the mix of it here and there too, saying “You’ll have more waitin’ for you in Vinson than you will in Billings” and “It’ll only be a week out of your way” and “We live in a democracy, fellers. Just put it to a vote and be done with it.”

That last one sounded mighty reasonable to most of us. “Everybody stop your yappin’ and we’ll settle this quick with a show of hands,” Tornado called out. “Now then, raise your hand if you think we oughta—”

Just about every man Jack of us was about to shoot his paw into the air and send us riding off to Vinson. But before Tornado could finish calling for the vote, a familiar voice piped up again.

“Whoa now! Hold on there!”

Gustav was standing by Pryor’s horse, and as we turned to face him, he said something that made me wonder if we needed to have him trussed up next to Sweetman.

“Boys,” he said, “I think we need to ask ourselves a very important question: What would Sherlock Holmes do in this situation?”

It had been weeks since I’d read out “The Red-Headed League” for the whole bunch, so it took a few seconds for the words “Sherlock” and “Holmes” to come together in their heads. When it did, the boys either snickered or shook their heads in confusion.

“Who’s this Holmes feller?” Pryor asked.

“An Englishman,” Charlie said with a sad sigh. “One of them ‘detectives.’”

“Well, what’s he got to do with us?”

“Plenty, Mr. Pryor,” my brother said. “Looked at the right way.”

Charlie and Tornado shared a little glance that said they’d struck on something they could agree on: It looked like Old Red had left his sanity back along the trail somewhere in North Texas.

Gustav smiled grimly. “I know what you’re thinkin’. But just hear me out. If you still wanna take us chargin’ off to Vinson after I’ve had my say, well, I’ll forfeit my part of the reward.”

I could see lips moving soundlessly in the flickering light of the fire. The boys were doing some quick mathematics. My brother’s share wouldn’t mean too much when spread around the group, but it must have been enough.

“Go ahead,” Tornado said.

Gustav took a deep breath, cleared his throat and had his say. For a man unaccustomed to speechifying, he did a whiz bang job of it. His voice quavered once or twice early on, but once he built up a head of steam there was no stopping him.

“Fellers,” he began, “you know me. I’m the kinda cow puncher who likes to keep both boots square on the ground or firm in the stirrups. I’m not one for flights of fancy or unnecessary gum-flutterin’. So I’m not just mouthin’ off here for my own amusement. If I don’t miss my guess, each and every man in this outfit has a bull’s-eye on his back, and we better get ’em off lickety-split or there won’t be anyone left to do the buryin’.

“Now a month or so back we heard how Mr. Sherlock Holmes cracked up a gang of bandidos over in London, England. He didn’t do it with fast guns or quick fists. He did it with sharp eyes. He saw the hidden connections ’twixt this thing and that thing—connections that were there for any man to see if he just tilted his head a bit and found the right angle of lookin’.

“That kinda thinkin’ made a powerful impression on me. I have to admit, there was a part of me that was hopin’ for a chance to try it out myself. Well, boys, I got my chance and I took it. You can rest assured I wasn’t too happy about it, though.

“If you’ll recall, it was me’n’Big Red that went back for Billy and Peanuts after we lost ’em in that stampede. What I saw put me in mind of Mr. Holmes right off. Somethin’ didn’t sit right, and I did my best to suss out what it was.

“First thing was how the boys were killed. They were each of ’em stabbed in the gut and chest. Now think about that. Where’s a man gotta be to poke a feller that way? Why, right in front of him, that’s where. But Billy and Peanuts were doin’ their rounds. They were mounted. How’s a Kiowa or Comanche kill a man on horseback? With an arrow or

a bullet or by hoppin' right on the horse with him and stabbin' him in the back or reachin' around and slicin' his throat.

“And then there was where the bodies were left. They were propped up against a bluff, nice and tidy. Now you can't tell me they died that way—sittin' side by side while two somebodies went to work on 'em with blades. No, sir. They were killed somewhere else and moved.

“But why? Well, here's one thing to ponder on: If they'd been left where they died, what would have happened? A few hundred head of cattle would've run over 'em, that's what, and there wouldn't have been so much as a fingernail left for us to find.

“So what are we to think? A gaggle of renegade Indians talked Billy and Peanuts down off their saddles, knifed 'em, scalped 'em, dragged 'em out of the way so their bodies wouldn't get mussed up any further, then made off with . . . how many head did we lose? Just a dozen or so? No. Uh-uh. It just don't figure.

“Of course, I was chewin' on this as we moseyed up the trail. But I was doin' it quiet-like cuz I didn't have enough conclusions sewn together to make half a hankie. And then we ran across Mr. Sweetman there, and suddenly I had me a whole new mouthful to chew on.

“I knew he was nothin' but venom and manure practically the minute he opened his mouth. He said his horse got shot and lamed up so he had to put it down. Well, I took care to get up close to that pinto of his. There were two wounds alright: one in the head, one in the flank. But it was clear as day which one came first. You get a horse shot in the hindquarters, run it across the prairie, it's gonna be soaked in sweat and blood. But that carcass was dry as desert dirt, and the blood around its head was already baked to a crust.

That horse had been dead over two hours before we showed up. The shot we heard—the one into the haunch -- that was just to draw us in.

“So we ride up, and this crafty outlaw gets the drop on us. Fine. Makes sense. But then my little brother—who, try as he might, ain’t exactly Comanche material when it comes to stealth—is able to sneak up and lay him out with one swat? A swat that’s half air? You don’t need a hound dog’s smeller to know that stinks.

“Then once Sweetman’s back on his feet he doesn’t waste two minutes before he’s hissin’ like a wildcat cuz I’m strayin’ too close to his saddlebags. And when we join up with the rest of the outfit, every other thing out of his mouth is, ‘My saddlebags! My saddlebags! Touch ’em and die!’

“Well, it was easy enough to figure out what that really meant. Tell a boy fifty times an hour not to look in the cellar and you know he’ll be creepin’ down there with a lantern the first time you turn your back. Sweetman was desperate for us to look in those damn bags.

“Only he didn’t count on how easily buffaloed you fellers are. I finally lost my patience yesterday mornin’ and sneaked me a look when I came in off watch. Sweet made it easy for me by gettin’ up to make water when I strolled into camp. Why, he practically handed the saddlebags to me and said, ‘Have at it.’

“It seemed mighty curious to me that an outlaw named ‘George Sweetman’ would come up with an alias as wispy thin as ‘Joe Sweet’ then practically wave a wanted poster under the nose of every man he met. I figured if I sat back and watched a little while longer, Sweetman’s real plan would come into view soon enough. So I kept my trap shut

and pretty soon our lawman here arrived, and there the whole thing was, stretchin' out before me like a wide open valley.

“Billy and Peanuts weren't killed by Indians. They were killed by the only folks who could somehow coax 'em off their horses before planting a knife in their gullets—white men. They were scalped and left to find so we'd blame a raidin' party off a reservation. The killers only took a few head of cattle cuz they were gunnin' for bigger game.

“We might've set off after the raidin' party—leavin' the herd sittin' out there on the trail with hardly a hand around to greet whatever rustlers might happen along. Or, with the outfit down a couple men and a band of scalp-hungry braves on the prowl, we might've put in at the nearest town. That would have been Vinson.

“But Charlie, he chose to push on, so we kept headin' north. Then a few days later, Sweetman falls into our laps, and he does everything but hand-deliver a telegram tellin' us he's an outlaw with a bounty on his head. And if we wanted to collect that bounty, where would we go? Again, the nearest town. Vinson.

“But none of us gets the message . . . or so Sweetman thinks. So a sheriff's deputy just happens across our trail and spots Sweetman right off. Takes him without a fight, too. And where does this lawman want us to go? Where else? Vinson.

“And it's a funny thing about this lawman. Quite a coincidence. His horse's wearin' the Diamond T brand. And that just happens to be the same brand I saw on Sweetman's pinto.

“What am I to make of that? Well, there's only one thing to make. Both those horses were stolen from the same place by the same gang, and this feller callin' himself 'Pryor' is no more a deputy than the beans I ate for dinner. He and Sweetman want us to turn

southeast toward Vinson. I suspect they've got a crooked buyer there just waitin' for our herd—and probably a few gunmen sittin' up in the hills, whittlin' the hours away till we get our steers close to town and they can pick us off at their leisure.

“That's how I reckon it all, anyhow. As my brother's reminded me a few times, I ain't no Sherlock Holmes, so I could be seein' things all cross-eyed. But I've been workin' hard to see it straight, the way Mr. Holmes would, and if I've got it wrong . . . well, I invite you boys to tell me another way to figure it that makes half the sense.”

Nobody said a word for nearly half a minute. We all just stared at Old Red in a trance of glassy-eyed stupification. It was Pryor who broke the spell with a dry chuckle.

“Whooooee,” he said. “I think your friend here must've been ridin' without a hat today. The sun cooked his brain right through, eh, fellers? Now to get back to the business at hand”

Every man in the outfit turned to face him, and those faces didn't look thunderstruck any longer. They looked mad.

“Don't tell me you think that crazy little coot's onto somethin'?”

Pryor didn't get an answer in words. He got it in action. Charlie and Tornado stepped up together to grab his arms. He tried for his six-gun, but I got a fist upside his skull before he was half-way to the grip. It was a good, solid punch, too. Pryor sagged in Charlie and Tornado's hands, and when they realized he'd been knocked cold they simply let him plop to the ground like a patty out of a bull's backside. I bent down and unholstered Pryor's gun and handed it to Charlie.

He thanked me with a little nod, then turned to glare at the rest of the boys. “Anyone here still feel like holdin' a vote?” he grumbled.

Everybody stared down at the dirt, suddenly looking mighty ashamed of themselves.

“Alright then.”

Charlie turned toward my brother, and his grim scowl blossomed into a big grin.

“Well, Old Red, looks like that Sherlock Holmes has got hisself some competition.”

He gave my brother a shake of the hand so enthusiastic it nearly tore his arm off, and suddenly the rest of the boys were pushing in around them both, slapping my brother on the back and huzzahing his world-class smarts. Gustav withstood it all in bashful silence for a moment before he held up his hands and called for everyone to quiet down.

“Thank you, fellers, thank you. But before y’all go and elect me president, someone needs to get over to the chuck wagon and tie up Sweetman before he can cause any trouble.”

I looked past my brother and the men gathered around him. “Ain’t he already . . . well, I’ll be damned!”

Sweetman was on his feet next to Pryor’s horse. He had a rifle half-way out of its saddle scabbard. In a flash he had nearly a dozen guns on him. He let go of the rifle butt and kicked at the dirt.

“How’d you know he wasn’t tied up proper?” Charlie asked.

“Who was doin’ the tyin’?”

Charlie nodded, understanding right off. “Pryor.”

“That’s right. I figured he might want his partner free to lend a hand, so I put an eye on the rope he’d wrapped around Sweetman. It was done up with a timber hitch knot, so Sweetman could slip it any time he chose. He had to wait and see if his play was gonna come off, but once Pryor was down he was bound to pull somethin’.”

Everyone shook their heads, marveling at how simple all that deducifying seemed once it was talked out. Over the next few weeks, the boys had Gustav go over the whole thing again and again. It got to be torture for Sweetman and Pryor, who had to hear over and over how my brother had tripped them up. Sweetman would get to swearing a blue streak whenever the subject came up, which naturally inspired everyone to reminisce about it all the more.

The two outlaws rode with us as far as Dodge City. We kept both of them out in the open, and not a second passed when there wasn't a shotgun stuck in Sweetman's face. If the rest of his gang trailed us, looking for a chance to spring him, we never knew it. Should they have tried, he wouldn't have done them much good as a mastermind, not having a head and all.

When we got to Dodge, it turned out the reward on Sweetman was still good—five hundred of it, anyway. Pryor was just dripping a little honey when he said it was up over two thousand. We picked up some extra dinero, though, since Pryor had a bounty on him too, only it was under the name “Frank Adams.”

The boys took a vote on it and decided to give all the money for Sweetman to Old Red. My brother's too retiring a fellow to argue with such gestures, so he just slipped me a big wad of the cash and told me to treat the outfit to the biggest rave-up Kansas had ever seen. Charlie had consented to give us two whole days to live it up before we hit the trail again, so I used the money to indulge the fellows in every pleasure Dodge City had to offer, which is plenty.

Gustav didn't partake of the fun, though. He used some of his newfound fortune to rent a hotel room and hire a working girl to spend the days there with him. It was all

purely gentlemanly though, I assure you. You see, he managed to dig up a copy of “A Study in Scarlet” somewhere around town and he needed someone to read it to him.

If only that gal had the patience to write for him, too. Gustav tried putting this letter together with her, but she kept interrupting his yarn-spinning with questions. The man can’t even read, for Pete’s sake, and she’s asking *him* how to spell “Sherlock.” He finally came and grabbed me out of the Blue Boar Saloon and forced me up here practically with a gun in my ribs.

But even though I lost the chance at a few more drinks, a few more hands of poker and a few more hours of sleep, I’m actually sort of glad it turned out this way. Writing this all down was a mighty big chore, and it helps me feel a little bit of extra ownership in my brother’s world-class conundrum-busting. I reckon your pal Dr. Watson probably feels the same way sometimes. You might want to ask him about that.

Well now, looks like I finished up just in time. Charlie’s started pounding on the door threatening to set fire to the hotel if we don’t saddle up pronto. We’ve still got a thousand miles of ground to cover before those Blackfeet get their steers. Wish us luck, Mr. Holmes.

Anyway, that’s how it all happened, I swear on my dust-covered soul.

Sincerely,

O.A. Amlingmeyer

Dodge City, Kansas

July 2, 1892